



THE MYTH OF NEUTRALITY: WHY ARCHITECTURE IS NEVER APOLITICAL

Heba Sayeed

Master of Science,
Department of Architecture and Design,
International Islamic University of Malaysia

Abstract: This paper advocates for a critical transformation in architectural education, emphasizing the shift from a technical-centric approach to one that prioritizes critical thinking, inclusivity, and cultural awareness. It underscores the importance of exposing students to diverse cultural influences on the built environment and argues that architects must consider the social and ethical dimensions of their practice. By fostering an understanding of how architecture reflects cultural values, this transformation aims to empower architects to design more inclusive and socially responsible structures. Ultimately, the paper envisions architects as agents of positive societal change, creating a more equitable and just world through their work.

Index Terms - Architecture, Architecture Education, Culture, Mcdonaldisation, Critical Theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

The act of shaping the built environment is a complex and intricate process, spans from construction science and techniques to artistic and philosophical considerations. Therefore, an architecture curriculum should encompass this spectrum of knowledge, integrating both practical and theoretical aspects to foster a more holistic output. However, modern architectural education often prioritizes labor market value and problem-solving skills, overlooking the critical examination of design's purpose and the power dynamics inherent in architecture. This paper delves into the interplay between power dynamics and architecture highlighting how architecture both reflects and perpetuates existing power structures while shaping cultural values. By understanding the politics of cultural hybridity and advocating for the integration of critical science in architectural education, architects can develop inter-cultural intelligence to address complex cultural and social issues in an increasingly globalized world. Recognizing that architecture can never be neutral, designers can create inclusive spaces that bridge cultural divides and mitigate negative impacts. This proposed emancipatory approach fosters greater understanding and empathy among communities, contributing to a more harmonious and inclusive world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Architecture in Shaping a Globalized World

Vitruvius, in his book on the education of an architect quotes, *“The architect should be equipped with knowledge of many branches of study and varied kinds of learning, for it is by his judgment that all work done by the other arts is put to test. This knowledge is the child of practice and theory.”*

This was the idea of architectural education as a marriage between theory and practice, however with the evolution of architecture from a craft to a profession it resulted in the increased focus on technical skills and problem-solving, there has been a shift away from this integrated approach to education. The contemporary debate on architectural education concerns the recontextualization of the role of the teacher, the underlying ideology as well as updating the to fit the needs of the diverse and multicultural society. The built environment has always been a powerful tool for signifying the social progression of societies, and as society progresses,

new issues emerge, which require newer methodologies and updated schools of thought. And in the study of design there has historically been various schools of thought which have informed the pedagogical approach, however, in response to the current needs of society, there is a growing focus on an emancipatory approach. This approach creates empathy through cultural intelligence and consequently helps us make sense of the realities of our multiculturalism by referencing broader patterns of power. I aim to demonstrate how the various systems of power are interwoven with aspects of design, and how these correlations imply causation. This paper discusses an alternative to the modernist nature of architectural education which is neutral and apolitical. It explores approaches in pedagogical engagement by making future architect's active agents of change.

Architecture is not just about creating beautiful buildings and spaces, but a way of manifesting and materializing ideology as pointed out by Mabel Wilson during her talk at the Critical Dialogues on Race and Modern Architecture symposium (Wilson, 2016). Architects have a significant role to play in shaping the world around us, as the buildings, they design reflect and perpetuate social and political beliefs. And educators are not merely bearers of information but leaders who visualize change and develop a critical ability among students. Mokyr highlights how the “purpose of education is not just the inculcation of knowledge for intellectual development but also emancipation for the purpose of social progression” (Mokyr, 2002).

It acknowledges how architecture can never be neutral nor can they be designed in an isolated bubble of creativity and preferences. Architecture is always influenced by underlying power structures, such as economic, social, cultural, or racial, and vice versa whether we choose to acknowledge them or not. But the benefit of adopting this lens is that it allows us to question the assumptions and values that underlie prevailing design practices and to explore better alternatives, and more equitable approaches to design and urban planning. Ultimately, challenging the norm and recontextualizing the role of architectural education as a powerful tool for examining the built environment and for promoting more inclusive and democratic design practices that emancipate the historically ignored sections of society.

