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THE DECOLONIAL DEBATE TERRITORIES

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THE DECOLONIAL DEBATE: TERRITORIES O DEBATE DECOLONIAL: TERRITÓRIOS

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Marcelo Tramontano: The decolonial debate has gained momentum in numerous spheres, not only within academia at a historical moment when the idea of a multipolar world also seems more feasible. With regard to academia, this is still a controversial topic on which opinions vary across a wide spectrum. How do you perceive the interest in the decolonial debate at the current time?

Fernando Lara: I will speak briefly about my journey and how I got into this debate. Eighteen years ago, in 2005, I returned to the United States to teach at the University of Michigan. At that time, I was working on a book derived from my doctoral thesis. I was bothered by the geographical concentration in the North Atlantic of canonical examples of the modern architecture history of the 20th century. I drew a map (Fig. 1) based on the most prominent books for teaching modern architecture: Kenneth Frampton's book, Jean-Louis Cohen's book, which was published that same year, William Curtis' book, and Spiro Kostof's book, which is widely used in the United States. Spiro Kostof covers five thousand years of urbanization in the world, but I only used chapters about the 20th century.

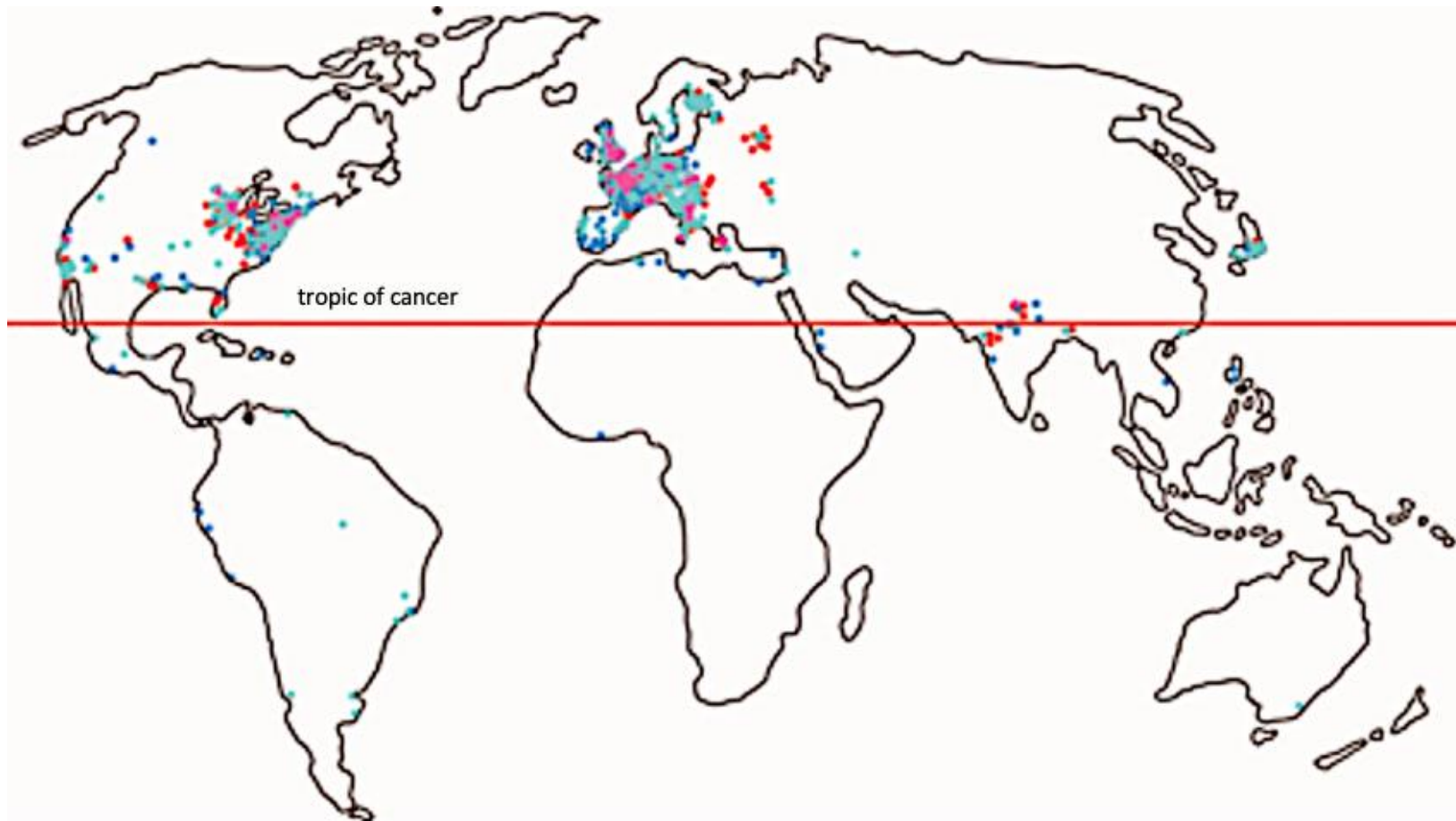


Fig. 1: Map mentioned by Fernando Lara. Source: F. Lara, 2005.

I marked each building mentioned in these books with a dot on the map. I saw that their concentration in the North Atlantic was gigantic. For example, concerning the Iron Curtain, there was clearly a concentration in Austria and Germany close to the Czechoslovakian border. However, those same books ignored demonstrations in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Russia as they laid on the other side of that geopolitical border established after World War II. Five years later, I started writing the book "Modern Architecture in Latin America" published in 2015 but written since 2010, having, as a background for my reflections, those findings from the map. I wondered how it would be possible to elaborate a discourse to understand the architecture of Latin America and what form that discourse should take.

In attempting to write the introduction and conclusion of the book, where we dealt with concepts somewhat external to architecture, I started reading authors who focused on Latin America. This choice led me to discover the Modernity/Coloniality group, consolidated in the United States at Duke University and the University of North Carolina, with intellectual figures like Walter Mignolo, Arturo

Escobar, and Enrique Dussel. This group was highly productive in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In this literature, I found several crucial insights, especially in Aníbal Quijano's works, a Peruvian economist who worked at ECLAC [Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean]. In 1992, the year of the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival to the Americas, Quijano wrote a fundamental text countering the idea that the Americas participated in the development of modern capitalism. According to Quijano, modern capitalism would not exist if there had not been European occupation of the Americas. This perspective is quite powerful.

