

Reimagining Architectural Theory from the Historicized Periphery

Architectural theory in recent decades has gone through a series of crises, re-examinations, and revisions. It has survived dead ends, false starts, and even its own self-annihilation. Theory, however, as a speculative system of concepts with an “appetite for modifying and expanding reality”, is still with us. With the presumed return to the “fundamentals” of the discipline, it is perhaps again on the rise.¹

While architecture curricula have been reconfigured to meet the demands of these various theory transmutations, the Euro-American core of theory has remained surprisingly stable. While it may be argued that the center of theory has migrated—wandering from London to Paris, from New York to Chicago, from Los Angeles to Rotterdam, and back again—the presumption that theory emanates from Western global centers to the underdeveloped peripheries of the Global South has remained fairly constant. Moreover, due to theory’s proclivity for assessing challenges facing the current moment and speculating forward toward possible futures, it tends to overlook historical concerns. Recent theories examine the effects of emerging technologies, neoliberal forms of space-making, and environmental crises with a pressing sense of the unprecedented nature of these problems and the urgency with which they should be addressed. Theories examining the “risk society” speculate on the various ways society organizes itself in response to risks such as environmental catastrophe. The purpose of this paper is to challenge this model using a specific historical example outside of one of the conventionally-understood “centers” of theory production. The intention is not to discredit the rich tradition of Western scholarship theorizing the built environment, but to illuminate the productive potentials of shifting the center of theory both geographically and historically can have for generating a more fluid, interconnected, and relational understanding of space. Is it possible that by decentering our point of reference, we can generate theories more reflective of the dynamism and rich diversity producing the global built environment?

Specifically, the case of the port city of Old Calabar in the southeastern corner of present day Nigeria presents a productive case study for architectural theory operating at the historicized periphery. Though scholarship exists documenting Old Calabar’s multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan history as a trade port, it often neglects the importance of architecture in the process of articulating the city’s political and cultural values. The architectural form of “traditional

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compounds”—rectilinear, multi-room, wattle and daub complexes—appears in several written sources though often in dualistic terms. European accounts from the period tend to denigrate and exoticize them, while postcolonial scholars idealize them as unified, communal spaces. Without preserved sites or visual documentation are these compounds mere rhetorical constructions? Complicating matters, the ensemble of spaces constituting Old Calabar’s urban context have often been described as autonomous, decentralized, informal, ad hoc, impermanent, and thus “elusive” from the standpoint of the architectural historian. The presumption of autonomy, however, belies the contested politics and multiple influences organizing these fragmented zones. Incorporating indigenous and European forms, these hybrid spaces of encounter served as instances of what Duanfang Lu has called “entangled modernities”. This paper contends there are historical congruencies in these spatial disjunctures. As historians and designers, we need to expand our vocabulary to accommodate the fragmentary, decentralized spaces of the conventionally understood “periphery”. They resonate, perhaps much more deeply, with contemporary forms of networked architecture than do the centralized boxes, towers, and castles which tend to make up our history books and theory anthologies.

Contemporary accounts of globalization emphasize transnational flows of people, capital, and ideas. Within these narratives, context is eschewed in favor of the logic of connection and flows of transnational capital, but it is important to underscore from which direction these flows occur—from the center to the periphery. The postcolonial urban theorist Ananya Roy suggests that 21st century theorizations must disrupt and de-center these categories. She argues for “dislocating the Euro-American centre of theoretical production; for it is not enough simply to study the cities of the global South as interesting, anomalous, different, and esoteric empirical cases.”² In her view, Roy argues that the center of theory-making must move South in order to recalibrate the geographies of authoritative knowledge. Historically, spaces in the global North are interpenetrated by those from the global South. Relying on these outmoded theoretical models is inadequate for understanding the interdependent dynamics of global flows and disruptions. Moreover, it is pedagogically inadequate to study the peripheral, sidebar courses on “non-Western architecture”. To do so miscalculates the diverse ways centers and peripheries are mutually constituted.

