

Detroit Colony

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Using French Casablanca and colonial exhibitions as case studies, the paper adopts a postcolonial perspective to conceptualize contemporary Detroit as a colony- an exotic zone of experimentation and creative license necessary for the maintenance of architecture disciplinary identity. It's argued the importance in studying these forms of colonial architecture is not simply to provide a more inclusive understanding of architecture or to lament the stereotypical racist representations of colonies in built form, but to underscore the operationalization of difference at particular, situated historical moments. This speculative paper aims to historicize and contextualize seemingly new experiments in architectural and urban form in Detroit. Situating them as part of a longer legacy of colonial urbanism creatively, it re-imagines them not as romantic fantasies or ineffective failures, but as charged, socially produced spaces borne of recurring struggles for power, meaning, and representation in the built environment.

FRONTIER ZONE

Over the course of the last hundred years, the perception of Detroit's industrial landscape has undergone a number of changes in the eyes of architects and planners. Once the center of automotive ingenuity, mass production techniques, and modern factory design, it slowly transformed into an icon of postindustrial failure and decay by the end of the twentieth century. In recent years, the city has once again captured the imagination of artists, designers, and innovators of all kinds. Detroit's urban fringes have been refashioned as spaces of creative experimentation and economic opportunity. Attracting distant entrepreneurial members of the creative class, Detroit has become a frontier zone and staging ground for architectural and urban innovation.¹ Urban farming, experimental house renovations, art exhibits, and sustainable urban interventions have popped up in and around the ruins of the city.² In parallel to these developments, the US Pavilion at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale "The Architectural Imagination" showcases "new speculative architectural projects designed for specific sites in Detroit." Curators Cynthia Davidson and Monica Ponce de Leon selected "twelve visionary American architectural practices to produce new work that

demonstrates the creativity and resourcefulness of architecture to address the social and environmental issues of the 21st century."³

Centuries prior to this revival, European imperial powers expanded their territorial influence to areas in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The age of colonialism was characterized by nations in search natural resources and new markets (buyers of goods) to fuel the burgeoning Industrial Revolution. The economically-driven goals of imperial expansion were always justified by the colonizers' civilizing mission and the benevolent pursuit of knowledge. The colonial city served as a terrain of experimentation in botany, sanitation, medicine, manufacturing, and warfare. But as Fasil Demissie argues, "More than steamboats, machine guns, cameras, and other material objects of colonialism, architecture and urbanism made the empire visible and tangible."⁴ As such, colonial conquest and experimentation on the periphery was always intimately connected to academic institutions and public exhibitions which systematized and broadcast the image of progress to a wider audience in the metropole. The project of imperialism was centrally concerned with the control of space as an efficient means to rule populations and extract resources, but also a field for the staging of difference and the construction of identity and self-representation. While there are numerous historical contexts to examine this dynamic, this paper focuses specifically on the seminal scholarship on French Casablanca by anthropologist Paul Rabinow and historian Gwendolyn Wright and research on colonial exhibitions by political theorist Timothy Mitchell. Rabinow and Wright saw colonies as "laboratories" of spatial experimentation while Mitchell argued colonialism divided the world into two: one part exhibition, one part museum.⁵

After a close analysis of this work, the paper adopts a postcolonial perspective to conceptualize contemporary Detroit as a colony- an exotic zone of experimentation and creative license necessary for the maintenance of architecture disciplinary identity. It's argued the importance in studying these forms of colonial architecture is not to simply provide a more inclusive understanding of architecture or to lament the stereotypical racist representations of colonies in built form, but to underscore the operationalization of difference at particular, situated historical moments. As Edward Said pointed out, "My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence...but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical intellectual, and even economic setting."⁶ The postcolonial study of the colonial city is not a historiographic project which seeks to account for the subaltern subjects who live there, but one which is a necessary part of the understanding the



Figure 1. Henri Prost and Hubert Lyautey; 1914-22; Casablanca, Morocco (Source: *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, Gwendolyn Wright, 90).

