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Situated Design: Participatory exercises for an appropriate architecture within Wichi Indigenous communities in Argentina

Abstract

The transfer of typologies, technologies and materials promoted by development programmes does not usually take into account the solutions of form and function with which the Indigenous communities of Central Chaco give meaning to their architecture. The contents and designs promoted from a centralised management of decisions are implemented by agencies with the capacity to influence policies that are unaware of the local conditions and the trajectories of the peoples on which they have an impact. On the other hand, it will be shown how design education in Argentina focuses on other issues. From different theoretical guidelines of Latin American critical thought, the need to decolonise the principles of modernity towards alternatives where the point of origin is to be found in subaltern knowledge will be raised. Within this framework, the work explores the logics of the social construction of habitat through participatory design processes that allow the communities to be elevated as actors with their own voice and capacity to design programmes with local identity, through action research projects in the Indigenous territory of Lhaka Honhat in the province of Salta, Argentina.

Introduction

The way of inhabiting Gran Chaco has been modified over time. From a nomadic tradition, the Indigenous groups that lived in it designed vegetal technologies for the construction of shelters. They were organised in systems of temporary villages that adapted to the variability of the geographical conditions of the area they inhabited. As described by Argentine theorist De La Cruz (1997), the colonisation of Gran Chaco has had different expressions, based on religion, state policies and, today we could say, based on the market. This historical process has resulted in a tendency towards sedentarisation (De La Cruz 1997). However, local groups have been able to resist many of these influences, defying the advances of supposed development in the region.

This paper presents the results of research carried out within an Indigenous territory located in the current province of Salta,

Argentina, on the border with Paraguay and Bolivia, also known as the Pilcomayo River area (Figure 1). This territory comprises the ex-fiscal lots 14 and 55 and is called Santa Victoria Este. From a decolonial perspective, this research proposes to establish a dialogue between the historical processes that have marked the housing situation in Gran Chaco and the issue of design education in Argentina. Furthermore, some exercises focused on architecture will be analysed, which are the result of participatory work with members of the Indigenous communities of *Lhaka Honhat*¹ that inhabit this territory and students and researchers from the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urbanism of the University of Buenos Aires (FADU at UBA). To close, reflections are proposed

¹ Lhaka Honhat means 'Our Land' in Wichi language. It is the name of the Indigenous Association founded in 1992, which represents the five cohabiting Indigenous groups: Chorote, Chulupí, Tapiete, Toba, and Wichi.

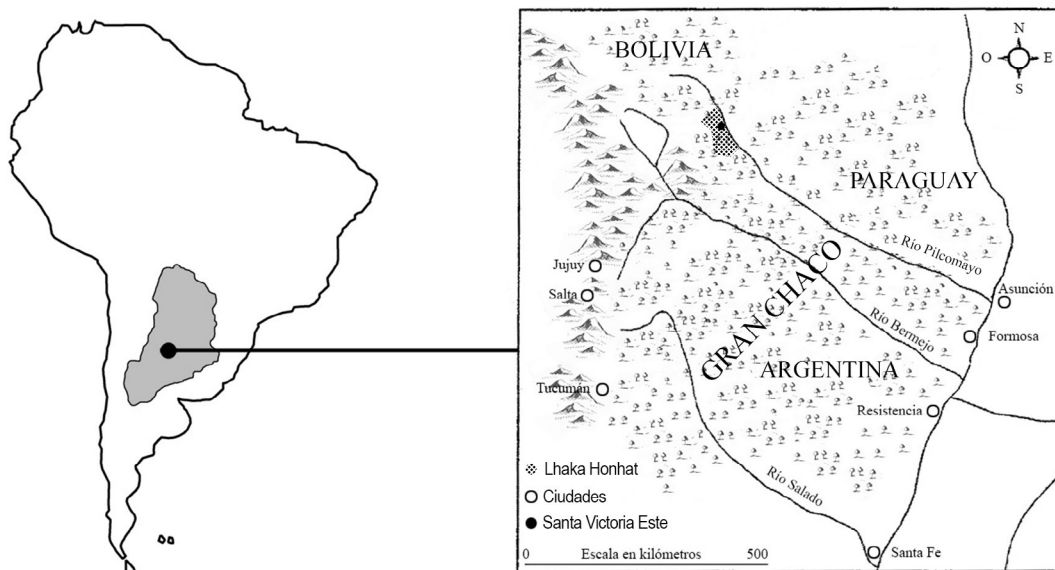


Figure 1: Location of the Gran Chaco (own elaboration)

