Archival Ambivalences
Modernity, Coloniality, Architecture

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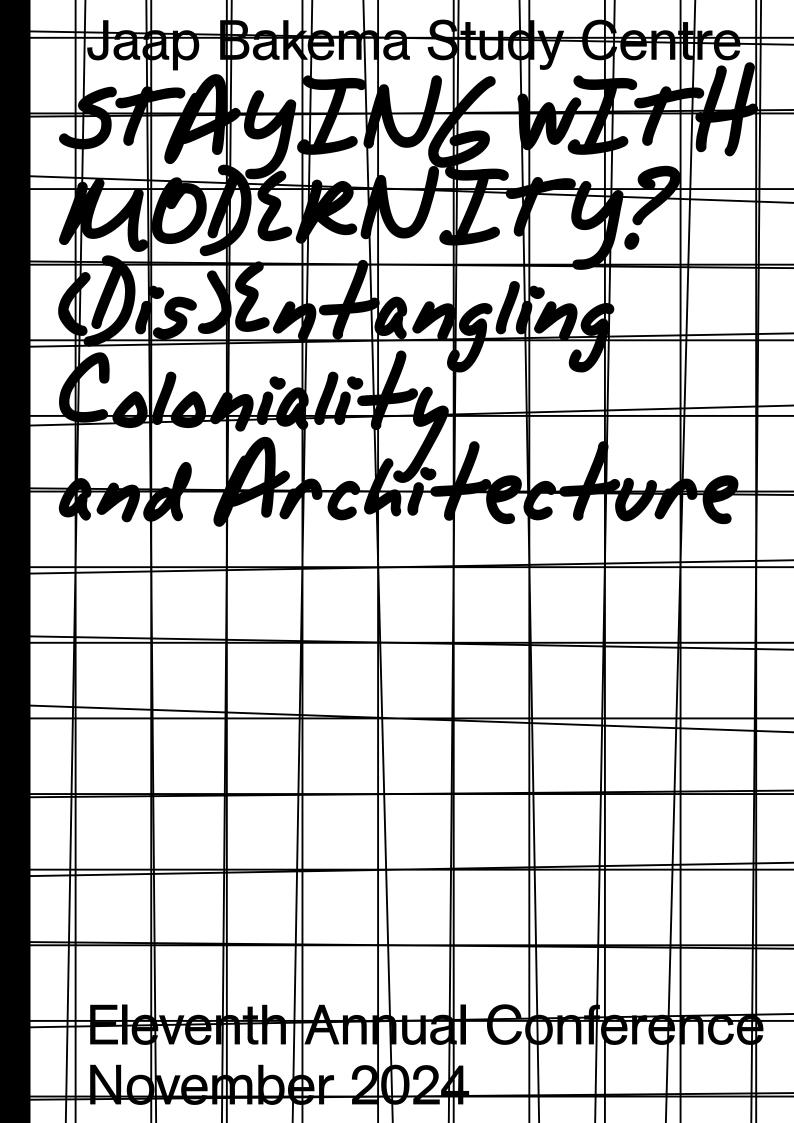**Important note**
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Jaap Bakema Study Centre

STAYING WITH MODERNITY? (Dis)Entangling Coloniality and Architecture

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Brinkman & Van der Vlugt, Van Nelle factory, Rotterdam, 1931. Factory built for the processing of tobacco, coffee, and tea. Photographer unknown. Image source: Collection Nieuwe Instituut, archive TENT p1.

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Archival Ambivalences: Modernity, Coloniality, Architecture

The combination of the three terms–architecture, coloniality and modernity– has turned out to be a most productive research field. Among its results it counts a growing library of new and innovative research, which aims to re-assess established histories and theories to open the discourse for hitherto unheard and overlooked voices, as well as new conceptual frameworks and methodologies. Scholars in the field know that such reassessment is easier said than done. Despite this productivity, the structures of our institutions are also quite tenacious, even when one can observe signs of change. The struggles around those terms are not just related to power and the control over the discourse. They are particularly sensitive, since they concern issues of historical and archival justice, and who decides about that. Next to identity issues, value systems are brought into the equation; neutrality is neither possible nor accepted. More than before, positionality and relationality have become key aspects of research practices regarding their validity and criticality.

