

BEYOND POST-DEVELOPMENT THEORY: CRITICALLY CONSIDERING ARCHITECTS, CULTURE XTTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Post-Development theorists have challenged the act of international development, however more recent literature, especially by academics from countries receiving aid, suggests otherwise (Matthews, 2004). Utilizing appreciative inquiry (Salama, 2017) the authors explore and provide an environmental scan of the contemporary landscape where architects are currently involved in international development. The research features and compares a few reviews by architects (among other design practitioners), social scientists (particularly development ethnographers), and feedback from their host communities. This paper aims to better understand how critiques amongst other social sciences inform architects' designs beyond adopting simplistic and formalistic design motifs. Complementing major gaps in the literature, the authors utilize recent personal projects as reflective practitioners (Bierwolf, 2017).

The authors interrogate how decolonizing international development has impacted architectural projects (Samuel, 2014.) Finally, the work builds upon the idea of 'collective wisdom of the wide array of stakeholders, professionals, politicians, decision-makers, and citizens (both engaged and disenfranchised) who have the will and wherewithal to make a difference and to make the world safer, healthier, and better' (Sinclair, 2015.) The tension between modernity and tradition, and the international

and the vernacular, are critically considered. Architects play important roles in helping with decision-making processes throughout a development project (Gao, 2016). When local architects design projects, they empower local populations (Widiarso, 2018).

Methods deployed in the present research include literature review and logical argumentation. Informed by the literature and guided by tacit knowing of the authors as experienced and embedded practitioners, the paper concludes with a conceptual frame that proffers insights into the ways that architects' engagement in international development is perceived by themselves, their own communities of practice, social scientists, and the host communities. Further, the frame offers guidance around engagement in complex and multi-faceted international development projects.

KEYWORDS

International development; theory; architecture; culture; systems-thinking

1. INTRODUCTION

According to UN Habitat (unhabitat.org), 'by 2030, 3 billion people or 40% of the world's population will need access to proper housing'.

Providing proper shelter, housing, and other buildings to accommodate the full range of individual and social function allowing people to realize their full potentials and enjoy choice, freedom, and hope for their futures remains a wicked problem (Buchanan, 1992) that requires multi-level multi-stakeholder thinking, initiatives, and interventions. The majority of this housing and built environment crisis is in the Global South, and it seems that without commitment and action from other countries, organizations, or individuals, there is not much hope for relief given the long history of colonialism, politics and proxy wars, climate change, weak or failing economies, brain drain, lack of skilled workers, and access to building materials.

By applying original techniques, architects can provide solutions to create culturally responsive spaces that utilize locally available building materials and construction techniques with improvements to address the demanding new circumstances.

What is International Development?

International or global development refers to international initiatives targeting human development and the reduction of social problems such as poverty and inequality while improving political, economic, health, education, employment, and other social systems (Castro, 2011). Global development is often used interchangeably with international development, but it encompasses a broader scope and is not limited to the Global South with 'vertical' scale and a 'horizontal' scope (Horner, 2017). A relational Global Development concept is "the new paradigm to replace international development" (Horner, 2020). International development and disaster relief are distinct but interconnected fields. While disaster relief focuses on immediate, short-term assistance in the aftermath of a crisis (Sollis, 1994), international development aims to address long-term issues such as poverty, education, and healthcare (Taubman, 2011). Disaster relief architecture is a subset of humanitarian architecture.

'Development was, to cite Arturo Escobar (1992), 'an immense design project itself, one that requires radical disassembly and rethinking beyond the umbrella terms of "global modernism" and "colonial modernities," which risk erasing the sinews of conflict encountered in globalizing and modernizing architecture' (Dutta et al, 2022) The involvement of architects in international development has evolved significantly since the post-colonial era. Initially, Western expertise was seen as essential for developing nations (Beeckmans, 2014). However, this perspective has shifted, with growing recognition of local cultural heritage and the complexities of development (Smits, 2014). Architects have played crucial roles in shaping development discourse, influencing urban planning, and addressing housing issues in the Global South (Muzaffar, 2007). The rise of humanitarian architecture has led to a focus on serving marginalized communities and contributing to post-disaster reconstruction (Charlesworth, 2014). Some countries, like Israel, have positioned themselves as alternative sources of expertise in development projects (Levin, 2022). Anthropological studies have examined the institutional practices and global economic integration aspects of international development, highlighting the importance of ethnographic approaches and the growing influence of new donors like China and India (Mosse, 2013).

