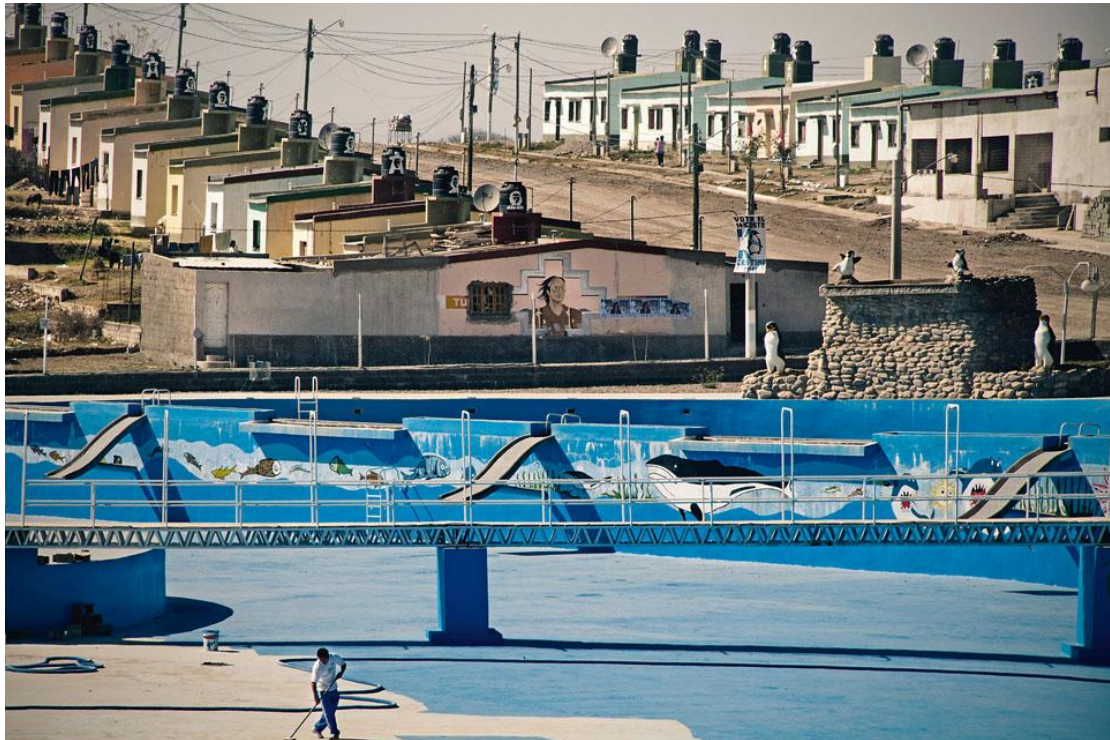# ECOLOGIES OF EXISTENCE

ARCHITECTURE AND MODES OF LIVING

Godofredo Pereira, Platon Issaias, David Burns

Tomás Garcia Puente, *Alto Comedero*, Argentina.

Summary

Ecologies of living bring together material, environmental, technical, social and mental domains. To think ecologically is not so much a matter of protecting existing ecologies, but more importantly, a matter of generating conditions for different ones to emerge and affirm themselves. Only on these terms can a properly *ecological* project take place.

In our proposal, architecture is understood as a practice that has the ability to give consistency, or even to formalize, certain modes of living. To do so, the studio will focus on the impact of debt-restructuring policies and investigate the effects of the current crisis as a crisis of subjectivity. Students will be asked to identify multiple aspects of living from emerging modes of production, to types of social organization, of inhabitation or relations to nature, that do not conform to the ossification of social structures, familial relations and psychological imaginaries inherent to neoliberal forms of urban development. The studio aims to investigate

the possible role that architecture can play in giving both material and social consistency to these processes, sometimes by providing spaces for events to happen, other times by formalizing a specific program, and others even by giving visibility to certain communities and their modes of living. In our view architecture gains its political relevance precisely when it is able to think space and its configurations in terms of living. And it is in this sense that we argue that architecture is a significant category of ecological struggle.

We propose a radical model of ecological thinking, where conceptions of nature are inseparable from practices of living. Traditional environmental perspectives tend to separate the human from nature. Instead, we will look at how each mode of living carries with it a specific mode of relating to nature. We aim to disrupt one of the central tenets of neoliberal forms of city making which is the promotion of *multiculturalism*: what is the worth of supporting the cosmopolitan coexistence of multiple cultures if only one kind of (capitalist) production is allowed? If only the entrepreneurial self is validated as the subject of the contemporary city? Against this, we aim to encourage students to speculate about how architecture can promote alternative subjectivities that are grounded not simply in cultural transformations but in actually different practices of living.

