

Modern Fetishes, Southern Thoughts

Fetiches Modernos y Teorías del Sur

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Artículo de Reflexión

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Abstract

This article problematizes the uncritical fascination with modern architecture, approached here through the notion of the fetish. Uncritical fascination with modern architecture has caused many architects to disengage from the socio-political realities of Colombia in order to design buildings that look like twentieth-century European precedents. Such an endogamous approach forecloses the possibility for architectural innovation, keeping architects in a vicious circle of repetition. The concept of coloniality is introduced as a vehicle to overcome the limitations of the modernist project, and the reproduction of colonising principles that give priority to European discourses and ideas. Finally, the article further discusses the concept of coloniality through recent debates on African cities and the emergence of 'postcolonial urban theory'. The aim is to demonstrate that architectural scholarship in Colombia would benefit greatly from an engagement with southern theory, as well as from a greater emphasis on the contemporary urban condition, and the complex history that has led us to where we are currently.

Key words: Modern architecture; Eurocentrism; Coloniality; Decolonization; Postcolonial urban theory

Resumen

Este artículo cuestiona la fascinación con la arquitectura moderna que ha existido en Colombia desde principios del siglo XX. La arquitectura moderna, descrita aquí a través de concepto de 'fetiché', se asume como un discurso euro-céntrico que requiere un riguroso cuestionamiento crítico desde la academia con el fin de superar las limitaciones que impiden desarrollos propios e innovaciones más a tono con las realidades socio-culturales de nuestro país, con ello superando las superficialidades formales y ambientales derivadas de un discurso académico primordialmente español muy reducido y colonizante. Se introduce el concepto de colonialidad, extraído del trabajo académico de varios pensadores latinoamericanos, con el fin de iniciar una revisión rigurosa de los discursos que sostienen la fijación con el movimiento moderno en Colombia. Posteriormente se crean conexiones teóricas con discursos urbanos desarrollados en África que permiten una aproximación a la situación de nuestras ciudades a través de un filtro diferente al europeo, y mucho más cercano a la realidad de la ciudad colombiana.

Palabras clave: Arquitectura moderna; Eurocentrismo; Colonialidad; Descolonización; Teoría urbana postcolonial

In September 2018, the School of Architecture at Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano organized an event entitled *Arquitectura y Educación*. The speakers were all male, white-mestizo, and educated at the three most prominent schools of architecture in the capital of Colombia: Universidad de Los Andes, Universidad Javeriana, and Universidad Nacional. Although neither the organizers, nor anyone in the audience seemed to have noticed the homogeneity of the panel, this apparently insignificant detail is very relevant, considering that this issue of *Dearq* examines Colombian architecture from the outside. From outside, it is clear that Colombian architecture remains dominated by white-mestizo, middle-class men who have the social and cultural capital, as well as the economic capacity, to run a practice. Since its creation in 1962, no Afro-descendant or indigenous architect has ever won the Colombian National Award for Architecture, and only two women have received it: Eugenia Mantilla de Cardoso, in 1973, for the Auditorio León Greiff, and Silvia Arango in 1992, for her book, *Historia de la Arquitectura en Colombia*. Indeed, only one woman has received the national award for a "Proyecto Arquitectónico", confirming the assumption that women are better placed in academia than in practice. Ana Elvira Velez, from Medellín, won the Biennial Award in 2006, a year when the national award was not held.

Moreover, important themes such as race, class and gender have certainly not been a central theme in debates about architecture in Colombia, a profession that can be safely described as elitist. Elitism in the profession relates not so much to the fact that architects themselves belong to a socio-economic elite, but rather to the exclusions caused by the narrow representation of Colombia's socio-cultural, racial and gender diversity in architectural practice. Admittedly, a single academic event does not provide sufficient evidence to judge the condition of an entire profession. Yet, there is ample evidence to

demonstrate how narrowly represented architecture is in Colombia — in both theory and practice — as well as the barriers that such limited representation cause for understanding the realities of Colombian history and the condition of its society today.

In a country whose constitution recognizes and vows to protect its ethnic and cultural diversity, indeed a country where 48.7% of the population are women, the lack of recognition of these groups — ethnic minorities and women —, as well as their absence from discussions about the country's architecture is immensely revealing: It demonstrates the existence of hierarchical systems that underpin the exclusion of certain social groups. In this article, I will argue strongly that these hierarchical systems are based on colonial principles that remain dominant and, ultimately, prevent architects from finding adequate solutions to the most pressing issues in architecture today.

Thus, this article starts by problematizing the uncritical fascination with modern architecture, the fetish, a phenomenon that has caused many architects to disengage from the socio-political realities of the country in order to design buildings that look like twentieth-century European precedents. Such an endogamous approach forecloses the possibility for architectural innovation, keeping architects in a vicious circle of repetition: reproducing. In the second section, I will then introduce the concept of *coloniality* as a vehicle to discuss how Colombian architectural production has been historicized and is currently theorized. Finally, I will further discuss the concept of coloniality addressing recent debates on African cities and the development of "postcolonial urban theory". The aim is to demonstrate that architectural scholarship in Colombia would benefit greatly from an engagement with southern theory, as well as from a greater emphasis on the contemporary urban condition, and the complex history that has led us to where we are currently.

