



Unsettling the City: Decolonial Approaches to Urban Memory and Museums

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The Fall 2025 issue of the *CAMOC Review* takes a critical look at the intersections of decolonisation, memory, and urban space, with a focus on city museums around the world. While conversations around decolonising museums have gained momentum in recent years, they have largely centered on national, ethnographic, and art institutions. This special edition asks: how are city museums—museums of place—engaging with the legacies of colonialism embedded in their collections, narratives, and urban contexts?

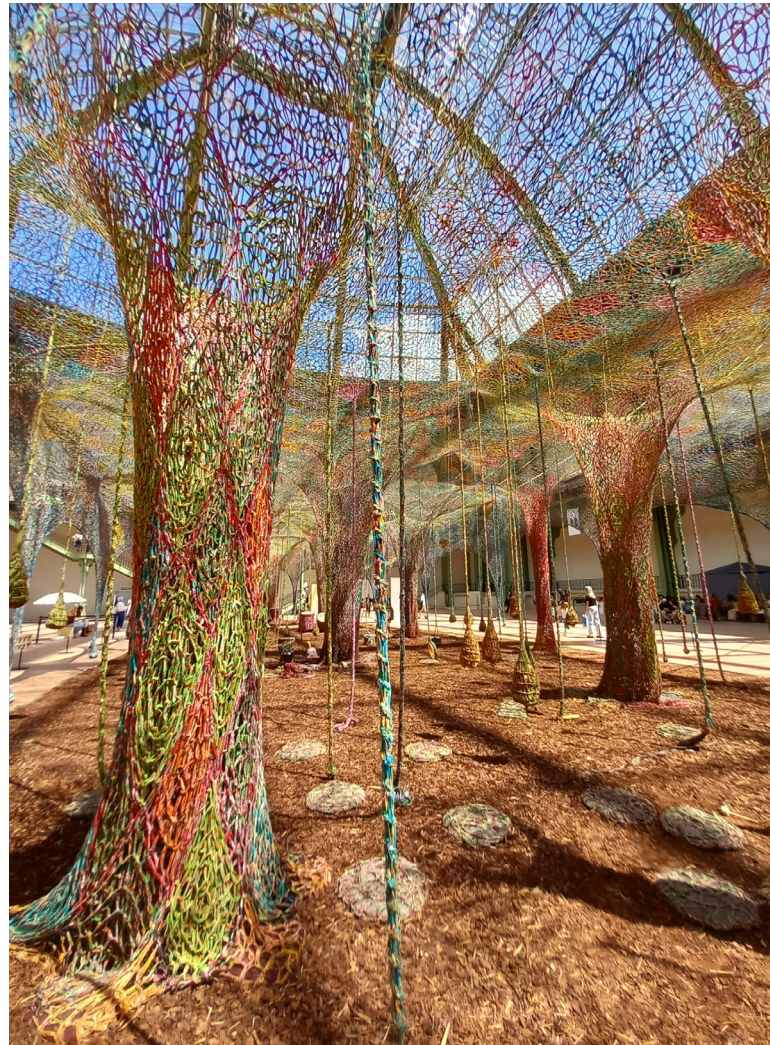
Contributors from Nigeria, India, Mexico, the Netherlands, Canada, the UK, and beyond explore a wide range of strategies, from speculative storytelling and community curation to interventions in colonial archives and museum architecture. Through case studies, critical essays, and exhibition reviews, this issue foregrounds voices from both the Global North and South, highlighting how city museums can serve as powerful platforms for unsettling dominant histories and creating space for diverse, often marginalized, forms of knowledge and memory.

Featuring richly illustrated articles and reviews, this edition also offers reflections on major projects and publications shaping decolonial discourse today. As a teaser, we invite readers to explore a short visual essay on a recent installation by Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto—whose work embodies the spirit of resistance, healing, and ecological awareness central to this issue.

Review exhibition - Ernesto Neto - *Nosso Barco Tambor Terra* - Andréa Delaplace

The Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto's installation at the Grand Palais d'Été in Paris (June 2 to July 25, 2025, as part of the France-Brazil Season) offers a powerful example of how a decolonial gaze through art can prompt reflection on our relationship with the environment and nature.

