A. Indigenous Architecture as Basic Architectural Design

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ANECDOTE OF BENGAL VERNACULAR SPACES

Ashik Vaskor Mannan (1), Sudipta Barua (2)
(1) Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, American International University–Bangladesh [AIUB], Bangladesh
ashikvaskor@aiub.edu, ashikvaskor@yahoo.com
(2) Lecturer, Department of Architecture, American International University–Bangladesh, [AIUB], Bangladesh
sudipta@aiub.edu, sudipta_barua79@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The idea of this text is to renarrativize and re-evaluate the institutionalized architectural narration of Bangladeshi vernacular architecture through ‘alternate discourses’ which can be termed as history from the below.

Innumerable number and vastness of rivers are the basic of all structural formation in Bangladesh. These rivers and river-based agriculture helped to develop ethnic native identity which stresses to develop a unique indigenous vernacular spaces and architecture. This Vernacular architecture examines the dwellings, village formations and settlement patterns of the same societies.

The most pervasive architectural presence in this delta is the ‘pavilion structure’. The most elemental pavilion is the rustic ‘Bengal Hut’ where the vernacular architecture starts. Again ‘Bungalow’ is such a dwelling unit which was regenerated from the basic living unit of Bengal hut of the indigenous subordinate people and became popular and patronized by the colonial ruler and later established as a kind of architectural style in Western continent.

The study tried to investigate and enunciate the development of vernacular spaces of Bangladesh through postcolonial discourses, from ‘Bengal Hut’ to famous ‘Bungalow’ which is a new kind of voyager that open up class of ‘instrumental’ or ‘native informants’, which function as an anecdote of alternate history and was not so branded to western as well as in indigenous, such a way indigenous knowledge can be turned into intellectual property.

Keywords: Bengal Hut, Bungalow, Post Colonialism, British colonial period

I. FRAME WORK

If we look back to understand our historical and cultural matrix in the perspective of world narration, we would always found a space of difference-fragmented and episodic history. The forces of history and tradition of settlements in Bangladesh is holding diverse ethnic, imperialistic cultural and religious beliefs.

Certain physical and cultural factors not only act as constrains but also as the source of ideas for the formation of settlement, family structure, art and architecture in Bengal. Topology, climate politics and economy are the foremost factors behind it. The main stream of civilization and pattern of life in this distant land seems to have remained virtually unaffected over thousand of years where numerous clusters of villages formed the bed-rock of the society, the bulk of which is depended on agriculture. The art and architecture of the land is essentially an expression of an agricultural society who eked out their living from the soil, which profoundly influenced their creation. The rural values, knowledge
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which constituted a large section of masons, craftsmen, live a simple life and dwelt in unpretentious mud, bamboo or thatched huts, which in course of time and for the colonization got disregarded.

In rural area, architecture is understood as a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than as a static and inert ‘object’ that can be studied only in terms of its formalistic characteristics. Vernacular architecture examines the dwellings, religious and agricultural structures, fortifications, village formations and settlement patterns of the same subaltern societies, and difference is defined through criteria of function, environmental and climatic concerns, and formal, three dimensional qualities of space. Our land, which is segmented by rivers, causes regionality. But regionality created by rivers has a unified multiregional cultural Condon.

History of Bangladesh is a history of Imperialism. Invaders like Aryans, Greeks, Mongols, Turks, Afghan invaded India through west and their influence in Bengal was felt much later in modified form. All of them except the British wanted to stay and blend with the indigenous but merely the British wanted to rule like a colony.

Colonial influence has been explained by different authors in different ways, to some it was a transition between the traditional and the modern, to some colonial architecture is a product of Cultural contact while other believe it is a function of dependent peripheral capitalism. There is no need of such segmental explanations because all the interpretations hold true in different degrees for all colonial countries. There was never a homogenous colonial style, but there were of course, similarity of attitudes among colonizers that gave rise to certain patterns of development. The concept, such as stability and change in terms of architectural expression are quite complex, especially when applied to cultures with and already rich and strong building tradition that were suddenly brought into contact with imported ideas and tastes.

