



SOVEREIGNTY INSIDE OUT: AN ANTIDOTE TO THE OVERDOSE OF SPATIAL ABSTRACTION

The Estallido Social, the 2019 mass protests in Santiago, Chile, were initially sparked by a raise in bus and metro fares, but quickly grew to embody an aggregation of various grievances, including the Mapuche people's demands for land, natural resources, and autonomy. The photo that opens this short essay (Figure 3.1) documents an incendiary moment in 2019, with the Mapuche flag flying triumphantly over the equestrian statue of General Baquedano. Manuel Baquedano González (1823–1897) was the leader of the Chilean military campaign beginning in the 1860s that ultimately “pacified” the Indigenous Mapuche inhabitants of Araucanía, cementing control over this region for the young nation's elites. After approximately four hundred years of conflict, repression, and displacement from the conquistadors' arrival in the sixteenth century, Mapuche protestors continued to assert their sovereignty over the territory and over the enshrined military leader of European descent who led their massacre in the nineteenth century.

In my understanding, sovereignty and populism are not opposites but are indeed two adjacent concepts along the spectrum of modernity and coloniality. Reflecting on the provocation given to us by editor Milton S. F. Curry, I realized that while populism as such remains unexplored in my work on architectural theory, sovereignty is central to my thinking around the entangled developments of design, modernity, and coloniality after 1492. What I see in this image of the Mapuche flag raised before Baquedano's statue is the possibility of a different understanding of sovereignty, as a relationship between people and space that turns the traditional state-based idea inside out. I argue that sovereignty coupled with spatial abstraction, as a lens and practice, have operated as both a scaffolding for colonization and as a tool for determining who and what is included and who and what is excluded.

Let me begin by elaborating on the traditional understanding of sovereignty. In 1966, Francis Hinsley defined sovereignty as a theory of power¹ necessarily limited to the rise of modern states and thus an exclusively European development. Twenty years later, John Hoffman doubled down on the idea that sovereignty is entangled with the rise of the modern state but proposed that the two be kept theoretically separate.² The Eurocentric definition of sovereignty, as a concept

that depends on and pertains solely to modern states, has been gradually dismantled, with Patricia Mische arguing in the 1980s that “sovereignty should be understood not in terms of states or territories but as a dynamic, interactive process involving a system of relationships and flow of energy between different spheres: biosphere, technosphere, sociosphere, noosphere.”³ This expanded definition would be developed and systematized by Giorgio Agamben in his *Homo Sacer*, originally published in 1995,⁴ to the extent that many more contemporary discussions of sovereignty carry the sentiment, along these lines, that it is “thus no longer an absolute right and that its implementation has become subordinate to the values imbedded in the human rights doctrine.”⁵

I ask the reader to consider the chronological overlap between the materializing notions of sovereignty and the rise of architecture. In the last few years, I have explored the role of architecture as it relates to modernization, colonization, and the rise of capitalism. Latin American scholars Anibal Quijano,⁶ Arturo Escobar,⁷ Sylvia Winter,⁸ Walter D. Mignolo,⁹ and Denise Ferreira da Silva¹⁰—notably, among many others—have contributed considerably to the body of thoughts and ideas that has come to be known as decolonial theory. Two axioms of decolonial theory are central to my architectural concerns: 1) from Quijano, that it is not that the Americas participated in the rise of capitalism but rather that there would be no capitalism if not for the European occupation of the Americas, and 2) from Escobar, that modernization and colonization cannot be separated, as they are two sides of the same coin.

Centrally underlying René Descartes' systematization of *cogito, ergo sum* (in English, “I think, therefore I am”) in the early seventeenth century was spatial abstraction.¹¹ Synthesized in the early seventeenth

[Previous] Figure 3.1. Mapuche flag above equestrian statue. Cropped from *Gente con banderas subida al caballo de Plaza Italia (2019)*. October 23, 2019. Photograph by José Miguel Cordero Carvacho. Available from: Wikimedia Commons. © Copyright José Miguel Cordero Carvacho. Creative Commons License (CC BY-SA 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>.

century by Descartes, *cogito, ergo sum* entails a process of creating difference between those who represent (inevitably, at that time, European white males) and those who are represented (others, who are not male, not white, and not Homo sapiens).¹² Spatial abstraction likewise imposes a distance between those who represent and those whom are represented. Relational processes operate in the opposite direction, fostering approximation instead.

