

Urban Amazonia: an Interview with Ana María Durán

Blanca Begert, MEdSc '20

Ana María Durán is a visiting scholar at YSoA and teaches a seminar on the history of cities in Amazonia. In a conversation last week, we discussed the urban character of Amazonia and the politics of resource extraction in the forest. The full interview is available online at yalepaprika.com.

B: Brazilian geographer Bertha Becker called Amazonia a “foresta urbana,” an “urban forest.” Even knowing that there are over 33 million people living in Amazonia, it’s still surprising to hear this region referred to as an urban forest. What do you think of this characterization?

A: The first time I understood there were cities in the Amazon was when I went to Manaus when I was 15 years old. We stayed in a hotel at the edge of the city and that edge marked me. It’s not like this everywhere in the city, but at that instance it was a manichaic, hard edge of forest and city, brutally disarticulated from each other. Having grown up with this idea of Amazonia as a pristine wilderness, I was shocked. This was a huge city in the middle of Amazonia, full of industrial sites.

The urban history of Amazonia goes all the way back into pre-colonial times. One of the more recent chapters during which Amazonian cities prospered was during the first industrial revolution in England, when the demand for latex soared. The rubber tree is endemic to the Amazon and at the end of the 19th century Amazonia was the only area where latex existed. Imagine all tributaries of the Amazon basin suddenly becoming these hinterland economies that each have a system of cities in place, and an entrepot, a collection point for trade, where you meet the Amazon.

It was the first pan-Amazonian extractive system, analogous to what is happening with other extractive systems now. It was brutal there. Indigenous communities everywhere were being enslaved to tap rubber. We’re still living the same story. The resource is different, but you still have systems of slavery, immense violence, abuse, accumulation, the barons in Latin America, and the beneficiaries in other empires. Once the rubber plant was bio-pirated, and taken by the British to the colonies in Southeast Asia, these economies in the Amazon collapsed—but what a relief for Amazonians.

B: In Jim Scott’s *Agrarian Societies* class, we talked about how the state relies on simplified, knowable units to govern. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between the state and Amazonia?

A: Jim Scott’s book *Against the Grain* has been so helpful for me in terms of understanding Amazonia and the non-panoptic vision. I think Amazonia has such a negative relationship with the state because you cannot control it. In order to apply visual control mechanisms, you have to destroy the forest. Bolsonaro has tried to do this. But if you destroy it, you fall down with it. The resource appraisals we do in Amazonia are all about our ability to see it from above with satellites. But the Amazon is non-Foucauldian. It’s not a panopticon.

Amazonia drives the state crazy. Any loophole the state creates is countered by some resistance, some structure that the state doesn’t know how to deal with. It’s the condition of the forest. The canopy is not a site for visual power. It’s a place for sounds, spatiality, water, it’s a different kind of place. There is a local knowledge of water routes that is beyond our access. Amazonia defies the West and our systems at every level, that’s why we crack down there.

B: We talk about informal cities and you refer to them in quotes. Is “informal” not the right way to be thinking of these cities?

It’s hard to name it. Informal means lacking form, and that’s not the case with these cities. Latin American scholars tend to prefer “auto-construido” which means “self-built:” the city that is built by all the people who have not been incorporated into the capitalist systems and are not part of the market or the state. Mike Davis calls them the “surplus” humanity. I’m not sure if I like that term, because he’s looking at it from the center outwards, though of course he is using it in a very cynical, Marxist way, to critique capitalism. People refer to “frontier cities.” Here I give credit to Susanna Hecht, who once said to me, “Frontier? From whose perspective?” We’re advancing into Amazonia so it’s a frontier of extraction, the oil frontier, the soybean agribusiness frontier. But from the perspective of indigenous peoples it is not a frontier at all, it’s an invasion.

“Frontier” needs to be questioned as a concept urgently because it has to do with jurisdiction, land tenure, and security. Indigenous populations are being dispossessed once again because our ontologies don’t take them into account. They don’t have the same property system as us. We try to impose ours and kick them out. It’s a continuous clash. So many people die in Amazonia every month due to land conflicts. In the abstract world, the market is this benign mechanism of exchange. On the ground, it has a brutal, violet, geopolitical side. Just look at the article by Judith Kimerling for the Vermont Law Review—the oil companies were throwing bombs from the air into Waorani settlements to open the ground for extraction.

ON THE GROUND

Tuesday 2/18

At a “How to Start a Firm” panel, Carmel Greer advises students not to socialize with or date other architects in their free time. Anti-social members of the audience feel validated in not attending a 6on7 in two-and-a-half years.

Thursday 2/20

Hours before the opening of *In Memoriam*, the new student-curated exhibit in the North Gallery, an all-school email hits inboxes looking for Erin Bessler’s 2x2 “cookie-shaped” model which has gone missing.

Lizabeth Cohen presents her “Saving America’s Cities” lecture to a packed crowd in Hastings Hall. Cohen paints a rather rosy glow over the history of Ed Logue’s Urban Renewal in New Haven (and sells autographed copies of her book at the post-lecture reception).

“Today is both Louis Kahn and Rihanna’s birthdays. Can you imagine them being one continual karmic soul?” – Scott Simpson, M.Arch I 2021. (Co-incidentally, we learned the 20th was Dean Berke’s birthday as well).

Friday 2/21

Outlines hosts a “Queer Takeover” of 6on7, flooding the 7th Floor back pit with LGBTQ students from across Yale’s Graduate Schools. Decorations include a groin vault of balloon arches, the structural integrity of which was questionable at best.

