

Post-structural Possibilities in Architectural Design: Deconstruction as a Strategy to Start Architecture of Postcolonial Knowledge and Ideology

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Abstract – Architecture is politically powerful, and its interdisciplinary nature makes it rich and colourful. Postcolonial critique is one of the ways that one could look at and understand architecture and the built environment of post-independent Sri Lanka. By looking at architecture and architectural approaches through a postcolonial eye, one can see the remains of colonial dichotomies of colonials finding their other in indigenous people. Deconstruction, introduced by Jacques Derrida, understands that the logocentric vision is violent. Deconstruction is commonly used in reading and interpreting subtexts of literary texts, although there is an architectural style called ‘deconstructionism’. The deconstructive strategy leads to questioning the ideological approaches toward architectural designs considered as “good architecture” especially in postcolonial situations like Sri Lanka, where the most prominent architectural narratives are highly elite and colonial. And from pedagogical aspects, “problem-solving” architectural approaches are privileged in which the vernacular-inspired buildings are appreciated. In a postcolonial critique, these attempts are remnants of the colonial gaze on indigenous groups of people. This paper examines the ideological issue of the post-independent era architecture of Sri Lanka by using deconstruction and also suggests deconstruction as a way of approaching architecture of postcolonial ideology.

Keywords: Architectural design, deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, postcolonialism, post-structuralism.

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I. Introduction

Architecture is a complicated subject. And it has many approaches, narrations, readings, interpretations and ways of doing it. It can be considered a powerful political art. For K. Michael Hays, architecture is “a way of negotiating the real”, and what he means by it is that architecture is a symbolic production whose primary task is to create concepts (Hays, 2010, p. 1). Fredric Jameson is one of the philosophers who understood the political potential in architecture as a political art and identifies that unlike other art forms, which need a ‘minimal effort in reading’. The political reading of architecture can be easily ignored because it is to be lived in or moved around (Jameson, 1992, p. 245).

Just as art, architecture is contributed by philosophy too. It is indeed a materially existing physical practice. Nevertheless, the impact of philosophy and critical theories in architecture makes architectural discourses more academically rich. For instance, Heidegger’s involvement in the idea of “place & space”, Marx’s involvement in the production, and Derrida’s involvement in architectural meaning, clearly provided an intellectual backbone to the architecture of the latter half of the 20th century. Contemporary architecture practice is intellectually based on the foundation laid predominantly in the 20th century. But in the late 60s, its capacity for social reforms was questioned by the writings of Venturi, Rossi, and Tafuri (Eisenman, 2008, p. 129).

Postmodernism gave birth to a number of philosophical trends that reject the Eurocentric metanarratives of modernism. Postcolonial critique was built on a set of postmodern, post structural, post Marxist ideas. And also from an architectural point of view, the need for regional identities were brought into discussion too. Critical regionalism was an influential critique but later it was also criticised in different aspects.

This is a critical point in architectural critical thinking where the discourse predominantly privileges the modernist conceptions on architectural expression especially in a context like in Sri Lanka. It gives an intellectual ground to question the architectural perception on the architectural creations of every historical period based on an Eurocentric set of ideas of appreciation as there is only one set of fundamentals to appreciate architecture in Sri Lanka especially where elite approaches and styles hegemonically dominate the architectural ideology. The margin of error for accusations of violence in architecture in post-structural perspectives is thin. For example, the common sense of aesthetics and proportions are anchored in elite practices in Sri Lanka, which comes directly from colonial backgrounds. Their use of vernacular materials, proportions and technology is also a colonial attempt of force-regionalizing. The regionalizing efforts since the 80’s are increasingly proven to be Eurocentric and modernism-centric as well. Therefore a new ideological position to start architecture in Sri Lanka is needed.

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II. The Question of Colonisation

Not only Sri Lanka but also the entire subcontinent of South Asia was under the hegemony of the European power. Postcolonial scholars argued that the natives were ideologically forced to think of the white Europeans as superior. And the language of the many indigenous intellectuals was English, and the knowledge they received was again Eurocentric.

The postcolonial studies opened up a novel path to look at the histories of post independent nations. Postcolonial scholars like Edward Said, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakrabory Spivak pioneered the discourse exposing how the Eurocentric ideologies were developed perceiving the colonies as others. They questioned the knowledge of the intellectuals of the colonies in the East and the knowledge is not innocent and is just like another commodity imported from the West. The Europeans use the 'knowledge' manufactured in Europe and are Eurocentric to make Europe the "ideal". In that process, the Europeans are the ones who create the identity of the people in the third world for them.

