

Article

Let the Trees ‘Talk’: Giving Voice to Nature through an Immersive Experience

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Abstract: Current decision-making regarding urban design, architecture, and spatial planning often emphasizes existing power balances, which historically have excluded other humans, such as indigenous people, and nature from conversations and decision-making. The purpose of this study is to explore if and how an empathic experience could give insights into how nature can be given a voice, and, more concretely, how a group of trees on the TEC campus in Monterrey would feel about a sudden change in their direct environment. The methodology is divided into three parts. The first is the explanation of the case study and immersion of the (human) participants in the site. The second stage consists of deep listening and reproducing the imagined expressions of the trees. In the third stage, the participants return from the site, evaluate, and formulate a manifesto. The experience suggests that it is possible to inspire human beings to imagine what trees would have to say if we only imagined their language. It also shows that it is possible to gain access to a formerly hidden environment. The conclusion is that the empathic access to these formerly muted worlds, such as those of nature or socially marginalized peoples, can strengthen our understanding of, and our ability to resolve, the current environmental crisis.

Keywords: nature speaks; immersion; voice to trees; empathic practice; Monterrey



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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, almost 70% of global biodiversity has been lost [1,2]. The major causes that have led to this reduction are found in the introduction of invasive species in many biomes in the landscape [3], transformational land use change of large areas into agricultural lands, and the overexploitation of natural resources, pollution, and climate change [4]. For instance, more than “15 billion trees are cut down each year, and the global number of trees has fallen by approximately 46% since the start of human civilization” [5] (p. 201). The clearing, fragmentation, or degradation of forests has been accelerating ever since [6]. This has resulted in a ‘nature crisis’ [4], giving reason for the need to fundamentally bend the curve [7].

In urban design, the urban environment is planned to meet the needs of human beings, establishing a walkable grid of streets, close to work and the necessities of life. It requires connection between the systems that form the city, such as people-moving networks, energy networks, communication networks, and road networks [8]. This way of thinking reflects the Anthropocene, a newly defined geological era, which emphasizes the central role of mankind in impacting geological and ecological processes [9].

During the last 150 years, this Anthropocenic mindset has become common in urban planning practice. It views nature as a resource to accommodate the needs of the urban inhabitants, the buildings of urban infrastructure, and it keeps the urban fabric going. Nature itself has limited or no influence on making decisions for the future regarding the way cities are designed and developed. Generally, urban planners, policy makers and politicians do not consult, nor share, the decision-making with nature, or natural entities—these being all living non-human organisms—as individual species and/or are

united in ecosystems. Nature, or natural entities such as trees, rivers, forests, or mountains, are not in the room when these decisions are made, nor are they represented by human beings. Although it is well accepted that animals, trees, and plants are communicating with each other, they do not use the same language or have the capacity for speech that humans do. Speech, using words and sentences that are understandable to humans, is the only part of communication that all non-human organisms do not share with human beings. Therefore, to include nature's interests in human deliberations, these must be spoken through human utterances. The presence of nonhuman nature in deliberation about environmental choices thus requires human representation. There is no reason to assume that those who are morally considerable should be limited to those who can be involved in deliberations [10] (p. 266).

In this article, a distinction is made between human beings and other forms of nature, living or non-living. This is because of the dominant influence human beings have had on their environment so far. It is argued that to include these other forms of living and non-living nature in the planning and decision-making process, a more regenerative future can be achieved. The investigation is therefore focused on understanding and representing trees to give them a voice in the current planning process. This also is the limiting factor of this study, as it is an experience at a small scale, with a limited amount of people and trees. Ideally, this experience shall be expanded and repeated on a much larger scale.

2. Problem and Background

The colonialist mindset views the earth as an inert entity to be exploited using technology and science. Modern humanity has largely adopted this mindset. However, even scientific discourse struggles with hidden forces of violent and unprecedented climate events. Therefore, nonhumans must be given the space so that they can, and do, communicate [11] and restore their voices as part of our (human) stories [12,13] (p. 257).

