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#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

“Community” as the basic architectural unit: rethinking research and practice towards a decolonised education

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Abstract

As a contribution to the decolonisation debate, we need to develop theoretical frameworks that are better suited to diverse contexts, specifically Africa, and we need to elevate local knowledge systems, thinking that originates from the African continent and architectural theory from African scholars. It also demands a shift from documentation (which we tend to do when studying Africa) to interpretation and the development of new theories and new methodologies of research and practice.

This paper therefore explores why societies build and what governs the building processes, acknowledging that societies build for reasons, including and, beyond the need for shelter. The layers of meaning that make up the building process include status, power, social convention, values and ideas on aesthetics. This inherent layering of meaning through building ensures that every built work is a deliberate act – consciously or unconsciously – which communicates meaning and gives shape and identity to those that build.

Architectural history traditionally deals with individual buildings, yet historically building and spatial expressions are almost always collective forms of expression. Architectural history tends to focus on the ‘monumental’ rather than the architecture of the ‘everyday’. It is therefore expected that to develop this alternative theory which sheds light on the ‘collective’ or ‘community’, would rely heavily on texts on residential architecture, the domestic scale and residential neighbourhoods. These are explored and interpretative models developed through analysis and adaption of various theories and texts.

It is proposed that the ‘community’ or the ‘collective’ should be considered as the basic architectural unit of design, embracing complexity, uncertainty and allowing for multiple voices to emerge and multiple actors to intervene in the built environment while ensuring minimal conflict. This approach is at odds with current practice and education which favour the individual over the collective.

Keywords: *community, architecture, decolonisation, education, practice*

Decolonising architectural theory

Decolonisation means the consideration of other contexts, other voices and other experiences – that is exploring beyond what has been presented to us as valid, academic and professional; it is seeing and acknowledging the value of other knowledge systems previously excluded from academic debates. How we approach this task is being interrogated and differences are rife. We have a dilemma in terms of what to use and what to discard from Western theory. However, it is important to note that this exploration presents us with a great opportunity. This paper makes a contribution towards the development of a theoretical framework for interpreting space and built form that is better suited to African contexts. It is based on various schools of thought and authors and aims mostly to shift the focus from the ‘individual’ to the ‘collective’.

The daily face-to-face interactions of dynamic social networks and patterns of interaction in collective spaces ultimately define what we recognise as ‘settlement’. The values that underpin ‘settlement’, as an expression of ‘collective’ aspirations rather than ‘individual’ aspirations, are at the heart of vernacular settings. The focus on the ‘individual’ has dominated practice in the profession, which is at odds with how vernacular settlements were built and developed in much of Africa. Indeed, it has been said that vernacular architecture is town planning or it is nothing (Turan 1990).

Another aspect to consider is that some practices are based on the occupation of open space as opposed to the construction of buildings. This is not something that would be highly valued in conventional practice which celebrates the bold, dominant, permanent and visible, rather than some understated spatial expressions which are more temporal in nature. The decision **not to build** can still be considered an architectural decision. This simple acknowledgement makes a massive difference! It allows us to elevate many African rituals and study them as spatial and architectural forms of expression. The *‘halaqat al zikr’* is one such example. This is an Arabic phrase: *‘halaqa’* translates into ‘circle’ (of people or worshippers) and *‘zikr’* into ‘remembrance’ (of Allah or the prophet).

Whether people build massive monuments or building simply is linked to resources, but it is also linked to belief systems and cultural norms. Building dominant structures or understated structures also relates to forms of social understanding. Buildings that stand out as isolated objects are a different form of expression from buildings that merge with the surroundings and are not easily identifiable. All of these are not neutral configurations. These contain meaning and convey socially understood messages.

‘Meaning’ in the built environment comprises two facets. Firstly, it implies the shared repertoire of significance, importance or quality attributed to an artefact. The common understanding of the symbolism of artifacts creates the cultural identity of a community. In semiotic terms, this is an interpretative community, sharing the same codes. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge the meanings read by the interpreter or researcher, as these may not necessarily coincide with those of the community under study. Meanings read by the authors no doubt reflect the authors’ cultural frameworks and experience. Meaning is a matter of social definition. Interpretation or ‘meaning-making’ includes subjective processes as a part of the academic enquiry (Osman, 2004: 3).