II. PRESAGE

The delta, comprising now of Bangladesh and most of West Bengal, is located between two geo-political matrices. On the one hand, it has always been considered as a part of Western orbit, formed mostly by the large Indian culture extending towards Persia, Arabia and ultimately Europe. This aspect is apparent in most explicit levels of culture, language, liturgies, institutions and laws. On the other hand, at a more foundational level, an irreducible stratum links it with an eastern matrix formed of the South-East Asian culture.

The western matrix gives the culture a visible superstructure; it is the eastern matrix which reveals the true nature of delta. The Eastern matrix comprises predominantly a water based civilization- a world of moistness fecundity and lushness- where cosmological and valorized concepts are generated from river dynamics and agricultural rituals. The eastern matrix possesses a more terrestrial cosmology rather than a celestial one, where order in the universe, is manifested by the annual flooding, the monsoon etc. The popular venerated spirit is the serpent, being specially honored all along the matrix, as in Bengal, rice cultivation has generated specific rituals and honorific practices.

It is also a matrix of ‘rice culture’ where rice is not something merely consumed but is the basis of value- construction of a collective ethos and mythos, and of the articulation of self identity. ‘In the Bengal delta rice-cultivation is an extensional occupation; the production of rice is the production of world view.’ Clay is the basic material found in the delta, although bamboo and timber have also been used commonly as building like hut and bungalow material, which is directly produced from river and agricultural vastness.

The 15th and 16th century saw the truly upsurge of a Loukik [vernacular and folk] Bengali culture. Two streams characterized the region. The domain of the pandits who authority came from the Vedik Sastra , and the vernacular stream, the domain of the plebeians, the dweller of the villages and rivers, whose

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1 Richard Eaton- The rise of Islam and Bengal frontier 1204-1760, University of California Press 1993. pp.15
practices relied mostly localized belief and rituals. Subaltern practice their own way to build dwelling unit as well as bungalow[ regenerated from hut] through emerging vernacular sense on the other hand civilized elite group established and patronized the bungalow as a style for pleasure home. Indigenous architecture has a clear relationship with collective consciousness, relation with the soil, cultural behaviour and values and norms. The subaltern, for historical period made their dwelling respect with material articulation and other lattice of intensity and contextuality.

The integral relationship between pavilion and environment is also the key to complex organization, from simple clustering to complex patterns, and finally form a deltaic city. Deltaic morphology implies the disposition of isolated building in a fabric of paddy fields, gardens, orchards, lakes and ponds. Clusters are formed by grouping pavilion ‘unit’ in a series, or around an amorphously interiorized space [the courtyard]. An understanding of deltaic development lies, not in the dense labyrinthine fabric of cities, but city- forms east of the Bengal delta in the ‘rice culture’ matrix, where the distinction between urban and rural morphology has not been so oppositional, and building took their place in the natural milieu with minimal turmoil.

Figure 1. Bengali Hut with Uthan

Figure 2. The activities of Uthan

III. VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE AND BANGLADESH

The Latin word ‘vernacular’ means native. In native context, Architecture is vernacular when it exhibits distinct characteristics in construction techniques, material use, performance of space, social system within a particular community to sustain. Vernacular is also referred to as “the mode of expression of a group or class”. The Theoretical elaboration of vernacular idea primarily focused on the features of vernacular architecture:

“Vernacular architecture comprises the dwellings and all other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources, they are owner or community-built, utilizing traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating values, economies and ways of living of the cultures that produces them.”

“Vernacular architecture generally embodies community values, and less evidently, may symbolize concepts of cosmos, or acts as an analogue for the abstraction of belief. Thus even a simple dwelling may reflect both the material and spiritual worlds of its builders and occupiers.”

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2 Pundranagar to Sher-e Bangla nager-‘Chatana’ publication 1998,Dhaka, pp.9
3 Mohammed A. Mukndir & Dewan M. Hassan, Traditional house Form in rural Bangladesh: A case study for Regionalism in Architecture.
Vernacular architecture, therefore, is an essentially social and region specific built forms made of local materials using local technology in time and place by a particular community.

