Beyond Mud Huts: The Marginalisation of African Vernacular Architecture in Colonial and Modern Discourse

How has African vernacular architecture been marginalised within modern architectural theory, and how can it be reinterpreted beyond materiality to challenge structural racism and coloniality?

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how African vernacular Architecture has been marginalised within architectural theory and public perception. It rejects the assumption that African architecture is primitive or that its exclusion from the canon is accidental. Instead, it interrogates the ways in which colonial and modernist ideas have come together to construct a hierarchy that privileges Western architectural traditions. Drawing on decolonial and critical race theory, the dissertation traces how colonial epistemology invented the modern/vernacular binary that would regulate African architecture to the periphery of architectural discourse. It dismantles the very idea of modernity and how it cannot be separated from its darker side, coloniality. It further critiques how reactions like critical regionalism cannot fully dismantle Eurocentric frameworks. Going beyond architecture, it questions the idea that Africa is "a continent without progress". Instead, it exposes the ways historiography, the rejection of oral tradition, and the invented notion of *Africa* have all contributed to its marginalisation. Furthermore, the dissertation argues that modern architectural theory is structurally racist and calls for the reconceptualisation of African vernacular architecture beyond materiality, emphasising its social and political dimensions. By challenging dominant narratives, advocates for a transformation of global architectural pedagogy that is anti-racist.

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Introduction

African architecture defies generalisation by style, building material or climate. Yet despite this diversity, African built environments, with the notable exception of Egypt, have been largely ignored in Western academia. The language of "mud huts" and the persistent caricature of African buildings as primitive have been perpetuated within both public imagination and academic discourse. Such portrayals are not isolated misconceptions but part of a broader system of knowledge production that precedes Western architectural traditions. When acknowledged, it is confined solely to the realm of ecological material culture or framed through a romanticised *Noble savage* lens that orientalises its indigenous practices without critically studying its contributions. Africa, and by extension African architecture, has been positioned as stagnant in time or studied as an anthropological curiosity rather than as a dynamic field of design.

Linda Nochlin's landmark 1971 essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* rejected the futile search for overlooked female "geniuses," shifting the focus instead to how institutional

gatekeeping, as well as the male-centric definition of genius, rendered greatness structurally impossible within the canon(Nochlin, 2024). Here, Nochlin called for rewriting the canon's terms, not padding it with exceptions. In the same way, this aims to address *Why Is There No Great African Architecture?* The trend of multicultural surveys has been criticised as simply tacking on "minority" to Euro-American canons without addressing systemic inequalities(Posts, 2013).

To address this, the study adopts a decolonial and Foucauldian approach to understand the historical relationship between architecture and coloniality in shaping the modern canon. The argument this essay makes is simple: African architecture is not marginal because it lacks theory; it lacks theory because theory was built to exclude it.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Vernacular architecture as an academic concern

Much of the literature agrees that the formal study of vernacular architecture is a relatively recent academic pursuit. It was during the 1970s that the field began to develop its current trajectory (Oliver, 1976, p. 16) ("Vernacular Architecture," n.d.). Traditionally, Western architecture valued permanence and monumentality. Vernacular environments were treated as pre-modern, static backdrops to the supposedly universal and progressive story of Western architecture (Prussin, 1974), leaving everyday, anonymous buildings either unrecorded or categorised as

ethnographic “culture” rather than architecture. The result is a disciplinary canon in which European modernism and classicism are seen as the only forms worthy of recognition.

Paul Oliver’s work marks one of the most important shifts away from this hierarchy. In *Shelter and Society*, he argues that vernacular architecture—what he calls “shelter”—must be understood as a product of social, cultural, and environmental contexts rather than through a narrow definition of what counts as “real” architecture (Oliver, 1976). He insists on an anthropological approach that foregrounds the intricate relationship between architecture, society, and culture (Oliver, 2007). More recent authors, such as Adam Jasper, continue to explore the relationship between these disciplines (Jasper, 2020). In architectural circles, Paul Oliver is best known for his extensive body of work, *The Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World,* which has cemented his reputation as one of the leading scholars in the field (Oliver and Aalen, 1997). This global, collaborative effort is almost 2,500 pages, and its sheer size is a testament of the diversity of buildings proving that vernacular architecture is not marginal but central.

Alongside Oliver, Bernard Rudofsky helped to popularise the idea that anonymous, non-professional builders also produce sophisticated built environments in his most famous book *Architecture without Architects* (Rudofsky, 2009). He acknowledges the Eurocentric approach to architecture circulars, admitting "Architectural History, as written and taught in the Western World, has never been concerned with more than a few select cultures”(Rudofsky, 2009, p. 1). However, his approach is notably different. Where Oliver is descriptive and ethnographic, Rudofsky is often aesthetic and romantic, using arresting images and abstract arguments

("vellinga2017conversation%283%29.pdf," n.d.). This approach, although inclusive, risks exoticizing non-Western environments as timeless, context-less artefacts, reinforcing the colonial gaze that reduces cultures to aesthetics while ignoring historical, racial and political conditions.

Sandra Piesik's book *Habitat* introduces the topic of vernacular architecture through the lens of climate and environmental change (Piesik, 2023), organising building traditions by the Köppen-Geiger climate zones ("Köppen-Geiger Explorer," n.d.). This climatic structuring highlights how vernacular buildings are made to work with their environment rather than being technologically backwards. Although the book lacks analytical depth, and is almost like a coffee table book, its is packed with high-quality images and some cultural explanations. It should also be noted that the Köppen-Geiger's reliance on only rainfall and temperature is a crucial flaw. It is a classification used for vegetation.(Gupta et al., 2023)

1.2 Writing about Africa

To write about Africa in a culturally sensitive and non-stereotypical way*, The Oxford Handbook of Modern African History* offers a way to situate architecture within broader nineteenth- and twentieth-century transformations in politics, religion, economy, and climate. Grounding architectural analysis in these histories helps avoid treating the African built environment as static and more informed by both colonial encounters and internal influences (Parker and Reid, 2013). More directly, Binyavanga Wainaina's *How to Write About Africa* also offers a satirical and sarcastic criticism dismantling Western clichés of the region(Curtin, n.d.), providing useful tools for spotting similar tropes in architectural writing.