A Fascination with Modern Architecture: The Fetish

At the event *Arquitectura y Educación*, held at the Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, architect Leonardo Alvarez presented his award-winning project for the School of Nursing at Universidad Nacional de Colombia. The building is an elegant, well-accomplished, concrete structure that sits on a difficult site opposite the School of Law, and adjacent to the Schools of Medicine and Veterinary Science. It generates an interesting landscape at various levels, leading towards the audacious structure of large cantilevers and seemingly tilted floor plates partially elevated on pilotis. The question that ensued was obvious: What does its merit consist of? The architect presented the building alluding to the use of references taken from Swiss architect Le Corbusier, and from the quintessential Colombian architect, Rogelio Salmona. In Alvarez's own words, he appropriated the facades from the Swiss and the staircases from the Colombian. Additionally, the architect commented on the way his building responds to local environmental conditions, such as the variability of natural light in Bogotá, and the outstanding views of the Savannah that can be seen from the roof terrace — both key themes in modern architecture. It appears that, for Alvarez, the merit of his building lies on the fact that he can connect his own building with a tradition of architectural modernism, both internationally and in his own country. In his presentation, there was no mention of the people: the students who will use the building, their experience of architecture, of education, or indeed no discussion of larger questions about changing conditions of education in an era of rapidly evolving pedagogical technologies. The architect himself explained that he received the commission and set out to design a building responding solely to two criteria: the given brief, and a set of pre-conceived formal characteristics.

The other two architects who presented that evening took a different approach. No doubt both are influenced by modern architectural discourse; no doubt architectural form is important for them; and no doubt both aspire to receiving national and international recognition. However, they articulated the design of their buildings as a process that *also* develops in connection with the people who will eventually use them. Indeed, one of them organized workshops with children in order to generate key elements of the architectural form and to determine the spatiality of the classroom. For Daniel Bonilla and Ricardo La Rotta, educational briefs require

careful investigation because pedagogical theories, teaching methods and technologies are changing rapidly. For these architects, designing an educational facility implies analysing the processes by which students of different ages learn. As a result, it is also necessary to explore the changing relationship between teachers and students, which in turn leads to questioning concepts such as classroom, workshop, or laboratory.

This kind of critical approach to architectural design does not prevent formal exploration. The buildings produced by these three architects share multiple characteristics and are all adventurous and sophisticated in multiple and different ways — I am certainly not arguing that any of these architects is better than the other two. The point is that a possibility exists for locating architectural merit in the relation between buildings and people rather than between buildings and buildings, or between architects and architects. While the former approach would enable architects to address directly specific aspects of Colombian society attempting to find adequate solutions, the endogamy of the latter approach has the opposite effect: It isolates architects from the complex realities of our society, focusing only on the form of buildings.

Let us explore Colombian architectural discourse in the 1980s and 1990s in order to understand the source of this fascination with modern architecture and its genealogy. Colombian architects and historians in those two decades were busy trying to develop arguments to validate their practices so they could insert themselves in the history of modern architecture, assumed as a singular, univocal narrative. In so doing, these architects developed what can now be seen as naïve scholarly strategies to construct a coherent account demonstrating their accomplishment doing something the Europeans had created: modern architecture. However, they failed to notice — and still have not — the way in which the Europeans had already inscribed the architectures we produced into their own history, and, in their account, Latin American architectures were seen as transgressions of an original. In other words, the Europeans found failure precisely where Colombian architects and historians found success. Inadvertently, the architects and historians of the 1980s and 1990s reconstructed a colonial narrative that allowed Western architectural discourse to remain superior.



Figure 1. School of Nursing at Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Architect Leonardo Álvarez. Photography: Rodrigo Dávila



Figure 2. Preschool San José. Architect Daniel Bonilla. Photography: Rodrigo Dávila



Figure 3. Art School at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Architect Ricardo La Rotta. Photography: Rodrigo Dávila

My emphasis on the fact that the Europeans had already claimed modern architecture to be their own is based on written evidence. From Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, first published in 1896, through the books by Kenneth Frampton, Francesco Dal Co, and William Curtis, the inscription of non-Western architectures has always been ambivalent — both a recognition and a denigration at the same time. A clear example of this ambivalence is found in the way William Curtis claims ownership of modern architecture. He argues that "the modern movement in architecture was the *intellectual property* of certain countries in Western Europe, of the United States and of some parts of the Soviet Union".¹ With this statement, Curtis creates a relationship of dependency in which anyone using modern architecture outside those countries is indebted to the owners, and must credit them for their use, otherwise intellectual property rights would be infringed — at least metaphorically. Note that his book, published in 1982, also indicates that, "by the end of the 1950s,

transformations, deviations and devaluations of modern architecture had found their way to many other areas of the world",² continuing to affirm, in a subsequent chapter, that "it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that modern forms had any appreciable impact on the *less developed countries*, and these forms were usually *lacking in the poetry and depth of meaning* of the masterworks of the modern movement".³ At his most charitable, Curtis admits that the Latin Americans were able to carry out "judicious adjustments of generic features of modernism to the climates, cultures, memories and aspirations of their respective societies."⁴

