

FROM POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUES TO ARCHITECTURAL POSTCOLONIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

We present interconnections between post-colonial conditions and architecture pedagogy through specific workshops we conducted in Reunion Island, in the Indian Ocean. These workshops addressed the following questions: Can we develop an architecture pedagogy that develops singularity? Can we take advantage of multiculturalism to engage singularity and speak of creolization processes in architecture? How can we create a new culture, one not given by the global market but instead developed through sharing experiences, common stories, individual experiences and specific knowledge?

This series of international architecture and landscape workshops, titled "Architecture and Vegetation," was organized by Séverine Roussel and Philippe Zourgane between 2002 and 2004. The session, "Architecture and Vegetation, Hybrid Home Spaces," that gathered together students from South Africa, Kenya, Madagascar, China, India, France, and Reunion Island in 2004 is presented here as a case study.

In this workshop, participants used vegetation to invent new relationships and new potentialities. In colonial territories, cultivated areas ordered the whole territory, including the city. Plant life had a certain autonomous agency, and the major/minor relationship between built and non-built space was inverted. Linking this inversion to the economic, financial, and political conditions of colonialism and post-colonialism allows us to avoid focusing solely on the planning and iconic architectures of these territories. We entitle this inversion of minor/major relationship as *vegetation as a political agent*. This foregrounds the ways in which vegetation orders social and economic relations. The use of vegetation today opens new fields not only for sustainable development and ecological purposes, but also for reworking vegetation as a political agent

in a different way than it was used during the colonial period.

Questioning the role of architecture in a post-colonial context means also questioning the notion of culture: local culture, common culture, the shared colonial culture, and universal culture. Thus, speaking about decolonizing pedagogy is not primarily about positioning Western knowledge against non-Western forms of knowledge. It is instead about breaking the structures of domination put in place by the colonizing powers and recognizing the legitimacy of the pre-colonial cultures. We envision building upon all the above-mentioned layers of culture and engaging a singularity in the process of becoming, a process of "creolization" instead of "globalization."

There is a damaging and self-defeating assumption that theory is necessarily the elite language of the socially and culturally privileged. It is said that the place of the academic critic is inevitably within the Eurocentric archives of an imperialist or neo-colonial West."

—Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1998)¹

INTRODUCTION

Between 2002 and 2004, Séverine Roussel and Philippe Zourgane (RozO architectes office) organized a series of international architecture and landscape workshops titled "ARCHITECTURE AND VEGETATION" on Reunion Island, a French department in the Indian Ocean. The workshops emerged from the recognition of the fading links between former colonies and colonizing countries that in turn revealed new arrangements, new trading routes, new aerial and shipping trajectories, and new fluxes. The boom of new global cities in the

Indian Ocean region—Dubai, Guangzhou, Mumbai, and Singapore—has led to new configurations. Europe is no longer the center of the world, as it was in the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries. Young architects have to reinvent themselves in this context, to situate their design potentialities in this new web of relationships. The aim of the workshops was to draw a new map for contemporary architecture, one that would replace the frame of reference from a Western-centric reference point to a multi-focal approach organized around the Indian Ocean. The workshops brought together students from countries situated throughout this region—students who share a common history, a common climate, a colonial history, and a new global economic situation—alongside some students from Europe. It offered these students a chance to share experiences and knowledge and to build common methodological tools in architecture.

Architecture and territorial planning have long been tools for colonization. Plantations in the 16th-18th centuries crisscrossed the territory with lines of force, starting from the furrow that organized the slaves' houses, the technical buildings, and the fences that made up enclosures. These lines, along with the network of roads and the city, created a matrix for the spatial organization of the colonial territory. The city was only an epiphenomenon of the plantation: the technical space connecting ships, stores, and warehouses, and, incidentally, the residents of the governor and local administrators. The city depended on the plantation, rather than the other way round. In the first phase of colonization, when plantations flourished, segmentation of spaces corresponded to the segmentation of social and racial groups and production. To each task corresponded a production tool: each human being was assigned a geographic location.²

During the second colonial period (19th-20th centuries), colonizers transformed the landscape as one strategy to pacify the colonized people. These transformations included the management of urban centers and management of the colonial territory at various scales, from village units to the scale of the whole colony. Trees, crossroads, natural springs and gathering points, signs, writings, micro-architecture, as well as administration buildings such as schools, courts, and

town halls suppressed indigenous ways of organizing the landscape and constructed a new landscape over them. The simultaneous transformation of the different scales of landscape was a strategy of colonial warfare and a tool of assimilation and acculturation.³

Questioning the role of architecture in a post-colonial context means also questioning the notion of culture: local culture, common culture, the shared colonial culture, and universal culture. Many of the new colonized elite abandoned local education systems and formed the first global universal elite, developing the universal intellectual knowledge that we all share today while helping to extend Western culture to the rest of the world.⁴

