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'Institutional Agency' and architecture in the field of colonial empire building

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For many contemporary critics who railed against its technocratic yoke and the putative banality of the built environments it produced, the Public Works Department of British India seemed to embody the infernal apparatus of colonial power itself. But, is it reasonable to regard an institution as an intentional agent in its own right? Challenging such assumptions, this paper attempts to sketch the outline of a more diffuse and necessarily historical account of specific institutionalised modes of production and reasoning in practice. It seeks to explain the architectural work attributed to a bureaucratic government institution as the production or ‘position-takings’ of position holders in at least two overlapping fields: on one hand, what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called a bureaucratic field within the meta-field of the colonial state: on the other hand, a field of production, broadly concerned with the technical development and construction of the built fabric of British India, in which compelling and even contradictory concerns with ‘Architecture’ constituted a ‘sub-field of cultural production’.

Using Bourdieu’s analytical tools to articulate relevant objects of architectural inquiry in the present case, what I hope to establish is the existence of a sub-field of cultural production in which individual members of the PWD were engaged, and with which the bureaucratic field constituted by the PWD had surprising affinities. Though dominated briefly by actual members of the architectural profession, this putative sub-field of cultural production also put some of the basic assumptions – the notion of professional autonomy in particular – and the boundaries of that profession at stake.
The Public Works Department (PWD) of British India was one of the most prolific building institutions in modern history. Embodied in the countless buildings it constructed, from palaces to humble sheds, it was also one of the most ubiquitous components of the colonial regime – together with the Indian Army – that manifested British power in India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, whilst the extraordinary contributions to the architecture of colonial India by celebrated metropolitan consultants such as Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker have been relatively well studied, architectural historians have largely overlooked the far more substantial body of colonial-modern buildings that was built under the institutional agency of the PWD. Inordinately influenced by early polemical critiques, the few who have paused to consider it have tended to dismiss it peremptorily as the artistically debased output of mere bureaucratic production. As one of the more passionate critics of the PWD in its day charged, the PWD was “a chartered anti-aesthetic society” that was relentlessly destroying the autonomous, crafts-based tradition of Indian architecture.

Undoubtedly, as I have discussed elsewhere in the context of a broader study of ‘colonial-modernity’ in the architecture and building culture of British India and Ceylon, logistical and cognitive economies exercised within this geographically distributed departmental system did indeed introduce radically new methods of design and procurement that effectively set Indian architecture on the course to modernism a century earlier than is generally assumed. But, incommensurable with the self-consciously individualist agency of ‘modern masters’ such as Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn, whose impact on modern architectural form and thinking in post-colonial India in the second half of the twentieth century can be reconstructed and assessed with relative precision, this earlier colonial institution on which I wish to focus here can hardly be objectified as a singular and intentional agent.

On a theoretical level, therefore, this paper considers the role of ‘institutional’ agencies in the design of architecture (as differentiated from ‘individual’ authors/agents), and how such intuitive but potentially reductive notions of agency might be better explained. Through a close, critical examination of the historical case of this prolific government department of works and buildings, the paper challenges the assumption that such institutions can be regarded as instrumental agents in their own right. This assumption is problematic, I argue, because it tends to discount the complexity and contingent nature of the phenomenon, reducing it to what, in a vulgar Foucauldian account, might be described as just the “infernal apparatus” of “power” itself where agency ultimately seems to rest with some higher, essentially metaphysical sort of “will”. Alternatively, what I will attempt to sketch and interpret here is the outline of a more diffuse and necessarily historical account of specific institutionalised modes of production and reasoning in practice.

Making heuristic use of some of the available extra-disciplinary tools for analysing institutionalised behaviours – specifically Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theories of ‘the field’ and ‘cultural production’ – my immediate objective is to alter the scope and re-frame the focus of legitimate architectural inquiry in the present case. The paper thereby
seeks to explain the architectural work attributed to this institutional agency as evidence of a bureaucratically objectified framework of practices and dispositions, engaged within multiple relational structures or ‘fields’, in and through which individual human agents acted with varying degrees of complicity and engagement.

