

# **(Un)-Controlled : a conversation with Denise Bertschi and Barbara Maçaes Costa**

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(UN)-CONTROLLED

A conversation with  
Denise Bertschi and  
Barbara Maçaes Costa

Karina Breeuwer  
Julia Martignoni

At the Rolex Learning Center we meet with architect Barbara Maçães Costa and artist Denise Bertschi for a discussion. To kick off the conversation, we introduce our guests with two pairs of images. The first pair focuses on national borders, while the second deals with the separation between the built environment and nature.

J&K Migration and the environmental crisis affect our daily lives. Nevertheless, there still seems to be a lack of awareness for these issues in the architectural education—regardless of whether the schools are technically or theoretically oriented. Yes, as students we are often sensitized to a greener and more sustainable/durable architecture, but the question remains what that actually means. What are the responsibilities of an architect today in relation to these crisis? What will they be in the future?

BC I'm personally interested in the relation between architecture and land, and the limit separating them—how far this limit needs to go, how strict that border needs to be. If you understand one of the basic definitions of architecture as the creation of a domestic interior, then you have a whole range of interiority and exteriority that architecture can perform; you can go from the total immunization of a militarized and violent border control, to a softer limit that acts as an environmental threshold, a veil that separates you from your context and protects you, while also sensitizing you to what is happening outside, blurring the limits of where you stop and the world begins.

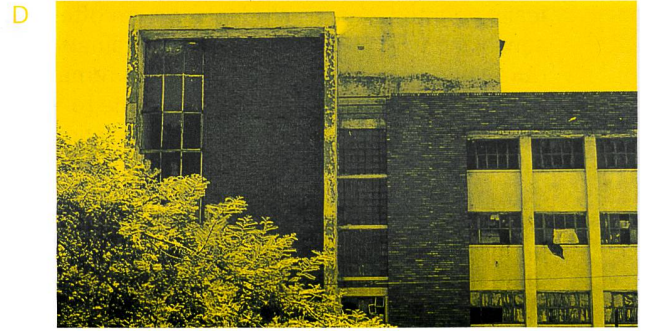
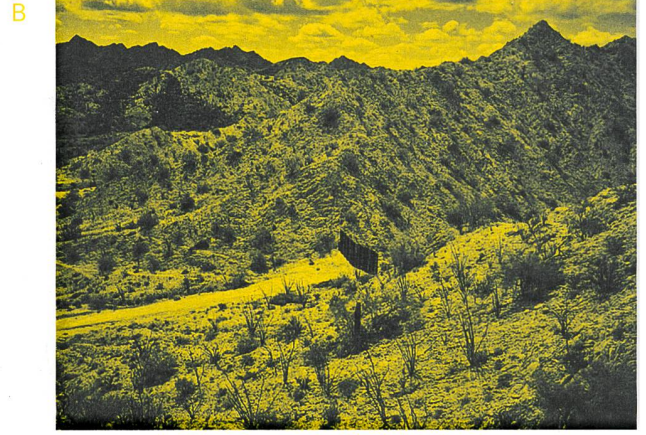
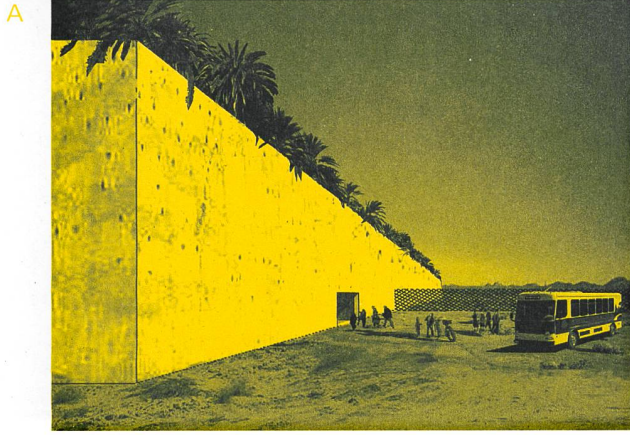
I appreciate the opposition between these two groups of images where one embodies this harsh, top-down definition, and the other a more self-generative version. The projects represent two classic tropes of architectural relations with the vast open landscape. OFFICE's project is the oasis, and Wright's one is the back-to-the-land camp. The first image is about immunization, a clear border, with a sharp contrast between the domesticated inside and the uncomfortable and arid outside. Wright's campus is attuned and blurred with nature. Wright's campus is more in tune with nature. Paradoxically, something unites them, that could be understood as a fetishisation of nature, especially in terms of a certain mythology of the desert. The oasis is a device historically employed as a caravansary by North-African and Middle-Eastern tribes—used to facilitate movement for merchants—but here it is used to control migrants. It works as a kind of paradise garden but it is also a political device for sorting humans

