Figure I.1. Dots represent twentieth-century buildings mentioned in Spiro Kostof's *History of Architecture*, Kenneth Frampton's *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, William Curtis's *Modern Architecture since 1900*, and Jean-Louis Cohen's *The Future of Architecture since 1889*. Drawing by author.

memory and by discussing theories of space (from cartography, geography, and anthropology but mostly from architecture) that have been proposed as counterweights to five centuries of Eurocentrism. Architecture has played a central role in this construction, and we have only started to properly study it through the lenses of decolonial theories.

The Land of Short Memory

Ten years ago, I was standing on the steps of the cathedral of Lima, Peru, when a group of elementary school students walked by, and I could not help but hear their teacher explaining that they were going inside to visit the tomb of Francisco Pizarro, who had founded that city in 1535. I immediately thought about the excavation of ancient settlements that are visible all over Lima and kept that moment in my memory because it summarizes a peculiar and quite damaging way in which we tell the history of the Americas. Growing up in Brazil, I was taught in the exact same way. The history of Minas Gerais, where I was born, started in 1693 when Portuguese explorers found gold pebbles at the foot of the Itacolomi mountain peak. Erasure and exclusion are operating in that very sentence, for Itacolomi is a Tupi word that means stone shaped like a boy, from *itá* (stone) and *kunumĩ* (boy).

One of the great joys of my academic career happened every August in Austin, Texas. Because classes always started on a Wednesday and I taught

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my undergraduate Signature Course on the history of urbanization in the Americas on Monday and Wednesday mornings, I had the honor of delivering to eighteen first-year students their very first college class. In that first meeting, I asked where they grew up, the majority being from the suburbs of Houston and Dallas, some from the Rio Grande Valley, and a few from out of state. Then I told them that their first assignment was to write a fictional piece about a regular day in the life of a person exactly their age and gender, who lived exactly where they grew up, but five hundred years earlier. What they wrote is less important than the fact that they realized how little they knew about the long history of the land they call home.

In the Americas, we live in a land with a very short memory, a limitation that has been imposed on us and reinforced by centuries of Eurocentric narratives. Leopoldo Zea wrote in 1953 that the Americas were not discovered but "covered" with a narrative of European superiority and modernity that fogs our view to this day.[5] Until very recently, even intellectuals committed to understanding the identity of those lands suffered from and reproduced the idea of land without memory. The Mexican poet and diplomat Octavio Paz, for instance, wrote that "America was, if it was anything, geography, pure space, open to human action. Since it lacked historical substance—ancient social classes, established institutions, religions, and hereditary laws—reality presented no obstacles other than natural ones. Men struggled not against history but against nature. And wherever there was a historical obstacle—indigenous societies, say—it was erased from history, reduced to a mere natural fact, and dispensed with accordingly."[6] Paz contradicted himself in the paragraph above, so I guess I am absolved of any heresy in disagreeing with the great Mexican scholar. The Americas were never lacking institutions, religions, laws, or social classes. They had it all, in a variety of forms. America was home to over twenty-five million people in 1492—people who had lived here for thousands of years; people who built great cities such as Tenochtitlán and Cusco, to use the European concept of urbanism; people who also built thousands of other settlements, mostly low density and in deep synergy with nature. It was a nature transformed and modified by human hands but still very much revered and respected. Octavio Paz was wrong in the first sentence quoted above, and he knew it. The third sentence says it all: wherever there was a historical obstacle, it was erased.

To lay out the basic tenet of this book, I will edit Octavio Paz's paragraph to show how it would read if the order of the sentences were reversed: *America was the place where Indigenous societies were erased from history, reduced to a mere natural fact, and dispensed with accordingly. In its quest to tame nature, men [of European descent] struggled against history. History was an inconvenient reality and an obstacle to the full domination of nature. To reduce America to a pure space*

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open to [white men's] actions was tantamount to erasing any historical substance: ancient social classes, established institutions, religions, and hereditary laws. How different is the meaning of Octavio Paz's sentences in reverse order? How striking is the violence of this erasure, a process of historical destruction that was indeed quite successful? Generations upon generations all over the Americas learned that our continental space had no history prior to the arrival of the Spanish flotilla in October 1492.