1.3 African vernacular architecture, more specifically

Although relatively limited, the literature directly addressing African architecture is growing. Paul Oliver's *Shelter in Africa* introduces a range of regional and ethnic building traditions. It briefly covers some of the patronising writing from early travellers and explorers in the introduction before displaying the diversity of the region, with each chapter covering a specific region. Each chapter covers a specific region, showing that supposedly "simple" structures are, in fact, deeply embedded in complex kinship systems, religious belief, and ecological adaptation.

Susan Denyer's *African Traditional Architecture* (Denyer, 1978) pushes against material reductionism by uniquely organising her book around topics like village layouts, town formations, defence systems, building processes, decoration and style. She demands an interdisciplinary approach and rejects the tendency to generalise architecture in the continent. This moves African architecture firmly into the realm of theory: it is something through which to think questions of power, gender, economy and aesthetics, not merely a set of exotic building techniques.

Labelle Prussin's *An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture* makes the critique of marginalisation and material reduction explicit, saying "Even the most sophisticated ethnographic surveys of the cultures of Africa often failed to transcend 'material culture'"(Prussin, 1974), but doesn't go into much historical detail beyond that. Her introduction

shows how African buildings have often been treated only as ethnographic specimens or as examples of "earth" or "thatched" technologies, stripped of symbolic, cosmological and political meaning. She argues that an understanding of African architecture requires specific examination of the physical, technological, sociocultural, and politico-economic environments, placing African architecture in a 'universal framework'. She also criticises Paul Oliver's use of the word "shelter" arguing for a distinction between shelter and architecture. differentiating between real, concrete space and philosophic, existential space.

René Gardi's *Indigenous African Architecture* (Gardi, 1973) similarly foregrounds local materials and techniques, but in doing so, he uncovers their embeddedness in social roles, craftsmanship traditions, and environmental adaptation. The book covers case studies of homes and owners, but it is richest in its high-quality images. Yet, like Rudofsky, Gardi's work also raises questions about positionality written from a European perspective; it risks aestheticising or romanticising African "tradition" even as it documents it. He writes, "I encountered countless backward Africans who lived happier, more content and meaningful lives than…" underscores how cultural interpretation through a colonial lens requires careful, critical reading.

1.4 Race and colonialism in architectural theory

To understand why African vernacular architecture has been so persistently marginalised, the literature on race and architectural theory is indispensable. *Race and Modern Architecture*, edited by Irene Cheng and colleagues (Cheng et al., 2020), demonstrates that "race thinking" is not an external contamination of a neutral discipline, but something that heavily influenced modern

architectural theory. The collection of essays traces how ideas of racial hierarchy and evolution informed not only urban segregation but also racial typologies of architecture. This is one of the most comprehensive books on the topic, as architectural historians have traditionally avoided the topic (Cheng et al., 2020, p. 3).

Mark Crinson's *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Crinson, 2003) reveals how modernism was entangled with imperial and post-imperial projects in contexts like Ghana, Hong Kong, Iran, India and Malaysia. He notably critiques the claim that modernism is an "international style", which is especially relevant when modern architecture presents itself as universal. Crimson has also written books like *Rebuilding Babel: Modern Architecture and Internationalism* (Crinson, 2019), extending his critique by showing how discourses of internationalism masked persistent inequalities and exclusions. Looking at the history of twentieth-century optimism and the ideals represented by the Tower of Babel (built by people united by one language) were adapted by internationalist western architecture.

Walter Mignolo's The Darker Side of Western Modernity (Mignolo, 2011) adds a broader decolonial frame, arguing that modernity is inseparable from what he calls the "colonial matrix of power." From this perspective, modern architecture's universalist claims are inseparable from histories of capitalism, slavery and empire. African vernacular architecture, then, is not marginalised because of its characteristics as non-monumental but rather because acknowledging its contributions would destabilise the story of Western modernity as the sole engine of progress.

Vera Egbers's *Architectures of colonialism* (Egbers et al., 2024), complements this by tracing how colonial power is literally inscribed in built environments and memorial practices.

Carol Ann Dixon's PHD thesis, although focused on art rather than architecture, examines the othering of Africa in Western museum practices. Her analysis illuminates how African material culture is framed as timeless, exotic or childlike in institutional settings. Applying her arguments to architectural collections and exhibitions reveals how institutional practices reproduce the same racialised hierarchies that structure ideas of 'good' architecture.

2. Methodology

Rooted in critical qualitative inquiry, this research adopts decolonial theoretical frameworks to investigate the marginalisation of architecture in the African continent within colonial and modern discourse. Utilising Foucauldian discourse analysis, the study aims to understand how architectural realities are shaped by power. It rejects the value-neutral scholarship and replaces it with an axiology that centres justice, equity, and respect. This chapter follows 4 sections: the decolonial frameworks and what exactly that word means, the ontological and epistemological foundations that the research is committed to, the research strategy and finally, the limitations are addressed with transparency.

2.1 Decolonial Theoretical Framework:

This dissertation aims to trace some of the ideas and examine the roots of this marginalisation in colonial discourse, its persistence in global design education and then offer a subsequent way of creating a decolonial framework. Following the idea of "learning to unlearn to relearn". This essay will delve into pre-colonial case studies not as a form of nostalgia or for the sake of "returning to tradition" but rather to apply the principles of *Sankofa*, a Ghanaian word which literally means to retrieve, to learn from the past in order to inform the future("About Sankofa - Sankofa | Stockton University," n.d.).

A rigorous understanding of decolonial frameworks begins by making a sharp distinction between *colonialism* and *coloniality.* Colonialism refers to the concrete practice wherein a nation extends and maintains political and economic control over other people ("Definition of COLONIALISM," 2025). In contrast, coloniality is a broader and more abstract phenomenon, referring to the underlying patterns of domination and power that persist long after formal colonial rule has ended (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Thus, coloniality endures beyond the demise of empire. It is kept alive in books, cultural habits, shared beliefs, the way entire communities see themselves, personal dreams, and many other parts of daily life and modern society.

'Anti-colonial' often refers to the physical and observable resistance movements directed against colonial powers, but their fundamental limitation is the assumption that decolonisation concludes

with the withdrawal of colonial governments (*2. Anticolonial, Decolonial and Postcolonial*, 2023). Walter Mignolo, who developed the concept of 'decoloniality of knowledge'(Mignolo and Walsh, 2018), explains that these liberation movements are better described as 'dewesternization': struggles waged against colonialism according to the terms set by the nation-state. Decoloniality, however, goes further; it is not a state-driven project, but rather involves grassroots organising anchored in local histories and knowledge. True decolonisation, therefore, constructs new ways of being outside colonial frameworks (Okoth, 2023, p. 12).

