



# COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

eug

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of broad, expressive brushstrokes in various shades of teal and dark blue. A prominent, dark, textured square, resembling a piece of fabric or a different material, is positioned in the center-right area, overlapping the brushstrokes.

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TOMO I

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del origen de la modernidad  
a la era digital

TOMO I

JUAN CALATRAVA  
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(EDS.)

# **COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA**

del origen de la modernidad a la era digital

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|                                                                    |       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| INTRODUCCIÓN . . . . .                                             | XXIII |
| Juan Calatrava, David Arredondo Garrido, Marta Rodríguez Iturriaga |       |

## TOMO I

### FOTOGRAFÍA, CINE, PUBLICIDAD: LA COMUNICACIÓN VISUAL

|                                                                                                                                                                                               |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| DOS PELÍCULAS SOBRE LA COMIDA Y LA CIUDAD . . . . .                                                                                                                                           | 29 |
| Juliana Arboleda Kogson                                                                                                                                                                       |    |
| EL PAISAJE DE LA ESPAÑA MODERNA DEL <i>BOOM</i> DESARROLLISTA A TRAVÉS DE LAS TARJETAS<br>POSTALES . . . . .                                                                                  | 37 |
| Cristina Arribas Sánchez                                                                                                                                                                      |    |
| CLOTHING, WOMEN, BUILDINGS. THE ARCHITECTURAL IMAGES IN FASHION MAGAZINES. . . . .                                                                                                            | 49 |
| Chiara Baglione                                                                                                                                                                               |    |
| LA PLAZA (BAQUEDANO) EN LA CIUDAD (DE SANTIAGO DE CHILE) EN DIEZ FOTOGRAFÍAS:<br>DISCURRIR DE UN IMAGINARIO URBANO A TRAVÉS DE SU REGISTRO VISUAL . . . . .                                   | 61 |
| Pedro Bannen Lanata, José Rosas Vera                                                                                                                                                          |    |
| ARQUITECTURA POPULAR Y PAISAJES SIMBÓLICOS: LA HUELLA DE FEDERICO GARCÍA<br>LORCA EN EL CINE ESPAÑOL . . . . .                                                                                | 75 |
| Paloma Baquero Masats, Juan Antonio Serrano García                                                                                                                                            |    |
| ESPACIO URBANO Y ARQUITECTURA EN LA REPRESENTACIÓN CINEMATOGRAFICA DE<br>LA MARGINALIDAD COMO TEXTO MODELIZADOR DE LA CULTURA. UNA APROXIMACIÓN DESDE LA<br>SEMIÓTICA DE LA CULTURA . . . . . | 87 |
| Diana Elena Barcelata Eguiarte, Andrea Marcovich Padlog                                                                                                                                       |    |

|                                                                                                                                                        |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>FILMS AS MANIFESTO. GIANCARLO DE CARLO AT THE X TRIENNALE OF MILAN</b> . . . . .                                                                    | 101 |
| Gemma Belli                                                                                                                                            |     |
| <b>LAS CELOSÍAS DE LA ALHAMBRA: CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UNA IMAGEN</b> . . . . .                                                                               | 113 |
| Bárbara Bravo-Ávila                                                                                                                                    |     |
| <b>TRANSITAR SOBRE EL TEJADO: HACIA NUEVOS IMAGINARIOS URBANOS A TRAVÉS<br/>DEL CINE. EL MEDITERRÁNEO Y BARCELONA</b> . . . . .                        | 125 |
| Marina Campomar Goroskieta, María Pía Fontan                                                                                                           |     |
| <b>ORIGEN Y DIAGNÓSTICO DEL <i>COLLAGE</i> POSTDIGITAL COMO EXPRESIÓN ARQUITECTÓNICA<br/>DE LA DIFERENCIA A INICIO DE LOS AÑOS 2000</b> . . . . .      | 137 |
| Alejandro R. Carrasco Hidalgo                                                                                                                          |     |
| <b>FOTOGRAFÍA, ARQUITECTURA Y PATRIMONIO: CONSTANTIN UHDE Y LOS <i>MONUMENTOS<br/>ARQUITECTÓNICOS DE ESPAÑA (1888-1892)</i></b> . . . . .              | 151 |
| Miguel Ángel Chaves Martín                                                                                                                             |     |
| <b>ESCRITORES Y DIBUJANTES VIAJEROS EN LOS REALES SITIOS. EL ESCORIAL EN LAS REVISTAS<br/>ILUSTRADAS ESPAÑOLAS Y FRANCESAS DEL SIGLO XIX</b> . . . . . | 163 |
| Pilar Chías Navarro, Tomás Abad Balboa, Lucas Fernández-Trapa                                                                                          |     |
| <b>BUILDING THE IMAGE OF MODERNITY: THE INTERACTION BETWEEN URBAN ARCHITECTURE<br/>AND MONTAGE IN EARLY FILM THEORY AND PRACTICE</b> . . . . .         | 175 |
| Bernardita M. Cubillos                                                                                                                                 |     |
| <b>UTOPIA IN ARCHITECTURE AND LITERATURE: WRITING IDEAL WORLDS</b> . . . . .                                                                           | 191 |
| Jana Čulek                                                                                                                                             |     |
| <b>LA FORMA DE LA LUZ. PROYECTOS, IMÁGENES, RECUERDOS (S. XX-XXI)</b> . . . . .                                                                        | 205 |
| Maria Grazia D'Amelio, Antonella Falzetti, Helena Pérez Gallardo                                                                                       |     |
| <b>LA MIRADA SOBRE LA VIVIENDA COLECTIVA CONTEMPORÁNEA EN EL CINE: DE LA DISTOPÍA A<br/>LA REALIDAD SOCIAL</b> . . . . .                               | 217 |
| Rafael de Lacour, Ángel Ortega Carrasco                                                                                                                |     |
| <b>ESPACIO Y TIEMPO EN LA ADAPTACIÓN CINEMATOGRAFICA DE UNA OBRA LITERARIA.<br/><i>SOLARIS, BLADE RUNNER Y 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY</i></b> . . . . .     | 229 |
| Juan Deltell Pastor                                                                                                                                    |     |
| <b>LA MURALLA ROJA. ENTRE EL ESPACIO REAL Y EL VIRTUAL</b> . . . . .                                                                                   | 243 |
| Daniel Díez Martínez                                                                                                                                   |     |
| <b>CRÓNICAS DE UN ARCHIVO LATENTE. LOLA ÁLVAREZ BRAVO: FOTÓGRAFA, TAMBIÉN, DE<br/>ARQUITECTURA</b> . . . . .                                           | 257 |
| Alicia Fernández Barranco                                                                                                                              |     |
| <b>ARCHITECTURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE MODERN ERA. THE ITALIAN SETTING BETWEEN<br/>THE TWO WARS (1920-1945)</b> . . . . .                              | 269 |
| Adele Fiadino                                                                                                                                          |     |
| <b>GEORGIA O'KEEFFE Y BERENICE ABBOTT: MIRADAS CRUZADAS DE NUEVA YORK</b> . . . . .                                                                    | 281 |
| José Antonio Flores Soto, Laura Sánchez Carrasco                                                                                                       |     |