In rural Bangladesh, the patterns of pastoral heritage evolved through countless generations and affected the evolution of the traditional house form. The traditional Bengali house form, ‘Bengal Hut’, in its basic form is a cluster of single-storied dwelling units around a courtyard, which is ‘Uthān’ in local language. The space organization of hut is based on broad categories of function it is to perform. Two distinct functional domains inner house and outer house are found in Bengali Hut which respectively performs family functions like sleeping, cooking and eating and formal functions such as socializing with the community. Adding to spatial order, Bengali Hut is also culturally defined by social codes, customs and norms which are often defined as ‘the female domain’ and ‘the male domain’ which correspond with the ‘inner house’ and the ‘outer house’ respectively. In addition to public/private realms, religious beliefs also influence the layout of hut. Muslim huts are laid out following the cardinal directions of the Qibla for prayer and also to determine sleeping and toilet orientation. On the other hand, a spatial dimension of Hindu Hut emphasizes ritual purity within the house or the homestead.

Although the climate factors in shaping the rural house form of Bangladesh apparently less deterministic, the introvert layout of the hut around the courtyard, the low-height hut with projected roof overhangs and vegetation around to circumscribe the landscape, the insulating capacity of thatch roof, mud wall or bamboo panel all contribute significantly to the excellent thermal performance of the Bengali Hut.

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7 Mohammed A. Muktadir & Dewan M. Hassan, Traditional house Form in rural Bangladesh: A case study for Regionalism in Architecture.
8 Mohammed A. Muktadir & Dewan M. Hassan, Traditional house Form in rural Bangladesh: A case study for Regionalism in Architecture.
The most pervasive architectural presence in the delta is the ‘pavilion’ structure. Its singular persistence as the idea of dwelling further clarifies the culture of Bengal Delta. The most elemental pavilion is the rustic Bengali hut which is essential a roof [known as the Bangla roof] a canopy defined by the uniquely bent roof meant to thwart the intense sun and torrential rain and directional wind and secondarily the walls, permeable to the movement of the air and placed well within the perimeter of the roof. The hut is a free standing form whose pavilion like quality, manifested by the parasol roof and the permeable wall is emphasized by the verandas, terrace and semi enclosures, creating an ambiguity from inside and outside. And cluster of hut created the social bonding and here the middle space or the courtyard work as a space of performance. Sometimes it is a breathing space; sometimes it is a meeting space.

If we go further and investigate Bengal hut we can see other architectural form is also influenced from this hut. Bungalow of or belonging to Bengal. Bungalow is the relations of dependence and re-inscription between architecture and anthropology. Bungalow is a reconfiguration of the deltaic hut. True Bungalows (say the purists) represent structural simplicity, efficient use of space, and understated style.

IV. POST COLONIALISM AND BANGLADESH

“Post-colonialism’ loosely designates a set of theoretical approaches which focus on the direct effects and aftermaths of colonization. It also represents an attempt at transcending the historical definition of its primary object of study toward an extension of the historic and political notion of “colonizing” to other forms of human exploitation, normalization, repression and dependency. Post-colonialism forms a composite but powerful intellectual and critical movement which renews the perception and understanding of modern history, cultural studies, literary criticism, and political economy.”

As suggested by its name, post colonialism is about dealing with the legacy of colonialism. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly the most prominent form this has taken to date has been in the cultural realm, especially with respect to identity politics and literary studies. Thus, the most common way the term has been used is in reference to a genre of writing and cultural politics, usually by the authors from the countries which were previously colonized. All post colonialist theorists admit that colonialism continues to affect the former colonies after political independence.

What post colonialism does in Bangladeshi cultural history is to enable us to question the totalizing tendencies of European reading practices and interpret the texts on their own terms and read them

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9 Huts of Bengal, Archaeological Studies and Training, Eastern India.
10 Anthony D. King 'The Bungalow': The Production of a Global Culture,p-11
11 “Global Justice and Cultural Diversity” and "Post colonialism in Science, Medicine, Economics and Culture", Conference about Postcolonial study and criticism in literature-introduction paper- Toronto in 1999
from our specific locations. Interestingly, much of the "us" and the "our" doing this reading is projected in nation-state terms.

