

## Trouble in Paradise – Appendix

GUBAHÁMORI + Filip + László Demeter

### TRANSCRIPT

*Appendix* is an expansion of the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition presented at the Polish Pavilion at the Biennale Architettura 2021. It is the result of discussions with members of the six architectural teams invited to work on the project, which took place between March and April 2021. A year of waiting for the opening of the Biennale, postponed by the pandemic, prompted the participants of the exhibition to ask themselves to what extent the themes and solutions proposed in their projects are still relevant in the new reality. In the first episode we listen to the conversation between Rafał Śliwa and Sándor Guba, Peter Hámori (GUBAHÁMORI), Panni Bodonyi, Budha Tamás (Filip) and László Demeter, authors of *The Sacred Species* project.

## POLISH PAVILION AT THE 17TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION — LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

Venice, 22 May–21 September 2021

*Trouble in Paradise*

**curators:** PROLOG +1 (Mirabela Jurczenko, Bartosz Kowal, Wojciech Mazan, Bartłomiej Poteralski, Rafał Śliwa and Robert Witczak)

### participants

architectural teams: Atelier Fanelsa, GUBAHÁMORI + Filip + László Demeter, KOSMOS Architects, Rural Office for Architecture, RZUT, Traumnovelle

authors of the *Panorama of the Polish Countryside* Jan Domicz, Michał Sierakowski, Paweł Starzec, PROLOG +1

authors of the *Glossary* (online): Michał Sierakowski, Paweł Starzec, Wiktoria Wojciechowska, Patrycja Wojtas, PROLOG +1

exhibition visual identification, catalogue graphic design: zespół wspólny

**organiser:** Zachęta — National Gallery of Art

Polish Pavilion commissioner: Hanna Wróblewska, Director of Zachęta — National Gallery of Art

Polish Pavilion office: Ewa Mielczarek, Joanna Waśko

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## OFFICE BACKGROUND

### **Rafał:**

Interestingly enough, we have reached you due to your proposal for the same Venice Biennale, as you know, which was entitled TERRITORY, it is broad title which aligned with our agenda, and reading the brief left us without doubt that we have a *compagnon de route*, you know, the fellow travellers, the brief described it as:

*The TERRITORY project proposes a radical change in anthropocentric thinking, and focuses on the consequences of what urban sprawl, rural development and changes in land use caused in ecological systems in order to satisfy human needs.*

We thought that it would be a great opportunity to invite you to contribute with your perspective in the Polish countryside. So for this occasion you created a collaboration of architects, graphic designers and an environmentalist. How did you come together?

### **Sándor:**

The TERRITORY was our first collaborative project and the fundamental idea, as you mentioned, came from the examination of human usage and the landscape change of the rural areas of Hungary.

### **Peter:**

There was also the main question of the Biennale: 'how will we live together?', which always refers to humanity. What we wanted to achieve with that project was to show what if there's another perspective. What if we are not alone here? Who are the others? And what are the habitat loss problematics of theirs? So with Sándor, as GUBAHÁMORI, we reached out to some partners who we used to work with before. One of them was Filip (Panni and Tamás), who are visual artists and illustrators with a very similar mindset to ours when talking about our built and natural environment. We also knew László who is a scientist at the Centre for Ecological Research, Hungary. This is how we started this conversation.

### **László:**

It was quite surprising to me that in the sphere of architecture, there are people who think about topics that are the very core of my interest. So it was such a pleasure to join this team and do have a common experience.

### **Panni:**

I personally have worked together with GUBAHÁMORI on a competition. We made a proposal for the House of Fairy Tales, H. C. Andersen Museum in Denmark. We enjoyed working together, looking at the same thing from different angles and perspectives. Me and Tamás, we have a studio/collective: Filip, where we and other artist friends work on different projects in all areas, basically.

### **Rafał:**

Were there roles in the project somehow defined from the outset? Or was it like a completely open collaboration that started from the conversation and you sorted it out on their way? How did you see your role during the process?

### **Péter:**

I think it started when Panni mentioned the architectural competition for the Fairytale Museum. When we started we didn't want an illustrator to be the illustrator of the competition. We knew Panni, how she approaches a project.

