

The Rurapolis Platforms:

*Architectural and performative means of action in the abandoned territories of
the Pyrenean cross-border space*

Salomé Wackernagel

LéaV/ÉNSA Versailles – CY Université Paris-Cergy
salome.wackernagel@gmail.com

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Abstract: A possible reimagining of the phenomenon of urban sprawl is presented here, with a view to exploring and projecting a model of territorial development adapted to present and future societal and climatic contingencies: this involves rethinking the urban landscape on the basis of fragmented and neglected rural typologies. The Rurapolis platforms are anchored in the cross-border territory of the Pyrenees – between Navarre in Spain and the Pyrénées-Atlantiques department in France. A collective process of rammed earth construction combined with contemporary dance, brought to the abandoned village of Egulbati for a few days, will be used to address the issue of rural depopulation in a region where there are more than a hundred abandoned villages. These ruins, which run like fissures through the landscape, are seen here as potential clusters to activate a Rurapolis adapted to the ecological transition. The aim here is to show how a small-scale cultural initiative such as the Rurapolis platforms would allow us to take action in the context of the climate and health crisis, assess the viability of a larger-scale, long-term territorial project, and ultimately give visibility to a possible renaissance of the rural environment and its ruins on the back of a collective experience that revives a forgotten place.

Keywords: rural ruins; architecture; rehabilitation; Earth; performance; culture; peripheries.

<i>Terra es territorio,</i>	<i>The Earth is territory,</i>
<i>Terra es identidad,</i>	<i>The Earth is identity,</i>
<i>Terra es el lugar donde habitar.</i>	<i>The Earth is the place to live.</i>
<i>Habitar la periferia,</i>	<i>Live the periphery,</i>
<i>Abrazar la periferia,</i>	<i>Embrace the periphery,</i>
<i>O el miedo a salir de ella.</i>	<i>Or the fear of leaving it.</i>
<i>Abrazar las raíces,</i>	<i>Embrace the roots,</i>
<i>Derrumbar fronteras,</i>	<i>Tear the borders,</i>
<i>Y encontrarse donde sea.</i>	<i>And meet wherever it is</i>
	<i>(From: Terra, 2020)ⁱ</i>

Anchoring

A possible reimagining of the phenomenon of urban sprawl is presented here, with a view to exploring and projecting a model of territorial development adapted to present and future societal and climatic contingencies: this involves rethinking the urban landscape on the basis of fragmented and neglected rural typologies. Established in 2016, the Franco-Spanish Euroregion of New Aquitaine-Euskadi-Navarre is full of rural ruins, located mostly on the Spanish side. Throughout Europe, the depopulation of rural areas has accelerated with demographic decline. The aim here is to focus on the rural context of Navarre as a basis for extrapolating and making visible the idea of a *rurapolis* made up of rural clusters, which could serve as a model for other areas suffering from similar circumstances.

The starting point for this process of reflection is the periphery: the analysis of suburban space, and in particular urban sprawl, calls into question urban planning methods and territorial policies that seem out of step with the challenges and aspirations of a context disrupted by the health crisis and climate change. Indeed, it seems necessary to rethink the territorial chessboard as something other than a delicate balancing act between different urban environments spreading in a vast “free” space. The upheavals envisaged by the forecasts of global warming and the disruption caused by the pandemic over the last two years are an inspiration to transform the way we live, prompting a desire, if not for rurality, at least for a different urbanity and urging a shift in our focus of interest towards territories considered to be remote (such as high altitude areas), which could become the only places that are habitable as temperatures rise. This hypothesis would establish the framework for the process. It is formulated as follows by Bruno Latour, in his book *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, which starts from the following hypothesis:

Without this idea that we have entered a New Climate Regime, we cannot understand either the explosion of inequalities or the extent of deregulations.... To

resist this loss of a common orientation, we shall have to come down to earth; we shall have to land somewhere. (Latour 2018, p. 2)

Rethinking the periphery

The issues at stake thus call into question the validity of urban sprawl, raising the question of the future of the metropolis. In *Les métropoles barbares* (The Barbarity of World-Cities), Guillaume Faburel defines the modern metropolis – the kind that has been built around Europe’s historical centres – as a formal, colonialist and invasive manifestation, associated with “the birth of European colonial empires and the exploitation of conquered territories” (Faburel 2020, p.13, translated).

