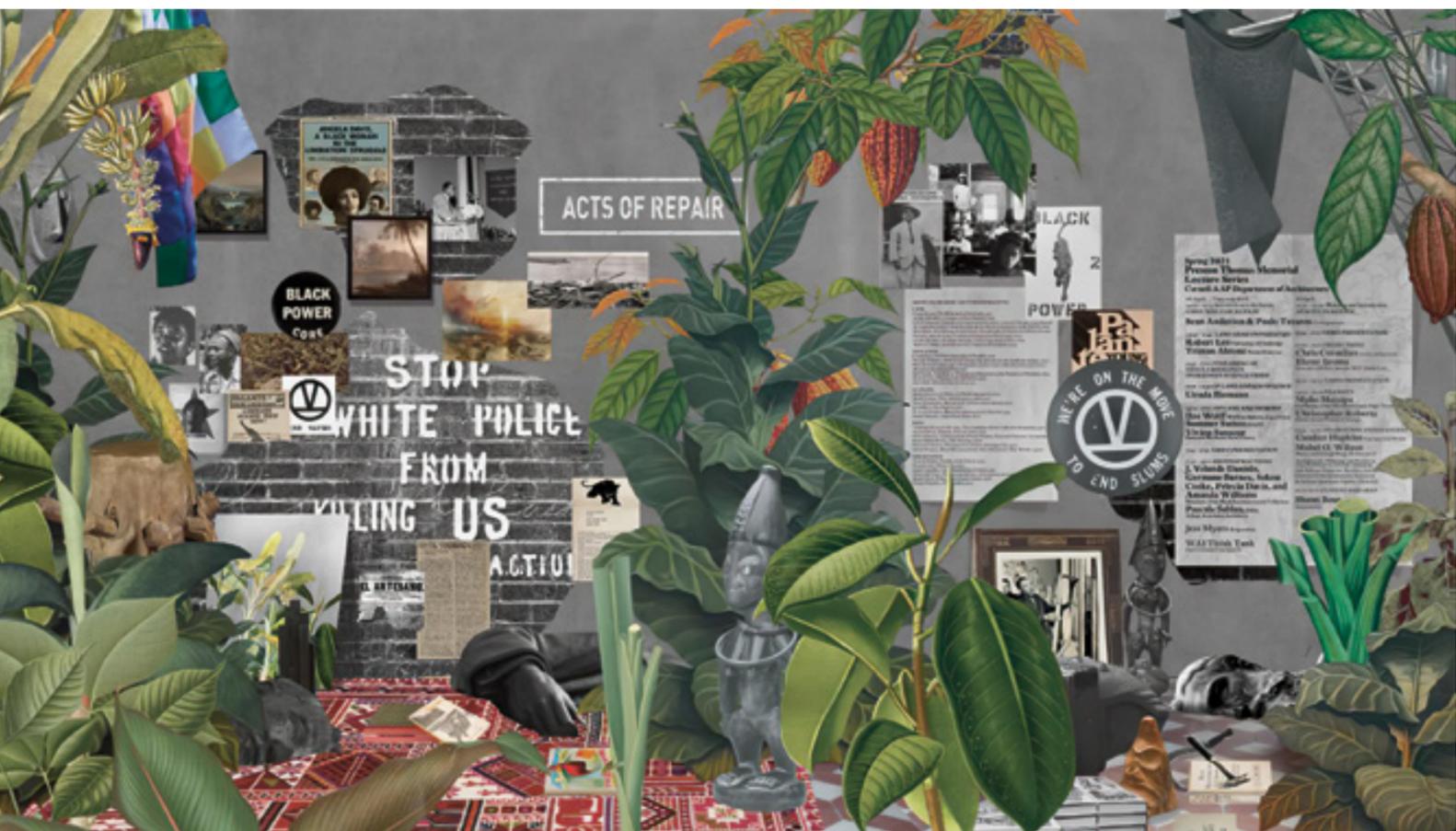


From

Paulo Tavares in conversation
with Markus Krieger and Alex Nehmer

Planning to



WAI Think Tank, *A Post-Colonial Mural: Propaganda for Acts of Repair*, 2021

Poster for the Preston Thomas Memorial Symposium at the Cornell AAP Department of Architecture in Ithaca, NY, in 2021, curated by Paulo Tavares and Sean Anderson

Architecture and planning have long been instruments of colonial capitalist exploitation of people and land, argues Paulo Tavares. With Markus Krieger and Alex Nehmer, he discusses how the disciplines can begin to decolonize and align themselves with the struggles of Indigenous communities to repair the Earth.

