

Dissolving the Equator: Boundary Deforming at the Start of a New Century

EDUARDO AQUINO
University of Manitoba

Artists and writers throughout the continent are currently involved in a redefinition of our continental topography. We imagine either a map of the Americas without borders, a map turned upside-down, or one in which borders are organically drawn by geography, culture, and imagination, not by the capricious fingers of economic domination.¹

Guillermo Gómez-Peña

THE PLACE OF ARCHITECTURE

Architecture, like any other art, translates the essence of a culture. It becomes part of a community's cultural formation. Understanding this, could we then consider Architecture as an important part of the identity of the Americas as a whole, uninterrupted, continuous territory? Could we reflect on the American territory (i.e. belonging to the continent of the Americas) as a contiguous culture, joining all the distinctive expressions, from Patagonia all the way to Alaska? Is there a sense of identity connected to the idea of a "New World", and if so, could we use Architecture as a means to measure and understand this cultural contiguity? The claim by Gómez-Peña, suggesting a *redefinition of our continental topography*, invites us to look at an issue that gradually increases in importance as the world rethinks and evolves its geographic and cultural borders. This is an opportune moment for architects and educators to ask: Who are we, Americans from all the Americas? While artists and writers are shifting the boundaries of what constitutes the notion of "local," architects face a different challenge. If art and writing are mediums that can be identified beyond locality by the nature of their reproducibility, conversely Architecture is the physical expression of a given site, always connected to a specific geographic location. The experience of Architecture and its territory exceeds the purely visual, and is less or non-transportable by its very nature. Architects could embrace the character of their medium in order to support relevant modes of reciprocity and communication. Traditionally, architects have always traveled. The practice and study of Architecture invites one to travel and explore new places and different cultures. Traveling has always been associated with the evolution of architectural ideas. This opportunity to meet in Havana (a significant midpoint between South and North) invites us to debate alternate modes of learning, pedagogy and practice that transcend geographic boundaries. Learning and researching the metier of Architecture requires a constant renovation of the methods we use to navigate through this age of global urbanism. Perhaps, and

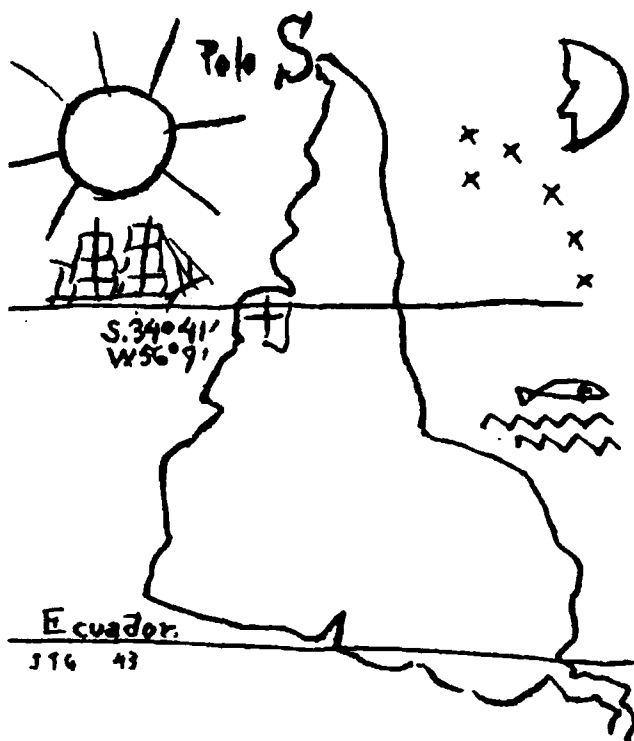


Fig. 1. Joaquín Torres-García, Upside-down map, 1943, ink on paper, Torres-García Family Collection, Montevideo.

most of all. I would like to begin to identify a new cultural landscape and a new sense of identity. A new sense which is not exclusively associated to policies, economies or geographies, but one that searches for more honorable meanings, to the making and thinking of an Architecture that recuperates the ability to tell stories up-and-down this vast territory. What follows is the identification of a few significant cultural turning points that celebrate cultural reciprocation. These moments also contributed significantly to the understanding that "a sense of place" is a result of the crisscrossing of different attitudes and ideas through the inversion of roles and paradigms. What I would like to propose here is a possible model for the exchange of experiences among architects of the Americas.

