

# THE GLOBAL AND THE PLANETARY: POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM IN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

*While architectural historians today continue to demonstrate an unprecedented commitment to issues of globalization and transculturality, there is an emerging body of literature on ecology, environmentalism, and environmentality as key subjects that attend to the interconnectedness of our vastly heterogeneous world. This ‘environmentalization’ of the discipline is noticeably less concerned with the asymmetries of geopolitically determined cultures. It diverges from decades of interdisciplinary conversations about the dismantling of Eurocentric canons, suggesting that the new ‘planetary perspective’ – with its ecospheric inclusivity beyond human subjectivity – will replace rather than extend the ‘global perspective’ of geographical inclusivity beyond European subjectivity. By considering an ecocritical direction in the humanities that is based on the critical insights of postcolonial literature, this essay contemplates a decolonized approach to studying architecture and ecology. Its methodological analysis supports the growth of architectural history into a trans-disciplinary field, one that advances knowledge of the built, natural, and social environments as deeply entangled, without privileging the Global North’s postindustrial interests over the assessment of Southern, Indigenous, and diasporic developments. Just as the modifier ‘global’ is anti-globalist and resists cultural hegemony, so too must ‘planetary’ signify more than a universalist vision of ecology that presupposes an undifferentiated humanity imperiling a generalized nature.*

Architectural history is fundamentally interdisciplinary. For decades, scholars in this discipline have engaged in the same intellectual discourses as their contemporaries from other branches of the humanities. Many of these discourses, including New Left Marxism, poststructuralist feminism, and postcolonialism, have informed historical research through socially conscious critical theories that succeeded the multidisciplinary Frankfurt School of continental philosophy<sup>1</sup>. Only in recent years, with environmentalist concerns of the postindustrial world pulling the humanities closer to the sciences, have historians opted to mute critical theories as a primary methodological source and turned to a post-critical form of interdisciplinarity<sup>2</sup>. Curious about how architectural history, as a self-assertive yet outward-looking discipline, will stay in conversation with other humanities disciplines, this essay reflects on the ecologically conscious ‘planetary perspective’ with the postcolonial insights that undergird the ‘global perspective’<sup>3</sup>. More specifically, by reevaluating the concept of ambivalence from postcolonial literature, the present analysis extends an ecocritical position that acknowledges the value of intertwined histories for a decolonized study of architecture and ecology.

## The question of a global architectural history

Around the turn of the millennium, historians began to move away from the colonial model of narrating the world’s heritages. Critical thinkers of the late twentieth century’s postcolonial front

– most notably Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha – mobilized a generation of architectural historians, alongside art historians and scholars across the humanities, to interrogate Eurocentric conceptions of cultural development<sup>4</sup>. While existing approaches to locating more geographically diverse and inclusive knowledge are far from consistent, the rather unspecific and open-ended aim for a ‘global perspective’ of history to replace ‘world history’ has undeniably become a disciplinary norm. The reassessment of canonical textbooks and their colonial roots, traced to the fourth edition of Banister F. Fletcher’s *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method for the Student, Craftsman, and Amateur* (1901), has been a vital contribution of architectural historians attentive to the postcolonial cause<sup>5</sup>. Francis Ching, Mark Jarzombek, and Vikramaditya Prakash presented a connective survey of historic sites from all continents in *A Global History of Architecture* (2006), with an innovatively global chronology that contrasts Fletcher’s Mediterranean-Atlantic pedigree. Nearly two decades later, architectural scholarship continues to exhibit unprecedented commitment to addressing globalization and transculturality<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, it appears that the postcolonial answer to the colonial marginalization of cultures outside Europe and European-settled America in survey texts is increasingly about distancing from this type of literature altogether, in preference of revising a problematic timeline<sup>7</sup>. One observable consequence

of the discipline foregoing a shared chronological framework is the proliferation of research directions that remain isolated from one another, shackled to divisive categories of the past, and unevenly valued on an international stage<sup>8</sup>.

Cautious of the “anti-survey” trend, especially in the liberal training of building design professionals, architectural historian Esra Akcan has proposed the excavation of intertwined histories as a means of globalizing architectural studies<sup>9</sup>. Intertwined histories focus on moments of parallel, overlap, and fluidity between two or more cultures – particularly those that historians have traditionally kept polarized. The contemplation of history’s multicultural, intercultural, and trans-cultural layers draws from post-nationalist as well as postcolonial dialogues on globalization and globality. It implores our historically Eurocentric and elitist discipline to engage with a broader set of actors and spaces in order to comprehend the ethnocultural, gender, and socio-economic disparities that have been created through the intercontinental flow of power and resources. Akcan’s consideration of the translatability of German architecture in post-Ottoman Türkiye, for instance, does not only inform that lesser-recognized protagonists from around the world are involved in the privileged account of Europe’s industrialization and modernization. It also entertains a post-colonial renewal of the survey that relates new findings on the Global South to the extensively researched Global North, as opposed to retreating from the latter to devote to the former<sup>10</sup>.



