Reflections on Andean women making space(s)

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The Andes. A world that contains many worlds. In this special issue, *Women Making Space in the Andes: 1400–1900*, the Andes emerge as an editorial, epistemological, and curatorial choice. This choice acknowledges a vast region that exists both within and beyond the so-called "ancient Andes" of the Inca Empire—a historiographical reference that remains prevalent within architectural history in European and Anglo-American contexts. As the Bolivian sociologist and Aymara activist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui reminds us, to speak of the Andes is to refer to a living entity;[1] mountains are not inert geological formations, but guardians of memory and active participants in everyday social and political life. To "make space in the Andes," is therefore to make space for practices that are, in most cases, as and as distinct as the mountains themselves.

In her contribution to this special issue, Paula Salazar Rodríguez invites readers to consider the present through the practices of the past. This invitation is as central to her contribution as to all the articles from this special issue, forming a core element of its ethos. The question of how to engage critically with the role of architectural history today —a pressing concern for the field in these turbulent times—is addressed here through the convergence of three interrelated concerns that continue to struggle to make space within the boundaries of Western architectural historiography. First, the issue locates architectural-historical debates at the core of the Andes, rather than framing them through Latin America as a conceptual construct or South America as a purely geographical category. Second, it centres women and their spatial agency within this context. Third, it situates these enquiries within the period 1400–1900, spanning from early processes of colonisation to moments of anti-colonial unrest.

1. The Andes

In this response, I will address these three key points to frame this historical research within contemporary concerns and architectural history enquiries. I want to start by expanding on the decision of foregrounding the Andes, to do so may be a deliberate overarching anti-colonial stance,

[1] Paulo Ilich BACA, "Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Multispecies Justice in the Andes," *Dejusticia,* 16 January 2026. https://www.dejusticia.org/en/silvia-rivera-cusicanqui-and-multispecies-justice-in-the-andes/. Accessed 06 March 2026.

which most authors in this dossier for *ABE Journal* engage with. Latin America, as a contested term and construct, emerged in the nineteenth century in response to the imperial efforts and ambitions of the U.S. and Europe.[2] For the Argentinian philosopher Walter Mignolo, Latin America as a term and denomination is all but neutral. It belongs to a 19th century nation-building mentality and a structural imposition through language—an agglomeration of geographies under a romance language umbrella, and one of exclusion: *Latin* in opposition to a *non-Latin* (largely Anglo-American). It emerged from Europe in its urgency to categorize and to recognize cultural affinities by differentiating the Andes region from the "Anglo" American one.[3] Since then, Latin America has long been understood as a construct based on presumed shared identities. Yet, in some moments in history the intention to homogenize and control the region has been countered by emancipatory ambitions rooted in shared efforts of dismantling Eurocentric (and other imperialist) dominance, re-centring advocacy and self-determination. A recent example of this can be seen in the widespread social and political mobilizations against the U.S. Trump administration's military threats and incursions in Venezuela, widely regarded as illegal interventions in the country's sovereignty. In this context, "Latin America" stood as a framework for regional and post-colonial solidarity, in opposition to this imperialist threat, demonstrating the continued political significance of the concept as a site of resistance. Still, in many cases, it remains a homogenising strategy, one driven by the need to separate and justify neo-colonial political and economic interests and by an intention to draw borders and boundaries that remain exclusionary.

It is telling that no authors in this set of texts engage with Latin America as construct. Instead, they decidedly foreground the Andes as their underpinning and distinct geopolitical, topographic, cultural and ancestral landscape. A system of mountain ranges that stretches all along the western coast of South America from Chile to its most northern country, Colombia, where it dissipates into three branches before encountering the Caribbean Sea. Within architectural histories in Europe, the Andes mostly lives through the imaginaries of Alexander von Humboldt, the Prussian geographer who extensively documented these mountains and their inhabitants through his own worldview whilst benefitting from the network and knowledge of his Andean hosts, such as the Creole biologist and geographer Francisco José de Caldas in Colombia.[4] As seen in the recent exhibition of Humboldt's visualisations of interconnected ecosystems and thermal floors as part of the OMA exhibition at Fondazione Prada in Venice (November 2025), these diagrams continue to dictate readings and

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[2] See for instance, Walter D. MIGNOLO, *The Idea of Latin America*, Maiden MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005, and Michel GOBAT, "The Invention of Latin America: A transnational History of Anti-Imperialism, Democracy and Race," *The American Historical Review,* vol. 118, no. 5, December 2013, p. 1345-1374. URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23784580. Accessed 14 April 2026.

[3] It is worth clarifying that also, according to Michel Gobat, it is also a term already used before by Central and South Americans protesting U.S. expansion to the Southern Hemisphere. Refer to footnote 1.