LE CORBUSIER

Architects experiment with place: we travel to discover new and different architectures. The architecture of Cuba, in its historical and modern traditions, will only intensify our experiences and we will return with transformed eyes, to once again evolve our practices, and develop our work as educators. Le Corbusier, a classic example, was profoundly influenced by travels made during his career. His *croquis de voyage et études* (e.g. the trips to Athens, Pompeii, and Rio de Janeiro) are the most famous evidence of his traveling.² Another example is Montreal's grain elevators, a main inspiration for *Towards a New Architecture*. Drawing was the tool to record his experiences and to absorb the maximum offered by the places he visited. One could trace the evolution of his thoughts through an analysis of his travel drawings. How rich would it be to study his evolution as an architect through an investigation of Brazilian or East Indian influences on his work? Is there a relation, for example, between Oscar Niemeyer's Pampulha with Corbusier's Chapel Notre-Dame du Haut, Ronchamp? After a first encounter in the early thirties during the design of the Ministry of Education and Health Building in Rio de Janeiro (1933), Corbusier and Niemeyer met again, now in 1947 in New York. They were both invited to design the United Nations Headquarters on the shores of the East River in Manhattan, as part of an international team of architects. The final scheme, known as Project 23-32, was the result of two schemes initially proposed by the two architects: Le Corbusier (23) and Oscar Niemeyer (32). An European architect meeting a South American architect in North America to design a building that would become one of the most important symbols of international cooperation, peace and democracy. As the International Modern movement made so clear, architectural ideas also travel. The successful collaborative experience of these two influential architects is one of the many inspirations to search for a new identity based on exchange.

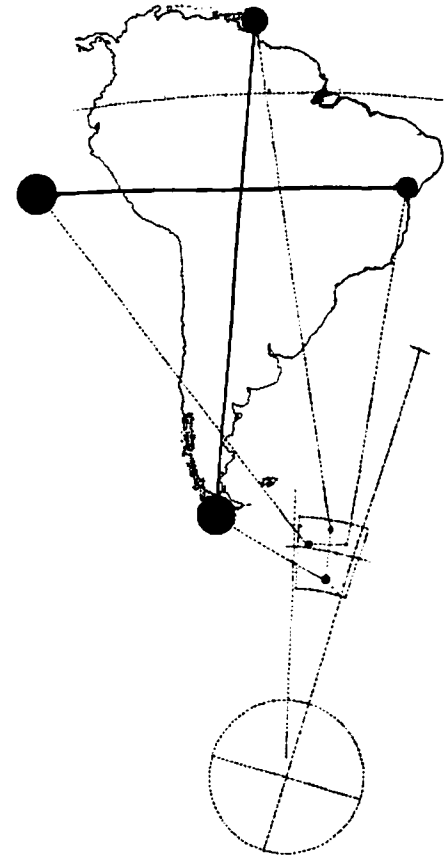


Fig. 2. porque anoté cuatro estrellas enfiguradas como una almendra (because I wrote down four stars formed like an almond). Open City collective, from *América*. Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, 1967.

SOUTH-NORTH/NORTH-SOUTH

Le Corbusier's travels to the new continent serves as a prime example of architectural exploration, pointing to another attitude among architects: the tradition of the old and the search for the new. The preeminence of European culture and economy in the shaping of our contemporary world has always supported a *horizontal* communication trend that goes East-West and West-East, especially between North America and Europe. Even before the exploration and colonization of the Americas the Europeans have always looked with curiosity at the "New World" (Columbus, Darwin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's the Noble Savage, etc.) and since the explorations of the 14th and 15th centuries the Americas have always developed this special fascination. When the Portuguese royal family fled Europe to escape the Napoleon's forces, they exiled to Brazil, and along with them brought the French Academy (the so-called French Mission) to establish the educational system in Brazil based on Eurocentric knowledge and values. The Municipal Theater of Rio de Janeiro is one of the most permanent manifestations of this European eclectic influence in Latin America. However, the opposite is also true. The new

