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Architecture, Hybridity, and Post-Apartheid Design

Jonathan Noble

- 1 My interest in architectural hybridity grew out of my doctoral research. My PhD is entitled *White Skin, Black Masks: On Questions of African Identity in Post-Apartheid Public Design, 1994-2000*, and it considers public architectures of the post-apartheid period—works which have initiated an imaginative dialogue with subjugated histories. In many cases, this imaginative process has meant the inclusion of “foreign elements”; that is to say, material fragments, spatial types, or symbolic tropes associated with subjugated histories. These elements are layered onto the architectural object: façades are commonly thickened with architectural, sculptural, and decorative motifs representing diverse narratives (fig. 1).

Fig. 1 : Constitutional Court of South Africa, Johannesburg



1998, by OMM Design Workshop and Urban Solutions
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- 2 Architectural representation is being hybridized, and this hybridization allows for new dialogues across divided subject positions: black/white, white/black, both, neither, and in-between. The full version of this paper further elaborates upon contemporary South African architecture, and is due to be published as a chapter in a forthcoming book.¹

The paper opens with a discussion of early postmodern, architectural, preoccupations with hybridity, especially Jencks' "double-code" and Venturi's "obligation to the difficult whole," and ultimately concludes that Jencks and Venturi pay scarce attention to social discourses, to questions of power and subjugation and, as such, their formalist concerns white-wash political antagonisms.² *Nevertheless, I contend that postmodernist representation is the kind best suited to expressions of postcolonial identity, but not in the way that is figured by these early postmodern theories.*

The paper then introduces postcolonial notions of hybridity, and begins by clarifying a few important theoretical terms. For Foucault, a discourse is a body of knowledge and practice that is distributed throughout the social field.³ Discourses are a regularity in dispersion, a sameness in difference. They are also normalizing and exclusionary in that they regulate what constitutes valid practice. Foucault maintains that discourse is prior to the subject: we are the body of knowledge and the nexus of practices that make up our everyday lives. Likewise, *the marginalized subject is her subjugated discourse.* This has implications for social representations, because individuals and groups can, and do, identify themselves in stories, films, artworks, and in works of architecture. We can study the political implications of these discourses to see which subjectivities have been denied. In this, I use the work of political philosophers Laclau and Mouffe, who have expanded Foucauldian discourse analysis to include questions of subjectivity and

agency.⁴

In contrast to early postmodern theory in design, contemporary postcolonial interest with hybridity is motivated by a commitment to subvert the homogenizing closure of dominant, Eurocentric narratives. In Fanon, the confrontation between the colonial and the colonized, at times, leads into a danger zone of unfathomable difference.

Look at the nigger! . . . Mama, a Negro! . . . The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up.⁵

- 3 In this passage the little boy and the Negro appear to look past each other, each misrecognizing the other. In the Negro the boy sees a savage image of “quivering rage,” while in the boy, the Negro sees his image as despised humanity. For a brief moment, the Negro, conceived as animal, is not so easily fixed on the outside of white power. The repressed subject returns to haunt the boundaries of white imagination. A disturbance occurs on the surface of an exclusionary discourse. In postcolonial theory, and especially in the work of Bhabha, this disturbance opens a window of opportunity, allowing the marginalized subject to position herself. Bhabha explains that, “[h]ybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition.”⁶

I have presented what may be called the primal scene, which is formed from a confrontation of the colonial and colonized. Hybridity is commonly used in literary studies which seek to understand the politics of this encounter. Yet these concerns require translation, if they are to be useful for architecture.

The paper observes that study of hybrid forms lends itself to *complex histories*. Hybridity occurs when we mix incongruous elements. Studying this mix, we will want to know about the pre-history of the components that make up the mix, the history of how the mix comes about, and the nature of the resulting hybrid formation, is it a harmonious totality, or a forced proximity of unassimilated parts? I complete this section by concluding that: in its general sense the word hybrid is rather too vague, and for which reason writers such as Bhabha and Fanon are careful to study hybrid forms in their political specificity.