In what follows, I will first very briefly outline aspects of Bourdieu’s field schema pertinent to the present exposition. I will then describe the building scene associated with the ubiquitous PWD system, and how, specifically, this scene could be interpreted as a ‘field’. In the final section I consider how a relatively autonomous sub-field of cultural production concerned specifically with questions of ‘Architecture’ structured relations between agents operating not only within the bureaucratic field of the PWD, but in external resistance to the PWD as well, within the larger field of colonial empire building.

‘fields’

Among many who have considered the applicability of Bourdieu’s thought to architectural history and theory, Helen Lipstadt has been perhaps the most rigorous. A field, as Lipstadt explains, is “a structural configuration or space of objective relations between both positions and position-takings, and each other.”6 Crucial to understanding how this seemingly imprecise but very particular concept could represent a bureaucratic space of practice is Bourdieu’s emphasis on “struggle” and “historicity” as the essential dynamics that constitute a field in space and time, as opposed to a fixed or static set of social relationships.7 As an immanent, relational structure that is never fully objectified in institutional form, it is the position takings (or “moves”) of the different players in a field that reveal the nature of its specific stakes and the extent or limits of its interests. The game-like struggle for dominance of players within a field tends, therefore, to be a struggle for authority over the field itself by which the existing boundaries can be secured or altered to better insure the sustainable reproduction of the dominant player’s authority.8

After this paradigm case of the struggle for field domination is the historical struggle by which Bourdieu explains the genesis of “the state”. In Bourdieu’s terms, the colonial state of British India, for example, was an ensemble of fields (or ‘meta-field’) constituted through the concentration of different types of capital and their respective fields – such as the Army, and the colonial political, and civil services – each of which vied with each other for dominance in the balance of power they shared over the policies and symbolic identity of the state.”9 With time, this symbolic capital of the state was partially bureaucratised, in both externalised institutional forms and internal cognitive forms structured through schooling and social behaviour, which gave rise to what Bourdieu calls the “bureaucratic field”. The colonial state of British India, as it had matured by the late nineteenth century, was a prime example of such a bureaucratised social space, and the ensemble of discrete bureaucratic fields that operated across it, not least the Public Works Department.

A “field of cultural production”, in Bourdieu’s sense, is the locus of struggle for authority gained through the monopoly of the cultural capital specific to it.10 But the specific nature of such cultural capital – “architectural art” and its appreciation in the context of colonial
empire-building, in the case in question – distinguishes this particular type of field from others through its relative autonomy from material or political motivation: that is, its essential “disinterestedness”. As we shall see, a comparable disinterestedness is a distinguishing characteristic of the bureaucratic field as well.

The Public Works Department and the field of colonial empire-building

Along with the Army, the Public Works Department of British India was among the most powerful, extensive and objective manifestations of colonial administration and agency in India. As the technical branch of government, the PWD was almost solely responsible for producing the panoply of utilitarian buildings and infrastructure, including all military and government buildings, ports, railways, roads and irrigation works through which both the coercive and constructive power of the colonial state was materially embodied and objectified. The PWD was also the supervisory authority for the production of all official architectural projects. Although architectural designs for monumental public buildings were often commissioned outside the department, a substantial range of public buildings was also designed in-house.

As a bureaucratic organisation, the PWD had its origins in the Military Works Board of the British East India Company administration, the de facto colonial government of India before the British Parliament formally assumed direct control under Crown rule, in 1858. Military engineers therefore dominated the executive hierarchy of that civil department from its inception. Though challenged by growing numbers of civil engineers and, eventually, registered architects as well, the military engineers continued to dominate the PWD through to the end of the nineteenth century by which time their parent organisation, the Royal Engineers Corps, was redirecting its resources to other less stable corners of the global British Empire.