Situated on the edge of the Pyrenees, the city of Pamplona has been a strategic point between France and Spain for centuries, controlling the crossings to Aragon and La Rioja. This situation made it a fortress city until late in its history: its walls and citadel contained an ever-growing population until the early 20th century. It was not until 1915 that the city was finally allowed to expand outside its walls. This late growth makes it possible to clearly identify its outskirts: Pamplona’s urban area literally sprang from the ground during the 20th century, and new collective housing areas continue to emerge, following parcel-based urban plans, designed on former agricultural or vegetable plots. Decade after decade, homogeneous neighbourhoods have been constructed, characterised by contemporary styles, on predetermined sections of land: Ensanche, built in the 1920s, the Etxabakoitz neighbourhood (1950), La Milagrosa (1960), Iturrama (1970), Mendillori (1990) and Soto Lezkairu (2006), to name just a few. Today, the contours of the Cuenca de Pamplona urban area are still defined by the different periods of construction of the districts that have sprung up there: its territory also includes the surrounding villages and former rural areas, which residential and industrial satellites have gradually colonised.

This urban proliferation, which could be described as a “barbarian metropolis”, to quote Faburel, continues to evolve concentrically around its historic centre: its strategy is to “nibble” away at the territory, a process that is defined in contemporary urban planning language as urban sprawl. The dominant urban nucleus has gradually absorbed the minor urban nuclei and the nearby villages into its space, forming a single centralised unit.

In this context, it seems necessary to ask whether the aborted process of forming “metropolitan cities” was not a missed opportunity to address some of the problems posed by spatial transformations. (Indovina 2020, p.11, translated)

But how can this be remedied? The fact that “the process of transformation of the territory that ends in the creation of a diffuse city presents several levels of irregularities”, as Francesco Indovina states, is one of the problems of suburbanity. What model should be proposed in the face of the critical situation highlighted by the latest IPCC report? An initial approach, even before proposing an alternative territorial project, is to give visibility to the areas that are suffering.

In the context of the case study examined here, the Pamplona conurbation alone accounts for 50 per cent of the total population of Navarre and is also experiencing constant demographic

and geographical growth. As a mirror image of this endemic growth, the rest of the region is becoming increasingly neglected, and its villages are facing a dramatic process of depopulation. Rural depopulation and the abandonment of entire villages have inexorably set in over the last few decades as a result of a rural exodus that has disrupted much of Europe. Andoni Iso, a sociologist from the University of Navarra, describes the regional context in this way: “Another effect related to ruin does not occur in the city but in the more distant metropolitan and peri-urban environments” (Francesco Careri, “Ciudad & Cultura”, unpublished lecture notes, Pamplona, 2021). In a particularly intense expression of this phenomenon, Navarre has recorded the depopulation of a total of 109 villages throughout the region. On the other hand, a counter-phenomenon can also be observed: the reactivation and repopulation of rural nuclei, of which there were 26 in the period 1981–2020 (Maljean and Pons, n.d.). At the same time, governmental public institutions are seriously concerned about the problem, as demonstrated by the creation in 2019 of a commission to combat depopulation in Navarre. It is clear, then, that there is an interest, at both the institutional and societal level, in reflecting in depth on the future of the region and our ways of living and dwelling.

Horizon

While it is easy to think that “one of the invisible revolutions of our time is the seizure of power over the territory by large cities” (Faburel 2020, p.33, translated), it is also possible to see in them what the same author calls a “socio-ecological horizon” – that is to say, a living space that can adapt to changing natural conditions and capable of generating a dignified, communal and egalitarian living environment. In this periphery, there are questions to be asked about the new models to be explored and the living urban material capable of manifesting a resilient future for the city and the suburban space. The aim here is to study a possible process of reversing the urban-rural dialectic. How can we rethink the future of European cities from the rural world in this cross-border territory and imagine places of commonality in the face of environmental and sociopolitical challenges?

