Colonial Space and Histories of Architecture

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The history of modern architecture in most schools around the world follows a heroic saga that still prevails, virtually intact: Enlightenment rationality, 19th-century industrialization, radical change in the 1920s, then later avant-garde movements that uphold the early commitments to innovation. With only a few minor exceptions, all this happens in northern Europe. At a discrete distance two subsidiary narratives slightly expand the geographical purview. The first is an origin myth. In the West it proceeds from "primitive" settlements to Greco-Roman classicism, and from there to other familiar stations of "the survey." (There are Islamic, Chinese, and other classical foundations elsewhere.) The second current embraces vernacular traditions, both those of the specific nation or locale and those of "other" cultures from around the world – now a "non-western" requirement of the ACSA curriculum guidelines, one that expands knowledge but also sustains a new primitivist romance.

History classes, like studios, treat each of these conceptions as a universal, a "timeless" world heritage that provides a basis for originality. Even local vernaculars become an all-encompassing, interchangeable type: pure geometries and balanced ecologies, untouched by the degrading commercialism of mass culture. (How uncanny that the characterization echoes the aspirations of modern architecture itself.) Designers anywhere can refer to Japanese or Yemini dwellings, with little knowledge of the specific evolution of either one, much as they might draw from the plans of Terragni or images from microbiology. History aligns with formal appreciation and justification, but seldom with the subtleties that Clifford Geertz has called "local knowledge."[1]

The modernist account, like other histories, excludes resistance or reinterpretations of its own agenda, rarely investigating its mistakes or omissions. To do so would be to raise questions about the catechism of beliefs and the canon of saints. Most modernists sense this when they define history as a constraint to overcome, a parochial view of the world that resists all change.[2] (History is still there, of course; it begins anew today, and new saints will be annointed.) This combination of attitudes explains the reluctance to engage a more nuanced and contentious account of the built environment, and therefore the almost complete absence of the colonial world in architectural curricula.

This absence reduces complexities to a crude dichotomy of major truths vs. "minor aberrations" or, put differently, an articulate appreciation of modernity vs. an "inchoate misunderstanding." Yet modernity doesn't have just one meaning; it generates differences – some hegemonic, destructive, unequal; others liberatory and creative. Europe and the United States were crucial, of course, but they were not the only sites of experimentation. How then to break out of this restrictive framework, to engage the ambiguous interrelations, inversions, and inequities? The word *colonial* helps us confront this task. It resists aestheticization. It points out the unevenness of modernism, but also a richness of interpretations, adaptations, and creative forms of resistance.

My efforts here derive in particular from Georges Balandier's concept of a "colonial situation."[3] In the early 1950s, Balandier emphasized the multiple patterns of relationship and power that would remain after decolonization, just as potent as the strict legal status of colonial domination. He understood that such relations were simultaneously fixed and flexible, controlled and uncontrollable, responding to internal and external forces. That model of power, influence, and, I would add, opportunities, is, if anything, more resonant today than ever.

In fact the colonial realm is also necessary for understanding the very nature of Western culture.[4] The concepts of "Europe" and "the West" emerged with imperial exploration and conquest in the 16th century. Renaissance ideas about formal geometries, military security, social hierarchy, and civic identity were pivotal in laying out the Spanish settlements in the Americas.[5] The 17th century saw the principles of science define European modernity, in part as a contrast to the irrational Other – whether local peasants or far-away colonial subjects, typically imagined as frightening and ignorant, or occasionally as pure and natural. So, too, with Enlightenment ideas of rationality and progress. Historicist styles of the 19th

century derived from classifications of history and civilization that reaffirmed the West as the culmination of human development, while encouraging interest in "timeless" other cultures to be simultaneously protected and uplifted by the "colonial mission."

