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Postcolonial Theories in Architecture¹

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Globalization has shifted architects' attention to the world at large. Even though many architects have worked outside their home countries (or adopted lands) in the past, transnational practice has become a common routine in the architectural office today, due to the new legal arrangements, international trade agreements and advanced communication technologies. Architectural services are now designated by the World Trade Organization as globally tradable commodities. Yet, more often than not, architects find themselves unprepared for such a task due to the relative lack of theoretical sophistication and historical knowledge about architecture beyond European and North American countries. Moreover, as common as the words globalization, multinational and cross-cultural might be, the future remains unclear, since the forces of history are acting in contrary directions about opening and closing borders. Postcolonial theories aspire for an architecture better equipped for a global future, so that globalization does not unfold as a new form of imperial imagination.

This chapter gives a critical overview of authors who have contributed to postcolonial theories in architecture from the 1980s till the early 2000s. The term postcolonial may refer to both a historical period—a period that started after WWII when previously colonized countries gained their independence one by one, and were established as nation states—and a specific set of related theories. This chapter unpacks the latter meaning. While there is much to be said about postcolonial histories (architectural practices, counter-alternatives after colonization, problems of nationalism that replaced colonial rule) and how they are directly and indirectly shaped by some of the ideas explained in this chapter, such accounts are reserved for the chapters in the second part of this book.

One may start by defining postcolonial theory in architecture as the term used to refer to a new way of understanding “non-Western” contexts. It may at first seem ironic that the very definition of the geographical scope of these studies is predicated on exclusion. The word “non-West” not only refers to and simultaneously continues the ideology of an exaggerated difference between the “West” and its “other,” but it also disavows the differences within these “others” themselves. The unsuccessful attempts to find alternative names for these countries, such as “third world,” “underdeveloped,” or “peripheral,” point to the inherent unaccountability of a considerable part of the globe within the given hierarchies of the world-system. Part of the self-proclaimed task of postcolonial theory has been to allude to the insufficiency of the categories used to represent these countries, not necessarily due to the inaccuracy of the name, but because of the very process of rendering these countries as the “other” within the definition of the “Western” self. Avoiding these terms or ignoring the constructed contrast and hierarchy between the “West” and its geographical “other” does not offer an alternative, but merely disavows a fact. Therefore, I would like to discuss postcolonial theory as the quest to undo the hierarchies reflected in the term “non-West,” not by avoiding the term, but by treating it in distancing and ironical quotation marks.

One of the immediate impacts of postcolonial theory on architecture has been to express the necessity to challenge the Eurocentric canon.² The word loosely refers to the dominance of European and North American architects (generally White and male) in the institutions that shape the canon, including architectural practice, education and publications. For a more comprehensive analysis, one might reference Immanuel Wallerstein’s argument that social science as a discipline has been Eurocentric for five main reasons.³ Its *historiography* was based on the premise that European supremacy in the history of the world in the last two centuries was something to be “proud of.” Through its *universalism* one felt justified to claim that whatever happened to Europe “represented a pattern that was applicable everywhere, either because it was a progressive achievement of mankind which was irreversible or because it represented the fulfillment of humanity’s basic needs.”⁴ The belief that modern Europe was civilized justified the interest in *colonial* conquests to “redeem” non-European people. The distortions of *Orientalist* scholarship had political consequences to secure “Europe’s imperial role within the framework of the modern world-system.”⁵ And finally, the deeply

inscribed belief that *progress* was the “underlying explanation of the history of the world”⁶ became a justification imposed on all other Eurocentric practices over the world. Recent global developments in architecture, namely the facts that architects are increasingly building in places outside their country of citizenship, that more design studios and seminars in Western architecture schools focus on “non-Western” places, and that a plentiful amount of “non-Western” histories have been published in the recent years do not necessarily overturn the Eurocentric canon, because neither international practice nor curiosity about “non-Western” countries are new. They are also not values in themselves, unless their difference from previous Orientalist and colonialist attitudes can be specified. Similarly, reshaping the architecture canon in schools is not as facile as it might first appear, since bringing a few token examples from “non-Western” contexts as epilogues to a meta-narrative would hardly resolve the implications that Wallerstein, for one, discloses. According to the postcolonial theories discussed here, challenging the Eurocentric canon in architecture would ideally necessitate challenging the very conditions that have formed the canon itself. In the past 20 years, there has therefore been a growing scholarly interest in rereading the history of architecture from a perspective informed by the ideologies of colonialism and Orientalism.

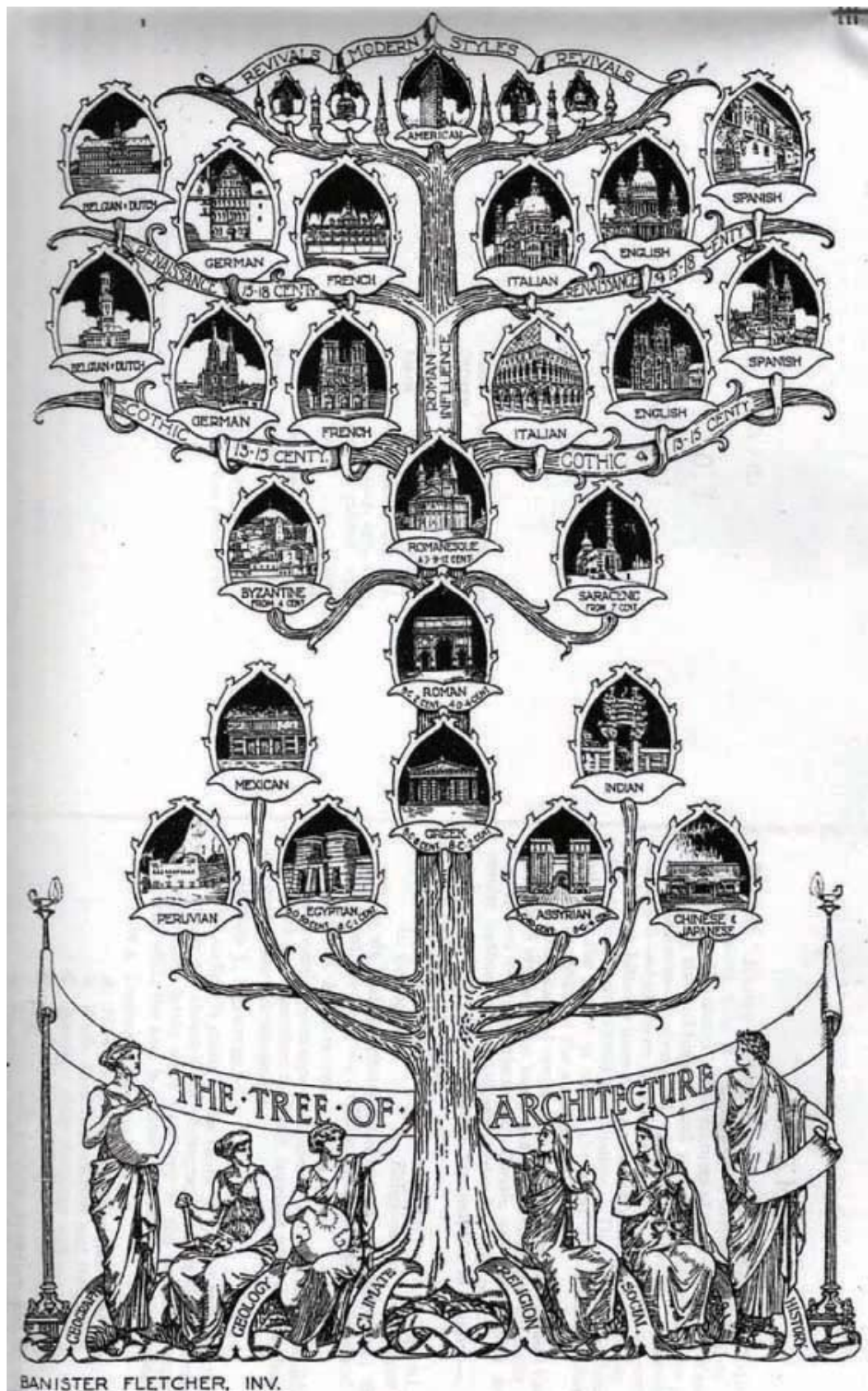
Edward Said’s 1978 book, *Orientalism*, laid the foundation for postcolonial theories in the humanities.⁷ Criticism within the discipline of Orientalism and its post-war successor area studies had existed before,⁸ but it was Said’s book that generated a sea change of ideas not only in literary studies (his field) but also in visual arts and architecture. Said discussed how the “Western” representations of the “Orient,” whether scholarly or artistic, constructed an imaginary border between East and West, and “Orientalized the Orient” as the exotic, fanciful, irrational, horrible and barbarian “other” of the Western rational, progressive and civilized Self. While the roots of Orientalist knowledge date at least back to the fourteenth century, Said focused on English and French sources in the nineteenth century, as well as contemporary American representations, in order to criticize the highly mediated and ideologically distorted form of knowledge that Orientalist studies historically produced. However, *Orientalism* is more than a critique of poor scholarship. Said illustrated the severe political consequences of this knowledge in creating hierarchies and imperialist attitude. Orientalist representations have not only constructed an ideologically distorted knowledge about the “Orient”, but have also created a hierarchy between the Orient and the Occident, not to mention the aim “to