The core problem is that in this context, humans have continued to form cities, use resources, and exploit non-human organisms; they then eventually make their terraformed constructs which are only possible by altering the surroundings extensively, which is the exact cause of their vulnerability [12] (p. 144). Wherever people subject their environment and bend the landscape to their will, they themselves seem to suffer the most from the adverse effects. It seems that suppressing and silencing nature eventually has reverse impacts. Or, as Amitav Ghosh questions, "Western scientists who believed that non-White peoples were by nature brutish, lacking in sensibility, and effectively mute were wrong. What if they were wrong also about the inertness and brute materiality of "Nature"? What if the people who could see signs of vitality, life and meaning in beings of many other kinds were right all along? What if the idea that the Earth teems with other beings who act, communicate, tell stories, and make meaning is taken seriously. And why should this be unlikely"? [12] (p. 197).

The extraction of resources by Western, brutal practices during colonial times muted 'other' peoples as well as non-human entities (everything (in)organic besides humans, such as animals, plants, stones, land, and water [14]). The signals from non-human nature, which take the shape of disasters, climate hazards, and other movements, can be seen as an illustration of the fact that they are no longer muted. According to Ghosh, "Bacteria viruses, glaciers, forests, the jet stream, all other beings and forces,—have unmuted themselves and are now thrusting themselves so exigently on our attention that they can no longer be ignored or treated as elements of an inert Earth" [12] (pp. 196–197).

To start listening to these unmuted expressions, we can learn from peoples that have kept a sense of sacredness of the natural environment. Peoples in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are an important source for understanding and knowledge on regenerating nature. In Asia, for example, consumerism-driven people are reconnecting with Earth-oriented movements, abiding sacred forests, lands, and waters. Here, the vitality of the landscape creates commonalities amongst the people that dwell in it and connect people despite their origins [12] (p. 221). If we apply these principles to the design of (places in) a city,

the landscape should be seen as the uniting entity, enabling the voices of people and nature that were formerly not heard to become part of the conversation. When planning and deciding about the future of the city, the landscape provides a platform to connect urban commonalities. Therefore, the landscape should be put first when planning for urban environments [15–21]. If we want to include vulnerable communities, indigenous peoples, and nature in the design and planning of our future urban environments, those groups should be offered a voice in decision-making processes. This requires humans to intrinsically be(come) nature and represent it in decision-making. The question is if and how to achieve this. This can be attempted in different ways:

- By understanding the forms of language and communication in nature.
- By capturing and giving a voice to nature.
- By creating a formal role for nature within organizations, and/or as a lawful entity with legal rights.

2.1. *Understanding the Language of Nature*

Nature's language is inherently related to its presence in human activities as a continuously changing activity with dynamics at several levels [22] (p. 44). Trees and plants may not have a moral standard [23,24]. They are "having a sentient, intelligent relationality of agentic, conscious, innovative entities embedded in unique, community-based lifeways" [25]. Trees and plants are seen to have a deliberate purpose and aim to control their own existence [26,27]. They communicate and are socially connected, taking care of their fellow community members, and keeping them alive [28] using "a vast network of roots and fungi working together", in a 'wood-wide web' [29,30]. So, trees and plants do have a language and they communicate and talk, at least with each other [31], but their intelligence is often not included in any (human) deliberation or decision-making.

2.2. *Giving Nature a Voice*

The willingness and capacity to speak and to be heard—in a deliberate democracy model—is unevenly distributed across class, gender, race, and ethnicity. The direct voices of nonhuman nature and future generations are absent. These require others to speak on their behalf. But who speaks for nature and with what legitimacy [10] (p. 263)? In order to hear the voice of nature in human decision-making processes, it can only be represented by humans, who in sufficient numbers internalize the interests of nature to secure the protection it deserves [32] (p. 844).

