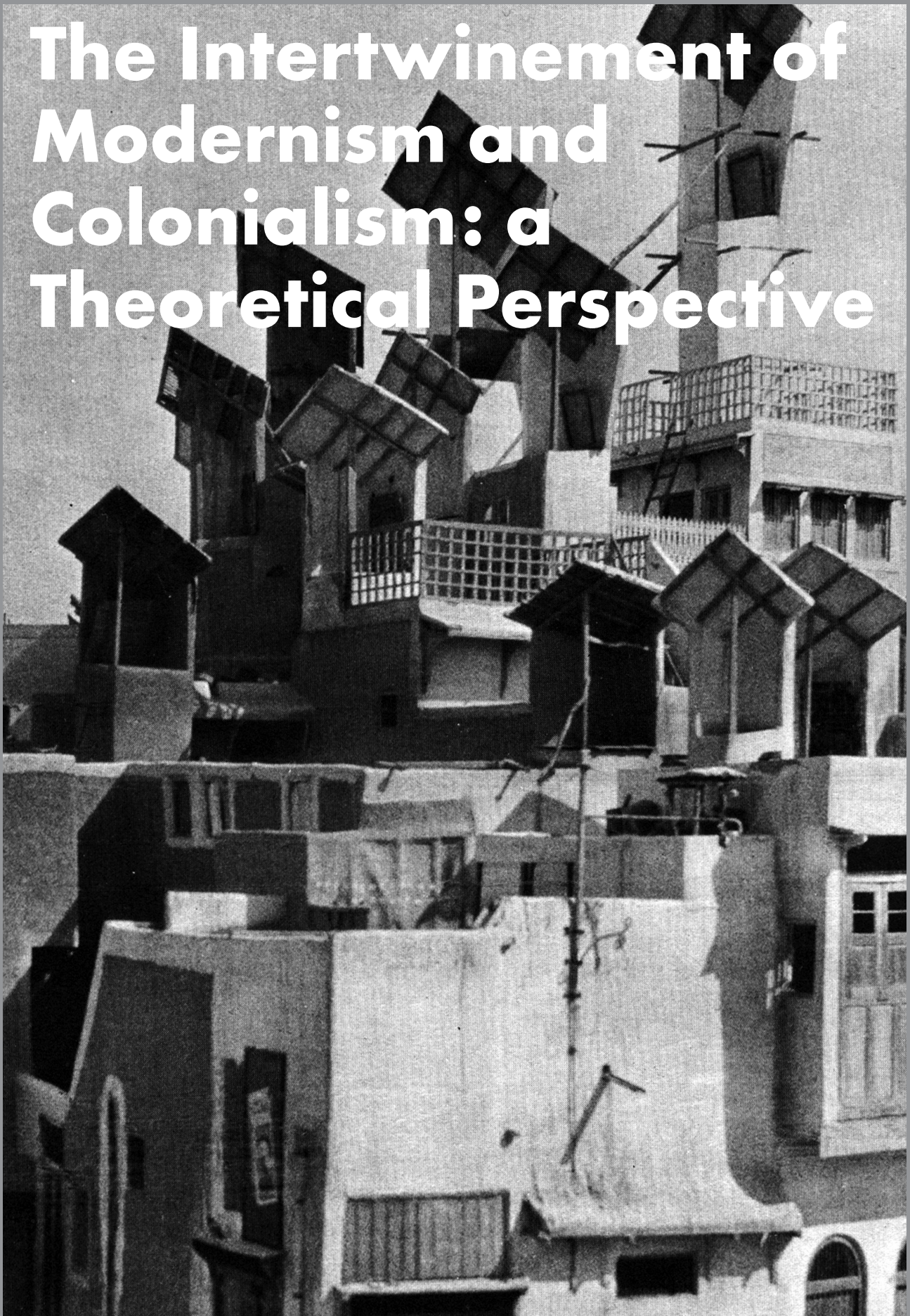


The Intertwinement of Modernism and Colonialism: a Theoretical Perspective



Post-colonial theory, following the lead of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, holds that the discourse that justified colonialism was not marginal to European culture, but that it formed a core ingredient of European thinking about Modernity and Modernism. This thought-provoking argument has not yet been thoroughly processed in architectural history and theory. This article explores these issues by introducing some of Said's thoughts and by discussing how they might be relevant for an interpretation of Modernism in architecture. It looks at primitivism in architecture as encountered in the work of Loos, Le Corbusier and Rudofsky, arguing that its colonialist bias is undeniable. The conclusion stresses how much Said's analyses still give rise to difficult questions about our ideas and attitudes.