Paradoxically, in her book, *Historia de la Arquitectura en Colombia*, published in 1989, Silvia Arango praises the work that Curtis denigrates as the product of a process of *asimilación consciente*, or conscious assimilation. Clearly, Arango's main objective was to articulate a narrative that allowed Colombian architecture to find a place in the world's architectural history, written by Europeans. In her own words:

1. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 491.

2. *Ibid*, 491.

3. *Ibid*, 567.

4. *Ibid*, 635.

"El inicio de este proceso de asimilación consciente es el que permite enfrentar los nuevos factores que irán abriéndose paso en la década del 70, dándole a la arquitectura colombiana un lugar en el contexto latinoamericano e internacional."⁵

In her effort to identify an architecture capable of attaining international recognition, Arango is at pains to underline every possible connection between Colombian architects and their European counterparts. For example, she points out that there was a first period of modern architecture influenced primarily by Le Corbusier through the uncritical appropriation of building techniques — such as reinforced concrete — and the implementation of CIAM urbanism to build infrastructure and satisfy housing demands.⁶ The second phase, that of conscious assimilation, was influenced by Bruno Zevi, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Alvar Aalto, architects who, in Arango's view, were more concerned with "the place" in the phenomenological sense of the word.⁷ Arango also assigns importance to the origin of the architects, their education, and training. She explains that Rafael Obregon's father was Spanish, and that he was educated in the United States, England, and France.⁸ Manuel Lago and his partner, Jaime Saenz, were educated in the United States where they had "direct contact with Mies van Der Rohe, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright".⁹ German Samper worked for Le Corbusier, as did Rogelio Salmona, who spent seven years in Paris, working at Rue de Sévres while also attending lectures given by Pierre Francastel.¹⁰

Arango feels the need to establish these connections in order to validate the work of Colombian modernist architects. The main argument does not focus on the way these architects developed solutions to the socio-economic problems of the time — the impact of poverty, social inequality, racial segregation and urban fragmentation on the quality of life of people, or the very fabric of cities — but to the way they embraced the principles of modern architecture and tried to implement them in Colombia. Arango did not notice that, in writing a history of Colombian architecture based on the fact that the protagonists were educated abroad and had worked for European and North American masters,

she was ratifying Curtis' claim of ownership, while simultaneously reconstructing a colonial narrative that prioritizes Western knowledge.

In a recent book titled *Ciudad y Arquitectura: Seis generaciones que contruyeron la América Latina moderna*, Arango attempts to dissociate herself from the formalist approach of her earlier book. In the introduction, she diverts the focus away from the "architectural object (*objeto arquitectónico*)", an approach that — she admits — presents limitations, to place emphasis on the architects and the urbanists who build modern Latin America.¹¹ At no point throughout the book, however, does she analyze in detail the socio-political contexts in which buildings are inscribed, other than by describing salient historical events in chronological order. Moreover, as she specifically indicates in the section called "sobre el procedimiento", her book is the result of a rigorous and meticulous examination of numerous collections of plans, photographs and architectural drawings, but does not include interviews with residents, employees, or builders of the buildings and cities she studies. As a result, she can only present a thorough formal analysis of buildings through the abstraction of the image and the opinion of designers, in complete isolation from the socio-cultural and political context in which buildings exists. While she concedes that Latin American territory cannot be assumed to be homogeneous, the closest she gets to discussing differences across the continent is in reference to climate — the way in which architects often validate formal and material choices distancing themselves from the preferences of the people. For Arango, "las comunidades arquitectónicas y urbanas se influyen recíprocamente en un proceso fecundo y creador, en el cual ha participado América Latina en la época moderna".¹² It follows that Arango's main intention is to argue that Latin American architects did not copy from their European and North American colleagues but took part in a simultaneous process of development: contributing to modern architecture rather than simply reproducing it. Even the notion of "generation" is taken from Ortega and Gasset — as she explains herself — ratifying unquestionably her attachment to European methods of historicization.

5. Arango, *Historia de la arquitectura en Colombia*, 247.

6. *Ibid*, 216

7. *Ibid*, 237–8.

8. *Ibid*, 231.

9. *Ibid*, 231.

10. *Ibid*, 243.

11. Arango, *Ciudad y arquitectura: Seis generaciones que construyeron la América Latina moderna*, 14.

12. *Ibid*, 15.

