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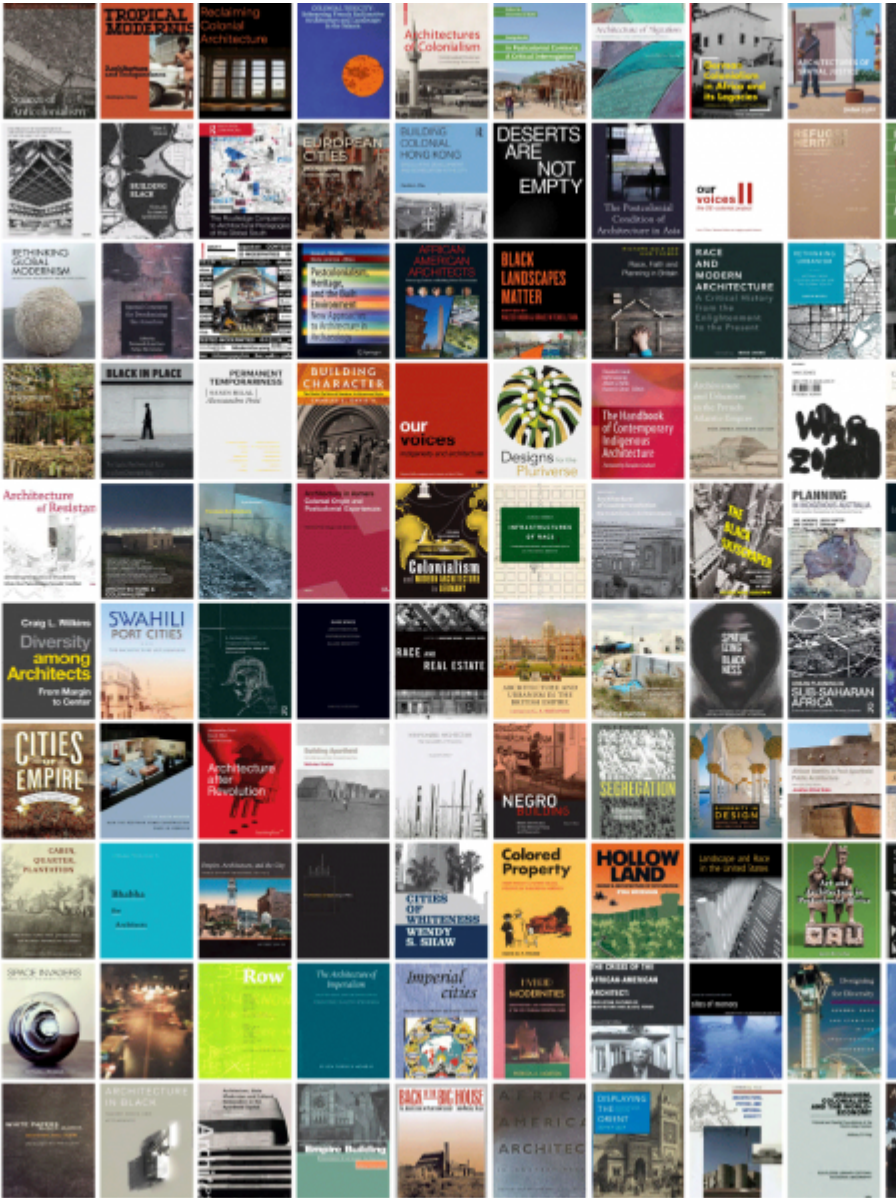
# Eleven ways towards a decolonial metamorphosis of architecture | L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui

## Architecture

How can we decolonise architecture? [Mathias Rollet](#), architect, PhD, research director in Theories and Practices of Architecture and lecturer at Grenoble School of Architecture (France), is the author of numerous works on the subject – including *Décoloniser l'architecture*, published in March 2024 by Le Passager clandestin. In this article for L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, he outlines the urgent need for a decolonial metamorphosis of architecture, so that it becomes a soft weapon in the fight against social and structural domination – whether in schools, in practices, in research, in institutions and in criticism.

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Mathias Rollet, architect and PhD in architecture



‘Decolonial resources in architecture: 100 works in English’. Bibliographic poster designed for the exhibition ‘RECLAIM ARCHITECTURE. Ce que les pensées

féministes et décolonialistes font à l'architecture (The impact of feminist and decolonial thinking on architecture)', presented in March 2025 at ENSA Grenoble – Université Grenoble-Alpes.