Architecture as a signature of time & power

The process of architecture is a cyclical in nature, moving through stages of experiencing, acquiring knowledge, creating, and repeating. Since ancient history, this cycle has been persistent, where we inhabited primitive shelters, acquired knowledge, shared that knowledge with others, and advanced our dwellings further. This cycle was repeated over generations, resulting in contemporary housing and infrastructure. Much like the elegant double helix structure of DNA, the two helixes of knowledge acquisition and creation intertwine harmoniously along a shared axis, representing the continuous flow of time (fig 1). Highlighting the importance of the passage of time, nature presents numerous reminders that act as signifiers of the specific time periods. For instance, the rings of a tree's bark, each ring representing the time period in which it was formed (fig 2). Similarly, the design of a building carries a unique signature of the era in which it was created, evident in its ornamentation, use of materials, spatial layout etc.

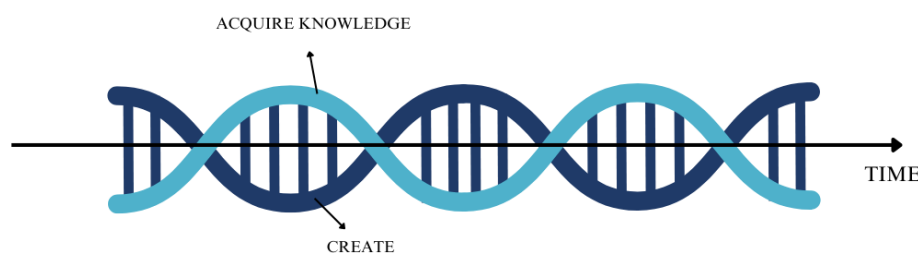


FIGURE 1: CONTINUOUS ITERATIVE PROCESS OF ARCHITECTURAL ENGAGEMENT

As aesthetics become more ahistorical, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine the era in which a building was constructed, the only reliable clue would be the construction techniques used. And unlike trees that have rings that serve as markers of time and climate, human societies are a bit more complex. They are structured into hierarchies that necessitate governance, which results in structures of power. These power structures can disrupt the natural cyclical process of architecture, creating intricate and often convoluted relationships between societal structures and architectural styles. Therefore, the study of design is intrinsically linked to history, as much as it is linked to construction. To adopt a holistic perspective in architectural education there has to be an awareness of the importance of societal power structures. This awareness acts as a catalyst for social change.

Italian Marxist architect and critic Manfredo Tafuri's perspective on architectural history highlights the complexity and ongoing nature of the field, that architectural history is not a simple linear progression of one style or language succeeding another but a constantly evolving and contested process that encompasses critical, theoretical, and practical struggles. He believed that architects and historians need to be aware of these complex and often conflicting forces to fully understand and engage with the education and practice of architecture. (Tafuri, 1977). In order to properly integrate critical science in architectural education, it is crucial to examine the hybrid nature of culture. Architects operate in a globalized world where cultural boundaries appear to be porous, and people have the ability to shape their cultural identities through interaction and exchange. However, this is not always the case, as cultural identities can also be fixed in certain situations, with cultures existing in contrast to one another.

Cultural hybridity

Cultural hybridity can be seen in the incorporation of diverse cultural influences into architectural design. The idea of a pure and authentic culture is a myth and cultures are not fixed or stable, but are instead constantly changing and evolving through their interactions with other cultures. Architects have the opportunity to incorporate a range of architectural styles and traditions into their designs. If executed skillfully, this approach can lead to the creation of innovative and distinctive buildings that celebrate cultural diversity. However, if not approached thoughtfully, it can result in cultural appropriation, exploitation,

In contrast cultural preservation prioritizes the preservation of the uniqueness and specificities of cultural identities. This approach can help to maintain and celebrate cultural heritage, but it can be exclusionist and perpetuate stereotypes which can lead to racism, essentialism and discrimination. In his influential essay, Frampton presented six principles for a critically regionalist approach to architecture, which includes rejecting universalism and cultural appropriation, acknowledging social responsibility, emphasizing historical continuity, and challenging the homogenizing force of western modernism (Frampton, 1983). Despite criticisms of the essay as outdated and essentialist, it provides valuable ideas that highlight the importance of preserving the specificities of regions and cultures. The myriad aspects of culture exhibit the inherent differences among us, but there is potential to coexist peacefully if we not only acknowledge our diversity but appreciate and celebrate it.

