

---

## Perhaps, We Have Been Drawing The Wrong Lines

Czaae Malpani

The act of orthographic architectural drawing (henceforth, drawing), in particular, presentation drawing, continues to remain fundamental to the praxis of architecture and architectural training. To question or deny this act, can precipitate a crisis of sorts. It certainly did for me<sup>5</sup>; and this paper emerges (much later) out of the same crisis to raise pertinent questions as to how the drawing is deeply linked to identity. Steeped in putative objectivity and linearity, it becomes a discursive tool that posits lines as boundaries and margins, creating the self and the other. This (architectural) self—a necessarily gendered self—is what I would like to bring attention to, with this paper.

The drawing is a seductive object, and years are spent refining how one draws to express one's ideas/self. Yet, the immediate answer for what an architect does, is that they design; not that they make drawings. While it may, at this juncture, feel as if I am stating the obvious, it is important to reflect briefly on this. Architects, through popular consensus, seem to *imagine* that they make buildings. There are very few architects involved with the *actual* making of a building, typically relegated to masons and contractors. Every architect (and, I do use this as an umbrella term to encompass students / faculty / practitioners) does *make* drawings; in fact, it is one of the first things architecture students are taught. Anthropologist Edward Robbins (1997, 8) argues that “the drawing is at once an idea and an act, an autonomous concept, and a mode of social production,” which exists to anchor architects to their discipline. He succinctly explains that architectural identity is intimately hinged on the production of drawings (Robbins 1997). It is what imbues the (figure of the) architect, through a series of calculated historical sleights, to create for themselves both autonomy and authority. In fact, the fledgling but important work done on architects and their relationship with drawing has brought to light the historically designed need for distancing and grounding their work (drawings) as being representative of reality, honesty, and scientificity (Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier 1997). Robin Evans (1997, 154) scoffs at the power



Figure 1: Minnette de Silva and Le Corbusier at CIAM, Bridgewater, 1947. Image Source: de Silva, Minnette. *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*. Colombo: GEDSands, 1998.

accorded to drawings, deeming that a “suspension of critical disbelief is necessary to enable architects to do their task at all.” For Evans, translations between drawings and buildings are anchored in everything but linearity, and yet architects persist in laying claim to buildings over drawings, which are their primary *site* of work.

Autonomy and Authority: these form the cornerstone of many patriarchal values. You can see it reflected in Karl Scheffler’s descriptors for an architect, as someone who pursued “man’s supreme yearnings,” and “possessed great, masculine qualities” (Stratigakos 2005, 147-148). This may well be why we still have “juries” within architecture schools with drawings as evidence (Chatterjee 2011), for everyone to battle over these values. It is confounding, then, that feminist architectural historians have left a lacuna in their otherwise brilliant scholarship by not investigating this site, i.e., the orthographic architectural drawing itself.

This paper, while not a redressal, does hope to open a conversation about where, how, and what we draw in order to understand how the very

act of architectural drawing does give rise to gendered beings. It does so through examining selected drawings<sup>ii</sup> each by Minnette de Silva<sup>iii</sup> (Figs. 1 and 2) and Le Corbusier for the Karunaratne House, Kandy, 1948; and the Villa Sarabhai, Ahmedabad, 1955 respectively. While the choice could have been any two Modernists, these two are inextricably linked not only through socio-political contexts, geographies of operation, but also their own interpersonal relationship. Le Corbusier needs no introduction, where even today, his ideology and work continue to inform architectural studies. On the other hand, very little survives of de Silva, who occupies a very interesting space in architectural historiography as one of the first few trained women (Modernist) architects from South Asia.