According to Sen, the power of choice is the most powerful driver of human development: Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency. The removal of substantial unfreedoms, it is argued here, is constitutive of development. (Sen, 1999) 'Sen's capability approach can provide a comprehensive framework to guide and safeguard the transformative roots of the participatory approach.' (Clark, 2019) Many Western aid organizations have been shifting from giving charity in developing countries,

such as Uganda, to promoting self-reliance in sustainable programs. But this approach often ignores the diverse ways participants in development programs understand the meaning and moral significance of material support. (Scherz, 2018)

Modernity is defined as a condition of social existence that is significantly different to all past forms of human experience. At the same time, modernization refers to the transitional process of moving from “traditional” or “primitive” communities to modern societies. (Shilliam, 2010) The modern divide between the natural world and the social world has the same constitutional character, with one difference: up to now, no one has taken on the task of studying scientists and politicians in tandem since no central vantage point has seemed to exist. (Latour, 2012)

As defined by the United Nations (2020), Sustainable Development empowers local people with the agency through knowledge sharing, empowerment, and an openness to learn from local communities. Supporting people in areas disproportionately affected by climate change and conflicts requires a reflexive or grounded approach to creating an enabling environment for local people to be masters of the process themselves, with the added ability to draw as much as possible on their local resources, including cultural, intellectual and technological traditions. Is the purpose of international development initiatives and interventions to produce an idyllic middle class, a dream still pursued in Western countries such as Canada? How can communities thrive and create hope for the future under adverse circumstances, resisting the idea that chances for social improvements are very slim without foreign intervention? (Auerbach, 2020)

We have already read that the assumption that “low-tech, traditional, and local” is not modern or is non-compatible with Modernity can be rightfully challenged. Günel reviews the ambitious City of Masdar master planning,

an example of design colonialism, and while not considered international development, criticizes the heavy high-tech unsustainable solutions. ‘Is it not true that those ‘under-privileged’ communities of which conduct their lives more harmoniously with nature, environmental stewardship, or conscious consumption, something we aspire to achieve through a comprehensive mindset shift rather than technical adjustments in the West?’ (Günel, 2019).

According to Matthews, when post-development theorists like Wolfgang Sachs are confronted with why development is still desirable, despite its many failures, they respond that “many still associate the concept with self-affirmation and redress, which [necessitates] the decolonization of the imagination”. Matthews explores “the difficulty that post-development theory confronts when faced with the continued desire on the part of many people in Africa for development,” (Matthews, 2004.)

Ferguson encourages us to consider the ‘question of likeness as an unsettling shift from the question of cultural difference to the question of material inequality – just as Mr. Lebona shifted my attention from a regard for cultural difference (a Sesotho-style house) to an acknowledgment of extreme inequality (a one-room house versus a ten-room house)’ (Ferguson, 2006) In reviewing the open letter from two Guinean boys, Ferguson explains how ‘mimicry and membership’ through the request to ‘help us to become like you’ should reveal relations of ‘material’ inequality that are currently concealed by debates on cultural differences. (Ferguson, 2006)

Smaller scale development initiatives, mostly by private donors are more prone to criticism by scholars who see White Saviorism as a personal motivation behind international development. Dickson et al (2023) see capacity building in that vein, quoting Kothari and Pierre: ‘The concept of capacity building (and its ideologies and practices) is effective and potent because it is cast as

technical and rational. Yet, in its mesmerizing repetitions, capacity building also depends on the ideological and political construction of the incapacity of African countries— that is, cultural, developmental, and civilizational lack' (Pierre, 2019) Dickson et al (2023) argue knowledge production has a hierarchical and colonial structure: 'The message is that they are the experts in all things has been reinforced since birth. They are taught that saving others is the burden they must bear' (Flaherty, 2016).

The Environmental Scan

The authors searched a number of journals featuring built works of architects that correspond to the somehow vague definition of international development. There is little peer-reviewed research examining the impact of foreign architects' design contributions to the improvement of the quality of life in countries identified as the global South. There are however published papers by academic architects reviewing their own initiatives as reflective practitioners, for example papers by Michael Smits (2014, 2017, 2020).

Mass Design Group

According to their website, 'MASS (Model of Architecture Serving Society) believes that architecture has a critical role to play in supporting communities to confront history, shape new narratives, collectively heal and project new possibilities for the future.' (Mass Design Group website)



Figure 1. The Rwanda Institute for Conservation Agriculture (RICA) © Iwan Baan

With their headquarters office in Boston, USA and a satellite office in Kigali, Rwanda, the multidisciplinary group, Mass Design Group, has established themselves as a reliable development partner, advocating for social justice domestically and internationally, 'justice is beauty'.

