WHAT IF? WHAT NEXT?

SPECULATIONS ON HISTORY'S FUTURES

SESSION 3A

COUNTERING THE CANON/S

Living Cultures: Recovering Indigenous Narratives in Architectural History

THE DENIAL OF THE ORDINARY

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"A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal."

Nikolaus Pevsner

The above quote encapsulates quite aptly the arguments of this paper: the narrative of inferiority and the dissent of the everyday. In the global south countries, even though informal settlements are the primary means of answering the demand for affordable housing, the dominant response is to eradicate, relocate or replace them. In all these discourses, these habitats are not considered as housing. They are seen as a form whose materiality and aesthetic has to be transcended; the houses of the majority of the population is not worthy of being called architecture. While informal settlements are generally considered as a manifestation of the neoliberal era, however, the informal way of planning is not a recent phenomenon. The self-organised process of planning had been the primary mode of producing housing from antiquity, yet they never found a place in the canon of architectural history. Most western architectural history had been written through the practice of excluding the 'architecture without architects'. And when there was an attempt to include the lost voices, it was created through the narrative of the 'primitive', the 'ordinary', the 'non-design' and the 'temporary'. In this paper, we question the epistemic injustice embedded in the writing of architectural history. What were the criteria of inclusion? And what was excluded? We question the construction of history. We argue for a theoretical space for including the silenced, erased architecture of the 'everyday' and the dominant mode of urban production in the global south countries.

Introduction

How many of us are lucky to live in 'architecture'? How many of us live in what would be only called a 'shelter', that has failed to transcend into the extraordinary? Billions of people, in reality, live in such places. Take informal settlements as an example. It is estimated that 55.9% of Sub-Saharan Africa's urban population resides in informal settlements. Likewise, the figures are 31.3% for South Asia, and 21.1% for Latin America.[1] These settlements are the primary means of answering the demand for affordable housing in the global South cities. The dominant response in many cases so far has been to eradicate, relocate or replace them; each reaction considered them as inferior. We use informal settlement here in a broader sense of a mode of architectural production beyond architects or designers and not as a euphemism for 'slums.'[2]

While informal settlements are generally considered as a manifestation of the neoliberal era, the informal way of planning and building is anything but recent. Known by various names – vernacular, tribal, folk or traditional – this socio-cultural production of housing had been the primary mode of designing and building from antiquity, yet it never found a place in the canon of architectural history. Most western architectural history had been written through the practice of excluding the 'architecture without architects'. In much of architectural discourse, such habitats are not considered as architecture with a capital A; the houses of the majority of the population is relegated to mere buildings or a shelter. They are seen as a form whose materiality and aesthetic has to be transcended. In this paper, we trace this particular form of 'othering', a subjugation of the 'building' under the dogma of 'architecture'. We see this is a form of epistemic injustice, an erasure of the everyday and a denial of the ordinary. This paper is not *of* history, but rather about what history *does* by including/excluding. We speculate on the repercussions of such denials and open up new fields of inquiry for the future of architectural history.

In this paper, we frame vernacular and informal settlements as two intertwining manifestations of the ordinary. These two strands are seldom mentioned in the same breath, although many have noted the underlying similarity between the two. Acknowledging their difference based on socio-political and economic context, we argue that these settlements have much more in common than the aesthetic; they share a structural suppression. Both are seen as an opposition to modernist planning ideals. The dominant narrative about vernacular architecture has been that they are primitive, ordinary and everyday. Similarly, discourse on informal settlements conceptualises these contexts as unplanned, non-designed, basic and temporary. In all these arguments, these settlements are seen as the other of the formally built architecture.

We use the conceptual framework of 'othering' to explore the processes of exclusion and call attention to the categories that were used to leave out these settlements. Through our research, we hope to reveal the colonial tendencies in the framing of the different terms associated with the settlements – primitive, ordinary, everyday, non-design and unplanned. Language is itself a manifestation of power and can polarise certain ways of thinking. Hence, the use of language cannot be separated from the position of power and biases perpetuated by practices of knowledge production. By unpacking the language used to discuss these settlements, we want to question the construction of architectural history. What were the criteria of inclusion? And what was excluded? While Western architectural-historical canon has largely excluded these settlements, we question even the partial moments where they do appear. Why is the vernacular and the informal often exoticised? We highlight the epistemic injustice embedded in the writing of architectural history and argue for a theoretical space for including the othered vernacular and informal architecture in their own terms.

