

My interpretation of the Indigenous University is represented by the black jaguar that inhabits the space of the sacred points between the Andes and the Amazon. It is the protective spirit that day by day safeguards this region in the thoughts of our elders, the guardians of the ancestral knowledge of the Inga People. Seen from space, the University has the form of a jaguar in the state of "samai," at rest. In Inga cosmology, the black jaguar is an important symbol of knowledge, of harmony, of infinity and is the color of the Earth who embraces us and gives us life. That is why it is so important that the house of knowledge and wisdom in our territory is embraced by the spirituality of our jaguar as the guardian of such sacred, strategic and emblematic territories in terms of biocultural wealth and a political ecology of peace.

Hernando Chindoy Chindoy,  
leader of the Indigenous Inga People of Colombia

A NEW INDIGENOUS UNIVERSITY IN THE RAINFOREST IN COLOMBIA

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Villagarzón,  
Putumayo,  
Colombia,  
1°01'46"N 76°36'59"W

0 5 10 20 km

## COLOMBIA

Area: 1 142 748 km<sup>2</sup> (total)

Population: 50 372 424 (2020 estimate)

Density: 44.08 pop/km<sup>2</sup>

Official language: Spanish

Recognized regional languages: >65

Capital: Bogotá, 4°35'56"N 74°4'51"W

Time zone: UTC-5 (COT)



## INTRODUCTION

The Inga indigenous people of Southern Colombia between the Amazonian lowland and the Andes decided to create a university and build a campus in their territory, in order to fill the lack of an institution for higher education in the region that is particularly tailored to their specific knowledge and to the requirements of a life in the territory.

The vision of the Inga for the university is to perpetuate their knowledge and to bring it in conversation with contemporary science and technology, and also to offer a high level of education to the young generation and give them a future in the territory.

Beyond this aim, The Inga, also called the Guardians of the Earth, see the university's project as the mean to achieve their commitment and mission to protect and strengthen nature (the condition of their survival, but also of all of us).

The projected site is a 400 ha plot of forested indigenous-owned land adjacent to a large National Park of extraordinary biodiversity, which is currently unprotected.

The program will focus on herbology, biodiversity, agro-ecology, forest conservation, bioethics and medicinal knowledge. By introducing environmental stewardship as an essential organizational practice, the university, which is to be built on the edge of the national park, will guarantee that the natural reserve is properly monitored and guarded, that their specific knowledge is transmitted to the future generations and that a sustainable local economy is developed. The program is open to all ethnic groups in the region and to international students.



A wide river flows through a lush, green forested valley. The river is surrounded by dense tropical vegetation and hills. The sky is filled with large, grey clouds. The text "EXPLORE THE UNKNOWN, BUILD KNOWLEDGE" is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# EXPLORE THE UNKNOWN, BUILD KNOWLEDGE

Anne Lacaton

## THE STORY OF THE PROJECT

In spring 2019, I discovered the Indigenous University project in the rainforest of Colombia during a meeting with Philip Ursprung, Dean of the Architecture department at ETH Zurich, and Ursula Biemann, artist. Ursula, having close ties with the Inga, wanted to submit the university project, in which she is involved, to ETH as an object for a design studio as well as a collaboration with the PUJ (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá), with the aim of bringing the project out of its territory in order to increase its renown, open up exchange and encourage new points of view. This was a unique opportunity to develop and bring into being a radically new university.

She retraced the history of this indigenous people, describing an immensely complex context and the highly critical situation of the indigenous and their natural environment who are under serious threat. The drastic slashing of ancestral land that has been imposed on them and has dispersed them.

The idea of planning their future in such an unstable, chaotic context and striving to exit a situation where all seems lost, through an educational project and the creation of a university, as the vital project for the survival of their people and the forest environment appeared as an act of resistance and impressive mighty resilience. I found the project fascinating, thought-provoking, and incredibly optimistic.

Philip Ursprung asked me to work on the topic with students in my design studio. I accepted without hesitation, along with the studio team, Simon, Ilona and Michel, we were extremely motivated to take part in the project.

Curiosity for the unknown, the force of the message, the prospect of a unique and extraordinary experience, the strong sense that this project united a range of key themes, contemporary and universal, here, in a particularly complex context and an extremely critical situation. It touched on major issues; the fragility and survival of nature and humans, ecology, climate, and more generally the project questioned the lifestyles of contemporary society, attitudes, inequalities and our relationship to the world.

The design studio project was immediately set up over two semesters - Autumn 2019 and Spring 2020 -, and also the academic collaboration with the PUJ in Bogotá and on the territory with the Inga and their official representative Hernando Chindoy. A field study trip was planned to bring together students from the studios of both universities to meet the Inga, discover their territory, and to listen to them.

The Inga came with concrete expectations for the project, formulated as follows: “the conception of an Indigenous University as well as the architectural planning and building of the campus in southern Colombia”.