The formalisation of colonial rule in 1858 had been precipitated by a bloody popular revolt that swept across much of northern and central India in the previous year exposing the fragility and inconsistencies in governance of the ad hoc ‘Company’ regime, not to mention its inherent iniquity. In the years immediately following the forceful suppression of the revolt, the rapidly augmenting new PWD system that emanated from the recently reformed ‘supreme’ (or central) Government of India based in Calcutta was therefore to play the leading role in a conscious new policy of pacification and appeasement through the building of modern public works and amenities. The PWD was thereby instrumental in efforts to consolidate and rationalise the Indian subcontinent as a colonial-modern state, at least in its spatial and technological dimensions. Politically and culturally, colonial India remained a complex matrix of profound and always potentially volatile differences.

Through the most dynamic period of new construction and development in the years immediately following the Revolt, the distinctive norms and forms of the everyday built environment of colonial India were rationalised by the PWD engineers and methodically codified in a bureaucratic system of design standards and procedures. But by the late
nineteenth century, what had initially been employed in this immanent PWD system as merely provisional, heuristic design and construction strategies to meet major building requirements in the short-term had become an increasingly rigid and constraining frame of design thinking. As one eminent member of the department’s dominant engineering fraternity argued in defense of this utilitarian approach, however, it was indicative not merely of a certain discipline but a distinct disinterestedness as well:

… if there are cheap and ugly box-like buildings, we have to remember that there is another aspect to the case. If the British had acted like the Moguls, they would have built great cathedrals and other monuments to their glory at the cost of the blood and tears of a conquered people; but they worshipped in cheap, barn-like churches, they lived in cheap houses, and worked in cheap offices, and for the benefit of the people they spent money in other ways …

This tidbit of the revealing debate that arose from the intermittent struggle within the bureaucratic field of the PWD, between engineering and architectural criteria – as position-takings of holders of competing positions – gives a good indication of the spectrum of possible outcomes at “stake”, and the compelling sense of investment in that field of the PWD engineers in particular. The quoted passage also gives us some indication of the deep-seated presuppositions of English Utilitarianism that underpinned their agency, and their unquestioned “belief in the game” of colonial development and service. As noted earlier, one of the distinctive characteristics of the bureaucratic field, as with fields of cultural production, is the disavowal of interest. Implicit in this defense of the frugality of typical PWD building designs was a claim of disinterested public service. This was a recurring stance by which the military engineers struggled to maintain their established dominance within the bureaucratic field of the PWD and, in turn, the dominance of the department in the field of colonial empire building. The latter was the actual building scene of British India. As a field, it was constituted by the struggle not only to design and construct the infrastructure and buildings of the colonial state, but to define the criteria and control the scope of what was required. In this bounded, game-like sense however, it also functioned as a “field of opportunity” (in the colloquial terms of business) for surplus market-seeking building professionals of the imperial core, in which each professional group struggled for domination and the opportunity, thereby, to expand and consolidate their respective professional empires on the colonial frontier. Backed by the symbolic and cultural capitals furnished by metropolitan professional institutes, and elite professional schooling in the case of the Royal (military) Engineers, dominance in the PWD hierarchy granted power over other competing professions that were directly invested in this field, and the potential to sustain and reproduce that advantageous state of play.

Although civil engineers, rather than architects, mounted by far the more serious challenge to the historical dominance of military engineers in this field of colonial empire building, the debate over ‘architecture’ and the PWD was an indicative field effect of the particular combination of dispositions and strategies with which the military engineers struggled to sustain their authority. Rather than proscribing their rivals, however, this strategy consisted in
attempting to render them redundant by extending themselves professionally, as the would-be Renaissance-men of Victorian India, to monopolise competence across the spectrum of the contemporary Arts and Sciences. Whilst claiming an omni-competent middle-ground, this amounted to a see-saw strategy of assimilation and distinction as the military engineers simultaneously extended and developed their competence in the latest technical innovations of civil engineering at one end of the field, and in the formal and representational aspects of Architecture, at the opposite end.

