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Property, Land, and Race in the Colonial Built Environment: An Interview with Itohan Osayimwese

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Itohan Osayimwese is an architectural historian at Brown University whose work focuses on the impact of colonialism on the built environment, with particular attention to the creation of racial difference in urban and architectural spaces. In this interview with Rixt Woudstra, she discusses her trajectory as a scholar, touching on her first book, *Colonialism and Modern Architecture in Germany* (2017), as well as more recent projects such as the *Routledge Critical Companion to Race and Architecture*, which she is editing with Felipe Hernández. One specific theme is the challenge of conducting research on architecture in the colonial context; Osayimwese points to the limits of the colonial archive and the discusses the possibilities that disciplines like archaeology might offer architectural history.

Keywords: architecture; race; colonialism; land; property; archaeology; germany; methods



Introduction

Architectural historian Itohan Osayimwese studies the effects of European colonization on the built environment. Osayimwese's pioneering work has probed questions about the global circulation of architectural knowledge, materials, and techniques, the production of racial difference in an architectural and urban contexts, as well as architecture's relationship to cultural anthropology. Osayimwese has taught for many years in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at Brown University, where she is also affiliated with Africana Studies, Urban Studies, and the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. She has served on the Board of Directors of the Society of Architectural Historians and is currently co-chair of the SAH Minority Scholars Affiliate Group. In this interview, she reflects on her trajectory as a scholar and how her personal background — growing up in Nigeria, Barbados, and Austria before training as an architect in the United States — has informed her scholarship.

In her first book, *Colonialism and Modern Architecture in Germany* (2017), Osayimwese explored how the German occupation of parts of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands shaped the emergence of modern architecture in Germany itself. One of the first publications to examine the far-reaching impact of German imperialism on modernist culture, the book considers a wide range of media, such as exhibitions and publications, alongside built works to dismantle established narratives about German modernism. Particularly revealing is her analysis of architectural prefabrication. While closely associated with architectural modernism, she shows how German firms developed prefabricated structures to support Europe's territorial expansion and for the purposes of proselytization in places such as German East Africa, Togo, New Guinea, and Qingdao, China. Other articles have investigated an impressive array of subjects, such as German architects' fascination for ethnographic texts in the 19th century, missionary architecture in Cameroon, and — a more personal subject — the work of the Nigerian artist and family member Josephine Ifueko Osayimwese Omigie. More recently, she has turned to the Caribbean to investigate how ownership and construction of land and property enabled African and African-descended families to obtain economic independence in the decades after abolition. These were often transient structures, sometimes self-built, that have left few traces in official archives. In this context, property, she argues, is closely associated with not just financial liberation but also a sense of equality and feeling 'fully human'.

During our conversation, which took place over Zoom in the Fall of 2021, we explored some of the challenges of conducting research on the colonial built environment. We discussed ways of navigating the colonial archive — an important subject in Osayimwese's first book — the dangers of extractive research, the advantages of being

an ‘insider-outsider’ while conducting research, and other methodologies such as oral history. Recently, Osayimwese has been studying archaeology, to discover how archeological methods can be applied to the discipline of architectural history. When the building itself no longer exists and other forms of documentation are absent, the land itself, she says, can function as a record containing traces of different phases of architectural development. In the interview, Osayimwese makes a strong case for looking at the built structure in combination with the land on which it stands. She also reflects on how the work of literary scholars and cultural historians, such as Saidiya Hartman, have influenced her work and enabled her to piece narratives together that are not commonly associated and are part of different historical traditions. Later in the conversation, we turned to the differences and continuities between postcolonial and decolonial approaches to architectural history and how recent events, such as the Black Lives Matter protests, have shaped her pedagogy.

Woudstra:

You have written extensively about European colonialism in relation to the built environment, and particularly the production of racial difference in urban and architectural spaces. The global circulation of architectural knowledge, goods, materials, and labor seems to be a recurring theme in your work, as is the movement of people. What brought you to architecture as the field in which to explore these kind of topics?

