

Framing Settler Colonialism through Modern Architecture, Le Corbusier and the West

Eric Nay

The West: Concept, Narrative and Politics

December 8–9, 2016, University of Jyväskylä

In the summer of 2016 UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) declared seventeen of Franco-Swiss architect, Le Corbusier's, iconic *International Style*¹ buildings and urban design projects "World Heritage" sites. This landmark decision, in effect, canonized the life's work of one very specific Western architect and his very particular ideological and geographically bound pedagogy in place and time by systemically enshrining Le Corbusier (the figure) and Le Corbusier (the pedagogy) geographically within modern architecture pedagogy forever.²

The history of modern architecture is a manufactured fiction³, of course, but it is a fiction that serves a specific hegemonic social and political purpose.⁴ The methods I have chosen to deconstruct the UNESCO decision, and the legacy it supports, relies on an ontological siting of

¹ The term, "International Style" was initially coined in an exhibition catalog that came about as the result of a groundbreaking 1932 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art meant to showcase an emergent modern architecture movement characterized by pure, white industrialized buildings being produced in Europe and America. The show was curated by Philip Johnson and the catalog was written by Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock. The International Style quickly became the definitive definition of the principles underlying the work of modernist icons like Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and others. See Hitchcock, Henry-Russell, and Philip Johnson. *The International Style*. New York: Norton, 1966.

² UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement." Online Announcement. July 2016. *World Heritage List*. 1 Aug. 2016. <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1321>

³ See Curtis, William. 1996. *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. London: Phaidon, 3rd Edition. 1996; Frampton, Kenneth. *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992. 314- 327; Kostof, Spiro. *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985; Trachtenberg, Marvin and Isabelle Hyman. *Architecture, from Prehistory to Postmodernity*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002. These texts represent the most widely used modern architectural history texts currently in use in North America today.

⁴ In this statement I am relying on Nicholas Gramsci's work and drawing upon his widely influential notions of "hegemony" and the "manufacture of consent." See Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. 1971. New York, International Publishers. Or as David Ruccio has written, "Hegemony represents a combination of leadership (of allied forces) and dominance (over opposing forces). It is created - it can and, for Gramsci, must be created - before assuming power, through 'passive revolution,' an important term that he simply adds at a later date in the margin." Ruccio, David F. "Unfinished Business: Gramsci's Prison Notebooks." *Rethinking Marxism* 18.1 (2006): 4.

the embodiment of modern architecture's narrative within the figure of Le Corbusier, in particular.⁵ Furthermore, a critique of this particular Western, colonial, hegemonic system might provide a means to look back at the methods by which imaginaries are produced and geographies informed in the studios and classrooms of architecture schools worldwide as a continuation of a regime of knowledge production that also reproduces race, class and colonialism as an effect.⁶

UNESCO's decision re-affirms that *International Style* modernism can, and will, continue to be the dominant narrative told through the discipline, even as new architecture schools emerge across the planet on non-Western soil. A new type of intellectual labor might be required to not just resist the Western canon, but to resituate it, which requires that unfamiliar analytical lenses be applied to the canon - such as settler colonialism⁷ and critical race theory⁸ as

⁵ "Throughout his long career, Le Corbusier was mainly associated with the *Unité d'habitation* and the Ronchamp church, as well as with the acerbic remarks for which he was never at a loss. As the years passed, his comments would take on an increasingly melancholic tone. In the 1920's, he was a manufacturer, a painter – even if he reckoned he had been 'rejected by professional painters' – a critic and an essayist, a reporter and a decorator. The well-rounded personality that he presented to the public was forever being reinvented." (Cohen, 2009: 13)

⁶ Edward Said wrote, "Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient, absolutely different (the reasons change from epoch to epoch) from the West." The complex notion of how the West has been perpetuated as a system of knowledge production through architecture has a large literature drawing from human geography and other fields, but I propose that architecture as a system of knowledge production might be reframed using the language of settler colonialism to delaminate how dominant bodies have produced "Others" through architecture as a form of ongoing occupation and conquest.

⁷ Settler colonialism demands that settlers, who perceive themselves to be comfortably grounded and at home in their new worlds, must recognize that colonialism is still an ongoing project and the violence, dispossession and occupation that settler colonialism represent is not simply historical. Settler colonialism is something in which they are complicit. The potency of architecture to perform settler colonial fantasies, to monumentalize territory, to enshrine and mark property and to produce the sensations of belonging – both real and imaginary – is how settler colonialism is enacted through architecture.

