



32 LISTENING TO THE SUBALTERN: THE ETHICS OF PROFESSIONAL WORK OR, NOTES TOWARDS THE PEDAGOGY OF THE INDIA STUDIO

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I speak today as an architect, and as an architectural academic. My submission is in the spirit of interdisciplinary dialogue. My imagined audience is the professional and academic architects working in and on South Asian Cities, although I am, of course, concerned with addressing issues of globalization that string all of us in the loop.

In December 1996, I attended two related conferences in Jakarta, Indonesia—"The Future of Asia's Cities" and "Tradition and Modernity: Contemporary Architecture in South East Asia and Beyond". The first conference, organized by the Asia Society (Akhtar Badshah), was inaugurated by President Suharto and consisted of a series of high-power panel discussions amongst senior government officials, influential developers, World Bank representatives, powerful bankers, along with architects, planners, academics and development activists. The scale and amount of building that is taking place in South-East Asia is mind-numbing. Far from being an exceptional extravaganza, the twin towers in Kuala Lumpur for instance are only the latest outgrowths of a huge colony of skyscrapers that now are crowding all the major cities in the region. By all projections, this building boom is expected to continue unabated, and consequently the urban population of the region is expected to double in the next 10 years. (With the anticipated emergence of China as a superpower of a new kind, it is not unexpected, then, that world's tallest building will be in Shanghai at the dawn of the new millennium—designed by KPF.) Dependent on their point of view, the panelists at this amazing conference saw the staggering changes anticipated in the future of Asia's cities, as looming horizons of crisis or, more often, of opportunity. (Some of those might be rethinking after the latest "bust" in South East Asia, but at that conference the general intensity of the debate was staggering, and given the dollar amounts that were discussed, frightening.)

The second conference, on "Tradition and Modernity," was confined to academics mostly from University of Tasmania and Indonesia earnestly debating the relevance of traditional and modern architecture for the emerging architectural profession of the region. Since most of the colossal amount of work in the area is done by American or Australian firms, this conference sought to legitimize and empower local professionals by setting the terms of a meaningful debate. As its title suggested, this conference aspired to a negotiated peace between conceptions of "tradition" and forces of "modernity", aspiring, perhaps, for a balance of the kind articulated by Kenneth Frampton and others under the general rubric of "critical regionalism."

In contrast with the numbers and forces that were discussed at the first conference, the timidity and impotence of the concerns of the second were mind-numbing, and debilitating.

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It was so obvious that a handful, or even a reasonably large number, of well intentioned architects, urban designers and planners working with the general agenda of preserving local identity by historic preservation strategies or by designing buildings that use local materials and work with traditional urban forms may produce occasional examples of good design, but they are certainly not going to in any way challenge the dictates of a globalizing economy.

I came back feeling, therefore, that to understand the full impact of the development that is going on today, one needed something of a paradigm shift of a kind that is still unclear to me. And I was left with the question, that if the future of Asia's cities is being decided in the board-rooms of power where ethical responsibility is gauged by returns on investment, how are we as academics and professionals to forge an adequate response and alternative? In that context, I could not but help think that what we might need to resort to was the discredited modernist idea of alternative master-planning. I felt that perhaps we needed once again that large-scale thinking that can anticipate new cities, that can furnish coherent visions for the new mega-cities—master-plans that can rival the plans of the developers, in the off chance that we might yet have our dreams.

And yet, as the long history of modernism in both the West and in the Third-World has taught us, this enterprise of master-planning runs the serious risk of being ineffectual or, worse, counterproductive. Modernist plans have always ended up serving hegemonic interests. There may be occasional successes, and there certainly are ways of contextually re-locating the complexities of modernist planning interests in the Third World. But, by and large, the postmodern and postcolonial critiques in specific, and historical evidence in general, have unquestionably established that, around the world, modernism was unable even to un-stage its colonial inheritance, far less realize its decolonized utopian visions.

