

Architecture as an Instrument of Colonial Power

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Abstract Colonial architecture and urban planning have historically served as potent tools for asserting dominance and enforcing social hierarchies within colonized regions. This paper examines the multifaceted role of architecture in colonial power structures, focusing on its applications in urban planning and design during the French colonial era, with insights applicable to broader colonial contexts. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies, this study explores how urban spaces were strategically designed to reinforce segregation, alienate indigenous populations, and symbolize colonial authority. The research method involves a critical analysis of case studies from Algiers and Hanoi, as well as a review of key texts including Gwendolyn Wright's *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* and Davide Ponzini's *Transnational Architecture and Urbanism*. These sources illuminate how colonial administrators adapted European planning models and integrated transnational architectural influences to craft spaces of both dominance and cultural negotiation. Findings reveal that while colonial architecture functioned as a mechanism of control, indigenous communities subverted its intent through cultural adaptations and repurposing of spaces. Additionally, the hybridization of colonial and local architectural styles highlights the complexities of power, negotiation, and resilience in colonized urban landscapes. This study underscores the enduring impact of colonial urban planning on contemporary cities, where spatial inequalities and inherited architectural forms persist. It advocates for postcolonial urban planning approaches that prioritize inclusivity and cultural representation, transforming colonial legacies into equitable urban environments. These insights hold significant implications for architects, urban planners, and policymakers seeking to reconcile historical imbalances and foster socially cohesive communities.

Index Terms— *othering, mimicry, ambivalence, hybridity, spatial segregation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Architecture and urban planning are indispensable tools for expressing cultural and political ideologies and values [1]. At the same time, they are expressions of control, as the power to make such decisions lies with those who hold authority. In a colonial context, architecture was not only a means of establishing infrastructure but also a powerful instrument to assert control and define social hierarchies within the fabric of colonized cities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As Gwendolyn Wright explores in *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, French colonial authorities deliberately shaped urban landscapes in their colonies to project an image of superiority and control [2]. This approach involved the imposition of European aesthetics upon colonial cities, reinforcing the cultural and political

authority of the colonizers over the indigenous populations. French urbanism thus became a declaration of power, designating colonial territories as spaces of "civilization" while frequently sidelining local architectural traditions.

Bill Ashcroft's *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* introduces a critical framework for understanding these dynamics. Through spatial segregation and monumental architecture, colonial authorities positioned themselves as the standard, framing local communities as outsiders in their own lands [3]. This deliberate spatial division underscores how architecture not only reinforced colonial authority but actively embodied and perpetuated this hierarchy, creating an everyday experience of division for the colonized.

The transnational exchange of architectural ideas, as explored by Davide Ponzini in *Transnational Architecture and Urbanism*, adds another dimension to this analysis of colonial urbanism. Ponzini notes that colonial architecture often integrated local influences with the aesthetic preferences of the colonizers, resulting in hybrid urban landscapes that encapsulated both transnational and colonial

influences [4]. These transnational elements reveal the complexity of colonial architecture as both a tool of dominance and a space for cultural negotiation, where local and foreign architectural practices intersected in nuanced ways.

From these perspectives, we see that colonial architecture was never simply a passive backdrop; it was a deliberate and calculated extension of power, a means to reshape the social landscape and communicate authority. Colonial cities were constant reminders of who held power and how that power was embedded in the structure of daily life. Examining these aspects of colonial urban planning provides insights into how architecture has historically functioned as a cultural tool, subtly but powerfully transforming societies and setting foundations that resonate in contemporary urban spaces.

III. METHOD

The paper is based on several references that provide a comprehensive overview of the topic and the necessary depth of information. The first step was to gain a broad understanding of the subject area, focusing on key terms and definitions essential for engaging in a discourse within postcolonial studies. Initial efforts involved drafting a framework of definitions to create clarity and a solid foundation for further exploration.