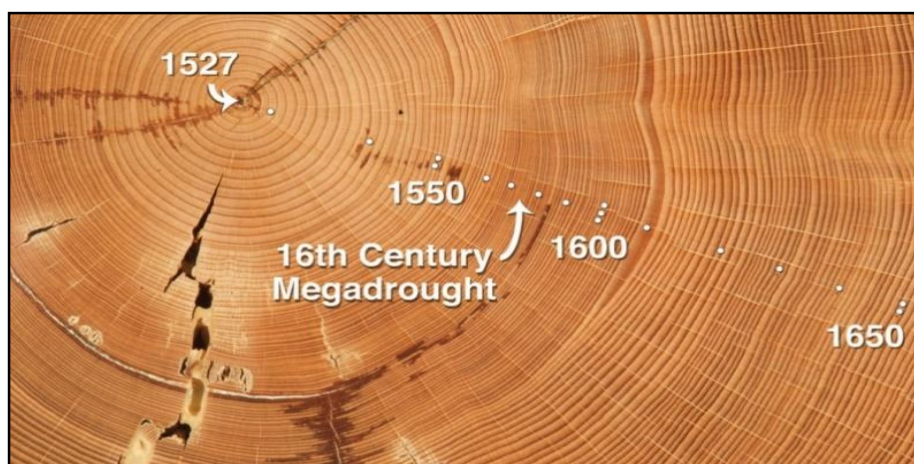


FIGURE 2: TREE RINGS SIGNIFYING THEIR AGE

III. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative research approach is adopted, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the subject matter. Data collection will involve surveys and semi-structured interviews with educators, students, and professionals in the field of architecture, providing valuable insights into their experiences and perspectives. Thematic analysis will be utilized to identify recurring themes and patterns, enabling a comprehensive understanding of power dynamics and their role in architectural education. The research design also incorporates reflexivity, acknowledging the potential influence of the researcher's own biases and promoting transparency throughout the study. By employing this methodology, the study aims to contribute to the critical discourse on architectural education and highlight the importance of addressing power dynamics to foster a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

First phase of the study involved a literature review of the existing literature on the role of architecture in shaping societies and the importance of cultural education in architectural education. The literature review was conducted to synthesize the existing knowledge on the topic and to identify the gaps in knowledge. The second phase of the study involved a survey of 50 architecture practitioners and educators from South India. The survey was conducted to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities of transforming architectural education in South India. The survey was conducted online and the respondents were recruited through a variety of channels, including social media, professional organizations, and academic institutions. The survey data was analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach.

The survey had a balanced gender representation, with almost equal numbers of men and women participating. About 40% of the participants were male and 60% were female.

The age distribution of the participants also showed a good mix of people from different stages of their professional and personal development. About 8% of the participants were in the 18-24 age group, suggesting that some young people are interested in architecture. The majority of the participants were in the 24-30 age group (33%), indicating that there are many emerging professionals in the field. About 41% of the participants were aged 40 and above, which shows that experienced practitioners and educators are also contributing to the survey. The survey is then divided into two sections. The first section of the survey asked respondents about their views on the concept of cultural hybridity. The term "cultural hybridity" refers to the blending and intermingling of different cultural influences. The survey asked respondents whether they believe in the concept of cultural hybridity, and whether they think the West also considers itself to be a hybrid of Eastern and Western cultures.

The second section of the survey asked respondents about the importance of fostering criticality and cultural sensibility in architectural education. Criticality refers to the ability to think critically about the world around us, and cultural sensibility refers to the ability to appreciate and understand different cultures. The survey asked respondents how important they think it is for architectural education to foster criticality and cultural sensibility, and what are some challenges and opportunities for transforming architectural education to be more critical and culturally sensitive.

These two sections of the survey were designed to assess the respondents' views on the importance of cultural education in architectural education. The survey results will help the researcher to better understand the challenges and opportunities for transforming architectural education to be more critical and culturally sensitive.