### Where do we draw?

Progress (and prowess) in architectural school starts with the materiality of cartridge sheets and moves towards immaterial or virtual interfaces. Both interfaces are marked by certain common characteristics: homogeneity, cleanliness, and rectangularity—none of which are incidental, and—all of which are descriptive of a blank slate. In capturing “perfectly” a Euclidian space into which a “design” may be inserted or imposed, they are reductive—as Henri Lefebvre (1991, 285-286) would deem them—“first of nature’s space, then of all social space;” thus exerting “a redoubtable power.” These blank slates, or *tabula rasa*, should not be considered merely happenstance, and as I argue here, are critical to the making of (the) architect/ure. As homogenous surfaces, wherein perceived “information” about the world is rendered into graphics that can be manipulated at convenience and placed upon already sanitized surfaces, they allow for an interesting dialectic of projection and introjection. In other words, the messy reality of the world can be easily filtered away, or better yet, become controlled. This, interestingly, mirrors the architect as well, whose own complex reality, messy gendered body, and personal identity are filtered out to project pure “ideas” in the form of lines upon this space, ready for reception. Simultaneously, the “self” as a *tabula rasa* readies for the mutual introjection.

Here, let us examine our selected drawings. Prima facie, both Le Corbusier and de Silva seem to firmly follow the conventional ways of drawing orthographically. However, tensions-latent to each—begin to emerge when we look at the composition and framing inherent to both works. Denotatively, building-line graphics are confidently centered on

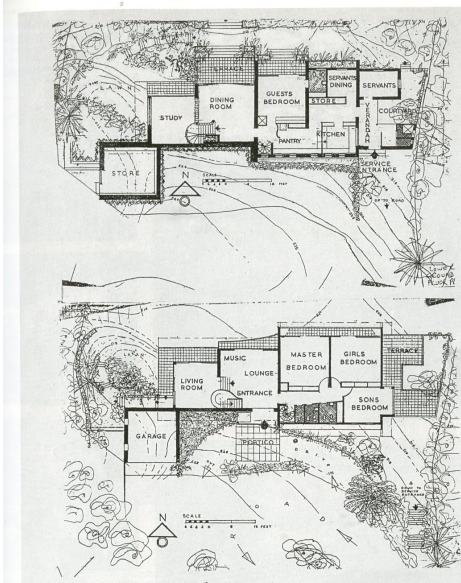


Figure 2: Plan Drawings of the Karunaratne House, 1948. Image Source: de Silva, Minnette. *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*. Colombo: GEDSands, 1998.

the border-less sheet in Le Corbusier’s drawing. They are markedly bold and command attention to themselves through an inverse relationship with the empty space around it. The distinct lack of a margin, or a border, draws the eye towards the series of vertical inscriptions (standing in for walls), themselves not differentiated from what may be a traditional understanding of the interior / exterior. On the other hand, the margin has a far more interesting presence for de Silva; for, it does more than merely frame her sheet. It establishes a limit, a check, a curtailment for her nature-graphics, themselves drawn with an intensity that strictly departs from the solidity and mathematical precision of her building line-graphics. In the former’s case, nature lines exist more as a token gesture; in the latter, they are acknowledged as a force, yet it is a force to be reined in. What makes the elements more interesting is the use of textual versus graphical information to inscribe the spaces carved out through an orthographic arrangement of lines. Whereas Le Corbusier—meticulously—uses furniture-graphics to

substantiate the denotation of spaces, de Silva uses connotative labels. While one is deterministic, the other is fluid; already accepting the vagaries of actual occupation. It is not so much the nature–culture dichotomy that I want to draw attention to; though that is at play here mediating the specificities of each architect’s gender and socio-political body; but, the attitude towards the drawing sheet, or surface, which for me is the location of the Architect-Self.

