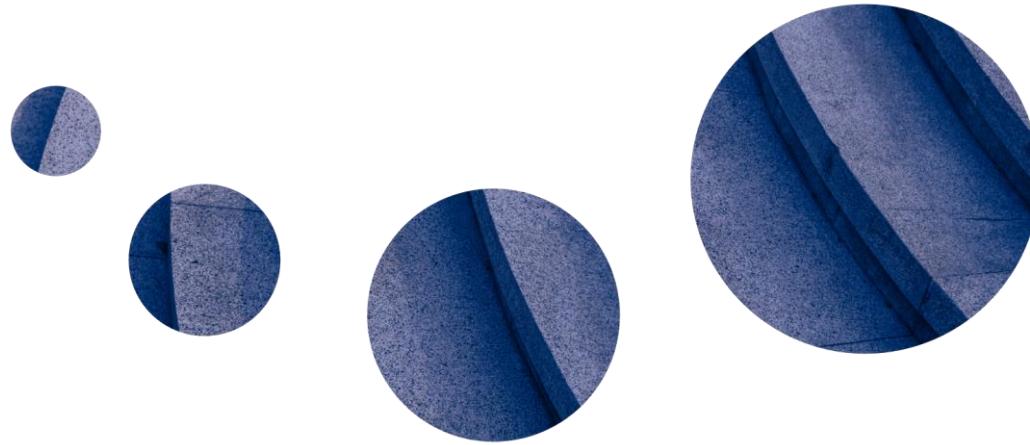




CRACKS IN THE FAÇADE: DECONSTRUCTING THE WEST'S MONOPOLY ON SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE

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This essay, by Prisca Disso, an interior architect and founder of Disso IARK& DSGN, a practice dedicated to sustainable workspaces. I am thrilled to contribute to "Currents," the collaborative project between Metode and LIAF 2024. This essay represents not just my participation, but my commitment to the festival's spirit of exploration and risk-taking. This essay delves into the critical field of intersectionality within architecture and design. Drawing on my personal experiences as a West African woman raised in Norway with an education and experience from Spain and France. I explore the transformative potential of merging cultural perspectives. My hope is that by sharing these experiences, we can illuminate a path towards a more inclusive and equitable design practice.

Thesis statement:

The world of design has always fascinated me, particularly its power to shape the way we experience and interact with our surroundings. However, as I delved deeper into this field, I began to question the dominant narratives and wonder if there wasn't more to the story?

Sustainable architecture has long focused on environmental responsibility. Yet, a truly sustainable future demands a more nuanced approach, one that acknowledges the historical and social context of the built environment. This essay argues for a decolonization of architecture, a movement that dismantles the dominance of Western perspectives and embraces the richness of diverse cultures and experiences.

At the heart of this decolonization lies the concept of intersectionality. By recognizing how race, gender, class, and other identities intersect, architects can create spaces that are not only environmentally sound but also equitable and inclusive.

This essay will explore how intersectionality empowers design, fostering social justice and enriching the built environment for all. We will delve into specific examples of architects and design collectives who are leading the way in this movement. Their projects will serve as testaments to the power of diverse perspectives in creating spaces that resonate with the local context and empower the communities they serve. The essay will then shift its focus to a call to action. We will examine practical steps that the architecture industry can take to embrace decolonized practices. This might involve implementing diversity initiatives, fostering community engagement, and revamping educational curriculums to incorporate a wider range of perspectives.

Finally, the essay will conclude with a hopeful vision for the future. By embracing decolonized design principles and cultivating a new generation of architects who are committed to social justice and inclusivity, we can shape a built environment that reflects the richness of our global society and serves the needs of all its inhabitants.

Introduction:

The dream of transforming a vision into a tangible space – that's what initially ignited my passion for design as a teenager. Sketching, creating, observing, and immersing myself in the work of past masters fueled my creative fire. Learning from the greats seemed a clear path to design excellence.

School challenged these initial ideas. It pushed boundaries, tested limits, and fueled countless all-nighters fueled by caffeine and determination. But amidst the technical skills and aesthetic explorations, a new voice emerged – a professor's insistence on sustainability.