Planting

Markus Krieger You have worked on territories whose ecological and social fabric was systematically damaged through extractivism and colonial expansion, for example the oil-and-mining frontier in the Ecuadorian Amazon. How can repair be conceived in these spaces without evoking reactionary ideas of an unbroken “original state”?

Paulo Tavares When we think of repair today, it is crucial to start by acknowledging that the work of repair has been done for years, even centuries, by communities who have suffered the damages caused by the extractive logic of colonial racial capitalism. These communities built institutions and organized themselves and others for repair, even when it was not always named as such. The idea of repair that stems from movements within the African diaspora and from Indigenous peoples is inherently forward-looking. Rather than trying to return to an “unbroken original state,” the question here is to reestablish the links and connections that have been violently severed. Addressing acts, policies, and designs of repair deals with questions of the past, of course. But many of the same questions remain highly relevant because colonialism operates on a continuum. Repair must therefore include reparations that address this history as well as the future. Take the climate crisis as an example: Without reparations, there will be no process of restoring the Earth because the ecological crisis is, to a great extent, a product of the colonial logics that drove industrialization in the Global North in the first place. The powers that be must come to terms with the wrongs committed in the past if we are to conceive more livable and sustainable environments for future generations, both for human and nonhuman communities.

As architects, designers, cultural practitioners, and visual artists who engage with repair, we should add in solidarity to the social struggles ongoing today. I consider my work to be a type of “militant” design that I call *design as advocacy*. This means asking how the tools of design—material, visual, legal, cartographic, and curatorial—can be mobilized to join forces with the politics of these communities, building alliances with them in defense of their rights and territory. Thanks to various projects I was privileged to do with Indigenous communities, I believe they are at the forefront of our most important struggles today with their movements. Their political philosophy and the

ways in which they frame spatial and land politics is a true avant-garde of political action in that they are fighting for the Earth, a biopolitics in the name of us all as living beings, a true universalism in that sense.

Alex Nehmer If architects and designers want to contribute in solidarity to the work of repair, they also have to challenge and overcome the colonial legacies within their own disciplines. How can those disciplines repair this legacy?

PT Architecture and planning, specifically modernism and its canons, have a long history of being operationalized to carry out damages and commit violence against land and people in various dimensions, whether they were a means to expropriate and colonize territories in the Global South or, for example, the “negative planning” in the territories occupied by Israel in Palestine, which Rafi Segal, David Tartakover, and Eyal Weizman have pointed out.¹ Design has often been and still is a means of disempowering, disfranchising, and bringing poverty to marginalized communities. It claims to drive modernization and civilization, especially in the Global South, but often leaves ruins in its wake—of communities, of land, of nature. Yet from the internal point of view of the discipline and its pedagogy, architecture is conveyed as something inherently positive. In history, and still today, you will find a whole vocabulary around notions of “development,” “progress,” and “betterment”—notions whose roots can be found in colonialism—used to define architecture, planning, and design, giving the discipline an almost messianic character. Architecture is built on the premise that everything it does is ethical in the sense that it purportedly aims to improve people’s lives. This foundational ideological veil of design has prevented designers from seeing the evil they create and reinforce. Discarding this ideology would be a first step towards decolonizing the discipline.

Then, of course, it is also crucial to challenge syllabuses and curriculums because architectural history and architectural education in general have been instrumentalized to reinforce ideas and imaginaries that sustained colonialism and racism. This is not only a question of challenging the content of what is studied and taught but also of rethinking the power structures within the institutions that design architectural education, from academies to museums and archives. Recently we have

Paulo Tavares, *Settler-Modernism*, 2021

witnessed setbacks, but we have also seen remarkable moves in that regard, such as the project *Unlearning Whiteness* at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation of Columbia University, and notably the creation of the African Futures Institute in Accra, Ghana, by Lesley Lokko.

MK Your work specifically confronts the colonial legacy of modernism in architecture. *Des-Habitat* (2019), for instance, addressed the appropriation of Indigenous cultures in architecture.