on the possibilities of generating critical thinking that allow us to question current training in design degree studies to think of possible futures that have an impact both inside and outside university.

A history of mobility

(a) Hup, the walking house

Which people in the past used to make their houses like this: they collected branches and bent them, afterwards, they used to put straw, and on top of it some sticks for the wind not to blow the straw. People before were not used to staying in the same place, they frequently transferred to the places where they wanted to go. That was their tradition, they used to move, and they would do it peacefully, since at that time there were just Indigenous people in this region. This is how houses started to be called hup [in Wichi language], what means grass, and even when it afterwards was made of mud, it remained being called hup. (Dixon 2014: 30, own translation).

A member of the Santa María Indigenous community, Dixon, described the way of life based on mobility and the characteristics of the Wichi domestic space. His words coincide with the observations made by historians and researchers, who describe the construction of shaded shelters and the movement of family groups in the territory, as will be shown below. These buildings had common features, such as a circular or oval dome-shaped floor plan, despite certain variations in their construction or morphological techniques. Panels made of tacuara reeds and aive

or paja brava grasses were placed on a structure of curved branches tied with plant fibres (Bennett 1949; Nordenskjöld 1929; Braunstein 1981). These plant solutions represent a prefabricated system, which could facilitate their execution by dividing tasks and transporting them from extraction places to assembly sites. At the same time, the entire structure was not always covered, but the cases varied according to the degree of permanence, use of the site, the incidence of wind and rain, the degree of sunlight, etc. According to anthropologist John Palmer, these kinds of buildings were usually the work of women. Afterwards, with the incorporation of the wooden support in the 20th century, this occupation shifted to men (Palmer 2005). Often the structures were limited to acting as windbreaks, and in the case of less prolonged stays, their construction was not necessary. The location was organised radially around the fire, and its area of use was marked by the clearing of the ground. The cleared sector identified the limits of a dynamic system of domestic appropriation of the landscape whose solutions were adapted to the ecological cycles of the monte (forest). The use of natural materials that made up the construction technology played a leading role in the mobility processes thanks to their biodegradable characteristics.

The concept of mobility has been reflected by authors from the early 20th century (e.g. Boggiani 1900; Karsten 1932; Palavecino 1936; among others). However, the incorporation of the toponymic perspective came later. That is, the naming of places, linking them with

criteria of classification, significance and appropriation of the areas of the monte, the scope of which becomes part of each group's sense of belonging to their area of circulation (see for example: Miller 1979; Wright 1991; Censabella 2009; Salamanca 2011; Braunstein 2012; Tola and Medrano 2014). The *monte* and water have a scope that can be considered as organisers of mobility systems. Likewise, they are transformed into many of the meanings that structure cosmological aspects, cardinal orientation schemes, spatial location parameters, and other criteria that remain valid in the occupation and use of the monte. In the case of the territory of study, a toponymic study was carried out (Lhaka Honhat 2002). This work has been a fundamental tool presented in the ongoing legal case for the rights of the territory that they ancestrally occupy (Carrasco 2009).² The precise request is community land rights, without internal divisions, which would allow for the continuity of mobility as a way of life and fair access to the commons.

This research has revealed that, although there is movement in the territory, it tends to take place in smaller spaces of time and place. The home is taken as the point of departure, often returning the same day to the place of settlement. In other words, there has been a process of sedentarism motivated by various factors that are discussed below.