What if, instead of thinking of the metropolis as an entity spreading out from its centre and whittling away in the surrounding territory (raising real questions about our resources and the resilience of the urban way of life), an entity was created to act as an alternative to the existing metropolises, in the cross-border territory of the New Aquitaine-Euskadi-Navarre Euroregion, in a decentralised and ramified form? This alternative form of settlement would be formed from the reactivated abandoned villages: there are a large number of such villages in this region as a result of the rural exodus and the gradual transformation of industry and the economy, which has rendered the cultivation of the mid-mountain and mountainous lands of the Pyrenees obsolete. The rural clusters, reactivated in a form of contemporary rurality adapted to the contingencies we would have to face, would form this fifth polis – a *rurapolis*, alongside the four existing *metropolises* (San Sebastian, Bordeaux, Bilbao and Pamplona) in the Euroregion. More specifically, the focus of study at the start of this Rurapolis project is on the initial development, which has been inferred from the territory: this extends over a cultural and geographical area along the Pyrenean massif, located to the southwest of Pamplona, bringing together the valleys of the Arce, Egiús, Aranguren, Unciti and Esterribar. The grouping of abandoned villages and hamlets that forms the basis of this research in the project includes around 30 villages – as well as a former factory (Ekai) – most of which have been abandoned

since the 1960s, when the last inhabitants left their homes to migrate across the border or to the city.

With these data, it is now a question of envisioning the urban, infrastructural and, above all, cultural project that would make it possible, at the territorial level, for a project focused on repopulation and reactivation to offset the urban/rural, periphery/countryside dynamics. The participatory process, self-construction and cultural activation, which serve to make neglected or forgotten spaces in the landscape visible and attractive, are taken up here as the anchor of a project focused on the recovery of rural ruins in a territory stretching beyond the Pyrenees, in order to give visibility to and facilitate the rehabilitation of these spaces for a future rurapolis.

The Rurapolis Platforms

The Rurapolis project clearly involves a precise analysis of the territorial relationships between the elements in the existing fabric – i.e. the suburbs, the villages that are still active, the natural areas and the zones of production. This analysis involves a sensitive approach to the territory, its margins and its scars, based on a process of wandering and walking that seeks to link the abandoned villages of the Rurapolis and the spaces of the diffuse city, using different modes of transport other than the car (walking, cycling, public transport). This exposes a marginal territory made up of off-centre nodes, with incomplete infrastructure and poorly adapted to the environmental challenges it faces, requiring a change of paradigm, of uses and of transportation. This on-the-ground exploration is accompanied by a mapping process. The issues at stake align with the description provided by Bruno Latour's regular artistic collaborators – director Frédérique Aït-Touati, architect Axelle Grégoire and landscape architect Alexandra Arènes in their *Terra Forma: A Book of Speculative Maps* (2022):

The challenge, then, is to connect depleted landscapes and ruins to dynamic sources and living things.... At this stage, we must redefine the notion of habitability. It no longer designates the capacity of a place or a territory to harbor living things, but rather the potential of the entities already present there to make a world together through their interrelations. (Aït-Touati, Arènes and Grégoire 2022, p. 159)

The challenge of the Rurapolis project lies in the theorising surrounding these interrelations because the recovery of rural ruins – the villages and settlements that have been completely abandoned on the territory in Spain – does not merely involve an architectural and constructive reflection on their rehabilitation. In fact, there are many very successful examples based on specific vernacular rehabilitations, as shown by the award-winning projects of *España Vacía, España Llena* (Empty Spain, Full Spain), the 15th edition of BEAU, the Spanish Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism, by architects such as David Sebastian (Casa en Tres Primaveras), the Studio Fuertespenedo (rehabilitations in Miraflores and Iabrega) and Sergio Sebastián (the partial rehabilitation of the abandoned village of Ruesta and the magnificent renovation of its chapel). In the area under study (western Navarre), the architects at Orekari Estudio are currently rehabilitating and building five houses in the abandoned village of Zoroquiain, according to the principles of bio-construction and in *auzolan*—a Basque term used to define the principle of collective self-construction in the Basque Country and northern Navarre. Examples of attractive rehabilitations of rural ruins are becoming a model and are multiplying in contemporary architecture all over Europe (here we might mention the work based on a

manifesto of ruralism by the Collectif Encore in France, Helga Blocksdorf in Germany, Gion A. Caminada in Switzerland and A25 Architetti in Italy). However, while there are many beautiful and effective models of rural rehabilitation, in which the original, obsolete building is transformed into a fabulous and inventive home (as demonstrated by the above examples), thought still needs to be given to the infrastructure of a rurapolis made up of reactivated, networked rural nuclei, which are themselves linked to the surrounding urban centres and active villages. Indeed, the Rurapolis as a territorial project does not only involve the rehabilitation of abandoned rural buildings, it also implies a new architectural thinking around a structure that can complete, extend and be grafted onto the existing one.

