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FOREST ARCHITECTURE.  
IN SEARCH OF THE  
(POST) MODERN WILDERNESS

EDITED BY STAMATINA KOUSIDI

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# FOREST ARCHITECTURE. IN SEARCH OF THE (POST) MODERN WILDERNESS

EDITED BY

STAMATINA KOUSIDI



Mimesis



FOREST ARCHITECTURE. IN SEARCH OF  
THE (POST) MODERN WILDERNESS  
edited by Stamatina Kousidi

This volume aims to expand on the discourse  
around the forest as an aesthetic-perceptual,  
conceptual-symbolic, and operative subject  
matter theme, as utopia and modernist notion  
alike, across a broad range of scales and  
contexts, exploring its contemporary relevance  
for the design project.

PUBLISHER  
Mimesis Edizioni  
Via Monfalcone, 17/19  
20099 Sesto San Giovanni  
Milano – Italy  
www.mimesisedizioni.it

FIRST EDITION  
March 2024

ISBN  
9791222308258

DOI  
10.7413/1234-1234027

PRINTING  
Printed in February 2024  
by Digital Team – Fano (PU)

FONTS  
Union, Radim Peško, 2006  
JJannon, François Rappo, 2019

GRAPHIC LAYOUT  
bruno, Venezia

MAKING-UP  
Albani Elizabeth Minichini Rojo

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Images, graphics and texts  
© The Authors

This volume was realised with  
Funds Mur-Prin 2017 (D.D. 3728/2017).  
The book is also available in open access at  
[www.iuav.it/prin-sylva-prodotti](http://www.iuav.it/prin-sylva-prodotti).

Each volume in the series is reviewed by  
referees chosen from members of the  
Scientific Committee.

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COLLANA SYLVA  
Project of the Research Unit of Università Iuav  
di Venezia within the PRIN «SYLVA. Rethink the  
sylvan. Towards a new alliance between biology  
and artificiality, nature and society, wilderness  
and humanity». Call 2017, SH2. Research Units:  
Università degli Studi di Roma Tre (coordinati-  
on), Università Iuav di Venezia, Università  
degli Studi di Genova, Università degli Studi di  
Padova.

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# FOREST ARCHITECTURE. IN SEARCH OF THE (POST) MODERN WILDERNESS

Σ I  
Y U  
L A  
V A  
Δ V

8—53 FOREST ARCHITECTURE.  
IN SEARCH OF THE (POST) MODERN  
WILDERNESS  
STAMATINA KOUSIDI

FOREST, DESIGN, OPERATIVE

56—73 DOMINATION AND SYMBIOSIS IN  
THE AMAZON RAINFOREST  
ALESSANDRO ROCCA

74—87 CEDRIC'S SENSE FOR WILDERNESS.  
THE ROLE OF FORESTS IN PRICE'S  
SEARCH FOR COEXISTENCE  
JACOPO LEVERATTO

88—99 THE FOREST AS A ROOM.  
THREE JAPANESE URBAN HOUSES  
BEATRICE BALDUCCI

100—116 THE CALL OF THE WILD. INHABITING  
THE FOREST IN THE WORKS OF  
KAZUYO SEJIMA AND SANAA  
GIULIA SETTI

FOREST, AESTHETIC, PERCEPTUAL

118—139 FOREST *AND* ARCHITECTURE.  
CONTEMPORARY DESIGN  
APPROACHES FOR PUBLIC SPACES  
CHIARA GEROLDI, ANNARITA LAPENNA

140—159 CAVITY. WILDERNESS ACTS BY  
COLONIZING  
LAURA ZAMPIERI

160—179 *TABULA SILVA*. REPRESENTATION AND  
PROJECT FOR THE FLEMISH FOREST-  
METROPOLIS  
FEDERICO GOBBATO LIVA,  
ANDREA MIGOTTO

180—199 A DIVE IN THE NORDIC GREEN.  
*FORESTURBIA*. A MANUAL FOR A  
LANDSCAPED CITY  
LUDOVICO CENTIS,  
ANGELA GIGLIOTTI, FABIO GIGONE

