90 years of solitude: the absence of Latin American sensibilities in the debate on architectural autonomy

90 anos de solidão: a ausência de sensibilidades latino-americanas no debate sobre a autonomia arquitetônica

90 años de soledad: la ausencia de sensibilidades latinoamericanas en el debate de la autonomía arquitectónica

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Abstract

This paper shifts its attention from "South-South" relations to the absence of "South-South" relations in a culturally blind chapter of architectural criticism. It focuses on the postwar debate on architectural autonomy whose disciplinary reduction, especially in the United States, prevented an urban interpretation of a culturally sensitive autonomy. The paper argues that the dogmatic architectural criticism of the twentieth century and the post-critical discourse of the twenty-first century have failed to recognize that critical sensibilities other than Eurocentric and North American approaches exist in other regions such as Latin America. The paper is structured in four phases: a brief history of architectural autonomy; its disciplinary reduction; its overlooked cultural dimension; and its urban potential. The goal is to highlight the cultural blindness of critical and post-critical architectural discourses through a theory sensitive to cultural and urban solitudes based on a revision of the interdisciplinary interpretations of the term autonomy.

Keywords: Cultural solitude; Urban solitude; Latin American solitude; Culturally blind architectural criticism; Architectural autonomy; Urban autonomy.

Resumo

Este artigo desvia a atenção das relações "Sul-Sul" para a ausência de relações "Sul-Sul" em um capítulo culturalmente cego da crítica arquitetônica. Centra-se no debate do pós-guerra sobre a autonomia arquitetônica, cuja redução disciplinar, especialmente nos Estados Unidos, impediu uma interpretação urbana de uma autonomia culturalmente sensível. Argumenta-se que a crítica arquitetônica dogmática do século XX e o discurso pós-crítico do século XXI não conseguiram reconhecer que existem sensibilidades críticas diferentes das abordagens eurocêntricas e norte-americanas noutras regiões, como a América Latina. O artigo estrutura-se em quatro seções: um breve histórico da autonomia arquitetônica; sua redução disciplinar; sua dimensão cultural negligenciada; e seu potencial urbano. O objetivo é destacar a cegueira cultural dos discursos arquitetônicos críticos e pós-críticos através de uma teoria sensível às solidões culturais e urbanas, baseada em uma revisão das interpretações interdisciplinares do termo autonomia.

Palavras-chave: Solidão cultural; Solidão urbana; Solidão latino-americana; Crítica arquitetônica culturalmente cega; Autonomia arquitetônica; Autonomia urbana.

Resumen

Este artículo desvía su atención de las relaciones "Sur-Sur" para enfocarse en la ausencia de relaciones "Sur-Sur" en un momento histórico de crítica arquitectónica insensible a procesos culturales. Este texto se centra en el debate de posguerra sobre la autonomía arquitectónica cuya reducción disciplinaria, especialmente en los Estados Unidos, impidió una interpretación urbana de una autonomía sensible a fenómenos culturales. El artículo sostiene que la crítica arquitectónica dogmática del siglo XX y el discurso poscrítico del siglo XXI no han reconocido que en otras regiones como América Latina existen sensibilidades críticas distintas de los enfoques eurocéntricos y norteamericanos. El artículo se estructura en cuatro fases: una breve historia de la autonomía arquitectónica; su reducción disciplinaria; su dimensión cultural pasada por alto; y su potencial urbano. El objetivo es resaltar la ceguera cultural de los discursos arquitectónicos críticos y poscríticos a través de una teoría sensible a las soledades culturales y urbanas basada en una revisión de las interpretaciones interdisciplinarias del término autonomía.

Palabras clave: Soledad cultural; Soledad urbana; Soledad Latinoamericana; Crítica arquitectónica culturalmente ciega; Autonomía arquitectónica; Autonomía urbana.

1   Introduction

This paper was conceived at the intersection of a research premise omitted historically by architectural erudition and an assumption accepted as an incontestable truth within architecture. The premise explains that the philosophical roots of the term "autonomy" entail engagement rather than detachment within Western culture, while architectural experts have accepted that the formulation of architectural autonomy leads unquestionably to the detachment of disciplinary aspirations from societal concerns. This collision between an omitted premise and an assumption exposed a collateral damage: the cultural blindness of traditionally established trends of architectural criticism, that is, Eurocentric and North American approaches.

Thematically, the paper focuses on the disciplinary reduction of architectural autonomy that overlooked its own cultural implications. Historically, its scope ranges from the 1930s (when the term "autonomy" was introduced into architecture) to the twenty-first century (when the post-critical discourse failed to provide a productive alternative to disciplinary reductions). Culturally, it highlights the assumptions made by North American and European architectural criticism and the arrogance of the post-critical discourse that diminished, through omission, the alternative critical sensibilities derived from "other" cultural contexts, such as Latin America. Methodologically, the paper builds on philosophical, artistic, and political interpretations of autonomy to counter the disciplinary narcissism that dominated the debate on architectural autonomy.

The paper is structured in four sections: first, a brief history of architectural autonomy; second, its disciplinary reduction; third, its overlooked cultural dimension; and fourth, its empirical and urban potential. It counters the lifeless conceptualism of architectural criticism and the mere pragmatism of the post-critical discourse that permeated the debate on architectural autonomy in the United States and Europe. The following lines advocate a projective theory sensitive to cultural phenomena and urban empiricism.

2   A brief history of architectural autonomy

The term "autonomy" has historically provided a productive contemplation of the role played by philosophy, art, politics, or architecture, among other cultural realms, within society. It paradoxically tackles unsolvable but productive questions formulated by individuals, collectivities, cultures, or disciplines throughout the history of humanity: Who am I? Who are we? The political, social, economic, and environmental challenges, which the Covid-19 pandemic only exacerbated, demand a reevaluation of the role design plays within society. This paper counters the architectural dogmatism that defends "what architecture is" as an irrefutable truth to advance a constant redefinition of architectural and urban premises sensitive to changing cultural phenomena.

Autonomy constantly reemerges when Western societies and cultures face existential crises. It represents a productive tension between a critical method and cultural contingencies that played a significant role in the outbreak of the Mother of Western Revolutions—the French Revolution—as well as in the aesthetic rebellion of Cubism and Dadaism, the political rift in modernity of the two World Wars, and the formulation of architectural autonomy by a brave Jewish scholar in 1933, when Nazism came to power. Individuality is not individualism. Paradoxically, autonomy represents our critical attitude

toward the circumstances that define and redefine constantly our own individuality.