The idea is to build an infrastructure anchored around platforms that punctuate the space of the Rurapolis, thus creating a network across the territory. These milestones, located along the network of paths, railways and/or completed or newly designed roads, would have multiple and evolving functions as the territory develops: starting out as a figurative totem, the built structure could then become an exchange platform for farmers and residents. One piece of micro-architecture – initially an isolated stage for cultural events in a natural/rural environment – could, over time, with the reactivation of the village next to it and the evolution of the climate, become an open-air amphitheatre. Another of these typical Rurapolis architectures would be the progressive extension of an abandoned building, gradually rehabilitated to become a house (again)...and so on. These structures, created from materials taken from the ground, are grafted onto the existing ruins – primarily platforms for exchange and for disseminating the Rurapolis, they are evolving in tandem with its territorial development.

The construction method proposed for these platforms, which are a mark of the networked set-up of the Rurapolis, is the rammed earth process, commonly known as *tabiya*. This is geared to a material that has a legacy as a building tradition in many parts of the world, including various regions in Spain and France, and which is currently being recovered in the contemporary architectural scene owing to its constructive, aesthetic and, above all, ecological qualities. For while the process of reactivation envisaged with the Rurapolis project in the Pyrenean cross-border territory includes ideas involving vernacular materials – stone and wood – which have a long tradition in the region, rammed earth, as used in contemporary architectural practice, is envisaged as an essential complementary technique owing to its versatility and its living and ecological qualities. On this basis, we can begin to imagine a repair of the existing fabric, an extension, new minimal structures, or even new buildings in untreated raw earth concrete, in an evolutionary process that extends the organic, earthy dimension of the project.

The Rurapolis proposes a narrative that reverses the urban way of life, and especially of the urban planning mode which generates peripheries that are ever more distant from the historical centres on which they depend, in order to reinvent a more ecological, self-sufficient and communitarian way of living, anchored in a heritage and a natural territory. Most of us today are city dwellers who are unfamiliar with the rural way of life, its rhythms, its constraints and its potential adaptation to hybridity, integrating other ways of working and functioning in society. As a result, the narrative of happy frugality and a return to nature of the kind so extolled after lockdown and in the face of the climate crisis has an anxiety-inducing aspect. It is therefore essential from the outset to grasp and make the Rurapolis attractive as an alternative territorial development project. To this end, the research is based not only on a mapping of the territory, and a visualisation of the Rurapolis platforms, but also on self-construction as a collective experience. The experimentation with earth as a material and the technique introduced, takes into account the cultural dimension that this moment of initiation – the full-scale articulation of the project – implies in the space-time of the Rurapolis.

In order to anchor the Rurapolis project as a rite of initiation in the territory, the construction of a basic module is planned for September 2022 in Navarre, in the abandoned village of Egulbati. The full-scale prototype will evoke the sacral and socially structuring figure of the *frontón*. The fronton, a key architectural element in the spatial construction of Basque villages, is a wall traditionally located on the main square – adjoining or using the church wall itself – designed for playing Basque pelota. The fronton as a generic piece of architecture is in itself a masonry wall, often made of local stone, placed at the end of a flattened rectangular area, measuring approximately 10 × 30 metres. There are numerous examples of frontons and their size, shape, texture, colour and finish vary in each community, town, valley or village. The recreational and social use of the fronton is transcended by its cultural significance and identity. This simple and seemingly modest architecture is monumentalised by the role that is intrinsically attributed to it. As a recurring and symbiotic figure in the abandoned settlements visited during this research, the fronton confers – by its mere presence in a desolate and neglected landscape, where it appears like a solitary totem – an atemporal and almost sacred character: delimiting the space, it transforms the void into a presence conducive to human, social and cultural appropriation, as a unique civilisational element.

Accordingly, the object created as a physical and real introduction to the Rurapolis study area will be a kind of repetition of this *frontis*, created by a small group of participants supervised by an expert in rammed earth who will impart his know-how in this construction technique. Within the space of a few days, a simple piece of prototypical architecture will be realised, charged with a meaning that extrapolates its form and its mere presence in this territory: this will involve the creation of a *polis* (or city) to demonstrate the tangibility of the Rurapolis through the collective self-built construction of a small new and unifying monument in the middle of an abandoned landscape. The introduction of a new technique, albeit one with a long heritage in this territory, and the displacement of materials, people, efforts and energy that this intervention implies will allow us to take another look at the depopulated village of Egulbati (a village located on the outskirts of Pamplona, where this first intervention will take place) and to make the future large-scale territorial project of the Rurapolis visible.

