

# CAN ARCHITECTURE REPAIR THE PLANET? FRACTURES, DISCONTINUITIES, SYNCHRONIES, AND OTHER EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISLOCATIONS NECESSARY FOR THE POST-CARBON CITY

¿Puede la arquitectura reparar el planeta? Fracturas,  
discontinuidades, sincronías y otras dislocaciones  
epistemológicas necesarias para la ciudad post-carbono

A arquitetura pode reparar o planeta? Fraturas, descontinuidades,  
sincronias e outras dislocações epistemológicas necessárias  
para a cidade pós-carbono

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## ABSTRACT

Can architecture repair the planet? With this seemingly unusual yet fundamentally urgent question, the exhibition project The Great Repair at the Haus der Künste in Berlin confronts a critical reorientation: moving away from architecture as the endless pursuit of novelty and consumption, towards a practice grounded in preservation, durability, and care for existing realities. This shift towards ‘mending’, maintenance and repairing calls for the recovery of ancient and embodied knowledge systems, where materiality is not merely a means but a locus of meaning and engagement, and where building becomes an act of relational stewardship, embedded cooperation, and the transmission of practical wisdom. From the point of view of its epistemological underpinnings, it further requires abandoning utopian projections of a decarbonized future; visions that remain perpetually deferred and abstract, in favor of a radical presentism, an ethical stance that insists on responding to the urgencies of the here and now. Navigating between the expansive but often totalizing ‘distractions’ of utopian thought (as Cesar Rendueles warns us against) and the immobilizing despair of apocalyptic narratives (as in the timely critique to so-called ‘endtimes fascism’ by Naomi Klein), this essay proposes an architecture rooted in radical materialism and an attentiveness to the differential, the faulty and the polyphonic. From this foundation, a framework of practices and recommendations will arise, focused on repair, and sensitive to the cracks, wounds, vernacular tactics, and the fractures that shape the social fabric of our cities.

**Keywords:** ecology, urban transformation, epistemological discontinuities, post-carbon city, repair

## RESUMEN

¿Puede la arquitectura reparar el planeta? Con esta pregunta aparentemente inusual, pero fundamentalmente urgente, el proyecto expositivo *The Great Repair* (La gran reparación) de la Haus der Künste de Berlín se enfrenta a una reorientación crítica: alejarse de la arquitectura como búsqueda incesante de la novedad y el consumo, hacia una práctica basada en la preservación, la durabilidad y el cuidado de las realidades existentes. Este cambio exige la recuperación de sistemas de conocimiento antiguos y encarnados, en los que la materialidad no es un mero medio, sino un lugar de significado y compromiso, y en los que la construcción se convierte en un acto de gestión relacional, integrado en el cuidado, la cooperación y la transmisión de la sabiduría práctica. Además, exige abandonar las proyecciones utópicas de un futuro descarbonizado —visiones que siguen siendo perpetuamente diferidas y abstractas— en favor de un presentismo radical, una postura ética que insiste en responder a las urgencias del aquí y ahora. Navegando entre las ‘distracciones’ expansivas, pero a menudo totalizadoras, del pensamiento utópico (como nos advierte C. Rendueles) y la desesperación inmovilizadora de las narrativas apocalípticas (como en la oportuna crítica al fascismo de fin de los tiempos de M. Klein), este ensayo propone una arquitectura arraigada en el materialismo radical y en la atención a lo diferencial, a lo fracturado y a lo polifónico. A partir de esta base, surgirá un marco de prácticas y recomendaciones centrado en la reparación y sensible a las grietas, las heridas, las narrativas vernáculas y las fracturas que conforman el tejido material y social de nuestras ciudades.

**Palabras Clave:** ecología, transformación urbana, discontinuidades epistemológicas, ciudad post-carbono, reparación

## RESUMO

A arquitetura pode reparar o planeta? Com esta pergunta aparentemente incomum, mas fundamentalmente urgente, o projeto da exposição *The Great Repair* (A Grande Reparação) na Haus der Künste em Berlim enfrenta uma reorientação crítica: afastar-se da arquitetura como busca incessante pela novidade e pelo consumo, em direção a uma prática baseada na preservação, durabilidade e cuidado das realidades existentes. Essa mudança exige a recuperação de sistemas de conhecimento antigos e incorporados, nos quais a materialidade não é um mero meio, mas um lugar de significado e compromisso, e nos quais a construção se torna um ato de gestão relacional, integrado ao cuidado, à cooperação e à transmissão da sabedoria prática. Além disso, exige abandonar as projeções utópicas de um futuro descarbonizado —visões que continuam perpetuamente adiadas e abstratas— em favor de um presentismo radical, uma postura ética que insiste em responder às urgências do aqui e agora. Navegando entre as ‘distrações’ expansivas, mas muitas vezes totalizadoras, do pensamento utópico (como nos adverte C. Rendueles) e o desespero imobilizador das narrativas apocalípticas (como na oportuna crítica ao fascismo do fim dos tempos de M. Klein), este ensaio propõe uma arquitetura enraizada no materialismo radical e na atenção ao diferencial, ao fragmentado e ao polifônico. A partir dessa base, surgirá um quadro de práticas e recomendações centrado na reparação e sensível às fissuras, às feridas, narrativas vernáculas e às fraturas que compõem o tecido material e social de nossas cidades.

**Palavras-Chave:** ecologia, transformação urbana, discontinuidades epistemológicas, cidade pós-carbono, reparação

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Let us for an instant imagine, we had arrived at the paradise of architecture; a place where urban beauty reaches its fullness and the everyday is bestowed a touch of grace and even gas stations become objects of exquisite care. There, design abandons any interloping local anchoring and assumes a universal vocation so pure that it would be impossible to situate it in any precise location. Such is the case of this service station conceived by the Italian architect Giuseppe Pettazzi, which takes the form of an airplane halted on the ground: two wings extended to the right and left, joined to the central body by delicate, sober friezes, as if the machine were about to take flight. If one were to remain before it, simply captivated by its restrained yet eloquent structure, one could easily believe oneself transported to Milan or perhaps to the luminous and ambiguous Vienna of the 1930s. For some, the urban appearance of these cities and the cited timelines, may represent what I, in a moment of self-imposed stupidity, dare to describe as ‘universal’ (Fuller 2015).