The reading of Arturo Escobar's works was another revelation. Around 1995, Escobar wrote and published his doctoral thesis, which I read almost twenty years later, between 2013 and 2014. He skillfully ties together the idea that modernization and colonization are two sides of the same coin, thus inseparable: every modernity implies a coloniality. With these two axioms, I was compelled to reconsider our historiography, the way we understand Latin American architecture. I delved into this literature, which includes the works of Ramón Grosfoguel, Gloria Anzaldúa, Denise Ferreira da Silva, among others, to understand the relationship between modernity and coloniality.

That was a turning point for me as I had been trained in DOCOMOMO [International Working Party for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement], in the celebration of the Modern, a national project that, in Brazil, was articulated with Lúcio Costa during the Vargas government, spanned the Kubitschek years and culminated in the years of Dilma Rousseff government. I suddenly started perceiving various degrees of coloniality present in this entire process. There is much literature on this, such as Lorraine Leu's book on the significance of the dismantling of Morro do Castelo in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 20th century. The most important building in Brazilian modern architecture, the Ministry of Education and Health, was erected on the remains of a demolished hill in which an Afro-Brazilian community used to live before it was displaced. The very urban plan of my hometown, Belo Horizonte, is an expansionist colonial project commonly referred to as settler colonialism. I grew up with the idea that the history of Minas Gerais began in 1697, at the start of gold exploration. However, people had been living there for four thousand years. Where is that history? It disappeared. Through these inquiries and discoveries, I arrived at the decolonial debate.

What captivates me in this debate and keeps my interest in reading more, writing more, and continuing the discussion is that the vast majority of its ideas and concepts originate in South America. Even though some Mexican and Puerto Rican intellectuals are involved, a South American perspective dominates. I have found in colleagues of an older generation educated in Marxist ideas, significant resistance to decolonial discourse. They argue that the issue of race is exaggerated, a North American trend, or, as Jorge Liernur told me last year at a seminar in Mexico, that the decolonial debate is an imposition from North American academia and, therefore, another form of intellectual colonization. My response is that this understanding may be correct to some extent, as North American academia does lead this debate, but such leadership is not exclusive to them. An African perspective is also emerging, as well as an Asian perspective we know little about. I have already met people from Singapore and China discussing ways to explain the world from an Asian point of view, which certainly is not the European perspective. Moreover, it is crucial to note that many of the essential scholars in this field are South American, such as Enrique Dussel, Arturo Escobar, Walter D Mignolo, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Ramón Grosfoguel, who actually is Puerto Rican. I see something in this thought that stems from a spatial experience unique to South America.