Hybridity is not always subversive in character. For example, at New Delhi, Herbert Baker designed a quintessential example of British Imperial architecture. Viceroy House, the centerpiece of this capitol complex, shows a hybridization of European classicism and various Indian decorative motifs. These little details do not destabilize the grand discourse of this classical edifice, but rather, they participate calmly within it. For reasons such as this, postcolonial perspectives do not appreciate cultural hybridity on its own terms alone. As Shohat explains: “[a] celebration of syncretism and hybridity per se, if not articulated with questions of historical hegemonies, risks sanctifying the *fait accompli* of colonial violence.”⁷

- 4 The paper considers distinction between:
- a) Conscious and Unconscious,
 - b) Momentary and Sublimated,

c) Overt and Hidden forms of hybridity . . .
distinctions that prove useful for understanding architecture.

a) Conscious and Unconscious

5 I introduce the first distinction, between conscious and unconscious hybridity, with reference to the work of Robert Young and Mikhail Bakhtin, and conclude by pointing out that both kinds of hybridity are useful for architectural studies.⁸ ⁹Historians, for instance, may appeal to the less than conscious hybridizations that occur within seemingly closed cultural forms. In this way the historian can study how Western architecture appropriates various non-Western influences. Anthony King has done important work in this direction.¹⁰ Studies of this kind seek to pluralize Western history from within, so as to combat the closure of Eurocentric thought. But ideas of hybridity may also be used in a conscious way, in a way that can inform artistic practice. Numerous studies have been made of the syncretic strategies that inform artistic traditions of marginalized people. Shohat, for instance, discusses hybridity in media, film studies, and Third World Cinema.¹¹ Paul Gilroy, a leading theorist of racial politics, theorizes syncretic forms that are widely adopted by contemporary black artists, writers, and musicians.¹² While McClintock documents risky hybrids that inform the works of various black South African poets.¹³ These studies demonstrate that marginalized groups commonly make use of syncretic forms as a way to negotiate their fragile identity in the face of a dominant culture which excludes them. As Gilroy makes clear, “[b]lack expressive cultures affirm while they protest. The assimilation of blacks is not a process of acculturation but of cultural syncretism.”¹⁴

The conscious and unconscious aspects of hybridity, as identified here, are, however, not always so easily distinguished. In the case of historical studies into the unconscious hybridization of culture, the point must surely be to conscientize the reader, to show plurality where it was previously concealed. While in the case of artistic production, it should be clear that both conscious and unconscious influences combine in the production of art. In both cases, the critic or historian who wishes to interpret hybridity in design, must articulate it, theories it, and consciously so, to assert these hybrid practices with weight and political significance.

b) Momentary and Sublimated

6 Returning to my earlier discussion of the primary scene, we can also observe that conscious and unconscious forms combine in the momentary practices of daily life. Hybridity flickers in the ambivalent moment, back and forth, across conscious and unconscious registers of thought, fear, and desire. This emphasis on the momentary, in Bhabha, gives his idea of hybridity a certain ever-present and inevitable character. It is difficult, however, to imagine what this inevitability of the hybrid presence could mean for architecture. Bhabha can appeal to hybridity in the momentary confrontation between colonial and colonized subjectivities, because despite the humiliation that is imposed upon the colonized subject, this subject nevertheless exists, and continues to live out her life under the eye of colonial power. In the case of architecture, however, in what sense does the material presence of African urbanity threaten colonial rule? If we look to patterns of town planning and architectural design, in the colonial, apartheid,

and finally the post-apartheid era, we discover a near seamless repetition of Western styles and types. On the whole, African architectures, and modes of urban or rural life, were thoroughly marginalized to the urban periphery, if not obliterated outright. In the paper I develop this point of inclusion and exclusion from modernised urbanity in relation to Paul Gilroy's use of Du Bois' idea of "double consciousness."¹⁵ Du Bois' double-consciousness in that of a black subjectivity spilt between two disjointed worlds, two disjointed histories, two disjointed imaginations.¹⁶ This in turn repeats themes articulated by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*: a notion that gains expression in the work of many artists and theorists of the black diaspora. My point is this hybrid condition of inclusion/exclusion may be sublimated into expressive forms such as architecture.