And she does not just illustrate what's written there. She goes beyond the lines and illustrates the real core of the text. So we wanted to have a companion who thinks. In all of these projects including the Territory project also wanted to have a team where there are no roles. We didn't want to be the architects because this is not just an architectural problem. We wanted to have different angles in the way of thinking. At least I think we didn't have many roles in the process. What do you think, guys?

**Lászlo:**

Quite the same. I felt that my role was to put the ecological knowledge and the knowledge gathered from the local communities from all over and around the Carpathian Basin in which I am working. Maybe to clarify kind of existing knowledge, to put it in expertise.

**Rafał:**

Does it also mean that the subject of the countryside and maybe the subject of the territorial problems is something that was at that time or maybe is recently discussed in Hungary? Or is it something that you came up with independently of the current discussions?

**Sándor:**

It is not if you see contemporary architecture discussion. I think it's quite a new approach. In Hungary, the contemporary architecture discussion is more about the questions of the building's scale. It's very important how your curatorial concept and also ours is more about approaching the problems from the big scale and not from the building scale.

**László:**

I think from the perspective of nature conservation or resource management, this kind of territorial thinking is very dominant. However they are thinking in terms of segregation, not very much in integration. It means that within the field that we create, for example, nature conservation areas like National Parks, where all kinds of human activities must be excluded and that kind of space is just dominated for conservation purposes. It seems that it's not really effective: not good for nature conservation nor for local communities. More radically, it happens that even local, indigenous communities are excluded from their own land which was properly managed before. It's kind of a conflict. It seems that this kind of territorial thinking it's not that good. We want to challenge it in this project. Especially for me in my work, it's always important and it seems in nature conservation it is always on the table.

*THE PROJECT*

**Rafał:**

That sounds very to the point, especially if one thinks about the title of your proposal to the pavilion, The Sacred Species. It is very bold, it automatically implies the idea of, if not a religious concept, then at least a change in the mentality. How did you arrive at the project and how would you describe it?

**Péter:**

The title, Sacred Species, wants to challenge the concept of anthropocentric thinking, which led to exploitation of natural areas, the territories, and destruction of natural habitats. Basically this was the reason why today we ended up in the age of mass extinction. It is because there's always one species that is above all the others. As we know, this is the Homo Sapiens at the moment. We wanted to challenge this question, who is the sacred, who is the one, or a bit more specifically to your curatorial strategy, who owns the countryside. This is how we came up with this Sacred Species title.

**Rafał:**

The concept actually derives from this scale of territory, because indeed in the curatorial concept for the Polish Pavilion we have delineated the three areas that are of interest, which are: the territory, the settlement and the dwelling. This is strongly felt in your proposal that you look at the complete picture from far away. I had the impression as if the form of settlement in the form of the dwelling were very much subordinated to what happens at the territorial scale.

**Péter:**

Yes, because what we think is that our built environment and its smallest particle, which is a house, is not something that we create 100 per cent. We think that it is created by our cultural institutions, our social attitudes and practises and customs and faith and beliefs. Let us call these cultural commons. We wanted to show that where is the root of the problem? So if you have to start from the territorial spatiality according to your strategy, the change has to be on the territorial scale and the landscape scale, which is big. It also brings the question of ecological time, which is again, a change in scale, you can see it like a building compared to a landscape. It's human time compared to ecological time. It's the same jump in scale. We came up with this strong starting point: let's change the sacred species from human to trees and let's see what happens. We wanted the visitors to recognise empathy, or the feel of loss or fear or loss of anything that used to be normal. That's why we changed these two species: let's see what if trees are doing the same thing that humans do to the landscape and how Homo Sapiens is enjoying itself? From that big picture, we were stepping down to settlements and to buildings. In settlements we could see that the trees as the wooden areas are penetrating the settlements, roads are disappearing, urban spaces are getting smaller, and the forests are invading your garden. In our project, we also say that it is a sacred species so you cannot cut a tree out because you don't kill a saint. You don't do wood processing anymore. You don't use the wood for building purposes, so you cannot touch them. And what happens if a tree starts growing inside your building? So we are arriving at the building scale, the dwelling spatiality, how we change the smallest particle of our built environment. Is it going to be a hideaway, for example? And we are saying, yes the human environment is going to be subordinated.

**Rafał:**

Is that a brilliant description of the process at which you arrived, but where does it start from? Doesn't it start from the point of view of losing a little bit of control? Because there is an underlying idea that we have too much control right now, yet we want to have it even more. Precisely putting people in the network within other species, but not at the top of the of this food chain automatically makes us lose the control, lose this kind of global ties. What is at stake here? Is it the condition of climate change or the search for a new way of living?