These definitions were then contextualized and connected to insights derived from the books and articles I read, which provided additional depth and direction. Through this process, the initial approach evolved, refining the focus and allowing for a deeper analysis of the lasting influences of the colonial era.

The structure of the work emerged progressively. The introduction addresses the significance of understanding postcolonial influences, emphasizing their enduring presence in contemporary contexts. Following this, a theoretical framework is established by defining critical terms and concepts. These include notions of identity, power dynamics, and cultural heritage within postcolonial studies, enriched by references to foundational texts.

The analysis then examines specific case studies or examples that illustrate these influences in action. By contextualizing historical legacies within modern systems, the paper reveals both visible and subtle continuities of colonial structures. Furthermore, the study reflects on the immense complexity of addressing such issues, stressing the importance of a sensitive and nuanced approach.

Finally, the research identifies key takeaways and opportunities for engaging with this topic responsibly, acknowledging the need for a thorough and empathetic understanding of its multi-layered nature. The insights gained aim to foster awareness and highlight the necessity of deliberate consideration in addressing the complexities of postcolonial legacies.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Postcolonial Concepts

Postcolonial theory offers essential concepts for understanding how colonial architecture operated as a tool of dominance. Bill Ashcroft's *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* introduces terms like "othering," "hegemony," "hybridity," "ambivalence," and "mimicry" that illuminate the cultural and social dynamics behind colonial urban design.

A foundational concept, "othering," describes the colonial tactic of casting local populations as inherently different from and subordinate to the colonizers. The colonial system was meant to eventually make an improvement for the "other" (the colonized) and, in theory, eventually gain the status set by the colonizer, but in reality, it was endlessly deferred [3]. In urban planning, this was achieved through segregated neighborhoods that separated European quarters from indigenous areas. These spatial divisions reinforced a visible social hierarchy within the city, embedding the notion of "the other" directly into the urban landscape.

The concept of "hegemony" refers to the subtle imposition of dominance through consent rather than force. This was achieved through convincing other social classes that the ruling class's interests were the interests of all. So, domination was not exerted by force but more subtly by having power over the economy, state apparatuses, and media [3]. Colonial architecture often exercised this kind of control through its monumental forms and strategic placement. Government buildings and other colonial structures were designed to evoke authority and stability, cultivating a sense of order that encouraged compliance and acceptance of colonial rule as a permanent presence in the everyday lives of the colonized [3].

"Mimicry" is the process by which the colonized attempt to imitate the colonizer but, in doing so, create a blurred or partial copy of colonial culture. The result of "mimicking" the colonizers' cultural habits and values never results in a simple reproduction of these traits. Mimicry represents a crack in the total authority the colonizers try to achieve [3]. In architecture, this might involve local elites adopting European styles or construction techniques, producing buildings that appear colonial but subtly differ. This mimicry both acknowledges colonial influence and exposes the limitations of its complete adoption.

"Ambivalence," meanwhile, describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that defines the colonizer-colonized relationship. Local communities often felt both drawn to and resistant toward colonial practices and aesthetics. In theory, thus, the colonial relationship is always ambivalent; it generates its own destruction. In the example of Charles Grant, who tried to impose Christian beliefs on Indians but worried they would become "too turbulent for liberty," his solution was to produce a partial

reform within empty British manners [5] This demonstrates the conflict inherent in such relationships. It creates an ambivalent situation that disrupts the monolithic power structure [3].

Finally, "hybridity" refers to the blending of colonial and indigenous elements, resulting in structures that combined both influences in unique ways [3]. Rather than fully imposing colonial forms, some buildings integrated local materials or motifs, creating a hybrid style that reflected both foreign dominance and local adaptation.

These concepts—othering, hegemony, mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity—reveal how colonial urban spaces were more than functional; they were embedded with intentions to control and reshape social relations. Architecture became a cultural tool, used to assert authority but also transformed by the complexities of cross-cultural exchange.