According to developPPP, Mass partnered with 'GIZ, a federal German enterprise operating in international cooperation for sustainable development and education work.' 'Together, the project partners trained 592 apprentices, including 204 women, in construction trades such as masonry, carpentry, plumbing, and welding, as well as occupational health and safety standards.' Through inclusive leadership, Mass contributes to capacity building and the empowerment of their project's stakeholders. The Rwanda Institute for Conservation Agriculture (RICA) won the 2023 campus landscape architecture award for its delicate balance between the built form and the natural setting and was honored for being 'the first climate-positive campus of its kind, leveraging a unique agricultural model, sustainably sourced materials, and off-grid power sources.' (landezine website). 'This 3400-acre campus will be the first carbon-positive university in the world' (Logan, Architectural Record)

Francis Kéré

Francis Kéré received attention and prominence when his first project, a primary school in Gando, Burkina Faso, received the Aga Khan Award:

'A primary school built cooperatively by a whole village community. Its clay walls are topped with a double roof structure of adobe and tin that blocks the heat of the sun, making the inside up to six degrees cooler than it would be with tin alone. Inspired by this model, two neighboring villages now have their own new schools, built entirely with their own labour and funded by community members living away from home.' (AKAA citation on their website)



Figure 2. 'Courtyard of the Benga Riverside School. Photo by Jaime Herraiz for Kéré Architecture
 Located on the banks of the Revúboé and Zambezi rivers, the Benga Riverside School provides an education space for the Benga Riverside Residential Community.' (Kéré Architecture website)

The IB school website describes how the design “fosters an atmosphere of social inclusion and ecological symbiosis, with buildings that blend effortlessly into their natural surroundings,” (Benga Riverside

School website.) They see the architect’s use of local materials not as being cheap, but as creating harmony and sustainability.
 The below picture is chosen to be compared with the next architect’s project.



Figure 3. Benga Riverside School as it blends with the natural environment (© Benga Riverside School website)

SelgasCano



Figure 4. Konokono clinic in Turkana, Kenya © Iwan Baan
Architects: Selgas Cano, Ignacio Peydro and students
from MIT studio Unmaterial

The photographer explains how 'Selgas Cano brought 10 MIT students in 2014 to an isolated desert in Northwest Kenya to design and build a vaccination and educational centre serving the nomadic Turkana people. They hoped to interrupt the students' dependence on digital technologies and confront them with basic questions about habitat and design.' (Iwan Baan website)

Toma Berlanda, a professor at the University of Cape Town reviews this project, seeing it as an opportunity for architects to create unchecked forms with little or no regard for the local stakeholders' preferences:

"Colonialism found in the Modernist project a powerful and willing partner for the shaping of conquered territories in the southern hemisphere. Today, amid a new wave of colonial activity based on subtler and less easily identifiable strategies, little is done to understand its effects on the way people live and give form to their shelters. Neo-colonialism is an urgent issue but one which most of the profession is ill-prepared to interrogate. In order to address the underlying

questions of the appropriateness of architectural concepts and their technical implementation, local and foreign experience needs to come together in an unbiased way to negotiate the challenges of intercultural communication. This is an indispensable prerequisite if such cooperation is to have sustainable and productive results.

The proliferation of the Western quest for exotic adventures has led to a new form of educational colonialism...

The pavilion's elegant structure certainly raises questions about the significance of design studios focusing on the Global South (which seem to have become a ubiquitous component of studies within Western architecture schools), and also the difficulties of assessing the impact of such projects on local communities who ideally should be active participants in the process as well as being its beneficiaries," (Toma Berlanda, 2015.)

There is evidently a similarity between the sheet metal roofs for this structure and the one designed by Francis Kere. However, due to Mr. Kere being originally from the Global South and his extensive involvement with local stakeholders, reflected in the intricate masonry, one cannot apply the same criticism.

Instead, an appreciative inquiry approach would offer a more empathetic view of the study abroad course design; given the limited time which likely forced the team to pre-design the structure before arriving on-site, along with the absence of locally sourced materials or stakeholder engagement, this was the best they could accomplish, and beyond the White saviorism discussed earlier, the project improves the life of those people. An appreciative inquiry approach will be more empathic to the study abroad course design and the fact that with the little time that perhaps forced the team to pre-design the structure even before arriving on site

and no locally available building materials or engaged local stakeholders, this was the best they could accomplish and beyond the white saviorism discussed earlier, the project improves the life of those people. The choice of this project and quoting the criticism is to juxtapose similar conditions for author 1's own development project, not as justification but to illustrate the complexity and limitations one faces with best intentions in heart and best strategies in mind.