We will focus on giving a constituent presence in the city to ecologies of living that are most commonly ignored, left in the margins of architectural discussions, or packaged under the label 'alternative': from religious communities or more 'traditional' neighbourhood associations, to sex workers organizations, recreational collectives, or even urban gangs, underground music and bikers groups, all of the above produce not only their own subjects but, equally important for us, their spaces of action. However, we aim to do so not from the paradigms of exodus that dominated the 1960s and 1970s discussions, such as self-excluded hippie and religious communities in the US, or European community-based architectural experiments that often at the 'local' level replicated the existing power structures of enclosure and even a certain level of depolitization. In our view the idea of community or local scale as an alternative to capitalism could be possibly misguiding, by avoiding existing power relations and the ruthless interiority of capital.

Instead, we aim to explore how collectives of living can become constituent political and spatial actors of the city by affirming through architecture their radical difference. In our view, it is through architecture, that modes of living and the production of subjectivity can be best fore-grounded as the essential political questions in the discussion of ecology today.

On Ecology

Vince Gilligan, Breaking Bad, 2008-2013

In an age of planetary transformation, ecological concerns have raised to the top of our priorities. The complex causalities between humanity and the Earth are today at the centre of discussion in both scientific, political and economic circuits. The Anthropocene proposal – that argues that mankind has indeed a geological impact – has further incensed these concerns: claiming that we are inhabiting an epoch where our geo- and biosphere are essentially determined by human actions, it has made evident the need to critically access the ways in which we are occupying and transforming the Earth.

These are concerns that both directly and indirectly affect the discipline of architecture. Directly due to its large degree of responsibility in these matters – for example, the construction industry and the promotion of endless urbanization are at the centre of climate change. Indirectly as its object of study –living and modes of co-existence– is facing dramatic transformations: large-scale migrations, political turmoil and climatic shifts are forcing a drastic reconfiguration of how we inhabit this planet. Because of this, ecology has become a necessary concern for architects, urban designers and design practitioners at large.

And yet, our conceptions of ecology remain profoundly conservative. Ecological concerns and perspectives are all too often returning to romantic notions of Alpine mountainous landscapes, Mediterranean slopes or the lush tropical settings of Cameron's AVATAR that are always devoid of a political and historical context. For our point of view, positions such as these that oppose ecology to technology are deeply conservative, as they reinstate the division that has created the destruction of nature in the first place. This is founded on the fallacy that there is a difference between a pure nature and an impure or artificial mankind.

What is at stake here is that a simplistic understanding of how nature and humans are entangled with each other is missing the fact that these are not always two opposing categories. Not only are there many conceptions of humanity as there are of nature, but of any other supposed universal category. In other words, both idyllic and managerial conceptions of nature that we so regularly promote, are more often than not, in their ecological framework, imposing a reductive conception of nature. In ignoring how nature is indiscernible from living, we have been unable to grasp the politics of nature (what it is, how we relate to it, etc). We have thus, remained unable to construct a properly ecological thinking and practice.

On Subjectivity and Modes of Living

Harmony Korine, *Mr. Lonely*, 2007.

This research argues that an ecological thinking is one that concerns itself first and foremost with the modes of living and of existing in the world. To move from a naturalist conception of ecology to one based on ecologies of living implies to direct one's focus to the workings of subjectivity. Following authors such as Félix Guattari or Maurizzio Lazzarato, we consider capitalism as a crisis of subjectivity, i.e. as a crisis in modes of living and inhabiting the Earth. It is impossible not to relate our current stage of climatic transformation to the expansion of a capitalist monoculture. However, this is a crisis that paradoxically emerges from the exponential proliferation of subjectivities: Guattari would argue that capitalism "launches (subjective) models the way the automobile industry launches a new line of cars". Expanding

on these claims, we could insist that the key aspect of capitalist politics consists of the articulation of economic and technological flows with the production of subjectivity. This brings together the political economy with the subjective one: from sweatshops in south-eastern Asia to mass-media and global advertising campaigns in local television and radio broadcasts, from profit-oriented social networks and search engines, to the creative industries worldwide, profit and the production of subjectivity come hand in hand and become one undivided entity.

The reverse of this, of course, is that any crisis in the economic and political system carries perforce a crisis in its models of subjectivity. The dramatic transformations of subjectivity visible in the last few years of political turmoil across the Mediterranean are the most recent example of this. But we should notice as well the subjective transformations that are presently occurring across Europe (particularly in its South) as a result of the sovereign debt crisis and the destruction of the European Project. If 'crisis in subjectivity' are the mechanisms themselves by which processes of capital accumulation re-assert themselves, we cannot ignore that these carry, nonetheless, a huge potential for social and political transformation. Thus, subjectivity is a key battlefield for every area that is concerned with living, amongst which architecture and design practices have a predominant role.

However, same as in discussions over ecology, we remain prisoners of conservative conceptions: in common knowledge subjectivity is assigned to the individual as a vague alternative to rigorous thought, i.e. as some sort of explanation for authorial creativity. However, this creates a fundamental problem. The mode by which capital colonizes subjectivity and its location at the heart of political struggles all across the globe is rendered invisible. Following Guattari, we argue that in capitalist societies, subjectivity is produced at the interception between forms of social subjection and forms of *machinic* enslavement. By social subjection we refer to modes of semiotic subjection (media, social networks), and how these produce subjectivities via redundancy.

