

Dhāranā: The Agency of Architecture in Decolonization

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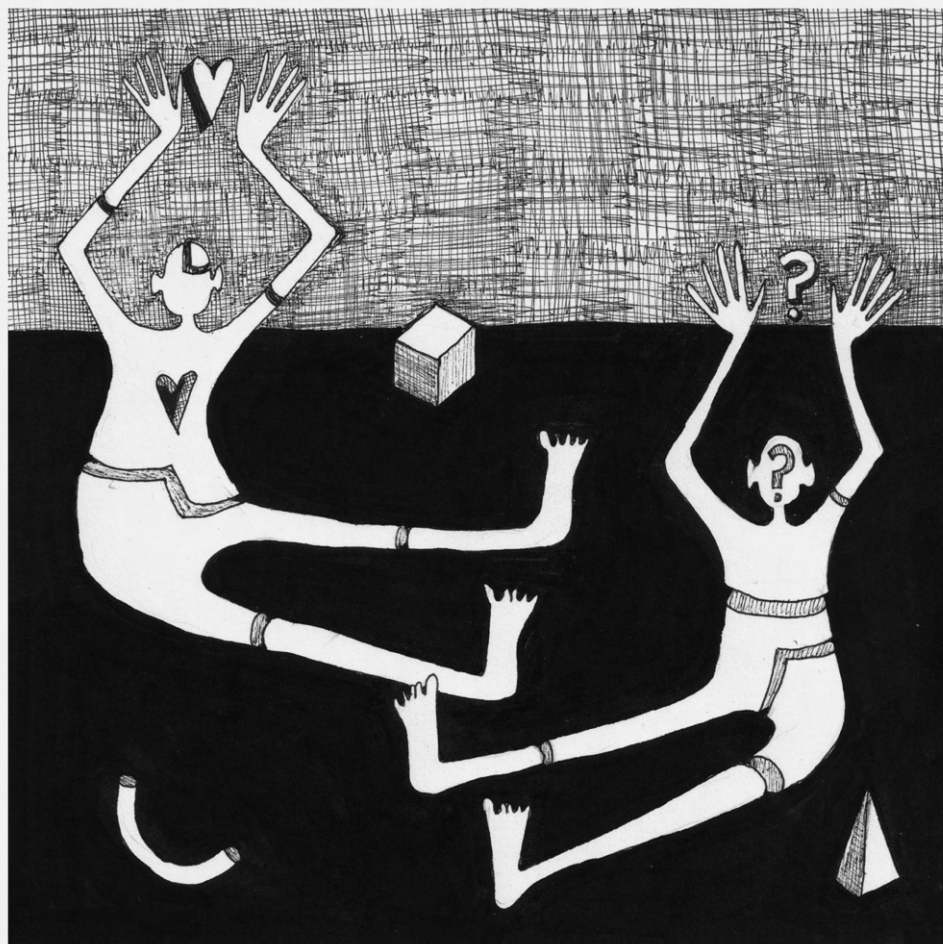
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"This warning, to remain vigilant of one's own framing by institutions upon whose stages we perform our protests, to understand and persistently critique those stages even as we perform on them, is a warning that was current then, and remains current today in my writing for publication of this piece."

Figure 1. Illustration by Tori Haynes.

Dhāranā: The Agency of Architecture in Decolonization

What is the agency of architecture in the ongoing project of decolonization?

The following is a reading of the postcolonial philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's keynote presentation at the Theatres of Decolonization: [Architecture] Agency [Urbanism] conference that was held in January 1995 in Chandigarh, India.¹ As a reading it is of course necessarily interpretive, which is to say it is actively constituted as much by errors and omissions as it is by explications and contextualizations. I have been driven by the desire to understand, to rethink and re-know an event that took place twenty-five years ago and that was formative in my biography. The editor of this journal, Jorge Otero-Pailos, informs me that it was also in his. Remembering the past is always also a reconstitution of the past in the present. It is a strange temporality neither past nor present but the past as present, which has a mirrored relationship to the future that will have been, the future anterior. *Future Anterior* is announced as the title of this journal as somehow, one imagines, a metonym of the possibilities of a preservation practice.

Remembering, in this future anterior sense, is the work of bricolage, the very architecture of memory that Freud described for us in his description of the "eternal city" in *Civilizations and its Discontents*.² A bricolage is different from something like a Nolli's plan of Rome, that is an idealization, though the tension between the two—between the desire to idealize and fix in memory versus that of allowing the unfinished and the ruin to persist as such—is a constant struggle, that one glosses over only at one's own peril. With this caveat held front and center in my thinking mind, I submit the following as a future anterior bricolage of Spivak's presentation, the same but other, very much my own language, authored and authorized by me, though if you read the "original," it also authorizes bricolage as a kind of critical agency of reading emergent possibilities of the present.

Which is also to say that the "Spivak" referred to in this essay is the readerly figure, constructed by me, whose relationship to the "real" person is simultaneously irrefutable and unverifiable. This is a double-bind that will surely come undone in ways that I cannot possibly know in advance today as I write

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and that will have been determined by the imperatives of your situation of reading, dear reader. My personal relationship with Spivak is complex. She has occupied the figure (very problematically as will become clear later in this text) of a “*guru*” for me. The only way to correctly “translate” a guru is via loving critique. The reader will have to decide if I have been able to do so via their own readerly critique. From my vantage, this critique has taken the form of remembering as self-conscious bricolage. In taking the original published paper, and remembering its day of presentation at conference, I have tried to remain as (un)faithful to the original as possible.

I was one of the co-organizers, with John Biln, Kultar Nat, and Jaspreet Takher, of the Theatres of Decolonization: [Architecture] Agency [Urbanism] Conference. The main title of the conference was a phrase I had extracted out of context from one of Spivak’s essays.³ In her essay, Spivak was referring to the many sites, the many theatres as in a war, where the struggle to decolonize the world was being staged and the many, many dialectical hierarchies that that struggle performed. [Architecture] and [Urbanism], so-bracketed as to indicate their careful staging in the conference title, seemed like two of the theatres on which this battle certainly was being staged, but marginal to postcolonial theoretical discourses that were centered in the humanities. Additionally, we had used [Architecture] and [Urbanism] themselves as wings to center-stage the term “Agency,” that stood on its own, without any brackets, and was as such, I now retrospectively recognize, the staged “hero” of our play. “Agency,” it seemed then in the mid-1990s, was like architecture and urbanism marginalized in postcolonial theory. While the question of postcolonial identity—the complex double-layered framing of subjectivity as the hybrid postcolonial condition—had been significantly theorized, its necessary corollary, agency, the mission and trajectory of doing, seemed less well outlined. As architects, and architectural theorists, we felt that the task of the architect was aligned to the doer, to the agents of civil society, not just in the form of the work of imagining the future in terms of how it will look, but also the work of executing that task. What is architecture and urbanism as a verb, rather than as a noun, was our question, as engaged to the critical global task of decolonization? To “architect,” the word deployed as a verb as it is nowadays to describe the work of designing things like software or business processes, was not yet in fashion then in the early 1990s. At that time, the Cold War had just been won by the capitalist West, and globalization was just ramping up. Architecting, and its newfangled corollary “being mindful,” was as still in the wings.

We had held the conference in Chandigarh, the great Nehruvian postcolonial city master-planned by Le Corbusier,

with intention. In the 1990s architectural postmodernism was still an “in” topic in Indian architectural circles, with all its attendant obsessions with historicist reconstructions of identity. Many papers at the conference sought to promote design agencies centering the “reassertion” of a kind of “Indianness” in contestation with the futurist modernity embodied by Chandigarh. Chandigarh was the site of the celebrated agency of the Indian nation-state, attempting to stage decolonization via the heroics of a capital city, designed by a master architect. It was the site of a fabulous triumph, or a spectacular failure, depending on your point of view, a phoenix or a ruin. In either case, Chandigarh stood as a test case of the agency of architecture in decolonization, much celebrated and much maligned and contested. By choosing Chandigarh as the conference’s site, we wanted to enter into that “contest” by invoking the postcolonial.

Chandigarh was also my hometown. The city in which I had been born and brought up. My father, a larger than life figure in my life, was one of the architects who had worked with Le Corbusier on the design of the city. I nursed a certain displaced nationalist pride in the city, and its architectural identity. By the 1990s, the postmodern critiques of modernism were beginning to peter out, and it was yet unclear what they were going to be replaced by as the new normative of architecture. The Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition at MoMA in New York had just been staged, with middling success. Sustainability and ecological thinking were still a ways away, the global supply-chain manufacturing juggernaut had still not come to full steam, even though the first set of Global Agreements on Trade and Tariffs had just been negotiated. The gavel of economic globalization had been sounded, but the effects were yet to be felt. Nothing we used at the conference was yet made in China. And, the internet was nothing more than a novelty. We published the proceedings of the conference in hard copy only, a limited edition of two hundred copies.⁴

In academic circles in the United States where I was living and teaching, poststructuralism and deconstruction was the dominant discourse, with postcolonial theory its newest political-action wing. This is what I had studied and just finished writing my dissertation on. We imagined ourselves at the bleeding edge of the discourse. In 1993, two faculty from the architecture program of the National University of Singapore, Gulsum Baydar Nalbantoglu and Bobby Wong Chong Thai, had organized a conference entitled *Architecture (Post)Modernity and Difference* that sought to bring the postcolonial question to bear upon contemporary thinking about architecture in Asia, in particular, and the postcolonial in general. I had attended this conference on my way from New Delhi to the United States,

where I would defend my dissertation. Earlier, in 1990 the students of the architecture program at the Technical University of Delft in Holland had organized a conference entitled “Context and Modernity,” designed to critique (critical) regionalism and connect poststructuralism to architecture. I had attended that event too, and Franz Ziegler, one of that conference’s chairs became a lifelong friend. In Singapore, some of us formed the “Other Connections” organization, designed to construct a non-normative, non-metropolitan network of postcolonial architectural thinkers. The inaugural meeting of Other Connections held at the Singapore conference designated Chandigarh as the next location of its conference, agreeing that this city was the perfect postcolonial site, urgently in need of deconstruction.