The Case for Spatial Theories

This book is not about the ancient history of the Americas like the one written by Paulette Steeves.[7] Nor is it a survey of our American built environment like the one written by Clare Cardinal-Pett.[8] What I hope to do here is to draw from multiple sources that have advanced the knowledge of our American history, discuss the role of architectural theories in the erasure and exclusion that happened after 1492 (in the first part of the book), and start compiling theories and concepts that connect to and arise from our history (in the second part). I am aware that the scope of the book is quite ambitious, and to that criticism I would respond that I am just a storyteller, connecting the dots that I see as shiny new points of light elaborated by hundreds of other scholars, trying to show you a new constellation. Let's call this exercise an attempt at theorizing, because to me it is clear that our American spaces have been undertheorized. The measure of my success would be the opportunity given to other scholars to use those stories as roadmaps for their investigations. The measure of my failure would be if I elicit no response at all, like so many scholars from the so-called Global South, ignored and relegated to footnotes. Again, as Ailton Krenak said, we are just trying to delay the end of the world.

At this point, I need to elucidate what I mean by architectural theories. Following K. Michael Hays's proposal of theory as a practice of mediation between building form and its social-economic context, I intend to use the spatial experience of the Americas as a thread to both measure and connect the dots of multiple data points in the history of our continental space.[9] Not coincidentally, the Mixtec sign for "architect" depicts two men stretching a thread, measuring something.[10] My purpose here is to propose and discuss a set of concepts that will eventually develop better lenses through which to analyze the built environment of the Americas. Agreeing with Krista Sykes, I understand theory as a way to "uncover aspects of architecture practice that, while not useful or even correct for building now, may become a resource for future architectures . . . by exposing the gaps and holes in our discipline and our discourse that are our own inability to see beyond the present and its ideological closure."[11]

By proposing theory as a measuring stick, I challenge the so-called

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"eclipse of architectural theory" presented by many contemporary authors such as Sykes, C. Greig Crysler, and Elie Haddad.[12] My understanding is that such "eclipse," sometimes discussed as an overdose after the 1990s' so-called critical theories, is actually a saturation of the European postmodern, poststructuralist discourse. As Michael Sorkin reminds us, those late twentieth-century elucubrations were severely limited by their inherent self-referentiality, looking at only buildings designed by famous architects.[13]

To wrap up this short incursion into what I mean by architectural theory, I go back to the Mixtec sign to propose other layers of meaning to the tensioned thread held by both architects. Beyond measuring something, the Mixtec architects are also connecting two points. This is how I see the effort of developing architectural theories for the Americas. Much like the ancients observed the sky and connected stars that moved together, I see those concepts as new constellations being drawn from a complex and diverse field of historical points that are intricately connected but have not been named yet. This is precisely the metaphor that I use to explain my work as a theoretician: connecting the dots between multiple sites and events to draw new patterns that explain our contemporary world a little better. It is also a collective effort, as represented by the need for at least two Mixtec "architects" to tension the thread. My work is only possible because dozens of scholars have conducted rigorous research on a plethora of sites and events. This book is my attempt to connect those dots and draw new concepts in search of architectural theories for the Americas.

Encountering Decolonial Theories

For the first two decades of my career (1995–2015), I was a scholar of Latin American modern architecture and published widely on the topic. Looking back, I was always adjectivizing the modernism of Latin America. I had to write about "conservative modernization" or "incomplete modernization." Reading the decolonial theories of Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Arturo Escobar, I learned that every modernization implies some colonization. What I was doing for those two decades was comparing the modernity of the so-called periphery, where the coloniality is very visible, with the modernity of the center, from which the coloniality had been mostly (but not completely) pushed aside to the outskirts, be it Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, or the Parisian *banlieues*. As I will discuss in chapters 7 to 11, the relationship between modernization and colonization in the Americas is a spatial one. They can be close together, as in Rio's *favelas*, or separated by the US highway system, but they are symbiotic. One does not exist without the other.