B. Colonial Politics in Architecture

In *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, Gwendolyn Wright examines how French colonial policies explicitly shaped urban planning to establish and maintain social hierarchies. French colonial administrators viewed cities as tools for projecting European superiority, organizing urban spaces to reinforce their authority while simultaneously segregating local populations. This approach, detailed by Wright, prioritized the creation of "civilized" environments that were visibly distinct from indigenous spaces, embedding a sense of order aligned with European ideals [2]. The urban layout often positioned government buildings, military installations, and European-style neighborhoods as the city's core, relegating local communities to the periphery. This exclusion from the urban center reinforced feelings of marginalization among indigenous populations, increasing tensions between colonizers and the colonized as social and physical boundaries reinforced each other.

In her case studies of Algiers and Hanoi, Wright further illustrates how these policies manifested in practice. French planners in Algiers imposed a European-style grid system that visually and functionally separated European settlers from the local Algerian population, shaping daily interactions and reinforcing the divide. By intruding into sacred buildings, the French occupied mosques for their military [2]. This act sent a message to locals that their sacred buildings, being occupied by the military, were now equalized and subordinated to colonial authority. In Hanoi, French authorities introduced a city layout that contrasted heavily with local architecture, creating a spatial hierarchy that emphasized colonial dominance and minimized indigenous presence. With buildings like the Hanoi Cathedral or the Hanoi Opera House, the French imposed themselves through an extravagant and disproportionate architectural style that even left European settlers with concerns [2]. Such arrangements marked these cities as statements of French control, making social distinctions visible in the physical environment and contributing to a sense of alienation among indigenous communities.

C. Transnational Influence on Colonial Urbanism

Davide Ponzini's *Transnational Architecture and Urbanism* offers a perspective on how colonial architecture was not solely European but also shaped by transnational influences. This approach recognized that colonial architecture emerged from exchanges between the colonizers and local cultures, producing a distinctive blend. As Ponzini explains, transnational interactions often resulted in architectural hybrids that reflected both colonial aspirations and adaptations to local conditions [4]. These designs incorporated elements from the indigenous architectural vocabulary, whether through materials, spatial organization, or decorative details, subtly blending European and local styles.

Ponzini's case studies on French colonial cities highlight these exchanges. In certain urban areas of North Africa and Southeast Asia, French colonial buildings displayed architectural features borrowed from local traditions, whether for practical climate adaptation or to appeal to local elites. In this way, transnationalism softened the colonial imprint, making architecture in these colonies neither entirely foreign nor fully indigenous [4]. These hybrid structures illustrate the complexities of colonial architecture as a space of both dominance and negotiation, where colonial and local influences merged to create unique urban forms.

D. Case Study of French Colonial Cities

French colonial urban planning was deeply intertwined with the goals of establishing control and asserting cultural dominance over local populations. Gwendolyn Wright, in *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, explores how urban planning in French colonies across North Africa and Indochina served as a tool to organize, control, and display colonial authority [2]. French planners designed cities with distinct European features, arranging streets, public spaces, and buildings in ways that reflected European order and aesthetics. This structured design aligned with colonial goals by visually and functionally reinforcing the presence of colonial power.

In cities such as Casablanca and Saigon, Wright notes how French administrators introduced architectural features like wide boulevards, grid layouts, and centralized administrative districts [2]. These design elements facilitated the smooth operation of colonial governance and economic control, ensuring clear separation between the colonial center and local quarters. The carefully arranged urban spaces not only facilitated surveillance and regulation but also fostered a sense of authority and control that subtly extended into the lives of the colonized populations. This layering of European urban features over indigenous environments created cities that clearly communicated the values and dominance of the colonial regime.

The following provides a more specific example of colonial transformation in Saigon.

Vietnam had long been home to majestic religious and imperial complexes, yet these were not primarily urban civilizations. The majority of the population led rural lives. The different regions of the country brought significant variation in settlement patterns, often defined by specialized

trades. These settlements comprised smaller, closed communities, each functioning as an independent republic with its own shrines and traditions. Land was owned and worked communally.