2.3. *Allowing Nature to (Co)decide*

Once the language of nature is understood, and it is given a strong enough voice, the third element is then to allow nature to play a role in decision-making processes. One way to arrange this is to give nature a seat at the table where decisions are made, or even to make it the CEO [33–35]. Another way is to give nature lawful rights, which has also been put into practice in many ways and in many countries granting legal rights to nature or natural objects, such as rivers, forests, or ecosystems [36]. Nature, from the Whanganui river in New Zealand to the immense Amazon rainforest, has the right to exist, flourish, thrive, and maintain ecological processes [37]. However, as the inclusion of Mother Earth in the Bolivian legal system illustrates, this is only "a reiteration of current western viewpoints in which the rights of nature neutralize political conflict, hence extending the juridical logic to non-humans" [38].

To give nature lawful rights may not be a fundamentally novel concept, but it can contribute significantly to opening up opportunities for nature to speak to us (humans). For too long, nature has not been a factor in decisions made by human beings. The way we recognize the sound, the will, and the rights of nature is important in re-establishing our relationship with nature. It may open up the space we need for the emergence of a "kincentric ecology" [39] in which space and time are made for the aliveness, intersubjectivity, and perspectives of trees and all nonhumans and for the knowledge systems of natural laws and

design in which “all living beings co-operate and co-create” [40] (p. 73). This would enable “the return of space-time chronotope, (Chronotope: a concept for the cultural analysis of space and time, considering all the different voices involved in social processes) of a healthy past to that of a healthy future”, as called for by the Quechua concept of pachacutij [41] (p. 256), which means ‘the turn of the world’ in the Quechua language.

Translating this into principles that are useful in design processes, five biocentric principles to include nature are defined and deemed essential [42]:

- To actively include non-human needs in the design process (the bio-inclusive principle).
- To consider that all living beings are mutually interdependent, with interconnections not always evident or visible (the bio-rhizomatic principle).
- To actively seek environmental rebalancing via the recognition and re-establishment of synergies between living beings, and between these living beings and the natural environment (the bio-synergetic principle).
- To consider in equal manner the relevance of all forms of life, whether human or non-human (the bio-equity principle).
- To interact with nature, leading to a fundamental reciprocity, with changes in nature changing ourselves and vice versa. Reciprocity, in turn, requires interaction, exchange, and proximity (the mutual becoming principle).

In the immersive experimentation process, these principles have been concretized and used to define the operating space in which the experiment could take place.

3. Materials and Methods

The core question is how to include nature in a decision-making process, and what would nature’s voice be? To experience this, a site at the campus of Tecnológico de Monterrey, in Monterrey, which is suggested as the location to build the new architecture faculty, is used as an example. On the site, there are approximately 35 mature trees (Figure 1). These trees form a community, an urban forest if you wish, that provides cooling, humidity, shade, and biodiversity to the people working and passing by this zone on campus.

