

Asháninka Architecture: Reflections on dwelling materialization in the Peruvian Amazon

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Abstract:

This essay is an invitation to reflect on the idea of space from a perspective other than the Western one, inspired by the worldview of the Asháninka people, an Indigenous group inhabiting the Peruvian and Brazilian Amazon. Thinking and rethinking about dwelling and architecture in a context where the notions of house, home, community, and territory intersect (blurring their limits and borders, mingling and generating more diffuse boundaries) can offer the architectural discipline new approaches to design and construction. In this way, I hope to contribute to the revaluation of an Indigenous worldview, specifically from the Central Peruvian Rainforest, by expanding and rendering more sustainable a concept that lies at the very core of architecture: space.

To this end, I begin by outlining the problems that arise from the prevailing preference for a Western perspective over other approaches and ways of dwelling, revisiting concepts such as property, intimacy, and domesticity. I then situate the geography and context of the Asháninka people in the Central Peruvian Jungle. Next, I present the relationship between the Asháninka and their environment, based on observations and insights gathered during community visits. Finally, I describe traditional Asháninka housing, its construction processes, modes of use, and the ways in which these dwellings reveal and materialize a distinct way of thinking and living.

Keywords: Asháninka architecture; Spatial perception; Amazonia; Non-Western perspectives

<<Architecture is more of a mental mediator between the world and ourselves than a mediator between human ways of life and the ecological context>>
(Pallasmaa, 2020, p. 128)

Foreign concepts: property, intimacy, and domesticity.
Several authors have pointed out that architecture has become increasingly detached from sustainable ways of living. (Beim, 2023; Heynen, 2016; Morton, 2023;

Pallasmaa, 2020; Rivera Cusicanqui, n.d.; Watson, 2020). However, there is no consensus among them as to when this rupture began. Some point to the Anthropocene, others to the Enlightenment, Modernity, or different historical moments. What remains clear is the emergence of a dominant development model that overshadows and discredits other ways of living. (Beim, 2013; Watson, 2020). While the dominant paradigm exalts scientific progress, other cosmologies, which

is often silenced or dismissed sustain more relational and ecologically integrated ways of living (Watson, 2020).

In this context, it is important to recognize that colonized societies—such as the one examined in this essay—have experienced repeated interruptions in their development processes, which have truncated or significantly altered the continuity of ancestral practices (Rosas Caro, 2024). Moreover, in the current globalized context, there exists a tangible preference for the cultural expressions of certain groups over others. This phenomenon is what scholars Joseph Gómez and Fanny Canessa describe as an attachment to *preferential citizenships* (Gomez & Canessa, 2019). As a result, syncretism and the adaptation of foreign ideas have emerged, and through reinterpretation, these influences have shaped ways of thinking and, consequently, the materialization of architecture.

The familiarity and everyday nature of certain ideas often lead us to assume they are universal or timeless, when in fact they are neither. Many concepts we take for granted, such as private property, privacy, or domesticity, are relatively recent constructions and not present in the same way across all cultures. We tend to treat these notions as if they were naturally occurring or applicable everywhere, but it is essential to critically examine and contextualize them within specific historical and cultural frameworks.

Let us begin with the concept of property, which is closely tied to the pursuit of dominance. Peruvian lawyer Juan Manuel Rosas notes that the term itself carries an inherent notion of human superiority over other beings, grounded in the power that humans claim to exercise over them—a distinctly European and colonial conception (Rosas Caro, 2024). From this perspective, property is not a neutral term but one with clear utilitarian agency, shaped by the context of conquest. It is fundamentally linked to control and positions humans at the top of a hierarchy in relation to other species.

Regarding the private sphere, architect Witold Rybczynski (2009), in his book *The House: The History of an Idea*, explores the origins of intimacy and privacy. He argues that these are not static or universal concepts, but cultural constructs that have evolved over time. Like private property, he points out that the notion of privacy originates in Europe and is closely tied to the rise of individuality and the development of the modern self. This idea materializes architecturally in the form of the compartmentalized bourgeois home—a clear architectural expression of the nuclear family ideal (Rybczynski, 2009).