[4] Alexander VON HUMBOLDT, *Vistas de las cordilleras y monumentos de los pueblos indígenas de América* [1rst published as *Vues des Cordillères, et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amériqu*e, Paris, chez L. Bourgeois-Maze, libraire, quai Voltaire, 21 [1816?; Translated by Gloria Luna Rodrigo and Aurelio Rodríguez Casto], Madrid: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2012.

understandings of a very complex and large mountainous system through a western, foreign, and contested perspective.[5]

The Andes is a geologic landscape formed roughly 50 to 60 million years ago. It is also a territory ancestrally inhabited and named. Its etymology derives from the Quechua dialects it is home to. What Humboldt's work overlooks is that the Andes, as a geologic formation does not exclude the knowledges that live within it. On the contrary. This co-dependency is the ground for what Stella Nair, in her piece in this special issue, sees as a distinct building typology grounded in Andean ancestral beliefs. It is also the ground on which Maria Eugenia Allende Correa builds her arguments. In Allende Correa's contribution, Florence Dixie portrays this cohabitation through depictions of indigeneity (Tehuelches nomadic peoples in particular) where livelihoods, territories, landscapes are foregrounded. Both Nair's and Allende Correa's accounts resist coloniality through their non-engagement with sovereignty claims and nation-state-imposed borders.

There is another critical aspect, most clearly addressed by Hultzsch and Pérez Martínez in the introduction of this special issue. It is the conceptualisation of the Andes as mediated through some of its main religious institutions which historically framed the Andean region's social, cultural, and political realities according to ecclesiastical and colonial imperatives, shaping both local identities and external perceptions of the Andes. However, as both Mamani's and Pérez Martínez's contributions argue, women's agency within religious colonial institutions in the Andes between 1400 and 1900 represent a complex and often overlooked dimension of colonial society, wherein women navigated, negotiated, and at times subverted ecclesiastical structures to exercise social, spiritual, and economic influence despite the constraints of the patriarchal and colonial authority and the spatial configuration of the convent.

What all authors of this dossier argue is that ideas that emerge from this context are themselves unique to the circumstances that generate their conditions for articulation. This is where the Andes can function as critical and analytical framework.

2. Women's agency and practices of spatial production

The Andes also brings an understanding of ancestral relations to lands such as *Abya Yala,* the original and ancestral name of the western hemisphere and translates into "fertile land" for the Guna people of Colombia and Panama.[6] But also to ancestral relations to land that today we understand as gendered, such as *Pacha Mama* or "mother earth." The deity that for some Andean Quechua-

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[5] For critiques of this perspective, see for instance: Petra BROUWER, "A New Genre: World Architectural History Surveys," *in* Petra BROUWER, Martin BRESSANI and Christopher DREW ARMSTRONG, *Narrating the Globe: The Emergence of World Histories of Architecture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023. See also: Alberto GÓMEZ GUTIÉRREZ, "A pioneer critic of Alexander von Humboldt's inventions: Francisco José de Caldas," *International Review for Humboldt Studies*, HiN XXV, vol. 25, no. 49, 2024. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18443/372.

[6] The aim is not to erase other Indigenous ancestral categories that recognize Indigenous relationships to land. See: Emil KEME, "Invisible No More: Abiyala and Indigenous Liberation," *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, special issue *Indigenous Voices*, Spring 2023, 19 April 2023. URL: https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/invisible-no-more-abiayala-and-indigenous-liberation/. Accessed 14 April 2026.

speaking peoples embodies fertility, sustenance and both nature and human life cycles. In neither case, the Andes is a subject and object to be conquered but instead a motherly entity to be nurtured and nurtured by. This brings us to the second point, the question of women's agency in making spaces. Most of the papers contained in this section have been written from a South American—Andean perspective, and either by South American authors or by scholars with a distinct sensitivity to the Andean context as made evident in the way in which their articles embody the nuances of a region and the multiplicity of languages across it.

Foregrounding women is foregrounding the question of gender: a question that across the Andes, in this particular period, also poses difficulties. As we have learned from Maria Lugones, gender is an act of "othering" and a colonial construct.[7] Within this understanding sits Chandra Talpade Mohanty's reading of how "western eyes" have also conditioned our views on "indigeneity" as othering practices.[8] Both "othering" processes, as Silvia Cusicanqui argues, have been further legitimised by republican systems of governance and modernisation implemented since the colonial domination.[9] These "othering" processes lead to an understanding of women as "vulnerable minorities" instead of central pillars of biopolitics and perpetuate androcentric and other imaginaries around the nature of built environments.