In 2023, health and war emergencies have exacerbated social, economic, environmental, and political tensions throughout the world. A revision of the debate on architectural autonomy provides a productive method to study the relationship between design and society while social and political polarizations increasingly permeate international politics and communities worldwide. This paper counters the disciplinary reduction of the term "autonomy" within architecture through an interdisciplinary method to maximize its cultural and urban potential.

Terminology normally clarifies the meaning of words, but the definition of the term "autonomy" operates otherwise. It suggests creating *ex nihilo* – out of nothing – a "freedom from external influence" (OED Online, 2021). Nevertheless, the dictionary reveals the critical character of the term solely as a half-truth. It conceals its sociohistorical determinacy and ideological motivation.

Autonomy (from the ancient Greek *αὐτονομία*: *autos* = self + *nomos* = law) refers to the aspiration of an individual or a collectivity to use its own laws. In medieval times, it differentiated the state from the church, while its modern use explains our contemporary understanding of aesthetics derived from the rational revolution of Immanuel Kant (Clarke, 1999, p. 2). The architectural interpretation of autonomy has rarely recognized that the philosophical roots of the term verify a self-governing condition that is culturally and historically determined. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Contrat Social* preceded Immanuel Kant's "autonomy of the will" toward the emancipation of the modern consciousness of the individual. The paradigmatic consequence of the rational awakening of the Enlightenment was the French Revolution, which reduced the preceding centuries to a "prehistory," according to Karl Marx (Damisch, 2002, p. 14). Thus, the critical character of autonomy is both cause and consequence of Western cultural development.

2.1 Philosophy

The modern age increased the tension between the history of the self and "the history of History" that has haunted humanity to the present day (Foucault, 2005, p. 403). The individual and collective search for identities that today seem to permeate any social realm is inherent to modern sensibility. The scientific discoveries that have expanded our knowledge of the external world – external to the individual and external to planet Earth – motivated the philosophical exploration of our inner selves. The exploration of new horizons, such as the Moon or Mars, expands the frontiers of our knowledge and feeds our Freudian need to explore who we are. New knowledge redefines, consciously or unconsciously, our relationship with the world as the self strives for autonomy. The tension between the autonomy of the self and its cultural formation necessarily reveals a perpetual and unsolvable question: Who or what defines the self? The autonomy of the modern consciousness of the individual, formulated by Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century, was sensitive to the scientific revolution consolidated by Galileo Galilei's use of the telescope a century before (Figure 1). The more we look outside ourselves, the more we need to look inside ourselves. But individuality is not individualism. The general maxim of autonomy is that self-governance is sensitive to social, cultural, human, and urban conditions despite, paradoxically, its rebuttal of cultural and historical determinism.

Figure 1: Galileo and personifications of Astronomy, Perspective and Mathematics, frontispiece for "Opere di Galileo Galilei" by Stefano della Bella, 1656.

Source: The MET Museum/The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1951.

2.2 Art

The Kantian autonomy informed our modern understanding of aesthetics revealing the cultural implications of any aesthetic consideration even though the latter is often discriminated as an apolitical and asocial anecdote. In the nineteenth century, the poets Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé set an aesthetic rebellion against a world that did not comprehend the artist. Their position informed the art movements Aestheticism and *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake), which left out sociopolitical themes. The movements advocated a critical art, but they radicalized it to the point where it departed from any sociopolitical concern. But the next century, Walter Benjamin (2010, see Epilogue) considered that fascism rendered politics as aesthetics, while communism politicized art. The cultural critique of the avant-garde movements such as Dadaism suppressed the distance between art and the praxis of life, between aesthetics and the means-ends rationality of capitalism. Avant-garde could develop a self-critique of "art as institution" only after art detached from the praxis of life and was deprived of sociopolitical content. Duchamp and Dada tried to reject the issue of quality and to abolish the distance between high and "less high art." But their failure was consummated when the less high art of the

Fountain (Figure 2) and the Bicycle Wheel were absorbed by the museum as an institution. This successful failure of the avant-garde productively questioned the cultural and historical formation of an autonomous or critical work of art.

Figure 2: Fountain, Marcel Duchamp, 1917. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz.

Source: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, 1917, Fountain, photograph by Alfred Stieglitz at the 291 (Art Gallery) following the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit, with entry tag visible. The backdrop is The Warriors by Marsden Hartley.

2.3 Political theory

The antipodal ideas of Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt distinguished "the political" from politics and rejected the conformism of society. Schmitt considered that the concept of the state was analogous to the concept of the political. However, he recognized that the development of the modern state challenged its own monopoly through an internal political struggle between new and evolving internal forces (Schmitt, 2007, p. 19-22). Arendt considered that modern privacy – "to shelter the intimate" – was discovered to contrast the social realm. She argued that the rise of mass society exemplified how society tends to "normalize" the behavior of its members, excluding the possibility of action and speech that result in human plurality (Arendt, 1998, p. 38-40). The political ideas of Arendt and Schmitt challenged each other. Arendt contested the concept of "sovereignty" – supreme dominion, authority, or rule – with the manifestation of "human plurality" through action and speech. Schmitt conceived the state as the decisive political entity

necessitating an "enemy" to coalesce authority. He opposed pluralism, anarchism, liberalism, and their attempts to undermine the authority of the state (Schmitt, 2007). On the other hand, Arendt (1998) opposed "sovereignty" because its mastership rejects freedom and plurality. However, both authors agreed that "the political" was inherent to human life but often illegible. Both theorized its legibility, that is, the autonomy of "the political" in everyday life to prevent the normalization of depoliticized social behavior.