Thus, for us, speaking about decolonizing pedagogy is not primarily about positioning Western knowledge against non-Western forms of knowledge. It is instead about breaking the structures of domination put in place by the colonizing powers and recognizing the legitimacy of the pre-colonial cultures. We envision building upon all the above-mentioned layers of culture and acknowledging the singularity of our shared experience of becoming, a process of creolization instead of globalization.⁵

Edouard Glissant defines creolization as “the meeting, the interference, the shock, the harmony and the disharmony between cultures, throughout the world-earth.”⁶ Globalization, in turn, is “harmonization to the bottom, the reign of multinationals, the standardizations, the uncontrolled ultraliberalism in global markets (a corporation advantageously relocating its factories in a distant country, a patient doesn't have the right to buy drugs for the best value in a neighboring country) ... the negative side of a wonderful reality that I call Globality.”⁷

The workshop series “ARCHITECTURE AND VEGETATION” addressed the following issues: Can we develop an architecture pedagogy that supports this singularity as opposed to universality? Can we take advantage of multiculturalism to engage *singularity* and speak of creolization processes in architecture? How can we encourage this creolization to occur?

A CASE STUDY: THE WORKSHOP “ARCHITECTURE AND VEGETATION, HYBRID HOME SPACES”

In 2004, this two-week workshop took place in Hell Bourg village in the Cirque de Salazie, on Reunion Island.⁸ Directed by Séverine Roussel and Philippe Zourgane, with the support of the “Cité de l’Architecture” represented by Fiona Meadows, it gathered together forty-four masters students (Figure 1) from nine faculties of architecture:

- Witwatersrand Faculty of Architecture (Johannesburg - South Africa)
- Nairobi Faculty of Architecture (Kenya)
- South China University of Technology (Guangzhou - China)
- Shenzhen Faculty of Architecture (China)
- Ahmedabad Faculty of Architecture - CEPT (India)
- L’École Supérieure des Métiers et Arts Plastiques (Antananarivo - Madagascar)
- Reunion Island branch of ENSA Montpellier (France)
- ENSA Clermont Ferrand (France)
- ENSA Montpellier (France)

Students were invited to design and build a 1:1 scale model of an experimental house. To help students draw on their research and intuitively shared knowledge of tropical architecture devices, they followed a set of

rules: each room of this house had to blur the inside and outside, and vegetation had to be used as an architectural material.

The workshop comprised one week of design and one week of building. Students were divided into seven groups composed of students from different universities, with each group in charge of a different room of the house. Diversity in the groups was key to ensure sharing of knowledge and technologies. Students from northern countries were in a minority in each group (Figure 2).

Frantz Fanon wrote, “Every colonized people — in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality — finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards.”⁹ Decolonizing pedagogy accordingly requires the deconstruction of dominant global standards (mainstream architectural language) to incorporate diversity, to move forward, and to connect with singularity.

The program of the house consisted of the following seven rooms: one kitchen/dining room, one living room, one bathroom, two bedrooms, and two tropical



Figure 1 - Photo of the whole group of students on the workshop site. Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.



Figure 2 - Week of design process
 Students during the one week design working in groups to make models and sketches of their projects.
 Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.

lofts. A majority of the rooms' designations were the same as those used in standard housing worldwide, suggesting the existence of a universal common usage of those rooms, and a common way of life. The decision to include a room that is not typically included in Western housing was made purposefully, to draw attention to the need to question those designations and to question ways of living and uses. The site is not an abstraction; it has peculiarities and a history, and from them the project arises.

The situation of the house in the countryside privileged vegetation as a design element. Plant life was central to colonial and modernist spatial operations. It has been the subject of botanical study, a source of wealth via spices or coffee, a field of production for agricultural plantations, and an exotic subject for literature and travel tales. During the 17th and 18th centuries, vegetation had a central position in the whole of Western society, being acclimatised and modified in botanical gardens. In the 19th century, vegetation became associated with a strict calculation of productivity and of the number of human beings needed to service the industry.

In colonial territories, cultivated areas ordered the whole territory, including the city. Plant life had a certain autonomous agency, and the major/minor relationship between built and non-built space was inverted. Linking this inversion to the economic, financial, and political conditions of colonialism and

post-colonialism allows us to avoid focusing solely on these territories' planning and iconic architectures. We entitle this inversion of minor/major relationship as *vegetation as a political agent*.¹⁰ This foregrounds the ways in which vegetation orders social and economic relations. Vegetation orders financial flows, flows of human beings, and flows of intellectual ideas and personnel. In our post-colonial world, the role of vegetation in territorial planning and architecture allows designers to invent new relationships and new potentialities.