By Hilde Heynen

The historiography of *Modernism* in architecture has seen quite some additions the last couple of decades. One of the more important revisions of *Modernism's* history has to do with a postcolonial critique. This critique starts from the assumption that Modernity and colonialism are in some ways intertwined—that they cannot be seen as intellectual discourses that are totally separate. For one thing, this has to do with an economic context. Take for example the Van Nelle factory, one of the famous icons of *Modernism*. This was, in fact, a coffee, tea and tobacco factory—which means that this icon of Modernity got into the world as a result of colonial expansion, colonial policy and colonial production. It cannot be denied therefore that the Van Nelle factory was part and parcel of the whole colonial condition.

In the book *Back from Utopia*, which was edited by Hubert-Jan Henket and me, we tried to come to terms not only with the physical heritage of the Modern Movement, but also with its ideological heritage. In my own contribution I raised some issues, some questions of colonialism, which I summarized as follows:

In postcolonial theories the interconnections between the Enlightenment project of Modernity and the imperialist practice of colonialism have been carefully disentangled. Following the lead of Edward Said's Orientalism, it is argued that colonial discourse was intrinsic to European self-understanding: it is through their conquest and their knowledge of foreign peoples and territories (two experiences which usually were intimately linked), that Europeans could position themselves as Modern, as civilized, as superior, as developed and progressive

vis-à-vis local populations that were none of that [...] The other, the non-European, was thus represented as the negation of everything that Europe imagined or desired to be.¹

This is, in a nutshell, the argument that Edward Said developed in his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978). I will discuss the main ideas of this book in a first section of this paper. In the second part I will question whether similar logics are to be found in architectural discourses. Finally, by a way of conclusion I will try to make up a kind of balance as to what to think of Modern architecture in light of the insights developed from *Orientalism* and post-colonial theory.

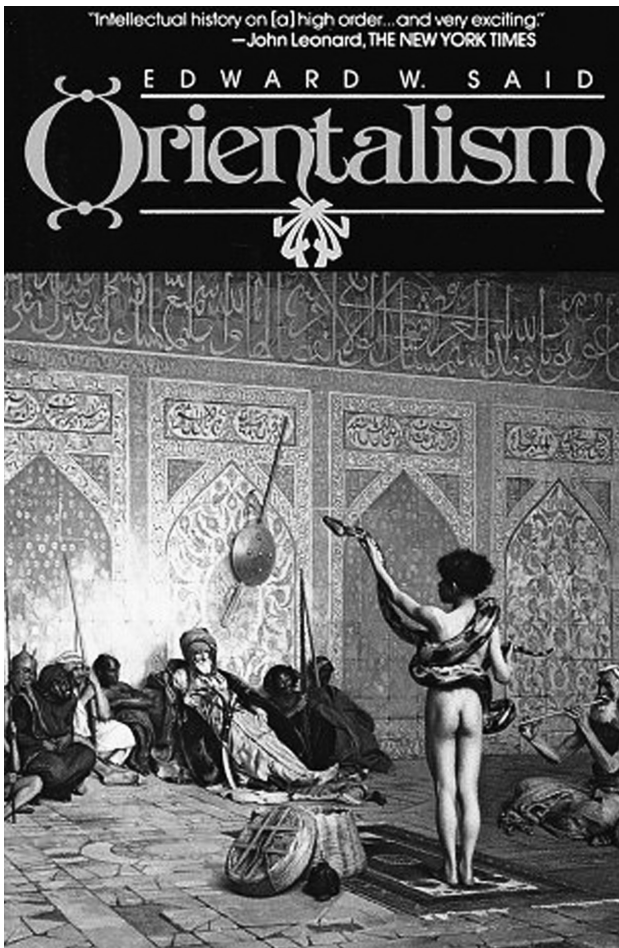
Orientalism

Edward Said (1935–2003) was a Palestinian intellectual, born in Jerusalem, who became a scholar teaching at Columbia University, in New York, in the field of comparative literature. The central theme in his work is the relation between cultures. His book *Orientalism* starts from the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature: what we call the Orient is in the East because our point of reference is Europe. Men make their own history, he claims, they also make maps and these maps then structure our conception of reality:

Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in, and for, the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.²

In art, the term *Orientalism* refers to a whole series of images which form a certain tradition that depicts the fantasies of Western painters about the East. Famous topics are women in the harem, women making toilets, women

< Image from Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects*. A short introduction to non-pedigreed architecture, 1964.