2.4 Architecture

Architectural experts have assumed that the disciplinary formulation of autonomy is a formal problem. However, the autonomy of architecture originated as a system based on cultural transformations rather than formal fixation. In 1933, the Viennese art historian Emil Kaufmann formulated *autonomen Architektur* (architectural autonomy) as a system in which form was secondary. His formulation relied on "the reality of change" rather than "the fixation on style" and reduced formal transformations to symptoms of systemic changes that operate at a cultural level (Kaufmann, 1955, p. 75). Kaufmann considered that the rational revolution of Immanuel Kant paralleled Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's designs (Figure 3). He drew correspondences between the challenge of the Kantian "autonomy of the will" to the heteronomy of past philosophies and the departure of Ledoux's pavilion-like architecture from the heteronomy of Baroque compositions. The transition from the Renaissance-Baroque system (unified masses) to the autonomous architecture of Ledoux (separated masses) was the outcome of a gradual process sensitive to cultural transformations rather than a sudden break informed by brilliance. Kaufmann (1982) identified Ledoux as the precursor of modern architecture – *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier* (From Ledoux to Le Corbusier) – tracing the gradual formation of an autonomous system propelled by "the reality of change" of intangible (social, economic, and political) forces. This idea was echoed by the Italian architect Aldo Rossi, who considered himself a pre-modern rather than a post-modern architect. This distinction responds to the sensitivity of Rossi's work to the cultural concerns of the architecture of the Age of Reason and the sociopolitical program of modern architecture of the first half of the twentieth century.

Emil Kaufmann formulated *autonomen Architektur* (architectural autonomy) in 1933 as Nazism seized political power. His formulation advocated the value of impurity in an era when purity was racially promoted to denigrate "others." It took a lot of courage for a Jewish scholar to contradict a nationalist ideology in 1933 when Kaufmann published *Von Ledoux Bis Le Corbusier: Ursprung Und Entwicklung Der Autonomen Architektur* (From Ledoux to Le Corbusier: Origin and Development of Autonomous Architecture). His reference to Paul Klopfer's *Von Palladio Bis Schinkel: Eine Charakteristik der Baukunst des Klassizismus* (From Palladio to Schinkel: A Characteristic of the Architecture of Classicism), published in 1911, demanded the same importance given to Karl Friedrich Schinkel's German Neoclassicism for the French architecture of the Enlightenment and the Revolution (Vidler, 2002). The social and cultural unrest of the second half of the twentieth century, which questioned inherited knowledge, gave a new impulse to Kaufmann's formulation (1985). His analogy between the Kantian "autonomy of the will" and Ledoux's rebellion against Baroque architecture attests to the importance of philosophy as much as design in the development of Western societies. In the twenty-first century, autonomy provides an often-denied critical framework for design within cultural conditions that demand social and political engagement amid racial, gender, economic, health-related, and environmental tensions.

Figure 3: Second plan, Saline de Chaux, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Ledoux's architecture at the Saline responded to aesthetic concerns that Kaufmann called "a pavilion system" in which the "association of independent elements" replaced the subordination of the parts to Baroque composition.
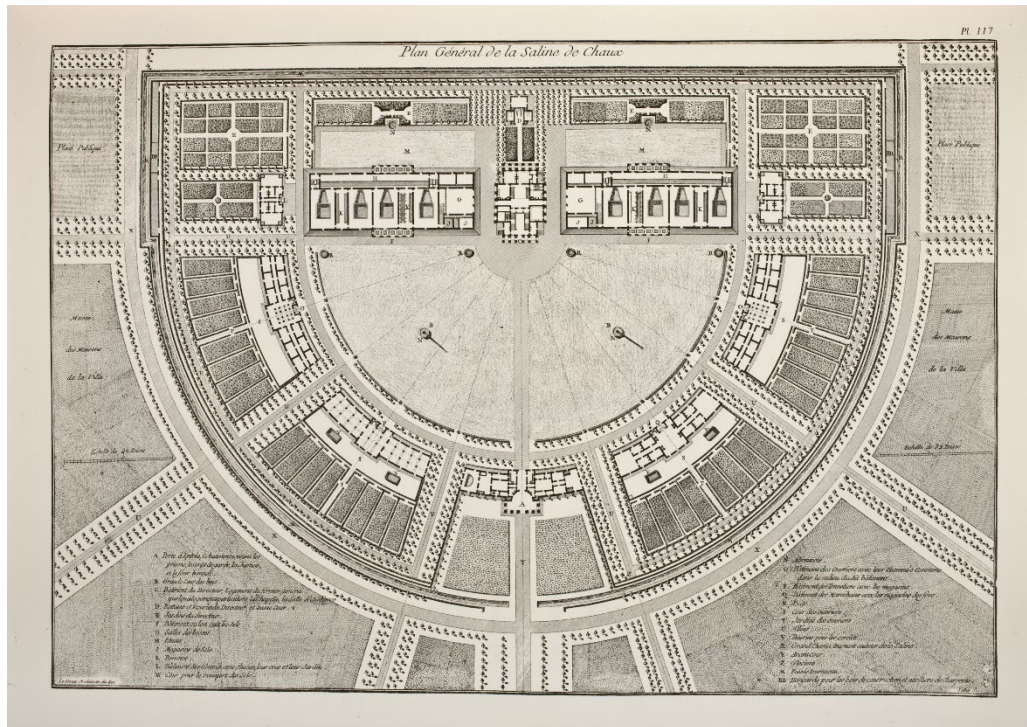
Source: From L'Architecture, plate 16/Harvard Fine Arts Library.

The heritage of the two great wars of the last century was the skepticism toward concepts, ideas, and institutions that survived the armed conflicts. Debates about cultural constructions such as human nature, discipline, power, and history revealed that "culture" was not static but a category that demanded constant redefinition. Architecture, like other disciplines, was entangled in the struggle between self-government and cultural determinism. But the impatience of architecture succumbed to an impulsive interpretation of architectural autonomy. It relied on the "qualitative" values of the discipline, that is, architectural form, to counter internal and external challenges such as a technological fascination, the adoption of biological terms and sociological methods, or the rise of a consumer society and mass culture. However, the result was paradoxical obedience through alienation that led architecture to detach from society. The autonomy of architecture formulated in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the United States, must be renamed as the *alienation of architecture* through disciplinary obsessions and "objective" excesses.

