



The bilingual architect

Description

I retain fond memories of *Biology 101* – a lab-based undergraduate science elective in which we lab-coat rookies dissected Formaldehyde-soaked frogs and weighed the collective scalps of lamented snap-frozen drosophila. Not least, we learned the language of nature: zygotes and gametes, monocots and dicots, dominants and recessives, liverworts and mosses.

But no bio-vocabularizing prepares you for the zoo of terms appropriated and invented to conjoin nature with architecture. Rachel Armstrong provides a helpful summary of terms in her interesting book: *Vibrant Architecture*.

She defines “vibrant architecture” as “a stochastic form of architecture that is compatible with a Nature-based method of architectural production” (41). Vibrant architecture is less about improved industrial practices based on nature’s models, buildings as living entities, or artefacts inspired by the natural world; rather, it is an architecture that taps into nature as “deconstructed and stripped of its aestheticisms to reveal its raw, relentlessly material character” (23). I interpret this crudely as an architecture that acknowledges the informal, and the compositionally inconvenient, if not inelegant, nature as *mess*.

Other terms she defines include: process philosophy, complexity, actant, assemblage, natural and post-natural, ecological living technology, synthetic biology, protocell, natural computing, morphological computing, vibrant matter, and inorganic sympathy.

Biogenesis

But none of the terms have been as profligate as *biology* itself. Here’s a list of some commonly occurring bio-oriented portmanteau terms I’ve encountered in the bio-architectural literature: bio-3D-printing, biocides, biocolonisation, biocompatible, biocomputation, biodesign, biodeteriation, biodigital, biofouling, bioinformatics, bioinspiration, biolinguistics, biological computer, biomaterial, biome, biomimesis, biomimetic, biomimicry, biomorphic, bioreactive, bioresponsive, bioscaffolds, biosphere, biosynthesis, biotechnology, biotone. Further terms appear in the recently published and aptly titled *The Routledge Companion to Biology in Art and Architecture*.

As I'm interested in biosemiotics, it cannot go unremarked just how amenable certain terms are to combination, and subsequent proprietorial and disciplinary claim, branding, and even innovation. The prefix *bio-* derives from the Greek *bios*, meaning *course of life*. A *logia* is a *discourse*. So a biology is a discourse about the course of a human life, i.e. what happens, or at least an account of what happens, during someone's life. Biology is the study of the life course, and not just of humans but any organism. So biology equates to organic life. On the other hand, a discourse about a human life is now consigned to writing about it: i.e. biography (*graphos* as *writing*).

Bio then appears as an abbreviated form of both *biology* and *biography* – organic life and life stories. Biology has overtaken biography in the stakes for portmanteau dominance. Few would think that biocide means the death of a biographer, biodesign as the design of a biography, or that biomimesis is the impersonation of someone's life story.

Through its etymology at least, biology is grounded in story-telling, language and communication. So biology enjoys a literary and even semiotic foundation of sorts, at least as expressed in English and other European languages that have commerce with Ancient Greek and Latin.

The classical (Greek and Latin) words *geographia*, *genesis*, *organum* and *technologia* provide similar fecundity in the lexicon of linguistic and disciplinary invention (*geo-*, *geno-*, *organo-* and *techno-*). The Latin *natura* (nature) is less productive, offering fewer possibilities for hybridization, and *physicus* (natural science) fares little better.

So perhaps the form of the word *nature* and its progenitors contributes to its isolation and the difficulties we have in understanding that to which it refers – or perhaps that is nature's strength.

After such an assemblage, all that remains is to wish readers and bloggers a Merry Biomass!



References

- Armstrong, Rachel. 2015. *Vibrant Architecture: Matter as a Codesigner of Living Structures*. Warsaw: Gruyter Open
- Terranova, Charissa N., and Meredith Tromble (eds). 2016. *The Routledge Companion to Biology in Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge

Note

- Image is of Christmas trees for sale in Broughton.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. architecture
2. biology
3. biosemiotics

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Author

rcoyne99

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