*Campoung Bazas*

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**Fig. 1** *Kampung Bugis, Singapore, ca. 1890-1910. Stilted neighborhood of Singapore's Bugis migrants from South Sulawesi, Indonesia (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RF-F-00-5018-41).*

<sup>1</sup> Also notable is the interdisciplinary commitment of twentieth-century architectural historians to continental philosophy's phenomenological-existentialist and psychoanalytic-semiotic branches. These two related intellectual traditions, when compared to New Left Marxism, poststructuralist feminism, and postcolonialism, are more focused on the subjective individual than the objective collective.

<sup>2</sup> 'Post-critical' is a response to critical theory's dominance in the academic study of architectural design, referenced here to denote critical theory's absence in ecological scholarship. See R. SOMOL, S. WHITING, *Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism*, "Perspecta", 33, 2002, pp. 72-77; G. BAIRD, "Criticality" and Its Discontents, in *The New Architectural Pragmatism: A Harvard Design Magazine Reader*, edited by W.S. Saunders, Minneapolis 2007, pp. 136-149; R. MARTIN, *Critical of What? Toward a Utopian Realism*, *ivi*, pp. 150-161.

<sup>3</sup> A notable title that considers the humanities shifting from 'global' to 'planetary' is O. MOULD, *From globalisation to the planetary: Towards a critical framework of planetary thinking in geography*, "Geography Compass", 17, 2023, 9, pp. 1-13, <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gec3.12720> (last accessed 20 October 2024).

<sup>4</sup> E. SAID, *Orientalism*, New York 1978, pp. 49-73; G.C. SPIVAK, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by R.C. Morris, New York 2010<sup>5</sup> (first ed. New York 1985), pp. 21-78: 37-38, 62-63; H.K. BHABHA, *The Location of Culture*, London 2004<sup>2</sup> (first ed. London 1994), pp. 28-56. Notable titles that discuss postcolonial theory as a methodology for architectural historians include: E. AKCAN, *Postcolonial Theories in Architecture*, in *A Critical History of Contemporary Architecture: 1960-2010*, edited by E.G. Haddad, D. Rifkind, London 2014, pp. 115-136; Z. ÇELİK, *Reflections on Architectural History Forty Years after Edward Said's Orientalism*, "Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians", 77, 2018, 4, pp. 381-387; I. OSAYIMWESE, *From Postcolonial to Decolonial Architecture: A Method*, in *Architectures of Colonialism: Constructed Histories, Conflicting Memories*, edited by V. Egbers et al., Berlin-Boston 2024, pp. 17-42.

<sup>5</sup> See critiques of Fletcher in G. BAYDAR NALBANTOĞLU, *Toward Postcolonial Openings: Rereading Sir Banister Fletcher's History of Architecture*, "Assemblage", 35, 1998, pp. 7-17; K. JAMES-CHAKRABORTY, *Beyond Postcolonialism: New Directions for the History of Nonwestern Architecture*, "Frontiers of Architectural Research", 3, 2014, 1, pp. 1-9.

<sup>6</sup> Another notable example of a survey text that queries Eurocentric precedents is EAD., *Architecture Since 1400*, Minneapolis 2014, pp. vi-xx.

<sup>7</sup> Fletcher's *History of Architecture* was first published in 1896. The twenty-first and latest edition, retitled *Global History of Architecture*, was published in 2019. At the time Ching, Jarzombek, and Prakash published *A Global History of Architecture*, a number of textbooks adhered to Fletcher's emphasis on Europe and North America. Two notable titles that are still in print are M.W. FAZIO, M. MOFFETT, L. WODEHOUSE, O. HOPKINS, *Buildings Across Time: An Introduction to World Architecture*, Boston 2023<sup>6</sup> (first ed. Knoxville 1983); and R. INGERSOLL, *World Architecture: A Cross-Cultural History*, New York 2019<sup>2</sup> (first ed. New York 2012).

<sup>8</sup> E. AKCAN, *Writing a Global History Through Translation: An Afterword on Pedagogical Perspectives*, "Art in Translation", 10, 2018, 1, pp. 136-142: 138.

<sup>9</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 138-141. Chattopadhyay notes that Upton refers to such an approach as "webs and flows". See S. CHATTOPADHYAY, *The Globality of Architectural History*, "Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians", 74, 2015, 4, pp. 411-415: 413-414; D. UPTON, *Starting from Baalbek: Noah, Solomon, Saladin, and the Fluidity of Architectural History*, "Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians", 68, 2009, 4, pp. 457-465: 465.

Despite such a promising horizon for more inclusive scholarship, there is an emerging body of literature on ecology, environmentalism, and environmentality as key subjects that attend to the interconnectedness of our vastly heterogeneous world<sup>11</sup>. This 'environmentalization' of architectural history, referred to as the 'ecological shift' in this essay, is noticeably less concerned with the asymmetry of geopolitically determined cultures. Previously colonized or less rapidly industrialized regions of the Global South are not necessarily omitted from discussions of land use, water management, climate control, natural resources, energy supply, environmental regulation, and rural systems as architectural issues. However, the intellectual foundation is no longer postcolonialism's critique of hegemonic 'Western' traditions and Northern modernity. Instead of navigating away from Europe's colonial legacy, the current 'ecological shift' tends to re-center history around industrialization, an enterprise of European origin and imperialist function<sup>12</sup>.