|                                                                                                                                                                                            |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>REALIDADES Y FICCIONES DEL SUEÑO AMERICANO: LA CASA PUBLICITADA EN EL SUBURBIO ESTADOUNIDENSE DE POSGUERRA</b> . . . . .                                                                | 293 |
| Estibaliz García Taboada, Javier Fernández Posadas                                                                                                                                         |     |
| <b>CARTOGRAFÍAS CINEMATOGRAFÍAS: LOS DESCAMPADOS DEL CINE QUINQUI</b> . . . . .                                                                                                            | 309 |
| Ubaldo García Torrente                                                                                                                                                                     |     |
| <b>DOCUMENTOS DE ARQUITECTURA: PASIÓN POR DOCUMENTAR</b> . . . . .                                                                                                                         | 321 |
| José Ramón González González                                                                                                                                                               |     |
| <b>COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA MEDIANTE LA FOTOGRAFÍA: TRES MIRADAS SOBRE LA CASA URIACH</b> . . . . .                                                                                       | 335 |
| Arianna Iampieri                                                                                                                                                                           |     |
| <b>GRAND HOTEL ARCHITECTURE AS DEPICTED, PHOTOGRAPHED, AND FILMED IN THE CASE OF THE CIGA: COMPAGNIA ITALIANA DEI GRANDI ALBERGHI</b> . . . . .                                            | 349 |
| Ewa Kawamura                                                                                                                                                                               |     |
| <b>THE IMAGINED AND THE LIVED: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF KOWLOON WALLED CITY IN CYBERPUNK SCIENCE FICTIONS AND HONG KONG URBAN CINEMA</b> . . . . .                                           | 361 |
| Zhuozhang Li                                                                                                                                                                               |     |
| <b>PHOTOGRAPHED ARCHITECTURE: THE CASE OF THE VILLAGGIO MATTEOTTI IN TERNI BY GIANCARLO DE CARLO (1969-1975)</b> . . . . .                                                                 | 371 |
| Andrea Maglio                                                                                                                                                                              |     |
| <b>LA REPRESENTACIÓN DEL ESPACIO URBANO A TRAVÉS DE LA FOTOGRAFÍA. ESTUDIO COMPARATIVO DE LA PLAZA MAYOR DE SALAMANCA, PIAZZA SORDELLO EN MANTUA Y MOUNTJOY SQUARE EN DUBLÍN</b> . . . . . | 383 |
| María Gilda Martino                                                                                                                                                                        |     |
| <b>STEEPED IN INFLUENCE: THE IMPACT OF TEA ADVERTISEMENTS ON BLACK URBAN DOMESTICITY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PRESS.</b> . . . .                                                               | 393 |
| Nokubekezela Mchunu                                                                                                                                                                        |     |
| <b>EXPLORING LANDSCAPES THROUGH VISUAL NARRATIVES: BETWEEN CARTOGRAPHY AND FIGURATIVENESS</b> . . . . .                                                                                    | 407 |
| Giulio Minuto                                                                                                                                                                              |     |
| <b>LA ARQUITECTURA COMO PASARELA DE MODA</b> . . . . .                                                                                                                                     | 421 |
| Marta Muñoz                                                                                                                                                                                |     |
| <b>IMÁGENES QUE COMUNICAN Y SONRIÉN. EL HUMOR GRÁFICO EN LA ARQUITECTURA, DE LA CARICATURA AL MEME</b> . . . . .                                                                           | 431 |
| Idoia Otegui Vicens                                                                                                                                                                        |     |
| <b>EL LUGAR COMO GENERADOR DE LA IMAGEN: EL <i>STREET ART</i> COMO PATRIMONIO DE LA CIUDAD</b> . . .                                                                                       | 443 |
| Larissa Patron Chaves, Bernardino Líndez Vílchez                                                                                                                                           |     |
| <b>LO SINIESTRO EN EL ESPACIO DOMÉSTICO. ENCUADRES Y RELACIONES VISUALES EN LA CREACIÓN DE NARRATIVAS DE SUSPENSE</b> . . . . .                                                            | 455 |
| Aina Roca Mora, María Pia Fontana, Juan Deltell Pastor                                                                                                                                     |     |
| <b>GAUDÍ BAJO EL ENCUADRE: LINTERNA MÁGICA, <i>FOTOSCOPI</i>, CINE DOCUMENTAL</b> . . . . .                                                                                                | 469 |
| Carmen Rodríguez Pedret                                                                                                                                                                    |     |

|                                                                                                                                                    |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>ROBERTO PANE Y EL PAPEL DE LA FOTOGRAFÍA COMO HERRAMIENTA DE INVESTIGACIÓN CRÍTICA E HISTORIOGRÁFICA</b> .....                                  | 483 |
| Raffaella Russo Spena                                                                                                                              |     |
| <b>EL MENSAJE DE LOS PREMIOS PRITZKER: DISCURSO OFICIAL Y REACCIONES CRÍTICAS</b> .....                                                            | 493 |
| Laura Sánchez Carrasco, José Antonio Flores Soto                                                                                                   |     |
| <b>ENTRE PLANOS. LA ESCALERA EN LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL IMAGINARIO ARQUITECTÓNICO A TRAVÉS DEL CINE</b> .....                                          | 507 |
| Juan Antonio Serrano García, Paloma Baquero Masats                                                                                                 |     |
| <b>DIAPHANOUS WHITE. THE INDUSTRIAL GARDEN CITY OF ROSIGNANO SOLVAY THROUGH THE COLORS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MASSIMO VITALI</b> .....                 | 521 |
| Chiara Simoncini, Giulia Gabriella Sagarriga Visconti                                                                                              |     |
| <b>CHILE EN <i>HOGAR Y ARQUITECTURA</i>, 1970. SERIES FOTOGRÁFICAS DE PATRICIO GUZMÁN CAMPOS SOBRE LA OBRA DE SUÁREZ, BERMEJO Y BORCHERS</b> ..... | 533 |
| Andrés Téllez Tavera                                                                                                                               |     |
| <b>ITALIAN SKYSCAPERS IN THE CINEMA DURING THE PERIOD OF ECONOMIC BOOM</b> .....                                                                   | 547 |
| Annarita Teodosio                                                                                                                                  |     |
| <b>THE SPLENDOR (AND THE <i>SHINING</i>) OF SPACE: COMMUNICATION AND ARCHITECTURE AS STORYLINE CATALYSTS IN KUBRICK'S WORK</b> .....               | 559 |
| Manuel Viñas Limonchi, Antonio Estepa Rubio                                                                                                        |     |
| <br><b>CONSERVAR, ORDENAR, DIFUNDIR: ARCHIVOS, MUSEOS Y EXPOSICIONES</b>                                                                           |     |
| <b>OPEN-AIR MUSEUMS IN BORNEO AND THE DIALECTIC OF VERNACULAR FORM</b> .....                                                                       | 575 |
| Azmah Arzmi                                                                                                                                        |     |
| <b>PRESERVING/SHARING/COMMUNICATING 20TH-CENTURY ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE: THE CASE OF THE IACP-NAPLES ARCHIVES.</b> .....                            | 587 |
| Paola Ascione, Carolina De Falco                                                                                                                   |     |
| <b>COMMUNICATING MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE: THE ROLE OF EUROPEANA COLLECTIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ARCHITECTURAL MEMORY</b> .....                      | 599 |
| Helena Barranha, Isabel Guedes                                                                                                                     |     |
| <b>TRAS LOS REGISTROS DEL CONCURSO DEL PLATEAU BEAUBOURG</b> .....                                                                                 | 609 |
| M. Fernanda Barrera Rubio Hernández                                                                                                                |     |
| <b>CATEGORIZACIÓN DEL <i>MELLAH</i> EN MARRUECOS</b> .....                                                                                         | 621 |
| Julio Calvo Serrano, Carlos Malagón Luesma, Adelaida Martín Martín                                                                                 |     |
| <b>SOBREEXPOSICIÓN. EL MITO DE LA ARQUITECTURA CHILENA CONTEMPORÁNEA Y SUS ESTRATEGIAS DE CIRCULACIÓN</b> .....                                    | 633 |
| Felipe Corvalán Tapia                                                                                                                              |     |