Understanding the east and the west in architecture

The concept of the "East" and the "West" has fascinated scholars and philosophers for centuries [Said, 1978]. This has led to many debates about the fundamental differences between the two cultures [Hall & Gieben, 1992]. The relevance of exploring what makes the East East and the West West has increased in recent times due to the blurred lines between cultures brought about by migration, globalization, and the rise of multicultural societies [Said, 1978]. This understanding can help us navigate the challenges and opportunities of living in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world.

In his influential book *Orientalism*, Edward Said [1978] examines how the West has historically constructed an image of the "Orient" as exotic, mysterious, and inferior. Said argues that this image has been used to justify Western domination over the East, both in colonial and imperial contexts, as well as in contemporary representations of the Middle East.

This viewpoint is also shared by prominent cultural theorist Stuart Hall [1992], who pointed out how "the West" is not a geographical term, but rather a historical and cultural construct. Hall argues that the idea of the "Other" has been central to Western thought since the Enlightenment age, which constructed a binary opposition between the West and the non-Western world. This division has been used to justify Western colonialism and imperialism, as well as to construct a sense of national identity and superiority [Hall & Gieben, 1992]. Both Said and Hall critique how Western thought constructs an "Other" to justify its own superiority and exercise power over others [Said, 1978; Hall & Gieben, 1992]. They also emphasize the need to recognize the diversity and complexity of non-Western cultures and to move beyond simplistic binary oppositions [Said, 1978; Hall & Gieben, 1992].

Cultural appropriation in architecture

Understanding the constructed binary and the justifications for it provides a framework for architecture students in understanding how cultures interact with each other and to recognize the differences [Said, 1978; Hall & Gieben, 1992]. While globalization encourages the integration and exchange of cultural elements, there is also

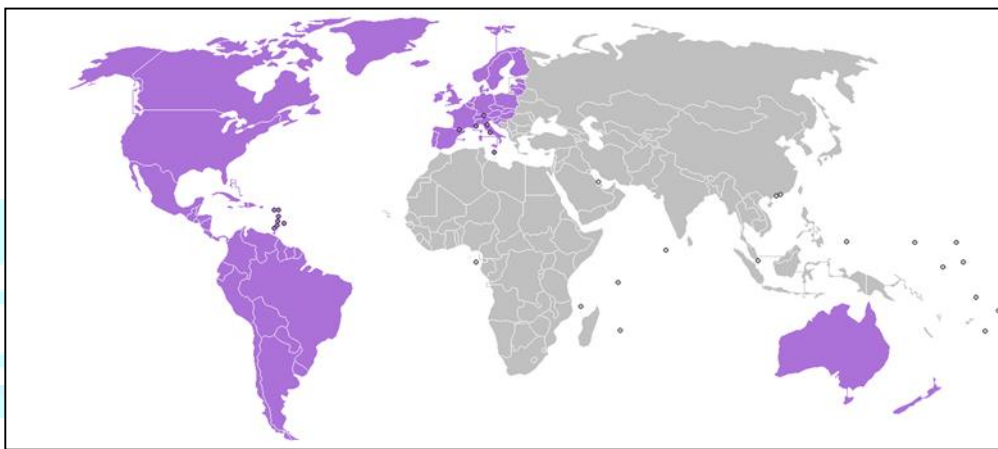
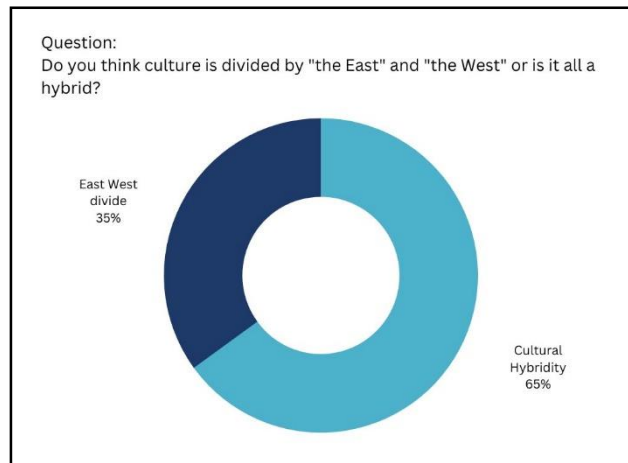
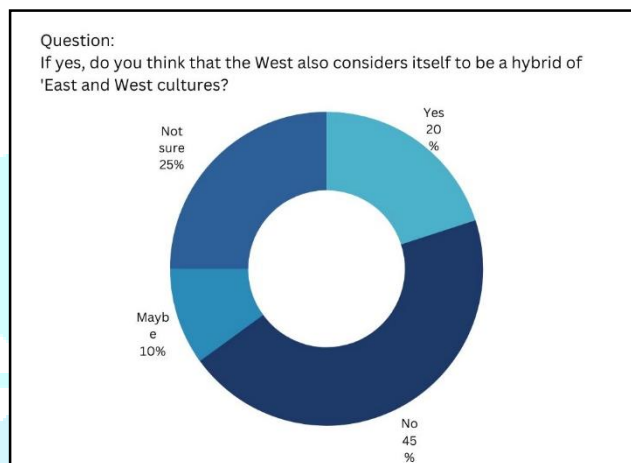