### Ambiguity of the Anthropocene

The rise in research on architecture and ecology as more than a technical subject requiring quantitative analysis is to rectify the typically minor role of the natural environment in the study of built environments. Within this loosely delimited field, some historians have adopted the interdisciplinary method of ecocriticism, which is critical of any strictly environmentalist revision of history and seeks to pluralize ecology's meaning for humanities research<sup>13</sup>. Yet, much of the momentum behind the current 'ecological shift' is the work of several Latourian scholars from architecture schools who are more closely allied with architects than with art historians<sup>14</sup>. Daniel Barber, Kim Förster, and Lydia Kallipoliti converge in their emphasis on the 'Anthropocene', a term borrowed from the sciences to entertain the unbinding of cultur-

al studies from anthropocentric precedents<sup>15</sup>. In the postcolonial disciplines of the humanities, could the framing of ecological scholarship around the Anthropocene be capitalizing on the term's scientific ambiguity to understate the variation, segmentation, and stratification of human cultures? There is no practical justification for historians to latch onto this label, as scientists are still undecided on whether to date anthropogenic impact to the onset of a major industrial phase (e.g., mechanization, electrification, chemicalization) or an earlier period of technological breakthrough (e.g., stone tools, agriculture, metalworking)<sup>16</sup>.

On a more ideological level, the Anthropocene (along with related neologisms such as 'Capitalocene' and 'Plantationocene') functions as a catchphrase that promotes the conformity of all human societies to the ecological knowledge and intelligence defined by the visions of certain authoritative economies<sup>17</sup>. Generalizing humanity's interaction and coexistence with nature across time, regions, and cultures distracts from the fact that Europe's historical ambitions to colonize, industrialize, and modernize the world is the very seed of past architectural research alienating the natural environment<sup>18</sup>. Thus, the ecocritical reexamination of architectural history should proceed with the critical insights of postcolonialism as a continually relevant branch of poststructuralist-Marxist thought. It is merely skimming the surface to resist the apparatus of centralized power that Förster describes as "the reproduction of a white, Western, male perspective" in *Environmental Histories of Architecture* (2022)<sup>19</sup>. More crucial is the unravelling of this 'ecological shift' in architectural historiography as a latently self-referential, inward-looking, and neocolonial discourse of the Global North that reinforces Southern, Indigenous, and diasporic 'Otherness'. Presently, a noteworthy oversight has less to do with ethnocultural, geopolitical,



or gender heterogeneity than the profound intertwinement of built and natural environments for many lesser-studied heritage groups, which contrasts the prevailing modern sense of architecture and nature as discrete yet reconcilable domains. An example of this intertwinement in history is Tenochtitlan, an urban ecosystem of the Mexica people on Lake Texcoco that was lost in the seventeenth century to Spanish colonization and is now undergoing restoration as an environmentalist project (figs. 2-3).

### Postcolonialism and ambivalence

While the most apparent indication of postcolonialism stimulating a global architectural history is the departure from Eurocentric, nationalist, and patriarchal scholarship, applying postcolonial methodology in historical research does not constitute a Global South subfield that shuns the North. It simply fosters an intellectually rigorous look at globalization as communicative of the world's fragmentation into connectible pieces rather than its coalescence into a singular future. According to Bhabha's theory of cultural difference, postcoloniality is a condition of hybridity and ambivalence specific to the decolonized Global South, in which formerly subjugated nations establish their sovereignty by negotiating between precolonial recollections and colonial influences<sup>20</sup>. This discernment of history's ambivalent layers should not be likened to the postindustrial environmentalist perception of humanity as a singular, undifferentiated entity burdening the planet. Ambivalence is the fluid 'in-between' that defies the binary 'either-or', whereas ambiguity is generalization that disregards nuance. Bhabha's equation of cultural hybridity with the emancipative 'third space' was pivotal in empowering the Global South as a key scholarly target at the end of the twentieth century, when the North's colonial mindset continued to shape humanis-

tic knowledge even decades after the formal decolonization of Asia and Africa.

Largely aligned with the feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty's idea of the 'composite Other' and Spivak's contemporaneous theory of the 'voiceless subaltern', a number of postcolonial thinkers have continued to develop this relatively young intellectual tradition in the post-millennial decades<sup>21</sup>. Their work exposes and explains the acutely marginalized segments of a world globalized through neoliberalism, techno-progressivism, and environmentality. Cultural historian Robert Young contends that "postcolonialism remains" because the humanities have not given up on the subaltern, and historians still strive to bring "the invisible" into visibility<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, literary scholar Amar Acheraïou recommends "decolonization of postcolonialism" by continually analyzing the intersectional dynamics of power and submission that maintain ethnocultural, gender, and socio-economic hierarchies. Concurring with Acheraïou's line of reasoning for remediating postcolonialism's fundamental principles of hybridity, ambivalence, and 'third space', Ian Baucom apprehends that the global magnitude of human actions intensifies "unfreedom" by fomenting "subaltern[ity], inequality, and vulnerability"<sup>23</sup>. As a postcolonial theorist of historiography in the environmentalist age, Baucom is adamant that the planetary magnitude of climate change, carbon-cycle acceleration, sea-level instability, and other naturally occurring 'forcings' emblematic of injustice to the ecosphere, is inextricably linked to synthesized 'forces' of social injustice. For historians exploring the ecological dimensions of human cultures, including architectural historians, Baucom's reflection on the forcing-force dialectic points to postcolonialism's capacity to unravel humanity's complex tensions as a critical countermeasure against the eco-hegemonic trivialization of cultural vectors<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> E. AKCAN, *Architecture in Translation*, Durham 2012, pp. 3-5.