Suddenly, familiar terms like "aesthetics" and "form" were joined by "cradle to cradle," "BREEAM," and "circular economy." Sustainability, once a distant concept, became a responsibility woven into the very fabric of good design. My original design dream morphed into a deeper purpose: shaping not just spaces, but the future itself.

However, the transition from academia to the professional world revealed a disconnect. The "dream job" often prioritized different concerns, leaving an unsettling feeling that something was missing.

Then, in March 2020, the world paused. This pause amplified the nagging sense of incompleteness. My professor's words from years ago echoed – designers are shapers of the future. Networking with like-minded individuals brought a sense of community and shared values. These talented colleagues meticulously considered material lifespans, CO2 reduction, and pushing sustainable boundaries – a wealth of knowledge to learn from and incorporate. Yet, amidst the discussions, a disquieting thought arose: was there a blind spot in the sustainability narrative itself?

My initial fascination with design stemmed from its power to shape our experiences. However, as I delved deeper, I began to question the dominance of Western narratives and the narrow definition of sustainability focused solely on environmental concerns. This essay argues that decolonization, a movement dismantling Western dominance and embracing diverse perspectives, is crucial for achieving a truly equitable and sustainable built environment. By integrating

intersectionality, which considers how race, gender, class, and other identities interweave, architects can design spaces that are not just environmentally sound but also socially just and inclusive.

This essay will explore how decolonization and intersectionality empower design, fostering social justice and enriching the built environment for all. We will delve into specific examples of architects and design collectives who are leading the way, followed by a call to action for the architecture industry to embrace these principles. Finally, the essay will conclude with a hopeful vision for a future where design reflects the richness of our global society and serves the needs of all its inhabitants.

Voices of young Norwegian architects

My journey and experiences as a working interior architect resonate deeply with the challenges outlined by young Norwegian architect Jananciya Arulanantham's Essay "The Architect, Diversity and the Absence of It". Similarly, the "Safe Space podcast" from three young architects from different walks of life who exposes the struggles faced by architects from diverse backgrounds. These narratives collectively reveal a troubling lack of intersectionality and inclusivity within the industry.

These young voices share firsthand experiences of sexism in the workplace, classmates from other cultures struggling to find jobs due to potential discrimination based on origin and aesthetics while underlining the untapped potential of a more diverse industry. Their stories underscore the value of bringing fresh perspectives and experiences to enrich architecture.

A lack of diversity inherently excludes valuable perspectives, leading to a homogeneity of thought and design that creates blind spots. Sustainability, at its core, requires a community-centered approach, one that embraces diverse perspectives. As Arulanantham points out, the current landscape, dominated by "well-to-do white men," limits our understanding of good architecture. This narrow perspective hinders innovation and overlooks valuable contributions.

This issue challenges the status quo and goes beyond race; it's about the limitations of a monoculture in approaching sustainability. If architects are meant to design for the communities they serve, then why are these communities not reflected within the profession itself?

Architect Bui Quy Son's (part of the "Safe space podcast") experience is another compelling example. Despite settling in Europe and aligning with European values, Bui observed the overwhelming presence of white, heterosexual men in both educational institutions and professional practices – a pattern mirroring even his native Vietnam. This observation raises a critical question: Is this who defines what architecture is? Should there be a call to action to challenge the bias and assumption within the architecture industry?

Who defines what architecture is and whose voices are included or excluded? - Limitations of mainstream architecture

To achieve a truly equitable and sustainable society, architecture must not only shape communities but also reflect their cultural richness. This requires diverse perspectives in design practices to foster innovation in sustainable solutions.

- **Case study: Scandinavian practice - White Arkitekter:**

Swedish/Scandinavian firm White Arkitekter stands out as a leader in the sustainability movement. Their commitment is commendable for several reasons. First, they prioritize projects aligned with the UN Sustainability Goals, a globally recognized framework for achieving a sustainable future. Second, their focus on "helhetstenking" (holistic thinking) underscores their understanding that sustainability requires a comprehensive approach. This likely includes considerations for energy efficiency, material life cycles, and the overall impact on the built environment. They are also actively seeking to enrich their knowledge base, suggesting a willingness to learn and adapt truly pushing the boundaries of sustainable design. These efforts position White Arkitekter as a valuable contributor to the field of sustainable architecture.