"Postcolonialism may give the impression that the sole preoccupation of the colonized after territorial independence is colonialism. There are grave ramifications to such a postulation. Excessive interest in colonialism can cause us to ignore our histories before colonialism, and also conveniently to overlook indigenous annexations and annihilations of our own people and their history." 12

Founder of the ‘Subaltern study group Ranajit Guha argued;

"What clearly is left out of this un-historical historiography is the politics of the people. For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that is the people". 13

As a regional entity Bangladesh had been a unique modifier. All the external rulers excepting the British could be tempered and later on could be identified with the local people and culture. May be it is because all of them belonged to oriental cultures having similar values and also that they settled in the region. For the first time during the British rule the ruling class remained as alien usurpers and failed to identify themselves with the local people. At a later the western educated Bangladeshi middle class assumed a similar role. However, indigenous values could not be eradicated.

Traditional histories are often influenced by Marxism when they are explaining or discovering the Bengal history. Thus, they tend to begin with India in a kind of semi-feudal state, then go on to tell how it was colonized by the British, how it was politicized, and how it eventually earned its independence. The heroes of these narratives are the Indian elites: the elites, usually presented as the first Indians to gain any sort of political consciousness, are said to provide the inspiration, the ideas and the values, for resistance and rebellion against the British.

During the study of the works on the postcolonial discourse, two prominent aspects emerge: a descriptive concept of post colonialism and a programmatic concept. 14

In Indian Subcontinent, this term ‘Subaltern’ has been brought to the center of critical scholarship by the Subaltern Studies Collective writing since 1982 on South Asian history and society from a "subaltern perspective." In the Preface to Subaltern Studies, 15 Volume I, Ranajit Guha proposes the following definition:

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13 Ranajit Guha was the founding father of Subaltern studies. Subaltern Studies vol.2 1985 p-04 Oxford University press, New Delhi, India


15 The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) or Subaltern Studies Collective are a group of South Asian scholars interested in the postcolonial and post-imperial societies of South Asia in particular and the developing world in general. The term Subaltern Studies is sometimes also applied more broadly to others who share many of their views. Their approach is one of history from below, focused more on what happens among the masses at the base levels of society than among the elite.
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"The word ‘subaltern’ . . . stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is, ‘of inferior rank.’ It will be used . . . as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way."  

Without access to the line of social mobility, rather then name of a differential space can be termed as subaltern. They are outside the established structures of political representation and power and denied access to both mimetic and political forms of representation. Gayatri Spivak termed subaltern-

“The space of difference inhabited by those who have no access to the lines of mobility within a society.”

This definition gives us the true portrait of subaltern voicelessness. The Subaltern Studies Group adopted Gramsci’s idea to encourage rewriting action of Indian subcontinent history. The dominant history on Indian subcontinent nationalism doesn’t involve the role of subaltern groups, workers, and middle class people living in the cities or villages. To speak it briefly, what meant by subaltern is “the non-elite people”. And what meant by “the elite people” is “the dominant groups, either come from indigenous people or foreigners”. The foreigners are the British state authorities, the corporate owners, traders, plantation owners, land masters, and missionaries. While the indigenous people can be divided into those who work at the national level (feudalist entrepreneurs, indigenous employee in higher bureaucracy) and those who work at the local and regional level (members of dominant groups).

By speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society. Postcolonial literature and cultural theories locate the culture and historical subject matter from pre colonial period to the present.

The term "subaltern" in this context is an implied reference to an essay by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1881–1937). Literally, it refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion.

The SSG arose in the 1980s, to attempt to formulate a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia. Although they are, in a sense, on the left, they are very critical of the traditional Marxist narrative of Indian history, in which semi-feudal India was colonized by the British, became politicized, and earned its independence. In particular, they are critical of the focus of this narrative on the political consciousness of elites, who in turn inspire the masses to resistance and rebellion against the British.

Instead, they focus on non-elites — subalterns — as agents of political and social change. They have had a particular interest in the discourses and rhetoric of emerging political and social movements, as against only highly visible actions like demonstrations and uprisings.

The Subaltern Studies group was founded by Ranajit Guha. Other scholars associated with Subaltern Studies include prominently: Gyan Prakash, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin, David Arnold, David Hardiman, Sumit Sarkar, Gyanendra Pandey, Dipesh Chakrabarty.

