

# GLOBAL CITIES AND THE GHETTOIZING OF THE AMAZON BASIN

ANA MARÍA DURÁN CALISTO

*“Our traditional cities are based on the fiction that there are inexhaustible fountains located outside the city that permit indefinite extraction.”*

Izaskun Chinchilla

*“Then learn this of me: to have, is to have; for it is a figure in rhetoric, that drink, being poured out of a cup into a glass, by filling the one doth empty the other.”*

William Shakespeare

*As You Like It*

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## **The voyage**

To sail the Amazon from west to east, to descend from Quito in the Andes to the outpouring of the river-sea into the Atlantic Ocean, is to come upon the phenomenon of the megalopolis from the point at which its traces are least visible or apparent. The gradient of the river unwinds like a roll of photographic film, unspooling slowly from “the raw to the cooked<sup>1</sup>,” from the wild to the domesticated. The cross-section that is forced upon us by this guillotine of water invokes Peter Greenway’s camera in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. The ship glides from the kitchen of the planet into its living room, descends to the bathroom, lowers us into the sewer, returns to the living room, escapes into the bedroom, emerges at the car park... The jungle profile, asphyxiated between the two firmaments of air and water, persists; it decomposes into urban images along the pioneering route opened by Francisco de Orellana in 1541-42. The corridor of vegetation dissolves into oil pipe-

lines; it rears up in the form of a building truss or an incinerator; it is transformed into a derrick or a tower; it is reflected in the water as a silo or a power plant. The Amazon is urban, a river megalopolis, a metropolitan mega-Venice.

### **The media**

Why has the urbanization of the Amazon basin remained relatively invisible in the media? Remoteness is a geographical concept, defined on the basis of parameters of distance and access; or a temporal concept, as in “remote in time.” But remoteness is also a category defined by the mass media, in which the Amazon is construed as a non-urban, or anti-urban space, lacking construction, industry, or citizens who might question the heaven / hell duality through which it is generally represented. Even web browsers, which are assumed to be open systems capable of harboring alternative voices, produce images that are mostly green or blue, zoological or ethnographic, when the query “Amazon” is typed in, reinforcing the romantic idea of the region as the exotic place *par excellence*. Here and there a hotel brochure or book jacket will be splashed with images of the “cultured jungle,”<sup>2</sup> explaining to some extent why the myth of the Amazon continues to live on in the media even as its complicated reality tells other stories. Those refuges from the contemporary world, those last bastions of physical escapism and isolation, cannot be represented as “urban”—precisely that which is being fled—but must instead be the living portrayal of “nature in its purest state,” of utopia, the place that no longer exists. At the other extreme of the paradises constructed by ecotourism, which packages geographical commodities, and ethnotourism, which markets indigenous cultures, is the anti-myth: the Amazon as hell and harbinger of the apocalypse. The incriminating images depict expanding agricultural borders, smoking tree trunks, roads plunged into gigantic patches of deforestation. In this diptych of global consumption, the Amazon as the object

of the urge to explore and the Amazon as the provider of raw materials, lie the roots of its real and tangible conflicts, and perhaps an epitome of the dilemma of the contemporary world.

**The exotic:**

**The myth of the remote**

**The myth of the pure**

**The myth of isolation**

On February 27 2008, Wang Shu, Dean of the Academy of Arts in China, opened a conference at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University by showing a series of paintings taken from the landscape tradition of his country. One by one, traced in red or blank ink, the most beautiful illustrations of rugged mountains appeared on the screen. Eventually, these pictures began to alternate with other images, panoramic photographs of mountain ranges in China. “In my country, people used to worship mountains,” he explained, “now they mine them.” Huge craters carved out by mechanical shovels in different landscapes were interspersed with pictures of the spring-towers that rise, as if by magic, in the instant cities of the oriental dragon. “In order not to contribute to the further erosion of mountains, we use the waste products of the construction industry,” Wang Shu continued, while he displayed the structures that he designed and built with his group at Amateur Architecture Studio. His educational centers and museums are monumental mineral edifices whose walls accumulate, like geological faults, the sedimentary strata of construction debris. Different degrees of grinding produce a variety of textures and tonalities in a pastry-like architecture that can be regarded as raw material, as constructed geology, or as future mine. Wang Shu’s architecture reminds us that matter—the hard side of energy—can neither be created nor destroyed, but only transformed. And it becomes clear that as far as matter is concerned, the remote is near at hand --it’s literally at home--, the artificial is natural, the other is the self, and the Amazon is São Paulo, Beijing, or Toronto.