12 Figure 1. Cover of Edward W. Said's book *Orientalism*, 1978.

leading a life of luxury and laziness—or men, brave men confronting the desert alone on a horse (think of the imagery in films like David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*). Also in literature you have Orientalist works, just like academic studies of the East fall under Orientalism. The Orient in most of these examples captures the imagination, and evokes a very specific kind of image, with often erotic associations. Often the images suggest decadence and lasciviousness, a kind of looseness which is seductive, but at the same time there is an implicit moral message about the dangers of such luxury. The Orient is thus represented as full of mystery and secrets. Its people are represented as being very enigmatic, very indirect, as persons you cannot easily get to know and hence as individuals who might be unreliable. The implicit message these images and texts bring about is that the Orient might be threatening, and that, therefore, it needs to be brought under control. And that message acts as a kind of alibi for the civilizing mission of the West.

According to Said, this type of analysis does not pertain only to paintings or to literature. He claims that Orientalism pervades our whole way of thinking:

*Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institutions; nor is it [...] representative and expressive of some nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Oriental' world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts.*³

Orientalism is an organizing factor, a structuring factor which influences our frame of mind, our worldview, the way we think about the world. And the way Europeans think about the world, the way European or Western consciousness is structured has to do with the will or intention to understand. This primary drive however is only gradually moved from the will or intention to control, to manipulate or even to incorporate that which is manifestly different. Said:

*(Orientalism) is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly a different (or alternative and novel) world [...] it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power.*³

His point is that all kinds of knowledge in literature and texts, and paintings, that are produced by Western scholars and artists and authors and architects and that address the East or the colonies, can never be seen as totally disconnected from the fact they are European. Europeans always already are in a kind of unequal relationship with the people they are depicting or writing about. When they write about the East, their interpretation becomes the dominant perspective. Dealings of academic, scholarly interest with other parts of the world cannot be abstracted from this unevenness in power. Unevenness in power produces some kind of awareness of the superiority of the West. And it is this conviction, the conviction of the superiority of the West, which justifies the colonialist enterprise.

That the West had a civilizing mission was an idea that was shared among many many layers of society until well into the 50s and even the 60s. Maybe the idea of the civilizing mission by now has become politically incorrect. This does not mean, however, that the idea of superiority has vanished. This superiority also has to do with what Said calls hegemony, the dominance of certain cultural forms over others. It simply has to do with matters of quantity, since there are many more books produced in

Europe and America about the rest of the world than the other way around. So there is a kind of unevenness also in the directions of the interactions.

*Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay had called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.*⁴

In architectural history these notions have taken some root in the last couple of years, although still not enough. Therefore, in order to show how colonialist thinking works also in architecture, I want to take a look at the notion of 'the primitive' in Modern architecture, in order to see how Said's analysis about implicit colonialism in our discourses is applicable to architecture.

Primitivism in Modern Architecture

It is very clear that the notion of the primitive does carry a colonialist overtone in the discourse of Adolf Loos. He stated in 1908, in his famous essay on "Ornament and Crime", that:

*In the womb the human embryo passes through all the development stages of the animal kingdom. At the moment of birth, human sensations are equal to those of a newborn dog. His childhood passes through all the transformations, which correspond to the history of mankind. At the age of two he sees like a Papuan, at four, like a Teuton, at six like Socrates, at eight like Voltaire [...] The child is amoral. To us the Papua is amoral. The Papuan slaughters and devours somebody, he tattoos his skin, his boat, his oar, in short, everything that is within his reach. He is no criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate [...] The urge to ornament one's face, and everything within one's reach is the origin of fine art. It is the babble of painting. All art is erotic.*⁵