Osayimwese:

Great question, and it’s nice to take a moment to think back to my trajectory. It’s kind of a cliché, but I always wanted to be an architect, from the moment I knew about architecture. I had an uncle who went to MIT to study architecture and he was the only architect I knew. He came back to Nigeria and built the first modernist house that I had ever seen. I think it was in high school that I realized that architecture, at least in the United States where I was planning to study, often meant graduate school — so as an undergraduate I pursued a liberal arts degree instead, in an interdisciplinary degree program at Bryn Mawr college called Growth and Structure of Cities. It had a strong architectural history thread alongside a strong urban history thread, and so from the very beginning my architectural history training and interest has always been closely intertwined with urban studies, looking at the designed and built environment on different scales. I’d say that I received a really strong foundation in architectural history, but I realized very quickly that the kinds of things I learned did not really address my experience as a person who grew up partially in Nigeria, partially in Barbados, and partially in Austria. The non-Western world was briefly mentioned — maybe when we

talked about ancient Egypt — but there were vast perspectives missing. My particular experience, which is an outcome of colonial histories, was not explored in any of that. So that's how I came to be interested in filling some of those gaps in what I was learning.

Woudstra:

I'm curious also about some of the key texts that shaped your thinking in all this.

Osayimwese:

I found that while architectural history was not often addressing the kinds of experiences that I was familiar with, other disciplines were addressing them. The urban history and urban studies aspect of the program that I was in at Bryn Mawr was very much interested in questions of power and historical inequality. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) was earth shattering for me. It just really shook my foundations, historicizing and placing into context and explaining the development of the part of the world that I was somewhat familiar with, and speaking not only to European colonization but to the experience of the colonized. I was also double majoring in English, and I found that literature was also a discipline in which there was a lot of thinking happening about histories of colonialism, about the non-Western world, about so-called Commonwealth literature. This was the early '90s, when postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies were developing out of English literature and other fields. So I also remember reading Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (1978) — another book that's been foundational for me and for all of postcolonial studies, of course. Saïd talks about orientalism as a body of scholarship or a discipline, and at the same time it's a discourse that has a reach far beyond scholarship. For me, Saïd still offers a model for thinking through that problematic relationship between the work that we do as scholars and structures of domination and power. It was only later that I became familiar with the work of Stuart Hall, possibly because I was in an American academic context, and we just weren't reading Stuart Hall much in undergrad in the United States (Hall 1997). I went to graduate school for the precise purpose of bridging the gap between what appeared to be two quite distinct fields and disciplines.

Woudstra:

In the book that came out of your PhD, *Colonialism and Modern Architecture in Germany*, you showed how the emergence of architectural modernism in Germany was related to the country's imperial expansion. German imperialism is a subject that has, at least until recently, received relatively little attention, Germany having been 'late' to the colonial project. What prompted you to write about the German context, and how is it different from some of the more well-covered histories regarding British or French colonial architecture? How does it undo the more canonical narrative of German modernism?

Osayimwese:

The beautiful thing about being a perpetual student is that you have these moments when the lightbulb goes on. This was one of those moments for me. I was in the PhD program at the University of Michigan. I'd been interested in these kinds of questions since my undergraduate years at Bryn Mawr and when I was doing my MArch at Rice, but no one had ever mentioned German colonialism to me. So, I took a class at Michigan — I just saw it in the course catalog — on German colonialism. How could I have grown up and spent a good portion of my life in West Africa, and no one taught me this history? This speaks to the need for further decolonization of the curriculum in former colonized nations, at the elementary and secondary levels. So I finally came to learn about this history in my 20s in graduate school, and I thought, 'Well, this is fascinating — why is Germany such an understudied area in comparison to all the other colonial powers?' And I also realized that having gone to high school in Austria, where my family moved, I had a potentially useful skill set. While I wasn't fluent in German, I had enough to get involved in what was then a burgeoning area of scholarship. Prior to the 1990s German colonial studies was only sometimes pursued in East Germany and West Germany, and very occasionally in the United States. Only after the fall of the Berlin Wall in '89 was there a real field making a concerted effort to study Germany's colonial history and colonial past — from the European perspective, of course. Some people argue that there hasn't been much scholarly attention paid to German colonialism because it was relatively brief, but even though the period of formal colonialization was short, I think German colonialism is unique in the length of its buildup. It is clear that German-speaking individuals, groups, and businesses were involved in an empire, broadly speaking, for many, many, many decades if not centuries before state-sanctioned colonization. I think Germany is somewhat unique in that regard (Figure 1).