“cultural production”?: “Architecture” in the field of colonial empire-building

Equipped by their academic schooling, and the cultivated predisposition of the intellectual elite of the British military classes, the military engineers serving in the PWD brought their aesthetic sensibilities as skilled sketchers and watercolorists, together with their technical knowledge of building engineering, to tackle a wide range of architectural projects, from humble regimental churches and barracks to major public buildings. These ventures into the professional domain of the architectural discipline experienced little resistance within the PWD, and were opposed with only mild disdain and general resignation by members of the British architectural profession, who saw little significant opportunity in India before the turn of the twentieth century. It fell upon the autonomous lobby of crafts advocates in colonial India to articulate the most passionate criticisms against this putative subsumption of Architecture by modern engineering. Paradoxically, then, it was this radical fringe – the least professionally qualified of the various players in the field – who had succeeded, by the late nineteenth century, in dominating the moral high-ground of disinterested concern for the status of Architecture in colonial-modern India. Such disinterestedness was the hallmark of what can be discerned as a distinct sub-field of “cultural production” within the larger field of colonial empire-building. The anomalous stance of the crafts enthusiast, F. S. Growse, was a revealing case in point. Growse was a district administrator in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) who took an unusually pro-active role in conserving and promoting the traditional building crafts of the various provincial localities in which he was posted. Although the ICS was the elite circle of power and privilege in the colonial bureaucracy, Growse willfully sacrificed his upward progress in government for the sake of his architectural convictions. Not only did he court official censure and, ultimately, demotion, by persistently defying the design norms and protocols of the PWD, using public funds to commission traditional craftsmen to design and build modern public buildings such as churches, market-halls and district courthouses, he also surrendered considerable political capital and personal resources in order to insure that this renegade crafts-built architecture, along with his polemical critiques of the PWD system, were disseminated through independent publications. The anti-PWD polemics of Growse and other crafts enthusiasts in India were philosophically aligned with William Morris and John Ruskin’s contemporaneous Arts and Crafts movement and its critique of mechanisation. The brunt of this polemic was therefore directed at the baldly utilitarian output of the PWD, focusing – somewhat reductively it must be said in its
defense – on the department’s standardised designs for the simple, everyday buildings such as barracks and bungalows. But this critique strategically ignored the comparatively extraordinary and self-consciously architectural design efforts by engineers such as Captain Henry St. Clair Wilkins, Captain James Fuller of the Bombay PWD, and, in particular, Captain Samuel Swinton Jacob, the British chief of public works and buildings for the nominally independent princely State of Jaipur. While Wilkins and Fuller produced monumental compositions in the Italian Gothic style for public hospitals, Government Offices and Law Courts, that would sit comfortably astride George Gilbert Scott’s slightly later gothic designs for the University of Bombay, Jacob was altogether more radical in his efforts to produce a hybrid architecture that was demonstrably both modern and Indian. Working, like Growse, in the provincial backwaters of the colonial scene, and sympathetic in part with the craft lobby’s concern to sustain a living connection with India’s past architectural splendours, Jacob – as an engineer/architect – was not content, however, to simply surrender the ideals of design and innovation to some all-providing notion of tradition. Rather, Jacob and his indigenous staff of skilled draftsmen proceeded methodically to objectify traditional Indian architectural practice in the form of an encyclopedic graphic compendium of typical stylistic details from which novel new building designs could be freely and efficiently composed.17

In the struggle for dominance in this putative sub-field of cultural production a bi-polar field structure had emerged by the end of the nineteenth century. Whereas the fundamentalist aesthete, Growse, with his ostensibly selfless commitment to the restricted production of an architecture without architects represented the relatively more autonomous pole of this field, Jacob’s innovative approach to the efficient (re)production of tradition-based Indian architecture, represented the patently more heteronomous positions and position-takings typical of the military engineers of the PWD – the “bridge-builders” of the colonial technocracy, both literally and figuratively – in their tactical engagement across several overlapping fields. Indeed Jacob was sufficiently prolific and proficient in the production of these hybrid designs, to be pulled out of retirement, in 1912, to serve as a special advisor to Edwin Lutyens – upon the latter’s appointment to head up the design team for New Delhi – as the most knowledgeable living British authority on the Indian styles.18