continent looks toward the old in search of experience and knowledge. Traditionally, North American academic architecture studios look for overseas experiences in European countries more than any other region in the world. An example to notice is the traditional Prix de Rome, as if the utmost destination for architects would be the Italian capital. A proposition should be made based on our motivations to gather in Havana. An invitation, perhaps, for architects of the Americas, to look at their own territory, and learn from the experiences incubated in our own territory. An invitation to dissolve our own boundaries, allowing in this way a greater communication and a more profound understanding of our own identity. As artist Hélio Oiticica says in the preface of the *Information* exhibition catalogue (MOMA, 1970): "I am not here . . . to defend either a career or a nationality. Actually, I would rather speak about a region that does not appear on official maps, a region called the Southern Cross. Its original inhabitants never divided it. Others came, however, who for some reason did it."³ Could we simply suspend for a moment our national representations as Colombians, Brazilians, Cubans, Americans or Canadians, and learn about our extended identities? Can we shift our sight to the South-North axis, now, deeply rooted in the land, in the extension of the territory, and no longer defined by political histories and economies influenced by nationalistic motivations? Is there another allusion for the territory prior to our arrival here, prior to colonizing interferences, as Zacharias Kunuk beautifully tell us in the story of *Atanarjuat*, at the dawn of the previous millenium?

AMERICA/AMEREIDA

This extended South-North territory is named the Americas. But maybe there is another America. Godofredo Iommi, the Argentinean poet, and Alberto Cruz Covarubias, the Chilean architect, met in Chile during the sixties, and created La Ciudad Abierta (The Open City), in the village of Ritoque. It was at that meeting that a fundamental change began in the traditional systems used to understand and interpret places, spaces, and architecture. The meeting between a poet and an architect generated new methods of thinking and producing architecture that deviates from the traditional instrumentality of the discipline. The intention was to re-create an understanding of the place, the territory occupied by the people, and the architecture made from the interaction between building and the land. Their methods were based on myth and poetry. Their findings were through the extensive exploration of South America as a single territory, despite its economic and political divisions. A new name was given to the new land: *Amereida*. And a new map based on the Southern Cross was drawn: an upside-down topographical map of the South American continent. It was an invitation to re-name the newly discovered territory, like a poet making a new poem. A territory that would occupy their imaginations and sustain the creation of a new place: La Ciudad Abierta, the Open City. Since the '70s the

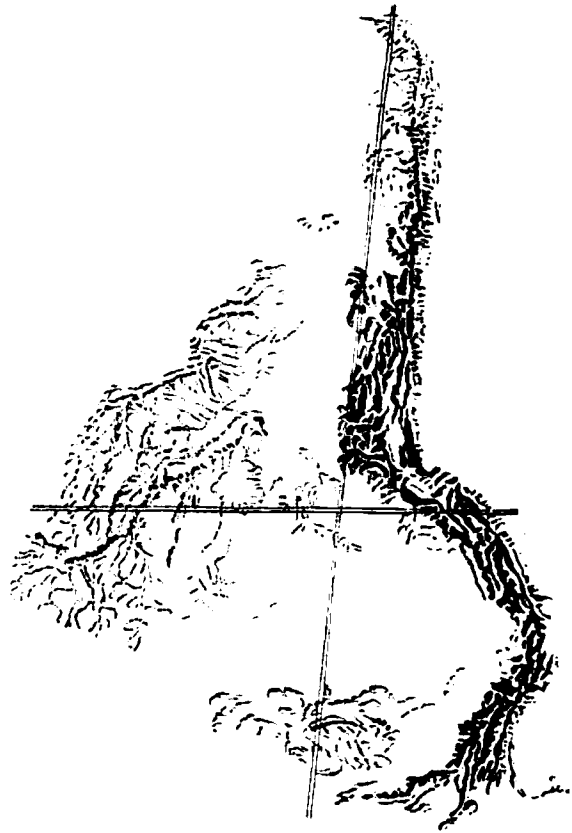


Fig. 3. South America upside-down topographical map. Open City collective, from *Amereida*, Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, 1967.

Open City has been evolving as a locus for experimentation in poetry and architecture, not based on the rational of the colonizer. Instead it manifests itself through the poetic forces which lend observation and creativity a new light to interpret and identify a new architectural entity.

AMERICA ES UN DON (AMERICA IS A GIFT): PRAGMATISM AND POETRY

Poetry has asked for our origin and destination as Americans, from a place where Amereida arises, the relation between the Eneida and America. To be in this continent implies something: is there a significance to distinguish us? The intention of this poetic vision is to reveal a possible peculiarity that America wakes up like a finding. Which is the answer to the gift, or the present? Gratitude. What is the implication for Architecture and Design? There must be another dimension; to this day the practices that builds inhabitable spaces are primarily concerned with proximity, but with Amereida distance is incorporated, the total extension of the continent in the conception of our living. To reveal America is the task of all the Studios of the School. Once a year, in the third trimester, a Travesía takes place: professors and students go