We suddenly awaken from this daydream worthy of a European postcard, only to realize that we are neither in Milan nor in interwar Vienna, but rather in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. The European imagination, irritated by such a *fata morgana*, quickly hurries to restore to the city the exotic, resounding colors that, according to its myopic canon, properly belong to Africa (Denison, Yu Ren and Gebremedhin 2003). Asmara, like Nova Lisboa (now Huambo) in Portuguese-controlled Angola before it, functioned under Italian occupation as an elegant laboratory of colonial modernity. There, the vices of old imperial violence are disguised with refined lines and an internationalist architecture that, rather than imposing itself brutally, seek to elicit from the ‘grateful’ locals a gesture of admiration and gratitude toward their civilized European redeemers. The station in question (the celebrated Fiat Tagliero) together with a handful of other carefully selected buildings, conveniently isolated from the rest of the city, has sustained for decades that overused and arrogant nickname: Asmara, the Milan of Africa (McGuirk 2017).

What strange anxiety drives European imperialism to this compulsion to duplicate everything, to replicate, name, and translate until the other, the native, the resistant is emptied of meaning? Unable to tolerate what is truly irreducible, its alienated gaze turns the globe into a board of equivalences, a cartography of mirrored capitals imitating its own centers. The colonial epistemological machinery (which, more than territories, colonizes ‘noumenal territorialities’, imaginaries, and ways of inhabiting the world) operates by manufacturing copies and by generating soothing symmetries. Abandoned to its mimetic delirium, this factory of resemblances claims to see in Aveiro the Venice of Portugal, in Abidjan the Paris of Africa. As if the only way to apprehend the world were by organizing it into an infinite echo of itself, neutralizing all otherness under the harmless appearance of rhyme and forced kinship (Mbembe 2001). In tune with this old imperial impulse to translate the world into its own language, the German artist Lothar Baumgarten noted the denigrating weight contained in the gesture of Alonso de Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci in 1499, when they baptized a territory along the Orinoco River as Venezuela ‘The Little Venice’. There, where the omnipresence of water, stilt houses, and life suspended over canals suggested to the European eye a tropical simulacrum of its *Serenissima*, a borrowed name was unhesitatingly imposed, a foreign mirror. Baumgarten, attentive to this logic that not only renames but also erases, revealed how colonial toponymy operates as an act of symbolic possession: to name is to domesticate, to translate the alien into a forced familiarity, reducing unique landscapes to mere echoes of distant capitals, exposing the violent



Fig. 1. Fiat Tagliero, Giuseppe Pettazzi, 1938. Photo by David Stanley via Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY 2.0. (The characters in Amharic above the building were not part of the original design)

mechanism that turns territories into stages of replica and metaphor, erasing in the process the possibility of a full otherness (Harley 2001).

All territorial colonialism inevitably rests upon epistemological colonialism; a colonialism that normalizes, renders invisible, hides, and denies the terms, words, and meanings that allow for the existence of realities that do not fit within its hegemonic vision of the world. This epistemology of domination is necessarily totalizing, serving the need to catalogue and codify everything according to the univocal logic of a single regime and a single destiny. Here, plurality, cacophony, fragmentation, and discontinuity have no place. In this sense, the control over territory is sustained by a control over language; that primary instrument of power, also constructed in systemic terms, that is, as a totalizing concordance, free of fractures, between the parts and the whole (Spivak 1988; Mignolo 2007).

The entanglement between linguistic systems and colonial domination has been thoroughly mapped by scholars, and it need not be rehearsed here in detail. It suffices to recall Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1998) incisive question in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), where she interrogates the extent to which the subaltern, even in the act of asserting fundamental rights, must do so through a language and discursive framework already inscribed by the codes of the oppressor: in the 'language' of the oppressor. Yet, the implications of this phenomenon extend well

beyond the conceptual realm of vocabulary and expression. Beneath what might appear as a mere conceptual imposition (the authority to name, to categorize, to define) lies a deeper, structural operation: one that governs how meaning is organized, how differences are articulated, and how relationships between subjects and narratives are regulated. This form of interpretive violence does not just silence alternative discourses; it actively flattens discontinuities, suppresses fractures, and forecloses the possibility of a multiplicity of voices and worldviews coexisting within the same discursive space (Mignolo 2009). As Arroyo and Rodrigues remind us in this issue of Astrágalo, such totalizing imprint on holistic thinking is at odds with the simultaneity of multiple temporalities and spatialities —which, in themselves, can be explained by their historical complexity (...) and which are necessary to process new externalities born of their singularities and of political, economic, and cultural globalization. In denying these layered temporal and spatial realities, dominant narratives not only reproduce colonial logics but impede the emergence of alternative modes of being, knowing, and relating (Escobar 2018).

In the context of architecture as a means of articulating utopian visions, the first question I wish to address in this article is not, however, how these colonial utopian narratives function as mechanisms for suppressing otherness, but how they present themselves as holistic and unambiguous frameworks for shaping social and spatial order. By this I mean that, beyond their role as instruments for suppressing otherness, the most pressing issue to unravel is how the suppression of otherness is neither an isolated occurrence nor solely the result of explicit political agendas. Rather, I argue that it is the product of their claim to universality and hegemony, where the politics of domination emerges as a product of an “epistemology” of domination, mastered through the arrangement of parts in a way that produces the illusion of a coherent and seamless whole.

