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Rethinking 'architect' and 'architecture'

Jaideep Chatterjee

Jaideep Chatterjee reflects on the inside and the outside of typical ideas of architecture, the architect, and architectural history.

My fellow architects, let me begin this piece with a provocative, even blasphemous, proposition: it is time to do away with the twin terms 'architect' and 'architecture' as signs that stand in for what we are, what we do or as a 'thing' in the world.

I suggest this not out of some personal vendetta or distaste for them. Indeed, I am a registered architect in India, a historian and anthropologist who writes on architects and architecture, the Dean of a School of Art and Architecture and, if that were not enough, I am also married to an architect. Rather, it is for two reasons, the first of which is somewhat pragmatic and the second of which, more crucial, is epistemological.

The first reason, the pragmatic one, is that our experience tells us these terms neither capture the complexity of the built environment nor the multiple roles we play as agents in its (re-) production, dissemination, contestation, and sustenance. Here, one has only to think of the number of graduates from any architecture programme who engage the built environment in multiple ways as its advocates, its managers, authors, critics, chroniclers, and so on. Furthermore, not only are these terms inadequate to represent us or our work but – with their connotations of primary, chief, original, originary, etc. – they actively get in the way of us being able to form meaningful connections with other agents of the built environment. Thus, architects and architecture find themselves alienated from all stakeholders and allied agents (human and non-human) in the production of the built environment.

The second reason, I believe, we need to jettison these two terms, is not unrelated. Indeed, in many ways, it is the reason why these terms are an inadequate intellectual resource to think about what we do, who we are and what are the 'objects' of our labour. The two terms, as I have argued elsewhere, invoke, (re-)produce, and enunciate as well as continually interpellate us, our work, and the built environment within the ambit of a problematic history. It is a history that denigrates difference, that turns it into a hegemonic structure of value, and which is structurally violent towards 'others' (people, things, objects, environments) that are, in the first place, 'othered' and maintained by this history.

To elaborate my claim, let me present a composite narrative that I argue underpins most, if not all, understandings of the terms architecture and architect. The narrative goes something like this: The meaning of 'architecture' and 'the architect' have existed since prehistoric times. Indeed, they are coterminous with being human. Yet they were, at the time, in potential, not-yet fully formed. As history unfolds and progresses from prehistoric times towards its later stage(s), the meaning of 'architecture' and 'the architect' too begins to germinate from their potential stage towards their actualisation. And each stage of history – classical antiquity (for some), the Renaissance (for others), the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns (for yet others), and the Industrial Revolution (for others further) – actualises this not-

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quite-yet meaning of 'architecture' and 'architect' bit by bit until we arrive in the present (modernity), when we have apparently achieved the fully formed meaning of architecture and the architect.[1]

I shall have more to say about these not-yet 'formed' stages of meaning later. For now, however, let us look at the narrative to unpack the code of history that is embedded in it. The first thing to note is that, though this narrative acts as a descriptor of the history of meaning of architecture and architects, it seems to have no history of its own. That is, it is itself not historically situated but rather seems to unfold with the flow of time, which is itself assumed as homogenous, secular, unidirectionally and natural (belonging to nature). Given this 'naturality' of its 'temporal' flow this (a)historical 'natural' narrative further assumes a separation or detachment of time from events, persons, and things, and a specific spatial assignment of events, persons, and things within that time.

As many postcolonial scholars have argued, this tripartite movement – specifically: the invocation of empty homogenous natural time; the separation of time from events; and the specific assigning of places within this time of events – has profound implications for our relations and presentations of our 'selves' and of the world around us.[2] Take for example, a person standing in front of the Red Fort in Agra, India today. For this person, gifted with a consciousness of empty homogenous time, the fort – even though contemporaneously present – always appears as something built in 1573 AD by the Mughal Emperor Akbar. In other words, the fort appears as something that is out of step with the observer's time, something anachronistic. What this appearance of anachronism does is twofold. First, it continually extricates this person from her lived relations with the Red Fort, thus framing the time of fort as *the time-that-is-past* and *time-that-is-separate* from the time of the observer. At the same time, anachronism, in turn, frames the time of the observer as a discrete unit that is completely bounded and separate from what came before. The only relation between these two times is, ironically, now restructured by the continuous unidirectional flow of calendrical time.[3]