control, manipulate and claim hegemony” over it. Said’s work inspired several architectural historians and provided a useful category for critically examining the place of the “non-West” in seminal architectural theories and histories.

Sir Banister Fletcher’s broadly influential *A History of Architecture*, for one, divided world architecture into “historical” and “non-historical” styles.⁹ While he discussed “historical styles” as Western ones that have continuously evolved from Ancient Egypt and Greece to the present; he introduced Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Ancient American and Saracenic architecture as “non-historical” styles without evolution or succession. Fletcher visualized his argument with *The Tree of Architecture* illustration (Figure 6.1), in which the main trunk represents Greek, Roman and Romanesque architecture that support the branches of European and American architectures. These “historical styles” are implied to be in constant progress and succession, whereas Eastern “non-historical styles” are pictured as the side branches that do not grow any longer or give life to any other style. Fletcher’s representation of the “non-West” is an example of Orientalism, not because he considers it inferior, but because he presents it as non-historical. One of Said’s basic objections to Orientalist knowledge was the denial of history, change and progress to the “Orient” as if these belonged exclusively to the West. Despite the manifest changes in the knowledge of the “Orient” through the centuries, a latent Orientalism which constructed the vision based on the “separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability” nevertheless persisted, Said argued. The “very possibility of development, transformation, human movement ... is denied the Orient and the Oriental.”¹⁰

One can find similar types of Orientalism in other books of architectural history and theory. One of the most important systematic and detailed critiques of Orientalism in architecture and architectural theory is Mark Crinson’s *Empire Building. Orientalism and Victorian Architecture*, published in 1996.¹¹ Crinson analyzed the role of racial theory and the premise of “Western” superiority in British architectural theory during the nineteenth century. He illustrated various types of Orientalism and racism in the work of Edward Freeman, James Fergusson, John Ruskin and Owen Jones. For instance, Crinson’s analysis of a debate between Ruskin and Jones proves to be quite illuminative in exposing different types of Orientalism. In *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), Ruskin voiced his fascination with the hybrid nature of Venetian arches and celebrated the mixture of

different cultures, including the “Eastern” influences that enabled this fusion (Figure 6.2). In *The Two Paths* of 1859, however, he completely adopted the dominant rhetoric of racial politics and repudiated any possible influence of the East on the West. What once enabled richness now became distant and alien “cruel persons” who produced “lower kind ornamentation” and even the “worst and cruelest nations” that took delight in it.¹² As Crinson discloses, Ruskin’s “cruel and cruelest nations” were nothing but the cultures that “received the most sympathetic treatment” in Owen Jones’ *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856). In this book, which was written as part of the educational reform initiated by Henry Cole after the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition, Jones collected examples of ornament from several parts of the world, with an unusual emphasis on “non-Western” ornament. In declaring that Islamic ornamentation was also a “rational, geometrical ordering of flat surfaces,” and that its use of color was also “scientific,” Jones claimed to have found the universal law of ornament based on nature (Figure 6.3). In doing this, Jones not only assimilated Islamic ornamentation within his own frames of reference, but also used the “Orient” as a legitimating ground to prove the universality of his own discovery. Crinson’s reading of Ruskin and Jones exemplifies three common approaches to the “non-West” that all warrant critical attention. Ruskin separated “Orient” from Self (West) first as the alternative then as the cruel nation; while Jones sought justification for the Self’s (West’s) own universality by assimilating the “Other” (“Orient”) into his own frame of reference.

