EQUALITY

HOT!

BAAAA

¡VICTORIA!

LOVE

IMAGINE

ARCHITECTURE FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
COMUNAL

The practice of traditional architecture is based on the complex under-standing of inhabiting, the collective production and transmission of knowledge, the construction of the habitat through communitary processes of mutual aid that strengthen the social fabric, as well as cultural and territorial identity. It is a practice of community self-production where the inhabitants, without intermediaries, are the ones who manage the multiple processes involved in the production and transformation of the habitat and themselves. In other words, the creative activity of praxis (understood by Sánchez Vázquez as praxis for social transformation and revolution) is a process not only of self-production of the habitat but also of self- production of the collective consciousness through the dialectical and recursive relationship between reflection-action or theory-praxis. Here lies the importance of critical reflection and the philosophy of praxis: recognizing ourselves as historical beings with the ability to collectively transform and produce our social reality.

Otherwise, the past centuries of architecture have gone from being a diverse common good at the service of people (for the production of habi-tat and collective consciousness) to a hegemonic practice whose purpose is the accumulation of capital and domination, leading to alienation, the transformation of socio-ecological relations and the fetishization of archi-tecture: where architecture is understood as an object (commodity) and not as a process and network of social relationships. This type of prac-tice, despite continuing to require the organized participation of various actors, attributes its production to an individual author: an entity that, without having the multiple knowledge necessary to carry out a job from start to finish, can be recognized as the mastermind behind the architec-tural object, hiding social relations of exploitation, dispossession, racism, coloniality, and violence.

Social Reconstruction of Habitat
Courtesy of Comunal

Violence, defined by Sánchez Vázquez as the denial of the creative capacity of the human being, is related to the hegemonic vision of a social order that fragments the collective and places the market (and the accumulation of capital) as its main axis (Herrera et al., 2020), leaving aside the collective subject. There are different types of violence, however, they do not operate in isolation. On the contrary, the forms of violence that we present here (which we have identified from our learning by doing through integral accompaniment) are part of an interdependent and articulated economic-political system that generates great social inequalities. Therefore, we consider it urgent to rethink together the ways in which we exercise our praxis: what actions reproduce violence from architectural practice in the multiple dimensions that conform inhabiting? What hegemonic thoughts and conceptions of architecture reproduce acts of domination, dispossession and exploitation?

Epistemic violence:

— Marginalize or make invisible the knowledge of people in the management, design, and production of their habitat, validating only the knowledge generated in hegemonic academic spaces and "professional" spheres, reproducing racism and the coloniality of knowledge (Anibal Quijano).

— Appropriating multidimensional collective knowledge (construction techniques, medicinal, productive, textile, ritual, etc.), exercising extractivism, and epistemic dispossession.

— Considering traditional ways of living and vernacular architecture as backward, deny traditional constructive knowledge as appropriate, and appropriable community sciences to the socioecological context.

Enviromental violence:

— Denying the right of the inhabitants to participate and decide the future of their territory.

— Exploiting and putting at risk the natural assets that sustain the life of communities, for example, through real estate development that embodies accumulation by dispossession (David Harvey), expelling people from their territories (and cities), and breaking the socioecological relationships established in them.

— Making invisible the production of nature and the uneven development (Neil Smith) generated by the extraction of construction materials.

Economic violence:

- Imposing megaprojects and architectural projects that promote a capitalist and developmentalist economic model that displaces people from their territories (and cities) and puts their economy at risk.

- Introducing construction technologies for the accumulation of capital at an accelerated rate (such as 3D printers used to produce houses in Mexico) and not the democratization of science and redistribution of power, undermining traditional trades, local production chains, and solidarity economies.

- Using architecture as a means of accumulation through touristification (of rural and urban areas), causing an increase in the cost of living and the eviction of the inhabitants.

Institutional violence:

- Implementing institutional programs and public policies that promote unworthy forms of living (such as minimum housing) that only benefit the economic, political, and quantitative interests of power groups: politicians, developers, architects, among others.

- Applying decontextualized, racist, and technocratic construction rules and regulations that homogenize the habitat and erase people's technical-constructive and territorial knowledge.

- Generating population censuses that characterize non-hegemonic ways of life as precarious. For example, in Mexico a dwelling that uses traditional constructive systems and local materials (bamboo, palm, wood, reed, bajareque, etc.) is considered precarious. This leads to replacing constructive cultures with prototype and authorial housing models.