Thus, if globalization today demands a master-planning response to stand the possibility of being effective, we find ourselves in the clutches of an ethical dilemma where there is a "right" on both sides of the ideological battlefield, the *dharmakshetra-kurukshetra*, raising the familiar old question of modality of ascertaining right action in the field of seemingly equivalent choices. Charles Correa in *The New Landscape* articulated this dilemma as follows:

"To do this in the context of the Third World, the architect must have the courage to face very disturbing issues. For what is your moral right to decide for ten thousand, for a hundred thousand, for two million people? Then again, what is the moral advantage in not acting, in merely watching passively the slow degradation of life all around?"

To understand our choices, and since I know something of Indian history, let me elaborate the first half of the dilemma by rehearsing the critiques of India's state-sponsored project of modernization. The critical issue turns on the question of the ethics of representation; representation both in the political

sense of "speaking for" and the aesthetic sense of representing, "saying anew". In India the Nehruvian project of modernization did not work because the people, the representative citizens, were not involved in the process. Laurie Baker, the English architect who has practiced on a small scale in southern India for the last 40 odd years, voiced this simply by starting a speech sponsored by the Indian Institute of Architects on the topic "Architecture and the People" with the following:

"The subject given to me is architecture and the People. Did the promoters mean *the* people, or could they have said architecture and People? Saying *the* People implies that we architects are in one category and the people are in another."

(G. Bhatia, *Laurie Baker*)

In India the architects and planners are considered "professionals", and in terms of our colonial and modern legacy, they *are* in one category, and the people in another. That is what it means to be professional, i.e., to be not untrained. Consequently, modernism, not only architectural but also economic and institutional, certainly produced great deal of professional expertise, but failed to stage decolonization because its elitist, top-down framing never enabled it gain the legitimacy to properly represent, speak for, the people in whose name it was exercised. The failure here was not of the translation, but of the transfer of idiom, caught in the replay of the colonial web of professionalism.

In addition the modernist epistemological claims failed to gain legitimacy because they did not translate. Modernism, to drastically condense postcolonial critiques, was ultimately Eurocentric. Its aspirations, however laudable, were located in the European Enlightenment that, however influential, was ultimately born of Judeo-Christian lineage. This is the issue of aesthetic re-presentation, the saying anew, where the saying anew amounted to a re-saying of a Eurocentric epistemology. This issue is more complicated, and one could of course delineate the modalities of the translation of idiom here, through a discussion of the ready incorporation of the Eurocentric idiom in the postcolonial episteme of the Third World. Such translations, like those colonial, help re-construct postcolonial identity but are unable to offer strategies for effective resistance to counter neo-colonial processes such as the globalization that we are witnessing today.

That the European Enlightenment and its offspring may help frame, but is not likely to stage, decolonization in the Third World is chronicled in stories of resistance as, for instance, in Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's influential text on women's ecological movements, *Ecofeminism*. In this book, Mies and Shiva's central contention is that all the significant grassroots movements that have resisted globalization over the last 40 years or so, have their ideological origins *not* in academic writing or in global narratives such as those of Marxism, but in the coherences and contingencies of the everyday lives of the people, particularly of the women, that are affected at the nether reaches of patriarchal, capitalist, neo-colonial,

globalizing and other hegemonic processes. They demonstrate that women around the world, under great bodily and emotional threat, have repeatedly resisted the destructive erosion and transformation of their daily eco-lifeworld and have done so, not only because they have felt economically exploited, but more so because such hegemonic processes directly and indirectly threaten and destructively rewrite the ecologically informed coherence of the epistemological life-world that sustains their individual and social sense of selves. Gayatri Spivak, drawing on Foucault, might call this epistemic violence.

Ecofeminist movements are thus properly subaltern, in the sense that they properly represent the unrepresented. Their subaltern text thus suggests that the effects of globalization, as also its resistances, are best understood by the concatenation of multiplicitous micro-battles in which in the known and familiar experiences of subaltern life worlds are pitted against European commodities-based epistemologies of the capitalist economy. This subsistence perspective, or the survival perspective, as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva call it, is the "life producing and life preserving work" that not only "is a necessary pre-condition for survival" but, with increasing ecological destruction, they moreover claim "can also show a way out of the many impasses of this destructive system" (M. Mies and V. Shiva, p.297-98).