200—220 *UPSTATE ROME*. A SUBURBAN  
ARCHIPELAGO  
LINA MALFONA

FOREST, UTOPIA, MODERNISM

222—245 ARCHITECTURE AND NATURE. ON  
THE ORIGIN AND CONVERTIBILITY OF  
ARCHITECTURE  
WERNER OECHSLIN

246—267 THE QUEST FOR WILDERNESS IN THE  
FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE  
SUSANNE STACHER

- 268 — 291 CONSTRUCTING THE MODERN  
FOREST IN GREECE. DIMITRIS  
PIKIONIS AND THE PERTOULI  
EXPERIMENT ON THE MOUNTAIN  
RANGE OF PINDOS  
EMILIA ATHANASSIOU
- 292 — 309 BEYOND DUALISMS. THE  
“ELECTRONIC URBANISM” OF TAKIS  
CH. ZENETOS. 1962-1974  
YORGOS TZIRTZILAKIS
- 310 — 317 1592 HOUSES IN THE FOREST. BRUNO  
TAUT AND THE WALDSIEDLUNG  
ZEHLENDORF IN BERLIN  
CHIARA CARAVELLO
- 318 — 330 THE FOREST IN BRUNO TAUT’S *CITY  
CROWN*. A SPIRITUAL AND  
PERCEPTUAL UTOPIA FOR OUR CITIES  
KEVIN SANTUS

#### FOREST, CONCEPTUAL, SYMBOLIC

- 332 — 347 TREES, VINES, PALMS, AND OTHER  
ARCHITECTURAL MONUMENTS  
PAULO TAVARES
- 348 — 359 EXPOSURE. 48 VARIATIONS OF  
DARKNESS  
VALENTINA NOCE
- 360 — 375 THE TEATRO REGIO IN TURIN.  
A FOREST PERSPECTIVE  
MARTINA MOTTA

- 376 — 389 UNPREDICTABLE SPACES. FOR A NON-  
DOMESTICATED USE OF WOOD  
FRANCESCA ZANOTTO
- 390 — 401 PORCH AS SCREEN OF TREES  
CHARLIE HAILEY
- 402 — 411 DISGUISED AS A TREE  
KOSTIS VELONIS
- 413 — 425 BIBLIOGRAPHY
- 427 — 430 BIOGRAPHIES

designed to be, but it acts as if it were part of a world that was never designed. This is how architecture creates the “atmosphere” of a situation, through its enactments, operations, or performances.” D. Leatherbarrow, *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, Princeton Architecture Press, New York 2009, p. 39.

¶ √ J. Corner, A. Hirsch (eds.), *The Landscape Imagination: Collected Essays of James Corner 1990-2010*, Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton NJ 2014, p. 258.

¶ ^ Ivi, p. 270.

¶ ] K. Frampton, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¶ E “In its workings the building is what it was designed to be, but it acts as if it were part of a world that was never designed. This is how architecture creates the “atmosphere” of a situation, through its enactments, operations, or performances.” D. Leatherbarrow, *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, Princeton Architecture Press, New York 2009, p. 39.

# FOREST, DESIGN, OPERATIVE

I

# DOMINATION AND SYMBIOSIS IN THE AMAZON RAINFOREST

ALESSANDRO ROCCA

In the center of Piazza Navona, in Rome, in place of the trough for the horses of the Pamphilj family, there is now, since 1651, the fountain made by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in travertine, marble, granite, and bronze which represents the four major rivers of the continents then known: the Danube for Europe, the Ganges for Asia, the Nile for Africa and the Rio de la Plata for the Americas. The statues representing the rivers are the work of other artists, Antonio Ercole Raggi, Claude Poussin, Giacomo Antonio Fancelli, and Francesco Baratta, but Bernini's heroic conception fixes the point of origin of the four rivers and, therefore, we could say of the world itself or at least of the vital principle, of the natural and primal force that makes life on earth possible. *Erosão. Sorimáo u Ipirungáua (Erosion – The Origin of the Amazon River, 1952)*, by Brazilian musician Heitor Villa Lobos, is a grandiose sonata full of dissonances, as I believe is typical of modernist music, animated by impressionistic touches and refers to a universe that, on that date, could well be said to be unknown. In about fifteen minutes the composition takes us to a series of sound spaces and thunder and a whisper alternate, a fresh chirping followed by a sudden aggravation of the notes.