The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano is credited with advancing those ideas when he moved away from economic-centric "dependency

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theory" in the 1990s to propose a world system that explains the intricate relationship between modernization and colonization. Before Quijano, Leopoldo Zea and Edmundo O'Gorman, both in Mexico, had already started to question the way we narrate the history of the Americas. As noted earlier, Zea had suggested in the 1950s that the Americas were not discovered but "covered" with a Eurocentric identity.[14] O'Gorman suggested in the late 1950s that the encounter with the Americas had triggered European modernization and not the other way around.[15] It was an idea that has been corroborated by innumerable scholars, from James Blaut in 1989 to David Wengrow and David Graebner in 2021.[16]

Also in Mexico, Pablo Casanovas coined the term "internal colonialism" in 1962 to explain persistent inequalities.[17] It is unclear if Zea, O'Gorman, and Casanova knew about Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* of 1952, but their arguments are very much aligned and they precede Edward Said by two decades and Homi Bhabha by three.[18] In 1992, Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein coined a sentence that has now become a classic. They argue that "it is not that the Americas had a significant role in the development of capitalism[;] there would be no capitalism if not for the occupation of the Americas."[19] As I will develop throughout the book, my main point, paraphrasing Quijano, is that it is not that the Americas had a significant role in the development of architecture as we know it but that there would be no modern architecture if not for the occupation of the Americas. A few years later, Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* appeared, and in it he elaborates the thesis that there is no modernization without colonization, both being different sides of the same coin.[20] In the words of Escobar, "Some of the key notions that make up the conceptual corpus of this research program are thus: the modern colonial world system as the ensemble of processes and social formations that encompass modern colonialism and colonial modernities; although it is structurally heterogeneous, it articulates the main forms of power into a system."[21] Walter Mignolo went further by demonstrating that "the emergence of the Atlantic circuit during the sixteenth century made coloniality constitutive of modernity," something that Quijano also explores in his discussions of the "coloniality of power."[22]

Another central figure in decolonial theory is Enrique Dussel, who wrote an extensive body of work discussing how Europe invented itself and the role of the Americas in this process. Dussel explains that "the West" is an ideological construction that operates by selecting from scattered ancient sources to draft a coherent narrative that upholds European centrality. In his words, this is an

> ideological invention that first kidnapped Greek culture as exclusively Western and European and then posited both the Greek and Roman cultures as the center

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> of world history. This perspective can be considered erroneous from two standpoints. First, as we shall see, there was not yet a world history in an empirical sense. There were only isolated, local histories of communities that extended over large geographical areas: the Romans, the Persians, the Hindu kingdoms, the Siamese, the Chinese, or the Mesoamerican and Inca worlds in America. Second, their geopolitical locations did not allow them to be a center. The Red Sea or Antioch, the final destination of commerce with the East, was not the center but the westernmost border of the Euro-Afro-Asian market.[23]

It is not hard to apply the same logic to the history of architecture to understand that we need a much more complex theory, beyond the romantic reductionism of Greece, Rome, the Gothic, and the Renaissance.

The reality is much more complicated and nuanced than the Western historiography of art and architecture would have us believe. It was in the Americas that ideas of abstract space were tested, and this was certainly one of the triggers of modernity, not a consequence of it.[24]

My point here is that decolonial and otherness studies in Latin America go back at least seventy years, and the topic has been widely discussed only after being published in English by the modernity/coloniality group based at Duke University and the University of North Carolina in the early 2000s. It was the modernity/coloniality group that first turned my attention to decolonial thoughts, and I need to acknowledge that the most transformative concepts came from Latin America: Milton Santos, Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, Arturo Escobar, Aníbal Quijano, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Maria Lugones, and Denise Ferreira da Silva. Together they taught me to break the epistemological barriers that defined as peripheral all architecture not done by Anglo white males.[25]

Decolonizing the Spatial History of the Americas

In response to that major problem, I spent six years researching, reading, and systematizing information on all kinds of spatial concepts and theories that originated from or are based on the American experience. During that time, I published a series of articles in peer-reviewed journals and trade magazines, discussing the roots and the consequences of our Eurocentric knowledge base in architecture and the urgent need to decolonize it.[26] In those six years, my thoughts evolved from a denunciation of how Eurocentric our architectural history has been, to erasure and exclusion as consequences of such in our contemporary cities, to a more detailed elaboration on how exactly our design instruments produce and sustain inequality.[27] I use all that as a basis for the first part of this book, which I have titled "Dismantling Eurocentrism," but try to move forward in the second part, which is where

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a chronological sequence of "spatial theories for the Americas" is discussed. I am of course not alone in this endeavor, bouncing my ideas against those of Felipe Hernández, Diana Maldonado, Fernando Martínez Nespral, Ana María León, and Luis Carranza. We meet several times per year in person or in the Zoom universe, and our writings are very much informed by each other—or at least mine are significantly influenced by their thoughts.

