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**Putra, Yvette ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8219-1872> (2025) The Tree of Architecture Revisited, Rethought, and Rejected: Decolonising Architectural Education. In: Innovations in Decolonising the Curriculum: Multidisciplinary Perspectives. Emerald Publishing, pp. 61-71.**

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83608-912-420251006>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83608-912-420251006>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/15496>

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# The Tree of Architecture Revisited, Rethought, and Rejected: Decolonising Architectural Education

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## Author Biography:

Yvette Putra studied architecture and completed a Master of Design (Heritage) and a PhD in architecture at the University of Melbourne. She was previously employed by the University of Melbourne, Deakin University, and the University of New South Wales, all in Australia, and is currently the Academic Course Leader for the BA (Hons) Architecture programme and Senior Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom. Her research chiefly provokes intersections – of architecture and art, cultural, and social histories – in underrepresented groups and regions and deploys counter-hegemonic and multinational approaches. Her teaching experience spans both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, including in architectural design, history, and theory, art history, and urban history and theory.

## ABSTRACT:

This chapter arises out of the recent shift in architecture towards more critical and global approaches. Outcomes of this shift have included the emergence of counter-perspectives in the spaces of discussion and dissemination of architectural thought, previously overwhelmingly Westernised in content and participation, and the decolonisation of architectural education, such as through the diversification and internationalisation of the study of architectural history. Meanwhile, Banister Fletcher's "Tree of Architecture" has been cited in the scholarship as a potent symbol of architecture's colonial agenda and Eurocentric hegemony. The Tree's bigoted and reductive views of non-Western architecture have been critiqued, and attempts have been launched to redress the harm that the Tree and similar thinking have wrought on architecture and its education. This chapter proposes ways of decolonising architectural education, particularly in the specialist areas of history and design, and asserts the benefits of decolonising architectural education. These measures provide students with a truer image of architecture as it has existed and continues to exist and prepare them for more adaptive and ethical architectural practice in a twenty-first-century, globalised world.

## KEYWORDS:

1. Architectural education
2. Decolonising the curriculum
3. Colonialism
4. Banister Fletcher
5. Architectural history
6. Architectural design

## Introduction

This chapter arises out of the recent shifts in architecture towards more critical and global approaches. As a fundamental, immutable, and universal expression of the human condition,

architecture – across its education, practice, and theory – has undoubtedly been impacted by the prevailing struggles of today, which seek to denounce and ameliorate systemically entrenched racial and social injustices.

Among the changes brought to bear on architecture is the gradual recalibration of its narratives through the allegations of monstrous acts by once-vaunted architects such as Le Corbusier (Rault, 2005), Philip Johnson (Gamsó, 2017), and Richard Meier (Monk, 2020). These figures had, until lately, been enshrined in architecture as paradigmatic and sacrosanct, so any inquiry, into their lives and works, usually constituted uncritical hagiographies. Alongside this, architecture has interfaced with public confrontations with racism. These are, not least of all, the censure of racist monuments, which was galvanised by the Black Lives Matter movement, beginning in the United States and soon finding traction in Europe (James-Chakraborty, 2022).

Meanwhile, there have been attacks on how colonialism has sullied the frameworks and institutions of the bureaux and schools of architecture. A remarkably legible example of such in the profession is the denouncement of the imperialist-themed Jarvis Mural, installed in the mid-1930s at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) headquarters in London (Wainwright, 2024). In this mural, insultingly backward and monolithic imagery of British colonial subjects flanks a more dignified representation of the RIBA Council.

Those whose vocations are in architectural education are tasked, by the higher echelons and professional infrastructures governing their institutions, with synchronising their work with the global and urgent resistance against colonialism. The decolonisation of the curriculum is the most prominent manifestation of these efforts.

