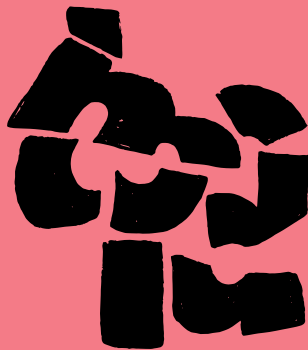


EXTRACTION

This pamphlet is one of a series produced as part of the research project ***Architecture after Architecture: Spatial Practice in the Face of the Climate Emergency***.

Each publication introduces a topic, concept or theme crucial to the project through a range of perspectives and asks 'What does it mean in the context of climate, architecture, and spatial practice?'

Based on ongoing discussions amongst the research team and others, the pamphlets aim to be reflective as well as projective. They are preliminary in nature, written to be accessible, and usually written by one author working in collaboration with other members of our collective, **MOULD**.



**Architecture after Architecture**  
**Spatial Practice in the Face of the Climate Emergency**

# EXTRACTION

## **The maintenance of life and the violence of scale: a differentiated look at extractivisms**

Extractivist practices shape spaces and lives through colonial, capitalist, and exploitative ideologies that can be summarised as extractivism. Extractivism is the logic of fossil-fuelled capitalism, and capitalism requires it, as well as the inequality it produces. Green capitalism performs the very same operation by conceptualising the earth—all the things and beings in it—as material in a mechanical system.

The effects and consequences of violent extractivisms are not only historic but continue to be felt in the present. In the face of the climate emergency, extraction is being expanded and intensified. Architecture as it is currently constituted— buildings, knowledge, profession, education—is built and feeds on extraction. How and why did this happen, what possibilities exist for architecture after extractivism or post-extractivist spatial practices, and how might these be brought about?



*Extraction is a primal pursuit, a business of wresting raw materials from the earth that can be converted into value. From pits, wells and mines, raw geology is liquidated into energy and money, a double alchemy at the heart of the modern capitalist economy.*

*The car, the fridge and the lightbulb – technological embodiments of modernity's power to diminish distance, forestall the seasons, and render irrelevant the earth's rotation – remain, for the most part, tethered to a netherworld of rocks and reservoirs.*

Gavin Bridge, *The Hole World*

Figure 1.

# What is extraction?

From the latin 'extrahere' meaning to draw (trahere) out (ex).

In its simplest form extraction refers to the removal of something, and of someone claiming it for utilisation elsewhere. 'It' might be material, energy, labour, or knowledge; human, non-human, or non-living. The sites of extraction and utilisation might be geographically distant or within a localised network; their relation may be equitable and accountable, or reflect an uneven balance of power, and exploitation.

Extraction becomes a violent operation with scale and disconnection: specific forms of management of resources which relate to large scale operations depleting the earth's resources, and privatising decision making about exploitation, prioritising particular ways of life at the expense of others. It is violent not only in extracting materials themselves but in the sites, networks, and economies surrounding the point of extraction; not only in the immediate present but also over long periods of emergence.

Extraction is far more than material, and the violence of extraction is far more than visible: extractivism reshapes the world socially, politically, and economically, for its own ends—and to conceal its own workings through the maintenance of an extractivist status quo. Extraction is wilfully blind to its effects, and is as much about the production of the devalued, or waste, as it is about the production of value.

## Extraction is colonial

Extractivists, capitalists, and colonialists share same ideology of exploitation. The climate emergency has its roots in colonialism: the violent expropriation of resources from parts of the globe that are at the same time excluded from the economic activity generated by those resources. In respect of the climate emergency, activists talk about the rape of the earth by industrialists, but this is a method practiced and developed through histories of European settler colonial extraction that saw certain sites, materials, and peoples as ripe for appropriation, or conversion into capital.

The climate emergency is in large part the re-emergence of consequences of extraction: the effects of extraction refusing to remain external (to former and present-day colonisers, and the economies that have benefited from it).