mechanisms constituting the centered modern self. As such, this paper is not intended as a critique of the many well-intentioned creative projects in a city struggling with a number of social and economic problems, but a reflection on what role have these experiments had historically on testing new spatial technologies and the constitution of architecture's disciplinary identity. It's a provocation to think more critically and expansively about interventions on urban frontiers of many kinds. What are their potentials and limits? Lastly, this paper doesn't take sides in the understandably heated debate between the organizers and participants of the "Architectural Imagination" exhibition and the members of Detroit Resists. Instead, it sees these two positions as fundamentally different approaches to imagining urban futures consistent with a much longer historical arc of colonial urbanism. This speculative paper aims to historicize and contextualize seemingly new experiments in architectural and urban form in Detroit using two seminal case studies.

CASABLANCA AS SOCIAL LABORATORY

Rabinow's *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* powerfully illustrates the nineteenth century milieu from which modern ideas about statistics, architecture and urban planning emerged. Examining the development of these "social technologies" as a response to a crisis of representation and moral degeneration in the metropole

in the mid-nineteenth century, Rabinow exhibits how the colonies then constituted a "laboratory of experimentation for new arts of government capable of bringing a modern and healthy society into being."⁷ Ostensibly free from the political restraints and social malaise at home, the colonies served as a "trial run" for ideas generated in European institutions like the Musée Social and Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Zoning technologies developed in Tony Garnier's Cité Industrielle became central to the organization of space in the colony and one of the hallmarks of modern planning. Rabinow's focuses his study on figures like Hubert Lyautey, Joseph-Simon Gallieni, Henri Prost, and Michel Ecochard operating at the intersection of biology, architecture and urban planning, attempting to generate new forms of regulating the modern social order. These "technicians of general ideas," conceived of society as an object sui generis and a target of state intervention. Equipped with a pressing faith in progress, they sought to find scientific and practical solutions to public problems. Colonial North Africa in the early twentieth century became just one of these fields of experimentation. On the achievements of these urbanistic test-sites Jean Royer comments, "Urbanism was introduced in France thanks to colonial urbanism."⁸ Gwendolyn Wright argues along similar lines stating that colonies throughout the French-speaking world served as "laboratories", "champs d'expérience" or experimental terrains. Colonies seemed like "unadulterated primitive lands where one could carry out controlled tests" in architectural form-making and urban planning.⁹ These innovative spatial technologies could then be implemented in imperial metropolises like Paris.



Figure 2. Joseph Marrast's Palais de Justice, 1925, Casablanca (Source: *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, Gwendolyn Wright, 115).

Located on the shores of Morocco, Casablanca presented a clear example of French colonial urbanism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Much like France's earlier urban encounters in Algiers, Casablanca was conceived as a dual-city with separate zoning and building codes for the traditional indigenous and European sections. The Moroccan experience, however, represented a political shift for the French in that it was guided from the start by a policy of association rather than assimilation. Assimilation, a policy which asserted the universality of French concepts of formal beauty and the cultural predominance of France's mission civilisatrice was violently demonstrated through the destruction of indigenous cities and towns, a tangible military presence, and the implementation of gridiron plans with explicitly stylized French architecture. Assimilation characterized the colonial cities in Algeria and Indochina in the nineteenth century; however this policy was eventually abandoned on the grounds that it proved to be politically and economically inefficient.¹⁰ In contrast to the "xenophobic architectural pretense" of assimilation was the policy of associationism which explicitly promoted the value of, and often amplified cultural differences between the colonizer and colonized by instituting a self-conscious policy of preserving the localized spatial forms of the indigene.¹¹ A key component to associationism was the policy of preservation. As Shirine Hamadeh argues, the policy of association and the complementary invention of the concept of the "traditional city" was really just a modification of what Edward Said has called Orientalism. Representing the traditional city by preserving it immobilized it and dissociated it from any future process.¹²

