

Columbia University
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation
Advanced Architecture VI Studio - Spring 2020

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AMAZONIA AFTER FITZCARRALDO



Fitzcarraldo, by Werner Herzog

CONTEXT

As noticed by architecture critic Guilherme Wisnik, the 20th century heroic architecture has given place to a blurred aesthetics that expresses the uncertainty and opaqueness of our society - instead of exposing systems, buildings now perform mysterious atmospheres. The pretensions of rationalism, expressed by its glass houses, were substituted the myopic images of the polycarbonates and curved glasses.

This is not a studio about Amazon, but Amazonia. Instead of gigantic warehouses, we will look at the vastness of forest. Instead of speed and performance metrics, we will investigate slowness and uncertainty. Our studio will be driven by the pace of the river, its particularities and its monumentality.

AMAZONIA

The filmmaker Werner Herzog shot two movies in Amazonia: *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972), and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), both starred by Klaus Kinski. *Aguirre's* script is based in the dramatic history of Lope de Aguirre, who lead one of the first expeditions to explore the Amazon river, in 1561. The second movie, *Fitzcarraldo*, is inspired by the economic rubber boom of the late 19th Century. *Fitzcarraldo*, the character, is an opera fan and entrepreneur that

buys a boat to explore rubber in far lands and dreams to build an opera house in Iquitos, Peru. During his odyssey, he faces the challenges imposed by the harsh environment, as well as his own madness.

Life in Amazonia is dictated by the omnipresence of water. Since ancient times they are the pathway for the native communities and still today they are the main channel for moving people and goods in the region. In the 70s, during the military dictatorship, there was a major effort connect the territory by road. But the so-called Transamazonica was a failure, and trucks can only ride parts of it, during the dry season. The photographs of Transamazonica are similar to a Fitzcarraldo's sequence, when decides to move his boat through a hill to make a shortcut. Life mimics art and vice-versa. The forest is an enemy to be defeated.

The Amazonas river begins in Arequipa, in the Peruvian Andes, and flows across 7,000km, until it reaches the Atlantic coast, in Brazil. It disputes with Nilo, in Africa, the title as the longest river in the planet and is, by far, the largest in flow rate - its amount of water is equivalent to the sum of the nine next largest rivers in the world. It receives de contribution of 1,100 tributaries and covers a watershed of 6,5 million km, equivalent to 2/3 of the USA. To flow across the entire length of the Amazonas river, a water drop would take about forty days. After the journey, when reaching the Atlantic, the drop would be part of a gigantic water flow constituted by 226 million liters (4,3E +12 water drops) per second. The place is so wet, that evaporation generates an aerial river that that heads inland, diverts in the Andes mountain range and defines the rain seasons as far as 5,000km away.

If today we know that Amazonia is not the lung of the world, we could say it's the belly bottom. A pot of fertility where everything is alive and is home 25-30% the world's biodiversity. Despite that, the ecosystem is sustained by a 20cm thick fragile crust of soil. Damages to the ecosystem are almost irreversible.

Today, about 1/4 of the Brazilian Amazonia is declared as indigenous reserve. Unfortunately, with the ascension of far-right Bolsonaro government in Brazil, situation became critical. His hateful bragging was followed by the dismantling of federal environment agencies, as well as the National Indigenous Foundation, increasing in 80% the occurrence of fires and threatening the indigenous and other local communities.

FRAMEWORK

In the studio we will travel to Manaus, in Brazil, and beyond it, by boat.

The two million people city is located in the mid-way of the Amazonas river and is the hub of a network that extends from the Andes to the Atlantic. Manaus grew after becoming a free industrial zone by the military dictatorship, in the late 60s, and its economic and urban development evolved in total disarticulation with its natural potentials, neglecting the relation with the river. Despite that, the riverfront is still an alive setting, where people and products arrive and leave, contact point among the vernacular and erudite knowledge, among the forest and the urban. A place of contrasts and conflicts.

Manaus will be our entry to the Amazonia, and we will have the relation with the river as our focus. But instead of Fitzcarraldo's perspective, we will explore notions of time, community and local knowledge, in the search for singular qualities that address questions such as environment, development, social justice, sharing, among others.

According to Philippe Vassal, from architecture studio Lacaton et Vassal, architecture should be confident of the inhabitant. We will design buildings, public spaces, infrastructures, or a combination of these, that will address what it means to be in Amazonia and what our contribution can add to these populations. We will reflect on the destruction of the forest and murder of indigenous populations. We will consider sustainability, economy and culture. We will think about how things are global and local at the same time. We will not deny contemporary civilization as we know it, neither adopt cynicism as a discourse. We will avoid the naïve and the picturesque. By investigating another reality, our aim is to bring new perspectives that help us to place ourselves in the world. We will be humble enough to listen to the local culture and ambitious enough to raise new questions. We will dream, experiment, and dig ourselves into the Amazonas river mud.

COURSE STRUCTURE

Students will work in pairs.

Part 1 - Context investigation

The first part of the studio is dedicated to investigating the context, in its multiple facets and scales. It will include lectures, readings and assigned tasks.

Part 2 - Hypotheses

Students will be asked to identify questions of their interest and establish hypotheses through pre-designs. The river and the relations that it holds are the focus of our studio. Manaus waterfront is our priority, but other locations can be proposed.

Part 3 - Field Trip (Kinne)

The field trip is when the hypotheses will be tested and adjusted. Half of the time will be spent in Manaus and in the other half we will sail by boat into the forest. We will eat and sleep in the boat, eventually, in hammocks.

Part 4 – Design phase

The last part of the studio is dedicated to consolidating the designs. As mentioned above, they can be buildings, public spaces, infrastructures, or a combination of these.