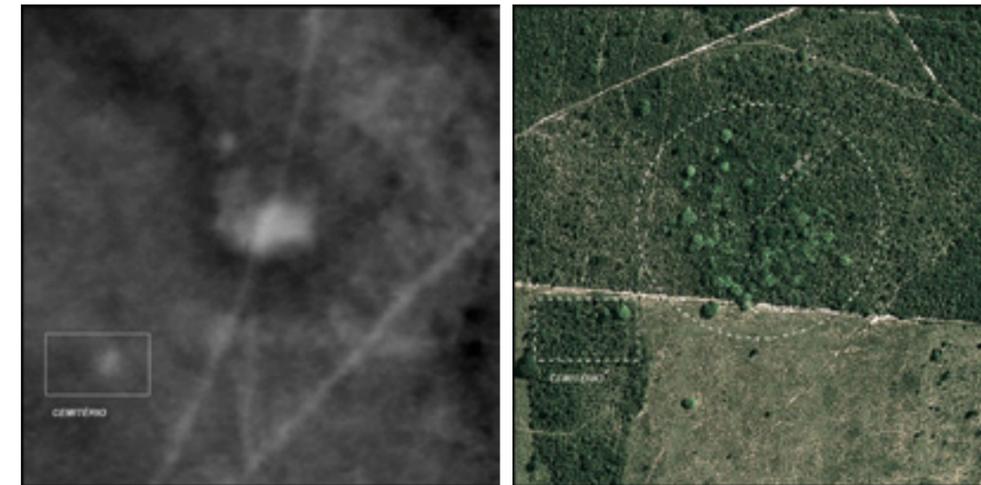
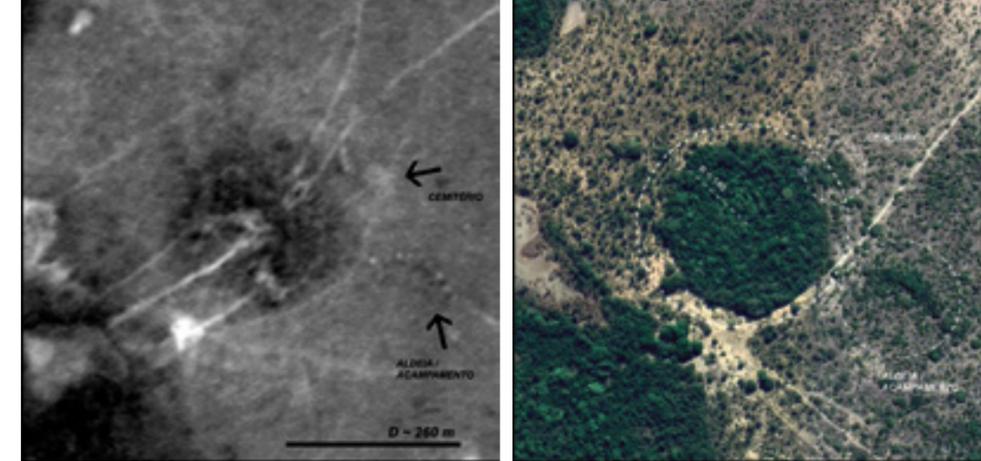
PT The extraction of knowledge, the arts, and cultures is at the core of colonialism. If you look at archival records, the origins of much of the scientific knowledge attributed to the modern Western world have been extracted from Indigenous knowledge by colonial processes. In my practice, I aim for an awareness of this history and its current implications. In that respect, I particularly question how architecture has historically supported these colonial processes of expropriation. Modernism's appropriation of Indigenous motives, objects, and crafts goes back to the idea of "primitivism" developed by the early European avant-gardes. As we know, this aesthetic appropriation was a product of imperialism, of looting Indigenous artifacts and transporting them to museums in the metropolitan centers of imperial powers in Europe so they could be consumed by a cultural elite eager to relate to "exotic" non-Western cultures. That is another reason why reparations are deeply related to the field of art and culture, including, of course, architecture. A similar process, with its own specificities, happened at the surge of the modernist vanguard in Brazil, who appropriated the "primitive" as signifiers of modernity, but a very specific type of modernity in the sense that it was distinctively national. *Des-Habitat* engages in critical dialogue with this history through the imaginary and discursive archive of modern architecture. The project focuses on the famous modernist magazine *Habitat* developed by architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi, as part of the curatorial program of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), one of the most important modern art museums in the Americas. I tried to show how in *Habitat* specifically, and in Brazilian modernism more broadly, there was an appropriation of Indigenous symbols, images, and objects, claiming them for a nationalist modernism. The publication of Indigenous arts and crafts in *Habitat* served as an ideological veil to the violent process of colonial expropriation of Indigenous lands that was going on at that time and escalated with the US-backed military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. In many ways, modernism was therefore complicit, even if not declared as such, with new forms of colonialism. Another such example is Brasília, the modernist capital built at the center of the national territory in the late 1950s, which was conceived as a means of advancing the colonial frontier of national expansion. As Lúcio Costa, the