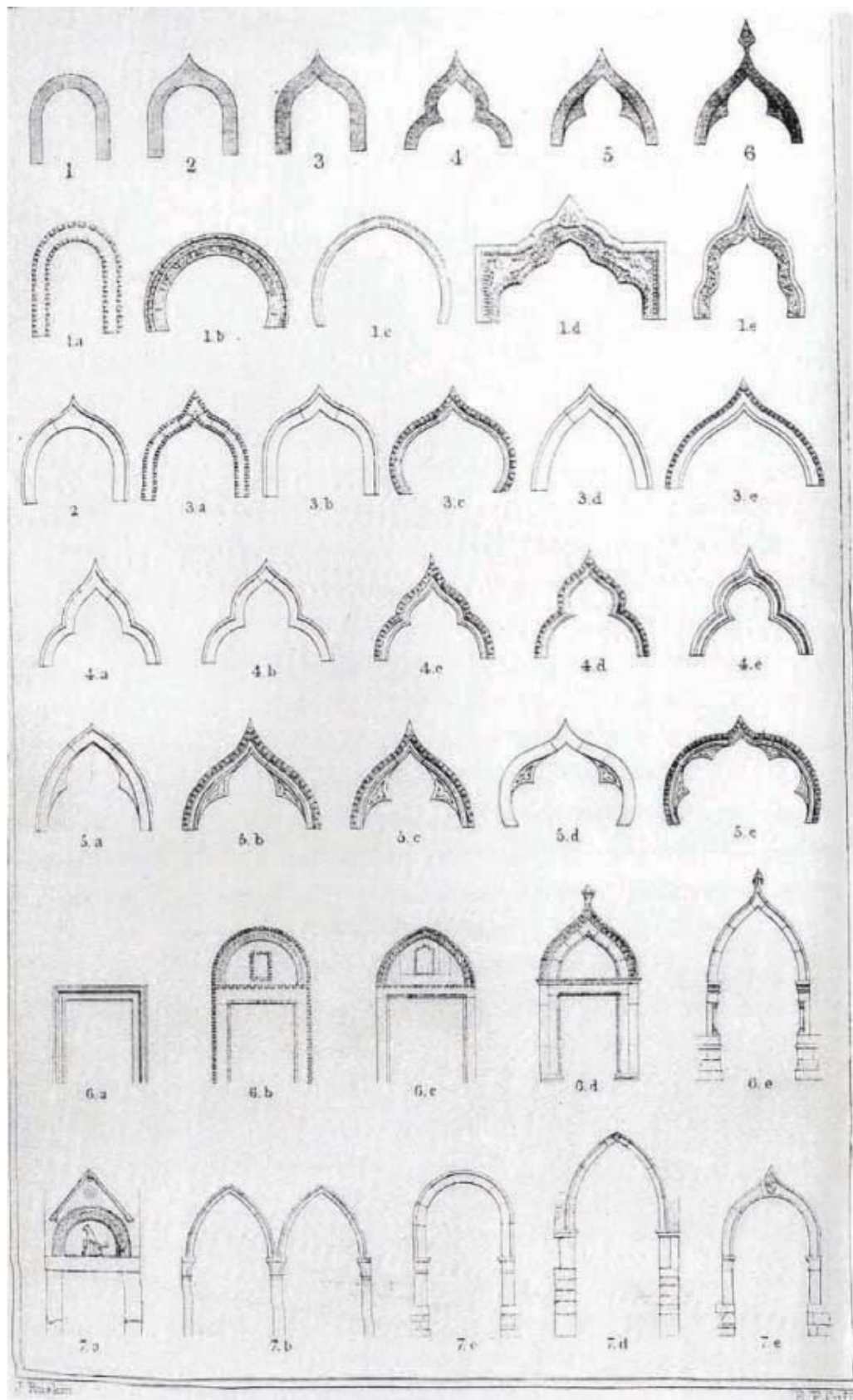


6.1 Sir Bannister Fletcher, Tree of Architecture, illustration in *A History of Architecture*. On the Comparative Method, 1901

A severe political impact of Orientalist knowledge and representations was the assumption that “non-West” needed Western help and redemption through colonization.

A map prepared by Rem Koolhaas and AMO illustrating the European colonies all around the world visualizes the extent to which European colonization shaped world history throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ([Figure 6.4](#)).

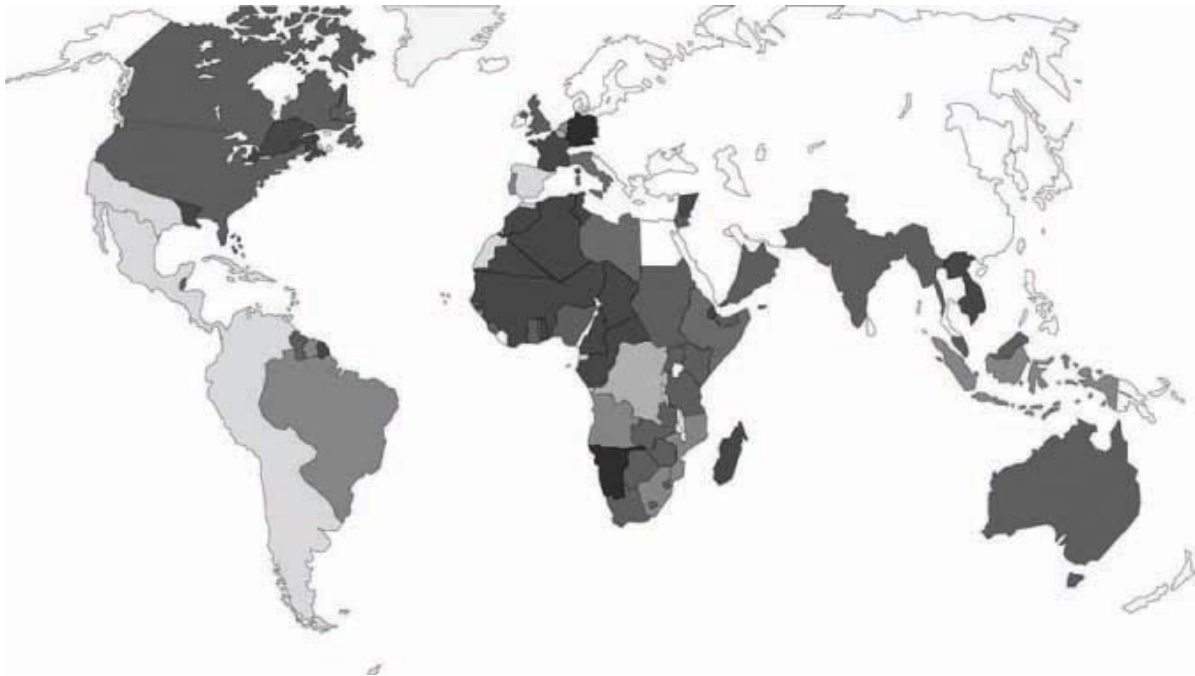
However, critical accounts on the impact of colonization on world architecture came late to scholarship. Only in the early 1990s did works that analyzed colonial architecture on a broad geographical scope ignite attention, beginning with the initiatives of such scholars as Brian Brace Taylor (whose early editorial article in 1984 exposed the ideological history of colonial architecture in Morocco, Tunisia, Mali, Egypt, and Indonesia), and Nezar Alsayyad, whose 1992 edited volume, *Forms of Dominance*, brought together major scholars.¹³ More focused books on the history of colonial architecture in French and Italian colonies in Africa, or British colonies in Asia challenged earlier accounts of heroic modernism.¹⁴ These studies brought forth evidence that the colonialist expansion of world powers during the rise of capitalism in search for raw materials and new markets was coupled with layers of racism. The necessity to create controlled reorganizations in the colonies brought city planning and architecture to the fore as the main institutional setting and the crucial tool of representation in the making of colonial societies. Almost all of the master plans for the colonial cities envisioned a segregated population, reserving different zones for the colonizing and colonized populations ([Figure 6.5](#)).