To point out an interesting part, Spivak (1988) writes in her essay on the British abolishing Sati pooja in 1821. She sees this as "white men saving brown women from brown men". This is the example she takes to demonstrate how the Europeans create people's identities in the third world, making them a rather barbaric tribe. This is an attempt by Europeans to define themselves as a modernised or civilised nation by condemning the culture of their colonies as barbaric and backward.

III. Architectural Colonialism and the problem of the "problem-solving approach"

I need to apply the subaltern theory to architecture. Sri Lankan architectural narration that is predominantly shaped by Geoffrey Bawa's narration. While acknowledging the fact that it is beautiful and aesthetically pleasing, the question needs to be raised regarding architectural critique that "Can we think from our minds? Do we have an indigenous ideology to design or appreciate our architecture? Aren't we importing our knowledge from Europe to appreciate ours?" How does architecture contribute to maintaining Western supremacy?

It is doubtful that Victorian values applied in Ceylonese lifestyles were identified and attempted a decolonization by the majority. One reason for that is that the very Buddhist ideology in the post-independent Ceylon and Sri Lanka is a byproduct of Christian religious, ideological, cultural and value systems, because the Buddhism (the religion of the majority) that people like Col. Henry Steel Olcott reformed was based on protestant Christianity (Obeyesekere, 2002). Hence, it is required to reconsider what makes sense in peoples' conscience as works of architecture, especially for the enormous majority of the middle class. It would be enough to take a look at the cityscapes covered with bright coloured plastic name boards or the houses of contemporary middle-class families with complex roofs or the Buddhist temples with many uncompleted concrete buildings or the expensive reception halls and textile shops full of baroque decorations facing main highways in every city that fulfils people's desires. They are "bad architecture" according to the academic and professional architectural discourse, but still, they exist, because they serve a class anxiety related to aesthetics.

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On the other hand, the question of the 'let-us-go-back-to-vernacular' attitude in architecture, arrives. Vernacular architecture indeed possesses good robust and sustainable qualities and their performances in tropics are proven. But is questioned is the attitude of intellectuals. If one reads the subtext of this notion, the ideological apparatus of the West to define themselves as the developed kind is apparent. As Nihal Perera puts it, the circulation of knowledge regarding "orientalism", "Indology," "tropical agriculture," "tropical architecture," and "development" reduced the need for control of military power by creating a hegemonic power through the academic and professional institutions (Perera, 1998, pp. 61-62). Further, Anoma Pieris (2005) understands that this aesthetic based regionalizing effort reflects "the desire of postcolonial elites to construct a sense of geographic belonging". However, the attempts on regionalizing architecture in Sri Lankan context seem to have no ground level, both in aesthetic and sustainable parameters. Most, if not all of these "tropical" hotels are air conditioned and the streets of the "third-world" cities are covered in plastic boards. As a developing post-independent country, isn't society asking for air-conditioned, aluminium-cladded, or baroque-decorated architectural language after all?

For example, German architect Anna Heringer designed a school in rural Bangladesh with earthy materials and vernacular technology. The question is the ideology, or in other words, do the people in rural Bangladesh ideologically accept this kind of vernacular-inspired mud building for their children? If they do, why would they wait for a white woman to arrive from the sky and re-introduce their own vernacular architecture to themselves? They should have done it already.

Walter D. Mignolo (2009) talks about epistemic disobedience as a necessary step in decolonizing. For him, the common sense in academia is that "the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo Americans have science". He brings an example of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the Maori anthropologist's case on practising anthropology as a Maori and for Maori rather than studying Maori as an anthropologist, asking the important question of the origin and the purpose of knowledge. He argues;

I am not saying that a Maori anthropologist has epistemic privileges over a New Zealand anthropologist of Anglo-descent (or a British or US anthropologist). I am saying that a New Zealand anthropologist of Anglo descent has no right to guide the 'locals' in what is good or bad for the Maori population... There is a good chance that Maoris would know what is good or bad for them better than an expert from Harvard or a white anthropologist from New Zealand. And there is also a good chance that an expert from Harvard may 'know' what is good for him or her and his or her people, even when he or she thinks that they are stating what is good for 'them', the underdeveloped countries and people. (pp. 14-15)

Yet again, this is not an accusation against Anna Heringer for creating architecture inspired by the vernacular architecture of Bengal and she might have done it with the pure intention of serving the poor people of Bangladesh. But if we explore the subtext, or deconstruct the very text of it, we find (maybe unconsciously) the effort of pushing the natives back to the primitive vernacular. We need to examine the ideological need of the indigenous people and how they embrace it. This work indeed is relatable to Spivak's notion of "white men saving brown women from brown men" as "a white woman saving brown men, women, and children from themselves".