<sup>11</sup> Barber explains the Foucauldian concept of 'environmentality' and its relevance to architectural history in D.A. BARBER, *Environmentalisation and Environmentality: Re-Conceiving the History of 20thc Architecture*, "Design Philosophy Papers", 7, 2009, 3, pp. 145-160. Whereas environmentalism is generally defined as the social response to human impact on nature, the neologism 'environmentality' references Foucault's 'governmentality' to denote the exercise of power through environmental policies. A notable title that elaborates on this subject is A. AGRAWAL, *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*, Durham 2005, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> For examples of scholarship that has presented timelines of ecologically conscious architecture: L. KALLIPOLITI, *Histories of Ecological Design: An Unfinished Cyclopedia*, New York 2024, pp. 17-26; P.J. TABB, A.S. DEVIREN, *The Greening of Architecture: A Critical History and Survey of Contemporary Sustainable Architecture and Urban Design*, London 2016, pp. 1-3; J. STEELE, *Ecological Architecture: A Critical History*, London 2005, p. 11. A recent volume that addresses preindustrial developments is *Land Air Sea: Architecture and Environment in the Early Modern Era*, edited by J. Ferng, L. Jacobi, Leiden 2024, pp. 1-24. Titles exceptional in their consideration of preindustrial Asia include: S. HOSSEINI, *The Invisible Lake of Sa'adat-ābād and the Safavid Architecture of Affect*, "Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians", 82, 2023, 4, pp. 395-419; V.D. DAMAYANTI, *The Political Economy of Banjarmasin's River Landscape During the Sultanate Period (1526-1860)*, in *River Cities in Asia: Waterways in Urban Development and History*, edited by R. Padawangi, P. Rabé, A. Perkasa, Amsterdam 2022, pp. 85-109; M.P. SOBTI, *Eurasia's Historical Space of Palimpsest – Desert, Border, Riparian and Steppe*, in *Architecture on the Borderland: Boundary Politics and Built Space*, edited by A. Pieris, New York 2019, pp. 15-35.

<sup>13</sup> The origin of ecocriticism is in literary studies. See C. GLOTFELTY, *Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis*, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by C. Glotfelty, H. Fromm, Athens 1996, pp. xv-xxxvii: xvii-xviii. Two notable titles on the subject for scholars of visual culture are: T. MORTON, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 11-14; A.C. BRADDOCK, *Implication: An Ecocritical Dictionary for Art History*, New Haven 2023, pp. 12-13. A recent monograph that exemplifies an ecocritical approach to architectural history is M. ZARMAKOUPI, *Shaping Roman Landscape: Ecocritical Approaches to Architecture and Wall Painting in Early Imperial Italy*, Los Angeles 2023, pp. 20-22.

<sup>14</sup> Influential for these scholars are social scientist Bruno Latour's theories of 'actor-network' and 'nature-culture': B. LATOUR, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes. Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, Paris 1991, English trans. *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge 1993, p. 106; Id., *On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications*, "Soziale Welt", 47, 1996, 4, pp. 369-381; Id., A. YANEVA, "Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move": An ANT's View of Architecture, in *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design, Research*, edited by R. Geiser, Basel 2008, pp. 80-89.

<sup>15</sup> K. FÖRSTER, *Introduction*, in *Environmental Histories of Architecture*, edited by Id., Montreal 2022, n.p.; D.A. BARBER, *Architectural History in the Anthropocene: Introduction*, "The Journal of Architecture", 21, 2016, 8, pp. 1165-1170: 1165; L. KALLIPOLITI, *History of Ecological Design*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Environmental Science*, Oxford 2016, pp. 1-60: 3. Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen are credited with the coining of the term 'Anthropocene' in J. DAVIES, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, Oakland 2016, pp. 42-45.





Fig. 2 Map of Mexico City and Lake Texcoco (from G. BRAUN, F. HOGENBERG, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, Coloniae Agrippinae 1572, I, p. 58; © Utrecht University Library Special Collections).



Fig. 3 Lake Texcoco restoration project, Mexico City, commissioned 2020 (© KARI/ESA).

<sup>16</sup> R.K. LOGAN, *The Evolution of the Anthropocene and Climate Change: A Media Ecology Approach and a Call to Action*, "New Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication", 2, 2022, 3, pp. 182-228: 188-214.

<sup>17</sup> A notable title on these neologisms is D. HARAWAY, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*, "Environmental Humanities", 6, 2015, 1, pp. 159-165: 160.