In this process, I also decided to no longer talk about Latin American specificities and exceptionalities since I do not recognize the Rio Grande and Rio Bravo as a division between two Americas. The spatial history of the Americas, the European occupation of spaces, and the Amerindian holocaust are the same in the whole continent. We survived a pandemic with a lethality ranging between 1 and 2 percent. Imagine what the genocide of indigenous peoples was like in the 16th century, with a lethality rate of originary peoples that reached 90 percent in some groups in the Americas and the trauma it generated. The colonial idea of imprisoning people in Africa and forcibly bringing them here to replace the workforce that died in the 16th-century pandemics, is also very similar. The occupation and territorial exploitation are comparable from Chile to Canada. So, my interest is to think about the Americas, and this is another attitude that faces resistance. Yes, there are many Latin American and regional specificities: in the Andean countries, where the presence of indigenous populations is still strong, the countries of the La Plata Basin, like Paraguay, with the Guarani language, the

Caribbean, with its also peculiar history. Indeed, histories are local but at the same time, they share many similarities that have not been properly explored.

I am currently interested in thinking about American concepts to discuss these architectures. European concepts are fundamental but insufficient. And I want to work on such insufficiencies and the concepts we must develop to understand our own architecture. Overall, I see the decolonial debate in architecture as an opportunity to shuffle and deal the cards again. The cards have been dealt for three hundred years, but now we have the occasion to shuffle them. We have just edited an issue of the DeArq publication from Colombia, which we called *Barajar el cánon*, Shuffle the cards in English, a concept from my colleague Fernando Martínez Nespral from Buenos Aires, that refers to the idea of shuffling the cards and dealing them again, reacting to the rigged game we have been playing for so long.

Marcelo Tramontano: In fact, the currentness of this debate, as you mentioned earlier, is transversely positioned in the world, due in particular to the rise of China, a Global South country, in the current dispute for various hegemonies with the great powers of the North: technological, scientific, cultural, political, and other kinds of hegemony. The debate, therefore, reaches all areas of knowledge and, in our case, the field of Architecture and Urbanism. We may encounter resistance and hesitancy, but issues like those you mentioned do need to be discussed and confronted.

You also mentioned the modern architecture model, formulated as a means of domination that clearly illustrates the spatialization of the notion of the coloniality of power through specific ways of conceiving space, select hegemonic construction systems, forms, and architectural programs. These elements have been presented, since Adolf Loos, as a sort of cultured and civilized opposition to the architectures considered barbaric in the rest of the world, including those of the peoples of the South. However, when universalized and imposed on a planetary scale, this model has also been seized, reworked, and adopted by different peoples as expressions of their own culture. How do you see this phenomenon?

Fernando Lara: I see two sides to this question. The first is very positive. The beautiful side of Oscar Niemeyer's work is that he managed to incorporate Brazilian identity, especially that of Rio de Janeiro, into his architecture. Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Vilanova Artigas did the same thing in Sao Paulo. They all read the places where they were and produced exuberant, wonderful, innovative, and in some cases, genius architecture. The headquarters of the French Communist Party, designed by Niemeyer in Paris, is brilliant. The School of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Sao Paulo, designed by Artigas, and Paulo Mendes da Rocha's buildings, especially the Paulistano Club, have ingenious architecture. But along with this Brazilian identity they interpreted, another Brazilian identity is at the core of this architecture. It involves the fact that it was produced with concrete molds made of deforestation wood, the fact that the metal framework and cement were carried on the shoulders of mulatto men who never had a chance to enjoy this modernity or very little. Another considerable Brazilian invention, the Unified Health System, which provides universal free access to all Brazilian residents, was created a few decades after the period between the 1940s and the 1970s when these great constructions were produced. Imagine the number of workers who became invalid, died, or suffered for the rest of their lives because they did not have access to a health system, medical treatment, and hospitals. There was no care for this significant portion that integrated and still integrates the construction process. Many workers died or lost body parts in a process linked to ecological issues related to deforestation and, in general, the exploitation of natural and human resources.