Earlier we mentioned the Repensar la periferia project and located our work as a methodological continuation of it, enabling us to view this process of self-construction in rural areas as a shift or extension of the process initiated in the periphery. This cultural and identitary approach, linked to an emblematic element of the rural heritage and its social function (invoking the figure of the Basque fronton), is found in the work of the architect Martino Pedrozzi and the long-term process entitled *Ricomposizioni*, in the Ticino Alps (in southern Switzerland). This project focused on the recovery of *rustico* architecture – small single-storey or two-storey buildings structured around a wooden frame, with a massive dry stone envelope and a slate roof. These typical constructions, located in high mountain pastures, were once used as extra housing and barns during the summer months and the period of transhumance. Today, the rural exodus and changes in agricultural production and livestock breeding have caused these architectural objects to fall into disuse and they are now a feature of the Alpine landscape. Martino Pedrozzi started to study and recompose them in 1994, rearranging the stones in a sculptural manner around the perimeter of the site of each house, thus creating an abstract and typological volume that pays tribute to a lost heritage. Pedrozzi is a professor at the school of architecture in Mendrisio, and he has integrated this process of *Ricomposizioni* into a pedagogical programme: several times in recent years, groups of students (up to a hundred strong – as was the case in 2019 in Luzzone, during a workshop involving architecture students from the three Swiss

cantonal schools in Lausanne, Zurich and Mendrisio) go to the mountain pastures in the Malvaglia Valley to participate in workshops of symbolic recomposition. After several hours of walking to this remote territory out in the middle of nature, they move and recut stones to recreate geometric volumes that take up the initial imprint left on the ground by each collapsed building. These *Ricomposizioni* are a tribute to a vanished civilisation, questioning our current vision of the territory. The effort involved in moving the stones once cut by hand by the peasants of Ticino is transforming the territory anew by virtue of a simple architectural gesture with a sculptural quality – repeated over and over with patience and resilience, with no function other than its cultural and patrimonial dimension.

Another example of the emblematic recovery of a rural landmark, the work Super Cayrou by the architects' collective Encore Heureux marks the territory and anchors it in a space-time with a new focus on lost modes and uses. Built in 2020 in the Occitanie region of France, on the route to Santiago de Compostela, this work of “art-refuge”, as the architects describe it, has three interesting aspects in relation to the Rurapolis platforms project: firstly, it proposes the reinvention of a vernacular heritage for the future, taking up a phenomenon that marks out the paths of the region (the piles of stones that punctuate the paths as landmarks, as well as the emblematic figure of the dolmen, also mentioned by the designers), in order to create a contemporary and geometrical architecture using dry stones – a traditional construction method that involves piling up stones without mortar to create massive walls that are more or less indestructible if the precepts of the local craftsmen are respected. Secondly, this architectural creation is the result of a process of consultation and anthropological analysis of the territory, in accordance with the required uses: the Super Cayrou is a refuge serving as a camp for pilgrims, as well as an observation point and meeting place for the locals. Finally, the building, which is designed on the basis of this listening process, is constructed collectively, with a view to transmitting traditional know-how, creating a lasting back-and-forth dynamic during the period of construction in the movement between a remote corner of the territory and more populated areas.

Performance

Following on from this, the Rurapolis platforms represent an inaugural moment in the territorial projection of the rurapolis – a futuristic, deliberately utopian vision (but anchored in the ground and thus a far cry from any kind of science fiction) that presents an alternative to the urban planning of the suburban space as it is currently practised on the outskirts of Pamplona and on a global scale. A vision that is also necessarily adapted to the post-oil paradigm and changes to the climate and society.

The Rurapolis project is thus introduced by a process of self-construction that sets out to physically mark the territory and revisit its numerous rural ruins. This workshop on the rammed earth technique will end with a festive evening featuring a contemporary dance performance entitled *Terra*, by the artist Galina Rodríguez, as well as an on-site dinner and camp: eating and dancing under the stars, in the midst of the ruins of the small village of Egulbati, which has been deserted since the 1960s. This experience of immersion in the heart of a fragmented territory, combining construction, theory and a collective and cultural event, shapes the desire

to forge a unique experience. The creation of an emblematic architecture and its festive inauguration revives the activity of the abandoned village of Egulbati and may be unrepeatable. But what is the actual utility, per se, of this prototype of the Rurapolis platform? What is the meaning of this performative experience, bringing strangers together in a neglected territory that was previously unknown to them? How can we consolidate, affect, extend and transform the territory beyond the event?