In 1859, France invaded Cochinchina and captured Saigon's citadel. The outward-lying settlements were burned and destroyed in the process. The French then rebuilt the area, transforming it to accommodate Europeans. These early constructions were crude in both material and representation. A grand plan was later envisioned by Colonel Coffyn—a name that, by a grotesque coincidence, mirrors the destruction he planned for Saigon's vernacular architecture. He envisioned a colonial city spanning 2,500 hectares and housing half a million people. His design included a grid layout with orthogonal main axes and a diagonal grid system for most of the city.

In the early years of French colonization, land prices in areas distant from Vietnamese and Chinese villages were kept low to encourage French settlers to move away from the indigenous population, thereby enforcing spatial segregation. This strategy, coupled with attractive opportunities for Europeans, led to Saigon's rapid growth. With this growth came hotels, ports, docks, restaurants, and prisons. Major streets were named after prominent French figures. However, despite the aspiration to emulate Parisian urban designs, Saigon's development lagged. The military engineers were unable to replicate Parisian sophistication in this provincial setting, resulting in a blurred imitation of the original.

A notable example of French ingenuity was the Botanical Garden in Saigon. Alphonse Germain avoided replicating European designs in detail. Instead, he merged the exquisite techniques of French garden design with the local nuances of the land. This approach created something new—an integration of two influences rather than a direct copy—appreciated for its balanced and innovative character.

Nonetheless, many French buildings in Saigon were constructed to highlight the stark differences between colonizer and colonized. Government buildings, such as the Governor's Palace, exemplified French classicism without any regard for the surrounding context. These contradictions often led to tensions, as exemplified by the burning of numerous buildings by the communards [2].

Saigon continued to develop under French planning until 1945. To this day, the spatial segregation, political influence, and tensions between colonizers and the colonized remain evident in the city's urban spaces

E. Mechanisms of Control through Urban Planning

Spatial Segregation was a primary method through which colonial powers enforced social hierarchies. Bill Ashcroft, in *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies*, describes how spatial "othering" in colonial cities physically separated the colonizers from the colonized, embedding a rigid social structure within the urban layout [3]. This division often took the form of separate European and indigenous neighborhoods, where European quarters were typically central, well-maintained, and designed with grand architecture, while indigenous quarters were confined to the periphery. By relegating local populations to less

accessible, often underserved areas, colonial authorities reinforced their dominance both socially and spatially.

This separation was not merely physical; it also imposed a lasting sense of exclusion and difference, underscoring the power imbalance between the two communities. Kamleithner et al. emphasize that the former European quarters often retained their status as hubs of political and economic power, while indigenous neighborhoods, pushed to the periphery during colonial rule, became zones of neglect and underdevelopment [6]. This inherited urban inequality has far-reaching implications. Former colonial centers frequently attract investments and infrastructure upgrades, reinforcing their status as elite districts, while marginalized areas struggle to secure basic services. These patterns of segregation mirror colonial practices, where infrastructural decisions were tied to the colonizers' priorities, disregarding the needs of local populations [6].

Gwendolyn Wright's analysis of Moroccan cities offers a deeper insight into these spatial segregations. Colonial authorities aimed to introduce and showcase the latest concepts of contemporary city planning, enabling European centers to flourish economically while attempting to shield traditional Moroccan life from the impacts of modernization [6]. In Casablanca, the Place de France and the Boulevard du IV Zouaves created a clear spatial divide between the original Moroccan-built environment and the new harbor area. This modern port and its surrounding European-style buildings were developed to accommodate the needs of colonial economic expansion, further broadening the reach of European influence and deepening the divisions within the city.