It is worth noting that architectural theory lags behind architectural history in this regard. For decades architectural historians have been concerned with upending the Western canon as the soul narrative for understanding architecture. Textbooks have noticeably shifted from the Eurocentric classics like Bannister Fletcher’s classic *A History of Architecture* to Spiro Kostof’s *A History of Architecture: Setting and Rituals* and Jarzombek, Ching, and Prakash’s *Global History of Architecture*.³ While these more recent volumes are not without their flaws, they do make a concerted effort to be more inclusive, understanding relationships. Architectural theory volumes are strikingly conservative in this regard. Written nearly exclusively from a Euro-American perspective with entries by an overwhelmingly white and male point of view, are volumes by Joan Ockman and K. Michael Hays and more recently the Krista Sykes and Harry Francis Mallgrave.⁴ Only recently have collected volumes begun to think in innovative ways about center and periphery relationships. The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory is one such text which breaks the mold of previous theory anthologies. The guiding themes of the book: interdisciplinarity, cross-cultural frameworks, the economy of reflection and action, and provisional and open-ended investigations, like

this paper share a similar interest in upsetting linear conceptions of the spread of Western modernity. All of these themes are productive starting points for constructing future pedagogical models.⁵ It is the scholarly task of designers, theorists, and historians to elucidate historicized examples of spaces of encounter from the periphery.

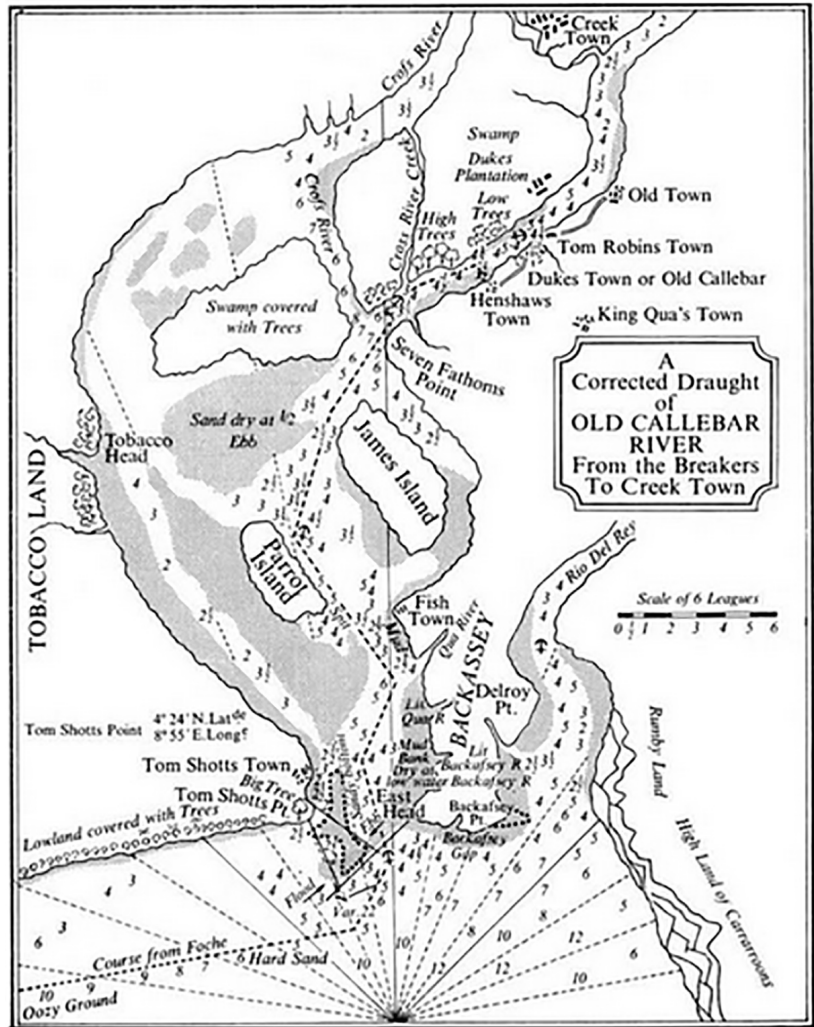
THE CASE OF OLD CALABAR

The environment of Old Calabar, stitched together with a transient network of war canoes transporting goods and slaves between compounds, trading houses, temporary barracoons, and British slaving ships docked in the Calabar River, was intricately linked to the circuits of exchange flowing through the Black Atlantic and the American plantation complex. Old Calabar differed, however, from other slaving ports and colonial cities in that Europeans did not establish territorial authority there for centuries. There were no slave castles or foreign forts—any of the markings of extraterritorial colonial permanence-- in the city at this time. Instead, the ships and towns constituted a polycentric landscape governed by a hybrid form of British maritime finance and Calabar *Ekpe* or leopard society, a male secret confraternity that regulated trade, settled disputes, and served a host of other administrative, ceremonial, and artistic functions. Antera Duke, an African slave trader and high-ranking member in Ekpe documented his daily activities in a diary.

