Decolonizing architectural pedagogies

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DECOLONIZATION is defined as the 'disappearance of empire as a political form, and the end of racial hierarchy as a widely accepted political ideology and structuring principle of world order.'[1] However, notes Ramón Grosfoguel, the elimination of colonial administration did not lead to decolonization. In fact, we 'continue to live under the same "colonial power matrix",' which did not 'evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past 50 years,' and we continue to experience its legacy, in the form of patriarchal structures of knowledge, environmental degradation, and climate change.[2]

Thinking through Grosfoguel's writing, Ansari et al note how Eurocentric knowledge continues to dominate the curricula of westernized universities, informing the 'relationship between the increasing neoliberalization of the university as an institution, as well as the formation of students who are more concerned with the needs and desires of employment markets rather than with critical thinking.' Such universities produce 'Westernised elites in the Global South (or non-West) that act not only as active promoters but also as active gatekeepers of Eurocentric and colonial knowledges.'[3]

Decolonizing architectural pedagogies will involve questioning where knowledge production should be situated, and seeking alternative sites of knowledge production, outside the academy; generation of 'non-hegemonic knowledge;' disrupting the neutrality of western knowledge, and deconstructing terms that are sustained by the institution; and collective research and co-authorship of knowledge.[4] While decolonization of knowledge must begin with 'epistemological critique of feminist and subalternized racial/ethnic intellectuals', the question of one's position as a 'point of departure' is a significant one, as it acknowledges 'how one has come to know the world, and in turn, what knowledge one has gained from one's own (embodied) experiences of passing through the world and how these are never neutral or universal.'[5] To this end, it would be

1. Jan C Jansen, Jurgen Osterhammel and Jeremiah Riemer, *Decolonization: A Short History*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2019, p. 1.

2. Ramón Grosfoguel, 'The Epistemic Decolonial Turn', *Cultural Studies* 21(2-3), 2007, p. 219.

3. Ahmed Ansari, Matthew Kiem, de O. Martins and Pedro J.S. Vieira de Oliveira, 'Three Perspectives on Decolonising Design Education', *Parse* 8, 2018, https://parsejournal.com/article/three-perspectives-on-decolonising-design-education/.

4. See Harriet Harriss and John Harris, Session Call for Decolonizing Architectural Pedagogies, Schools of Thought: Rethinking Architectural Pedagogy 2020 Conference, https://architecture.ou.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Decolonising-Architectural-Pedagogies-1.pdf; Pelin Tan, 'Decolonizing Architectural Education: Towards an Affective Pedagogy', in Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal (eds.), *The Social (Re)production of Architecture: Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice*. Routledge, London, 2017, p. 78; Alessandro Petti and Marie-Louise Richards, 'What Does it Mean to Decolonize?' Decolonizing Architecture Advanced Studies, 2017, https://www.daas.academy/about/.

5. Ramón Grosfoguel, 'The Epistemic De-

useful for me to think of where I am coming from, to identify where I am going.

My identity – as a woman of colour; from the third world, the Global South, and Asia; an Indian-born Australian transnational feminist academic practitioner in architecture, based in India and Australia through work, travel and citizenship, with work experience in China, and close friends across Australia and Asia – as yet remains an emergent one. Growing up in a Bengali Brahmin middle class family in Delhi, as a bilingual heterosexual feminist girl going to a public school in Delhi, gaining my architecture degree in an '*avant garde*' architectural college professing to the profession and becoming aware of the enduring influence of the colonial history of architectural education in India (though my dissertation), and travelling to Australia in the late '90s when India was yet to emerge as an important regional presence in Asia and overseas, and being exposed even more to contemporary western/white architectural discourse and scholarship, contributed to as well as complicated my (divided) epistemological affinities.

Working in a space of displaced identity, rebelling against the institutionally sanctioned 'rightful place' as a scholar of Asian/Indian studies in architecture, forgetting the deeply internalized racism of the three hundred years of colonization of India, and inheriting new racisms of Australia, I worked as an academic of colour, with Australian students from diverse backgrounds, recognizing my complicity in 'representing' white academia and upholding ideas of architectural excellence based on

colonial Turn, *Cultural Studies* 21(2-3), 2007, p. 212; Petti and Richards 2017.

very specific constructions of knowledge. While working with students in China, and then India, served to dismantle hierarchies of academic excellence in my mind, it also revealed as well as reminded me of the deep fissures within Indian (and Chinese) pedagogies in architecture.