The conceptual frame sits within the larger methodology of employing critical analysis[3] for the paper. By locating the language around the 'vernacular' and 'informal', or its absence in architectural historical discourse, we firstly trace their different modes of othering. Particular major texts that form the canon are given special attention in this process to understand the context in which such practices have occurred. We are aware that in many western institutes, some of these texts are not taught anymore. While digressing from the canon is an important step

in decentring knowledge production, we argue that it is not enough. In order to reimagine academia, these texts have to be re-read, problematised and called out for their colonial tendencies. The methodology that we adopt – the chronological unpacking of the writing of history – shows us how each era was built upon the colonial practices of the earlier. Secondly, to identify the repercussions of the various forms of othering, we employ speculative analysis that "frames methodology itself as a process of asking inventive, that is, more provocative questions".[4] This paper is an act of problematising the history of architectural history so that the conditions for a more just future become possible. Historicising is a political act, and what gets excluded from the writing of history gets erased from the architectural imaginations of future generations.

The 'Other'

The 'other' and the process of 'othering' is an epistemological concept that refers to how certain groups and contexts are differentiated, excluded and reduced to a category relegated as different to the dominant.[5] While the concept of the 'other' and notion of 'otherness' has been employed by various fields ranging from sociology, philosophy, anthropology, gender studies, feminist and race studies, and there are differences in the construction of the arguments, yet, in all these disciplines, the other is located outside of what is perceived as influential and powerful. In a way, 'othering' is a process of marginalisation by drawing boundaries to determine what can be included and excluded.

Discourses of othering often are constructed through the use of concepts like superior and inferior, inside and outside. The other exists and is defined relative to the identity that it has been differentiated from.[6] Hence power relations are an integral part of the creation of the other. Othering involves the use of stereotypes. In some cases, it is achieved through the representation of the other as exotic, mysterious as in the case of the oriental. However, in most instances, it is done by dehumanising, discriminating and stigmatising, for example, religion, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation.[7] Othering creates boundaries and social meanings that get reinforced over time by the continued use of the categories. When othering gets institutionalised, then the prejudicial practices amplify, which leads to an inequitable and unjust society.

We use the work of Jean-François Staszak[8] and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak[9] to frame our arguments about the other and othering. Staszak identified two strands of otherness perpetuated by Western thinking. First, the binary logic that creates dichotomous concepts, for example, legal/illegal, formal/informal, urban/rural, developed/underdeveloped and many others. The second otherness was produced through colonisation. The West transported its value system to the colonies, which was further reinforced through universal claims of knowledge and power. He argues that discourses that universalise concepts lead to a hierarchical organisation of societies. An example of that would be the concepts of progress, development or the civilised, where the Global North becomes the benchmark for the Global South.

In a similar vein, Spivak highlights two different forms of otherness in her groundbreaking article "Can the subaltern speak?"-- one perpetrated by the West and the other perpetuated by the elite. She argues that the epistemic injustice of colonisation that established the superiority of West continues to be propagated by the elite from both the global South and North. Questioning the production of knowledge, she points to universities, organisations and discourses that silence the subaltern. She urges us to think about the power dynamics of representing, speaking for and theorising the other. Taking the cue from Spivak and Staszak, we examine broadly the canons of architectural history to identify the practices of othering.

Where is the Ordinary?

We start our discussion with the *Ten Books on Architecture*, dating back to the first century B.C. Vitruvius' gift to the field of architecture was his three principles - *utilitas, firmitas,* and *venustas* which translates to commodity, firmness and delight. In many ways, the focus on sturdiness and aesthetics is his legacy. The negation of the ordinary is evident from the content page as well as

his use of language. Out of the 321 pages of this thick book, only three and a half pages are dedicated to the humble abode. Here, Vitruvius starts by comparing the early human being with wild beasts who lived in caves and woods and whose proximity to nature was equated with savagery.[10] Describing the early forms of dwelling as shelter, and huts, he qualifies them as a house only when the foundations, brick and stone walls with timber roofs appear.