There is Amazonian architecture made up of many and different versions that represent specific histories, cultures, and different peoples. In the film *Fitzcarraldo* (Werner Herzog, 1982), the protagonist embarks on a long journey to listen to Enrico Caruso singing in *Ernani*. Despite heroic efforts, Fitzcarraldo, who is the protagonist, arrives late, just in time to see the public evacuate from the Manaus Opera House. It is the Amazonas theater, built in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and an emblem of the conquest, colonization, and civilization of the region. Seven hundred seats, inaugurated in 1896 with *La Gioconda* by Amilcare Ponchielli, the theater is a singular stylistic hybrid, with an Italian-designed neo-Renaissance architectural base, surmounted by a gigantic dome decorated with ceramic tiles assembled according to the colors of the Brazilian national flag and it is also the sign of the triumph of economic globalism at the end of the century when raw materials, in this case, rubber, became vectors of migration, investments, and connections, which could easily cross the oceans and penetrate the most distant forests. At the center of the city of Manaus is the “Bosque da Ciencia,” the scientific forest that presents, relocated to the urban context, the fauna, and flora of the Amazon. Inaugurated in 1995, with an extension of thirteen hectares, it gathers some memorable attractions such as the largest leaf in the world belonging to the *Coccoloba* genus (Polygonaceae) and the manatees that swim in the tank together with other typical species of the forest.

Brazil, 2009.  
© Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas Images/Contrasto.



Marubo Natives, Amazonas States, Brazil, 1998.  
© Sebastião Salgado/Contrasto.





Manaus was born as an outpost in the jungle, a commercial and logistic center serving the export of rubber, and its symbols, therefore, represent the eruption, in the center of the Amazon, of European and cosmopolitan culture, largely still based on rules colonial, of the Belle Époque. Around and beyond the city extends the endless expanse of the rainforest with the tangle of thousands of rivers that feed the Amazon River, which in Manaus receives its major tributary, the Rio Negro, and the network of roads, of various dimensions and quality, which connect centers separated by immense distances and cross the borders with Venezuela, Peru, and Bolivia.

About seventy years after Vila Lobos another musician, Jean-Michel Jarre, tries his hand at the theme by releasing the album *Amazônia* where the rhythmic and melodic fabric welcomes a continuous buzz of voices, sounds, songs, percussion, and noises; a symmetrical sound carpet to the green and blue carpet that covers the forest. Jarre explains: “I wanted to avoid the ethnomusicological approach or creating background music. So, I conceived a sort of toolbox containing musical elements – orchestral and electronic – intended to recreate or evoke the timbre of natural sounds, to which I added sounds from the environment, and finally ethnic sources (voices, songs, and instruments) from the sound archives of the Ethnography Museum of Geneva (MEG)”. And then he adds: “I approached the Amazon with respect, in a poetic and impressionistic way”<sup>¶</sup>. The fifty-two minutes of the composition are the soundtrack that accompanies Sebastião Salgado’s two hundred photos collected in an exhibition, *Amazônia*, which offers special observation points to enter and get lost in the forest, among its inhabitants and its landscapes. The photographs are collected in aerial views, organized by forests, rivers, storms, mountains, islands, and close-up portraits of members of ten different Amazonian populations. In the repeated shades of Salgado’s deep black and white, *tout se tient*: aerial views, storms, rivers, and the bodies of the natives, with the clear intention of demonstrating the symbiotic profile of an immense and differentiated world but also unitary and unique; a universe in which, according to Salgado’s story in images, everything belongs to the same nature. In Salgado’s photos, architecture appears very little, his lens lingers to emphasize the interpenetration between people and the natural environment, a fascinating and unknown relationship, for a European eye, but which overlooks the fact that together with the environment the built environment also exists in the Amazon, which includes a series of different types but all based on the use of wood and foliage, especially in the innermost regions, while the use of masonry,

in raw earth or bricks, it is more frequent in the conditions where the European influence was strongest, such as in the *Quilombo*, in the Bandeirista Houses and the metropolitan slums.

*Kamayurá* houses are vast rooms covered by a single wooden structure which is wall and roof, entirely covered with straw; the entrance takes place through a single small opening in the center of a completely blind wall: “A well-known indigenous residential typology, the *Oca* (in Tupi) or *Oga* (in Guarani) is one of the forming units of villages. Usually built with straw and timber, without interior separations, it is a collective living space and is also used for daily activities such as cooking and making artisanal objects. Another example of indigenous living spaces is the *Maloca*, mainly found in the Brazilian and Colombian Amazon. They are also known as ‘big houses’ and are larger than the *Oca*, besides having interior partings in which different family groups live. Each tribe bestows specific features to the architecture and space organization”<sup>¶</sup>.