Thirty years later, the aim still is to find a place in modern architecture as if it were the only discursive route to value the remarkable work of mid twentieth-century Latin American architects. The point she continues to miss is that modern architecture is a “knowledge”, not simply a formal repertoire of urban and architectural forms to which one can contribute some. As such, both architects and historians remain enmeshed in a western epistemological system that undermines their contribution. In other words, we would never be able to study the reality of Latin American cities, which, on the whole, have not been designed by architects and do not respond to singular and clearly traceable genealogies (to use her own words), but to a convoluted and often antagonistic processes that do not fit her methods of historicization.

Please note that I concentrate on the work of Silvia Arango not in order to diminish her contribution to academic discourse in Latin America, but, rather the opposite, because, as the author of two of the most important publications on the subject, her work becomes both a reference and a platform to develop newer, and more nuanced, approaches to study both Colombian and Latin American architectures.

Moreover, in the past thirty years — since the publication of Arango’s first history of Colombian architecture — no other book has been published in Colombia, with the same scholarly ambition, and many of those published tend to celebrate modern architecture in the same fashion, fetishizing, as I have argued, the contribution of Le Corbusier and the legacy of modern architecture. Publishing statistics are telling. For example, Ediciones Uniandes has published four books on Le Corbusier over the past ten years (three by the same author) and two more about the work of Colombian Modernist architects who worked for him: Rogelio Salmons and German Samper. Also, since its creation, *Dearq* has dedicated three issues to Le Corbusier (issues 2, 14, and 5) and two issues to modern architecture in Colombia and Latin America (issues 3 and 12 respectively). As such, 19% of the issues of this magazine have been dedicated to modern architecture. Admittedly, several other issues of this journal address pressing questions in Colombian architecture, embracing an ampler agendas, including gender (women in architecture), social disparities (informal architecture and urbanism), as well as conflict: architecture for peace. That is why I believe that *Dearq* is the most appropriate academic publication to introduce a decolonizing agenda

Latin American Theory and the Decolonizing Agenda

At this point, I would like to invoke a strong current in Latin American scholarship that has developed since the mid-1960s, generating a range of methodological approaches to question the authority of Western knowledge. Such questioning enables the inclusion of a multitude of epistemological traditions that had been excluded since the colonial era and, therefore, remain peripheral in contemporary academic debates. In particular, I want to focus on the concept of *coloniality*, coined by Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova in 1965, and later developed by Peruvian Anibal Quijano, a term that has been regularly deployed by other Latin American critics such as Sergio Castro Gomez (Colombia), Arturo Escobar (Colombia) and Walter Dignolo (Argentina). Quijano often links the term coloniality to power, *la colonialidad del poder*, referring to the persistence of colonial principles and structures in contemporary society. These principles and structures are often imperceptible precisely because they are prevalent, embedded in the racial, political and social hierarchies imposed by the European during colonialism. A clear example is the fact that ethno-racial minorities, particularly Afro-descendant and Indigenous groups continue to be discriminated against, currently representing the majority of the poor, under-educated, and unemployed population of the country who live in deprived conditions, either on the peripheries of cities or rurally. Let us stress here that no Afro-descendant or Indigenous architect has ever won the Colombian National Award for Architecture since its creation in 1962 and that these two ethno-racial groups remain under-represented in schools of architecture, judging panels, and professional bodies throughout the country. “Coloniality, then”, in Quijano’s own words, “is still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed”.¹³ However, Quijano sustains that coloniality is not exhausted in the problem of racist social relations, but extends to all other instances of an Euro-centered colonial/modern world, becoming the cornerstone of the *coloniality of power*. Power is central because every aspect that we explore — economic disparities, political representation, the parameters of architectural judgment, etc. — will always revert back to the prevalence of colonial principles of control and the hierarchal organization of our society.

13. Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”, 170.

Indeed, the fact that the history of Colombian architecture is represented through the work of white/mestizo architects educated abroad, and whose buildings look like those designed by their Euro-American masters — for whom they worked — is the clearest expression of coloniality in Colombian architecture today.

In his remarkable book, *Crítica de la Razón Latinoamericana* (1996), Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro Gomez affirms (referring to the work of Gayatri Spivak) that,

"...no existe un sujeto colonizado que, irrumpiendo desde la exterioridad de las estructuras imperiales, pueda articular su voz a través de los discursos de las ciencias humanas europeas. Quien pretende representar al subalterno en un discurso articulado según las reglas del saber occidental moderno (sociología, etnología, e historia, etc.) está reforzando, en clave epistémica, los mismos mecanismos de dominación colonial."¹⁴

That is why I maintain that it is a mistake to represent the history of Colombian architecture — and the contemporary practice of architecture in the country — according to narratives and analytical methods which developed at a particular moment in global history when colonialism was still at its height. Similarly, the effort to “try to find a place for our architecture” in such a history, as Arango does, is a highly questionable scholarly practice. It is possible to understand why Curtis makes such a great effort to undermine non-Western contributions to the development of modern architecture, after all, claiming its ownership on behalf of Western Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union, is an attempt to retain their authority.¹⁵ However, it is less comprehensible that Colombian historians submit uncritically to those narratives in order to gain access to a system that has already condemned them subalternity. In fact, the ethical responsibility of Colombian historians ought to be that of delinking themselves from those narratives in order to write our own history, rather than trying to find a place in someone else's.