The workshop was situated in the hot and humid mountains, near a spectacular pond. The site held giant bamboo, cryptomeria trees, chayote lianas, hibiscus, and the remaining stone wall ruins of an old house. Students set up their living spaces in close connection with all the existing elements. Building materials and vegetation, micro- and macro landscape, were given the same level of importance and were considered as a pre-existing architectural frame and the potentialities from which the project emerged. This approach was a far cry from the modernistic *tabula rasa*.

The choice of materials included galvanised steel sheets, green mesh shades, plywood, transparent tarpaulin, wood battens, bamboo canes, and other natural materials. Our focus on materials reflects a belief that material choice can be one means to activate students' political awareness due to the economic, political, and social networks involved in the procurement and distribution of particular materials worldwide. All our chosen materials are low-tech, lightweight, and affordable, making them popular for low-cost and informal construction in countries on the shores of the Indian Ocean. Lightweight materials are valued for their low thermal inertia and as filters, external skins, sun protections, visual protections, and internal separation screens. We view the use of these materials falling somewhere between the construction of space and what we refer to as "texture." Following different social and environmental rhythms, these materials allow houses to be transformed for a single event or over a longer period as a family grows, not incidentally, fulfilling the modernist architectural fantasy of the modular, transformable dwelling. Architectural types such as the "garden house" suggest human dwelling spaces while seamlessly merging with

the surrounding vegetation. In these ways, buildings are less enclosed structures than part of the textures made up of building fragments and cultivated biological features knitted together by untamed vegetation.

Given these precedents, the workshop set students the task of reinventing human uses by using vegetation as an architectural tool. Through this process we were able to draw several important conclusions.

First, students' work questions standard domestic programming—living rooms, bedrooms. In some cases, students updated traditional practices (such as sleeping outside in summer, an outdoor kitchen, or an outdoor shower) that had disappeared in contemporary housing. In other cases, they were eager to design spaces in tune with the climate and nature.

In one experiment, the living room, re-named *Alive Living Room*, was not designed as the living space for a family but as a space to enjoy the refreshing breeze that offers an escape from humidity. Transparent swing panels allow the regulation of air flow without hiding the view. The room was built in the shade of a clump of giant bamboos to protect the corrugated sheet roof from heat.

The kitchen/dining room, named *Gastronomica*, was designed with two cooking areas: the main kitchen area outdoors, and an indoor one for use in case of rain. The design of the space allows the table to easily be

rotated for use completely outside (to enjoy the warmth of sunshine in winter or the fresh night air in summer) or in an outside-but-covered situation (protected from direct sun in summer) (Figure 3, 4).

The bathroom, *Mossy Bath*, was built in the portion of the site that contained ruins. It includes a sun bath area and an outdoor shower. The design sought a direct connection between sun and skin, wind and skin, moss and skin. The large bath space can be shared by several persons, subverting typical expectation of privacy and use (Figure 5).

A room named *Possible Loft* revisits the traditional veranda, as it is disconnected from other rooms. It provides shade, frames the landscape, and accelerates air flow. Another room named *Threshold loft* was built on the slope, with a succession of levels to literally inhabit the topography. This space is defined by its quality of light, type of humidity, and seating for small groups. It establishes continuity with the adjacent spaces formed by the vegetation:—it is a modulation or variation, not a break. Ceiling heights elongate the height of the trees' branches (Figure 6, 7).

The students created a house in which the placement of each room on the site considered climactic comfort, taking advantage of the existing topography, vegetation, views, draughts and breezes, and areas of shadow (Figure 8).



Figure 3 - Building of the scale 1 model - Gastronomica
Students, during the one week of building, build a full scale model of their Gastronomica room using bamboo, prefabricated metal sheeting and green mesh shades.
Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.



Figure 4 - Gastronomica
The Gastronomica room nearly finished is partially sheltered by giant bamboos on one side and is framing the large landscape on one end.
Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.

This typology is common on Reunion Island in spontaneous housing districts. It required the design of a new spatiality that the students named *The Link*—a covered path connecting all the rooms together (necessary in case of rain) (Figure 9, 10).

Structural design mixed different concepts. The *Gastronomica* model used a complex grid structure;

lightweight materials and lightweight structures from the Indian Ocean were mixed with high-tech knowledge. The group that realised the *Possible loft* model designed a structure combining different knowledge bases to design a large space free of pillars. In the absence of scaffolding, one of the Chinese students taught the others about a traditional Chinese structure that is assembled flatwise on the ground and then raised in



Figure 5 - Mossy bath
The Mossy bath room was built in the ruins on the site .
Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.



Figure 6 - Building of the scale 1 model Threshold loft
To build the full scale model of the Threshold loft, students transformed the natural slope of the site to create a succession of levels and thus literally inhabit the topography.
Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.