Sunday 2/23

With a midnight deadline to submit resumé and work sample sheets for the career fair, a wave of melancholy spreads throughout the studios as students are forced to come to terms with their past work. Recalling the time, stress, and sleep-loss involved, many are dumbfounded at how little they have to show.

Monday 2/24

With less than a day before BP presentations, first year students find themselves in model-making crunch time only to discover the shop closed due to a post-lecture reception. Dismay,

rage, and stress are met with a color-changing gin that turns from bright blue to magenta with a squeeze of lemon.

An email from the university warns that the CDC has placed Italy at a Level 2 alert due to coronavirus. Rumors fly around the fifth floor that the administration is considering the viability of this summer’s Rome trip.

Second year students threaten to drop out of school at the suggestion of the reinstatement of the Brooklyn trip, and grit their teeth at the idea of sketch books filled with analytical drawings of the Vessel.



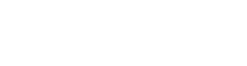
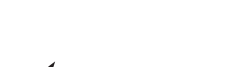
THE DEAN’S LIST: MUSHROOMS

Welcome to the Dean’s List: your weekly destination for Deborah Berke’s most on-topic, off the beaten path rankings.”

Dean Berke: “My favorite mushrooms... Note that I do really like mushrooms of ALL kinds, especially sautéed in butter (in the winter) and raw in a salad of thinly sliced celery and fennel with vinaigrette (in the summer).”

Penthouse-Porcini
7th Floor-Portobellos
6th Floor-Morel
5th Floor-Cremeni
4th Floor-Chanterelles
Basement-Enoki
Sub-Basement-Chicken of the Woods

“Discarded from the rankings: Matsutake, wood ear, Toad (of Nintendo’s Super Mario fame), Psilocybe cubensis (magic mushrooms), and Amanita muscaria (Santa’s reindeer mushrooms). Dean Berke: “Toad is cute, legal and mindlessly distracting. Psilocybe cubensis is definitely distracting and is only legal in the Bahamas, Brazil, Jamaica, the Netherlands, and Samoa.”



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Statement from the Editors
Blanca Begert, MEdSc '20 and Jen Shin, M.Arch II/ MEM '20

Humans have lived in intimate relationship with so-called “Wild” landscapes since time immemorial. But our current notion of Wilderness is a fabrication, an ongoing colonial project of cleansing under a racialized veil of purity.^[1] It relies on a myth of nature without people, consecrating the human-nature binary.

The separation of nature and culture is a feature of the “one-world world,” the Eurocentric vision that there is only one reality, which can be understood through the modern Western sciences.^[2] The one-world world “present[s] itself as exclusive and cancels the possibilities for what lies beyond its limits.”^[3] It inscribes its ideas of who should be in the Wild, and what they should be doing there, on the landscape itself.

The production of Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins’s *Girls* at the Yale Repertory Theatre this fall evoked a lush jungle. Plants in every shade of green glowed onstage, enshrouded in mist. Insects hummed in the back-ground. In this Edenic, mystical forest, Deon, the Dionysius character in this riff on Euripides’s *The Bacchae*, sets up a sound system. Soon, the jungle transforms into The Clurb. Self-identified “girls” flock to the forest to air their grievances against society and let loose. To the white, male law enforcement in town, these black, brown and queer bodies dancing in the forest are deviant and untamed, a threat to be controlled with violence. These people aren’t supposed to be in this park, acting like this in the woods. Challenging a rigid, singular ideal, *Girls* teaches us to consider another kind of Wilderness, messy and impure, composed of a plurality of voices, relationships, and realities.

For this issue of *Paprika!*, we invited contributors to enter into a radical rethinking of Wilderness. We received a diverse cast of submissions some from architects, some from scholars in other fields—all searching for cracks in the artifice of the human-nature binary. Many of these contributions, themselves acts of optimism, experiment with ways to “relinquish our hold on the one-world world” and “embrace

pluriversality.”^[4] With regards to the Western notion of “Wilderness,” the point is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, because, in fact, there is no baby to be found.^[5] Instead, our contributors commune with archival mold, reframe the layers of the Camargue, orienteer the contradictions of the Guadalupe Mountains, reject Mars, reimagine land sharing, and encounter living rocks. In sum, they embrace multiple realities, co-existing and intersecting across space and time. As a practice, this type of work opens us up to new modes of thinking about our role here on earth. By engaging alternate methods of seeing and understanding the world around us as neither natural and wild, nor fabricated and controlled, we hope this issue serves as an entry point into the larger collective and ongoing work of reimagining our planetary relationships and opening spaces for abundant futures.^[6]

[1] Kosek, Jake. 2006. “Racial Degradation and Environmental Anxieties,” 142-182. in *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[2] Law, John. 2015. “What’s Wrong with a One-World World?” *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 16(1): 126-39.

[3] Cadena, Marisol de la, and Mario Blaser, eds. 2018. *A World of Many Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

[4] At this month’s *International Society of Tropical Foresters* conference, Juanita Sundberg challenged the audience to “relinquish our hold on one-world world, which gives us so much authority, and embrace pluriversality, an openness to other ways of being and worlding.”

[5] See Sandra Harding’s introduction to *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women’s Lives where she calls for the creation of diverse New Sciences rather than a complete overhaul of a monolithic science*. See also our weekly cartoon.

[6] Collard, Rosemary-Claire, Jessica Dempsey, and Juanita Sundberg. 2015. “A Manifesto for Abundant Futures.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105(2): 322-30. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00045608.2014.973007>

Illustration by Paul Meuser, M.Arch I, '22