creator of Brasília's master plan wrote, the city was born from "a deliberate act of possession [...] a gesture still in the sense of the pioneers, along the lines of the colonial tradition."² I call this "settler-modernism," in an inversion of the concept of "settler-colonialism."

MK But there are also tools and strategies for repair found within design. In the context of the project *Trees, Vines, Palms and Other Architectural Monuments* (2013–ongoing), you have argued that the Amazonian forests can be seen as the architectural and artistic heritage of non-Western forms of design. What strategy was behind using the notion of heritage to describe these artifacts?

PT The starting point for this understanding was an extensive survey undertaken with the Xavante people of central Brazil, who had been forcibly removed from their territory by the military dictatorship in the 1960s. We were asked to conduct a forensic architecture investigation of the villages that had been displaced or destroyed. As we worked on the mapping using various media and field surveys, we noticed that those abandoned sites were marked by singular forest formations, which at first glance may appear "natural," but which the elders who guided us recognized as ancient settlements. We began to ask ourselves whether we could read those forests as ruins of the architectural remains of those villages rather than simply as part of nature, and what this would imply in legal, political, and architectural terms. Could we understand them as a form of cultural, architectural heritage? What memories and histories could they register and recount? What kind of lessons do they teach contemporary design? After all, ruins are one of the main epistemic resources in architectural practice, history, and theory.

In other projects as well, I have had the privilege to do advocacy work with different Indigenous groups in Brazil and Latin America at large. Working with them, one learns how the forest configures a cultural and historic entity to which Indigenous folks attach various symbolic, memorial, and social connotations—just as Western culture does with architectural monuments and cities. In that respect, I was also deeply influenced by the thought and practice of writer and activist Ailton Krenak and anthropologists Pierre Clastres and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Furthermore, I had the privilege of conversing and working with some of the most prominent Amazonian archaeologists and botanists, people like William Balée, Eduardo Góes Neves, and Michael Heckenberger, who have been arguing since the 1980s that the forest is largely the product of Indigenous forms of inhabitation and land management systems. As more research is being undertaken, we are better understanding that the forest is the product of very sophisticated ways of seeing, organizing, managing, and designing the land developed by Indigenous communities across the Amazon. In that sense, the forest is a kind of architecture, an invaluable architectural heritage that Indigenous forms of knowledge and design gave to us all and to the life of the planet. The "primeval forest"—the quintessential representation of nature in colonial-modern Western epistemology—is, in fact, constructed and planted. We could explore a whole new dimension of landscape design by learning

Paulo Tavares, *Trees, Vines, Palms and Other Architectural Monuments* (excerpt), since 2013

Identification of the Xavante village of Bô'u. The dense formation of the rain-forest has preserved the original, circular footprint of the old village. The region is known as Bô'umoahô (place of production), alluding to its wealth of natural resources and the prosperity of the village in former times.



Paulo Tavares, *An Architectural Botany* (excerpt), since 2018

What does it mean to say that an environment that is considered the quintessence of nature is actually a cultural artifact? In the center of the project is a visual archive that ethnobotanist William Balée set up in the 1980s during his pioneering research with the Ka'apor. Can the archive be understood as an architectural inventory?

from these forest ruins and the knowledge embedded within them.

AN What are the consequences for the work of repair or reparation if we understand these sites as heritage?

PT This leads us to think about reparation in two ways. First, as epistemological decolonization: To legitimize itself, colonialism needed to develop a system of knowledge that identified nature as an object of mastery while at the same time racializing communities as primitive, under-civilized, and underdeveloped. Reparation necessarily requires dismantling this epistemic construction, which is at the core of colonial racial capitalism. Indigenous fights are fights for reparations for this epistemic violence that enabled colonialism to take place. And architecture, its history, and its teachings are strongly rooted in that history.

