

The term *decolonize* has gained a new life in recent art activism, as a radical challenge to the Eurocentrism of museums (in light of Native, Indigenous, and other epistemological perspectives) as well as in the museum's structural relation to violence (either in its ties to oligarchic trustees or to corporations engaged in the business of war or environmental depredation). In calling forth the mid-twentieth-century period of decolonization as its historical point of reference, the word's emphatic return is rhetorically powerful, and it corresponds to a parallel interest among scholars in a plural field of postcolonial or global modernisms. The exhortation to decolonize, however, is not uncontroversial—some believe it still carries a Eurocentric bias. Indeed, it has been proposed that, for the West, de-imperialization is perhaps even more urgent than decolonization.

What does the term *decolonize* mean to you in your work in activism, criticism, art, and/or scholarship? Why has it come to play such an urgent role in the neoliberal West? How can we link it historically with the political history of decolonization, and how does it work to translate postcolonial theory into a critique of the neocolonial contemporary art world?

—Huey Copeland, Hal Foster, David Joselit, and Pamela M. Lee

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In trying to respond to this loaded question it's necessary to clarify the perspective and position from which one is seeing and speaking, as well as the experiences which have shaped one's understanding and practice of the term *decolonization*. In my experience decolonization has essentially been understood and practiced as a double movement: On one side it's a critical approach to the status quo and an antidote to normalization, while on the other side it's a movement towards the creation of meaningful and emancipatory forms of life. These movements have emerged and developed concrete meanings in the context of Palestine, where decolonization is essentially understood above all as liberation against the Israeli regime of occupation, colonization, and apartheid. In 2007, Sandi Hilal, Eyal Weizman, and I established DAAR (Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency),¹ an architectural and artistic collective practice which aims to imagine the reuse of colonial structures for different intentions than they were originally designed for, from evacuated military bases to refugee camps, uncompleted governmental structures, and the remains of destroyed villages. Architecture in the process of colonization and decolonization plays a crucial role in organizing spatial relations and expressing ideologies, and even when it's abandoned and left in ruins, it is mobilized as evidence of political and cultural claims. The analysis of the ways in which colonial architecture has been reutilized is a new arena for understanding broader political and cultural issues around national identity and exile, senses of belonging or alienation, and social control or urban subversion. For Decolonizing Architecture, it is not enough to simply invert the structures of power. In postcolonial India, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi had different positions on how to reuse evacuated British colonial buildings: Nehru wanted to reuse them for the new independent government, prisons as prisons, school to be continued to be used as schools, etc., while Gandhi believed that a liberated India should radically change the functions of these colonial structures in order to serve the interests of the people and liberate themselves from the inherent structure of power relations.

The difficult task of Decolonizing Architecture, therefore, is to reimagine new uses that will not be trapped by structures of power. In this sense decolonization is closer to an act of profanation to present structures of domination rather than a messianic promise of a more just future that never arrives. Giorgio Agamben points out that "to profane does not simply mean to abolish or cancel separations, but to learn to make new uses of them." To profane is to transgress lines of separation, to use them in a particular way. If to sacralize is to separate and bring common things into a separate, sacred sphere, then its inverse, to profane, is to restore the common use of these things. Reutilizing colonial architecture, therefore, does not only mean to dislocate power but to use its destructive potential to reverse its operation by subverting its uses. It is, accordingly, important to distinguish between secularization and profana-

1. www.decolonizing.ps.

tion. Secularization leaves the power structure intact; it simply moves it from one sphere to another. Profanation, however, manages to deactivate the power devices and restore the common use of the space that power had confiscated.

Historical processes of colonization and decolonization and today's conditions of coloniality and decoloniality, to borrow Walter Mignolo's conceptualizations, have shaped the world order and continue to sustain systems of privilege. The European colonial/modern project of exploitation, segregation, and dispossession began five hundred years ago, when the world was divided into different races and nations considered to be inferior to Europe, which remained the center of reference of culture and civilization. Perhaps the most striking example of this inherited privilege is the right of free movement granted to European descendants and negated to the rest of the world. It has to be said that the European colonial/modern project was imposed not only outside of Europe but also within Europe itself. Southern Italy, where I was born, for example, is still today considered "underdeveloped," "traditional," and "backward," the object of a failed project of modernization.

In 1940 the Fascist regime founded the "Ente di colonizzazione del latifondo siciliano" (Colonization Entity of Sicilian Latifundia) with the intention to modernize/colonize the Sicilian countryside with new, modern rural towns. The countryside was also considered "deserted" and "unproductive" and therefore needed to be "reclaimed," "civilized." A few years earlier, the "Ente di colonizzazione della Libia" (Colonization Entity of Libya) had been established with the intention of bringing modernity to Libya and erecting modern cities and architecture in Libya,



Alessandro Petti. Verso un Ente di Decolonizzazione (Towards a decolonization entity). 2020.

Eritrea, and Ethiopia. While architectural modernism, in particular, continues to be celebrated for its progressive social and political agenda, what the modernist rhetoric of progress and innovation obscures is its dark side, namely, its inherent homogenizing, authoritarian, and segregationist dimensions. These modernist conceptions are still present in contemporary architecture and urban planning, where, in the name of modern architecture, entire communities, forms of life, and historical sites are erased.

A critique of modernism alone is not enough, having already been conducted by postmodernism. The task of the present is, additionally, to imagine architectural forms of demodernization. Therefore, for all those who are living in modernist structures, it is time, within the larger struggle of decolonization, to focus our efforts on undermining and destabilizing the very foundational modernists' values, categories, and epistemologies that continue to permeate our realities, irrespective of geographical location and North/South divisions.

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