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Pérez Guembe, Elena

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Architectures of Care. From the Zapotecs to the Cosmos

Author: Elena Pérez Guembe, TU Delft

Supervisor: Klaske Havik, Prof. Dr., TU Delft; Angeliki Sioli, Prof. Dr., TU Delft

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Point of departure. Bridging communities of knowledge to help repairing a broken planet

Our current “Anthropocene-Capitalocene condition asks architecture [...] to take care seriously” (Fitz & Krasny, 2019, p. 20). Care for oneself, for the others and the planet in a “life-sustaining web” where architecture is “much part of weaving this web”(Fitz & Krasny, 2019, p. 13). This research departs from two facts:

Firstly, that indigenous populations are the guardians of our *genetic biocultural memory* as specie –a memory which is genetically recorded, necessary for the survival of any specie- that allows for *socioecological resilience*. This is, “the capacity of a social productive system to cope and resist unpredictable and catastrophic changes maintaining themselves within their normal state”(Toledo et al., 2009, p. 99)¹. A capacity that in our case, was interrupted by the scientific and industrial revolution (Toledo & Barrera-Bassols, 2008).

Secondly, that in this moment in history, closely associated with the Enlightenment, were established the foundations of the Western program of modernity which entailed a type of thought built on the binary distinction human/non-human that many cultures on Earth do not share. This, according to Braidotti, generated a universalization of Western thought built over a basis of excluded “racialized, sexualized and naturalized others”, creating a sense of exceptionalism over species and bodies including nature, as an endless supply for exploitation (Braidotti, 2013). “Human” is not a neutral term. Who counts as human? Whose knowledge is recognize as valid?. Yet, “Mayas from Yucatan are three thousand years old, pygmies sixty thousand... [and] our civilization has placed itself on the border of collapse in barely three hundred years.”(*) (Toledo et al., 2009, p. 99)

As the need of finding socially and environmentally resilient solutions is highly pressing, this project revises counter-hegemonic architectural practices situating itself on the Zapotec indigenous *cosmopraxis* from Oaxaca (Mexico): on its episteme and praxis of living, to discuss what it really entails, in our current time, to practice Architectures of Care.

How Zapotec way of thinking, which implies a symbiotic relationship with the environment in a human-non human-nature-culture continuum, is expressed in the house? How this approach, which involves a way of design thinking that totally differs from hegemonic Western approaches, can help us to nurture resilience through inclusive, *architectures of care*? Could we complement each other’s knowledge for the sake of building a better future for all?

Zapotec cosmopraxis

If we must design differently, we need to learn to think differently and this involves to rethink our own subjectivities. Current architectural studies rethink subjectivities from feminist approaches in relation to space and gender, and others, look at the indigenous only from ecological points of view, searching

for green solutions for optimal environmental adaptation in a merely utilitarian way. This research offers a step forward, by studying indigenous Zapotec subjectivity through their built environment in a holistic manner, as part of a *cosmopraxis* where the house is conceived as a *total habitat*². This is, it studies the domestic space as a cultural artefact, a socio-cultural process. This also involves the study of emotional-cultural ties with nature and the cosmos through myths, rituals and oral culture³.

I am aware of the complexity involved, but precisely, this approach avoids the danger of falling into the tendency of modern science of creating “universal laws” applicable elsewhere. This project is about learning how to think differently, and about learning different forms of knowing and living. Its complexity relies on looking at a praxis of living and its cosmogony together, and it aims to develop an approach on how to rethink our own subjectivities through hermeneutics and material culture as architectural discourses, for understanding and cooperation. Firstly it intends to establish a dialogue of expertise between traditional wisdom and contemporary architecture, including the “missing people”. Secondly, it gives account of a patrimony of global cultural value that risks disappearing; and, thirdly, it seeks to express this knowledge in a language that is both theoretically adequate for academic discourse but it is still accessible to most people.

The architectures of study are a group of existing house-workshops of traditional trades from Zapotec communities which constitute identity traits rooted in Mesoamerican traditions. These are: *the house of the black clay artisan*, *the house of the weavers*, *the house of the mask maker* and *the house of the poets*. A last concluding chapter will be for the *house maker* -the union of all mantras. We could say, that these listed activities are *time capsules* and repositories of a living knowledge that has been perpetuated through practice and passed on through generations for thousands of years. As in the case of the black clay, where the community of artisans -who are mostly women-, have perpetuated working techniques for around 2500 years.

Since their own ontology and epistemology is built over a “dimension of being” intimately weaved into a “dimension of doing” in the quotidian experience, in order to understand the ways of thinking and working of these communities, as well as to understand how these relationships structure the architectural space, the research method involves necessarily an active engagement through making. From the material itself to the spaces where these activities take place and connected to the everyday living. Making not only allows to understand this natural interconnection between doing, myths, rituals, belief systems and technology, but it also allows to build the necessary bonds and trust, due to the investment of time that the action involves, which sometimes is performed collectively and based on principles of reciprocity called *tequio*⁴.