This is precisely the aim of a Latin American critique that has gained strength since the 1960s, yet a kind of critique that has found little echo amongst architects in Colombia, who still continue doing what Castro so sternly warns us against: to try to articulate our voice through a discourse of domination in order to find a place within it. That's is why I find the concept of coloniality to be very useful, for as the Argentine philosopher Walter Mignolo explains, “Coloniality points toward, and intends to unveil, an embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress and modernization, and being good for everyone”.¹⁶ Moreover, citing Colombian philosopher Castro Gomez, Mignolo addresses the importance of decolonizing epistemology, that is, contesting the hegemony of Western knowledge according through which our buildings are transgressions, deviations and devaluations of modern architecture.

“Decolonizing Western epistemology means to strip it out of the pretense that it is the point of arrival and the guiding light of all kinds of knowledges. In other words, decolonizing knowledge is not rejecting Western epistemic contributions to the world. On the contrary, it implies appropriating its contributions in order to then de-chain [them] from their imperial designs.”¹⁷

Thus, I maintain strongly that the ethical responsibility for Colombian architects, architectural historians and theorists is to embark on the difficult project of decolonizing architectural discourse in order to overcome the limitations — and immense scholarly perils — of presenting modern architecture as “the point of arrival and the guiding light of all kinds of knowledge”. More importantly, delinking our architectures from dominant Euro-American narratives — especially those which focus mainly on generating form — would allow Colombian architects to respond to the challenges that our cities pose, and to find solutions to many of its problems.¹⁸

14. Castro-Gomez, *Crítica de la razón Latinoamericana*, 152.

15. Authority is used here in the double sense of the word, both as authors and possessors of the power to sanction.

16. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 6.

17. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures Decolonial Options*, 82.

18. Indeed, creativity and innovation require a departure from established practices: how would Colombian architects innovate if their objective is to find a place in something that already exists. While I disagree with Curtis, he is right arguing that during the 1950s and 1960s, Developing World architects, or Colombian in this case, were largely only reproducing generic features of modern Euro-American architecture. Indeed, Leonardo Alvarez's description of his own work reinforces that position demonstrating how Colombian architects seem only to be able to copy.

I do not intend to question the valuable contribution of our extraordinary modernist architects to the development of architectural discourse and practice in Colombia. Nor do I intend to undermine the architectural validity of their buildings, which are elegant, functional, very well built and many have withstood the test of time graciously — to set the record straight: I strongly disagree with Curtis. However, as contemporary scholars, our responsibility is to scrutinize their contribution rigorously and fairly, just as it is also our scholarly responsibility to review the way in which their contribution has been historicized. Silvia Arango's book remains important in Colombian architectural academia, but it presents only a partial and very limited survey of the country's architecture, subjecting it to subalternity.

It is important to note that recent work in cities like Medellín, where the innovative transport systems, and some of the libraries and public spaces that have been created throughout the city, along with the Unidades de Vida Articulada (UVA), demonstrated that Colombian architects are, indeed, developing design methodologies to respond more accurately to the urban realities of contemporary Colombian cities. There are also more modest architectural projects in distant and deprived communities — many devastated by rural violence — which are evidence of changing attitudes towards minorities on the peripheries. The work of Simón Hosie in El Salado (Bolívar), or the minute but significant urban provocations of the group Arquitectura Expandida, are also examples where architects have deployed their technical and creative skills to produce elegant buildings that belong to an international aesthetic, while simultaneously responding the complex, and often gruesome, realities of minority groups in the country. Most of these architects, however, are male, white-mestizo, and educated at prestigious universities in Colombia and abroad. Therefore — and please read carefully — the point is not to question, or diminish, the value of the outstanding work produced by practitioners in Colombia, but to reveal the narrow frame within which these practices exist and the even narrower terms within which they are theorized by academics.

Turning to the City and Learning from the South

Decolonizing Western epistemology is an interest of academics throughout the Global South, not only in Latin America. This common interest has generated valuable South-to-South collaborations, which, in turn, have produced fruitful methodologies to study non-Western cities and their architectures. Indeed, cities have become —again — central to architectural discussions, surpassing the enthrallment with building form; or "el proyecto", as it is called in the reductionist Spanish technical tradition. In fact, some of the most insightful urban studies have been produced in relation to African cities, generating an entire scholarly movement called "postcolonial urban theory". It is my contention that, as Latin American architects, there is more we can learn nowadays from Africa than from European cities and their architectures. The dominance of western conceptualizations of architecture and cities has diverted attention from Africa. According to such conceptualizations African cities have failed and, therefore, they are not worthy of scholarly attention. What seems never to have occurred to colleagues in Colombia is that the Africans thought the same about our cities, and hence, everyone in the Global South was looking at the West for referents. That is why decolonizing Western architectural knowledge is of paramount importance: because there is much to learn from the unique configurations, as well as the complex historical and socio-economic characteristics of Southern cities which have undoubtedly made an immense contribution to the development of contemporary global urban cultures.¹⁹