On the morning of January 21st, 1785, Duke walked down to the shore of the Calabar River to advance goods to Captain John Savage of the of the Liverpool slaving ship *Liverpool Hero*. Situated at the crossroads of a vast commercial network, Old Calabar and its several ports-- Duketown, Creek town, Henshaw Town, Old Town-- was a site of intense cultural and economic exchange at the peak of the slave trade in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Figure 1). Antera Duke, who had learned to speak and write in Pidgin trade English, recorded his daily activities and exchanges in a handwritten diary. The next day he wrote:

About 4 a.m. we were in Eyo Willy Honesty's house and we walked up to see Willy Honesty in his yard. He killed one big goat for us. Soon after that we walked up to see our town and took one great gun [cannon] to put in a canoe for two of Egbo Young [Offiong's] men to bring home to Aqua Landing. We went together to Henshaw Town and came back, and at 3 o'clock in the afternoon we and everybody went to "dash" Eyo Willy Honesty's daughter... 1496 rods besides cloth, gunpowder, and iron. We "played" all day before night[fall].⁶

What Duke is describing in his diary is the network of spaces, social ties, customs and ceremonies, which made up his particular socio-cultural milieu. In it we catch a rare glimpse into the mind of eighteenth-century African entrepreneur and a detailed document of his slave brokering activities with several English and African merchants.⁷ In the passage, Eyo Willy's Honesty's house was a prefabricated wooden structure shipped from Europe and one of a variety of trading goods advanced to captains for slaves to be delivered at a later date in a practice called "trust trade".⁸ Pawnship, a system in which individuals are held in debt bondage as collateral for loans, served as another mechanism for guaranteeing credit in this coastal economy.⁹ Willy Honesty's "yard" was one of the several traditional Efik compounds which served as a node in this system of trade. These wattle and daub structures were, like the prefabricated houses, flexible, impermanent spaces, suggestive of the ever-shifting landscape of Old Calabar politics



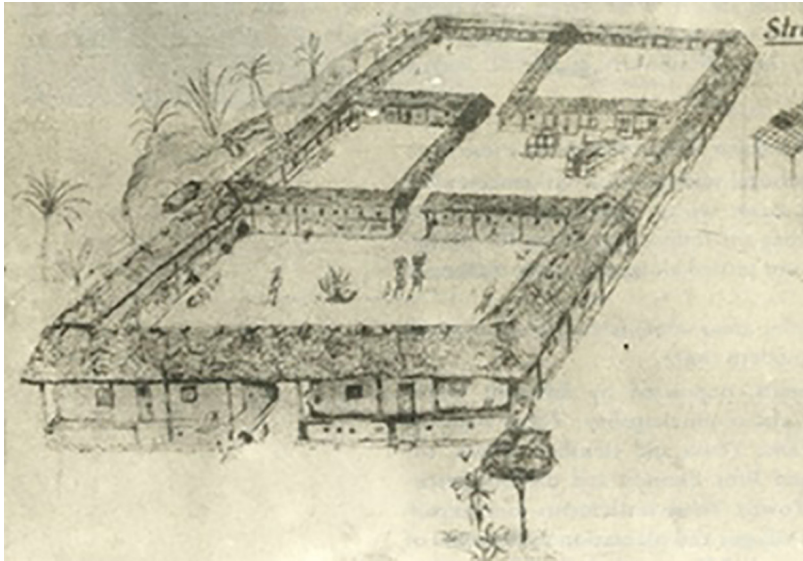
(Figure 2). Inter-ward conflict and market fluctuations in the face of an emerging Atlantic capitalism made for a contentious and unpredictable trade environment.