Order is the other dominant idea that was communicated throughout the book. Jeremy Till points out that Vitruvius' association of architecture to imperial power has had a big impact on how we perceive architecture.[11] While these are outdated ideas, the pervasiveness of this thought continues to influence architectural discourse. It laid the foundation for the qualities of permanence, beauty, and order to be considered essential for any built form to qualify as architecture. Architecture became the practice of imposing order by eradicating and modifying those that are considered as unruly or appearing messy.

From Vitruvius, we move onto the Renaissance period, the time of Leone Battista Alberti and Andrea Palladio and their extraordinary architecture of churches and villas. The fundamental principles of this period were symmetry, proportion and functionalism. The perfect forms and the grand buildings of this period which were documented and spread through the printing press became the vocabulary of architecture. In Alberti's focus on beauty and functionalism, one can identify the concept of purity that can be traced back to Plato.

The disconnect with the everyday and the ordinary was evident in the Renaissance writings. Christy Anderson points out that, Alberti's book titled *De Re Aedificatoria* translates to "on architectural things" implying his power over deciding what counts as architecture.[12] It was written by and for the elite of that period; penned in Latin, the language understood only by the privileged. Anderson also highlights the use of the words 'early modern' and Alberti's theorisation of architecture as a process that starts by conceptualising the design of the building before constructing it. The term 'early modern' insinuates that anything before this was pre-modern and designing and preparing plans as a precursor to building meant those built without these steps can be reduced to the category of non-architecture.

The idea that an architect has the moral responsibility of controlling the different areas of the city in order to design it can be traced back to Alberti's comparison of the process of designing the house to the city, coupled with the emphasis on the harmony of parts to the whole. This line of thinking led to the notion that the architect is a god-like figure whose job is to save the city through the act of designing and planning. At the same time, the quest for visual purity gradually translated to the architecture of cleanliness; by removing the disorderly, irregular and the non-conforming. What followed was the conflation of visual order with social order and the disastrous consequences of modernity.

Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture*, originally written in 1895, is another key architectural text. The first book was a documentation of the European architectural styles; however, the fourth edition of the book included a section titled 'The Non-Historical Styles', that covered Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Central American architecture. While the eurocentrism in architectural history is very apparent, it is also the dichotomous reading of historical architecture vs non-historical that we want to highlight as an act of othering. Samer Richani points to the 'Tree of architecture' illustration on the front cover of this very popular book that, "depicts the sturdy upright trunk bearing the names of European styles. [Whereas] the 'non-historical styles' are supported by the Western trunk, with no room to grow past what appears to be the 7th century."[13] For Richani, this diagram is a reminder of West's hegemony over architectural history.

In the earlier paragraphs, we have highlighted the othering tendencies that have been part of architectural historicity, whose eventual consequence was modernism. The principles of modernist architecture of 'ordering', creating an 'architectural harmony' through a hierarchical structuring of space, can all be traced back to the key texts in architectural history. Zygmunt

Bauman describes modernity as a practice of designing away difference, where the modern state legitimises specific visions, built forms and eliminates the ambivalent in the name of coherence.[14] In a sense, the key concept of 'ordering' was the erasure of the 'other'. In the words of Bauman:

> The struggle for order is not a fight of one definition against another, of one way of articulating reality against a competitive proposal. It is a fight of determination against ambiguity, of semantic precision against ambivalence, of transparency against obscurity, clarity against fuzziness. The other of order is not another order: chaos is its only alternative. The other of order is the miasma of the indeterminate and unpredictable. The other is the uncertainty, that source and archetype of all fear.[15]

