

# From geo-politics to geo-poetics: Decoding the *Interior Sea* to (re)present the South American continent

## Introduction

For more than five decades, the *School of Valparaíso* in Chile<sup>1</sup> has endeavored to develop a pedagogy and research in architecture based on the experience of building speculative Works of architecture, away from traditional methods of research and theoretical production. This commitment for the Work has been materialized in projects such as the *Open City* (1970-2019) and the *Travesías of Amereida* (1965;1984-2019). However, and almost contradictory, this attitude towards architecture is based on a geo-poetic vision of the South American continent created by the School in the mid-sixties, which is postulated as a fundamental element in the development of architectural projects.

The geo-poetic vision emerged from the *Travesía of Amereida* in 1965, a wandering trip through the interior lands of South America, seeking to ‘unveil’ them through poetry and art in action, inquiring into the question of ‘being American’ and its correlation with the inhabited and uninhabited extent of the continent. From this original experience, the *Thesis of the Interior Sea* (1971) was formulated, taking the geo-poetic vision to the field of architecture and urbanism, and establishing a critical position facing the geopolitics of the seventies, particularly regarding the development of the South American region towards the World-System.

Nevertheless, for the School, this vision must be linked to architectural-*praxes*. For this reason, since 1984 until now, the *Travesías* are a direct experience of architecture carried out on the territory, whose main objective is to ‘unveil’ the South American continent through the development of different design practices of architecture and design whose focus is to build ephemeral Works of architecture.

On the other hand, the poetic foundations and territorial insights created through the *Travesías* are practically unknown even to the current members of this School, as a result of the rejection of scientific academic production, and choosing an oral/visual transmission developed through the montage of public exhibitions or documentary records stored in Historical Archives. These extensive unpublished materials are fundamental to this research, especially given their link to the current commitment towards ‘the territory’, developed in the field of architecture and urbanism, but also in the human sciences and the arts, in which new visions and critical actions facing the Anthropocene era are executed.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the name *School of Valparaíso* is used to refer to the actual School of Architecture and Design of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, in Chile. This name has been given in several international publications such as the *Valparaíso School: Open City Group* (Perez de Arce and Perez Oyarzún 2003); *The Road that is Not a Road and the Open City* (Pendleton-Jullian 1996); *Building Cultures Valparaíso* (Various Authors 2015) thus facilitating the review of other references in English.

This paper aims to be presented as a re-narration about the origin and development of the geo-poetic vision toward the South American continent and its transcription in the architectural-*praxes* developed during five decades within the *Travesía*, decoding how this practice sets a balance between a metaphorical vision of reality, a critical understanding of contemporary urbanization/urbanism processes, and an empirical knowledge about architecture and territory from which a holistic, empathic, and also ethical perspective of cross-disciplinary action can be drawn.

In this regard, this paper is not based on Practice & Design Driven Research but in the research about the practice of one of the first schools developing an artistic/territorial approach into the field of architecture, but whose trajectory and progress is unknown. Thus, this paper is grounded in the analysis of historical archive documents and my experience leading some *Travesías* as a professor at the *School of Valparaíso*.

### **Poetry, art and architecture in the Work-Making**

In 1965, a group of architects, poets, philosophers, and artists related to the *School of Valparaíso* made a trip from Tierra del Fuego in the extreme south of the American continent to Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia. This collective study trip called *Travesía* inspired the participants to write *Ameréida* (Various Authors 1967) a poem that combines the epic of Aeneas, with the chronicles of the discovery of America and the wandering experience as a way of questioning the origin and actuality of the continent. The *Travesía* was the empirical proof of his radical philosophy: the coexistence between poetry and embodied architectural practices as a means of learning and creating *Obras* -Works.

However, this radical position towards architecture dates back to the 1950s, with the re-foundation of the architecture institute of the Catholic University of Valparaíso. In 1952 the rector of the institution managed to contract a group of young architects led by Alberto Cruz, and the unusual integration of the poet Godofredo Iommi and the sculptor Claudio Girola as professors (Eyquem 2002).

The group began an unprecedented way of teaching architecture based on two premises: On the one hand, to explore the relationship between 'word and action' (Reyes 2011; VV.AA. 1985) through three languages -architecture, sculpture, and poetry-; on the other hand, to approach it through the *Obrar* -Work(ing)-, that is, by creating Works of art whose singularity lies in summoning the School and the city (A. Cruz 1959).