For more than a decade now, I have been working on the problem of the 'obsolescence' of architecture as a discipline.<sup>1</sup> One of the conclusions of this investigation is that the transformation of our discipline has become necessary and urgent, and that it must aim for both ecological and 'decolonial' horizons. No, architecture is not doomed to be what it once was. Here and abroad, a myriad of stimulating examples proves that different theories and practices of architecture as an emancipatory tool are possible. We can choose what to put behind the word 'architecture', individually and collectively; we can choose to make it a tool in the service of all kinds of struggles (decolonial, feminist, queer, animalist, etc.) and not just in the service of domination. Hence the title of our latest book, *Décoloniser l'architecture* ('*Decolonising Architecture*').<sup>2</sup> That being said, what can be done specifically with this idea of 'decolonising' architectural projects, in architecture practices or in schools, in architecture criticism or in architectural research?

Of course, we could start by defining the 'decolonial perspective' with reference authors, to make it clear that its 'focal point is no longer colonialism [...] but coloniality', which extends over the long term, and of which colonialism is 'only one of the historical manifestations'.<sup>3</sup>

We could also refer the idea of 'decolonising architecture' to the hundred or so works that examine the fundamental relationship between architectural modernity and structural racism, the links between urbanisation and imperialism, the use of architecture as a weapon of choice for the colonisation of settlements and segregation or even apartheid, the possibility of reclaiming and reappropriating architectural remains in post-colonial contexts, the troubled legacies and opportunities in tropical contexts, and much more.<sup>4</sup>

We could also discuss the need to clarify the exact meaning of the term 'decolonial', which authors such as the sociologist Stéphane Dufoix are probably right to describe as being as 'full of meaning' as it is 'light as a feather, easy to use without the risk of being contradicted because it circulates without any real significance'.<sup>5</sup> Or to debate whether it should be used as a metaphor or not when referring to architecture.<sup>6</sup>

All this, however, does not quite answer the legitimate questions that students, teachers, practitioners, researchers and architectural institutions might ask themselves about the practicalities of decolonising architecture. To put it plainly: *what* should we decolonise, and *how*? This contribution therefore puts forward *eleven points*, each of which, in its own way, attempts to describe as concretely as possible what an effective decolonisation of architecture might consist of.

## **Eleven decolonial paths for architecture**

### **To say that architecture needs to work on its decolonisation means opening up a number of questions:**

1. ... regarding the **programme**: what do we, as architects, agree to produce? Because, generally speaking, architects and urban planners are placed in situations of subordination to commissions that never – or almost never –<sup>7</sup> raise the question of 'coloniality', it can be difficult to work on this in the late phases of project management; and it is upstream in the process of transforming the built environment that we need to work. So, how can we encourage the emergence of mixed communities that are critical and aware, concerned and

supportive, and capable of reformulating commissions? How can we encourage the emergence of creolised social bodies, capable of co-designing programmes in a different way, of identifying issues, of discussing their validity, the nuisances they generate or the interests they serve, the invisibilisations they entrench or the dominations they perpetuate?<sup>8</sup>

2. ... regarding **construction sites**, production lines, assembly lines and construction: who actually builds, and according to which systems of more or less invisible racial and social domination? Who uses polluting materials at reduced cost, above all because that's what our designs and the economic realities of contemporary construction suggest we should do? When do we take the time to really check that one form or another of 'modern slavery'<sup>9</sup> (which is always played out on racialised people, whether they are Nigerian, Vietnamese or Romanian) is not at work on the building site? To put it plainly: 'who is building your architecture?'<sup>10</sup>
3. ... regarding architectural '**references**': what models (people, buildings, theories, concepts) do we have in mind when we design architecture, and to what extent are these models 'Western-centric'? What images of development, progress, growth and 'colonial capitalism'<sup>11</sup> are conjured up by the project – albeit unconsciously? How are the singularities of tropical situations taken into account or avoided by the histories and theories of architecture from the Global North? Given the central place of references in the methodology of the modern architectural project, changing the reference system is much more than a symbolic question – it is the whole project, its processes, its aims and its methods of evaluation that are turned upside down.
4. ... regarding '**value systems**', in the sense of the political and moral aims of the project. What foul 'universalism'<sup>12</sup> could be lurking in our architectural criteria, in our thinking about the space we design or describe? Or, on the contrary: can we prove ourselves capable of taking real account of multiculturalism, of the many ways in which we inhabit space together (from the kitchen to the public space) without seeking to resolve them, to conform to them, to 'integrate' them? To say that we need to transform our architectural value systems, in other words, is to say how important it is to radically change what we place our architectural knowledge and skills *at the service of*. In practical terms, this means, for example, doing away once and for all with architectural competitions that do not take post-occupancy evaluation into account in their judgements.
5. ... regarding **the way the project is represented**, i.e. in concrete terms: which types of drawings show what? Or, even more clearly: why are all architectural perspective renders inhabited only by able-bodied, white, middle-class people in their thirties, when the weather is fine and all we have to do is go for a walk and enjoy the beauty of the surroundings? Is the plan the best tool for working with resident communities to achieve multicultural appropriation of spaces? Do our maps of places reveal or hide past and present colonial events?<sup>13</sup> This is a tricky two-pronged challenge: to combat both the omnipresence of the image (digital, photographic, etc.) in architecture and the tyranny of ordered composition (plan, façade, etc.), and to move towards other types of working methods capable of engaging other types of extended 'spatial agency'<sup>14</sup> that are both more inclusive and more critical.
6. ... regarding the designer's **posture**: can we claim to be non-white, non-masculine, non-binary or non-abled – for instance – in order to claim the possibility of designing 'differently', from other life experiences, from other bodies, from other communities than those of the modern white man? Can we ask ourselves anew which architects we, as fellow architects, think we are imitating? Does this necessarily mean questioning the stereotypical figure of the architect (white, male, straight...) and refusing to let this stereotype continue to be the 'norm', the 'normal', the obvious *centre* around which unnecessary *margins* gravitate? Consciously choosing to re-anchor our architectural cosmologies in other worlds is not just about representativeness or transforming our minds and discourses; it's not just