The only program at our disposal was a site for setting up a campus, a few texts and films presenting general concepts for the university laid out by the Inga, and Ursula Biemann’s accounts.

Faced with this context, a process still at its outset, and our position in this project and this entirely unknown territory, my first step together with the studio team was to clarify our stance on the objectives and the form of the studio’s contribution, the attitude we would take in tackling the subject with the students, and the way to define our place in this highly ambitious project, with discernment and humility.

Our intention, far from seeking to displace or replace local skills, was not to produce concrete, ready-to-build projects, as the Inga probably expected – this did not seem appropriate to us, neither in the timing of the process, still at its beginnings, nor in our role in the project – but to offer studies, reflections, proposals, that may be useful to the development of the project by the Inga.

The results of this work are presented in this book.

## THE STUDIO'S OBJECTIVES

The Indigenous University project was the opportunity to engage with a context whose conditions are completely different from the ones we know in Europe. For many of us, students and professors, this situation was totally unknown.

The objective of the design studio was therefore not to produce finalized architecture projects for the construction of the campus, but to put together thorough, comprehensive documentation, based on knowledge that it would be necessary to acquire. The studio would offer analysis, viewpoints and ideas that could serve as a foundation and contribute to the fine, detailed process of drawing up the university program, preliminary to the design and construction project, which the Inga would have to establish.

In this way, the studio needed to start off by building up knowledge on the basis of research and in-depth analysis of the Putumayo-Piemonte region and the site envisaged for the campus' creation, namely on themes such as geography, climate, geopolitics, the educational system, the history of the Inga people, their culture, spiritual foundations and relationship to nature, agriculture, economy... anything that could foster knowledge and understanding of the subject and the territory.

The proposed work was to research, analyze, document, gather data, amass references, in close collaboration with the partner studio at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and the Inga indigenous people, with the goal of digging up information, establishing knowledge and shedding light on positions, reflections, questioning and ideas of what this university could be like. Proceeding with utmost freedom, a curious and open mind to widen perceptions and the field of reflection was the most useful contribution that we could offer the Inga in defining its project.

The two partner studios in Bogotá and Zurich worked in parallel on the same topics, with a common schedule, sharing the same specific objectives:

- To learn from indigenous communities about their conception of, and interaction with the territory, their needs, ambitions, and iconography
- To help empower local communities and institutions in structuring a pertinent project which aims to promote the construction of a University or Studies Center
- To conceive low-tech passive environmental solutions for an isolated low-income population, taking into consideration the pertinent geophysical and climatic conditions and the vernacular techniques and typologies
- To generate materials through research, analysis, concepts, experiments, plans, 3D representations, diagrams, models and spatial programs that would be helpful for the future development of the project

# ATTITUDE

Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal

Tackling this subject raised the question of our role in this project.

What legitimacy could we claim in carrying out a project here, in a completely unknown territory, so removed from us, when we knew nothing about the people, the place, the climate or the geography?

Why would we know how to do? Or do better than the people over there.

What is our role and place as a school in such a project?

And yet there are no taboo subjects,

we are free to reflect on any subject, anywhere,

it is a question of attitude, ethics,

knowing precisely what our place is, and what our limits are.

We can work on what we do not know, but the rule and ethical code is to always have the discernment to know where to situate ourselves and to be deeply and sincerely aware of who we are.

To proceed with the humility of the one who does not know and who has everything to learn.

Questioning our role in this project should not paralyze us or prevent us from being curious, open and enthusiastic, or from reflecting on the project proposed to us, or from making plans. Proposing does not mean imposing.

The Inga people invited us to reflect on their project because they were interested in a new outside perspective and the approach that we could bring from a distance, which could possibly enlarge their field of reflection. They expected us to offer a point of view, ideas, or even projects, which could eventually be useful for nourishing their debates, their studies, and their decisions.

It was important and respectful to respond to their invitation by bringing our contribution.

By working on their project, we were also placed in the situation of learning from them.

The approach suggested to the students is the one we have when beginning any project:

to accept not knowing, being lost, having to learn and to find a way  
to accept uncertainty and doubt, to use these to increase attention and discernment  
to appropriate the unknown and to turn uncertainty into a catalyst  
to learn, to accumulate, to look, with an open mind, without filters,  
to free oneself from habits without denying experience,  
to think freely,  
to question, to criticize, to look behind the question,  
to work rigorously to create oneself more freedom  
to commit, to be generous,  
to invent, to dream.



## METHOD

To respond to this particular situation, it was a matter of placing oneself in a position of maximum openness in order to understand, step by step, the context and the objectives of such a project, and to envisage the most pertinent strategies and orientations. This led us to call into question the project approach and its usual linear sequence – program, analysis, intentions, project – which does not seem appropriate to us. It is not necessary to wait for everything to be defined before starting the project's design.