The relationship between native populations and contemporary architectural culture reflects the complexity of the processes of colonization, integration, and conflict that run through the history of the Amazon. The most significant architectural story, able to interpret the colonial dimension in a dialectical way, is due to Severiano Porto who, in 1966, settled in Manaus and remained there for thirty-six years, tracing the coordinates of an architecture strictly connected to local conditions: “architecture for rural areas starts to opt for local materials, low-impact construction techniques, traditional typologies and passive strategies for solar protection and ventilation. The Minas Gerais architect Severiano Porto, trained at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), was one of the first Brazilian architects to systematically concern himself with the preservation of the Amazon environment”<sup>¶</sup>.

Using techniques and materials typical of the Ribeirinhos and Caboclos populations, Porto creates an architecture that can well be defined as Amazonian. In the house built for himself, in 1971, and in the Residência Robert Schuster (1978), both in Manaus, he widely uses wood as the main building material and arranges plans, sections, orientations, roofing, and facade treatments to adopt all bioclimatic strategies, with natural shading and cooling techniques. The most innovative aspect of Porto’s architecture, compared to the local context, is the systematic introduction of wood as the main material: “timber was cheap, easily available and well known to local builders”; a pragmatic choice but also of strong ideological and political value, in an era in which, in the Brazilian Amazon, “the idea of adapting a building

to local conditions was almost non-existent”<sup>Λ</sup>. In Manaus, Porto builds other significant residences, such as the Balbina Center for Environmental Protection (1983-88, with Mario Emilio Ribeiro) which represents the most accomplished manifesto of modernist architecture founded on the reworking of Amazonian cultural elements, with its soft landscape of pitched roofs covered by local tiles called *Cavaco*, made of wood splinters: “The roof is a continuous and unique surface that covers the entire complex, varying in form, height, and width, providing good protection from solar radiation and rain”<sup>Λ</sup>.

The legacy of Severiano Porto remains an important alternative, in Brazil, to the modernist formalism of Oscar Niemeyer and the brutalism of the Paulista school, and numerous projects nourish a position characterized by the recognition of non-European cultures, attention to ecological impact, the systematic use of bioclimatic solutions. In the heroic modernism of Niemeyer, Alfonso Eduardo Reidy, and Lucio Costa, in Rio, and João Batista Vilanova Artigas, Lina Bo Bardi, and Paulo Mendes da Rocha in São Paulo, the modernist Brazilian architecture is born from the grafting of European models and industrial materials in the vibrant body of the Brazilian metropolis, elaborating an impressive local version of international culture.

Compared to the masters of metropolitan Brazil, the forest, provincial architecture of Severiano Porto is radically different; it belongs to the culture of the time but also in a different current of thought, which is, in many respects, alternative. Porto’s antecedents and fellow travelers are found in various international models of vernacular architecture, such as the San Francisco Bay Style, proposed by William Wurster (1895-1973) and presented at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1949, with the *Domestic Architecture of the San Francisco Bay Region* exhibition<sup>Ε</sup>. In the refinement and awareness of Porto’s cultural design, the famous exhibition *Architecture without Architects* (MoMA, 1965) could also have played a role, a manifesto of new attention to non-modern, local, vernacular architecture, and a sensational expression of a rejection of the codes disseminated by Modernism and International Style<sup>ϕ</sup>. Bernard Rudofsky’s research, although strongly oriented towards an international one, does not however report any mention of the Amazon.

The strong modernist imprint of Brazilian architecture still seems dominant today with its message of optimism and confidence in the possibility of making an important contribution to the country’s problems. Of note is the initiative of *NAMA – Nucleus Modern Architecture in Amazonia*, which on the website defines itself as “a thematic nucleus of the Federal

University of Amazonas – UFAM and gathering of artists, architects and research groups from the universities, which seeks the recognition, documentation, preservation, and dissemination of Amazonian modernity. It started its activities in 2016 by organizing the I SAMA – Seminar on Modern Architecture in the Amazonia in Manaus. From then on, it organizes annual and itinerant seminars: the II SAMA in Palmas, 2017, the III SAMA in Belém, 2018, and the IV SAMA in Boa Vista, 2019”<sup>ϖ</sup>.

