

DECOLONIZING ARCHITECTURAL PEDAGOGY: TOWARDS CROSS-CULTURALISM

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a critique of architecture school curricula dominated by "Western traditionalists." It reckons with their focus of neutrality, expertise, and scientific rationality as foundation of professional knowledge. These are ideologies of knowledge whose cunning lies in imposing and maintaining a Eurocentric and male-dominated mentality amongst architectural students, despite a selective inclusion of women, people of color, and other underrepresented groups. Against the colonization of the minds of new entrants in the field, the essay presents an approach to decolonizing the architectural mind. By way of entering into the topic, it stakes out a "malleability hypothesis" that questions what is required to defend the discipline and if we, in fact, need to at all.

The discipline of architecture is robust enough to withstand multiple, sometimes competing interpretive frameworks, amongst which the western rational perspective is but one. As a demonstration, it outlines a History of Architecture undergraduate survey based on a broader conception of technology developed with colleagues at the Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative, GAHTC. Taking technologies of globalization (communication and transportation) as the lens through which to look at the history of architecture, the course allows students to see thousands of years of interaction and participation among diverse cultures. The theme also enables us to frame the history of Arab & Bedouin architecture in the context of history of media and technology, as opposed to the traditional framework of religion and primitivism. In so doing, the survey undercuts nationalist histories and spurious philosophies of the genius of a special (western, white) people, still at the heart of many survey books. In addition, our teaching material counters the disciplinary disposition to

privilege the study and scrutiny of sites of power, like cities, by looking at the relationship between centers of power and the pushback they get from village and first society worlds. Our goal is to present students with different ways of attributing meaning to spaces and materials, forms, and buildings. We demonstrate that the construction of meaning is based in competing theories of self (ontology), of knowledge (epistemology), and of the universe (cosmology). Taking aim at our profession's self-understanding, this diversification of forms and roles of architecture across space and time offers a cross-cultural perspective.

Yet, approaching the problem through the vehicle of the survey has its limitations. It is unrealistic to expect students to remember, understand, and parse this radically different perspective without creating structural opportunities in the rest of the curriculum to synthesize, experiment, evaluate, and apply these ideas. The essay concludes with a discussion of changes happening in the University of Utah's overall strategic planning. These are attempting to address this limitation, to go beyond demonstrating the contingency and impoverishment of modern thought towards the generation of new and more inclusive habits of mind of future architects.

A COLONIAL DISCIPLINE

The call for decolonizing architectural pedagogy in this essay requires a preceding consensus among us. We have to agree, in the first place, that architectural education, irrespective of diverse recruitment, is a colonial enterprise. That the 21st-century vocation of channeling the thought and socializing the aspirations of entrants in architectural schools, in every part of the world, is still entrenched in 19th-century colonial mentality. We have to share the cognition that we still dwell and operate out of the fortresses on the seashores

of the colonized world, built between the 15th and 19th centuries, to enable the hegemony of Europe over the rest of us. Despite efforts, the knowledge diffused to those allowed entry into its precarious space is still dominated by what education theorist James A. Banks aptly calls “Western traditionalists.”¹

The profession engendered by Western traditionalists is still defined by middle-aged white men. It is undoubtedly graduating many more women and openly transgender people in the profession than in the 19th century, but Nel Noddings astutely notes that these new members have not yet transformed professional standards. To succeed, they have to *assimilate* to the notion of a “reasonable person,” still informed by male standards of decorum, originality, and looking the part. Likewise, the literature on professional practice, law, codes, and corporate practice is dominated by male theorists. As a result, transgender and “female experience” still “simply disappear.”²

