

The Magazine for  
New Design Culture,  
Creative Visionaries,  
Eco Entrepreneurs &  
Purpose Driven Economy

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THE-NOMAD-MAGAZINE.COM

[ ISSUE NO 12/2022 ]

14 € | DE  
15 £ | UK  
19 SFR | CH

n°  
12



# nomad



# TOBIAS LUTHE

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MIND  
FOLLOWS  
NATURE

In this day and age, it's hard to believe in a bright future. The world is in crisis mode, striving to avert the worst, and that leaves little room for looking ahead and for life-affirming visions. *But inspiration dies last*, says Tobias Luthe. I catch up with the 46-year-old sustainability scientist and regenerative design expert on a video platform; he's in Oslo, where he spends several weeks a year lecturing at the School of Architecture and Design. Luthe has chosen the snowy peak of Monte Viso as his background for the call. The iconic mountain in the Western Alps is a statement, a beacon of progress. Nature is Luthe's fount of strength. Through and with nature, he shatters old certainties and dismantles spatial dimensions of our thinking in order to reassemble them into a new, richer and more multi-faceted whole.

At the foot of the stunningly beautiful Piedmontese mountain, Luthe has joined forces with an ever-growing community of scientists, students, entrepreneurs, activists, friends and visitors to establish the MonViso Institute, a real-world laboratory for testing and exploring sustainable living environments. By doing so, he and his team are helping to wrest the little mountain village of Ostana from the brink of extinction, while also releasing design from the yoke of joyless functionality or subjective aesthetics. For Luthe, artefacts like the *Grown brand* skis he designed and made from hemp, which won him the 2018 ISPO Eco Achievement Award, are keys to new areas of thought in which we can reimagine the interconnection and impact of our activities as interactions with our natural environment.





The war in Ukraine has shattered the peace order in Europe, the World Climate Council’s warnings of the irreversible impacts of climate change are becoming ever more dramatic, and COVID-19 has taken its toll on us. Does the topic of sustainability even have a chance in the face of these multitudinous crises?

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The endless suffering unleashed by all these crises naturally takes front and centre stage. At the same time, every crisis is also the birth of an opportunity. Recurrent instability generates stability and is the only way to arrive at stable systems. It’s a law of nature. Throughout the entire history of humanity, sustainability has never been more important than it is now. We have reached a point where multiple and diverse crises are taking effect, overlapping and invigorating each other. To break this dynamic, we need new cultures of thinking. All challenge, whether it involves climate or environmental action, freedom or democracy, ultimately leads to a crucial question: how can we, as human beings, create an economic and social future that is worth living, based on limited ecosystem services?

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What’s your answer to that question?

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By establishing a new relationship with nature. Although we’re part of the natural world, we have completely lost our connection to it. Our relationship with nature is the path that will guide us through the complexity of the world we inhabit. We need to abandon the paradigm that nature and economy are irreconcilable opposites. Our connection to

our natural environment is our impetus for developing new approaches, new scope for action and new practices—— new tools —— to deal with this quivering, jellied mass of complexity, as I imagine it. We can only achieve this by changing the cultural and mental approaches that we adopt. The bedrock for this change is trust: trust in ourselves, in our social networks and in nature itself. In fact, you could say, trust in mutual dependence with everything around us.

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The term *tools* probably makes most people think of technical gadgets for making life easier, whereas the tools you mean are geared more towards spirituality. How can a fundamental trust in nature become the cradle of concrete progress?

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Through outdoor experiences, activities set in natural environments that go beyond our comfort zone. Like mountain hikes or bike tours that engage the mind as well as the body. In this curated environment, we can start to ponder what a bioregional economy could be like. We need to realise that we need distance to achieve progress. Everything always has to happen so fast, and usually leaves us panting along behind. That goes for all areas——politics, consumption, mobility, information processing.

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So is it fair to say you’re creating spaces for new ways of thinking through simplification and inspiration?

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Yes, that's it. We need a new culture of conscious living, and a simpler environment like a mountain village is very helpful in reaching this. It streamlines life; people can immerse themselves in the elements, ground themselves more effectively, recalibrate themselves and reacquaint themselves with real-life processes. One of our projects in Ostana involves building skis from hemp which we harvest ourselves at an altitude of 1500 metres. This draws wholly new horizons of experience and knowledge, not confined in a vacuum of specialism, but transdisciplinary. And while I'm exploring the versatility and diversity of hemp as a material, I'm also thinking about the future of Alpine tourism and encountering the consequences of climate change at first hand as I ski over the few remnants of the glaciers. During all this, I can familiarise myself with the eco-footprint of the product.

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You set up the MonViso Institute, a real-life laboratory, in Ostana in 2015. What are the distinguishing features of a laboratory like this?

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A real-life laboratory is a physical space in which experiments can be performed, and mistakes can be made. Unlike a closed-shop chemical laboratory, it's part of the real world. It is subject to environmental impacts. That's what makes it so exciting. But first and foremost, a real-life laboratory is a journey. It's not something you just set up and that's all there is to it. When I first visited the village seven years ago, many people had already poured years of effort into combating the

depopulation crisis. We would never have come into contact with the inhabitants without the new *rifugio*. But as it was, our commitment had the effect of an enzyme, a catalyst triggering an upswing. It's important to realise that the MonViso Institute is not only made up of buildings and land; at the same time it's part of a community which is itself connected with various other areas in turn.

