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# Architecture Without Borders?

## The Globalization of Humanitarian Architecture Culture

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### Introduction

In a recent interview, one of the founders of the popular architecture news website ArchDaily explained how their site was part of a historical shift in architecture culture. Architecture publications based in the Global North have dominated the production and dissemination of architectural knowledge for consumption by the rest of the world for decades (e.g., through texts and journals, as discussed by Crysler 2003). But ArchDaily—based in Santiago, Chile—has been challenging that dominance by bringing a sizeable segment of the production of architectural knowledge to the Global South.<sup>1</sup>

This statement is one about architecture's borders. The vitality of architecture depends heavily on global flows of information, knowledge, and ideas. As a field that straddles arts and technical fields, architecture is intimately connected to avant-garde arts movements as well as innovations in the sciences. Further, as a field connected to urban and rural development, real estate, and national identity, architecture is also tied to political, economic, and social forces (see, e.g., Castells 2000; Kanna 2011; Ong 1999). As a result of architecture's groundings in the arts, sciences, and development, the geography of knowledge production and consumption in architecture is as uneven as the geographies of political economy.

Humanitarian architecture, like architecture in general, is shaped by global flows of knowledge, information, and ideas. Best practices in community engagement, the aesthetics of humanitarian architecture, and ideas about the role of professionals with respect to the public each represent forms of knowledge that are *produced*, *circulated*, and *consumed*. This essay is a reflection on the structures and agents that participate in the exchange of humanitarian architecture knowledge globally. Attention is given to institutions (Powell 2007) as the structures that govern the production, circulation, and consumption of humanitarian architecture culture.

In their collection of essays, *Transnational Civil Society*, Srilatha Batliwala and L. David Brown (2006, 8) note the importance of “a transnational public discourse” as a set of frameworks that define the problems and solutions that humanitarian workers enact. Batliwala and Brown (2006, 8–9) write that

some transnational discourses have reshaped transnational agreements on values, norms, and assumptions, which have in turn shaped the behavior of intergovernmental institutions, national governments, and even ordinary citizens and their communities.



This statement speaks to the same triad, highlighted in the previous paragraph, of the *production* (via discourses), *dissemination* or diffusion (via transnational flows), and *consumption* as teaching or patterning behavior (e.g., shaping behaviors of people and organizations). Batliwala and Brown's argument is directly applicable to the world of socially engaged architecture. In the context of humanitarian architecture, the institutions that produce, diffuse, and teach humanitarian architecture include organizations like Architecture for Humanity, publications like *Design Like You Give a Damn* (Architecture for Humanity 2012), and news sources like ArchDaily. Before turning to the stories of these institutions and telling about their role in shaping cultures of humanitarian architecture, I turn to scholars who have studied the nature of architecture culture.

Professions have cultures. Judith Blau (1987), Beatriz Colomina (2010), Dana Cuff (1992), Robert Gutman (1988), Spiro Kostof (1977), Magali Sarfatti Larson (1995), Joan Ockman (1993), and Garry Stevens (2002) are among scholars who have studied and written about the culture of the architecture profession and architecture practice. They write from sociological, historical, economic, geographic, and cultural studies perspectives. Collectively, these scholars shape an understanding of architecture practice that is contingent on specific social, political, and economic moments and places in the world. They tell us how and why architects in different professional cultures do work differently.

But perhaps the most relevant study of professional cultures for this essay comes from outside architecture. In her study of the field of economics, Marion Fourcade showed how differently the professional and academic fields evolved in France, England, and the United States (Fourcade 2009). In France, economics has strong characteristics of a political science. In England, it serves the economic interests of the colonial enterprise. In the United States, economics is a highly rationalized and technical field. Fourcade's research showed that a field is shaped as much by national cultures as it is by abstract principles of the work itself.

Extending Fourcade's findings, we can appreciate that how an architect thinks about and does humanitarian work depends on the culture of her profession. Humanitarian architecture done by organizations based in the United States will be done differently from humanitarian architecture done by organizations based in, say, Chile. Some of the questions that underlie the discussion in this essay were born from this understanding. If we consider humanitarian architecture a field of work, like economics, then what are the implications of national professional cultures on the kind of work that humanitarian architects do? Is there an approach to humanitarian architecture in the United States that is different from the approach to humanitarian architecture in Chile? Are, say, North American humanitarian architects more entrepreneurial? Or do they tend to frame their involvement in developing communities as part of a savior model? Do, say, Indian humanitarian architects depend more on local knowledge? Or do North American humanitarian architecture institutions condition ways architects around the world think about humanitarianism?

