

LAND: A DECLARATION

Closing Ceremony
2016 Venice Architecture Biennale
November 27, 2016
Giardini

Pierre Bélanger (Curator, Canadian Pavilion #EXTRACTION)
James-Taylor Foster (Curator, Nordic Pavilion #InTherapy)
Malkit Shoshan (Curator, Dutch Pavilion #BLUE)
Hamed Bukhamseen/Ali Karimi (Curators, Kuwait Pavilion #BetweenEastAndWest)



It is particularly ironic and infuriatingly frustrating to reflect on the blind eye of the professional Architectural Establishment and the Design World whose focus on urban environments completely and thoroughly ignores, suppresses, marginalizes, and ablates the territorial scales of urbanization. The map is no longer the territory.

Often dismissed as resource hinterlands, these territories represent more than 90% of the surface of the planet. If we assume that cities only occupy a mere tenth of its extents, then the other 90% of the planet's ground is where nearly 1.5 billion people, of indigenous backgrounds, live. The cultural centers that we so often tout as so-called "cities" are, in fact, dominant colonial métropoles that are creating divides, further and further, between inherited colonial-settler rule of extraction and pre-state cultures of cultivation.

What is fundamentally absent from this discussion is the question of land. Not because it is invisible, but because it is powerfully indivisible. Is it the missing variable? Land, the x-factor in the battleground of empires?

As Edward W. Said claimed in his 1993 book, *Culture and Imperialism*:

"The main battle in imperialism is over land, ~~of course~~; but when it ~~came~~ comes to who ~~owned~~ owns the land, who ~~had~~ has the right to settle and work on it, who ~~kept~~ keeps it going, who ~~won~~ wins it back, and who now plans its future—these issues ~~were~~ are reflected, contested, and even ~~for a time~~ decided in narrative [...] Nations (*much like the buildings of the Biennale*) are themselves narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment, ~~mobilized~~ mobilizes people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection; in the process, many Europeans and Americans ~~were~~ are stirred by these stories and their protagonists, and they too (once) fought and (continue to battle) for new narratives of equality and human community."

As architects, when we draw, we fight.

As Said suggested earlier in his 1985 *In the Shadow of the West*:

"what we must eliminate are systems of representation that carry with them the kind of authority which [...] has been repressive because it doesn't permit or make room for interventions on the part of those represented."

So let's make no mistake: we live in a greater era of imperial domination (read: colonization) than ever before, that is entirely ruled by the transnational corporation whose fate was predicted by the economist John Kenneth Galbraith over a half century ago in his 1967 *The New Industrial State*:

"In the twentieth century, capital [and power] became more important than land."

Let's make no mistake either, then, that, at the expense of a complete disregard for territorial issues across the world we are headed into a militant era of protest, struggle, and confrontation in and out of cities, displacing centers of power.

#NoDaPL this year is one of many recent examples in the US Midwest in which the Standing Rock Nation of the Sioux Tribe are fighting for the future of the Missouri River against the predatory invasion of land by the US Army Corps of Engineers and builders of the Oil pipeline from North Dakota to Texas. #OccupyINAC gained traction across Canada last Spring as a result of the failed governmental response to act on the rampant rate of suicides of indigenous youth during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The ongoing Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women is another watershed change demonstrating how the struggle (and I mean the fight) for territorial rights is now coming to you in cities where we choose to ignore over the other 90%. The so-called refugee crisis across Europe is not a crisis of citizens or citizenship. The real crisis is one of the imperial mind—the State, one of statelessness and borderlessness. It is the *nation-state* that IS at risk. After all, we—the people—are all immigrants.

What these stories have in common is that they are largely fuelled by extractive industrial and colonial culture of statehood that forms the functional and imperial basis of the modern environment of Architecture; architects, its baggage handlers.

This declaration is thus not only about overthrowing the myth of urbanization as primarily composed of cities in the First World, or skimming a territorial understanding of environments in the Fourth World. It is about the deep extraction and tracking of migration as predominant challenges of our time: displaced peoples, changing climates, resource concentrations. This declaration is therefore about the recuperation of LAND.

These are not only challenges: they are confrontations to state sovereignty. They are physical processes threatening political borders and economic structures of nation states. They are evidence of alternative states and new geographies, that may be less visible, less stable, and less permanent, but potentially more robust world, in the sense of what Gianni Vattimo outlined in his 1983 manifesto *Il Pensiero Debole*, as a "weak world."

The histories of extraction are the ideologies of colonialism and so there is a particularly irony that, in the *un-grounding* of design disciplines and the mainstream Architectural Establishment that does not teach *about* land, nor advocate *for* land, does not teach *in* land for the neither the present nor the future.

This present declaration consequently addresses 3 new possibilities and new levels of knowledge for the future:

1. Historically, we must assess and intervene upon historical front lines that run deep across centuries—not simply bureaucratic terms—in order to map out the growth of an industrial Empire today, extensions of 19th Century Victorian ideologies that persist today.
2. Spatially, we must establish links between land, law, life, and language that are driving some of the most important land struggles today and have been razed by discovery era ambitions and frontier philosophies since the 15th Century. We have to move away from the pornography of the open pit abyss of mega-mines, the chaos of encampments, and spatial apartheid.
3. Politically, we must decolonize the imperial basis of spatial policy and design through the recuperation of territorial knowledge, that has mistakenly failed humanity by associating mid-century processes of political independence of colonized countries as liberation from ever-present, ever-powerful imperial authorities.

If we are to avoid the "ultimate fate", as Franz Fanon's claimed in his 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth*, that "[the process of] decolonization has always been violent", then it is perhaps in the retroactive recognition and interactive representation of the scales, states, and spaces of imperial domination—at their source, in the entrenchment of state infrastructure and state equipment—that the Decolonization of Design can begin and that the liberation from overpowering structures of control can truly address the most important technology, tool, and technique of the 21st Century: the revenge of territories and its peoples.

For us all—regardless of race, religion, creed, colour, gender, identity—equity is the new equality.

Land is all we have, Land is our x-factor.