One hundred and forty speakers from sixteen countries attend the conference, all of them, other than the keynotes, traveling on their own dime. Spivak was one of our four invited keynote speakers.⁵ The other three were Alan Colquhoun, the modernist historian from Princeton University; Anthony King, the colonial historian from SUNY Binghamton; and Balkrishna V. Doshi, India’s celebrated modernist/postmodernist architect, a graduate of Le Corbusier’s Paris atelier, who was to later, much later, go on to win the Pritzker Prize. Colquhoun sunnily unpacked the concept of “regionalism” in modernism for the assembly. Regionalism was not quite the newfangled response to postmodernism that it was made out to be, Colquhoun argued. It had been around for a while, with some questionable provenances. King questioned the epistemic stability of the colonial and the postcolonial as terms. Were they perhaps much too fashionable?, he asked, a risky gambit knowing full well that Spivak, the locus of the postcolonial discourse, was in the audience, and yet to present. This was an unusually presentist presentation for King, known more for his carefully indexed historicist work, such as that on the bungalow.

And Doshi, in his characteristic manner, told stories from practice, most spectacularly iterating his design of his own office, Sangath, as a series of feints, false starts in the journey of a hapless visitor looking for the entrance to his atelier, which he ultimately finds tucked into a modest pit in the ground, that is useful to keep the building cool. Doshi’s point, I impute, was that creativity is a search, with many false starts, a necessary preamble to the coded work of design that works best in the shadows. For those of us who knew Doshi a long time this was a familiar refrain, a beloved narrative outlining the inevitable uncertainties of the design process, even if as a tall tale. Ironically, the carousel projector failed in the middle of Doshi’s presentation, mixing all the slides up, a bricolage of the hap-

less! But he muddled through, quite like his imaginary hapless visitor to Sangath.

Spivak had asked to speak last so that she could, she said, learn about architecture — not her native discipline — though via the convoluted and ultimately ill-fated collaborations with architecture that her mentor Jacques Derrida had engaged in Paris and New York. She would have been, one assumed, well conversant with the constitutive entanglements between architectural thinking and philosophy in contemporary Western critical theory.⁶ “Deconstruction,” after all, was a self-consciously architectural concept-metaphor that came to define Derrida’s *oeuvre*, even though — and especially so for those of us very interested in the architectural framing of poststructuralism — deconstruction was clearly a verb, a doing of a kind, a kind of agency, that was like architecture, even though it aspired to something like a collapse of the architectural as the focus of its purposes and aims.

In 1986, the year I had joined graduate school in Cornell University, where Derrida was quite the rage; an interview with him had just been published in the Italian architectural journal *Domus* entitled “Architecture, Where Desire May Live.”⁷ In it Derrida raised the question of architectural thinking not as a “technique separate from thought” but as the question of “architecture as a possibility of thought”: “Let us consider architectural thinking. By that I don’t mean to conceive architecture as a technique separate from thought and therefore possibly suitable to represent it in space, to constitute almost an embodiment of thinking, but rather to raise the question of architecture as a possibility of thought, which cannot be reduced to the status of a representation of thought.”⁸

From this it followed that if architecture as one kind of a possibility of thought haunted philosophy (or at least the Western modern philosophy that Derrida was critiquing) then there might be another kind of architecture as the possibility of thought, another kind of a thought-architecture, so to speak.⁹ Architecture as a possibility of an-other thought suggested other as yet unknown ambition for architectural thinking that fueled many a heated conversation for us graduate students smoking one cigarette after the other in Sibley Hall’s café, “The Green Dragon.” In the *Domus* interview, Derrida described this ambition as something like the search for another kind of a “College” that does not yet exist,¹⁰ a “formless desire for another form,” a place where “desire” can live:

The “Collège” has to be habitable in a totally different way from a university. Until now, there has been no building for the “Collège.” You take a room here, a hall there. As

architecture, the “Collège” does not exist yet and perhaps never will. There is a formless desire for another form. The desire for a new location, new arcades, new corridors, new ways of living and of thinking. That is a promise. And when I said that the “Collège” does not exist as architecture yet, it might also mean that the community it requires does not exist yet and therefore the place is not being constituted. A community must accept the commitment and work so that architectural thinking takes place. A new relationship between the individual and the community, between the original and the reproduction is emerging. Think of China and Japan, for example, where they build temples out of wood and renew them regularly and entirely without them losing their originality, which obviously is not contained in the sensitive body but in something else. That too is Babel: the diversity of relationships with the architectural event from one culture to another. To know that a promise is being given even if it is not kept in its visible form. Places where desire can recognize itself, where it can live.¹¹

Crucially it seemed, in this Derrida formulation, the possibility of a new thought-architecture, a “Collège,” was connected to, entangled with, the project of the Tower of Babel—not the making of it, but of course of its destruction that resulted in the polyglot world. This would require arcades and corridors of another kind with new ways of living and thinking. Derrida illustrated the latent project of Babel with the example of Ise Shrine in Nara as the possibility of a new kind of a relationship between the one and the many, the original and the copy, which can be recognized as the problem of translation—a promise given even if not kept—places “where desire can recognize itself, where it can live.”¹²

How the question of difference, or *différance* in Derridian lingo, was parsed into a political reading of the modern postcolonial was the project that Gayatri Spivak, along with others, had helped define in the late 1980s. Postcoloniality, one could argue, was one of these new corridors and arcades. Spivak had built her reputation as an engaged translator of deconstruction from French into English and from Western into postcolonial and feminist and Marxist theory. She was advertised, famously, as a “marxist-feminist-deconstructivist.”¹³ Deconstruction and postcolonial theory, in other words, worked in the margins. The site of architectural theory, of postcolonial architectural theory, and of postcolonial architectural theory attempting to reargue modernist agency of the old nation-state in the era of globalization, felt particularly precarious, the margins of the margin. “What is architectural agency in decolonization?” was our implicit question for Spivak, a critical, constitutive supplement

to the question of the agency of architecture, or the architect, in deconstruction. Our operative metaphor, rather than the corridor or the arcade, was the “stage” and the “theatre.”

The Architect-Reader, Reading Error

On the last evening of the Theatres of Decolonization Conference, standing behind a beautiful mid-century modernist podium, wearing her signature formal presentation outfit — a saree — Spivak spoke in the auditorium of the Le Corbusier designed Government Museum of Chandigarh.¹⁴ She began with a series of feints, a set of critiques and with a few unexplored thesis possibilities. At the end of her presentation, in the question and answer session, Spivak remarked that she had “that shameful passionate addiction to the aesthetic that I have to indulge; but I will say that I will not celebrate it and make it the best of things because I love it.” This tension between a “passionate addiction to the aesthetic” and the determination not to celebrate something just because you love it, structured Spivak’s presentation all through the evening.

The first of these was a critique of the contradiction of framing an elitist high-theory conference as dedicated to the question of decolonization. What is a conference, or for that matter an architectural project as a symbol of the aspirations of a nation-state, or indeed architecture itself, anything other than synecdoche as trickery — “one production passes itself off as the other. . . . Non-resident Indians screaming decolonization as struggle in metropolis [read: Seattle/NYC/Chandigarh] of their choice.” This was a carefully placed entry point to the enabling critique of subject position; the simultaneous recognition and questioning of subject positions of authors. Is not an elite theory conference on decolonization, with a celebrated academic like Spivak as one its anointed keynotes, in fact part of the problem? In which sense of “staging” was the conference staging decolonization? Was it a performance intended for elite consumption and aesthetic gratification, or did it in fact actually contribute to the long process of resistance and struggle that is decolonization?

While Spivak did not unpack it in her presentation, the point of confronting subject positions in the opening, as I have interpreted it, was to underscore that the contradiction of using elite theory to talk decolonization was constitutive: it cannot be undone or mitigated. There is no way out. Even as the project of decolonization could not possibly begin elsewhere other than via its inheritance of the institutions of the colonial-Enlightenment world, it had to recognize that the intended objective of its project had to include its own undoing, and not just of a conveniently scapegoated and othered colonial outsider. In other words, while the project of decolonization could

not undo its instituting within metropolitan location it is critical that it remain vigilant of its moorings. This warning to remain vigilant of one's own framing by institutions upon whose stages we perform our protests, to understand and persistently critique those stages even as we perform on them, is a warning that was current then, and remains current today in my writing of this piece. In this spirit, I will in time conclude this essay with a reading about preservation and institutional framing.