In February 2020, I organized in Austin the colloquium "Decolonizing the Spatial Histories of the Americas," the first ever devoted to that topic, with the main goal of looking beneath the Eurocentric frameworks (represented by the grid in the colloquium logo) to reveal aspects and instances of our built environment that can help us craft our own narrative. Luckily, the colloquium happened two weeks before the COVID pandemic shut down travel worldwide, and twenty scholars from all over the world attended, including three of the ones cited above: Hernández (my cosponsor), Nespral, and León. The 2020 colloquium was a unique opportunity to cross-pollinate and disseminate our efforts toward the decolonization of architectural history and theory, and, as a result, we published two books.[28] The one published by the University of Texas Center for American Architecture and Design shared the title of the colloquium: *Decolonizing the Spatial History of the Americas* and comprises case studies that bring to light episodes of our environmental history that we considered understudied up to that point. My introduction to that book, "Five Radical Frameworks for Decolonizing the Spatial History of the Americas," reads like a pedagogy manifesto. Pieces of that text are intertwined in the book, and though I do not intend to repeat it here, it is worth mentioning that the full articulation can be seen online as a lecture at the University of Southern California delivered in February 2021.[29] The other book, *Spatial Concepts for Decolonizing the Americas*, was published by Cambridge Scholars in 2022, and as the title indicates, it is an effort to develop American concepts to analyze American spaces.

In the spring of 2023, my last semester at the University of Texas, we organized a second colloquium, this time proposing the Americas as a crossroads of the Global North and Global South.

The papers presented in the 2023 meeting build upon our previous efforts and push forward an argument for centering the historiographical narrative on the Americas. At the very end of 2023, another meeting, this one convened by Ana María León and Fernando Martínez Nespral at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, consolidated the group Nuestro Norte es el Sur that they created in Quito in 2018. With the South as our compass and the Americas at the center, our spatial theories can see a whole new set of relationships with Asia to the west and Europe and Africa to the east. I hope the reader now understands what I am doing here—shuffling the

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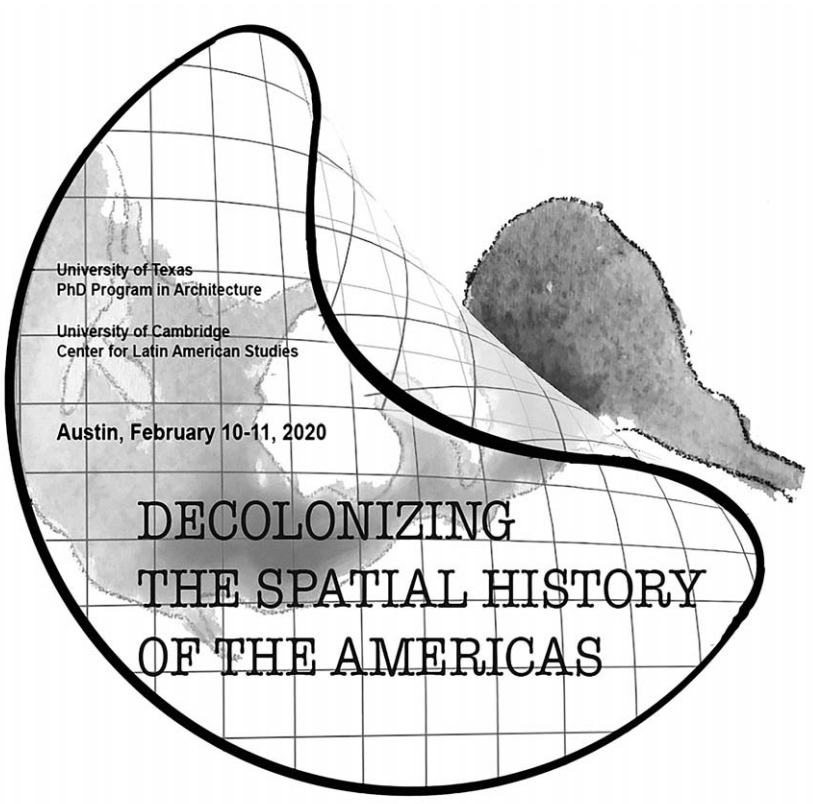

Figure I.2. The poster for the 2020 Colloquium on Decolonizing the Spatial History of the Americas. Drawing by author.

standard definitions of North, South, East, and West toward a new set of spatial theories for the Americas.