3   The disciplinary reduction of architectural autonomy

The development of the autonomy of architecture during the second half of the twentieth century differed substantially from its initial formulation during the interwar period. Kaufmann originally formulated it as an autonomous system sensitive to cultural changes and became a disciplinary redefinition based on formal parameters indifferent to contents and contexts. The reduction of autonomy to a disciplinary concern was based on its fallacious interpretation as detachment. It resulted in the polarization of architectural theory between resistance (to cultural determination) and skepticism (toward an autonomous architecture). Alternatives to the irrevocable destiny, the dissociation

between architecture and society, tried to bypass the dead end. They explored what lies "between culture and form" or a "quasi-autonomy," but they paradoxically exacerbated the polarization and denied a self-evident truth: culture and architectural form constitute each other (Hays, 1984). The failure of a disciplinary reduction of autonomy is symptomatic of the incapacity of a dogmatic architectural theory to fully acknowledge that a critique of "the other" (culture) implies a critique of "one's own self" (the culture that constitutes architecture) (Castoriadis, 1992, p. 17). The critique of architecture toward culture or capitalism implies a critique of its own substance and vice versa. Architecture synthesizes cultural concerns as it questions and produces cultural values; otherwise, it is reduced to a decorative form-making. If there is to be a critical architecture, it must be a *self-critical architecture*.

But the critical attitude of the autonomy of architecture was not homogeneous – a culturally and historically sensitive interpretation developed on both sides of the Atlantic. Aldo Rossi, in Italy (Figure 4), and Peter Eisenman, in the United States (Figure 5), led the return to disciplinary concerns. However, Eisenman's highly conceptual approach differed from Rossi's cultural critique. In 1966, Rossi's *The Architecture of the City* and Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* revitalized architectural theory relying on historical analysis. Rossi advanced the cultural development of type in relation to urban form and collective memory. At the same time, Venturi drew on humanism, anthropology, semiotics, sociology, mannerism, and pop art to expose the cultural complexity that has historically influenced architecture (Hays, 1998, p. 60). But the "impure" autonomy, theorized by Rossi and Venturi, was countered by the conceptualization of disciplinary "purity" during the following decades, especially in the United States. Venturi's theory was sensitive to the everyday urban landscape, while the photographer Robert Frank captured the bleak complexity of the social reality of the United States by the mid-twentieth century.

F i g u r e 4: Unità Residenziale, Quartiere Gallaratese 2, Aldo Rossi, Milan, Italy, 1968-1973.

Source: Photograph by Leandro Cruz (2014).

Figure 5: House III, Peter Eisenman, Lakeville, Connecticut, 1969-1971.
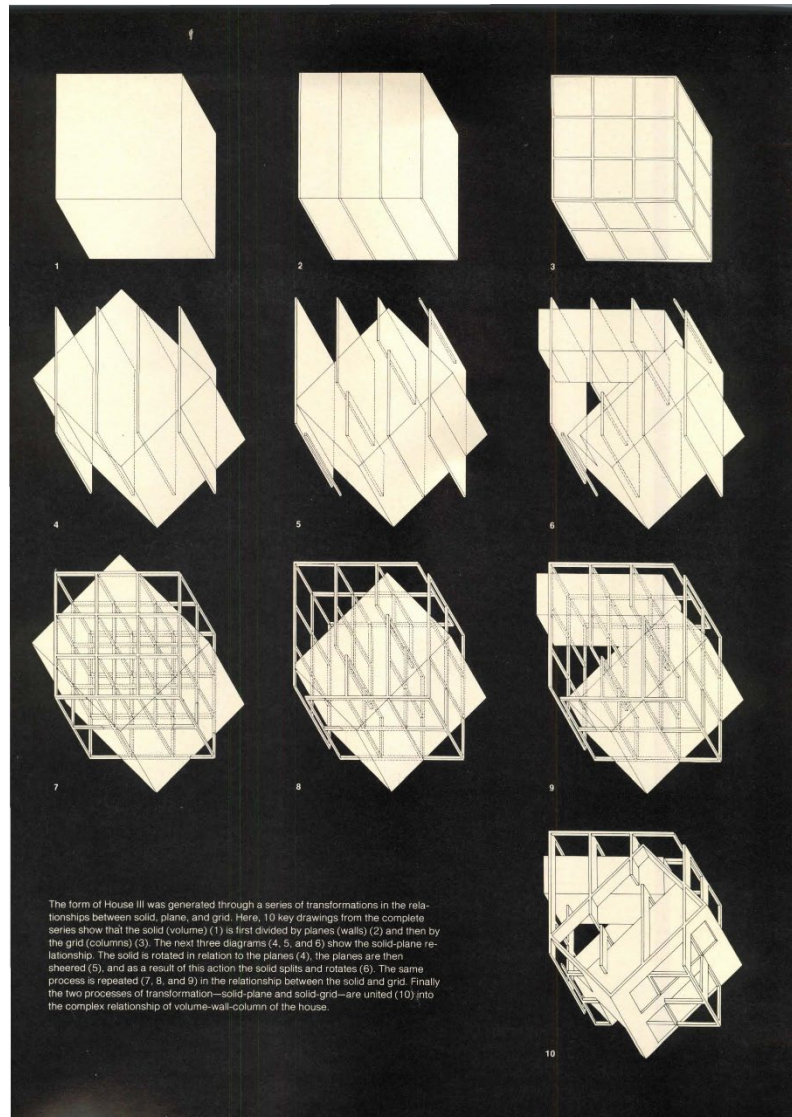
Source: *Progressive Architecture*, May 1974.

But "official" architecture obstinately turned inwards. Diana Agrest formulated the struggle between "Design vs. Non-Design," emphasizing the hermeticism of architecture vis-à-vis other cultural realms such as film, literature, music, painting, or photography. She argued that culture permeated the public domain through its social codes as if design was deprived of social codes or inaccessible to the public (Agrest, 1998). On the other hand, Stanford Anderson praised the tension between conventions and practices, which produced a "quasi-autonomous" architecture that is neither self-referential nor obedient to external circumstances. But the use of a prefix explicitly assumed the absolute condition of autonomy. The prefix *quasi-* is redundant when autonomy already refers to the paradoxical cultural and historical formation of a self-governing condition (Anderson, 1986). The ideas of Agrest and Anderson regarding autonomy belong to a genealogy that confused autonomy with independence derived from an impulsive interpretation (Hays, 1984; Frampton, 1991, p. 17).