FIGURE 3: MAP OF WESTERN WORLD (LIST OF WESTERN COUNTRIES, N.D.)

the risk of cultural appropriation [Tuhiwai Smith, 1999]. For example, the use of traditional Chinese elements in Western architecture without understanding their cultural meaning can be seen as appropriation. This can be offensive to Chinese people and can also contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes about Chinese culture.

Cultural intelligence in architecture

To create a more equitable and inclusive built environment, it is essential for architecture education to focus on developing students' cultural intelligence (CQ). This means equipping them with the skills to interact with cultural elements in a respectful and sensitive manner, recognizing their value and significance, and avoiding any exploitative or tokenistic use. CQ can be developed through a variety of methods, such as studying different cultures, conducting field research, and participating in cross-cultural exchange programs [Early, 2002]. Architecture schools can also create opportunities for students to learn about the cultural history of different places and to work with people from different cultures. The survey was conducted among 50 architecture practitioners and educators in the South Indian region. The findings reveal that a majority, 32 out of the 50 (65%) respondents believe in that the east and west is a hybrid, emphasizing the blending and intermingling of different cultural influences. However, a smaller proportion (15%) still perceives a distinct division between "the East" and "the West" (Fig 5). On the other hand, when asked whether the West also considers itself to be a hybrid of 'East and West cultures, the responses varied. A significant portion 34% 17 out of 50 responded with 'maybe' or 'not sure', indicating that they were not sure about their response and 36%, 18 out of the 50 believed that West does not consider itself a hybrid. While only 28% responded positively, suggesting that the West does perceive itself as a blend of Eastern and Western cultures as illustrated in (Fig 6).

**FIGURE: 4****FIGURE: 5**

Importance of fostering criticality and cultural sensibility

Similar to the construction of the "other" by the West, numerous power hierarchies exist that perpetuate exclusionary practices. These biases extend into the design process, manifesting in various ways such as limited accessibility, gender-based discrimination, socioeconomic disparities, and more. These factors significantly impact design decisions, reflecting the underlying power dynamics that shape the built environment. One way to overcome this inconsideration is by fostering criticality in architects. In order to foster criticality and cultural sensibility in architecture students, it is essential to incorporate a comprehensive educational approach that goes beyond technical skills and design aesthetics. To counter these challenges, a paradigm shift is necessary. Incorporating politics into architectural education is crucial for creating fair, sustainable, and culturally rich spaces. Architecture and politics have always been intertwined and the examination of the political dimension of architecture is essential to prepare architects for the increasingly hybrid world. As noted by Shapiro, the role of institutions is to move past narrow self-serving concerns and drive social change that reflects the nature of the society (Shapiro, 2009). The current disposition of architecture education places more importance on economic growth than on sustainable development, cultural consciousness, and climate conservation. This perspective is rooted in the dominant capitalist power structure, which tends to label anything that doesn't generate immediate profit as trivial.

Another factor contributing to bias is exclusionary design norms and data bias that arise from a prevailing tendency to rely on default "neutral" data and current norms, often leading to the privileging of the interests of dominant groups.(Criado Perez, 2019) . This standardization contributes to a phenomenon known as *McDonaldization*, which is characterized by increased efficiency, predictability, standardization, and calculability in various industries, including healthcare, retail, education, and architecture (Garland, 2008; Hayes & Wynyard, 2002)). It draws its name from the fast-food industry, symbolizing its focus on speed and uniformity. In architectural education and practice, Neufert's book "Architects' Data" exemplifies the influence of McDonaldization. Adhering strictly to Neufert's standardized approaches may lead architects to overlook the diverse needs and unique characteristics of different contexts, resulting in generic and disconnected designs.