6.2 Ruskin, *The Orders of Venetian Arches*, illustration in *Works*, 1851–53

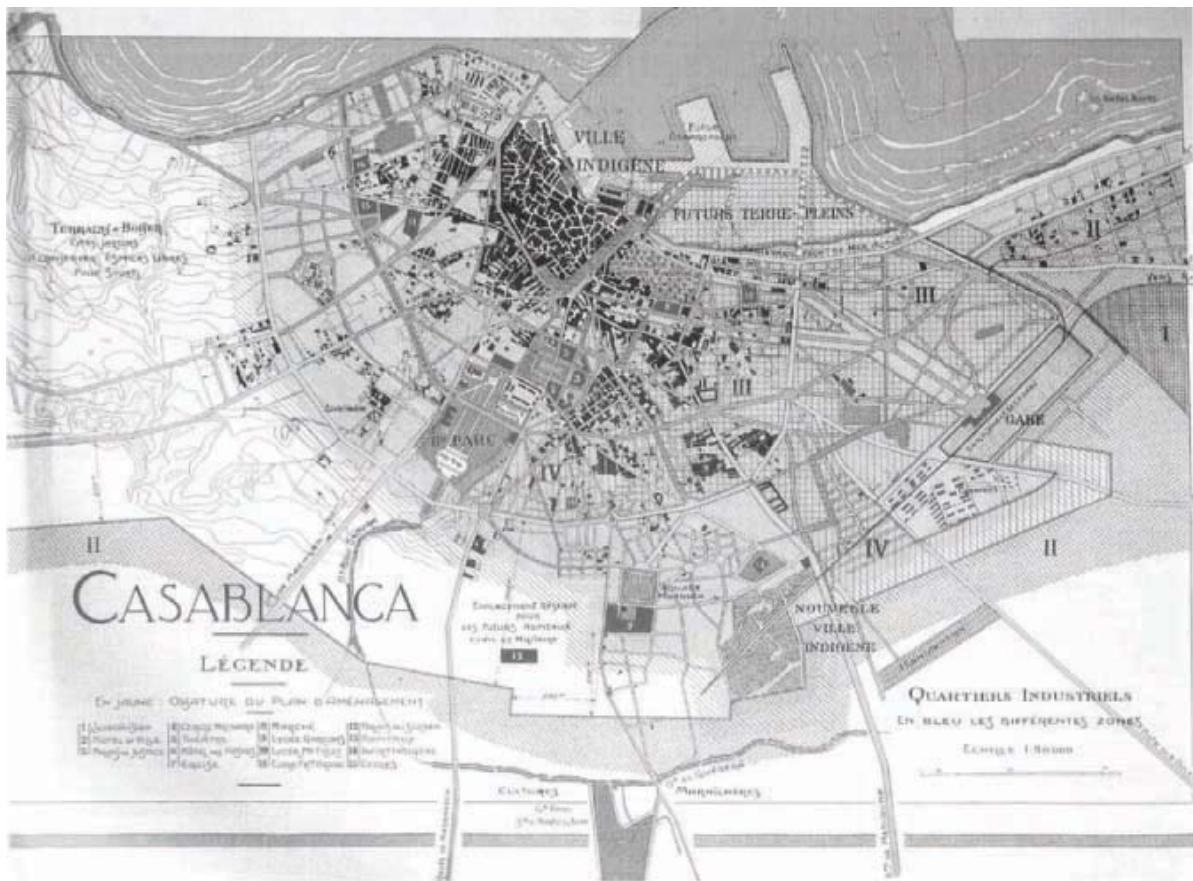


6.3 Owen Jones, Arabian Ornament, illustration in *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856



6.4 Rem Koolhaas and AMO, Eurocolonies map, c. 2001

In addition to spatial mechanisms of ethnic, racial and sexual segregation, the colonial architects' most common concern was their confrontation with the local building traditions and the urban fabric of the colonized city. In this regard, each place needs to be examined in relation to its own specific history. Examples of large-scale demolition of existing urban fabric, conservation according to Western values of preservation, and buildings designed as replicas of architectural styles in the mother country or imitations of local styles as a means to gain the sympathy of the colonized are too diverse to generalize in neatly fixed patterns. Nonetheless, colonial architecture is perhaps one of the best examples through which one realizes the limits of architects in sustaining critical building practice within a hegemonic setting. In her analysis of three French colonial cities in Morocco, Indochina and Madagascar, Gwendolyn Wright highlighted some colonial architects whose "good intentions" led to questionable consequences. Whether it was the proponents of *Arabisances* style in Morocco who made an effort to come to terms with local building traditions and collaborate with local craftsmen (though they ended up with a sentimental pastiche of historical styles of the region), or the proponents of *Chantiers nord-africains* who imported European modernist symbols based on the conviction that these forms would carry the indigenous people to the level of universal standards of beauty; no practice could conceal the fact that "colonialism inevitably prevented equality, no matter what kind of architecture was built."¹⁵



6.5 Henri Prost, Master Plan for the extension of Casablanca, Morocco, published in *France Maroc*, 1917

The master architects were usually no exception. As Taylor was one of the first to spell out, the assumption that “there was no connection between the work of the official architects, planners and technicians in the colonies and the so-called *avant garde*, or pioneer movement in European architecture” was simply a “myth.” The most overt example, Le Corbusier’s ambitious plan for rebuilding Algiers, has been critically reconsidered by historians Zeynep Çelik and Michele Lamprakos (Figure 6.6).¹⁶

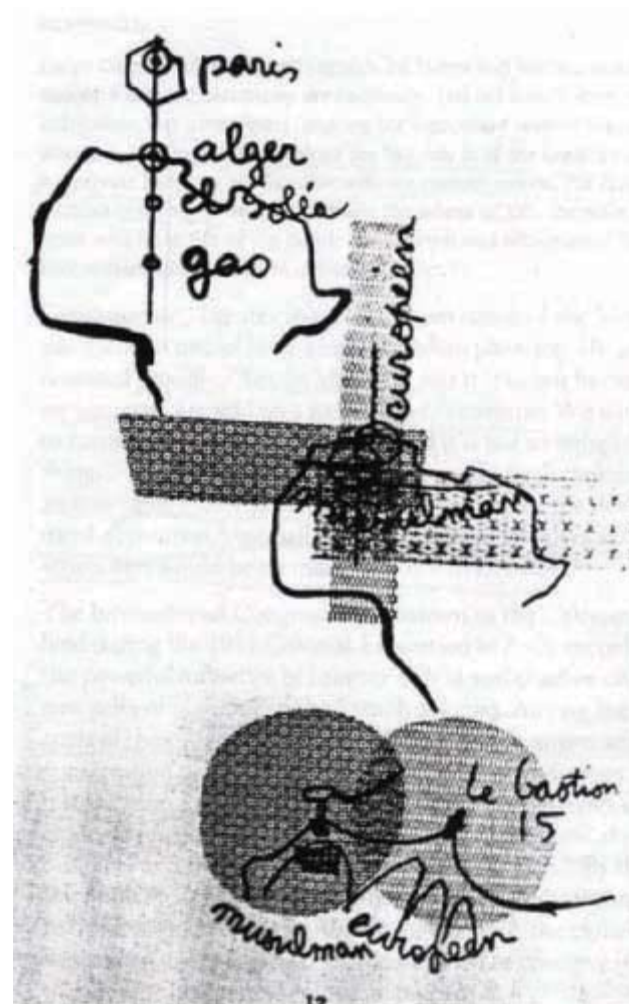
Far from being critical, Le Corbusier often expressed his fascination with the expansionist ideologies of *la grande France*. His diagrammatic sketch of the map of France and Africa linking Paris, Algeria and Gao as the backbone of an expanded France visualizes his support for colonialism (Figure 6.7).

