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Building Global Modernisms

GWENDOLYN WRIGHT

We usually forget that modernism came into being in a world framed by colonialism, where visions for improvement and innovation overlapped with and often caused brutal destruction. In the colonial world as elsewhere, modernism was, and remains, at once a universal ambition, a transnational operation, and myriad local variations. Likewise, resistance to these forces has long been an integral part of modern life, whether in the form of nostalgia for the past or, as we realized so brutally on September 11, 2001, that of violent opposition. The processes of modernity are not inherently homogeneous; they generate comparisons and differences, some unequal and destructive; others liberatory and creative. These distinctions haunt all aspects of culture, including the domain of architecture.

Place is always a factor, even in a global world, though no place is autonomous. Indeed, the term *modernism (modernismo)* was invented in Latin America in the 1880s by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío.² Here, as elsewhere, the colonial legacy was formative. New frameworks of knowledge and new aesthetic concepts moved back and forth between colony, former colony, and metropole, linking and blending the domains identified as West and non-West, white and nonwhite, high art and mass culture—even as a panoply of laws, intellectual constructs, and spatial practices sought to enforce these dichotomies.³

In diverse and partial, though quite cohesive ways, the physical environment became a strategy for enforcing common values while maintaining difference within a conjoint modern world. It was at the turn of the last century—the moment when the United States and Japan officially entered the overseas colonial fray⁴—that architecture assumed a major role in the worldwide enterprise of modernization. The French general Joseph-Simon Gallieni built markets and hospitals 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." A century later it is still unclear whether such structures should be considered as the gifts of beneficent social reform or tactics for pacification. To some extent it depends on positionality, but even then a clear, unequivocal judgment is difficult to achieve and defend.

Ambiguities abounded in the colonial world. Architects and engineers built factories and ports to facilitate a transnational economy; others designed modern housing and commercial buildings along spacious boulevards. To



Murals by Duclos de la Haille for the Colonial Museum at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris. Courtesy of the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens, Paris. situate these interventions, thereby luring tourists as well as investors, teams of architects and art historians preserved cultural-heritage sites and established contextual guidelines for new structures. Seldom discussed if always visible was the underside of modernism, the segregation, exploitation, destruction, and callous neglect inscribed onto the spaces, typically left blank on modern maps, where the vast majority of indigenous people lived and worked. The politics of space involved complex, asymmetrical assertions of power: domination, resistance, incorporation, and exclusion. It was an unstable calculus, both morally and practically.

In 1951 the anthropologist George Balandier spoke of "the colonial situation" to evoke the anomalous ways in which hegemony might still be exercised—and contested.⁸ Even as national independence evolved in the aftermath of World War II, nonlocal forces continued to affect the fate of cities and countrysides, without completely determining what happened. Global processes and local agency still coexist, sometimes as before in disequilibrium, conflict, or even chaos.⁹ Today's "outsiders" include transnational financiers, corporate executives, nongovernmental organizations, dealers in illegal goods such as weapons and drugs, the international tourism industry, and peripatetic professionals, such as architects. (To be sure, "insiders," both official leaders and shadowy bandits, play an equally critical role.)

As a result, many people have experienced "the modern," at least in part, as a brutal, alien imposition, a force that destroyed their livelihoods and social norms, the good with the bad. Of course, others seized opportunities and many benefited from improved conditions. Yet the gap between winners and losers, whether cities or individuals, seems even greater now than in the past. The fears and realities of inequality, instability, and extraneous control, all of which began under colonialism, have grown apace under the pressures of today's global economy. Balandier's model of strains and ambiguities is thus, if anything, more resonant than ever.

The September 11 bombings struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, two incontestable symbols of American neocolonial power—military, economic, and cultural. Americans and the rest of the world have disparate opinions about this power and its relationship to the globalizing forces of modernity. ¹⁰ Likewise the vehemence that fueled the attacks and their aftermath have various origins, especially if one allows for the contradictory emotions of respect, distrust, desire, and rage. ¹¹ Open and honest discussion about such tensions is no easier in our neocolonial era than in the earlier classic era of colonialism. To concede possible reasons is not to justify terrorism or the misuse of global power. Understanding is not the same as endorsement or capitulation. But it is the only possible beginning for productive change, rather than ongoing conflict. *All* parties must make an

effort to comprehend opposing, even paradoxical points-of-view and to redress legitimate grievances, especially those related to unplanned consequences of public actions.

