

Soft Bricks, Hard Mortar of Immanence

Thinking through Other Figurations of Architecture in Development

This book offers a different way of looking at modern architecture's impact across the world. It's not, however, a story of famous architects or celebrated buildings in distant capitals. Nor is it an appraisal of "other" or "alternative" modernisms elsewhere.¹ Rather, it is an account of the ways in which modern architects and planners after World War II, working for newly founded international "development" agencies such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Ford Foundation, solved one of the key dilemmas of the twentieth century: how to allow decolonization without accounting for the centuries of loot that had been drained out of the colonized world.

While Europe was offered the famous Marshall Plan for postwar reconstruction as a grant, not a loan, the so-called emerging Third World was offered the theory of "development." Modern architecture made development plausible in the absence of capital. With "open-ended" designs that relied on participatory and "self-help" models, modern architects and planners shaped the belief that development could happen by lining things up. Architecture was presented as that magic hat that could produce time,

energy, and resources—in short, make change possible—from within what was already present. To the extent that these schemes failed—and they all did, even by their own proclaimed standards—it was usually seen as the fault of the enlisted participants. But where were they supposed to summon the required time, energy, and resources to build their own houses after a day of hard labor and harder commute? Such questions were never raised or answered in the development arena.

I'll argue in this book that the intersection of architectural modernism and development foreclosed the discussion on historical responsibility and colonial debt before it ever began.² Architectural responses to the costs of decolonization—appearing in the form of low-cost housing, urban planning proposals, community development schemes, building research centers, project reports, and planning legislations—created a language of magical beginnings for both national and international stakeholders. Born was a new epistemological terrain inhabited by speculative figures, from inhabitants in village houses to migrants in city slums, who could summon something out of nothing. Their presumed aspirations, goals, and needs, staged through architecture and planning, presented them as plausible alternatives to what were essentially political questions of historical debt.

I will explore the various dimensions of this historical erasure by looking at a series of architectural projects across the world, from self-help housing in Ghana, to village planning in Tema, Nigeria, to urban planning in Venezuela and Pakistan, to “tropical architecture” projects in Nigeria. My focus is deliberately not on any one geographical area. Rather, I seek to identify new agendas, new ideas of space and time, and new coding of land, materiality, and the native body that summoned new modes of intervention and new ways of claiming expertise through architecture and planning that avoided the shadows of history.

DESIGNING IMMANENCE

Framing immanent change through architecture and planning has been a risky business, a business, first and foremost, of risk management. In the decades after World War II, ever new design and planning approaches were devised to speak to changing development agendas. Yet these different approaches had one thread in common: they all attempted to erase the present costs of pursuing a promised future.

Accommodating these costs was just as much an economic as an epistemological problem. In the immediate postwar era, many newly independent national governments and international institutions focused exclusively on generating industrialization, whether it was incrementally setting up new industry or industrializing agriculture. Anthropologist Arturo Escobar has famously explained this particular focus as a "regime of reality" in which certain ideas of progress appeared natural and inevitable, so much so that the massive displacements and disruptions caused by these endeavors were cavalierly ignored.³ How this regime of reality was constructed is certainly a question at the heart of this book. But all such dominant claims to inevitability run into contradictions as they switch frames, from international to national, from one national institution to another. This book tells the story of how these contradictions were managed through certain architectural modes and models of intervention.

The statements from the United Nations and the World Bank, for example, rhetorically cast aside all objections as signs of "ignorance" when addressing an international audience. But such offhanded comments couldn't be advanced in national theaters or economic calculations.⁴ Post-colonial governments didn't like to be called ignorant. Only those development approaches that had currency in particular national contexts could be advanced in them. Displacing people from land through industrialization had to be situated not only within a narrative of change, but also within a context of economic development to finance loans and to make the lenders appear solvent. Put differently, the "costs" of development had to be given a sense concurrent with national political agendas as well as with economic doctrines of particular international institutions. It had to be situated within a larger calculus of political and economic risk. Architecture and planning, this book argues, enter the development arena as mediums giving sense to these risks, making them appear tenable both politically and economically.

This was no marginal task. How to locate risk had been a problem at the heart of modern economics. John Maynard Keynes in his seminal work of 1938, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, defined risk as the problem of deciding between how much to spend to sustain the present and how much to save to secure the future.⁵ If the public saved too little, Keynes argued, it couldn't bear the costs of the imagined future. But if it saved too much, then it would not consume enough in the present to sustain the economic activity that was supposed to lead to that promised future.