|                                                                                                                                                                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>ARCHITECTURE FILM FESTIVALS: AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVES, PROTAGONISM AND ACTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN SPACE</b> .....                                                            | 645 |
| Liz da Costa Sandoval, Tania Siqueira Montoro                                                                                                                                     |     |
| <b>TURÍN 1926: LA MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE DI EDILIZIA, LA NARRACIÓN DEL CAMBIO</b> .....                                                                                            | 657 |
| Annalisa Dameri                                                                                                                                                                   |     |
| <b>ECOLOGÍAS PRODUCTIVAS: HIBRIDACIONES ENTRE LO RURAL Y LO URBANO A TRAVÉS DE TRES EXPOSICIONES RECIENTES</b> .....                                                              | 669 |
| Eduardo de Nó Santos                                                                                                                                                              |     |
| <b>UNA RECOPIACIÓN DE LOS PROYECTOS DEL GRUPO NORTE DEL GATEPAC (1930-1936)</b> .....                                                                                             | 681 |
| Lauren Etxepare Igiñiz, Leire Azcona Uribe, Eneko Jokin Uranga Santamaria                                                                                                         |     |
| <b>PRODUCTIVE ARCHIVES AND ARCHITECTURAL MEMORY</b> .....                                                                                                                         | 691 |
| Michael Andrés Forero Parra                                                                                                                                                       |     |
| <b>"ABOUT THE STYLE AND NOTHING BUT THE STYLE": EL ESTILO INTERNACIONAL Y LA MODERN ARCHITECTURE: INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION DE 1932</b> .....                                      | 701 |
| Daniel Gómez Magide                                                                                                                                                               |     |
| <b>BRASIL CONSTRUYE. LA ARQUITECTURA MODERNA COMO ICONO IDENTITARIO DE BRASIL, 1943-1957</b> .....                                                                                | 715 |
| Ramón Gutiérrez, Ana Esteban Maluenda                                                                                                                                             |     |
| <b>URBAN CONCERNS IN CURATORIAL ASSEMBLAGES: AN INQUIRY INTO DESINGEL'S ARCHITECTURE PROGRAMME AROUND THE 1990S</b> .....                                                         | 731 |
| Alice Haddad                                                                                                                                                                      |     |
| <b>LA PRODUCCIÓN PLANIMÉTRICA DE LEOPOLDO TORRES BALBÁS COMO ARQUITECTO CONSERVADOR DE LA ALHAMBRA. RESTAURACIÓN DE LA COLECCIÓN TRAS EL CONOCIMIENTO DE SUS MATERIALES</b> ..... | 747 |
| Rafael Lorente Fernández, Ana M <sup>a</sup> López Montes, M <sup>a</sup> Rosario Blanc García                                                                                    |     |
| <b>LA MEMORIA VIRTUAL: DOCUMENTACIÓN Y HERRAMIENTAS DIGITALES DE TRATAMIENTO Y DIFUSIÓN</b> .....                                                                                 | 761 |
| Jorge G. Molinero-Sánchez, Concepción Rodríguez-Moreno, María del Carmen Vílchez-Lara                                                                                             |     |
| <b>DEL ARCHIVO DIGITAL AL ARCHIVO FÍSICO. LA EXPERIENCIA DEL ARCHIVO DIGITAL DE ARQUITECTURA MODERNA DEL ECUADOR</b> .....                                                        | 773 |
| Shayarina Monard-Arciniegas                                                                                                                                                       |     |
| <b>ANÁLISIS DE ESTRATEGIAS CURATORIALES POR MANUEL BLANCO. MOSTRAR ARQUITECTURA PARA COMUNICAR</b> .....                                                                          | 787 |
| Héctor Navarro Martínez                                                                                                                                                           |     |
| <b>THE SERGIO MUSMECI ARCHIVE AS A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING HIS FORM FINDING</b> .....                                                                                                | 801 |
| Matteo Ocone                                                                                                                                                                      |     |
| <b>COMMUNICATING THE CONTEMPORARY CITY. PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES IN A PARTICIPATORY PERSPECTIVE</b> .....                                                                        | 811 |
| Serena Orlandi                                                                                                                                                                    |     |

|                                                                                                                                                                                     |            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>"MUSEOS" DE ARQUITECTURA: UNA COLECCIÓN DE IDEAS . . . . .</b>                                                                                                                   | <b>825</b> |
| Nuria Ortigosa                                                                                                                                                                      |            |
| <b>LA APLICACIÓN NAM (NAVEGANDO ARQUITECTURAS DE MUJER): RETOS Y OPORTUNIDADES DE UNA HERRAMIENTA BIDIRECCIONAL PARA LA INVESTIGACIÓN Y TRANSFERENCIA DE CONOCIMIENTO . . . . .</b> | <b>835</b> |
| José Parra-Martínez, Ana Gilsanz-Díaz, María-Elia Gutiérrez Mozo                                                                                                                    |            |
| <b>VENECIA, 1976: LA BIENNALE ROSSA DEL PABELLÓN ESPAÑOL. UNA COMPROMETIDA EXPOSICIÓN INTERDISCIPLINAR, FINALMENTE "SIN" ARQUITECTURA . . . . .</b>                                 | <b>847</b> |
| Antonio Pizza                                                                                                                                                                       |            |
| <b>ENTENDIENDO LOS PAISAJES DE DESIGUALDAD URBANA. ENFOQUES, MÉTODOS E INSTRUMENTOS PARA UN ATLAS OPERATIVO ESTRATÉGICO PARA EL SUR DE MADRID . . . . .</b>                         | <b>859</b> |
| Alba Rodríguez Illanes, Miguel Y. Mayorga Cárdenas                                                                                                                                  |            |
| <b>"ASÍ VIVE EL CAMPESINO ESPAÑOL": RECONSTRUCCIÓN, HIGIENIZACIÓN Y PROPAGANDA EN LA EXPOSICIÓN NACIONAL DE LA VIVIENDA RURAL (1939) . . . . .</b>                                  | <b>873</b> |
| Marta Rodríguez Iturriaga                                                                                                                                                           |            |
| <b>LOS BARDI Y EL MUSEO DE ARTE DE SÃO PAULO: TRANSFUSIONES MUSEOGRÁFICAS ENTRE LO POPULAR Y LO ERUDITO, LA CALLE Y EL MUSEO. . . . .</b>                                           | <b>889</b> |
| Mara Sánchez Llorens                                                                                                                                                                |            |
| <b>EXPONER ARQUITECTURA. LA EXPERIENCIA DEL MUSEO MAXXI DE ROMA . . . . .</b>                                                                                                       | <b>901</b> |
| Elena Tinacci                                                                                                                                                                       |            |
| <b>URBAN STORYLINES OF CON-TEMPORARY MURALS IN MINOR ARCHITECTURES . . . . .</b>                                                                                                    | <b>913</b> |
| Luca Zecchin                                                                                                                                                                        |            |