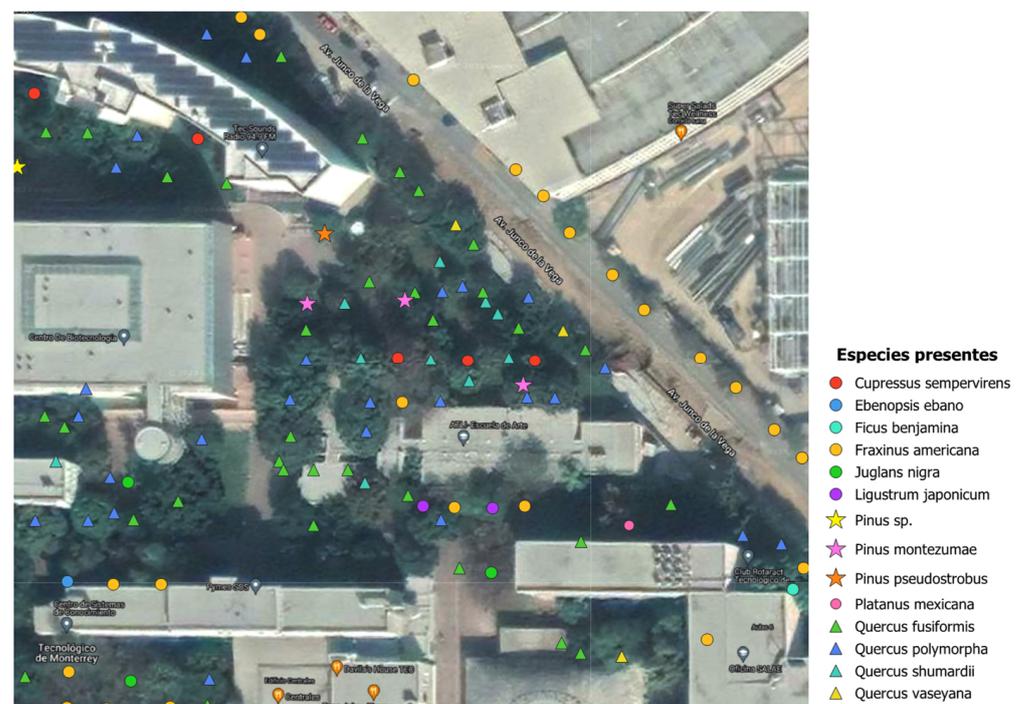


Figure 1. Site with the existing tree species (especies presentes).

3.1. Methodology

Methodologically, the experience builds on the work of David Kolb [43,44], Ann Baker et al. [45], Mike Sullivan [46], and Chris Kayes [47] who emphasize that new knowledge is created in conversations during experiential sessions, no matter how long or short these last. Indigenous knowledge creation works in the same way, out of relational exchange between all, human and non-human, with new knowledge emerging, often by having a jar [48,49]. This process of deducting new knowledge while undergoing an experience and talking about this is combined with (participatory) Action Research [50,51], in which the researcher is part of the experience, and Appreciative Inquiry [52–55], which emphasizes the positive interaction during the experience and investigation. The experience is therefore used as the platform for both generating the knowledge and recording the findings. Moreover, the approach to investigate the relationship between human beings and other forms of life or non-living things fits in recent scientific developments in other academic fields such as in archeology, which intensively discusses the question of agency of non-human entities, and how to interpret the relationality between human beings and other beings [56,57].

For this investigation to be successful, it aimed to create an immersive experience for the participants. The people involved would need to feel as if they are becoming part of nature, becoming a tree. For this, a specific methodology has been developed that establishes a safe space and presents a challenge to engage. The main stages of the experience were (1) the introduction and move to the site, (2) the immersive experience, and (3) the return and evaluation of the experience.

3.1.1. Introduction and Walking to the Site

The experience started in a conference room, where all participants (who voluntarily subscribed to this workshop) came together. The group was very diverse and consisted of people from different countries (Mexico, the US, and the UK), genders, and experience levels both academically (senior professors and consultants, academic staff, Master, and Bachelor students) and practically (leaders and ecological experts of the campus planning and maintenance team). Although the people were not pre-selected by the organizers of the experience, they were part of a broader international conference on design (RSD24). Therefore, the group of participants was already interested in this type of experience.

Before walking to the site, the leaders of the workshop provided an explanation of the case study and the conditions of the experiment. The case study is the new architecture building that is planned exactly where the trees, and hence the participants, in the experience are located. The architects' /decision-makers' plan was to remove the trees and replant them elsewhere. The conditions in the experience were such that the facilitator of the experience created a safe environment, in which the expression of everyone was respected, and that the participants felt at ease to say anything they wanted, and nothing that was raised would be seen as strange, an impossibility, or wrong. In this environment "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking" [58,59]. Moreover, psychological safety is also identified as a key factor for innovative learning and knowledge creation [59]. In practice, to create such a safe environment, the facilitator needs to be very sensitive, and constantly check in with the participants about how they feel during the session, by looking at their body language, potential hesitance to say certain things, and so forth. This is a skill that cannot be explained in absolute terms but is essential in allowing people to express themselves freely.

After this introduction, the group walked to the site. This took approximately 20 min. Everyone was asked to start a conversation with other group members to enhance the conversation about how people would feel if they had to move to another place just because someone had planned to construct a building where they had their home.