The introduction of fully qualified architects into the PWD, in the early years of the twentieth century, was, by all evidence, the outcome of a rare direct intersection between the bureaucratic field of the PWD and the relatively autonomous political field of colonial policy-making. Such matters were the concern of the ICS – Growse’s branch of the colonial bureaucracy – the so-called “heaven-born” state nobility of specially groomed technocrats who directly ruled British India through the Viceroy’s council and the district administrative system.19 After decades of political ambivalence if not outright censure on economic grounds, this novel call for “Architecture” was a sign of fundamental changes in the conceptual framework of Empire itself. Buildings were no longer required to transform and develop the environment, but rather to represent a colonial social order that had reached a steady and sustainable state in its development – or so it was believed. An imperial architecture was now required that would give identity to the corporate whole and particularity to its subordinate
parts. But once installed within the PWD system – beginning in 1901 with the appointment of John Begg as the first Consulting Architect to the Government of Bombay – this vanguard of RIBA-qualified architects set to work on their own relatively autonomous agenda, striving passionately to dominate and restructure the anomalous sub-field of cultural production regarding “modern-Indian architecture” that had been developing without their involvement in the margins and by-ways of colonial empire-building. Not only did they attempt to win artistic autonomy, internally, from the engineering cadre that continued to dominate the PWD as a bureaucratic field, but from the external crafts lobby as well.

The actual buildings that these PWD architects designed were an intriguing product of their struggle, and the relative autonomy they had established by the second decade of the twentieth century in this unlikely position, nested within the bureaucratic field of the PWD. Although several of these departmental architects were highly accomplished in the archaeologically correct representation of Indian architectural styles, their mature work gravitated towards a more demure free-style derived from a broad palate of regional architectures that could provide rational solutions to the technical problems of building in a hot climate yet affirm the renewed convictions of the day in the universal applicability of the greater Greco-Roman architectural heritage.

Begg’s later designs illustrate his own leaning towards a Byzantine variant of the genre – a style that could be said to represent the very foundations of the Christian civilisation of the West while, at the same time, the most “Oriental” of the European building traditions. In the processes as in the forms that the architecture of modern India might follow, Begg argued, “it was the day of … uncompromising middle positions, … not … for extremes.”

In 1907, Begg was promoted to the top post in this fledgling architectural branch of the Indian PWD, and over the subsequent 14 years of his tenure at the helm, at least 20 other qualified architects were recruited through the RIBA. Most of these functioned in a relatively independent capacity as heads themselves of the consulting architect’s offices in each of the various provincial and territorial governments that comprised British India. Much to Begg’s chagrin, however, these younger men were professional opportunists, by in large, who evidently coveted their effective autonomy from Begg’s supervision, demonstrating little loyalty to any corporate vision of a modern British Indian architecture. Begg tried hard to exercise some influence upon his colleagues’ methods and standards of professional performance. “In [the] struggle with conditions inherent in every problem,” he argued, “… it is not the ‘free-hand’ the architect requires so much as sympathy, confidence, appreciation and protection from non-professional and other irresponsible criticism.” While it was necessary to give a fairly “free-hand” to each man individually; he felt there was something to be said for the old “esprit de corps” of the PWD engineers and the formal coherence of their built product. Recognition of the status and responsibilities of the architects within the PWD system depended in part on recognition and understanding of that system itself.

Begg found himself occupying a curious position at the intersection of two different fields, on the one hand promoting the ideal of the architect as an autonomous professional within
the colonial works system, exercising distinctly different expertise and practices from those of the PWD engineers; on the other hand believing that solidarity in promoting that view, and reasonable conformity to the rules of play that prevailed in the colonial works system, were the only way in which he and his colleagues could possibly succeed in gaining due respect and dominance in their own field. Despite all the immediate contention surrounding the unequal relationship between the professions in the department, Begg had to concede his admiration for “the older architectural efforts of the PWD – those of the engineers – … [that] had the merit of a very considerable coordination and consistency …” In his view, these were the result of his rivals’ common schooling back in England, “and by the feeling of solidarity implanted in the men by that and their common service conditions.”