The tremendous strides we have made in critical theory and humanities-oriented studies of the built

environment have been valuable only to a small extent beyond history and theory seminars. They have vociferously critiqued modernity and modern architecture, their repressions and exclusions. Yet, in most coursework and design, we promote modernity, as defined by male European architects and theorists, as the ideal above all else. For decades, postmodern critics have pointed out that formulation of knowledge, even as it has objectivity as the goal, cannot escape being wound up with personal, cultural, and social factors brought into the lab by the researchers. Yet we would be hard-pressed to find courses on building systems, communication, computation, material technologies, green design, and structural techniques to put on the table; the particular values, assumptions, perspectives, and intellectual positions of the educators or authors on the reading list of courses in those courses. Instead everything is taught as neutral and objective knowledge—placing it beyond the pale of critical probing. It would be in the best traditions to find professors who explain why they value technological developments in the European design offices, Western universities, and the most powerful corporate labs



Figure 1: Permanent settlement of a previously nomadic Kabuli family of four brothers and parents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan shows ingenious reuse of airy jute bags and cement bags and other refuse for residences.
Courtesy: Author

over those that are being developed in the mountains of Afghanistan to survive the precarious conditions of its endless war (Figure 1). If both are contemporaneous, both solve immediate afflictions of the modern world, and both are ingenious in contextual response, why is the former enshrined as cutting edge and the latter dubbed as primitive, and left out of syllabi?

Silences of syllabi developed in the tradition of Western empirical sciences indoctrinate students in an insidious ideology. They rhetorically (not scientifically) equate discoveries in nano-technology, self-changing smart materials, and robotic fabrications with “progress.” Here, “progress” has made little improvement on the tradition of the 19th-century concept of history, as a relentless forward march. The presentation of scientific information without a conversation of what is considered worthy of research—how is innovation evaluated, how rigorously is architectural application of material research associated with who benefits, who can afford it—diminishes understanding of the relationship between science and power. The result is training in blindness, bias, and a sense of superiority that has kept “cultural imperialism” and the affluent world’s hegemony alive.³ It also makes it difficult for undergraduates to realize what more and more complex fabrication systems do to the social organization of labor and bargaining rights of unions. The result in this case is a cognitive dissonance between their design intentions and design decisions.

The asymmetrical power of expertise, when veiled under egalitarian ethos of making our artistic services available not just to the paying few but all sections of the global society, crushes fragile ecosystems and ways of being in the world that are at odds with our taste and cognitive structure. And we never realize it. Our curricula’s uncritical appreciation of criticality, lukewarm enthusiasm for difference, and unimaginative love of imagination, has done little more than reproduce colonized minds and imperialistic bodies. Our discipline’s traditional valorization of novelty, monochromatic promotion of diversity of systems of knowledge, and worship of high tech has suffocated the cunning of hand. We are still on the bandwagon of development ideologies, long discredited by critics across the world; however, most architects have not gotten the memo that we need to move from

development mentality to dialogue.

Conversations in classroom, workshop, and labs routinely obfuscate thinking through the role of high tech education in the deskilling and amnesia of modern society. The discussion of the ever-increasing dependence of building, repair, and adaptive-reuse on specialists, and the shrinking ability of communities to build for themselves, needs to rise to the surface. As architects get closer to scientists and lab experiments, design development becomes more convoluted. Thomas Schröpfer notes that it develops research and service centers to keep an eye on innovation in materials and structures.⁴ The more complicated a system, the higher the barrier of entry for previously self-building communities to intervene and take advantage of applications. This leads to what Stephen Moore aptly warns as the disempowering, anti-democratic stimuli embedded in large scale and complex systems of design and construction.⁵ The double-edged relationship of expertise to the democratic project as elucidated by the historian of science Paul Feyerabend is nowhere more valuable than in a profession like architecture.⁶