**Panni:**

I think it's the latter one. I think it's just to find another way, another role of our existence in this global ecosystem because human activities are trying to control nature all the time which means that every solution and every development or improvement we are trying to make in our life is not really sustainable. But I mean, sustainability is also another subject. I think that the trees spreading and taking the habitats of people is also a criticism of the human approach, which is that we ignore this long term thinking. Every countermeasure we make will only complicate the problems even more. We can see now that if technology could change anything it would have done already but the problems got worse, much worse over time. The change has to happen in our view on this whole system. That's why we chose to have culture as a common which is the central point of the concept of our proposal.

**Rafał:**

It reads the common not only as the forestry, because forestry is the subject of this example. It's only a means to an end. However, it seems that the planetary condition is the common, the earth is the common, everything that we utilise as general common. Yet even though it somehow asks for an administrative condition, the very nice thing that you underline in the project is somehow the lack of the administrative condition and much more community based scenario. That basically the maintenance of living in this condition is very much in regard to what people in particular communities have and how they manage to make their own way of living within their particular environment. So how much does the community play a role within your project or maybe this kind of tension between the community and the administration?

**Peter:**

Maybe I would ask Laszlo to talk about his ethnographic knowledge in indigenous communities where there is no administration at all and how they manage to maintain their lands where they live.

**Lászlo:**

According to my experience in every landscape, even in Europe, even in more urbanised areas of Europe, a bit further from the urbanised area at rural landscapes, there are communities which bear lots of knowledge about how to manage their landscape. It's actually a very kind of local knowledge based on local experience, and it does not come from a global scale. It's often not documented in lots of landscapes. In places I am working in Serbia, Hungary, Romania there are communities which have this knowledge and living practise, I mean, grazing systems in forest and pastures and marshes are managed by the local communities. They have the common shepherds herding the herds of locals. It's a very complex system and it works. Now the science task is to document this kind of system from the top scale to bottom, to have legislation to support it. For example, the EU has common agricultural policies which do not really reflect this kind of knowledge. Maybe more integration from bottom to top would be really nice. Some steps were made. In the EU there are really large areas of intensively managed agricultural fields which are very poor in biodiversity, it is recognized and the task is to solve it somehow. The new Common Agricultural Policy has some regulation to integrate small natural features like Green area managed by local rules. They claim that it will guarantee local diversity, for example, bees or pollinators of which the agricultural sector will also benefit. This is how I can describe from legislation and administrative perspective to a more local. What will be needed in both scales is this kind of change in perspectives and to have more thinking from the perspective of nature, even at the local scale. That is what we need.

**Rafał:**

Just to clarify one thing, because we are still talking about the countryside, but do you envision this scenario as , well we all know that this radical scenario is just meant to make us think about the possibilities of change and different ideas, but do you think that there's a possibility for such a scenario only for Europe or Central Europe, or is it a more kind of planetary possibility? As a mindset, right?

**Péter:**

It is.

**Sándor:**

In the other part of the world, maybe not the trees will be sacred species, maybe it will be another thing. I think the idea is the same.

**Lászlo:**

I think even better examples will be found out of Europe somewhere else in a more remote area, maybe in those parts where the European kind of thinking does not dominate, this kind of Western European type of thinking. Out of this system there are good examples. I think a concept which really fed our idea was the sacred sites. There are lots of sacred sites in the world all around, in India, even in Europe. These sites have very special protection, which is taboo or any other mental constructions which do not let people to cause harm to those sites. I met, for example, with a Kyrgyz guard of this kind of sacred site who was the priest of that site and told that in sites (which were actually grasslands, no trees were on that type of land) people don't really want to harm it because they believed that something of a higher level that protects it. As if his place is under the protection of a god or something like that. We need more of that kind of thinking in Europe, not the man who controls the natural systems. I think it was that bit of knowledge which pushed our idea a bit further. But it was a year ago. It's really hard to reflect on the very start.