Architecture and the concept of community

The notion of community is considered by the authors as a key element in architectural configurations, in vernacular and informal settings, and architecture, in these contexts is considered as being indistinguishable from urban design. Thus the ‘architectural scale’ and

the 'settlement/urban scale' are one and the same in the sense that vernacular settings and informal settings are almost always about the 'collective' and rarely about the 'individual' – be that in terms of formal expression or in terms of decision making structures. In other words, the individual building cannot exist or be understood outside of its urban and neighbourhood context. Sometimes the community connections are not so evident visually or spatially. In vernacular settings, the morphology of villages/towns sometimes dissolves the distinction between one family home and the other. This is very evident in “medina” settings. (See Figure 1).

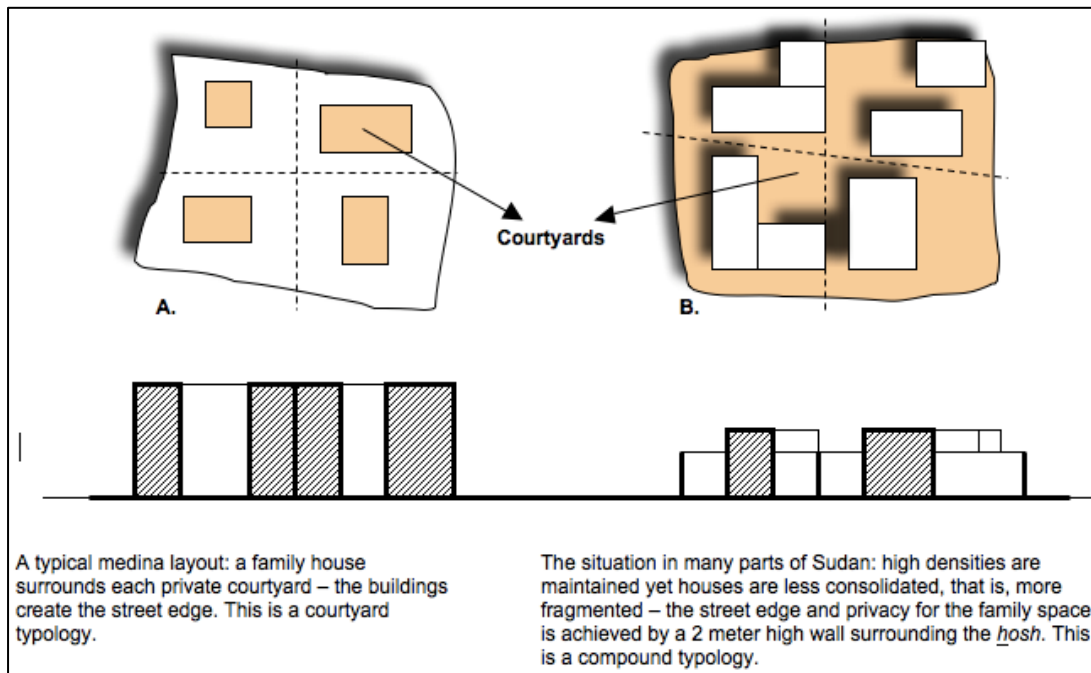


Figure 1: Comparison between the morphology of Sudanese towns and villages and that of other Muslim cities. (Osman 2004)

A community is defined as the daily network of face-to-face interaction in a settlement setting. These social networks constitute a spatial and built context of a neighbourhood. A community could be described as a form of 'corporate unit' (Kenyon 1991, p. 21). In some parts of northern Sudan, networks of interaction between people are based on their *fareeq*. This concept is not easy to translate spatially as members of a *fareeq* do not necessarily live directly next to each other. The demarcation of the *fareeq* is strong in peoples' consciousness and is reflected in their patterns of interaction, but it is not necessarily apparent in the settlement layout. People from different *fareeqs* may be immediate neighbours. A *fareeq* will also have ties with other *fareeqs*. This interaction implies frequent visits and assistance in the form of finances, food and lending a helping hand in ceremonial occasions. *Fareeq* is an Arabic term describing a corporate unit of nomadic groups, two to four settlements headed by a *shaykh* (Kenyon 1991, p. 21). The term *shaykh* is also used to denote a leader and not necessarily a religious man. *Fareeq* people derive their identity from the group corporate identity "a powerful impact on the everyday lives of its members and can exert considerable pressure on people to conform to social norms." (Ferraro 1998, p. 249 and Osman 2004, p. 136) (See Figure 2).

