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Divergence. Decolonial Perspectives on Designing in Latin American Informal Urban Areas

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Co-production and Public Space: Perspectives and Experiences from Latin American Informal Neighbourhoods

SURLab 2022
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1/3

Co-production and Public Space: Perspectives and Experiences from Latin American Informal Neighbourhoods

SURLab 2022
Book 1 / 3

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Co-production and Public Space: Perspectives and Experiences from Latin American Informal Neighbourhoods

SURLab 2022. Book 1 / 3

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Divergence. Decolonial Perspectives on Designing in Latin American Informal Urban Areas

Antonio di Campli

Abstract

Thinking decolonially about dwelling, space and its project, particularly in informal areas, means imagining them as an archipelago of points of enunciation, a constellation of micropolitics, and laboratories of experimentation. Decolonising means thinking that space can be kaleidoscopic, shattered, ambiguous, and not representable through fixed cartographic projections. The kaleidoscope is an instrument that returns multiple images, multiple places, juxtaposed, superimposed or nested one inside the other: a pluriverse. Therefore, decolonising the urban project for informal areas means decolonising the theory, discourses and concepts through which we think about its spatial and dwelling practices and imaginaries. What is being questioned are the relations of domination, inequalities and socio-spatial conflicts triggered by the design paradigms prevalent today, to transform them. The decolonial project legitimises itself starting from the recognition of colonial power devices, their link with specific imaginaries of living and economies, making explicit the mechanisms that feed and legitimise coloniality as a model of knowledge that crosses multiple spheres of experience: knowledge, disciplinary practices, relations between society and ecologies, up to racial and gender relations. Design can be conceived as a set of practices aimed at configuring spaces where many 'worlds' can coexist, negotiating with each other. This does not mean designing tending towards totally indeterminate, imprecise configurations, but towards non-univocal landscapes, divergent and non-transparent spatial arrangements, linked to multiple and, therefore, non-oppressive narratives.

Keywords: urbanism, urban poverty, resilience, colonial difference

Introduction

It is important to analyse how certain paradigms define their subjects; how some ideas come to be seen as best practices; and how certain colonial power structures are perpetuated. Poverty is one of the main semantic devices that marks the discourse on urban informality that became hegemonic in the last decades. At a time when the Western capitalist model has been proclaimed as an example of civilisation and progress, concepts such as 'underdevelopment' or 'informality' have become functional discursive elements to maintain precise schemes of power.

Development is a double-edged sword and informal settlements are the wounds that bleed where the first world meets the third (Anzaldúa, 1987). Political narratives of the informal settlements as the theme of progress are part of a global agenda promoted by institutions such as the UN, the World Bank and the IMF, which seek to penetrate from below, from the urban poor themselves. They inoculate design strategies and discourse focused on the concept of 'resilience', that is, on the survival of the inevitable effects of development, leaving its basic premises intact. Therefore, is it possible to produce a discourse on informality and its project beyond the modernising rhetoric of development, performance, and identity?

To answer these questions, a reflection is proposed on some characters and possibilities of the decolonial project focusing in particular on the concept of colonial difference as a matrix of design thinking. The colonial difference is the space in which the coloniality of power is articulated. But it is also the place where a margin thinking emerges capable of questioning hegemonic knowledge and paradigms.

In the field of design practices, decolonisation is a process of questioning and restructuring of logic, values and design strategies. This process requires time, responsibility and above all a willingness to experience conditions of vulnerability. The reference is both to the fragility of those who think about the project starting from marginal conditions, moving on unstable soils, and to the incomplete, open character of the new socio-spatial ecologies experienced.