(b) New constructing technologies

We understand sedentarisation in the area as a historical process, associated with colonisation. De La Cruz (1997) states that there are accounts of expeditions as early as 1586. In the 18th and 19th centuries, there was an important religious influence in the area. Afterwards, there were military campaigns in different time periods to conquer the area by the state.³ Another strategy for the demarcation of the borders of the nation state was to send criollo families (who do not consider themselves indigenous) to the Chaco region, promising to grant them land titles. This phenomenon took place at the beginning of the 20th century.

These influences of colonisation, in particular the arrival of the criollos and the missions, brought to the area new ways of life associated with sedentarisation. The new construction systems installed in the territory—for instance the wooden supports—were partially incorporated by the Indigenous groups, as reported by authors from the first half of the 20th century. The roof was then separated

² The case is between the Lhaka Honhat Indigenous Association and the Argentine State. In 2020, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled in favour of the five Indigenous communities represented by Lhaka Honhat, requiring the state to grant land titles as commons within six years (Carrasco 2020).

³ For example the so-called desert campaigns during the governorship of President Julio Roca in the 1880s.

from the walls. The concept of the ranch appeared, was incorporated and redefined, and some of its technological solutions are still in use today. Its construction, from the observations during fieldwork, can be characterised as described below.

The essential comfort of shade is always guaranteed by the construction of a roof. Then, the building process continues by closing off certain sectors for the configuration of the different environments where two main uses prevail: the contained space for sleeping, and the semi-covered space where most of daily life takes place. The environments are recognised as densities or shelters materialized by the roof (shade), the shelter from the wind (protection) and the cleanliness of the terrain (limits). The kitchen can form part of this continuous space, or, as in most cases, form an independent semi-covered space in which the fire plays a leading role. Whether they are areas under the same roof or independent for complementary uses, the presence of this protection from the sun marks the structure of the house and its starting point. It can be said that Chaco domestic space is realised from the top down: first the horcones (columns), varas (beams) and largueros (rafters), the fajina or enramada (stick bundles) and the final completion of the roof with a mixture of earth and straw. Once the roof is finished, the vertical enclosures (walls, windows, doors, etc.) and floors are built in stages according to the needs of each family (bottom part of Figure 2).

The domestic unit is constructed, lived in and abandoned following the course of

the nuclear family that constitutes it. Its dynamic condition, appropriate to both social cycles and mobility, endures both in memory and in the practices of today's economy. For example, significant events such as the death of a family member determine the abandonment of their room. It is dismantled or left to degrade due to the action of the rains, returning to the earth thanks to its decomposition as a natural construction system. In other words, the domestic unit is part of the symbolic and ritual values that structure it. In addition, the materials used are obtained in the monte, involving botanical knowledge of tree species, types of wood, techniques for cutting and its treatment.

Nowadays, the living way is transformed by the incorporation of state housing in the territory. These houses are conceived from the perspective of urbanity and tinged by development perspectives, far removed from local values, as analysed in Trillo et al. (2024).