<sup>18</sup> Ahuja has presented a similar argument, though not specific to architectural history, concerning "environmental injustices [...] as components of longer processes of colonialism and racial disposability generated by extractive capitalist development": N. AHUJA, *Planetary Specters: Race, Migration, and Climate Change in the Twenty-First Century*, Chapel Hill 2021, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> FÖRSTER, *Introduction...* cit., n.p.

<sup>20</sup> BHABHA, *The Location...* cit., pp. 49-52.

<sup>21</sup> C.T. MOHANTY, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, "Boundary 2", 12, 1984, 3, pp. 333-358: 334; SPIVAK, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*... cit., pp. 62-63.

<sup>22</sup> R.J.C. YOUNG, *Postcolonial Remains*, "New Literary History", 43, 2012, 1, pp. 19-42: 23-24.

<sup>23</sup> I. BAUCOM, *History 4 °Celsius: Search for a Method in the Age of the Anthropocene*, Durham 2020, pp. 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Ivi, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> From Wölfflin's scholarship on Baroque Italy in the late nineteenth century to Bergdoll's scholarship on Revolutionary France at the turn of the millennium, generations of modern historians have been interested in moments of radical shift for architectural expressions and ideologies: H. WÖLFFLIN, *Renaissance und Barock: Eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien*, München 1888, English trans. *Renaissance and Baroque*, Ithaca 1967, pp. 15-17; B. BERGDOLL, *European Architecture 1750-1890*, Oxford 2000, pp. 1-5.

### Toward a decolonized ecological shift

The notion of rupture is a familiar and favored one in modern architectural scholarship<sup>25</sup>. Perhaps this has incentivized an 'ecological shift' that readily circumvents and distances itself from decades of interdisciplinary conversations about the dismantling of geopolitically or ethnoculturally based elitism, such as Eurocentrism. Architectural historians have yet to connect postcolonialism and ecocriticism. In other branches of the humanities, critical discussions of ecology with the insights of postcolonial theory affirm that the 'global perspective' of geographical inclusivity beyond European subjectivity is not supplanted by a 'planetary perspective' of ecospheric inclusivity beyond human subjectivity. Two premillennial titles that exemplify this continuity are *Green Orientalism* (1993) by philosopher Larry Lohmann and *Green Imperialism* (1995) by historian Richard Hugh Grove<sup>26</sup>.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, when the majority of postcolonial scholars saw capitalism as a lingering form of imperialism oppressive to decolonized nations and their diasporas, anthropologist Vassos Argyrou presciently confronted the neocolonial implications of environmentalism<sup>27</sup>. In *The Logic of Environmentalism* (2005), Argyrou foresees the Global North's sustainability agenda, an unwinnable race for the Global South, as

a reversion of postindustrial societies to the colonial age, with the same economic and political levathans from the 'West' expected to lead the entire planet forward.<sup>28</sup> While Dipesh Chakrabarty and Leela Gandhi, two esteemed voices of the postcolonial discourse, have since celebrated ecological awareness as an inspiring frontier for historians, social theorist Neel Ahuja warns that such optimism can obscure deep-rooted and well-known structures of inequity, such as racism, ableism, and poverty<sup>29</sup>. An intricate point in Ahuja's *Planetary Specters* (2021) is that othering, exploitation, disempowerment, and dehumanization – historically imposed on Global Southern, Indigenous, and diasporic populations – often serve as the most elucidative instances of society's entanglement with the environment<sup>30</sup>. These global forces inductively and descriptively reveal the broader picture of planetary forcings acting upon humanity. Furthermore, they lay bare the mainstream ecological discourse's propensity to pedestal nature (ecosphere, ecosystems, natural resources) with the end goal of deductively and prescriptively rationalizing cultural responses to environmental pressures (environmentalism, environmentalism, sustainability science).

For architectural historians, concepts such as Ahuja's 'planetary specter' of eco-social subalternity, Baucom's 'force-forcing' dialectic, and





Fig. 4 Nautical chart of South China's Zhujiang Delta (from "Guangdong tong zhi", 1731, III, p. 34; © Harvard-Yenching Library).

Acheraiou's 'third space' of hybrid oppression provide an intellectual compass for 'postcolonial ecocriticism' – a critical approach that bridges postcolonial and ecological contents. Like ecocriticism, this was first theorized in literary studies, originally as an intervention against ecocriticism's neocolonial tendency to reserve the right to "speak for nature" to the postindustrial Global North<sup>31</sup>. It is an alarming sign of the 'planetary perspective' eclipsing rather than enhancing the 'global perspective' when historians of other cultural productions, such as art and architecture, have welcomed ecocritical methods without considering postcolonial ecocriticism. The integration of environmental and historical studies to reframe our understanding of the world, its cultures, and their natural contexts is not about creating an open terrain – the 'degree zero' in Roland Barthes's semiotic terminology – in which post-humanist research is unburdened by existing knowledge of human predicaments<sup>32</sup>. Yet, as literary scholars Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley point out in *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), "those who tend to prioritize the environment over all human needs" have been at odds with "those in the social justice movement who insist that human equity must precede green conservation and preservation"<sup>33</sup>. This ideological conflict, with both

sides reducing the ecological camp to environmentalism and the postcolonial camp to Global Southern studies, has kept architectural historians from new knowledge of the built environments as embodiments of power that entails human forces and natural forcings.