The main Western design and urban planning paradigms are deeply rooted in modernism and, at least in the strictly European tradition. It is a composite set of design practices which, especially in their postmodern neoliberal variants, are marked by a capitalist productivist tension that reflects on the project substantially as an exercise of increase or enhancement of places, cultures, economies, natures. The distinction between the public and private spheres in the dwelling-practices, the idea of nature as an external object (to be protected or, on the contrary, to be exploited), culture as an identitarian infrastructure, public space intended as a place of social mixity, are examples of Western ideas

that inform interpretative-planning paradigms of space and that operate, in an opaque way, as devices of colonial knowledge. Briefly, these are the main features of the composite set of design discourses that we call Western Urban Theory. Therefore, decolonising the urban project means decolonising the theory, discourses and concepts through which we think about space and living. What is being questioned are the relations of domination, inequalities and socio-spatial conflicts triggered by the design paradigms prevalent today, to transform them. The decolonial project legitimises itself starting from the recognition of colonial power devices, their link with specific imaginaries of living and economies. It makes the mechanisms that feed and legitimise coloniality explicit, as a model of knowledge that crosses multiple spheres of experience: knowledge, disciplinary practices, relations between society and the environment, up to racial and gender relations (Lugones, 2008).

Space is inherently violent, unequal, unjust. Its project is always linked to the configuration and circulation of models. However, this does not mean that design must operate as a colonial agent, but it can be conceived as a set of practices aimed at configuring spaces in which many worlds coexist, negotiating with each other, as the Zapatistas say. This does not mean that designing tends towards totally indeterminate, imprecise configurations but towards non-univocal, non-transparent spatial arrangements, linked to multiple and therefore non-oppressive narratives. The decolonial project prefigures places marked by a multiplicity of places of enunciation, passing through a process of dis-learning and re-learning capable of going both beyond mere participatory perspectives, or the protection of marginalisation. The reasoning on the project as a thought on the ecologies of the coexistence between social, ecological, and economic differences, aims to question traditional classifications and cartography as well as the clarity of the tools and concepts that we usually use in our analysis and design practices.

The decolonial project operates from the epistemic boundaries of modern thought, questioning Eurocentric or Western forms of spatial planning and design. It is therefore a border thinking, a frontier thought where subjects, collectives and social groups who live on the margins produce knowledge that can be transferred from one place to another, constituting an exteriority to modernity. The decolonial project produces new statements through a destructive attitude which, however, does not aim at building a new discourse with universal value. As Grosfoguel (2016) argues, there cannot be a single language to speak of decoloniality, but it is necessary to recognise a pluriversity of projects.

In the West as elsewhere, spatial conflicts arise from the difference in meaning and value associated with particular practices of space production. They do not arise from the cultural difference per se, but from the gap that is produced between different forms of dwelling and the related values that govern social life

in relation to space, economy, ecology, property, body and knowledge. Struggles for meaning are therefore central to the structuring of the social and physical world. Conflicts over living are therefore the reflection of underlying ontological differences, that is, of different ways of understanding space. The current crisis of habitability is generated by a modern thought that operates through distinctions, separations between culture and nature, nature and society, urban and rural, male and female, black and white, and ultimately by the dominance of the capitalist model of society hetero-patriarchal. Patriarchy, in particular, is the main reason for the erosion of relations between society, the environment and economies. Therefore, to address this crisis it is useful to reflect on the practices of living, on the interaction and conflict between multiple forms of spatial production, observing plural socio-eco-cultural configurations, questioning, as Philippe Descola (1996) states, that naturalistic ontology typical of Western thought that arises precisely from the opposition between nature and culture.

These arguments are what legitimise the launch of a reflection on the decolonial project, in particular when addressing Latin American informal urban areas. Therefore: Is it possible to produce a discourse on space and its project beyond the modernising rhetoric of development, performance, identity? Is it possible to overcome the traditional dichotomy between natural and cultural politics and economies? What categories do we have to talk about non-Western spaces and societies? How to integrate their space-time discourses and experiences with theory-building practices produced within the West itself?

Is it possible to make a critique of Eurocentric modernity without throwing away the best? How to operate if some categories, keywords of Western thought on the city and on the territory such as, for example, public, nature, domesticity, production, become unreliable tools? What to do with public space, mixity, rooted living that takes care of places? To answer these questions, a reasoning around the characters of the decolonial project is proposed below.

Friction, distortion, connivance. The ‘colonial difference’ as a matrix of design thinking

In many respects, Western Urban Theory, in its various declinations and evolutions, is articulated by a dualistic thought that tends to transform space into a controlled, readable object, devoid of shadow areas. There are no empty areas. The space of western urbanistic thought, in particular of the modernist one, is a finished construction. But often, this finitude is a fiction since the interaction between paradigms and forms of knowledge, Western and otherwise, always produces twists, misunderstandings, dross, interruptions. For this reason, the hypothesis is supported here that an operational rendering of decolonial thought in a planning key should focus on the concept of colonial difference

which Aníbal Quijano (1992) has defined as the product of conflictual cultural interchange processes, that is, of frictions between local knowledge and western paradigms. The colonial difference is the space in which the coloniality of power is articulated but it is also the place where a borderline thought emerges, capable of questioning hegemonic knowledge and paradigms[1].