*to a point in the continent to realize a project that is considered as a gift, a donation.*⁴

Architecture is a form-generating process. The traditional methods used to generate form, especially in Europe and North America, are based on Euclidean values of rational logic. The North American philosophical paradigm is most revealed through pragmatism. Pierce and James initially articulated pragmatism as a kind of method of looking at reality, on how we can be able to discern what is true and what is false. Pragmatism became the theory of meaning behind society's processes, from political to economic, from cultural to social, permeating and influencing the methods in which knowledge is created, establishing the tension between scientific knowing and moral values. Architecture has always been very close to the scientific and economic growth and change, extended to today's practices where exclusive commercial interests convincingly replaced discourse, another result of pragmatic influences in the production of architecture. Architecture, with the exception of rare cases, has become a branding apparatus of economic powers. In this sense it has become a major force for creating powerful corporate identity. Such attributes largely influenced the design process through the tradition of critical theory and decision-making, including form-generating processes. That's why our philosophical structure is so clearly defined (and separated) by theory and practice. This is what takes place North of Equator.

THE PRACTICE OF POETRY

The experiments South of Equator, initiated by Godofredo Iommi and Alberto Cruz in Chile, questioned and shifted the pre-conditions of pragmatism by introducing *poetry* as a new coefficient in the design process. For our colleagues at Open City poetry is the catalyst for form-generating processes. According to Professor David Jolly, the director of the school of architecture, "the function of poetry is to pull the ground out from under the architects."⁵ Professor Mark West, in a recent extended stay as a resident researcher, has participated in one of the *poetic acts* in Open City. In his description every project concentrates on a new building to be built on the site of Open City, on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, in Ritoque. The program, as well as the type of building, is defined prior to the actual initiation of the design process. There is always a leading architect/poet who assumes the function of motivator and facilitator of the process, distancing himself as an author, since all projects are consistently a collaborative effort. All parts involved (students and professors) are invited to participate in one or two *poetic acts*. The one poetic act attended by Professor West took place in a natural amphitheater formed by the sand dunes where Open City is located. The poet solicits words from all the participants, whom offer any and all the words without restriction or pre-judgement. The poet compiles each and all the words offered during the poetic act into a poem, without

removing or adding any other words. The result in poem from the poetic act becomes the foundation for the new building. The poem then returns to the group of collaborators and is transformed into line drawings, generated directly from the reading of the poem. Another such poetic act took place on the streets of Santiago:

The Poetics Studio (El Taller de Poética) invites the participant to an act in the middle of the city. Three poets masked with fabric, followed by a crowd, burst in the middle of daily downtown traffic, reciting a poem that produces an unexpected silence between the habitual murmur. Daily tasks stop by a brief moment as if it was a brief holiday that quickly goes away. The recitation goes on from gallery to gallery to finish in the Cerro Castillo, as a favorable, conclusive act: the descent by foot."

As Professor Jolly comments: "even the poet doesn't know what the poem means," making it clear that the instrumentality of architecture and the literary qualities of a poem assume a secondary role in the process. The poem becomes a catalyst in the process of finding form. Poetry falls from the ranks of the literary canon to become a generator in the everyday of the design process.

LINA BO BARDI AND CARMEN MIRANDA

*When one is born, one chooses nothing, one just happens to be born. I was not born here, but I chose this country to live in. For this reason, Brazil is my country twice times over, it is my 'Country by Choice,' and I feel like a citizen of all its cities, from Cariri to the Minas Gerais Triangle, the cities in the countryside and on its borders."*⁷

Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi immigrated from Italy to Brazil in the '40s to become one of the greatest exponents of Brazilian Architecture of the second half of 20th century. She not only assumed an extremely important role as an architect, but her work represents one of the most eloquent translations of Brazilian culture through the medium of Architecture. As Bo Bardi affirms, Brazil became her choice and it was a natural receptor of her architectural ideas. Very industrious, Bo Bardi left a body of work still to be fully studied and understood. Her extensive research on popular culture and indigenous crafts allowed her to explore the core of Brazilian arts. A point to be made here is Bo Bardi's displacement from Europe to Brazil, finding a sense of identity stronger than her Italian roots, as she became a Brazilian citizen. It is in this act of displacement she found her own footing and personal relation to a place. Her works arises from the short-circuit between her European formation with the discovery of something totally new to her, in this case Brazil. It is in this cultural intersection that a new expression was created. The new identity is a revision of the notion that someone really belongs to a place, and therefore her