My transnational trajectories in architectural academia filled me with a great sense of unease and placelessness, which always seemed to suggest, 'What Right do you Have' (to decolonize architectural pedagogies)? So, acknowledging as well as honouring my 'lack' of expertise and authority, but claiming a voice, a space in these conversations, I propose a few thoughts. There are many academics and practitioners who have 'fathered' discourses on rethinking architectural education in India (Neelkanth Chhaya, Prem Chandavarkar, Manoj Mathur and others) and decolonizing pedagogies (Jaimini Mehta). However, as colonial pedagogies always seek to sustain extractive methods of accessing resources; preserve status quo with respect to asymmetries in forms of access, power, and privilege; and maintain the hegemony of institutions, it is now time to transgress the limits of these discourses.

Keeping in mind the unique colonial legacies within Indian architectural education, and negotiating what Peilin Tan terms as the 'territorial' and the 'trans-local', I propose the following call to action, to decolonize architectural pedagogies in India (of which I shall detail out the first three, and the most urgent).
1. Feminist Paths to Decolonization: Commit to feminist critique, utopias, and leadership in architecture, education, practice, research, and criticism.
2. Climate Change, Environmental Degradation and Ethical Practice:

Commit to institutional leadership and responsibility in researching, disseminating, and above all, mitigating effects of climate change.
3. Liberatory, Critical, Radical Thinking: Commit to challenging conservative values that have become ossified and are defended in the name of tradition and culture; acknowledge the oppression and violence these values perpetuate.
4. Imagine new Pasts, New Futures: Commit to being discerning, critical of unquestioned pasts and traditions that might not lead to inclusive futures; build new futures, collectively, without recourse to nostalgia about a lost past; and cultivate and welcome regional solidarities and affinities in architectural cultures.
5. Challenge the Canon, Generate New Knowledge: Commit to stepping out of the shadows of colonial technocracy, and questioning the pragmatism of applied research; generate new ('fundamental') collective and shared research in architectural histories, and engage in robust cross pollination with theory, humanities, and cultural studies; be critical to the singular narrative of 'useful knowledge' governing the current knowledge economy in India.
6. Dismantle Architectural Representational Histories: Commit to challenging colonial ways of seeing, possessing, managing; focus on oral histories, palpable histories over cartographic documentary processes; emphasize 'thickening' of drawings over disembodied abstractions; analyse the validity of presentation drawings and models, and explore hybrid representational processes that defy the gaze.

One of the most urgent needs is to recognize the role of gender and feminist thought in architectural education, practice, research, and

criticism, and this has nothing to do with the rather banal argument that more than half the students enrolled in any architectural programme in country are women. It has to do with the fact that more than ever Indian communities and cities need spaces that are diverse, inclusive, safe, empowering, and pleasurable, and the basis of this thinking is feminist. Architectural educators in India 'give the nod' to gender equality, but not to feminist thought, which is understandably threatening to the prevailing hegemonies sanctioned through gender, caste, and class. Feminism is something to dabble in, and not take seriously, in architectural education in India. Notwithstanding the rare student project that takes gender, and/or feminism as its core concern, this is not something that is pursued seriously at large, as a systemic, integrated, and curricular approach.

A related path is to appreciate that we need feminist forms of academic leadership in architectural institutions in India. It is for this reason that Kush Patel, Madhavi Desai and I organized the Gender and Academic Leadership in Architecture in India in 2020, which looked critically at the 'engagement of women and persons of minoritized genders and sexualities in the construction of the academy, architectural knowledge, professional identity, and academic practice,' and sought out 'alternatives to patriarchal conventions of leadership.'[6] We note that while a number of institutions are fulfilling the corporate mandate of increasing women's representation and visibility at all levels of academic governance (whilst not always

6. Madhavi Desai, Anuradha Chatterjee, and Kush Patel, 'Symposium Abstract', in Kush Patel and Soumini Raja (eds.), *Research Symposium Proceedings: Gender and Academic Leadership in Architecture in India*. Avani Institute of Design, Calicut, 2021, p. 199.

acknowledging non-binary genders, trans, and queer persons), work cultures have a long way to go in terms of providing intellectually and emotionally inclusive spaces to work, network, and grow.

It is alarming to note that when academics and industry practitioners in architecture in India talk about the gap between the academia and industry (and they talk about this a lot), they are still really only referring to the gap in knowledge and skills in a graduate with respect to the market/industry, without acknowledging their own lack of responsible thought and action with respect to the impact of India's built environment on climate change, despite the latest IPCC report and the projected impacts on India. In India, sustainability is seen as the domain of a few experts. While concerns about the environment, biodiversity, and natural resources are considered by select architects and landscape architects, urban designers and planners remain silent and/or uncritical of development patterns that continue to contribute to urban sprawls and the degradation of rural habitats.