The convoluted nature of modernity, as well as so-called tradition, comes into sharper focus if those in the West look outside Europe and the United States—just as the reverse also happens. Like a magnifying glass or an "inverted telescope," in Benedict Anderson's term, these "other" spaces highlight what might too easily be overlooked closer to home. 12 Peripheral terrains are usually dismissed as insular, scorned as derivative, or excluded as strange, yet they help define the center. "Staging the modern has always required the non-modern," contends Timothy Mitchell. "The production of modernity involves the staging of differences . . . [one register] providing the modern with its characteristic indeterminacy and ambivalence and the other with its enormous power of replication."13 The system is not inherently fixed, nor is it one-directional. New elements infiltrate, some well-established, others neoteric, altering modernity's appearance and its trajectories in unexpected ways. The variety of combinations ensures that cities will never be experienced in exactly the same way, look just alike, or benefit all citizens in the same way.

This viewpoint casts new light on various assumptions, both spatial and intellectual, that are usually taken for granted. Social imaginaries such as the public sphere and a homogeneous, interconnected global world tend to discount the vast differentials that exist. Why, for instance, should we assume that Walter Benjamin's flâneur is the universal essence of urban modernity? After all, the twentieth-century idea of "modern man," while intended to be progressive, unthinkingly ignored gender differences and denied the appeal of seemingly outdated forces such as religion and nationalism. Proclamations about democracy or universal rights to decent shelter, health, and well-being have been used to justify European colonialism and American military action in the world. Can they also confront the growing class and racial inequities in our own cities?

Universal standards are never really placeless. ¹⁴ Germany, Britain, and France once vied to be the de facto center for a modern, international vision of architecture and politics disseminated from their capitals. Today the United States asserts the prerogative to define and defend its presumed values as those of all the world—confusing a broad desire for freedoms and material well-being with a particular parochial version by no means universally available to all Americans. In a similar way, professions appeal to the public good in jealously guarding their positions of privilege. Architects, for example, protest any dilution or compromise of their artistic and intellectual authority, whether the issue is innovative aesthetics or the preser-

vation of historic monuments. Can we instead take up the call of Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* and consider other narratives about modernity, ones that challenge our premises about universals in the processes of history, invention, and legitimate forms of knowledge, to say nothing of family, community, and progress? To engage "contradictory but profoundly connected" interpretations would be cosmopolitan rather than universalizing, inventive rather than dogmatic. ¹⁵ Yet architects of buildings and policy will face a real challenge. To see "the contemporary as plural [and] equal," writes Chakrabarty, "makes it impossible to talk about the 'cutting edge,' the avant-garde, the latest that represents the future."

Time, too, must be refracted differently. The prefix of *premodern* or *preindustrial* homogenizes differences, isolating them outside the horizons of time, as does that of *postmodern* and *postindustrial*.¹⁷ Failing to grasp historical particularity, such terms mystify more than they clarify. The issue goes far beyond precise chronologies. To reify the past as a field of fixed qualities is to disregard its ambiguities, inconsistencies, and repressed continuities. This in turn justifies the prejudice embedded in dismissing a particular client, a group, a district, or a nation as "backward," "not yet" modern, and therefore not worth full consideration. In like manner, definitions of modernity tend to be inflexible, denying the multiple, even conflicting layers of conventions and change that shape any place or person. Ernst Bloch's term "nonsynchronicities" underscores the simultaneous but radically divergent experiences of "Now." 18

To be sure, Western culture has also embraced conditions found outside its domain, usually in an exoticism of creative and self-serving misreadings about "timeless" values. Travelers and artists still seek inspiration from cultures they deem spiritually and socially harmonious, unaffected by modern fashion, unchanging and "authentic." There is also a subcategory of primitivism that seizes on pure form. Early twentieth-century modernists were drawn to the unadorned white walls of Moroccan and Algerian medinas, as well as to African masks. In the 1950s and 1960s, hoping to reanimate the rigidity of orthodox modernism, groups like Team X extolled the complex geometric patterns of dwellings in the villages of Mali, Yemen, Turkey, and the Greek islands. ¹⁹ This universal vernacular focused on the rejuvenation of one's own creative spirit rather than a depth of respect or understanding for quite diverse subjects.