Spivak's opening also served to set up the constitutive problem with Chandigarh, one of the conferences unstated topics, as a top-down nationalist project. For Spivak, the problem with Nehru-Le Corbusier's Chandigarh was not that it was designed by a Western architect or that it was so directly indexed to nationalism or that it was modernist in form. Rather the Chandigarh problem was its indebtedness, and continued indebtedness, to the figure of the architect-hero, the genius creator or the master architect. "One of the most astonishing things at the Conference," Spivak observed, was "the obstinate lingering of *gurvāda* [the master-disciple relationship], worn like a badge of honor by Le Corbusier's associates." Many at the conference, myself included, unabashedly bandied the Le Corbusian badge of honor. Defending ourselves against the postmodernist critiques, at a time when the Nehruvian state with its quasi-socialist aspirations was beginning to be dismantled, felt like an act of resistance advanced in the name of preservation. (Since the conference, parts of Chandigarh have in fact been problematically granted World Heritage status as part of Le Corbusier's *oeuvre*.¹⁵) Spivak, however, was quick to point out that the Chandigarh-gurvāda problem was that the gurus, as also each guru's disciples who followed and championed a preservationist cause, did not see themselves as sufficiently accountable to the intended clients of a nationalist project, i.e., the representative citizen, which in the case of India was, and is by far, the rural poor. Gurus and experts have a critical responsibility, Spivak insisted, to ensure that they "put decolonization on stage" by ensuring that the subaltern is "seriously involved in the production." While the Nehruvian countervision—the West on tap rather than on top—was ambitious and expansive, its problem was not that it was "Western" or based in the European Enlightenment. Rather, it was unsuccessful because it assumed that the educated elite—like Nehru himself—would use their access to the privilege of education to benefit all and not just themselves. This critical embrace, expected of Nehruvian intellectuals—which included most of us from South Asia who were hosting the conference, and like Spivak who occupied places of high rank in academies worldwide—did not come off because the subalterns did not look eye-to-eye with, were not responsible and accountable to,

each other. The Nehruvian elite took their access to privilege as a natural right of their superiority, and left the subalterns to fend for themselves. Rights and responsibilities as very different modalities of agency was the topic she would return to later in her presentation. But for the beginning, to set aside the claim to specialness that the Nehruvian–Le Corbusier vision of Chandigarh embodied, Spivak mused that perhaps “the fault line of the upward gaze at the guru was already continuous with a withholding of the responsible exchange of looks and speech with groups below.”

But, if the Nehru–Le Corbusier modernist vision was compromised, Spivak had even less patience for the postmodern “Indianists” who offered historicist visions of an “Indian” modern architectural idiom, based variously on formalist readings of old Indic cities, havelis, tombs, and villages. She described this as “ethnic-chic” architecture. It is perilous, Spivak emphasized, to make “connections between a superficial smattering of Sanskrit . . . and Euro-US hi-tech to show that Hindu India is a living heritage as ancient as it is modern.” This she described as an act that could quickly become “trickery” that enables the elites that global capitalism is designed to empower—“the theorist and the artist, the NRI and the architect”—to successfully “secede from the rest of society.”

In the presentation to follow, Spivak herself was to engage in proactive readings of “smattering[s] of Sanskrit,” weaving them into contentions that were deconstructive or, some might argue, “Euro-US hi-tech” theory. The difference between the two, therefore, is not in the form, but in the ethics of their staging. If one had to cull one teacherly lesson from Spivak’s presentation, it was learning to distinguish, how to triage, between various aesthetic practices based on the *dharma*, the situational ethics, of their agents. I will return to this presently.

Spivak pushed her critique of the architect as guru with her reading of Doshi’s presentation from the night before. But here, even as she criticized Doshi, the idea that she as a reader also had the responsibility to offer constructive critique, to productively as best as she could (mis)read the presentation for alternative possibilities and agencies for architecture, also came to the fore. Indeed, her whole reading of Doshi became about misreadings, a heuristic opportunistically set up by Doshi himself.

Spivak described herself as being “under that night’s spell . . . seduced, infected, hoodwinked” by his presentation, which is to say by his architectural thinking. As I noted earlier, Doshi had narrated as fiction the “programming” of his much celebrated design of his own office—Sangath—as the journey of a hapless client coming to his office for the first time, as the “management of misreading,” a designerly logic intended to

suggest that architectural agency could function like an interactive performance piece engaging a possible client haptically even before s/he meets the architect. Doshi had ventured on, being a willing participant in the 1980s architectural post-modern expectations of cultural representation, to rationalize his design as embedded within the Indian ethos, casually claimed via personal experience as the easy inhabitation of unprogrammed in-between spaces, as the sites of sociality.

Doshi is a master storyteller and it is easy to be seduced by his narrative. Telling compelling stories about architecture, that is in itself “inert” as a craft taught with great patience and pride in schools of architecture, one painstaking crit after another. There is a magicity to it, a studied elision between fact and fiction, necessity and possibility, that is kernel to our craft of architectural thinking. After all, to design, or to “architect” as in contemporary parlance, is to imagine solutions to problems that are not quite defined, via logics that are as speculative as they are claimed to be indexed to scientific certainties.

For Spivak, the difference between fiction as such, that is, singular and unverifiable uses of heterotopic space to imagine worlds that are not accessible to descriptions of fact, and fiction deployed to misrepresent facts — “fake-news” in contemporary parlance — is a kind of hoodwinking. Distinguishing between the two can be said to be the very purpose of a design crit. For Spivak, this distinction was critical to make in architectural thinking, perhaps more than even fiction writing, because of architecture’s role in society. She described this as the question of “architecture as verification, the making into truth. Architecture as the verification of fiction in the authoritative transformation of space.” Architecture, because of its intimate relationship with capital, and because of its capacity to “concrete-ly” embody ideological claims carries the authority to re-present fictions as fact. It makes things believable, real.¹⁶ This culturally and economically inscribed authority is a responsibility that architects must take careful cognizance of, and be held accountable for.

Architecture, in other words, has the very high potential — indeed one might argue has the financial imperative as the work of meeting expectations of the paying client — to work as “hoodwinking.” For Spivak, the abuse of architecture’s fiction-into-fact making authority is most obvious, and most pernicious, when it serves to legitimize the hegemonic purposes of global capital — “ethnic fictions fabricated as a sales pitch.” As the “verification of fiction in the authoritative transformation of space” we can see Spivak connecting Derrida’s critique of architecture as the ghost that weighs down Western philosophy with its hierarchic logos of presence (against which he posited

the text as an open ended weave) to the Marxist critique of aesthetics as the ideological instrument of capitalist hegemony. In 1995, when this presentation was made, the Cold War had just ended and the engines of neoliberal capitalism that we now recognize as globalization were only just revving up. Spivak noted that with the new global agreements on trade and tariffs, data and capital were now free to cross national boundaries unchallenged and as a consequence, Spivak noted (quoting the US Secretary of Labor), “communities have even less capacity to determine their own fates.” In this context, architectures that claimed to speak for the silenced communities — “ingenious fictions,” as she called them — but in fact worked to legitimize global capital were the most questionable.

In what way, then, could architectural thinking not be a hoodwinking, but responsible discourse, an agent of decolonization? By way of misreading, Spivak lightly touched on what an aesthetic reading, a productive reading of error, might alternately be. Doshi’s performance of his building, prompted Spivak to ask: what is architecture as the “management of error”? Considering this question, Spivak briefly flirted with indulging a “satisfying” culturally synthetic theoretical reading connecting Derrida’s notion of *destinerrance* with an opportunistic reading of a hymn in praise of Chandi — the goddess that Chandigarh is named after — that celebrates the causality of error.

But she shied away from that reading and one can only speculate what its contours might have been. The hymn to Chandi that Spivak thought of connecting *destinerrance* to was: *Yā devī sarvabhutesu bhrānti rupena sansthitā namastaswai* — respectful greetings to the goddess who inhabits phenomenality in the form specifically of error. The key word in this invocation is *bhrānti*, which the Collins dictionary translates as “misunderstanding” or “illusion.” Derrida’s discussion of *destinerrance* dwells on the concatenation of errors that inevitably and, he argues, desirously creep into any addressing of a message.¹⁷ *Destinerrance* speculates the pathway to unknown futures, not futures that are known or knowable and predictable within reason, but those other futures that are unknowable in the present, those that, through that unpredictable concatenation of error-ing, will have come to pass (the future anterior, again!)

Architecture as *destinerrance-bhrānti*, as a spatial-thought practice of the management of error, as the institutionalization or deification of error, is a theoretical speculation that promises much. It has resonance with Derrida’s wish for architecture as the “design” of “places where desire can recognize itself, where it can live,” as a new kind of a feminist corridor or *khōra*

making.¹⁸ How might this come to pass? Design is future making. But future making known and described in detail, as in construction documents, is different from future preparation as the carefully cultivated enablement of the possibility of error—error that is not known in advance and thus cannot be predesigned. This is a notion of cultural resilience and preservation related to, but distinct from, the more conservative idea of cultural resilience or preservation as “managing change.” Design preservation and resilience as the cultivation of a certain kind of error, as the pathway, the search for another as yet unknown future — *l’avenir*, in French—opens itself up to the risks of uncertainty in a manner that is distinct from the technologies of preservation that circumscribe change in a manner designed to ensure that vested interests, inevitably of the elite, survive undisturbed. We could also think of this as the distinction between Walter Benjamin’s angel of history propelled into the future backward by the storm of progress, and Paul Klee’s twittering machine as the self-turning crank of history that produces accidental bird songs.¹⁹

There is a difference, in other words, between error as the modality of destitution and the form (*rupa*) of the Goddess Chandi, and error as the disguise of hoodwinking, and it would be a fatal error to mistake, indeed replace, one for the other. Elite architects performing easy culturalist readings claiming to speaking for “India” and “Indiannesses” have to make sure that these are not just self-serving claims designed to use and effectively silence the marginalized that they claim to speak for in the interest of gaining admission into the privilege granting centers of the metropolitanized West.²⁰ But it is also just as superficial to claim piety in the form of endless toil in search of service to the most subaltern of the subalterns. There is a self-serving righteousness that subtends claims to authenticity and access to the “real” people based on endless protocols of immersive anthropological practices. Just as the representation of the subaltern is an impossible but necessary task, the unattainable but critical challenge of the elite architect must remain to try and undo the losses attendant to his/her access to privilege in pursuit of iterative, error-laced processes of imagining alternate, better futures. The task of working toward unknown futures, the attested task of the design, runs the inevitable risk of becoming narcissistic and/or trickery; but that does not absolve the architect of its responsibility.