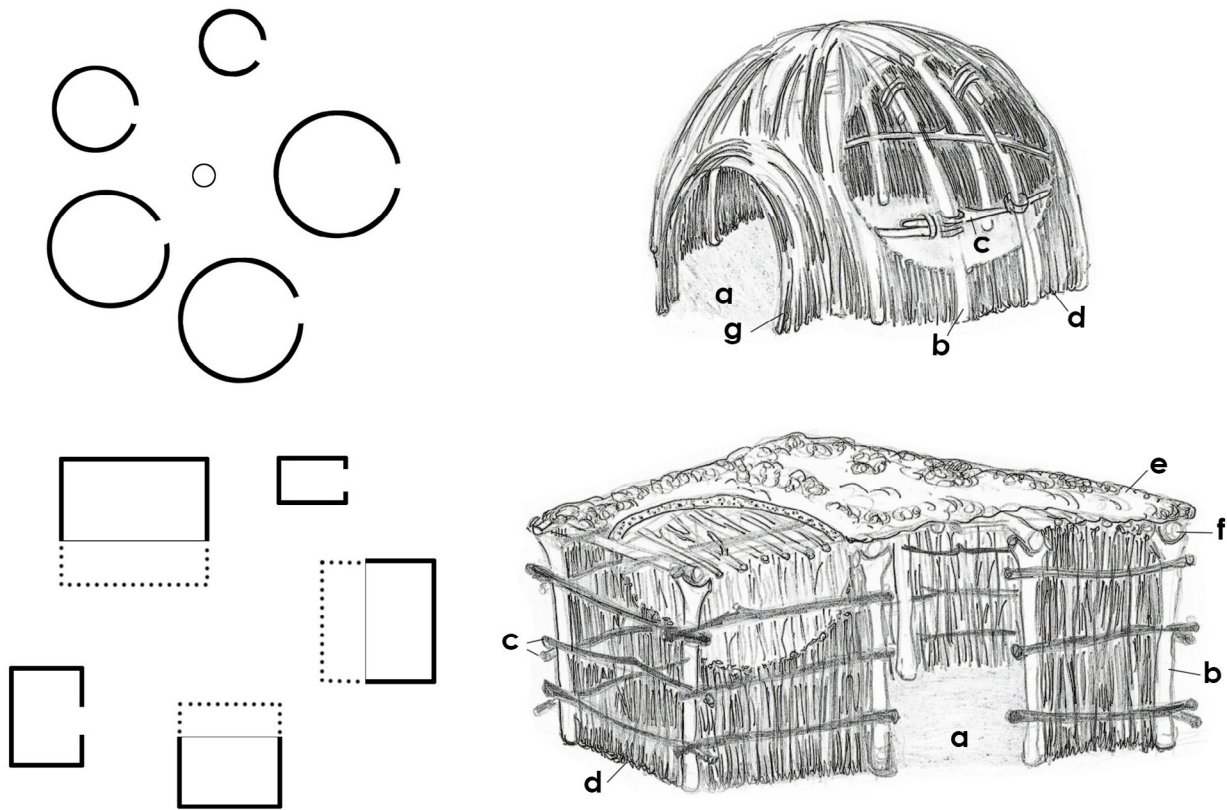


Figure 2. Left: spatial organization. Right: Parts of the hup (house). Top: with the technologies before the incorporation of the wooden support. Bottom: current typical criollo ranch. a) lapeh / b) ch'utey / c) lëp'alkaynek / d) nofwinek / e) lhetekcho / f) lëch'otjwa / g) lëjwamek o lamäy nay (redrawn by Silvia Quintana on Montani (2017), Wichi translations by Justino Pérez in 2023.

Decolonial theoretical framework

To begin with, it is necessary to highlight the very conception of territory held by Indigenous groups. As proposed by Arturo Escobar, based on his work with Latin American communities, territory must be understood separately from the modern concept of land as a capital good. It is necessary to understand it, he says, as "the material and cultural conditions for the reproduction of life," (Escobar 2014: 84). In the words of Cristina Pérez, the general coordinator of Lhaka Honhat: "We have like an affection to the territory, a respect, it is not just something

the territory. It is sacred" (Perez's talk at the University of Buenos Aires. June 6th, 2023). The territory is the setting in which their way of life is reproduced, and there is an affective condition of respect for it. This conception coincides with what the Indigenous Andean thinker Espejo Ayca describes as mutual nurturing. In her work, the author explains the relationship that exists in Andean Indigenous communities with all the things that surround them. This bond, she says, is a bond of maximum respect, where the things themselves are named as subjects (Espejo Ayca 2022). In

the words of Pérez, a similar conception can be glimpsed: one of total respect and affection.

These mentioned perspectives are descriptive of a worldview, an ontology that differs from the modern Western one. It is important to revise some aspects of the Western modernity that function towards an idea of development, where other ways of knowing are oppressed. This current Western world system, which has become globalised, some authors say, is the result of different forms of coloniality (Quijano 2000; Segato 2013).