Embodied by administrators such as Lyautey and Prost, associationism "insisted on respect for and preservation of distinctive local cultures... and the realization that this respect, when combined with social services

like schools and hospitals, might counter resistance far more effectively than military strength."¹³ As Wright points out, the approach was not entirely new, borrowing much from the English system of colonization and the principle of "indirect rule" using local elite and their existing institutions of power.¹⁴

In 1913, Lyautey chose the Beaux-Arts educated and Grand Prix de Rome winner Henri Prost as the head of urbanism in Morocco. Given the task of creating order out of what was referred to as "an already chaotic situation", Prost's 1914 plan for the city of Casablanca was organized around Haussmann-like boulevards, though he didn't insist on absolute axial symmetry which typically dominated Beaux-Arts plans (Fig. 1). Instead he modified each design to accommodate zoning and topography. He gave strategic importance to the placement of connections between the port and railway stations, in between which he placed commercial and economic zones. Following the commercial centers and fortification zones surrounding Paris he had studied at the Musée Social, the Moroccan version of the "fortif" zone culminated in Prost's open zones of non edificandi between the medinas and villes nouvelles, or new towns.¹⁵ According to Wright, the term *cordon sanitaire* suggests the health precautions inherent in this familiar colonial policy of separation.¹⁶ The circulation pattern of broad radial and peripheral boulevards of Prost's master plan facilitated movement between these districts.¹⁷ As Jean Dethier explains, Lyautey imposed three rules from the start: separation of the medinas and European quarters, protection of the traditional Moroccan heritage, and a new style of town planning for Europeans.¹⁸ As though to later confirm the success of this segregationist policy, Parisian art critic Léandre Vaillat described the city as "a laboratory of Western life and a conservatory of oriental life."¹⁹

The public Grand'Place, an exemplification of French associationism, was a key element in Prost's plan for Casablanca. It maintained a collection of governmental structures meant to architecturally express French authority and munificence in Morocco. Prost's guidelines stipulated the use of indigenous Moroccan ornament in a "restrained but impressive manner" and that French architects design the various buildings to "generate a pleasing sense of vitality." The initial work was carried out on a tight budget so Prost resorted to what he called an "architecture of surface." The expression of this policy are evidenced in the detailing of Adrien Laforque's Central Post Office and Joseph Marrast's Palais de Justice (Fig. 2). In each case the details, according to Wright are "distinctly Islamic", but their symmetrical organization as well as the axial site plan asserted French control of the setting and institution.²⁰

One of the clearest demonstrations of associationism's spatial consolidation of difference and techno-cosmopolitanism's incorporation of local traditions at the scale of the building is Albert Laprade's 1918 architectural ensemble in the *habous* (religious foundation) quarter of Casablanca. This "new medina" located at the outskirts of the city, was conceived as a district to accommodate the growing Muslim population which had overrun Prost's previous growth estimates. Clandestine *bidonvilles* built by laborers and the old medina in the city center could no longer contain the pressures exerted by this expanding population.



Figure 3. Albert Laprade's 1918, habous quarter, Casablanca (Source: *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, Gwendolyn Wright, 158).

The habous quarter was intended to explore “the interconnections of forms, social practices, and historically sedimented values.”²¹ For example, the seclusion of women in courtyards and the shielding of family life from the street determined the arrangement of houses. As a design, the quarter was a Disneyfied Western stage-set complete with neo-Moorish façades (Fig. 3). The concern for aesthetic treatments to produce an exoticized, romantic representation of Muslim life revealed colonialism’s tendency to freeze economic and political development for natives in a picturesque representation.²² The habous was conceived not simply as a functioning traditional neighborhood but as a zone spatially and temporally separate from the modern European districts. It was a fictive representation of a timeless essence of the Orient ossified into the landscape. To emphasize the novelty and experimental quality of this approach at the time, it is worth noting that the thematization of zoned neighborhoods-- the “*unite de voisinage*”, although practiced by American planners, was not yet an element of French urbanism during this period.²³ The experimental urban terrains in cities like Casablanca served as critical testbeds for new forms of architectural and urban space-making. Just as important as these built spaces were the spaces of representation constructed in the colonial exhibitions of the time.