Upon arrival at the site, the immersive process began.

3.1.2. Immersive Process

After arrival, the group was asked to stand in-between the trees in a circle, so that everyone could see each other. Everyone was asked to close their eyes for two minutes, be quiet, and imagine being one of the trees, being part of a community, an urban forest. Then, they were asked to take a deep breath and register how they felt, being a part of nature.

While standing there, the current context was presented as follows: “Here, a large new building is planned to be constructed. It will be just in front of you (tree), maybe even on top of you (tree). They promise to move you (tree) to another place”. The question was asked to see how the participants would feel about this, and whether they, as trees, would like or dislike certain parts of the planned change on the site [60].

At this stage, a process of empathy strengthening started. Participants were asked to use all senses to activate acute, active, and receptive awareness and sensitivity with their entire body, trying to hear in a way that they could be “fully present with what is happening in the moment without trying to control it or judge it” [61]. This is needed in order to cultivate an expanded awareness [62]. This way, the perception can be moved from the mind and head to the heart and belly. Sensing the trees and the environment makes it possible to divert from rationality, linearity, judgement, and preconceived ideas. Instead, it opens the senses to nonlinearity that welcomes the unexpected, where stilled presence, receptivity, and reflexive discernment can be cultivated as an “innate ability [that] lies dormant in all of us” [63] (p. 6). This inner space is called “the intuitive field, comprising of an inner ear, hearing the subtle voice of nature” [64] (p. 73). This process allows for the empowerment of nonhuman concerns, perspectives, and planetary roles [25]. The boundaries that have separated humans from the life-worlds of nonhumans that they share can be contested and reworked [65] (p. 205).

During this phase of the immersive experiment, several primers were put forward to enhance the flow of thoughts. The following questions were asked to the participants (as if they imagined being a tree):

- Being a tree, what decisions would you make for this site?
- Being one of the trees, do you want to stay or move, and if so where to?
- As a tree, what would be the conditions for constructing something at the site?
- Thinking about the future, as a tree, what is important to you?
- Being a tree, what future do you want to propose for the site?

The participants were free to speak whenever they felt like speaking, to whatever question or thoughts they might have. With these primers, the immersive part of the experience was finished. The whole session was recorded. Despite the immersion of the participants, the methodology was limited by the (un)conscious human projection of their thoughts onto the trees. Besides this, the trial was limited in time, and therefore not extensive enough to fully develop the skills needed and the long commitment required to communicate with trees.

3.1.3. Return and Evaluation

After the immersive part ended, the group walked back, giving them time and space to contemplate the session. Upon returning to the meeting room, the experience was evaluated, feelings were condensed, and suggestions and concrete proposals were discussed. As much time as the participants deemed appropriate was reserved for this evaluation. The findings were collected and turned into a written reflection of the experience with which everyone felt satisfied.

4. Results

4.1. Recorded Quotes

During the 30 min immersive session, the main quotes were collected and grouped. The participants responded in the conversation as if they were trees. Several quotes were found to be directly related to the (re)moval or replacement of the trees:

“My roots are compressed, I feel acidity, and I am high on CO₂, it is very noisy to be a tree here”.

“As long as my roots are kept together and protected, I am fine with moving to a greener space”.

“If I could choose my place, I would choose a natural forest”.

“If I would have to leave this place and moved to somewhere else that would really be traumatic”.

Other comments by the participants aiming to empathize with the trees were about the relationship of the trees with humans, and were specifically related to the architects of the future building:

“Humans need me as much as I need them. Can we have a collaboration”?

“This could be a place where people hug me, and they learn about my behavior, my life, and the environment”.

“We want to have a conversation with the planners and architects”.

“I will not integrate in your project, but you need to be aware that you enter my environment with your project. Think you project around me and everything around me. You are in my territory, not the other way around”.

“Architects don’t know my language so I need a translator to express my feelings and wishes”.

“I want to have personhood, and have the legal right to exist, so if you mess around with me or kill me you are screwed. You can’t just destroy me and cut me down”.