“We “played” all day” denotes he participated in a ceremonial form of Ekpe masquerade dancing and celebration. As historian Ivor Miller points out, in the absence of a centralized state, each of the dispersed semi-autonomous communities in Old Calabar had its own Ekpe lodge where matters concerning local governance were settled.¹⁰ United by prestige and obligation, Ekpe and its members served as a critical protective mechanism against loss in the expanding eighteenth and nineteenth century slave market. In sum, this assemblage of spaces, people, institutions, and practices constituted a localized, small scale architecture of risk in Old Calabar. Archiving the architecture of this proto-risk society is the focus of this paper.¹¹

ARCHITECTURE AND THE RISK SOCIETY

Underscoring the diverse ways the local and the global intertwine, Ulrich Beck conceptualizes the emergence of a “risk society” as a recent phenomenon. We are moving towards a “new modernity”. He writes of a “new kind of capitalism, a new kind of global order... a new kind of society and personal life in the making.”¹² Moreover, he sees prior conceptualizations of risk insufficient in the face of the global reach of the systemic dangers posed by this new modernity.

Figure 1. “A Corrected Draught of the Old Callebar River” (Source: Bold, Edward. *The Merchant's and Mariner's African Guide*, 1822).



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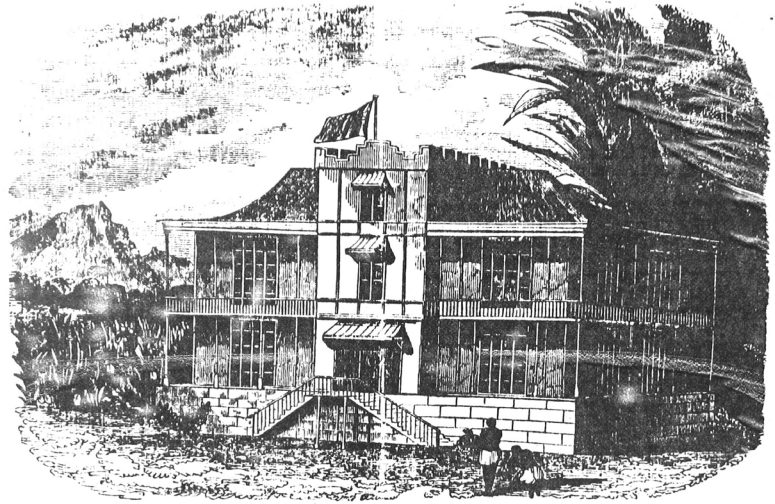
Anthony Giddens sees globalization as a similar break—a process of disembedding in which social relations are lifted out of the local. For Giddens this process starts in Europe and spreads, with other cultures giving way to its center to periphery directional force. Previously “local” space becomes unbound and deterritorialized in this new modernity.

The purpose here is to marshal the concept of the “risk society” as defined by Beck and others, and apply it to a specific historical urban African context to illuminate the productive potentials of dislocating the center of architectural theory temporally and geographically. The paper challenges standard conceptualizations of risk and expands upon them along three interrelated vectors—time, geography, and architectural configuration. Using the decentralized political structure and urban form of Old Calabar as a counterpoint to studies of contemporary architecture and risk, the aim of this paper is to expand and historicize risk. In contrast to the universalism inherent to the risk society perspective, this paper highlights the various ways risk has been mutually constituted by a diverse set of European and non-European actors. In the process, risk as an abstract concept, is deterritorialized and shown to operate as currency of governance and self-governance on the peripheries of empire as much as within their cores.

“Risk design” and the “taming of chance” is at much at work in the shimmering centralized structures of the contemporary neoliberal city as the networked, ad hoc, and temporary spaces at the edges of the eighteenth century slaving economy.

Architectural historian Jonathan Massey’s article analyzing Foster+ Partners’ Gherkin Tower in London compellingly puts forth the concept of “risk design”. Massey argues “By using design to reshape the risk imaginaries associated with climate change, terrorism, and especially financial globalization, 30 St Mary Axe redesigned the City of London’s economy and spatial form.”¹³ The power of Massey’s study is that it displays the ways risk can change the nature and distribution of risk. Using the work of Beck and others, Massey describes how the built environment can leverage risk through neoliberal methods of governing at a distance. Can the concept of risk and design for risk aversion be expanded and be shown to reside in alternative geographies and during other time periods? Preliminary investigations into the historicization of other “neoliberal” built

Figure 2. Traditional Efik compound (Source: National Museum at the Old Residency, Calabar, Nigeria, undated sketch).