Paradoxically, when recounted from the new 'global perspective' rather than the outdated 'world perspective' of Eurocentrism, the history of preindustrial colonialism is valuable for decolonizing the ecological discourse. By setting aside postindustrial assumptions about humankind's obligation to honor and protect the ecosphere, historians no longer allow environmentalism, environmentality, and environmental science to dictate the terms of ecological research. In *Green Imperialism*, Grove suggests that "any attempt to understand the foundations of western environmental concerns actually involves writing a history of the human responses to nature that have developed at the periphery of an expanding European system"<sup>34</sup>. Grove's discussion of colonial activities on tropical Asian, African, and American islands does not merely cover the spread of environmental degradation from Europe to other continents. It also shows how global powers appropriated Indigenous knowledge of the biodiverse tropics to construct scientific views on human-nature relations.

<sup>26</sup> L. LOHMANN, *Green Orientalism*, "The Ecologist", 23, 1993, 6, pp. 202-204; R.H. GROVE, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, Cambridge 1995, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Two notable titles on the postcolonial discourse of capitalism as imperialism are: M. HART, A. NEGRI, *Empire*, Cambridge 2000, pp. xii-xiii; and C.T. MOHANTY, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Durham 2003, pp. 8-9.

<sup>28</sup> V. ARGYROU, *The Logic of Environmentalism: Anthropology, Ecology and Postcoloniality*, New York 2005, p. 165.

<sup>29</sup> D. CHAKRABARTY, *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, "Critical Inquiry", 35, 2009, 2, pp. 197-222; L. GANDHI, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New York 2019<sup>2</sup> (first ed. Edinburgh 1998), p. 183; AHUJA, *Planetary Specters...* cit., pp. 3-6.

<sup>30</sup> This point summarizes the field of environmental injustice. Notable recent titles include: D. ANDREUCCI, C. ZOGRAFOS, *Between Improvement and Sacrifice: Othering and the (Bio) political Ecology of Climate Change*, "Political Geography", 92, 2022, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629821001724> (last accessed 23 November 2024); *Indigenous Resurgence: Decolonization and Movements for Environmental Justice*, edited by J. Dhillon, New York 2022, pp. 1-4; *Environment, Power, and Justice: Southern African Histories*, edited by G. Wynn, J. Carruthers, N.J. Jacobs, Athens 2022, pp. 30-35.

<sup>31</sup> E. DELOUGHREY, G.B. HANDLEY, *Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of the Earth*, in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, edited by E. DeLoughrey, G.B. Handley, Oxford 2011, pp. 3-39: 20-25.

<sup>32</sup> R. BARTHES, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Paris 1953, English trans. *Writing Degree Zero*, London 1967, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> GROVE, *Green Imperialism...* cit., p. 12.

Three decades after Grove's pioneering work, the field of colonialism and ecology is finally gaining traction, as evidenced by a recent surge of studies on the Haudenosaunee Great Lakes, Caribbean Sea, Yunnan-Bengal Corridor, and other historically underrepresented crossroads of the early modern 'colonial periphery'<sup>35</sup>. Scholars across the humanities have contributed to this growing discourse over the years with their assessments of built or inhabited environments, emphasizing the physical spaces of human societies, cultures, and politics in environmental history. Art historian Barbara Mundy's study of Tenochtitlan's aquatic landscape, environmental historian Chad Anderson's study of Haudenosaunee land development, and historian of geography Christopher Morris's study of Asia's, Africa's, and America's 'wetland colonies' are a few examples<sup>36</sup>. They demonstrate that behind the subject of architectural history are historians from various disciplines, brought together by an interdisciplinary methodology of theoretical depth and wide applicability in the humanities, such as postcolonial ecocriticism.

Among the small but active group of architectural historians focusing on ecology before industrialization, the works of Christy Anderson and Jennifer Ferng recall Grove's inclusion of Indigenous protagonists in narratives of colonial enterprises<sup>37</sup>. Anderson's reconstruction of Newfoundland's Beothuk fishery infrastructure and Ferng's dissection of the Aboriginal Australians' climate control systems are further examples of how ecocritical scholarship integrates the postcolonial reinterpretation of colonialism. For Anderson, the migratory patterns of Beothuk fishers and their transient habitats, in existence a century before the 1610 settlement of English merchants on North America's Atlantic coast, tell a story of water, land, and human lives that sheds light on the environmental impact of more permanent colonial constructions<sup>38</sup>. Similarly, Ferng examines

the Aboriginal observance of atmospheric and celestial phenomena in their land settlement practices, with the intent to unmask Europe's Cartesian reverence for the scientific mind over the intuitive body that has displaced Indigenous knowledge since the late eighteenth century<sup>39</sup>. In their research on the early modern world, not only are Anderson and Ferng stepping away from the colonial characterization of Indigenous developments as primitive, atemporal, and illustrative of European progress, but they are also exploring the ambivalent circumstances of colonization, migration, and globalization to learn about ecology as independent of postindustrial environmentalism and the mainstream ecological discourse's teleology.