For example, the coloniality of time, which implies that the temporal proposal is conceived as a single historical line, where the past represents not only what happened some time ago, but also what happens in other parts of the world, other than the central countries. The present and the future are represented in Europe (and today the United States) and the other expressions are linked to the past. In other words, the temporal dimension merges with the geographical dimension and defines modernity. Contemporaneity does not reflect a present, but a geopolitical position (Quijano 2000; Segato 2013). Segato proposes that this idea must be overcome, thinking of groups as historical vectors in different dimensions, with a shared past and a project for a common future (Segato 2013).

This thinking of Indigenous groups associated with the past can be identified within development plans that literally follow this conception in the name of development. Formulas and funding

are given, based on statistics that differ from local contexts, eradicating existing thoughts and local technologies. Within architecture, it is worth mentioning the existence of policies that respond to indicators of Unsatisfied Basic Needs (UBN) promoted by the United Nations (UN) through the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). In many cases, negative consequences arise, because justifying with such measurements, local knowledge is replaced and gets lost. In the local Argentinean context, for example, adobe constructions are blamed for the nesting and proliferation of the *vinchuca*, the agent that transmits the *Trypanosoma Cruzi* parasite that causes the *Mal de Chagas* disease. All this persists despite numerous investigations that have mitigated the negative perception of earthen constructions by precisely identifying the risk factors for vector nesting.⁴ Rurality and ancestral knowledge are directly cancelled out; they are considered obstacles to be eradicated.

In addition to these analyses, knowledge was structured in a hierarchical way, what can be seen as the coloniality of knowledge. In this conception, academic development has been (auto) placed at the top of the pyramid, what Castro Gómez (2007) calls the hybris of the zero point. In the section that follows, the focus is on how these concepts are reflected in design and architecture formal education in Argentina.

⁴ See for example Rotondaro (1999), Rolón et al (2016), Mandrini et al (2018)

Decontextualized education

Unfortunately, nowadays such things are still taught. It can be confirmed, we have learnt almost nothing. The formal and traditional educational system, and specifically in the topic [Indigenous groups in Argentina] shows an unreal reality, which keeps on being reproduced (but which they insist that we accept and naturalize). Why are Indigenous groups taught in the past tense? And not in the present, as social actors leading struggles and conquering their own rights? Why do we allow children to be taught like this? (...) This is the homework given to an 11-year-old. They lived, they settled, they harvested, they manufactured, they had, and many, many more verbs, but always in the past tense. None of them in present form. Why? Isn't it time to rethink education? (Post of Pérez. Salta city, May 2023).

The theoretical concepts outlined in the last section are evident in the quote from Cristina Pérez above. The current situation of Indigenous people is not a topic in education. Moreover, at universities, the so-called classical (European) theories are followed to the letter. Particularly at FADU, Beatriz Galán stated on several occasions that formal education avoids the context, generating content unrelated to the Argentine reality. In her words:

By default, traditional teaching [at FADU] is not systemic, it excludes context, closing the door to complex thinking. At most, what is understood by context in traditional teaching is something very immediate to the product, a scenario of use, but the product is not considered as nesting in a cultural network. (Galán 2008: 24).

The author proposes that to explain this cultural network, it is necessary to understand the context as a complex system. Innovation, according to her, should be understood as a "collective mechanism of knowledge accumulation in complex systems" (Galán 2008: 25).

This raises the need to incorporate other types of knowledge into design and architecture education. By way of exemplification, some exercises worked on in 2022 and 2023 within the framework of a network of research projects are presented below.⁵ A premise was that the root should be related to the Indigenous perspectives, generating design and "architecture whose point of origin is to be found in subalternised spatial conceptions," (Mignolo cited in Farrés Delgado 2016, p.186). The research was conceived as research through design. This category belongs to the classification popularised by Frayling (1993).⁶ It proposes, as called by Findeli et al. (2008), results that are relevant in three different fields: in research, in the field of design and architecture disciplines and in the field of formal education in these mentioned disciplines. In the specific case of the project, it is the participatory exercises carried out with students and researchers with FADU at UBA and members of the

⁵ Agudin's PhD in Social Anthropology and Design at the University of Bern is funded by the Swiss National Foundation. This project gave rise to Research Project PIA 22-001 at FADU-UBA with the participation of researchers: Malena Pasin, Mercedes Ceciaga, Lautaro Safón, Martina Cassiau, Valeria Díaz, and the authors.

