OPINION

DECOLONISING THE ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION NARRATIVE WILL RENDER MORE INCLUSIVE AND CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE DESIGN SOLUTIONS

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1. Introduction

Migration and immigration flows have capsized our world, not only from a demographic perspective, but also culturally, politically and spatially. While colonisation, having taken the world by storm over the course of the five last centuries, is over, today former colonial empires are still experiencing its sequels, represented in various forms and depths across communities globally. This epoch is synonymous to pain and suffering and also synonymous with the introduction of new global systems, more specifically mass migration and increased cultural diversity. Today, one fact is certainly clear: we have reached a time when there is no specific part of the world that can be attributed exclusively to one given race or cultural specificity.

Our current global demographics today constitute a series of overlaps of a multiple races and cultures, and the constant state of flux of the world's population has now started to blur racial boundaries. This can be argued to have always been the case if the world is viewed from a long timescale, but this has never happened so fast with such deep economic and global societal repercussions. Today, this historical morphology is represented beyond the confines of intangible cultural entities, as our densely populated cities are testament to this amalgamation; showcasing a diverse and vibrant population, which adds to the richness of the urban fabric. This modernist trend is hailed by numerous academic literatures supporting that contrasting and clashing diversity equates to economic opportunities in the immediate short term. This however fails to account for the long-term negation of the cultural fabric, reverberating badly on not only economic metrics but also societal structures.

It is undeniable that this trend was directly accelerated by colonialism through various means. We are now witnessing a time where over-ambitious master plans replicating euro-centric models are sprouting all over Africa; a time where most of the major cities in Latin America have lost their historical character to a jungle of steel and glass boxes; and, a time where a randomly picked commercial building in Panama City curiously resembles that in Detroit, London, or Toronto. Whereas before, imperialist strong-armed governance models supported alienated building styles to support political and cultural bias, today the question arises as to why this is still perpetrated.

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2.   The damage begins in architecture school

The fundamental cause of this aggressive wave of conformism is damaging not only to the eye, but also to the soul. Even though emerging literature— mainly pioneered by Christopher Alexander, Nikos Salingaros and others— points to fact that architectural education is key in shaping new architects, the tender years of architectural school irrationally promote design philosophies and the worship of edifices hailing the culturally disconnected, the contextually inappropriate and the ineffective and inefficient. The case as to why this is furthered is as surprising as it is hard to grasp. Nikos Salingaros offers interesting perspectives on this as he compares this to a brainwashing process leading to modernism as a 'cult'. While this is a strong remark, modernist teachings do induce an inherent tendency for students to lean towards the creation of design artefacts heavily influenced by the 'Developed World', disconnected from their own identity and culture.

Another issue of size is present, that of the architect's ego, as master builders of the urban world. Other domains contribute equally. This is demonstrated recently through COVID-19, where construction sites were put on a standstill on the calls of health professionals. Society does not need solely one field, so we need to call on educators to stop encouraging the boasting of the mindset of future architects as being the 'Saviours of the World' and that Modern construction practices should be adopted by the entire world under the pretence that they are 'pure', 'simple', and 'cost-effective'. In fact, this mindset is a modern-day replica of the ethos that was accelerated during colonial times, a mindset geared towards the spread of cult-like propagandas for control and power. We later saw that this practice led to inhumanity and destruction, so why replicate it?

Architectural education should not revolve solely around training the mind to produce abstract shapes —termed as being creative; it should also encourage and train our souls to be more open and accepting, aimed at training future architects to be sensitive to inclusivity in both gender and culture, while supporting the virtues of humility.

3.   Expanding education and role models

Architecture is a manifold discipline, a network of complexities, and yet the vast majority of architects is totally unacquainted with other fields like economics, sociology, public health, politics, and others which are essential towards understanding the dynamics of their terrain; the perpetual mutation of the urban realm. In the rare cases that architects understand other fields, their insight is often centered on practices and theories based on a First World setting. While it is understood that certain geographies are more equipped than others, and have more research outputs, it is nevertheless important to highlight that the dynamics of economics, public health, or others, in the Developing World differ greatly from the ones in the Global South. A disconnect is thus present in academia, due to funding flows in developing economies, that impact negatively on the rest of the world. We need a larger viewpoint to grasp this; an experience which is unfortunately very scarce in today's Academia.

We advocate for a shift in practices and mindset in architectural Academia. In a world where cultural boundaries are becoming more and more blurred, it is high time for architectural teaching to catch up with both time and context.

There is firstly a need to diversify teaching practices, with a greater exposure and influence pertaining to local architects, rendering culturally appropriate, sensitive and intelligent designs — away from the abstraction and negation of space. The works of Indian architect Charles Correa and Indigenous Canadian architect Douglas Cardinal comes to mind. Doing this, we do not advocate that those figures are shot to stardom, but that those (merely as two examples among dozens of established practitioners in a comparable position) be given more recognition by architectural schools in their particular context.

It is also interesting to see that while western design principles negated our cultural identity, some people like Alexander and Salingaros emerge from those geographies and are working tirelessly to provide us with a better understanding of our living environment. We need to be able to think critically as to what approach may be more contextually appropriate. Not only will this resonate with students to adopt a broader scope of knowledge, but students will be unconsciously trained to think in a truly different manner, and ultimately generate design that can remediate on the deep and cultural loss that communities around the world have suffered.

Doing this will also empower all students equally, irrespective of race and gender by ensuring fair representation of their culture and showcasing that everyone can excel in the architectural field, regardless of one's origins.

4.   Diversification of ideas

Today, the fourth industrial revolution brought us a diverse and rich selection of tools for learning about various architectural cultures and methods arising from differing parts of the world; hence, breaking the current glorified 'First World' bubble. We still need to break the dogmatic colonialist attitude forcing the consumption of Western Modernist models to students as the only possible solution in the 21st century. Traditional building is being termed as old-fashioned, and traditions are dismissed out of hand. We are building a foundation that will further negate our cultural fabric for decades, even centuries, to come.

Future architects need to have other aspirations than stardom. A diverse teaching realm that puts everyone on the same pedestal will leave no room for condescending attitudes or feelings of entitlement, senses which are currently very well ingrained in today's current and future architects. This will also result in a more balanced and tolerant workplace a few years down the line.