"Making space" counters this and does so by presenting "women making space" in myriad ways. We see it in the female convents of Chile and Perú where the role of women was not only expansive but essential to the consolidation of its architectural and urban dimensions. Female agency within these communal and religious architectural typologies also meant agency in other spheres, such as labour practices and social, political and intellectual forms of communal organization. In Bogotá's *chicherías*, Salazar explains, women set an example of how, whilst being socially subordinated, peasant and Indigenous women deployed a wide range of strategies of insubordination and resistance that have blurred the lines between symbolic and material, ancestral and contemporary, public and private: such practices clearly stood against republican coloniality and other forms of oppression, such as the ones led by middle-class women's writings. In the case of Perez Martinez's article, on nuns and convents in nineteenth century Chile, the role of nuns as spatial agents was to oversee construction and urban and rural planning. Convent narratives, such as the ones present in her article, not only offer an insight into how women perceived and documented the socio-cultural and spatial realities of Santiago de Chile during the 17th century, but also centres the authors of these works—Sor Josefa Peña Lillo and Sor Úrsula Suárez—as agents whose textual production "makes space" when illustrating the intersection of gender, lived experience in Chile under colonial rule and religious life. We see it in Mamani's contribution, where *conciertos* as legal documents

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[7] María LUGONES, "The Coloniality of Gender," *in* Wendy HARCOURT (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development. Critical Engagements in Feminist Theory and Practice*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

[8] Chandra Talpade MOHANTY, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2*, vol. 12-13, Autumn 1984, p. 333–358. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/302821.

[9] Silvia RIVERA CUSICANQUI, "*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 111, no. 1, 2012, p. 95–109. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-1472612.

illuminate building practices just as they document nuns acting as pillars in the creation of the built environment, going beyond matronage and claiming architectural agency. In Allende's case, we see it manifest in the coloniality of Florence Dixie, a European woman, claiming freedom by projecting her own self onto Aniwee, her Tehuelche Indigenous fictional character, and the latter's Andean territory. Finally, in Nair's case, making space refers to women in the Inca *acllahuasi,* as a female centred building and institution within the Inca empire that not only captured the imagination of the Iberians, as the author argues, but also embodies the entanglements of ancestral livelihoods as they relate to a distinct gendered space, and the role that women played within the Inca built environment.

In all cases, the Western conceptualisation of women as marginalised "other" has enabled an invisibilisation of women's struggles, agency, and spaces of the past—which, as we see today, are also of the present. Salazar Rodríguez makes this clear in her contribution. While she argues that *la mujer popular* has been written out of history, the same has occurred to her spaces of action: the *chicherías* as her space of emancipation and subversion, once invisible for republican eyes, remain today invisible for some of Bogota's contemporary society. Something similar happens to spaces such as the *acllahuasi,* or the "House of the Chosen Women," spaces of education and introspection as Nair argues. We can see how the *acllahuasi* as a gendered space, and the role of women within the vast Inca empire in shaping its imperial built environment and everyday life, have had ripple effects in informing the role of women and their spaces among some of the Inca descendants, such as the Inga Indigenous in Colombia.[10]

The architectural history accounts presented in this theme section are informed by a historically attuned sensitivity to the entanglements of women's agency and its intersections with practices of spatial production. In tracing these entanglements, the contributions demonstrate how such practices may also operate as points of departure for resisting structural systems of oppression, both historically and in the present. To foreground these dynamics entails engagement with a lineage of Latin American feminisms that is deeply rooted in struggles against patriarchy and other intersecting forms of domination.[11]

As a foundational analytical category, Latin American feminism enabled an understanding of women's struggles in relation to power, oppression, and domination within this context. It subsequently gave rise to gender as a methodological framework through which women's struggles in the region could be articulated. Crucially, as the Mexican historian and feminist writer Francesca Gargallo argues, it also allows for an understanding of feminism that precedes European feminisms and is rooted instead in a continental, ancestral, and Indigenous gendered perspective originating in

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[10] See: Musu Antonio Jacanamijoy Chasoy, Pedro Luis Jajoy Juajibioy, Jhon Darwin Tisoy Jacanamijoy, Juliana Ramírez Rodríguez, Catalina Mejía Moreno, *Inga Kaugsai* (Habitar Inga / Inga Dwelling), Bogota: Central Saint Martins; London: University of the Arts, 2025.

[11] Here, the term *Latin America* is used in recognition of the context in which Latin American feminism emerged as a movement and has self-identified) See: María Pia López, *Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience and Desire*, Medford, MA; Cambridge: Polity, 2020 (Critical South).