In this second sense, anachronism further denies heterotemporality – that is, the fragmentary and pluralistic nature of the observer's present.[4] It denies, so to speak, the simple observation that our present *always and already* comprises things that simultaneously 'belong' in other *and* our time. Taken together, what we have here is a powerful self-referential structure. The institution of the 'empty time' of history makes anachronism possible, and anachronism, in turn, works to reinstate the 'empty time' of history, through which a singular history (of professions, of nations, of anything) is narrated.

If we revisit our composite narrative, we can now see it as replete with this mechanism. This narrative, as we saw, assumes the 'empty time' of history. Consequently, there is (a meaning of) architecture and the architect in classical Greece. There is (a meaning of) architecture and the architect in medieval times. There is (a meaning of) architecture and the architect in Renaissance. So on and so forth.

For the architect, student, or discipline *of* today (read: entity enabled with the linear historical consciousness) these 'things', due to the principle of anachronism, appear as things that once belonged to their historical context and now exist in the observer's time as a 'bit' of that past. This objectification through the principle of anachronism – their extrication from shared and lived relation(s) with the observer – not only turns the eye of the observer-as-participant in to the eye of the witness-as-historian but also turns the meaning(s) of 'architecture' and 'the architect' into evidence, affirming the 'rule of evidence' of historiography. This mechanism, in turn, reinstates the 'empty time' of history through which a singular, universal narrative of the meaning of architecture and the architect can be told.

Once surrendered, this universal singular narrative of the meaning of architecture and architect spawns, underpins, and effects 'particular' narrative(s) of meaning of architecture and the architect *[1]*. Since the invocation of the empty time of history assigns specific times to meaning(s) of architecture and the architect, and since all architectures belong to some time, it follows that there is an architecture that belongs to 'our' time. And since these meanings of architecture(s) and the architect 'belong' to *different* times from what has been deemed, by historicist logic, to be the meaning of architecture assigned to 'our' time, historicist consciousness (architect and architecture) following the flow of time judge the former meanings as anachronistic and accords them a 'fixed' status, calling them by hyphenated names, 'Gothic architecture', 'Romanesque architecture', 'Medieval architecture', 'Neoclassical architecture', and so on.[5] As the descriptors indicate, these 'architectures' are something that is seemingly added on to 'architecture' proper.