It is true (and at the risk of reproducing the very logic I seek to critique) that I am not entirely exempt from this bias when I frame utopias as flawed; for in doing so, I advance an overlapping argument in which an epistemological dimension (their tendency to conceptualize the world as a unity) intersects and converges with a structural dimension (their holistic character as narratives in which parts and wholes cohere) and a political dimension (their role as instruments of colonial domination). It is this relational fabric, I contend, the way connections are constructed and differences managed in order to sustain a totalising order, that demands closer critical attention. See for instance how the designation of European export architecture in the Global South, such as Chandigarh or Brasilia, as international and as illustrated in the opening vignette, reflects this very phenomenon. While it is true that both cities exhibit gestures of local inclusion; Brasilia with its Burle Marx-designed lush gardens, and Chandigarh with distinctive elements like its dove-emblazoned coat of arms, the overarching aesthetic in both cases speaks in an almost corporate idiom (Holston 1989).

And not merely as *ou-topos* (no place) but essentially as *eu-topos* (a better place), utopias, as imagined by Moore, Campanella, Bacon, and their successors, serve as speculative visions of perfected or radically transformed societies. These are not just casual thought experiments; they are comprehensive blueprints in which every aspect of life, from daily customs to social structures, is meticulously arranged to ensure harmony in the whole and thus eliminate dissent. In this way, utopias operate not only as hopes for better worlds but as totalizing fictions, as perfectly geared clockworks, where freedom and difference often yield to order in the name of imagined perfection (Jameson 2005).

Still, what if we subject utopias to the gaze of psychology and supplement the vision we have of them as mere instruments of conscious domination? Can we not approach them as dissociative

states of consciousness, as survival mechanisms or heuristic tools born out of necessity, as fragile architectures of meaning designed to negate moments of total collapse? Have utopias not flourished precisely under the shadow of a crisis, standing as purposefully formulated speculative mirrors held up to a fractured present, reflecting not what is, but what might be otherwise? Can we not smell the stench of rotting blood and human waste of decaying Rome wafting through Virgil's intoxicating verses of a peaceful and pristine Arcadia? Hear the clamor for gallows rising from beneath Marie Antoinette's beguiling pastoral reveries? Feel the rising heat of a burning planet lurking beneath the lush, cooling illusions of Avatar? Can we not see, behind utopias, a normalizing discourse, a reassuring veil concealing something more unsettling, while endlessly promising that everything will be alright?

Today and in the name of healing and sustainable planning, utopian visions are being churned out on an industrial scale. Alongside a suffocating planet, our screens are saturated with a constant stream of proposals for immaculate and increasingly unattainable futures: These are the promoters, the policy makers, the commissioners of the post-oil metropolis, the carbon-free paradise, offering the ever elusive comfort of unsullied possibilities. Consider, for example, projects like Morgenstadt, developed by the esteemed Fraunhofer Institute for Innovation and Digitalisation (Fraunhofer IAO 2012). Their imagery is inescapable: visions lifted straight from *The Jetsons*, endlessly replicating scenarios of interconnected cloud cities, weightless infrastructures, frictionless exchanges, and economies built upon the total digitalisation of life itself. No trace of struggle, no sign of real labour, no sign of poverty.

In the face of digital capitalism's accelerating compression of space and time, seen in the rise of gig economies and the push toward ever smaller and multitasking living spaces (being one of Morgenstadt's focal points, eliminating offices and reintegrating office work into your digitalized home) these utopian images appear to rewire the social contract between capital and labour into a self-dissolving event. Morgenstadt and its ilk offer polished futures, the promise of socio-ecological harmony through endlessly adaptable systems: rooftop greenhouses, vertical farms, and modular agriculture units proliferate in these speculative cities. Nothing rests on the ground proper, no old buildings, reused nor repaired infrastructure. Nothing reminds us of what these cities might have looked like in a present that was ours and which now, is the past to its merry inhabitants. Browse images of future cities online, and you will find countless iterations of the same dream, visions projected ever further into the future, yet always promising to deliver new consumer possibilities. These are frictionless utopias where everything gleams in shades of green and blue, where the stubborn traces of the old city, its histories, its ruptures, its grounded lives have been erased. Everything is aerial, nothing truly roots. Trees hover on rooftops like techno-Babylonian gardens. Nothing touches the earth. In this imaginary, green is the new gold.

How not to grow suspicious? How not to think of these smart cities as attractive blueprints for new markets, new desires, new commodities disguised as emeralds: green cities that dress up old depredations in the reassuring language of sustainability? For, alongside these plans, as implausible as they are captivating (clean living spaces for a planet of middle classes), we encounter cities such as Dubai in the desert or the 'desert' island of Prospera (Marshall 2022); trials of clean and privatised spaces for the rich. These urban developments can be seen as unsettling laboratories for what Naomi Klein calls 'extra-planetary escape fantasies' (Klein 2025): abandoning a planet in flames for a bubble paradise reserved for those who can afford them. Built on slave labour and exclusive resource control, Dubai and Próspera situate in remote locations that evoke the colonized future imagined for Mars (Dunnett 2021).



Fig. 2. Fictional animated family from the classic American TV show “The Jetsons,” produced by Hanna-Barbera. Source: courtesy Warner Bros.

But if we consider Próspera, Morgenstadt, and other utopias of self-salvation as mere reactions to the discourses surrounding our planet (the ways these discourses frame the crisis of our way of life and the ruinous consequences of limitless growth) how is it that these very formulations lead us to a dead end? If we gather them under the banner of ecological thinking, with its associated tectonic, social, and architectural expressions in imagined cities of the future, where then, does this, to my mind, utterly disabling, flaw originate? Could it be that something intrinsic to the very fabric of ecological thinking has brought us to this point, that its internal logic has rendered it ineffective as a practical, heuristic tool for confronting the climate emergency? After revisiting the holistic ambitions of ecological thinking, particularly through the work of César Rendueles and others, I have come to suspect that our flawed responses to the climate crisis are marked by the same blindness: an uncritical commitment to total coherence between the whole and its parts. It is precisely this seamless alignment that places us in a cognitive blind spot. Recall how, even when we talk about Nature, we hypostasise it as a kind of romantic abstraction, harmonious and centred, where everything is related to everything else. My intuition is that real, actionable solutions, especially within the field of architecture, bound to the vital and consequential activity of building cities, emerge not from closed, harmonious systems, but from their fractures, discontinuities, and material resistances. From the stubborn irregularities that theory cannot easily assimilate. It is in these interruptions, these fissures, that alternative futures begin to take root (Haraway 2016).