Juxtaposition as Method (not Comparison)

After the publication of our survey book *Modern Architecture in Latin America: Art, Technology, and Utopia* (with Luis Carranza, 2014), I had the opportunity to lecture about it at twenty-seven different universities, twenty-three of them in the Americas. I traveled widely between 2015 and 2018, going from Florida to Chile and from Mexico to Moscow. With me, I brought (or printed anew) a timeline of the twentieth century on which we plotted 150 buildings that we thought represented the experience of modern architecture in Latin America. Occupying large walls (the original canvas measured six by thirty feet), this graphic piece allowed us to think differently simply because the buildings were plotted together for the first time. The question that follows is why such a diagram had not been put together earlier. The answer is that most books on Latin American architecture were structured around a comparison with

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paradigmatic European buildings. In our case, they were simply juxtaposed on a large canvas, with the European events registered as small footnotes along the upper and lower edges of the timeline. The experience of traveling with the exhibition and lecturing about *Modern Architecture in Latin America* was central to the development of this book in two senses. One, it taught me how arbitrary, and colonial, it is that the Rio Grande splits the North American continent. The more I study, the more I am convinced that the Americas have a lot in common in the history of its built environment. Two, I kept thinking that I wanted to write a book that did not compare the architecture of the Americas with the architecture of Europe. Among over twenty book reviews of *Modern Architecture in Latin America*, the one by Francesco Dal Co is my favorite. The celebrated Italian critic praised our book but complained that we did not engage enough with the European literature on Latin America, something that we did on purpose. If we are to develop a rigorous conversation about the built environment of the Americas, we ought to have the ability to link and delink from European concepts as we see fit.

In 2017, I found a very good articulation of what I was looking for in Juliet Hooker's *Theorizing Race in the Americas*.[30] Using four authors to discuss the idea of race in our continent—José Vasconcelos, W. E. B. Du Bois, Domingo Sarmiento, and Frederick Douglass—Hooker proposes a method of juxtaposition and not comparison. In her words,

> Juxtaposition places two disparate objects side by side, and it is by being viewed simultaneously that the viewer's understanding of each object is transformed. . . . Juxtaposition thus allows us to ask: What happens when thinkers and traditions that are viewed as disparate are staged as proximate, what insights are revealed? . . . Most centrally, however, juxtaposition does not assume prior similarities or differences between thinkers and traditions. One of the problems with comparison is that it presumes the existence of stable and discrete traditions of thought that are available for comparison. But by assuming prior difference (or connection) between traditions, comparison does not interrogate the boundaries between traditions as contingent products of political power. In contrast, I view juxtaposition as a historical-interpretive approach that seeks to situate the resonances and/or discontinuities between traditions of thought within the specific historical, intellectual, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts in which they emerged.[31]

The Structure of This Book

The first part of the book, entitled "Dismantling Eurocentrism," comprises four chapters. The first is an analysis of the absence of the Americas from canonical books of architectural history until the late twentieth century, starting from the Banister Fletcher editions of 1896, 1903, and 1919, to those