My own research on early modern urbanization around the South China Sea and Indonesia reveals that the European colonizers' imported ways of mediating built and natural environments co-evolved with the divergent local systems of Chinese and Muslim diasporas, as well as those of the Indigenous Southeast Asians. A plurality of ideologies for inhabiting the land, harnessing water, coping with climatic features, utilizing natural resources, and administering public health was already in place. To adapt to the same littoral conditions in the stormy tropics, while Southeast Asia's interisland migrants constructed neighborhoods on stilts to accommodate flooding (fig. 1), Dutch engineers transformed shallow seas into port cities with diked canals. This precursor of modern land reclamation demonstrates that our industrialized society's distinction of architecture from ecology was surfacing well before industrialization, alongside many remarkable traditions of building habitable structures in accordance with geological, atmospheric, and biological factors. Furthermore, attached to these examples of architectural history overlapping with environmental history is the social history of in-between experiences, anom-

<sup>35</sup> E.E. JONES, *Haudenosaunee Settlement Ecology Before and After Contact in Northeastern North America*, in *Frontiers of Colonialism*, edited by C.D. Beaulieu, Gainesville 2017, pp. 31-58; D.S. Yü, *Environmental Edging of Empires, Chiefdoms, and States: Corridors as Transregions*, in *Yunnan-Burma-Bengal Corridor Geographies: Protean Edging of Habitats and Empires*, edited by Id., K. Dean, London 2021, pp. 46-67; M. FERDINAND, *Une écologie décoloniale: Penser l'écologie depuis le monde caribéen*, Paris 2019, English trans. *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, Cambridge 2022, pp. 25-35.

<sup>36</sup> B.E. MUNDY, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, The Life of Mexico City*, Austin 2015, pp. 25-51; C. ANDERSON, *The Built Landscape and the Conquest of Iroquoia, 1750-1820*, in *Investing in the Early Modern Built Environment: Europeans, Asians, Settlers and Indigenous Societies*, edited by C. Shammas, Leiden-Boston 2012, pp. 265-294; C. MORRIS, *Wetland Colonies: Louisiana, Guangzhou, Pondicherry, and Senegal*, in *Cultivating the Colonies: Colonial States and Their Environmental Legacies*, edited by C.F. Ax et al., Athens 2011, pp. 135-163.

<sup>37</sup> Architectural historians generally work on colonialism after industrialization. Among the considerable number of titles in this field, a recent volume that represents the current direction of scholarship is *Architectures of Colonialism...* cit., pp. 7-10.

<sup>38</sup> C. ANDERSON, *Left on Shore: Iron and Fish in the North Atlantic*, in *Land Air Sea...* cit., pp. 211-232; 215-218.

<sup>39</sup> J. FERNG, *Cosmogenic Histories: Aboriginal Observations on Catastrophe and Climate*, in *Land Air Sea...* cit., pp. 173-207; 176, 180.





Fig. 5 Mazu Temple, Lantau Island, Hong Kong, founded in 1644. Conserved cultural site in the Zhujiang River Delta (photo S.H. Wan).

alous heritages, and compound oppression arising from multiple trans-regional powers grappling with natural forcings in their occupation of foreign territories<sup>40</sup>.

South China's Zhujiang (Pearl River) Delta, home to one of the world's most populated megalopolises, stands as a striking example of the consolidation of former European colonies and the modern Asian nation-state. Spawned from the estuarine region's archipelagic landscape of jagged coastlines, precipitous mountains, and isolated coves was a rhizomatic, decentralized form of settlement that thrived on maritime trade beside the imperial Chinese, Portuguese, and British authorities who laid out hierarchically concentric cities. From nautical charts to conserved sites, I have relied on a miscellany of records to piece together a history of urban morphology, architectural traditions, and environmental responses that reclaims the presence of the minoritized Hakka, Hokkien, and Teochew Chinese cultures during the European colonization of Asia (figs. 4-5). Such a culturally conscious direction of scholarship will, on the one hand, synchronize the 'ecological shift' in architectural historiography – thus far riveted to the sciences – with the growth of postcolonial ecocriticism in the humanities as a unifying thread. On the other hand, architectural history will gain from researchers interpreting archival materials with environmental and social contents that the discipline found extrinsic in the past. Architectur-

al historians are uniquely skilled in mining visual documents of physical spaces, such as the extensive Dutch colonial collections of cartographic images, geotechnical drawings, and travel sketches that I consult in my research (figs. 6-7). These underutilized sources might be less accessible to historians with other specializations.