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THE IRON PALACE OF KING EYAMBO.

forms such as the free trade zone have been elucidated elsewhere.¹⁴ Is the shift to a risk society as seismic and novel as Beck portrays it? As Jonathan Levy points out in *Freaks of Fortune*, risk does have a history. Born on the deep, “risk” originated in the language of maritime trade. “Risk was first synonymous with marine insurance—a financial instrument for coping with the uncertainty of transporting commercial goods across maritime space.”¹⁵ The Old Calabar slave trade therefore provides an interesting case study for imagining prior manifestations of the risk society.

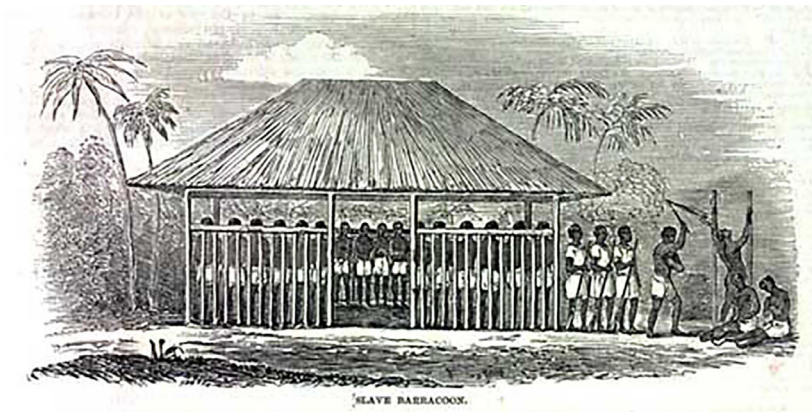
THEORIZING FROM THE TEMPORAL PERIPHERY

Through a methodical scoring of archival documents relating to the slave trade, historians Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson demonstrate how building trust with local merchant houses offered protection against the risk of defaulting on loans. It was an adapted form of British maritime financial practices mixed with the local indigenous titular governing society of Ekpe which facilitated the growth of trade in this part of precolonial Africa. Resonant with a neoliberal market logic, Lovejoy and Richardson argue Old Calabar and its system of merchants and middlemen acted as an example of “transaction cost economizing”. They write, this practice “provides a graphic illustration of how, despite cultural and other differences at the “interface”, financial and commercial innovations allowed cross-cultural trade to flourish in precolonial West Africa.”¹⁶ The evidence of rising slave shipments suggests that British merchants and African dealers in slaves were able to agree on forms of accommodation including pawnship that reduced the risks of advancing credit for the British and allowed African dealers to compete with other groups in the Atlantic world for British commercial capital.¹⁷ As one observer noted in 1790, relatives were “always particularly anxious” about their fate and “seemed much distressed whenever they took up an idea that the ship would sail away with the pawns.”¹⁸ While the risk society perspective tends to universalize and exceptionalize the catastrophic dangers existing in the present moment—climate change, financial crisis, terrorism—Achille Mbembe correctly points out that any historical account of the rise of terror must address the global phenomenon of institutionalized slavery and the plantation complex.¹⁹ Trust, pawnship, slavery, and their associated spaces were integral components of the proto-risk society.

Figure 3. “The Iron Palace of King Eyambo (sic).
King Eyamba’s Iron Palace (Source: *The Builder*,
1843, May 13, 1843, pg. 171).



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The scholarly task of “archiving risk” presents several methodological challenges in the context of Old Calabar. In a foreword to Ugo Nwokeji’s book *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra*, Lovejoy elaborates on these difficulties and adds to them the important point that in the context of writing on the uneasy history of slavery, it seems documenting certain events may not be desirable in some societies. There is a “wall of silence” in the Bight of Biafra about aspects of the past.²⁰ The presence of sources such as Antera Duke’s diary and documentation of slaving journeys is all the more critical. Complicating these matters, and reflective of the multi-ethnic character of this historically cosmopolitan city, scholarly work discussing Calabar’s origins and traditional architectural practices is riven with contesting spatial and temporal claims about issues of land ownership, migration flows, and political figures. Sifting through these frictions, gaps, and silences in the archive makes for a stimulating, yet difficult task of archiving risk in this context.