In his plans for the city of Algiers, Le Corbusier developed proposals that continued France’s colonial policies in creating segregated spaces for different races and classes. His vision aggressively seized the whole landscape from mountain tops to the sea, and thereby turned *casbah*—where the colonized population would continue living—into a miniature imprisoned by the European city from all sides and above. The placement of the large modern office blocks at the port would cut the colonial population’s access to

water. In one of the versions, the 100-meter high viaduct connecting the segregated European residential and European business district contained housing cells for African workers underneath: “a poignant image of colonial infrastructure literally supported on the backs of native labor,” in Lamprakos’ words.¹⁷ Le Corbusier cannot be reduced to his colonialist ambitions. Nevertheless, such demystifications help develop a more refined understanding of the relationship between architecture and ideology, as well as individual architects’ abilities to transcend the hegemonic structures of their times. Apart from his colonialist ambitions for Algeria, Le Corbusier also received sound criticism for his Orientalism. The curvilinear forms of his housing blocks in the project for Algeria, and the representation of the Casbah as a veil prompted Çelik to argue that Le Corbusier gendered the “non-West” as the exotic, penetratable, feminine “other” of the masculine “West.” Çelik also interpreted Le Corbusier’s *Journey to the East*, where he wandered around the “delicious women” in the “exotic, distant, fanciful” streets of Istanbul, as a form of Orientalism that presumed his own superiority.¹⁸



6.6 Le Corbusier, Obus Plan for Algiers, 1931–42



6.7 Le Corbusier, Diagram for the extension of France to Africa

While these critical accounts in the early stages of postcolonial theory rightly questioned the ideology of colonialism and Orientalism, scholars in visual arts have recently complicated the critique of Orientalism by revealing the gray zones and complexities, and by looking more closely at the Western and “non-Western” artists who took steps toward overcoming the stereotypical representations of their times.¹⁹ Continuing with the same example, Le Corbusier’s Istanbul trip was recently reevaluated by a number of scholars.²⁰ The architect’s views of Istanbul had been formed by French Orientalists before he even reached the city, most notably by Pierre Loti, Gautier and Nerval. Le Corbusier perhaps never totally overcame this Orientalism, but he was showing signs of criticism against these writers after he lived in Istanbul for seven weeks: “The konak, the Turkish wooden house, is an architectural masterpiece. (On every page of his book Gautier wrote that it was a hen coop—proof that the dogmas of art are as immutable as those of the Holy Father!)”²¹ Apart from growing to appreciate the wooden houses of Istanbul against the will of his Orientalist teachers, Le Corbusier acquired the

panoramic vision as the appropriate representational mode for Istanbul after a possible acquaintance with the genres developed by local photographers, which indicates that he might have welcomed influences from not only the vernacular heritage but also the modernist contributions of “non-Western” artists.²²

The rereading of modern architecture through the perspectives of colonialism and Orientalism sparked the construction of postcolonial theories in architecture, which I would like to discuss under two main approaches. The first approach—which may be called the *poststructuralist trajectory of postcolonial theory*—problematizes the very possibility of representing the “other.” In her text, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” Gayatri Spivak argued that the *subaltern*—just like the peasants who, according to Marx, cannot make their class interest valid without the formation of a unified class subject—cannot be represented within the received structures of the “West.”²³ “It is impossible for French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe,” Spivak wrote, “It is not only that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary.”

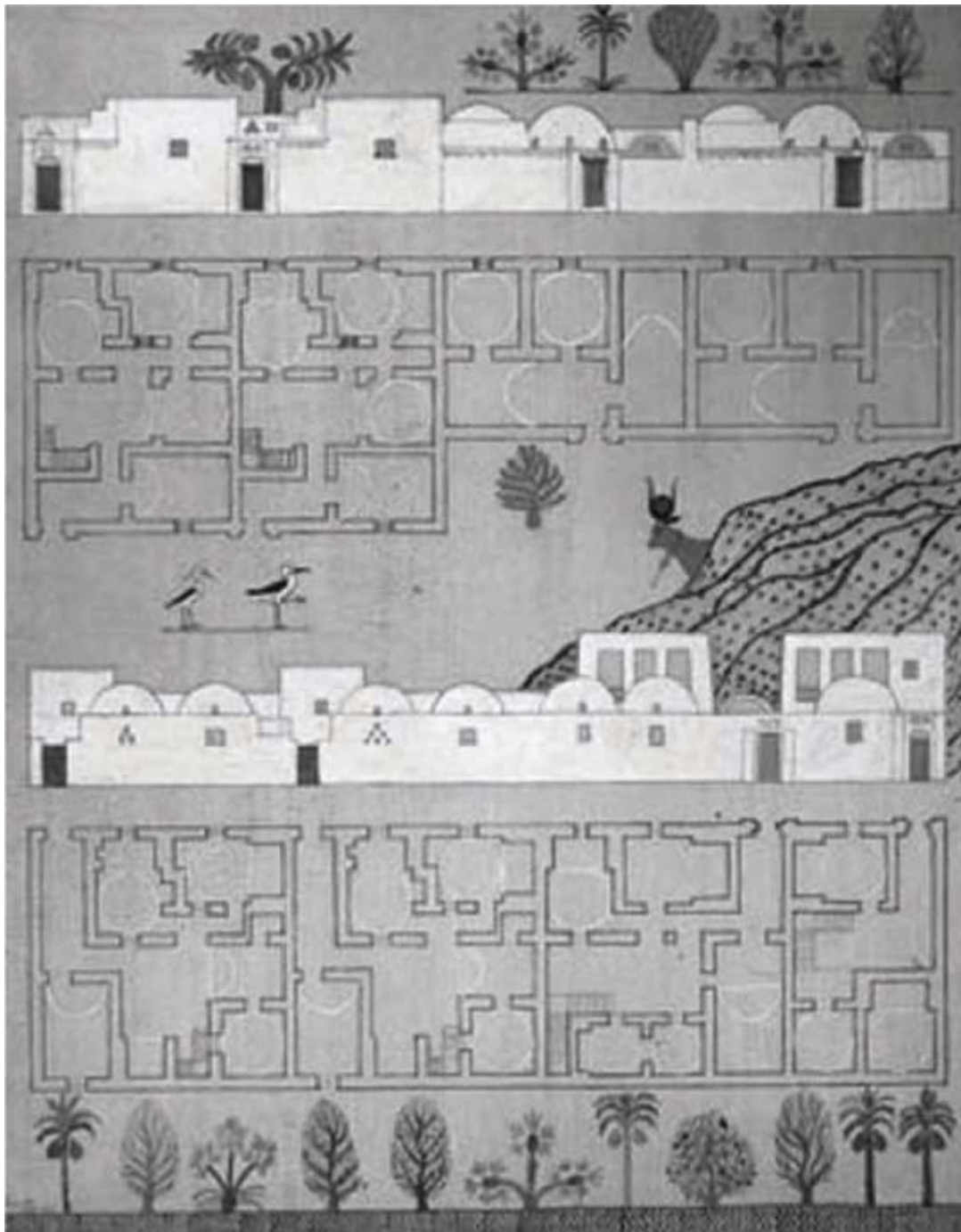
²⁴ Any attempt to represent or translate the “other” into one’s own system of reference would be an assimilation of the incommensurable into the familiar. Rather than the delusional attempts to “let the other(s) speak for himself,”²⁵ Spivak proposed Derrida’s *continuous deferral* theory as a much more viable strategy in order to “resist and critique “recognition” of the Third World through “assimilation.”²⁶ This continuous suspension theory demanded admitting the necessity of representing the “non-West,” while simultaneously questioning the very possibility of this representation. Thus it meant that the confrontation with postcolonial problems necessitated a much deeper critique of the Self.