Consider criticisms that exist of transnational humanitarianism and humanitarian architecture: that humanitarian work is inflicted with a White savior complex (e.g., Cole 2012); that humanitarian design is a space for architects and engineers to work in developing communities to practice aesthetic and technical innovations (e.g., Goodman 2014); or that designers doing short-stint humanitarian work in foreign developing communities lack the training to bring sustainable infrastructural improvements to those communities. These criticisms are connected to specific ways of thinking and doing humanitarian architecture, many of which are shaped in the Global North through doing work in the Global South. An important question thus arises: do ways of thinking about humanitarianism in architecture that are shaped in one part of the world coerce architects in other parts of the world to think about and do humanitarian architecture in similar ways? This question of coercion can be analyzed by thinking about the *production*, *global diffusion*, and *consumption* of humanitarian architecture culture.

The author conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with about 80 architects concerned with social engagement in Canada, Chile, Iran, the United States, and the United Kingdom, between



2012 and 2017. Many of the architects were active in the production, dissemination, or consumption of ideas about humanitarian architecture. Participants in the research included, for example, editors of major architecture news sites, educators, leaders of organizations, students, professionals who had migrated between countries, and humanitarian architects. In order to protect the anonymity of interviewees, the author has used alternative names and combined elements of different architects' experiences to create fictional but representative cases. Data in the form of interview transcripts and texts by and about architects and humanitarian architecture grounded a qualitative content analysis of cultures of architectural practice. The data and analyses from this research are presented in this essay as vignettes that provide a better understanding of the nuanced processes driving the globalization of humanitarian architecture culture.

### Producing Humanitarian Architecture Cultures

Schools, organizations, and professional bodies are among the sites that institute humanitarian architecture. According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary* (2015), the verb to *institute* means to "set in motion or establish." Many universities have programs that train students to do humanitarian architecture. Auburn University's Rural Studio, Portland State University's Center for Public Interest Design, the University of Colorado Boulder's Praxis Studios, and the University of Illinois's Chicago Design Center are examples of dozens of programs that represent an academic institutionalization of humanitarian architecture work. These programs institutionalize humanitarian architecture by offering degree programs, certificates, or core curricular components. Beyond academia, organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity and Architecture for Humanity (now defunct), have established a set of practices of humanitarian architecture through home construction and transnational development projects. And professional bodies, such as the American Institute of Architects (AIA), support humanitarian architecture by, for example, recognizing and celebrating humanitarian architecture projects. In these ways, these academic, organizational, and professional sites *institute* humanitarian architecture.

But these are not the only sites that set the practice of humanitarian architecture in motion. Magazines, books, websites, and even awards similarly play a role in instituting humanitarian architecture. Popular publications, weblogs, and design competitions are often what a global audience of architects looks to first. The glossy pages of fancy books on humanitarian architecture do much to attract attention. And in doing so, they define humanitarian architecture through such things as the essays in a book, the title of the publication (just as this volume does), and discussions around the book in reviews, criticisms, and praise. The popularity of blog posts and TED talks that cover humanitarian projects gather momentum and go viral. Students of architecture emulate what is popular, not just what is vetted in board meetings of professional associations.

This latter set of institutions of humanitarian architecture is distinct from the first set in a number of ways. Publications, websites, and awards often require less capital to operate. A small team can launch a popular humanitarian architecture news blog in a couple years, whereas a university program in humanitarian architecture requires layers of approval, funding, and the commitment of larger resources. Publications, websites, and awards distribute their message globally and rapidly. Architects in most parts of the world can participate in international design awards, whereas only a select few can participate in the awards offered by professional associations. And this reflects an important point of distinction. Publications, websites, and awards are more nimble, less regulated, and as a whole, less formal—or *informal*—institutions. Universities, large organizations, and professional bodies are often larger, with more developed bureaucratic structures, and represent more *formal* institutions.