The installation, *Nosso Barco Tambor Terra* (Our Boat Drum Earth), transforms the Nave of the Grand Palais



into an immersive, sensorial landscape. This artwork brings together a wide range of sensory materials: from the soft, hand-woven fabric used to create a forest-like environment, to the evocative scents of spices and the presence of diverse musical instruments. Together, they invite the visitor to immerse themselves in a singular, multisensory experience. The crochet forest, functioning like a living membrane, filters the natural light pouring through the Grand Palais glass canopy, creating a soft, shifting atmosphere. Visitors are invited to step into this sensorial urban jungle—an immersive



environment where, for ten minutes at a time, in groups of twenty, they can reconnect with their senses.

Before entering the installation, participants must remove their shoes, a ritual that enhances their physical and emotional connection to the space. The floor, covered in small wooden pieces, may feel surprising—almost unsettling—at first. But as the experience unfolds, it becomes part of a larger sensory tapestry.

Around them, a delicate choreography of colors and filtered light plays through the crocheted trees, while the air is infused with the heady aroma of spices. Fabric lianas hang from above, each suspending small pouches filled with fragrant ingredients—cinnamon being the most prominent among them. Together, these elements create a space of wonder, grounding, and subtle transformation.

Entwined within the hanging lianas and fabric tentacles, scattered across the forest floor, are musical instruments—some familiar, others unexpected. The sculpture integrates musical instruments from across the globe, periodically activated in performances where visitors are encouraged to enter, explore, and play the hidden drums. From *pandeiros* and *tamborins*, iconic to Brazilian samba, to drums and percussion instruments

originating from Africa, Asia, and South America, this hidden orchestra forms an integral part of the experience.

These instruments, tucked into the folds of the crocheted landscape, invite visitors not just to observe, but to engage. As they explore the installation, guests are encouraged to play, to listen, and to become part of the soundscape—discovering how rhythm and resonance can awaken yet another layer of sensory connection within this living artwork. By bringing together diverse cultural rhythms, Ernesto Neto poetically suggests the possibility of a universal language—one rooted in vibration, breath, and shared pulse. Designed to be explored and inhabited, this monumental piece creates a tactile and symbolic bridge between the human body and the Earth, highlighting the continuity between the two through handmade craftsmanship, organic materials, and ancestral techniques. The work reflects on the legacy of sailing and navigation—forces that profoundly reshaped global relationships and geographies.

Through a porous architecture infused with ritual and collective energy, Ernesto Neto reimagines symbols of colonial histories as spaces for communion, healing, and reconnection. The title of the work—*Nosso Barco Tambor Terra*—is itself revealing of the artist's intention to reshape our relationship with the natural world.

At its core, Ernesto Neto's work is about *reenchantment*—a call to reconnect with the Earth through rhythm, ritual, and sensory experience. The title of the installation, *Nosso Barco Tambor Terra* ("Our Boat Drum Earth"), encapsulates this intention. The "boat" is not just a vessel, but the planet itself—a shared journey, carried by the pulse of the drum. For Neto, the drum is a heartbeat, a chant, a prayer.

Known for his interactive and immersive environments, Neto invites visitors into spaces where the boundaries between body, earth, and spirit dissolve. He describes this installation as "a prayer, a chant, a dance"—a living encounter between participants and ancestral knowledge. The work becomes a ritual of reconnection, urging us to feel the Earth not as backdrop, but as a living being. In *Tambor Terra*, the goal is not just to witness art, but to *experience* it—to move, to listen, to breathe, and to remember that we are not separate from the planet, but deeply, rhythmically, part of it.

That this installation takes place inside the Grand Palais, a monument built for the 1900 Exposition Universelle—a showcase of imperial grandeur and a symbol of European cultural supremacy—adds profound layers of meaning. Paris, once the "city of light" and

the center of the western “civilized” world as Walter Benjamin called it the capital of the 19th century, now hosts an artwork that questions those very narratives. By occupying this historically charged space with organic forms, Indigenous wisdom, and participatory rituals, Neto inserts a decolonial perspective into the heart of the Western canon.

The city can be challenging and alienating—its concrete and steel structures often sever our connection to the Earth beneath our feet. Urban architecture, built for efficiency and control, distances our bodies from natural rhythms. Neto’s installation responds directly to this disconnection.