and controlling their ability to move. It gives a green appearance to a machine that is violent and extremely racialized. I wonder if this aesthetic choice makes the violence of these devices more evident, or if it green-washes them.

The second image, Taliesin, is a kind of 20th century version of Renaissance villeggiatura, reflecting an urban sensitivity towards nature. You step out of your city context to contemplate something beautiful but life itself is still connected to the metropolis and depends on it. F. L. Wright is in many ways the inventor of a modern architecture that blurs the borders between outside and inside. In this way, it is the opposite of the oasis. But this openness does not necessarily mean approximation, because it could be argued that some design choices, such as the interpretation of desert animal skeletons into architectural structures, create a certain distancing, by reducing the desert to a cliché, a stereotyped image.

DB As my background is more artistic, I would like to comment on these other two images and on the political aspect of image making. The first photograph shows a desert, a mountainous landscape with a road and an absurd little border which you can easily circumvent. It documents its absurdity and non-functionality. But what does it mean to photograph this and show it in a gallery, in a western context? The people affected by this image are not the ones suffering from the situation shown in this image. As we are currently sitting in the RLC—an extremely 'protected building' and privileged academic institution—how can we be sensitized by the work of this photographer? If we ask ourselves how to act in this moment of crisis, it helps to analyze these methodologies of representation very specifically. Part of this is to question your own artistic practice and to ask how it could have a transformative power.

J&K As an artist, Denise, working on a critical examination of Switzerland's colonial past and its neutrality, you must be confronted with these issues of borders and separation. How does this impact your practice? We asked you both



A OFFICE KGDVS, Border crossing,  
Anapra MEX-USA, 2005  
C Antônio de Cunha Telles,  
Indios da Meia Praia, 1975

B Frank Lloyd Wright, Taliesin West,  
Scottsdale Arizona, 1938  
D Denise Bertschi, Neutrality as an Agent,  
ARTIVIST, Johannesburg, 2018

to bring a relevant image on the topic, could you introduce yours?

DB The image I brought is a still taken from a video installation in Johannesburg. It documents six buildings which were linked to the Swiss-South African gold trade during apartheid. Extensive complex trade systems relocated the gold pool from London to Zürich at the time. We can safely say that a majority of these extraction commodities are still traded through Switzerland today. I travelled to South Africa with a cultural grant from Switzerland, which is paid with our taxes. But where do these come from? We know that the taxes paid by (unethically) acting multinationals based in Switzerland, such as Glencore, also flow into funds for our universities and cultural grants.

So what I try to do with this practice is first of all to produce an aesthetic for these invisible processes. We usually don't have an image for trade; its an email you write or a contract you sign behind closed doors. My goal with my practice therefore is to give a spatial impression of these places, to map and bring consciousness about strategic places where violent business has happened. In this image we see a modernist building built during the apartheid in a white segregated center of the city.

In the 90's at the end of the apartheid, this white segregated center was taken over by black population that reclaimed it. The white trade then moved away to a new segregated area. Buildings of the reclaimed center became ruins, or in this case squatted. The six buildings portrayed were linked to the UBS gold trade. I showed this video installation at the Swiss Art Awards in Basel, of which UBS is one of the main Sponsors. But what impact can these images have in an art fair, more than being a sensitization tool?