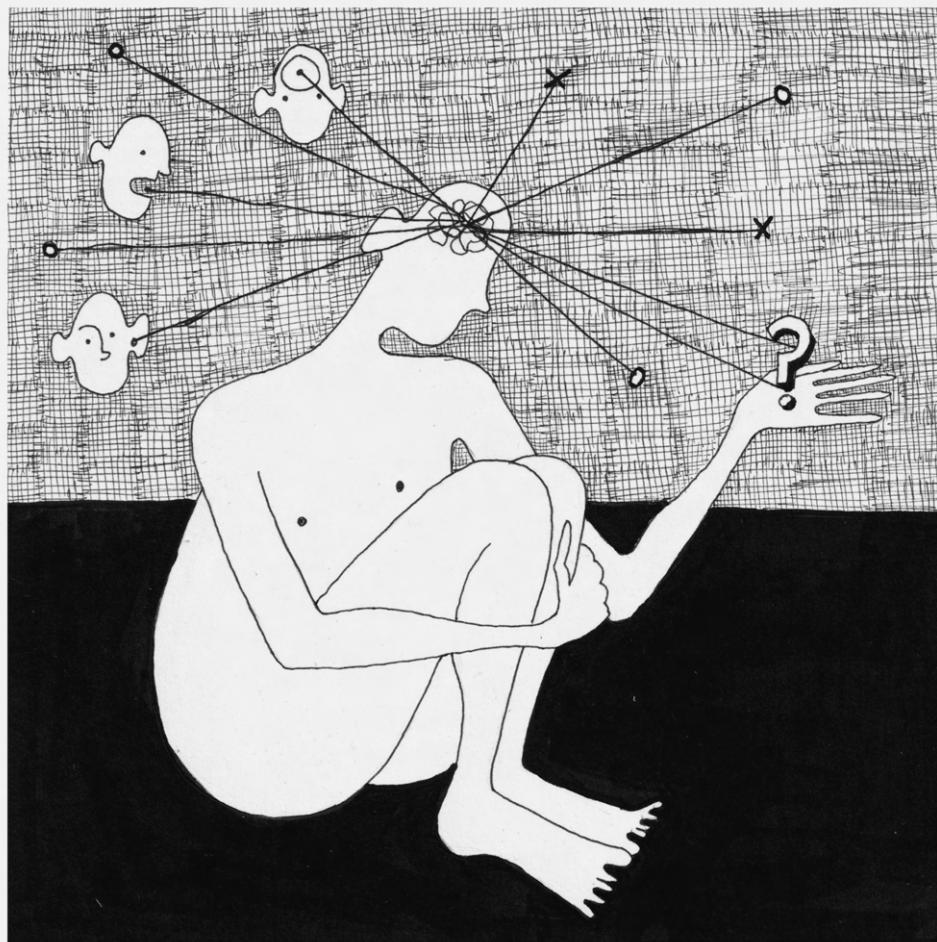
We can now return to the question of *gurvāda* and the critical embrace of the master-discipline relationship with which we began this first part of her presentation. The master-discipline relationship, as painstakingly outlined by many postcolonial theorists like Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and

others, is not quite so straightforward, not quite so simple a task as ensuring representation. This was an idea that Spivak herself had outlined, in her sympathetic but critical reading of the project of the Subaltern Studies Group, in her celebrated 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern speak?”²¹ At Chandigarh, she engaged this problematic via the introduction of her own “cultic status” in the academy. Recalling a conversation with her own one-time guru, Swami Pavitrananda, Spivak recalled his prescient advice to her as a young teacher:

“And don’t you ever think, he had added, that you are a guru. If you think that you may be one, you have proved to yourself that you are not. If I feel I am making a difference and changing people’s minds expressing myself as myself, it is sure proof that nothing is working.” “I know the old man was right,” Spivak noted. “It is, I fear, with this digested skepticism about *gurvāda* that I look at great men, architect-artists.” Architects, like public intellectuals, must confront their inevitable identification as elites, as gurus. This cannot be avoided; yet it must be accounted for, worked through. It is double bind that cannot be sidestepped.

How, then, is the elite theorist, and the architect hero to perform as the not-guru? Instead of architect as hero or architect as author, Spivak offered for consideration not the immortal and timeless but the “altogether time bound,” figure of the architect-reader. The reader is not the passive “receiver” of content, but an active agent. Reading in deconstruction, in other words, is an aesthetic question, an iterative performance of creativity as critique. You cannot just read to consume; you have to read to critique. And learning to read as critique requires creativity and responsibility; it is a craft that has to be learnt via praxis, quite like design.

In other words, critical reading, like design, marked by productive use of misinterpretations and errors, is patient, hard work and must always remain accountable to the larger good and not become self-serving. In her presentation, Spivak suggested that an architect-reader, seeking conscientiously to speak for the poor/unrepresented/subaltern would begin by looking not at palaces and iconic historical structures—as many postmodernist presenters at the conference had sought to do—but by examining the “garbage dump and the toxic waste dump.” Architecture when considered from the vantage of the garbage dump, if I were to consider that question from a very contemporary vantage, would parse out as the architect set up as a culturally woke systems-thinker dedicated in contemporary parlance to systems thinking and net-zero kinds of sustainability, as in for instance ensuring that all waste is completely recycled on site.



"I know the old man was right", Spivak noted. "It is, I fear, with this digested skepticism about gurvada that I look at great men, architect-artists."

Figure 2. Illustration by Tori Haynes.

Deruralization

Categories and terms, particularly in as much as they impute disciplinary epistemic identities and thereby carry the inevitable risk of epistemic valorization/violence, must be deployed with care. "Urbanism" was celebrated in the title of the conference, bracketing with "Architecture" the central term of the conference, "Agency." This was the 1990s, and we were happily reading people like Henri Lefebvre, imbibing the democratizing contentions of urban life such as the ecological benefits of densification and of course the "right to the city." Not directly engaging the question of urban life, Spivak approached the urban via a foundational critique of the category of the urban, the epistemic violence/violation at the heart of its constitution as a distinct—which is to say, as an "othering"—entity:

The word “Urbanism” . . . marks the site of the ignoring of the recoding of the representative citizen from the rural poor to the urban consumerist. This recoding or, strictly speaking, reterritorializing of agency is negotiated by venerating or dismissing the rural as tradition or nostalgia. Rural spatial practice as a repository of architectural idiom takes its place within this problematic.”

For Spivak our unexamined use of “urbanism” in the conference title, repeated and reinforced instituted biases. In her essay “Acting Bits/Identity Talk,” published just prior to the Chandigarh conference, Spivak argued for the necessity of remaining attendant to the manner in which institutions *in* culture are subtended by the instituting, by the setting to work and the work setting, of culture. “Institutions *in* Culture,” Spivak wrote, “must precomprehend [the] . . . instituting of culture, not simply as a chronologically prior event but as a philosophically subtending layer.”²² Institutions in culture, in other words, are never independent of culture themselves, they are always subtended by culture, in the same way in which a chord subtends an arch, i.e., by underlying and including it. In doing so, a subtending chord determines the measure of its arch by marking off its end points, its setting. In the same way, institutions in culture, find their end points and thereby their measure in their subvention in the instituting marks of culture.

Both architecture and urbanism are institutions in culture; and as such precomprehending and accounting for the precise manner in which they are instituted in culture is, therefore, the ethical responsibility of their agents. With all its claims and contentions about the idea of democratizing access and flattening traditional hierarchies, the urban, *as* such is constituted as a site of othering. The urban is constituted as the not-rural, the not-natural, the not-barbarian, which it then swings around to, at its best, offer to “include” in its patrimony. Think of the Roman citi-zen who othered the barbarians to constitute the city; then think of the long lineage of colonial and postcolonial legislation that forced urban property- and ownership-based conceptions of subjectivity onto the non-urban communities, in particular the so-called tribals, in the name of equality and egalitarianism only to dispossess these subaltern communities of their lands and to derecognize their identities and social understandings as “tradition” or “nostalgia.” This is a well-worn formula: first other, deny and thereby marginalize and other the “weak” to constitute the self as, say, Western/male/Universal; and then offer to re-encompass the “margins” within its patrimonies of inclusion such as “unity in diversity” or “the particular and the universal” or “we are all humans first and

local, regional, eastern, feminine, transgender next.” Derrida described this trajectory as that of “phallogocentrism.”²³ In the postcolonial context, we can think of this simply as the economy of Eurocentrism.

The urban, in this sense, is more accurately described or encoded as “deruralization” (my term) wherein the ethical responsibility of the derural is not about extending normative conceptions of space and society to include the nonurban, but requires the work of persistent critique to question and reimagine/retheorize the institutional and intellectual frameworks that posits spatial social practices (architecture, urban and regional planning, landscape, etc.) as coded from within the social and political textile of the urban. It is not enough simply to have to have the interests of the poor “at heart” — or to conduct a studio and seminar that intends to work with the rural. Indeed, these are most likely instruments using the name of the subaltern to access privilege in the metropolis (think for instance of the various “slum porn” studios that are conducted in many schools of architecture and urban planning). What the derural requires is a re-coding of the epistemic field of thinking architecture and the urban as others to the rural/natural/tribal.

Rather than something like the right to the city, or the architect-speaker as the enlightened speaker for the rural authorized by the laws of the city, Spivak suggested that “the architect-as-reader give way to his or her broader role as citizen, and then begin to read sustainably.” This was an interesting moment, a critical turning point in the presentation as Spivak returned to the idea of the citizen, which is to say to the idea of the nation, nationalism and the identity and agency of the citizen. For an architect/urbanist to be a “citizen” first requires the reconsideration of architecture, and urbanism, and reconsidering them not as discipline specific constructions tied to identifiable objects in the “real” world — buildings, streets, transportation systems — but as life processes constitutively entangled within the larger textile of life. This is not citizenship in the simple rights-based sense as guaranteed by a nation’s constitution, in the service of which architectures such as those of Chandigarh were made as “verifications of fictions.” Rather, architect as reader acting as a socially sustainable agent requires a different understanding of the *socius* and its constitution of and constitution by the *socius*.