Figure 7 - Theshold loft
The Theshold loft establishes continuity with the adjacent spaces formed by the vegetation. This space is a modulation or variation, not a break. Ceiling heights elongate the height of the trees' branches. Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.



Figure 8 - General model at the end of the design week
Picture of the whole house model at the end of the one week design.
Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.

the upright position with the force of only a few persons (Figure 11).

In general, students' contributions did not bear a direct relationship with their own countries. In fact, in a context where Western standards are omnipresent and developing one's own singularity is difficult, such contributions can't emerge. Becoming aware of one's own culture is a slow and nonlinear process. We intend the word *culture* to describe one that is current and constantly evolving. Embracing culture in this way is less about reconnecting with one's own culture than it is about standing back from our everyday lives to understand changes in our own culture at a given time.



Figure 9 - Design documents The Link
Selection of sketches and models presented by the group of students in charge of the general coherence of the house project. This group proposed a new spatiality that the students named The Link. Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.



Figure 10 - The Link
One portion of the full scale model of the covered path connecting all the rooms together called the Link by the students using bamboo structure.
Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.



Figure 11 - Building of the scale 1 model - Possible Loft
Students build the full scale model of Possible loft which is a large space free of pillars whose structure revisits a traditional Chinese structure assembled flatwise on the ground and then raised in the upright position with the force of only a few persons. Courtesy: René Paul Savignan.

CONCLUSION

Our practice and pedagogy strive to redefine architecture. We speak about substances instead of forms; a pure substance is not defined by its limits but by its quality. We advocate for an architecture that intermingles nature and artifice, inside and outside spaces. We design hybrids that are no longer objects but rather textures characterized by a logic of sensations.¹¹

This architecture doesn't produce recurrent and well-identified typologies, but substances constantly changed by new habits, new desires, or newcomers who bring a new cultural background. Creolization processes are thus activated in architecture.

Borrowing the concept of *non finito/non cominciato*, which Giulio Carlo Argan uses to describe Michelangelo Buonarroti's practice, our design work and teaching focuses on the activation of potentials, not on a tabula rasa, but within a constantly evolving field which is never "complete."¹² It offers an alternative way to mix concepts and thoughts without hierarchy, making room for a field of possibilities organized by forces and individual design concepts.

The workshops focused on exploring new bodily capacities, and students had to work through a non-formal approach. The result is an architecture that is fluid, following use and body movement: a hands-on,

non-formal approach whose theoretical grounding resides in the design process itself. A new identity emerges from these bodily encounters, from a reconstructed memory, from our new living conditions. Perhaps we have to think about our identities as no longer overdetermined by the perpetual dualism imposed by Western modernity (such as colonizer/colonized, white/black, or dominant/dominated), but instead a being constructed in a much more fragmented way: a becoming Creole that mixes experiences, cultures, and political consciousness without hierarchy. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 28.
2. Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de La Relation, Poétique III*, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 78.
3. Philippe Zourgane, "Programming the landscape," in *Destroy, Build, Secure, Readings on pacification*, Edited by Tyler Wall, Parastou Saberi and William Jackson, (Ottawa: Red Quill Volume, 2017).
4. The spreading worldwide of the universal culture outside Europe began with the first colonial movement (XVI-XVIIIth century) with key words of the enlightenment such as democracy, freedom, equality; key words that remained an abstract set of tools in the colonial space.
5. We borrow our conception of the process of becoming from Achille Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre*, (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2013), 42–143.
6. Edouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde*, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1997), 194.
7. Edouard Glissant, *La cohée du Lamentin Poétique V*, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2005), 15.
8. The book *Architecture and vegetation. Hybrid home spaces* is archiving this workshop. French version: Monografik Edition, Paris, 2006. English version : David Krut Publishing, Johannesburg, 2006
9. Fanon, Frantz, *Peau noire, Masques blancs*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 37. "Tout peuple colonisé — c'est-à-dire tout peuple au sein duquel a pris naissance un complexe d'infériorité, du fait de la mise au tombeau de l'originalité culturelle locale — se situe vis-à-vis du langage de la nation civilisatrice, c'est-à-dire de la culture métropolitaine. Le colonisé se sera d'autant plus échappé de sa brousse qu'il aura fait siennes les valeurs culturelles de la métropole." English version, Pluto Press, London (1986); new edition published 2008.
10. Philippe Zourgane, *The Architectural Free Zone: Reunion Island and the Politics of Vegetation*, unpublished Ph.D. Goldsmith College, London, 2013.
11. For a more in-depth discussion of this concept, see Gilles Deleuze, *Qu'est ce que la philosophie?*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1991) and Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon, Logique la sensation*, (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1981).
12. Giulio Carlo Argan e Bruno Contardi, *Michelangelo Architetto*, (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 1990).