BC What it might do, is a modest goal but a crucial one: to point out contradictions. This is what interests me in this image of the border: it shows the contradiction of wanting to reinforce the border and the impossibility of actually doing it. The contradiction between the oasis utopia and the dystopia of total control becomes even more apparent. These often well-intentioned gestures are nevertheless betrayed by internal contradictions, by false consciousness, by things escaping the illusion of total control.

When looking at what and how architecture controls, the borders it tries to create, the inside/outside links it tries to immunize, it is also relevant to see how it fails to do so. How a white-coded modernist building from

the apartheid era gets subverted and re-appropriated by the people it was supposed to exclude. Perhaps even this ambiguous oasis in the Mexican desert might be imagined as a migrant sanctuary instead of a modern-day concentration camp.

These sort of images are suggestive because we consume images all the time. Sometimes things that look very inoffensive and integrated, low key and sensitive, might actually contain hidden dark sides. You can reflect, with this image, on the production of architecture as you reflect, Denise, on the production of art. Does the architect play the role of cultural sage in «solving» other people's problems? Who do our images really serve? Can architects channel the desires, aspirations and struggles of the people? Can we be critics of power and allies of struggle?

My image was taken from a documentary that was shot in Portugal, during the revolutionary period between the 1974 Carnation Revolution and the Constitution in 1976. Within this period, there were two crucial social movements for land-rights and housing rights that gave rise to the Agrarian Reform and the SAAL process, an architectural and political experiment intended to address the terrible housing conditions of the poor. A series of social housing complexes were commissioned by the government, partly financed by it and often self-built by the people. One of these projects became the subject of the documentary, from which my image is taken from. There were many similar projects, but the reason this «tin neighborhood», self-built by a fishing community on a beach of the Algarve, became famous is that it was mediatized. The documentary is called *Continuar a Viver ou Os Índios da Meia-Praia*, which means «Living on or The Indians of Meia-Praia». The people living there were known as «indians», a slur that denominates a typical dehumanization and racialization of poverty, because, despite being white and Portuguese, they were seen as wild, foreign, uncivilized. The documentary is a classic example of militant cinema. It dignifies and exalts the life of this community without condescension or romanticism. And this is a difficult balance to achieve. The director himself noted his initial difficulty in being perceived as an outsider who could represent a form of violence or uneven power whilst filming, because of the difference of social class.

DB Something similar in terms of social class and your own position as an outsider happened to me in Johannesburg: I was there with someone accompanying me because this part of the

city is a violent area and I was an embodiment of their (former) enemy. We started filming the building from quite far away when all of a sudden we heard these people chatting. The person with me luckily understood that they were worried that I would film this building and that it would result in someone buying it and gentrifying it. We eventually sat down and talked with them to explain the actual goal of this short film. That moment was crucial to realize the difficulties of your own position in this place.

We have to be very sensible when intervening in these environments as architects or artists.

BC What I think you are doing is monumentalizing something when you take something that looks banal and turn it into art, you make it visible within the culture. In my case, the documentary gave this anonymous neighborhood dignity and value. You can trace back the people in the documentary; we know who the people are today and their narratives matter. Through the derogatory word (indian), which turns these people into a stereotype, they have been represented as individuals who are part of a revolutionary history. Architecture that is not necessarily seen as beautiful by academia or bourgeois sensitivities can thus become historicized and seen as an alternative, subversive monument.

This epic moment when a collective of people rise up and move one of their houses became the symbol for the radical aspirations of the SAAL: to provide an architecture by the people, for the people, more than focusing on any specific style or authorship. To make architects the allies of the powerless rather than power.

J&K When talking about providing proper living conditions to endangered communities and excluded minorities through architecture or else, how do you link this to the idea of border immunization and with future changes that will necessarily happen with climate change?