Fig.01 – Work[ing] in the harbor of Valparaiso 1958  
Historical Archive Jose Vial Armstrong EAD-PUCV, Chili.

With this proposal, the School moved away from the academic and neoclassical teaching that characterized the Chilean schools of architecture of the 1950s, inspired by the spirit of the European avant-garde that sought to change the relationship between academic theory and artistic practices, or more radically, to put praxis before theory. In poetry, aligning with the path of poets such as Baudelaire, who opens modernity with his question about the unknown; Rimbaud, who warns that the word will never again rhyme with actions, encouraging ‘change of life’; and Hölderlin, who long before claimed the poetic condition of the human being (Iommi 1963, 1976, 1979, 1981).

The academic program began with the creation of two fundamental practices carried out until today; The first was the *Observación Arquitectónica* -architectural observation- (A. Cruz 1959, 1982; F. Cruz 1993) which consists of making sketches in the city, freehand drawings accompanied by short notes, whose paused process allows contemplation and reflection about spatiality, gestures, and acts that happen in daily life. For the school, a poetic process -in the meaning of *poiesis*- because it seeks to reveal and eulogize the reality; and creative because the drawings must nourish the architectural projects developed within the Workshops (Jolly 2015).



Fig.02 – Exhibition of observation drawings, 1956  
Historical Archive Jose Vial Armstrong EAD-PUCV, Chili.

The second practice was the *phalène* (Various Authors 1969; Iommi 1984b) or Poetic Acts, created by Godofredo Iommi in 1953, whose purpose is to transform into public experience the proposal of a 'poetry made by all' put forward by the Uruguayan-French poet Isidore Ducasse (Iommi 1981). Thus, the *phalène* is a poetic game of public character -which takes place in the public space and freely summons those who are present- that aims to create a poem with words spoken by the participants and connectives arranged by the poet. With these two practices, the School began learning acquired in the city and not the classroom, and developing poetics oriented by the way of the word and not the poem (Arriagada 2017).

However, in order to move forward in the idea of 'poetically unveiling' the daily life of Valparaíso, Iommi in the midst of the sixties posed a radical question; what is the origin and actual meaning of 'being American'. Thus in 1965, professors of the *School of Valparaíso* organize a trip through the South American continent called *Travesía* (traversée), with the purpose of crossing and unveiling the interior of the American continent. A trip traced far from the big cities, because they hide, in the poet's words, what is really American, because they are "dense with knowledge, splendid but empty of myth, inventing it quickly and fallaciously" (Iommi 1983; Arriagada and Coelho 2015).

### **Crossing to re-create: the geo-poetic turn of *Ameréida***

The *Travesía* began in Punta Arenas, in the extreme south of Chile, crossing the Argentine Patagonia and finished in Santa Cruz de la Sierra due to the presence of the guerrilla of Ñancahuazú. This 42-day trip motivated the group to collectively write *Ameréida*, a poem that gathers in its name the finding of America and the Aeneid (Various Authors 1967; Iommi 1982b, 1982a) re-creating the idea of *latinidad* in the Americas beyond the historiographic conceptions founded in the 16th and 19th centuries (Iommi and Girola 1983). A book that mixes historical, cultural viewpoints about the process of occupation of the continent, intermingled with words coming from classical and modern poetry, and insights emerged from the multiple languages gathered during the *Travesía* (1965)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Participants of the *Travesía* (1965); Professor of the *School of Valparaíso*: Alberto Cruz, architect, Chilean; Fabio Cruz, architect, Chilean; Claudio Girola, sculptor, Argentinean; Godofredo Iommi, poet, Argentinean. Friends of the School: Edison Simons, poet, Panamanian; Jonathan Boulting, poet, English; Michel Deguy, poet and philosopher, French; Henry Tronquoi, designer/artist, French; Jorge Pérez Román, painter, Argentinean; François Fedier, philosopher, French].