The second way we can understand repair through these “forest monuments” relates to architecture, its practices, and public manifestations. We are currently witnessing cities exploding in contestations of monuments that celebrate the history of colonial racism. Heritage and public architecture are at the center of a decolonial battle for reparations. But it is not enough to list the monuments to be dismantled. We need to work towards building new memorial landscapes to care for, sites that can enable other histories to be told while at the same time healing the Earth.

AN If we start from the point of acknowledging nature as designed, what does this mean for design practices going forward? In your text “In the Forest Ruins,” published in *e-flux* in 2016, you argue we should shift from *planning* the planet to *planting* the planet. What does this vision mean for you?

PT As Bruno Latour and others taught us, the basis of modern knowledge—and here I should add *colonial-modern* knowl-

edge—is a fundamental distinction between nature and culture, where “man,” more precisely the white man, appears as the master of the world of beings. It is important to understand the ways in which design, in its canonic Western forms, has been among the most effective means of materializing and operationalizing this dichotomy on the ground. Architecture as a knowledge system defines nature as an object of possession, mastery, domestication, and control. At the same time as architecture and urbanization have heavily impacted the ecological balance of the planet, technology has reached the capacity of operating on a planetary level. Geoengineering, which is largely based on technologies derived from environmental warfare tactics developed during the Cold War,³ is presented as a new stage of technological evolution in which design becomes the ultimate form of planetary management. But this reproduces the same anthropocentric and evolutionary principles of Western thought and the image of “man” as the master planner that led us here in the first place. This presents a crucible paradox, which in my view is as much political as it is existential: We cannot solve the environmental crisis using the same concepts, means, and tools of design. Design needs to abandon ideas about planning and governing nature. It really bothers me to see how designers use the ecological catastrophe we are living through to promote ideas of innovation as “planning the planet” in very uncritical, depoliticized terms.

I am of course not arguing that we don’t need future-oriented thinking and projects—on the contrary. But we do need to forge a different conception of design altogether. In the essay you mentioned, I make a conceptual shift from planning to planting. Planning implies hierarchy and control, a top-down approach. Such ideas are rooted in colonial views and class divisions between intellectual and practical labor. Planting—planting gardens and forests, not plantations, I should be clear—is a form of design that implies an intimate relationship with the soil, the land, and which is cultivated collectively through generations. Planting and cultivating the earth is a form of knowledge that comes from folk, Indigenous, and peasant traditions, a bottom-up approach that, as the “forest ruins” of Amazonia teach us, plays concrete roles in regulating the planet’s ecological balance. Planting is, by definition, a form of planning, but one that needs to be fine-tuned to the agency of numerous non-human agents that are part of the environment—climate, soil, animals, bees, insects, etc. In that sense, one may think about how the concept of planting may lead us to a form of design that displaces the imperial power and anthropocentrism that historically have been embedded within design. In the text, I call this “design beyond the human.” We need to be humbler and understand that we are just one piece in a larger extended network, and that design is a form of cooperation between different human and nonhuman entities and forces.

MK Another path to overcoming anthropocentrism could be granting nature rights, i.e., recognizing nonhuman entities as legal subjects—a theme you have repeatedly come back to, for example, in your works *Forest Law* (2014) with Ursula Biemann and *Non-Human Rights* (2012). In your view, what are the possibilities and limits of employing legal means as a tool for restorative justice?

PT *Forest Law* and *Non-Human Rights* deal with the question of the rights of nature in Latin America, and more specifically, the Ecuadorian Amazon. The rights of nature—the “rights of Pachamama,” as they are known in Ecuador and Bolivia—legally came into being through the constitutional reforms in Ecuador in 2008 and in Bolivia in 2009. This represented a “new constitutionalism” in Latin America, in which nature figures as a subject of rights in similar ways as humans do. It is important to

acknowledge that the rights of nature are not the outcome of some form of pure environmentalism. It emerged from years of Indigenous uprisings against neocolonial policies, neoliberal austerity, and the racial structures that define post-colonies in Latin America.