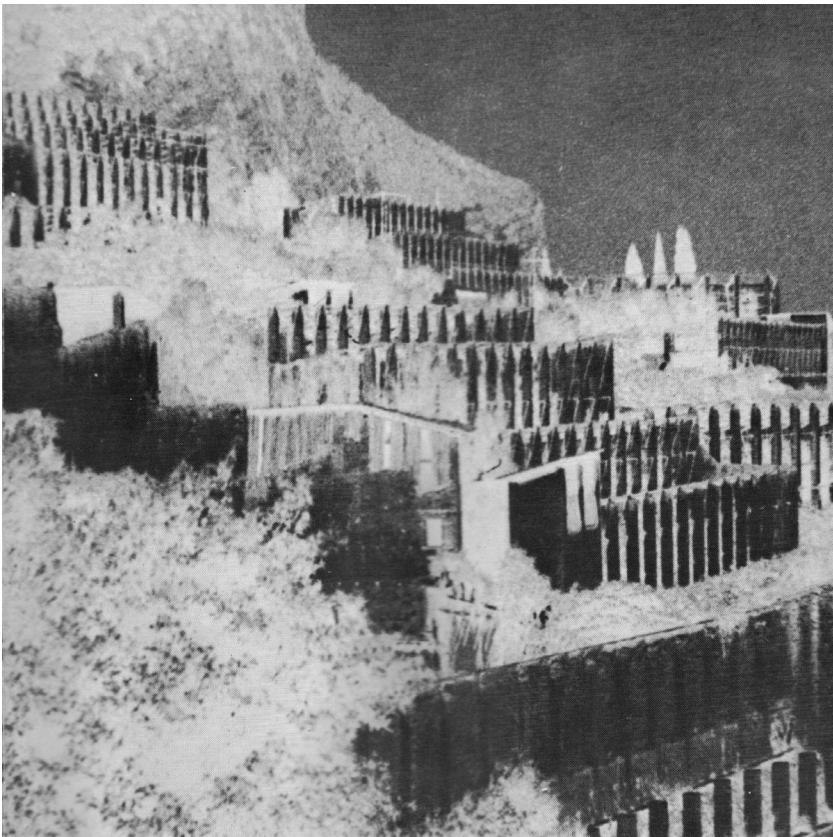
What Loos is constructing here is a comparison between the Papua and the European as a legitimating or a justification for the superiority of his ornamentless Modern architecture. The justification for that idea comes from a notion that was popular in the 19th and early 20th century, namely that other (non-European) people are childlike. This conforms to a way of thinking that in an-

thropology is known as evolutionism: it looks at the differences between cultures as differences of hierarchy, as if all people are on an evolutionary ladder and some are further developed than others, but the others will get there in time. Such an evolutionist way of looking at the differences between the cultures is very much part of the colonial discourse.

Le Corbusier was also very much interested in the primitive, yet in his discourse other aspects prevail. Adolf Max Vogt wrote a book on Le Corbusier called *Le Corbusier, the Noble Savage*. He claims that Le Corbusier's work mediated between on the one hand rationality and geometric order, and on the other hand primary facts in archaeology and architecture. According to Vogt, Le Corbusier's preference for pure geometric forms came from his fascination for archeological findings and for the architecture that he encountered in his *Voyage à l'Orient*. He gives examples of buildings by Le Corbusier that testify of this influence (one of his houses in the Weissenhof Siedlung bears a strong resemblance in volumetric composition to one of the buildings he sketched in his *Voyage à l'Orient*; the Villa Savoye shares similar characteristics with another oriental building).

If one compares Loos and Le Corbusier, it is clear that for Loos the primitive was the pre-rational, the childlike, the one who loves tattoos. Thus the primitive for Loos is what has to be overcome. His cultural paradigm is evolutionism and social Darwinism—the idea that cultures that are further developed are stronger and that the others cultures will die out. For Le Corbusier on the other hand the primitive is rather the primary, the original, the authentic, that which has to be regained. The latter approach, it seems to me, became the most important in *Modernist* architecture: also later on we find again and again this idea of the primitive as the authentic that has to be reinstalled. That interpretation makes up the attitude of what we can call primitivism in architecture.

Now from a post colonial perspective primitivism is a questionable attitude. In architecture we didn't question it that much but it is instructive to look at another field, e.g. art history where this matter has been extensively discussed. The debate started because of the 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, called "Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern." That exhibition brought together a series of Modern art works with a series of so called 'primitive' objects from the non-Western world. The whole idea was that the exhibition would display that maybe there are more affinities and similarities between Western Modern art and these tribal arts. This show has raised an enormous amount of criticism. Thomas McEvelley summarized a few of the argument that have been made.



ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS
by Bernard Rudofsky

Figure 2. Cover of **Bernard Rudofsky's** book *Architecture without Architects. A short introduction to non-pedigreed architecture*, 1964.

Figure 3. Image of the exhibition of the same name at the Museum of Modern Art of New York, 1964. © Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 4. Image from the book with the wind-scoops (called bad-gir by Rudofsky) on the roofs of buildings, which channel air into their interiors.



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*I have no doubt that those responsible for this exhibition and book feel that it is a radical act to show how equal the primitives are to us, how civilized, how sensitive, how 'inventive': indeed, both Rubin and Varnedoe passionately declare this. But by their absolute repression of primitive context, meaning, content, and intention (the dates of the works, their functions, their religious or mythological connections, their environments), they have treated the primitives as less than human, less than cultural—as shadows of a culture, their selfhood, their Otherness, wrung out of them.*⁶

This is an argument that one encounters again and again, it is part of the criticism of how European colonizers dealt with the art and cultures of the people they conquered. Objects in colonial museums are typically the kind of objects that were taken away because they were admired by the colonial explorers, and very often one finds in Europe, in America or in Australia a lot of 'primitive' objects that have no history as objects, the origin of which is not exactly known, nor their function or social role or cultural meaning. All this information is abstracted; they are just there as aesthetic objects—nice to look at, to admire, but in fact devoid from their cultural contexts. I agree with Thomas McEvilley that it is very questionable whether it is justifiable to do that, to just see them as aesthetic objects.

Another argument is formulated by Hal Foster, who states that there is something very strange and contradictory about our Western, or Modernist, fascination with the primitive. Because one cannot escape that the observation that:

*The Modern discovery of the primitive really means its death [...] no anthropological remorse, aesthetic elevation, or redemptive exhibition can correct or compensate this loss because they are all implicated in it.*⁷

The fact that all these explorers and all these well meaning people ventured out to undiscovered parts of the world, collecting all these nice objects, resulted (unintentionally but nevertheless inevitably) in the extinction of the primitive that was investigated. And that is a moral dilemma that not many of those involved in these kinds of travels of discovery are truly recognizing.

Within architectural culture, the fascination for the primitive and the non-Western is also very much present. From the late 1950s onwards one can recall e.g. Paul Oliver's *Shelter and Society*; Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects*, Amos Rapoport's *House Form and Cul-*

ture or Joseph Rykwert's *Adam's House in Paradise*. Such books are very often written by architects or architectural historians, whose point of reference is Modern architecture. The trope of authenticity therefore is of major relevance, as for example in the book by Bernard Rudofsky, who formulates his intentions as follows:

*The exhibition is not an exercise in quaintness not a travel guide, except in the sense that it marks a point of departure for the exploration of our architectural prejudices. It is frankly **polemic**, comparing, as it does, if only by implication, the **serenity** of the architecture in so-called underdeveloped countries with the architectural **blight** in industrial countries.*⁸

The whole idea is that Modern architects can learn something from this so-called primitive architecture, or the architecture in the so-called underdeveloped countries. They can learn something from it because of the qualities that are inherent to it: it is communal architecture instead of individual; it fits buildings into their natural surroundings; there is a desire for secure, well defined places instead of the sprawl of unchecked growth in the West; a rare good sense in the handling of practical problems; there is humaneness in this architecture and in general the people behind these buildings look at the good of everyone rather than at profit making.

The imagery Rudofsky displays is similar to the one in the "Primitivism" exhibition, in the sense that the images are not very well identified, not much information is given about them. There is usually a region but not more specific information as to dates or makers. Images are organized in a visually attractive way, but not as part of a serious investigation into the history of these specific places. The implicit message is that the primitive is 'the Other' of the Modern Movement. The primitive is our 'other'—as Said is arguing we construct the Orient to identify ourselves. Rudofsky's viewpoint can thus be summarized as follows: "the primitive is the 'other' of the Modern, Modern architecture has to regain the qualities it lost, and these qualities are mirrored in primitive architecture."