As Marcos Cereto (professor at the Faculdade de Tecnologia at Universidade Federal do Amazonas – UFAM) noted in the Nama MIT Conversation, “Shabonos and Malakas are part of contemporary architecture in the Amazon. Severiano Porto learned from Yanomani’s *Amaku* coverage”<sup>ϗ</sup>. Cereto recognizes a concept that, differently, is clearly expressed in Salgado’s photographs: we all live at the same time but, also, each culture lives in its own time, and that communication, cultural and technological exchange, economic relations between the clear world of the global network and the Amazon rainforest is a project with an important, albeit recent, history and a future yet to be written.

#### THE AMAZONIAN LEGACY OF SEVERIANO PORTO

The legacy of Severiano’s experience is an important memory for Brazilian architecture, a lesson in humility and attention to the environment that was also appreciated by strongly urban architects rooted in the Paulista modernist line, such as Angelo Bucci<sup>Ϙ</sup> ϙ. The lesson of Porto can be found, for example, in the Rio Bonito House (2005, built in Lumiar) by Carla Juaçaba<sup>Ϙ</sup> ϙ and in other projects that, in recent years, again resume the theme of architecture strongly linked to local conditions. The Experimental Floresta Ativa Center (2014-17) is built by Cristina Xavier in Arapiuns using two traditional techniques, the wooden structure and the thatched roof from local palm trees<sup>Ϙ</sup> Ϛ. The Centro de Pesquisas Cangucu (1998-99), by Luis Hildebrando Ferreira Paz, also belongs to this approach. The Xingu Indigenous Park (2019), built in the Kisêdjê Settlement, in São Félix do Araguaia, is a community and cultural center designed by Estúdio Gustavo Utrabo and is a project that interprets the characteristics of Xingu architecture, based on the construction of voluminous canopies in wood and straw, and returns a rationalized and industrialized version, with an elementary volume with a concrete base, a wooden structure, brick walls, and a tin roof<sup>Ϙ</sup> ϛ.

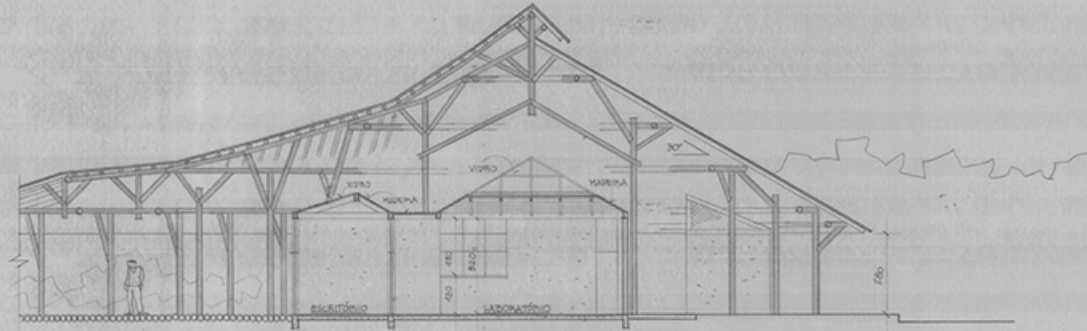
Among the works proposing an interesting contemporary vernacular, evolved and stripped of picturesque elements, is the Children Village, built in Formoso do Araguaia by Aleph Zero

(Gustavo Utrabo & Pedro Duschenes) and Rosenbaum (Marcelo Rosenbaum & Adriana Benguela) and awarded with the RIBA Award for International Excellence 2018. In this college building, the link between local traditions and knowledge is brought together through specific participatory know-how<sup>11</sup>. As Camillo Magni writes, “Marcelo Rosenbaum, owner of the studio, is known in Brazil for his design methodology called ‘people transforms’ with which he investigates the possibilities of combining an authorial activity such as a project with a participatory approach. Addressing mainly the indigenous communities of deeper Brazil, he immerses himself, travels, and lives firsthand in the contexts where he works, absorbing the culture of the place and conveying it within the architectural project. With great sensitivity, he draws on the most ancient knowledge linked to ancient traditions and opens cultural bridges between the present and the past”<sup>12</sup>. The technology is based on the layout of buildings in raw earth blocks and imposing wooden structures in the courtyard. It is the large continuous canopy, supported by 288 lamellar wood pillars, which seems to evoke, reformulated in a rationalist key, the continuous roof of the Balbina Center for Environmental Protection by Severiano Porto. The college represents, as Magni notes, a peculiar meeting point between the two traditions, the modernist one prevailing in São Paulo, and the vernacular one ascribable to Porto: “It is interesting to highlight how the typical rigor of Paulista architecture is recognizable in the inflexible geometry of the steps structural and in the muscular structure that becomes the main figure of the architectural composition. At the same time, the use of materials such as wood and raw earth as well as the articulated variation of non-load bearing elements (terraces and recreational spaces) constitute a different way of interpreting the project and connecting it to the local context”<sup>13</sup>. Technologies are explicitly commensurate with local conditions, “the decision to use glued laminated eucalyptus wood came from the abundance of the material in Brazilian territory, the absence of the use of wood in larger-scale buildings and all the benefits that a light and slender structure could provide to the project”<sup>14</sup>.