Recall here, Jean Baudrillard’s (1994) discussion of the map, or the *hyperreal*: a reality which has come to replace the reality-out-there. Thus, the drawing sheet as the site of projection/introjection bears no relationship to the “physical” site. It is a convenient split, as it allows the author-agent to inscribe their world onto a space of purity, removed from the defiling and polluting reality, which is an actual site. Furthermore, this drawing-space is ultimately controllable, open to easy manipulation in the guise of line-graphics splayed out over Cartesian space. Subsequently, both the authors are imbued with a power—an authoritative control which redefines what “reality”. Whether through making present or making absent, the sheet, and consequently, the world is controlled and appropriated by architects. Think of Heidegger’s (1977) *world-picture*, which is the world seen through a particular world-view akin to a flattened-out plane upon which our ideas and thoughts are projected, for us to be able to read them back, and give meaning to our own experiences. Similarly, the architectural drawing does not so much project forward (towards the building), as much as it introjects towards its maker—it acts as a mirror. This picture/drawing itself assumes a quasi-mathematic tautological form for architects, firmly tied into issues of objectivity and scientificity, and ultimately, masculinity, through this act.

*We teach appropriation and control, a world that we can and must shape, through the act of architectural representation.*

## How do we draw?

The drawing sheet provides a surface, a mirror for our identities. While one may sketch on it, these sketches are supporting actors—primordial and subservient simultaneously. To be accepted as legitimate, the drawing must be drafted *at scale*, i.e., with scientific precision. This automatically fixes scale as being mathematical, obliterating any discussion around it within architectural representation. On the other hand, many geographers following Kantian, Marxist, phenomenological interpretations, to name a few, have challenged this view of scale. Scale is social—scale as

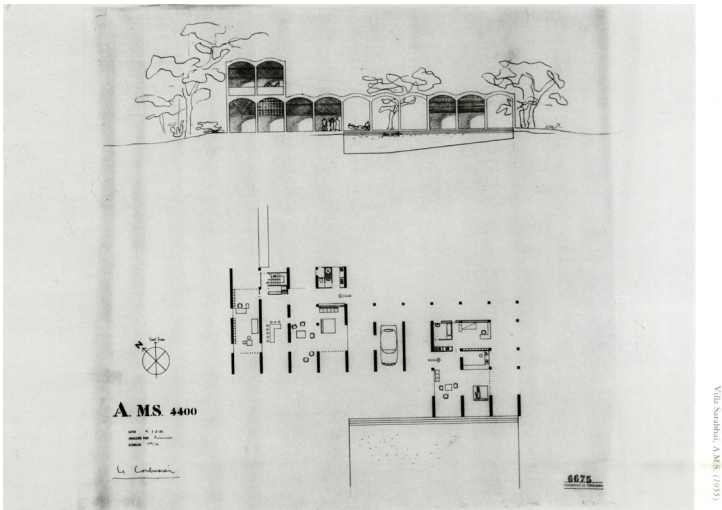


Figure 2: Plan Drawings of the Karunaratne House, 1948. Image Source: de Silva, Minnette. *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*. Colombo: GEDSands, 1998.

productive of space; and the ontological—that which is not pre-ordained but emerges out of structures of meaning and experience.

To understand the working of scale, we only have to look at maps. Maps, as J.B. Harley (2001, 51-82) argues, were themselves instruments of control, via the control of knowledge, and thus, power. The rational space of the map, much like that of the drawing, always intended to bring order where there was none, or really, wilfully was not accorded. Through scaling, the author/maker/possessor could frame and present reality. Scale, then, is always political. It is not innocuous or neutral, an argument geographers Neil Smith and Sallie Marston make. Marston (2000, 219-42) frames it as, “scale making is not only a rhetorical practice; its consequences are inscribed in and are the outcomes of both everyday life and macro-level social structure. [...] In short, scale construction is a political process.” Consequently, scale allows for categorization and classification, the enacting of hierarchies, the play-off between the active agent and the passive recipient. Within the realm of architectural representation, the latter find themselves not only arrested somehow by the drawing but—and certainly not accidentally—at its mercy.