Finally, a set of quotes related to the (natural) way of growing, the life of the tree, and what demands and desires they had were expressed:

“I am losing my freedom to grow. My roots are not able to grow large enough to support my canopy”.

“I am part of all life. I want to feel the soil, the leaves, and other plants that grow around me and attract other animals, insects, and birds”.

“There is a nutrient rich soil here and there is plenty of space to get more of my kind along, there is space for many of my brothers and sisters”.

“I would like to have a nutrient pond and a diversity of companions that are not similar as me because together we make a healthier forest”.

“What I would love the most is to have more companions with me here. I mean more and other trees so we can form a true forest community”.

“I want to feel alive as a natural tree, in my own natural habitat: I need space to grow, the freedom to live, the air, water and nutrients to flourish, and I need more fellow trees around me so we can form an urban forest together, doubling the amount of us”.

The separate quotes of the participants have been grouped and subsequently used in the conversation after the immersive experiment itself.

4.2. Clustering of Findings

Based on the clustered comments during the immersive experience and the in-depth conversation and evaluation of the experiment afterwards, the thoughts, quotes, and reflections have been turned into a joint manifesto. The manifesto was written immediately after the immersive experience, and it was composed by the participants, just after returning to the room. The actual text is slightly more rationalistic because when people put their experiences into words, it is rationalized, but it reflects largely their experiences. Besides

this, the participants also aimed to direct the manifesto towards the decision-makers, which they did not need to worry about when they were in the immersive experience. This has also influenced the language used. The relevant elements of this manifesto are the following:

“In choosing the location for the new architecture building on the TEC-campus in Monterrey, the urban forest has not been consulted. So far, the architectural design process has not been opened to a conversation with the existing trees on the site. As community of trees, we have been given the opportunity to speak, through immersion by 13 participants in the ‘what-would-nature-think’ experiment. This gave us the possibility to express our preferences, insights, and contributions to the design and development of the site.

As a community of trees, an urban forest, we do not want to leave this place. Even though the conditions are urban and environmentally not optimal (acidity, noise, concrete pavements), replacing us to another, maybe even better, place still doesn’t make us happy. We lose our companions and friends, and we will, most likely, be overgrown by healthier trees that are living in the new place. Moreover, we have so much to offer to the site were we currently live: shade, oxygen, humidity, habitat.

Moving us will traumatize us. The change of home, not knowing what is going to happen, the new environment, this uncertainty, would be a traumatizing experience for us. We rather stay and glue ourselves to the soil.

We want to be taken care of in the best possible way. This means that we want to have more space to grow, to feel the freedom of deciding by ourselves where our leaves and branches take us. We want to be saved from the pinching rocky pavement and the suppressed soil. We want to feel the soil becoming alive again, filled with little creatures, water, and nutrients. We want to have more of our companions to join us at this place. A younger generation of trees that increase the diversity of age, species, and biodiversity. We want to offer our joint canopies to the students and everyone that comes here. We want to be a joy for everyone that looks at us and enjoys us.

Remember we have rights too. All over the world, rivers, mountains, forests, and landscapes have received lawful rights, so they are treated as full-fledged beings. We have the right for being who we are, where we are, and what our home entails. We need this to stay healthy, and therefore we need to have unlimited access to the fertile, living soil, the air, and the water. In return we will give you clean air, more water and humidity, more living beings, and lower temperatures. On top of this we will capture excess carbon for you, so humans will suffer less from rising temperatures. Our urban forest can become a living lab where in an open classroom everyone can learn about the importance of trees, forests, animals, plants, eco-communities for the survival of all of us on this planet.

Finally, please let us speak to the architect so we can express our needs, our wishes and our contributions to the longevity and quality of this place. We do not oppose a new building. But we also do not want the building to colonize us and our space. No, we want the building to be so exciting because it has included the lives of us and our companions in the design. To give the future architecture students, the professors and everyone on campus the best possible learning experience by immersing themselves in the nature of the place. Being in, building with and belonging to an urban forest. We want a building that truly transcends lives. The lives of young people, and our lives too”.