Paradoxically, this field-specific struggle was to prepare the ground for the architectural apotheosis of Empire that Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker were presently invited to build at New Delhi, a further overtly political intervention that would once again close the field to the relatively autonomous state of architectural production that the in-house PWD architects had briefly attained. In an address to the RIBA in 1921 while home in England on long-service leave, Begg boldly proclaimed “a great future for architecture and architects” in modern India, hopeful perhaps of recruiting new colleagues to join in the cause. However, Begg was almost certainly aware that his political masters had already decided to retrench his own post and save him the bother of the return journey. In the scheme of the more politically sophisticated ICS technocrats who dominated the colonial administration, the grand edifice of Empire had already been substantially constructed by this time. Far be it for any architect, nor even the colonial engineers, to improve it.

Conclusion

In this necessarily brief, exploratory paper, I have examined some instances of the historical struggle between engineering and architecture within the bureaucratic space of the British Indian Department of Public Works, as indices of a discrete sub-field of cultural production in late colonial India that was specifically concerned with the nature and production of “modern Indian architecture”. I considered how this sub-field co-existed within the meta-field of the colonial state, with relative autonomy from the immediate bureaucratic field constituted by the PWD, and from the further removed political field of colonial policy-making and persuasion. Although architecture was undoubtedly used at times by the colonial regime as a tool for political representation and propaganda, we have seen how the colonial works bureaucracy was also, somewhat surprisingly, an institutional framework in which cultural production was undertaken with more independent and critical consciousness. The field of relative autonomy that John Begg believed he could circumscribe for himself and his “corps” of fellow PWD architects – incorporated paradoxically, as it was, on the difficult but institutionally stabilised middle-ground of salaried service to the colonial state – was free in his view from both the fundamentalist compulsions of purely tradition-bound building craft, on the one hand, and direct subservience to autocratic political patronage on the other, which was the fate of ostensibly independent consultants such as Lutyens and Baker. The degree to which Begg and his colleagues were truly “disinterested” players from economic
and political standpoints is certainly debatable. But Begg clearly believed in his own disinterestedness, to the point of self-sacrifice for the cause of a modern Indian architecture. The apparent elision illustrated in this case between the respective disinterest of the artist and the bureaucrat/technocrat – what Bourdieu observed as their mutual "interest in disinterestedness"27 – merits further investigation, I believe, along the lines of the “field study” I have attempted to sketch here. For those of us engaged in the study of the recent colonial-modern past and its relevance for better understanding cultural production in the global present, the inherent focus of this approach on the struggles for order at the boundaries and overlaps between fields promises further critical insight into the role that buildings and their builders can play in institutionalising the coercive and cultural violence of colonialism in other forms.

3 John Lockwood Kipling, quoted in Tillotson, *The Tradition of Indian Architecture*, 86.
8 Lipstadt, “Can Art Professions’ be Bourdieuan Fields of Cultural Production?,” 396.
10 Lipstadt, “Can Art Professions’ be Bourdieuan Fields of Cultural Production?,” 399.
11 Scriver, “Empire-building and Thinking in the Public Works Department of British India.”

17 This was progressively published as Sir Samual Swinton Jacob, The Jeypore Portfolio of Architectural Details, 12 vols. (London 1890-1913), with the anticipation that Jacob’s method would have wider application.

18 Metcalf, An Imperial Vision, 229.

19 Stokes, The English Utilitarians and India.


24 Public Works Department Reorganization Committee Report, 286.

25 Begg, “Architecture in India.”

26 Irving, Indian Summer; Metcalf, An Imperial Vision.

27 Bourdieu, Practical Reason, 84-85.