**Rafał:**

I like that this idea can be broadened to a much wider worldwide scale, because it starts to be aligned with some of the ideas about colonialism or the colonisation process. When the part of the conversation is about how the various indigenous communities would modernise themselves without being imposed, the colonialist perspective upon them, what it means then to modernise and simply to give them the direction of the development. And indeed, upon these discussions, there are the ideas that countries like Africa and their countryside have a completely new perspective, which is not the one way, not the other, but a third way: not the way of colonisation, neither decolonisation, but their own way of finding modernity and finding development by thinking differently about cities and countryside. The idea that you that you brought forward is not that much of the religious idea, even though it's provoking to think about sacred species, and especially in times when you can think of technocracy and believing in data, but the idea that starts from the consideration of where we are now and where does it lead to? So this is very much broadening the discussion. Within this how do you place that idea of engineering life and engineering the condition of life? Is there still some kind of a place for it in terms of administration?

**Péter:**

What do you mean by engineering life?

**Rafał:**

The scenario the project describes is very much the condition of living when you are placed inside of the particular community and you are there at the place. One can have the impression that it is a scenario of quite a harsh living. Then the question is precisely if this is life that the people are choosing on their own or they can engineer somehow and manage their own condition in a better way. This is kind of a tension about subordination, how much life can be subordinated to nature if we lose control?

**Péter:**

Yeah, OK, I get it. Let's think that we are pigeons, for example, just for a minute. So where did it start? I have no idea but maybe pigeons were living somewhere outside of cities for a long time and they were enjoying it happily. But they realised that maybe they can get food somewhere where they are actually expelled out from. Now we can see the pigeons are a species whose natural habitat is actually a city. So it brings up the question of adaptation. Homo Sapiens is one of the most adaptive species. It can adapt to any new situation very quickly and maybe that ability could be a drive for engineering anything and that can be on purpose. And that purpose being to survive, for example.

*THE REPRESENTATION*

**Rafał:**

Yes, adaptation is a keyword and it was an element very much present also during the process. Let's talk a little bit about the representation of the work and about the drawings, because at the moment, when we are discussing it, the catalogue is available and people can look it up online. They will be able to see a very coherent representation of the drawings of the maps, but also the imaginary from the perspective of the living within these spaces. There is this extraordinary drawing of the settlement, which is called The Scale of Time. The very specific and nice thing about it is that the major element of the drawing is the section of the earth. It's the very small, thin layer of life on Earth, this kind of anthropocentric condition. What can you say about these ideas for the drawing?

**Sándor:**

First of all, the visuals and the drawings are not to be considered as concrete plans or solutions. They rather serve as a metaphor for the current state of affairs and our view on that. I think this is the first point on this topic.

**Panni:**

Regarding the drawing, I think it's the change of perspective we are trying to enforce or trying to communicate with this work. We need to think about ourselves as a part of this huge thing and also to be able to think within the ecological timescale and how we affect the ecosystem. Peter had a really cool example of a research when someone was making sound recordings of an area.

**Péter:**

There are scientists who call that soundscapes like Bernie Krause is a famous one American scientist, and he just records sounds out of the natural or built environment. There are two types of sounds: the biophonic sounds, which are created by animals, larvae, a natural elements, and the anthropophonic sounds, which are created by humans, aeroplane's traffic, and the noise of machines. You can see that there are no untouched areas anymore. Anthropophonic sounds are to be found everywhere on Earth. It's always about the proportion of the two. If you add the two it's called cacophonia, but how much is anthropophonic and biophonic is a really interesting question. This is also an illustration of the image that you mentioned with the settlement.

**Panni:**

His main point was that there is no untouched nature anymore. Like, it doesn't exist.

**Rafał:**

It's actually much more interesting because one can nicely confront it with the drawings where the major presence is the amount of the trees that are spreading. There is a drawing that shows the trees spreading in time with the different conditions. This is the first thing that pops up into the eye. I like very much how this aligns with the idea of the model and how it was made, the whole process which serves to convey the idea of the chemical reaction that manages to overflow and overtake everything. How did you come up with this idea?

**Sándor:**

The reference of our model doesn't show even the territorial scale. The focus is to present there how the living space is shaped by the process we describe. In general, we think the curatorial concept presents a different approach with the tools of the classic architectural presentation medium, and it was important for us to show the time factor as on the drawing and the process of change despite this static presentation framework of the exhibition. And how does the model work? We just add the salt crystals layer by layer on this living space. What is very important is that the process cannot be fully controlled and it also reflects our basic idea of the project.