The task before is thus to dismantle that impossible topology, that Möbius strip where utopia and dystopia endlessly fold into one another, so that we might step outside its loop, and begin again, attentive to the fractures from which a more grounded, material epistemology can emerge. I think that bringing this particular dimension of utopian narrative construction to light could help explain why contemporary ecological thinking (often hailed as the pinnacle of critical consciousness) remains stuck between Mars and Armageddon, trapped in a dead end: suspended between the despair of giving up on a collapsing world and the paralyzing uncertainty of how to act within it. So, if we step outside the paralyzing loop, what do we find there? What other ways of building, designing, deciding as collective societies and transmitting and preserving knowledge around repair, reuse and stewardship do we find there?

Amidst the widespread admiration that Morgenland-style blue tooth-paste aesthetics evoke among entrepreneurs, there is, a modest and intuitive movement emerging, which may be hinting at a more viable approach, not only toward the future but also toward improving the present. This approach embraces architecture as a practice of reuse and repair to redefine the processes of building and abiding that deserves closer attention; as exemplified by the proposals featured at the exhibition *The Great Repair* at the Haus der Künste in Berlin (Artistic Director: Florian Hertweck; Arch+ Issues 250 and 253; Thurmann-Jajes et al. 2023), by the Studio ACTE in Rotterdam (Estelle Barriol and Fanny Bordes) by a group of novel architects and their leading mentors in Saarbrücken (gathered around the movement Knauben, a local term that spells out the activity of collaging what is at hand) and others. Rather than reiterating the critique of these practices already undertaken by the exhibitions mentioned earlier, my aim in this chapter is to interpret them as meaningful advances —as proposals that, often intuitively, succeed in dismantling the Möbius strip where utopia and inaction converge. In this sense, the attention I wish to devote to them arises from seeing them as genuine antidotes to the paralyzing or escapist tendencies embedded in the utopian visions of holistic thinking. For, if utopian thinking proves inadequate for grappling with crises and as I will explore in detail, it is by grounding itself in materiality and in radical presentism of what is available, I claim, that these gestures toward repair and maintenance represent a significant shift. Incidentally this is a stance that stays in line with Engels and Marx critique of “utopian socialism”: the speculative, idealist visions of thinkers like Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, and Henri de Saint-Simon, which, they argued, failed to grasp the material and historical conditions required for their realization (Marx and Engels 1880) or with Donna Haraway advocating for a messy Epistemology, a complexity of material multispecies and discontinuities (Haraway 2016).

In the following chapter, I intend to delineate the constellation of material practices gathered under the notion of repair architecture. Rather than approaching these practices as isolated acts of communal engagement and material reuse (as much of the accompanying literature has tended to do) I propose to interpret them as subversive enactments of radical presentism, fundamentally challenging the totalizing epistemological frameworks that underpin green capitalist visions of future urbanity. In this sense, I seek to reposition these practices not merely as technical interventions, but as potent counter-forces to the immobilizing and escapist tendencies generated by utopian narratives of the city to come.

The first section will offer a critical examination of contemporary discourses on sustainability epistemologies and ecological thought, with particular attention to the work of César Rendueles. Rendueles incisively identifies a constraining dimension embedded within the holistic and totalizing logics of these frameworks (what I conceptualize as green utopia) which, I argue, contributes to our current state of socio-political inertia and the re-emergence of social Darwinist

rationalities (Próspera, Mars and its pals). Building on this critique, the subsequent section will map the interventions of emergent practitioners working within the field of repair architecture, before advancing a set of subversive theoretical reformulations that accompany and illuminate their materially grounded, present-oriented methodologies. As a concluding reflection, and on the assumption that architecture and urban planning function as heuristic technologies, disciplines with a social vocation tasked with identifying problems, diagnosing crises, and outlining pathways toward better futures, I will propose this approach as an antidote to the paralyzing binary of utopia and dystopia: namely, the imperative to integrate more rigorous, materially responsive science into politics, and to infuse scientific practice with deeper political consciousness.

## 2. RETHINKING SUSTAINABILITY IN ECOLOGICAL DISCOURSE: OR WHAT DOES ARCHITECTURE ACTUALLY SEEK TO SUSTAIN?

Or by the same token, where does the fascination with the ASMR phenomenon come from?

ASMR is the acronym for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, but in the vernacular of our everyday interactions with our digital devices, we could translate these as audio-visual sensorial suggestions that regularly appear in our YouTube feeds. Filled with calming images and often featuring nostalgic settings evoking a simpler, imagined past, ASMR videos are not merely about storytelling. Their focus lies in the sensation itself; a carefully assembled collection of soft, repetitive sounds and visuals that, according to Zappavigna (Zappavigna 2020), serve to relax minds increasingly fragmented by the demands of digital attention economies. Whispering, tapping, the sound of insects moving through wet foliage. As a surrogate of intimacy, quite often, these videos feature no people at all. This is no coincidence. The ASMR promise a rest from semiotic engagement altogether; with no intrusion, no irritation and no need to react to another human being. Instead, there are the sounds, the crickets, the ants, the raindrops, the rustling of leaves, the quiet presence of objects and textures that offer a brief respite from our persistent, almost anxious tendency of human consciousness to interpret everything, to look for sense, to anticipate and fill-in story-telling loops.

Yet, we should consider a somewhat unusual philosophical angle towards these videos. For, while immersed in the ASMR universe, I argue, we seem to be released from the constant pull of anthropocentric metaphysics and the need to position ourselves at the center of meaning. For once, we are invited to dissolve into a world of sensorial stimuli and, where sense is superfluous: to become the hair to a brush, to become what the ant is to the moist soil of the jungle's ground, to become the supple and bouncy body of the leaf's caterpillar. Against the backdrop of an 'anthropomorphized' nature, the ASMR phenomenon might be read as yet another sign of how diverse, embodied sensory experiences, those of animals, insects, fungi, even hair, are beginning to rupture the increasingly brittle epistemological structures that have long sought to organize the natural world through a human-centered narrative (Barad 2007).