Ruth Wilson Gilmore also takes issue with what she calls 'romantic particularism', when academics try to challenge dominant European ideas, highlighting the "real" or "authentic" parts of culture that have been suppressed by colonialism, without recognising and trying to change existing power structures (Gilmore, 1993, p. 71). Therefore, this dissertation aims not merely to present case studies but to challenge colonial thought itself, avoiding the risk of romanticising or orientalising marginalised cultures. Instead, it seeks to expose, critique, and transform the structures through which coloniality is perpetuated in scholarship and culture.

As the title "beyond mud huts" suggests, one of the main aims of this dissertation is to challenge the narrow approach given to the African built environment in academia. When vernacular architecture is included, it is usually only through a sustainability lens in the age of the Anthropocene (Piesik, 2023) without further examination of religion, urban design, style or decoration. The Bolivian sociologist and historian Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui calls this

‘conditional inclusion’(Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 107), reducing colonised peoples to noble savages who are inherently pure and in tune with nature.

2.2 Research philosophy:

The analysis used is grounded in a social constructionist ontology of architecture and its categories. This dissertation rejects the idea that reality is fixed, objective or universal, and instead is dynamic and consciously shaped through cultural and historical contexts, particularly how ideas of African vernacular architecture have been shaped by colonial institutions. Through this critical lens, the aim of the research is to disrupt traditional binaries that structure much of architectural discourse, such as modern/primitive or high architecture/vernacular. It also seeks to uncover the hierarchies of privilege and elitism that marginalise African architectural practices while upholding Eurocentric traditions as the only legitimate source of knowledge. By approaching knowledge through this lens, divisions can not only be critiqued but also the reconstruction of alternative decolonial ways of understanding marginalised traditions. Situated within an interpretivist paradigm, this dissertation assumes multiple, relative realities, thus helping examine why some architecture has become dominant while others have been marginalised. Alternative ontologies, like positivist or universalist approaches, that treat knowledge as purely objective, would obscure the role of power and ethnocentrism in marginalisation, precisely what the dissertation seeks to expose.

This work is driven by axiological commitments to justice and anti-racist scholarship. Rather than claiming value-neutrality, it prioritises African practices and centres the work of black critical race theorists who have long been excluded from pedagogy. The research paradigm is a transformative one that not only recognises the inequalities ingrained in the Eurocentric canon but also aims to contribute, however modestly, to a more inclusive understanding of architecture.

Epistemologically, this dissertation adopts an interpretivist and decolonial stance, understanding how knowledge is historically produced by power rather than being neutral or objective. This approach values plural knowledge systems like oral traditions as being legitimate alongside archival materials and written texts. It rejects positivism's epistemological assumption that worthwhile knowledge can only be produced in one particular way, which historically reduces and erases the rich knowledge systems of non-Western cultures.

Informed by the ideas of Michel Foucault, architectural pedagogies and theory are treated as *discursive regimes*, the systems of power that regulate how topics are understood and discussed within society. For example, Eurocentric framings often reduce African vernacular architecture to only being read through an "authentic" sustainability lens, naturalising colonial hierarchies that position it as supplementary rather than theoretically complex. Foucault's *genealogical method* further influences this epistemology as it rejects the search for timeless origins of knowledge, instead tracing how "truths" emerge through power relations, opening space for reinterpretation.

2.3 Research Design and Methods

This dissertation employs a critical qualitative inquiry through a 3-phase approach to understanding the marginalisation of African architecture:

Phase 1: Systematic literature review

Materials analysed include:

- Colonial texts: like colonial planning documents, travel writing and exploration accounts. Ethnographic accounts that usually justify European intervention, and some colonial fiction
- Canonical theory: established ideas that have been fundamental in shaping, especially modernist, ideas like the works of Le Coubisier and Adolf Loos
- Decolonial counter-texts: critical race theorists, decolonial writers like Franz Fanon and Walter Mignolo, as well as scholarship in anti-racist architecture.

Phase 2: Foucauldian discourse analysis

Analytical process:

- Close reading of selected text, taking note of discursive strategies. Othering and homogenization, positioning Africa as pre-modern/primitive and unexamined Eurocentric assumptions and ideals.

- Identifying repetitive representations, whether how African architecture is reduced only to materiality, looked at through a sustainability lens and included conditionally or if it's completely left out
- What ideas are being valued and centred that lead to the exclusion of marginalised architectures?
- What has changed in attitudes throughout different periods and movements, colonial, modern, postmodern, etc?

Phase 3: Vernacular case studies

This dissertation does not contribute additional ethnographic case studies nor explicitly advocate for their proliferation; it instead uses them as examples to challenge the dominant discourse of material reductionism. Instead emphasising socio-economic backgrounds, religion, domestic ideas, etc.

2.4 Research Limitations

Researching this topic presents several critical challenges. First, the inherently broad and interdisciplinary nature of vernacular architecture makes it difficult to address in depth the discourse within each subject area. It encompasses a complex intersection of design, anthropology, history, environmental science, and sociology. A multi-disciplinary approach will often come at the cost of exploring any one area exhaustively.

Secondly, the sheer size and diversity of the African continent pose significant obstacles. It must be acknowledged that any reference to ‘African architecture’ will therefore always risk overgeneralisation. Any attempt to provide a holistic perspective inevitably falls short in representing the nuanced architectural traditions and local histories of specific regions or communities. This dissertation must therefore be taken as an introduction to the diversity of the continent rather than a holistic explanation.

Additionally, much of the existing literature on African vernacular architecture is not drawn from the fields of architecture or design proper, but rather from anecdotal accounts, anthropological studies, or broader decolonial scholarship. The scarcity of primary sources and formal academic writing from architectural practitioners, as well as many of the communities talked about, are oral societies that don’t have written documents of their practices. This analysis is constrained by its reliance solely on English language sources due to the researcher’s language limitations; other languages like French, Portuguese, and indigenous languages would undoubtedly enrich the analysis.

Many anthropologists argue that the combination of both emic and etic approaches is necessary to have a holistic understanding of a culture. Much of the current scholarship on African vernacular architecture, especially in English, is based on etic analyses by those who are not embedded within the communities they describe, limiting the depth of the research.

Many anthropologists argue that a holistic understanding of cultural practices requires both *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) approaches. However, much of the current scholarship on African vernacular architecture, especially in English, relies almost entirely on etic analyses by Western researchers who are not embedded within the communities they describe, limiting the depth of the research. This external perspective often privileges observable material forms with rigid standardised data over nuanced local understandings of aspects like spirituality that local communities prioritise.