Consider the comparison of the Pritzker Architecture Prize and ArchDaily's Building of the Year Award. The Pritzker Prize builds on expert juries and an elaborate process for nomination, review, and selection. It is an example of a formal institution of architecture culture. ArchDaily's Building of the Year Award, by contrast, is "a peer-based, crowdsourced architecture award" that is "chosen



by the collective intelligence of over 75,000 votes from ArchDaily readers around the world.”<sup>2</sup> It exemplifies an informal institution. When the Pritzker was awarded to Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena in 2016, it broadcast a message about the importance of socially engaged architecture to a broad and global audience of architects. The Pritzker Foundation plays a powerful role in shaping architecture culture through recognition. But as a formal institution, the Pritzker Prize is limited in how it engages architects in geographies off the beaten path of globalization. In contrast, ArchDaily’s Building of the Year Award is based on an informal form of producing recognition. As such, its readership and influence run deep across a much broader geography (Roudbari 2018).

The story of a nongovernmental organization founded by a small collaborative of architects and urban planners in Iran—*Shahri*—illustrates the power of informal institutions in defining socially engaged architecture cultures. The project was the brainchild of a recent graduate of a PhD program in urban planning in Canada, Maryam.<sup>3</sup> In 2010, Maryam had migrated to Canada from Iran for graduate school. Motivated by concerns over urban inequality in her hometown of Tehran, she studied social movements in architecture and planning. After graduate school, she returned to Tehran and engaged her peers in discussions around public-interest design and ideas around the right to the city (building on the work of Henri Lefebvre [1991]). She hosted informal conversations that evolved to teach-ins and she began circulating increasingly in-demand email invitations to events.

Maryam’s efforts gained the attention of a large number of architecture and planning students deeply concerned with inequality and socially engaged architecture and planning. At the time of my writing, only a couple years after its informal beginning, *Shahri* is a growing organization. It is *instituting* a culture of socially engaged architecture and planning in Tehran. *Shahri* still operates through email updates, hosted informal conversations, and now, coordinated official events. Many architects I interviewed spoke about the significance of *Shahri* in instilling a culture of socially engaged architecture practice in Tehran’s professional scene.

## Disseminating Humanitarian Architecture Cultures

The examples of the Pritzker Prize, ArchDaily’s Building of the Year Award, and *Shahri* all speak to the production of knowledge. But there is an important difference between how formal and informal institutions transcend borders through the dissemination of knowledge. In this section, it is argued that the knowledge produced by informal institutions transcends international borders more successfully than knowledge produced by formal institutions. Consider the following vignette.

After completing graduate school in architecture in 2000, Rosh worked with leading architects in Mumbai. She became increasingly interested in the work of globally prominent architects like Shigeru Ban. Rosh liked Ban’s work with cardboard and his creative approach to post-disaster housing. Shigeru Ban is well known for innovations in humanitarian architecture (Ban and Christian 2014). He has used recycled cardboard to build emergency shelters after disasters and Rosh thought this was fascinating. As her enthusiasm for her professional work at home waned, Rosh’s desire to work for a globally recognized architect, like Ban, grew. One summer, a friend visiting from the United States brought her a large compendium book on contemporary architecture—a heavy, thick, coffee table book with beautiful pictures and glossy pages (e.g., Taschen’s architecture compendiums). She found that the end of the book contained the addresses of the featured architects’ offices. This is before the Internet made finding information like this trivial. Until this book landed on her table, Rosh hadn’t had a resource for getting in touch with foreign architects. She sent her resume to several offices in Europe—including Shigeru Ban’s. To her amazement, she was offered an interview and later that year began working at Ban’s office, where she was exposed, firsthand, to the practice of the architect she had admired from a distance who seemed worlds away.

Working at Ban’s office, Rosh found the rigorous work around the clock to be meticulous and challenging. But she did not get the exposure to the creativity in design she imagined she might have



if she had the chance to work with Ban himself. After a couple years abroad, she returned home. She had a strong urge to share things she learned abroad, in the office, and in her own explorations, with students like her past self. She knew there was a thirst for the cutting edge in humanitarian architecture among her younger peers. As a new, young teacher, Rosh used a studio on low-tech design solutions for humanitarian crises to explore pure geometries, everyday materials, and affordable, basic shelters with her students.