## TOMO II

### REVISTAS, LIBROS, TEXTOS: LA COMUNICACIÓN ESCRITA

|                                                                                                                                                        |            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>CRÍTICA Y DIFUSIÓN DE LOS TRABAJOS DE RESTAURACIÓN DEL ARQUITECTO LEOPOLDO TORRES BALBÁS EN LA ALHAMBRA A TRAVÉS DE SUS PUBLICACIONES . . . . .</b> | <b>927</b> |
| Fernando Acale Sánchez                                                                                                                                 |            |
| <b>EL MANIFIESTO DE LA ALHAMBRA YA ESTABA ESCRITO. LA ARQUITECTURA ESPAÑOLA EN DEUTSCHE BAUZEITUNG (1915-1920) . . . . .</b>                           | <b>939</b> |
| Pablo Arza Garaloces, José Manuel Pozo Municio                                                                                                         |            |
| <b>BUILDERS AND DEVELOPERS IN 17<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY LONDON . . . . .</b>                                                                             | <b>953</b> |
| Gregorio Astengo                                                                                                                                       |            |
| <b>LA REVISTA HERMES (1917-1922) Y LA NUEVA IMAGEN DE LO VASCO. DEL CASERÍO AL CHALÉ NEOVASCO . . . . .</b>                                            | <b>967</b> |
| Ana Azpiri Albistegui                                                                                                                                  |            |

|                                                                                                                                                             |      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| <b>FOR A REFOUNDATION OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE: <i>METRON</i> IN THE FIRST YEARS (1945-1948) . .</b>                                                          | 979  |
| Guia Baratelli                                                                                                                                              |      |
| <b>LA REVISTA <i>ARQUITECTURA</i> Y EL DEBATE TEÓRICO EN UN PERIODO DE DESCONCIERTO (1918-1933): LA APORTACIÓN DE LEOPOLDO TORRES BALBÁS . . . . .</b>      | 997  |
| Juan Manuel Barrios Rozúa                                                                                                                                   |      |
| <b>LA GUÍA DE ARQUITECTURA MODERNA ANTES DE 1951: TRES PUBLICACIONES PIONERAS . . . . .</b>                                                                 | 1009 |
| Ángel Camacho Pina                                                                                                                                          |      |
| <b>RONDA, VISIONES DE UNA CIUDAD Y SU ARQUITECTURA POR CRONISTAS Y VIAJEROS (SIGLO XII AL XIX) . . . . .</b>                                                | 1023 |
| Ciro de la Torre Fragoso                                                                                                                                    |      |
| <b><i>FABRICATIONS</i>. 35 AÑOS DE LA REVISTA DE LA SOCIEDAD DE HISTORIADORES DE LA ARQUITECTURA DE AUSTRALIA Y NUEVA ZELANDA (1989-2024) . . . . .</b>     | 1035 |
| Macarena de la Vega de León                                                                                                                                 |      |
| <b>LA VIVIENDA SOCIAL ANDALUZA DE LA SEGUNDA MITAD DEL SIGLO XX EN LAS REVISTAS DE <i>ARQUITECTURA</i> . . . . .</b>                                        | 1045 |
| Rafael de Lacour, Alba Maldonado Gea, Ángel Ortega Carrasco                                                                                                 |      |
| <b>RESACA MODERNA: LA TRANSCRIPCIÓN DEL “AFTER MODERN ARCHITECTURE DEBATE” PARA LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UN CORPUS TEÓRICO ESPAÑOL . . . . .</b>                  | 1057 |
| Jorge Díez Estellés, Pablo Marqués Otero, Raúl Castellanos Gómez                                                                                            |      |
| <b>THE DIFFUSION OF ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE THROUGH TREATISES AND MANUALS ON THE ART OF BUILDING IN DENMARK BETWEEN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES . . . . .</b> | 1069 |
| Monica Esposito                                                                                                                                             |      |
| <b>HISTORIAS GRÁFICAS: “EL ALOJAMIENTO MODERNO EN ESPAÑA” DE FOCHO . . . . .</b>                                                                            | 1083 |
| Héctor García-Diego Villarías, Jorge Tárrago Mingo, María Villanueva Fernández                                                                              |      |
| <b>VISIONES CRUZADAS: HACIA NUEVAS PERSPECTIVAS DISCIPLINARES EN LA COMUNICACIÓN DE <i>ARQUITECTURA</i> (1959-1973) . . . . .</b>                           | 1095 |
| Eva Gil Donoso                                                                                                                                              |      |
| <b>LAS PRIMERAS MICROESCUELAS DE RAFAEL DE LA HOZ. ARTÍCULOS EN PRENSA 1958-1959 . . . . .</b>                                                              | 1109 |
| Alejandro Gómez García                                                                                                                                      |      |
| <b><i>PIVOTAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF UNSEEN EVENTS</i>: FIVE ARCHITECTURAL NARRATIVES FROM UNITED STATES HISTORY, 1871-2020 . . . . .</b>                         | 1121 |
| Irene Hwang                                                                                                                                                 |      |
| <b><i>HOUSE BEAUTIFUL</i>: INTRODUCING AMERICAN WOMEN TO THE WORLD . . . . .</b>                                                                            | 1131 |
| Kathleen James-Chakraborty                                                                                                                                  |      |
| <b>A BERLIN CATALOGUE. A REPERTOIRE OF ARCHITECTURAL FIGURES FROM MICHAEL SCHMIDT’S PHOTOBOOKS . . . . .</b>                                                | 1141 |
| Marco Lecis                                                                                                                                                 |      |
| <b>EL SOPORTE PAPEL Y LO DIGITAL. DESVELANDO LA VIDA Y OBRA ARQUITECTÓNICA DE MILAGROS REY HOMBRE . . . . .</b>                                             | 1153 |
| Cándido López González, María Carreiro Otero                                                                                                                |      |