Before I refer to the impact of postcolonial urban theory, it is important briefly to review some of the themes explored by social scientists, cultural theorists, urbanists and philosophers in Africa, identifying the areas of overlap with the group of Latin American theorists discussed above. In his book *On the Postcolony*, the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe wrestles with many of the same issues that concern Latin American scholars. For him,

19. The urban and architectural innovations of architect Edgar Pieterse at the African Centre for Cities, as well as the outstanding academic work of AbdouMalique Simone and Sussan Parnell, come readily to mind. Their work introduces a wealth of interpretative and analytical tools, which, in turn, contribute to the production of innovative public spaces, housing policies and public-private collaborations. Similarly, collaborations between Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre and various institutions in Mozambique and Angola have led more nuanced approximations to the city, which surpass the mere formalism that Neil Brenner criticizes so acutely.

"It is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world. In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity."²⁰

Note that Mbembe refers to "Africa as an idea, a concept", which shares with Edmundo O'Gorman's argument that [Latin] America is an invention,²¹ and is indeed the title of Mignolo's book cited above, *The Idea of Latin America* (2005). More importantly, Mbembe argues that Africa is conceived by the European to be different so that Europe can emerge superior in the process, allowing it to establish the norms that determine its relationship with Africa.

Following the logic of Said's *Orientalism*, that insightful analysis of the process through which an exteriority is required to validate the constitution of Europe as the locus of enunciation of modernity and authority, Mbembe proposes that only when we are able to inhabit the gap which opens between the invented Other and the inventing Self can we address the shortcomings of cultural representation — and, here, both Other and Self are multiple, varied and heterogeneous entities, both marked by internal differences, tensions and contestations. As such, the claim for *author-ity* becomes questionable, because the condition for that claim is based on its univocality.

Central to Mbembe's critique is a focus on the historical realities and continued struggles of people against the structures that have placed them in the position where they are: African, black, poor, or Muslim. For Mbembe,

"...the constitution of the African self as a reflexive subject also involves doing, seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and touching. [...] Thus, the African subject is like any other human being: he or she engages in *meaningful acts*. (It is self-evident that these meaningful human expressions do not necessarily make sense for everyone in the same way.)"²²

In that final note, timidly expressed within brackets, Mbembe's critique is at its most potent. To make sense of these meaningful acts of human expression we need continually to develop alternative and ever more complex methodologies to approach the realities of African culture, society, politics, its multiple economies and, of course, its cities. These realities *do not make sense* for everyone in the same way, but they cannot be dismissed on that basis. They may not be intelligible according to the parameters of a given epistemology — say Western — but are the result of meaningful acts that belong to, and exists within, alternative systems of knowledge.

Let us bring this discussion to the realm of architecture by analyzing the opening sentence of Abdou-Maliq Simone's book *For the City yet to Come*.²³ He starts the book affirming that "African cities don't work". To an inattentive reader this may sound like an acceptance of failure. Yet Simone uses this as a provocation in order to advance an acute critique of methods of analysis that interpret African urban conditions in relation to an imaginary Western city against which African cities are considered faulty.

The argument that results from the articulation of Mbembe and Simone is that African cities may not make sense to everyone in the same way, yet they provide home for millions of Africans and are the result of specific circumstances that make sense to those who live in them. That is why turning to the people is necessary in order to overcome the shortcomings of a history that focuses only on objects — the buildings, the physical fabric of cities — without addressing the people who inhabit them.

In a more recent publication, Simone problematizes the colonial origin of urbanization in Africa in relation to people. For him,

"...the importance of colonialism is not that it gave rise to cities in what was for the most part a rural continent. Rather, the crucial move was to shape urbanization so cities would act instrumentally on African bodies and social formations. They would act on them in ways that made various endogenous forms of, and proclivities toward, urbanization possible only within the context of an enforced engagement with the European world."²⁴

20. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 2.

21. Edmundo O'Gorman was a Mexican writer, historian and philosopher, author of the influential book *The Invenición de América* (1958), amongst others. He was the brother of architect and painter Juan O'Gorman.

22. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 6.

23. Simone, *For the City yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*, 1.

24. Simone, "On the Worlding of African Cities," 18–19.

Here, Simone makes a fundamental point: He interprets the colonial city as an instrument to “enforced engagement with the European world”. The city imposes on the colonized body, on the people, a complex system of social relations, economic transactions (capitalism), political structures (democracy), ethno-racial exclusions, and so on, which cannot be eluded. Cities use their physical infrastructure in order to position citizens and resources strategically, so that they can be deployed efficiently and be accounted for. That is why Simone wishes to:

“...extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people’s activities in the city. African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used. These intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure—a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city.”²⁵

Here, Simone frames the notion of *people as infrastructure* and, as such, sets an immense challenge to architecture and urbanism, a challenge that is captured very effectively by Arturo Escobar, who elegantly introduces a new agenda for design, beautifully articulated in the first chapter of his volume *Designs for the Pluriverse*.