The debate on autonomy persisted at the turn of the century. Hubert Damisch and Anthony Vidler built on the often-overlooked philosophical genesis of architectural autonomy. Both authors revisited the alliance between architecture and philosophy that formed

autonomen Architektur and, according to Kaufmann, set the beginning of Modern architecture during the Enlightenment as part of a "long process of political and aesthetic struggle" (Damisch, 2002; Vidler, 2002). Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting (2002) put forward a critique of the disciplinary reduction of autonomy, advocating for the pragmatism of a "projective" architecture. Their post-critical position built on Rem Koolhaas's skepticism toward architectural criticism (Baird, 2004). But this discourse is problematic because it implicitly asserted that all theory is full of lifeless conceptualizations. George Baird warns about the risk of a merely practical approach that relegates theory via the skepticism toward the supposed detachment of its critical attitude. Baird (2004) challenged the post-critical effort advocating for the development of a projective theory to counter any decorative pragmatism.

The most recent architectural autonomy, formulated by Pier Vittorio Aureli, characterizes the antagonistic relationship between architecture and urbanization as the political distinction between friend and enemy advocated by Carl Schmitt. The idea of "the formal" and the idea of "the political" overlap, according to Aureli, because "both address the possibility of separation, composition, and counterposition." Dogma's project Stop City (2007) presents the heterogeneity of architectural form that confronts the processes of urbanization (Figure 6). Aureli is aware that urbanization is not homogeneous, it "is not an apparatus made of flows; it is made of closures and of strategic forms of containment" (Aureli, 2011, p. x). He argues that urban governance dialectically establishes the "smoothness" of global economic transactions and trade vis-à-vis walls, enclaves, or closures. However, Aureli's unilateral approach is problematic because it fails to identify the cultural heterogeneity that characterizes the effects of urbanization in different locations, countries, or regions (Aureli, 2011). Are not the effects of urbanization processes, from region to region, as heterogeneous as the "quality" of architectural form? Is not the idea of architectural form as conceptually homogeneous as the idea of urbanization?

This paper calls into question the anachronism of mere antagonistic approaches that led to armed conflicts globally and the isolation of disciplinary knowledge during the last century. It advocates the self-critical dimension that inheres within the critical character of autonomy as an antidote to the excesses of morality and narcissism. It argues that the more we discover about the external world, the more we need to explore our inner self, and vice versa (Kant, 2015, location 129). The more any design interpretation of autonomy engages with urban phenomena, the more it needs to reevaluate its own self as well as its relationship with the urban condition. Thus, critical efforts within design must overcome any dichotomic reduction based on an opposition (Agrest's "Design vs. Non-Design"), connection/separation (Hays's "Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form"), or dry antagonism (Aureli's The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture). Culture and architecture constitute each other; thus, any critical architecture implies a self-critical architecture. But the prevalence of narcissistic architectural reflection has dominated the discourse on autonomy within design. It has prevented the formulation of design's cultural critique based on autonomy as a methodological alternative to the dead-end of an alienating criticism.

Figure 6: Dogma, Stop City, collage, 2007.
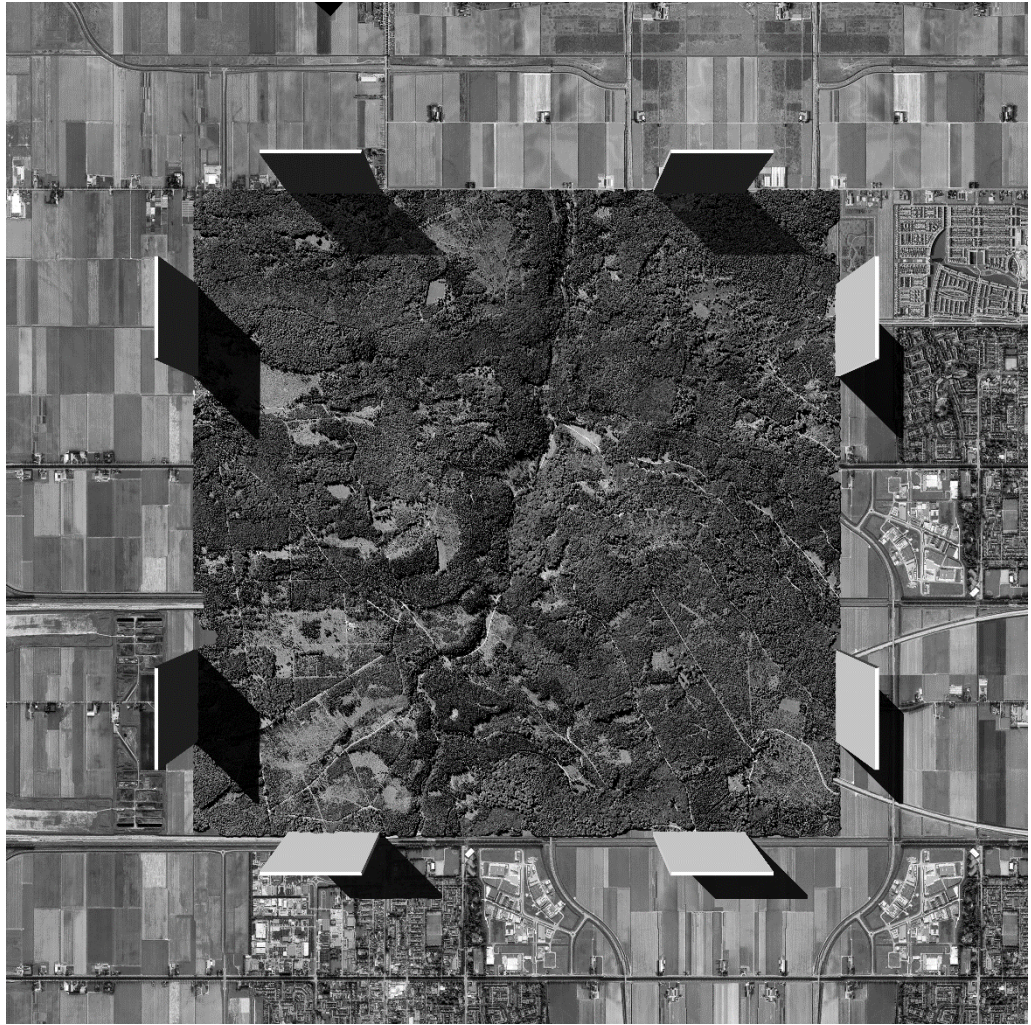
Source: Dogma.