WORLD AS EXHIBITION

Timothy Mitchell’s *Colonising Egypt* provides a compelling account of British imperialism in nineteenth century Egypt integrating a rigorous theorization of representation’s role in constructing and maintaining colonial power relations and producing modern identity. Rather than

distinct processes separated by geographic and cultural difference, the experience of modernity and colonialism are conceived by Mitchell as co-constitutive. While the imperial world order was unfolding, there was an attempt to re-order Egypt to appear as a world “enframed.” Mitchell writes, “Egypt was to be ordered up as something object-like. In other words, it was made picture-like and legible, rendered available to political and economic calculation.”²⁴ The whole project was built on establishing this abstract, constructed order and depicting it as an uncontested objective fact. The point is not that there existed some sort of misrepresentation (as argued by Marx), but that this “world-as-exhibition” promises a truth that lies outside its world of material representation. World Exhibitions such as those in Paris in 1889 functioned simultaneously as stages for showcasing Western progress and innovation and displaying the strange, fanciful, exotic elements (however fictitiously constructed) of the colonial periphery.²⁵ In contrast to French portion of the exhibition, the Egyptian exhibit is represented as a caricatured world, frozen, museumified in the past. Mitchell writes:

The Egyptian exhibit had also been made carefully chaotic. In contrast to the geometric lines of the rest of the exhibition, the imitation street was laid out in the haphazard manner of the bazaar (Fig. 4). The way was crowded with shops and stalls, where Frenchmen dressed as Orientals sold perfumes, pastries, and tarbushes. To complete the effect of the bazaar, the French organisers had imported from Cairo fifty Egyptian donkeys, together with their drivers and the requisite number of grooms, farriers, and saddle-makers. (Fig. 5) The donkeys gave rides for the price of one franc up and down the street, resulting in a clamour and confusion so life-like, the director of the exhibition was obliged to issue an



Figure 4. Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1889: the Egyptian exhibit. (Source: *Colonising Egypt*, Timothy Mitchell, 3).



Figure 5. Donkey drivers on the Rue du Caire, Paris, 1889 (*Revue de l'Exposition universelle de 1889*, vol. 1). (Source: *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs*, Zeynep Çelik, 77).

order restricting the donkeys to a certain number at each hour of the day.

The Egyptian visitors were disgusted by all this and stayed away. Their final embarrassment had been to enter the door of the mosque and discover that, like the rest of the street, it had been erected as what the Europeans called a *fagade*. 'Its external form as a mosque was all that there was. As for the interior, it had been set up as a coffee house, where Egyptian girls performed dances with young males, and dervishes whirled.'²⁶

The construction of the world-as-exhibition was a critical vector in the identity formation of the modern French state. Mitchell's book builds on Said's insight, arguing the Oriental other is not merely peripheral but indeed necessary to the construction of Western modern self. Colonising Egypt's contribution though is its demonstration of how thoroughly spatialized this process is by providing incredibly lucid analyses of nineteenth century world exhibitions, schools, department stores, and cafes, but also the construction of the modern city itself. In describing the segregated "compartmentalized" modern city, Mitchell writes, "The identity of the modern city is created by what it keeps out. Its modernity is something contingent upon the exclusion of its opposite... the city is dependent upon maintaining the barrier that keeps the other out. This makes the outside, the Oriental, paradoxically an integral part of the modern city."²⁷ Further, historian Zeynep Celik astutely notes that as temporary installations, the national pavilions could be French colonial planning in Casablanca in the early twentieth century and the

Egyptian Exhibition at the 1889 World Exhibition in Paris. Of course there are several differences in this comparison, but some of the similarities challenge assumptions about conceptions fundamental to the discipline of architecture such as progress, novelty, modern and traditional, core and periphery. First, progress is not a linear process. Historical change undergoes unpredictable inclines and declines with unintended consequences. While Detroit once epitomized faith in technology and modern progress, it was unhinged by larger economic forces beyond its control. Once a center of innovation it developed into a degraded ruin seemingly peripheral to the global economy. It now can be seen as a laboratory of experimentation once again as the creative class reimagines its urban future. Unlike the extra-territorial colonial outposts of French colonialism, Detroit exists as an internalized colony within the boundaries of the US nation state.