In a similar way, at once respecting and reducing other cultures, what is now loosely and inaccurately called "postmodernism" first emerged in the colonies, overlapping with modernist experiments rather than succeeding them. *Mestizo* façades and grand spectacles characterized governmental buildings in British India and Malaysia from the 1880s, then in colonies as

diverse as Dutch Indonesia, French Senegal, and Italian Ethiopia. The original goal was to suggest mutual respect and inclusion, masking the power relations that in fact pertained. Yet this "hybrid" architecture has taken on unintended meanings. ²⁰ Modern, neotraditional, and creolized buildings alike have served to legitimate quite different regimes and institutions. Put simply, no architectural idiom can be seen as inherently progressive or oppressive, pure or contaminated. ²¹

There is, however, a serious problem with architecture that limits diverse cultural and political expression, for the imposition of rigid design guidelines can directly affect social practices. The pervasive replication of Western prototypes for office towers, shopping malls, and residential enclaves in the past several decades evangelizes a global market economy. Hegemony is not limited to the West. As part of their effort to purify Islam, adherents of the orthodox, Saudi-based Wahhabi sect are now imposing their prototype of the mosque as a universal for Islam.²² The insistence on a single idea—not only dome and minarets, but religious beliefs and quotidian acts—condemns the multifarious local traditions of Southeast Asia, China, Africa, and other locales. Saudi wealth has subsidized the building of new, often quite imposing mosques all over the world, which greatly enhances the power of this group and their preferences.

Architecture that claims to synthesize different cultures or epochs can also be problematic. Consider the well-meaning Western architects in the 1970s and early 1980s who designed grand projects for Baghdad, Tehran, and Riyadh. The rulers who commissioned these schemes wanted to give symbolic precedents to their authoritarian regimes. Newly conscious of history and the limitations of modernization, the architects believed they could decide which traditions were significant and which aspects of modernity were essential. Indeed they professed to distill the very essence of Islam as well as that of the specific local culture. But who can presume to know the essence of a culture, a place, or its people? To identify an essence is to deny history, cultural complexity, and the unpredictability of change. The answer is not to disengage from all cultures outside one's own milieu, for hubris can likewise obscure the oppressive or self-serving effects of projects close to home. Urban renewal made this all too clear, as do New Urbanist housing projects and the megalomaniac proposals for the World Trade Center site.

What then is the place of "non-Western" cultures in today's architecture culture? To ask this question necessarily prompts a critical reexamination of the "Western" canon, including the avant-garde who seek a rupture with its legacy. A well-entrenched saga of twentieth-century modernism, centered on Europe, is still taught all around the world, proclaiming one foundation, one canon of saints, indeed a quasi-religious faith that often reduces

modernism's original aspirations to a catechism. At a discrete distance is the "survey," a broad sweep often tagged "From Caves to Graves" that follows nineteenth-century conventions of art history in its segments on "prehistory," then "classicism" (taking Greco-Roman antiquity as the foundation), medieval, Renaissance, and so forth. Some professors take excursions to describe synchronic developments in Asia or the Islamic world. What about the interconnections, asymmetries, and exclusions that flow and churn between these too neat groupings of space, culture, and temporality?

Recent interest in multiculturalism, as well as a travel-guide taste for the exotic, has fueled Western curiosity about the traditional architecture of the Islamic world, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa—each treated as an autonomous entity. Contemporary architecture from the same regions is by and large ignored. Inequality pervades even our respective ignorance. Some architects have translated New Urbanist principles into purported national vernaculars or broad semblances of a pan-Asian or pan-Arab language; these sites demand critical engagement not shallow classifications. Tokenism may add a few architects' names to the modernist pantheon—Hassan Fathy, Luis Barragán, Fumihiko Maki, Charles Correa, and Balkrishna Doshi, for example—categorizing them under labels such as alternative modernisms, other modernisms or peripheral modernisms. These terms originally implied a pervasive openness and experimentation, yet all too often they serve to reinscribe Western hierarchies.²⁴ Can there not be comodernities and respectful dissent about the term that carries modernism ahead into new terrains, incommensurable yet engaged with one another in multiple ways?