⁸ Critical race theory began as a methodology housed in legal scholarship. For a better understanding of its origins and its utility as a practice see Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993): 1707–1791 and later work in the area of critical whiteness studies in texts such as Richard Dyer's. *White*. (London: Routledge, 1997); Leonardo,

methods. These specific critical frameworks might foreground a revitalized method of architectural thought production by re-centering the land as an ontological methodology.⁹

In my research I focus on how Le Corbusier, is produced and reproduced as the central figure within the modern architectural narrative with purpose. Le Corbusier, as a result of a particular Western pedagogical system, becomes the central figure who is taught to embody a regime of architectural discourse, preform material outcomes, and project imaginaries that depend upon constantly re-imagining and re-centering the West as a process through his figuration. In my work, I subject Le Corbusier to a number of useful, but unfamiliar lenses that the scholarship of architecture, historic preservation and criticism of the built environment has eschewed - particularly critical race theory and settler colonialism - as critical methodologies.¹⁰

I question how the pedagogy of architecture has been, and remains, geographically and ideologically enshrined in this particular imaginary and how a select group of key figures from the Western canon of modern architecture, like Le Corbusier, are still used to produce a system of knowledge, which, in turn, reproduces particular types of places and spaces that is

Zeus' *Race, Whiteness, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and Elijah Anderson's "The White Space," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1:1 (2015): 10-12.

⁹ "(Laurentian University's) architecture program "highlights design and culture for the north – particularly northern Ontario – with an emphasis in developing expertise in wood." Design studio courses focus on "practical building solutions for our northern climate, taking into account cultural sensitivities, diverse histories and community profiles" as a strategic and ideological focus. "An appreciation for the integration of indigenous and natural materials in building and site design, as well as an understanding of the importance of collaboration and interaction with other students, faculty and community groups" is a hallmark of a Sudbury's pedagogical model." Nay, Eric. "Teaching Architecture in the North." *Made in Canada. Alternatives Journal*. November (2014): Web.

¹⁰ The new generation of Canadian Indigenous scholars working in race, space and place include Martin Cannon, Jeffrey Cornthassel, Eve Tuck and others. See Tuck, Eve and Marcia McKenzie, *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

universalizing, dominating and remains entrenched in colonial ideas and attitudes.¹¹

Architecture is both a material practice and an ontological process. Architecture, when it is at its best, produces a socially produced fiction that structures human relations using the built environment, which sets the stage for the human drama or operates as a framework to memorialize or produce fantasies needed to survive. The concept of the West, if I define it as an embodied architectural fantasy, may also be useful as an analytical tool for critiquing institutions like the United Nations and UNESCO. For the modern architectural myth to work it must be geographically situated, and the centrality of the West (and Paris) must be populated with memorable figures to allow these narratives to be taught effectively to forge traditions and memories. This demands a very particular pedagogy of spatially-grounded story telling, and requires figures like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe as performers.

Furthermore, architectural education must constantly re-center its historical situationality in material space to re-affirm the canon's vulnerability and risk of obsolescence with the onslaught of global hybridity. This project only can succeed through the reification of specific embodied traditions re-enacted through the performance of situated imaginaries, which each depend upon the teaching of the iconic Western canon embodied by key modern figures to succeed. Even Finland's own modern "master" architect - Alvar Aalto - can only be peripheral to this discourse, since the canon must be unforgivably narrow by definition to survive. Finland too

¹¹ My own research is specifically situated within the Canadian context. This is also a context in which the Canadian government has taken up the political and social project of acknowledging a myriad of historical and ongoing systemic injustices towards its Indigenous populations that includes crimes that range from genocide to systemic violence and murder of Indigenous women and girls today across the country as a common practice. See Razack, Sherene. "'It Happened More Than Once': Freezing Deaths in Saskatchewan." *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, vol. 26 no. 1, 2014, pp. 51-80.

must be marginalized in this particular narrative.

To complete my critique I rely heavily on a body of canon-troubling scholarship from a new generation of Indigenous Canadian scholars working in settler-colonialism as well as a number of well-established critical race scholars who have taken up architecture as a methodology to tease out systemic racism, colonialism and forms of social oppression.¹² I also draw upon a growing body of contrarian architectural scholars who have taken up issues of agency and identity to critique modern architectural pedagogy using race, class and gender.

The case studies that I have chosen in my project to situate my argument include UNESCO policies, modern architectural history textbooks, and pedagogical practices used in architectural studios. The intentions of this conference, specifically to “problematize the idea of the West even further” as more than a social construct means that the idea of the West is an ongoing pedagogy that requires places, figures and subjects to persist. In architecture this pedagogy is expressed materially in practices that are defined by space, place and power, which rely on perpetuating Western imaginaries and subjectivities - which must be taught to be performed – whether consciously or not.

¹² See Cheng, Anne Anlin. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; Harris, Dianne. *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013; and Wilson, Mabel. “To Make a Black Museum.” *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums*. Berkeley: U of California, 2012. 242-296 for particularly rich methodological examples for how to deconstruct architectural types like the suburban tract home (Harris) or even Adolph Loos’ project for Josephine Baker (Cheng) using social science methodologies intersected with architectural theory. As an additional (and regionally appropriate) example, in “Ralph Erskine's Special Kind of Arrogance: Erskine's White Sweden” the author attempts to systemically use the lens of whiteness to critique Erskine and his practices simultaneously as a methodology to situate a broader criticism of how architecture produces race as an embedded pedagogy and as an aesthetic of racialized aesthetic privilege (Ray, N., & Werner, J., 2014). See “Ralph Erskine's Special Kind of Arrogance: Erskine's White Sweden.” *Arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 18(4), 293-298).