Most of de Silva’s drawings are drawn to an eighth of an inch

and textually announced as such in FPS, despite her own training in the metric system. This may well have been her concession to her clients and audience, who would have been used to a Colonial FPS system. In contradistinction, Le Corbusier mathematizes the same value as a fraction while adhering to the metric system, making it more scientific than “read”, and closer to engineering. Moreover, whereas the former prominently draws attention to it, the latter seems to obfuscate it, perhaps even treating it as a given. For Le Corbusier, the scale is further hinted at through the modular *man*, itself ambivalent and problematic. Though both drawings are small-scale drawings, which would imply a significant amount of material resolution, this resolution is far more overt in Minnette’s drawings, where her own subjectivity as a woman, as a post-colonial subject, is at play. Le Corbusier favors the more pictorial aspects—his “idea” retaining its cultural implications—over the need for information.

Given this, if the politics of scale is inextricably linked to the production of space, how does this relationship determine the identity of the architect and the discipline? How are the architect-self and the audience-other getting constructed?

Scale, hegemonically, serves the function of a distancing device, controlling the kind and amount of real and imagined access the audience has into the architectural drawing. It implicates the audience’s bodies in this comprehension. De facto, scale necessitates a forced exclusion of the reader, rendering them as passive receivers of knowledge, while simultaneously placing the active control of comprehension and narrative back into the author’s hands. If not actually depicted, the polyscalarity of any representation has played itself out for the architect, away from that which is presented. The incessant adherence to a particular scale by the architect is an excellent example of a case of production, where the process of consumption is pre-determined.

Polyscalarity is eschewed in favor of fixity, thus occluding difference. The very act of generating scaled drawings through orthographic projections is at issue here. That there is a mathematical relationship established between a plan and an elevation, which is derivative and self-referential, and is thus not particularly different from, say, a theorem, should be a red flag. Geographers Doreen Massey, Gillian Rose, Liz Bondi, et al., have favorably brought up polyscalarity as a “paradoxical space”, one where social relations are stretched over space, allowing space to be seen in flux inclusive of breaks and fractures (Bondi and Davidson 2005, 16–31). Whether in the drawings here, or orthographic drawings in general, this very difference—and potential—is what is discarded to promote a geometric authenticity.

Alternate representational techniques find themselves abandoned in lieu of the marked ubiquity and sanctity of the drawing first and foremost, and thereafter, by extension, the sanctity of the author. That the act of scaled drawing is self-referential, i.e., the drawing refers not just to its own internal logic, but the logos of the entire corpus of orthographic representation is a key aspect because we locate the Self in the drawing through other such drawings. In other words, we give up the “Other” to locate the Self in a putatively honest, objective, and indisputable framework of architectural representations.

*We teach exclusion and authority, through the act of architectural representation, a world in which we shall narrate and represent.*

## What do we draw?

Tim Ingold (2013, 129) proposes that, “drawing that tells, describes a line—it is a graphic act—but that line is descriptive of nothing but itself. It is, however, *transformative* (my emphasis). It transforms the draughtsman, in making the work, and it transforms those who follow, in looking, with it.” Each instance of making a drawing not only irrevocably changes its author, but it also firmly situates the author’s body within and without the drawing. It has an affective relationship with the author’s identity. We could interpret this act of drawing as a form of citation, especially borrowing from Judith Butler’s (1993, xxi-xxiv) “performativity as citationality” through which gender is performed by situating the body within the material-being. Here, of the drawing. We do this through literal (signing the drawing) and figurative ways (by allowing our drawings to “naturally” belong to a corpus of other such drawings.) Thus, if the body—transformed and transfixed—is so deeply implicated in the drawing, what is the gender of this body?

Gender, we recognize, is hardly a stable category. It is constantly performed and reaffirmed. The body is always already located within a heterosexual matrix, through which identity is constructed through simultaneous acts of imprinting and abjection. The irony of the fact, that these are the very processes that inform architectural drawing, is not lost here. By occupying the space of a drawing, through acts of scaling, filtering, etc., we, thus, exercise various forms of control, through which architectural identity emerges out of the creation of what Henri Lefebvre (1991, 286-287) describes as “the phallic formant”, that is, a space which...