Rybczynski also discusses domesticity, attributing to it, like intimacy, a development linked to the European conception of family life. He considers this cultural construction to include not only a set of activities but also the meanings that transform a simple house into a home (Rybczynski, 2009), a place shaped around the nuclear family as the central unit of society. Along the same lines, scholar Hilde Heynen highlights domesticity's relationship with the division of uses, viewing it as a product of the separation between family life and work, or more broadly, between the public and private spheres (Heynen, 2016).

It is worth emphasizing that, according to Heynen, domesticity has an epistemological link to the term “to domesticate,” which carries strong civilizing connotations. This connection reveals domesticity's alignment with broader ideological frameworks, particularly those emerging alongside industrial capitalism and imperial expansion. In this sense, domesticity functions not merely as a cultural construct but also as a colonial tool that helped organize and legitimize dominant social orders (Heynen, 2016). Understanding its origins and context is therefore essential to unpack its normative influence on architectural and spatial thinking.

In this way, it becomes evident that the concepts of property, privacy, and domesticity are far from being neutral, universal, or timeless. On the contrary, they

carry distinct historical and ideological weight, shaping social organization in ways that can feel foreign or even imposed upon groups such as the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon. This does not mean, however, that such groups are unaware of or disengaged from these ideas; rather, they engage with them differently, through logics that emerge from their own cosmologies and ways of inhabiting. Just as these concepts have deeply informed the Western model of the single-family or bourgeois house, they are equally crucial for understanding Asháninka architecture—but through an entirely different cultural lens.

Indivisible relationship: Asháninka interdependence with the forest.

All architecture reflects the values and states of the society from which it emerges (Gillaud, 2014). Vernacular indigenous architecture, in particular, offers a direct, practical response to specific environmental challenges while serving as a faithful expression of its cultural context. In this sense, to understand Asháninka architecture as a spatial response to both the forest environment and the socio-historical pressures that shape it, it is first necessary to introduce the Asháninka people and their deep, interdependent relationship with the Amazon rainforest.

Among Peru's 55 officially recognized Indigenous peoples, 51 are Amazonian. This contrasts sharply with the region's low population density: although the Peruvian Amazon occupies nearly 65% of the national territory, only 13% of the country's population resides there. The Asháninka are the largest Amazonian Indigenous group in Peru, with a population of approximately 114,000, of whom nearly 70,000 live in recognized Indigenous communities (Laura, 2021). In the VRAEM region, the geographic focus of this essay, roughly 10,000 Asháninka live in 45 communities (CARE, 2024).

The history of the Asháninka, like that of many Amazonian peoples, runs parallel to Peru's official historical narrative. Key national events such as the independence from Spain or the War of the Pacific have

little local relevance. Instead, transformative episodes for the Asháninka include the arrival of Catholic missionary orders, the brutal period of rubber extraction, and the violence of the internal armed conflict. These events, often absent from mainstream Peruvian historiography, have profoundly shaped the Asháninka experience and territorial realities. Understanding how the erosion of Asháninka territorial sovereignty has impacted their everyday life is crucial. This erosion is not only political or legal, it materializes in their settlements, in the transformation of their spatial practices, and in the architecture itself. Their dwellings thus become both shelter and testimony: living markers of a disrupted autonomy, but also of resilience and deep-rooted forest interdependence.

Talking about the Ashaninka is referring to their connection to the territory; this has been very close since ancient times, and one of respect for the surrounding environment. Oscar Espinosa, in this regard, mentions that the Ashaninka are dependent on the territory and grant it a symbolic value. Their relationship with the forest is fundamental, providing the Amazonian indigenous people with everything they need for living, such as food, clothing, medicine, and also building materials (Espinosa, 2010). In other words, the forest becomes the pharmacy where they get their medicine, the supermarket that supplies them with food, the store where they buy their clothing, and the hardware store where they obtain their building materials.