Architectural criticism theorized the space "between culture and form" (Hays, 1984). This attitude failed to recognize that culture and form constitute each other. Form is not culture, and culture is not form. But form informs culture, and culture informs form. Consequently, they are not strictly separated. This is precisely what K. Michael Hays (1984) concluded, using Mies van der Rohe's architecture as an example, that nevertheless contradicts his own premise that separated culture and form through the preposition "between." Thus, the belligerent attitude of a critical architecture was never a self-critical architecture, in the Kantian sense, that scrutinizes its own validity through its practical capacity. In the last decade of the twentieth century, Rem Koolhaas articulated the self-evident crisis of the critical discourse as follows: "The problem with the prevailing discourse of architectural criticism [...] is [the] inability to recognize there is in the deepest motivations of architecture something that cannot be critical. [...] Maybe some of our most interesting engagements are uncritical, emphatic engagements, which deal with the sometimes insane difficulty of an architectural project to deal with the incredible accumulation of economic, cultural, political but also logistical issues" (Koolhas *apud* Baird, 2004). Justifiably, he advocated for a form of engagement with reality, but the essential problem of this statement is that the death of the critical discourse suggested the impossibility of alternative critical methods to tackle the crisis. Koolhaas implicitly indicated that the failure of the architectural criticism, developed in Europe and the United

States until the turn of the century, cancels the possibility of an alternative critical attitude (non-European or non-North American) sensitive to intellectual and geographical diversity or the emergence of critical methods from "other" cultural contexts, such as Latin America.

The post-critical discourse questioned the dialectical and reactive attitude of the preceding criticism to advocate for the performative and active capacity of architecture. Its genealogy drew upon business management methods (Michael Speaks), art (Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting), pop culture and commercial activities (Stan Allen), and the "ephemeral" within design (Sylvia Lavin). Interestingly, these positions challenged "the formal" in an architectural and philosophical sense without fully acknowledging it. The formal dimension of Kant's philosophy corresponded to his interest in the lasting and enduring truth of reason, while Rossi and Eisenman's formal attitude corresponded to the redefinition of the inherent values of architecture. This need for perennial truths emerges, according to Theodor Adorno, "where urban exchange societies (bourgeois) have developed. That is to say, that the new is actually a source of insecurity, a threat, something worrying" (Adorno, 2001, p. 44). For Adorno, the separation of manual and mental labor privileged fixed logical forms to the detriment of a supposedly inferior experience. Thus, the value of truth is attributed to that which is permanent while degrading that which is transient or new. The post-critical attack against the critical discourse is an assault on the *status quo* of architecture. But it timidly restricted its field of action to an understanding of the discipline "as force and effect" that replaced a misleading interpretation of autonomy as detachment. It failed to extend its own interest to the "urban exchange societies" from which the "autonomy of the will" originally emerged. The post-critical discourse failed to understand, like its critical counterpart, that autonomy emerges and constantly reemerges within Western societies. Both, critical and post-critical attitudes, kidnapped criticism as a prerogative of few and turned it into a monopoly that excluded the cultural nuances of alternative ways of living that emerge in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The biggest failure of architectural criticism relied on its incapacity to formulate an autonomous theory sensitive to geographical and intellectual diversity. The twenty-first century has painfully shown us that the more social, economic, and political systems establish their global dominion, the more our cultural nuances refuse to conform to a general idea of social coexistence. Autonomy is a productive tension between the individual and the collective as well as theory and practice. Thus, it represents a method that vindicates the cultural importance of design as discipline and profession.

4   The cultural sensitivity of autonomy

Since the mid-twentieth century, cultures and societies have undergone structural transformations, while the monopoly of architectural criticism has focused on formal debates. The critical and post-critical debates have ignored cultural contents that inform the development of any form of knowledge and society at large. The result has been *the critique of the status quo* from *the comfort of the status quo*. The legibility project of a critical architecture has not been formulated yet in other terms than formal. It has excluded the spatial and temporal dimensions explored by sociology, literature, and cinema, among other disciplines and practices.

During the twentieth century, spatial and temporal sensitivities could have potentially extrapolated autonomy to the urban condition developed in Europe and the United States.

But they went unnoticed by the fixation on the form-function debate of the critical monopoly. The exception was Aldo Rossi, who praised the representational and critical capacity of cinema identified decades before by Le Corbusier and the Modern movement. He was sensitive to the Italian realist and neo-realist cinema committed to depicting the dynamic and misery of a social reality that Fascism tried to conceal. In 1963, the Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni distinguished the shared necessity of seeing, developed by a painter and a director. The former depicts reality through a static medium despite painting can represent temporal and spatial rhythms, while the latter captures a reality that denies its crystallization to present it as a new perception. Film, for Antonioni, was not about sound or picture; it was "an indivisible whole" that extends in time resisting its mere figurative expression: "The people around us, the places we visit, the events we witness – it is the spatial and temporal relations these have with each other that have a meaning for us today, and the tension that is formed between them" (Antonioni, 1996, p. 51). This statement preceded Tafuri's assertion in the 1970s that, "Art and architecture have been dominated by the ineffability of hypothesis, and have been so little creators of experiences" (Tafuri, 1980). This paper engages with the new challenges imposed by urbanization that need a theoretical engagement sensitive to empirical knowledge and cultural solitudes.

The impulsive interpretation of post-Kaufmann architectural autonomy and the post-critical discourse overlooked the lessons provided by "other" disciplines and "other" cultural sensitivities. Aldo Rossi advocated the formulation of an autonomous architecture based on the cultural importance of other cultural realms and disciplines. But Rossi was an exception within the post-Kaufmann interpretation of architectural autonomy that tended to restrict its own horizon to the internal history of the discipline to the detriment of other histories, other sensibilities, other passions. The urban interpretation of autonomy has been repressed by Eurocentric and North American (United States) approaches that have dismissed the acceleration of urban processes throughout the world since the mid-twentieth century.

The contribution of Aldo Rossi and La Tendenza to urban studies was based more on method than content. It is, nevertheless, still a valid method to study the instrumentality or operability of history within the design process, the tension between persistent spatial structures (monuments) and urban dynamic (social, economic, and political processes), and the political dimension of design "choices" responsible for a thriving or deteriorated urban condition. But the limitation of Rossi's theory relies on the exclusion of the acceleration of urban processes throughout the world, such as North American suburbs and Latin American slums, since the demographic explosions of the second half of the twentieth century.