Woudstra:

The study of German colonialism has also been limited by this still sometimes quite narrow definition of what colonialism is.

Osayimwese:

Exactly. German-speaking Europe — and I say 'German-speaking' to include Austria — did not formally have colonies in the early colonial period. But the German case offers, as you suggested, particular opportunities for challenging that definition of colonialism. From my perspective, German colonialism coincided with so much happening in art, in science, in the cultural sphere — in the late 19th century, there was just so much activity, so much critical thinking, so many new questions being asked.



Figure 1: German colonial modernism in scale models of 'tropical houses' shown at a German colonial exhibition, ca 1930s. Courtesy German Colonial Picture Archive, Frankfurt University Library, 7101_3162_0993_0053.

I could never understand why the small body of scholarship on German colonialism that existed when I started working on this project, which was in 2004, never seemed to ask, 'wait, is it just a coincidence that there's a lot happening in the cultural sphere during this period when the German state officially colonizes a significant number of places in the world?' No one had really started thinking about whether there was any intersection between those two things. Germany has such canonical status in the architectural history I was trained in that it was not possible to conceive of modernism as a co-production between Germany and the non-Western world.

Woudstra:

One of the key concepts in the book is that of the 'colonial archive', or as you write, 'sites of knowledge production where the colonial state collected, included and excluded, ordered and reordered information in the belief that comprehensive knowledge would lead to the control of colonized societies' (Osayimwese 2017: 14–15). You and I have previously had conversations about the difficulty of uncovering the stories of those left out of colonial archives. In the introduction of your book, you start with a fictional anecdote, imagining your protagonists meeting together in Berlin in 1913 to discuss architectural construction in Germany's colonies. This reminded me of how Saidiya Hartman has employed fictionalization to excavate those histories that otherwise would have remained unwritten. What opportunities exist in architectural history to address these gaps in the archives?

Osayimwese:

I think there are all sorts of opportunities, and I've seen some suggestions that scholars of architecture are starting to work with Hartman's concept of critical fabulation. We're prone in architecture to adopt theories and concepts and methods from other disciplines — which I don't think is a problem — but I also think it's important to delve into what Hartman meant by 'critical fabulation'. I don't think it is about fiction or narrative so much as finding ways to bring together threads of history that it hadn't seemed possible to see in one frame. Hartman describes critical fabulation as 'playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story' (Hartman 2008: 11). That's important because the elements are there — they're not made up, right? She doesn't say representing but *re*-presenting the sequence of events and divergent stories from contested points of view, with the goal of jeopardizing the status of a singular account or displacing received accounts. That's what I was trying to do in my book *Colonialism and Modern Architecture in Germany*. The canonical history that we tell of modern architecture in Germany is still an insular story — about master thinkers or master architects or master builders — even with all the scholarship that has been done to resituate modernism vis-à-vis gender, the vernacular, the role of engineers, etc. We all know the names of these masters. And it is always about Germany itself, not Germany in relation to the world. These are the kinds of narratives that I wanted to destabilize (Figures 2 and 3).