It is because of this status as a place of supply that the Asháninka's knowledge of the territory is of great importance, as a daily awareness of the control they must have over it, considering this an important, I would say vital, part of their culture. However, this should not lead us to think that the territory only acquires fundamental value for the Asháninka as a place of extraction; on the contrary, it is also conceived as a sacred place, a space of worship. In this sense, understanding that the forest is also the space where lakes, hills, and water are found; or that it is the sacred place where they observe their stars and communicate with other beings for their worship is crucial (Romaní, 2012).

For the Asháninka people, the Amazon forest is not a place of extraction of resources, but rather a place of reciprocity and exchange, since divisions such as those between nature and human beings are nonexistent. Territory is conceived as a single, indivisible entity, in which the material and spiritual form a unity (Romaní, 2012). This conception is far removed from the Western world's dichotomous idea that the tangible and intangible are two irreconcilable realities.

It is not surprising, then, that in this conception of the world, within a logic of territory as something indivisible, interrelated, and interdependent (III), the idea of property as dominion has no place. Or, the positioning of human beings above other beings is even more inconceivable. Rather, ideas of exchange and reciprocity are what mark the relationship between the Asháninkas and their environment.

It is not surprising, then, that the Asháninka have traditionally chosen to live in small groups of three to five families (Sarmiento, 2016), with a community of no more than 50 people, in order to avoid conflicts among their peers and to efficiently manage the resources at their disposal. This situation changed drastically in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the arrival of terrorism (1) in the region. This meant that they had to settle in larger groups, between 300 and 500 inhabitants per community, for protection (Espinosa, 2016). This had an impact on their social dynamics and relationship with the resources that the forest provides them.

In this way, we get a clearer idea of the Asháninka's connection to their environment, the Amazon rainforest. This connection is different from that found anywhere in the West or the globalized world. and that the value they assign to the place they inhabit is not exclusively economic, but also encompasses various dimensions, including symbolic ones. It remains, then, to explain how this way of living materializes in architecture without delaying any further.

Asháninka Vernacular Architecture

The architecture of the Asháninka people, like that of many other Indigenous communities, is radically

different from Western ways of building. As is common in vernacular architecture, one of its qualities is that the people who design their homes are also the same people who build and use them (Gonzales, 2021). Thus, these homes end up being a rapid response to specific needs, without theoretical pretensions, as is the case with so-called formal architecture, which involves construction professionals such as architects in their processes.

Their composition is the result of the combination of social needs and a dialogue with the Amazon, the natural environment where they reside. Their construction processes, shapes, textures, colors, interactions, and symbolic values are a reflection of their way of thinking. Or rather, constructions that are harmonious with the environment and, far from primitive, reflect a respectful relationship with nature and its cycles (Gonzalez, 2025). Therefore, the following will describe them based on observations and interviews conducted in the context of the May 2025 workshops organized by Regen, an organization that seeks the responsible regeneration of the Amazonian forests, as well as information gathered during visits with the organization Construye Identidad in 2017.

Regarding the construction processes of traditional Asháninka housing, these are closely linked to the immediate environment that surrounds them. Thus, the materials for their structure, vertical enclosures, roofs, and joints are entirely taken from the forest. The cedar for their columns, the cane for the secondary structures and walls, the palm fronds that cover their roofs, and the plant fibers sachawasa (2), that bind their elements are all sourced no more than a two-hour walk from the dwelling site, indicates XXX, an Asháninka master builder from the Central Peruvian Rainforest.

The techniques used by traditional farmers are the work of men; Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer master builders, and the transmission of this knowledge is not very fluid. Nowadays, with the introduction of new construction materials and technologies, there is a need for skilled labor to handle tools and techniques using industrial materials. Thus, while previously a couple of people with an axe could build a house in a few weeks,



Image 1: Interior of Pancotsi | Credits: Personal archive of Hilter Gonzales



Image 2: Ramada | Credits: Personal
archive of Hilter Gonzales

without needing a nail, today, materials must be brought in by river, along with master builders and their tools, to build new, more “modern” homes, at the cost that this entails (Gonzales, 2021).