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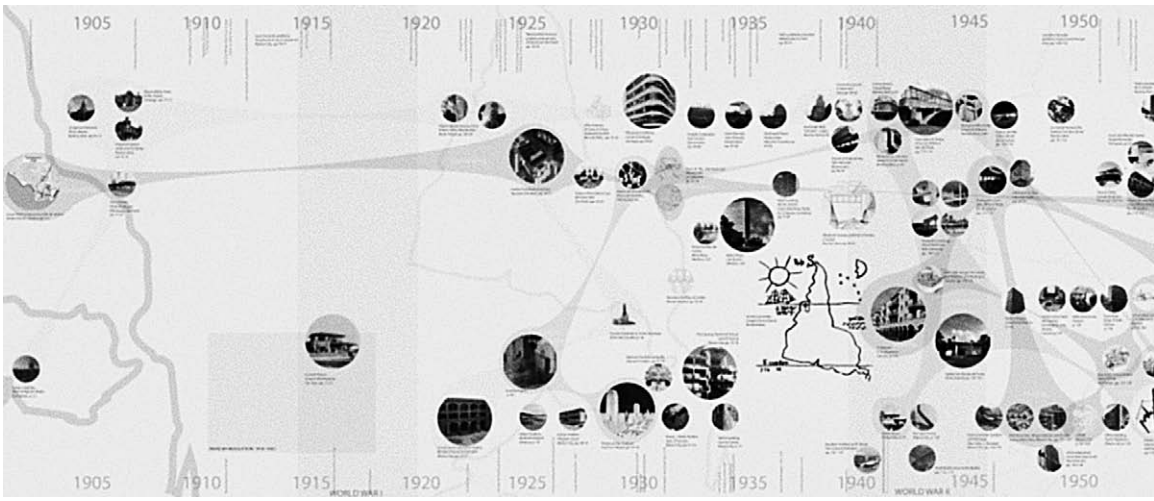

FIGURE I.3. The timeline banner (on which are plotted 150 buildings that represent the experience of modern architecture in Latin America) exhibited in twenty-seven cities between 2015 and 2018. Drawing by author.

of Mumford in 1935, Benevolo in 1972, and Kostof in 1985, among others that deal with the European Renaissance and the rise of architecture as we know it in the sixteenth century. The first chapter closes with a discussion of improvements and limitations as presented by the survey books of the twenty-first century: those of James-Chakraborty in 2014; Ching, Jarzombek, and Prakash in 2017; and Ingersoll in 2018. Chapter 2 focuses on the changes around spatial representation that happened as a consequence of European expansionism and the occupation of the Americas in the sixteenth century, leading to the Cartesian synthesis of "Cogito, ergo sum" in 1637. The third chapter continues the discussion of the Cartesian revolution with an analysis of its American roots, from Montaigne's conversation with the Tupinambá in 1562 to Antonio Rubio's *Logica mexicana* of 1603.

Chapter 4 closes the first part with a proposition that many of my colleagues will consider heresy but that I am happy to defend. I depart from Setha Low's discussion of the Mexican Zócalo as the template for Plaza Mayor in Madrid, designed by Juan de Herrera for King Felipe II in 1581. From there, I present the open chapels built in sixteenth-century Mexico to elaborate on the question of how much the open spaces of absolutist Europe were influenced by the open spaces of the Americas. My point is that majestic open spaces and an elaborate axis, the core of the so-called urban baroque of the seventeenth century, were a hegemonic feature in the Indigenous Americas, and we thus need to add that precedent to our discussions around the baroque, a spatial concept developed by the Jesuits on both sides of the Atlantic.

The second part of the book, titled "Foundations of Spatial Theories

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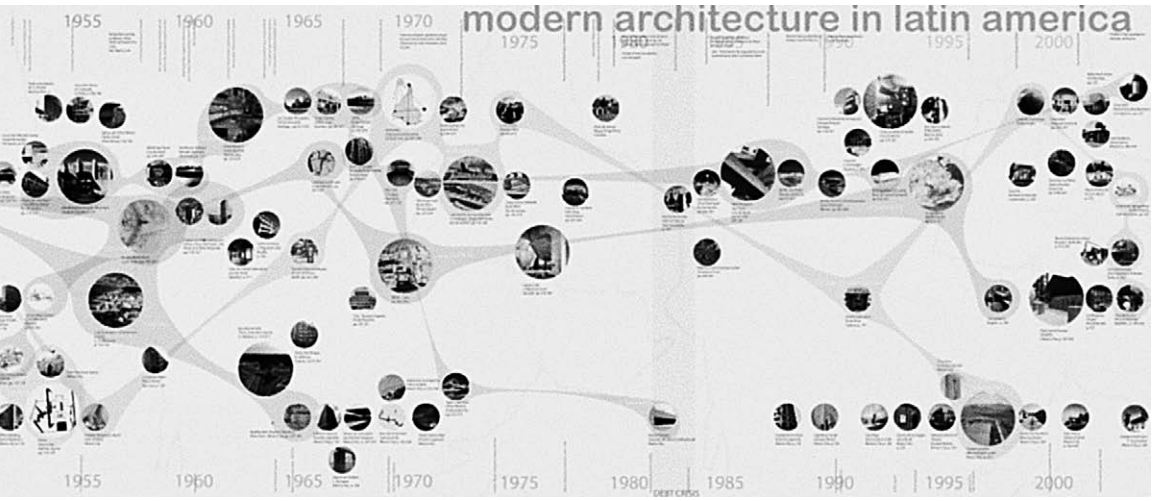