Sources from www.wikipedia
Homi Bhabha argued,

"Any group or society that has been oppressed wants an acknowledgment of its own history, a history which has been hidden or denied. I'm not pretending it's an easy matter. But to the extent to which it can have a positive transforming influence, I'm attempting with my work to shift notions of what it means to belong to a culture, to have an identity -- to show how limited it is to cling onto rigidly defined imperialist or nationalist ideas,”

V. THE ANECDOTE

Following the recent developments in theorizing architectural historiography, postcolonial theory informs the understanding of history by a heightened awareness of the inherent politics within architecture. Architecture is understood here as a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than as a static and inert “object” that can be studied only in terms of its formalistic characteristics.

Until recently architectural historians have been reluctant to examine issues of politics, race and gender in the production of the built environment. New approaches to architectural history induced by studies in vernacular architecture, cultural geography and social history have created fresh insights into the history of the built environment. This effort would be better served if we took another look at some of the nineteenth-century defining ideas that have shaped architectural history, and the intellectual assumptions that have emerged unquestioned in twentieth-century discussions of modernism.

Vernacular architecture examines the dwellings, religious and agricultural structures, fortifications, village formations and settlement patterns of the same subaltern societies, and difference is defined through criteria of function, environmental and climatic concerns, and formal, three dimensional qualities of space. The theoretical developments in subaltern studies of 'hegemony', to explain the power and the resolve of cultural systems, provide the potential for questioning the space occupied in architecture by the classification 'vernacular'. Our land, which is segmented by rivers, causes regionality. But regionality created by rivers has a unified multiregional cultural Condon. How regional characters here become an instance of unison?

Subaltern agencies build their dwelling, space from their previous knowledge and the material availability. For timeless and changeable landscape temporary and moveable architecture was evolved. For this shifting architecture and for the joint family structural and cultural system forced them to be together. So concept of living in togetherness is manifested. This collective consciousness creates a certain type of vernacular form and space.

The hut is also the basic unit of the universe of the Bengali peasant, as the household is the unit of production, both tied intimately to the milieu formed by the hut and a court and the wider paddy fields. In this sense, the deltaic pavilion is not merely a visual object but a synthetic production of a local ecology, sociology and mythology.

The hut type and deltaic geography have also spawned characteristics settlement patterns. Along rivers and cannels, homesteads clustered on earthen mounds amongst rice field and groves have created a timeless landscape. Through historical changes, social upheavals or religious revolutions, the milieu of the subaltern village has remained more or less unchanged. It is still formed by the same kind of relation with nature and the river, same locational quality of the homesteads, paddy fields and groves.

19 ‘Rethinking experience of countries with colonial past’ interview with Homi Bhabha from Artforum [W.J.T. Mitchell] from The University of Chicago Chronicle 2002.
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The idea of the pavilion is manifested by many concrete forms. The bamboo woven hut on stilts and thatch on an earth platform are straightforward example. And the bungalow also developed from this deltaic pavilion structure.

"The solid centralized mass, constructed in brick out of social need and monumental urges, the Bungalow are the elaboration of pavilion idea." 20

Bungalow of or belonging to Bengal. Bungalow is the relations of dependence and re-inscription between architecture and anthropology. Through the insights from subaltern studies, we are forced to respond to the question of biases within the discourses on vernacular; and the question of subaltern agency as it is tied to the nature of evidence emanating from non-literate, indigenous societies. They build Bungalow which had imported to Europe as a very successful summer house.

VI. WRAPPING UP

History is capable of playing a definite role in social mobilization. In almost every country, attempts have been made by some sections or groups to control history. This is done by influencing the collective consciousness of people through protagonist actions favoring some ideas or interpretation and misrepresentation of historical events. Bungalow epitomized the idea of dwelling in nature under the assured shelter of a big roof from where one could look out into the distant horizon. Various type of tectonics were employed for the Bungalow but always derived from lessons learnt from the climate and local idioms. But in colonial ideology of racial segregation, it came to encourage spatial distancing and separation. It soon transplanted into an architectural style all across the subcontinent and all over the world.