Extractive histories come with real material presents, as well as new guises in regulatory and fiscal policies through which the enrichment of some at the expense of others is sustained—often through relations of economic dependency. Extraction operates primarily through the construction and maintenance of an exploitative system of relations. In many formerly colonised places, colonial extractivism has been replaced by neo-extractivism, where independent states replicate colonial models of resource extraction trading social and environmental resources for financial power, encouraged by neo-colonial instruments and institutions.

*Climate injustice, for Indigenous peoples, is less about the spectre of a new future and more about the experience of déjà vu [...] part of a cyclical history situated within the larger struggle of anthropogenic environmental change catalysed by colonialism, industrialism and capitalism.*

*Kyle Powys White, Is It Colonial Déjà Vu?*

*Capital comes [into the world] dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.*

*Karl Marx, Capital Volume I*

## **Extraction is appropriation**

All these operations hinge on the creation and subjugation of what is considered as 'non-life' by late capitalism. Ideas about the inert material matter of nature are essential to a society built on extraction. Just as colonialism operates by subjugating the 'other'—rendering someone or something mute, denying their agency—the appropriation of nature requires the consideration of nature as a resource for exploitation; both as a 'tap' from which material and energy can be supplied, and as a 'sink' to which unwanted waste can be sent.

This way of thinking is tied into ideas of mastery central to extractivism: the construction of a subject, we over here, in relation to a distant object, that/them over there; or the separation of parts based on what matter is deemed to matter.

But whilst extractivism continues apace via the intellectual reconstruction, and material appropriation, of externalities, climate breakdown dissolves these categories, and removes us of the illusion of the external.

## Extraction is ignorant

The hegemonic power held by extractivists (people, institutions, and companies) is based on the production of knowledge systems that establish extractivism as the status quo. It not only relies on externalising others spatially, but in relation to time: a form of deliberate forgetting, or disassociating themselves with the consequences of extraction.

The continuation of extractivism relies on disavowing the damage that its own industries wreak upon the earth. Extraction requires deliberate carelessness—what Ecuadorian economist Alberto Costa calls ‘well-programmed amnesia’—for where things come from and where they end up.

The consequences of extractivism include both global climate breakdown, and the catastrophic local effects that not only transform landscapes in the immediate present, but resurface across generations. In this way, the consequences of extractivism draw links across times extractivists would prefer to draw boundaries around, by refusing to be confined to a specific period of time.

*But the past does not exist independently from the present [...] nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past.*

*Michel-Rolph Trouillot,  
Silencing the Past*

*Environmental destruction is accepted as the inevitable cost of achieving development. Since this is not questioned, these approaches are weakly analytical, lacking in historical analysis and unconnected to the underlying problems.*

*Alberto Acosta, Extractivism and neoextractivism*



# Extractivism and spatial production

The production of space is fundamental to the ideology of extractivism. Architecture is the (re)production of territory, but also the financialisation of space: the built environment is central to the transformation of materials and labour into energy and capital.

*[It is] an understanding of our present, and its dislocations, that helps bring about unknowable futures.*

*Elizabeth Grosz, In the Nick of Time*

Foregrounding exploitative or violent forms of extractivist practices as a core element of spatial production is about recognising that the production of energy from materials is linked to the form of architecture. More importantly, it is about resisting the kinds of isolation and externalisation that are typical of the architectural project. If extraction is about displacement, and dislocation, then what does it do to spatial production?

Extraction is constitutive of the carbon modernity that constitutes architecture: an industrial modernity built on denialism, and the production of externalities, that allows sustainability to be equated with overproduction. It does so via measures of 'sustainability' that deliberately permit, even encourage, the production of externalities, in order to describe projects as non-extractive because they generate profit without harming the ecosystem. This relies on only seeing

certain kinds of extraction and not others, in particular the systems of knowledge, power, and labour that arise from long histories of the spatial practice of extraction. Equally, some decarbonisation technologies that are presented as offering escape from the messy world of extraction depend fundamentally on new and greater forms of material extraction: of rare earth elements, and all the machines required to extract, transport, and process them.