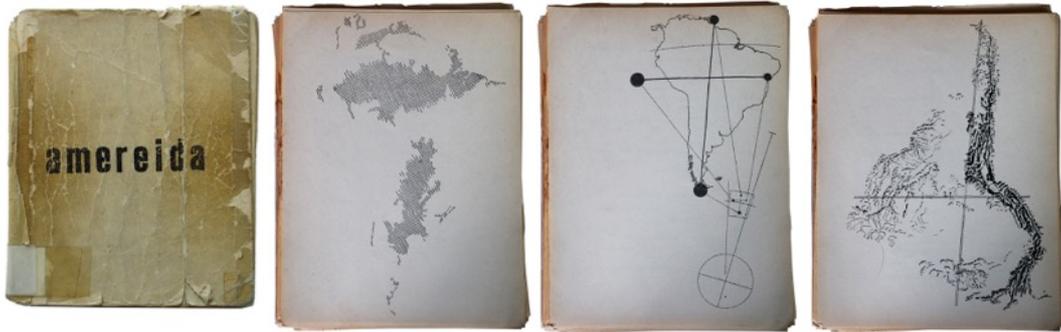


Fig.03 – Portada; *Mar Interior*; *Proyección Cruz del Sur sobre el continente*; *Propio Norte y accidentes geográficos*, Libro Amereida, 1967  
Historical Archive Jose Vial Armstrong EAD-PUCV, Chile.

One of the most radical ideas developed from Amereida's narrative is the notion of the *Mar Interior -Interior Sea*-alluding to the vast interior of the continent, a territory exploited since colonization but sparsely inhabited, an extension without orientation, a drift and still unknown to most of the American civilization that inhabits the edges (Iommi 1983, 1984a) poetically, a land of shipwrecks, like that of Enea's wanderer, and the one lived during the *Travesía*, an experience of radical detachment to recreate the question of being American (Iommi 1982a).

Together with the text, 10 cartographies represent the transcription from the metaphoric space of the poem to the geographic space of the continent, not starting from descriptive geographic methods, but questioning the emergence and occupation of the continent in the world, and finally, proposing an orientation given by the constellation of the Southern Cross (Various Authors 1967; Eyquem 1985) in which to have an *Own North* is to look to the South. Thus, the descriptions of the *Interior Sea* and the continent seek to be different from other apparently analogous concepts and geographical categories, such as hinterland or wastelands (Iommi 1984a) but rather to become a 'notion' in the sense of an ongoing thought and knowledge, permanently open to interpretations arising from the embodied experiences guided by poetry.

In this way, the *Travesía* and its geo-poetic vision was understood as a forerunner experience, to initiate a pathway to re-create the reality of the continent through collective words and actions, but an invention that was only possible through the accomplishment of many of the usual practices developed in within the *School of Valparaíso*: public poetic acts; the construction of collective and ephemeral Works; the observation of reality through drawing and words, but this time taking a turn facing the wandering experience across the vast and desolate interior of the continent, thus opening up a study of architecture committed to the American extension, that is, to those remote territories and abysmal magnitudes are not usually encompassed by architecture.



Fig.04 – Camping, Work and muleteer in the Argentine Pampas; First *Travesía of Amereida*, 1965  
Historical Archive *Jose Vial Armstrong* EAD-PUCV, Chili.

### ***Travesías* in progress; (re)presenting a continent**

Since the First *Travesía* of *Amereida* in 1965, all the projects of the *School of Valparaíso* have turned towards a geo-poetic, originated from the creative freedom inaugurated by modern poetry, in which the possibility of associating discordant elements -namely poetry and geography- comes into play (Iommi 1985). Thus, in the publications *The Thesis of the Interior Sea* and *Thesis of the Own North* (A. Cruz et al. 1971; Various Authors 1970) the geo-poetic vision of the American continent was presented through 15 large-scale maps and brief manuscripts as a critical counter-proposal to the geo-political vision of dependence and globalization of South America arising from the academia. Nevertheless, these drawings did not seek to represent territorial accuracies; on the contrary, they sought to be a speculative and critical way of describing other relationships between the continent, its interior lands, and the world, overlapping the traditional perspectives.

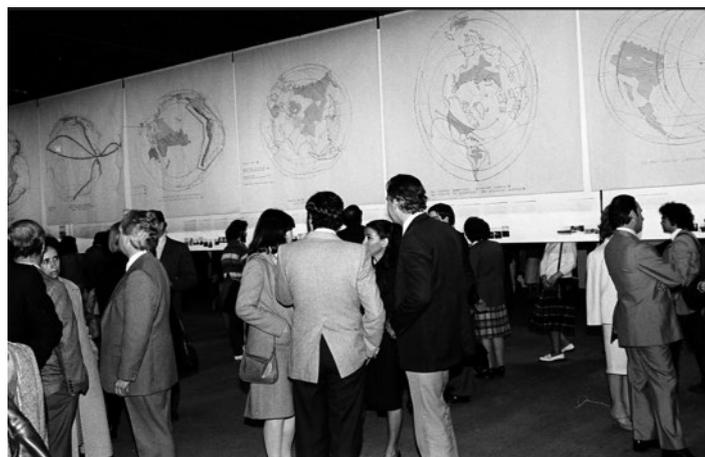


Fig.05 – Maps of the *Thesis of the Interior* and *Thesis of the Own North* (1970) re-drawn to the Exhibition “30 Years of the School of Valparaíso”, 1982  
Historical Archive *Jose Vial Armstrong* EAD-PUCV, Chili.