Exhibitions like the "Architectural Imagination" pavilion operate in ways similar to the World Exhibitions of the nineteenth century. They operate with by constructing dual images of the world. The image of modernity and progress is contrasted to a degraded, primitive other. In the case of the colonial exhibition, the chaotic, traditional, Egyptian forms contrasted the innovative technologies and crisp lines of the French exhibition. The Egyptian exhibit was represented, as a timeless entity permanently museumified contrasted to the dynamic progress of French modernity. Of course these were staged fictions, but nonetheless played a part in the construction of the modern urban self. Likewise, in its use of the specific sites in Detroit as staging grounds for "exciting future possibilities" posed by elite visionary designers, the organizers of

the “Architectural Imagination” reenact the static/dynamic, backwards/progressive binaries staged in the colonial exhibition. In their critique, Detroit Resist cites specifically the colonial language utilized by the organizers of the US pavilion. Like the disgusted Egyptian visitors to the World Exhibition of 1889, their op-ed argues:

In staging an exhibition of speculative architectural projects as a gift of “a high level of architectural design and language” to Detroit’s residents, we hear the echo of civilizing missions whose colonial authority is cast as educative and morally uplifting; in the claim that the exhibition of these projects “empowers citizens,” we see the imagination of an abject citizenry with no capacity to empower themselves.²⁹

Another similarity these exhibitions share are their intimate ties with academic institutions in the production of authoritative knowledge. Colonial experiments and exhibitions in the French context were products of the institutions like the Musée Social and Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Likewise, the “Architectural Imagination” is closely linked to architecture schools like Princeton University and the University of Michigan. The material produced for the exhibition was not for “concrete solutions”, however, like previous colonial experiments the projects contained within served a critical role in the construction of architecture’s disciplinary identity.

These spaces are not isomorphic with those constructed during the era of high colonialism, however aspects of Detroit’s urban experimentations were prefigured by the colonial urbanism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Detroit colony is not a spatial experiment carried out on foreign peoples in a distant land, but one which performs as an internalized colony. The alien subjects are not exotic others of a distant territory, but the contemporary colonized other of those left behind by the processes of neoliberal globalization and institutional racism like the members of Detroit Resists. Like the “experimental terrains” of colonial conquest, the spaces of Detroit present an ostensibly blank slate for economic development and creative speculation. As noted in one blog, the construction of zones of development in Detroit like the recent Dequindre Gap, a 1.2-mile pedestrian and bicycle path that replaces a disused rail line in an industrial area, connects two viable zones of activity in the city (the renovated riverfront; Eastern Market). With a “zone specifically designed as an experiment in living”, designers implicitly repeat the tactics (non edificandi and cordon sanitaire) of colonial urbanists operating in different circumstances hundreds of years prior.³⁰ Like Rem Koolhaas’s profoundly optimistic speculations on the informal urban infrastructure and “self-organizing” principles of Lagos, Nigeria, the discursive logic of Detroit’s struggles and potentials are render the city “so bad it’s good”.³¹ Rather than embrace either side of this contentious debate, it is perhaps most productive to understand Detroit colony as actively situated at what Ananya Roy calls the “impossible space between the hubris of benevolence and the paralysis of cynicism”.³² Situating the real and imagined projects put forth in contemporary Detroit as part of a longer legacy of colonial urbanism creatively re-imagines them not as romantic fantasies or ineffective failures, but as charged, socially produced spaces borne of recurring struggles for power, meaning, and representation in the built environment.

ENDNOTES

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