In fact, through the persistent trope of animal becoming, this has been a stance which, for decades, has sought to assail what philosophy has named the metaphysics of presence, offering, in its place, a vision of a world as a field of multiplicities, of overlapping and plural consciousnesses. By targeting figures such as Heidegger (Heidegger 2001) (himself a relentless critic of metaphysics, who in turn left its deepest foundations intact), it was Derrida (Derrida 2008) and Irigaray (Irigaray 1983; 1999) who illuminated the figure of the human subject, hidden in the blind

spot of the scaffolding of meaning. Thus, revealing how even the most rigorous attempts to transcend metaphysics remain trapped in the gravitational pull of the human, such efforts claim that the mechanisms that lead to the construction of meaning continue to revolve around the same anthropocentric horizon from which they seek to escape. In this trajectory, the question of animality offers a particularly evocative turning point, a way of destabilizing the centrality of the human subject and proposing alternative ways of inhabiting and conceptualizing the world. An experience unfiltered, radically present, raw, immediate, and insistently material, splintered by fractures and moments of disjunction. Given that the focus of what follows is an effort to trace the trope of becoming an animal, understood as a rejection of abstract, totalizing rationalizations of impossible futures in favor of an architectural experience grounded in the fractures of materiality and the immediacy of the present, this apparent digression cannot be dismissed as trivial.

Building upon longstanding critiques of the metaphysics of presence, certain original and generative interventions emerge, most notably in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze&Guattari 1987). Drawing inspiration from biologist Jakob von Uexküll, they turn their attention to the lived, sensorially saturated worlds of ticks, dragonflies, and other nonhuman beings. Each creature inhabits what Uexküll calls an *Umwelt*: a world of meaning, sensation, and affect particular to its species, constituted by the relational weave of what matters to it and what does not. (A concept already shadowed by Heideggerian metaphysics and its own tensions with presence). In the seemingly placid scene of a meadow, Uexküll reminds us that no singular, objective meadow exists, no universal stage upon which cows graze, dragonflies' flit, and humans observe. What appears to be a shared world is, in fact, a convergence of countless *Umwelten*, each a lived, embodied milieu: the cow's meadow, the dragonfly's, the mushrooms'. Each is shaped by its own functional codes, perceptual rhythms, and corporeal demands, coalescing only belatedly into what we might call a world-image. For the dragonfly, the meadow is not a continuous, harmonious field but a fragmentary constellation composed solely of what concerns its being and survival. These intersecting worlds do not meet within a stable, noumenal architecture, but through contingent, ephemeral crossings, largely indifferent to human meaning, revealing a reality textured by multiplicity rather than governed by unity.

Here, *Umwelt* functions not as an exotic biological curiosity, but as a philosophical device, as an inversion that disrupts the seamless metaphysical architecture of presence. It unsettles the presumption that reality can be gathered and organized within a singular, continuous, human-centered horizon. In its place emerges a world splintered into multiple sensorial and affective registers, each tethered to the modalities of different beings, each composing a partial, intersecting, and often irreconcilable reality. This is not a catalog of perspectives, but a challenge to the totalizing impulses of Western metaphysics. The *Umwelt* displaces fantasies of coherence and unity, replacing them with a shifting, fragmentary field of contingent realities, a kaleidoscope of discrete yet entangled life-worlds. In these fractures lies the possibility of a reconfigured ontology, one attentive to difference, discontinuity, and the incommensurable multiplicity of experience. As Rosi Braidotti (Braidotti 2013) explains, becoming-animal requires relating to animals as animals ourselves, decentralizing, and abandoning the humanist conceit of a harmonized, ordered nature. Despite what constructs like the Fibonacci sequence, the golden ratio or Platonic forms have long projected, Nature (with capital N) has no harmonic center, nor does it tend toward oneness. To dismantle these metaphysical delusions, Braidotti insists, we must also account for insects, for other forms of life and their immeasurable worlds, if we are to overturn entrenched hierarchies of presence and representation.

But becoming animal is not a whimsical detour in a passing phase of philosophy preoccupied with the extreme or the extracorporeal. Rather, it gestures toward a deeper, ongoing tension, one that finds a parallel in ecological thought's attempts to conceptualize nature itself. This tradition, often grounded in classical inheritances, has taken on renewed significance in the shadow of the climate crisis, not merely as a descriptive framework but as a heuristic tool for rethinking catastrophe and imagining the conditions of survival. Here too, the contest persists between centralizing, totalizing visions of a world of cascading effects and those that seek to apprehend it through fractures, discontinuities, and pluralities. It is within this critical terrain that I wish to engage with certain revisionist interventions into the epistemological foundations of ecological thought, foremost among them the work of César Rendueles et al. (Rendueles et al. 2023), as it offers a timely and incisive critique of a centralizing and, in my view, ultimately ill-fated tendency within ecological discourse. A tendency whose latent consequences, whether they culminate in escapist fantasies of Mars colonization or in paralysis and total abandonment, shape the ways we imagine and design future "urban" solutions for the planet.

In his essay "Ecologismo y holismo. Implicaciones teóricas y prácticas de una ontología monista", César Rendueles highlights how ecological thought remains deeply indebted to a monistic ontological framework. This is what has traditionally been called holism. It is a worldview that advocates for a unified understanding of reality, highlighting the interconnectedness and systemic character of phenomena, and conceiving of ecosystems as integrated wholes in which all components interact dynamically with one another. A genealogical reading of ecological thought, such as the one undertaken by Rendueles et al., reveals the extent to which contemporary anxieties about inevitable, cascading catastrophes could be rooted in the conception of nature as an indivisible totality. This conception, itself a product of a particular intellectual lineage, emerges from the entwined legacies of natural philosophy and romantic naturalistic mysticism (Rendueles cites Merchant 1980 and Glacken 1967). It imagines the processes unfolding within nature, or those that affect it (including the often-invoked Anthropocene) as expressions of an interconnected whole, composed of linear chains of cause and effect, in which everything is presumed to be linked to everything else.

