Guía de diseño arquitectónico aymara para edificios y espacios públicos
In recent decades, the integration of communities into the processes and attention to local identities have become a basic condition in the design of public buildings. However, when those designs are developed from a centralized state structure, communication with the local environment becomes difficult. That led the Chilean state – through the Directorate of Architecture of the Ministry of Public Works (MoP) – to develop a series of Guides for Ethnic Architectural Design of Public Infrastructure. In this debate, we are interested in delving into the capacity of these guides to decolonize architectural design. Are they a useful tool for this purpose? What is their role in the design process? Do they allow a horizontal dialogue to be established with the communities? Or are they a tool to fix an identity from above?
In our times, speaking of colonizing visions – and the necessary and imminent decolonizing stance within architecture – is delving into the past and future as well as addressing underlying themes of globalization, visions of progress, and the homogenization of the lifestyles with which our profession is in constant dialogue.

Globalization has intrinsically allowed positioning Native peoples within an identity ‘crisis of extinction’ and, consequently, in the face of such a worrying process of disappearance, it has also allowed for a greater recognition and dissemination of the bases of their worldviews and the territorial conditions, rites and complex social structures that shape them. In this process, it has been possible to understand that many Indigenous peoples have not remained intact over time nor oblivious to the effects of change, both local and global.

Today, cultures do not live as they did ancestrally, even the desires of the new generations are as diverse and complex as they are in Western cultures, in terms of maintaining lifestyles, types of work, models of education, ways of dressing, among others, and this is also presented as an important factor of change to consider when we approach cultures under the decolonizing gaze. This raises a relevant point to discuss: although the essence of the original peoples is affected by contemporary visions, it is from their context, beliefs, and social structure that they inescapably establish their particularities.

I want to focus my opinion on the current design instruments and methodological, not on their role as tools but on the bias in their reflection of the permanent paradox between development and homogenization that architecture and global trends propose. This while placing myself on a regional and academic front where identity and creation values are widely discussed. Here, I would like to highlight the fundamental contribution these materials have in the recognition of Native peoples, closer to cultural guides that have systematized knowledge and allowed the dissemination of local values to those designers and architects who do not live directly in contact with them.

However, the core discussion about a design with cultural relevance opens new questions and ways of approaching such problems and territories. Beyond the conscious recognition and respect for the local, it should delineate new principles between the spheres of apparent progress and their associated governance, persistently promoting this insular and specific knowledge as a trigger for different ways to generate locality and actual progress. In other words, planning, evaluating, and innovating based on their own terms and fundamentals, no longer as a specific commission at different scales, from a private client or a public bidding, but rather generating an immersive field and multiple discipline factors, enabling architecture to be also decolonized.

It seems obvious to approach original people from a deep perspective, but let us not forget that the sole valorization of the past is not enough, nor the exhaustive collection of information to study their current state: we must add the future temporal variables in which the cultural dimensions should be preserved and present them through a network of multi links to the political spheres, connected and related at last to the territory where both intend to coexist. From this perspective, the visions of progress and development as we currently conceive them would be challenged and forced into a nourishing discussion.

Throughout history, the point of view of colonization has sought to base progress on infrastructures, connections, access to sources of knowledge, technologization, entertainment, ways of life, among others, establishing them as essential elements for a nation’s development. This led to the nourishment of a technical and effective view of planning and construction processes, giving rise to the biases of ‘forms or references’ instead of the possibility of enhancing the cultural foundations from which architecture can contribute.

The invitation that I make today to my architecture and thesis students is to understand that ‘island of knowledge’ based on the local, to work on that cultural relevance that entails ethnographic variables but also the prospective, the worldview, and the current threats, the spatial and the material of the cultures, and, above all, to be an active front in the innovation of such insularity and of the global synergy that all this entails.

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ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE: VISIONS OF DECOLONIZATION

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