3. The modern/vernacular binary

3.1 The myth of modernity

Modern architecture is traditionally narrated as having emerged from revolutions in technology, materials, industrialisation, and a desire to reject traditional styles and embrace avant-garde aesthetics. A break from tradition towards universal progress. Yet this story conceals the deeper historical role of colonialism, imperialism and fascism.

Modernity did not simply originate from the Renaissance or Enlightenment; it emerged concretely in 1492, when Christopher Columbus made his first voyage to the Americas. The so-called Age of Exploration. Europe not only discovers its capacity for global domination, but it also starts to position itself against the ‘other’. The 2 terms modern and traditional are often seen as antonyms. However, as the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano writes, modernity has never

existed in isolation from its colonial underside, what he calls the “coloniality of power”. It is exclusively a European phenomenon, one constituted by a dialectical relation with the non-European (Dussel, 1993, p. 65). Modernity’s very foundations rest on the subordination of ‘other’ cultures and systems of knowledge and affirming Europe as the “centre of the world” (Quijano, 2000).

Walter Mignolo extends this argument, arguing that “modernity” is not an ontological or theological movement but rather a mere fiction, used to justify European hegemony. The essence of this rhetoric involves the assumption that history progresses linearly, positioning Western Europe as its guardian (Deloria, 1973, p. 76). He writes that the language of emancipation promised by modernity cannot be separated from the colonial logic that justifies violence, extraction and dispossession (Mignolo, 2007). It is that very sense of superiority that obliges it to spread “civilisation” to “underdeveloped” parts of the world. Modernity, therefore, justifies itself through this rhetoric of salvation, licensing colonialism as a moral duty (Dussel, 1993).

The issue is that the concept of modernity is inherently a paradoxical one. Often defined by its rejection of tradition, it suggests that modern society should completely break with the past to achieve progress. This means a constant rejection of the old in favour of new technologies and social structures. However, it creates a contradiction: If to be modern is to be anti-tradition, its followers must embrace a tradition of being anti-tradition. The myth of modernity, therefore, systematically disregards and erases non-European histories and traditions while presenting itself as the universal model of progress (Li and Han, 2025).

When we understand African architecture through this lens, all that is non-European is disqualified as traditional, all that is traditional is anti-modern, and all that is anti-modern must be backwards and in need of salvation through European intervention. To achieve a more equitable understanding of African architecture, one must move past the binary of modern/vernacular.

3.2 The issue of defining "vernacular"

"Vernacular architecture" and "modern architecture" are two terms often presented as directly opposed to one another. One is traditional, indigenous, handcrafted, and often considered 'primitive'. The other is new, practical, progressive, and oriented towards the future. One idea cannot be understood without the other.

But it is important first to discuss terminology. What vernacular architecture is, and how it is distinct from what is considered 'modern'. The idea of modernism in architecture was first recognised as an 'international style', defined by its strict adherence to functional and utilitarian design. The term was first coined by Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson (Hitchcock and Johnson, 1997). "International" here was meant to describe architecture with transnational values considered appropriate across nations, regardless of culture, beliefs, or economic development.

The book, written in 1922, categorises architecture through national boundaries at a time when over 80% of the world was under colonial control. This ignores the power structures at play. How can we call anything “international” when the majority of people have no nation-state? (King, n.d.) Hitchcock and Johnson’s book also features fewer than 50 architects from just 15 countries, almost all of them Western. One must also question how adequate categorising architecture based on a nation really is, compared to climate. Although the built environment has undeniably been central to nation-building and developing national identity, the idea of the nation-state is a relatively recent one. Understanding it through terms like “national” or “international” is therefore more political than critical.

Instead of understanding the emergence of “modern” architecture in Europe through a socio-political and economic lens, and through the material and cultural conditions of its time, Hitchcock and Johnson describe it merely as a style. When we label what is “modern” and “progressive” as international, those who do not adhere to that standard must be, by extension, regressive or backward. It establishes an awareness of otherness; this otherness has laid the foundation for a new architectural category: the vernacular. All that is not modern.

One common definition of vernacular is ordinary, seen as a common building within a location. In that case, skyscapes are commonplace in Manhattan. Are they not logically New York City vernacular buildings?(King, n.d.) There is no clear line between what is vernacular and what is not; it is a term mostly only applied to the ‘other’. In fact, according to the distinguished

historian Nikolaus Pevsner, vernacular architecture is not architecture at all; it is mere building. For Paul Oliver

Mark Crinson describes the concept as belonging to the ‘master’s language’. From its Latin roots *vernaculas* from *verna,* a ‘slave born in the master's house’ (Bruun, 2013, p. 25). It functions as a hierarchical label; everywhere in spaces of colonisation, the vernacular referred to those who were colonised. To label something as vernacular was to create an asymmetrical relationship to something subordinate (Crinson, 2020, p. 226).

Despite acknowledging "vernacular" as a colonial category, no neutral alternative exists that escapes Eurocentric framing. This dissertation retains the term “African vernacular architecture”, enacting strategic essentialism. A concept theorised by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to describe when marginalised peoples use their oppressors’ language temporarily to manoeuvre discussions of liberation(“(PDF) Strategic Essentialism,” n.d.).

4. Working “around” modern theory

4.2 Romantic regionalism

It is important to first mention that we must avoid the assumption that culture and identity are fixed and naturally tied to the land. These ideas, as we’ve seen with the nazis “blood and soil” ideology, which linked race, culture and land rigidly and extremely. This is what Lewis Mumford warned against in his work The South in Architecture, where he explains that identity

is not geographically determined. Instead, it should respond to social and cultural conditions, rather than simply trying to 'return to tradition' and rely on deterministic ideas of place (Lewis Mumford, 1941). *Romantic regionalism* and the "return to tradition movement" mistake geography for identity instead of understanding architecture as dynamically evolving.