⁶ Research for, about and through design.

Lhaka Honhat Indigenous communities that form the corpus of the data. In the next section, different experiences will be analysed.

Exercises focused on architecture

Based on the experience of a work team within the territory, students from different design disciplines at FADU were offered the possibility of doing a research internship in a project anchored in that institution. From architecture, a wide range of topics were addressed, such as construction systems, form and function of the domestic unit, symbolic and ritual aspects, uses of the built space and its link with the territory. Thanks to the nature of the exercise and the students of different careers who participated (industrial, textile and graphic design), exchange experiences were obtained that allowed an enriching complement between the different disciplines. Below, the experience resulting from the relation between textile and constructive records of local knowledge is presented.

During the field work that lasted one year for Agudin, several visits to the territory for Trillo, and a weeklong experience for the students, different local groups have been accompanied in the process of collecting, spinning, dyeing and weaving the chaguar (*Bromelia hieronymi*). There are ethnographic references about the use of chaguar to produce textiles since the beginning of the 20th century (Lozano 1941 [1733]; Nordenskiöld 1912; Rosen 1924; Schmidt 1937; Millán

1944; among others). In the early 1990s, anthropologists von Koschitzky (1992) and Alvarsson (1992) presented a comprehensive study of textile bags, from the production process to their uses and meanings. Montani (2017), investigated the meanings of designs in ethnolinguistic works carried out among some Wichi Indigenous peoples. These patterns of figures and ornaments formed from geometries generated by the combination of coloured threads dyed with natural tint are related to vernacular names and meanings that tell local history. As part of the main lines of work, different textile figures in force in the area were surveyed (Figure 3), which reflect the great variety of designs used in the chaguar woven bags known as llicas.

Among the construction skills of Wichi vernacular architecture addressed through knowledge exchange and participatory design exercises (Figures 4–6), the use of vegetable fibres and wood for the formation of closed and open frames in the construction of walls and enclosures stands out. The closed frames are covered with earth mortar to give rise to the construction system of quinchá and bahareque. The open frames are used as permeable envelopes that facilitate cross ventilation, thermal comfort and the creation of spaces. Based on this logic, both knowledge of textile and construction design were linked to materialise solutions on the architectural scale of the envelopes. For this purpose, the zigzag or elbow weave, known in Wichi as *katoltes wok chojnhiche*, was chosen. Based on this logic, formal proposals were made, taking the lattice to an architectural

scale. That is, considering the lattices as a significant element of the Wichi vernacular architecture, they were taken as an axis to explore participatory design alternatives applied to the construction

of permeable walls used as enclosures, sunshades, partitions and other functions of containment of spaces for shade and social gathering of the family group.



Figure 3: Patterns of textile chaguar bags from Lhaka Honhat Indigenous territory (work within the research project).



Figure 4: Mapping of wood and plant fibre lattices used in vernacular construction (work within the research project).

The architectural result of the weave represents what in textile design is called a broken twill (Figure 5). For its manufacture, wooden sticks of palo bobo were used, mounted on frames using the vernacular technique of woven cane ceiling.⁷

⁷ The work in the territory was possible thanks to the collaboration of the artisans Amadeo Frías and the brothers Justino and Adolfo Pérez, from the community of Cañaveral and the authors. Students Julián Lichy, Joaquín Nigoul and Martín De Rito participated in the design process with experiences located in the territory.