In much of architectural education, decolonisation is frequently immediately fulfilled through diversifying and internationalising the study of architectural history by drawing non-Euro-American content into the course's ambit. This is demonstrated through newer publications devised for classroom use, such as *A global history of architecture* (Ching, Jarzombek, & Prakash, 2017), which describes architecture from every continent.

Coincident with these decolonising mobilisations is the reproof of the “Tree of Architecture” in architectural discourses. The Tree has been criticised for its bigoted and reductive views of non-Western architecture and the harm that it and similar thinking have wrought on architecture. In this chapter, I use the Tree as my point of departure for decolonising architectural education by sketching its potent symbolism of the colonial agenda and Eurocentric hegemony in architecture. I propose ways of decolonising architectural education, particularly in the specialist areas of history and design. I assert the benefits of decolonising architectural education, including how doing so provides students with a truer image of architecture, as it has existed and continues to exist, and prepares students for more adaptive and ethical architectural practice in a twenty-first-century, globalised world.

## “The Tree of Architecture” and (de)colonising architectural education

The depth and pervasiveness of colonial attitudes in architecture, most acutely in how they have shaped architectural education, is exemplified through the notorious “Tree of Architecture.” In 1896, the British architects Banister Fletcher (1833-1899) and his son, Banister Flight Fletcher (1866-1953), published their work, *A history of architecture on the comparative method*. The Tree first appeared in the fifth edition of *A history of architecture*, which was published in 1905.

Although *A history of architecture* was updated several times in the twentieth century, its focus

never ventured far from historical Western architecture. In *A history of architecture*, this canon was habitually arranged in a tidy chronology of styles, beginning with, for instance, the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman styles of antiquity, then progressing into the Gothic, Renaissance, and later styles. *A history of architecture* also depicted these styles in neat groupings of scaled drawings, with finespun linework and rigorous detail, which have since become emblematic of the publication.

When architecture from outside the West was admitted into the scope of *A history of architecture*, this was achieved, as in earlier editions, through a wilfully ignorant handling of an already attenuated coverage (Fletcher, 1905). For example, in the fifth edition, Chinese and Japanese architecture were, appallingly, jointly treated. In a further inimical move, these editions of *A history of architecture* clustered the non-Western exemplars – which are, of course, culturally rich and geographically diverse – under the obscene heading of “The Non-Historical Styles.”

*A history of architecture* was both the consequence and defender of the colonialism that permeated architecture and its education for most of the previous century. The publication was an essential reference during that era before being superseded by more internationalised studies like *A global history of architecture*. But strikingly, I remember, from my own experiences as a student, that *A history of architecture* endured as a text for architectural courses in Australia into the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The anachronistic and deleterious perspectives in *A history of architecture* were baldly summated in a metaphorically conceived frontispiece, namely the Tree. This infamous image graced the earlier versions of *A history of architecture* and, despite having some augmentation over the years, the Tree’s message stayed unchanged. In one iteration (Fig. 1), the anthropomorphic allegories of the values that innervated architecture – inter alia, geography, geology, and history – were gathered at the Tree’s roots (Fletcher, 1921). Cultivated in this way, various architectural styles flourished through the Tree, with the Greek and Roman styles occupying the central trunk and putting forth a thriving array of other Euro-American styles.

The comparative placement of non-Western ‘styles’ on the Tree was a careless attempt to systematise non-Western architecture according to the colonial taxonomy. On the one hand, this denoted a tacit acknowledgement that the ages of these so-called ‘non-historical styles’ approximate those of the Greek and Roman styles. On the other hand, the Tree scornfully rendered these non-Western traditions as infertile and stunted because, unlike their Western counterparts, they did not grow branches. Thus, within the four corners of a single illustration, the Tree invalidated the entire spectrum of non-Western architecture by portraying it as not only insubstantial but also degenerate and extinct.