Before moving to make a case for post-colonial, globally multicultural/cross-cultural curricula, it must be said that this snapshot of the state of architectural education is how it appears to someone whose architectural training has taken place in the post-colonial world, and whose intellectual development has been shaped by the American academy. I belong to a generation of architectural historians whose political consciousness has been shaped by scholarship like Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*. This is not a view of the center from the periphery. I am located neither at one nor the other. The only authorial voice that I can exercise is of a global citizen, and someone who is implicated in the project of training architects herself. Even as my scholarship, teaching, and disciplinary activism aspire to be grounded in scientific method, I do not speak as a “neutral” but as a “socially situated” scientist who aims to achieve objectivity by placing her subjectivity on the table. Position-taking, it must be remembered, is not simply an exercise of individual will and self-awareness. It is something others allow us. It is a collective feat, valued by peers, and encouraged by mentors, publishers, and readers. That I speak here on this topic suggests that we have arrived at a moment

open to the intellectual reciprocity between scholars and educators from former colonizing and colonized cultures. Yet we have much hard work ahead of us that must be done collectively. We have to ensure that the post-colonial voices in history and theory of architecture are reduced neither to the voices of the “other” nor “humanists.” If typecast as the depository of these types of ideas, safely included but contained in such a way as to immunize the rest of the academy from the deeper implications of their critiques, we would only hasten the irrelevance of architects to the future. The profession will fail to resurrect itself and will remain an anachronistic curiosity of yesteryears.

Decolonizing architectural pedagogy requires delivering disciplinary education out of the European fortresses into the larger world. It mandates freeing our mental anchors from the canon of Brunelleschi, Ledoux, Le Corbusier, Rossi, Jean Nouvell, etc. The shift in curricular direction ought to be a shift away from the insular treatment of architectural production as an end in itself. It calls for a broader definition than monuments that privilege certain civilizational narratives above others. Canon knowledge ought to be replaced with cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives of the built environment.

The irreverence—in fact, abandon—with which cross-cultural pedagogy demands the exploration of disciplinary limits is not a call for dismantling architecture and its institutions. On the contrary; we still stand on the strong and steady shoulders of our disciplinary ancestors. We benefit from the field established by them. Their study and production of great monuments and structural developments established architecture as a profession and academic discipline. Their emphasis of undergraduate surveys on history of artistic influence and technological rationality has not only framed the architect as possessing originality, creative cunning, and a force of historical change, but has also established architecture as an autonomous cultural field.

MALLEABILITY HYPOTHESIS

Far from reducing architecture to just a sign of capital, language, and politics, cross-cultural education rising from the ashes of decolonization is certain evidence

of our discipline’s striking malleability. It relies on architecture’s ability to convincingly take whatever shape we give it. If we want it to be just media, it will be just media. Applied art, fine arts, technology, artistic genius, unfolding of the Hegelian Idea, a social production, producer of community, gender, race, class relations, nationalism, publicity, and consumption—it will adapt to all these framing devices equally well. Bringing this malleability to the fore is highly productive. It gives students a variety of ways in which to think about creative labor and the effects of spaces they propose. It is fruitful in making them see vividly the ease with which their strategies can turn against their intentions. History professors, studio instructors, and technology researchers can demonstrate to students the importance of inculcating a habit of separating artistic intentions from both the means of achieving them and historical effects. In this case, it is not the stock of information that they learn but a habit of mind that is of value.

The malleability or tenacity of the built environment to maintain its integrity, no matter what lens is imposed on it, should disarm our impulse to protect our territory. There is no way for theorists and practitioners of yesteryears to know this without the benefit of our excursions into the realm of humanities and social sciences. We can tell them we don’t need history of styles, West-over-the-rest mindset, high tech above low tech and passive systems, or a choice between professionalism and social justice to mark our territory. Our territory is not going anywhere. We need not discount one in favor of another. Multiculturalism, like interdisciplinarity, does not threaten but strengthens architecture as a “field.” It enhances its capacity of governing the production and evaluation of its goods (buildings, codes, policies, registration, disciplined speech, exhibitions, etc.) according to its own internal criteria. Changing its rules so minorities in the discipline can see themselves, see difference, learn from one another, argue, and collaborate is vital. Practicing critical discourse, mutual respect, generosity, and listening undermines heroic notions of leadership, but gives pedagogues new tools to train their students as more than hireable technocrats, skilled labor and creative problem solvers; something more relevant than critically acclaimed but rarely hireable artists. Skills and tools for intervening in a

multifaceted, ever-changing terrain of professional practice gives architectural students the chance to fashion themselves as socially responsible civic actors.