c) Overt and Hidden forms of hybridity

- 7 In order to draw out the significance of my third set of categories, overt and hidden forms of hybridity, I move to consider the social problematic that faces contemporary public design in South Africa. When confronted by the hegemony of Western theories and practices, I suggest that post-Apartheid architecture could: a) appropriate Western architecture, in an attempt to form a new undifferentiated relation between white and black, b) reject Western architecture outright, attempting to design from scratch, or c) hybridize Western architecture, Africanize it, adapting it to local needs and aspirations. Of the three options presented here, hybridity is bound to emerge as the most sensible way forward. But this is not to say that the first two options have no currency whatsoever, because at stake here are also many more subtle questions of artistic representation. Architecture may well embody a discursive hybrid, but this does not necessarily mean that the work will explicitly make hybridity its primary theme. In other words, we can have overt as well as hidden types of hybridity in design. I conclude via a discussion of Aletta Norval to demonstrate the political significance of hybrid forms in the context of South African history.¹⁷

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ANNEXES

Fig. 2 : Constitutional Court of South Africa, Johannesburg



1998, by OMM Design Workshop and Urban Solutions
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Fig. 3 : Constitutional Court of South Africa, Johannesburg



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Fig. 4 : Red Location, Port Elizabeth



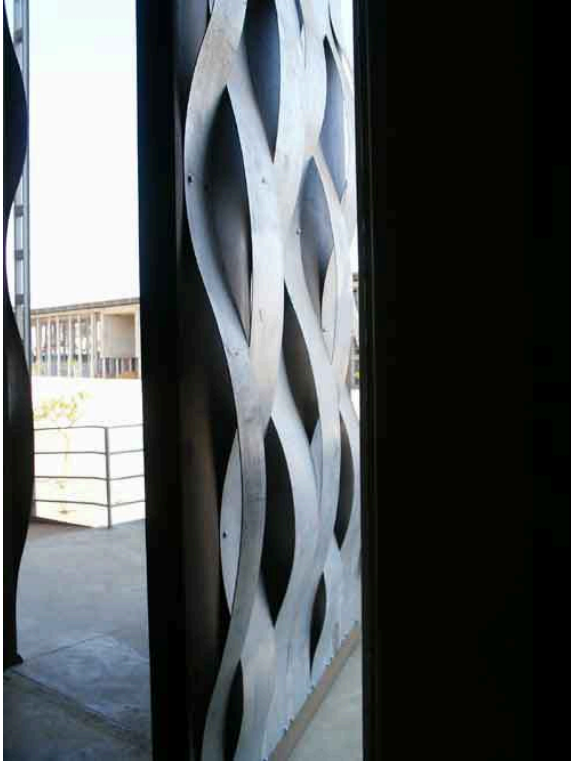
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Fig. 5 : the Walter Sizulu Square of Dedication, Kiptown



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Fig. 6 : the Walter Sizulu Square of Dedication, Kiptown



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Fig. 7 : the Walter Sisulu Square of Dedication, Kiptown



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Fig. 8 : Metro Mall, Johannesburg



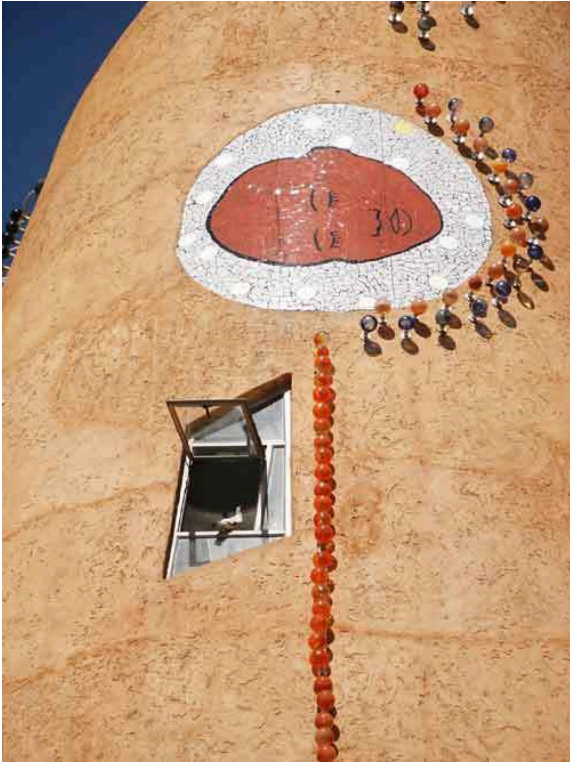
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Fig. 9 : the Northern Cape Legislature, Kimberly



