

# Sociologically Reframing Le Corbusier: Settler Colonialism, Modern Architecture and UNESCO

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**Abstract.** In my current research I focus specifically on how Le Corbusier, the figure, was forged over the past century through architectural pedagogy as an institution and how Le Corbusier, almost inconceivably, still dominates the central narrative in how modern architecture is conceived, taught and reproduced. It is still Le Corbusier who shapes architectural discourse, structures historiography and is mimicked through performance as a performative norm. Le Corbusier's figuration has also resulted in postmodern global practices that continue to devalue all non-compliant ideologies and pre-modern or anti-modern epistemologies - all the while quashing any alternative ways of being, or building, in the world that vary from the late modernist norm - specifically in relationship to ways of seeing and being in the Land. By subjecting this system of figuration (specifically within architectural education) to a number of useful, but unfamiliar lenses borrowed from the social sciences, I am interrogate how the scholarship of architecture, the framing of architectural heritage and the spatial realities of the built environment have eschewed any and all non-conforming frameworks through the canonization of Le Corbusier as an embodied institution. I draw specifically in my work from scholars working in critical race theory and settler colonialism who use architectural space and narratives as a methodology. The driving thesis behind my work questions how the pedagogy of architecture is able to remain geographically and ideologically grounded by this one dominant figure, Le Corbusier, and what types of knowledge production must be introduced to remedy this debilitating condition.

**Keywords:** Le Corbusier · UNESCO · Architecture · World Heritage · Settler-colonialism · Indigeneity

## 1 Le Corbusier, World Heritage and UNESCO

In the summer of 2016 UNESCO declared seventeen of Franco-Swiss Architect, Le Corbusier's, iconic International Style buildings and projects "World Heritage" sites. This decision, in effect, canonized the life's work of one very specific architect as an institution and ensured that Le Corbusier's story would continue to serve as the central narrative used to tell the story of modern architecture. While UNESCO has

thoughtfully reframed “World Heritage” to include iconic representations of early modernity on a global scale, this decision is different and carries with it a very particular agenda resulting in the enshrinement of Le Corbusier (the figure); Le Corbusier (the pedagogy); and Le Corbusier’s life as the saga from which modern architecture is said to have sprung.

A 2016 UNESCO press release stated, “Chosen from the work of Le Corbusier, the 17 sites comprising this transnational serial property are spread over seven countries and are a testimonial to the invention of a new architectural language that made a break with the past. They were built over a period of a half-century, in the course of what Le Corbusier described as “patient research”. The Complexe du Capitole in Chandigarh (India), the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo (Japan), the House of Dr Curutchet in La Plata (Argentina) and the Unité d’habitation in Marseille (France) reflect the solutions that the Modern Movement sought to apply during the 20th century to the challenges of inventing new architectural techniques to respond to the needs of society. These masterpieces of creative genius also attest to the internationalization of architectural practice across the planet” [1].

## 2 Orientalism, the West and the Subject of Space

The end result is that architecture produces and reproduces its own inwardly-focused canonical world of ideas, aesthetics and spatialities even when exported to non-Western places from Buenos Aires to Chandigarh as a project. Through this regime a continuation of the colonial project recurs, which depended upon the Land, architecture and occupation to remain as the tools of the colonizer used to spatialize these thoughts in time and space as a form of continuing conquest. “The idea of protecting sites as an example of ‘world heritage’ developed during the twentieth century but had its antecedent in the nineteenth century. We are now familiar with the side of ‘world heritage’; and there inter-governmental World Heritage Committee which was formed after the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the Convention Covering the Protection of World Heritage (World Heritage Convention) (1972, enacted 1975) designates sites of World Heritage” [2].

Edward Said wrote, “Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient, absolutely different (the reasons change from epoch to epoch) from the West” [3]. The complex notion of how the West has been perpetuated through architecture might be critiqued in terms of how dominant bodies have viewed and produced others through architectural occupation and conquest as a fiction that structures all versions of history and human relations using the built environment as a stage set for designed human relations. Architecture can also serve as a framework to memorialize and enact fantasies of an ideal imaginary civilization that has never existed through the material production of places, spaces and even buildings. In my work I rely on a number of definitions of space, but rely most heavily on Lefebvre’s conceptualization of the social production of space as a general frame of reference [4].

The concept of the West, as an architectural construct, may also be useful as an analytical tool useful for critiquing how institutions like the United Nations, is able to produce a continuation of the settler colonial project through mechanisms like the

framing of modern architectural heritage. These mechanisms and tools go beyond taxonomies and classification systems and demonstrate that for the modern architectural myth to work it must be spatialized and mythologized simultaneously in material space and place. I refer to “spatialization” in the context of a sociological methodology practiced by a number of critical race scholars that include Goldberg and Razack [5, 6]. Note that critical race theory began as a methodology housed in legal scholarship and has morphed into a social science methodology. For a better understanding of its origins and its utility in practice see Harris, Cheryl I. “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993): 1707–1791 and later work in the area of critical whiteness studies in texts such as Richard Dyer’s. *White*. (London: Routledge, 1997); Leonardo, Zeus’ Race, Whiteness, and Education (New York: Routledge, 2009); and Elijah Anderson’s “The White Space,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1:1 (2015): 10–12.

### 3 Pedagogies and Practices

Narratives must be populated with charismatic or memorable figures to carry weight, and these figures must be configured in such a way to allow narratives tied to race, class, gender and power to persist in a very particular way in order to subtly maintain social practices that are both enacted within and dependent upon architecture, race, class and gender as a system. This socio-spatial practice demands a very particular pedagogy be in place to persist un-noticed in the haze of invisibility that whiteness affords those who belong [7].