According to the authors, this scenario owes much to the lasting influence of mathematical formalisation, which has shaped both the theoretical edifice of modern natural sciences and their pragmatic applications. Citing Randall Collins' (Collins 2009) notion of a science of rapid discovery, they suggest that the underlying epistemic logic runs as follows: if deductive reasoning allows us to derive predicates as partial coherences within an internally consistent totality, then it seems natural to imagine that the processes of nature obey the same principle. Thus, the famous metaphor, a butterfly's wings in Brazil unleashing a cyclone across the ocean, becomes emblematic of a worldview that presumes a latent, coherent structure beneath the apparent disorder of the world.

At the foundation of this epistemology, however, lies the conviction that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, or more precisely, that the parts exist only to sustain the coherence of the whole, each one implicitly carrying within it the imprint of the totality to which it belongs. Everything fits, and nothing escapes. In this sense, ecological and environmental thought, the authors argue, remains the heir to a cosmological imaginary that envisions the world as an orderly, intelligible whole, guarded by a transcendent, unifying principle that fends off chaos, contingency, and heterodoxy.

Without denying the profound interdependence of ecological systems, such a monocausal and totalising epistemological framework proves rather perilous, for it frames the ecological crisis as

a singular, uniform collapse awaiting us all, and thus obscures other, more differentiated ways of understanding and responding to it.

In this nihilistic context, the authors advocate for a revisionist reorientation of environmental thought, recognising that its persistent, holistic impulse, i.e. the tendency to frame ecological crises within an all-encompassing, totalising ontology, has frequently resulted in paralysis rather than action. This insistence on interpreting phenomena exclusively through the lens of an abstract, interconnected totality leaves little room for alternative narratives, fragmentary interventions, or the development of pragmatic, situated tools capable of addressing the complexities of our material condition. For the authors, the social dimension should serve as the element that, if not outright disruptive, then at least reorganizes emerging assemblages, forms of cooperation, and modes of decision-making. Translated into techno-architectural practice, these alternative tools would distinguish themselves not only through their capacity to engage with partial, localised, and more immediately accessible phenomena, but also through their deliberate refusal to be absorbed into the abstraction of a universal whole. In resisting the gravitational pull of totalising frameworks, they remain anchored in a radical, materialist presentism, a philosophical stance that privileges immanence, contingency, and the irreducible multiplicity of the here and now. It is precisely this grounding in the material immediacy of the present that enables such interventions to contest abstraction and open up new spaces for ecological, social, and technological agency. For, on the other hand, what might happen if, instead of imagining the crisis as a universal, undifferentiated collapse, we learned to perceive it as a constellation of material turbulences: unequal, contingent, and unfolding in uneven and irreducibly diverse socio-material contexts? Might it be that by attending more carefully to these situated ruptures, fragile connections, discontinuities, and heterodoxies, rather than chasing after abstract ideals of planetary totality, ecological thought and practice could yet discover meaningful ways of intervening in the climate emergency?

### 3. LEARNING FROM THE SLUM: FUNCTION FOLLOWS FORM

Architecture as repair belongs to this lineage of heterodox practices: a material, situated intuition of what it means to build, not from pristine beginnings, but from the obstinate remains of what persists. It is a constructive mode that rejects the fantasy of total design, preferring instead the provisional logics of improvisation, bricolage, and contingency. In 2023, Berlin's Haus der Künste compiled a comprehensive catalogue of these practices, now politely renamed a 'trend', as if the art of mending were a novel cultural discovery rather than one of humanity's oldest and most quietly subversive arts. It bears emphasising that the impulse to patch, tinker, and cobble things together long predates the deformations of habit wrought by mechanised production and the tyranny of serialisation. Indeed, it is precisely the rise of industrialisation, with its mania for standardisation, repeatability, and total design, that rendered repair not only economically inconvenient but ideologically suspect; an obstinate reminder of the imperfect, the particular, and the hand-made in a world increasingly seduced by the smooth surfaces of mass production. Predictably, this impulse towards what one might term creative destruction marches in lockstep with capitalism's cycles of crisis and dispossession, where each economic collapse conveniently clears the ground for new opportunities in real estate speculation. Every war, every recession, leaves in its wake not only ruins but blueprints: a promise, or perhaps a threat, that new homes will rise to stabilise what the market has once again undone.

Repair has always carried the mark of the human hand and, perhaps more crucially, the restless, improvisational mind. For as long as things have broken, they have been mended: on the benches of shoemakers, in kitchens, in back alleys and sheds, in the long lean seasons of scarcity and the idle interludes of surplus. In certain places, this improvisational instinct even acquired its own vernacular. In Germany's Saarland, for instance, it is known as *Knauben*, a delightfully untranslatable technique of gluing, patching, and collaging improbable fragments into unlikely new forms, whether in architecture or the contraptions of everyday life. Such practices are born not of theoretical speculation, but of necessity, resistance and irrepressible wit, a quiet, stubborn refusal to let the world dissolve into planned obsolescence without at least attempting, however oddly, to reassemble it. As a plausibly consequential expression of the plural environmentalism proposed by Rendueles, practices of repair constitute not merely technical gestures but inhabit a politically contested terrain, a space where ecological concerns are inextricably entangled with societal struggles over value, memory, and futurity. Beneath the countless invocations of sustainability, so often enlisted to embellish utopian imaginaries and render them ideologically innocuous, persists a question too seldom asked: what, precisely, is it that we seek to sustain? Which forms of life, relations, and material arrangements are deemed worthy of preservation, and which consigned to obsolescence or ruin?