In architectural curricula, sustainability is taught intermittently, and incorporation of sustainability in graduation projects remains an elective choice. Students are rarely encouraged to undertake retrofit and/or adaptive reuse projects in college, and they are not sufficiently sensitized towards the environmental impacts of large, new build commercial projects, especially in ecologically sensitive zones.

While the Centre for Science and Environment has released its significant publication, *State of India's Environment 2021*, how many architects, educators, and

students will ever read this? Most professionals in the built environment lack what David Orr calls 'ecological literacy', the understanding that 'all education is environmental education.' These are not problems that plague just Indian institutions, but they have been observed in many higher education institutions across the world. While Santiago Porras Álvarez et al note the 'isolated character of the sustainability modules which do not find their way into the design studio process', Basak Gucteyer talks about the 'lack of interest, awareness, compatibility in knowledge, and persistence on defining an ultimate method of teaching sustainability.'[7]

The AIA Committee on the Environment Report (2006) is appropriately critical of the 'typical curriculum', which sees 'environmental courses as a necessary requirement, [but] few if any treat sustainability as fundamental to the practice of design.'[8] Nevertheless, it is heartening to see a number of countries commit to higher education climate leadership role more recently – a commitment that should be made by Indian architecture schools as well.

As Lesley Lokko argues, 'architecture has had such a deep and embedded relationship with spatial practices – colonization, settlement,

7. Santiago Porras Aìlvarez, Kyungsun Lee, Jiyoung Park and Sun-Young Rieh, 'A Comparative Study on Sustainability in Architectural Education in Asia – With a Focus on Professional Degree Curricula', *Sustainability* 8(3), 2016, p. 3; Basak Gucyeter, 'The Place of Sustainability in Architectural Education: Discussion and Suggestions,' Athens Journal of Architecture 2 (3), 2016, p. 242.

8. The AIA Committee on the Environment, *Ecology and Design: Ecological Literacy in Architecture Education 2006 Report and Proposal*. AIA, 2006, p. 22.

dispossession. If you don't teach students to question it, you're ignoring a huge part of what the profession does.'[9] However, in India, where the post-colonial condition is one of persisting 'internalized oppression' of dominant and subordinate groups, impacted and shaped by the experience of colonial subordination, this bears out as the absence of 'liberatory consciousness' and widespread apathy towards the painful realities of disenfranchised communities.[10] It is for this reason that we must engage even more wilfully with debates on social justice. However, does architectural education serve this purpose, of education?

In a world more dominated than ever by the neoliberalist imperative of education as the means to fit into industry norms and accumulate wealth, are we teaching our students to manage these expectations, and contribute to their discipline? I have already asked some of these questions in my 2019 essay 'Embracing the Crisis' in *ArchitectureLive*, where I argued that our institutions 'do not prepare students to become future learners – they create docile bodies. The point of education is not obedience but the ability to think not just critically but more importantly, independently. So, the academy must not just educate, but also teach students how to question education.' New pedagogies must engage with the difficult and uncomfortable questions that are already being asked by critics and activists at large, with respect to religious, caste hierarchies; heteronormativity; and patriarchal foundations of family, and patriarchal values within other institutional settings.

In the above-mentioned essay, I also asked: 'If the objective of one's career as an architect is more than earning money, how are we supporting graduates? What in our pedagogic innovation is preparing students to take responsibility for their education, and their life?... How are we preparing students to determine their own self-determined trajectory through life? Are we able to prepare our female students to stand up to familial pressures in absence of societal support of their work?...Are we able to prepare our male students to reject familial pressures of being the bread winner (cash cow) for their own family and extended family, get a green card, get permanent residency? If we do not prepare students to probe societal frameworks then what good is this discussion on pedagogy, and how sustainable and impactful will innovations in architectural education be? In closing, can we agree that architectural education must be concerned with much more than architecture, or it cannot be truly transformative.'[11]

Decolonizing architectural pedagogies is a project that must be co-situated within the space of students, not just the educators. It is a difficult, shared, and inter-generational project – one that will require a combination of solidarity and conviction of diverse communities (with competing, and even conflict needs and desires) to even make a start.

9. Danielle Mileo, 'Lesley Lokko: Decolonising Architecture', *Assemble Papers*, 2019, https://assemblepapers.com.au/2019/09/04/lesley-lokko-decolonising-architecture.

10. Teeomm K. Williams, Understanding Internalized Oppression: A Theoretical Conceptualization of Internalized Subordination, Open Access Dissertations, 2012, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/open_access_dissertations/627.

11. Anuradha Chatterjee, 'Embracing Crisis in Architecture: Between Discipline, Profession, Academy, and Industry,' *ArchitectureLive*, October 2019, https://architecturelive.in/embracing-crisis-in-architecture-anuradha-chatterjee/.