We need a political architecture to resist a civilizing architecture

Precisamos de uma arquitetura política para resistir a uma arquitetura civilizatória.

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Abstract
Architecture has always been a tool for spatial control. The civilizing mission imbedded in our profession comes with a layer of coloniality that we need to first be aware of and then subvert. Arturo Escobar's discussion of colonization as something inherent to modernization explains that our civilization and our civilizing processes are directly responsible for the social evils that circle us today. The question that comes regards the role of architecture as both a tool and a result of such modernization/colonization and the possible antidotes that I believe lies in the political realm.

Resumo
A Arquitetura sempre foi um mecanismo de controle territorial. A missão civilizadora embutida em nossa profissão vem com uma camada de colonialidade da qual precisamos primeiro estar conscientes e depois subverter. Arturo Escobar em sua discussão explica a colonização como algo inerente à modernização, sendo nossa civilização e nossos processos civilizatórios diretamente responsáveis pelos males sociais que nos cercam hoje. A questão resultante diz respeito ao papel da arquitetura como ferramenta e resultado de tal modernização/colonização e os possíveis antídotos que eu acredito se encontrarem na esfera política.

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Even before this year's Covid-19 emergency that placed us all in quarantine the ugly facets of our Western civilization were already visible: unbearable inequalities, unsustainable resource exploitation, deep rooted sexism, racism and xenophobia. I propose that we think of all the evils just mentioned and so many others as inherent components of our civilizing processes, and that we think of political processes as the only possible solution for the herculean challenges of overcoming them. I know it sounds counter-intuitive, for according to the prevalent common sense, civilization is something that everybody should aspire and politics, well politics is the dirty job of pushing and pulling on the inevitable path of our Western civilization. I bed to disagree with the established norms here for I see colonization in every act of modernization that lies at the core of the West hegemony. The work of Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar are by now well-known enough that I don't need to explain who they are and why what they wrote matters. Nevertheless, I suspect that very few of my fellow architects and even the scholars of architecture have not yet fully grasped the consequences of the modernity/coloniality group (as they are known) in deconstructing many tenets of our discipline.

In that sense I apologize for any redundancy but I will start by remind us all that civilization is rooted in the Latin term *Civitas*, meaning the social body of citizens bound together by law. In contemporary language *civitas* gave us city, civilization, citizenship. *Polis* is a Greek word that also means a group of citizens that agreed upon certain rules and customs. Used as a synonym of city, the term *polis* gave us politics but also policy, politeness, police. But their similarities end here. The Greek idea of *polis* implies smaller groups of people deciding their rules and customs while the Roman idea of civitas implies the imposition of the law over the population at large. Polis is grass-roots, civitas is top-down.

Moving back to Arturo's Escobar paradigmatic analysis of colonization as something inherent to modernization, it is not hard to understand that our civilization and our civilizing processes are directly responsible for the social evils that circle us today. The root of our civitas/modernity lies in Rene Descartes' separation between res cogitans (mind) from res extensa (everything else), the mind of European men were now 'masters' of everything else that is not only land and resources but also all women and all non-European men. For Descartes, there is no soul or mind in nature, only in men, angels and God. This synthesis made Descartes second only to Plato in the Western tradition. In a recent article published at *The Plan Journal* I have elaborated on how the occupation of the Americas triggered transformations in the discipline of architecture that we had not examined before. In the word of Argentinean scholar Roberto Fernandez, "no territory has been closer to a pure modernity, from the Renaissance utopias to the energic application of the ideas of counterreformation (1600s), illuminist (1700s) and positivism (1800s)."

Don't take me wrong, I celebrate many of the achievements of our cartesian modernization such as clean water, sanitation, vaccines, encyclopedias in my pocket, and air travel (or whatever new format of visiting different people and places we shall have after the Covid pandemic). But I cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that such modernization / civilization was built to benefit the white male, at the expense of everybody not-white and not-male.

The question that follows is about the role of architecture in this process. From the 16th century military treaties that used geometry (as developed North and South of the Mediterranean) to optimize the European occupation of the Americas, to the grid that turned Amerindian lands into commodities to be bought and sold along with millions of African bodies, to the churches and chapels that gave a divine reasoning for such tragedies, the history of architecture overlaps with the hegemonic modernization/civilization that brought us here now.

It is of course easy to point to centuries ago and see coloniality in the actions of kings, cardinals, *conquistadores* and *coronéis*. More difficult is to see coloniality or the dark side of our civilization in beautiful buildings that we not only admire, we celebrate daily in our seminars, lectures and writings.

Starting in chronological order, we rarely discuss the fact that Corbusier's Unité d'Habitacion was built to "civilize" North Africans that were emigrating to continental France and had Marseille as their main port. The history of the Pieds-Noirs (dark feet) people cannot be detached from the French government decision to build the first Unité in Marseille for Corbusier consistently tried to see his architecture as a civilizing tool. When we use the coloniality/modernity theoretical approach to look into modern architecture we perceive that it worked as an instrument of expulsion and control everywhere. In *Eugenics in the* Garden Fabiola Lopez-Duran found several references to white supremacist eugenics ideas in Le Corbusier notebooks.

The same notebooks that dozens of scholars had studied before and choose not to see the eugenic references. Despite having invented and benefited from it, Europeans do not have the monopoly of coloniality. The campus of the UNAM displaced an Ejido – communal land – in the southern periphery of Ciudad de Mexico, Mies iconic Crown Hall displaced an apartment building (coincidentally called Mecca) which housed a thriving African-American community. So many of our celebrated modernist buildings in Rio de Janeiro were built on top of *cortiços* violently removed, starting with mayor Pereira Passos in 1904 and continuing all the way to mayor Eduardo Paes one century later. As a student of architecture 30 years ago I was enchanted with the undulating forms of the Balbina Environmental Center designed by Severiano Porto, only to learn 20 years later that Balbina is one of the worse disasters every built by Brazilian engineers, its shallow lake destroyed miles and miles of forest, displacing thousands of families in order to generate only 30% of the expected electricity. As a result, Balbina generates more green-house gas than a coal plant of the same capacity due to the huge amount of methane constantly liberated by the shallow since operations started in 1989.