At the 12th International Architecture Biennale of São Paulo in 2019, I presented a project at the Centro Cultural São Paulo (CCSP) developed with my students (Fig. 2). I was already deeply affected by the Mariana disaster, but during the Biennial month, the Brumadinho disaster occurred, killing many more people. What we presented was part of a studio work we had developed at the University of Texas in Austin, where I was then a professor. I asked the students to build a 3D digital model of different paradigmatic buildings in Brazilian architecture and quantify the chemical and mineral elements in each of those constructions. They calculated the amount of iron, aluminum, calcium, and other elements. Then, we did the reverse work, computing the size of the impact those buildings caused in the natural environment. Each of the buildings generated a hole: in the iron mine, in the aluminum mine, in deforestation, in the limestone mine. Finally, we overlaid the size of the holes on the scale of the Mariana disaster for comparison. Unfortunately, architecture is like this. Any small domestic renovation generates an ecological impact and a socio-economic impact. It generates added value, appreciation, or depreciation of areas. Facing this problem is part of the responsibility of architecture.



Fig. 2: Panel presented at the XII Sao Paulo Architecture Biennial. Source: F. Lara, 2019.

Here in the United States, there is a vigorous movement to address the labor issue of architects, from the understanding that the architect is not a creative artist whose genius is recognized by sponsors. An architect is an employee who needs a union, a limitation of weekly working hours, a minimum wage, which is not the norm in the United States. Schools sell to students the illusion that everyone will be a famous architect and, one day, will have a huge office, based on the exploitation of other young people who will come later. This debate is very central here. I think in Brazil, there is a slightly better understanding of the socio-economic structure in which architecture is inserted. Architects, especially those trained in good public schools, understand the economic integration of architecture and what it means for the profession.

These contemporary issues lead us to reassess modern architectures. The racism of Lúcio Costa and Le Corbusier, as demonstrated by Fabiola López-Durán's book, the numerous stories of harassment attributed to Oscar Niemeyer, for example. How to measure this? Is it necessary to separate them from their work? Or not? Is it possible to keep viewing the work of Woody Allen in the same way after you know about his relationship with his adopted daughter? I do not think so. My colleague Christopher Long wrote a book about the rape case Adolf Loos went through, based on the architect's own testimony and the testimony of the girl who accused him. It is impossible to keep seeing his work in the same way after reading the book. You cannot separate the work from its creator. This also happens because the field of Architecture insists on not separating. When we look at a building, we say that "this is a Niemeyer," not that "this is a building designed by Niemeyer, detailed by his team, budgeted by the construction team, built by three hundred people, and paid by someone." We do not have the entire closing titles at the end of the movie. We only associate the work with its creator. And when the creator is overthrown, what do we do with the work? I think this is a central question to be discussed as a consequence of the decolonial movement and identity struggles. We have to find other ways to assess and discuss architecture because these ways of the 20th century are, again, insufficient.

Marcelo Tramontano: This architecture you problematize so well corresponds to the model presented to students entering the first year of architecture courses in Brazil, Latin America, and perhaps worldwide as the ideal model, or the architecture that should be taken as a benchmark for quality and, in a way, pursued. In Brazil, many students enter university through racial, social, and indigenous quotas, as you know. They often belong to peripheral communities where descendants of groups and peoples that were most subalternized in the process of colonization predominate and have suffered –and still suffer– the effects of the perpetuation of coloniality. It means that the hegemonic nature of this architectural model and its presentation to students as a paradigm would lead to the erasure of the references that each one brings with them. How could we promote new readings of the architecture teaching and learning process from a decolonial perspective?

Fernando Lara: In my texts over the past three years, I have delved into a process I call spatial abstraction. Why have I dedicated myself to studying this process? Because it was systematized in the 16th century, at the same time that Europeans were consolidating

their dominance over the Americas. Once again, following the guiding star –to use a Christian metaphor– of Arturo Escobar, Aníbal Quijano, and Enrique Dussel, there is no separation between the process of colonizing American territories and the process of systematizing architectural tools, which is a process of abstraction and distancing. In the time of Leon Battista Alberti or Filippo Brunelleschi, they were thinking about drawing tools based on all the knowledge of the time –Islamic knowledge, Italian antiquity and so on– and they created tools to accelerate or enhance architectural thinking. Architects of that time were constantly on the construction site. The distancing between architects and the construction site began in the 15th century Florence but was systematized in the 16th century by the great treatises starting with Sebastiano Serlio, passed through Andrea Palladio, and extended to Giacomo Vignola. It is a process of taking distance, separating the architect from the physical construction. It correlates with what René Descartes systematized in 1605: the separation between mind and space, between the mind and the rest. We have imposed this process of abstraction on architecture students since then. Since the 17th century, the imposition of this process generates precisely what you have just pointed out. It happened to me. In my family, there were no architects. I do not come from a family that had the social capital of the elite, so after graduating, I did not have clients who would allow me to carry out the works that, as a student, I imagined I should do.