4.2 Critical regionalism

One of the prominent reactions to the failures of modern architecture, however, has been *critical regionalism*. The term first appeared in print in 1981, in an essay by the architectural theorists Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre (Tzonis and Lefaivre, 2016), but was really explored and popularised by Kenneth Frampt. It is an architectural approach that critiques the placlessness and lack of identity associated with the international style of modernism, as well as the whimsical individualism associated with postmodernism. Critical regionalism is separate from 'romantic rationalism' in the sense that it does not simply want to return to vernacular architecture but rather to provide architecture rooted in modern tradition while still being tied to geographical context. As Frampton writes, its goal is "to mediate the impact of universal civilisation with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place". He explains that architecture can only be sustained today as a critical practice if it assumes an *arrière-garde* position by distancing itself equally from the Enlightenment myth of progress and from a reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the architectonic forms of the preindustrial past. (Foster, 2002, p. 21)

Frampton argues that while modernism tries to erase sight, flatten the land, standardise the form, critical regionalism should use topography, context, light and wind to shape the building, resisting the generic “object-building” dropped anywhere.

Although Frampton’s ideas are meant to empower local identities, they can also be problematic as criticised by Keith L. Eggener in his essay *Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism* (Eggener, 2002). As a concept, critical regionalism can be problematic, particularly when applied to the architecture of developing, postcolonial nations, as it can exemplify a phenomenon described by urban historian Jane M. Jacobs, who wrote "Just as postcolonialist tendencies have always been produced by colonialism, so colonialist tendencies necessarily inhabit often optimistically designated postcolonial formations” (Jacobs, 2003, p. 14). It is applied by external authorities rather than emerging from local contexts. As a result, the assumptions behind the theory can contradict its intended goal. It was inherently contradictory as it depended on, and to some degree sympathised with, universal modernism, even as it worked against it.

Eggener explains how Barragán's work was initially unappreciated in Mexico but was later validated internationally, and how the response was patronising with an implied primisvism. He is praised for being “very Mexican” but not too Mexican to where it could be understood by the West. He is characterised as "sensual and earthbound", Frampton romantises the influence of the Mexican village, and inaccurately portrays his lack of formal architectural education. His innocence and authenticity are prioritised over the fact that he was a well-read professional and

real estate developer. (Frampton, 1983). In reality, Barragán's work was directly informed by the work of Le Corbusier, Richard Neutra, Frank Lloyd Wright, and other Europeans and North Americans more than it was by any Mexican vernacular examples.

Keith L. Eggener concludes by reminding us that “In looking for ways in which to think about buildings 'internationally' we need to be sure that we're not creating a new intellectual imperialism."

While yes, critical regionalism aligns with decolonial goals by resisting universalising Western modernism and valuing local context, it is not enough to actually dismantle the Eurocentric canon; it only seeks to work around it. The next chapter further explores why ideas of modernity are structurally racist and, therefore, to be truly decolonial, must be addressed at the root.

5. A continent without progress?

5.1 Africa as outside of time

V.Y. Mudimbe's influential 1988 book explains how the concept of Africa as a unified entity was largely constructed by non-Africans, especially Europeans (Mudimbe, 1988). Africa was not just a geographical fact but rather a construct produced by explorers, missionaries and philosophers.

This framing laid the groundwork for how Africa would later be positioned within Western historical thought.

In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel distinguishes four historical worlds: the Oriental, the Greek, the Roman, and the German (Hegel and Hegel, 1837). Africa, by contrast, is described as "Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature" and as having "no movement or development to exhibit"(Hegel and Hegel, 1837, p. 117). This means Africa is positioned before or outside History-with-a-capital-H; historical agency, development, and Spirit only belong to Europe. An "ahistorical" continent will therefore have its built environment declared "non-architectural". He positions Africa as outside of time altogether.

Periodisation further ingrained this exclusion. Periodisation is a European construct that makes change over time a 'manageable topic' (Stearns, 1987). The Eurocentric concepts of the three ages and prehistory have therefore been criticised, as they don't capture the complexities of the continent (Parker and Adjaye, 2023). Even terms like pre-colonial have been dismissed as simplifying history into a static before and after European colonisation ("African Historiography and the Challenges of European Periodization" n.d.). This positions Africans as passive recipients rather than active historical agents. In the British Museum, for example, the *Europe* section is split into different rooms based on time period, whereas there is only a singular general *Africa* room ("Museum map | British Museum," n.d.).

As European architectural history often presents itself as a narrative of linear progress, this only reinforces the idea of the static continent outside of time. In 1896, Banister Fletcher published *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* (Fletcher and Cordingley, 1896), becoming one of the earliest "global" histories of architecture. He depicted architecture almost as an organic form of development, as shown on the *Tree of Architecture* (fig 1). He places national European architectures as evolved and 'grown out of' a Greek, Roman and Romanesque 'trunk'. Not only are modern styles depicted as progress, but Indian, Chinese, Assyrian, Mexican and other styles are lower branches, disconnected as if 'dead branches. It should also be noted that, except for Egypt, African architecture is completely left out. This book has become a standard reference work with over 20 editions published since.

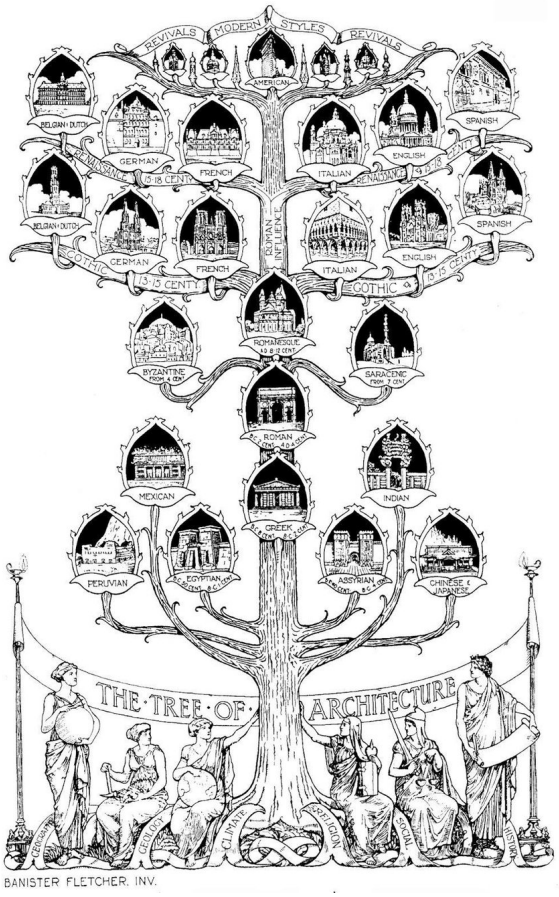


Figure 1"Tree of Architecture," frontispiece of Sir Banister Fletcher, A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method for the Student Craftsman, and Amateur, sixteenth edition. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.