Architecture has always been a tool for spatial control and Brazil has always been a huge land grabbing machine since 1500. We know very little about the reasons for the murder of Marielle Franco but it is surely linked to land invasion (*grilhagem*) by militiamen in the west of Rio of January. We know a little more about how this land was managed before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1500, but it is worth remembering that the first European economic activity in Brazil was to convince the natives to cut off Páu-Brasil and send it to the other side of the ocean. Our land was named after a process of deforestation with cheap labor to export commodities with low added value. What a destination!

To overcome this tragic fate, we need to decolonize the stories of our architecture and this implies several actions:

To realize that there is no modernization without colonization. For each Esplanada do Castelo or Pampulha that we built, hundreds of poor families were expelled from their homes, indemnified or not, so that modernism settled in all its exuberance.

To realize that each of these wonderful buildings existed before in wooden forms cut from some area of Atlantic forest (in the case of the Rio-SP axis where they are more

numerous) and soon afterwards be filled with steel, limestone and clay excavated from some other site.

To realize that poor shoulders (mostly blacks and mulattos) carried each of these materials in exchange for a salary that did not allow them to enjoy the modern city, forcing their families to build their own houses, without a document of ownership, without water, electricity or sewage.

To realize that architecture is an integral part of the economy's financialization process, draining resources previously invested in production and generating employment and income, carried through the financial system to processes displaced from the world of production.

To realize that modern architecture has always brought with it a moral component that seldom had a progressive bias such as the women's empowerment project of Conjunto Pedregulho and in most cases normalized the inequality expressed in maid's rooms and service elevators. Regardless of the progressive or reactionary bias, modern architecture has always been an instrument of coloniality in the sense of teaching the masses how they should live their lives.

Is there any hope for a progressive, truly empowering architecture in the future? I dare to be optimistic and to answer yes. Moreover, a Brazilian experiment called Participatory Budgeting have already proven to a powerful instrument of community organization and empowerment. Created by the PT mayors in the late 1980s, the Participatory Budgeting brought to the table parts of society that had been excluded for centuries. Allow me to diverge a bit to discuss the fact that architecture has always been a tool of exclusion, although we dress it as exclusivity. Exclusivity and exclusion are one and the same, one only exists because of the other. Architecture has celebrated exclusivity for too long and it is time to understand that the real consequence of an exclusive design is the exclusion of the majority that cannot be there. What the Participatory Budget induced in Porto Alegre and Belo Horizonte (the two largest cities that experienced it the longest) was a significant increase in political participation and a popularization of the terms of the debate. Conceived and implemented when municipal budgets were tight, the Participatory Budget was sidelined when the GDP growth of the Lula years brought big money to big construction companies. A movement that grew out of polis became civitas once it reached the complexity of

the federal government. Other groups took over the grass roots space, groups that preached religion, violence and hate.

On the pessimist side, we have not yet fully examined the ecological impact of every line we draw. At the XII São Paulo Architectural Bienalle I presented a study of the ecological footprint of the Pampulha Chapel (Niemeyer 1942); Brasilia Cathedral (Niemeyer 1960); MASP (Bo Bardi 1967) and FAUUSP (Artigas 1968). My students at Texas calculated the mineral breakdown of those famous buildings, and the volumetric impact that those left in the landscape. Plotted over an aerial photo of the Mariana / Bento Rodrigues dam disaster of 2016, the four paradigmatic buildings had the holes that each demanded drawn to the scale of Bento Rodrigues covered in toxic mud.

A political architecture in the sense of opening the decision-making process to a variety of actors could reactivate the power of design as an antidote to the coloniality consequences of our modernization endeavors. Arturo Escobar leads the way again with his publications around the design of the pluriverse[1]. In his words, we should "ask whether design can actually contribute to enabling the communal forms of autonomy (....) mobilizing the grass-roots communities of Latin America firmly in the scope of design, perhaps even at its center in the case of those wishing to work closely with communities in struggle". The synthesis of Escobar teaches us that we should work "from the bottom, to the left and with the earth".

Contemporary architecture inherited several problems from modernity, and those problems create many layers of coloniality. We have an industry that consumes an insurmountable amount of resources to create instruments of exclusion, guided by the ego of a few "enlightened' white men. The politics that we need now are the precise opposite of this. The participatory / collaborative processes "from the bottom" are the antidote for the authorship trap that holds architecture hostage of a few inflated egos. The "left" direction moves architecture to become a tool of inclusion, abandoning once and for all the obsession with exclusivity that disguises the forces of exclusion that supports it. And "with the Earth" reminds us that unlike what Descartes

proposed 400 years ago, we are not separate from all other beings in this small planet of ours.

As an undergraduate student of architecture, thirty years ago, I had a professor called Radamés Teixeira that used to repeat ad infinitum a very simple question to all of us during design reviews: how does your project makes the world a little better? Professor Radamés is now 96 years old. He grew up, studied and taught for 4 decades under the belief that modernization would lead to better lives, and it did in so many aspects. But he also understood that every line that we draw will generate some coloniality, will few richer than most, will abuse ecological resources and will often be the result of the architect's egotistical projections. His question remains as a guide for our very much needed political stance.

How does your project makes the world a bit better?

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