Nowhere did this argument find a better reflection in architectural theory than in Gülsüm Nalbantoğlu’s “Toward Postcolonial Openings: Rereading Sir Banister Fletcher’s *History of Architecture*.” Unlike the reassessment of Fletcher’s book through a critique of

Orientalism referred to earlier, Nalbantoğlu's critical rereading was grounded on the "recognition" of the unrepresentability of the "other," elaborated by Spivak, and the differentiation between *difference* and *diversity*, elaborated by Homi Bhabha. In "Commitment to Theory," Bhabha defined cultural *diversity* as a category of comparative studies based on the "pre-given cultural contents and customs ... giv[ing] rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity."²⁷ Cultural *difference* on the other hand, "focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the *name* of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation."²⁸ For a postcolonial critic placed in a poststructuralist background, the notion of cultural diversity gives way to the delusion that one can represent all cultures within one's own system of reference, whereas the notion of cultural difference implies the impossibility of this comparison and smooth translation. For critics who want to resist the recognition of the "non-West" simply through assimilation into the mainstream system of reference, it is *difference* not *diversity* that has to be underlined. Thus, the categories of "historical" and "non-historical" used by Fletcher to represent "Western" and "non-Western" countries assume that these cultures are *diverse* and comparable using "Western" tools. In Nalbantoğlu's words, "the underlying premise in [Fletcher's book] is that cultures can be aligned on the same plane of reference; compared and contrasted by the tools of the historian."²⁹ This premise of cultural diversity "covers over, however, issues of incommensurable difference and problems of representation that prevail at every cultural encounter."³⁰ Nevertheless, according to Nalbantoğlu, Fletcher's book is still useful, because it overtly exposes a fundamental difficulty in representing the "other." The reader realizes in the book the "other's" untranslatability. "In his analysis of non-Western architectures, Fletcher introduces his readers to such terms as non-historical and grotesque, which disturb the logos of the text. He exposes what exceeds and cannot be contained by [his own] framework."³¹

There are a number of contemporary buildings that can be better appreciated through the poststructuralist trajectory of postcolonial theory. One common misunderstanding is the assumption that the only resistance to the Eurocentric canon is radical regionalism (a term already loaded with connotations based on European developments), usually attributed to the building practice of architects such as Hassan Fathy or Abdel Wahed El' Wakil, as if they performed in a self-contained and isolated context in their countries (

[Figure 6.8](#)). Postcolonial theory simultaneously seeks to challenge this preconception, and it might be worth recalling Said's own discomfort over the misuse of his book for the purposes of Arab nationalism. While regionalism might be one response among many, I would instead like to cite two authors who interpreted Jean Nouvel's and Charles Correa's buildings through poststructuralist postcolonial theory. Nouvel's Arab World Institute in Paris, which was expected to represent "Arab culture" in France, exposes instead the impossibility of this task in the face of a rising consciousness of Orientalism. John Biln argued that Nouvel and more pertinently the exhibition designers successfully develop a critical strategy because they "seem resolutely self-critical, skeptical of representation but convinced of its necessity, locked in the same but in pursuit of self-difference." The designers achieve this, Biln argued, by representing the "Arab culture" always "as reflections of the West, rather than truths of the East." Deliberate distortions of the museum objects, mixed reflections and superimpositions of the references to "West" and "East" challenge conventional representation modes that presumably capture the "truth" of the exhibited object ([Figure 6.9](#)).³²



6.8 Hasan Fathy, Gouache on paper for New Gourna, Egypt, 1945–48

Vikramaditya Prakash revealed a similar critical strategy in Charles Correa’s Jawahar Kala Kendra project in India (Figure 6.10). A question that disturbs most “non-Western” architects, Prakash reminded, is the burden of identity, namely the expectation that a “non-Western” architect represents his/her identity in buildings, while no such requirement holds for European or North American architects. In Prakash’s eyes, Correa responded to this expectation by offering an alternative, but without pretending that it does not exist: “For those of ‘us’ caught in the double bind of asserting a different regional identity and simultaneously preventing its normative essentialization ... I would

suggest that this desire for anchoring is best left suspended.” Prakash found Correa’s project important because the architect neither denies the importance of the question of identity nor seeks to represent the presumably “true” and “unchanging” Indian identity. Rather Correa “parodies the impossible stereotype ‘Indian’ by suspending it within distancing quotation marks.”³³ The critical strategy Biln and Prakash found in Nouvel’s and Correa’s projects is the suspension of any definition of a particular identity despite the acknowledgment of its necessity for resisting cultural colonization.