The economic term for the optimum balance between spending and saving was “discounting,” and the fundamental question for modern macroeconomics was how much the future should be discounted. The initial advances in the field were made not by Keynes, who made discounting a global problem for economic planning, but by his beloved protégé at Cambridge, Frank Ramsey, who had written three mathematically intense papers by the age of twenty-six on calculating optimum discounting. Ramsey died soon after. But, before his death, he chastised economists, himself included, for advancing a self-fulfilling view of discounting. Discounting made sense, Ramsey argued, only because economists disregarded the side effects of growth, “a practice,” he said, “which is ethically indefensible and arises merely from the weakness of the imagination.”⁶

Ramsey’s admonition highlighted not just a mathematical or an ethical problem, but also an epistemological one. It pointed to how discounting formed a *pharmakon*, both a poison and a cure.⁷ Discounting calculations made it possible to conceptualize growth, but only by suppressing the possibility of unforeseen costs associated with change, be they human or environmental. This limited worldview was not simply a matter of ideological positioning—that these costs didn’t seem to matter to some. For the human and environmental costs would indeed become the focus of later discounting practices. Rather, discounting’s power, and its weakness, lay in its ability to account for costs in a manner that allowed for them to be ignored. This meant viewing the future through the prism of constant growth. If the future was exponentially larger than the present, then all present costs of growth became negligible.

According to this purified logic, a penny today was worth infinitely more in the distant future. To borrow an example used by economist John Broome to explain the gymnastics of discounting, a penny saved by Julius Caesar would be worth more than the world’s economy today.⁸ On the one hand, therefore, Caesar should have saved that penny and saved the world a lot of trouble. But on the other hand, since it was only a penny that was required to save the world’s future, Caesar didn’t really need to save that penny. It could always be saved later. Discounting cheapened history both backwards and forwards.

Though the calculations of discounting might not be simple, its results ended up being so: consume all you want, because the costs are negligible in terms of what is yet to come. The same went for people: if they were displaced today, their hardships would be a drop in the sea of well-being

they were to secure later. Discounting justified both extreme consumption and extreme hardship.

But these conclusions would have different implications for the development context than for the so-called developed world, with architecture and planning being called in to frame the costs of change differently in each case. For the industrialized world, discounting was a problem, as mentioned above, of striking a balance between savings and expenditure. This was an attempt to bring together the two trajectories of capitalism, the market and the society, that were deemed parallel but separate, under the umbrella of a third: the welfare state.

The possibility of such a welfare state is foreclosed in the colonies. As Marxist economist Utsa Patnaik has shown, Britain “drained” \$45 trillion (fifteen times its gross domestic product [GDP] in 2018) from India alone between 1769 and 1939.⁹ In the aftermath of the accumulation of this deficit, discounting the future took on a new meaning: designing processes, plans, and subjects that could replace the idea of the welfare state with that of a self-generating development.

In this book I argue that architecture and planning formed the primary mediums of this curious staging. Self-help architecture proclaimed the presence of free time. Tropical architecture schemes insisted that cool breezes aligned the native body with the environment to release untapped social and economic potential. Open-ended planning schemes kept dictators in place. Mathematical equations might have hummed with economic claims, but architecture and planning silently performed a critical discounting function by imagining futures, pasts, and presents, and subjects that inhabited them, that served as the premise for countless mathematical models of immanent change.

BRETTON WOODS

This story takes a critical turn on a quiet afternoon in 1944 at the Mount Washington Hotel at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, United States. The resort property was unusually quiet this summer. Its grounds had been cleared of the usual summer crowds to host a solemn occasion: a meeting of 730 delegates from all 44 of the Allied countries, coming together to decide the future of the world's economic order after World War II.

But there was a group within this group, representing the biggest economies of the world, who called the shots. Delegations from previous protectorates and colonies, such as Iran, Iraq, and the smaller European nations, were not allowed to enter these discussions. They were to wait in the corridors for their fates to be decided behind closed doors, while inside sat some of the world's most influential economists, including John Maynard Keynes of Britain, Harry Dexter White of the United States, and Mikhail Stepanovich of the Soviet Union.

The meetings of this group, however, were riddled with anxiety. The conflicting interests of the governments of the attendees had made it clear that a new model of world governance was needed. The empire had to go. The United States had financed the war, and it now controlled the strings of global finance. The Soviet Union had to accept that arrangement even as it threatened a long, cold fight. The group tussled over trade zones, tariffs, currency values, and security guarantees and settled on a protracted plan that came to be known as the Bretton Woods system: a series of international institutions (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund [IMF], and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade [GATT]) guaranteeing that no country would go into unsustainable debt, something that was seen to be the cause of the two world wars.¹⁰ All seemed sorted out, grudges mellowed, at least momentarily, as sherries poured.