In previous articles, I have explored the idea that “the rise of spatial abstraction [is] a consequence—not a cause—of the European occupation of the Americas.”¹⁵ My argument for seeing tools of abstraction in design and the invasion of the Americas as intrinsically conjoined, however, extends far beyond the temporal overlap of the sixteenth century. The very same spatial abstraction that we use to *project* spaces in the near future allowed European kingdoms to project their power over to the other side of the Atlantic. Here I call on both meanings of the Latin word *projectare*, meaning to design and to launch forward.

Ricardo Padron and Doreen Massey, in their scholarship exploring spatial abstraction, illuminate how it was developed as a tool of colonization and modernization. Padron explains that before the early sixteenth century, movement was recorded as it related to personal itinerary, relying on relational descriptions in which the traveler is immersed in the report.¹⁴ It was only after the 1520s that we saw the development of maps in which the traveler is removed from the description. Massey begins her book *For Space* with a scene of Aztec Emperor Moctezuma II and Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortéz strolling the canals of Tenochtitlan together, with local Indigenous ruler Moctezuma observing dense relational interactions, while Cortéz calculates the riches that a military assault would yield.¹⁵

It is important to distinguish between spatial abstraction, the ramifications of which I am concerned with, and abstraction generally—abstraction itself being so fundamental to the human history of consciousness and manipulating objects that it likely predates our species. Jean Piaget’s theories, tracing the development of abstract thinking in children’s early learning processes, suggest that most of us, before we can walk, begin developing abilities to differentiate between internally occurring concepts and external phenomena.¹⁶ As such, abstraction lies at the root of every written language—including Nahuatl glyphs, the Mayan script predating European occupation of the Americas.

The power of spatial abstraction allowed Cortéz to return to Tenochtitlan months later with the allied Tlaxcalteca to sack and destroy the city, while relational responsibilities might have influenced Moctezuma’s limited response. We might never know because the one who yields power owns the map and the narrative, while the ones who are subject to power are plotted in the map and silenced in the narrative.

Here we see two different kinds of sovereignty—a relational sovereignty based on interactions between peoples and spaces, and a spatially abstract sovereignty based on the state monopoly on exercising violence. A relational sovereignty erodes the Eurocentric concept that sovereignty is tied to the rise of the modern state. It is hard to argue against the Navajo, the Yanomami, or the Mapuche when they claim sovereignty by being in and with their lands for thousands of years. They claim sovereignty by approximation.

The main point here is that spatial abstraction dissolves relational sovereignty by imposing a safe distance between the mind of the colonizer and the bodies of everybody else. Agamben again was the one who made that clear with his proposal of sovereignty as a process of exclusion. In his words:

The sovereign exception is the fundamental localization. The “ordering of space” that is constitutive of the sovereign nomos is therefore not only a “taking of land” but above all a “taking of the outside,” an exception.¹⁷

Agamben acknowledged that he took this idea from *Mille Plateaux* by Deleuze and Guattari, where they wrote that “sovereignty only rules what it is capable of interiorizing.”¹⁸ Such interiorization was indeed abstracted and imposed from afar in the case of the Americas. The lines projected in space functioned as a *datum*—to use a favorite word of design studio reviews—that determined who belongs and who does not, who is sovereign and who is not.

Sovereignty is, thus, intrinsically linked to drawing abstract lines over territory, be it the Mississippi prairie, the southern Araucanía, or a small plot of land in any city of the Americas. In the words of Escobar and Mignolo, those lines determine who reaps the benefits of modernization and who bears the burden of colonization. So, it follows that modern sovereignty (and, by definition, colonial sovereignty—two sides of the same process) is a concept of exclusion and control based on a spatially abstracted geometry that defines who has rights to own what and who therefore does not have those rights.