|                                                                                                                                                                                               |      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| <b>LAS PIRÁMIDES DESPUÉS DE LE CORBUSIER. <i>THE NEW ARCHITECTURE IN MEXICO</i> DE ESTHER BORN, 1937</b> . . . . .                                                                            | 1165 |
| Cristina López Uribe                                                                                                                                                                          |      |
| <b>THE ROLE OF ILLUSTRATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE EARLY MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY</b> . . . . .                                                                                                      | 1183 |
| Fabio Mangone                                                                                                                                                                                 |      |
| <b>SINERGIAS Y DIVERGENCIAS: LA REPRESENTACIÓN DE LA ARQUITECTURA BARCELONESA EN <i>ILUSTRACIÓ CATALANA Y ARQUITECTURA Y CONSTRUCCIÓN</i> (1897-1908)</b> . . . . .                           | 1191 |
| Pilar Morán-García                                                                                                                                                                            |      |
| <b>THE HERALD OF A NEW WORLD. ALDO ROSSI AND <i>THE ADVENTURES OF PINOCCHIO</i>: AN ARCHITECTURAL THEORY</b> . . . . .                                                                        | 1205 |
| Vincenzo Moschetti                                                                                                                                                                            |      |
| <b>DEL <i>LIKE</i> AL <i>BYTE</i> PARA LLEGAR A LO “ECO”: LAS REDES SOCIALES COMO <i>INFLUENCERS</i> DE OTRA ARQUITECTURA EN LA ERA DIGITAL</b> . . . . .                                     | 1219 |
| Francisco Felipe Muñoz Carabias                                                                                                                                                               |      |
| <b>REVISTAS COLEGALES DEL COAM (ESPAÑA) Y EL COARQ (CHILE). DE BOLETINES GREMIALES A ENTORNOS DE PUBLICACIONES</b> . . . . .                                                                  | 1229 |
| Gonzalo Muñoz Vera, Paz Núñez-Martí, Roberto Goycoolea Prado                                                                                                                                  |      |
| <b>A THICK MAGAZINE: MANUEL GRAÇA DIAS' <i>JORNAL ARQUITECTOS</i> AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CULTURALIST ARCHITECT</b> . . . . .                                                             | 1243 |
| Vitor Manuel Oliveira Alves                                                                                                                                                                   |      |
| <b>ANÁLISIS COMUNICATIVO DEL LIBRO <i>PLUS</i> DE FRÉDÉRIC DRUOT, ANNE LACATON &amp; JEAN-PHILIPPE VASSAL</b> . . . . .                                                                       | 1257 |
| Ángel Ortega Carrasco, Rafael de Lacour                                                                                                                                                       |      |
| <b>LA EXTRAÑA PARADOJA: LAS REVISTAS GARANTES DE LA VERDAD</b> . . . . .                                                                                                                      | 1271 |
| José Manuel Pozo Municio                                                                                                                                                                      |      |
| <b>CUANDO LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UNA CIUDAD PASA POR LAS PÁGINAS DE UN PERIÓDICO: <i>LA CIUDAD LINEAL. REVISTA DE URBANIZACIÓN, INGENIERÍA, HIGIENE Y AGRICULTURA</i></b> . . . . .               | 1285 |
| Alice Pozzati                                                                                                                                                                                 |      |
| <b>LA DIVULGACIÓN Y ANÁLISIS DE LA ARQUITECTURA HABITACIONAL FUNCIONALISTA A TRAVÉS DE <i>ESPACIOS. REVISTA INTEGRAL DE ARQUITECTURA Y ARTES PLÁSTICAS EN MÉXICO, 1948-1957</i></b> . . . . . | 1301 |
| Claudia Rodríguez Espinosa, Erika Elizabeth Pérez Múzquiz                                                                                                                                     |      |
| <b>DISCURSOS PATRIMONIALES EN LA REVISTA <i>ARQUITECTURA</i> Y LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UN RELATO HISTÓRICO NACIONAL</b> . . . . .                                                                  | 1313 |
| Elina Rodríguez Massobrio                                                                                                                                                                     |      |
| <b>THE MAKING OF ARCHITECTURAL IMAGERY IN THE AGE OF UNCERTAINTY AND DISEMBEDDING</b> . . . . .                                                                                               | 1329 |
| Ugo Rossi                                                                                                                                                                                     |      |
| <b>ARCHITECTS AND THE LAY PUBLIC IN AN AGE OF DISILLUSIONMENT: SOME NOTES ON ACTIVISM, SATIRE AND SELF-CRITICISM IN BRITISH ARCHITECTURAL PUBLISHING</b> . . . . .                            | 1341 |
| Michela Rosso                                                                                                                                                                                 |      |

|                                                                                                                                                      |             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>ESCAPARATE PÚBLICO DE UNA NUEVA ARQUITECTURA. LA COMUNICACIÓN DE LAS EXPOSICIONES UNIVERSALES . . . . .</b>                                       | <b>1357</b> |
| Alberto Ruiz Colmenar, Beatriz S. González-Jiménez                                                                                                   |             |
| <b>GEOMETRÍA, UNA REVISTA PARA COMUNICAR EL URBANISMO DE LOS ARQUITECTOS . . . . .</b>                                                               | <b>1369</b> |
| Victoriano Sainz Gutiérrez                                                                                                                           |             |
| <b>ESTADOS UNIDOS EN LOS BOLETINES DE ARQUITECTURA ESPAÑOLES. 1945-1960 . . . . .</b>                                                                | <b>1381</b> |
| María del Pilar Salazar Lozano                                                                                                                       |             |
| <b>ARQUITECTURA Y ANSIEDAD EN LA OBRA DE ISAAC ASIMOV . . . . .</b>                                                                                  | <b>1393</b> |
| Mario Sánchez Samos                                                                                                                                  |             |
| <b>MIES Y EL PERIÓDICO <i>TRANSFER</i> . . . . .</b>                                                                                                 | <b>1407</b> |
| Rafael Sánchez Sánchez                                                                                                                               |             |
| <b>FROM DOMESTIC INTERIORS TO NATIONAL PLATFORMS. MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND INDIAN WOMANHOOD IN THE <i>INDIAN LADIES' MAGAZINE</i> . . . . .</b>       | <b>1417</b> |
| Pooja Sastry                                                                                                                                         |             |
| <b>COMMUNICATING THE WELFARE ARCHITECTURE FOR WOMAN AND CHILD IN FASCIST ITALY . . . . .</b>                                                         | <b>1427</b> |
| Massimiliano Savorra                                                                                                                                 |             |
| <b>MOBILIARIO Y DISEÑO INTERIOR EN EL MÉXICO MODERNO EN TIEMPO REAL: LAS PUBLICACIONES ESPECIALIZADAS EN LA PRIMERA MITAD DEL SIGLO XX . . . . .</b> | <b>1441</b> |
| Silvia Segarra Lagunes                                                                                                                               |             |
| <b><i>SUN AND SHADOW</i> Y LA TRANSICIÓN DEL PROGRAMA DOMÉSTICO A LA OBRA MONUMENTAL DE MARCEL BREUER . . . . .</b>                                  | <b>1453</b> |
| Erica Sogbe                                                                                                                                          |             |
| <b>EL REGISTRO FOTOGRÁFICO DEL <i>PLAYGROUND</i> COMO CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LOS IMAGINARIOS MODERNOS DE ESPACIOS DE JUEGO URBANOS . . . . .</b>            | <b>1463</b> |
| Nicolás Stutzin Donoso                                                                                                                               |             |
| <b><i>LES PROMENADES ET LE PAYSAN DE PARIS</i>. EL PARQUE DE BUTTES-CHAUMONT ENTRE LA LÍRICA Y LA TÉCNICA . . . . .</b>                              | <b>1471</b> |
| Diego Toribio Álvarez                                                                                                                                |             |
| <b>EL PROYECTO URBANO EN LAS PUBLICACIONES DE ARQUITECTURA EN CHILE: UNA SECUENCIA ANALÍTICA (1930-1980) . . . . .</b>                               | <b>1483</b> |
| Horacio Enrique Torrent                                                                                                                              |             |
| <b>LE CORBUSIER, 1933. UN LIBRO Y UNA <i>CRUZADA</i> CONTRA LA ACADEMIA . . . . .</b>                                                                | <b>1495</b> |
| Jorge Torres Cueco                                                                                                                                   |             |
| <b>OTRA <i>ARQUITECTURAS BIS</i>: LA APORTACIÓN CRÍTICA DE MADRID . . . . .</b>                                                                      | <b>1511</b> |
| Alejandro Valdivieso                                                                                                                                 |             |
| <b>LA ARQUITECTURA DEL CONOCIMIENTO . . . . .</b>                                                                                                    | <b>1523</b> |
| Ruth Varela                                                                                                                                          |             |
| <b>LA CASA EN EL MAR Y EL JARDÍN: LA COLABORACIÓN DE LINA BO EN EL DEBATE PROPUESTO EN LA REVISTA <i>DOMUS</i> DE 1940 . . . . .</b>                 | <b>1535</b> |
| Carla Zollinger, Eva Álvarez, Carlos Gómez                                                                                                           |             |