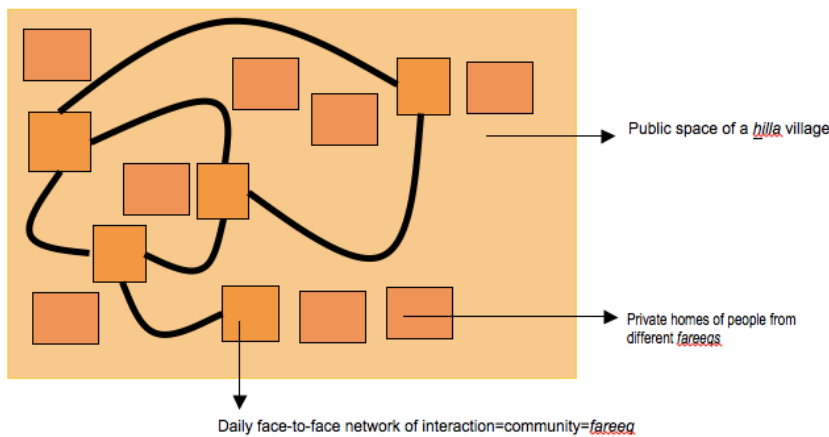


Figure 2: The *fareeg* in northern Sudan. (Osman 2004)

To better understand the role of the built environment professional in dealing with such complexity, some of the concepts related to community and multiple voices and decision makers, agents of control, and the cultural languages in the built environment are further unpacked in the following sections.

Levels and agents of control and the collective ‘language’ of the built environment

Control is exercised by groups or individuals in any cultural setting – across a range of levels from the very personal level (clothes, garment can be extended to include body, utensil and includes food systems) to the more communal levels (house, family accommodation and furniture – which can also extend to partitioning systems – indicating a small collective form of decision-making in the built environment. The highest levels of decision making in the built environment are therefore those of the settlement or neighbourhood in a rural or urban context and in the city. Figure 3 attempts to group these concepts together to showcase how this higher level, meaning the collective and communal decision-making that contributes to a shared language and understanding that allows people to collectively inhabit the same spaces. In other words, space and built artifacts act as mediators between individuals and their needs/aspirations in relation to the needs/aspirations of the collective, group or community.

Language/Code	System Parts of speech nouns, verbs	Syntagm Sentence
Clothes/Garment System	Set of pieces that cannot be worn together, variation corresponds to a change in meaning	Juxtaposition in the same type of dress of different elements
Food System	Set of foodstuffs	Sequence of dishes chosen
House/Family Accommodation System	Set of stylistic variations of the same layout/form/materials – selection is based on meaning	Juxtaposition of different layouts/form/materials in the same contexts
Furniture System	Stylistic varieties of a single piece	Juxtaposition of different pieces in the same place
Architecture System	Variations in style of a single element of a building	Sequence of the details at the level of the whole building
Settlement Village/Town Rural/Urban System	Variations in settlement layout and relation of buildings to each other and to streets and open spaces	Sequence of the buildings at the level of the whole settlement

Figure 3: The built environment based on the elements of semiology, developed by Roland Barthes (1915-1980), portrayed by Hale (2000, p. 140) and Leach (1974, p. 49) and adapted by Osman (2004).

Habraken explains that certain environments are sustained through the order achieved by various actors (Habraken, 2000: 29). He elaborates that a:

...built environment may be described solely in terms of live configurations operating on different levels. In doing so, we describe it as dynamic form controlled by people; fully taking into account that built environment is the product of people acting (Habraken 1998, p. 28).

These actors:

...communicate, negotiate, bargain and cooperate. Such direct interactions are necessary for the built environment to remain in stasis, and they have their own conventions. Although agents may contest portions of a built environment, it exists to be shared as a whole. Hence, reaching formal consensus is an important aspect of the environmental game (Habraken 1998, p. 29).

Habraken refers to configurations under the unified control of a single agent as 'live configurations'. "Thus defined, a live configuration 'behaves' like a single self-organizing entity" (Habraken 1998, p. 18). The single agent is the community as an entity. Both the 'body/garment/utensil' and 'partitioning' are indicated as 'live configurations': they are under the control of a single agent, in this case the community. 'Utensil' is included as being that which is moveable; 'food' and 'furniture' are seen to be more under the control of a single agent rather than the community, even though social norms may place pressure to conform to some food types related to certain occasions. Kent explains the issue of control as follows:

...low social complexity is a situation usually regarded in anthropological terms as synonymous with organisation based on principles of kin-relationship, genealogy, and shared [beliefs in] supernatural force rather than hierarchical stratification and separated central power. Individual members of such societies adhere to conceptual realities that emanate from implicit acceptance of group-exclusive supernatural and relationship unity, a relatively holistic world view that stresses communal rather than individual identity. On the domestic level this conceptual structure applies to the basic communal group and its living space, tending to downplay architectural segmentation of each domestic activity or activity sets (Kent 1990, p. 167).