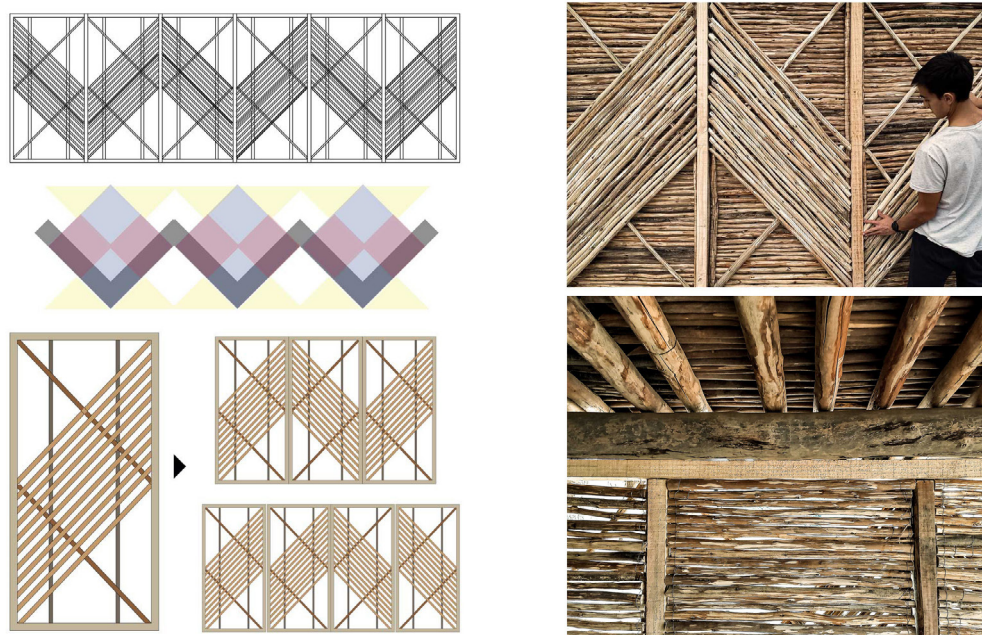


Figure 5: Design of enclosures based on textile patterns (exercises carried out within the research project, student involved: Julián Lichy).

Other exercises were carried out in 2023 in connection with the Garbarini Chair of Industrial Design for the FADU at UBA in the last year of the degree. Based on bibliographic research and a study trip to the territory coordinated by the authors, the project explorations were focused on shadow architectures. The documentation of local construction systems and the knowledge exchange generated in meetings and workshops have provided numerous vernacular answers that are taken as input for the search of suitable design solutions: independent wooden

structure, *horcón*⁸, typology of facing rooms, integrated galleries, intermediate spaces between internal and external areas, shaded roofs, envelopes, open and closed walls. All these strategies respond to peasant and indigenous knowledge that transcend beyond the material aspect of their constructions towards broader meanings that are part of an architecture with its own significances.

⁸ In Spanish, *horcón* is the column composed by a trunk and limb stump.

On this basis, the students proposed a modular over-roof system that provides a setting for the generation of shade and cross ventilation as a thermal comfort strategy. In this way, a communal shaded space is generated to live according to the dynamics of the family group (Figure 6). The design of anchors and connecting pieces among the posts facilitates their disassembly and transportation in case of need to move them to new sites according to the economies of mobility and the environmental factors presented throughout the research. In addition,

the formal proposal also refers to one of the chaguar weavings, known in the Wichi language in the area as fwokatsaj ch'otey (armadillo's ears). It is worth mentioning that the anchoring pieces respond to technical criteria that allow their resolution with tools accessible in any blacksmith workshop and low-cost materials. Beyond their passive properties for thermal control, the over-roofs are presented as an appropriate solution for water harvesting in contexts of scarcity and difficulty in accessing this resource, like this territory in winter.