F. Infrastructure and Accessibility

Control over infrastructure and transportation networks further reinforced colonial power by regulating accessibility and mobility within the urban landscape. Wright discusses how colonial authorities prioritized the construction of roads, railways, and ports that connected European districts to administrative centers while limiting direct access to indigenous areas [2]. By designing transportation networks that favored colonial interests, these infrastructures supported economic extraction and facilitated governance while restricting local movement.

Davide Ponzini's *Transnational Architecture and Urbanism* provides additional insight into how transnational planning influenced these infrastructures. Colonial authorities frequently adapted local techniques in road construction or public works but channeled these improvements toward supporting the colonial agenda [4]. Infrastructure was thus a means to control not only the flow of goods but also the movement of people. These networks underscored colonial priorities, demonstrating that urban planning was as much about enforcing control as it was about facilitating trade and governance.

G. Subversion of Colonial Spaces

Colonial urban spaces, though designed to impose control, often became sites of subtle resistance and adaptation by indigenous communities. In *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, Gwendolyn Wright highlights

how local populations found ways to repurpose and subvert these spaces, infusing them with their own cultural practices and meanings [4]. By altering the uses of public squares, markets, and even residential layouts, indigenous groups could express resistance to colonial authority within the confines of imposed urban plans. This transformation of colonial spaces allowed local communities to assert their presence and cultural identity in ways that colonial designs had not anticipated, creating a quiet but persistent pushback against the structures of power.

H. Hybridity and Transnationalism in Architecture

Colonial cities also became places where colonial and indigenous styles merged, producing unique forms of architectural hybridity. This mixing was especially visible in architecture, where local materials, climate-adapted features, and decorative elements often found their way into buildings that otherwise followed colonial styles. Hybridity in architecture thus became a subtle form of negotiation, reflecting both the authority of colonial design and the resilience of local influence.

Davide Ponzini's *Transnational Architecture and Urbanism* further examines how transnational exchanges fueled this architectural blending. Ponzini notes that colonial architects sometimes adapted indigenous techniques or collaborated with local craftsmen, resulting in buildings that embodied aspects of both cultures (Ponzini 2020: 130-135). This hybridity reflects the complexities of colonial urbanism, where authority and adaptation coexisted in the urban landscape. Through these hybrid forms, colonial cities displayed a layered identity, where control was visibly asserted but continually modified by local presence and cultural resilience.

V. CONCLUSION

Colonial architecture and urban planning served as powerful tools of social and political control, reinforcing colonial authority while shaping the everyday experiences of local populations. Through mechanisms such as spatial segregation, monumental architecture, and controlled infrastructure, colonial authorities embedded a lasting social hierarchy within the urban environment. French colonial administrators in particular used urban design to project superiority, constructing European-style spaces that visibly separated and subordinated indigenous communities. This design of colonial cities was not incidental but a deliberate strategy to maintain control, enforce separation, and communicate a clear social order. Meanwhile, postcolonial theories like "othering," "mimicry," and "hybridity" reveal how colonial urban spaces also became areas of cultural negotiation, where indigenous communities both resisted and adapted colonial structures.

The complex legacy of colonial urbanism offers important insights for modern urban development in former colonies. Colonial cities, which were designed around principles of exclusion and control, often still bear the imprints of their colonial pasts in spatial divides, architectural styles, and infrastructure that prioritize

colonial-era centers. Addressing these legacies calls for urban planning that actively seeks to integrate formerly marginalized areas, reimagine historical structures, and adapt infrastructures to better serve all communities.

For contemporary architects and planners, this means valuing hybridity and cultural diversity, designing spaces that reflect local identities rather than imposing foreign ideals. Engaging with local histories, materials, and forms can transform cities into inclusive spaces that honor their complex pasts while fostering equity and cultural representation. In this way, postcolonial urban planning can reshape colonial legacies into environments that serve diverse communities, promoting both social cohesion and cultural resilience in today's rapidly globalizing world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We express our gratitude to Udayana University Lecturer, who gave support and enrichment our article.

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