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FIG 1 HERE  
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To be sure, *A history of architecture* and the Tree has had a remarkably involute cooperation with colonialism in both architectural education and architecture at large. This legacy has been criticised in twenty-first-century scholarship, with Lu Duanfang contending, “As long as Western-centric epistemological assumptions remain dominant and other knowledges are considered residual, we remain very much still in the shadow of Sir Banister Fletcher’s ‘Tree of Architecture’” (Lu, 2012, p. 129 65).

In 2020, the twenty-first edition of *A history of architecture* was released. Its title, *Sir Banister Fletcher’s global history of architecture*, was intended to evoke “a willing palimpsest, as opposed to a *tabula rasa*” (Fletcher, 2020, p. xv). As a comprehensive, multi-authored reworking of the original

publication, this edition discards the paucity of its former outlook and seeks to more authentically and respectfully capture architecture on a global scale. Needless to add, the Tree is only found in this edition to explain and justify its revisions.

My teaching practice is informed by these radical transformations. This is coupled with my recollection of the confusion and dismay with which, as a student from the Global South – the very locus of the ‘non-historical styles’ – I was compelled to engage with *A history of architecture*. In my introductory lectures today, I continue to show the Tree to students. However, I distinctly and vociferously frame it as a didactic hinge between the perniciousness of colonialism in architecture over the last century and the present-day urgency for practitioners to disown such attitudes. In this manner, the Tree functions much like a colonial-era artefact would in a museum. The Tree in my teaching thus becomes an obsolete relic, signifying a dark past and evoking alarm and disappointment in its viewers while acting as an exhortation for newer generations to operate with greater integrity than their forebears.

Yet, the strivings towards a more equitable future for architecture and its education are more complex than simply contextualising the Tree and other colonial traces. I argue that revisiting and rethinking the Tree is the starting point for a more nuanced and sustained decolonisation of architectural education and, ultimately, the rejection of the Tree. The specialist areas of architectural design and history, which figure strongly in architectural courses worldwide, are the focus of my discussion.

## Ways of decolonising architectural education

The epistemological violence, inflicted by the Tree of Architecture and other instruments of colonisation in architecture, impels us to make reparations. Much of the recent discourse is unequivocal about the decolonisation of architecture, and many educational institutions support this position. Still, questions remain as to what measures can be implemented in the classroom.

### Non-hierarchy

A basic step towards decolonising architectural education is to commit to a non-hierarchical view of architectural history, which dispels the Tree as a model for interrogating architectural history. This can be partially accomplished by adhering to a thematic rather than chronological organisation, which mimics the trends in museology aimed at decolonisation and diversification (Phillips, 2022).

In one sense, a non-hierarchy alludes to the different accountings of history and time across cultures, in which some, including the First Nations of Australia, do not privilege linear temporality (McGrath, Rademaker, & Troy, 2023). More specifically for architecture, a non-hierarchy suggests the perpetuity of tradition, as observed by some cultures, and what it brings to bear on the built environment. This is exemplified by the ‘living heritage’ found in Asia and other regions, in which a building or site originates in the remote past but still maintains its function and presence in the community (Wijesuriya, 2015). This contrasts with the static isolation of historical 168 monuments, which is the foundation of Western reckoning and practices.

Therefore, the content and pacing of lectures are not to be dictated by the standard timeline. Instead, their impetus is thematic. Each lecture covers architectural exemplars and principles across various cultures, which are accorded as equal attention as possible, with no single tradition endorsed as dominant. A case in point is a lecture on the theme of ‘dwelling’. This lecture explores the phenomenon as it manifests in the Ancient Roman domus and insula, Chinese siheyuan and tulou, and Japanese machiya and nouka, among others, while delving into the cultural, economic,

social, and other factors governing them.

In addition, the myriad and overlapping threads linking global sites and concepts are identified and traced. Doing so reveals where the narratives of cultures coincide, diverge, and interact, such as how the Indian subcontinental *bangla house* type influenced the colonial bungalow. These elucidations organically spark classroom discussions about cosmopolitanism, imperialism, globalisation, and so on, both historically and contemporarily. In sum, such non-hierarchical thinking is more accurate, illuminating, and subtle than the roots, trunk, and branches arrangement of the Tree.