**Rafał:**

I remember the tests we were taking here in Wrocław. It was extremely exciting to see the first results when you came up with the recipe, with the mixture, how to make it and we noticed how it really works, how the salt started to grow over time. We were extremely surprised with the effect which can be seen on the model itself.

**Péter:**

Sándor's mother is a chemistry teacher. So we had some backup from family.

**Sándor:**

But we tried a lot of different possibilities, because, for example, the normal table salt works also very well, but it makes a different kind of crystals. We were also researching the best crystal forms.

**Péter:**

And I think it's also extremely interesting how the layers are different, because the first layer is something that you cannot really see, it's almost there but nothing really happened. With the second layer it gets faster, it gets bigger. And the third layer has just hid everything that was built by the model makers. It's like exponentially changing, not linear.

*THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC*

**Rafał:**

This is absolutely remarkable, and if I remember right now, it's been one year ago. Since then everything was suspended and we are still somehow in this weird time of the pandemic. At that precise moment when we were finishing the exhibition the COVID was acknowledged in Europe. But no one knew how it's all going to end. The problem of the exhibition was a minor one, it was set in delay and we had to face much bigger problems of the daily routine. However, after this year of time, I guess everyone had particular thoughts about their own work. We were also wondering, what are your thoughts about your work after the year of time? Would you change anything to the project?

**Panni:**

I don't think we would change it. We think it's really in perfect accordance with the situation of the pandemic. First of all, it shows perfectly how humans have gained territory over other species. The chances for such disease outbreaks are getting larger and larger. The other thing is that we have a situation where everyone experiences the same thing, so we have this common ideology, which in this case is the common threat to our health and economics, that makes us collaborate, as individuals and also as different nations. Besides that, we also adapted very well. The aspect of adaptation you can see in this one year by how our lives have changed. It feels almost like it's normal. We have new social habits and new rules regarding public health. The space where we live has gotten much smaller and limited, but we got used to it. We have managed to change our lives so we can live in the current situation. I think it's almost like part of a project – having this exhibition right now in this pandemic.

**Rafał:**

Adaptation is such a good word in here, again, it returns back from the project as the driving force for it. Another one question is about the role of the countryside, was it articulated by COVID or did it amplify the interests of people in the countryside? Did you observe anything like this?



**Péter:**

It's a place to escape from the city, and I think it's the same kind of relationship when we say that the countryside is the food storage of the city or its treasure mind. I still think it's not equal. One of them is subordinated to the other. We can also say that it reflects how capitalism really works, because those people who could afford that or who had that kind of job which made it happen, they could move to the countryside, but otherwise nothing really changed because this kind of relationship between urban and rural didn't change.

**Rafał:**

Whenever people get in terms with the pandemia or whenever it would be mitigated in terms of the causality, do you think that any kind of new order or new ways of living will be established, or will we simply return to the normal as we wanted before? Or is it just the idea but everyone wants things to get back to the same?

**Péter:**

I think there are these dichotomies. One thing you mention: the relationship between Africa and Europe, for example, the colonised and the coloniser. I think there's the same kind of relationship between Eastern Europe and Western Europe. We always wanted to be Western Europe, but we cannot be because we are Eastern Europe or Central Europeans. It's different. We have to accept and we have to live the idea that we have a different attitude and we have to make it 100 percent. I think this is the same kind of relationship between the rural areas and the urban areas. It's just different in scales like a fractal. You go down and you find the same kind of it's a dichotomy. I'm not sure if humans can think differently because we always need something on the other side, because this is how we make or define the groups. It's important to be a part of a group, so there has to be someone on the other side as well.

**Panni:**

You think we will return to normal?

**Sándor:**

No, no, but I hope not. I think that's why these kinds of projects are very important.

**László:**

I think many of us will return to the previous normal and many of us will adapt to the new normal situation.

**Péter:**

Regarding this new normal and old normal, at the beginning we also said that we think both the environment and the buildings are not something that we create but are created by our culture. And the solution to this very complicated problem is if we make a change in our heads, it will not change us by itself. So if we change, then there's a new normal. If you don't change and you don't treat our project or you don't want to understand our project, then I don't think there's a new normal.

**Rafał:**

I think this is a good bottom line to the whole conversation. Thank you so much. Thank you for your time and for everything that you said today.

**Gubahamori + Filip + László Demeter:**

Thank you very much.

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