THEORIZING FROM THE GEOGRAPHIC PERIPHERY

Related to time, geography is another important vector of analysis in the study of Old Calabar as representative of a proto-risk society. Unsettling the space of European origins and hegemony and problematizing the narrative of a unidirectional flow of Western modernity unto uncivilized spaces existing at the peripheries of empire has been the project of several recent scholars. Showing the diverse ways modernist architecture was adopted, modified, interpreted, and contested in different parts of the world has been the subject of many studies.²¹ What emerges is a diagram of a mutually constituted modernity and one forged in the space of colonial encounter, connection, and exchange. Within the hybrid and negotiated risk mitigating mechanisms of British mercantile and traditional

Figure 4. “Old Calabar” (Source: *The Illustrated London News*, 1873, pg. 376).

Figure 5. “Slave Barracoon” (1853) (Source: *The Uncle Tom’s cabin almanack, or, Abolitionist memento*, pg. 51, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division).

ENDNOTES

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6. Behrendt, Stephen D., A.J.H. Latham, and David Northrup, *The Diary of Antera Duke: An Eighteenth Century African Slave Trader* (New York: Oxford University, 2010), 137.
7. Hair, P.E.H., "Antera Duke of Old Calabar: A Little More About an African Entrepreneur", *History in Africa*, vol. 17 (1990). 359-365.
8. Ibid., 361. Hair notes that one Liverpool trader in 1769 kept a "Trust Book". See Simmons, Donald, "An Ethnographic Sketch of the Efik People." In *Efik Traders of Old Calabar*, ed. Daryll Forde, 1-26 (London: Oxford University, 1956).
9. Lovejoy, Paul E. and David Richardson, "Pawns Will Live When Slaves Is Apt to Dye": Credit, Risk and Trust in the Era of the Slave Trade" in *Pawnship, Slavery, and Colonialism in Africa*, edited by Paul E. Lovejoy and Toyin Falola (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003). 71-96.
10. Miller, Ivor. *Voice of the Leopard: African Secret Societies and Cuba* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 5-6.
11. I define "proto-risk society" as a society which shares qualities of, but historically prefigures that of "risk society" defined by Beck.
12. Beck, Ulrich 2000, 81.
13. Jonathan Massey. "The Gherkin: How London's Famous Tower Leveraged Risk and Became an Icon" 05 Nov 2013. *ArchDaily*. Accessed 17 September 2014. <http://www.archdaily.com/?p=445413v>
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16. Lovejoy, Paul E. and David Richardson, "Pawns Will Live When Slaves Is Apt to Dye": Credit, Risk and Trust in the Era of the Slave Trade" in *Pawnship, Slavery, and Colonialism in Africa*, edited by Paul E. Lovejoy and Toyin Falola (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003). 92.
17. Ibid. 75.
18. John Ashley Hall quoted in Lovejoy and Richardson. 89.

Efik Ekpe, risks are reworked and reinscribed in the peripheries and brought back to the metropole. Colonies at the edge of empire have always acted as laboratories-- spaces of experimentation where norms and disciplines were first tested and implemented. This is precisely the argument in Paul Rabinow's *French Modern: Norms and Forms in the Social Environment*. After Foucault, Rabinow views risk from a governmentality perspective, positing that it was in colonial Morocco where France's first comprehensive experimentation in urban planning took place.²²

In the urban context of Old Calabar, "planning" takes on a less centralized role. This can be seen in the prefabricated Iron Palace of King Eyamba V (Figure 3). In this image we see perhaps a more traditional form of architecture, the Iron Palace of King Eyamba the V who ruled over Duketown and Calabar trade networks in the early to mid-1800s, coincidentally, after the time of British abolition of slavery. In the urban context of Old Calabar, "planning" takes on a less centralized role but houses such as this served an important role in conveying an image of wealth, power and prestige. Often these houses were embedded into the compound structures. What existed was a hybrid of traditional and modern architecture which is not conveyed in this image, a rendering made outside of the Calabar context. In it we see an idyllic portrayal of the object in an exotic landscape. The plans are clear of any sense of adaptation or change which necessarily took place in these contexts. Roughly a golden section in plan, the house was and rationally conceived space.