As for the architectural object itself, the traditional Asháninka dwelling in the VRAEM is composed of two main volumes: one closed, which we will call “pancotsi” (house in Asháninka), and the other open, which we will call “ramada” (ramada), due to the colloquial term for it. Both, although freestanding, form a housing unit, with specific times, activities, and forms. In this way, I will describe each of them in form, materiality, color, light, objects, values, and activities, as observed in the visits made to different communities in May 2025.

The first volume, pancotsi, is a rectangular volume in plan, approximately 6 x 4 m in size and barely exceeding 2.5 m in height. Its only opening is the entrance door. These are monospace, meaning they have no partitions or dividing walls inside (See image. 1). Although there are no windows, their walls, made of bamboo, cane, or rough wood, are tied together with sachawasa (a type of woven wood), forming textures and patterns similar to those of looms. The rough finishes allow light and wind to pass through, allowing the house to breathe, creating an atmosphere similar to that of a canvas tent.

In this interior, the roof is the star of the textures, as the interweaving of palm fronds forms a much more homogeneous pattern than that of the walls, creating a cool environment in the constant temperatures of over 30°C. The accentuated earth floor completes this fresh, embroidered atmosphere. With no other furnishings inside except for mats called *shitatsi* (3) in the local language, which are used for lying down and resting at night, the few personal belongings are attached to the wooden beams and columns with ropes or plant fibers, in the absence of trunks, dressers, or cabinets.

These homes are single-family homes and accommodate approximately five people. Everyone sleeps together here, and although people can rest during the day, they are mostly used at night. Access to these homes is not restricted to other members of the community, but it

is unusual for anyone outside the home to enter and circulate normally, as the “ramada” is used for more social activities.

The second volume that makes up the Asháninka home is the ramada (See image. 2). This is a free and fluid interior space structure, poorly defined and with a strong visual connection to the surroundings. This is composed of a structural system of four wooden trunks, usually cedar or ishpingo, that support a roof of palm leaves, woven in a similar manner to those of the first volume described. While it may be perceived as a very open space, it is nonetheless defined and an interior space; this is because the difference between being inside it or not is indisputable. In this sense, the continuity with the exterior floor connects it to its immediate surroundings; however, the difference is determined by the shade it casts, which is a highly prized asset in a context like the Amazon.

Inside the ramada, the temperature is different, the wind flows freely, as does the multitude of dynamics within it. In Montaner's words, it is the type of space that is a focal point of events due to the intersecting flows and great dynamism; where people cook, eat, converse, drink masato (4), take a short nap, weave, make pottery, or simply be with other people. Due to the dynamism and overlapping uses described above, this space is appropriated with a variety of objects hanging from its beams and columns. Thus, the presence of shitatsis is frequent, such as stools, less than half a meter long, used as kitchens, tables, chairs, or beds. Additionally, the presence of hammocks, logs that serve as seats, and the communal cooking pot make it an important part of daily use.

Walking within the communities and entering the ramadas, without further protocol or permission, is common behavior. The fact that the Asháninka dwelling is composed of two volumes without a fence or boundary that prevents passage between them creates a fluidity and allows for multiple movements within the community. Similarly, the beginning and end of the communities, understood as groups of houses, are diffuse and not physically delimited within the

forest. This makes the boundaries between housing, community, and territory blurred and unclear, making the distinction between being in a domestic interior and a private space ambiguous.

Similarly, the uses of both architectural objects, the pancotsi and the ramada, reflect the degrees of intimacy they contain through the porosity of their coverings. Their porous or nonexistent vertical enclosures create unclear boundaries, in keeping with a privacy and intimacy that overflows the spaces. This demonstrates how domesticity is not specifically related to housing and is more of a cultural product that manifests itself in different ways. Architecture is a materialization of it.