Such a process of distancing is imposed on students already in their first year of graduation. They are told: "forget your previous spatial experience, forget where you lived your first 18 years of life and all your experience of space. We will teach you, from scratch, what a wall is, what a window is, what a sleeping place is, what a dining place is." It is a classic process of modernization, of colonizing students' minds from the premise of bringing them to modernity. How to break with this is the crux of the matter. How to reclaim knowledge that I call relational, not abstract? Emotions, stories... How to bring back to the drawing board or the computer the history of places, of those who lived and live in them? How to understand these spaces? Because the modern training is a process of distancing students from these affections, stories, and relationships in order to manipulate them, working at the whim of those who pay us. This issue is extremely clear to me, but I do not know how to rescue such knowledge. I keep trying to find ways in scholars who inhabit cities that have survived modernization, whether of African, Indigenous, Arab, or Asian matrix. In these references, there is knowledge we do not know how to bring to the architectural design, and I think this knowledge is the key to overcome the crisis we are experiencing, in which drawing no longer works. It does not work for social or climate crises. We must seek other tools and theoretical frameworks to advance in this matter.

I find the work of modern architects sensitive to this other knowledge much more interesting. I am thinking of the architect Lina Bo Bardi, who was enormously sensitive to construction issues and deliberately denied distancing herself from it. Lina did not draw, or drew very little but used to stay at the construction site, which was a brilliant move on her part. I also think of Lelé – the architect João Filgueiras Lima – who understood that architecture is made by the hundreds of workers on the construction site. He began to design with the process in mind, considering what two men can carry as prefabricated components, for example. I think architects who understood these things were more successful, and their work seems more interesting to me.

Marcelo Tramontano: Listening to you, I remembered Lina's crucial contribution to the cultural sphere and not only to the architectural and constructive thought. I think of the Nordeste exhibition she organized at Solar do Unhão in Salvador, opening the local Museum of Popular Art, where she denounced the centuries of subalternization and erasure suffered by the Afro-descendant population in the region and rescued their artistic production. Lina, Lelé, Eládio Dieste, Severiano Porto are radical moderns whose work and thoughts must be permanently discussed with architecture students.

In your dialogue with different schools and peers in Latin America, what place do you think is being given to decolonial thinking in the teaching of architecture and urbanism? In what way and to what extent has this debate – or not – taken place in the region's schools? Do you know of successful experiences, or places where these ideas have blossomed?

Fernando Lara: Argentina holds a significant position in this debate, starting with Marina Waisman in Córdoba in the 1980s and 1990s and nowadays with Fernando Martínez Nespral. Argentina is home to a discussion hub. I recall the exhibition Andrea Giunta and Agustín Pérez Rubio organized at Malba, the Museum of Latin American Art in Buenos Aires, the most important Latin American modern art museum. The curators reorganized the Malba's collection based on Latin American criteria in an exhibition called Verboamérica, which lasted a year and a half. Although Malba has since returned to exhibiting works according to European criteria,

the artworks were displayed for a year and a half following Latin American criteria. Works by artists who had never been side by side were presented in the same room. For instance, works by León Ferrari and Di Cavalcanti were placed side by side to discuss religiosity. In Mexico, few people are working on these issues. Chile has a history of very rich and diverse architectural thought as well. The Catholic University of Chile focuses more on form and tectonics, the University of Chile has a more socialist approach, which resembles the teaching in Brazilian public universities, and the Catholic University of Valparaíso, a school closed on itself, with several fantastic experiences, but very isolated.