A corresponding notion of the inadequacy and oppressiveness of a dendriform model is extolled by Christopher Alexander in the aptly named paper “A city is not a tree” (Alexander, 1967). Architecture, closely related to the city of Alexander’s polemic, is similarly “a receptacle for life” and, so, follows the proposition that if “the overlap of the strands of life within it [is severed], because it is a tree, [...] life will be cut to pieces” (Alexander, 1967, p. 348).

In the classroom, the rejection of the Tree, in favour of more democratic and pluralistic reasoning, strengthens cohesion within the student cohort by not privileging the culture of any group. This also underscores the multivalent contexts that students must inevitably manoeuvre through their future architectural practice and opposes the crippling orthodoxy defining the architecture of previous generations.

## Inclusivity

As outlined above, a non-hierarchical approach to architectural history education, by bringing together global specimens to investigate a certain theme, yields itself to inclusivity. This resonates with students from international backgrounds in Western institutions, like I once was, for whom a fiercely Eurocentric architectural history is alienating and denigrating. Revolving architectural history around inclusivity allows these students to value their own histories and feel pride in their backgrounds, and the participation of these students in ensuing discussions reinforces the validity of their viewpoints and instils a sense of belonging to the cohort.

It is worth mentioning that a major pitfall of this strategy is that, in the classroom, it is impossible to exhaustively cover the architectural history of the entire world. In practical terms, the decolonisation of architectural education has broadened the scope of architectural history, but the time in which to teach it has not been – and cannot realistically be – commensurately lengthened. As such, the decolonised teaching of architectural history is to be properly prefaced, indicating that it is representative rather than encyclopaedic. Equally, there must be an emphasis on instructing students in methodological more than factual knowledge, enabling them to conduct self-study into the aspects of architectural history not fully probed in the classroom.

While championing inclusivity in architectural history, terminology such as ‘style’, which is grounded in colonial and Western thought and a key feature of the Tree, is recommended to be retained in the curriculum. However, this is insofar as students must understand such constructs to be fully equipped to participate in architectural discourses and heritage practices. There must also be a caveat, for students, that such Eurocentric terms can discredit architecture from outside the West.

The historical bias against non-Western architecture is likewise illustrated through the disparagement of sites and structures that do not have ‘architects’. The rectification of this delusion tentatively began with Bernard Rudofsky’s “Architecture without architects” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1964, but it is still grievously incomplete. In other words, decolonising architectural education means launching a riposte to the discipline’s ideals that stem

from the European Renaissance, in which “Architecture was no longer part of the guild system and the architect, unlike the master mason, was armed with the tools of scientific systems” (Lozanovska, 2009, p. 235). Such a repudiation can be satisfied by acknowledging and valuing the architecture that can and does emerge from the hands of artisans, artists, and builders, not to mention communities and owner-occupiers, as typified by the vernacular architecture of many cultures.

## Diversification

A related way to decolonise architectural education is to embrace a diversity of precedents and resources in architectural history and design. This is, once again, a refusal of the narrow definitions and interpretations of architecture, as were established in the Tree. One reason that such variegation is needed is that the sources of knowledge of non-Western cultures are diffused. In fact, researchers from the Global South are discriminated against in the established scholarly frameworks of peer review and publication (Lor, 2022). For these researchers, their work can be overlooked, or even denied, for a perceived lack of credibility or other problematic reasons.

In this way, it is vital to accommodate art, oral histories, music, and other such ‘atypical’ sources in the lectures, reading lists, and other apparatus of architectural courses. Doing so also upholds the contributions of the students whose conceptualisations of commemoration and storytelling do not meet Eurocentric norms, such as the oral traditions of Black communities worldwide.