The architect-reader, reading garbage dumps and toxic heaps, to interrupt, to deconstruct the “primary,” monument-focused form of architecture, points toward an ecological agency for the architect. An ecologist agency does not work through direct action, or focused problem solving. It requires a much more indirect kind of way of working, a more displaced responsibility based understand of agency, as for instance

illustrated via the “butterfly effect” in chaos theory. From a postcolonial perspective, it requires a radically decentered understanding of society and our location in it. This was the focus of the second half of Spivak’s presentation.

Dhāranā, or the Responsibility-Based Agency of Architecture

The second half of Spivak’s presentation focused on outlining theory for that other kind of citizen-architect-reader, a theory that seeks to situate *responsibility*—let’s say in our case professional responsibility—and more particularly how to *act* responsibly, from a postcolonial theoretical frame. To outline the weave of such a socially sustainable agency for architecture, Spivak chose the rather unusual gambit of invoking referential/verificatory quotes from well-known Sanskrit texts from Hindu India, in particular the Mahābhārata. The Mahābhārata is an epic narrative describing a war between cousins, part history, part moral exposition, with an inserted dialogue known as the Bhagvadgita (the “Divine Song”) that is often circulated in modern India, as a consequence of colonial instituting, as the essence of Hindu philosophy.

Spivak’s extensive use of readings of short extracts in Sanskrit opened her up, as she herself noted, to the charge of being an “Indianist,” i.e., for invoking things Indic as somehow cultural representative. She had already castigated architects for using light smatterings of Sanskrit to verify themselves on a global stage. Along those lines, it is also perilous for me to repeat her invocations of Sanskrit in this publication for that too runs the danger of “standing in” for an “Indianism” that positions me as a native informant. When Western scholars read, say, Plato, quoting in Greek or Latin as Derrida for instance often does in a contemporary way, they don’t have defend themselves for being Western-ists. But non-Western scholars do. This is a catch-22, a kind of a damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation. Until the power dynamics of the postcolonial condition are effectively decentered this is double-bind that one must fjord simply by making a choice, reading it one way or another.

In Chandigarh, Spivak took the risk to speak the Sanskrit (and also to publish it in the proceedings of the conference). To clearly signal her self-consciousness of the risk she was running, she performed the theatre of casting a “spell”—*burī azar wale tera muhn kala*—often found painted on the back of trucks that perilously ply the highways of India, designed to ward off the evil eye. Spivak left her spell untranslated both in her presentation and in the published proceedings to follow, a performative gesture that I leave undisturbed now too. But, in re-membering that presentation here, I do not have access to another spell. I will simply note that Spivak’s readings forced

me to read these Sanskrit quotations, and their contexts, in ways that I had not done before. In other words, I learned concepts that I, given my inevitable identity as a native informant from India, did not have any “natural” familiarity with. As one conversant with the English language, you the reader may or may not be familiar with them too. Via my reading, I learned something new about myself. I invite you to do the same.

Spivak began by noting that “agency,” the central term of the conference’s banner, is the entitlement to action, the mechanism, the social infrastructure that authorizes an architect/urbanist to practice his or her craft in the name of the broader socius. Think, for instance, the right earned by an architect through licensure, establishing competence of knowledge not accessible to others. This is a rights-based entitlement to agency earned by establishing expertise, so called. But professionalism, the expectation of professional responsibility of architects, requires not just a rights-based but also a responsibility-based accounting for that agency. In a rights-based model the corresponding responsibility of the architect is to ensure the health, safety and security of the structure in specific, but more broadly, at least through academic training, is to make a constructive contribution to the larger, public good.

The larger public good, as our broader professional responsibility, is an idea that most architects and urbanist are familiar with. But how this responsibility to be accounted for and actualized largely remains unaddressed in schools of architecture and planning. Some schools advocate practices such as participative design. But the question at hand is larger than that, more theoretical and sociological, of the very *modality* of responsible agency. How a responsibility-based agency is to be executed requires a different understanding of who is the executing agent (subject), as of the her/his relationship with the socius that s/he is affirming responsibility of.²⁴

To wit: socially situated responsibility-based notions of agency cannot be derived from unverifiable fictions such as “the nation,” “the common good” or “the larger cause of humanity” because such abstractions, as catachresis, are productively inaccessible in the mechanism of daily life.²⁵ The socius, Spivak argued, works in other ways. This is what she introduced as the mechanism of dharma. Dharma is often loosely and quickly characterized as the social code by which caste Hindus are expected to live their lives and which they as such uphold as a society.²⁶ But Spivak produced a more nuanced reading via a productive reading of a famous verse from the Mahābhārata: “I empower myself (as they say) to quote a lovely tag from the Mahābhārata to gloss the idea of socially sustainable rather than individualist agency: *dharanāt*

dharmaityahu dharmam dhārayate prajāh. Dhārayate—gets sustained is too passive and sustains is too active—is in [a] wonderful middle voice.” The site is the field of battle, the moment when the warrior-hero Arjuna prepares to kill his estranged brother Karna, some would argue “unfairly,” because the latter’s chariot wheel is stuck in the mud. Dharma for Arjuna is the ethical framework of society, which Arjuna has sworn to uphold, the reason that he is fighting the war. It can be identified as a responsibility-based notion of social agency. In the quote at hand, as Arjuna ponders his responsibility, his dharma, the philosopher God Krishna is explaining to Arjuna (think architect as reader/citizen) the nature of dharma.

Etymologically, dharma derives from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ*, which is support, hold, uphold, bear. The Sanskrit for earth, for instance, is *dhartī*, which is derived from the same root. Krishna explains dharma not as a moral code that stands outside of society, but as something constituted in its holding and holding up of society. The full verse, in Krishna’s voice, is as follows:

**धारणा धर्म इत्याहुः धर्मो धारयते प्रजा
यत स्याद धारणा संयुक्त स धर्म इति निश्चयः**

Here is the transliteration:

*Dhāranāt dharma ityahuh dharmo dhārayate prajāh
Yat syād dhāranā-samyuktam sa dharma iti nishchayah.*

And here is my labored phrase-by-phrase translation of the verse, incorporating Spivak’s interpretations:

Dhāranāt in being upheld/sustained, *dharma ityahuh* dharma comes to be called as such; and *dharmo* by dharma, *dharayate* is held up/sustains, *prajāh*, the socius or the produced/projeny; *Yat syād* this quality, *dhāranā-samyuktam* sustaining/being sustained associated with, *sa* that, *dharma iti nishchayah*, is certainly dharma.²⁷

Spivak translated the quote, as she stated, “productively,” which we can read as in a designerly, iterative manner, rather than a narrowly, prescriptive one. For Spivak, the key terms in this quote were *dhāryate*, from the first line, and *dhāranā*, from the second. *Dhāryate*, she translated is something between “sustains” and “get sustained,” a middle voice, neither one nor the other, but both. And *dhāranā* she offered is a sense of mental abstraction that “cannot be generated from the concatenation of doing-word. . . [but] has its being in the discourse that sustains the socius.” Dharma holds up/is

held up by (*dhāryate*) society, no doubt. But the socius itself is something like a self-sustaining discourse that is neither independent of its being upheld/upholding by subjects, nor is it something can be simply reduced to it. This idea is conveyed by *dhāranā*.

Parsed through Spivak's translations the full quote can be iterated two more times as follows:

*By holding up, dharma comes to be known as such;
dharma sustains/gets sustained by society;
That which has such upholding/sustaining-qualities that
is dharma for sure.
Dharma, the moral/ethical fabric/structure of society is
that which is sustained by and sustains society, which is to
say that which issues from dharma;
What has this sustaining/sustained, holding up/held
quality is dharma; and what dharma sustains/is sustained
by, holds/is held up by is society or what results as a
consequence of dharma.*

Let us try and parse this reading of dharma into a reading of a socially sustainable agency for the architect. What is an architect's dharma? An architect designing is a subject at work. But while an architect can claim to be practicing a craft as authorized by a social accrediting authority such as a licensing board, subjectivity itself, my sense of self, Spivak argued, does not originate from an imagined site of singularity within the human body/mind our "fluctuating, selfconscious, person-part." Rather it is constituted otherwise, in/of the socius:

Agency is the entitlement to action. The agent is the person who acts with an entitlement given and/or claimed, and validated and/or recognized by institutional powers or collective resistance, political and/or contained within histories of *techne* or craft. The "subject" is a bigger network . . . not accessible even to its fluctuating, self-conscious, person-part. It is only in this sense that the subject is de-centered. . . . Much of our "effect" as subjects is in spite of ourselves, its "outlines" intersubjective. At its most abstract, the assumption of this subject is "subjectity," not "subjectivity."