From Chile comes an experience that I am absolutely a fan of and continue to follow, seeing surprising results: the School of Talca. Juan Román, the school's director, founded it about fifteen years ago. It is a small public school in an equally small and poor agricultural town with vineyards and a tradition of logging for the furniture industry. Juan came from the School of Valparaíso bringing its methodology and various interesting innovations to create the School of Talca. The first two years of the course are very traditional, with basic seminars in design, construction, architectural history, systems, urban planning and the like. From the third year onwards, students take parallel seminars while joining a team in the studio. This team is led by a fifth-year student who is graduating, and brings together third-, fourth- and fifth-year students. The great innovation of the School of Talca is that fifth-year students have to build their graduation work, and if they do not do it, they do not receive their diploma. Of course, they do not design cultural centers or other large buildings, but rather a canopy in front of the city hospital to protect people waiting in line, a viewpoint on top of a hill where people often walk, an accessible platform for wheelchairs in the fruit market, and so on. The projects are small but beautiful and well executed. Furthermore, they prioritize teamwork from the third year of the course. The student entering the third year becomes the intern who will create the basic drawings, try to find out the price of something, help with the budget and carry the materials to the site. Overtime, he rises in rank on the team –constantly recomposed– and when he reaches the fifth year, he will lead a team of five students who will help him build his project. I think this methodology is sensational, and the works are beautiful.

Something that frequently bothers me in the Global South is that university extension projects developed for poor areas are themselves poor. They use tires to make retaining walls or to renovate a small square. The materials are usually quite basic, the very idea of composition and placement of materials is excessively primary, and the projects are as cheap as possible. The Talca School manages to pervert this. The works are deeply embedded in the community, which is part of the school's success. The city hall donates materials, the owner of the sawmill provides some wood, the owner of the building materials store donates the stones, and so they create works that constitute small *follies*, to use an idea from Bernard Tschumi. The city is dotted with these little *follies*, little architectures.

A crucial difference in relation to the Valparaíso school is that the work remains in the city, as in Valparaíso the work is abandoned. The school of Valparaíso does not believe in the architectural object, let's put it this way, but it does believe in the act of building. There, they cannibalize their own creation. From one year to the next, students go to Ritoque –the area of the school dedicated to constructive experimentation– and collect materials. Ritoque is full of ruins. And Ritoque is not inhabited, looking like an architects' amusement park. Talca has the advantage of being a city with very low density, a rural and small town where work is integrated into residents' daily lives. However, this project is very recent, and I don't know what the school will be like in ten years or when Juan Román retires, since his leadership is decisive. Several questions concern the future, but today, I find it the most interesting school in the Americas.

Marcelo Tramontano: Fernando, to conclude our conversation, we want to ask you a question that we pose to all VIRUS interviewees. Based on everything we have discussed here, does the future seem promising to you?

Fernando Lara: I believe that one can see the glass as half empty or half full, in a proportion of 50/50. That is my response to your question. With the glass half-empty, it's easy to explain. We live in a time of resurgence of the extreme right, censorship and the emptying of university issues. The issue of censorship is central here in the United States. Brazil went through four years under Bolsonaro, Argentina will have years under Milei, the United States went through four years under Trump, and there is a significant chance he will return. We have to live in a reactionary time. In this sense, the glass is half empty. I do not see architecture prepared to be propositional to lead the necessary debates. I see architecture very much in tow all these issues. On the glass-half-full side, I remark the expansion of the idea of architecture beyond the elite. A profession and a disciplinary field that have always been very elitist are finally discussing their own elitism. Some nations and societies are working against this elitism, bringing a more diverse

community into architecture, even if it is still challenging in other places. In the European case or in the case of prestigious North American universities, at least we are discussing and denouncing this elitism. In this regard, I see the glass as half-full.

I also perceive that another digital revolution is coming to shake up the foundations of Architecture, which is the issue of image production through Artificial Intelligence. Incredibly powerful images are already being produced through Artificial Intelligence. From image production to the design of entire buildings it is a tiny step. I think such developments will force the field of architecture to rethink itself. What will be our contribution in this new scenario? Designing buildings that comply with building regulations will be a task performed by ChatGPT in ten years, not by someone with an architecture degree. For those, what contribution will we propose? There is a small hope that architecture will become purposeful again because we have this power and responsibility. Better than many other areas, we are able to design the future. Cinema can present an idea of the future, but we translate the idea of the future into implementable projects. We anchor images of the future to real issues. I have hope that Architecture will really start designing cities without cars, inclusive cities that can reduce carbon emissions, that can encompass various ways of living, distinct from modern design, which demolishes self-built areas to implement housing complexes that aim to teach people how to live.

I hope that digital tools help empower people in general and that they can achieve better living spaces. But there is also a strong chance that the use of these tools will promote more elitism and gentrification. I cannot see an advantage on either side and I find myself quite pessimistic. Like all elections worldwide in recent years, which are resolved with 51% for one side and 49% for the other, I think, in this case, capital and big tech companies are at 51%, and empowering social movements are at 49%. How to turn this game around is a fundamental question we need to face.