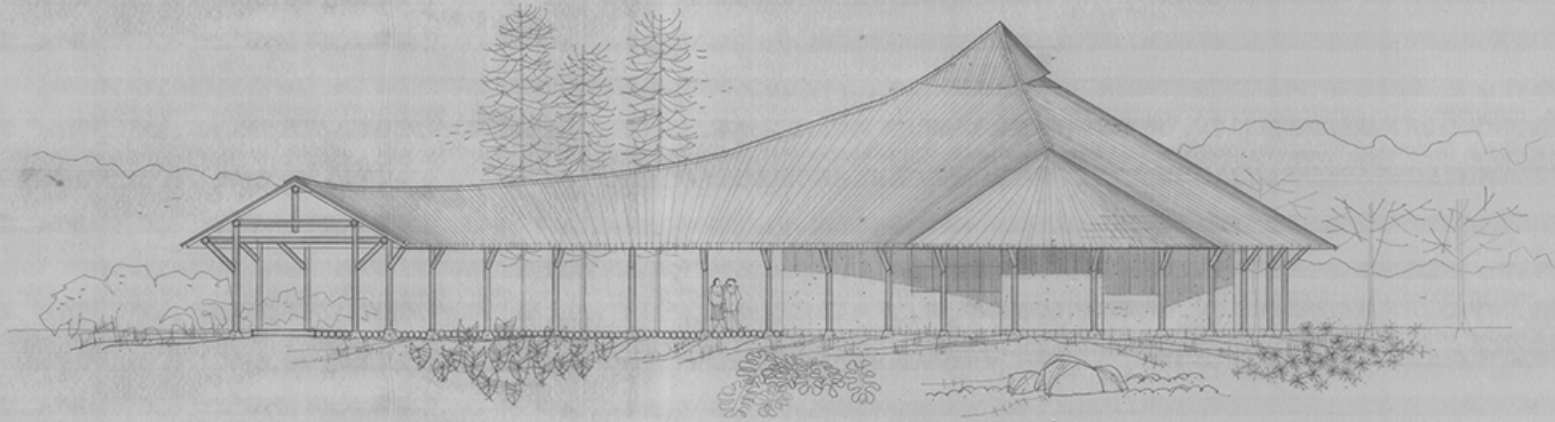
In the Amazonian and Brazilian scenario, the renewed interest in environmentally sensitive, sustainable architecture, commensurate with local resources, is combined with the constant tension of a territory that remains frontier; a laboratory where the destinies of the planet, which are also linked to massive deforestation, overlap with the issues of cultural, and sometimes even material, survival of native populations. In the XVII Venice Biennale of Architecture (2021) the collective Somatic

Collaborative presented a project, “Manaus: A New Contractual Agreement between City and Forest in Urban Amazonia – 2020”<sup>15</sup> which, in an experimental approach, hypothesizes a new alliance between the world of the rainforest and a potential new urban development: “[the project] examines the urban and territorial transformation of the Mindu River, a small inner city stream that connects the Amazon and Black Rivers with the Reserva Florestal Adolpho Ducke. Through the careful examination of five spatial conditions – the tower, the island, the urban edge, the anchor, and the bridge – the project proposes an urban imaginary that transforms the Mindu and advocates for a co-existence of ecological conservation and urban development, tempering the harsh divide between city and forest in the Amazonian region”<sup>16</sup>. The discussion is open: the tension between the imitation of tradition and new ideas of order and progress can be the common thread that, between the contradictions of the recent past and the anxieties that populate the future, can give life to new and original experiments for Amazonian architecture<sup>17</sup>.

Balbina Environmental Protection Centre, cross section and north elevation.  
Limnology laboratory.