Meanwhile, in their South of Market office in San Francisco, the team at Architecture for Humanity was piecing together what would become their first major publication. An employee browsing the web stumbled upon a picture of a shelter that Rosh and her students designed and built. Its simplicity was intriguing. Its use of scrap wood and mud was convincing. A printout of the project image made it to the pin-up wall of the office with scores of images of other projects from around the world. Eventually, the shelter that Rosh and her students made found its way into *Design Like You Give a Damn* (*DLYGD*, Architecture for Humanity 2012). *DLYGD*, like the compendium that landed on Rosh's table years earlier, is a heavy, glossy, and attractive book of images and ideas. Like the other compendium, *DLYGD* has travelled with aunts, cousins, and friends to become gifts to young, idealistic architects in many parts of the world. *DLYGD* has become a reference for humanitarian architecture scoured and cited by designers around the world. And Rosh's project was in it.

Rosh's practice gained credibility by virtue of having been published in a globally circulating book. Young architects in her home city of Mumbai looked to her as a representative of the global wave of humanitarian architecture spread by *DLYGD* and popularized by the over 1 million views of Architecture for Humanity cofounder Cameron Sinclair's TED talk. Through the project published in *DLYGD*, her subsequent work, and growing participation in international workshops for humanitarian architecture, Rosh shaped for her employees, students, and the community of leading architects in Mumbai an understanding of humanitarian design and a way of doing it.

Rosh's story illustrates the range of impromptu, informal, and formal channels that play a role in the global diffusion of humanitarian architecture culture. A combination of formal institutions (the architecture profession in her home country) and informal institutions (the globally circulated book that her work was shown in) is at play in Rosh's story. But the informal institutions are the ones that cross borders more easily. These institutions are the ones that hundreds of young architecture students in many corners in the world are tapped into.

For more on theories of diffusion of knowledge and cultures of practice relevant to architecture, the reader is pointed to work by James Faulconbridge (2010), Robert Kloosterman (2008), Kathryn Mitchell (2004), Minoo Moallem (2011), and Aihwa Ong (1999). These scholars represent a range of disciplines, from anthropology, architecture, and economic geography to transnational feminist geography.

## Consuming Humanitarian Architecture Cultures

Informal institutions are often easier to work with and to work through. An architecture student can easily submit a humanitarian design concept to a website that circulates humanitarian architecture design ideas, [worldchange.org](http://worldchange.org), for architects around the world to study. Many architects can play on the global stage when the backdoor pass is an informal institution. Access is more distributed. Arjun Appadurai writes that the "strength of many actors and movements that wish to join their efforts across national boundaries is often their ad hoc, unstructured, and evanescent material shape" (Appadurai 2006, xii). He goes on to write, "they always face the danger of becoming hierarchical, bureaucratized, slow, and conservative as they become better networked, supported, and institutionalized." Informal institutions enable the proliferation of humanitarian architecture around the world.

The global proliferation of humanitarian architecture work is intimately connected to the workings of the institutions of architecture. Most notable among these institutions are universities, large



organizations, professional associations and weblogs, publications, and awards. For these institutions to establish projects or partnerships with similar groups in other countries is often a complex process. By contrast, more informal sites, such as crowdsourced design news sites, exchange ideas and information across borders almost seamlessly. The experiences of those transnational architects whom I interviewed suggest that it is the unfiltered and informal ideas about humanitarian architecture that transcend borders most readily. The filtered or more vetted ideas take longer to spread around the world and to trickle down into the ranks of architects. A tour through popular websites, publications, and awards for humanitarian architecture reflects the ideas about humanitarian architecture that are spreading around the world.

George Thomas, a scholar of globalization, writes (2009, 117), “activists, in particular, define problems as global and identify rational goals of peace, justice, and participation as properties of a global good society.” He continues: “while many resist global forces and world cultural elements, they through their contentions are building a world polity and cultural reality.” In the context of architects participating in informal institutions, Thomas’s sentiment underscores their role in shaping a global culture of practice that transcends borders.