Urban phenomena have been excluded mainly by the Eurocentric and North American (United States) approach of architectural autonomy and the post-critical reaction. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated poverty indexes. By the end of 2020, 209 million people lived in poverty in Latin America, representing an increase of 22 million people from 2019 (CEPAL, 2021). The exacerbation of poverty and social inequality, stemming from the acceleration of urbanization, is not exclusive of poor countries; it also affects rich countries. What are the mid- and long-term social consequences of the pandemic? How could design tackle the cultural specificity of urban problems collectively? The "young, neophyte, clumsy, and crude" European moral sentiment, denounced by Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century, recognized the political independence of regions, such as

Latin America, but not their aspirations for cultural autonomy. Nietzsche (2002, location 1939-1953) attacked the poor knowledge of "moral philosophers" evidenced by their "crude knowledge of moral facta, selected arbitrarily and abbreviated at random – for instance, as the morality of their surroundings, their class, their church, their Zeitgeist, their climate and region." This quote can perfectly describe the cultural blindness that has dominated both sides of the debate on architectural autonomy—the critical and post-critical positions.

Figure 7: Art City Project, São Paulo, 1994-1998. Photo by Nelson Kon.

Source: Photo by Nelson Kon.

Human distinctness differs from otherness (Arendt, 1998). The conception of "the other" (urbanization, capitalism, or culture) as the enemy is paradigmatic of the exacerbated antagonism of architectural autonomy. This conception of "the other" contrasts with Hannah Arendt's defense of action and speech as activities that actualized the human condition of natality and plurality, respectively. Thus, action implies the possibility of taking the initiative or beginning something, while speech implies the possibility of living together among equals without sacrificing our individuality. Processes of "difference" are common to human distinctness and otherness, but their construction of identity as relational or internal vary. Design and culture are not equivalent, but they do constitute each other. African, Asian, European, Latin American, and North American identities are not equal. Thus, their respective individuality must be respected rather than "included" in the main current of history through magnanimity. A comprehensive study of Peter

Eisenman's formulation of architectural autonomy goes beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief explanation can shed light on its limitations. The processes of "difference" operate antagonistically within Peter Eisenman's architectural autonomy and agonistically within Chantal Mouffe's political theory. Eisenman internally renovated the architectural syntax based on a purely "objective" aspiration that discriminated subjective perspectives and cultural phenomena. At the same time, Mouffe (2013) advocated a "constitutive outside" that redefines our personal, individual, collective, cultural, or disciplinary identities constantly, based on an agonistic negotiation between the inner self and the external world—Who am I? Who are we? The constant redefinition of our Latin American sensibility must be an incentive to engage with other ways of understanding life rather than an impediment. However, the attempt to elevate our relative cultural solitude, as Latin American architects and urbanists, to the possibility for engagement requires a profound intellectual reflection often neglected by positivistic aspirations.

5   The cultural and urban potential of autonomy

Latin American social reality is so pressing that our design methods tend to surrender to pragmatism without reflection. *Doing* is preferred over *thinking*. Theory is often considered a luxury rather than a constituent part of Practice. The history of humanity is the history of ideas. Reason and empirical reality are interdependent. The mother of Western revolutions, the French conflict, derived from Immanuel Kant's rational revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract, and the *Encyclopédie*, among other ideas. The Mexican and Cuban Revolutions attempted to reverse precarious social conditions through ideas as much as practical deeds. But the contempt for intellectual resources in the region is historical. Positivism – a philosophical system that only recognizes what is scientifically verified – has influenced education in Hispanic America until today. Political independence was attained but not *cultural autonomy*. Our ideas are not entirely ours because we face the particularities of our reality using foreign schemes—mainly European or North American (United States). Our ideas belong to the past, as memories, and to the future, as desires, precluding their proactive implementation in the present. The architectural and urban oeuvre of Oscar Niemeyer, Luis Barragán, Lina Bo Bardi (Figures 8 and 9), or Rogelio Salmona as well as the literary work of Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Mario Vargas Llosa attempted to develop a cultural effort sensitive to a Latin American reality eager to find its place in the world. The autonomy of Latin American culture – its design, its literature, its philosophy, its science, its urbanism – is an arduous and ongoing struggle that is yet to be consolidated.

Cultural processes rely on historical events that are often taken for granted. Latin American architecture and urbanism tend to either restore the idyllic landscapes of our pre-Columbian past or chase a dubious "progress" through borrowed methods. It oscillates between picturesqueness and positivism without proposing a culturally and historically conscious response based on theory as much as on practice.

America was invented rather than discovered (O'Gorman, 1958). Europe presented its own historical particularities as universal through a new continent that was synonym of future. America, for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, was "the land of the future [...] a land longed for by those who are weary of the historical museum of old Europe" (Zea, 1963). America, up to the nineteenth century, was only "the echo of the Old World and the reflection of an alien way of life" (Zea, 1963). In Hegelian terms, the history of America can only be written when past experiences are assimilated through a dialectical process. But this

philosophical method offers advantages and disadvantages. The limitations of dialectics to tackle the challenges of urbanization from a design approach are increasingly evident. The dialectical, often antagonistic, distinctions between city and nature, urban and rural, formal and informal settlements have become obsolete. Urban development must not confront or destroy natural environments and "formal" settlements must not stigmatize "informal" settlements. On the other hand, the ethical dimension of Hegelian dialectics could lead Latin America to acquire reality and stop imitating Europe via mere positivism.

Figure 8: An aesthetically unorthodox Teatro Oficina challenged the typological "coherence" of architectural dogmatism, Lina Bo Bardi, São Paulo, 1984-1994.

Source: Photos by Nelson Kon.

Figure 9: Teatro Oficina, Lina Bo Bardi, São Paulo, 1984-1994.

Source: Photos by Nelson Kon.

Figure 10: From the top: Aerial view of Mexico City, Juan Gomez de Trasmonte, 1628; Vuelta a la Ciudad Lacustr; Aerial View of the Proposal for the New International Airport, Alberto Kalach, Mexico City, 2010.