Seen from the point of view of project practices, the colonial difference is intended as a device capable of redefining analytical and design categories starting from the idea of exteriority. If the concept of the interior is linked to the rhetoric of civilisation and progress, the exterior, the margin, the interface, is the place of the colonised, of the Indian. Zone of contamination, exchange and conflict: *nepantla*, a Náhuatl word that Gloria Anzaldúa uses to describe those spatial, temporal or psychic crises that occur in transition situations. Colonial difference is always a borderland.

In Latin America in particular, in planning practices, in construction processes, in the management of administrative models, knowledge is used and protocols are respected, but it is never really fulfilled. The application of a certain model, paradigm, is proclaimed, but never fully adhered to. It is obeyed, but it is not fulfilled. However, the non-compliance has only partly to do with the question of the solidity and control of applied knowledge. Unexpectedly, through it we see an ironic form of resistance to dominant powers and paradigms. And if these distortions were the most interesting element to think about? If they were the result of the friction between paradigms, of the collision between knowledge and places, the most fertile ground for research?

The design response to colonial conflicts is not to be sought at the level of the constitution of counter-identities, counter-paradigms, perhaps based on patrimonial reinterpretations, and therefore, again, of a Western matrix, of ancestral knowledge but on that of practices (planning and writing) of the margin, *nepantlere* would say, again, Gloria Anzaldúa, of the cannibal and predatory embodiments of imaginary, of knowledge. All this produces engulfment, betrayals, and practices of difference that do not have to do with the exaltation of identity but that arise from twists and conflicts. These allow us to prefigure compositions, assemblages between local spatial thoughts. This leads us to think about the project through different practices and terms, to consider, for example, spatial fragmentation, distance between social groups, opacity, not necessarily as a problem. Similarly, instability, vacillation and even destruction of soils, ecologies, settlements, can become project paradigms.

The decolonial project, understood as the assembly of worlds or the composition of the pluriverse, revolves around two key terms or concepts: divergence and intertwining. These two conceptual strands are intertwined with those of addiction and generation.

The decolonial project is the space of divergence

The referred divergence does not concern subjects, practices or cultures conceived as discrete entities that share certain constitutive properties that allow them to be compared by identifying those that are similar or different. Rather divergence is something that constitutes the same entities or practices of space production, both in their specificity and in the interactions between them. A space of divergence is defined by a disagreement that can never be nullified without each entity giving up what it considers important with respect to a conflict situation over an object or situation of common interest. Spatial knowledge, the decolonial project, in this sense, is above all a place of divergence, aware that, in a given situation in which several collectives and space production practices coexist: an object, a river, a mountain, an isolated, it is always crossed, out of proportion, by different interests, visions, desires. Critically, excess through knowledge, and therefore not knowing (as different collectives know), can be an important condition for the establishment of forms of relationship linked to forms of understanding not based on sharing the same values, on identity. Therefore, rather than cancelling the divergence they are constituted by it. What we are referring to is the intersection of understanding and divergence within processes of a partial connection between entities, collectives, socio-spatial ecologies; an encounter between knowledge practices and entities that maintain a dimension of excess, misunderstanding, diverging.

What exceeds can be something obscure to the subjects involved in the comparison, as well as to the designers; however, it is constitutive of it. Spatial concepts produce worlds and are specific to certain worlds; however, concepts different from those that subjects and collectives bring with them can also be made in the here and now of encounters, collisions, between knowledge, paradigms, preserving differences between the various subjects. In meetings between acquaintances, there is nothing that everyone shares or observes in the same way; however, it is necessary to be aware of this condition. It is therefore necessary to think about project forms capable of managing divergent epistemic practices. It is a policy in which the agreement negotiated through the comparison and conflict between different visions, concepts, paradigms and imaginaries, does not erase the differences between the collectives, but rather makes them visible.