In 2020, the Spanish Ministry of Culture published an essay as a collective methodological compilation with the title *Pensar y hacer en el medio rural: Prácticas culturales en contexto* (Thinking and Doing in the Rural Environment: Cultural Practices in Context). While it is interesting to note the renewed institutional interest in the rural environment in recent years, it is even more notable that the role of culture and creation and the artistic vision are placed here at the heart of the discussion:

If we value culture as a collective heritage, it is a crisis that must be interpreted in terms of cultural failure or collapse: the loss and dissolution of the beliefs, values and imaginaries that have served to sustain and underpin rural communities.... It is in the recovery and reconstruction of this vital link that culture must intervene, and do so through certain cultural foundations and bonds that, without renouncing the past, respond to new forms of being and moving in the world. (Burgos 2020, p.14, translated)

The self-construction of a collectively created architectural prototype – and the cultural programming as the inaugural phase of the project – allows the fictional project, thought out on a larger scale, to be concretely anchored in a specific location, which has been in a state of collapse for decades.

The German philosopher Gernot Böhme sketches out a new form of relationship between “environmental qualities” and “human dispositions” by thinking about the atmosphere as a generator of a new aesthetic. According to Böhme, this new form of relationship, which is the basis of ecocriticism (implying a repositioning of artistic expression and creativity with an eye to the impact of the climate crisis), requires a passage through the sensory experience. To take the idea further, he adopts the term *aïsthesis*:

Aïsthesis is therefore equivalent to being in presence: there is no feeling in general, there is only situational feeling, according to an affectivity that touches sensitive subjects and produces effects of presence. (Böhme, 2020, p.9, translated)

It is also a matter of proposing a contribution to the ecological transition while taking into account collective subjectivity. In his book *The Three Ecologies* (1989), the philosopher Félix Guattari describes “social ecosophy” as the reconstruction of “the modalities of ‘group being’ [être-en-groupe...] through existential mutations driven by the motor of subjectivity”. According to the author, it is necessary to implement “effective practices of experimentation, as much on a microsocial level as on a larger institutional scale.” (Guattari 2000, pp. 34–35) The Rurapolis platforms deliberately constitute a moment close to the sublime in the sense that the natural environment enters into resonance with the one-off action and the lived experience, taking up a sentiment that is at the root of Romanticism, a movement fascinated, transfixed and inspired by spectacular mountains and ruined landscapes, seized by both awe and a feeling of

being suspended in time and accompanied by a creative impulse. This sense of the sublime in nature that the Romantics inherited from humanist culture (Stacher 2018) allows a new idea of the territory to emerge and places human action – building collectively – at its heart. Recovering this momentum means allowing a small-scale cultural initiative – in this case, the Rurapolis platforms – to have a sense of agency in the face of the ecological crisis, showing the viability of a larger-scale, long-term territorial project and giving visible form, through a collective experience of self-construction reviving a forgotten place, to a possible rebirth of the rural environment and its ruins.

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Salomé Wackernagel is an architectural designer and researcher defending a pluridisciplinary approach in her own practice of architecture. She is currently developing a practice-led PhD under the title *Rurapolis – Rethinking the Periphery from Rural Ruins in the Pre-Pyrenees*. She is specialized in collaborative processes and self-construction in the public space, working on architectural, social and cultural projects in different urban and rural contexts. After studying architecture and design in Paris, Versailles (France) and Berlin (Germany), where she also worked from 2012 as a freelance architect for Raumlabor (Berlin), Museumstechnik Berlin in collaboration with David Chipperfield Architects (Berlin), Lacaton & Vassal (Paris), in the fields of scenography, urbanism and social housing, and finally co-founded the architecture

collective Enter This, she moved to Spain in 2018. Salomé Wackernagel is currently in residence at the Laboral Centro de Arte in Gijón, Asturias, and visiting researcher at the Geography Department of the University of Navarre (UNAV).

ⁱ Extract from the performance Terra by the Colombian dancer and choreographer Galina Rodríguez as part of the project Repensar la Periferia, Pamplona, 2020