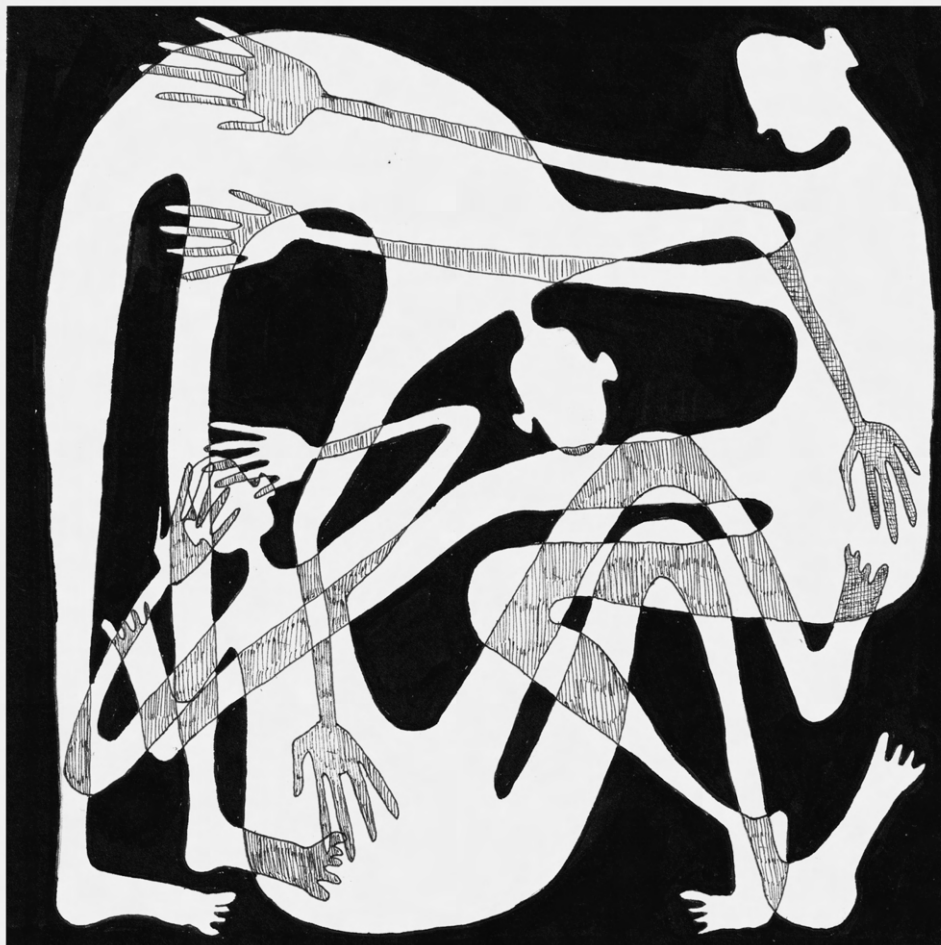
By this reading, subjectivity—who I am and what I want and do, or our "effect"—is not individually constituted, as putatively guaranteed by constitutions of nations, including that of India, but is in fact decentered, an experienced effect of the workings—weaving—of the social fabric. That is dharma. To

act to uphold/be upheld by dharma requires recognition that my actions as an architect are woven into a larger textile that is larger than, exceeds behind and in front, and is larger than the experience of our-selves:

One acts in terms of a script and an elusive code that goes from nature in the roughest sense to a social fabric or textile. We are held in a script which scripts our role so that to act within is to act in the consciousness of a responsibility that exceeds us behind and in front where the individual is at risk thinking that he or she, normally he, is the only agent and the agent of a right. This is an idea that should become readable to us.

The idea that should become readable to us here is that the ethics of responsibility that should drive a new imagination of architectural agency has to find its moorings in an understanding of the social that is neither abstract nor individualist but intersubjective. This is dhāranā.

Constituted as such, Spivak suggested a “holding spectrum” or dhāranā for a new architecture. One could think, she suggested, of one pole of architecture as being simple social practice—as when a subaltern woman covers her face with her saree when she defecates in public so that she is not recognized by a passerby—with the other pole being the ultimate destiny of all architecture, which is as a ruin: “Now I have proposed a holding spectrum for architecture which begins with spatial practices and ends in ruins. Architecture so called congeals from the former and looks forward to the latter. When in ruins it can only indicate contradictory text of built space that interrupts the contemporary.” From this spectrum, one way to think of a new subjectivity for the architect is to consider the Sanskrit word “atman” that is usually offered as the loose translation for the English word “soul.” Rather than a sense of deep interiority, that is ultimately abstract and transcendental, that is implied by the Abrahamically derived word “soul,” *atman* is cognate with the Greek word *atmos*, from which we get words like “atmosphere.” Atman understood thus as the core of life is not a deep interiority as capitalized on by the traditional rights-based understanding of subjectivity, but the experience of being as held by an exteriority that is not transcendental or distant, but which surrounds you, holds you, envelops you, and most importantly continually enters and exits you as breath or “prana.” Your soul, your breath, your prana, your being—indeed everyone’s being—is not within them individually, but in-between us all, a selfness that is constitutively—at its source, from the very beginning, always already intrasubjective, in between. To be is to breathe, and



"To be is to breathe, and to be ethical accountable to your atman is to be ethically accountable to the atmosphere, the dhāranā."

Figure 3. Illustration by Tori Haynes.

to be ethical accountable to your *atman*, is to be ethically accountable to the atmosphere, the *dhāranā*.

Design Karma: The Enablement of Situational Imperative

Spivak's productive reading of *dhāranā* situates subjectivity and agency—the entitlement to action—in a displaced, decentered, socially sustained discourse. Situated in such a matrix, architectural agency can be said to be subscribed to and subtended by something like an "ecological" *dhāranā*, where the ecological is before and beyond the architectural and sustains/sustained by it.²⁸ The ecological in this sense is not a finite and quantifiable systems approach to life, but a surrender to the superior or subtending other-ness of the ecological as the entity, the *atmos*, that operates with a more

than us-centered — posthumanist, I think would be the current term — logic of its own.

What, then, is ethical action, or responsible design work, situated within/subtended by this framework?

In Sanskrit “doing,” or action, is described as the performance of *karma*, which has been very loosely colloquialized into contemporary American as the idea of “what goes around comes around.” In the Mahābhārata, karma is more rigorously enjoined to Arjuna as the action that he must perform as his dharma, which is to say the action that is attuned to and engages its subscription to and subtention by dhāranā. As such, as Spivak argued it, karma is informed not by a stand-alone set of abstract principles (like the ten Commandments, or the five points of architecture), but by the imperatives of the situation that somehow come clear in the specific theater of immediate life, the “field of action” or the *kshetra* — as subtended by dhāranā. This is how Spivak described *kshetra-karma*, segueing from a paper presented by the Delhi-based architect and academic A. G. K. Menon:

A. G. K. Menon gave a powerful talk called “Imagining the City.” He was urging the city planners to remember that the Indian goes by situational imperatives and not by principles. Or, we could say, *kshetre karma vidhiyate*. Again that middle voice, that in the *kshetra* — nice space metaphor right there — in the field of the action the imperatives happen to explicate. That is about the best I can do with the middle voice — you neither do it, nor is it passive, but somehow it emerges in the field as a situational imperative.

While from a Western deterministic perspective karma, as situational imperatives, can be construed as something like a slippery relativistic ethic, its operative logic is more apprehensible when we think of epistemic modalities such as architectural design thinking. I am not thinking of the contemporary business school-driven ideology of design thinking that identifies a marketing-driven focus on polling and refining the “user-experience” as the key to design thinking. I am referring rather to the logics of design, as the process of iterative “trying on” — essaying, in the French sense of the word — of formal and spatial necessities that present themselves, that somehow come clear via the imperatives of the situation. This is an enablement or an operative logic of architectural thinking that should be familiar to any modern designer. This kind of agency of design can be described as being *kshetra-karmic*. You neither do it, nor is it passive, but somehow it emerges in the field as a situational imperative. In this sense, then, architectural and urban design *kshetra-karma* is the enablement

that comes from recognizing of the imperatives of the situation, in the middle voice sense of the terms, which implies neither a self-authored nor a deterministic notion of agency—which is a design agency that is neither the “wish of the architect” nor simply “form follows function.”

Architectural design thinking formulated as karma, operates in the field, the *kshetra*, of the holding otherness of life, its *dhāranā*. Formulated as such, the karma of the architect is not self-expression or reification of abstractions such as the nation or “ideal beauty.” Rather, it is part prayer and part carefully calibrated entanglement of work with the holding *dhāranā* of life, entangled simultaneously with careful consideration of the situational imperative, the *kshetra-karma*, and open acceptance of the inevitability of error and the indeterminacy.²⁹ Spivak described this as “deflect[ing] desire through the holding otherness”:

In the face of the double bind, a decision is inevitably made. In that spirit, I offer you a cut that severs the double bind, keeping it in place; a leap that crosses the aporia, leaving it intact.³⁰ Here is that reading: the object does not become loved by the desire directed towards the object. *My* self-expression, *my* right emerge out of the unexamined way [ordinary architect]. The examined way [affirmative deconstruction, deconstructivist architect] is to deflect desire through the holding otherness.

Or more simply: “History is larger than personal good will. Therefore, study the history by bearing witness to the evidence of your senses. This history stages your act as an historical agent, not simply as an individual agent.”

Design as Bricolage

Spivak began the concluding section of her presentation by asking: “If in an attempt to understand one’s staging of agency in decolonization today brings me to the conclusion that it takes place in the theater of the continuity of imperialism, do I see any alternatives?” Her answer was that in the first place we must let “ruins be ruins,” which is to say that architects seeking to undo history by legitimizing one kind of architecture over the other, as for instance the colonial or the Indo-Islamic in favor of the ethnic-chic “Indian-modernist” run the risk of history rendering them irrelevant or worse of playing into the hands of cultural dominants (economic, religious, social). Instead, she recommended that the architect focus on “reading” the present, as a citizen, as a *kshetra-karma* activist tuned to the subaltern and the problem of deruralization:

If you turn the planner's nose to urban conservation schemes to look at pre-industrial cities without a framing discourse you are going to miss the problems of globalizing India. Let us not artificially exclude the rural from Indian urbanism: let us not look upon the villages as the repositories of dead tradition. Let us look at them as the locus of hard-core economic resistance, where the binary opposition between economy and culture is broken down every day. Where initiatives for local self-government immediately confront the global; as the area where the devastation of women's bodies and of land as the dumping ground of international pharmaceuticals, of the displacement of peoples, destruction of the eco-biome, the destruction of traditional knowledge and means of production. (I am thinking of something like the Flood Action Program in Bangladesh.) That rural where the large non-elite NGOs girdle global problems lead on to cities with the problems of women's sweated labor and export-based capital development, that rural is the new dynamic front against exploitative globalization. If one looks at the rural in that way, if one looks at the holding picture then, feeding the imagination of students of planning, you teach them to ask not merely what should this city be but why this emphasis on urban development, here, now; where should we build, with what task, today? Perhaps all I am asking is that you expand the notion of the situation—the *kshetra*—out of which the imperatives will emerge.

