The 4th Nature

If per Cicero, wilderness was the first nature, agriculture the second and the garden the third, then the city and its planetary supply chains is the fourth. The old idea of nature as a wild thing out there, over the city walls no longer exists. The city has now reached the ends of the earth where it confronts its fundamental problem: the burgeoning life of our cities is causing the slow, horrible death of nature.

The problem is both conceptual and material. Conceptually, the very word “nature” gives rise to culture as its antithesis and whatever is antithetical to nature cannot survive. Inversely, if by nature we mean everything; then subsumed as such, culture is natural and its latest expression in the planetary efflorescence of urbanization is simply evolution at work. Gazing down from the satellite one is then hard pressed to find any ethical footing.

But these are word games, for if by nature we specifically mean non-human species of plant and animal then the blood is on our hands. Materially, since the life of the city ultimately depends on terrestrial ecology, the death of plants and animals is not only appalling in and of itself, it also means, ultimately, the death of the city: the death of civility. And that too would be only natural.

If it is to endure – not to colonize other planets but learn to dwell on this one— the challenge for the planetary city is to avoid its environmental success becoming its demise. In other words, to avoid the ‘tragedy of the commons’ the city cannot just continue to grow unconsciously through selfish actions, it must be designed with collective foresight which in turn must now be based on feedback from the environmental conditions of the Earth System as a whole. In short, cities need to be redesigned in terms of the ecological flows within which they are nested. This much we know.

But how? It is in the very nature of the city to resist ecological flows. The 4th nature is one yet to be invented, one which strikes a tension between flow and resistance, one which is neither culture nor nature, but a new amalgam of the two.