Recognizing the impact of McDonaldisation is vital for professionals, as they must actively challenge the standardized approach and create opportunities for students to foster individuality and develop an awareness of cultural specificities.

Ogbu's research highlights the significance of identity, both voluntary and involuntary, in the teaching and learning processes (John, 2003). Voluntary identities are those that individuals choose, while involuntary identities are those that are assigned based on factors such as race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. In the field of architecture, it is essential to recognize the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, as their identities can influence their interaction with the curriculum and their design approach. Architectural regulations and building codes play a significant role in shaping power dynamics within society. Incorporating the study of politics in architectural education is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the profession and its societal implications as it creates an awareness and empowers architects to create fair, culturally rich, and sustainable spaces. These implications not only encompass our well-being and quality of life but also our cultural identity, social interactions, and the overall fabric of society. Many social advocacy movements have resulted in architectural policy changes, such as the Public Health Movement leading to building codes promoting health and safety, the Green movement influencing energy-efficient design, and the Disability Rights Movement advocating for accessible design. These examples demonstrate how social values can be embedded into the built environment for more inclusive and equitable spaces (B. B. Wilson, 2009)

The World Report on Disability highlights the importance of equal rights and access for people with disabilities. In Malaysia, the revision of the People with Disabilities Act aimed to ensure these rights. Additionally, the International Islamic University introduced "barrier-free architecture" and established the Kaed Universal Design Unit to promote awareness and educate on design regulations (World Health Organization. & World Bank, 2011). This illustrates how the practice of

architecture and the education along with the language around the subject can reflect our values and empower the excluded groups. By regularly using intentional and mindful language and inclusive and culturally sensitive terms, as well as being well informed on the social issues of the region, it can enable architects to fully maximize their potential as a civic minded architect.

Integrating critical science in architectural education

The prevailing view is that education is an investment and people pursue higher education primarily to obtain high-paying jobs. This human capital theory, which although well-recognized, often oversimplifies the dynamics of the employment landscape, particularly during times of economic downturn. An alternative view is the intrinsic notion, which sees education as a means to empower individuals to make independent and informed choices about their lives.

The intrinsic approach in education emphasizes the inherent value and joy of learning, focusing on personal growth, critical thinking, and self-discovery. On the other hand, the instrumental approach views education as a means to achieve practical goals, such as acquiring specific skills and knowledge for career advancement. Kromydas supports the idea that these two approaches to education are complementary and mutually supportive (Kromydas, 2017). By acknowledging the value of both approaches in architectural education, educators can foster inclusivity and strike a balance between the pursuit of knowledge and personal fulfillment, while also recognizing the practical benefits that education offers to individuals and society as a whole.

The current state of architectural education dampens this expansive potential of young architects, and instead of recognizing them as visionaries shaping history and advancing culture, it often leads to the creation of uncreative individuals with a deficient or misplaced intercultural understanding. Rather than nurturing an experimental mindset and fostering culturally specific problem-solving that promotes transnational understanding, the curriculum instead emphasizes standardization, pushing architects into a rigid framework of right and wrong. However, when it comes to culture, there is no absolute right or wrong; there are only different perspectives.

Teachers play a vital role in bridging societal values with the values of individual students, fostering fresh perspectives and deeper understanding. Critical pedagogy creates an environment that allows students to think critically, take risks, and reflect on the knowledge gained, while also recognizing that education is not just about receiving information. It recognizes the limitations of standardized curricula and teaching methods in acknowledging the diverse narratives, histories, experiences of students. It views students as individuals who possess the capacity to become critical, informed, and knowledgeable members of society and agents of social change (Sinha, 2016)). When architects are capable of seamlessly combining their technical expertise with their aesthetic sensibility and social consciousness and apply this fusion to the specific needs of the context, it

leads to interesting results. And overtime, creates a sense of place which promotes social progress and cultivates a harmonious coexistence of the community within the built environment.