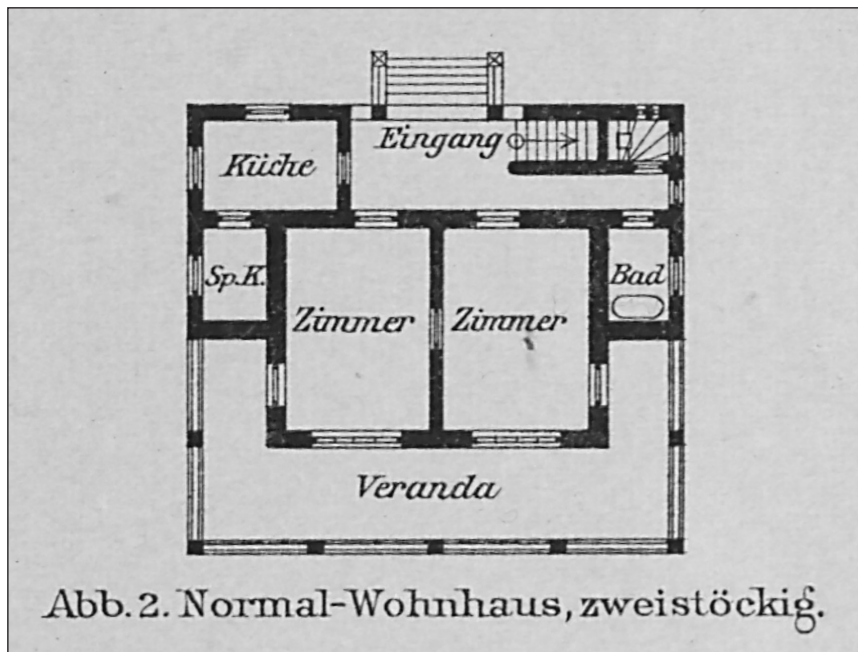


Figure 2: Plan of standard two-story house for German colonial administrators in Dar es Salaam, before 1905. From Gurlitt (1905: plate 9).



Figure 3: Example of standard two-story house for German colonial administrators in Dar es Salaam, as seen in 2006. Photograph by Itohan Osayimwese.

If we look back carefully, I think we can find scholars of architecture and the built environment who were already doing something similar, but Hartman gave us language for that method. You're bringing divergent threads of divergent stories together and presenting them as a snapshot, in order to highlight a story that *is* in the archive, that you know *did* happen, but that just hasn't been seen or envisioned. In architecture we are still really dealing with a canon, which I think aligns with the 'archive' as it appears in Hartman's thinking — the aim is to find the silences in the archive and to help the voices that are there to find their way out. So when I start to map the architectural canon onto Hartman's approach to the archive, critical fabulation really does offer many opportunities for us. I think that people get a little bit confused about critical fabulation and start to think about it as a kind of fictionalizing, but what Hartman does with the story of an enslaved girl, Venus, who's there but who you can't find in the archive — is say, 'Okay, so this person was there, what might she have said? What might have happened?' The leap is in tying stories together and finding the strings that connect them. For me, in the course of imagining what might have been said within this intersection between modernism and colonialism in Germany, I was actually able to find some of those traces. But first I had to make the radical move to imagine the two together.

Woudstra:

Let's talk about your new project. Recently you were awarded a New Directions Fellowship from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which allows faculty to study

subjects outside of their primary field. During this fellowship you have studied historical archaeology in relation to the built environment in Barbados. This is something I am very interested in. In what ways do you see archaeology contributing to your project? More generally, how do you think archaeology can help write architectural histories of the (colonial) built environment?

Osayimwese:

I've started, but unfortunately the pandemic interrupted my studies. But I am still planning to learn more about archaeological methods and ways of thinking, to open up some research avenues that weren't available to me previously. The project is about the relationship between property and migration in the Anglo-Caribbean from emancipation in 1834 to the 1980s and 1990s. My argument is about the way in which people of African descent in the English-speaking Caribbean were finally able to realize the goals of emancipation. Abolition occurred first, in the sense of achieving liberty from bondage, and then emancipation second. What I mean by emancipation is economic freedom and the ability to accumulate wealth through that economic freedom, the ability to do what they wanted to do with their labor power — to put it in Marxist terms — which was obviously not available to them under bondage.