Le Corbusier's significant role in the architecture of cleanliness is well documented and amply debated. Hence we will skip Corbusier's early ideology and jump to his later works. While Corbusier's interest in the ordinary and the vernacular was noticeable in his writings from the second half of his life, it was eclipsed by his call for standardisation and mechanisation of living in the early period. Similarly, one could sense the patronising and colonial way of framing his arguments about the ordinary in his writings. In his book, *Precisions,* he writes, "I found these blacks basically good: good hearted. …. The limits they had learned to impose on their needs, their capacity for dreaming, their candidness resulted in their houses being always admirably sited, ….. their rooms largely adequate."[16] In the same book, he goes on to say that, "it is an excellent thing to keep an element of the savage alive in us." And we will end by quoting one of Corbusier's most telling declarations, "to create architecture is to put into order." This order he refers to is only a very specific ordering, a version that follows a certain path, and excludes any other form of order. The ordinary, the vernacular and informal, automatically is relegated in such a frame. The manifestation of such narratives in design is apparent in Corbusier's vision for Algiers in Plan Obus, where the existing old city fabric is erased to place his utopian architectural forms, pure and glistening in the Mediterannean sun, eclipsing the ordinary city below.

Next, we unpack Edmund Bacon's classic book *Design of Cities* to talk about the modernist period. Bacon very clearly states the role of this book in his preface, "[it] is rich with ideas that apply to other cities in all parts of the world where there is a desire for a finer physical expression of man's [sic] inner aspirations."[17] Here, he not only affirms the superiority of American architecture but also stresses the inferiority of other cultures and contexts which do not desire the aesthetically pleasing and ordered architecture. Critiquing Bacon's book, Till points to the titles of the sections that capture the essence of the book - the narrative of order in the city.[18] His titles refer to Vitruvius and Corbusier, and one can see how history becomes the tools by which a certain narrative is propagated, with the canon appearing to provide legitimacy to the social acts of exclusion. Till then focuses on two illustrations in the book, one by Piranesi and the other by Bacon. Piranesi's *Veduta di Roma* paintings show the ordinary and everyday life along with the broken built form and ruins of the city. In contrast, Bacon's illustration is an edited, cleaned up version, devoid of people, materiality as well as context.

The trend of legitimisation of the extraordinary and aesthetic purity as architecture was perhaps best articulated by Nikolaus Pevsner in his famous quote,

> A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.[19]

The language becomes an instrument of power that creates a separating line for a building to be worthy of being considered as architecture. He invokes visibility and aesthetics as his decisive factor. The cathedral is visible, has an imposing presence whereas the bicycle shed is anonymous and quotidian. Pevsner's part in othering was pivotal because of his contribution to the discourse; the long list of buildings he chronicled in his architectural guides and the various journals he published and edited. His sentiment expresses the power of the profession and its gatekeepers. It affirms history's role in validating the extraordinary and disconnection from the ordinary and the everyday. In other words, what is historicised shapes the narrative of what is good architecture and what is not even architecture?

The Vernacular and the Informal

To bring some specificity to the discussion and articulate the ordinary better, we pay particular attention to the terms 'vernacular' and 'informal'. Vernacular comes from the Latin word *vernaculus*, meaning native, domestic, indigenous, originally referring to the slaves.[20] While the use of the term has evolved over the years and its negative connotation has disappeared, its establishment as the other of mainstream architecture remains. In the case of the term informal, it is framed as the other of formal. Both informal settlements and vernacular settlements are described and theorised in contrast to the dominant form of architecture.

Focusing on the vernacular, one can see that the term has been associated with words like primitive, tribal and traditional. The concept of 'traditional' implies that the society and people in question are not yet modern. They are primitive since they haven't been civilised and they haven't progressed to the West's value system. Staszak emphasises that the coloniser considers itself superior to the colonised since it assesses it as a burden upon itself to civilise the uncivil; hence any knowledge produced by them will reinforce this colonial stereotype. He also draws our attention to the continuation of the primitive ideology for the sake of tourism. The vernacular is exoticised and romanticised as a pristine, untouched space. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* had written about the patronising way the west viewed the east.[21]