Methodology

Methodologically, I combine three types of skills in the research process:

Firstly, I use **principles of *comunalidad*** for on-the ground interaction and fieldwork activities. The *comunalidad* is the local indigenous epistemological work made by a generation of indigenous intellectuals born in the 40's and 50's which emerged with the movements of 1968⁵. It is also the way these communities have of working and structuring their individual and collective activities. I use these principles for interacting, co-creating and co-(l)aborating with local communities in their own terms, through shared interests. This, applied as a fieldwork research method, involves my own participation on communal activities as well as the organization of collaborative artistic activities that reaffirm essential features of their identity and practice, elevating the indigenous every day.

Secondly, I use **architectural ethnographic tools** for architectural analysis together with exploratory writing which includes local voices and different narrative forms⁶.

Thirdly, I apply **posthuman critical theory tools** for the work of self-critique and to move away from ingrained patterns of thought, using its *situated cartographic principle* to think and make. This allows

a multi-temporal and multi-referential simultaneity (moving back and forth between present, past and future; and from local to global -or rather, to cosmic-), to open possibilities for a shared becoming while being grounded in the every day. I cultivate its *ethics of affirmation principle* for knowledge sharing, outside and inside Academia, seeking to stimulate an open discussion (Braidotti, 2019). For this, I use the multi-interpretative forms of artistic approaches, which allow me to navigate through myths, oral culture and rituals. I apply this design driven approach during the experimental-making process as well as for research sharing⁷. My intention is to demonstrate that these traditions are alive, and able to influence change, in spite of attempts of quieting them as well as of disconnecting them from their ancestral past.

1. Translated from Spanish by me. From this point onwards I will put the sign (*) to indicate this.
2. A living entity with hopes, desires and forms of being, which not only places us in relation to the world but to the cosmos at large. The house, conceived as a total habitat, and as a platform that negotiate intimacies, sustaining collective and individual activities which give meaning to its inhabitants, in a continuum in equilibrium with all that exists, through symbiotic relationships, is what I call Architectures of Care
3. As Mexican sociologist and philosopher Blanca Solares puts it, “the understanding of language from the position of who is talking and what he/she wants to express entails dimensions of Being, which go far beyond from traditional disciplinary academic approaches. It not only exceeds the typical classification of sciences, but puts in crisis counter forms like mythos-logos, prejudice-critical reason, or past-future, characteristic of the occidental discourse” (*) (Solares, 2002, p. 9). For more information on the notion of symbolic hermeneutics and the understanding of the rational and the imaginary as a unitary conception of the human psyche, see (Solares, 2007) and (Durand, 2000).
4. Tequio refers to a work which is conceived as “mutual help” and is a form of organization of indigenous communities from Mexico, being Oaxaca the estate with the greatest number of indigenous groups. It has many different names, being perhaps the term tequio the most extended one, as it comes from the nahuatl word tequitl. The terms in Zapotec for tequio also varies among different Zapotec groups, since Zapotec language has sixty-three different variants, sometimes unintelligible among them. Thus in Zapotec from the Isthmus (Coast Region) for example, they use the term guendaliza’ (if not just tequio) which stands for “help through friendship”, or raakne’ in other Zapotec communities from the Central Valley of Oaxaca, such as Teotitlán del Valle by instance. For more information about this concept see (Zolla & Zolla-Márquez, 2004).
5. The comunalidad is a term coined by indigenous intellectuals from the region of Oaxaca, which defines the living praxis of the indigenous communities of the region, in their own terms and “from the inside”. For more literature on the notion of comunalidad see (Aquino Moreschi, 2010, 2013; Aquino Moreschi et al., 2013; Díaz, 2001). My point is that the comunalidad, the indigenous epistemology which is built on self-sustaining collaborative practices which also defines the meaning of place, and that is sustained by a human/non-human/nature/culture continuum is expressed in the house, as it entails a praxis of living.
6. Bringing people voice’s and stories to the fore, as well as language to illuminate the past, it is also a way of acknowledging and offering back to people, a way of being where they can recognize themselves. People’s voices and language are used as primary sources, since their own experience and language, are the closest to thought and to a memory that has been passed on over generations through time immemorial. This is, it entails the living patrimony of such an admired Mesoamerican past. As critic Gloria E. Chacón argues “nation-states in Latin

America have established a distance between pre-Columbian civilizations [...] by fixing them in the past and disconnecting that past from the living indigenous people they continue to attempt to assimilate” (Chacón, 2018, p. 17). Through these voices and exploratory narratives my intention it is to dismantle those disconnections and move fluidly between present, past and future, to cultivate the conditions for a shared becoming. See next paragraph for further explanation.

7. This is a live open-ended process that requires tenacity, rigor and flexibility, where “the place of practice involves the productive possibility of specifying, situating and allowing somewhat unexpected qualities to emerge, whether this comes out as a thing, a collective, an expression, or something else” (Parikka, 2019, p. 42). Artistic processes and art itself, allows to point out things without the need of defining them, it creates propositions and has the capacity to open conversations, and to generate different points of view and perceptions among people of different backgrounds and education levels.

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