Therefore, architectural education must constantly re-center its own historical past in relation to the universal quality the modern project as a problem to re-affirm a canon at risk. To support the maintenance of fading modern myth entrenched in race class, gender and Eurocentric privilege means that modernity can persist as a project. This ideology must be implanted in the imaginaries of a new generation of architects year after year in books, in classrooms, in studios, and in public apparitions in institutions like UNESCO to survive changing educational regimes and more globally fluent student bodies. This project depends upon the teaching of a particular western canon though key modern figures like Le Corbusier to survive.

In my own reading of how architectural education and the modern project have been co-produced, I rely heavily on a body of scholarship from a new generation of Indigenous Canadian scholars working in settler-colonialism as well as a number of well-established critical race scholars who have taken up architectural issues in their work to tease out systemic racism, colonialism and other forms of social oppression using the architectural space and place. The key case studies that I use include UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) policies and practices around modernity; modern architectural history textbooks, and architectural studio pedagogy as it is performed as an act of institutionalized hegemony.

## 4 Universality, Modality and Modernity

The modern project reached its apex with the canonical work of the International Style masters in the nineteen twenties and thirties and it is right to teach this key period in history, but the fantasies surrounding this period need to be questioned. The canonization of this period, and of Le Corbusier in particular, predetermines the persistence of the hegemonic whiteness of the modernist fantasy as its primary goal. In this statement I am relying on Nicholas Gramsci's work and drawing upon his widely influential notions of "hegemony" and the "manufacture of consent" [8].

While revolutionary proponents of modern architecture like Le Corbusier shaped the ethos and the form of the modernist revolution in architecture, modernity's universal values devolved into a little more than a visual fantasy that has proven that the aspirational transformative social dreams of these early modernists were never so easily realized or even authentic. Latour has pondered whether we ever were modern at all [9]. The modernist fantasy was a particular white fantasy built less around a dream to liberate the masses through technological innovation, moral and aesthetic hygiene or even a rejection of Renaissance traditions, but it was forged in the erasure and silencing of "Others." "Other" voices and epistemological ways of being in the world were rendered meaningless and deemed pre-modern in the process of becoming modern. Perhaps this is where my critique needs to be situated? Critical race studies and settler colonialism recognizes this realization and can give us the methodologies to critique the modern project as a social construct in which race, class and gender have always been present.

As a reminder, the term, "International Style" architecture as a method to represent the iconic work of early modernity (particularly of the crisp, clean white box ilk) was initially coined in an exhibition catalog that came about as the result of a groundbreaking 1932 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. This landmark show was meant to showcase an emergent modern architecture movement characterized by pure, white industrialized buildings being produced in Europe and America seemingly spontaneously as a sign that we had become modern. The exhibition was curated by Philip Johnson, and the catalog was written by Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock. The International Style quickly became the definitive apparition of the principles underlying the work of modernist icons like Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and others. See Hitchcock and Johnson [10].

## 5 After Modernism

While we now accept that modernity failed as a project, more problematically, we do not accept that its methods and practices still remain in place haunting us through the dated practices, archaic methods and colonial aesthetics that we still teach and practice in the academy. Numerous scholars have praised the discursive and experiential nature of studio teaching, but few have questioned this process as a performance. To do this I must rely on the social sciences and scholars like Butler [11] and Davis [12]. The conflation of modern architecture and settler-colonialism, from my vantage point, too provides a means to look back at the methods and imaginaries that we continue produce

in the classroom and how our buildings and cities perpetuate colonialism, racism, classism, sexism, ableism and white supremacy as material outcomes of our learned (and therefore- taught) desires.

While there are numerous resistant regional practices and pedagogical methods in place ranging from using local materials and knowledge systems to embracing the neoliberal rhetoric of sustainability appearing in communities worldwide as a form of resistance to the hegemony of the modern project the dominant discourse remains in control on the ground in the academy.

## 6 Conclusion

My suggestion is that a new type of intellectual labor is required, which might require that analytical lenses, such as settler colonialism and critical race theory, be taught and applied as frameworks to foreground a revitalized method of architectural thought production which re-centers the Land as a pedagogical counter-argument to the modernity canon. Human geography and other postmodern frameworks are simply not enough as critiques to unseat the modern project.

Asking specifically how Indigenous epistemologies and frameworks might be taken up by Indigenous people as well as settler colonists has produced a number of significant methodological texts that I would propose to use as weapons to disarm the canon from within the regime of architectural education. [13–15] Furthermore, the modern pedagogical “method” has become the default standard worldwide and is being replicated in architecture schools offshore, which has resulted the west’s reaffirmation as the arbitrator of aesthetic and pedagogical colonization within the discipline. An early and scathing critique of the failures of the American system of architectural education appeared in the mid nineteen nineties [16] and many new critiques continue to be written - particularly from a position where race, class and gender are no longer erased. Mabel Wilson and others have taken up intersectional critiques that were only beginning in the nineteen nineties using race as a dialectical method [17].

There are also new precedents for a kind of pedagogical rethinking of the modern project that are worth mentioning as a conclusion. Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario Canada houses the first new architecture school to be established in over forty years in Canada. Its particular mission is centered on a curriculum that is centered on the architecture of “the North” and Indigenous epistemologies. As I wrote myself, “An appreciation for the integration of indigenous and natural materials in building and site design, as well as an understanding of the importance of collaboration and interaction with other students, faculty and community groups’ is a hallmark of a Sudbury’s pedagogical model” [18]. Also *Ever the Land. A People, Their Place. Their Building* is a documentary film set on Indigenous land in New Zealand which presents a material solution for reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the Crown centered on how the Land can be prioritized using architecture and building as a remediation process tied to Indigenous notions of respecting the Land as a living being to overturn how architecture is produced [19].

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