Everything in the world is the product of a respective historical process. History scholars explain the real history from their philosophical point of view, which makes history itself seem to be a “blackbox” that is unknown to the people. In the other way, this interaction of history and philosophy sometimes has a positive impact by gathering the factual historical evidence, which can be proved to be realistic to the people.

Architectural development of our deltaic subaltern region has the strength to serve the physical and spiritual needs of people, from a single family to entire family. At the physical level, the build form of bungalow, it embodied centuries of learning with regard to orientation, climate, building material and construction techniques. At the spiritual level, the build form conveyed total harmony with the life

20 Pundranagar to Sher-e Bangla nager-‘Chatana’ publication 1998,Dhaka-p-10

21Proper knowledge for the orientation in architecture in this region developed for social innovation and people’s real need and experience For example the proverbs of "Khana" that have been used widely throughout the South Asian region were developed by a woman named "Khona"—a famous personality in the mythical stories of this region [Khona was a wise woman in the court of king Bikramadditya-1st century B.C.]. Many of these proverbs include nature and environmental protection. Such phrases through interpersonal communication channels were active in creating awareness for environmental protection in rural Bangladesh. Having such a rich tradition, subaltern are not only the silent managers of their natural resources but are active in protecting biodiversity through their age-old traditional knowledge and practices. They possess intense ecological insights drawn from their culture and their productive and maintenance roles. They are able to offer ecological insights that are deeper and richer than the technocratic recipes of international experts or the responses their own societies. some proverb are given below which are practiced for hundreds of years for building subaltern hut and the bungalow-

“South facing is the best; East facing is the next to rest; West facing unwanted they say; North facing has little to pay”. Or “light wall and roof is slope; all the family will stay in hope”

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style in all its daily as well as seasonal rituals, unifying the socio cultural and religious aspirations of
the individuals and community. Life style and activity followed in consonance with nature and
architecture [bungalow] with nature.

Application of such realistic and yet value oriented attitudes, gave the society a sense of confidence
and much needed feeling of self sufficiency. The external considerations were accepted under force
and were gradually absorbed to facilitate the continuance to the envisaged life style. In this process,
the role played by the people was that of shareholders in an enterprise. While the roles of each
discipline may be demarcated, the final outcome expressed the multiple considerations that went into
making it. That is how all different forms of architecture in Bangladesh have, over the centuries, given
birth to a vernacular idiom, sustained the culture and in the process, sustained itself.

As a response to the culture, grew our human settlements along fertile stretches of land that we have
been blessed with it on plenty. Built with genius sensitivity to the local climate, taking the best
advantage of local material and craft the Bungalow form was emerged and it is a reflection of cultural
excellence of the people it sheltered. It seems to be custom made by the life style, an example of how
material influence build form and how it can create environ that can nurture a life tradition and vice versa.
And all in all the house the basic unit where the human race comes to life and is nurtured, and
the patterns such dwelling places create in the form of spaces, open and shut, is a true reflection of
the values a culture stand for. But this legacy does not touch most of our modern environ. We may need to
nurture again our ability to deal with variation as a creative force, and to think of structures that
incorporate heterogeneous elements as a challenge to be met by innovative design. We may now be in
a position to think about the origin of form and structure, not as something imposed from the outside
on an inert matter, not as a hierarchical command from above as in an assembly line, but as something
that may come from within the materials, a form that we tease out of those materials as we allow them
to have their say in the structures we create.22

If the history of the world has been a colonialist process of the dissemination of Western civilization,
and if the non-Western world is still ruled by the Western world morally and intellectually, then
postcolonial discourse has to assume the form of a neo-Gramscian Long March in the realm of culture.
This is not merely because culture has always been a field of anti-colonial struggle, but more
importantly, in the age of hegemonic imperialism, culture has become the privileged and even the only
field of counter hegemonic struggle. This very local culture, not only challenge the continuity of neo
imperialism and colonization but also challenge the intelligentsia who have refused to hear or
acknowledge the subaltern voice. The challenge and the significance is ‘subaltern does speak’.

22 Manuel De Landa, ‘Material Complexity’,