More directly relevant to architecture is that historical representations of architecture from outside the West do not always conform with the European tradition. These non-Western depictions can be discovered in other artefacts, which range from East Asian handscrolls that convey their views through axonometry and performative unrolling to Indian miniatures that chiefly use a flattened aerial perspective. Such documentation also challenges the ascendancy of ‘realism’ in much of current Western architectural representation, thereby recognising mythological and spiritual qualities, which are still esteemed in other cultures.

Moreover, the ostensible advantages of digitisation in architectural education are countered by the colonialism that digital spaces have inherited from actual spaces (Risam, 2019). With the awareness that the digitisation of information does not always extend to marginalised, minority, and subaltern voices, their knowledge must still be routinely uncovered first-hand and from the real world, through fieldwork, interviews, and comparable methods. These techniques also afford students the experience and skills to consult and empathise with people from all walks of life, which is imperative for architectural practice appropriate to a globalised world.

## Closing the divide

To decolonise architectural education, it is necessary to close the divide between architectural history and design, which, in architectural courses, usually sit awkwardly side by side rather than integrated. Essentially, decolonisation in architectural education cannot only inhabit the theoretical sphere because, to more fully encourage change, it must extend into that of praxis. Architecture as built is the most public and visible aspect of the profession and, so, a powerful means for future architects to reify racial and social justice.

One way of actualising this synthesis in the classroom is to write design briefs that demand critical, decolonised readings of history. For example, students can be assigned to respond meaningfully to international sites or clients and users from minority groups. These tasks equally reflect the context for architects practising today, and students must be ready to meet this reality.

Accordingly, the students' proposals are to be prevented from descending into caricature, historicisation, or oversimplification of non-Western traditions. These fallacious design moves remind us of the Tree's sentiments and were, of course, prevalent in colonial architecture such as the 'Indic styles' of Edwin Lutyens and other architects. There cannot be a return to such outdated approaches, which often thoughtlessly appropriated sacred architecture for secular buildings and hybridised or transposed architecture from different cultures and places without respect for specificities.

Furthermore, classroom dynamics must be subject to decolonisation and seen as another opportunity to fracture hierarchies. To these ends, diverse responses and a plurality of viewpoints, particularly in architectural design, are to be fairly received and critiqued. Bullying, discrimination, excessive self-interest, and other abusive and harmful acts, which have contaminated much of architectural education, must be avoided.

It is not farfetched to propose that such hostile behaviour in the spaces of architectural education has been fomented by colonialism. This is due to colonialism being adjacent to classism, racism, and sexism, and there is, as discussed in this chapter, the more obvious colonial propensity for a stubborn, singular understanding of architecture. Much like the colonial project itself, such a deficient grasp of architectural pedagogy is often excused as being helpful or permitted because it is the 'natural order of things'.

## Conclusion

This chapter rejects the Tree of Architecture to propose ways of decolonising architectural education at the classroom level and support students to practise more responsibly and apposite to the twenty-first century. Applications of decolonising architectural education can expand to areas other than history and design, and it would be valuable to examine how decolonisation could add to, for instance, construction and material studies.

I conclude by pointing out that realising positive change in architecture as a whole is, more than in other creative fields, an exquisitely frustrating undertaking. This is due to architecture's defining characteristic as a physical intervention on the landscape. Simply put, architecture as-built is almost always a complex, expensive, and lengthy project. Hence, any attempt to disengage it from prejudice has to negotiate with the controversies accompanying the costly and permanent 'solution' of demolition, along with economic, juridical, and political will and cultural and social inertia. Despite – or, perhaps, because of – these conditions, it is worth persisting to decolonise architectural education. As the first step towards becoming an architect, architectural education is significant space for decolonising endeavours in and beyond architecture.