5.2 Bias in historiography

These philosophical ideas were reinforced by 19th-century historiography. Most African societies recorded their history via oral tradition, thus lacking written historical records before European colonialism. As history transformed into a professional academic discipline with a strong reliance on archives, oral history was left out. Prominent Oxford historian Hugh Redwald Trevor-Roper famously said, “Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness"(Trevor-Roper, 1989, p. 9). Buildings without textual authorship, dates, or named architects were rendered invisible within architectural history.

Typological analysis is commonly understood as a *synchronic procedure*, a snapshot in time analysing architecture while ignoring historical development and evolution (Martí Arís et al., 2021). Many anthropologists, however, have critically examined this idea, especially in the study of architecture. They make the case that it objectifies buildings, stripping them of their dynamic qualities. Tim Ingold refers to it as a colonising move: "ready-made objects, ripe for analysis" (Ingold, 2013, p. xiii)

Instead, a *diachronic approach* should be implemented, understanding how architecture has changed and evolved over time to fit its cultural and historical contexts. That way, African architecture can be understood as reacting to its environment rather than being a fixed expression of cultural values handed down from the past (Devalle, 2023).

To decolonise architectural history means to begin by decolonising the way historical recordings are valued.

6. Structural racism in theory

6.1 Historicism, the precursor to modernism

The 19th century was a period of architectural historicism; this was a dominant movement characterised by a revival of past styles, such as Gothic, Renaissance, and Romanesque Revival. Rather than developing entirely new forms, architects frequently looked to historical precedents for authority and inspiration.

Edward Augustus Freeman, a prominent Victorian historian, played an important role in shaping early architectural historiography. His book *A History of Architecture* (1849) was one of the first comprehensive English-language surveys of global architectural history. Freeman approached architecture through a “philosophical” and developmental framework, interpreting architectural forms as evolving, emphasising Romanesque and Gothic styles as pinnacles of structural form (Bremner, 2013). But Freeman's architectural theory was never neutral; it was part of a broader intellectual movement to invent a superior Anglo-Saxon and Aryan racial tradition that supports British nationalism (Cheng et al., 2020, p. 7).

Irene Cheng explains that twentieth-century modernism cannot be separated from the intellectual foundations established during nineteenth-century historicism. This historicism only came as Europeans became aware of their relative place in world history, a knowledge built on comparative studies of other cultures (Cheng et al., 2020, p. 135). At the same time, many architects were searching for an architectural language suited to the future. It was in this context that racial science appeared to provide the answers, ones that were historically grounded, an explanation for architectural development and design. (Laugier, 1755)

Racialism, the belief that humanity is divided into distinct biological races, possessing inherent characteristics, played a significant role in these theories. Within this framework, architectural styles can now be interpreted as evidence of racial history, with different races believed to produce distinct building styles. These styles could then be organised into a hierarchical evolutionary sequence from primitive to modern, with the latter being associated with Germanic (Aryan) civilisations (Cheng et al., 2020, p. 135). These 19th-century ideas laid the foundations for the emerging modernist architectural consciousness. Because classicism and traditional antiquity were the status quo, it was ironically "progressives" who used racial science to advocate for their modernist ideas.

6.2 Race and the origin of architecture

Marc-Antoine Laugier famously proposed the "primitive hut" in *An Essay on Architecture* (Laugier, 1755). This idea of a single prehistoric building type linked architectural progress throughout the world, enabling the construction of a linear history of human progress.

Quatremère de Quincy was among the first people, however, to radically depart from this single-origin story of architecture. He instead proposed in his 1788 essay that there were 3 equally primary types of architectural origins (Lavin, 1992, p. 40): the cave, the hut and the tent, each corresponding to a specific social organisation and mode of life. The cave was created by the hunting people and linked to the monumental stone architecture of Egypt. The tent, for the herdsmen, was considered the precursor of Chinese wooden construction. And the hut for the settled farmer formed the basis of Greek architecture (Quatremere de Quincy, 2012). According to him, the cave and the tent were limited in their capacity for further development. Only the hut was the "principled type" as it was the precursor to "civilised" western architecture (Lavin, 1992, p. 69). Yes, this model relied on speculation rather than empirical reasoning; it foreshadowed a trope where only Europeans were capable of progress, while other peoples were destined to be historically stagnant (Cheng et al., 2020, p. 137).

Compared to these ideas of Quatremère de Quincy that cited geography as the main reason for these primitive typologies, we see ideas in the 19th century start to be more explicitly racialised. In Edward Augustus Freeman in *A History of Architecture* (1849) he writes that "The necessities of climate and differences of geographical position produce no inconsiderable influence on manners, arts, and intellect" and instead credits it to "deeper causes", that deeper force being here being race, he continues by explaining the "law of Divine Providence has divided the offspring of our common parents into widely distinguished races"(Freeman, 1849, p. 15).

While this isn't explicitly *racist*, it introduces the *racialisation* of architecture. There is an evident link from geography to race in trying ot justify architectural diversity, one that would later reveal how architectural discourse constructed a hierarchy of architectural development that privileged Europe as the site of progress. With Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of Volksgeist, German for national spirit, the idea that each cultural group possesses a distinctive collective spirit, now meant that architectural forms were not merely cultural expressions but manifestations of inherent racial characteristics(Herder and Forster, 2002).

6.3 The case of ornamentation

Examples of racialisation of styles can be seen in the work of Owen Johns *Grammer of Ornament.* This became a classic and was extremely influential in its bold theories on the use of colour, geometry and abstraction. It was presented as a liberal appreciation for non-Western design, and yet Johns continuously associates different styles with racial mental attributes. He writes about the "work of the refined and spiritual Persian" for example, compared to the "not less refined but reflective Arab", and finally "the unimaginative Turk" (Jones et al., 1856, p. 112). The point here is not who he thought to be more refined or spiritual; in fact, his ideas were rather arbitrary. But rather how aesthetic forms could be used to stereotype racialised mental attributes.

Owen Johns advocated for Europeans to learn from the ornamentation and design of these 'primitive cultures'. He writes, "If we would return to a more healthy condition, we must even be

as little children or as savages; we must get rid of the acquired and artificial, and return to and develop natural instincts" (Jones et al., 1856, p. 21). Although he seems to be valuing non-Western ornamentation, he thus differentiates between the modern West and what he describes as the childlike, primitive, instinctual ornamentation of the non-Western man. This primitivist mindset idealises the other while maintaining the Western superiority ideal, valuing the non-Western only for its naivety and authentic proximity to nature.