Fig. 1. Carmen Miranda. Album cover for the movie, *The South American Way*, 1940.

localization is paramount to her sense of personal identity. The reinvention of a place within one's inner creative spirits cannot be compared to the politics of place. Like Bo Bardi, Carmen Miranda invented herself by transforming the traditional notion of identity and femininity by displacing herself first from Portugal to Brazil, and then from Brazil to Hollywood. The *Brazilian Bombshell* became famous for her headdress of tropical fruits and flowers, by her joviality and musical strategies, becoming the highest-paid woman in the United States. As Caetano Veloso says: "Carmen conquered "white" America as no other South American had done or ever would. She was the only representative of South America who was universally readable . . ." Open City redefined the map of the Americas by dropping its political boundaries to favor the continuum of a territory. Carmen Miranda's movement East-Southwest-North, and Lina Bo Bardi's move East-Southwest supports the notion that geographic displacement and boundary

deformation can be generators of powerful new creative processes, new attitudes, and new ways of thinking and making.

ANTHROPOPHAGY MANIFESTO

Only anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. The world's only law. The masked expression of all individualisms, of all collectivisms. Of all religions. Of all peace treaties. Tupy, or not tupy that is the question. Against all catechisms. And against the mother of the Gracchi. The only things that interest me are those that are not mine. Law of man. Law of the anthropophagite. The struggle between what one would call the Uncreated and the Creature illustrated by the permanent contradiction between man and his Taboo. The quotidian love and the capitalist modus vivendi. Anthropophagy. Absorption of the sacred enemy. To transform him into totem. The human adventure. The mundane finality. However, only the pure

elites managed to realize carnal anthropophagy, which brings the highest sense of life, and avoids all the evils identified by Freud, catechist evils. What happens is not a sublimation of the sexual instinct. It is the thermometric scale of the anthropophagic instinct. From carnal, it becomes elective and creates friendship. Affectionate, love. Speculative, science. It deviates and transfers itself. We reach vilification. Low anthropophagy agglomerated in the sins of catechism-envy, usury, calumny, assassination. Plague of the so-called cultured and christianized peoples, it is against it that we are acting. Anthropophagi."

In 1928 Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade wrote the Anthropophagy Manifesto. Unique to colonized cultures like the Brazilian, a cultural resistance was formed in the 1920s to respond to the predominant European influences on the local culture. The notion of Anthropophagy (cultural cannibalism) was defended by Brazilian Modern artists who searched for a sense of identity in face of international suppression. This notion was based on the recognition that there was not a typical, nationalistic Brazilian culture, but instead the culture was shaped by the "carnivorous" consumption of all imported influences, which were vomited back as something "Brazilian." The total acceptance of this apparent lack of authenticity and originality has produced a significant source of creative energy. In the following decades Brazil produced its most important and culturally significant work in the visual arts, music, literature, and architecture. Anthropophagy should be looked at as a strategy to dismantle authorship and cultural proprietorship, presenting inverse tactics that challenge the status quo of creative thinking. Initially, Brazil and Latin America were greatly influenced (and in a certain sense still are) by European and North American thought. The Anthropophagy movement reverted the process of cultural colonization by sending back to America the transformed jazz rhythms through Bossa Nova and the presence of Carmen Miranda, or the translation of Rock'n'Roll through Tropicália, which initiated the so-called world music genre.

UPSIDE-DOWN MAPS

An upside-down map is a re-invention of the territory. It represents a desire for transformation. A desire to look at the world with different eyes. There are three different maps. The first one is Gómez-Peña's map inviting us to redefine our continental topography. This redefinition would include the disappearance of political borders, and instead the drawing new borders by lines of imagination and culture, overpowering the economic dominance that controls today's systems. The second map is Joaquín Torres-García's *Upside-down map* from 1943, where the Uruguayan artist contemplates new parameters:

... Our north is the South. That should be no north for us, except in opposition to our South. That's why we now turn

the map upside-down, and now we know what our true position is, and it is not the way the rest of the world would like to have it. From now on, the elongated tip of South America will point insistently at the South, our North. Our compass as well; it will incline irremediably and forever towards the South, towards our pole. When ships sail from here traveling north, they will be traveling down, not up as before. Because the North is now below. And as we face our South, the East is our left. This is a necessary rectification: so that now we know where we are.¹⁰

This new cultural positioning is also shared by the original mentors of the Open City through the new designation of Amereida as their own upside-down map. Now the Southern Cross overlays the continent to orient the discovery of the interior sea.