Of course, it may be common to be somewhat ignorant of the full context of one's action—let's take a look at how and where we live, how we travel, the things we buy—but pointing out these complexities and difficulties of individuals living in extractivist economies should not prevent also pointing out the big issues, companies, and people perpetuating extractivism as an all-pervasive mode of life.

Instead of staying in an extractivist mindset, this also shows how necessary it is that we act on the constructed distances between actions, and places of extraction. Architects must play their part in shifting their practice to one that makes conscious decisions about social, spatial, and material relations. Those architectural 'projects' that are ignorant of the material as well as other networks within which they are embedded must recognise responsibility to distant events and wider deleterious processes just as much as they do to what goes on in the boundaries of the traditional 'site'—those seemingly immediate things that are already here and which more obviously require negotiation.





Figure 2.

# Architecture as the practice of accountability

Architects need a wider sense of modes as well as means of production, in order to move beyond amnesia, and the isolationism of the architectural project or object. If architecture after extractivism were to be based upon the idea that humans are not separate from but both dependent upon, and constitutive of, wider natural systems, then it might describe a form of practice that does not ignore its context but confronts it, does not pretend to offer solutions but makes negotiations, is responsible for its own waste. The whole earth will have to be the site, and what happens *there* for the production of the *here* is not separate from the project, but part of it.

Therefore, we must be against any net (-zero, etc.) metric which compensates a 'bad' thing here with a 'good' thing elsewhere. Climate breakdown demands moving past this mode of understanding (dis)connection. Rather, only gross measurements that go beyond even life-cycle- and use- costing, to planetary-scale costing might expose the violence of extraction.

Architecture after extractivism needs also to engage critically with its own processes of knowledge production. This includes knowledge beyond the discipline, and going beyond architecture's position within the construction (and deconstruction) industry. The continuing re-production of knowledge systems that enables extraction is just as important to us in thinking about extraction as the sites themselves.

Instead of tabula rasa solutions that start with denial—an empty site, a new use, new materials—non-extractive work would be revitalising, regenerating, repairing: not only materially but in relation to the social-political-structures that condition an understanding of value. We need to go beyond material and technical repair to think about changing systemic patterns, through organisational frames—doing the repair work of broken social, economic and political structures, and of recognising spatial practices that are not valued.

Non-extractive architecture must work by acknowledging and cooperating with others in processes of making, including not only human but also non-human agents. This doesn't mean to say harnessing—imagining in a typically hubristic fashion that things will do what we tell them—but also accepting uncertainty and contingency as central to design. So, not seeking to selectively activate bits of nature as little machines but living in expectation of unintended consequences.

To avoid repeating the willful blindness that the continuance of extractivism requires, we must understand 'architecture' to refer not only to the small proportion of building done with the involvement of architects, but the major part of the construction industry as well as the professional, intellectual, and pedagogical structures surrounding the production of the built environment.

The denial of architecture's addiction to extraction is only possible because of the distance drawn between spaces of extraction, and products. We should reject the term sustainability when it is employed as a cloak to 'sustain' capitalist extractivism. Sustainability can be useful, however, in defining architecture after extractivism as being about operating within limits: a process may then only be called 'sustainable' if it does not rely on externalities (the exploitation of some/things for the well-being of others).

Building (or not building at all), without the need for the production of exploitative externalities, might begin to describe architecture as the practice of accountability.





## Quotes

- Page 2 Gavin Bridge, 'The Hole World: Scales and Spaces of Extraction', *New Geographies*, 2 (2010), 43–49 (p. 43).
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- 7 Elizabeth Grosz. *In the Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 108.

## Images

- Figure 1 Marble Quarry in Northern Italy. Anthony Powis (2014).
- 2 'Extraction is Addictive'. MOULD with Amandine Forest (2021). Risograph Print.

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