## LA ARQUITECTURA EN LA ERA DE LA COMUNICACIÓN DIGITAL

|                                                                                                                                                             |      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| <b>LA DIFUSIÓN DE LA ARQUITECTURA EN LA ERA DE LA POST-FOTOGRAFÍA: EXCESO Y ACCESO . . . .</b>                                                              | 1547 |
| Luisa Alarcón González, Mar Hernández Alarcón                                                                                                               |      |
| <b>UNA MIRADA DESDE EL METAVERSO A LA CIUDAD . . . . .</b>                                                                                                  | 1557 |
| Mónica Alcindor, Alejandro López                                                                                                                            |      |
| <b>MANIERISMO <i>ON STEROIDS</i>: REFLEXIONES EN TORNO A LOS PROCESOS CREATIVOS EN LA ERA DE LA COMUNICACIÓN DIGITAL . . . . .</b>                          | 1565 |
| Serafina Amoroso                                                                                                                                            |      |
| <b>APLICACIONES DE LA INTELIGENCIA ARTIFICIAL EN ARQUITECTURA. CLASIFICACIÓN Y ANÁLISIS DE OBRA EN LA ERA DIGITAL . . . . .</b>                             | 1577 |
| Guido Cimadomo, Vishal Shahdarpuri Aswani, Jorge Yeregui Tejedor                                                                                            |      |
| <b>FROM PHYSICAL TO DIGITAL: THE IMPACT OF TWENTY YEARS OF WEB 2.0 ON ARCHITECTURE . . . . .</b>                                                            | 1587 |
| Giuseppe Gallo                                                                                                                                              |      |
| <b>NIKOLAUS PEVSNER EN LA BBC: LA COMUNICACIÓN ORAL DE LA HISTORIA DEL ARTE Y LA ARQUITECTURA . . . . .</b>                                                 | 1599 |
| David García-Asenjo Llana, María Pura Moreno Moreno                                                                                                         |      |
| <b><i>CREAFAB APP</i>: HERRAMIENTA DIGITAL PARA LA INVESTIGACIÓN Y GESTIÓN DE PROCESOS DE REINDUSTRIALIZACIÓN CREATIVA EN CIUDADES HISTÓRICAS . . . . .</b> | 1613 |
| Francisco M. Hidalgo-Sánchez, Safiya Tabali, María F. Carrascal-Pérez                                                                                       |      |
| <b>REPRESENTACIÓN Y DIFUSIÓN DIGITAL DEL PATRIMONIO MONÁSTICO: EL PROYECTO <i>DIGITAL SAMOS</i> . . . . .</b>                                               | 1627 |
| Estefanía López Salas                                                                                                                                       |      |
| <b>ARQUITECTURA PARA REDES O ARQUITECTURA PARA LA VIDA . . . . .</b>                                                                                        | 1639 |
| Ángela Marruecos Pérez                                                                                                                                      |      |
| <b>ENSEÑAR EL PROYECTO (Y TRANSFORMAR LA CIUDAD) EN LA ERA DE LA COMUNICACIÓN DIGITAL</b>                                                                   | 1649 |
| Paolo Mellano                                                                                                                                               |      |
| <b>REVISTAS DE ARQUITECTURA LATINOAMERICANAS: EXPERIENCIAS Y RESULTADOS DE ARLA . . . .</b>                                                                 | 1661 |
| Patricia Méndez                                                                                                                                             |      |
| <b>LA MUTACIÓN DEL DIBUJO PLANO A LA REALIDAD AUMENTADA. UNA NUEVA FORMA DE COMUNICAR EL ESPACIO Y SU CONSTRUCCIÓN EN LA ARQUITECTURA . . . . .</b>         | 1673 |
| Alejandro Muñoz Miranda                                                                                                                                     |      |
| <b>¿INVESTIGACIÓN O ACTIVISMO? EL CASO DEL <i>MAPA INTERACTIVO DIGITAL DE ARQUITECTURAS IDEADAS POR MUJERES EN ESPAÑA, 1965-2000</i> . . . . .</b>          | 1683 |
| Lucía C. Pérez Moreno, David Delgado Baudet, Laura Ruiz-Morote Tramblin                                                                                     |      |

# **Open-Air Museums in Borneo and the Dialectic of Vernacular Form**

Los museos al aire libre de Borneo y la dialéctica de la forma vernácula

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## **Abstract**

Los museos al aire libre del patrimonio cultural de Borneo pretenden preservar y mostrar las casas tradicionales de las comunidades indígenas. Sin embargo, la autenticidad de estos museos es cuestionable, ya que a menudo aíslan las casas de su contexto original y presentan una visión romántica de la vida tradicional. Este artículo sostiene que la arquitectura vernácula de Borneo no es estática, sino que ha evolucionado, respondiendo a los cambios en las necesidades socioeconómicas y a la globalización. También destaca la actitud ambivalente de los indígenas hacia las casas vernáculas tradicionales, ya que representan su identidad cultural pero no ofrecen mucha comodidad ni practicidad en el mundo actual. El artículo hace un llamamiento para que los museos de arquitectura al aire libre de Borneo sean más inclusivos y documenten la historia de los cambios en el estilo de vida de los indígenas y la adaptación de sus hogares.

Open-air cultural heritage museums in Borneo aim to preserve and showcase the traditional houses of the indigenous communities. However, the authenticity of these museums is questionable, as they often isolate the houses from their original context and present a romanticized view of traditional life. This paper argues that vernacular architecture in Borneo is not static but has evolved, responding to changes in socio-economic needs and globalization. The paper also highlights the indigenous people's ambivalent attitude towards traditional vernacular houses, as they represent their cultural identity but do not provide much comfort or practicality in today's world. The paper calls for open-air architecture museums in Borneo to be more inclusive, and to document the history of the indigenous people's changing lifestyles and the adaptation of their homes.

## **Keywords**

Museos al aire libre, Borneo, arquitectura vernácula tropical, pueblos indígenas  
Open-air museums, Borneo, tropical vernacular architecture, indigenous people

## Introduction

The purpose of the Sarawak Cultural Village in Kuching and the Mari-Mari Cultural Village in Kota Kinabalu is to preserve and showcase the traditional houses of the indigenous communities in Borneo for domestic and foreign tourists. The structures here were reconstructed using traditional materials and techniques, such as with belian ironwood, bamboo and nipa leaves (fig. 1). They were built in a natural setting as if to convey that these houses exist in a pristine, unspoilt environment. In Sarawak Cultural Village for example, these houses are spread out around a lake amidst the lush backdrop of tropical rainforest and Mount Santubong. Annual cultural and religious events such as the Rainforest Music Festival and Hari Gawai are often held there, with captivating performances and re-enactments. Despite being a popular cultural attraction, the downside to these open-air museums is the issue of authenticity. Visitors may not comprehend the real-world challenges that are affecting the actual indigenous villages in Borneo today, as these houses are isolated from their original context due to their commodification for tourism. These open-air museums seem to suggest that these traditional building forms, which respond to the cultural and climatic environment, have stood the test of time and contrast with the international modern style, characterized by standardization and technological innovation.



Figure 1. The Orang Ulu House at the Sarawak Cultural Village, 2022, Azmah Arzmi.

When you go for a quick drive along the Pan-Borneo Highway in Sarawak past the Bidayuh and Iban villages, you would be hard-pressed to find these pure timber longhouse structures depicted in the Cultural Village, although a few may exist in remote areas. Rather, there are a myriad of different forms of detached houses, ranging from wooden houses on stilts with zinc roofs to a single-storey house made of bricks. Most of the indigenous Sarawakians no longer live in longhouses, some having moved to the port cities and smaller towns for work, some setting up detached houses in villages close to the cities or living in the peri-urban areas. Those who do, do not live in a pure timber longhouse. Instead, they live in renovated two-storey longhouses made of bricks, concrete, glass, zinc, or tiled roofs. Vernacular in form, but modern in structure. Their traditional spatial configuration is also supplemented with additional layouts according to the needs of the residents. The reality is in sharp contrast to the books and past research on indigenous houses in Sarawak published over the past 50 years.

