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(Not Just) A Skin-Deep Image Problem?

Emre Akbil and Leo Care

This provocation asks, in this age of image saturation: how can we represent people in our architectural designs that are specific, appropriate, representative and diverse? Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, the paper explores the potential of an 'image equality archive' created in The University of Sheffield's School of Architecture, to act as an interactive resource for students to question, examine and evaluate the representation of peoples in their design projects.

The paper explores the minefields that reside in architectural representation of human figures due to colonial structures that remain untouched. The archive then is proposed as a tool to open conversations around these structures that tend to make figures at categorical intersections invisible.

Finally the paper ends with future uses of the archive and a speculative institutional framework that could grow around it in order to ensure that conversations remain open and sustainable in terms of its capacity to make structural changes within the architectural pedagogy of design projects across the school.

A Provocative Image?

Picture the scene: an architecture student stands in front of their work (or more recently turns on their microphone and skims across their Miro Board) and presents their design project to a group of peers, tutors and invited guests. Their verbal and visual presentation beautifully captures the physical and social context of their site and surrounding

neighbourhood, with a detailed understanding of potential user groups. The student goes on to articulately express how a range of key issues encapsulating environmental imperatives, material considerations, humanitarian influences and appropriate forms of construction have all been thoughtfully woven together into a carefully crafted building that is sensitively anchored to locale, people and place. All of this care and attention, consideration and design intent, is then encapsulated in the key drawing, which is inhabited by... the same photoshopped, white-skinned, sunglass-clad, briefcase-toting, twenty-something, go-getters that appear in everyone else's projects – not just at Sheffield or any other school of architecture, but probably the whole world! In one swift and possibly caffeine-induced last-minute decision, the whole ethos and actively pursued sense of contextual responsiveness is wiped out, as easily as if someone had splashed an internationally available globally franchised frappuccino over it!

In this age of image saturation, limitless selfies, access to photos of virtually anything – from new cosmological frontiers to people's toenail clippings – surely we can and should be able to represent people in our architectural designs that are specific, appropriate, representative and diverse?

Questions surrounding the monoculture of people so often represented in student architectural design images abound. Is this just a graphic misstep? Or is it a manifestation of more deep seated and unconscious racial, ableist and societal biases? Does the narrow band of figures that regularly appear in student work represent a lack of awareness in the bodies that are conceived of to dwell, use, inhabit and exist in their architectural designs? A more troubling question is whether this issue is also a manifestation of a much wider social and ethnic hegemony within architecture's culture and curriculum? 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: Call to Action' provided the impetus to go beyond finding answers to these questions and to form an initiative to start to reveal and address them.

Intersections at London Road

The second year undergraduate cohort at SSoA have been working in the London Road area of Sheffield over the academic year of 2020-21. This is one of the most ethnically diverse areas of the city, which in itself is one of the most diverse in the UK. This location provides an interesting place to explore issues of marginalisation and representation within a real life context, as well as within student project scenarios. In order to bring the issues of equality in representation to the fore, we introduced Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, which was originally theorised to address the marginalisation of Black women within anti-discrimination

- 1 Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1990), 1241–1300; Devon W. Carbado and others, 'INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory', *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10.2 (2013), 303–12 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000349>>.

law in US as well as critiquing discrimination and/or exclusion of Black women in feminist and anti-racist politics.¹

Introducing theoretically grounded positions enabled students to embrace the importance of intersectionality and encouraged them to reconsider their categorisations of people, as well as the labels that we use to refer to each other. Crenshaw's tenet also challenged students to consider the reality of societal cross-sectionality. For example, is it appropriate for a person who is experiencing homelessness to be represented in an architecture project for a public building? If so, there should be consideration that such a person can also be temporarily homeless yet +physically disabled+female+Black. These seemingly simple initial considerations started to inform students' thinking and reinforce the social connections between their work and the human context within which their designs are situated.