In terms of self-positionality, it is important to underscore that in Delft and Rotterdam, at the university and the museum, we are working from within the systems themselves. From academic and cultural institutions, with their libraries, exhibition spaces and archives. Despite the rigidity of the institutional context, this awareness also comes with the realisation that people can be agents of change, if they know how to create space for renegotiation and rebalancing. These issues aren't exclusively limited to abstract structures, it is also about actors and their agency. This is one of the goals of the conference: to share experiences and lessons about how one can successfully redirect one's activities with an impact on research and institutional routine, a matter of practicality, and one of empowerment. The experience gained thus far with such a project of redirecting has also made clear that everyday practice within those institutionalised places comes with feelings of ambivalence. In the first place this ambivalence stems from the need to relentlessly work with the stubborn logic of the archive and the wider institution, while simultaneously countering it. This touches every aspect of institutional work, from staffing and funding to acquisition policies, inventorising and metadata, research conventions, organising public access, and exhibition programmes. The whole 'apparatus' all too often underlines the Foucauldian idea of a discipline indeed, where knowledge and power are closely intertwined in a proverbial knot, impossible to untangle.

AMBIVALENCES

Such ambivalence also sits at the heart of the programme of the Jaap Bakema Study Centre, with a special focus on topics related to architecture and modernity, including welfare state policies, the related notions of democracy and planning, and the way architecture accommodates and shapes social relations. Against this background, Bakema himself raised the question of how architecture can contribute to an open society, not as a recipe or simple solution, but as a project which remains unfinished. Considering today's reassessment of contested histories of modern architecture, one might–and should–ask: open to whom exactly? And at what or whose costs? How democratic and liberal can a welfare state be, if it is–for instance–built on economic extraction of the Global South or the Majority World, including former colonies?

Bakema's ideas for an open society, shared with Team 10 members and many other contemporaries, arose from the experience of the Second World War. In the discussions on the future of architecture and planning thereafter, architects and planners had to come to terms with a new global condition, not only marked by the geopolitics of the Cold War, but also by an accelerating modernisation, of growing cities and urbanising regions. Complete countries, even continents were replanned. Along the decolonisation of the old European empires, a new wave of extractionist and exploitative economics went hand in hand with both welfare state policies as pursued by the new nations and the occurrence of neocolonial practices, with architecture and city planning as crucial tools and vehicles giving direction to this mid-twentieth century global condition. How then to assess the claims made by modern and modernist architects for progress and emancipation, their promise for a project of enlightened universalism?

This ideologically charged criticism of modernism is not new as such. Within the Western world, neo-marxists and liberal postmodernists alike have highlighted the close interrelations between late capitalism on the one hand and modern architecture and planning on the other. Their names are quite familiar, with Manfredo Tafuri, Colin Rowe and Charles Jencks among the best-known authors. Through Marshall Berman's work *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, and Hilde Heynen's interpretation of it for architecture, modernity became the key term to reframe the history and theory of architecture, not as a call for action, but as the descriptive denominator of an inescapable societal condition.

INTERSECTIONALITY

The current debates around coloniality, architecture and planning reignite those older discussions with a vengeance. Today, decolonising theory seems more impactful than the earlier postcolonial discourse, which largely left the architecture debate untouched. Decolonising debates have gained poignancy among others by their connection with new theories derived from Black femininist intersectionality. Intersectionality–famously introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw–recognises multiple specific systems of exclusion and marginalisation simultaneously at work, beyond universalist Marxist analyses of economy and class, and it has become a powerful tool to expose the gaps and deficiencies of what one in the Western world considers a democratic, egalitarian and just society.

When deployed in the archive, the tool of intersectionality is sharp as a razor. Architecture itself is already an index of unequal power distribution, the architecture archive even more so. It is therefore also a self-defeating, negative tool: looking for lost voices trying to salvage other stories, one might get overwhelmed by the silence in the archive and the way it resonates with past and present power relations. Such experience of how the archive is a document of absence constitutes another element of the ambivalence surrounding the calls for compelling institutional change and archival justice. It can be argued that after postmodernism in the 1970s and '80s, today, the combination of coloniality and intersectionality theory once again brings a profound revision of the history of Western modern architecture and planning, including their tenets.