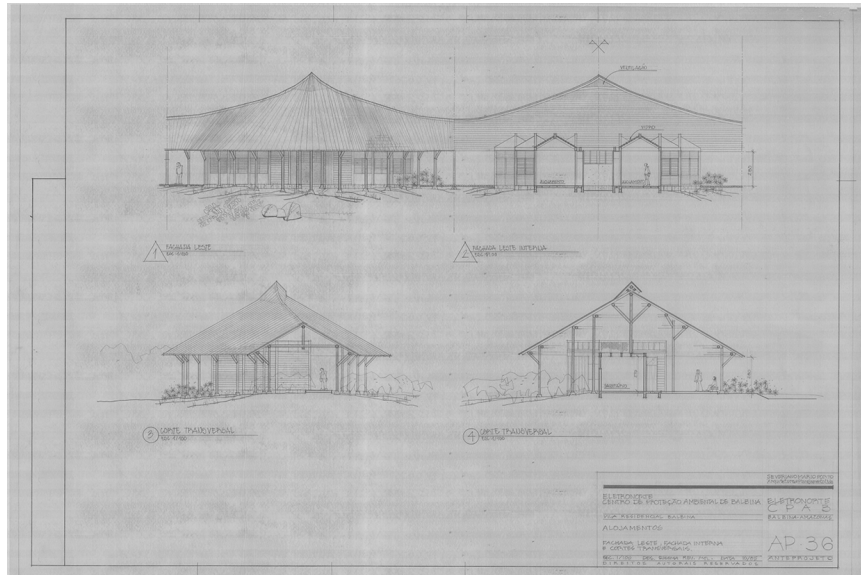
1 CORTES TRANSVERSAL  
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2 FACHADA NORTE  
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SEVERIANO MARCO PORTO Arq. Urbanista e Arquiteto	
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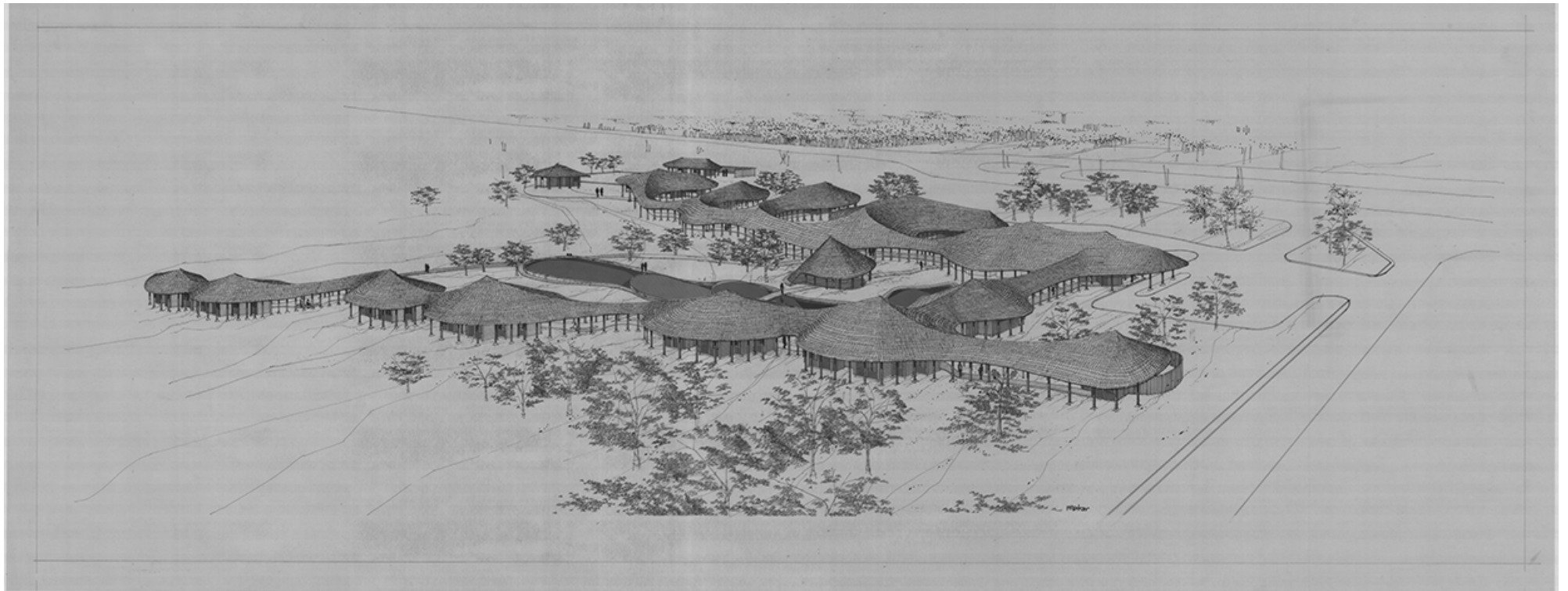
Balbina Environmental Protection Centre, east and internal elevations and cross section. Accommodation.