Consider the mass clearance of working-class neighbourhoods in post-war European cities like Glasgow's Gorbals or London's Docklands, justified in the name of hygiene and efficiency, but largely driven by the interests of property markets and the logistics of mass construction (Guillery and Dale 2010). So, it is in this terrain of conflict, where competing visions of continuity, loss, and transformation confront one another, that repair practices reveal their radical political charge, unsettling the apparent neutrality of ecological discourse and insisting upon the inherently selective, and therefore contested nature of every project of preservation. To make sense of these practices, one must return to the rhythms and logics of natural cycles, which encompass the diverse roles of producers, scavengers, collectors, consumers, and decomposers, fungi and the myriad organisms engaged in processes of decay and renewal. As in nature's raw, unceasing evolution, driven by the necessity to dismantle and transform, so too does an architecture of repair and restoration emerge: a tangled ecology of actors, gestures, and tasks: from waste management and material salvage to the meticulous cataloguing of reusable resources; from the generation of situated knowledge to the cultivation of cooperative human assemblages. It is a practice attentive not only to the material continuity of things, but also to the fractures, residues, and scars left by time, rupture, and intervention. In this sense, repair is never neutral; it unfolds as a site of political struggle, where the meaning of continuity, value, and survival is contested and reimagined.

Take for instance the work of the collective Urban-Think Tank (UTT), whose project "Torre David" in Caracas captures the power of material reclamation and adaptive reuse (2013). From an abandoned monolith to a selfmade socio-architectural experiment the Torre David skyscraper in Caracas was definitely abandoned in the mid-1990s due to economic crisis. By 2007, it was occupied by around a thousand families who transformed the unfinished tower into a thriving informal vertical community, improvising infrastructure and social life within its skeletal frame. Urban-Think Tank intervened in 2011, not by imposing top-down solutions but by deeply engaging with the building's existing social and material conditions. Through ethnographic research and collaboration with residents, UTT proposed repair-based strategies that valued the building's embodied energy and the community's improvisational resilience. Their work reframed Torre David as a radical example of repair architecture, one that functions not merely as an architectural improvisation, but as an

ontological provocation within the ruins of late capitalism. Among the initiatives supporting the project are the establishment of small shops and affordable commercial spaces scattered throughout the tower, alongside recreational and communal areas on several floors. Though constructed with modest, low-cost materials, these spaces actively counteract the alienation often associated with high-rise living. What was once dismissed as a ghetto, synonymous with crime and neglect, has transformed into a symbol of community revitalization and dignity, where residents have been respected and included at every stage of the process. Through the intervention of this think tank, and the tower's occupation and adaptation, an unfinished skyscraper (once a symbol of speculative finance) transforms into a heterotopic space where opposites collide and dissolve: ruin and progress, abandonment and habitation, failure and resilience. Torre David resists melancholic preservation or nostalgic restoration; instead, it enacts a politics of immanence, a spatial and social practice that celebrates the ontological dignity of the fragmentary, the incomplete, and the provisional.

The case of the Torre de David (brought to international attention through Iwan Baan's photographic essay and awarded the Golden Lion at the 2012 Venice Biennale) disrupted prevailing European perceptions of architectural repair. It revealed, with stark clarity, how acts of spatial transformation in contexts of structural inequality can arise not from aesthetic experimentation but from urgent necessity. For a European gaze often attuned to curated, controlled interventions, the occupation and informal governance of the unfinished skyscraper exposed forms of social ingenuity that emerge beyond the increasingly fragile boundaries of Eurocentric urbanism. What this case makes visible is not merely a moment of architectural improvisation, but the inscription of a broader geopolitical and urban condition; particularly that of the Global South, where practices of spatial recovery and collective repair constitute the everyday fabric of urban survival. In Latin America, for example, the occupation of abandoned, unfinished, or underutilized buildings functions less as an anomaly than as a widespread, if unofficial, policy of last resort. These acts are popular responses to persistent housing crises and systemic exclusion, where the right to inhabit space is asserted through appropriation, negotiation, and reinvention. In Brazil, movements such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST) have long organized large-scale occupations not merely as acts of resistance, but as generative practices of collective housing, civic identity, and spatial justice. These movements unsettle dominant architectural paradigms by shifting the very locus of design, from the materiality of buildings to the relational infrastructures of society itself (Maricato, 2017). In this sense, The Great Repair is enacted not only in the physical rehabilitation of structures, but in the social reconstitution of the urban itself.

Moreover, the architecture of repair and reuse fundamentally unsettles the entrenched doctrine of form follows function, a principle long embedded in architectural thought and reflective of the productivity-driven ethos of modern construction. Rather than commencing from a blank slate or rigid typology, repair-oriented practice insists on working with what is given, the existing materials, fragments, and traces left by previous interventions. This ontological and epistemological shift challenges not only design methods but also the very temporality and logic of architectural production, dissolving linear narratives of creation and obsolescence into regenerative cycles of transformation.

The architectural office Studio ACTE in Rotterdam exemplifies this paradigm shift. Studio ACTE carefully collects and catalogs used and discarded materials from around the world, takes inventory, and builds only with what is available. Their Circular Pavilion in Rotterdam (2021) stands as a kind of experimental manifesto: constructed almost entirely from locally reclaimed materials, including timber beams salvaged from demolished buildings and recycled polycarbonate panels, the project



Fig. 3. Circular Pavilion in Rotterdam, Studio ACTE Rotterdam, 2021. Photo: Courtesy Ó Rubén Darío Kleimeer.

enacts a design ethic where second-life materials transcend their former functions to generate new spatial, formal, and atmospheric possibilities (See Fig. 3). In a sense, to build from what is at hand, gathered in ways both unexpected and unconventional, is to quietly unravel the long-held notion that form must always follow function. For Studio ACTE, materials and fragments alike are bathed in the unpredictable, emotional, and often startling aura of the *objet trouvé*. Like an archaeologist, confronted with a beam, a shard, or the trace of some past presence, the discerning mind cannot help but imagine a purpose, a function, for what chance has placed before it. In this encounter, the accidental becomes fertile, and discovery itself shapes design. In this way, Studio ACTE stakes a new position within architecture: in this contested territory of repair and reinvention, function follows the (discovered) form, and the logic of use emerges from the poetry of chance.