The company boasts a long history on involvement in East Africa dating back to the 1970s. Their 2021 Nairobi base serves as a hub for enriching their knowledge and portfolio through local partnerships and international collaboration. The firm acknowledges the importance of addressing recurring themes like mixed-use urban development, social and ecological sustainability, and the need for public spaces.

However, a potential disconnect exists between their stated goals and leadership structure, which currently lacks a permanent local presence. White Arkitekter emphasizes on local context, yet their East African Head of Business Development, Johan Dahlberg, is based in Stockholm, Sweden. While Dahlberg's expertise in sustainability is valuable, the lack of a local leader raises questions about the depth of their understanding of the region's specific needs and challenges. For

White Arkitekter to truly achieve their stated ambitions of enriching the local context and fostering meaningful collaboration, a strong local leadership presence in East Africa seems crucial. Can true knowledge exchange and a deep understanding of the region's needs truly flourish without strong local leadership at the helm? Does sending an architect from Sweden for four months constitute meaningful collaboration? This would ensure a deeper understanding of the region's social, cultural, and environmental nuances, ultimately leading to more impactful and sustainable design solutions.

Decolonization in architecture

While White Arkitekter demonstrates a commitment to sustainability, a public vision and roadmap to meeting UN goals on achieving 100% climate-neutral architecture by 2030, achieving a truly equitable and ecological approach requires deeper engagement with decolonization in architecture.

By relying solely on expertise from outside the region, White Arkitekter risks reinforcing the dominance of Western knowledge production and overlooking valuable local perspectives, essentially replicating the "cognitive empire" in their approach.

Decolonization in architecture goes beyond just materials and aesthetics. It's about shifting the power dynamics and dismantling the power structures that have historically privileged Western design philosophies and fostering a more inclusive field that embraces diverse perspectives. The "cognitive empire" refers to the dominance of Western thought patterns and knowledge production in architecture. By relying solely on their own expertise, White Arkitekter risks reinforcing this dominance rather than truly collaborating with the local context.

Challenging the cognitive empire

"The first problem therein is determining the genealogy of the idea of development. Where does it come from? From the perspective of the cognitive empire, the idea therefore is that the mainstream idea of development actually emerged from the very unfolding of modernity, which took the form of the ways of knowing peculiar to Europe, and later North America. These ways of knowing were imposed across the world, accompanying the empire's expansion. The impression was created that anything outside Europe is empty, devoid of ideas and even people. In short, empty lands are synonymous with an emptiness of ideas, knowledge, and expertise. This conception is the colonizer's model of the world, whereby everything outside of Europe is empty." (Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni in Architectural Expertise and the Coloniality of Knowledge)

Professor Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that Western knowledge systems dominate the discourse on sustainability in architecture and overlooks local knowledge and practices that are often disregarded, leading to a one-sided approach.

Decolonization requires a fundamental shift in the way architects are trained. The professor recommends a revision of curriculums to include a wider range of architectural histories beyond the Western canon. This could involve incorporating courses on traditional building practices from various cultures and fostering critical thinking about the biases inherent in architectural theory.

Because sustainable design should not just be about environmental concerns, there is also an importance of social equity that involve incorporating principles of universal design to ensure accessibility for all. Therefor it must be rooted in social justice that promotes inclusivity and address the historical marginalization of communities in the built environment.

Professor Ndlovu recognize that decolonization is a never-ending journey and pinpoint therefor that the architectural profession must continuously reflect on its biases and actively seek new knowledge and perspectives to create a more just and equitable built environment for all.

Applying decolonized design in action

Professor Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni's call for decolonized development emphasizes self-reliance, local knowledge, and a move away from singular Western perspectives. This shift towards "multiple epistemologies" or "intercultural translations" underscores the richness of diverse ways of knowing. Incorporating these diverse perspectives strengthens both architectural practice and historical narratives.

Sustainable solutions don't emerge from a vacuum. They require a collaborative approach that values the knowledge and experiences of local communities.