Thus, one lesson from the architecture of the Peruvian Amazon is the expansion of the idea of public and private in relation to the Western notion. This is because in the Asháninka communities of the VRAEM, this is not present in the same way as in Peruvian cities. Just as private property is alien in this context, the idea of community extends to what may be the hamlet, extending into the forest (Romaní, 2012). Similarly, activities that may be considered private, such as cooking, washing, grooming, or related to the interior of the home, in the Asháninka world take place outside the home, or failing that, in the forest.

While spatial segregation by functions and uses, as we saw previously, is a byproduct of the invention of privacy, the spatial processes that occur in the West are not the same everywhere, or in all societies. With this, I want to emphasize that this is not a single path, with a single goal: the typical dwelling segmented into bedrooms, kitchen, dining room, and living room. On the contrary, thinking about the stages of hybridization processes and the directions to be taken are pending and urgent tasks. Understanding that forms of self-awareness are not—and should not be—homogeneous and that these are materialized, among other ways, in architecture is essential for speaking about living and space.

Understanding that, as is the case in the Asháninka communities of the Amazon, the domestic uses we give to spaces are multiple, temporary, unconventional,

and even exceed the dwelling, and that this is tangibly manifested in the form of their architecture, is an opportunity to imagine new spatial dynamics distinct from those we are commonly accustomed to. Therefore, understanding that, in Juhani Pallasma's initial quote, architecture informs us about our way of living and how we think, and ends up being the reflection and vivid expression of a way of interacting with our environment.

Conclusion: Reimagining Spatial Epistemologies through Asháninka Architecture

Throughout this essay, I have explored how Western spatial concepts, property, privacy, and domesticity, are not neutral or universal, but rather historically situated ideas that have come to dominate architectural thinking. In contrast, the Asháninka worldview offers an alternative epistemology, one rooted in relationality, reciprocity, and the indivisibility of nature and culture. Their way of inhabiting space challenges dominant paradigms not by rejecting them outright, but by revealing their limits and offering different coordinates for imagining architecture. The architecture of the Asháninka, shaped by and in dialogue with the forest, speaks not of ownership but of stewardship, not of separation but of continuity. It does not enclose the individual from the environment, but rather situates the person within a porous network of relations social, material, and spiritual. Here, the boundaries between inside and outside, domestic and communal, are blurred, not as a lack of order, but as a reflection of a cosmology where space is fluid, shared, and alive.

This perspective invites architecture and architectural thinking to pause and reconsider its foundational assumptions. The case of the Asháninka is not presented as an exotic alternative, nor as a romanticized past, but as a living practice that offers valuable lessons for a world facing ecological, social, and epistemic crises. In a time when the environmental impacts of the built environment are increasingly urgent, revisiting vernacular practices like those of the Asháninka can expand our imagination about sustainability, not as a set of technical solutions, but as a fundamentally different way of relating to the world.

In this sense, Asháninka architecture becomes not only a spatial expression of a specific culture, but a political and ontological statement. It challenges architects, designers, and scholars to question the dominance of Western spatial categories and to listen more attentively to other ways of knowing, building, and living. If, as Juhani Pallasmaa argues, architecture reflects how we think and how we live, then the Asháninka case reminds us that other forms of thought are possible and urgently needed.

Notes:

1 - Between 1980 and 2000, Peru experienced a period of internal armed conflict between the terrorist groups Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement and Shining Path and the Peruvian state. During this period, the Asháninka people suffered a 10% reduction in their population.

2 - *Sachawasa* knot made from plant fibers that joins two branches perpendicularly.

3 - *Shitatsi* it is an Asháninka word used to describe mats made from plant fibers, which can be rolled up and used as rugs for sleeping or working.

4 - *Masato* is a fermented cassava drink, very popular in the Peruvian Amazon. It generates dynamism and social cohesion among its consumers when shared from the same container. Drinking masato is the equivalent of drinking beer with friends in Western cities..

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