Adolf Loos's 1908 essay *Ornament and Crime* is today regarded as a foundational manifesto of modernist architecture and design. Loos borrows Owen Jones' association of ornamentation with the primitive and argues that ornamentation is therefore holding modern architecture back. It should not just be reformed but completely abolished (Cheng, 2022). He argues that ornament is only used by the people of Papua, by blacks, which he calls *Neger* ("*n*gger*") and *Kaffer ("kaffir")*, by Persians and Slovaks. He then compares different cultures with a child's developmental phase, saying "At the age of two, (a child) looks like a Papua, at the age of four like a Germanic person, with six like Socrates and with eight like Voltaire" (Loos and Masheck, 1913).

These ideas, rooted in cultural and racial supremacy, laid the foundations for modern architectural theory. Le Corbusier writes in 1927 that "Decoration is of a sensorial and elementary order, as is colour, and is suited to simple races, peasants and savages" (Salingaros, 2002). This shows how much of modern theory explicitly positions itself as modern by positioning itself against all that is considered "other".

6.4 Modern standardisation

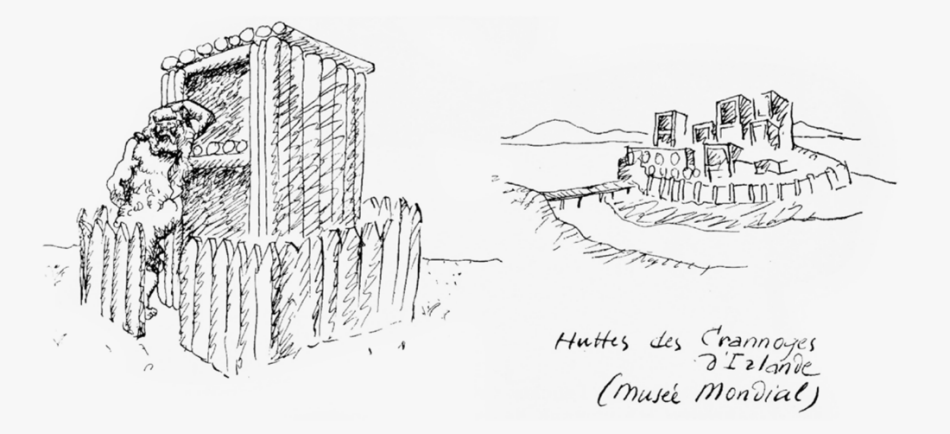
During the modern movement, the focus was no longer a search for the origins of architectural diversity but rather a search for a standardised prototype for mass production, to improve and reform society. Le Corbusier even looked back to "primitive" huts, like Swiss lake dwellings (Fig 2). He admired how those old homes were basic and repeatable and wanted to extend those ideas to modern architecture(Devalle, 2023).

However, this push for unified housing units was not completely innocent. It was also used to maintain and enforce control over the colonies. The emphasis on function was shared by anthropology, which moved away from theories of evolution towards theories of “structural functionalism”. It has been well documented that the purpose of this approach was to understand how native societies and systems worked in order to “indirectly rule” the colonies. They would plant these standardised modern homes to promote development and assimilation (Devalle, 2023).

This can be seen Le Corbusier's radical *Plan Obus* (1930–1933) , The rhetoric surrounding the plan consisted of that of the new colonial order of the time. It also attempted to segregate the traditional Casbah from new European areas. The plan epitomised modernism's colonial fusion: standardising "primitive" architecture into mass housing for imperial order, blending

functionalist reform with racial-spatial hierarchy. “Thus, the Plan Obus goes beyond being an Orientalist work of art; it is an Orientalist manifesto” (Tax, 2020).

The ”one size fits all” universal model of modern architecture, rooted in Eurocentric norms, would therefore justify segregation and render some homes civilised while others in need of saving.



(Figure 1)) Le Corbusier’s drawing of crannógs, prehistoric lake dwellings of Ireland. From Une maison, un palais

7. Villages: Do Africans need saving?

6.1 Urban Planning: a case study

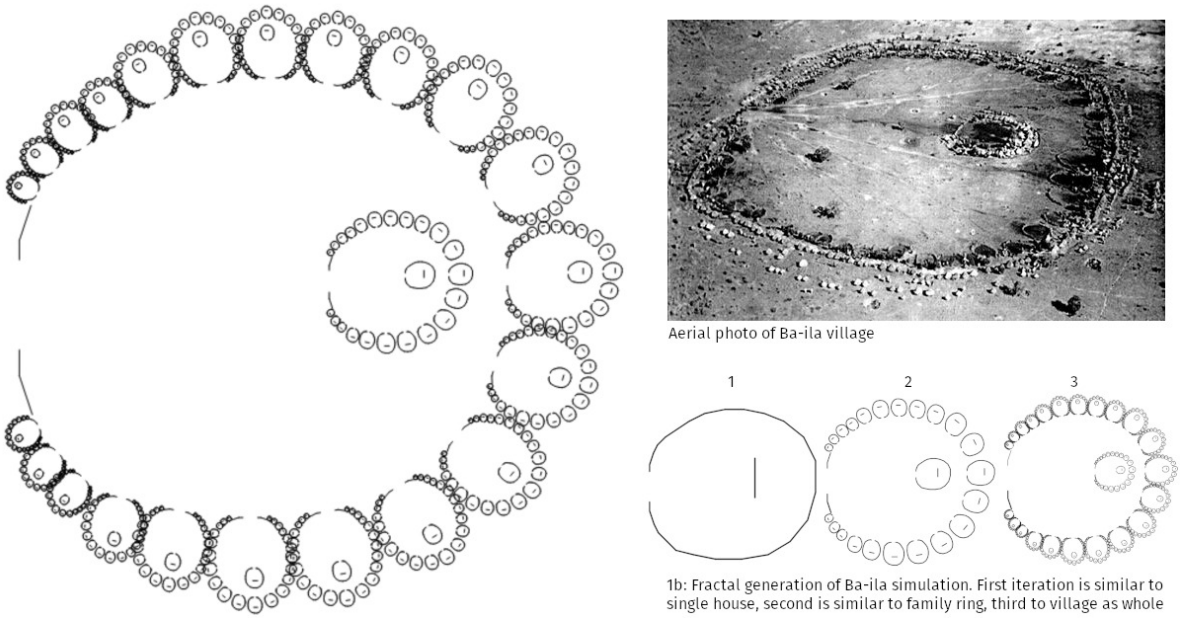
A persistent misconception is that Africans lacked the organisation and political sophistication required to build complex towns and cities. They were, at worst, characterised as isolated and unstructured, and at best, their development was solely a result of external alien or “civilising” influences. (Hull, 1976).