A respect for various traditions, great and small, distant and close at hand, by no means precludes the need for change, but it does temper the aggressive pace. Inventions and experiments must reach beyond the limited domain of a monoculture, including that of the avant-garde. Transnational, comparative alternatives have enriched literature, history, and the arts. Mikhail Bakhtin's acclaim for the genius of ordinary people's linguistic crudeness, unruliness, polylingualism, hybridity, and earthiness provides one incentive. So too does Arjun Appadurai's notion of a "disjunctive order" that moves ahead fitfully through unpredictable problems and felicitous surprises, rather than the smooth, all-encompassing "flow" so often evoked in today's discourse. The novelist Rey Chow celebrates "mobility, proximity, [and] approximation" as the hallmarks of a modernity that embraces our individual and cultural diversity. The novelist of the smooth of a modernity that embraces our individual and cultural diversity.

These authors share another premise: they recognize the colonial dimensions of concepts like modernism, postmodernism, and tradition. Now more than ever, all disciplines, nations, and religions must come to terms with this shared legacy. No one can simply dismiss colonialism or assume that

it only affects "other" places. The memory and effects cannot be contained or pushed aside. There is an uncanny parallel in our present circumstance as the world confronts the horror, pain, and fear of September 11. A dull amnesia attempts to fill the void, to mute the awareness of our collective human vulnerability. Here too memory cannot be circumscribed to one memorial site; it has multiple dimensions, global and local.

Architects today often speak of ambiguous histories and unexpected consequences, past and present. A recognition of this the colonial dimensions of this goal will prompt animosity in some and self-righteousness in others. It can also generate less presumptuous, more syncretic ways of looking at oneself and others, in architecture as in every field. In the wake of collective anguish, it is time to explore how the different logics of globalism, modernism, tradition, and multiculturalism can creatively engage one another. Can we produce histories and visions of the future attuned to local knowledges and universal hopes? The task will constrain and challenge us all.

Notes

- 1. Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Benedict R. Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (New York: Verso, 1998); and the journal *Third Text*, especially Rasheed Araeen, "A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics," *Third Text* 50 (Spring 2000): 3–20.
- 2. David Craven, "The Latin American Origins of 'Alternative Modernism," *Third Text* 36 (Autumn 1996): 31.
- 3. Jean-Louis Cohen and Monique Eleb explore this two-way experimentation in Casablanca: Colonial Myths and Architectural Ventures (1998; New York: Monacelli, 2002), as does my own book, The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Early theorists who stressed the interconnections include George Balandier, "La situation coloniale: Approche théorique" (1951), reprinted as "The Colonial Situation: A Theoretical Approach," in Social Change: The Colonial Situation, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein, 34-61 (New York: John Wiley, 1966); Franz Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks (1952; London: Pluto Press, 1986); and Bernard Cohen, An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987). More recent is Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper describe the "modular" nature of these strategies in "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, 1-56 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 13, drawing on Benedict Anderson's use of the concept in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1983), 4.
- 4. See Akira Iriye, Cultural Internationalism and World Order (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Rethinking American History in a Global World, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); "Empires and Intimacies: Lessons from (Post) Colonial Studies," Journal of American History 88 (December 2001): 829–897; Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., Cultures of United States Imperialism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), especially Kaplan's "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," 3–21; Gilbert Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, and Ricardo Salvatore, eds., Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of United States-Latin American Relations (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Louise Young, Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Fujimori Terunobu and Wan Tan, eds., A Comprehensive Study of East Asian Architecture and Urban Planning, 1840–1945 (Tokyo: Institute of Industrial Science, University of Tokyo, 1995).
 - 5. See Wright, Politics of Design, 76.
- 6. For an insightful discussion by a Latin American social theorist, see Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996).
- 7. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Also see Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Culture in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2000).
 - 8. Balandier, "The Colonial Situation."
 - 9. AbdouMaliq Simone, "The Place of African Cities," in The Pragmatist Imagination:

Thinking about "Things in the Making," ed. Joan Ockman (New York: Rizzolli and Columbia Books on Architecture, 2001), 234–243.