The manifesto is the final result of the immersive experiment. As a document, it will be communicated with planners and architects.

5. Discussion

The current environmental crisis, or polycrisis as some call it [66,67], requires a rethink of the way we develop, plan, and live in relation to our environment. When we allow for natural elements, such as trees, to contribute to the planning process, resilience can be improved and the processes of environmental degradation, social inequity, and ecological damaging might be slowed down and stopped. There is a fundamental difference between decision-making overseen by the elite and creating a process in which the parts of nature that were formerly not listened to are given a voice in the decision-making process.

This article describes the experience of a group of people that empathize with nature and aim to give a voice to what they think is important to nature. Placing humans in the position of trees in this immersive experience is a way to give the trees a voice. This is important if we want to include the perspective of nature itself in the decision-making process on how to deal with the polycrisis. When people were invited to listen deeply and speak about what they imagined, the trees would have said if they could speak the human language and their impressions could be shared. The participants in the experience felt confident in listening carefully, embraced nature, and were capable of expressing what they thought the trees could have brought forward, if they had been able to speak the human language. In this sense, the experience illuminated the potential of such an activity rather than proving that the human participants' comments represented the actual views and desires of the trees themselves.

The empathic practice undertaken in this experience has been limited in time. Communication with trees is a skill that likely requires a long commitment to fully develop. This very short research experience is helpful in order to get the conceptual process of thinking started, but the actual use of the concept in broader practice requires another level of time and skill.

The current market-driven society, however, would most likely view this experience as a playful, maybe even irrelevant exercise. Ruling parts of society benefit from keeping the status quo, so they would deem these types of experiences as extravagant. This position of the establishment reinforces existing power imbalances, as well as social and natural inequities. Many architects and urban planners have to operate in a planning and decision-making context that is, for a large part, embedded in an elitist environment. It constitutes a certain blindness to other viewpoints, such as the inclusion of the voice of nature in these processes.

However, this attitude or blindness also implies that the fundamental changes that are required in times of polycrises are not seen, nor accepted. It ignores the possible resolving power that nature and marginalized peoples have. Perceived impossibilities to access these resolving powers of nature should not lead to ignoring them. When this is due to ignorance, it would not be as dangerous as when it is ignored consciously. The experiment illustrates that muted nature can be accessed through immersive practice, and this gives reason to open the communication channels with natural elements and societally ignored groups. It can be expected that the contributions, knowledge, and solutions gained may help to tackle the environmental polycrisis.

6. Conclusions

In this article, an immersive experiment was reported as an example of connecting with formerly muted entities in nature. In this case, trees were the silenced group to which people attempted to listen deeply. By experimenting with this immersive practice, the people involved could give words to what the trees would want to speak about. This is more than a simple game. It required deep engagement, silence, and concentration on the question asked. Only then could people feel as if they were the tree. This is important because access to the tree is subtle and very specific to each individual. After immersing themselves in the experience, people were able to express what they assumed the feelings and opinions of the trees themselves might be.

It is clear that if we organize these immersive experiences, people can express and give words to explain their impression of what the trees themselves could be willing to talk about. This way, the trees are (partly) unmuted. What has worked in this experience can be applied to other natural entities, or even socially vulnerable or suppressed groups. However, this should be further investigated.

As mentioned before, environmental crises are large, and action is urgent. The current ways of taking care of our environment do not seem sufficient in resolving these problems. By including the representation by human beings of what they believe the trees would have said, an extra layer of thought can be added to decision-making. By doing so, it opens the door to a greater influence of considerations that human beings think are desired by trees. In this sense, it is an opportunity to enrich the spectrum of viewpoints that contribute to decision-making. It may increase the overall chances that valuable and/or effective responses are found to resolve these urgent issues. The experience that was undertaken was small and should be upscaled. A first step, however, is for human beings to be given access to becoming able to listen to trees that were formerly excluded from future-oriented conversations.

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