Basically, from the design point of view, this is the Deleuzian relational separation or disjunctive synthesis, a set of heterogeneous spatial production practices assembled ecologically, negotiating their difficulty in coexisting. I am referring to the definition of spatial devices that can be conceptualised as an expression of a border thinking / border design (Anzaldúa, 1987) which alludes to the possibility of defining design and planning strategies conceived as assemblages of local spatial thoughts.

Divergence, in terms of design, becomes disconnection, *desprendimiento* or delinking, as Walter Mignolo (2007) would say, a project strategy useful for configuring the coexistence between worlds: the pluriverse. Disconnection can be a condition to be investigated in an innovative way. It is not a question of a reassessment of the logic of gated communities, but of the possible operational rendering of that critical thinking around the space of a decolonial matrix that reasons on the characters of the shattered, split, opaque space (Glissant, 1990) and on the value of the contact areas, of the thresholds, among the various urban splinters (di Campli 2019).

The decolonial project as a place of intertwining. The dark ecology

The main Western socio-spatial thinking paradigms tend to be articulated according to normative dualisms through which to conceptually organise space and its project. In this binary logic, each side of dualism is seen as exclusive (rather than inclusive) and oppositional (rather than complementary), and where a greater value is attributed to one side of the dualism rather than the other.

Some of the main dualistic pairs are: production / reproduction (nature), urban / rural, public / private,civilized / primitive (nature), subject / object, universal / particular, culture / nature, reason / nature, male / female, mind / body (nature), reason / materiality, rationality / animality (nature), reason / emotion (nature), mind / body, (nature), freedom / necessity (nature), self / other.

In this list the concept of nature appears several times. Nature is a socially authoritative word, supported by the science that circumscribes it and by a concomitant series of actions (religious, political, economic) that treat it as an otherness now to be exploited, now to be protected. There is a bad way of thinking about the concept of nature, an essentialism that denies the specific and ambiguous qualities of life forms as such. Above all, it is necessary to overcome the idea of nature as something external or detached. The idea that there is this thing called nature and that it is under concrete, in the mountains or in our DNA, but never here, where we are. Furthermore, the notions of nature and natural present themselves as normative concepts that indicate how to behave or what is natural versus what is not. We all know how violent this way of thinking can be. Nature is a sort of anthopocentrically scaled concept designed for humans. This is why it is no longer possible to think of a single notion of nature but of different systems of practices and representations of the relationship between subjects, collectives and spaces.

In this multiplication I recall the concepts of diversity of nature (Descola 2005), of multinaturalism and perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 2010). According to Descola, the separation between nature and culture has no reason to exist,

either as a fact or as a conceptual model. It is in fact, a modern belief that has emerged since the Cartesian era, an ideological belief that Westerners have used to investigate other places and populations on the planet. Descola argues that in many cultures the distinction between what is human (and therefore superior) and what is not (and, being inferior, can be exploited) has no reason to exist. There are populations for which, for example, animals and plants have a soul like that of human beings and for this reason they are considered people with whom to entertain specific relationships. The diversity of a Descolian nature is easily combined with the concept of multi-naturalism and the closely connected concept of perspectivism defined by Viveiros de Castro to describe a conception, common to many Amazonian peoples, according to which the world is inhabited by different types of human subjects who capture reality from different points of view. Therefore, there would not be a single reality for all, nature, which different cultures see and interpret each in its own way (according to the Western multi-culturalist approach), but different realities, different natures, a plurality of worlds on which faces a single form of subjectivity, common to humans and animals.

The aesthetics of nature hinder the production of thought around the coexistence between differences between collectives, subjects, economies and practices of space production. To think in terms of design on the theme of composition and assemblage between differences, it is therefore necessary to focus not on the notion of nature but on that of ecology.