Spivak's example was the adaptation of people living out of pipes, the making of homes by displaced peoples out of large World Bank-funded sewer pipes that were left uninstalled as part of mismanaged infrastructure projects at the outskirts of Kolkatta. She described this as "innovative spatial practice, continuing the honorable tradition of Roma bricolage." But even as she honored these spatial practices, Spivak was quick to warn, that these are not accessible to us as elite architects and theorists. To appropriate them as our own agencies of design can only be appropriative and exploitative: "These are not examples that we can or will follow, although they are certainly innovative. Subaltern spatial practice is as irrelevant to us as are monumental ruins to them."

Instead she suggested that we learn to "nourish the schizophrenia" that we would experience if we turned our lives and our professional identities towards the subaltern and focused on identifying our ksheta-karmic agency as inevitably parsed through the sustaining/sustained textile of history, our dhāranā. An instance of this, in the context of decolonizing

India, she suggested was the “broken fragments of the idiom of minor colonial architecture” that though the sign of the colonizer was internalized by the architecturally impoverished general middle class:

Allow us to want the best of what we want . . . the un-emphatic bits and pieces of the minor public and private architecture of the Portuguese, British, and French colonials. If the common Indian has internalized them, they have earned the right to be called Indian just as English has become one of the Indian languages. This is the only idiom that is accessible to the architecturally impoverished general middle class. That is all that carries any echo, of any beauty.

By way of conclusion to this article, I would like to offer another schizophrenia that is worth nourishing, as a reading of preservation.

Another aside not fully developed in Spivak’s presentation reading rose from the question: “what is idiom in architecture?” — a parse, I presume, to Derrida’s discussion of the frame, the parergon, as the *passe-partout* in *The Truth in Painting*.³¹ In Derrida’s reading of the parergon, the question of “truth” in painting, its framing, trembles between the beveled edges of the mat or the frame, a restating of the hymen or the fold from his other texts. The frame for Derrida is the always already, the necessary but discarded scaffold that sets up the work of art, its critical supplement. Desire, or the experience of the aesthetic, elaborated by Julia Kristeva³² and other so-named French feminists as *jouissance*, in this sense is the necessary excess, that cannot be simply framed, but which is necessary for framing.

If idiom is not the institution of the autonomy of art but a constitutive entanglement with its frame, then the postcolonial position stated from the framework of decolonization would argue that the aesthetic must insistently be tethered to ethics, which implies that the question of excess, including *jouissance*, must be parsed as the question of engagement with the Other, that which is not one. “Given its history,” Spivak noted, architecture’s role in the public realm “may still be bound to intend public socio-political meaning by design, whose extreme is monumentality as spatial practice.” Architects are often enjoined, as Le Corbusier was in Chandigarh, to build monuments as spatial practices. But that cannot and should not be taken as enough by architects. An architect invested in the project of decolonization must seek to question, to interrupt, to deconstruct the hegemonic verifying fictions of architecture and the architect-hero. Idiom’s subvention by the institutions that

authorize it must be queried by idiom itself. Connecting Walter Benjamin's reading of allegory as ruins in *Origin of German Tragic Drama*³³ and Paul de Man's identification of the agency of allegory,³⁴ "or speaking otherwise," in the space of the other, Spivak composed a synthetic question: "How can ruins interrupt the primary text of architectural practice?"

Consider the following, in terms of ruins. According to the *New York Times* of March 19, 2008, Chandigarh is "A City That Sat on Its Treasures, but Didn't See Them." The "treasures" it refers to are the thousands of chairs and other pieces of wooden furniture that were designed by the Chandigarh Capital Project Team in the 1950s and 60s to furnish the structures that they were furiously building at that time. Like the architecture, fifty years later, this furniture, handmade by local furniture stores and craftsmen, is rundown and dilapidated. For some time now it has been replaced by new furniture, woefully purchased from manufacturers' catalogs, usually at significant cost, but of no particularly significant design merit given the Chandigarh tradition of modernism. Adjustable hi-tech looking chairs, in keeping with a global look, seem to be the preferred norm.

However, the *Times* critique referred not to the poor taste of the new furniture but to the lack of preservation of the old one. As per the antiquated bureaucratic logics of the government of India, old discarded furniture must be kept in state-owned warehouses, where it is piled up like trash, until after some time it is sold via auction to the highest bidder. Usually this old furniture is bought by the recycling entrepreneurs of the informal sector, who look to resell their purchase, bought in bulk, for reuse either by the poor as furniture or, more often, for firewood, at a small profit. Well, that is one way to let ruins be ruins.

But this is not the direction taken in the *Times*. The genesis of the critique were a handful of French and American art collectors who quietly showed up at the state auctions, easily outbidding the recyclers to buy the furniture for pennies a piece, and after completely refurbishing the furniture in their warehouses back in Europe, very profitably resold it at auctions for upward of \$20,000 a piece! Thus the trash to treasures story. "The process by which the furniture left the city's offices and made its way to New York and Paris," the *Times* article noted,

reflected a broader ambivalence among the public toward Le Corbusier's heritage in Chandigarh and widespread official neglect of his work. There was nothing illegal about the purchase by foreign dealers of the furniture, much of which was being thrown out or sold by the city's administration. But very belatedly, heritage experts in Chandigarh

are lamenting the loss of a vital part of the city's original design.³⁵

Why is there such drastic asymmetry in the global value of the furniture in two locations? Is it simply a matter of taste—one man's trash being another's treasure?³⁶

In 2010, Amie Siegel, a Harvard University-based visual artist, made a video-art documentary on the “plight” this furniture. Entitled *Provenance*, and shown in tightly controlled environments in a specific set of established museums and institutions, her film documented the furniture as it was innocently torn from its original home, carted in shipping containers across seas, elaborately redressed to perform in the art house markets, and then sold under the gavel to the highest bidder. Her film, an essay in the long take, lavishly dwells on the furniture in its places of origin, and, subsequently, in the homes and yachts of its new owners. Captured in high-definition, the film aspired to evoke the spectacle of the furniture, their providential journey, in what inevitably presented itself as “spot-the-contradiction” invitation to the viewer.³⁷

As the title of Siegel's film announces, the topic of the film is “provenance,” i.e., the objects story, as in where it comes from. Provenance is key to establishing value of an object at an auction and usually includes discussion of its relative importance in the context of the artist's *oeuvre*, its rarity, the history of where it has been, who has possessed it, prior publicity, and such. A chair is not an original as in unique hand-painted graphic, and so its provenance is central to its value on the auction block. This is the process of evaluating idiom, one might say.

An important section of the film focuses on the preservation or rather “restoration” process that transforms the broken trash bought in India into the auction-able items ready for the photographer's lens. It shows that each piece of furniture is carefully stripped bare of all its original run-down upholstery, carefully and completely repaired and polished, and finally “restored” with new upholstery to appear to be in pristine condition. One thing however is carefully maintained in this process: the clumsily hand-painted number transcribed from its record in the ledgers of the Indian bureaucracy. This is carefully preserved by the “conservators” to ensure that the identity of each piece of furniture is preserved as an original “made in India.” It is crucially this unique identifier, something like a signature on a painting, which materializes the connection to the furniture's “story.” It is this identifier, the mark of “authenticity,” that establishes the furniture's provenance, the key parameter that drives evaluation at the auctioneer's block.

Figure 4. Documentation of Jeanneret furniture found in Chandigarh, produced by the Chandigarh Urban Lab, University of Washington, 2011.



Figure 5. Documentation of informal street furniture found in Chandigarh, produced by the Chandigarh Urban Lab, University of Washington, 2011.



In 2009, in search of the story behind the “scandal,” I led a team of students from the University of Washington to Chandigarh to study the city “in the age of globalization.”³⁸ We dubbed it the Chandigarh Urban Lab and as part of our work researched the local provenance. Our focus was not to make an inventory of the total financial “value” of the furniture, or the total numbers of the furniture that exist, but to understand



Figure 6. Documentation of Jeanneret furniture, Chandigarh, produced by the Chandigarh Urban Lab, University of Washington, 2011.

the design logics by which it had come into being and then discarded/recycled.

Interviewing some of the architects who had worked on the furniture and some of the woodshops that had built it, we learnt that the furniture was designed to accommodate local joinery and woodworking techniques.³⁹ In fact, the core expressive structural logic of the furniture — their joinery, their finishes — derive almost entirely from the local, traditional ways of working wood by hand, than they do to the expectations of large-scale industrial manufacturing, the machine aesthetic, of the modernist movement. The furniture was handmade because it was cheaper to build it that way. In time, as more and more of the furniture was designed, the more “Indian” it began to look. Jeanneret famously toward the end of his life lived amongst one off items furniture that played with a diverse array of local materials and joinery, produced more cheaply than the cheapest furniture of yore.

This is design as *kshetra-karma vidhiyete*.



Figure 7. Documentation of informal street furniture, Chandigarh, produced by the Chandigarh Urban Lab, University of Washington, 2011.