- 10. The "Global Attitudes Project" of the Pew Research Center, Princeton Survey Research Associates, and the International Herald Tribune surveyed opinions of political, media, and business "elites" in two dozen nations. For example, large majorities elsewhere believe the United States is mostly acting unilaterally in the fight against terrorism, while 70 percent of American opinion makers believe we are acting jointly with friends. See http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A3490-2001Dec.19.html.
- 11. For an insightful appraisal, see Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, "Occidentalism," New York Review of Books (17 January 2002): 4–7.
 - 12. Anderson, The Spectre of Comparisons.
- 13. Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 24, 26.
- 14. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995); and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990).
- 15. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 254.
 - 16. Chakrabarty, 88.
- 17. Chakrabarty, 93. Also see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the 'Post'- in 'Postcolonial' the Same as the 'Post'- in 'Postmodern'?" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991), 336–357.
- 18. Bloch first used the concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* in the 1930s to probe the relations between modernism and fascism. It has been variously translated as "nonsynchronicity," "nonsimultaneity," and "noncontemporaneity." Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (1962; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 97. Also see Frederic J. Schwartz, "Ernest Bloch and Wilhelm Pinder: Out of Sync," *Grey Room* 03 (Spring 2001): 54–89.
- 19. See Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, Ordinariness and Light (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), esp. 66–178; Alison Smithson, ed., Team X Meetings (New York: Rizzoli, 1991); Eric Mumford, The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928–1960 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 222–238; Felicity Scott, "Bernard Rudofsky: Allegories of Nomadism and Dwelling," in Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture, ed. Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Réjean Legault, 215–238 (Montreal and Cambridge: Canadian Centre for Architecture and MIT Press, 2000); and Monique Eleb, "An Alternative to Functionalist Universalism: Écochard, Candilis, and ATBAT-Afrique," in Anxious Modernisms, 55–73. Anthony D. King juxtaposes the lyrical descriptions of indigenous housing in books like Bernard Rudofsky's Architecture without Architects (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964) with the negative appraisals of colonial officials who routinely demolished "indigenous housing," rural as well as urban, in the name of modern standards (Urbanism, Colonialism and the World Economy: Cultural and Social Foundations of the World Urban System [New York: Routledge, 1990], 53).
- 20. The term *hybrid* was popularized by the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. It has become quite popular in recent years, especially in architecture.
- 21. Michel Foucault insisted that no architecture is innately oppressive or liberatory, not even that of the panopticon or the Nazi death camps. "Space, Knowledge, and Power,"

interview with Paul Rabinow, *Skyline* (March 1982), 16–20; republished in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 245. Also see my essay, "Michel Foucault: Negotiating Colonial Spaces," *Arbejdspapir* 29 (Center for Urbanitet og Aestetik, University of Copenhagen, October 1998).

- 22. Renata Holod and Hasan-Uddin Khan, *The Contemporary Mosque: Architects, Clients, and Designs since the 1950s* (New York: Rizzolli, 1997); and Barbara Crossette, "A Challenge to Asia's Own Style of Islam," *New York Times, 30* December 2001, WK4.
- 23. For example, "Regenerative Approaches to Mosque Design," Mimar: Architecture in Development 11 (January 1984): 44–63; Mildred F. Schmertz, "Mosque as Monument: International Design Competition for the State Mosque, Baghdad, Iraq, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown," Architectural Record 172 (June 1984): 142–151; [Skidmore Owings and Merrill], Urban Design Middle East (New York, 1978); Charles K. Hoyt, "SOM's New Tower in Jeddah," Architectural Record 165 (February 1979): 102–106; Roger Yee, "Computer-Driven Development," Corporate Design and Realty 4 (November 1985): 70–75; Richard L. Meier, "Tehran: A New 'World-City' Emerging," Working Paper no. 249, University of California at Berkeley Institute for Urban Research and Development (December 1974); "Shahestan Pahlavi: A New Center for Tehran," Royal Institute of British Architects Journal 84 (April 1977): 136–147; and "Award: Llewelyn-Davies International, [includes Jacquelin Robertson and Franklin Israel]" Progressive Architecture 59 (January 1978): 98–99
- 24. The term alternative modernism was first used by Valerie Fraser and Oriana Baddeley in Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin America (London: Verso, 1989); it was then developed in Craven, "The Latin American Origins of 'Alternative Modernism," 29—44. On peripheral modernism, see Beatriz Sarlo, Scenes from Postmodern Life (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). In architecture the first use seems to have been Colin St. John Wilson, The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture (London: Academy, 1995). For an effort to redress the inequality of ignorance, see World Architecture, 1900—2000: A Critical Mosaic, 10 vols., ed. Kenneth Frampton (Vienna, Austria: Springer, 2000).
 - 25. Appadurai, Modernity at Large.
- 26. Timothy Brennan, "The Cuts of Language: The East/West of North/South," *Public Culture* 13 (Winter 2001): 52.