Now from a postcolonial perspective one can indeed criticize this kind of approach in the sense that it implies a sanitized, romanticized, sterile version of primitive architecture (this can be said not only about Rudofsky but also about someone like Aldo Van Eyck with his studies of Dogon architecture). McEvilley stated in his criticism of the "Primitivism" exhibition that the artifacts in it are sterilized—"the blood is wiped off them." The real history of these artifacts, the real and sometimes violent context in which they were functioning is absolutely ignored in

the way they are presented. The same is valid for a book as that of Rudofsky. It is basically a romantic viewpoint, since there is no real analysis of economic conditions or social inequalities—these are not addressed at all (unless for the notion that maybe poor people are more authentic). It is not geographically and historically specific, nor does it take the other seriously. Such books are typically produced by European or American intellectuals 'about' the others: there is no serious participation of the other, there is no interaction with the people who are depicted in such books. And also, following Hal Foster's argument, such an approach does not take into account the complicity of the admirers in the process of extinction of the things that they are admiring.

This kind of criticism, it seems to me, indeed applies to Modern architecture's fascination with the primitive and with the circumstances to be found in the so-called undeveloped world. There thus is, undoubtedly, a very real kind of intertwinement between the Modern discourse and the discourse that justified colonialism and imperialism. Does this mean however that we should denounce Modern architecture and Modern discourse, out of some sense of political correctness? I am not so sure about that.

The Hopes Embodied in Modernism

The main argument for a reconsideration of Modern ideas has to do, in my opinion, with its social ideals. The fact that the construction of Modernity and Modernism implies an interplay between the supposed superiority of Europeans versus the inferiority of all the rest, does not mean that everything about it becomes invalid. For we should also allow for the possibility that ideas of Modernity and Modernism can be opened up, that they do not belong exclusively to the West. Maybe it is this construction of the Modern as being equivalent to the West that needs to be criticized and deconstructed. If one tries to look at Modern architecture or to deconstruct the Modern discourse, opening it up for other possibilities then maybe some of its promises can be retained.

For me Modern architecture is most of all a social project, a social idea. It is not so much a matter of style, although it is very interesting as a style. The core of Modernist architecture for me lies in this whole program of social improvement, the idea that Modern architects were not just changing architecture, but through architecture they were going to change the world and to make it a better world. It can be summarized in the title of a publication of Giedion in 1929 *Befreites Wohnen*: what Modern architecture would bring to the people was liberation and emancipation. People would be liberated from oppression and deprivation. Instead of being confined to closed and dark environments, Modern architecture would open

up their world, let in light and air and make sure that people's lives would be better. This program was translated in a whole series of manifestations of the program of the welfare state, and that is for me the most important part of Modern architecture, the part that deals with social housing and building schools and hospitals and providing infrastructure and by doing that improving the lives of many people. This is also the message Catharine Bauer's book on *Modern Housing* (1934), in which she claims that Modern architecture is providing people with better housing, better environments, better amenities, all kinds of infrastructure. Modernism, as Bauer saw it and as I see it, is linked up with this idea of social emancipation and social progress.

If you take Modernism seriously in this sense, it indeed is absolutely open to be appropriated by other parts of the world. The argument that the idea of Western superiority is inherent to Modernism, should not be taken to imply that this whole ideology of liberalization and emancipation would be restricted to those people who recognize themselves as being superior. At a certain point some people have been criticizing Modern endeavors as for example Brasilia or Chandigarh, for being totally unconnected to the supposed cultural values and the way of life of the people they were built for. I would rather argue that in both cases there was a very conscious choice, a very conscious decision by politicians, by decision makers, to rely on this Modern glory in order to express the aspirations that they themselves formulate for the future of their country. It is clear to me that this kind of appropriations of ideas of Modernity is absolutely justified and is part of the whole dialogue and interplay that is the result of the process of Modernization.