The migrations of these formerly enslaved people and their descendants barely show up in the official archives — in my case study of Barbados they generally only show up when they leave the island. They are counted when they're on a ship, let's say, arriving to build the Panama Canal, for example. That kind of work was the first major wave of migration out of the English-speaking Caribbean islands that served the purpose of economic liberation from the plantation — from being stuck working on the plantation for low wages even after they were ostensibly emancipated. The goal was to be financially liberated, and the main way of expressing that financial liberation was to buy property, which Afro-Caribbean people were previously prevented from doing. They could not own property because they were property themselves, which stems from the way in which African people and African-descended people were not considered fully human. In a very circular reasoning, they weren't seen as fully human because they didn't own property, and they didn't own property because they weren't human and thus not allowed to own property.

So there is a very deep-seated link in the Caribbean between owning property and possessing liberty and being considered fully human. And the only way that they were able to finally do that was through short-term migration. They accumulated capital, which they sent home. They collected remittances and eventually bought a tiny piece of property — and the meaning of that property was far beyond what property typically means, because it was linked to their sense of being human. I'm trying to understand

and trace, at least in some cases, what this looked like. Property became the foundation for generational wealth, as it was passed down to their descendants, and so on. I followed a few families from that time who still own these properties that this first generation — the person who went abroad — was able purchase. Archaeology is helpful because these migrants only show up archivally at particular moments, as I said — leaving the island, maybe coming back to the island, maybe when they die in the course of trying to pursue this dream. Building the Panama Canal was a terribly violent experience and many, many people died.

Woudstra:

Are there traces in other archives? Does it show up in the property registers, for example?

Osayimwese:

Sometimes they show up in things like postal records when they send money back home, but it's much more difficult to trace how and when that money gets fed into and translated into property and then into houses. These people were often working outside of mainstream banking systems. Historically, they didn't have access, and when they did have access they didn't trust the systems. There were a lot of informal arrangements made — paying in part for the property and buying it over time, for example. When they finally owned the property, sometimes those payments and that transfer show up in the state archive, sometimes they don't. Oral history and family history become important there, but so do the invisible traces of buildings (Figure 4).

Woudstra:

And archaeology gives access to that more physical register of property.

Osayimwese:

Exactly — archaeology helps me fill in the gaps in the archival documentation. When they're buying these properties, more often than not they build structures — owning the land goes hand in hand with building something on the land. Usually a home, sometimes a shed of some kind to serve as an income generator for the people who are left behind. These were transient structures, they were not monumental. They were built out of wood, generally, and so there are very few of them left from even the first decades of the 20th century. So we can gather a great deal of information from oral history: 'Oh yes, my great-grandfather, who went to Panama to build the canal, built this house on this land. This is still the land, but the house that's there is not. But I can describe my grandfather's house to you'. I'm very interested in using archaeology to corroborate that information from oral histories, but also to learn more than the oral histories can tell me.



Figure 4: Hamilton House, Bank Hall, Barbados, as seen in 2006, likely built for carpenter Ethelbert O'Connor Scott, who worked on the Panama Canal in the 1910s or 1920s and returned in the 1940s. Scott purchased the property using remittances from Panama. The land was subsequently divided among six family members, some of whom still reside there today. Photograph by Itohan Osayimwese.

The project has really started focusing on land and I want to advocate for architectural historians to not separate the built structure from what it sits on and to think about the residues that the built structure leaves in the land. Land is amazing because it's a record. Even when the structure disappears, there's bound to be some kind of trace, no matter how miniscule. Even wood will leave some kind of trace in the land. We need to think about it as an archive, because in it there are these layers and traces of every intervention, human and also non-human. My interest is in trying to figure out how to access it, how to learn about it, understand it — particularly in those cases when it doesn't map on to what is present in the archive. This is crucial for areas of the world in which for many reasons there hasn't been a lot of investment in archaeology and architectural history. I'm still building up my knowledge of archaeology and I'm not quite to the point where I can deploy it myself, but that's okay. It's also important to know when to invite collaborators to do technical work that would take me years to accomplish on my own, or my entire career to become proficient in. But knowing what those techniques are is helpful.