In the West we think of ecology as something planted on the ground, which revolves around the place, the context. In this case, the place must be local: it must make us feel at home. Expressions such as the local, the organic, the particular, are good for environmental policies. Ecology imagines the interconnection, the fabric. The shirt is a tangle of differences. Fabric can mean the holes in a web and the texture between them. It suggests solidity and delicacy at the same time. It suggests both density and rarefaction. Or a complex, tangled situation, a concatenation of limiting or restrictive forces or circumstances: a trap. In the fabric, everything does not exist by itself, each entity seems strange; the fabric unites many strangers, many comers, Derrida would say (2002). Ecological thinking is full of shadows, it is inherently dark and intimate at the same time. There would be no fabric if there were no strangers. Isn't this the essence of decolonial awareness? There is always something sinister, uncanny, in discovering the fabric. It is as if there was always something else, someone else. The inexplicable mixes up because the interconnection allows it. Coexistence, therefore, is not harmony. It's like language. For meaning to happen, the language must be noisy, messy, blurry, grainy, vague and slippery. Similarly, the space of coexistence between differences must be very articulated within it, presenting an abundance of blurry situations, and mediation devices.

Environmental rhetoric is too often strongly affirmative, outgoing and masculine. It simulates immediacy, is sunny, frank, holistic and healthy. The fragmentation,

the mediation, the ambiguity, where are they? Ecology reasons on uncertainty, on hesitation. Its shape resembles that of a *polar film noir* in which the detective investigates from an apparently external, neutral point of view, only to discover that he is involved in it, contaminating the scene. There is no meta-position from which to make ecological statements. A decolonial project lingers in irony and difference.[2] Ecological thinking is linked to an ethics that we could define as coexistentialism. Something characterised by a female inertia. A form of awareness linked to introversion and passivity. There is something contemplative in ecological thinking. Interconnection implies separateness and difference. Distance does not mean indifference and detachment. It is not coldness.

Ecological thinking is not about infinite resources or not, it does not think of tenderness or wildness but of inexplicable familiarity; it has to do with vulnerability and responsibility. For this reason, rather than an idea of inclusion, it pursues an idea of radical intimacy. To imagine the stranger we therefore need thresholds, blurred spaces.

The decolonial project, therefore, requires thinking about ecology, not about nature. A distinction must be made between environmentalism and ecology. The concept of nature is linked to agricultural, sedentary societies, to the idea of land ownership. Nature has unnatural qualities such as harmony, purity, hierarchy, authority, harmony, neutrality. Ecology is something that has to do with coexistence. In this sense, the concept of nature does not do a good service to a decolonial project that should pursue not respect for the environment but the configuration of ways of living together in habitable places. *Ecologizing* a project means diplomatically assembling and composing habitats, collectives and species.

What we have tried to outline is a discourse articulated around concepts such as colonial difference' *desprendimiento*, coexistence, predation, connivance, failure, radical intimacy, estrangement. From the point of view of the prefiguration of spatial strategies, the main references are those of opaque space (Edouard Glissant), of cannibal thinking (Oswaldo de Andradeand Eduardo Viveiros de Castro) of destruction and vacillation (Euclides from Cunha). In conclusion, it can be stated that in the context of design practices the adoption of the decolonial perspective allows to articulate investigations and experiment forms of design focused on the recognition of differences, on the analysis of interactions and conflicts between different socio-spatial ecologies and on the attempt to define their relationships. In the pluriverse project, the main research fields have to do with the definition of contact areas between different ecologies and forms of spatial production, with the experimentation around the possibilities of multi-situated and reticular living practices, with the development of rural production practices linked to the invention of new ecologies or the creation of connection strategies between local economies and transnational processes. It is possible to consider all these practices not only as expressions

of local spatial thoughts (Viveiros de Castro, 2010; di Campli, 2019), but more generally as reflections on the epistemologies of exteriority, margins and areas of contact between knowledge, imaginary, space production practices.

Notes

1 For Walter Mignolo (2005) the category of colonial difference indicates the process of converting differences between knowledge, powers and cultures into values, establishing hierarchies. It is useful to clarify that the concept of 'colonial difference' is not synonymous with 'cultural difference'. Cultural differences are easy to negotiate. For hegemonic cultures it is easy to accommodate cultural differences rather than colonial differences. Cultural differences can be presented as legitimate, making their subordination opaque, otherwise, the concept of colonial difference makes the conflict between powers and paradigms explicit.

2 For a more extensive reasoning on the concept of decolonial ecology, on the question of ecological imperialism and on the relationship between gender and colonial issues, I refer to Ferdinand (2019).

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Colophon

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