The same year the Open City project was poetically founded (Iommi 1971) and in 1984 the *Travesías* were established as a pedagogical practice whose main objective is to ‘unveil’ the South American continent through travelling observing and constructing ephemeral Works across the *Interior Sea* (A. Cruz 1984) involving the corpus of the School, all the Workshops and disciplines -architecture, industrial design, graphic design-, poets and sculptors

Since 1984 the *Travesías* are the continuation of the study of the city toward the continent, carried out mainly in remote places outside the comfort of daily urban life. Each experience lasts for two or three weeks in which the group requires to give shape to the itinerary, the accommodation, the life and the poetic sphere, only possible through a commitment between individual and collective tasks, which allows them to create different modes of re-presenting - in the meaning of describing and ‘making appear’ - the relationship between crossing the continent and building *Obras* -Works. (VV.AA. 2012; Steane, Luza, and Jolly 2016; A. Cruz 2004).



Fig.06 – *Travesía* in the Atacama Desert 1985, Chili.  
Historical Archive *Jose Vial Armstrong* EAD-PUCV, Chili.

For the School, the Works are ‘gifts’ for the places of destination, they are not projected to solve the local needs or problems, neither a method to exploit the locations (Jolly 2012, 2017) but a sign in which the lightness -both material and technical- allows them to put in value something that has been acknowledged and interpreted from each situation, as a result of the dialogue and negotiation with the otherness, namely, with the inhabitants and the environment.

However, after thirty-five uninterrupted years of *Travesías* in progress, the question arises as to whether the intentionality of unveiling the American *Interior Sea* allows us to reinvent the ways of representing a continent that is no longer as unknown or isolated as in previous decades.

## Re-tracing the geo-poetics of (re)presentations

In 2014, together with the fourth- and fifth-year architecture and first-year industrial and graphic design Workshops, we departed of *Travesía* to '*Chiloé profundo*' - Deep Chiloé-, a name used to describe the most isolated and inaccessible territories of the Chiloé Island located in the Chilean Patagonia. For us, this territory belongs to the *Interior Sea*, because besides being distant, it is almost unknown to the world, or more precisely, known to about fifteen families.



Fig.07 – *Travesía* Paildad 2014, Chili.  
Alvaro Mercado

The 108-member group went to Paildad, a rural village located in a fjord in the southeast of the island, wondering how the notion of the *Interior Sea* is manifested in the place, seeking to unveil an answer that contributes both to our territorial study and the collective vision -group and community- of the island and beyond.

Paildad has been a place traditionally connected by the sea, through navigation among the fjords of the island. However, today this practice is paradoxically threatened as a result of urban integration projects promoted by the regional government, new roads and sea routes have been designed to connect sites for the cultivation and exploitation of Patagonian salmon instead of rural villages. At the same time, the regional development plans are increasing the massive purchase and sale of land by private companies, which is provoking socio-cultural transformations such as the emigration of locals toward cities on the island or the mainland (Díaz et al. 2014).

This scenario, imperceptible to foreigners like us, was revealed through the dialogical experience between the group, the local community and the extension. A creative relationship materialized in the projection of a Work whose purpose was to re-connect the community with the sea, through the building of a small dock, ramp and balcony to contemplate the landscape and access to the public services of Paildad; a basic school, a church, a communal headquarters, the cemetery and green areas.



Fig.08 – *Work[ing]* in Paildad 2014, Chili.  
Alvaro Mercado

From a critical point of view, today these pedagogical practices of building collective Works located in urban or rural areas are quite common and carried out by several schools of architecture or art in the world. However, the uniqueness of a *Travesía* lies precisely in opening a space/time to creative speculation in which poetic inspiration allows us to see the ordinary with other eyes; a return to not knowing ((Iommi 1971)). Thus, in Paildad we propose to re-present the relationship between Work/Continent in two ways: First, through the presentation of a poem that was carved and painted on the wooden surfaces of the Work, words about the place said by the group and the community. Second, through the cartographic representation of Chiloé within the Southern *maritorio* (Ucv 1971; Ivelic 2005)-mar and territory- today unknowingly overexploited and trans-nationalized.