The subaltern movement thus is not only about the locations of resistance, but is also, and more importantly, about the location and description of development alternatives. It will be instructive here to link the lessons of *Ecofeminism* to the arguments of the "Subaltern studies group." Like Maria and Vandana, the subaltern historiographers located the loci and contours of other historical resistance movements, not in the global narratives such as nationalism, but in the small scale efforts of the innumerable subaltern experiences. The descriptions and forms of such subaltern resistance, they argue, are rarely identical to their re-writing in superimposed narratives, such as nationalism.

In the claims of both the eco-feminist world and that of the subaltern historiographers, thus, we have the documentation of the workings of processes of hegemonization whose lessons for thinking effective strategies of resistance we will ignore only at our own peril. The principal lessons, from the pedagogical point of view are that, first, effective and lasting resistance to hegemonic processes will only be offered by those whose lives are directly and irreparably threatened, and these are the majority, not the minority; and second, that such resistance, although it is an economic and political "issue", is organized around epistemological and ideological fault-lines, as it were, and not those directly economic and political. This is not an idea that is different from the classic Marxist conception of the role of ideological processes in society, but I think that unlike Marxism that posits ideology as the superstructural effect of foundational economic relations whose ultimate emancipatory goal is "freedom of choice", subaltern thinking links economic and ideological issues in a fundamental bind whose conceptions of emancipation are accessible only through the contingent construction of the

epistemological life-world of the subalterns. The ideal of necessarily working through the contingent constructions of the epistemological life-worlds of the subaltern, thus necessitates the effective participation of subaltern and other marginalized groups as the prime participants and movers in any development process not only to ensure the proper addressing of developmental gains, but also to facilitate the effective maintenance, re-production and relevant transformation of their life-worlds. The latter is critical since the survival of subaltern epistemes, as *Ecofeminism* suggests, may be critical to the survival of all.

If this is a difficult ideal, it is necessarily so, and it is perilous to ignore it. Is it possible then, to return to the question that I began with, to address the subaltern perspective, and its critiques of modernism, in the process of producing effective alternatives for the cities of South and Southeast Asia in the throes of globalization? Is it possible to think of subaltern master-planning?

At first blush, the subaltern perspective does suggest that the professional practice of architecture and planning, given its operative location in the epistemological life world of the urban elite, is inherently ideologically suspect. This is certainly a plausible claim, and its logical conclusion is that the only viable way for an urban elite to act is as facilitators of self-empowering subaltern development processes. Master-planning, since it is always in some sense from above, seems out of the question.

I was born and brought up in Chandigarh. My father worked with Le Corbusier on the Capitol Project, and was the Principal of the Chandigarh College of Architecture where I studied to be an architect. Even as I was indoctrinated into the high ideals of Le Corbusian and Nehruvian modernism, there was always a sense that these ideals must be radically questioned. But the mid-70s, and certainly by the 80s when I was studying architecture, both the Nehruvian project of economic and cultural modernization of India as also the project of architectural modernization, were loudly criticized and considered to have failed India. As the Nehruvian state lost legitimacy and collapsed under Indira Gandhi, the Indian polity moved towards sectarian, religious and linguistic division conflict that all but undermined the one-nation secular conception of the nation. It was in this context that Indian architects attacked Chandigarh as too "Western" and initiated the search for an "authentic" Indian architecture. Suspicious of these searches of authenticity and still confused about the reasons underlying the failure of modernist ethics, some of us younger architects ended up questioning the very project of Architecture with a capital "A", and moved into what is known as the "development sector" working with NGO's in search of what I can now call as subaltern architectural practice. But later as my best friend moved even further away into ecological water management, I moved to academics in the United States, and this is the reason that the ultimate political effectivity of subaltern agency as a strategy of resistance has continued to haunt my concerns.