“What is required is a new kind of metro-fitting made up of design strategies capable of bringing about new infrastructures of life. Adaptation and resilience will have to be revisited through the creation of grounded, situated, and pervasive design capacity by communities themselves who are bound together through culture and a common will to survive when confronted with threatening conditions, not by global experts, bureaucrats, and geo-engineers who can only recommend the business-as-usual approaches that emerge from impoverished liberal mind-sets. All of this will call into question the notion of the city as an enduring socio-material form—perhaps the end of the modernist city, once the symbol of dynamism and progress. In short, the “recreation of urban life should occupy a central position in the structural changes that must occur if ‘we’ humans are to have a viable future” [...] Reimagining the city along these lines will have to be part of any transition vision and design framework.”²⁶

I hope to have been able to show that decolonial though in architecture requires that architects find ways to articulate their work in relation to the people they work for, not only in relation to the work of their peers and their predecessors. It is also necessary that architectural academics connect buildings to the complex socio-political and spatial conditions in which they exist, rather than perpetuating genealogical (or generational) structures of validation. I propose that engaging with the city could facilitate that connection with people, with history, and the colonial narratives of power inherent in its spatial configuration.

Only by turning to the people could a true history of cities be written, including the numerous and complex historical experiences of those who live in conditions of coloniality. That is how we would be able to understand that southern cities are as much a product of modernity as those in Europe and North America. Indeed, only by turning to the people would we be able to come to terms with the fact that the differences, fragmentations, disparities and contestations that characterize our cities represent the reality of our modernity. It is very important to stress that “coloniality” does not refer only to a condition that exists in former colonial contexts: It exists everywhere. The modern world cannot be understood without colonialism, or, to put it differently, colonialism is constitutive of modernity. Thus, if “coloniality” is the living legacy of colonialism, it affects everyone in the world, not only the former colonies.

Postcolonial urban theory has generated a global geography of urban analysis that amply overcomes the limitations of modern architectural discourse — and the boundaries of modern urban theory — which places a singular (and imaginary) notion of city at the center. As Neil Brenner puts it,

“In contrast to the totalizing, empiricist settlement fetishism of urban age ideology and other mainstream discourses of global urbanism, postcolonial urban studies embraces a reflexively relational approach to the construction of cityness. Rather than reifying the city as a generic, universal settlement type, this approach is productively attuned to the multiple socio-spatial configurations in which agglomerations are crystallizing under contemporary capitalism, as well as to the transnational,

25. Simone, *For the City yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*, 407.

26. Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy and the Making of Worlds*, 40.

inter-scalar and often extra-territorial webs through which their developmental pathways are mediated or “worlded”.²⁷

Having demonstrated how turning to the city is essential in order to understand the situatedness of architectural practices in Colombia (i.e., how cities reveal the position of architecture within colonial narratives of power, but also how these could be challenged), let me now address the second part of this section's heading, “learning from the South”. It refers to an important opportunity currently emerging in the Global South enabling us to study our cities and architectures while simultaneously challenging the dominant framework of modernism — modern urban theory, and the modern movement.²⁸ This is not simply because, as the South African urban scholar Edgar Pieterse argues, “the failure of the Western modernist adventure in much of the global South leaves open the cracks through which other practices, rationalities and worldviews can be glimpsed”,²⁹ but also because in Colombia we have failed fully to engage the realities of a colonial history, and how the legacy of that history continues to hinder our understanding of cities and architecture. Turning to the city and learning from the South is an invitation to embrace critical methodologies that would allow Colombian architects and urban scholars to overcome their fetishistic approach to modernism — which offers only a generic settlement type that failed throughout the Global South — engaging head-on the heterogeneity of our urban reality: the residential spaces produced by a stagnated middle-class; the architectures produced by excluded minorities; the pockets of indigeneity that appear in cities, with their spatial appropriations and alternative economic practices; the mostly Afro-descendant urban peripheries found in large conurbations; the very notion of a peripheral urbanism; and so on and so forth. It is in those contexts where we find our modernity and it is misleading — as well as irresponsible — to continue to wrestle against that reality from architectural academia.