#### The question of a planetary architectural history

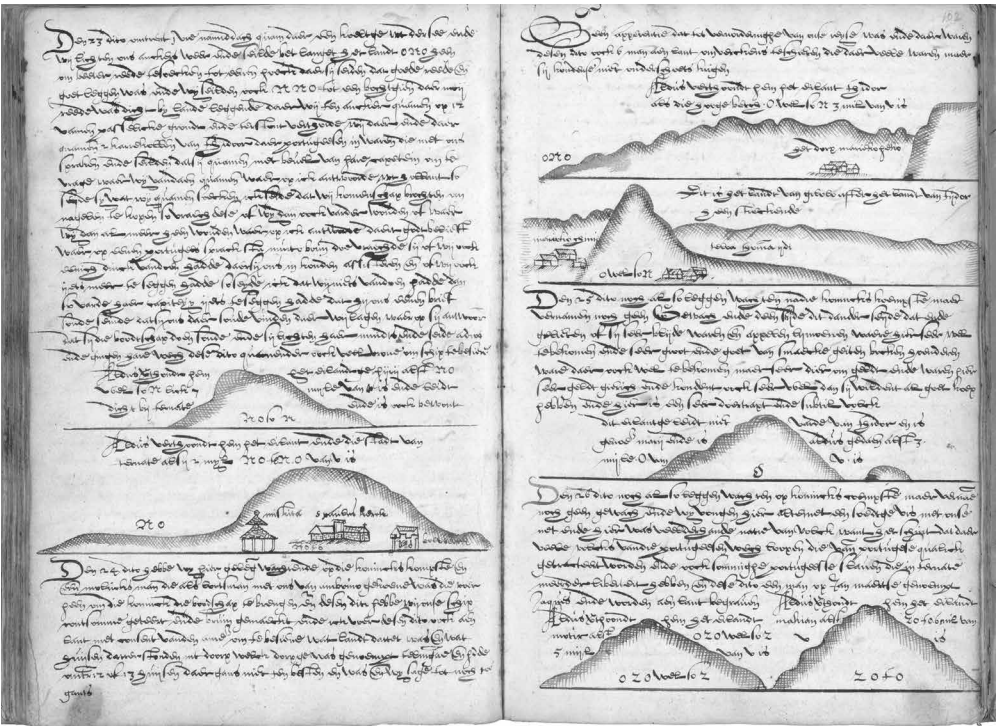
By addressing the theoretical underpinnings of 'globality' and 'planetary' – two seemingly analogous expressions representing separate discourses on inclusivity – this essay has argued that any 'ecological shift' in architectural historiography must not diverge from the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism and hegemony. On the contrary, the lessons of postcolonialism, which illuminate cultural difference and power relations, should usher in a constellational history of architecture and ecology – one that is decentralized yet interconnected, pushing back on the resurgence of scholarship with neocolonial, exclusionary, and post-critical overtones. Resituating the 'global perspective' and the emerging 'planetary perspective' as complementary rather than successive is also to dispute any instrumentalizing of methodological shifts to redraw rigid boundaries for the discipline. Enriched by interdisciplinary engagement with the postcolonial humanities and the environmental sciences, architectural history should evolve into a *trans-dis-*

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of architectural historians addressing the social history of in-between experiences, anomalous heritages, and compound oppression, see S.H. WAN, *Disciplining Otherness in the Tropics: Dutch Philanthropic Sites and the Urbanization of Indonesian Ports, 1640-1730*, "Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians", 81, 2022, 4, pp. 420-440: 436-437.



Fig. 6 H.D. Jolinck, *Journal of a Dutch voyager* documenting the survey of Ternate and Tidore in North Maluku, Indonesia, May 1599 (National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, 1.04.01, inv. n. 60, fols. 101-102).

Fig. 7 C. Coops, M. Ram, Dutch chart showing part of the Ciliwung River in West Java, Indonesia, 1701 (National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, VEL1168).



disciplinary study of built, natural, and social environments, not merely remaining an *intra*-disciplinary subject of historical developments reaffirming sustainable architecture. The discipline's current fragmentation, stemming from dissatisfaction with the canon's center-periphery model and the pursuit of a more 'global perspective', cannot be mended by reuniting historians around the interests of the postindustrial Global North. We must ask instead: how can we develop a 'planetary history of architecture' that does not disown, but rather thoughtfully and constructively inherits, the 'global perspective'? With this weighty question, we return to the chronological survey as a concluding reflection. By embracing the concept of intertwined histories, the discipline is not only capable of weaving the multidirectional research foci on the world's regions into a 'global' chronology. It also has the potential to reformulate the existing timeline of human cultures into a 'planetary' chronology. This requires a closer look at the built environments in their ecological contexts – recognizing them as historically specific, irreducible to postindustrial 'green' frameworks, and more entangled with than set apart from other architectural variables. Just as the modifier 'global' is anti-globalist and resists cultural hegemony, the modifier 'planetary' must signify more than a universalist vision of ecology that presupposes an undifferentiated humanity imperiling a general-

ized nature. From Paleolithic hominins inhabiting protective landforms and wild fauna assembling shelters to the modern city's public health measures and the industrialized world's vernacular remnants, a 'planetary' survey of architecture needs to be an open synopsis of a humanities subject that broadens environmental studies. The inclusion of Global Southern, Indigenous, and diasporic cases between prehistory and the present would not be an afterthought symptomatic of the Northern 'Self' spotlighting its culturally diverse 'Other' to mask environmentalization's neocolonial undercurrents. Attuned to the dovetailed interdisciplinarity of postcolonial and ecological discourses, such a post-canonical shift in architectural history does not have to discard the survey format to reject Eurocentric and anthropocentric linearity. Ultimately, it should advance transdisciplinary scholarship that communicates the value of architectural, urban, and spatial research to those outside of, but not to those within, the confining circle of historians guarding the disciplinarity of architecture.