By engaging with the monumental architecture of the Grand Palais—a symbol of refined civilization and classical grandeur—his work doesn’t oppose the building, but *inhabits* it in a way that subverts its logic. He softens its rigid lines with organic forms, fills its vast volume with scent, texture, and sound, and transforms its neoclassical symmetry into a space of ritual and sensory immersion.

In doing so, Neto challenges the binary between the “civilized” and the “natural,” confronting inherited ideas of culture as superior to nature. The rhythmic pulse of the drums, the fragrance of spices, and the tactile forest of crochet become a quiet, powerful protest—a reminder that reconnection and reverence can take root even in the most institutional of spaces.

Amid the intense heatwave that swept across Europe and North America in June and early July 2025, the urgency of climate change is impossible to ignore. In this context, Neto’s work resonates with even greater force, drawing on the ancestral knowledge preserved by Indigenous communities—wisdom that indigenous thinkers like Ailton Krenak and Davi Kopenawa emphasize as essential to maintaining ecological balance and imagining more sustainable futures.

During the recent heatwave, the vital role of trees in urban environments became strikingly clear—they offered shade, shelter, and a momentary escape from the oven-like heat of the city. Inside the vast nave of the Grand Palais, Neto’s crocheted trees echoed this function in symbolic and sensorial ways.

Though the soaring glass ceiling allowed the heat to filter in, raising the temperature inside the Grand Palais considerably, these textile trees provided a different kind of refuge. They evoked the protective presence of a forest canopy—not by cooling the air, but by offering a space for pause, immersion, and reconnection with the



rhythms of nature, even in the heart of a city pushed to its climatic limits.

Neto’s installation also highlights the power of contemporary art to pose urgent and complex questions—especially around decolonisation in both museums and cities. By transforming a space like the Grand Palais into a living, breathing environment shaped by Indigenous worldviews and ancestral knowledge, the work unsettles dominant narratives of art, culture, and history.

Contemporary art, in this context, becomes a vehicle for critical reflection. It challenges the traditional role of the museum as a neutral container of heritage and instead turns it into a site of encounter, discomfort, and dialogue. Neto’s *Tambor Terra* invites us to consider: whose knowledge counts? What kind of bodies are welcomed in cultural spaces? And how might we create environments—both artistic and urban—that honor other ways of knowing and being in the world?

In a city like Paris, long positioned as a global center of cultural authority, such questions resonate deeply. Neto’s work doesn’t offer definitive answers—but it creates space for feeling, listening, and imagining other possible futures, rooted not in domination or display, but in reciprocity and relation.



Ernesto Neto and Ailton Krenak resonances

Neto's *Nosso Barco Tambor Terra* resonates deeply with the work of Brazilian philosopher, writer, and Indigenous leader Ailton Krenak, one of the most influential voices in contemporary environmental and decolonial thought. Author of *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (2020), *Life Is Not Useful* (2023), and *Ancestral Future* (2024), Krenak has powerfully

challenged the extractivist logic that defines much of modern life. His ideas about non-anthropocentric humanity, the sacredness of dreaming, and the power of orality to reconnect us with community and the planet have shaped both environmental discourse and broader debates on what it means to inhabit the world differently.

Krenak's influence was recently recognized when he became the first Indigenous member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 2024. In April 2025, he shared his work at the Collège de France in Paris during the conference *Habiter la Terre à l'Anthropocène*, where he reflected on the limits of urban life as it is currently structured. According to Krenak, cities around the world—despite their cultural differences—are increasingly alike in form and function, built upon a logic of control, separation, and productivity. He questions whether this model truly serves human collectivity, and invites us to radically rethink the concept of the city itself.

Ernesto Neto's immersive forest, set within the rigid framework of the Grand Palais, echoes these concerns. By weaving ancestral knowledge, collective ritual, and ecological awareness into a site long associated with imperial grandeur and cultural authority, Neto's work disrupts the built logic of the "civilized" city. It invites us—like Krenak—to imagine other ways of being: grounded in rhythm rather than progress, in community rather than consumption, in memory rather than amnesia.

Through the language of contemporary art, Neto joins Krenak in asking not just *what kind of world we live in*, but *what kind of world we want to inhabit*—and whether art, sensorial connection, and ritual can guide us toward a more rooted, relational future.