Woudstra:

At the same time, archaeology itself as a discipline has a long and problematic history in terms of appropriating objects from colonized or occupied places and shaping the narratives around them. Does this impact your project?

Osayimwese:

That is definitely something that I think about and that I struggle with in some ways. But for the two regions that I'm focused on right now — the English-speaking Caribbean and West Africa — there's actually very little archaeological work that has been done. I think that's also an outcome of colonial structures, colonial history, and ongoing power imbalances in terms of where research funding and scholarship is invested. So that's a different outcome of colonialism. But also, I'm focused on these particular areas because they are places that I have personal connections to. My early training advocated for the separation between the personal and the scholarly — but now I'm totally embracing that the personal is political and is a valid subject of scholarship.

I think of myself as an insider-outsider in both the Caribbean and West Africa. The way I'm thinking about it in relation to the colonial history of Western scholarship and archaeology is that as an insider-outsider, there is the possibility of perhaps being less extractive in one's scholarship. Other non-outsiders also have the possibility of being less extractive, but being an insider-outsider I think offers particular opportunities that maybe outsiders to a particular site or community or society don't have. That's how I'm trying to undermine or sidestep the colonial tendencies of all scholarship and research, including archaeology. I'm thinking about this article I wrote, maybe two years ago, in *African Arts*, about a Nigerian woman who was one of the first women to study in the Fine Arts Department at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology and the only female member of the Zaria Art Society, and who turned out to be my paternal aunt (Osayimwese 2019). It was only possible for me to do that project because of my insider status. The woman, Josephine Ifueko Omigie, had been mentioned as a fleeting figure — 'Oh, there was some woman who was a member of our society. We don't really know what happened to her'. If I hadn't happened to read that sentence, maybe I wouldn't have thought, 'Wait, that name sounds familiar and there's something familiar about this story, let me investigate it more'. It's hard to theorize the personal, or to create a method out of those kinds of cases. That's something I'm still thinking about. But I would suggest that one way is to start from what you know, your connections, etc. That's not the only way one should do research, but I think it offers opportunities and also perhaps ways to avoid some of the pitfalls. This article was outside of my comfort zone, because it was personal — I struggled most with how to really think about this personal connection that I had with the protagonist (**Figure 5**).



Figure 5: Josephine Ifueko (Osayimwese) Omigie, in sculpture studio, Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, in 1958. Omigie was one of the first university-trained modern artists in Nigeria. Photograph courtesy of Isoken Omigie.

Woudstra:

Where in Nigeria did you grow up?

Osayimwese:

Actually, I was born near the University of Ibadan campus. That's something I want to do a project on in the future. I find the scholarship on Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew and the campus fascinating, and having spent the first significant part of my life on that campus, it's also fascinating to see where the lived experience of occupying those buildings overlaps with the existing literature. It's a long-term project, but I'm collecting oral histories of folks who grew up on the university. Many of us are the children and grandchildren of the first few generations of Nigerian students who attended the university, and there's an untapped, living archive of those, like my father,

who went to university there. He was in one of the early classes, and he would have been in those dorms and those buildings when they were first designed. What did these early students think of the university? What was their experience of the campus? Did it fulfill those lofty goals that it had, architecturally but then also politically? There's a generational memory of the university, and the campus has changed drastically over time. And then I'm also interested in the campus as a swan song of British colonialism, because the end was already in sight when the campus was designed. The British Empire didn't think the end was going to come so soon, but there were signs. So what happens when Independence comes? What was that transition like from the perspective of being part of the campus community? (Figure 6)



Figure 6: Izevbuwa Osayimwese (right) and friend in front of perforated concrete screen wall, University of Ibadan campus, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960s. Photograph courtesy of Osayimwese family.