Fig.09 – Poem inscribed in the Work of Paildad, 2014, Chili.  
Alvaro Mercado

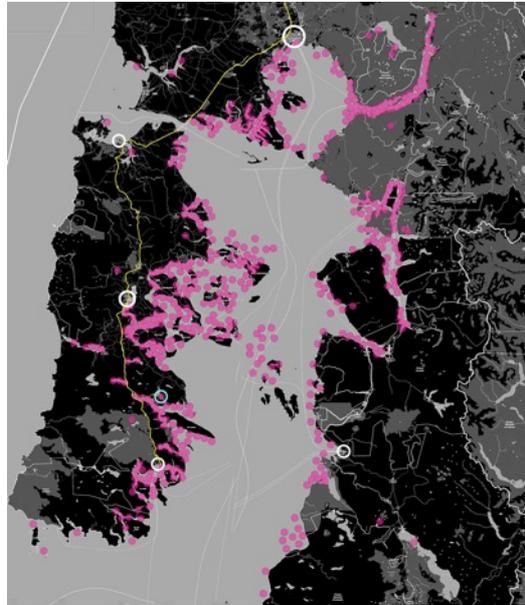


Fig.10 – Tracing the flows [white and yellow] and places of extraction [magenta] across Paildad [cyan] and the Maritorio.  
Alvaro Mercado

*Ongoing research*

Based on this historical analysis and experiences as professor at the *School of Valparaíso*, this ongoing research aims to trace and decode how the origin and deployment of the *Travesías* in the *Interior Sea* has faced the historical and current urbanization of the continent, understanding urbanization, on the one hand, as the means by which the *Travesías* reach isolated places of the continent, and on the other, as the current process by which new remote territories are integrated into the global, but mainly for the exploitation of natural resources, paradoxically causing the displacement or resistance of places that are virtually unknown to the world.

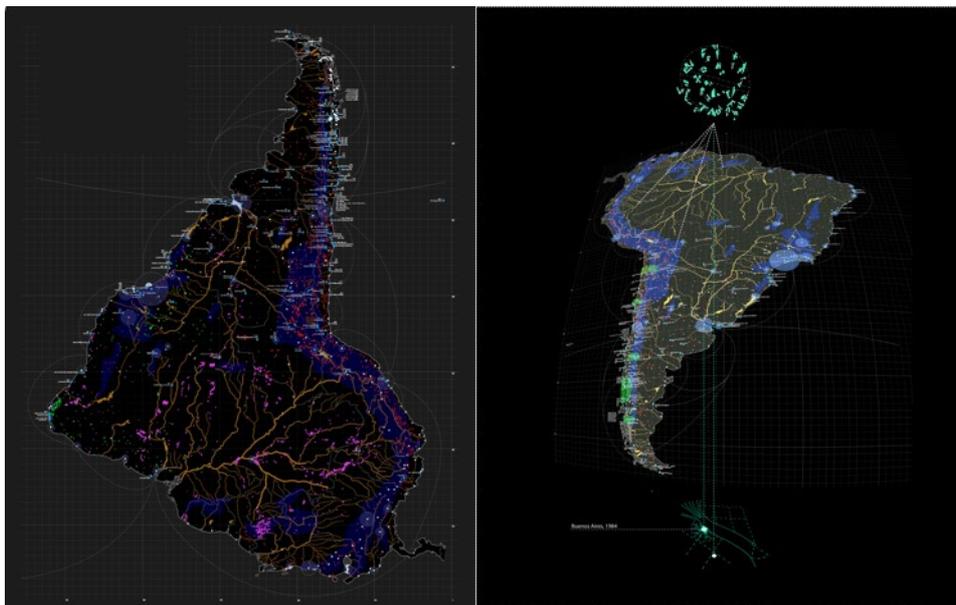


Fig.11 – Re-Tracing the American Interior(s) Sea(s) though the Travesías [1965;1085-2019]  
Alvaro Mercado

Mapping and re-tracing of the Inner(s) Sea(s) based on the narratives and Works of more than 250 Travesías throughout South America (1965:1984-2019) aims to open up other ways of representing -digitally- the relationship between geo-poetics and a continent in transformation, overcoming the traditional methods of descriptive geography and geopolitics. Finally, this research expects to contribute in the current discussion within the academia committed to approaching subjects –such as urbanization and territorialization– through design practices beyond the disciplinary boundaries of architecture.

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