Based on the above reality, it is necessary to understand participation as a collective right that recognizes people of any social class (and not only the dominant social classes) as subjects of action and not as objects of intervention, with the capacity to decide the future of their habitat through intercultural processes that necessarily imply political solidarity and class consciousness (bell hooks). Autonomous participation, and not forced, simulated, and instrumentalized participation for political and economic purposes, is a necessary tool for social transformation and spatial justice. From this ethical-political position, architecture must no longer be conceived as a work of authorship or as a static and unmodifiable object; but as a living, open, and evolving social process that operates at the individual and community level with the ability to transform our collective consciousness, the way we produce our habitat and our social reality.

Social Reconstruction of Habitat
Courtesy of Comunal

The Social Production and Management of Habitat [SP&MH], a concept [theory] coined by Enrique Ortiz in the 1960s and an architectural practice [praxis] that has been developed for more than 50 years in Mexico and Latin America, conceives the habitat as a dialectical relationship: as a product and producer of socio-ecological relations that implies the active, informed, and organized participation of the inhabitants in its management and development, under the control of self-producers and other social agents, where use value (social needs) is prioritized over exchange value (merchandise).

Although it is true that self-production and self-construction have multiple challenges for the inhabitants (technical, economic, political, organizational, administrative, etc.), these challenges cannot be reduced to the design of the architectural object, as it would be leaving aside the systemic and complex vision of inhabiting. In this sense, participation focuses on the recognition of the social subject through an integral accompaniment during the diagnosis of strengths, challenges and needs, the construction of collective strategies, the search for the efficiency of the economic and material resources of the inhabitants, and the strengthening of the community organization. Speaking exclusively from a technical perspective, the solution is not to replace the self-producer but to recognize that the only way to address the challenges related to the production of the habitat, without replicating structures of oppression and violence, is through participation and recognition of otherness with a respectful accompaniment that promotes the horizontal exchange of knowledge. Also, an integral accompaniment (technical & social) must be understood as a diverse epistemic practice in order to address the complexity of the habitat. That is to say, it is not an exclusive task of professionals, much less a process that should be carried out only from technical and architectural knowledge.

For the above, we would first have to unlearn and disarticulate the academic discourse that we have been introduced to since our formation: design as a sublime act that can only be performed by a few endowed with cultural capital for that purpose. It is necessary to eliminate the romantic vision around participation as an "inclusive" practice granted by professionals or institutions to the inhabitants and recognize it as a collective right that strengthens the autonomy and self-management of urban and rural communities. A political and ethical stance that rejects assimilation and finds its values in the diversity of thought and the collective construction of knowledge and, finally, an anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal, and anti-racist vision that defense the free self-determination of each community.

It is essential the importance of training architects capable of working from decolonial positions that reject the hegemonic, patriarchal, and neoliberal discourses of technocratic education. This type of academic training requires a critical pedagogy that allows us to exercise the philosophy of

praxis, in the words of Paulo Freire: "critical teaching practice, implicit in thinking correctly, encloses the dynamic and dialectical movement between doing and thinking about doing." Critical pedagogy for freedom also invites us to reflect on the impossibility of having a neutral and depoliticized practice, since it is precisely our reality as historical beings that leads us to take an ethical-political position, whether or not we are aware of it. In this regard, Sánchez Vázquez argues that depoliticization creates a consciousness vacuum (useful for the dominant classes and power groups) that is filled by the dominant hegemonic ideology, which leads us to a repetitive practice and distances us from the philosophy of praxis. In this sense, if we want to move away from an alienated and violent practice, the only alternative for hope and transformative praxis is to politicize design through critical thinking.

"Participation is not a matter of good faith, assistance or good will. It is not the sharing of ignorance and altruistic voluntarism, nor is it a simple methodological question of instrumental reason. From the vision and stance of SP&MH, participation is understood as an ideological, political and democratic posture."

Gustavo Romero. "Participación en el diseño urbano y arquitectónico en la PSH".

The processes of integral accompaniment, based on the theoretical-practical vision of Social Production and Management of Habitat, are focused on raising social awareness through political training and popular education, as well as strengthening the community fabric and autonomy, the organizational capacities of groups or collectives, legal and administrative accompaniment, the recovery of local construction systems and knowledge, the maintenance of productive chains and economies specific to each community (rural or urban), and the close relationship of the inhabitants with their territory. This implies recognizing that collective creativity is not found only in the design of the project but rather permeates each of the complex and recursive moments of participation. In other words, creativity is also manifested in the design of participatory tools, decolonial collective research, pedagogical processes of mutual learning, shared hopes, and social bonds. Always hand-in-hand with an integral accompaniment that has a clear ethical-political position and promotes collective rights to exercise a creative praxis that enables social transformation.

We must work for the construction of a world where many worlds can be.