Woudstra:

Another current project I would like to talk about is the *Routledge Critical Companion to Race and Architecture*, which you will be editing with Felipe Hernández (forthcoming). I am interested in the relation between the recent emphasis on race within architectural history and the increasing shift in our field toward global architectural history, through initiatives such as the Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative. It seems to me that the teaching of global architectural history has at times included thinking about the construct of race and processes of racialization in relation to the built environment, but that race isn't often primary in how these global histories are framed. In what ways are they related?

Osayimwese:

I wrote about this in an article that just came out in *Kritische Berichte* (2021). In this article I was particularly interested in thinking about the connections, as you suggested, between the recent scholarly excitement around race in architectural history, around the global, and also around the decolonial. I look at all three of those things together — and for me they're closely intertwined — and in the article I challenge the notion that all of this is new. I go to some effort to trace at least one of the major strands of the development of thinking on race in architectural history to the present, which I locate, not surprisingly, in postcolonial architectural historical research and scholarship, which really starts in the '80s and '90s. In the current literature on race in architectural history, there has been some acknowledgement of the fact that scholars who work on postcolonial architectural history have thought about race, but I think that that acknowledgement doesn't really do justice to the literature. I think a lot of people, especially those who are working on race in architectural history, might argue that race is primary in the scholarship right now versus not being primary or centered in the earlier scholarship. I've gone back and tried to see if that's really true, and I'm not convinced that it is. If we trace the development of postcolonial thinking and architectural history, which obviously comes directly out of postcolonial studies and postcolonial theory, then race is central. I even have a quote here from Bill Ashcroft who wrote in 2000 that race continues to hold a central place in postcolonial studies (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 186). The question, then, is whether architectural historians, who were orienting themselves toward the methods and frameworks of postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies and applying them to histories of the built environment, centered race in the same way. I think I would say, yes. I would say that the difference between that period of scholarship and today's is that race wasn't the only concept that was offered, but it was certainly a dominant one.

Woudstra:

Are you thinking of the scholarship of someone like Swati Chattopadhyay?

Osayimwese:

Exactly. What is her work about if not race? Or Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoğlu and her groundbreaking article on Banister Fletcher (Nalbantoğlu 1998). One of the underlying tenets of global perspectives on architectural history is to challenge the notion of a universal narrative or a meta-narrative, along with challenging the center-periphery model of seeing the world in the modern period. The scholarship on postcolonial architectural history did that and continues to do that, so I would argue that the global is a crucial part of this postcolonial scholarship.

The question then becomes — and this is controversial, but I'm happy to put it out there, because I know others have been thinking about it as well — why is it that race and the global have suddenly become visible to a much larger group of people at this particular moment? I think there are a number of things going on. I do think that it is in part due to the confluence of events happening around the world, particularly the violence against Black and brown bodies — this has always happened, but because of media technologies it is more visible to more people. But I would also venture to say that part of the reason this has become, for lack of a better word, something of a 'trend' right now in our discipline has to do with the fact that we are still caught up in those same structures of inequality and domination within our own academic culture. To put it boldly, the folks who were doing this work previously were immigrants, Black and brown people, women, non-cisgender people — individuals who operated under signs of difference, whether in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and so on, within our academic culture. What has happened is that now other people have become interested in this. In one way, we've become victims of our own success, or the other way of looking at this is that all the work that we have been doing has finally had an effect. I think it's a positive thing that more people are thinking about this, looking at it. It only becomes a problem when it is presented as novel and new, as something that's just been discovered by a few people when we know that there have been a lot of people working on this for a long time.

Woudstra:

It's quite true that a lot has happened since you have started writing about colonial architecture, including the Black Lives Matter protests. This, among other things, has prompted a more widespread examination of the legacies of slavery and imperialism, and the ways in which unequal conditions and power relations continue to shape and govern our society. Within universities, there have been increasingly loud calls to decolonize the curriculum and scholarship. What does decolonial architectural history mean for you? Has this influenced your pedagogy?