White Arkitekter exemplifies this mindset by collaborating with Kenyan engineering firm professionals, BuildX Studio. Their partnering on "The Future of Workplace" research prioritizes local needs, fosters community engagement, and champions innovative and sustainable design strategies. This perfect alignment with decolonized principles allows White Arkitekter to expand their vision beyond environmental sustainability to encompass a deep resonance with the region's cultural context. The partnership fosters a dynamic exchange of expertise as they can ensure the final design resonates deeply with the cultural context and aspirations of the East African community. Such collaborative projects demonstrate the potential of decolonized architecture to create truly sustainable and culturally resonant solutions.



Credit: White Arkitekter

Intersectionality and the power of diverse perspectives

By incorporating the principles of intersectionality, decolonized architecture becomes a powerful tool for creating spaces that are not only environmentally and culturally sustainable but also socially just and equitable. It allows for the voices of all community members to be heard and reflected in the built environment, fostering a more inclusive and representative future.

Here are some case examples from multicultural, woman lead architects and designers that embodies decolonized practices by setting forward their cultural heritages to develop their projects.

- **Réalimenter Masséna - Reinventer Paris by Lina Ghotmeh**

Lina Ghotmeh, a visionary architect shaped by the complexities of 1980s Beirut, brings a unique perspective to sustainable design. Educated at the American University of Beirut and the École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris, her multicultural background brings a unique perspective to her work. Ghotmeh is also a frequent speaker at international conferences, highlighting her commitment to tackling contemporary challenges. As a leading woman in a successful architecture firm, she is known for her focus on nature and community, she embodies both diversity and sustainable design philosophy.

Ghotmeh's award-winning *Réalimenter Masséna* project, born from the "Réinventer Paris" competition, exemplifies her dedication to both social and environmental sustainability. This project transcends the concept of sustainable feeding by creating an advanced research center and circular economy hub. But it's not just a building, but a vision for a sustainable future focused on food systems. Her experiences inform her "visionary approach" and "sensitive twist on architecture," evident in her focus on community. The project goes beyond simply providing space. It fosters social interaction by creating a hub for a diverse range of food-related professions: researchers, chefs, food economists, agricultural specialists, and even artists. This collaborative environment fosters knowledge sharing and embodies the principles of intersectionality in sustainability.



Credits: Réalimenter Masséna - Reinventer Paris by Lina Ghotmeh

Réalimenter Masséna embraces the concept of a circular economy, which aims to keep resources in use as long as possible. The design prioritizes accessibility and public engagement, emphasizing reuse, closed-loop systems, and self-sufficiency. It tackles sustainability holistically, considering not just energy efficiency but also resource management and waste reduction.

- **FACE-ing Urban Africa** – A documentary by Matri-Archi(tecture)

Matri-Archi(tecture) is a collaborative force that transcends borders. Based between South Africa and Switzerland, this group of architects, artists, planners, and scholars fosters a vibrant exchange of ideas between African and European cultures. Their core principle? Collaboration. They believe that working together, with diverse perspectives at the table, leads to richer and more meaningful outcomes.

Their mission is to amplify underrepresented voices and challenge the status quo. They champion intersectionality in design, giving voice to marginalized groups and highlighting discourses often overlooked by mainstream architecture. Through their work, they showcase the power of diversity to spark innovation and create spaces that reflect the complexities of our globalized world.

“Through occupying and creating Intersectional Space, design can foster symbiotic relationships with human interactions reflecting a polycentric heterogeneous landscape wherein idiosyncratic ideas continually catalyze non-discriminatory shared futures.” Here, intersectional design is both context and action, an overlap of discursive, digital, and physical.” –(Matri-Archi(tecture) in ArchDaily

Intersectional Design: Rethinking Architecture for the Future

Matri-Archi(tecture)'s commitment to intersectionality is beautifully exemplified in their 2019 project, "FACE-ing Urban Africa," for Nairobi Design Week. This project wasn't just about capturing images; it was a participatory experience that centered the voices and stories of 15 Kenyan women. By going beyond a traditional approach and involving the women directly, Matri-Archi(tecture) ensured a deeper understanding of their perspectives and experiences within the urban landscape.

