



Book Review: A New Indigenous University in the Rainforest in Colombia (2020). Studio Lacaton & Vassal and ETH D-ARCH

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Accepted: 28 July 2023 / Published online: 28 July 2023

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How to cite:

Ramírez Gröble, M. P. (2020), Book Review: A New Indigenous University in the Rainforest in Colombia. Studio Lacaton & Vassal and ETH D-ARCH., *Alternautas*, 10(1), 195-198. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31273/an.v10i1.1406>

University of Warwick Press

<http://www.alternautas.net>



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Book Review:

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A new indigenous university in the Rainforest in Colombia is the title of this work, published in 2020 by Studio Lacaton & Vassal and ETH D-ARCH. The book presents extensive visual documentation and a textual chronicle of the project to build an indigenous university in Putumayo. The publication recounts the beginnings of the project and the participants and provides reflections on the encounters. One of the main contributions in the book is made by the artist Ursula Biemann from Devenir Universidad. She was the one who made the various contacts possible after having made an expedition in the Colombian Amazon and having met and got to know the Inga culture. The book also presents the visions and proposals on the essential characteristics of the Inga University, which allows the construction of a first conceptual basis for the project. This document results from a collaboration agreement between the Polytechnic University of Zurich, Switzerland (ETH), the Department of Architecture, and the Pontificia Javeriana University, Colombia, with representatives of the Inga community of Putumayo.

Ursula Biemann provides a key part of the process in the book's introduction, namely the idea of publishing the book, describing her encounter with the Inga culture, and pointing out the most important and conceptual foundations on which the university is based. The recovery of the indigenous cultural identity of the Ingas, resistance, and ethnocultural recovery are three key aspects that recur throughout the

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book's chapters. The first part of the book summarizes the political and social situation, how the Inga communities have faced marginalization, exploitation of ecosystems, and forced displacement over the centuries, and pays particular attention to the process of community defense against conflict, drug trafficking, and violence. The community's identity as guardians of the earth is a key concept throughout the publication, both in words and in the various articles presented in the book, as well as in the magnificent images taken during Ursula's multiple visits to the Putumayo Forest region. Anne Lacanton describes the story of how the project began. She approached how she got involved in the project in the first round by exploring the possibilities of discussing the project with her students in her teaching course.

"Explore the unknown and build knowledge" is how she continues the first encounter with the idea of the project and the workshop during two semesters, namely 2019 and 2020, in collaboration with the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá and the representatives of the Inga community. The workshop with Swiss and Colombian students will take place in the territories of the Inga. Anna Lacanton describes the experience as unique, as the project's approach, objectives, and conditions completely differed from what the students had experienced before. The project aimed not to produce final architectural designs for the campus but to observe, analyze, reflect, and discuss with the communities how the campus design could reflect and embed the university's guiding principles.

A. Lacanton points out that a crucial reflection along the process was the question of legitimacy. How could they have something to say in a completely unknown environment, completely different from what they had been researching and working on? The attitude of how to work, how to approach, but above all, how to learn through the lens of Inga's people is the most significant experience of the project and the way to reflect on the role they were called to and played in the creation of the New University.

Raphael Blain, Philip Kaiser, and Sophie Keel reported on the ETH students' trip to Inga's territories in the autumn of 2019. During the four weeks of fieldwork with the Inga, the students analyzed and explored production systems, weather conditions, natural risks, infrastructure, socio-ethnic structures, cultural cosmologies, and relationships within and with ancestral territories. While the text describing the students' trip during the week is relatively short but rigorous, many pictures taken in the region and published in the book bring the reader much closer to the experience the students share in the text. More than 20 pictures from different parts of the region form a comprehensive landscape inviting you to see it for yourself.

Some of the primary reflections that emerge during the visit are related to theoretical and methodological procedures applied to carry out research projects, as the conditions, participation, and role of the researcher are experienced as new and different from what they have known. However, the extreme fragility of the indigenous peoples in these territories due to environmental degradation and their respective ecosystems are two central elements of his fieldwork and his visit to the Putumayo lands in the Colombian Amazon.

The second part of the book deals with the conceptual and architectural proposal that the students and communities discussed together during the visit. The meeting between the students and the Inga communities has led to a fruitful exchange of ideas and conceptions about the project and its development. The students' reflections resulted in the proposal of five different strategies for the campus design. In contrast to Inga's initial bid to have a unique campus, the student group proposed five strategies that connect broader scales: The concept of the university; the construction of the university facilities within the territory; the relationship between nature, climate, and other surroundings such as the forest, other communities, and the city; self-sufficiency; mobility and communication. The proposals are complemented by corresponding teaching and training programs, functional schemes, and architectural proposals to adapt to the different environments and spaces. The book contains many illustrations showing the diversity of Inga's landscapes and presenting ideas on using the territory to build a new university.

The concept of the university is twofold: 1) "The University as Process: Reciprocity and Community Life"; 2) "The University as Path: Beyond the Campus." On the other hand, the concept of the university as a space is reflected in a broader sense: 3) "The University in three contexts: City - Resguardo and Forest"; 4) "the University of the Network, at the foot of the mountain." The University is a crucial platform for connecting different actors, but at the same time, an important place to allow cooperation within regional communities to promote new reflections on ways of life, sustainability, and alternative paths within the territory. The environments in which students are daily in touch and involved, 5) "The Universidad: town and forest." The analysis provides a clear differentiation of each of those environments and how they can function in a complementary way to integrate the single specificities while building an ideal production knowledge atmosphere.

The final part of the book considers the process of reflection on how architecture can intervene to transform environments into more sustainable places. Furthermore, a critical reflection involves questioning the occidental notions of building models, the use of materials, and the values embedded in building concepts. A final key reflection deals with the theories of care and the extent to which the creation of architecture, in a broad sense, should consider the care of the planet and the careful treatment of different environments.