The pavilion's dry, reversible assembly methods actively resist the extractive, demolition-driven logic of the contemporary building industry, staging a conversation between material memory, environmental accountability, and speculative design futures. Here, waste is no longer a terminal category but a medium of latent potential, and obsolescence becomes rupture rather than end. This same reparative ethic extends to Studio ACTE's other key interventions. In *Building, Unbuilding, Rebuilding*, the Circular Pavilion itself was carefully dismantled after its initial use and its elements reassembled into a new structure in Brabant; a greenhouse demonstrating how building components can circulate through successive configurations without forfeiting their material or affective value. The process produced not only architecture but also a catalogue of joinery details and construction



Fig. 4. Circular Pavilion in Rotterdam, Studio ACTE Rotterdam, 2021  
(Detail) Photo: Courtesy Ó Rubén Darío Kleimeer.

methods, offering an open, adaptable language of repair that can be replicated or transformed elsewhere. Similarly, their Tree House project in Amsterdam mobilizes reclaimed wood, earth, and stone sourced from local infrastructural works and canal restorations. Designed as a reversible, dry-assembled structure, it offers a delicate, seasonal space for retreat and contemplation within a community garden. Across these projects, Studio ACTE enacts repair as a radical praxis. Their architecture reframes temporality as cyclical, layered, and non-linear, insisting on preservation and transformation as mutually constitutive acts.

Among the most compelling articulations of a reparative architectural ethos is Lacaton & Vassal's FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais in Dunkirk (2013), a project that intervenes not only in material structures but in the layered ontologies of place, memory, and historical sedimentation (Lacaton et Vassal 2014). Situated on the city's industrial port, a site indelibly marked by the trauma of the Second World War and the mass evacuation of 1940, the project operates within a terrain where architecture is inseparable from the politics of memory and the ethics of continuity. Dunkirk's spatial fabric, dense with unresolved pasts, becomes the charged medium through which repair enacts its quiet, insurgent gestures (See Fig. 4).

The commission for the FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais was, in its initial formulation, entirely conventional: to demolish a disused 1940s shipbuilding hall on Dunkirk's industrial port and erect in its place a new, purpose-built contemporary art centre to house and display the region's public collection. Yet it is precisely in their refusal of this brief, and of the broader architectural impulse it represents, that the project acquires its reparative and political force. Rather than participating in the cyclical violence of demolition and replacement, Lacaton & Vassal proposed a strategy of radical preservation: to retain the existing industrial hall in its entirety and construct a lightweight, translucent polycarbonate-clad double alongside it, replicating its volume and proportions while accommodating the programme required by the institution. Lacaton & Vassal elected to preserve the 1940s shipbuilding hall in its entirety. Arguably, their strategy is neither nostalgic restoration nor conservative heritage preservation but a radical refusal of erasure which stages a dialogue between past and present, endurance and transformation.

Furthermore, we could see behind this act of architectural duplication a profound philosophical proposition: that architecture might be understood not as the imposition of new form upon inert matter, but as a practice of attending to what remains, to the residues and contingencies of history embedded within the material and social ecologies of the city. In effect, a living archive of its own endurance, staging what Derrida might call a hauntology (Derrida 1994): the presence of absence, the unresolved temporality of history made spatially operative. In this sense, repair becomes a form of ontological care, an ethic of working with the already-there, refusing the violent temporalities



Fig. 5. FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, Lacaton & Vassal, 2013. Photo by Claus Ableiter via Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

of obsolescence, and resisting the perpetual now of capitalist production. Winfried Brenne's work on Bruno Taut's modernist housing estates (such as the Hufeisensiedlung and Gartenstadt Falkenberg in Berlin) represents another powerful illustration of repair architecture in practice (Brenne 2021). Confronted with the visible deterioration of buildings whose distinctive color schemes were central to Bruno Taut's architectural vision, Brenne's restoration has unfolded over the past decades as a doubled practice: assuming responsibility for the building's conservation while simultaneously rejecting a superficial approach of mere repainting or color substitution. Instead, his work embraces a deeper engagement with the materiality and history embedded in the original pigments. Recognizing that Taut's bold and expressive use of color is not merely decorative but deeply tied to the material and sensory experience of the architecture, Brenne insists on engaging rigorously with the original pigments themselves. From there on, Brenne has diligently gathered, and meticulously catalogued samples of the pigments employed by Taut, creating an archive of remarkable extensiveness, practicality and significance: with original construction elements, timber beams, bricks, paint pigments, and façade details, to preserve the physical and historical essence of these buildings. His interventions are deeply rooted in respect for the existing fabric. By doing so, he transforms these housing blocks into living archives, where the architecture carries forward the layered narratives of early 20th-century social idealism, wartime scars, and postwar adaptation.

As we can see from these projects and many other emerging practices, architecture and its communities are waking up to the fact that repair is much more than a technical act of fixing. It is a commitment to the radical materiality of what already exists: the fractures, scars, and discontinuities that bear the weight of history, labor, and social conflict. Every cracked beam or weathered façade is not merely a problem to be solved, but a site of negotiation between past and present, between matter and meaning. This insistence on the specific and the fractured resists the seductive allure of utopian projects like Morgenstadt (or those imagined on Mars, in Prospera, in Dubai; take your pick), which envision apocalyptic, seamless reinventions that erase the complexities and contradictions inherent in real places, as Naomi Klein reminds us. By embracing incompleteness and contingency, repair becomes a political practice rooted in the lived realities of communities and environments shaped by uneven histories and structural violence. It is by attending to the cracks, and working within the imperfections of the present, that new and sustainable futures can emerge, not from a blank canvas of total collapse and subsequent reinvention, but from the layered, marked, and living fabric of what is already here. Repair, then, is our quiet, insurgent refusal to surrender: a way to build futures from the fragments of the present, rather than to dream them up from some sanitized, speculative ideal.

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## SHORT CV

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