Starting off with the project is a way to define and to fine-tune the program, just as the project itself will call new knowledge, new analyses, then new reflections and decisions that will modify it and make it evolve, and so on, and so on...The project is no longer considered as the endpoint of the process, but as the trigger for reactive, interactive reflection, constantly in progress.

In this way, the projects produced for the Indigenous University by the design studio are to be considered in this perspective, not as final projects concluding a process but as inciters and generators not only of ideas and strategies, but also criticisms and questions, useful for re-interrogating the approach, pinpointing the objectives, and developing the program until its final precision.

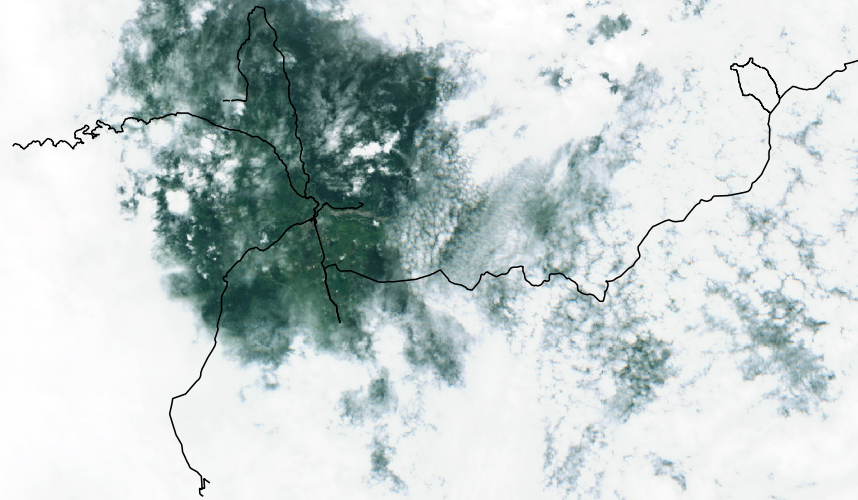
The students embarked on a phase of research and observation, knowledge development, data collection and inventory, as well as interpretation and understanding of the existing situation through their personal intuitive, sensorial and emotional perceptions.

They collected, very extensively, all the facts and data that they could find, then organized, classified, structured them, in order to establish a common resource base, available to the whole group, that was permanently added to and updated.

Prior to the voyage, their task was to accumulate the maximum amount of information, to ask questions, to check data on the spot, but also to formulate reactions, positions, viewpoints, that were constantly subject to change and re-questioning.

OBSERVING / INVENTORYING / REPORTING  
AN EXTREME CARE TO THE ALREADY THERE / NATURE, PEOPLE, SOILS,  
CONSTRUCTIONS, CLIMATE, ANY TREE, ANY RIVER, ANY WATER TRICKLE,  
EVERYTHING ALIVE...

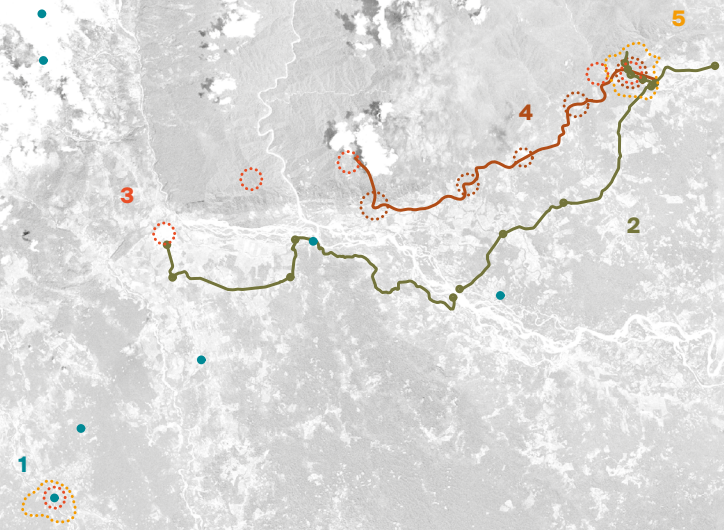
# JOURNEY



From the 20th to the 25th October 2019, the 17 students of the studio in Zurich, alongside indigenous students, and those from Bogotá, made a trip to the heart of the Inga territories, guided by Hernando Chindoy and with the help of Ursula Biemann. This intense and abrupt immersion into the reality of the community's context was preceded by four weeks of research and analysis. This research explored the different components of this fragmented and complex territory, that were previously unknown to the studio, such as: biology and biodiversity, economy, productive systems, climatic conditions and natural risks, infrastructures and urbanization, ethnic geography, indigenous social structures, cosmology, relationship to the territory.

# STRATEGIES FOR A NEW INDIGENOUS UNIVERSITY

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- PROJECTS



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