Source: From Ciudad Futura, Alberto Kalach

Latin American societies were not direct products of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. The empowerment of the middle class was cause and consequence of the deep cultural changes experienced by European societies that led to the modern construction of the individual consciousness and Louis XVI's violent deposition during the French Revolution. In contrast, the weakness of Latin American institutions corresponds to the social, economic, and political weakness of the middle classes. This social group lacks the power to implement an institutional system sensitive to our social reality. Few privileged decide the social, economic, and political fate of an unprivileged majority in the region.

The European conceptions of "modernism" and "modernity" also differ from Latin American cultural progression. The progression of modernism – as a philosophical (eighteenth century), political or revolutionary (nineteenth century), and artistic (twentieth century) conception – discriminated cultural tradition. On the other hand, modernity promised the salvation of humanity through the correspondence between technology/future and "progress." During the second half of the twentieth century, the skepticism toward "progress" derived from a skepticism toward linear history. How promising was the future after the atomic bombings of 1945? Consequently, the present supplanted "progress" in Western temporal imagination to focus on "the 'pure time' of the instant" that reconciles past, present, and eternity (Paz, 2009). The circular sense of time of the Aztecs (Figure 11), whose conflation with Spanish culture resulted in contemporary Mexico, differs from the European and Anglo-American fixation on an increasingly dubious "progress" inherent to linear history.

Figure 11: Calendario Azteca o Piedra del Sol (Sun disk), Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Photograph by William Henry Jackson

Source: Detroit Publishing Company photograph collection (Library of Congress)

The sense of future differed in the North and the South. Anglo-America created a new nation, while Hispanic-America inherited the religious Spanish order relegated by the Renaissance. The "invention" of America belongs to the scientific and technological development of the Renaissance, but the Iberian tradition gradually lagged behind the new European spirit. The Catholic Monarchs ruled Spain when Cristopher Columbus arrived in the new continent, while the Renaissance witnessed the transition from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican system, the decline of feudalism, the early development of mass-produced printing, and the Protestant Reformation. America represented an exile from history for Spanish and Portuguese conquerors and a place where unreachable privileges were at hand (Murena, 1954; Zea, 1957). America was, for the Anglo-American, a new world. On the other hand, the Iberian conquerors reproduced the old European order in the new continent (Zea, 1957). The architectural assimilation of historical processes in Europe and the United States exemplifies this distinction.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the Italian architect Aldo Rossi conceived history as continuous, while the American architect Peter Eisenman conceived history as discontinuous. For Rossi, the problems of the past were the problems of the present. He saw a continuity between the sociopolitical premises of the architecture of the Enlightenment and European Modernism. For Eisenman, the historical progression from the Renaissance humanism to the atomic bombings of 1945 justified his objective focus on the internal history of architecture that relegated subjective concerns. In European cities such as Berlin, Rome, or Paris history is not only a burden but also a propelling force. History was "the material of architecture" (Rossi, 1982). In the United States, technological, scientific, and economic "progress" counters history. History, in Latin America, is replicated because it is discriminated as creative or analytical force. For example, Mexico City exploded demographically by mid-twentieth century to become one of the biggest cities in the world. The Mexican capital – along with Bogota or Santiago – has concentrated air pollution, inequality, and corruption over time. The centralization of services, capital, and production has led to the creation of such urban monsters, which Octavio Paz (1977) described as a disgusting aspect of the Mexican tradition – the centralism of the Aztecs and Madrid. Thus, history becomes the reiteration of past failures rather than a proactive critical device for urban development.

Latin America must be original. This does not imply the nostalgic fixation on pre-Columbian, Spanish, or Portuguese origins but the assimilation of Latin America's everchanging reality. Originality represents the elevation of the particular to the universal to advocate the validity of Latin American knowledge and experience for other cultures (Zea, 1957). Originality was central for political independence; Simón Rodríguez – the tutor of Simón Bolívar and Andrés Bello – encouraged it. Bello (1848) instigated the Chilean youth: "You should learn to judge by yourselves, you should aspire to the independence of thought. That is the first philosophy that we should learn from Europe." Latin American cultural production must breathe on its own. Its cultural autonomy must build on indigenous and European heritage to deal with social, economic, and political contents that distinguish the region. Autonomy is neither independence nor nationalism. It does not promise a future that never arrives through a "revolutionary" impetus or ideological blindness. The goal must be to develop our own intellectual and practical methods over time to influence other cultures. The autonomous development of Latin America could only emerge, paradoxically, from a dialogue with other geographies and other ideas.

6   Final remarks

Autonomy was introduced into architecture almost a century ago, in 1933. Thus, 90 years have passed since architectural dogmatism excluded Latin American sensibilities as valid critical attitudes. These 90 years of solitude derived from the conflation of a research premise omitted historically by architectural erudition and an assumption accepted as an incontestable truth within architecture. The fallacious interpretation of autonomy as detachment that alienated the disciplinary aspirations of architecture from cultural concerns led architectural criticism irrevocably to cultural blindness.

The progression of critical and post-critical architecture during the twentieth and twenty-first century was indifferent to the cultural progression of Latin America – from a pre-Columbian past, European conquest, colony, freedom, and solitude. The arrogance that still dominates traditional trends of architectural theory and history declared the failure of critical approaches to propose a post-critical formulation without revising the possibility of a critical theory derived from Latin American sensibilities. But the question remains: Is the solitude of Latin America regarding the debate on autonomy the consequence of dogmatic arrogance or of the impossibility of architectural and urban theorists and practitioners in the region to leave behind positivistic aspirations that differ from Latin American social realities?

The cultural dependence on Europe tormented Latin American intellectuals until the last century. The Argentinian writer Héctor A. Murena (1954) described America as "a grown and inexperienced son, a senile young man who lives in the shadow of his parents." Octavio Paz's essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1981) reflected on Mexican identity by synthesizing the solitude of Latin American intellectuals within the closed colonial world of the seventeenth century and the eventual eagerness for political freedom. Paz considered that "to be ourselves, we had to break with this confined (colonial) order, even at the risk of becoming orphans." The term "solitude," for Paz and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, meant *engagement* rather than *detachment*. Paz considered that "if we open ourselves up, if we face our own selves, then we can truly begin to live and to think." Solitude, as creative force, thus guarantees our active engagement with Western culture and the constant redefinition of our identity—Who am I? Who are we as Latin American architects, urbanists, and citizens? What can we offer, as designers, to Latin American societies?

Acknowledgements

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