In pursuing a more robust pedagogy, in 2014 I joined a team of four architectural historians who have replaced the canonic survey that we were taught as students with a survey of global architecture. The thematic focus of our collaborative teaching material is the impact of different technologies of globalization on the history of architecture. Written into the topic of technologies of communication and transportation is interaction and participation among cultures. It undercuts nationalist histories and spurious philosophies of the genius of a special people. In four years we have produced a semester worth of peer-reviewed PowerPoints, lecture notes, handouts, quizzes and their keys, and bibliographies available as open source material for instructors. Our choices of technologies do not begin with world expos, railways, photography, and the phonograph. We do not prioritize modernity or mechanical technologies. Instead, we start with orality of first societies, speech as an early technology of communication. We feature early ships, the connective tissue created between the Indo-European world by the domestication of horses, 3,500 BCE, and the sub-Saharan Africa and Arabia by the domestication of camels 2,400 years later. We make room for medieval roads and first wheels, time keeping, mapping and fairs (Figure 2).

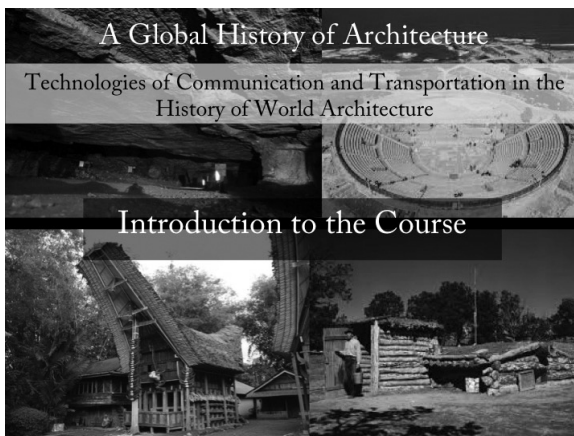


Figure 2: Cover image for undergraduate lecture Survey on Global History of Architecture created by Peter Christensen, Mrinalini Rajagopalan, Itohan Osayimwese, and Shundana Yusaf. Courtesy: Petr Brož, Arian Zwegers, BrokenSphere, and Author.

Our world history syllabus puts non-modern systems of knowledge that value the inarticulate, embodied *techne* on the same pedestal as articulate intellectual knowledge, the *episteme*. The sacred sections of granaries and pole houses in the rice belt of the Pacific Ocean are given the same due as narrowly functionalist layouts of *Sachlich* architects in Central Europe (Figure 3). Oral mentalities are put on par with literate attitudes to organizing information and space. Countering the disciplinary disposition to privilege the study and scrutiny of sites of power like cities, we look at the relationship between centers of power and the pushback they get from the dominated village worlds. We think through the competing logics of organization of urban and village communities. The same goes for nomadic and digital technologies, animistic and nationalist production of space, and the trading practices of land-respecting forest people without expansionist ambitions and empire-oriented civilizations.

Our goal is to present our students with different ways of attributing meaning to spaces and materials, forms, and buildings. We demonstrate that the construction of meaning is based in competing theories of self (ontology), of knowledge (epistemology) and of the universe (cosmology). It is the intersection of these three elements that makes the architecture of the Mongolian yurt different from the air-conditioned yurts dotting our national parks. We undo Max Weber's distinction that he developed in the 1930s between



Figure 3: The ship-shaped pole house of Toraja people in Indonesia called tongkonan. Before Dutch colonialism, tongkonan were the most elaborate of the typology, built only by nobles. Courtesy: Arian Zwegers

“rational” and “traditional” behavior, so central to the makeup of our modern thinking and architectural education.⁷ The diversification of forms and roles of architecture across space and time takes aim at our profession’s self-understanding. It reveals how our ideas of progress and dominating nature are antithetical to that of certain Aborigine tribes in Western Australia. Wade Davis reminds us that:

As recent as the 1960s, a schoolbook by the Treasury of Fauna of Australia listed the aboriginal people as an extant form of wildlife in Australia. What was missing was the failure of British to understand the subtlety of the devotional philosophy that was the dreaming. The whole purpose of life in Australia was not to improve anything. To the contrary it was to do the ritual gestures deemed to be necessary to maintaining the world just as it was at the time of its creation. As if all of Western thought had gone into pruning the shrubs in the Garden of Eden to keeping it just as it was when Adam and Eve had their fateful conversation. Had we followed that trajectory as a species, yes, we wouldn’t have put a man on the moon, but on the

other hand you wouldn’t be having a conference at Garrison, devoted to climate change.⁸

Our disciplinary imagination is firmly grounded in the type of rationality inaugurated by the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment coming out of Europe and has a hard time seeing animistic wisdom as anything but primitive, of the past, outmoded. The disengagement between body and mind inaugurated by Descartes has conditioned us to objectify the world, to see both the world and our bodies mechanistically and functionally. Any paradigm that implicates the soul and material in one another is mistaken for superstitious and archaic. Our response to solve problems of inequity, racism, and environmental degradation is not with questioning the orientation of western technology and inserting a caveat in what we call objectivity, but with more technology and an untenably puritanical view of objectivity.

Sun shrines in Chaco Canyon and drainage systems in Lothal, glazes on Han dynasty miniature houses and the spatialization of Mayan writing on temples in Copan show that animistic traditions are not primitive at all (Figure 4). They are sources of studying the movement of celestial bodies, engineering the land, communicating with ancestors, and preserving historical memory in buildings. Their wisdom is not outdated; they are differently sophisticated than us. Nor does modernity



Figure 4: The drainage system at Lothal, India, 3,700 BCE
Courtesy: Abhilashdvbk



Figure 5: A Bedouin weaver in the Arabian black tent, photographed somewhere between 1898—1946. Courtesy: Photographer unknown

have any monopoly on liberal ideas. My lecture on camel cultures in the Arabian Peninsula reveals that all camel architecture is women's architecture. The lightweight Arab tents are designed by them, woven by them, and erected by them. These Bedouin women in the most misogynistic part of the Muslim world have tremendous agency as designers, artists, and weavers, but it is exercised on different terms than we find in the west. Without romanticizing Arab nomads or Tuareg semi-sedentary camel herders, my camel lecture poses a question about what we call modern, democratic, egalitarian, or feminist (Figure 5). World history has allowed us to frame a history of Arab and Bedouin architecture in the context of a history of media and technology, as opposed to a history of religion and primitivism.

Yet, if the intellectual labor of the four of us does not elicit lateral learning from our students then all this work was for nothing. But as speculative studios and technology courses, environmental design, and thesis projects open up to learning from landscape intelligence and technics of making and moving material we may find accessible, democratic, and community-empowering technologies. This might enable us to undo the systematic suffocation of difference in modern thought.

One of the most precious ambitions of our global history survey is to demonstrate the contingency and impoverishment of modern thought. We hope to show the closures of the premise that the world is objectively knowable, and that the knowledge so obtained can be absolutely generalizable. What is at stake is the privilege that this form of thought enjoys due to its claims to universality, not whether it is itself a valuable addition to the repertoire of ways of knowing and doing.

Every lecture is divided into five twelve to fifteen minutes segments. Case studies are clearly divided. There is a summary slide at the end of each case study and a takeaway slide at the end. Inserted between case studies are two- to three-minute online quizzes and think-pair-share exercises. All my tests are open book and taken in groups of three. This method has proven not only to be an effective use of peer pressure but a form of active learning, where students argue the material with one another. Global history

of architecture is only the smallest, most elementary step towards undermining cultural imperialism at the heart of architectural education. And yet, here the architectural nature of our teaching must be highlighted. Our teaching kits for GAHTC build on a mentality open to speculation. This propensity for open-ended hypothesizing comes from our training in architecture and is an approach we share with our students.