When furthermore combined with the issues of climate change and ecology, including new and other epistemological traditions from these fields, a perfect storm seems to have gathered over western modernity and assumed progressive values. So where to begin? How to start countering this and make such ambivalence also productive? How to reverse the colonial gaze and how–indeed–to open the archive and achieve a more inclusive and regenerative approach?

COLONIALITY IN THE ARCHIVE

For the Jaap Bakema Study Centre and its activities, the urge to shift one's perspective comes among others from the ongoing research into the collection of the Nieuwe Instituut, most notably recent histories of Dutch Structuralism, and related archives, especially the Aldo and Hannie van Eyck archive. The Van Eycks together with important figures like Herman Hertzberger and Bakema already attempted to shift the colonial gaze away from Eurocentrism, to expand the horizon of Western thinking based on rationalism. Anthropology and the first postcolonial critiques redirected their thinking. Their libraries included key works by Franz Boas, Frantz Fanon, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Claude-Lévi Strauss and many more. At the same time, from today's point of view the conclusion seems inescapable that forms of exoticising remain prevalent in their conceptualisation of the non-Western contributions. For instance, Van Eyck's famous account of the Dogon people and their achitecture and culture in Mali–as beautiful and poetic as his interpretation is–can also be considered a form of cultural extraction, in which the Dogon and the journey to Africa serve as an

idealised, even fictionalised, example of human culture in service of a form of self-criticism of Western thinking at home.

The conference therefore locates the questions of modernity and coloniality in architecture within the archives and institutional memory, and seeks to acknowledge the inherent ambivalences to arrive at a new productivity. In the Call for Papers, we proposed three approaches to discuss ways of countering the power logic of archives and institutions: to embrace, to dismantle, and to pluralise.

First, it is crucial to stay with the problems of modernity, and their messiness. We are keen to learn from exploring the inherent paradoxes of open societies and welfare state arrangements in relation to the emergence of global economies as part of (neo)colonial networks, Cold War geopolitics, liberal world trade systems and their concomitant flows of exchange and migration. More speculatively, what role can archives and institutions of knowledge and of culture play in the future to address the ongoing legacies of colonialism which constitute the fabric of contemporary societies? We'd very much like to make the ambivalences of the archive and of the contested modernities productive here, to understand what was at stake at the time, to reflect on what can and should be done today.

Second, it is necessary to insist on the dismantling and reassessing of established histories. How might the history of modernism in architecture, its aspirations and legacies, be re-read and re-written? Such a practice of re-reading–time and time again–of the discipline of architecture and its histories and theories from the perspective of colonialism remains adamant, all in order to recharge the ongoing struggles for emancipation and justice. Such scrutinising of architectural archives aims to shed light on the often neglected spatial and material dimensions of colonial processes, as modernism is reassessed with due regard for its role within the colonial matrix of power. It is this sort of consistent and critical re-reading, which will advance the unfinished modern project. Paradoxically, it is only through such acts of de- and reconstruction, that central tenets of modernity– justice, equal rights, knowledge and how to use knowledge, and so forth and so on–can regain new power and proper validity.

Third, we need to pluralise history and theory beyond Western epistemologies. A multitude of histories might build up into what Arturo Escobar called the pluriverse. Decentring and 'provincialising' the Western gaze will help to rewrite shared histories, bring out new epistemological frameworks, and their interconnectedness. By advocating for a diversity of ways of thinking (and feeling and doing), we seek to resituate archives and institutional practices, to rebalance discursive power, knowledge production and evidence validation.

THE PLURI-ARCHIVE

What one sees in the papers developed for this conference is a vast range of possible responses to these questions. Author-based approaches are traded for network analyses, human-centred discourse makes way for tracing material cultures and agencies, established canons are amended and complemented with participatory and activist heritage practices. Clearly, one common insight shared by the participants is to rethink the archive not as something static, but as dynamic and alive. The archive is not just the objects sitting in the depots. We need to think of the archive itself as something relational and performative: it is the ways how we work with the archive and its objects and documents, that will bring out the change we seek, how we connect one archive with another, one practice with many more, one voice with a multitude of voices. History becomes recharged, one history turns out to hold a multitude of histories. It is in this way that the archive won't remain an index of oppression, or even its tool, it becomes a connector, from one history to other histories, broader and richer. The archive becomes a layered pluri-archive, source and resource for regeneration of a spectrum of knowledges and experiences.