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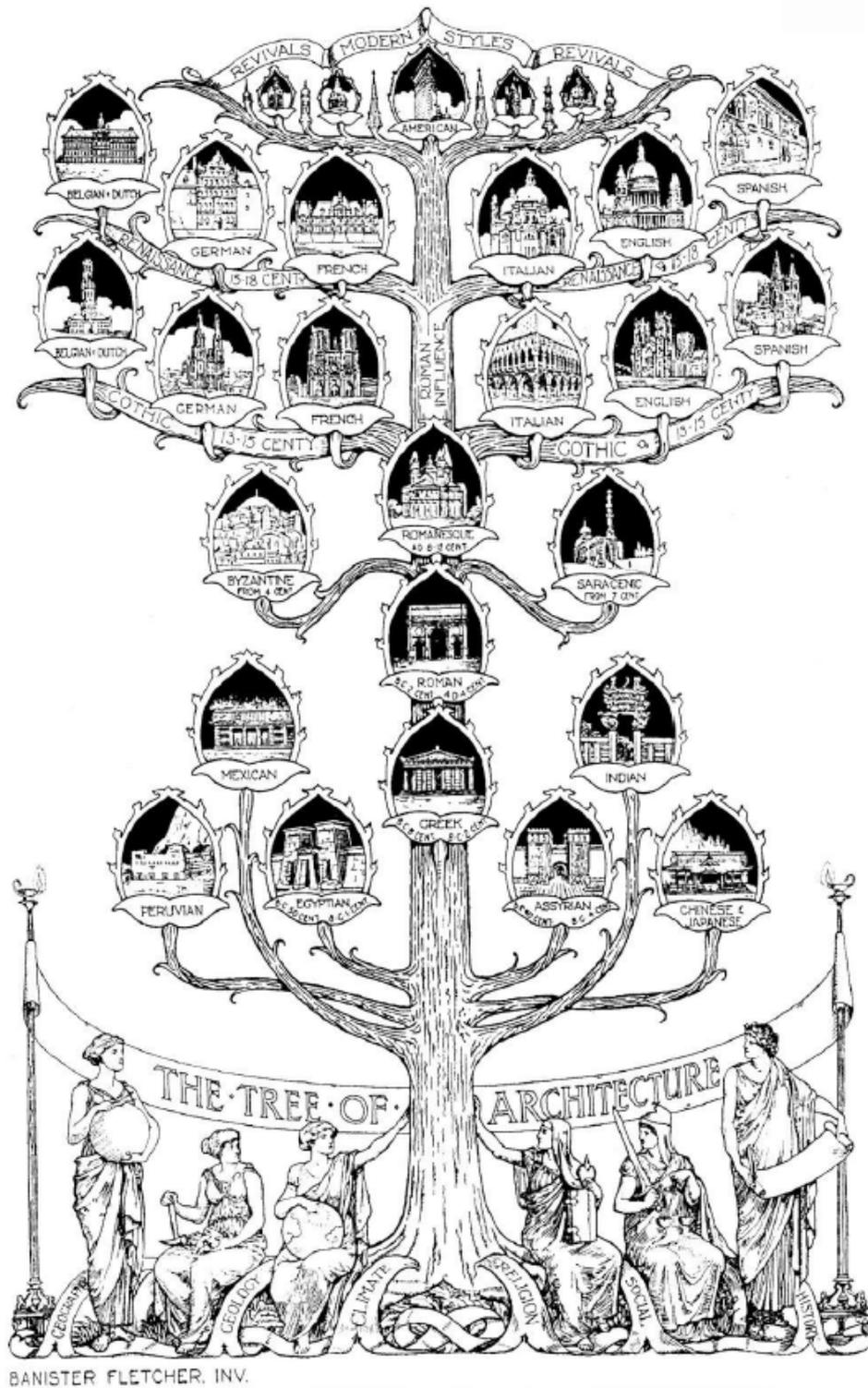


Fig. 1. "The Tree of Architecture." This iteration first appeared in the sixth edition of A history of architecture (1921). Fletcher, B. (1931). A history of architecture on the comparative method for students, craftsmen and amateurs, (9th ed.). B.T. Batsford Ltd., p. III.