Connections are even more intertwined with the next historical phase. After all, the term "modernism" (*modernismo*) was invented in Latin America in the 1880s by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. Likewise, in a recent book, *Provincializing Europe*, the historian and subaltern theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty challenges the implicit assumption that only Europe and the United States can define modernism's true forms and meanings – whether those of democracy, legitimate knowledge, or architecture.[6]

It was at the turn of the last century – the moment when the United States and Japan officially entered the overseas colonial fray – that architecture assumed a major role in the worldwide enterprise of modernization. The French general Joseph-Simon Gallieni built markets, hospitals, and roads as part of his military campaigns in Vietnam, Sudan, and Madagascar. "A construction site," he often declared, "is worth more to me than a battalion."[7] A century later it is still unclear whether such structures should be considered as the gifts of a beneficent social reform or tactics for pacification. So, too, with colonial-era factories, ports, department stores, schools, and modern housing.

The core *modernist* issues must be seen in this *colonial* context. Indus-trialization, infrastructure, social services, the challenge of housing problems, the inspiration of "primitivist" sources, even the idea of internationalism, all were enlisted to drive and justify European imperial expansion (as they would do for Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union at a later date). Colonial cities – including the major cities of Europe and the U.S. – required the sites that drive today's transnational world economy: train stations, highways, and airports; postal and other communication services; insurance companies and banks; electrification and public health. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the global economy pervaded every dimension of colonial space by the late-19th century.

The exploitation of this modernization, again more evident in the colonies, was everywhere quite brutal. Can we teach students to see multiple dimensions of modern architecture, both its positive ambitions and its destructive effects? After all, the modernist commitment to reform poses inherently colonial questions. Whose interests are being served – and ignored? Who decides on priorities or locations? What happens to the people or places deemed expendable or marginal?

The colonies also point out the historical and exotic components of modernity. Modern culture promotes a longing for escape and fantasy – sometimes about the future, a *tabula rasa* for experimentation, but also about the past. Indeed, the very notion of "tradition" is itself modern, a self-conscious holding onto (or invention of) places and ways-of-life which seem at risk. Historic preservation and regional design are thus integral to the modernist project, the necessary obverse of visionary utopias.

I'd like to suggest some of the constitutive elements of "colonial space," past and present (six in fact), emphasizing how they relate to a modernity that encompasses and extends beyond the so-called Third World. The colonial realm highlights particularities even as it charts exchanges between the West and non-West – or within these somewhat tenuous domains. These multiple differences, both well-established and neoteric, reinscribe global inequalities, but they also make it impossible for every city to look or be experienced as exactly the same.

First and foremost is power. By its very nature colonial decision-making is undemocratic and external. Despite claims to represent the "public good," politics revolves around the wealth and hegemony of an elite minority whose major concern is economic exploitation. The twentieth century has added, if not completely deferred to, the financial exchanges that underlay such activities, including speculative real estate, consumer markets, and illegal traffic in goods like drugs and arms.

The economy is not the only force at work. Fears about a loss of national sovereignty remain strong, even today. How then, did nations, including colonial states, display themselves, at home and in the colonies? Again, the process is pervasive, but much easier to see abroad. Most official 19th-century structures glorified neoclassical Western prototypes as the epitome of civilization. At the turn of the century, as resistance to centralized power grew stronger, state bureaucracies built new Potemkin-villages with deferential references to the local heritage. After World War II most colonies gained their independence and, like European cities of the era, turned to monumental modernism, hoping to represent hopes for universal standards and opportunities. When consensus and autonomy proved difficult to assert, identity politics again came to the fore in the civic architecture of the 1970s.

"Negative space" is also crucial. By this I mean the direct and indirect policies of inaction, blockage, demolition, and marginalization, all inscribed on the urban landscape. Colonial ambitions have typically coalesced around a twofold approach to urban space: the baroque and the blank. A few projects, bombastically inappropriate in scale and cost, represent paeans to authoritarian power – whether that of a government or the idealized market. These stand out incongruously against a vast landscape, not far away, typically left as blank, undemarcated space on maps – in reality, a dense mixture of dilapidated structures in need of repair and piecemeal, often illegal

adaptations that local people have cobbled together on their own.