Rights like these are always the result of political struggles. Throughout history, rights have been implemented to address, or indeed to repair, forms of structural violence. For example, the Maria da Penha Law (*Lei Maria da Penha*), implemented in Brazil in 2006, seeks to protect the rights of women against misogynist violence. It came into being as a recognition and remediation of the structural violence against women that shapes society. This necessitated specific rights that at the same time expanded the concept of universal rights. In a similar vein, the rights of nature acknowledge that within the social systems inherited from colonial-modernity, there is structural violence against nature because nature is treated as an object of appropriation and mastery, reduced to property instead of being seen as a living being. Therefore, a system of rights is needed that tries to fundamentally transform—or repair—this structure that permeates economic, political, and legal systems.

MK The Western understanding of property seems to lie at the heart of many of the struggles we have talked about.

PT The moment that nature can only be conceived as property, you are not only putting up a fence against land as commons and a resource for all but also putting up an epistemic fence against the very idea of nature itself, reducing life to an object subservient and subaltern to humans. When we claim that nature has rights, it implies that nature can not only be thought of as property. This has implications for economic equality and wealth distribution, and also our understanding of what nature is and the role it plays in our cultural, political, economic, and legal systems.

Enshrining the rights of nature into constitutional law has a cultural and educational dimension as well. Courtrooms, laws, legislations, conventions, etc., are public forums through which different relations between society and nature can be communicated. These rights offer a new political tool of struggle to the communities who do activism on behalf of the environment in very pragmatic terms: They can argue on constitutional grounds and raise their voice in the name of rights. Effectively, the rights of nature are one possible way of enacting reparations across various domains, not only environmental but also cultural, allowing us to define our societies beyond the predatory logics of capitalism and its colonial and racial structures. They are a step of “epistemic decolonization” toward a world where nature will occupy a different position within our cultural, legal, and political systems—an existential topic for humanity in the face of global climate change.

But of course, legal systems and systems of rights have limitations: They are important but not neutral. They can be turned upside down and used to enforce new forms of violence and colonization. There are many episodes, and indeed very recent ones, where the idea of human rights has been instrumentalized to wage war and impose new forms of domination. In a similar vein, we are also seeing this in how ecological discourses are being instrumentalized on behalf of global sustainability: for example, for militarized technologies of geoengineering, or new forms of land grabbing such as “carbon colonialism,” in which compensation areas created for CO₂ certificate trading are withdrawn from use by the local population.

AN As part of our 2021 exhibition *Cohabitation*, we showed the documentary film *Habitat 2190* (2019) by Hanna Rullmann and Faiza Ahmad Khan, which traces the installation of a new nature protection

zone on the site of a former refugee camp in Calais. It is an instance where nature protection becomes a tool of the European border regime directed against racialized people. How can we ensure that the rights of nature and humans are not pitted against each other?

PT The history of Western thought about the environment since the 18th century is, in many ways, a history of continued dispossession of colonized communities. There are various examples in history where environmental practices and discourses have been used by colonizing powers to enforce control and rule across the Global South. As historian Alfred W. Crosby famously analyzed in *Ecological Imperialism*, colonialism is also an environmental force. Today there still exist many instances in which environmental discourses and practices are instrumentalized as a means to enforce power over communities and people. The specific case in Calais you mentioned reminds me of the work of artist Ayesha Hameed, who explores the ways in which images of the “jungle” in Calais are used to criminalize migrants. I also have to think of the advocacy work by Lorenzo Pezzanni and Charles Heller against the border regime of Fortress Europe, which they define as a politics of “hostile environments”—a complex set of spatial and legal elements that include nature as a means to govern migrants. At the same time, the protection of nature is deeply connected with emancipatory struggles throughout history.

In what sense?

AN When studying decolonial movements, we find that there is always an environmental dimension attached to them, because racial colonialism is a system that operates against people and land, against communities and their territories. Struggles against colonial rule and slavery are fundamentally related to the dismantlement of the plantation system, which is a system of environmental destruction par excellence in the sense that it diminishes biodiversity through homogenization, treating nature as a pure commodity. Similarly, we can find deep-rooted environmental strands within the civil rights movement in the US, as exemplified in Robert Bullard’s seminal work on environmental justice. That is why, when dealing with the environment, it is important that we always start off grounded in the political struggles of the communities who are at the frontlines, those who care, nurture, and defend those environments.