Upton had argued that the dichotomies are a means to other the non-professionals from the professionals.[22] In every dichotomy, the professionally designed assumes a level of sophistication and extra-ordinariness from its routinised and anonymous counterpart. It is a tactic to claim and legitimise the architectural space by creating the lesser other. Hence vernacular architecture is the architecture of the other, conceptualised to validate the exclusive domain of the architecture with a capital A, designed by professionals.[23] Vernacular is a catch-all term that homogenises everything that is not the professional into one category. Colin Ward writes about the architects who were othered from the profession when they practised the other form of architecture, giving examples of Hassan Fathy and Charles Correa.[24] Similarly, he describes Rudofsky's experience. While his exhibition titled *Architecture without Architects* was a big success, he was never able to teach the non-pedigreed architecture in North American universities. It remained as the exotic other beyond annals of mainstream historicisation.

While vernacular has a connotation of the past, informal settlements are often seen as a recent phenomenon that is caused by, or at least coincides with, the rise of the neoliberal economy.[25] However, Sassen reminds us that 'informality has long existed'.[26] AlSayyad suggests that it is indeed formality itself which is the 'new' mode; informality being neither a new analytical concept nor a new urban process.[27] Manifestations of informal settlements can be traced back to instances in Greek city-states, where vacant or derelict temple or public property was seized. Rome had its 'tuguria' — informal lean-to structures as well as illegal neighbourhoods built by people. Braudel reports thousands of homeless living around shacks around the Paris city wall for centuries.[28] Goff, in *Shantytown USA: Forgotten landscapes of the working poor,*[29] records the history of informal towns, full-fledged self-built urban neighbourhoods across the United States, including a 20-block stretch of Manhattan. These shantytowns (also termed Hoovervilles) in New York were reported to be much preferable than the private tenement houses in terms of slum conditions. In his wide-ranging study of pre-modern Arab-Islamic and Mediterannaean cities[30], Hakim notes how informality has been the dominant mode of urban production throughout history. This is reiterated by Turner in his seminal work *Housing by People*[31] and by Ward in *Cotters and Squatters: The Hidden History of Housing.*[32]

In essence, the distinction with the vernacular is erased in such a framing. There have long been calls to see informal settlements as a form of urban vernacular.[33] If such is the case, then both the informal and vernacular are only manifestations of the underlying ordinariness, the narrative of inferiority being the point of commonality between the two. The stigmatisation of the informal as 'slums' has been widely noted. Perhaps few books capture such a normative narrative better than Davis's Planet of Slums, an apocalyptic vision of a Dickensian urban future in which the

world is over-run by 'slums'.[34] Drawing inspiration from Victorian-era England and the works by Engles, Davis paints a dualistic vision where urban informality is squarely equated with slums, a looming crisis. His reductive and dualistic reading has even been called 'urban orientalism'.[35]

What's next?

What then is the implication of persistent denial of the ordinary? History's task is nothing short of inventing new futures, as Kundera reminds us, "the past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past." At this concluding point, we can only speculate on the role of this selective historicisation on how the present is constructed through a narrative.[36] The culture of starchitects that we see now perhaps is the manifestation of a long-standing historical narrative that fetishises extraordinary architecture. The value-system implied with the historicity that we have sampled in the paper creates a set of desires that wishes to dispense with the ordinary. In the global South, demolition of old quarters and eviction of slums are common, and they are perpetuated by state and capital that promises to recreate the city in the image of 'modern architecture'. Cities often spend millions on building their own 'Bilbao Guggenheim' instead of upgrading the ordinary. The denial of the ordinary is not only in the annals of architectural history; it is complicit in producing a reality in which the ordinary is neglected.

We can only end with questions regarding the future of history if it allows the hidden, the forgotten, the impermanent, the ordinary a seat at the table of architectural history. What does a democratised history of architecture look like? What happens to the narrative of 'good' architecture beyond the dogma of the gatekeepers? What does it entail for architectural historians who practice their craft in unceded indigenous land, whose architecture has also been othered? If the history of architectural history has been that of othering, perhaps an alternative future begins with acknowledging the ordinary.

Endnotes

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