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Hence, the vernacular-romanticising approach does not work in the post-colonial discourse in architecture without creating a Eurocentric otherness within architecture. Also, it is still a question whether the “good architecture” for architects is good for ordinary people. In this sense, the architectural practice always operates at a different societal level and creates a gap between societal levels.

Milinda Pathiraja (2011) correctly notes that the interpretation on regionalism, especially on the cases like Geoffrey Bawa is an ideology that is used by the western scholars and is “attuned to western/global audience”. Instead, he suggests a “bottom up” program of a “third-world practice” that is generated by and sensitive to the location, opposing Robson’s (2003) notion that the architects of the third world shouldn’t be burdened by complex social issues. While agreeing on the fact that Robson’s (2003) notion is a highly elitist perception and a raffish attempt to be on a socially unchallenged level in this particular case, the generic meaning of it shouldn’t be ignored. Because on one hand architects do not always get to practise architecture with social issues and on the other hand it violates the architect’s right to choose, if that architect’s existential preference is not a social-issue-solving role. The idea on region is also facing a crisis in defining itself, regardless of it being western or non-western, if one looks at it in a post-structural view. In a non-western setting especially, it is more problematic, because on one hand the epistemological conception on the “location” gets the “Western-born” label and the ideological needs of the people of that particular location might not be very “location-sensitive”. And it is well reflected in the term “third-world”. In this point of view, the idea of “location” traps in a both epistemological and practical paradox. On the other hand, the existential needs of both architects and clients are ignored and violated.

The other question is the “redeemer” image put on the architects. It can be interpreted as a rogue political act of professionals, fulfilling their desire to be a ‘redeemer’. They seem to shout like Jesus saying “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mathew 11: 28). This redeemer image, which is created by people for themselves by charity, is an ideological attempt to be superior. Slavoj Žižek writes about the charity for African children;

When we are shown scenes of starving children in Africa, with a call for us to do something to help them, the underlying ideological message is something like: “Don’t think, don’t politicise, forget about the true causes of their poverty, just act, contribute money, so that you will not have to think! (Žižek, 2011, p. 4).

This sort of attempt creates a binary between the solution giver and receiver. Also, its logo centrically positions one group over the other, in this case, the solution-giving architects. In linguistic terms, when it comes to an understanding through binary opposition. Derrida calls it the “violent hierarchy” (Derrida, 2004, p. 39).

Behind these “problem-solving” approaches, lies the modern conceptions of progression and a universal utopian end to all problems. Modernism is developed around a belief in a universal truth or a reality and modernist architecture in particular, is looking for that universality. It begins with an idea of purity that ends with the idea of creating a utopian city for everyone, which was symbolically ended in 1972 with the famous demolition of Pruitt-Igoe social housing in Missouri. When the ideological stance for a modern utopian solution for a problem fails, it has to be a questioning of the ends of an architectural application.

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This is where the need for ideological postmodernity arrives. French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard uses the term “metanarrative” for such beliefs. It can be political, religious, or something else. But Lyotard simply defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 24).

IV. Meaning & Reasoning

The subaltern theory provides a proper ground to start architecture. Post-structural thoughts paved the way for the subaltern theory. But why the poststructural position? The structuralism-based problem-solving ideological mechanism (architectural and non-architectural) and logos-creating programs have failed the modern world. However, with the idea of an absence of a core meaning, in other words, a transcendental truth, I believe the world will be more tolerating.

For Ferdinand de Saussure, the meaning is generated by the “binary opposition”. The relation between the signifier signified, which creates the “sign”, is arbitrary because of the absence of a fixed relationship between the signifier and the signified. For example, a “cat” is a cat because it is not a dog or a rat, or something else. And also, the sound (sound image) of the word cat is different from the idea of the cat in different languages.

Contrastingly, Derrida believes that the meaning is generated by “différance”. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is both different and deferred. Therefore, a meaning of a word in a text (present) is created by deferring the words that are not there (absent). They are connected with a linkage between the absent and the present (Harland, 1987, p. 138). Therefore the meaning contains the identity (what is) and the difference (what it isn't) and it is continuously being “deferred” (Appignanesi, R., Garratt, C., Sardar, S. & Curry, P., 1995). Derrida further describes that the sign is determined by what he calls ‘trace’ (Sarup, 1988, p. 34). The sign, therefore, contains “traces” or “imprints” of all the other signs, and the meaning is generated by this relationship. Derrida says;

The (pure) trace is *différance*. It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such a plenitude. Although it does not exist, although it is never a being-present outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one call sign (signified/signifier, content/expression, etc.), concept or operation, motor or sensory (Derrida, 1967, p. 62).