“...cannot be completely evacuated nor entirely filled with mere images or transitional objects. It demands a truly full object—an objectal



‘absolute’. So much, at least, it contributes. Metaphorically, it symbolizes force, male fertility, masculine violence. Here again the part is taken for the whole; phallic brutality does not remain abstract, for it is the brutality of political power, of the means of constraint: police, army, bureaucracy. Phallic erectility bestows a special status on the perpendicular, proclaiming phallocracy as the orientation of space, as the goal of the process—at once metaphoric and metonymic—which instigates this facet of spatial practice.”

The act of drawing exemplifies this, not only through the very fact of it being a Cartesian grid, but standing as it does for control, and even a specific kind of brutality which hinges itself on erasure through the act of filtering and appropriating. However, recognizing this brutality, as well as our own implicated-ness in it, is difficult, given its operation through a locus of power based on sameness and the normative. So deeply ingrained is the belief that drawings are objective and honest that we rarely question their working, much less their affective relationship with their maker. Dorothea Olkowski (1999, 5) states, “fixed and knowable nature, guarantees the hierarchical order and grounds representation and *truth*”. Extending this notion to drawings, then, truth or the objective, supposedly latent in architectural representations, remains accessed and perpetuated by the architect solely. It is in their combined self-belief in both the universal (the act/object of drawing) and the individual (the author of the drawing), that drawings are oriented toward claiming the truth. That is, the act/object and the author are both rendered objective. Objectivity, in itself, is rather problematic. Bringing to Catherine McKinnon (1989–97), who argues that,

“Objectivity as a stance toward the world erects two tests to which its method must conform: *distance* and *aperspectivity* (my emphasis). To perceive reality accurately, one must be distant from what one is looking at and view it from no place and at no time in particular, hence from all places and times.”

The observer presumes they are no longer part of the process, while also assuming that they are essential to the object and not merely incidental to it. It can be safely inferred that objectivity itself hinges on an omnipresence and omnipotence—both processes inform architectural representation. Richard McCormick (2001, 47 as cited in Heynan and Bayder 2005, 3) argues that, “the gender of the subject who seemingly produced it, the subject it glorified and to whom it was addressed, was obviously, explicitly, indeed defensively masculine”, making the case the architect, the content, as well as the audience, is rendered masculine.

In essence, the maker of the drawing is actually posited as a God-like figure: superior, active, in charge of creation, all-seeing, all-knowing, the

possessor of distanced, aperspective and objective gaze, a masculine gaze, the holder of the view, the holder of knowledge, and subsequently power? Coming full circle, objectivity predicated on distance and aperspectivity, produces a kind of homogeneity, while actively occluding difference, and becomes a *masculine act*, irrespective of the biological sex of the author/maker of the drawing, as we see with de Silva and Le Corbusier. If anything, the sex of the author gets restricted to being a weak protest against the cultural hegemony of architectural representations.

It, thus, becomes pertinent to return to Butler's heterosexual Matrix, wherein both gender and sex precede the body. She (ibid., 3) argues that,

"The matter from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce itself, to reproduce itself; the *scenography* that makes representation feasible, representation as defined in philosophy, that is the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues, indeed their tragic relationships, without over-looking the *mirror*, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself."

This allows us to pull into focus the relationship between architectural subjectivity and the architectural drawing, the former drawing from, instead of merely "giving" to the latter. The disciplinary scenography, already gendered, gives figurative space for the architectural-being to emerge. Predicated on miming control and authoritarianism, the phallus belongs less to the man, and more to the architect, though enshrined within and without the temple of drawing.