6.9 Jean Nouvel, Exhibition in Arab World Institute, Paris, France, 1981–87, photo by George Fessy

These examples notwithstanding, poststructuralist postcolonial theory has best worked to expose the *exclusions* of Architecture, rather than offering ideas easily translatable into practice. *Postcolonial Space(s)*, edited by Gülsüm Nalbantoğlu and C.T. Wong in 1997, is a collection of articles questioning several layers of exclusion—the exclusions based on geography, gender, race and class—from historiography as well as from the profession of architecture. In this book, the word colonial is used metaphorically and the area of “postcoloniality” is broadened to include women, minorities or non-architect builders, in addition to “non-Western” and colonized subjects. In Nalbantoğlu’s words:



6.10 Charles Correa, Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur, India, 1986–91

writing postcoloniality in architecture does not merely entail an engagement with previously colonized cultures ... [but] with the boundaries that guard architecture's cultural and disciplinary presuppositions;

*boundaries that remain intact through certain exclusionary practices, that remain unquestioned once the institutional structure of the discipline is established. Writing postcoloniality in architecture questions architecture's intolerance to difference, to the unthought, to its outside.*³⁴

Placing the postcolonial quest in a much broader context where the basic disciplinary and professional boundaries of Architecture are problematized is the strongest contribution of this approach.

However, it may also turn out to be its weakest. Writing the history of exclusions—and only of exclusions—is actually the only appropriate step for a theory that grounds itself on the criticism that the excluded is unspeakable. In Nalbantoğlu and Wong's words, “recognizing that the repressed other can never be entirely contained in a given symbolic system—[these articles] emphasize exclusions and specific mechanisms of repression.”³⁵ However, the logical conclusion of an assertion that the “non-Western” cannot be represented in a Western language may lead to a strategic trap. The postcolonial quest itself becomes an impossible project of speaking the unspeakable, translating the untranslatable. The representative speakers *for* the “non-West” (but not *of* the “non-West,” since this is impossible according to this theory) should admit that they themselves are situated in the area of the speakable, by virtue of the very fact that they are speaking. However, they can speak about the “other”—the unspeakable—only if they contradict their own assertion that the “other” is unspeakable. It should follow that repeating the unspeakable and untranslatable nature of the “other” is all they will do, unless the given language itself within which they are also situated is deconstructed. Their approach escapes self-contradiction only if they admit—which they do—to their theory's narrow boundaries in the present and ambitious plans for the future. Continuous repetition of the same argument, the argument that the “other” cannot speak, becomes the sole (practical) strategy for the present. All attempts to let the other speak or translate the other's language are bound to be annihilated by the impossibility (or the extreme difficulty) in this attempt itself. In its constant repetition, the theory thus runs the risk of ending in self-annihilation and self-marginalization.

There are also limits in transferring Spivak's argument to architectural criticism. The content of the subaltern shifted depending on the context in Spivak's article, making it a much more layered concept than an abstraction. In the beginning of the text, one read about the unrepresentability of the “non-Western” within the reified frames of the Western thought, about the untranslatability of the “non-Western” concerns into Western

languages. Later in the text, Spivak developed the argument for the subaltern, which she defined as a group that could be identified with neither the dominant foreign nor the élite indigenous groups of India. Towards the end of the text, she further specified the question as the possibility for the “subaltern (woman)” to speak. Working with the Sati story, Spivak narrated the irresolvable dilemma a widow faced in India under the pressures of the nationalist groups that demanded her to keep tradition alive by killing herself after her husband’s death on one side, and the colonialist groups that claimed to be “saving brown women from brown men” on the other. The widow is left merely with the option of either supporting the nationalist groups by dying or the colonialist groups by living. Being pressed by the colonialist ideologies of the dominant foreign groups from one side, and the nationalist ideologies of the élite indigenous groups on the other, Spivak showed, the possibility of the voice of subaltern women evaporated in between. However, in the case of architectural criticism, it would be doubtful to remake this argument by dropping the class and gender issues. In their own countries at least, “non-Western” architects are not exactly like Spivak’s subalterns who inherently cannot represent themselves, but they are more often than not part or catalysts of dominant groups. While the argument about the unrepresentability of the “non-West” is still relevant in the context of the Eurocentric canon, as it exposes the difficulty of a truly global architecture, it loses its convincing power when transferred to the question of representing a “non-Western” architect in his /her own city.

This leaves a theory that focuses on untranslatability with the highly expanded scope of challenging Architecture with a capital A, rather than suggesting critical strategies toward immediate practice. Concluding with a comment by Nalbantoğlu:

*I think that one of the most significant lessons that postcolonial theory offers to the architectural sphere is the identification of “architecture” with a particular trajectory of Western history ... For what is at stake here is the very category of architecture, the disciplinary boundaries of which are delineated at a particular time in a particular place. Postcolonial perspectives reveal that when other architectures enter the grand narrative of the architectural discipline (i.e., the canon) they find themselves always already inscribed with the premises of the latter. The naming of other architectures with the already existing canonical tools of the discipline marks the erasure of any possibility to think the discipline differently. This is hardly surprising as the canon constitutes the very language of architecture, i.e., its symbolic identity. It sets the limits for architectural representability. Postcolonial theory, by its insistence on radical alterity, offers insights for critical openings that destabilize the very terms that the discipline takes for granted.*³⁶

The second approach—which may be called the *humanist trajectory of postcolonial theory*—is partly motivated by the aspiration to find an alternative to some of the uncompromising consequences of poststructuralist thought. Giving past cross-cultural encounters and intertwined histories their due acknowledgment, this approach questions the premise of untranslatability and the existence of “radical alterity” itself. One need not be imposing the Western symbolic system whenever coming to terms with the “non-West,” due to the already existing shared historical values, and the promise of constructing future ones. It is better to help undo the construction of a significant part of the globe as the “other” of the Western self, than to underline difference for the sake of challenging assimilation. If its Eurocentrism can be undone, humanism is still a more productive alternative, Said argued, and aspired for the *construction* of a cosmopolitan humanism as the next step for postcolonial theory.³⁷ Wallerstein noted that the real objective was “a reunited, and thereby non-Eurocentric, structure of knowledge ... and a more inclusively universalist vision of human possibility.”³⁸ In the field of architecture, those who emphasize histories of cross-cultural relations and who support translations between “West” and “non-West” reinforce this approach.³⁹

Returning to the question of the architectural canon, Sibel Bozdoğan challenged Bhabha’s and Nalbantoğlu’s emphasis on *difference* in place of *diversity*:

*But if difference is the powerful critical tool of postcolonial theory to pry open the western canon and to show what is wrong with it, the next step can only be either getting rid of the canon or trying to reconfigure it in a better way. Assuming that it is the second option we are after, it seems to me that an emphasis on both difference and diversity is necessary – an emphasis as much on what can be shared across cultures as on what is different. To hold these two seemingly contradictory impulses is our only way out if we don’t want cultural difference to be reified into essentialist and timeless discourses of identity ... [T]he fact that a work of art/architecture is produced by groups hitherto excluded from the canon, does not automatically and uncritically endorse these works ... [I]t is only when these works reach the level of skill and sophistication commensurable with the western canon that they actually begin to transform the canon.*⁴⁰