Let's take as a focus the Central Bus station in Brasilia—designed by Lúcio Costa and for me today by far the most interesting site of the city. Lúcio Costa's original urban design for Brasilia relates to the so-called pilot project, the part of the city that is now protected as heritage. Since its inauguration, however, the city has been growing enormously and the growth has taken place in satellite towns that are at a certain distance from the central city, which is really treated as a kind of unchangeable icon of Brazilian Modernity. The bus station is the place where it all comes together, where the people in the satellite towns commute and where there is a kind of turmoil of not just the official people—civil servants and the like—but also of inhabitants from the satellites, belonging to very different classes. The hustle and bustle in that bus station is for me where the real Modernity of a place like Brasilia is located—probably more so than in its very admirable Modern buildings. Similar things can be said about Chandigarh. I had the opportunity to visit Chan-



Figure 5. North view of Brasília's Rodoviária by Lúcio Costa in 1964.

digarh a couple of year ago, and when one visits the place the people (many people, not just architects and intellectuals) start telling you that the city has been developed by a very famous architect. They are clearly very proud of their city, and therefore I think it is absolutely irrelevant to assume that a place like Chandigarh lacks the Indian spirit or that it is foreign or not adapted to its context. Going there one sees clearly that, in one generation, people experience these cities as very self-evident places of their own—not as some foreign imposition that is alien to their own nature. Modernity indeed harbors the capacity to move, and to lose, to a certain extent, its all too easy association with the West.

Conclusion

It is proper that this paper, which is an exploration of the relevance of postcolonial theory for architecture, ends with some questions that are worth considering.

Does the acceptance of the Modern design principles imply an acceptance of the hegemony of Western discourse?

It seems important to me to think about this. I am not sure that I have an answer to this question. Post-colonial theory and Edward Said's analysis really make it clear that in our conventional discourses, notions of superiority are so inherent, so much part of our way of thinking, that it is not easy to develop a way around it. A possible trajectory can be found in what Jyoti Hosagrahar calls 'indigenous Modernities'. Her book *Indigenous Modernities. Negotiating architecture and urbanism* deals with Delhi and is about the indigenous Modernities that she sees emerging in India, not just recently but already since the 19th century. Her argument is that we should deconstruct the opposition between tradition and Modernity, because this opposition usually associates the Modern with the Western and the traditional with what is not Western. If one studies more closely urban realities such as those in Delhi one sees that that kind of neat opposition is not there at all. There is not such a neat division that would allow one to categorize certain phenomena as clearly Modern and others as clearly traditional. In the real messy life that makes up our cities one is confronted with all these things at the same time, they form alliances



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Figure 6. Chandigarh commercial center. Photo by the author.

Figure 7. The Rodoviária in 1976 with its hustle and bustle, the real Modernity of a place like Brasília. Photo by Waldir Pina, Brasília Public Archive.

and very hybrid phenomena. It is necessary and interesting to study these phenomena as very specific manifestations, or very specific forms of Modernity, that are not so much tied to images of what the West is supposed to be, but that are indigenous versions of a desire for Modernity that does not necessarily take its cue from the West.

Another question remains, one that is said to be central to the intellectual quest of Edward Said:

How can one know and respect the Other?

For Said building up knowledge of the other, understanding the other, studying the other is in fact very close to the desire to conquer the other, to control the other, to manipulate the other. It is clearly not an easy ambition, therefore, to know and to respect the other. Certainly for scholars and architects based in the West, it is good to reflect upon this. Why does one travel elsewhere? Why does one deal with Modern buildings and neighborhoods in other parts of the world? Should one continue to uphold the practices of the West—think e.g. about preservation guidelines, practices and technologies—as exemplary attitudes to be followed everywhere? What about the ‘shared heritage’ of so many colonial buildings? We should be careful not to fall into the neo-colonialist trap of thinking that the knowledge about conservation of Modern buildings is so much further advanced in Europe and America, and that we therefore simply can export this knowledge to other parts of the world and pose as ‘experts’ who can assess the heritage value of buildings regardless of their context. Neither, however, should we see that knowledge as totally irrelevant to Modern buildings in other parts of the world. We should not totally disqualify ourselves as architects, historians or intellectuals. What does it mean to respect the other? Where do we find that point of balance where we remain critical and honest as intellectuals and nevertheless respect the reality of other places and other viewpoints?

‘How can one know and respect the other?’ It is especially the respect, the interaction, the cultural dialogue, that is not made easy by the fact that there is often an undeniable unevenness and unbalance in so many respects between the people who are participating in this type of interaction. It is often there as a kind of structural difficulty, when students or experts from Europe or from North America are working on the built environment of places in other parts of the world. Attitudes of primitivism or exoticism are notoriously difficult to suppress, but being aware of this flaw in our intellectual make-up is probably a necessary first step to go in the direction Edward Said pointed to.

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