about paying legitimate homage to the remarkable work of others – whether their names are Carin Smuts, Yasmeen Lari, Anna Heringer, Max Jr. Bond, Sandi Hilal, Irene Cheng, Naomi Stead, Wandile Mthiyane or H  l  ne Frichot. It’s also a reminder that the reality of the architect and of architecture is no less embodied by these figures, their careers and their undeniably emancipating works; in other words, that is what ‘architects’ and ‘architecture’ *are about too*.

7. ... regarding **shared design**: with non-architects, with non-humans, with residents, with users... Insofar as it seems that there can be no real and complete decolonisation of architecture as long as the architect remains this supposed creative genius, bred *in vitro* in the secrecy of tightly sealed practices, shielded from the real world outside.<sup>15</sup> Many initiatives have been underway for nearly a century to design *with* the community, or even to design *as a member of the community* (in a neighbourhood, a region, etc.): these initiatives need to be pursued to give greater autonomy to possible counter-powers and the will to sabotage indigenusness, particularly in working-class neighbourhoods.<sup>16</sup> In a way, it’s a renunciation of control, power and domination that we’re talking about here, a ‘disengagement from the work’ (*d  prise d’oeuvre*, in French) – to use Edith Hallauer’s excellent concept.<sup>17</sup>
8. ... regarding the **reconstruction of History** ( whether colonial, patriarchal, extractivist, etc.) at stake in the architectural project, and in the relationships that our projects have with that which is already there. For example, can the project bring to light historical elements that are useful to contemporary dynamics of post-colonial memory or reparation? Can it help to bring about the first collective awareness of the colonial past and present in our own territories, or, on the contrary, does it work to erase these traces?<sup>18</sup>
9. ... regarding **‘plural’ cultural and intellectual visions**. When we talk about our projects and accompany our images and plans with quotations from Le Corbusier or Aim   C  saire,   douard Glissant, Franz Fanon, Fran  oise Verg  s, Fatima Ouassak, Houria Bouteldja, Malcolm Ferdinand: is this really equivalent, is it neutral, is it harmless? Is this necessarily ‘decolonisation-washing’, or is it also a desirable step towards helping to disseminate these thoughts and to link our actions with their lines?
10. ... regarding the subject of ***what makes ‘architecture’***: not just what ‘good’ architecture is, but what we actually mean by that term. Can a standardised industrial pavilion be considered architecture? Can a nuclear power station or a shack be considered architecture? Can a ‘situation’ be architectural?<sup>19</sup> Can a perimeter wall be architecture? These are important questions, especially as it seems difficult to believe in any real and complete decolonisation of the architectural discipline as long as only buildings designed by ‘architects’ (registered architects, it goes without saying) are considered to be ‘Architecture’.
11. ... regarding the **institutions that are acceptable or unacceptable from a decolonial perspective**. Can a CAUE<sup>20</sup>, a school of architecture or a Maison de l’architecture<sup>21</sup> claim to be fully decolonial, at what risk and according to what criteria? In a country whose ‘state racism’ has been proven beyond doubt,<sup>22</sup> and where the evidence of imperialist colonial policies has been piling up every week for centuries, what sense would it make to claim to be truly ‘decolonial’ as a public institution? Over and above the question of the representativeness of teachers in schools of architecture – which is certainly an important issue, but not sufficient on its own – it is all of the first ten points that seem to have to be addressed by a truly ‘anti-racist’<sup>23</sup> and decolonial approach to teaching architecture. At the very least.

## Avenues to explore

As can be seen, there is no order or hierarchy to these points, they are all necessary but not sufficient, and others could undoubtedly be added. They complement the five very valid points

already made by Mohamed Elshahed in January 2023,<sup>24</sup> and all the other calls for the decolonisation of architecture that have been made internationally in recent years. All of them should be seen as attempts to give concrete form to decolonial thinking in architecture, aimed at all those who, refusing fatalism, would like to tackle the metamorphosis of the discipline from this perspective. It won't be easy. It may even be impossible. But not to try, really, would be even worse.