Osayimwese:

In the *Kritische Berichte* article I mentioned, I walk us through, in a very brief way, the history of decolonial thinking in our discipline. For those who don't read a lot of postcolonial scholarship, I bring to the forefront the fact that right now, as we speak, there are debates taking place among scholars of postcolonialism, on the one hand, and the scholars of the decolonial, on the other. Scholars of postcolonialism are saying, 'Wait, we've been doing this stuff, we've been saying exactly the same thing for a long time. The decolonial is not new. The word decolonial appeared in the 1970s in postcolonial studies scholarship'. And the decolonial scholars are saying, 'Yes, but we are more activist, and we are not doing our work purely as academics'. So that's one of the differences that has been suggested — even if the work is interested in addressing the same questions, decolonialism might have more of an activist orientation and more of a practice. Now, that is not necessarily true. If we look at the people who fit into the category of early postcolonial thinkers, we find that many of these people were not academics. Edward Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, Sylvia Winter — these people were not academics in any sort of conventional sense of the term. They would write, they would perform, they would do all sorts of things, and many of them, I think one could venture to say, saw themselves as working actively toward changing current conditions, not just intervening in scholarship. That's the earlier generation. I think the generation of the 1990s, the subaltern studies folks, certainly many of them came from elite or privileged backgrounds but they thought of themselves as actively working toward changing things. I think this distinction between activism and scholarship is a false dichotomy.

I think this applies to architectural history as well. You asked how I think decoloniality fits into my pedagogy — I would venture to say that in all the work that I've done, I've really thought about it as something that I hope has an impact. But another way that I'm able to have an impact, of course, is through my teaching and a sort of verbal performance, which we do as academics. Everyone sort of works to their level of comfort in terms of the public-facing forms their academic work might take. For instance, I have collaborated with community organizations in the United States and in Barbados to develop programming using my research. I think as scholars, our work can and does have practical and pragmatic effects; we can create change.

Woudstra:

How has this influenced the way you teach the architectural history survey course? And do you think that there should be more attention to alternative research methods in the curriculum, such as oral history or archaeology?

Osayimwese:

For a long time I've been on the side of doing away with the survey. Or maybe I should put it differently — I think we need different types of surveys. Rather than one overarching survey, we need to have multiple surveys. I teach a survey, but it is not a survey in any conventional sense of the term. It's a survey that is conceived as a way to show global interactions and to show patterns that are shared and things that are distinct across cultures — not all, but as many cultures and places as I can. I do this by focusing on one particular building type, which is the house. By choosing the house, I'm making a point of trying to shake up the idea that architecture is only about monumental structures. So we talk about monumental houses and we talk about houses that are vernacular, non-monumental, transient, and portable. Looking at that one global building type achieves at least one of the goals of a survey, which is to provide this kind of broad overview. I will say I find it to be the most difficult class to teach. Even though I've already narrowed it down to the point that we're only focusing on one building type, the possibilities are still endless. I have to curate it and make choices, and those choices are often largely dependent on how much material I can find.

Woudstra:

Which, of course, is very political.

Osayimwese:

Exactly, so I find myself trapped right back in the same kind of dynamic that the course is designed to overcome. One of the ways that I deal with that is by being upfront with the students that there are going to be some lectures where we're going to have a lot of material, and it's going to be really exciting, we're going to have all these beautiful photographs. And then there are some where we'll work with whatever little piece of information we can find. But in the act of including it, I'm putting it on the same level. That's a political act and that's taking the first step toward overcoming this imbalance.

And I think we should talk about methods of research at all levels in our regular architectural history courses. I try to do that when I introduce a particular unit, especially if it's different qualitatively in terms of the visual material I have to offer. I'll tell my students, 'we're relying on archaeological reports, which tend to be kind of boring and have really badly sketched floor plans!' I try to help them not to take research for granted — to emphasize that research always shapes outcomes. Research has agendas and it shapes what we then learn as history. And so to make changes, we have to make the changes at the level of the research.

Woudstra:

Let's end here. Thank you so much for this conversation.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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