Before its shipment, Layrock and Co. Iron Merchants from Liverpool exhibited this private residence in 1843 to the curiosity of Liverpool citizens.²³ The house, similar to those cited in Antera Duke's diary above, might easily be dismissed as Western imposition on a traditional landscape or an example of what Marshal Berman terms the "modernity of underdevelopment".²⁴ In it, the non-Western subject aspires to and mimics the "genuine" modernity of Europe. In a similar vein, tropical modernists Fry and Drew sneered at its placement within what they saw as a pre-modern, polygamous culture of Calabar. Mark Crinson notes "its status for Fry and Drew seems to be both as a positive precedent for technological advancement and as a negative example of a collusion between western technology and pre-technocratic society, not democratic and certainly not monogamous."²⁵ These characterizations, however, overlook the complex ways in which British merchants were forced to adapt to the laws of Ekpe and negotiate risk in order to facilitate trade. Moreover, they inhabit a nostalgic and paternalistic view of modernity that operates through the dictates of rationality and centralized planning and governance. For better or worse, the frontier spaces at the edge of empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth century more closely correlate to the neoliberal spaces of contemporary "risk society".

DECENTRALIZED SPACES

Lastly, while the timeframe and geography of this research challenge assumptions lurking within the "risk society" hypothesis, another important consideration which sets this research apart from other analyses is the decentralized spatial character of Old Calabar. As mentioned before, the transactive space of the port of Calabar was comprised of an assemblage of impermanent, small-scale, and itinerant enclosures. The built environment of Old Calabar consisted of a mobile web of slaving canoes, compounds, prefabricated houses, temporary barracoons. British slaving ships docked in the Calabar River were intricately

linked to the circuits of exchange flowing through the Black Atlantic and the American plantation complex (Figures 4 and 5). While it is instructive to read the calculated plans of early modernity as machines for the “taming of chance” or as precursors to “reflexive modernity”, the informal urbanisms of sites like Old Calabar serve as prototypes for contemporary forms of streamlined neoliberal urban governance.

While the permanent architectures of empire like the Great Wall of China, the Castel Sant’Angelo, Vauban’s Citadel at Lille, or the slave castles of Africa’s Gold Coast might suggest a longer unfolding history of risk, alternative imaginings could consider the flexibility and maneuverability of neoliberal configurations of the “risk society”. The solid, sometimes militaristic infrastructures conceived by technocrats in strong centralized governments actively worked to mitigate risk, though might we not learn from early modern spatial arrangements that are decentralized, temporary, and suggestive of economy of means necessitated out of market constraints? The ad hoc and mobile architectures of the Biafran slave trade are but one example in a potential catalog of proto-risk society architectures.

Deterritorializing the architecture of a proto-risk society like that of Old Calabar sheds light on the multifarious ways early modernity was constituted. Challenging the teleology put forth by dominant narratives of globalization and risk, the networked architectures of Old Calabar pose a productive alternative imagining. The architectures of risk in Old Calabar confound contemporary conceptualizations of the risk society in three fundamental and interrelated ways. First, the act of archiving risk unsettles the persistent sense of novelty in this fraught concept. Positioning risk in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century challenges the persistent sense of newness associated with the risk society. Secondly, conceptualizing risk at the peripheries of empire rather than the center forces us to think of the complex ways risk is constituted. Hybridized ways of creating access to credit and mitigating risk in the face of the uncertainty of the burgeoning slave economy proved mutually beneficial for both British merchants and indigenous traders in Old Calabar. Lastly, tracing risk through decentralized spatial configurations in this fluctuating urban landscape suggests “the taming of chance” occurs in range of environments and emerges from diverse and varied cultural traditions. So what is at stake in this act of archiving, historicizing these spatial configurations? Why does this matter? It shows how deeply ingrained these ostensibly “neoliberal” conceptions of habitus—learned behaviors, spatial dispositions, and cultural values--- are in some contexts and how they affected Western architectural planning and economic mechanisms. Nigerians on the Biafran coast didn’t suddenly become ultra- independent, individualistic, entrepreneurial, and suspicious of any mechanism which seeks to centralize space, power, and resources. It wasn’t some evil hoisted on them by structural adjustment programs, a shift to flexible accumulation, or even the experience of British colonialism. These of course played a part, but writing off these developments as relatively recent phenomena is a scholarly misstep that covers up the histories of these places. As historians and designers, expanding our vocabulary to reflect the networked and impermanent spaces in Old Calabar can provide a more productive way of understanding the spaces of contemporary globalization. The historicized periphery rather than contemporary “center” marks the terrain of the architectural theory of the future.

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