‘Decolonial resources in architecture: 30 works in French’. Bibliographic poster designed for the exhibition ‘RECLAIM ARCHITECTURE. Ce que les pensées féministes et décolonialistes font à l’architecture (The impact of feminist and decolonial thinking on architecture)’, presented in March 2025 at ENSA Grenoble – Université Grenoble-Alpes.

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1. On this subject, see (in French) : Mathias Rollot, *L’obsolescence. Ouvrir l’impossible*, Métispresses, 2016; ‘Constat amer : l’architecture est archaïque’, in *Les Territoires du vivant*, Wildproject, 2023, pp.55-64; ‘Face à son obsolescence, trois scénarios pour l’architecture’, *D’A*, n°322, December 2024, pp.72-77.
  2. Mathias Rollot, *Décoloniser l’architecture*, Le Passager clandestin, 2024 (in French).

3. Philippe Colin, Lissel Quiroz, *Pensées décoloniales. Une introduction aux théories critiques d'Amérique latine*, La Découverte, 2023, p.38 (in French).
4. The exhibition *RECLAIM ARCHITECTURE. Ce que les pensées décoloniales et féministes font à l'architecture*, to be held at the Grenoble National School of Architecture (ENSAG) in March 2025, features two vast English- and French-language archives on the subject. [See the exhibition website](#).
5. Stéphane Dufoix, *Décolonial*, Anamosa, 2023 (in French).
6. In her article on the subject, Turkish architecture teacher and researcher Pelin Tan says that it should ('Décoloniser l'enseignement de l'architecture', « *Perdre le Pouvoir* », *Plan Libre*, no. 206, 2024), but this is in implicit disagreement with the authors of the book *La Décolonisation n'est pas une métaphore* (Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, Rot-bo-krik, 2022) – a second position that I more readily endorse.
- 7 One example is the recent Belgian institutional initiative '[Decolonisation of public space in the Brussels-Capital Region: framework for reflection and recommendations](#)', which is rare enough in Europe to merit a mention.
- 8 Thanks to Sonia Te Hok for her suggestions on this particular point, as well as for her enthusiasm and more general exchanges on the subject.
9. Eleanor Jolliffe, 'Architects must take a stand on modern slavery', *Building Design*, november 2017 (re-published in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, n°463, décembre 2024).
10. A reference to the initiative [Who Builds Your Architecture? \(WBYA?\)](#).
11. Sylvie Laurent, *Capital et race. Histoire d'une hydre moderne*, Seuil, 2024 (in French).
12. Read Mame-Fatou Niang and Julien Suaudeau's excellent *Universalisme*, Anamosa, 2022 (in French).
13. Cosimo Lisi, *Paris Capitale Coloniale. Violence cartographique de l'espace abstrait*, Eterotopia, 2024 (in French).
14. [Spatialagency.net](#)
15. For a thorough dismantling of this alien universe: Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends*, MIT Press, 2009.
16. In architecture, [the figure of Max Jr. Bond and Community Design](#). In the French context, we can only recommend the excellent works of Fatima Ouassak, including *Pour une écologie pirate* (Seuil, 2023).
- 17 Edith Hallauer, *Du vernaculaire à la déprise d'œuvre : Urbanisme, architecture, design*, Université Paris-Est, 2017 (in French).
18. On Paris, see in particular the recent books by Françoise Vergès, Seumboy Vrainom, *De la violence coloniale dans l'espace public. Visite du triangle de la porte dorée à Paris*, Shed, 2021 (in French) and Marcel Dorigny & Alain Ruscio, *Paris colonial et anticolonial. Promenades dans la capitale, une histoire de l'esclavage et de la colonisation*, published by Hémisphères, 2024 (in French).
19. An excellent question posed by Étienne Delprat in his book *Architecture(s)*

*oppositionnelle(s)*, éditions du commun, 2023 (in French).

[20.](#) Editor's note : CAUE are public French Councils for Architecture, Urbanism and Environment. They provide guidance to individuals, communities, and local authorities on projects related to building design, urban planning, and environmental development.

[21.](#) Editor's note: The Maisons de l'Architecture are French cultural centers dedicated to disseminating knowledge about architecture, urban planning, and landscape design.

[22.](#) Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Racismes d'État, États racistes. Une brève histoire*, Amsterdam, 2024 (in French).

[23.](#) WAI Think Tank, A Manual of Anti-racist Architecture Education, 2020. [Available in open access.](#)

[24.](#) The Architect's Newspaper, '[Five Points Toward Decolonizing Architecture](#)'

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