Fourth, maps also insist on the visible rationality of racial segregation and zoning: the categorization and separation of various activities and, implicitly at least, of groups. In principle, zoning is based on empirical criteria about collective economic development, health, and safety. Professionals then tend to allocate assets and liabilities in terms of the existing conditions. Thus the very act of zoning perpetuates inequalities, consistently protecting privileged areas while either ignoring poor, overcrowded districts or overburdening them with problematic installations because there is so little to "protect".

All the same, spatial boundaries, clearly demarcated and sometimes violently upheld, must be permeable in both directions in colonial space, facilitating the access of workers and servants in one direction; that of artists, voyeurs, and the police in the other. Permeability is especially prevalent in temporary or ephemeral public sites such as informal markets and places of entertainment or sports. Foucault called such settings "heterotopias," situated as they are outside a society's rigid categories of good/bad, stable/transient, real/imaginary, and he stressed the colonial world as a prime example of heterotopia. How can architects today enhance this informal, unpredictable realm? The task entails more than simply a representation of ephemerality.

Fifth, much the same is true of the connections between modernism and history. Despite its global dimension, colonial modernism sought to be ensconced in its locale, anticipating a dominant leitmotif of the present day. The colonies situated modern interventions. Their aesthetic drew upon three strategies: scholarly classifications, spatial separation, and hybridity or collage.

For instance, the French in Indochina established a major study center and museum system – the École Française d'Extrême-Orient – to label, rank, collect, restore, and preserve "the best" of the extraordinary 9th-century Khmer monuments, together with the "lesser" artistic products of the Cham and the Vietnamese, as well as artifacts in other neighboring countries the French hoped to bring into their sphere of influence. Architects and historians were charged with a quintessentially "Orientalist" task: to codify significant spaces, to determine what should be preserved, what was expendable, and what was "authentic" to the place and its supposed essential character, enough so to be a basis for European interventions. Indeed, colonial scholars invented the criteria and the very idea of entities called "Asian" or "Islamic architecture" (and those of Africa or Latin America as holistic entities).

Architects then used this history to create guidelines for the "situated" design of new buildings and spaces in *villes nouvelles*, as well as modifications in the "old" or traditional cities. Much like today's New Urbanists they imposed strict rules about scale, massing, materials, setbacks, signage, and streets. Political authorities then hired experts in film and advertising to promote the visual allure of this contextual work. To be sure, the results, highly self-conscious and visually alluring, sometimes resemble stage sets, as is the case with the Habous district in Casablanca (Albert Laprade with Cadet and Brion, 1918-30). This aesthetic denies the lively, messy amalgams of both history and contemporary reality, preferring a "typical," cleaned-up version of both. All the same, these spaces have not remained frozen in colonial time. Many such districts and buildings have been internalized as representations of the culture by those who live there. Can we criticize the artifice, but still appreciate the histori-cal and artistic accomplishments, as well as the opinions of local residents?

In addition, shifting locale, the interest in non-Western prototypes (taken – or constructed – as essential truths) affected European modernism itself. One could look at Le Corbusier's response to North Africa and Latin America in the 1920s and 1930s. Or post-modern interventions in the 1970s. I'd like to focus on the 1950s, when progressive modern architects such as Georges Candelis and Shadrach Woods in Morocco sought to take account of "the Muslim way of life." As the firm of ATBAT-Afrique they studied both the cubic volumes and the patterns of daily life in *casbahs* and *ksours* (the fortified towns of the Middle Atlas – the rural origins of most new immigrants to Casablanca). Even more intriguing, Roland Simounet did likewise with Mahieddine, a *bidonville* on the outskirts of Algiers. Partly in response to these examples, the CIAM meeting at Aix-en-Provence adopted the concept of *habitus*/habitat and Team X was formed. The Smithsons, AldoVan Eyck, and others emphasized the distinctive patterns of "everyday life," local and more general, based on analyses (more formal than cultural, yet still significant) of Dogon villages, Italian hill towns, and the working-class East End of London – though ATBAT-Afrique's housing remained their favorite. "Vernacular" settlements, especially those of the colonies, thus helped provide alternatives to CIAM's orthodox modernism.