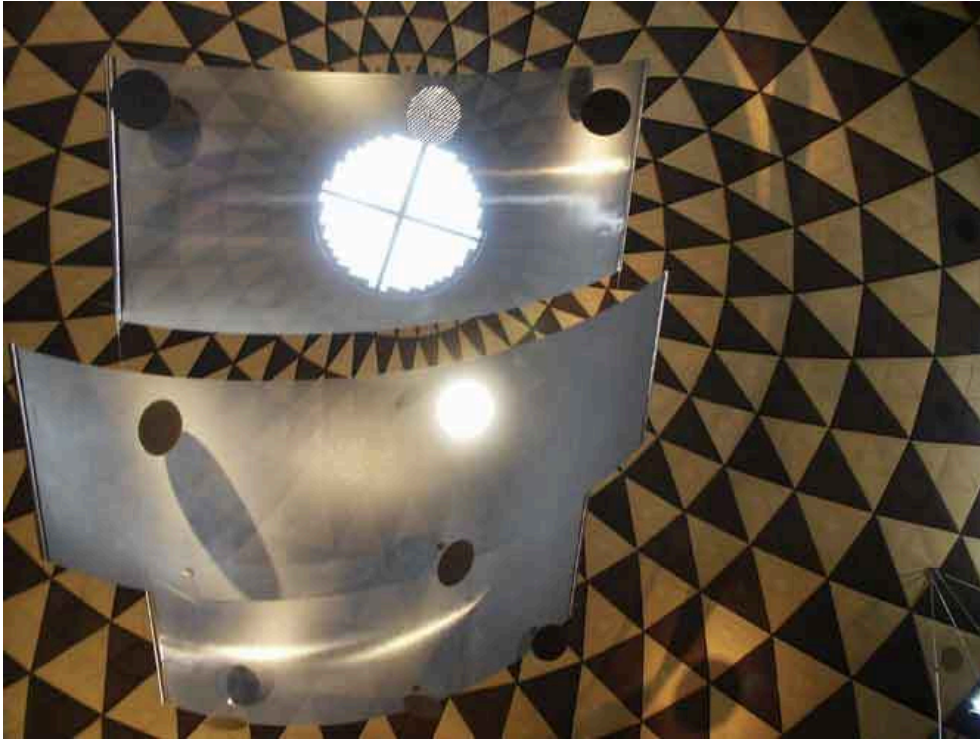
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Fig. 10 : the Northern Cape Legislature, Kimberly



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Fig. 11 : the Mpumalanga legislature, Nelspruit



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Fig. 12 : the Mpumalanga legislature, Nelspruit



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NOTES DE FIN

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RÉSUMÉS

This paper develops a methodological discussion on questions of hybridity in architectural theory and design, in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Reference is made to various different ideas of hybridity: from early postmodern interest in hybrid architecture (Jencks and Venturi), to postcolonial theory (Bhabha and Fanon), as well cultural studies on syncretic traditions among marginalized groups (Gilroy, Shohat, and McClintock). The paper promotes a postcolonial perspective on hybridity, which differs from the usual postmodern architectural perspective, through its emphasis on relations of discursive power (Foucault) that animate specific cultural/political conditions. Analytical distinctions are made between conscious and unconscious, momentary and sublimated, as well as overt and hidden forms of hybridity—distinctions that are particularly useful for an understanding of architecture.

INDEX

Index chronologique : XXe siècle, Epoque contemporaine

Index géographique : Afrique du Sud, New Delhi, Inde

Mots-clés : postmodernisme, hybridité, identité postcoloniale

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