In his book, Sten Rentzog addressed the critiques surrounding open-air museums in the context of Europe and USA. Whether it is the Skansen in Sweden, the Village Museums in Romania, or the Čičmany Museum Village in Slovakia, these open-air museums have the tendency to decontextualize buildings and romanticize traditional lifestyles. People keen on assessing these museum villages need to be critical about their accuracy and authenticity.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in Borneo, the Sarawak Cultural Village and Mari-Mari Village in Sabah do not depict the reality of the indigenous peoples' lifestyles. Visitors may not comprehend the real-world challenges that are affecting the actual indigenous villages in Borneo today, as these houses are isolated from their original context due to their commodification for tourism. These open-air museums seem to suggest that these traditional building forms, which respond to the cultural and climatic environment, have stood the test of time and are in contrast to the international modern style, characterized by standardization and technological innovation. Therefore, this paper argues that vernacular architecture in Borneo is not static but has evolved, responding to changes in socio-economic needs and globalization. In reality, these hybrid forms of the vernacular are commonly found in rural settlements throughout Borneo, whereas the pure traditional form, which is constructed out of natural, local resources is now difficult to find. Even in the heartlands of Borneo, such as in Padawan, Sarawak, near the Kalimantan border, the Bidayuh people have adapted their homes with industrialized building materials. Hence, this paper interrogates the interplay between these two vernacular forms, and the role of museums in communicating this dialectic. One that is fetishized by idealist architects and tourists, and the other in which the actual indigenous people inhabit today. This paper also highlights the indigenous people's ambivalent attitude towards the former, that, although it represents their cultural identity, it does not provide much comfort or practicality in today's world as much as the hybrid vernacular. Yet, as much as vernacular architecture enthusiasts insist on the preservation of the traditional, the evolution process of its hybrid counterpart should also be documented and included within the

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<sup>1</sup> Sten Rentzog, *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea* (Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag, 2007).

museum narrative. Open-air architecture museums in Borneo should be just as much about the history of the indigenous people’s changing lifestyles and the adaptation of their homes as well as the display of traditional vernacular heritage.

The first part of the paper discusses the depiction of the Dayak<sup>2</sup> longhouse and the Malay house typology within the Sarawak Cultural Village. Based on my fieldwork and interviews with indigenous villagers, I provide a couple of real-life hybrid vernacular homes of similar typology within Sarawak which have undergone changes over time due to the people’s social mobility and economic position. The second section discusses how houses should be viewed as subjects, rather than objects. The last section proposes a methodology of how hybridization of vernacular forms could be recorded, given the advanced technology and digitalization, to archive the houses and how they should be curated in today’s museums.

### The Modern Hybridization of Vernacular Traditional Homes



Figure 2. “Sectional Perspective of an Iban longhouse”. Source: Chen Voon Fee, *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Architecture* (New York: Archipelago Press, 1998), 34.

<sup>2</sup> [Dayak is an umbrella term referring to the different indigenous ethnic groups in Sarawak, which mainly consist of Ibans (50%), followed by Bidayus (6.5%), Melanau (3.1%)] Sarawak Government, *Sarawak Data*, available online at <https://data.sarawak.gov.my/>, retrieved on 15 August 2021.

In the Sarawak Cultural Village, as with the other cultural villages in Sabah, each vernacular archetype of the home is strictly classified as belonging to a specific ethnic group. For example, the Iban Longhouse, is different from the Orang Ulu Longhouse or the Bidayuh Baruk House. For this essay, I will discuss the typology of the longhouse and the Malay house, as they are the most common vernacular archetypes found throughout Sarawak.

The longhouse, which reflects the preference for communal lifestyles of the Sarawakian peoples, consists of several units for families connected by a long gallery (*ruai*) where gatherings and social activities take place (fig. 2). It is usually situated by the river, as the river used to be the main mode of transportation and lifeline of the Dayaks.<sup>3</sup> It is not uncommon to find longhouses consisting of 20 or more apartments, and usually people in the community are related to each other one way or another. As the family grows, another longhouse is built parallel to the original longhouse to accommodate more people. A longhouse is made of timber, raised on stilts at least two metres above ground, and are traditionally accessible via notched log. The posts can be made from belian ironwood, the roof is from nipa leaves and sometimes split bamboo is used for flooring. The *ruai* is sometimes connected to an open deck, where rice grains, pepper crops or fish are dried in the hot sun and where the women hang their laundry. The kitchen, bathrooms are often located within the units at the back. This typical spatial organization is captured in the Iban and Bidayuh Longhouse within the Sarawak Cultural Village.

A great example of a hybrid longhouse is the Mongkos Longhouse at the Bidayuh village of Mongkos near the Indonesian Kalimantan border in the Serian district of Sarawak. The village was founded along the Mongkos river, before the first road in the area was established in 1968. The architecture of the longhouse, which has existed since 1957, follows the description of the typical longhouse mentioned in the previous paragraph (fig. 3, fig. 4). Another longhouse was built parallel to the original longhouse, but it was burnt down in 2002 and rebuilt with bricks, concrete and zinc roof. Meanwhile, the original longhouse still retained its structural integrity, but the nipa roof has been replaced with zinc, and instead of notched logs, two of the tree entrances replaced with concrete staircase. Over time, the kitchens and bathrooms within the units became detached and then placed on the ground floor rather than on the raised platform of the original longhouse and solidified through concrete and zinc. Hence, the longhouse still maintained its spatial layout, but some parts were added and replaced with industrial building materials, particularly the wet areas. This is due to the belief that sustainable building materials may not last and the demand for permanence, given that the other longhouse had burnt down.

What open-air museums often fail to acknowledge, is the nuances and the cross-cultural, inter-ethnic exchanges which influence the real-world vernacular homes. As the Dayaks, who usually live upriver in the hinterlands or the highlands, move closer downriver to the coastline where the Malays reside, they usually adopt the typology of the Malay home. A

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<sup>3</sup> Chen Voon Fee, *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Architecture* (New York: Archipelago Press, 1998), 34-35.

Malay house is usually a single detached home and provides greater flexibility than the longhouse.



Figure 3. A hybrid vernacular longhouse in Mongkos, featuring a notched log staircase and zinc roof, 2023, Azmah Arzmi.



Figure 4. Azmah Arzmi, “The gallery, or *ruai*, where social activities take place in the longhouse”, 2023. Source: Courtesy of the author.

It is also raised on posts and the private spaces are intermediated by a social space in front at the main entrance. Unlike the Dayak Longhouse, the Malay house is only built for one family at a time and can be incrementally added over time as the family expands. Usually the more private the space, such as the bedroom, the higher it is situated within the home. The Dayaks often refer to the Malay house typology as *rumah limas*, which is now becoming the most dominant typology dotting the rural landscapes of Sarawak.

Nowadays, with the construction of highways and roads throughout Borneo, the Dayaks began moving away from their communities and built their homes along the roads rather than the river. They sometimes own their own fruit orchards or cash crop plantations such as pepper or palm oil, the roads helping to supply their produce to the cities. Their houses change over time as they begin to accumulate wealth or expansion of family members. Their changing lifestyles, economic and social mobility is often reflected in the transformative process of their homes, as demonstrated in the following case study.