This in turn leads to my final point, one of new, more fluid definitions and alternatives. The discourse of present-day architecture culture often invokes the hybrid, *criollo*, and *mestizo*, on the one hand; the incremental, adaptive, and contingent, on the other. These words refer, above all, to the conditions of colonial and postcolonial settings. They are also the language of postcolonial theorists – a topic too rarely discussed in studios or in history/theory classes.

True, architectural history has not engaged the challenge of difference. Yet a cursory attempt to cover *every* kind of history is not the answer. This approach inevitably comes down to a breathless and rather tedious compendium of people, places, and dates, one that in fact reinscribes the criteria of Western

conventions, including those of centrality and benign tolerance. Fernando Ortiz's concept of "transculturation" seems far more appropriate, for he emphasizes the multiple effects of interchange, both destructive and constructive, that characterize the colonial and the neocolonial world.[8]

This helps us pose three challenges. First, how can we juxtapose the ambitions of modernism with its underside of destruction, exploitation, and inequality – usually unintentional, especially on the architect's part, but potent nonetheless? Second, how can we introduce students to the interconnections, appropriations, competition, and inversions that underlie creativity, as well as the fluidity of cultural categories like Asia, America, the Caribbean, and Europe – indeed, those of modernism itself, a phenomenon that does not simply radiate out from an indisputable center? And third, how can we help students learn *how* to learn about "other places," the sites beyond the historical geography of established architectural masterpieces – in other words, the places where they will intervene as architects, even if they stay close to home?

Modernism is, by necessity, a composite: an invention and an adaptation to what exists; a manifesto and a pieced-together document; a particular site and an expansive, interconnected map of influences. It is a *bricolage* of ideas and a fusion of forms. Differences can't simply be relegated to another time ("the past") or a distant "other" place (the non-West), usually reduced to one-dimensional labels: traditional ways-of-life, backward or nostalgic; crude imitations of "real modernism"; ignorant or corrupt efforts at experimentation; and a few instances of "alternative" or "peripheral" modernisms, incorporated within the canon without challenging its premises. Most of the world is thereby discounted, including those within the West who work outside the mainstream.

If nothing else, the events of 9/11 remind us of interconnections, both intended and unexpected. Today it is impossible (or should be) to withdraw into a privileged realm of one's own, oblivious to the attitudes of others, whether they are hostile or inventive. As historians and as citizens of the world, we can no longer bracket out the vast realm of colonial space. It, too, has become a crucial element of modernity, as has in fact been the case for centuries.

NOTES

[1] Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983).

[2] See "Architectural History 1999/2000," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58 (September 1999); *The History of History in American Schools of Architecture*, ed. Gwendolyn Wright and Janet Parks (New York, 1990); and *The Architectural Historian in America*, ed. Elizabeth Blair MacDougall (Washington, D.C., 1990).

[3] Georges Balandier, "The Colonial Situation: A Theoretical Approach" (1951), rept. in *Social Change: The Colonial Situation*, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein (New York, 1966), pp. 34-61.

[4] One of the first, and still arguably the most thoughtful, of these efforts was Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture* (New York, 1984), based on his lectures at the University of California at Berkeley.

[5] See, for example, Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven, 2000); Richard Kagan, *Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493-1793* (New Haven, 2000); and Valerie Fraser, *Architecture of Conquest: Building in the Viceroyalty of Peru, 1535-1635* (Cambridge, 1991).

[6] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

[7] Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 75-79.

[8] Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940; Durham, N.C., 1995). A rich example of this approach is *The Short Century: The Arts in Africa, 1945-1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich, 2001).