One of Derrida's arguments for deconstruction is the absence of a core meaning. He describes that because of this play of signifiers, the difference and trace suggest the absence of a core meaning what he calls a transcendental signified. Therefore Derrida suggests Discourse.

In the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse—provided we can agree on this word—that is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences (Derrida, *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, 1978).

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One cannot judge architecture, standing from one perspective. And the problem-solving architecture, what Eisenman calls the “capacity of social reforms” cannot be applied in any philosophical or pragmatic ground because the utopian end of “solution” will never be a transcendental solution, in other words, a solution can be a problem from a different perspective. There should not be a stable position to judge architecture in this case, for example, saying this nationalist position is the correct one, or this leftist position is the correct one, or this liberal position is the correct one, and their prediction outcomes as solutions.

V. Architectural Meaning & Deconstructing the Constructed

Although the popular idea about the deconstructive architectural style and deconstruction in general is that it does not have a meaning, or demolish the meaning. Derrida made it clear when he was invited to design Parc de la Villette by Bernard Tschumi, that architecture without meaning and meaningless architecture is simply chaos (Derrida, 1985, p. 69). Architecture is a carefully woven text by using elements unique to architecture itself. The real meaning of the notoriously misunderstood Derridian notion “there is nothing outside the text” is that everything is an interlinked text, an architectural complex of texts that is part of an endless system of texts. Architecture is, therefore, responsible for the texts that it is a part of. It could be a social text, a political text, a contextual text, or something else, and importantly architecture produces meaning compared to those.

There is an architectural style that is commonly known as “deconstructivism”. People in the architectural discourse generally prefer to use the term ‘deconstructivism’ for any building that has tilted or curved walls or warped spaces inside the building. Derrida explains to Eisenman that the only way of deconstructing architectural thinking is “an attempt to visualise that which establishes the authority of the architectural concatenation in philosophy”. He further explains that from that point onwards, architecture can be like writing: “its spatiality, thinking in terms of a path, of the opening up of a way which—without knowing where it will lead to—inscribes its traces” (Leach, 1997, p. 303). This is a guideline to architecture, in a deconstructive way. Here Derrida sees architectural experiences as traces. But can architectural approaches or programs be deconstructive?

Although the idea of deconstruction is commonly used as a method of breaking down or dismantling concepts or in architectural terms, breaking down traditional or well-established architectural systems, deconstruction is a critical way of looking at the texts that are already constructed. American literary critic J. Hillis Miller sees “Deconstruction as a mode of interpretation works by a careful and circumspect entry of each textual labyrinth... Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself” (Miller, 2009, p. 341). Architects might come up with ideas of deconstruction of a contextual text, in a particular socio-political text. But deconstruction is not a way of construction, but a method of ‘demonstrating a text that is already dismantled’.

In a certain site-specific architectural typology, deconstruction makes more sense when it attempts to explore the textual labyrinth of the contextual text, which eventually explores the broader texts that are linked with ‘traces’. Charles Jencks comments on Frank Gehry that his

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architecture endangers itself by becoming completely “arbitrary and hermetic sculpture only referring to his own ideas of composition... Deconstruction is most effective when norms of construction and ornament are also there to be resisted” (Jencks, 1988).

On the other hand, the constructed meaning through the signification process of other architectural languages also need to be reconsidered when the architecture becomes a demonstrative tool of deconstructed reading of the text. For example, the modernist/functionalist, which is supposed to be a non-referential objectivity, has ultimately made itself a reference. Eisenman says “They were simply stripped down classical forms, or forms referring to a new set of givens” (function, technology). The points of reference are different, but the implications for the object are the same (Eisenman, 1998, p. 526).

The deconstructive reading of the Sri Lankan built environment is crucial in understanding postcolonial power relations. It can be a starting point to question everything, in this case, everything regarding the built environment from an ideological position of a city plan to a design of a window. Especially in the Sri Lankan context, there are “norms” created in architectural designs. Campbell (2012) suggests that “deconstruction is most needed at precisely those images where our immediate reaction is to say, “That is just the way it is” or “there’s nothing to be deconstructed here”, or “this is trivial”. For instance, especially in architectural education in Sri Lanka, the Geoffrey Bawa narration is the “norm” for architectural design and a “problem-solving approach” is the “norm” for an approach to architectural production, which marginalises other discourses and approaches.