Conclusion

The purpose of this issue of *Dearq* is to present perspectives of Colombian architecture from outside. I took outside to be both a geographical position,

outside Colombian, but also as a disciplinary one, outside architecture as a discipline. I have argued in the past that architectural scholarship in general suffers greatly from an endogamy that prevents inter- and cross-disciplinary collaborations. This interest may result from my own personal experience. Not only do I live outside Colombia, I teach architecture at the University of Cambridge — where I was the first Colombian ever to hold a permanent position — and currently I am the first Latin American scholar to be Director of a Center of Latin American Studies in Cambridge, where architecture is not taught. However, many of our students at the center study cities, and architecture is a continuous topic of debate. That is why the narrowness of architectural discourse in Colombia worries me much, especially given the fact that many Colombian scholars lead a global discussion on decolonizing western epistemology. I find it interesting, yet completely unacceptable at the same time, that we read Colombian theory at Cambridge — and, indeed, Oxford, ETH, Harvard, MIT, Columbia, and many other architecture departments in Europe and North America — while my Colombian colleagues are unaware of work produced by outstanding academics in their own country, indeed, their own city: Bogotá.

In this article, my aim is to introduce the work of that extraordinary group of Latin American scholars who have developed a new agenda for historicizing, theorizing and (I maintain) transforming Latin America. As I have shown, their work offers an opportunity for architects to exceed their fascination with modernism, seen as an aspiration for cities and the preferred image of buildings. Such an approach has artificially homogenized the history of architecture, which in turn has caused a homogenization of practice as well; a reductionism that contradicts the heterogeneous reality of our cultures and societies. Homogenization causes exclusions, and those exclusions represent a violence against those who are set apart. I believe the work of Colombian scholars such as Sergio Castro Gomez, Arturo Escobar, Mara Viveros, and Latin Americans such as Anibal Quijano, Enrique Duse, and Water Mignolo, amongst others, emerges as an immense resource to enhance architectural academia in Colombia, de-linking it from western epistemology while connecting with the realities of our peoples.

27. Schmidt and Brenner, “Towards a New Epistemology of the Urban?”, 162.

28. In the case of Colombia, it is also important to wean architects off Spanish scholarship.

29. Pieterse, “Grasping the unknowable: coming to grips with African urbanisms,” 15.

We started with an anecdote about the presentations of three renowned Colombian architects, all male, white-mestizo, middle-class, and educated at the three most prestigious universities in Colombia because decolonizing architecture does not simply refer to delinking from a dominant western epistemology, or to challenge modern architecture (which for many in Colombia has turned into a fetish). Decolonising architecture also refers to dismantling class barriers, gender stereotypes—the hetero-normativity of modern architecture rooted in the figure of the male master—as well as the racial classifications that exclude minorities from having an impact on architectural discourse. Mara Viveros has written extensively about these issues: race, gender, intersectionality, and white privilege in Colombia.³⁰ That is why both Arturo Escobar and Walter Dignolo remind us that we must not ignore the existence of such a thing as internal colonialism, whereby the same structures of domination that were previously imposed upon us by the European are perpetuated internally by dominant white-mestizo groups who support their claim for authority on the knowledge received from the colonizer.

The self-described “black-lesbian-mother-warrior” Audre Lorde poignantly articulated a devastating critique of western epistemology and patriarchy when she claimed that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change”.³¹ Modern architecture, taken both as discourse and as practice, is that tool, passed on to us to keep us busy with the master’s concerns while we ignore the blatant realities of our mostly poor and heterogeneous societies. I therefore join Lorde insisting

that it is academic arrogance to assume any discussion about architecture without examining our many differences, and without the input of the poor, the Afro-descendant, the women, the LGBT+ communities who inhabit, and built, our cities. Colombia has produced, and continues to produce, outstanding architects. I have mentioned many in this article—and in they are mentioned here it is because I consider them exemplary cases—but it is important that practitioners and academics connect with the realities of the people, rather than continuing to search a place in a global, univocal, and inherently hierarchical discourse. The value of our architecture is here, in Colombia, and it is here that we need to search for it.

I brought in the outstanding work of colleagues working about African cities in order to demonstrate how a broader interdisciplinary perspective, engaging the complex historical realities of the multiple groups of people who live in those cities, enables architects and urbanists to generate innovative responses to the challenges of our contemporary urban cultures. Embedded in this argument is a proposal to create stronger links with architects and academics in the rest of Latin America, in Africa, and in India, where colleagues are confronted with similar urban situations: poverty, lack of infrastructure, socio-economic inequalities, racial discrimination, etc. These countries share a history of colonialism, which is an inherent part of the world’s modernity. Learning from the South does not mean that we cease to interact, and learn, from Europe and North America. It means that we develop a capacity judiciously to articulate multiple and often contrasting epistemological positions so that we can generate our own knowledge as the route to validate our own practices.

30. See Viveros, M. (2019) “Social Mobility, Whiteness, and Whiteness in Colombia,” in the *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 496–512. See also Viveros (2007) “Discriminación racial, intervención social y subjetividad: Reflexiones a partir de un estudio de caso en Bogotá,” in *Revista de Estudios Sociales* [online], No. 27, 106–121. Other articles, and her ethnographic work on the peripheries of Bogotá, have been included in her book, *Les couleurs de la masculinité*, published in French by Le Couvert.

31. Lorde, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, 19.

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