BC Architecture shouldn't react to our environment merely by inventing technological fixes. It might seem like a paradox but, in my opinion, housing rights, land rights, initiatives against gentrification, enclosures and privatization of land, are much more effective ways of fighting climate change than the mere greening of construction.

This is because the environmental crisis is going to be played out as a crisis of who gets access to a comfortable lifestyle, and who gets excluded. It will be an issue of passports and borders

where the privileged get access to all the left resources. It's a class struggle, and the UN is warning of a future eco-apartheid, which will not be solved by trying to make capitalism less dirty, because that is not enough. Enriched populations will live in insulated paradises while others will be left outside to die, and this is a problem of hard borders.

You can measure that people in the Global North use up more resources than their territories provide, in order to maintain their bourgeois lifestyles. If everyone on the planet had the mean lifestyle of a person living in Switzerland, we would need almost three planets to sustain world population. In order to maintain this global inequality, resources from the South are extracted and brought up to the North, but the southern migrants are filtered out. Which takes us back to the image of the oasis, in this limited-access paradise garden that seems to be our current development model.

In that sense, I think it is relevant to revisit utopian and radical strategies and struggles for land justice. It seems impossible, right now, because the privatization of everything seems infeasible. Nevertheless, you can look back on social housing ideas that are unfashionable today but still very much valid, and proved successful not so long ago, such as the SAAL. How do we collectively make sure that everybody has access to a life worth living? How can we think up architectures that sensitize us to collective and common grounds, more than insulate us in our private lifeworlds?

I look at art because it makes contradictions visible, which are veiled by ideology. Architecture can build alternatives, especially academic architecture.

DB The role of art is this visualization of problematics and its mediation to a public. We need more than a sensitization: the role of activism and social, economic and spatial justice is crucial. Artists and activist lawyers could work together. There is a future in a collaboration between different roles. Through my PhD I research how Switzerland is entangled with foreign countries, not only today, but also how this happened in the past; we still see effects of a historically strong globalized Swiss merchants network, the extractions trade from three hundred years ago, and that made Switzerland a quasi imperial power even if it considered itself as a non-colonial country.

One method could be to start from the point where we are: which buildings are built with

what kind of money? What names do they bare? We don't need to travel far to see traces and understand these contexts, and become sensitive to our built environment. We are sitting in the RLC where at the entrance you can read the companies that sponsored it. This reveals the history of our extreme privilege. It's important to ask ourselves on whose expense this is happening. While Switzerland might appear as an extreme island of peace, the violence of extraction is ex-territorialized.

BC One has a tendency to see and represent cities as their strict footprint of settlement but we never really understand their true limits. Behind the city there is a huge «hinterland» that is needed to feed it. There is this beautiful quote from Jason W. Moore that says «Behind Manchester stands Mississippi». If you want to calculate the footprint of a city you have to calculate all its non-local hinterlands. You can see this with architecture as well, because some build-

ings can act as vestiges that let you trace back links between the metropolis and its colonies.

For the ecological crisis, this is crucial because we cannot understand the footprint of the Global North without tracing its tentacles into the Global South. So, the migrant crisis at our border is intimately connected with a myriad of resource frontiers deep within farther neo-colonial territories. And class struggles here are the flipside of racial/anti-colonial struggles there. The better we can render this visible, the more effective our ecological struggles can become.

*The conversation ends after three hours, but too quickly for our taste. Coming back to our first thought about architectural education and its approach to climate change and eco-apartheid, we still think that it should be more relevant in our curriculum.*

Born in 1996, is currently pursuing her Master's degree at EPFL after having completed her Bachelor's degree at the same institution.

Born in 1995, is currently pursuing her Master studies at ETHZ after having completed her Bachelor's degree at both EPFL and ETHZ.

Her research-based artistic practice is reflected in video-installations, photographs and the format of publications, in attempt to unmask Switzerland's political neutrality as an impossible balancing act.

Holds a Diploma in Architecture from the University of Porto and a Master in Drawing from the University of Lisbon. Her teaching focuses on environmental aesthetics and cartography as a situated language.