Yasmeen Lari

'Yasmeen Lari is Pakistan's first woman architect. Since the earthquake in 2005, she has devised various programs based on women-centred zero carbon footprint structures and sustainable building techniques, resulting in 40,000 green shelters (using bamboo, lime and mud)'. (Yasmeen Lari's website)



Figure 5. Yasmeen Lari outside the women's Centre in Sindh province, Pakistan, which is built on stilts to withstand floods.

© Heritage Foundation of Pakistan

Yasmeen Lari is RIBA's 2023 gold medalist in praise of her humanitarian work (Young, 2024) and Jane Drew

award in 2019. She is quoted to say 'I was a starchitect for 36 years. Now I'm atoning'. (Wainwright, 2020)

"Yasmeen Lari is Pakistan's first registered architect. Her humanitarian work also includes the building of larger community buildings and women's centers in various Sindh villages, recognizing women's needs for social spaces outside of the home and yet separated from public areas. The structures are also a response to the rising threat of climate destruction, as Pakistan ranks among the top ten climate-impacted countries. Where the flood risk is high, the structures are built on stilts, providing a safe shelter during high waters. The structures are often made of cross-braced bamboo frames, filled with mud. The center also provides space for people to share training in "barefoot enterprises," Lari's concept for spreading knowledge and empowering communities to self-build... Lari does not see herself and her collaborators as architects, she says, so much "as co-designers and facilitators but also trainers".

Lari compares this kind of engagement with what she calls the "international colonial charity model" that "believes in treating people as victims, giving them handouts, telling them to use concrete and all kinds of materials that are going to be even more destructive to the planet". The only way, she believes, is to work in ways that require minimal external funding," (Moore, 2023.)

One can wonder whether Yasmeen Lari's work is indeed international development as there are no external funding or foreign aid involved. The ultimate goal of any well intended and inform international development initiative is to enable local population and the beneficiaries of aid to become self-sufficient. 'Development is sustainable only if the beneficiaries become, gradually, masters of the process.' (Aga Khan, 2008)

The path forward: more sustainable building materials and techniques



Figure 6. Jim Wells / Postmedia July 24, 2022

‘[The Peace] bridge became a punching bag for critics. Just as quickly, the bridge became a source of pride for thousands of Calgarians who crowded onto the structure when it opened on March 24, 2012.’ (Klingbeil, 2017) Calgary is voted one of the top most livable cities in the world (Economic Times / NRI, June 27, 2024) coupled with significant GDP and wealth from its resource industries. As Babych (2022) reported, ‘there are more frequent incidents of shattered glass panels from people throwing rocks. Several defaced paintings are hanging from the top of the bridge to remind people the bridge itself is a work of art. “You’re standing in a work of art” reads a poster hung on one of the freshly smashed glass panels.’ One city Councilor suggested that ‘the city needs to find better material for the side panels so they aren’t easily shattered’. The city of Calgary administration later reached out to Mr. Calatrava’s office and received their permission to replace tempered glass with steel cables. (City of Calgary website, 2022)

One can imagine what would be the likely scenarios for future maintenance of high-tech or imported building techniques and materials created through international development in communities with comparatively less contact, transportation and affluence.

Authors own international development projects

While not comparable in scope and intent, author 1’s space-frame structures were

piloted in an under-populated area with abject poverty. People did not have much agency and preferred to show gratitude to encourage more development rather than criticism.

Discussing the ultimate form and feel of the portable school structure, while author 1 insisted on adopting the vernacular architecture, author 1’s friends in Iran simply dismissed it, worrying about Sistan’s Wind of 120 days that at times can exceed more than 110 km/hour. The local experts wanted a sturdy structure with a significant concrete foundation. For some strange reasons, not trusting the processes they take pride in, they over-design the structures. This is a common practice; for simple colds, physicians prescribe us penicillin injections, reasoning that all medications are not good quality. Their structure was to celebrate the progressive architecture practiced in Iran, and they were reluctant to portray an image of their practice as local and traditional with low technology. They saw the school structures as Swiss watches that everyone can wear, and the idea of ‘adopting’ the Swiss watch and making culturally sensitive adjustments in its look seemed ridiculous.