Such narratives ignore the deeply embedded systems of mathematical knowledge present across the continent. As demonstrated by Professor Ron Eglash, who writes extensively about African Fractals and how they have been used at the heart of urban design. Fractals are complex, never-ending geometric patterns that are self-similar across different scales, meaning they look similar or identical regardless of how much you zoom in. Commonly observed in natural forms such as ferns or snowflakes, fractal geometry has also long been embedded in African design systems. Although Africa's culture is incredibly diverse, fractal principles appear across numerous regions, serving as a foundational element of urban organisation. (*Ron Eglash*, 2007, p. 20).

Logone-Birni is a city in Northern Cameroon, the capital of the Kotoka people. This is an example of Architecture by accretion, where the building grows over time rather than being built from a single master plan. Figure 3 shows an aerial view of a palace in the city, and the structure is an example of self-similar scaling, the same pattern at different scales. There is also a behavioural pattern associated with the movement of the visitor. The passage is a rectangular spiral resembling the golden ratio, and as a person enters a smaller scale, they become more polite until they reach the throne, where they are shoeless and speak formally(*Ron Eglash*, 2007, p. 24).


(Figure 3)

In Southern Zambia, the Ba-ila settlements, as seen in Figure 4, are an example of circular fractals. Designed as a large ring of rings, the order and size are symbolic of one's social standing in the community. Their animal quarters are larger because they have more livestock, and their living quarters are larger because they are more important. The largest ring in the centre is occupied by the chief, and the rings at the back by his extended family. (*Ron Eglash*, 2007, p. 26)



(Figure 4)

These settlements demonstrate that African urbanism was neither accidental nor 'simply intuitive'; the use of fractals here shows a conscious knowledge system structuring hierarchy and governance. These settlements testify not only to the mathematical genius of African architecture but also to the modern principle of form following function.

6.2 Forced Villagisation:

Villagisation – the forcible removal of rural populations into internment camp-like settlements – was a policy employed by the British colonial government in Kenya after the anti-colonial so-called Mau Mau uprising (Feichtinger, 2017). It was an attempt to 'pacify' the colonised not only through military force but also by reshaping their built environment. These communities were forced into tightly controlled "strategic villages," while the colonial government burned and

demolished rural settlements and forcibly removed many hundreds of thousands of people from their homes to be resettled according to colonial planning principles (Curless and Thomas, 2017).

Instead of reflecting kinship, hierarchy, or local ecological knowledge, settlement patterns now prioritise easy surveillance. The resulting settlements were massively overcrowded and became a source of widespread suffering and an increased mortality rate (Branch, 2010).

Colonial repression was further supported by racialised pseudo-scientific theories. J.C. Carothers, director of the Mathari Mental Hospital in Nairobi, notoriously described Africans as "remarkably like the lobotomized Western European and in some ways like the traditional psychopath". His work, *The Psychology of Mau Mau*, argued that the rebellion was not caused by legitimate grievances but was a psychological reaction to the stress of transitioning from traditional tribal life to Western culture. Such claims provided a scientific veneer that helped justify harsh colonial policies, including villagisation and mass detention.

The imposition of strategic villages, therefore, represented more than a counterinsurgency tactic; it constituted a systematic erasure of Indigenous spatial knowledge.

Colonial authorities not only reshaped the built environment but also dismissed the sophisticated mathematical and cultural knowledge embedded within Indigenous planning traditions. The

destruction of fractal settlement systems thus illustrates how colonial power operated not only through military and political domination but also through the suppression of local knowledge systems that had long structured African urban life.

Conclusion

Rather than merely summarising this dissertation's critique, this conclusion presents 9 key takeaway points for an anti-racist architectural pedagogy:

1. Regenerate oral archives as primary sources:

   History and tradition must not be considered legitimate only when in written form. Oral histories, songs and material culture must all be recognised as rigorous forms of architectural knowledge.

2. Reject Eurocentric linear models of history:

   The idea that history progresses as a straight line from primitive to civilised with the end being western modernity must be understood not only as exclusionary but also as outright historically misleading, as it overlooks complexities and prioritises a narrative. Academics like John Grey argue that the myth of human progress is a dangerous one.

3. Adopt both synchronic and diachronic approaches to architecture:

   Typological analysis is usually talked about as a snapshot in time, ignoring history (the synchronic approach). However, this objectifies architecture and, instead of

understanding it as something dynamic and historically situated, sees African architecture as something that is just naturally passed down.

4. Expand beyond visual form:

   Reducing architectural analysis to simplified plans and drawings does much of the architecture a disservice. This is an inherently Western bias, as in many non-Western vernacular traditions, which is not always legible through form alone. How can we understand space beyond visual representations? sensory experiences? Movements and ritual practices?

5. Refuse material reductionism:

   Reducing African architecture to materiality, even in the case of sustainability, strips it of its complexities. It must instead be analysed as a product of social, political, economic, and spiritual systems. Western architecture should not be assumed to be climate-neutral, and the only architecture with theory.

6. Dismantle the concept of modernity:

   Completely. Modernity is not a progressive, universally applicable timeline. It must be critically interrogated and, as Walter Mignolo explains, cannot be understood without its darker side of coloniality.

7. Ornamentation as resistance:

   Rather than colours and ornament being dismissed as primitive and childish, they must be understood as culturally embedded. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues, taste is not neutral or personal; it is a political weapon. Ornamentation is therefore seen as an act of resistance.

8. Reject universalism in favour of pluralism:

Architectural pedagogy must move away from universalist claims that impose Western standards as globally applicable or that all architecture has one origin. Instead, a plurality of knowledge systems must be embraced, with each tradition being understood on its own terms

9. Teach critical race theory:

   There are those who dismiss critical race theory as being “too woke” undermining patriotism and national unity. However, decolonial and critical race theory should not be taught as separate topics but woven into architectural pedagogy. For example, the fascist and orientalist politics of Le Corbusier should be examined when talking about his influence and legacy. So long as architectural theory upholds racist values, anti-racism must be centred.

African vernacular architecture is not marginal because it lacks theory; it lacks theory because theory was built to exclude it.

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