Apart from suggesting an emphasis on intertwined histories, Bozdoğan argues in this passage that only when a non-Western architect “reaches the level” of Western “skill and sophistication,” can s/he be appreciated and press the boundaries of the canon. This proposition can remain postcolonial only under the premise that a “non-Western” architect *can* actually reach Western standards (which to be sure are always in flux), because s/he already shares them. The main premise of the humanist postcolonial critic is

that there are nevertheless globally shared criteria that are not necessarily Eurocentric. In other words, a non-Eurocentric universalism must have been possible for this approach to be theoretically consistent. However, this premise may turn out to be too fragile. What exactly are these standards? How, where and by whom have they been defined and are still getting defined? Aren't they dependent on the received hierarchies of the profession? Is taste—which seems to be the disowned yet principal criterion for inclusion and exclusion in the canon—a shared value? Such questions wait to be resolved for this position to become theoretically convincing (as Bozdoğan admits).⁴¹

The humanist trajectory of postcolonial theory, nonetheless, may have a much stronger chance for a practical impact in a globalizing world. As globalization continues to shape architecture, we have yet to see if the boom in transnational practice in China, the Gulf region, or ex-Soviet countries will bring a real difference. One of the most telling examples is Rem Koolhaas' own transformation from Orientalist beginnings ([Figure 6.11](#)) to what appears to be a more sincere engagement with the problems and potentials of “non-Western” contexts, or at least the acknowledgment of the necessity of a more research-based architectural practice.⁴² Perhaps in a globalizing world, the viable alternative is to improve the notion of universality from below and construct a new non-Eurocentric humanism, without skipping the poststructuralist challenge (hence a third way out of the two postcolonial theories). In any event, it seems that a rejuvenated humanism can only escape some previous exclusive notions of universality if it can fruitfully come to terms with postcolonial theories.



6.11 Rem Koolhaas and AMO, Regime of the ¥€\$, c.2000

NOTES

- 1 This chapter is an updated and condensed version of my article: Esra Akcan, “Critical Practice in the Global Era: Question Concerning “Other” Geographies,” *Architectural Theory Review* 7, no. 1 (2002): 37–58.
- 2 Theme issues on rethinking the canon in the journals of the two major professional associations serve as examples. *Art Bulletin*, published by the College Art Association (CAA), reserved its June 1996 issue (vol. 78, no. 2), and *The Journal of Architectural Education* published by Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) its May 1999 issue (vol. 52, no. 4).
- 3 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Eurocentrism and its Avatars: The Dilemmas of Social Science,” *New Left Review* 226 (November/December 1997): 93–109.

- 4 Ibid., 96–7.
- 5 Ibid., 100.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage, 1978, 1994).
- 8 Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 9 Sir Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture: On the Comparative Method* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901, 1943).
- 10 Said, *Orientalism*, 206, 208.
- 11 Mark Crinson, *Empire Building: Orientalism & Victorian Architecture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 12 Ruskin quoted in Crinson, *Empire Building*, 60.
- 13 Brian Brace Taylor, "Rethinking Colonial Architecture," *Mimar* 13 (1984): 16–25; Nezar Alsayyad (ed.), *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise* (Aldershot, Avebury, 1992).
- 14 See especially: Janet Abu-Lughod, *Rabat: Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980); Paul Rabinow, *French Modern* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1980); Thomas R. Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French* (Paris, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and Cambridge University Press, 1990); Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Zeynep Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997); Jean-Louis Cohen, Monique Eleb, *Casablanca: Colonial Myths and Architectural Ventures* (NY: Monacelli Press, 2002); Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003); Brian McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Colonial Libya* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* (NY: Routledge, 2007).
- 15 Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, 139.
- 16 Zeynep Çelik, "Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism," *Assemblage* 17 (April 1992): 59–77; Michele Lamprakos, "Le Corbusier and Algiers: The Plan Obus as Colonial Urbanism," in Nezar Alsayyad (ed.), *Forms of Dominance*, 183–210.
- 17 Lamprakos, "Le Corbusier and Algiers," 183–210.
- 18 See especially Çelik, "Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism," 59–77.
- 19 For Orientalist painting, see: Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). For Orientalist photography, see: Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan (eds), *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2013).

- 20 *L'invention d'un architecte: Le voyage en Orient de Le Corbusier* (Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier, 2013).
- 21 Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East*, trans. Ivan Zaknic (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).
- 22 Esra Akcan, "L'héritage des photographies panoramiques d'Istanbul," (Le Corbusier and the Legacy of Istanbul's Photographic Panoramas), in *L'invention d'un architecte: Le voyage en Orient de Le Corbusier*, 240–255.
- 23 Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.
- 24 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 280.
- 25 Ibid., 294.
- 26 Ibid., 292.
- 27 Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," in *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 34.
- 28 Ibid., 34.
- 29 Gülsüm Nalbantoğlu, "Toward Postcolonial Openings: Rereading Sir Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture* ," *Assemblage* 35 (April 1998): 13.
- 30 Ibid., 13.
- 31 Ibid., 15.
- 32 John Biln, "(De)forming Self and Other: Toward an Ethics of Distance," in G.B. Nalbantoğlu and C.T. Wong (eds), *Postcolonial Space(s)* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 30–32.
- 33 Vikramaditya Prakash, "Identity Production in Postcolonial Indian Architecture: Re-Covering What We Never Had," in G.B. Nalbantoğlu and C.T. Wong (eds), *Postcolonial Space(s)*, 51–2.
- 34 Nalbantoğlu, "Toward Postcolonial Openings," 15.
- 35 G.B. Nalbantoğlu and C.T. Wong (eds), *Postcolonial Space(s)* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 9.
- 36 "Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoğlu," Text in "e-Forum. 'Other' Geographies Under Globalization," ed. Esra Akcan, *Domus m* 9 (Feb–March 2001).
- 37 Edward Said, "The Relevance of Humanism to Contemporary America" Lecture at Columbia University, New York, February 16–18, 2000; Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2004).
- 38 Wallerstein, "Eurocentrism and its Avatars," 106.
- 39 New scholarship on "non-Western" architectural history is growing. In addition to recent books on modern architectures of individual countries including Turkey, Japan, China, India, Iran, Brazil and Indonesia,

especially relevant among those that bring together different regions are: Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi (eds), *Modern Architecture and the Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); Jilly Traganou and Miodrag Mitrasinovic (eds), *Travel Space and Architecture* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009); Duanfang Lu (ed.), *Third World Modernism: Architecture, Development and Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); J.F. Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino (eds), *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Mark M. Jarzombek, Vikramaditya Prakash and Francis D.K. Ching, *A Global History of Architecture*, 2nd edn (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2011).

40 Sibel Bozdoğan, “Architectural History in Professional Education: Reflections on Postcolonial Challenges to the Modern Survey,” *JAЕ* 52, no. 4 (May 1999): 207–15. Quotation: 209, 212.

41 Ibid., 212.

42 See: Esra Akcan, “Reading the Generic City: Retroactive Manifestoes for Global Cities of the Twenty-First Century,” *Perspecta Yale Architectural Journal* 41 (2008): 144–52; Esra Akcan, “World, Open City?” *Architectural Design (AD)*, Special Issue on *Islam and Architecture* (November 2004): 98–104.