Abya Yala—thus returning us to the Andes and distinguishing this tradition from North American or European feminist frameworks. Quoting the Aymara feminist Julieta Paredes, Gargallo writes: "toda acción organizada por las mujeres indígenas en beneficio de una buena vida para todas las mujeres, se traduce al castellano como feminismo," which may be translated as: "Any action organised by Indigenous women for the benefit of a good life for all women is rendered in Castilian [Spanish] as feminism."[12]

3. Deepening critical histories

Finally, this issue of ABE examines women's agency in shaping spaces within a distinct time frame—between colonisation and the processes of acculturation that the colonial and early emancipation or anti-colonial struggles entailed; in other words, between the colonisation and the consolidation of republican states. A period that poses challenges and possibilities. As acknowledged in the introduction of her contribution, Pérez Martínez highlights the near impossibility of relying on traditional historiographic sources, as writings of women during this time are seldom found in written form. Non-white women were mostly illiterate in their colonially imposed language, and literacy in its current form is rooted in colonial imposition. As in other pre-colonial contexts, storytelling and other oral and embodied languages were (and still are) their main form of cultural transmission. Their stories are therefore not textually documented within conventional historiographies or present in the archives of the poorest areas of the Spanish colonies and rely on novel and creative approaches to identify other forms of evidence.

In this sense, this dossier demonstrates that modern historiographic reliance on official sources or accounts has also been a means of historical marginalisation. All contributions open doors to looking beyond established architectural histories and engage with existing historical accounts as they manifest differently.[13] This in line with a contemporary efforts in the Andes across geographies, schools of thought and disciplinary fields where recent historiographies, whether architectural or not, have expanded an understanding of spaces of possibility for women during this period and beyond. As in the "concierto" case from Mamani contribution, they draw on non-conventional sources of architectural historiography, to question what architectural historiography can mean in these contexts.

All contributions bring to the fore women, their agency, their practices, and, in many cases, their autonomy. These are critical histories in which the role of women in shaping spaces is not merely acknowledged but examined in terms of the very processes through which such spaces were

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[12] See: Francesca GARGALLO, *Las ideas feministas latinoamericanas*, Ciudad de México: Universidad de la Ciudad de México, 2004; IDEM, *Feminismos desde Abya Yala. Ideas y proposiciones de las mujeres de 607 pueblos en nuestra América*, Ciudad de México, Editorial Corte y Confección, 2014, p. 21.

[13] This is a shared and contemporary effort from a multiplicity of fronts, and schools of thought. Due to the nature of this issue and the journal where it is published it is important to mention that most efforts come from the Andes territories where disciplines and fields of history have expanded an understanding of spaces of possibility for women during this time period and beyond.

produced. In doing so, the essays challenge the assumption that conceptual, spatial, and gendered frameworks developed historically in Europe were as applicable or relevant in the Andes. Perez Martinez's paper offers a clear illustration of this point. While Andean religious architectures, such as convents, have often been dismissed as mere "copies" of European models, their integration with Indigenous and colonial ways of life created new spatial forms in which women could subvert and negotiate the colonial order. In other words, women were active agents in shaping understandings of the Andes and its multitextured spaces—not merely as reactive counterparts to European frameworks, but as autonomous actors in their own right.

4. Rooting architectural history in recognising current struggles

Throughout this theme section, studying the past offers a unique method for understanding how history is reproduced under the specificity of the Andes, of women and of a period that expands between 1400 and 1900. Within this framework, architectural history is less about the study of permanent places, canonical histories, and historiographical continuums, to become instead a more deeply rooted analysis of time, geographic worlds and their embodied and gendered spatial practices. It is more about engaging with processes of unlearning hegemonical, linear processes and forms of historical and spatial discourses drawn exclusively from building. More about questioning what is and can be valued as historic evidence, and about collective efforts towards ongoing processes of demarginalization. This, I believe, is one of the key roles of architectural history today.

I would like to finish with two acknowledgements. Firstly, I am writing this today through the lens of a Colombian spatial practitioner and architectural historian based in the UK. It is this dislocation which has allowed me to recognize (and work towards challenging) the historical and ongoing difficulties for some histories (and stories) to still be foregrounded within architectural histories discourses across Anglo-Saxon and European contexts.[14] It is also this dislocation which has given me a distinct voice with which to respond to this issue's invitation. It is my personal perspective that you are reading now, one with distinct biases and urgencies. But also, one that understands and feels the importance of efforts such as the one contained in this section.

Secondly, and more importantly, I want to acknowledge those voices brought to us by all authors, their labour and struggles, and thank the authors who through their words are bringing them into these collective and knowledge-sharing spaces. We are also speaking of lands and people who experienced, and I want to emphasise here, continue to face ongoing processes of dispossession of land for instance, but also of histories and gendered agency. It is them who are also making space within a Europe-based journal.

As we move through the contributions in this issue, we encounter a constellation of nuanced and resonant histories that critically engage with the role of architectural history today, and with

[14] It is important to clarify that this is not exclusive for the case for Latin America only.

processes of reclamation and amplification of histories and space-making practices through the murmuration of their gendered voices and the force of their practices, both historically and today.