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How do you transfer the findings from your real-life laboratory to urban environments?

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What we're embracing at places like Ostana is a blend of knowledge input and inspiration. These flow experiences, this new creative force, can kick-start engagement——perhaps taking the form of involvement in a neighbourhood community or joining in with activities in the district. Noise, dirt, crowds and anonymity are all things that we only become aware of once we have cleared them from our daily lives and opened up space for alternatives. The same goes for our all-prevailing culture of winter sports. I find its corollary of blind consumerism repellent. Once you've built skis yourself, you gain an understanding of supply chains, resource consumption and material cycles, and that may well impel you to choose more thoughtful ways of enjoying the winter.

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Of course, skis don't exactly exert the most powerful leverage for mitigating climate change; that would be in the hands of industries like construction, which is responsible for 40 per cent of global greenhouse-gas

Dr. Tobias Luthe is an academic transdisciplinary hybrid. He is currently Associate Professor for Sustainability Science and Regenerative Design at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design (Norway), ETH Zürich and the University of Freiburg. At ETHZ he is head of the Systemic Design Labs teaching project series, hybridising science, design and transformative praxis. He is co-founding director of the MonViso Institute in the Italian Alps, a real-world laboratory for sustainability transitions and regenerative design. And he co-founded Grown, a design-with-nature lab and experience collective winning industry awards for biocomposites such as hemp skis. Tobias is a mountaineering guide and photographer.



emissions. What can your hemp skis tell us about tackling major global challenges?

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The skis are an example of systemic thinking, which can easily be mapped onto the field of construction. The same levels of decision-making are present in both, albeit on different scales. Here, too, the crucial issue is alternative raw materials and supply chains that need to offer the maximum climate neutrality and resilience, such as bioregional sources. These times of uncertainty are hitting home precisely how vulnerable we are in many areas. If we want to scale back our dependence on imported raw materials, we need to start by producing much more ourselves and creating alternatives, then using them more efficiently. Hemp is a good example for demonstrating the workings of a systemic circular materials economy; it can be used for food, say, if we think of our dependence on imported wheat; or for textiles, or as building insulation. Using hemp as a construction material enables us to store far more carbon than wood in terms of both area and time, because hemp grows much faster.

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Leopold Kohr, the economist who inspired the *small is beautiful* movement, once called for a return to the *human scale*. In your view, how can this return to a smaller scale be reconciled with large-scale living?

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We've undertaken exciting research on the subject of resilience—the ability of complex systems to adapt and innovate. Our work examined the question of which was more resilient, small mountain villages or larger

networks of communities. After analysing such networks, we came up with clear evidence that the greatest resilience is shown by a network of smaller regions linked to form a larger system. It's more effective because it results in more diversity and more opportunities—but only if the smaller com-

munities within it remain intact. Only then does the larger system make sense. This means we need global debate. We need transnational alliances. But in order to create them, we need functioning local and regional systems, communities that know and help each other. This framework can be mapped onto cities and bioregions; the regional level is crucial because the system needs to be large enough to serve as an activating force for resources, diversity and certain supply chains. On the other hand, I see politically drawn boundaries as being completely irrelevant, even obstructive. We need to direct our attention to regional, resource-based and cultural boundaries. And by *boundaries* I don't mean barriers, but permeable and interactive points of connection.

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*The Limits to Growth* was published by the Club of Rome 50 years ago. In an interview for SZ Magazin to mark the book's anniversary, Dennis Meadows, one of the main authors, warned that achieving greater sustainability is no longer possible and we need to focus on resilience. But if I understand you correctly, sustainability and resilience are not contradictions in terms. Is this correct?

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The modern perception of resilience is made up of two main elements. The first is adaptation, the capability of adapting and reacting to events such as natural disasters, say. The second is the capacity to innovate, the ability to transform our way of life in a visionary way. In theory, human beings are capable of learning from experience and identifying certain recurring patterns as a basis for devising strategies. Sustainability is an ancient concept, already applied——albeit

unconsciously——by humans five millennia ago. But today it's become something we need to actively recall to our conscious mind. The issue isn't about using something in a sustainable way, but about repairing what we have destroyed. Regenerative systems constantly renew their capabilities. So we end up with three core concepts: resilience, sustainability and regeneration. It takes time to categorise and connect them, and the process is predicated on a certain cultural mindset of withdrawing, contemplating, exploring beyond our own horizons and drawing on an array of knowledge sources. This is why it's so important to work with methods that can communicate this complexity.

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You call for a new form of connectedness, a new form of being human. What message would you like to send to science, which has spent so long pursuing a paradigm completely detached from nature?

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Basically, the same message that applies to us all. We need to create access to a new way of thinking——for example, about outdoor experiences. Being outdoors and interacting with nature is a process of physical activation and enables us to explore our environment with all our senses. That's quite different from spending life slumped in front of a computer. We scientists also have to learn that now and again, we have to simply do things and learn together along the way. That, to me, is the essence of design culture.

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Tobias Luthe, thank you.