In response to the question regarding whether the architecture curriculum should include teaching about the dominance of various societal power structures, the architects and educators indicate a diversity of opinions. Out of the respondents, 12 individuals expressed a positive stance, affirming the inclusion of such teachings. On the other hand, 3 respondents opposed the idea. Four respondents were unsure or had a neutral stance (maybe), while one respondent provided an alternative viewpoint. These responses highlight the varying perspectives on the incorporation of teachings about societal power structures within the architecture curriculum. While a majority supports its inclusion, a minority holds reservations or uncertainty. (Fig 6). These findings underscore the importance of further dialogue and critical discussions within the architectural community to determine the most effective approach in addressing these power dynamics within education.

The 2017 revised UIA/UNESCO Charter on Architectural Education recognizes the importance of cultural education in architectural education. It emphasizes the need to cultivate cultural awareness, understanding, and respect in future architects. It suggests that cultural education should be incorporated throughout the curriculum, rather than being limited to a single course or module. It also recommends that cultural education be taught not only through theory but also through practice, such as through study tours and fieldwork. Ultimately, the charter aims to shape architects who can create inclusive and respectful built environments.

Frank Gehry's quote, "Creativity comes from working within constraints," highlights the importance of constraints in fostering creativity among students. However, it is crucial to consider the nature of these constraints and how they shape students' problem-solving skills. Instead of only inculcating rigid and formulaic rules, students need to be exposed to constraints that push them to broaden their perspectives and prepare them for the diverse challenges they may encounter in the hyper globalized world. This entails providing them with problem-solving tasks that incorporate social constraints such as designing for specific cultures, addressing identity-based challenges, and considering social, economic, and environmental factors. By engaging with such constraints, students develop a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between architecture and society, enhancing their abilities and nurturing their capacity to create inclusive and contextually responsive designs. Architects and architecture students should seek out constraints and use them as opportunities to design buildings that respond to their region's particular issues. By integrating sufficient community research, case studies and discussions, students must explore topics such as colonial legacies, gentrification, and the impact of architecture on marginalized communities. They learn to question dominant narratives and challenge normative design approaches that reinforce social and spatial injustices. By integrating critical science in architectural education, students develop a heightened awareness of the social and ethical dimensions of their profession. They are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and mindset necessary to challenge the status quo, advocate for social justice, and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable built environment.

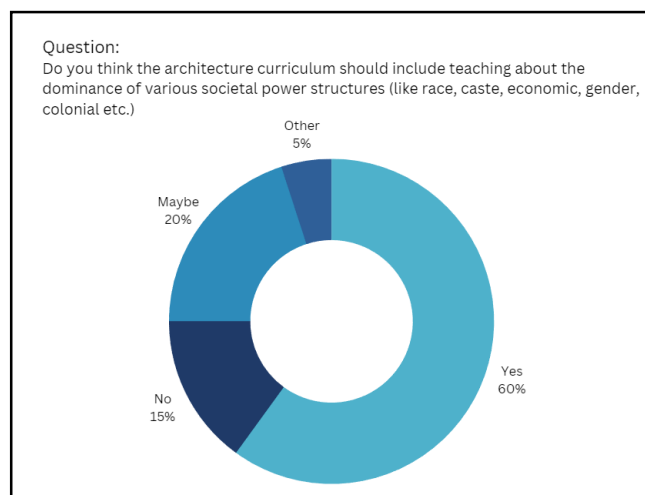


FIGURE: 6

IV. CONCLUSION

In light of the discussed issues, it is evident that architecture carries significant responsibilities and opportunities in shaping societies. By integrating critical study into architectural education, developing intercultural intelligence, and questioning dominant narratives in various societal hierarchies, we can pave the way for transformative architectural education. This approach equips professionals to navigate the complexities of our progressively globalized world, embracing diverse cultural perspectives and empowering built environments that reflect human values and experiences. Challenging standardized norms, fostering the sensibilities to overcome historic and cultural conditioning are essential aspects of this evolving educational paradigm. By embracing this transformative educational shift, architects have the opportunity to become agents of positive change. They can embody the values and aspirations of a global society, working towards a future where architecture not only responds to the needs of individuals and communities but also contributes to broader social, cultural, and environmental well-being.

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