Thus, perhaps, it is finally time that we recognize that we have been drawing the wrong lines. We have been looking to define architectural representation through the aegis of truth and objectivity, all the while encouraging appropriation and complete authoritarian control through the very use of drawing sheets upon which we place scaled graphical inscriptions. We have been continuously producing masculine / male architects, even if the biological sex of the architect differs. The orthographic architectural drawing has been an unrivaled champion of this. We are, in effect, architecturally drawing our own homogenously gendered bodies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In my final year of architectural undergraduate studies, I sought to design an "emancipatory" intervention at G.B. Road, better recognized as Delhi's Red Light

District. I do not deny my hubris here, one that flew out of the window, the moment I was, quite literally, thrown out of a brothel to be studied. Subsequently, I spent the next three months perched atop the stoop of a small MCD school situated at the geographic center of G.B. Road. As I gradually became a fixture there, many conversations—of desires, achievements, and travails—unfolded with the women and children who inhabited the brothels. It was impossible to not be moved and affected. These conversations became my evidence to raise an (architectural) battle cry for sensitive interventions. Today, I acknowledge that these are tall claims, for all I was to, physically, produce was a set of architectural representations: a series of lines and text, scaled to fit on a sheet. Representations which everyone would treat like the building itself (Chatterjee 2011). Yet as I designed, I found to my utter dismay that the complexity of these narratives seemed to disappear in the familiarity of lines running across my drawing sheets. For someone who not only believed in drawings, but had been socialized into them from childhood, this was debilitating. Somehow, the materiality of the representation just could not include the immateriality of the (women's) representations. How had the act of drawing failed me, a “me” that was almost an architect, but also part of a legacy of architecture, which had been evolving for the last 500 years, with drawing as its centerpiece and centerfold, a way to objectively communicate an idea or a narrative?

<sup>i</sup>I examine design drawings, as these provide the most amount of control and authorship for its makers, unlike the subsequent sets of construction documents.

<sup>ii</sup>Minnette de Silva is an interesting figure, as she self-styled herself as the first South Asian woman architect. She trained at J.J. School of Art and Architecture, Mumbai, and the Architectural Association, London. She was also keenly involved in the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Modern (CIAM). Further, she is remarkable, in that unlike many of her (masculine) peers who left behind manifestos, her legacy comes to us in the form of an autobiography. The autobiography itself reads like a chronicle, formally split into two sections, the first which covers “life” and the second which covers her “work”.

## References

Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation: The Body, in Theory*. Ann Arbor, USA: University of Michigan Press.

Bondi, Liz, and Joyce Davidson. 2005. “Situating Gender,” in *A Companion to Feminist Geography*. Edited by Lise Nelson and Joni Seager, 16-31. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter*. New York, London: Routledge.

- Chatterjee, Jaideep. 2011. "The Gift of Design: Architecture Culture in Post-Colonial India." Ph.D, Cornell University.
- de Silva, Minnette. 1998. *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*. Colombo: GEDSands.
- Evans, Robin. 1997. *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (AA Documents). Cambridge, Massachusetts : MIT Press.
- Harley, J.B. 2001. "Maps, Knowledge and Power," in *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, edited by J.B Harley, Paul Laxton, and Center for American Places, 51-82. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1977. "The Age of the World Picture." In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. New York, NY: Harper Perennial/Modern Thought.
- Ingold, Tim. 2013. *Making Anthropology Archaeology Art and Architecture*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Le Corbusier. 1983. *Ahmedabad, 1953-1960 (Le Corbusier Archive)*. Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- McKinnon, Catherine. 1989. *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Marston, Sallie A. 2000. "The Social Construction of Scale." *Progress in Human Geography* 24, no. 2 (June): 219–42.
- McCormick, Richard. 2001. *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity. Film, Literature and "New Objectivity,"* New York: Palgrave. Quoted in Hilde Heynan and Gülsüm Bayder. *Negotiating Domesticity*. London, New York: Routledge, 2005, 3.
- Olkowski, Dorothea. 1999. *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*. Berkeley, LA: University of California Press.
- Pérez-Gómez, Alberto and Louise Pelletier. 1997. *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Robbins, Edward. 1994. *Why Architects Draw*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Stratigakos, Despina. 2005. "The Uncanny Architect Fear of Lesbian Builders and Deviant Homes in Modern Germany." in *Negotiating Domesticity*. Edited by Hilde Heynan and Gülsüm Bayder. London, New York: Routledge.