In many cases, individual houses within a neighbourhood form a continuum and speak a similar visual language (subtle variations on typology), yet they are under the control of separate agents. This configuration cannot be seen as 'live'. Yet, the internal layout of the houses can be considered a live configuration: it is individual agencies as an expression of principles that are governed by the social norms of the community as a whole. Control does not always imply ownership. The house belongs to one owner, but there are two live configurations at work in determining the characteristics of this house: the one exercised by the owner and the other exercised by the community in the form of social norms.

These levels of control can be learnt through observation, but the underlying forces are not always evident. A cluster of houses may be wrongly seen as a unit. In reality, it is the whole neighbourhood that is the lowest denominator. Yet, these forces are invisible and can only be detected through understanding the socio-economic patterns, religious and social ritual and peoples' cultural attitudes.

“...Uniformity results from removing personal initiative from the creation of the artifact.” (Habraken 1998, p. 272). There is a limited variety within a given typology. While the individual house is not easily identified in a vernacular setting, levels of control do remain distinct. To remain stable, an environment avoids horizontal relationships between live configurations (Habraken 1998, p. 34). Within a single neighbourhood, individual houses are under the control of different agents: “Territory and its markers subdivide space, allowing similar configurations to coexist on the same level” (Habraken 1998, p. 34). Homogeneity could lead one to believe that the ‘higher level configurations’ at work, dominate ‘lower level configurations’, as intangible and unseen forces.

The meaning of artifacts in the built environment and the interconnectedness of things – an eco-systemic analytical approach to the concept of ‘community’

In this type of analysis, artifacts are approached in the sense that no ‘thing’ stands alone, but rather pertains to a whole setting of importance in its interpretation. The world is a collection of inter-dependent entities. Things are what they are by virtue of their relationship to each other. After all, Heidegger does equate ‘thinking’ with ‘dwelling’ (Cooper 1996, p. 92). Heidegger wrote: we build because we are dwellers (Krell 1977, p. 326). Therefore, artifacts/things, including buildings, making our existence/thinking evident.

The isolation and study of artifacts allows the researcher to borrow from a wide variety of sources and different schools of thought. This is an attempt to: “...reconcile the subjective self with an objective world” (Krell 1977, p. 259). Both Husserl and Descartes would examine an object by detaching it from its context and examining its essence. An object’s essential attributes are thus identified through ‘phenomenological reduction’ (Hale 2000, p. 96 and Urmson 1960, p. 217) bearing in mind that “...the organisation of the environment is a mental fact before it is a physical one...” (Rapoport 1977, p. 15).

Heidegger’s environmental phenomenology introduces natural elements and philosophy to describe places, an approach that was elaborated and applied by Norberg-Schulz (1980). Attention to the character of dwellings and how they are made is important in achieving a phenomenology of place. Phenomenological approaches bring the idea of existence, the notion of doubt/uncertainty, as well as faith in the correctness of choice and individual experience, to architecture. This approach is employed in this study by relating visible aspects of built culture to the particular location and people’s understanding of place: “The ‘whatness’ of an object can be learned through the ‘whyness’ of it... knowledge about an object is based on understanding or recognising the causes of that object” (Turan 1990, p. 9). Turan also explains how understanding the artifact through material, the form into which material enters and its use as insufficient because it only applies to the appearance of an object. However, there are many codes that make up a cultural context, as is demonstrated by Figure 4 below:

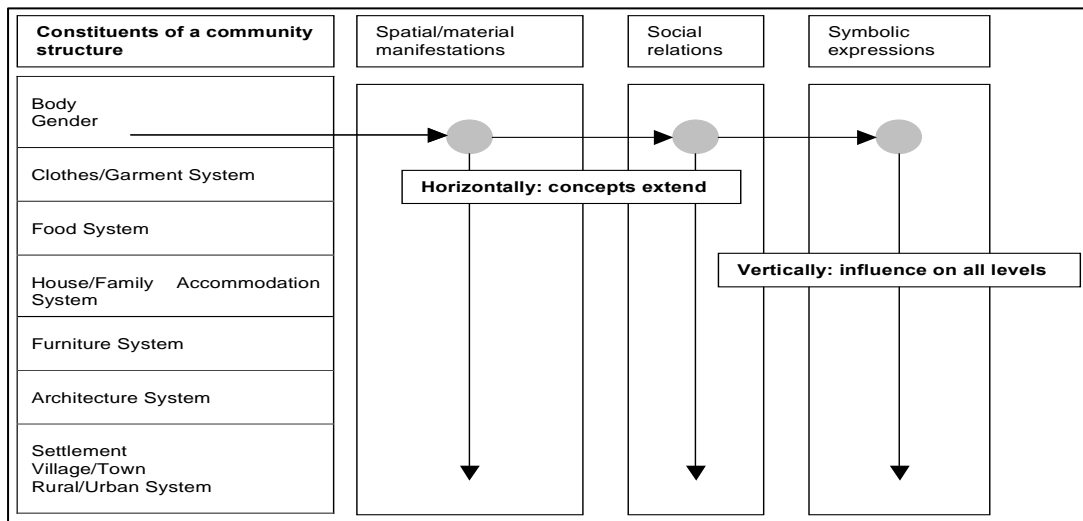


Figure 4: Codes that make up a cultural context, a framework based on Vagenes (1998, p. 124) and developed by Osman (2004)

According to Kent (1990, pp. 44-45), form, organisation and use of space are determined by naturally fixed, flexible and culturally fixed factors. This might be a limiting construct if one considers that climate and topography are considered naturally fixed elements. It is acknowledged by Kent that each factor modifies the effects of the others. In this case it is seen that none of the factors are really fixed. The differences between them would then be the rate at which they change (see Figure 5).

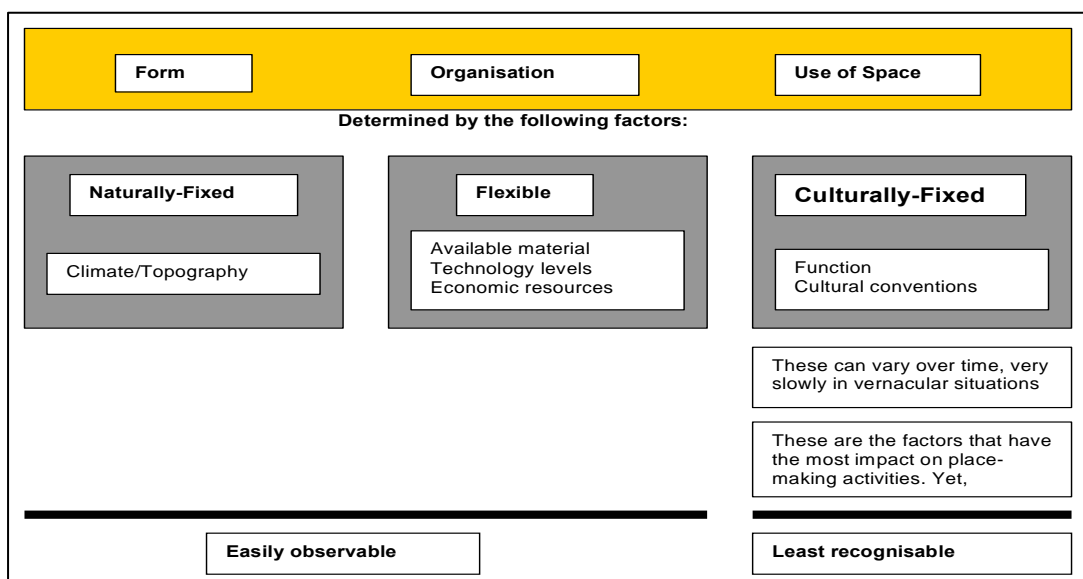


Figure 5: Determinants of form, organisation and use of space – adapted by Osman (2004) from Kent (1990)

The above text and diagrams aim to contribute towards the development of a framework to understand the built environment with a unique and particular focus. It is aimed towards developing a deeper appreciation for the role of collective decision-making in the built environment. It is important to remember that text and diagrams cannot replace the complexity of reality. It rather allows for a window onto reality by deconstruction and then synthesis into useable theoretical models. This framework can be used to better articulate a relationship between the traditional and the informal, previously excluded from institutional

architecture, and it therefore offers great opportunities for understanding and writing about complexity in the built environment.