As such, the design DNA of the Jeanneret furniture, we argued, derives from the sensibilities of ad-hoc informal architectures that are innovatively cobbled together, by situationist logics, from leftover trash by street vendors and informal sector service workers. Walk along any dilapidated urban street in India and you will encounter this kshetra-karmic design logic at work in spades. Since the same sensibility was used to make the so-called Jeanneret furniture, its true provenance, its dhāranā. To establish that other provenance the Chandigarh Urban Lab set about to document the street architecture, made from trash, as a practice of preservation, another way to let “ruins be ruins.”

Biography

Trained as an architect and architectural and urban historian, Dr. Vikramaditya Prakash is committed to transdisciplinary pedagogies and practices. His interests include global history, fashion and architecture, quantum theory, astrophysics, posthumanism and the opera. His podcast *ArchitectureTalk* is built around conversation with contemporary thinkers from diverse disciplines. He is co-founder (with Mark Jarzombek) of the GAHTC: Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative

Notes

² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961).

4 The proceedings were sponsored by the Office of the Dean of the College of Architecture and Urban Planning (now College of Built Environments) of the University of Washington. As proceedings, it is important to note that Spivak's paper that I am reading is essentially a gently edited transcription of an oral presentation that was as much, if not more, improvised as it was written. Consequently, it can feel episodic and collage-istic when read with the expectations of a single continuous narrative. This very same fact, however, also makes this paper a cornucopia of incomplete but fascinating tangents and asides, many of which I have seized on, following the trajectories of my own interests.

⁶ Derrida's entanglement with architecture via Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman has been variously commented on. Here is how Anthony Vidler cited it:

⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Architecture Where Desire May Live," interview by Eva Meyer, *Domus* no. 671 (1986), 17–25.

⁹ On the question of the haunting of philosophy by architecture, and vice versa, see Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).

¹¹ Derrida, "Architecture Where Desire May Live," 25.

¹³ Thus introduced in her first major published collection of essays, Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

²⁴ The museum had been commissioned as a replacement for the colonial museum founded by J. L. Kipling, and arts and crafts enthusiast who was also the father of the (in)famous Rudyard Kipling, that had been "lost" to Lahore in the partition of India in 1947. There were some important "artifacts" that came to India's share after the partition, and these had to be housed. Le Corbusier had left all the institutional projects located within the city to Pierre Jeanneret and his team of Indian architects.

But he had taken a special interest in the design of the museum, producing it as a version of his concept of the museum of infinite growth, whose two other versions are in Tokyo, Japan, and Ahmedabad, India. A great colonial-Enlightenment institution, the museum, more than a university, for Le Corbusier offered a way to acquire knowledge that was not passed down via the strictures of academia. It was a utopian, high modernist vision, an attempt at reinscribing the colonialist conception of the Euro-Enlightenment world citizen, organized the conception of an auto-didactic flaneur—a self-learner who learnt by direct observation and the evidence of his own senses. It was a vision in the making, in which the lectern (repeated in the Open Hand monument) was a crucial element, and whose final form Le Corbusier embodied in the unbuilt Museum of Knowledge designated for the Capitol Complex. Architecture as an unfinished project, and architectural agency as the project of uncertainty was thus already in play, however silently, as Spivak took the lectern.

¹⁵ I have proposed an alternate idea for a preservation practice for Chandigarh. See V. Prakash, “The Many Names of Chandigarh: An Index for Heritage Planning,” in Model House Research Group edited *Mapping Transcultural Modernisms* (Berlin: Sternberg Press 2013).

¹⁶ Bjarke Ingels, in fact, describes architecture as “the art and science of converting fiction into fact.” See the introduction to the ArchitectureTalk podcast at architecturetalk.org.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Khôra* (Paris: Galilée, 1993). Derrida was writing this short book when he was working with Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi. The “chora” was advanced as a key concept by some of the French poststructuralist feminists, in particular Julia Kristeva. While Derrida pushed the reading of chora as “sieve” in his work with Eisenman, Kristeva, reading Jacques Lacan, emphasized the chora as the no-place place, the place of the self that is outside and preliminary to our place in our bodies. Kristeva’s chora suggests a new outlining of the body as the “home” of the self as dancing in space, as, in other words, architecture. See J. Kristeva “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). The concept of *dhāranā*, as Spivak advanced later in her presentation, can be read as coterminous to Kristeva’s chora. Early the 1990s, just before the Chandigarh conference, I published an exploratory article, as a graduate student, on the “interests of desire” and possibilities of feminist architectural thinking. In this article, I relied on the agency of Mrs. Ramsey’s shawl, from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, as a concept-metaphor for a future architecture to come that construed place as both there and not there, in and out. See: V. Prakash, “The Interests of Desire: Feminism and Aesthetic Pleasure in Architecture” *Architecture + Design* New Delhi, March-April, 1992.

¹⁹ For more on this, see Shima Mohajeri, *Architectures of Transversality: Paul Klee, Louis Kahn and the Persian Imagination* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), and my conversation with Mohajeri on ArchitectureTalk. <https://www.architecturetalk.org/home/37>.

²⁰ Years later, in December 2009, at another conference workshop on preservation organized by her and Jorge Otero-Pailos, Spivak carefully drew distinction between her thesis of thinking of “critical regionalism” as a kind of a socially, culturally, and economically accountable preservation practice, and that celebrated in the architectural press. “I am not Kenneth Frampton,” she noted later to me via email dated May 4, 2010. Although I have nothing more from her on this distinction, it is a critical one for us in architectural history, theory and preservation to carefully parse through our interpretive registers for there is still a lot of architecture, and a lot of corresponding architectural scholarship, that seeks to pass off a kind of a lazy, superficial referencing as culturally embedded fact. This is a particular important subject in the context of thinking about interference between architectural preservation practices as cultural resilience.

²¹ Gayatri C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

²² Gayatri C. Spivak, “Acting Bits/Identity Talk,” *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 1992): 775.

²³ Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61–156.

²⁴ Professional responsibility is sometimes interpolated as the agency of the architect as a facilitator of “natural” social processes, where the entitlement to action, taken away from the top down authority of the figure of the architect is transferred to the unrepresented subaltern. But, participative design and planning, is not a responsibility-based agency, it is still rights-based with only the ethics of structural suspicion of any top down entitlement to agency. While useful in its pragmatic

outline for the project of decolonization, this reversal of the location of the seat of agency also does not open a pathway to reimagine a deconstructed agency for architecture, as something other than a rights-based entitlement to action.

²⁵ In a limited way these are of course useful abstractions, important for the quotidian purposes such as identifying locations for things like driver's licenses. But they have to be deployed with vigilance given the long history of their intimate connection with institutions of scapegoating and othering such as nationalism, immigration and war.

²⁶ Let me note parenthetically here that responsibility-based ideas of subjectivity and agency are not of course Indic in character versus some kind of rights-based identity of the West. What follows is a proactive reading of a particular set of quotes. Also, *Dharma* is not limited to India as a concept; *Dharma* is written as *dhama* in many South and East Asian cultures. The Chinese kanji for *dhama*, when read in Japanese reads as "Zen."

²⁷ I thank my mother, Savitri Prakash, for walking me through this phrase and phrase translation.

²⁸ We can also think of this as a planetary position, where the planet earth (recall the connection earth has to *dhama* as *dharti* via the common root *dhr*, I referred to above) as part of that ultimate otherness that is the expansion of the universe, not only holds us but subtends us and all other life that we know of as part of the *dhāranā* of the universe.

²⁹ Think the idea of "dissemination" in Jacques Derrida and Barbara Johnson, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University Press, 1981).

³⁰ In terms of recent theory, I think there is also a useful parse from this notion of *kshetra-karma* to that of "agential cutting" as the nature of doing that is described by theorists such as Karen Barad, building on the necessity of indeterminacy inscribed into sub-particle mechanics by quantum physics. The constitutive entanglement between meaning and matter or knowing and doing that Barad argues, linking queer feminist poststructural thinking to Bohrian quantum theory, is at least homologous, I would argue, to the indeterminate but coming clear in the imperative of the situation "entanglement" that Spivak is here describing, as I read it, between *karma* and *kshetra*. See Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

³² Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

³³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osbourne (London: Verso, 1985).

³⁴ Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187–228.

³⁵ Amelia Gentleman, "A City That Sat on Its Treasures, but Didn't See Them," *New York Times*, March 19, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/19/world/asia/19chandigarh.html?auth=login-facebook>.

³⁶ A useful discussion of the furniture and its destiny can be found in Episode 2 of the *Nice Try!* Podcast. See: <https://www.curbed.com/2019/6/6/18654337/nice-try-podcast-chandigarh>.

³⁷ In the middle, both in the film and the transformative journey of the furniture, *Provenance* documents the mechanics by which the old furniture is re-furnished for its new art-house markets. Extracted from its containers in small carefully controlled batches, the furniture is completely stripped of all its old worn out upholstery, dismantled, repaired and re-assembled and then luxuriously re-upholstered to conform to the expected look of a mid-century modernist piece "in pristine condition." The furniture is then photographed, set against neutral monochromatic backgrounds, so that it can be inserted into auction house catalogs in standardized formats. See Amie Siegel, *Provenance*, 2013, HD video, 40 minutes, color/sound.

³⁸ Full documentation of this studio, and several more to follow, can be found at chandigarhurbanlab.org.

³⁹ By way of full disclosure, I should note that my father, Aditya Prakash, was a core member of the founding team that designed Chandigarh with Pierre Jeanneret and others, and as such was as such one of the invested designers of this furniture. My book on his work, *One Continuous Line: Art, Architecture and Urbanism of Aditya Prakash*, published by Mapin Publishing of Ahmedabad, India, in November 2020, includes documentation of the furniture he designed.