But these were perhaps the most expensive drinks ever raised in the history of the world. The solutions and compromises that were reached at Bretton Woods were an artifice based on economic principles that were, in fact, propped up by extra-economic ones. One of the biggest economic anomalies in the new plan was Europe itself. Someone had to pay to rebuild it, and pay not as a loan, but as a gift. This had to be free money. If added in the red to the economic ledgers, the European economy threatened to repeat the cycle of loan, debt, devaluation, and default that had led from World War I to World War II.

Thus was born the European Recovery Program (later called the Marshall Plan, after US Secretary of State George Marshall, whose advocacy of the plan helped get it passed by Congress in 1948). The United States thus gave away some \$12 billion for the good of the "free world" for free. It was akin to an economic magic trick, where a whole continental economy came out of the economist's hat, betraying the necessity of make-believe in all economic decisions.

But all contradictions could not be covered with gifts or pretense. Some were too stark to be even acknowledged. These pointed to the future of

the decolonizing world and its undefined role in the new world order. Who was going to rebuild the decolonizing world? Territorial colonialism was on the retreat. If a detailed economic account was drawn, we could see to the penny what every imperial citizen owed to every subject in the colonies.¹¹ Imperial rights, civilizational mandates, and worldly and divine responsibilities had all kept a shroud over this lacuna in the world economy in the past. Colonial holdings had been an invisible resource, a miraculous blind spot of global capital that turned economic losses into imperial profits, hiding the true environmental and human costs belying the claims of ever-increasing wealth and growth.¹² Now that logic of the global economy had come undone. The lines on the ledgers had expanded to birth entire nations, demanding to be accounted for in the circuits of world trade.

Keynes had been a longtime defender of British monetary imperialism in India. But in the postwar era, he saw the need to rescue imperialism from its isolationist tendencies and move it beyond its mercantilist foundations into a system of managed trade relations between the imperial and new emerging global powers. "It [is] sheer madness," he warned, "to think the Empire can create a cave where we [continue to] take in one another's washing and ignore the rest of the world! . . . The countries we sell to are not necessarily the countries from which we buy, and if we begin unilateral trading we return to barter, the survival of the fittest and more war."¹³

For Keynes, such cave mentality couldn't be pursued after the war. But that didn't mean there couldn't be a cave where all the global powers could throw their dirty laundry together. This hole in the global economic ground was the decolonizing world. If these economies too were included in the "balance-of-payments" system, the world would have appeared to be lopsided, tilted with the drain of centuries on one side. It would also mean establishing comparable values for commodities, as well as labor, flowing from different ends of the global economy. A skein of yarn in England couldn't be worth a village's cotton in India. To make the same thing expensive somewhere and cheap elsewhere, to let a day's wage at one place turn into a year's earning, if not a lifetime's, at another, some parts of the world had to be kept waiting in the corridors at Bretton Woods.

Development provided the doctrine for managing this separation. Its driving force was not the ideological mindset that saw the emerging Third World following in the footsteps of the industrialized West, for that framework was given up after the first decades of failures. Development discourse's resilience stemmed from a lingering belief in magical

beginnings. It was the assumption that the Third World could produce the capital for its transformation out of its own empty coffers, that value could be created out of nothing, that progress could be achieved by realignment of existing resources, without correcting the balance-of-payments deficit as it was deemed necessary for Europe.

And it is this assumption that remained intact despite the various forms that development took in the decades that followed. This was true in the first two decades after World War II, when the belief in "big development" held sway and it was actually asserted that the Third World should follow in the path of the First World. It was also true when those experiments refused to "take off," as famous proponents of this approach, such as Walter Rostow, argued, and development institutions shifted to development of "human capital" and "basic needs."¹⁴ The amount of development aid contributed by the industrialized countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) often receives exaggerated attention; in reality, it has been a meager amount in comparison to the GDPs of these countries, which more accurately reflect the amount of their colonial plunder.¹⁵ In addition, more than 80 percent of all OECD development aid has been in the form of loans, historically offered on stringent conditions exposing Third World economies and vulnerable populations to the whims of international investors.¹⁶ This structure has stayed intact because development aid has primarily been considered supplemental. It was always supposed to set the conditions for immanent growth, not pay for it.

Modern architects and planners have been the conjurers of this belief. Their projects and proposals in the development context were justified on the very assumption that architecture and planning could harness untapped value in the Third World. Initially this role emerged from the constraints of the development context itself. In the absence of a welfare state, architecture had to be presented as its substitute. For the first decade after World War II, development economists were highly suspicious of any architectural and planning projects, considering them a waste of valuable funds that could be invested in industrial development instead.¹⁷ But what emerged as a posturing out of necessity spread to claim its place in the development arena as a practice of magical beginnings. Architecture claimed to rearrange what already existed to create value without any additional input. Little investment yielded high results, it was claimed, because architecture developed human capital that was to be the foundation for industrial capital. In this context, architecture provided a certain