‘Author 2 teaches students about architecture’s power to address human rights, wellness, safety, and dignity. Together they dreamed up a design competition: the Jinkai Shelter Initiative, drawing from the Hausa words Jinkai (mercy) and Jinka (roof), to attract talented Nigerian architecture students to design housing for those whose lives had been upended’. (University of Calgary website, 2020)

“We all have a basic human right to shelter,” the co-author asserts. “Shelter not only keeps us physically protected, but it also critically contributes to our psychological health, our sense of identity, and our need for dignity. The competition was an exceptional opportunity to empower Nigeria’s youth, while concurrently bringing attention to the tremendous humanitarian crises in the country.” (Jinkai Shelter Initiative, 2020)



Figure 7. Author 1 international development project, two space-frame tent schools in Southeastern Iran



Figure 8. Benjamin Moses, Crazy World Trends, Jinkai shelter initiative competition winner.

CONCLUSION

The authors could not find substantial literature originating from social sciences examining architects'-built projects contributing to international development. One limitation is that reviews of such projects are mostly written and published in the host countries national languages and not searchable through English search engines. There are also awkward situations where the recipients do not wish to show ungratefulness in presumably 'take it or leave it' aid milieu.

Given the architects' design contribution to global development are both quite small, with private donors involved, the social scientists either do not notice them or there are no large-scale impact assessments commissioned. The architects' design responses are usually fascinating with the *archi-tech-tonics* that usher new approaches to development, resulting in the admiration for the creativity takes over the space for objective critique.

The scarce literature are usually excerpts from the architects' own websites or awards citations, and there is no credible method to

validate the end users or recipients' opinion on how the created spaces cater to their needs and how much were they heard through participatory design approaches. There has been no mention of how the local experts were engaged and if, through cross-learning, there were opportunities for empowerment and capacity building.

One should not stop international development due to its many shortcomings but consciously strive to improve through creating more agency and power to the recipient societies in a participatory manner. Any form of external intervention can be associated with criticism and negative consequences. The better approach will be to empower the local communities and societies to make such decisions in a fiscally and ethically responsible manner. Creating a capacity building framework, inspired and informed by the subject local community's Indigenous ways of knowing and being, provides a new tool to help all stakeholders improve the international development interactions.

Creating a framework for design and building quality would help all the stakeholders to utilize concepts and language to communicate their perceptions and experiences of the created spaces, and support a less hierarchical relation between the recipients and the external agents. Kothari (2007) suggests that sustainable development is possible when the external stakeholders identify, learn from, respect and utilize traditional knowledge which is preserved through the local knowledge keeps. Author 2 (2023), a co-investigator in a precedent-setting pan-national design study, highlights an innovative & collaborative built environment framework that holds promise for adoption by professionals working on international development projects. He emphasizes that deployment of this model has potential to lead to countries crafting a unique National Design Policy, or National Architecture Policy, which clearly presents expectations for and pathways to quality in design, development, and construction (including sensitivity to local conditions and circumstances).

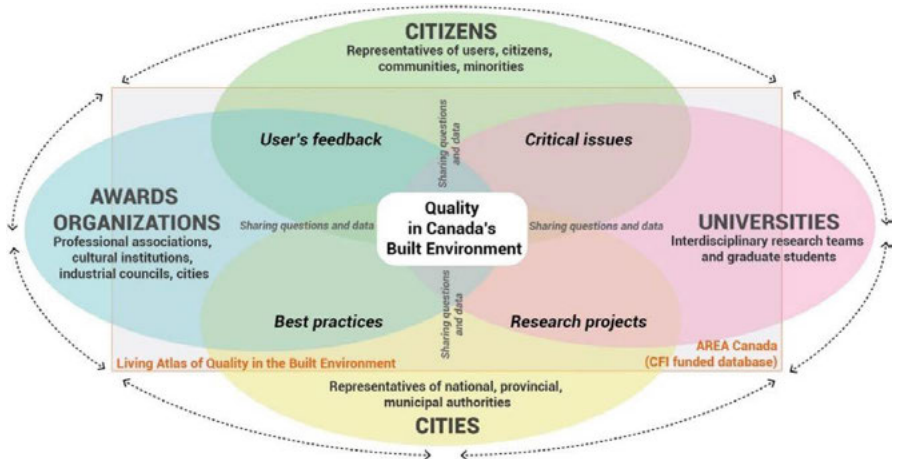


Diagram 1: Quality in Canada's Built Environment framework: Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Partnership Grant Project #895-2022-1003, Quality in Canada's Built Environment: Roadmaps to Equity, Social Value + Sustainability. Quoted in Brian R Sinclair.

There is an urgent need for academic, peer-reviewed research on architect-initiated international development projects through an appreciative inquiry methodology and according to a quality framework that facilitates communication, users' empowerment and voice and better cooperation between various local and international stakeholders.

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