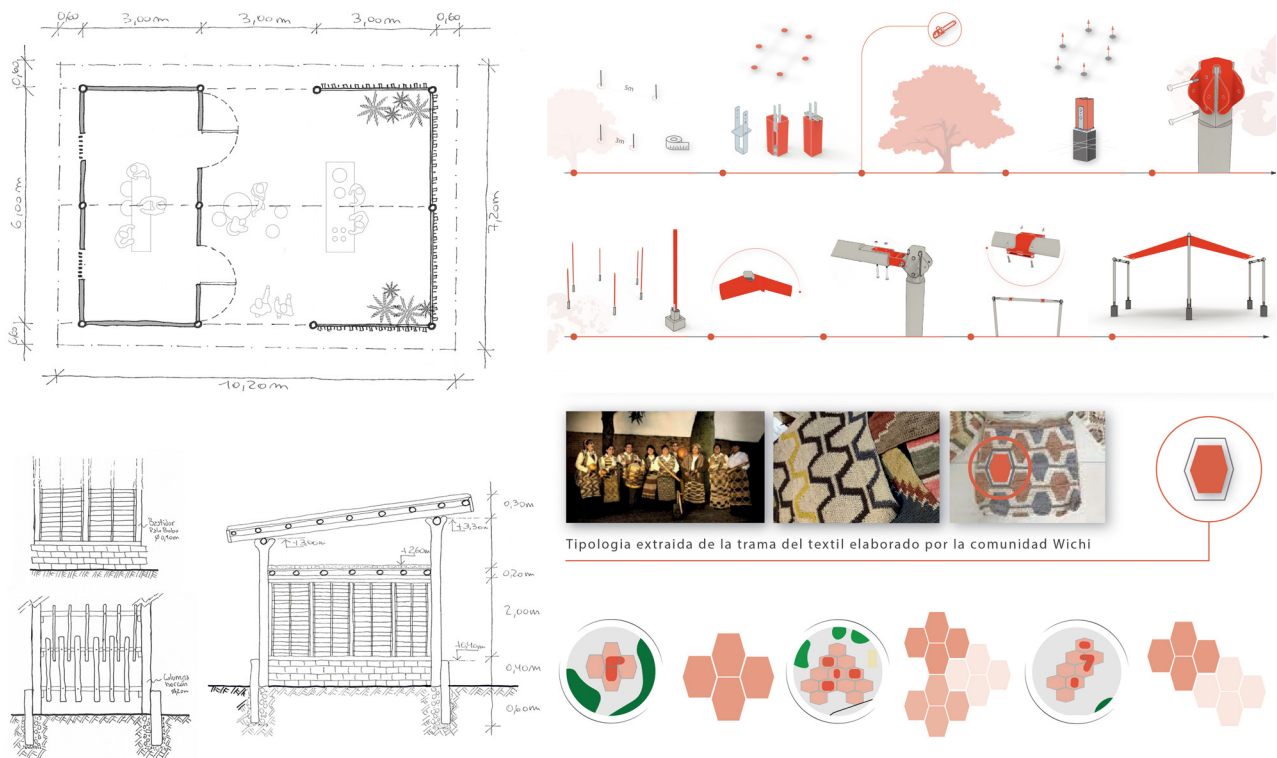


Figure 6. Left: exercises of participatory design of a domestic unit with materials and knowledge from the monte (illustrations: Trillo). Right: design of modular and removable over-roofs for mobility (exercises carried out within the research project, students involved: Bengolea Salvador, De Rito Martin, Nigoul Joaquín).

Conclusion

In the exercises presented, the aim was to work beyond market logic, which strongly governs education in design and architecture today within the context of Argentina. An attempt was made to dialogue with another culture, also belonging to the country. Such works can be triggers that allow us to reflect on the professional education that is proposed in universities. Is it possible to get out of the Hybris of zero point that Castro Gómez mentions by generating dialogues of knowledge?

It is usually considered that in design and architecture studies there is an opportunity to generate innovation. On the one hand, from knowledge

transmitted through words, like this paper, but also with material production, as shown by the exercises done. Far from thinking of them as finished solutions, it is proposed to see them as devices for opening dialogues, which transcend the material to allow us to reflect in a different dimension, to question historical and current parameters. It is thus considered that collective inquiry with community participation represents a horizon from which to think about innovation. We think it is necessary to question the principles of global modernity towards alternatives where participatory design processes allow communities to be elevated as actors with their own voice and the ability to design programs with local identity.

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