However, the use of deconstruction should be taken carefully. Tariq Jazeel (2007), for instance, deploys Derridian deconstruction reading on Geoffrey Bawa, arguing that he has dismantled the Cartesian dichotomy of nature/culture and human/non-human. While this is partly true, Bawa is romanticising nature over culture, by importing Italian proportions in buildings and landscapes mixing it with vernacular elements and layouts, at the cost of labour and material. And also his architecture created another dichotomy between classes. Here is where the understandings of existing regional binaries are important. For example, in Lunuganga or Kandalama, humanity was already powerless against the power of nature, before the constructions. The humans (architects, clients, contractors) are the ones that make nature powerless with alien-to-the-region methods. Then, I should ask, what is the point of letting nature to be powerful again and culture to be faded?

Although I was critical of Milinda Pathiraja’s notion of the region, and although he has started architecture as a “problem-solving approach” I could present his library project in Ambepussa at the Sri Lanka Army’s Sinha regiment headquarters as a deconstructive approach to a location. It was installed in the immediate aftermath of the Eelam war, in which the Sri Lankan government had to enlist a large number of young men, and had to carry out a well-organised ideological campaign uplifting the military personality to a sacred position. In this case, Pathiraja sees hierarchical binaries of *ranaviruwa* (war hero) vs. soldier ideologically, and a potential killer vs. a potential worker practically. And in an architectural sense, he brings the binary between the nature-romanticised, labour-intensive elite architecture like Bawa’s and the robust, self-resourced material practice of railway architecture to a common ground. Further, he applies it in a rigid military ‘location’, foreseeing the soldiers as civilians, deconstructing the binary between military and civil lives. Then the logocentric hierarchies of

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the location are exposed geographically, ideologically, technologically, pragmatically, morphologically, aesthetically, and timely, rather than given a solution. Although the designer has started architecture with a “problem-solving” mindset that is colonial, the outcome can be interpreted as a deconstructive approach, as the *auteur* is not present anymore.

However, although this particular “problem-solving approach” approach can be interpreted as a postcolonial deconstructive approach, many cannot be seen as such. Therefore one should be careful not to create otherness in identifying an ideological ground to build architecture on. In this way, a designer should start deconstruction with the text that is there on the location, right before the design starts. Sri Lanka, as a text created by binary oppositions, is an ideal place to practise deconstruction in architecture. In this manner, deconstructive architecture hardly becomes an “arbitrary and hermetical sculpture”. The language will not matter as far as it exposes the contradictions of an existing text. A more postcolonial approach would be an approach that can expose violent hierarchies in a region or a location in a programmatic, functional, aesthetic, or any other way.

Further, it could be the best possible identification of the region because in deconstruction, the locus or the centre of the idea of the region, both in a physical and timely sense, would be deferred. There will be no such concrete ground to identify a place as a location in essence in any perspective such as social, experiential, existential, absolute physical, or material. Therefore an architect would have to rely on a place and time-specific interpretation of his/her own, rather than relying on an externally (western, eastern, or locally) produced system of knowledge. In that way, an architect epistemologically isolated him/herself.

Conclusion: A deconstructive approach

The relationship between architecture and deconstruction is a highly abstract one. However, as it concatenates architecture with philosophy, the architectural approach to deconstruction and deconstructive approaches to architecture should be something more than abstract or conceptual. Although architects, especially from the 70s and 80s came up with an architectural style called “deconstructivism” it is doubtful that it does a deconstructive work, since deconstruction is not a dismantling tool but a strategy to expose an already deconstructed text.

The uncertainty, the lack of stable meaning, and the self-deconstructive nature of deconstruction and post-structuralism in general, help to reject the concrete conceptions in the architectural discourse like the idea of region. Derrida suggests “discourse” instead of a “transcendental signified”, the idea of discourse had to be taken into architecture as a “media for discourse”. Hence these concrete conceptions always are subjected to criticism.

Deconstruction is most effective when there are norms to be deconstructed. Then architecture becomes the medium of exposing violent hierarchies generated by the logocentric worldview. Architectural practices and education, especially in Sri Lanka, are established on a set of norms, which either fails to grasp the aesthetic taste of the majority or intentionally addresses a particular social group or class. The approaches to planning and functional aspects are the same, they are based on certain architectural norms. These norms, along with the norm of the “problem-solving” approach create violent hierarchies, privileging the architecture of

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these norms over others. It hegemonically suppresses other ideologies, approaches. Then one needs to accept the right of the elites to build elite, labour-intensive architecture too. However, in this case, the violence will remain. The architecture of post-colonialism, therefore, should take a “binary-revealing” ideological stance rather than a “problem-solving” one, because this logocentric binary always privileges one idea over the other and that could well be the “violence” that architects seeking for as “problems”. Deconstruction would be the strategy with which the architecture of postcolonial ideology should start, especially in a postcolonial state, with colonial hierarchies and values.

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