While the jury is still out, I have some provisional suggestions.

I think the limitation of the subaltern perspective is that, whether it is acknowledged or not, it relies on a blind faith in the ultimate victory of the subaltern, like the Marxist relied on the ultimate victory of the proletariat. This faith not only potentially mystifies and fetishizes the subaltern, but more importantly runs the tremendous risk of simply being proven wrong. We have seen the destructive transformation of life-worlds before, and we may see them again. The march of history is rarely the story of progress, as we well know.

Perhaps simply in the name of certain caution, but more likely in that of a still unclear realism, let me here invoke the well-known ecological slogan as instructive of that modality of thinking and action that might be necessary for our survival. This is a modality that links two epistemologies not in an hierarchical but a constitutive embrace—"Think global, act local"—where the local and global are allegories of each other. Perhaps the subaltern rewriting of this slogan might be the displaced inversion, "Local acting is global thinking". In this rewriting, global acting is opposed in the name of a local acting as thinking, that integrates into the interests of that global ecological idea, survival of the species. In between, within the folds, then, would lie the articulation of professional work, not just master, not just facilitator.

In conclusion let me sketch some of the two major turns of this re-thought professional practise.

The first is obvious. If we are interested in architecture/planning and people, if we wish to learn from and participate in the learnings of the ecofeminist worlds, if we wish to see our work informed by and participant in the daily eco-lifeworld of the subalterns—we cannot afford to act from the outside as top-down professional-individuals; we must listen and participate, and necessarily include community participation in the field of necessities that determines any planning process. The Badshah paper (this volume) has listed processes that facilitate this, those that develop the city community, move towards an empowerment paradigm, incorporate the corporate sector in sustainable urban development, and develop multi-stakeholder partnerships to achieve greater efficiency, improve effectiveness and increase enrollment and equity in our cities. If such partnerships include subaltern representation, their importance cannot be understated.

But partnership, and this is the second, is not only a matter of non-elitist practice, but it is also a matter of locating resistance through the epistemological categories of the subaltern. Thus, from the beginning we must think of our professional work as not the process of singularly legitimizing a "correct" way of doing things, but that of mediating the "correctness" of ways of doing things, of various relevant epistemologies. What is needed, then, is an ethical framework of action, rather than a list of ethical prescriptions. This argues for a different conception of professional ethics, where ethics is not the work of legitimizing a particular fixed world view, but is the more contingent situational based ethic that can effectively negotiate a field of choice. Such an operative ethic can be cast in the mould of a pedagogical strategy, a way of learning, that discloses responsible action through the contingent but

irrefutable logics of situational imperatives. Situational imperatives is the contingent logic of responsible action, given as ethical frame—*kshetrakarmavidhiyetah*—rather than a morality. It is the ethics of action given by proper learning in the field of choices. Put differently, it is an ethical logic by which the "correct" answer can only triangulated in the field of contingent necessities, but it is important to be able to identify the field of these contingent necessities.

Professional practice as inscribed by this kind of learning locates our work and identities as social individual, rather than as the traditional autonomous professional. As such we can work to generate master plans, but, like the concensuses of democratic process, we must see our plans are negotiated through subaltern life-worlds as contingent solutions. (What may be correct and adequate, may not be so later at a different time and different juncture.)

One way to open such a field of action, I will suggest, is through the establishment, especially in a world turning in the wake of globalization, of viable institutional structures, with proper representation, that can repeatedly assess the changing world, and respond adequately by proposing alternatives. Perhaps we can start by rethinking the forms and roles of professional bodies, academic centers, journals, think-tanks and the like. The responsibility of the profession as well as the academic community must be to help establish and staff such institutions and pedagogical programs. Such institutions will hopefully not only provoke and sustain debates, but in the longer run, such institutions have a greater chance of sustaining themselves in a meaningful and accountable manner, than the more short-term ones of grand plans or small-scale grassroots activism.

References

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