Here, it helps to distinguish domestic from international institutions—and both of those from transnational institutions. Institutions of the architecture profession were defined earlier as including professional associations, regulatory bodies, licensure, publications, awards, and competitions; add to that list education and continuing education in the form of lectures, colloquia, and workshops. These are the sites that define the profession, educate its membership, and build and disseminate knowledge, credibility, and authority (Abbott 1988; Evetts 2003; Fourcade 2009; Larson 1977). There is another category of institution, which operates transnationally and is defined here as professional institutions that are not identified as belonging to a given national profession. The transnational institutions of the architecture profession traditionally include a number of organizations that identify themselves as “international,” such as the International Union of Architects (UIA) and, historically, the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM). Transnational institutions also include, however, those organizations and projects that circulate, recognize, and bestow accolades upon architects and their projects around the world. Examples include globally circulating and internationally oriented design magazines, such as *DOMUS*; international design awards, such as the Pritzker Prize or the Aga Khan Award for Architecture; international design expositions and fairs, such as the Venice Biennale; and, recently, design websites, blogs, and among them, the growing cadre of international design competition websites, such as the World Architecture Community Awards and the World Architecture Festival. ArchDaily, discussed earlier, is an example of a powerful transnational institution. The vignettes of Rosh and Shahri illustrate how the dissemination of cultures of humanitarian architecture is rooted in such transnational institutions.

### Shaping a Global Humanitarian Architecture Culture?

The primary motivation for the research presented in this essay was a concern with ways formal institutions of humanitarian architecture were shaping—even coercing—architects around the world into a specific form of practice. Colonialist framings of humanitarianism are rife in architecture practice. Critics of humanitarian architecture, such as Eyal Weizman (2011), Kenny Cupers (2014), and those cited in the introduction earlier, write about this. The global diffusion of those framings and epistemologies is something that architects thinking about social engagement should be concerned about.

Others in this volume describe the magnitude of growth that humanitarian architecture has seen (Chapters 29, 30, 31). Instead of enumerating the spread of humanitarian architecture work around the world, the vignettes in this essay offer a view into how that growth happens. This view comes not from a quantitative analysis of humanitarian architecture work but from a qualitative study of the



experience of architects. The architects I interviewed spoke directly about the production, diffusion, and consumption of cultures of humanitarian architecture practice. Theirs are exemplified by the stories shared earlier. Importantly, several of those interviewed also spoke about the coercive nature of global architecture culture.

A globalized culture of humanitarian architecture can be interpreted as the dominance of one model of humanitarian architecture work over others. In this interpretation, what would happen if that dominant model were one that occasionally exploits the situations of those in need to produce exciting work for those who can help? The result would not be great. It would mean that there is an increasingly popular model of doing humanitarian architecture work that is being adopted by more people around the world. That model could, for example, consist of architects—as presumed experts or saviors—designing and building projects in communities less developed than the ones in which they live.

There are a couple ways of theorizing the globalization of institutions that support how one thinks about the globalization of humanitarian architecture. One is world polity theory and the other is world culture theory (see Beckfield 2003 for a comparison). Theorists in both camps are concerned with some idea about global culture. And in both camps, theorists consider the role of organizations, individuals, and institutions in generating culture. To simplify, the world polity theorists see international organizations and institutions as shaping a homogeneous culture. The world culture theorists argue that global culture has local flavor to it. The vignettes offered in this essay suggest that informal institutions of humanitarian architecture transcend borders more regularly. But, as informal institutions, they can also reflect intimately the culture of the professionals who shape them. Informal institutions produce, disseminate, and teach humanitarian architecture. It remains to be seen if informal institutions can carry humanitarian architecture culture across borders without homogenizing that culture (in keeping with world culture theory) in a way that is different from the homogenizing effects of formal institutions (as per world polity theory).

With the growing power of informal institutions, like ArchDaily, the monopoly of formal institutions is challenged. Such institutions as universities, CIAM, and the Pritzker Prize are no longer the primary producers and distributors of cultures of architecture. They share the pedagogical power of how those cultures are consumed with informal institutions. Coercion is still taking place. The difference now, however, is that cultures of humanitarian architecture are no longer just produced in the West and consumed by the rest. With crowdsourced channels for knowledge production (e.g., ArchDaily's Building of the Year Award process) on the rise, and with informal knowledge more easily traveling across borders (e.g., the distribution of ArchDaily content or the informal production of content in *Design Like You Give a Damn*), humanitarian architecture may yet find a way to transcend the borders that shape its cultures of practice.

## Notes

- 1 Author interview with ArchDaily, 2017.
- 2 ArchDaily Building of the Year Award webpage, accessed February 2017.
- 3 In order to protect the anonymity of interviewees, the author has used alternative names and combined elements of different architects' experiences to create fictional but representative cases.

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