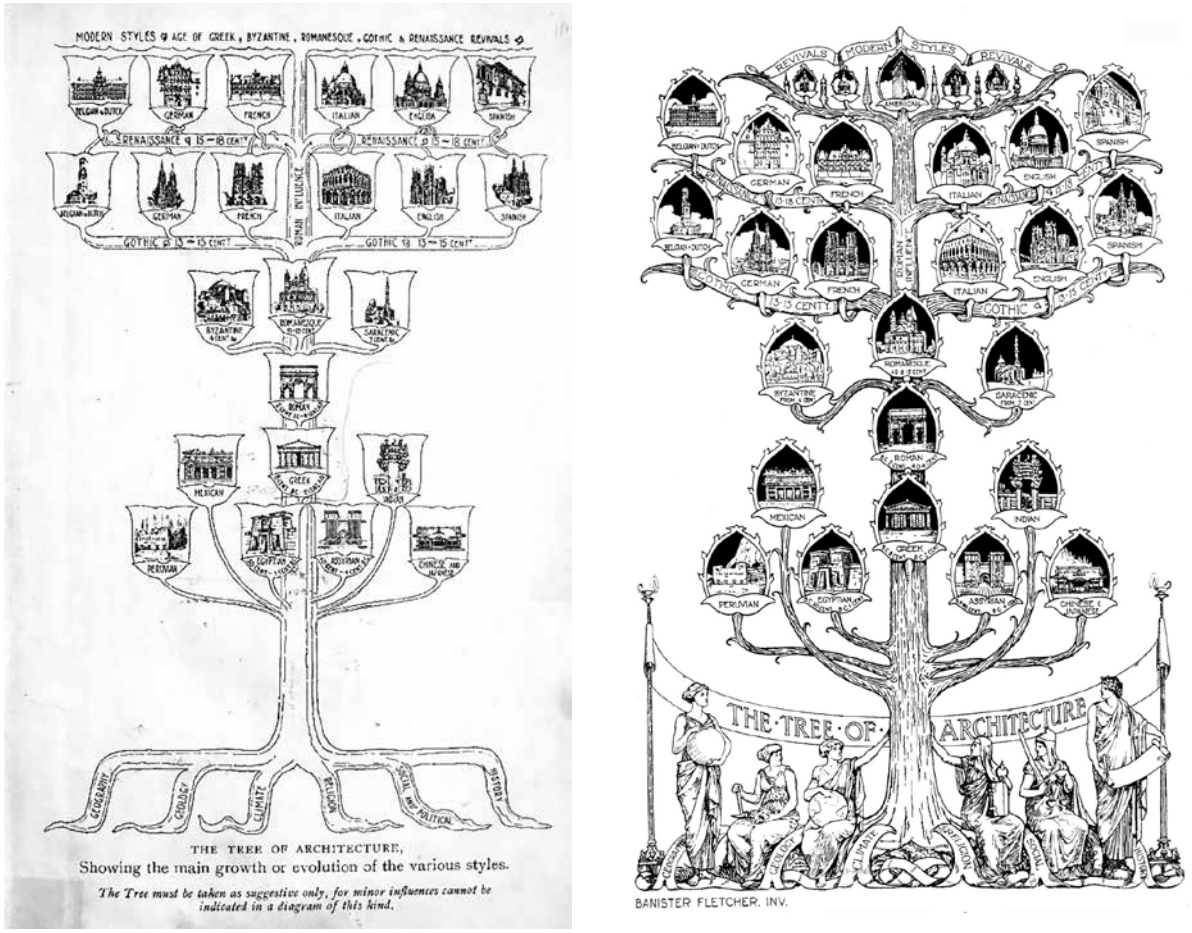
In many cases, even this 'respect' is not accorded, and these different meanings of architecture and the architect are placed completely outside the field of architecture and architects. They constitute the 'not-yet' or perhaps the 'never-will-be' meanings of architecture and architect. There is a whole set of nomenclature we use for these 'lesser' architectures and architects: 'low-cost architecture', 'vernacular architecture', 'architecture by non-architects', 'craftsperson', 'temple-architects', 'mistri', 'master-mason', 'builder', etc.

Historicism thus works to turn difference – that is, the different meanings of architecture – into a hegemonic structure of value. Ultimately, it allows the unfolding of a singular meaning of architecture and the architect, deemed most valuable, to proceed unscathed while all 'different' and 'anachronistic' meanings that do not add to the singular meaning to fall off the pages of architects and architecture.

But this is not all that the invocation of the 'empty time of history' does. As Timothy Mitchell notes, a powerful effect of the force of historicist thought is how it configures geography:

> *Historical time* [...] *the time of the West, is what gives modern geography its order, an order centred on Europe. Accounts of the modern world that introduce a topsy-turvy view of this geography, by locating important developments outside the West, typically re-establish the order of modernity by removing these irregularities from any determining local context, or any non-European regional or global*

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1a, b. The singular histories of the meaning of architect and architecture from two twentieth-century editions of Bannister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture*. What is noteworthy is that, from the year 1905 (a) to 1955 (b), the singular meanings of architecture and architect only became strengthened and even more pronounced.

> *context, and repositioning them within the West's uniform and singular history*. The discipline of historical time reorganises discordant geographies into a universal modernity [emphasis added].[6]

Such (re)organisation of an 'architectural-geography' centred on the West is also undertaken by the invocation of the 'empty time of history' in the singular narrative of the meaning of architecture and the architect.