Balbina Environmental Protection Centre, roof plan. Publication design.



Balbina Environmental Protection Centre, general perspective.  
Publication design.



Balbina Environmental Protection Center, east and north elevations.  
Reception, living room, museum, study rooms and warehouse.



73

## DOMINATION AND SYMBIOSIS

✠ <https://jeanmicheljarre.com/amazonia>, accessed 19 June 2022.

∞ J. Daudén, *Brazilian Houses: 9 Examples of Residential Vernacular Architecture*, <https://www.archdaily.com/909366/brazilian-houses-9-examples-of-residential-vernacular-architecture>, accessed 19 June 2022.

∞ “A arquitetura para áreas rurais passa a optar por materiais locais, técnicas construtivas de baixo impacto, tipologias tradicionais e estratégias passivas de proteção solar e de ventilação. O arquiteto mineiro Severiano Porto, formado na Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), foi um dos primeiros arquitetos brasileiros a se preocupar, de forma sistemática, com a preservação do meio ambiente amazônico.” A. Guerra, *Arquitetura brasileira: tradição e utopia*, in “Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros,” 76, 2020, pp. 158-200, here p. 172.

∞ L. Neves, *The New Vernacular of Severiano Porto in the Amazon*, in W. Weber, S. Yannas (eds.), *Lessons from Vernacular Architecture*, Routledge, Oxon 2014, p. 166.

∞ Ivi, p. 173.

∞ San Francisco Museum of Art, *Domestic Architecture of the San Francisco Bay Region: A Catalog of an Exhibition Held at the San Francisco Museum of Art*, Sept. 16, Oct. 30, 1949; E.K. Thompson, *The Early Domestic Architecture of the San Francisco Bay Region*, in “Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,” 10(3), 1951, pp. 15-21.

✠ B. Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art / Doubleday, New York 1964. It should be noted that Rudofsky’s research, although strongly oriented towards an international vision, does not report any mention of Amazonian architecture.

∞ *NAMA and the architecture of the Amazon*. MIT Architecture | Spring 2021 Lecture Series. A Research Studio conversation with Marcos Cereto, Angelo Bucci, and Xhulio Binjaku, moderated by Cristina Parreño; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5VipN-X3bQ>, accessed 19 June 2022.

∞ <https://nucleoama.weebly.com/about.html>, accessed 19 June 2022.

✠ <https://architecture.mit.edu/events/nama-and-architecture-amazon>, accessed 19 June 2022.

✠ <https://www.archdaily.com/457077/rio-bonito-house-carla-juacaba>, accessed 19 June 2022.

∞ “Nos diversos edifícios, a arquiteta Cristina Xavier optou por fundação de concreto estanque à umidade, estrutura em madeira de baixo interesse comercial e coberturas com telhas cerâmicas ou em palha provenientes de palmeiras nativas muito usada na região, alternativas

adequadas ao alto índice pluviométrico e calor intenso do local. Equipes de profissionais e consultores de centros urbanos maiores treinaram equipes locais para o uso de técnicas construtivas locais e modernas;” A. Guerra, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

∞ El Croquis, *Estudio Gustavo Utrabo (2015-2020). Ojo cerrado para verte mejor – Eyes shut to see you better*, 207, 9/3/2021; <https://www.archdaily.com/978232/xingu-cano-pies-estudio-gustavo-utrabo>, accessed 19 June 2022.

∞ <https://agentetransforma.org.br>, accessed 19 June 2022.

∞ C. Magni, *Collegio Fondazione Bradesco – Fazenda Canuanã*, in “Casabella,” 877, 9/2017, pp. 27-36, here p. 27; A. Guerra, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

∞ C. Magni, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

✠ From the project report, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ-SlVlUzQ>, accessed 19 June 2022.

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∞ All drawings by Severiano Porto courtesy of Núcleo de Pesquisas e Documentação, Departamento de Projecto de Arquitetura, Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.

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