Philip (74) and Sinyong (68), a married Iban couple, are farmers who cultivate palm oil crops. They reside in a modest village, Kampung Tungkah Dayak near the mouth of the Batang Sadong river, 72km away from Kuching. This stand-alone house (fig. 5) was originally made from timber in the 1970s when they first set up residence. It was a typical vernacular post-and-beam tropical house, raised on stilts, with storage underneath. There was the main structure in the middle and auxiliary parts attached on each side. Over time, as the couple bore five children, they added a ground floor and demolished the auxiliary parts to replace them with rooms made out of concrete walls and glass louvred windows (fig. 5). The family still retained the (now) upper floor of the original timber structure, only to replace the materiality of the roof and windows, along with added concrete foundation. Both floors of the main structure consist of a master bedroom, bedrooms and living rooms. The auxiliary part on the west consists of wet areas such as kitchen, toilet, along with dining area, storage and 'hang-out' area. The eastern auxiliary part contains an additional bedroom, extended living space and guest room. Their children have grown up and moved away, though their youngest daughter still live with them. However, their house is still expanding, and fig. 6 shows Philip and one of his sons currently working on constructing a veranda connected to the western auxiliary side. These extra spaces are intended to accommodate their extended family during festive seasons when their adult children and grandchildren come to visit.

To comprehend this other dimension of vernacularity in Borneo, one must acknowledge the indigenous peoples' need for self-actualization while negotiating their cultural identity in the face of modernization and globalization. John Turner<sup>4</sup> argued that one should also view housing as a verb, i.e., as a process of regenerating itself in the context of the users' livelihood. His second law of housing looks at what the house does, not what it is. In the case of Philip's family home, a clear understanding of the domestic relationships explains how

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<sup>4</sup> John Turner and Robert Fichter, *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 151.

spaces are adapted and parts retrofitted over time. Peter Kellett<sup>5</sup> noted that acculturation takes place when indigenous ethnic groups migrate to the cities and set up homes. Imitation in design and building practice of their homes are an attempt to validate their aspirations to succeed, with the audience being the neighbours. This is especially true of Philip's 1970s home, as they imitated the structure of Malay houses.



Figure 5. The house of Philip and Sinyong, both farmers who own a small palm oil plantation, 2022, Rio Ferdinand and Paul Natu.



Figure 6. Philip and one of his sons building an extension to their home to cater for family gatherings and rituals, 2022, Paul Natu.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kellett, “Original Copies? Imitative Design Practices in Informal Settlements”, *Archnet-IJAR, International Journal of Architectural Research* 7, n.º 1 (2013): 151-161.

### **Vernacular Home as a Subject rather than Object**

While it is true that these pure wooden indigenous houses of Borneo need to be preserved and documented in the form of open-air museums, the problem lies therein in treating them as, in the words of Peter Kellett a “static cultural model”<sup>6</sup> to be consumed by tourists and traditional architecture enthusiasts. This obsession with “purity”, to only validate vernacular indigenous architecture that is only made from pure timber and disregard their hybrid modern variant is very much a colonial mindset. Modernity is not an all-encompassing evil. It provides opportunities for self-actualization, transcends boundaries, allows indigenous peoples to pursue education, participate in the global economy, use advanced technology for their benefit, as well as speed up communication and thus improve quality of life. This concept lends credence to the indigenous people of Sarawak, as the morphological changes of their vernacular dwellings reflect their participation in modernizing ways of life. In conventional research on Borneo architecture, there is a lack of attention to the lived experience of indigenous peoples, as if they do not play a large part in the preservation of their own heritage.

This dichotomy between contemporary hybrid vernacular home and the traditional vernacular house exists within the discourse of Southeast Asian architecture. Open-air museums in Borneo owe their existence in large part due to the recognition of the value of traditional architecture and materiality during the colonial period (fig. 7). This perception also influenced a sense of pride and national identity in the post-colonial era. However, this objectification of the houses as an aesthetic, ‘cultural static model’ has no place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, seeing that cultural identities of the Dayaks are becoming more fluid, amalgamated in response to the evolving social and economic contexts. To overcome this matter, it is essential to decolonize the architectural exhibitions within open-air museums by considering the house as an active subject. This entails addressing the house as a container of social activities which creates and is created by meaningful practices.<sup>7</sup>

### **Decolonizing Open-Air Museums in Borneo**

Currently, open-air museums are based off colonial archives and imperialist projects. Information on indigenous vernacular architecture was collected in previous centuries through drawings, travel diaries, government reports, expedition journals or paintings by explorers from Western countries and then curated in the libraries and museums. The nature of which this research was approached and studied, needs to be adapted and decolonized. Decolonization of open-air museums in Borneo does not mean restitution of objects, but rather, a mode of practice on how information about the houses and their contexts can be disseminated. Open-air museums can also complement their housing artefacts with anthropological and ethnographic studies, shedding light on the local communities they are supposed to represent.

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<sup>6</sup> Kellett, “Original Copies?..”, 151-161

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Vellinga, “Living Architecture: Re-imagining Vernacularity in Southeast Asia and Oceania”, *Fabrications* 30, n.º 1 (2020): 11-24.



Figure 7. Tourists admiring the Baruk house, a typology associated with the Bidayuh ethnic group, 2023, Azmah Arzmi.

Another option is to encourage the co-production of knowledge and participatory methods. Local communities, native experts who have experienced building houses in rural settlements should be involved in the interpretation and representation of their houses during temporary exhibitions in museums. Digitalization and social media offer avenues for the public to share their oral histories and records of their multi-generational family homes. Through GIS and mapping research methods, open-air museums can also contribute to geographical understanding by showing the public the areas where longhouses and the *rumah limas* exist, bringing awareness to the distribution of housing styles across Borneo. Furthermore, open-air museums can depict the evolution of housing and its adaptation to changing times, highlighting the transition from river-based communities to road-connected settlements. Reinterpreted narrations of cultural practices and recognizing current building methods provide a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal of the people's lives and acknowledge how houses transform over time.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 12.

Educational programs could be introduced, as open-air museums are frequently visited by schoolchildren, university students and academics. These study trips should be tailored by providing opportunities to engage with people from local communities and promoting dialogues that promote critical thinking. Vernacular architecture often does not involve any registered architects, as they are made by skilled carpenters with inherited building knowledge from their forefathers. Open-air museums have done little to recognize the creativity, autonomy, and intelligence of these builders. Local workshops with the local artisans and village craftsmen could be held within these open-air museums, to showcase their skills as well as support their livelihood, thus preserving intangible cultural heritage.

### Conclusion

Memories and local knowledge of the indigenous people in Borneo do not disappear, despite a history of colonization and modernity.<sup>9</sup> As they relocate and recontextualize themselves in new urban or rural environments, they are open to interpretations in the production of spaces, which are articulated in the transformation of their homes. It is worth recording the evolving forms of their vernacular homes, as they represent the negotiation of cultural identity, which is stabilized through their collective and social memory that inform their everyday practices.

Hence, open-air museums are not only places where local architectural traditions are preserved, but also represent the national and cultural identity of the communities to which the vernacular houses belong. Open-air museums need to ensure their stability in order to fully capitalize on their distinctive resources. They should maximize their intellectual interactions with the public, transcending their traditional role as preservers of collective memory, and actively embrace the responsibility of critically examining history.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Silvia Spolaor and Vitor Oliveira, "Urban Forms of Informality: Decoloniality as a Perspective for Morphological Studies", in *Formal Methods in Architecture*, ed. by Sara Eloy, David Leite, Viana Franklim Morais et al. (Lisbon: Springer, 2021), 197-205.

<sup>10</sup> Rentzhog, *Open Air Museums...*





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