"FACE-ing Urban Africa" serves as a powerful reminder that women's experiences are often missing from conversations about urban design. This project not only celebrates their unique perspectives but also highlights their "global awareness of urban narratives," showcasing how women navigate the interplay of local and global forces in shaping their cities.



Credits: Portraits FACE-ing Urban Africa by Matri-Archi(tecture) Photography: Aisha Mūgo

The collaborative group actionable practices within the field demonstrate that by focusing on dismantling barriers to diversity in spatial education and *emphasis* on intersectionality, architecture can actively contribute to various social identities in design. This is a crucial shift in design philosophy. They don't just design for *people*; they design with them. By embracing diverse perspectives and dialogue, they create spaces that are not only *adaptable* and resilient but also truly representative of communities they serve.

A call to action

The future of sustainable architecture demands a chorus of voices, not a monotone. Western architects have a crucial role to play in dismantling the "cognitive empire" and fostering a more inclusive design future. Are you ready to embrace intersectionality in your design practice?" Here are a few steps you can take:

- **Curriculum reform:** Advocate for educational institutions to broaden architectural curricula by including global histories and diverse design philosophies.
- **Invest in Decolonization Resources:** Explore books, workshops, and online resources that can deepen your understanding of decolonization and intersectionality in architecture.
- **Seek Collaboration:** Actively seek partnerships with architects and communities from different backgrounds. Co-creation is key to achieving inclusive and sustainable design solutions.
- **Self-reflection:** Engage in critical self-reflection to identify your own cultural biases about design and sustainability. What are your blind spots?

By taking these steps, Western architects can begin to move beyond their own limitations and embrace the richness of diverse perspectives. This shift towards a more inclusive design practice is precisely what the "Copenhagen Lessons" advocate for.

Archivism – the Copenhagen Lesson way.

“Dignity and agency for all people is fundamental in architecture, there is no beauty in exclusion.”(UIA World Congress of Architects 2023 report – The Copenhagen Lessons)

The 2023 UIA World Congress of architects held in Copenhagen emphasized the need for a radical shift in architectural practices to achieve true sustainability. Their "Copenhagen Lessons" offer a roadmap emphasizing principles such as biodiversity, social inclusion, and the concept of "archivism" – architecture's contribution to the UN 17 SDGs.

The UIA report presents a compelling vision, but achieving this vision requires a new generation of archivists. Architects must engage in continuous learning, embracing diverse ways of knowing and partnering with local stakeholders. Educational institutions should revamp their curriculums to incorporate decolonial

perspectives and empower future architects to become archivists, designing for a multicultural world. Policymakers must incentivize sustainable practices and prioritize the well-being of marginalized communities.

Together, through archtivism and by embracing intersectionality, we can turn the 'Copenhagen Lessons' into a blueprint for a just and sustainable future for all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the dream of a sustainable future demands a chorus of voices, not a single melody. By embracing decolonization and intersectionality, architecture can shed the limitations of the "cognitive empire" and design spaces that are not only environmentally sound but also socially just and culturally resonant. Western architects have a crucial role to play: fostering self-reflection, advocating for curriculum reform, seeking collaborative partnerships, and actively engaging with decolonization resources. This journey towards a more inclusive design practice aligns perfectly with the "Copenhagen Lessons" and the vision of archtivism. By working together, architects, educators, policymakers, and communities can transform these lessons into a blueprint for a just and sustainable built environment for all. The future of architecture simply cannot be homogenous; it's a vibrant tapestry woven from diverse perspectives. As professor Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni reminds:

"In our thinking about the history of architecture, we must draw from multiple epistemologies. Another possible term is intercultural translations, so that when we think about this issue of the history of architecture, we really think about it in relation to the existing world – which is a multiple world, with multiple knowledges and multiple cosmologies. All that is not a problem, it is actually the richness of the plurality of the world. If you then want to wipe out a part out of existence so that you protect one part, then you have a problem." (Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni in Architectural Expertise and the Coloniality of Knowledge)

Are you ready to pick up your thread and contribute to the design of a more equitable world?

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