

# Pelli Studio: **CELEBRATING ANCESTRAL WAYS OF INHABITING THE LAND**

Ayamán practices in Siquisique, Venezuela, and surrounding rural territories

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Wild agave (cocuy) growing in Guamuco, State of Lara, Venezuela

Cocuy, is an agave-based alcoholic beverage or spirit culturally tied to the semi-arid regions of Lara, a state in western Venezuela. Within Lara, the town of Siquisique is the focal point of cocuy production, where over 500 *maestros* (masters) practice the art of distillation. Similar to Mexico's mezcal production, it undergoes a long and laborious process from cultivation through distillation ancestrally bound to the land and its people. Unlike mezcal, however, cocuy has had a difficult history after being made illegal for over 5 decades during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thereby limiting its entry and distribution to markets. Producers were aggressively harassed and even tortured; to the point that it is surprising to find that a knowledge-based practice of cocuy production has endured. Sadly, even today, the spirit carries traces of past stigmas and misunderstandings.

Presently, there is growing interest in cocuy, with many “entrepreneurs” eagerly entering what they believe to be a promising business, that includes product exportation. This presents many opportunities and challenges that this studio will engage as a premise of practice.

- The first level of complexity is understanding the cocuy plant, a member of the agave species. Indigenous traditions observed by local cocuy maestros are highly respectful to maintain the ecosystem's biodiversity, wherein agave plants grow symbiotically with numerous other plant and animal species. In contrast, inexperienced newcomers are replicating tequila and mezcal agave cultivation patterns that continue to devastate much of the Mexico's semi-arid regions. Rather than adopt foreign monoculture cultivation practices, the studio encourages students to embrace, deploy and celebrate essential virtues of ancestral Ayamán land stewardship practices.
- Secondly, construction materials and methods should embrace local availability and sourcing, which are readily visible in the town of Siquisique and its surroundings. However, recent construction has favored concrete masonry units (CMU), which does not have the thermal benefits of adobe bricks or *bahareque* (soil and clay-based adobe masonry units). The biproducts of cocuy production, e.g., *vinaza* or *mostra* and *bagazo*, can replace water and straw, creating a virtuous cycle, similar to permaculture systems, repurposing waste to produce building materials.
- The emergence of a prosperous adobe brick and *bahareque* production could catalyze the reconstruction and repositioning of a stock of beautiful houses, some dating back to the Viceregal period, that pepper the town of Siquisique. These houses have the potential to be reutilized for complimentary uses associated with cocuy production, consumption, traditions that celebrate Lara's culture, spirit and culinary traditions through museums and exhibitions.

Students are encouraged to embrace the site's reality, complexity, and messiness as “matters of concern” that inform design generators. They will begin by documenting and analyzing the site's myriads of social, environmental, economic, and political aspects to produce an array of relevant and viable proposals ranging from landscape strategies and fully designed earth-based constructions to the preservation and recovery of Spanish viceregal architecture. Finally, active stakeholders in the region will receive these proposals and consider them for implementation.



The homes of Nicolás Vargas in Guamuy, State of Lara. Venezuela