



Field Notes on Design Activism: 5

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This is the fifth installment of a [narrative survey](#) in which several dozen educators and practitioners share perspectives on the intensifying demands for meaningful change across design pedagogy and practice. How is the field responding to the interlocking wicked problem that define our time — climate crisis, structural racism, unaffordable housing, rapid technological shifts? To the increasingly passionate campaigns to decolonize the canon, to make schools and offices more equitable, ethical, and diverse? What are the issues of greatest urgency? What specific actions and practical interventions are needed now?

Much of architecture’s self-description as a discipline has been founded on a search for origins — whether in antiquity or modernity, within the western intellectual tradition or via alternative contemporary theories. As scholars around the globe consider links between historically overlooked practices and seek to reinterpret archives, canons, and identities, it is time for a rupture with dominant narratives.

One of the most urgent yet exciting possibilities in today’s architectural education is to establish open discussions regarding the critical role played by history in the complex relationship between “theory” and “practice.”

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Historians in the 20th century traced what they understood as the modern “style” using a variety of narratives, to assert a version of origins and to establish their own agendas; as Anthony Vidler has argued, in his 2008 *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*, “histories of modernism themselves were constructed as more or less overt programs for the theory

and practice of design in their contemporary context.” We seem to have forgotten, in our contemporary curricular categorizations of history, theory, and design, that (as Vidler notes) from the Renaissance to the mid-19th century, “history had supplied the ‘very stuff’ for architecture. The historian was the architect: from Alberti to Schinkel, it was the architect’s responsibility to write the history that would authorize both precedent and innovation.” If our sense of the “modern” and its associated precedents are based on a prejudiced formation of references and roots, then there’s a need to open up an entire world that lies outside this dominant intellectual inheritance. Can we formulate an alternative trajectory? Can we establish a different genealogy for an unorthodox modernity?



Consider, as an example, current theoretical constructs in Chinese scholarly circles — among them critical regionalism; discussions of tectonics, phenomenology, and autonomy; and study of traditional garden design or *Yuan Lin*. Across these modes of thought, we find an inadequacy of theoretical production relevant to histories of the “other” vis-à-vis contemporary practice, causing an unfortunate disconnect between design curricula and rich intellectual traditions outside the western canon. The argument is not to promote isolationism, nor to set East and West against one another, but to assert that diversity and inclusion can give rise to creative hybrids.

A rupture is needed to open up theoretical and stylistic constructs in our education, so as to collectively construct other lineages connecting history to theory to practice. Alternative versions of intellectual formation within our milieu are waiting for us, so that we can prefigure an alternative contemporaneity.

— **Rossana Hu**