Given that architecture as a praxis is deeply

entangled with this process, could we reverse the gaze and use the power of design to achieve an inclusive sovereignty, in opposition to the five-hundred-year-old modern/colonial sovereignty of exclusion? Could we incorporate non-abstract variables into the design process to open a wedge toward less exclusionary results?¹⁹ This seems to be where the ideas of Arturo Escobar are heading when he proposes that we use:

the practical potential of design to contribute to a profound cultural and ecological transition [...] if humanity is to face effectively the interrelated crisis of climate, food, energy, poverty and meaning. [...] To nourish design’s potential for the transitions, however, requires a significant reorientation of design from the functionalist, rationalistic, and industrial traditions from which it emerged, and within which it still functions with ease, towards a type of rationality and set of practices attuned to the relational dimension of life.²⁰

The relational aspect that Escobar highlights is central to the reconfiguring of sovereignty from an exclusive to an inclusive process. In the Americas we have many occurrences of such processes already discussed by architecture scholars, from the Zapatistas in Chiapas²¹ to the Xukuru in Brazil,²² Kreyole in Haiti,²⁵ and the Aymaras in Bolivia.²⁴

The groups listed above point to a reconceptualization of design and site appropriation, one that includes relational and participatory processes as core components and that by doing so propose an alternative kind of sovereignty. The public fights for autonomy of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples in the Americas make visible the overall resistance of groups excluded by the modern/colonial idea of sovereignty as a function of the state. This resistance sometimes takes the form of other geometries—for instance, when favelas do not conform to street grids or when Afro-descendants use their backyards for cultural affirmation because they were prohibited from exercising it out in public.

In all cases, we need to understand architecture as an accomplice to such oppression, to hopefully unleash the potential of design as a facilitator of pluralist and inclusive futures. For an inclusive and relational concept of sovereignty offers an antidote to the excesses in spatial abstraction that are killing us.

1 Francis H. Hinsley, *Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.

2 John Hoffmann, *Sovereignty: Concepts in Social Sciences* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), 13.

3 Patricia M. Mische, “Ecological Security and the Need to Reconceptualize Sovereignty,” *Alternatives* 14, no. 4 (1989): 389–427.

4 Giorgia Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

5 Johan D. van der Vyver, “Sovereignty,” in *The Oxford Handbook of International Human Rights Law*, ed. Dinah Shelton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 379–400.

6 Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Americana as a Concept, or the Americas in the Modern World,” *International Social Science Journal* 44, no. 4 (1992): 549–57.

7 Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

8 Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

9 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

10 Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

11 Fernando Lara, “American Mirror: The Occupation of ‘The New World’ and the Rise of Architecture as We Know It,” *The Plan Journal* 5, no. 1 (2020): 71–88.

12 I have developed these ideas further in Fernando Lara, “Abstraction Is a Privilege,” *Platform Space*, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.platformspace.net/home/abstraction-is-a-privilege>, and Lara, “American Mirror.”

13 Lara, “Abstraction Is a Privilege.”

14 Ricardo Padron, *The Spacious Word: Cartography, Literature, and Empire in Early Modern Spain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

15 Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005).

16 Jean Piaget, *Studies in Reflecting Abstraction* (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001).

17 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 19.

18 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateau: Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*, Critique ed. (Paris: Minuit, 1980), 445.

19 In another recent publication I explore the elitist tendencies of architecture as a profession that sells exclusivity as a spin on practicing exclusion. Fernando Lara, “We Need a Political Architecture to Resist a Civilizing Architecture,” *arq. Urb.* no. 29 (2020): 4–7. <https://doi.org/10.37916/arq.urb.vi29.480>

20 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

21 Tania Gutiérrez-Monroy, “Building Indigenous Resistance: *The Casa de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas, Yá ngbū Yá jbyōy*, Samir Flores Soberanes,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 76, no. 2 (2022): 93–108.

22 Fernando Lara, *Arquiteturas Originais Brasileiras*, *Archdaily Brazil*, April 19, 2021. <https://www.archdaily.com.br/br/956191/arquiteturas-originais-brasileiras>

23 Irene Brisson, “Damage and Repair: Imagining Collective Dwelling in Rural Haiti,” *Tbresbolds* 48 (2020): 106–15. https://doi.org/10.1162/thld_a_00714

24 Angus McNelly, “Baroque Modernity in Latin America: Situating Indigeneity, Urban Indigeneity and the Popular Economy,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 41, no. 1 (2022): 6–20.