Indeed, this geography created by the historically singular narrative performs a double bind. It shores up its own boundaries – its interior – as normative, while relegating those meanings which do not fit into its neat geography as the 'outside' in two different yet related senses. There is, first, an outside which does not even merit mention. One can easily think of many countries in Asia, Africa, even Eastern Europe which, if this 'history' is to be believed, has not produced a single 'architect' or 'architecture' that deserves mention. Second, there is an 'outside' which, although mentioned, is still prefigured by a 'lack': that is, this is an outside that is not-yet. Such is the force of this interiority, and the pedagogy of this interiority, that the term 'architect' and 'architecture' do not remain merely analytical categories but rather become forms of self-identification through which those who lie outside this geography see, produce, and locate themselves.

Perhaps the most important effect of the invocation of empty historical time within the singular narrative of the meaning of architecture and the architect is how it already assumes the meaning of things rather than inquiring into them. In this sense it limits our ability to truly engage with environments, objects, and people by turning them into objects of interiorised self-referential knowledge. Let us return, very briefly, to our 'purely' historicist observer, whom we left standing in front of the Red Fort at Agra, to see how.

As mentioned earlier, a fundamental claim of this historical time is that everything can be assigned a place within its continuous unidirectional flow. For our observer, the extrication of the fort and the observer from their lived relations – predicated on anachronism – and its subsequent assignment to the continuous flow of time renders the fort as the past in terms of meaning as well. That is, on the one hand, the fort appears as the past that has gone by, it is dead and lifeless. Its assignment in historical time ensures that it is fixed and bounded as that which *it was* in, say, 1573 AD. This delimitation also ensures that its meaning is no longer seen as fluid, changing, dynamic, and plural. Hence all subsequent 'histories', memories, events, actions, etc. are merely understood as 'additions' to an 'original' and not as the thing itself.

On the other hand, placing the fort in 1573 also makes it the past *as precedent*. That is, when writing a history of say, 'Forts of India',[7] it serves as an *instance* of a fort that, when seen from the time of the observer, came *before* the Red Fort in Delhi or the Kumbalgarh Fort near Jodhpur, each of which has been assigned, in turn, its own place in

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history. In both senses of the word – as the past that has truly gone by, and as the past that is an example – the meaning of the fort at Agra is something that is already occluded from the observer and fixed through the invocation of empty historical time, which appears in the guise of a 'type' now: forts in general. In both cases the observer is therefore dealing with a structure that occludes her access to the particular meanings of the fort in front of her. In other words, her investigation of the meaning of things presupposes it instead of inquiring into it.

In conclusion, it is from these standpoints that I argue for the need to jettison the terms 'architecture' and 'the architect'. Not only are they a singularly inadequate intellectual resource to address the central questions that ought to concern us today but also to retain them is to remain within the ambit of the singular history of the meaning of the terms 'architect' and 'architecture'. This, in turn, as I have argued, raises multiple issues, ranging from alienating ourselves from other stakeholders of built environments and from the very work we seek to undertake. But most importantly, the continued use of these twin terms condemns a vast majority of the agents of built environment and the majority of the built environment itself as always and already 'outside' a taxonomy and historical trajectory that these terms invoke . This is something we can no longer to continue to do.

Notes

1. I call this a composite narrative because some version of this narrative underpins almost all works about architecture and the architect. Indeed, often I have come across this 'narrative' verbatim. See, for example, the opening statements of Jon Lang in *A Concise History of Modern Architecture in India* (Delhi, Bangalore: Permanent Black, 2002), p. 1.
2. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 237–43. See also: Timothy Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity*, Contradictions of Modernity V. 11 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Gyan Prakash, 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34:1 (January 1990); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986); William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Sudipta Kaviraj, *Politics in India, Oxford in India Readings in Sociology and Social Anthropology* (Delhi and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997).
3. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 237–43.
4. Ibid., p. 243.
5. Indeed, the entire mechanism of 'styles' in architecture is nothing other than 'fixing' a particular architecture to a particular time period, that is, assigning it a 'space' within the empty time of 'history'. Of course, the question to ask here is, how does one decide what architecture belongs to that particular 'space' within the empty time of 'history'? If one does not already implicitly assume a commonality between buildings in the first place, which ironically has been put in place by the empty time of history itself.
6. Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity*, p. 7. See also Robert S. Nelson, 'The Map of Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, 79:1 (March 1997).
7. Fortunately, and perhaps not coincidentally, there happens to be more than one book with the very same name.

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