for the Americas," comprises seven chapters, organized chronologically, to present actors, concepts, and theories that I consider fundamental to understanding the spaces of the Americas. In chapter 5, I depart from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian perspectivism to propose that we need to incorporate relational knowledges into our design pedagogy and practice. The sixth chapter is a discussion of the colonial strategies of occupation, with a debate around the presence of the orthogonal grid thousands of years before Columbus's landfall and the implications of the grid as a tool for exclusion, first as seen in the Spanish settlements and later as a tool for erasure when Thomas Jefferson expanded the grid to continental scale.

Chapter 7 introduces Chicago as a fundamental place in which to understand the nineteenth century in the Americas, from its exponential growth between the 1830s and 1890s, to the first suburbs, the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893, and the racialized skyscrapers of the turn of the century. Here, I juxtapose Chicago's development as the "northern way," based on transportation strategies, and the reforms of downtown Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires that epitomize the "southern way" of segregation with much less physical distance. The eighth chapter juxtaposes Frank Lloyd Wright, Juan O'Gorman, and Lúcio Costa not only to illuminate their central ideas of land, economy, and history but to discuss their deafening silence around the racial issue and the participation of regular people in their ideas of modernity. Here, I highlight a wide gap opening between what architects were proposing and what intellectuals were discussing, because the same population that was missing from Wright, O'Gorman, and Costa occupied a central position in the thoughts of Vasconcelos, Du Bois, and Mário de Andrade, among so many others.

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In the ninth chapter, I discuss American responses against the hegemonic modernism of the first half of the twentieth century, departing from Catherine Bauer and Carmen Portinho, socially conscious but still defending modernist ideas, and following up with a discussion of how Eurocentric the midcentury reaction to modernism was, as epitomized by Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. In opposition to Venturi, I argue in the second third of chapter 9 that Jane Jacobs and Denise Scott Brown are the authors who better understood North American spaces in the second half of the twentieth century. The last third of the ninth chapter is devoted to my previous research on popular modernism as a phenomenon that creates tensions and problematizes Venturi, Jacobs, and Scott Brown. If the ninth chapter was heavily geared toward the north of the Americas, the tenth strikes a balance by focusing on theories from the south. I argue in chapter 10 that Paulo Freire, liberation theology, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (or CEPAL, in the Portuguese and Spanish acronym) are important contributions to the study and production of our American spaces. Moreover, the decolonial theories that I use as a basis for this entire book are very much a result of CEPAL, where Aníbal Quijano and Pablo Casanova worked for years, added to the fact that Enrique Dussel's thoughts are directly linked to liberation theology. If anything, it is appalling to note how little Paulo Freire is discussed in architectural scholarship despite him being recognized as a major theoretician of the twentieth century, the only one from the Global South to be amongst the twenty most cited scholars of all time. The emphasis on the south continues in the eleventh and last chapter of the book, in which I discuss the structures built without architects and mostly without the use of drawings. In chapter 11, I reject the label of "informal" commonly applied to such structures, as every building has form, and by calling some "informal," we are denying the agency and the intentions of its builders. Instead, we should understand *favelas* and *barriadas* as territories of resistance—Afro-Indigenous spaces that can teach us how to decolonize for real and not as an intellectual metaphor.

Ailton Krenak is very gentle in his proposal of telling one more story to avoid the end of the world. Although I thought we should not be that patient, he did teach me another lesson. In 2018, when Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil, a reporter asked Krenak if he was afraid for his people. No, he said, my people have managed to survive despite 518 years of persecution. I fear for you, white Brazilians, who are not used to resisting.

This book is a call for my fellow designers and scholars of the built environment to add their stories of resistance, empathy, and relational knowledges to the fight to build a better America or, in the words of Ailton Krenak, delay the end of the world.

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