This is profoundly visible if we think of how certain ideas, positions, ways of understanding are constructed not so much by a convincing content, but more by its endless repetition. Think of terms such as the "War on Terror", the "Arab Spring", or recently "Grexit", and of course "Climate Change". There, violent transformations and political struggles, i.e. moments where entire new forms of subjectivity and therefore living are at stake, are trimmed to almost meaningless slogans, repeated over and over again. But also at the *machinic* (corporeal) level, capitalism has produced a form of enslavement, which has consequences over subjectivity. Currently, the most evident example of this is the debt economy and the forced participation of consumers in vast value production and speculation machines (as receivers, users, creditors, etc), an entire apparatus of differential value relations that indirectly informs a precarious European subjectivity.

On Architecture

Lacaton & Vassal, Mulhouse Estate, France.

In this studio, students will have to imagine architectures for subjectivities around which certain collectives are starting to form and to self-organise. Primacy should be given to collectives currently in the process of constitution but students could as well propose to design for collectives that having existed for some time still lacking a spatial formalization. Importantly, an ecological perspective implies looking at collectives not simply as a common identity, but as a common *practice* or *mode* of living.

Students will have to conceptualize what are the key aspects that bring these collectives together – for instance, these could be a common social practice, certain legal condition or constraints, or a set of beliefs–, and imagine what could be the role of architecture in relation to such processes. Is there an opportunity to propose a new type of housing or form of dwelling? Is it a matter of developing collective equipment, such as a series of community centres – *social clubs* – for meeting or gathering, schools of health centres? Is it a matter of a project of land-use and reorganization of production? Is it a quest for different rights, political/spatial representation, or even defence mechanisms? The point is that there are probably innumerable ways in which architecture provides *consistency* to modes of existence. In the housing project for the Tupac Amaru indigenous community of Alto Comedero in Argentina, for instance, the most important feature the community claimed for was the

construction of a dinosaur-themed aqua-park. In that sense, seldom any "project" could be tackled through a singular perspective, but would always require deep investigation and research on the case, useful precedents and field work.

In this sense, throughout the year students will be asked to look at a broad range of collectives, from Social Movements (such as the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, Occupy or the 15th May movement in Spain), Autonomous Labour Collectives (such as the community of Marinaleda in Spain), self-managed Community Organizations (Kurdish Laundry Rooms; Barter Organizations in Buenos Aires), urban tribes such as music and lifestyle generated collectives; online digital communities, from dark web trading to whistle-blowers, or to scientific communities; or also Indigenous Groups as a the Mapuche in Chile or the Zapatistas in México.

Subcomandante Marcos, addressing the demonstrators at El Zócalo Square, Mexico City, 2006.

However, we would like to stress the fact that the above represent only one possible reservoir for potential projects. Such references are potentially limitless, and students will be encouraged to look extensively into literature, cinema or TV series as sites of fantastic subjective exploration. From Roberto Bolaño, to Wu Ming, from Werner Herzog to Harmony Korine, or Breaking Bad, from science novels, to anthropological accounts, and journalistic pieces, students will spend the year expanding the horizon of what it means to live in this world.

On Governments and Institutions

Lina Bo Bardi, *Study for Palácio das Indústrias,* 1990.

Especially in recent years, all across the world and particularly in Europe one could find many cases where collectives and social movements have managed to make themselves heard at the level of existing structures of governance. And in doing so, they gave visibility to a multitude of previously unrecognized and unrepresented subjectivities. We refer here to movements that obtain the power to govern even if partially in municipal, regional or even national level, often parallel or in conflict to pre-existing forms of governance. These are important spaces for the affirmation of political, sexual, familial or religious mutations, but that unfortunately, have remained for too long absent of architectural imaginations.

However, think for example the potential for a project to develop alternative programs and forms of living, responding or even formulating possibilities as these are expressed all around Europe: How for example one would consult a SYRIZA or a PODEMOS bureaucrat to design housing for students, unemployed, precarious workers, immigrants and refugees? How would these radically different ecologies of living register in the way we design or claim agency? And think as well about these processes as they unfold in Northern Europe and in particular in the UK, as the traditional party-structures are increasingly put under pressure by repressed subjective positions.

We believe that a certain finesse is required when someone is not anymore designing or thinking from a so-called "bottom-up" position or process, but sits within mechanisms and technologies that used to be exclusive to the state apparatus. What happens when the "state" is not to be either opposed or conquered, but used as a tool? How is it possible to think and to use its structures and institutional devices not just *within* and *against*, but also *for* and *towards* some sort of alternative? This of course poses fundamental questions about agency and our role as citizens, active intellectuals and design practitioners. But it is these questions that an *ecological* research on architecture and modes of living requires us to address.

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