*... the north designates them south
but they are not south
because in this american sky
even their light misleads the expectation
-gift or constellation¹¹*

This alternate cartography of knowledge has never been as relevant as it is now, at the start of the new century. The effects of globalization have pressed the cultural process toward two extremes. On one side there is the fear of a loss of cultural identity that may occur through the transformations of space, the changing of qualities of a specific locality, the alteration of the well being of individuals and the collective. At the other end there is a new cultural *resistance* fighting for the rights and interests, to the preservation of specific identities connected to a place, redefining therefore a sense of place, a quality necessary to promote the healthy continuation of cultural processes. Like any other cultural processes and professions Architecture has been greatly influenced by the drastic changes observed through the technological and economic transformations of our contemporary landscape. These transformations demand new ways of practicing and sharing in the proposed cartography. The necessity for exchange between South and North comes from the growing reality of displacement, the wide internal emigration movements of the Americas, making every place anyone's home. The greater need for authenticity and freedom will require new methods of investigation and possibility. Perhaps it is not only through theoretical argumentation that we will make our case relevant. The invitation here is to listen. To listen to each other and to learn. To take advantage of the communication tools we have today which were not in place ten years ago. Learning again through the legacy of Cruz, Miranda, Bo Bardi, Oiticica, Gómez-Peña and Torres-García in order to transform as we find ways to exchange and gather over our common interests. As the North searches for the South, and the South searches for the North, Architecture will be there not only to serve as a shelter, but maybe as a renewed home for the poetic word.

¿ CUÁL MAPA ?¹²

In the Open City, Travesías are annual journeys throughout the continent where poetic acts take place in the land. Every year a destiny is chosen and at the end of the journey an architectural intervention is created as a gesture of gratitude. They organize themselves in studios by which all the students and professors participate. They have gone from the Beagle Canal to the Easter Islands, to the Amazon, Ecuador, the Pampas, and the Forest. In the Travesías poetic acts and proclamations are carried out, culminating in light works of architecture and designs that are donated to the people of the place. This could be an idea. Imagine all the schools of architecture across the Americas.¹³ Draw a line connecting them all. This is a new road for a new knowledge. Imagine a midpoint in between each pair of schools. Imagine each of the two communities meeting at midpoint to celebrate poetry and architecture. This could be the beginning of a new continental topography, the beginning of a new map for the Americas.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Gómez-Peña quoted by Suzanne Lacy in *Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys*, in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

² See, for example, *Le Corbusier e o Brasil*, by Cecília Rodrigues dos Santos [et al.] (Sao Paulo: Projeto, 1987), or *Le Corbusier Sketchbooks* (New York: Architectural History Foundation; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c1981-1982).

³ Quoted by Paulo Herkenhoff in *The Void and the Dialogue in the Western Hemisphere*, in Gerardo Mosquera, *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996.

⁴ Statement about the concept of *America/America* from the Open City website (http://www.arquitecturaucv.cl/pags/escu/escu_amer_01.html).

⁵ From an interview with Professor Mark West, a scholar in residence at the Universidad Católica de Valparaíso in October-December 2001, January 2002.

⁶ Description from the Universidad Católica de Valparaíso website (http://www.arquitecturaucv.cl/pags/pre/pres_esce_01.html).

⁷ Lina Bo Bardi's *Literary Curriculum*, in *Lina Bo Bardi* by Marcelo Carvalho Ferraz (pg. 12). Milan: Charta, 1994.

⁸ Caetano Veloso, "Caricature and Conqueror, Pride and Shame", *The New York Times* (October 20, 1991).

⁹ Fragments from the "Anthropophagy Manifesto" by Oswald de Andrade. Originally published in *Revista de Antropofagia*, n.1, year 1, May 1928. Sao Paulo. Translated from the Portuguese by Adriano Pedrosa and Verónica Cordeiro.

¹⁰ Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida* (Barcelona:Paidós, pg. 234).

¹¹ Fragment from a poem by Godofredo Tommi, in *The Road That is Not a Road*, by Ann Pendleton-Jullian (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996, p. 77).

¹² *Which map? America*, volume 1 (Viña del Mar: Talleres de Investigaciones Gráficas de la Escuela de Arquitectura de la Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, 1997, first edition: 1967).

¹³ The International Union of Architects has catalogued more than 340 schools of architecture across the Americas.