Guía de diseño arquitectónico aymará 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?
I INVITE YOU TO READ AND DECOLONIZE YOURSELF
SIX ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN GUIDES FOR ETHNIC PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

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n June 21, 1887, in the middle of the nitrate bonanza after the conquest of Bolivian and Peruvian territories, with the Occupation of Araucanía only just completed, and a few years after the last Mapuche uprising of 1881, the law that reorganized the Departments of State (ministries) was enacted, creating, among others, one for Industry and Public Works, divided into three sections: Industry, Public Works, Railways and Colonization.

Along with agricultural, mining, and manufacturing activities, railways, buildings, and public facilities, it would also oversee the opening, conservation, and repair of roads, bridges, and street lanes; the regulation of hunting and fishing; as well as the protection of forests, the distribution of water, and the elaboration of the country’s maps. However, it would also oversee “everything that concerns the branch of colonization”: the Ministry of Public Works (with the acronym MOP in Spanish) was born a colonizer.

In 135 years of history and although relieved of duties such as immigration and the settlement of colonizers, the MOP, acting as the enforcement arm of most of the policies of a centralist state lacking in sensitivity to the territorial peculiarities of its long geography and the cultural identities of its peoples – especially Native –, has been quite far from detaching from its colonizing origin.

The attempt to regulate (normalize) the design and construction of territories and architectures does not only obey the desire to ensure minimum constructive quality or a certain standard of habitability: it is also a tool to define, or at least promote, lifestyles according to those proposed or suggested (by power) as desirable or, more bluntly, correct. Bridges, ferries, tunnels, and road bumps, together with ensuring connectivity for products and travelers, are also a way to transform a country naturally fragmented by rivers, mountains, straits, and fjords into a unitary entity, integrating the various peoples that inhabit its landscapes towards an idea of national identity.

The homogenizing efforts of the architecture made by the institutional power, manifested in almost identical housing blocks from north to south, models of schools and hospitals repeated to the point of exhaustion, as the embodiment of modernity and ‘suggesting’ a civilized, republican, and orderly way of life (to be taught and healed), are visible in housing settlements of the Agrarian Reform, which distinguished little to nothing between from a Kolla community in the Atacama, a Mapuche community in Araucanía, or the ranchers of Maule.

Through numerous regulations, manuals, and guides, the MOP has controlled a good part of the public architecture projects, spanning from how and who can participate in an open call to the dimensions and shape of the symbols that signal the finishing in a floorplan drawing, thus also colonizing the exercise of the profession.

With the weight of this history, and in the context of the growing relevance of Indigenous issues in public discussion, a decade after the 1993 Indigenous Law was enacted and almost two decades before the election of a Constituent Convention with gender parity and reserved Indigenous seats, in 2003 the ministry published Mapuche and Aymara architectural design guides – updated in 2016 –, and Kawéskar, Selk’nam, Yagán, and Aonikenk guides in 2020. We could expand on the details of these guides, which follow the same pattern of contents, divided into three main themes – cultural heritage, case studies, orientations –; all made up of six beautiful pictorial volumes, or in which the chosen case studies have improved over time. But we won’t. The commitment of the old ministry of colonization is put elsewhere: the different volumes go from the world of beliefs, language, customs, and economy, to objects, architectures, ways of organizing, and settling in the territory. All of this, as if walking through a landscape, proposing (not dictating) the reader (and the designer) to soak up a certain atmosphere, inviting them to consider nature as part of the original peoples ‘being.’

From the presentation of “architectures with cultural relevance” in the first guides – presenting contemporary projects of different quality and interest – we move on to the ‘case studies’ of the four newest and southernmost editions. Thus adding to the contemporary architecture other projects made by the peoples themselves, which are, therefore, more direct as well as evocative: the Fell Cave, the conchales on Navarino Island, the Ñexáus of Bahía Mejillones, or even contemporary sculptures and academic interventions.

Obviously, these guides are not enough to talk about a decolonizing process within the MOP. However, these guides, aside from being a valuable input for projects of Indigenous cultural relevance, open questions: where is the agency of individuals and communities in the design and formulation of public projects? How would a plurinational state affect these projects? Can we imagine a kind of ‘reverse colonization’ of hegemonic architecture led by First Nations or peoples hitherto marginalized, yet perhaps more in tune with the environmental and cultural challenges we are facing today? 

Dino Bozzi

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