## **The new cartographies**

If the tree house and the cave house are the archetypes of the first dwelling, then architecture is the archetype of the first collective text (marks carved on tree trunks are merely signs, signals). The most irrefutable historical document, the one that doesn't tell lies, is the palimpsest of geography. Today, every landscape is cultural and has been domesticated to some degree. In the text of the territory traversed by the Amazon River—its precarious and unstable calligraphies jointly inscribed by man and nature—, the thick branches of infrastructure that grow fatter as resources become scarcer are etched with greater and greater speed, and become the latest tentacles of global trade.<sup>3</sup> Along its channels flow oil, natural gas, wood, steel, electricity, copper, gold, rubber, soy, biodiesel, parrots, cocaine, people... In the opposite direction come tourists, voices, images, letters, information and industrial products; along with them arrive settlers who will live in entropic tumbledown villages, while the lineal clearings, the patches of deforestation, the plantations, and the megalopolises spread out.

If we had to imagine a cartography that could express, on a global scale, the relationship between the Amazon and other remote areas on the one hand, and the megalopolises on the other, it would have to show how the urban blotches of major cities and their suburbs fan out, while at the same time it would sketch the patches of deforestation, the proliferation of oil wells, the expanding branches of transport, energy and telecommunication infrastructure, the sprouting of tourist enclaves, and the shrinking of indigenous territories. This combination produces a very specific form of counter-urbanism; the ghettoizing of geography seems to be the flipside of urban expansion. Remote landscapes become a negative of the urban mega-positive, because areas that are rich in natural resources and raw materials are exploited primarily in order to build and sustain the megalopolises. To look at cities without looking at

those areas forces one to rethink the latter, to redefine them as a mine, as energy, as geography and infrastructure, as global trade.

### **Products with a history:**

#### **The hyper-realism behind mercantilist fictions**

The word “remote” can also mean “that which is not plausible, or very far from happening.”<sup>4</sup> The globalization of productive systems produced a disjuncture between consumers and the sources of the raw materials of the products that they consume. The harsh realities behind the origin of products in the global supermarket appear implausible when their forging in the earth is the only thing that is known for certain. The landscapes of extraction and those of its opposite, waste, are the hidden reality behind the theme parks of international commerce. As it turns out, reality is a fiction and at its base are products that are distributed without a history, without reference to the geography that they pulverize and displace. They are selected in catalogues, ordered on the internet; they are plucked from store display windows as if they had sprouted there by magic, the fruit of a ubiquitous and invisible tree.

On an architectonic scale, proposals for artificial topographies built in the name of ecology and marketed as “green” steadily increase in the contemporary world, while those topographies that already exist—and which until recently remained remote—deteriorate along with the sustenance of the people who live on them and vital resources like water. The world replaces one set of products without history with another, also without history, that takes advantage of the commercial possibilities offered by the discourse of sustainability. Conventional cars, presented as monstrosities from petrochemical Hell, are replaced by others, the hybrid “green” cars of the electric Paradise. From its lofty heights, the Salar de Uyuni awaits its turn in the clearance sale auction of South American geography,<sup>5</sup> a territory of reserves, whose resources have been

inventoried so that they can be extracted and transported, while “anti-imperialist” leaders negotiate terms and sums with transnational and national companies of various origins. As we slowly migrate from one resource to the next, from an oil-based economy to a post-oil economy—without altering growth patterns of the real estate market that are predominantly based on suburban sprawl—the Amazon in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and the western Brazil is being fragmented into tranches through prospecting concessions to multinational corporations.<sup>6</sup>

### **Ancestral Youth**

Before designing a proposal for a specific site, the landscape architects and artists Andy Cao and Xavier Perrot of Cao-Perrot Studio travel to the location in order to avoid misconceptions and to learn the history behind the elements that they employ. They observe and study raw materials and local traditions so as to reformulate them as a contemporary global exercise. Their practice constitutes a rare case of renovation in a world that has been taught by the market to favor only what is new and newsworthy, and which has, as a result, forgotten the charm of ancestral youth. Architecture has not managed to escape the mercantilist mindset that feeds on two types of obsolescence: one technological and the other imposed by shifts in fashion, contributing to the disastrous vicious cycle of extraction and waste.

Every landscape is a way of thinking, and in the shrinking of Amazon cultures one could lose the key to the “natural contract” that Michel Serres upholds, a contract that cannot be deferred in the face of the martial effects of a market that doesn’t sign truces or treaties. The future of the megalopolises is completely linked to the future of the remote areas that sustain them. Conservation projects, whose resources are channeled to various ecosystems, should also invest in the cities themselves. If the Western Eden is a garden, rather than a mountain

of gold, it's time to reappraise the value of the green mantle—its water and its life—that until now has been sacrificed in pursuit of the minerals that lie beneath. The road to social transformation may lie in biology and its technologies, and tropical forests may be the best hope for life in contemporary cities.

1 Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques Volume One*. University of Chicago Press edition, 1983.

2 Descola, Philippe. *La Selva Culta: simbolismo y praxis en la ecología de los Achuar*. Quito. ABYA AYALA, 1987.

3 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/31/science/earth/31energy.html>

4 “Que no es verosímil, o está muy distante de suceder.” *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*: <http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/>

5 [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/03/world/americas/03lithium.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/03/world/americas/03lithium.html?_r=1)

6 For a more detailed and cartographic view of this phenomenon see <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0002932>