The lecture class exposes students, as if to a language, not of visual styles but a way of thinking about the global history of architecture. Language—as anyone who, like me, has tried to learn in a classroom will tell you—is retained and flourishes only if it is practiced in everyday life, outside the classroom. Likewise, educators are fully cognizant that what happens in a history class stays in history class. It is unrealistic to expect all but the most exceptional students to remember, understand, and parse through the immense amount of information dispersed at lightning speed. Without creating structural opportunities in the rest of the curriculum to carry the ideas and habits of mind outside fast-paced lectures, conduct further reading, synthesize, experiment, evaluate and apply ideas, it is unlikely that global history courses will do much more than inspire some students to pursue architectural history.

As educators come to accept the need for reinforcing critical messages across courses, schools of architecture begin to emphasize integrated curricula and collaborative teaching. In Fall 2018, the University of Utah unrolled a new curriculum with precisely these challenges in mind. Together with two other colleagues, I taught the history class alongside three classes on research methods for designers, architectural communications, and studio. We taught the same cohort of juniors. Even though history was not integrated but taught alongside the three courses whose assignments and messages crisscrossed into one another, the students carried into the other courses, lessons of comparative analysis and horizontal thinking modeled in the history lectures. The result was the appearance of collage-like formulations in studio work. Students superimposed the sectional organizations of Iranian bazaars over Parisian arcades; diagrammed the location of middens in Mesa Verde

pueblos and the location of landfill in contemporary cities to think through competing attitudes to trash, personal accountability, and environmental behavior in Utah in the past and present. During material research, a group of students took inspiration from the tent of the Al Murrah people in South Arabia woven out of a composite of goat, camel, and sheep hair. They repurposed trashed grocery bags into yarn and then wove material, only to appreciate the accumulated skill and thought, patience and memory, vision and innovation that has gone into tensile carpets (Figure 6). Students intrigued by the personal networks sustaining refugee camps in Palestine or Sudan struggled to translate their de Certeau-like tactics in the guerilla tactics of their design proposals. History and theory here offer instruments of empowerment, intellectual tools, and social currency. In coming years I hope to populate this segment with many more examples and more sophisticated interfaces. It should be the goal of every syllabus, every class, to close the gap between ethical and practical thinking.

The crisscrossing of ideas throughout the entire semester teaches students how to intervene in unfamiliar contexts. World history and architectural practice in the contemporary context share something

in common. Both are vocations of generalists. Both force us to give up the farce of expertise in favor of activist and purposeful lines of inquiry. The idea of multicultural curricula is not to master every culture addressed. This is an impossible proposition. The goal is to operate with the humility of an apprentice. It is only by taking up the stance of a generalist and an apprentice that we can enter cross-cultural dialogue. Generalists and apprentices are defined by their openness to intervene in unfamiliar territories. This situates them uniquely to hold tradition and modernity, the aboriginal and the colonial, feminine and masculine, agrarian and urban, religious and scientific, oral and literate—and all the variety between these dubious categories of categorical difference—as mirrors to one another.

For this we have to teach ourselves to intersect the knowledge of village elders in China, who may be the last bastions of certain building skills, with the ideas articulated in the forty books of a Le Corbusier or *Delirious New York*. Positioning ourselves as generalists frees us to compare the weaving practices of women builders of the Al Murrah black tent in Southern Arabia with the techniques for designing and making prefabrication screens for a Herzog & de Meuron structure. We see the first embedded in Islamic and