The traditional and the informal

Many parallels can be drawn between the traditional and informal. In Rapoport's writings on vernacular architecture, he points out that "...evidence comes from many disciplines... it also makes available new approaches and new methods that "come with" these disciplines" (1990, p. 43). In earlier writings he also explains how the study of vernacular architecture may generate new fields of study "...at the intersection of two or more previously unrelated disciplines" (Rapoport 1982, p. 10). He believes that the boundaries defining disciplines are sometimes arbitrary (Rapoport 1977, p. 4).

Rapoport's main premise is that it is not possible to use a single characteristic to distinguish among entities as complex as built environments and that "...multiple characteristics become more useful the less clear-cut the case" (Rapoport 1990, p. 71, 1999, p. 60). As in traditional contexts, people today continue to act on, and influence their immediate environment, this being especially evident in situations where people have difficulty to access formal city structures and markets. These initiatives are perceived negatively and labeled as illegal and informal. However, they create an energy that should be celebrated and managed in efficient ways through innovative delivery, finance and technical systems – rather than being dismissed, eradicated or 'formalised'.

The traditional and the informal force us to ask questions previously excluded from institutional architectural debates. Learning from these contexts is more than imitating forms or spatial layouts; it is learning the process of negotiation and complex decision making as well as the mechanisms employed in the management of diverse and, sometimes, conflicting needs. This process implies the necessity to efficiently address issues of the delivery of professional service as well as managing the social systems that impact on these – this approach calls for a slower process that incorporates time as a crucial aspect to the development process. Indeed these processes may be described as Open Building, as 4-dimensional design or as time-based design – this is to mention a few theoretical schools that could greatly assist in the further development of this way of thought and its relevant applications in education and practice.

Rethinking practice...

Architecture oscillates between being defined as a science, as art production, as technology, as a professional service, as a community service. It is a profession that is constantly re-discovering itself, re-defining itself and re-establishing new roles for itself. As our ideas on architecture change, so do our expectations with regards to whom the profession engages with and how it provides a service to its clients – embracing sectors of society who have traditionally been excluded. Heightened social responsibility, environmental awareness and debates around ethical practice are the prerogatives that are leading the profession in directions relatively unexplored, as is the need to discover new markets and a renewed sense of relevance.

As we re-think practice, we are also considering the knowledge, previously unrecognised and untapped, to which we now have access. This is a challenge and an opportunity. We are in need of tools with which to gather information, represent it, interpret it and use it to develop frameworks of practice.

In this investigation, the boundaries between the disciplines tend to dissolve as it is discovered that to understand the built environment, one needs to build up an understanding of the culture, religion and social set up of a community as well as the geography and history of the region in question. In traditional contexts the separation of art from daily life, or a building from social interaction patterns is not possible. An interdisciplinary interpretation allows for deeper understanding of how people interact with the environment and how they shape their spaces at the micro and macro levels (Osman 2004, p. 6).

As an example, psychological comfort relates strongly to values and beliefs of a community. These concepts are transposed onto any physical context to make it more suited to the cultural identity of a people. This does not always have to be in the form of space-manipulation, but can be achieved by dress form, positioning of the body within the space and the movement of the body in space. Through observation, it becomes apparent that people from different cultures use the same space in different ways and that the movement patterns are varied (Osman 2004, p. 89).

How can these aspects be brought to the fore in architectural education?

...towards a decolonised education

This paper has investigated the idea of community, multiple voices and multiple decision makers in the practice of architecture. This is suggested as one way with which to decolonise architectural education. It is explained that this is at odds with institutional architecture, assuming that institutional architecture, and the institutes that deliver it (those that teach future architects) and the institutes that regulate its practice and regulate educational institutes, remain colonised.

Some individual explorations are already underway with regards to the creation of alternative methods of research and teaching in classrooms and studios. The nature of our profession means that some of these approaches are met with great skepticism and resistance. This discourages many in continuing with these explorations.

Architecture is not an easy field to study, teach or practice. There are many forms of exclusion that we have to contend with in a highly elitist profession. The exclusion is evident in attempts to silence difference; dismiss as nonprofessional alternative forms of design, thinking or practice and declaring other voices and forms of expression as invalid. This happens in both overt and subtle ways. Sometimes we carry out that censorship ourselves through self-doubt, lack of confidence and years of systematic conditioning.

The decolonisation debate has brought legitimacy to these explorations. This is cause for celebration. We now need to do the work that this process demands.

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