In that respect, one of the most influential thinkers and activists for me is the forest defender Chico Mendes. A rubber tapper in Amazonia, Mendes started his struggle against the development projects implemented by the military regime in the 1970s and early 1980s. Those projects were destroying the rubber and nut trees that ensured the livelihood of local communities. Mendes led one of the most representative movements calling for



The publication series *pumflet* was founded in 2016 by the collective pumfleteers (Ilze Wolff and Kemang Wa Lehulere). The issue on Summer Flowers (2021) is dedicated to the “Rainclouds” house which author, activist, and gardener Bessie Head had built in 1969 with the proceeds from her first novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Bessie Head saw her work as a continuation of that of Sol Plaatje, a South African journalist and author who documented the impact of the Land Act in his book *Native Life in South Africa* (1914). Today, the house is part of Botswana’s national cultural heritage.

radical land reform that would have given common property to rubber tapper communities, stopping deforestation. Shot in a political murder in 1988, he became known worldwide for his environmental fight against the destruction of the Amazon Forest. But besides being an environmentalist, Chico Mendes was the leader of the rubber tappers labor union; he was associated with the Brazilian Workers' Party, and his practice and thought were influenced by socialist thinking. He was a community organizer and political mobilizer against the repressive, fascist-like regime implemented by the US-backed military dictatorship in Brazil. He fought for human rights and for the forest, for democracy, liberties, and freedom of speech, for workers' rights and nature's rights, as those things are all entangled. The ecocide committed by the military government in the Amazon rainforest first had to dismantle any type of political resistance and democratic means of decision-making. It had to ban the right of free association with political parties and unionists and censored free speech. This was what Mendes was fighting against; it was an intersectional politics.⁴ He showed that we cannot separate politics and the environment.

We can still see this today. The neofascist government of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro was openly anti-Indigenous

and anti-environmental. It systematically dismantled legal protections for the environment and Indigenous lands and promoted land grab policies against forest communities of Amazonia, foremost illegal mining, which led to numerous cases of violence against Indigenous communities.⁵ At the same time, Bolsonaro's government was deeply authoritarian. He attempted to block every possible democratic avenue that would allow social movements to discuss those policies within traditional democratic and political arenas. For that reason, we must always look at environmental protection intersectionally and build alliances between different struggles. Environmental repair is never only about physically repairing the environment but also always about making historical reparations for historical injustices. Communities need to heal the body of the Earth.

This interview will be part of a chapter on the politics of solidarity. How can we advance from local alliances to global solidarity?

Today, everything is at the same time local and global, grounded and planetary. So local alliances are always also forms of global solidarity. Spatial politics need to be framed across scales, taking the ground as the Earth, the Earth as a planet, and the planet as our home.



American Indian Center of Chicago, *Land Acknowledgment*

Chicago Architecture Biennial 2019, curated by Yesomi Umolu, Sepake Angiama, and Paulo Tavares

1 Rafi Segal et al., eds., *A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture* (London: Verso, 2003). See also the interview with Eyal Weizman, "Architecture and negative planning in the West Bank," *Cabinet* 9 (Winter 2002/03), accessed November 18, 2022, www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/9/kastner_najafi_weizman.php.

2 Mário Pedrosa, "Reflexões em torno da nova capital," *Brasil: Arquitetura Contemporânea* 10 (1957), 2–5, quoted in Paulo Tavares, "Brasília: Colonial Capital," *e-flux*, October 2020, accessed November 18, 2022, www.e-flux.com/architecture/the-settler-colonial-present/351834/brasilia-colonial-capital.

3 More on this in Paulo Tavares, "Stratoshield," in *Textures of the Anthropocene: Vapor*, eds. Katrin Klingan et al. (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2015), 61–71.

4 Paulo Tavares, "Forest Alliances in the Amazon," *The Funambulist* 35, *Decolonial Ecologies* (2021), accessed November 18, 2022, thefunambulist.net/magazine/decolonial-ecologies/forest-alliances-in-the-amazon.

5 Fabrício Araújo, "Film Details How Bolsonaro's Policies Stimulate Mining in Yanomami Land," *Instituto Socioambiental*, September 6, 2022, accessed November 18, 2022, www.socioambiental.org/en/socio-environmental-news/film-details-how-bolsonaro%27s-policies-stimulate-mining-in-the-land.