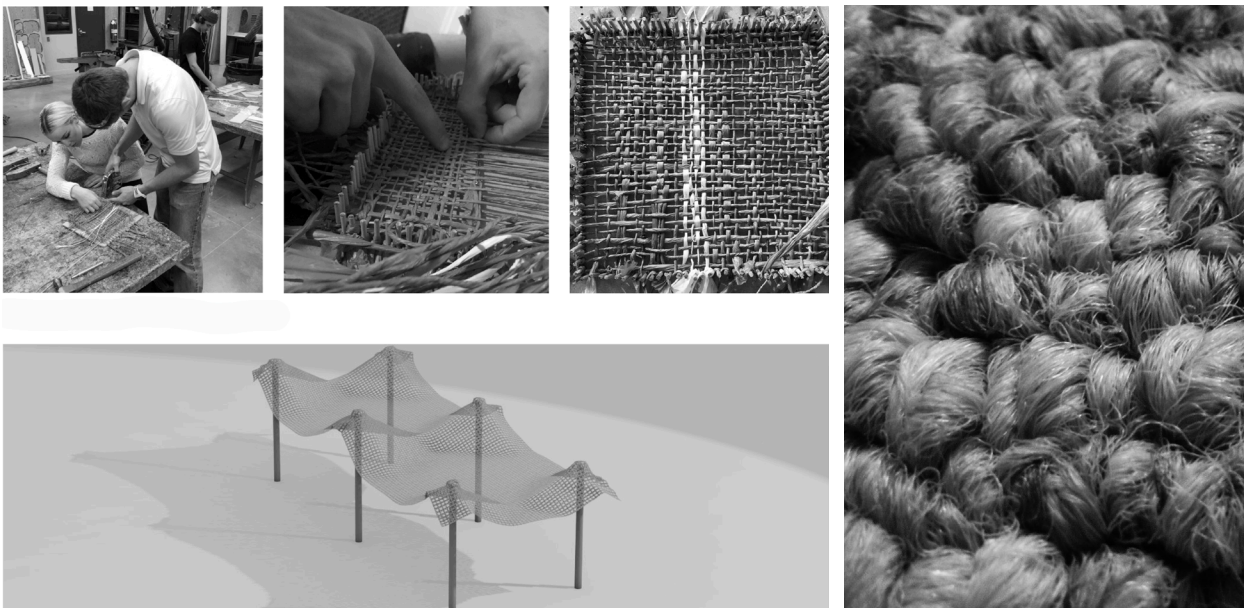


Figure 6: Student work: University of Utah Fall 2018, architecture student work by Stephanie King et al., Berber carpet weave. Courtesy: Author & Pi Guy

pre-Islamic myth and ritual of desert tribes, and the latter in our unquestioned belief in the superiority of technology, despite its near destruction of the planet. The first values the coextension of man, animals, and the world, and the assurance of tradition, and the latter places freedom from orthogonal lines and the excitement of novelty above all. Both are what Steve Marglin calls "organic" propositions—propositions in which the truth depends on the beliefs of agents.⁹

Both are distinct from "atomic" propositions, i.e., descriptions independent of belief. However, because mainstream architectural pedagogy is the child of globally dominating economies and polities, backed by hard power, the dominant educational ideology has come to confuse its freedom from spirituality and coexistence with nature with freedom from myopia and muddled beliefs. The claim to objectivity and universality seem to flow naturally from such hubris. Opening ourselves to listening to those who practice spaces and ideas differently than ourselves is critical to the decolonization of our and our students' minds. A multicultural curriculum is an excellent vessel to make explicit that our discipline's universalist pretensions are just that: pretensions.

The decolonization of architectural pedagogy probes and refines our various commitments—be they to artistic autonomy, sustainability, digital architecture, community engagement, or public interest—by situating them in wider and more inclusive definitions of modernity, freedom, progress, technology, community, and lifestyle. Our students are currently steeped in the belief that traditional systems of behavior and social organization are objectively sub-optimal and in need of intervention by competent architectural experts. They arrive having internalized claims to universality made on behalf of European Enlightenment, and convinced of the universal desirability of Western modernity. Multiculturalism meddles with their programming so they can see the imperialist impulse of their programming, and hear the critique of modernity and its economic, political, and military armature by competing systems of architecture. The project of modernization has resisted indigenous criticism because of the marginalization of indigenous ideas of progress. We have to see the colonial nature of this practice and how it has subsumed our educational

philosophy. Recognition is the first step towards change. ■

ENDNOTES

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