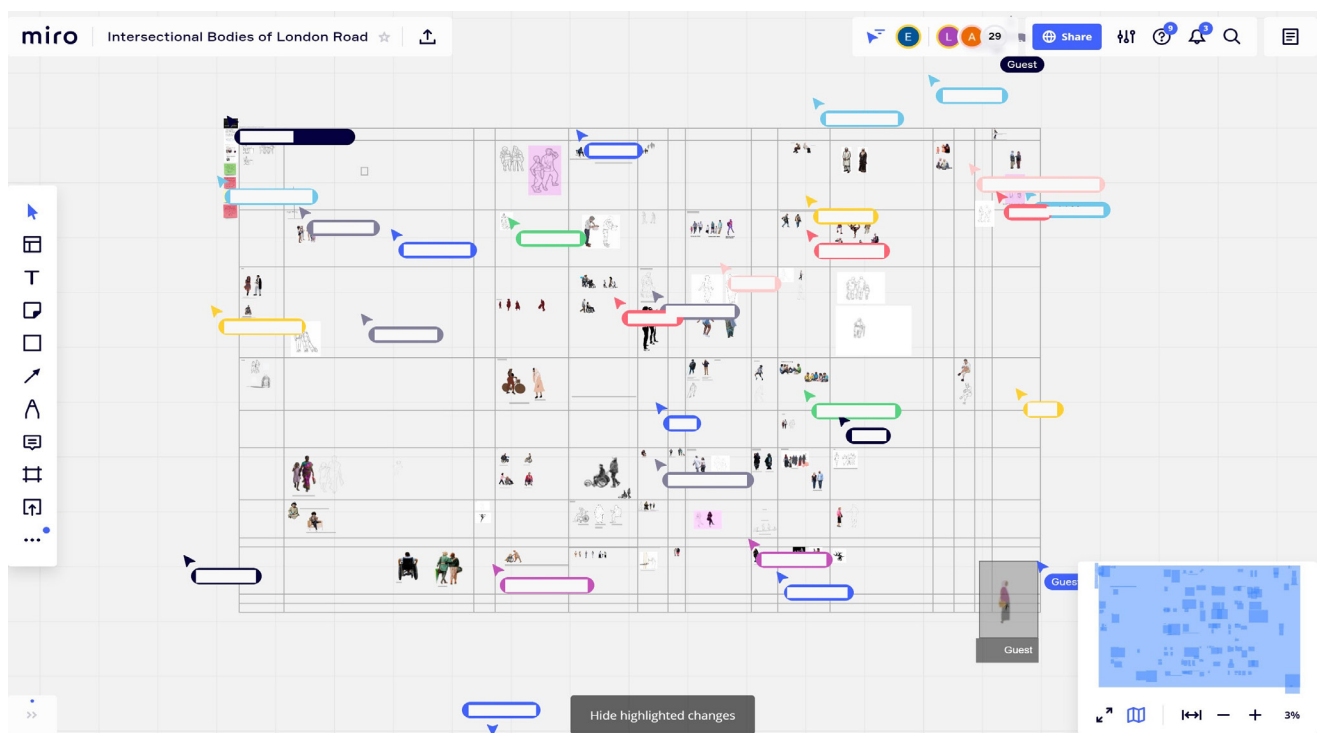


Figure 1. Screenshot of an online workshop looking at the representation of human figures, with students contributing to the Image Equality Archive of diverse and appropriate peoples, 2021.

As well as questioning and testing issues of intersectionality, students were also asked to source and create images that represented these newly appreciated peoples that could be directly used in their work. The figures were then discussed and shared amongst the year group. The outcome of this collaborative work marked the inception of a collection or archive of images and drawn figures.

The Image Equality Project: Can an Open-Source Archive Help Imagine Intersectional Difference?

Initially the archive of human figures was used for slowing down the processes of design production and allowing space for reflection on critical questions such as: how do race, class, gender identity, and ability intersect?² However, it needs to be said that 'equalising & diversifying curriculum in all aspects' is more than a skin-deep image problem and goes beyond the representation of human figures in architectural drawings.³ The human figure, often introduced as an element of scale, has a modernist, patriarchal and colonial history in architectural drawings and is a manifestation of a deeper hegemony. The oppressive lineage of architectural representation cuts across architectural history and goes deep into architectural graphic standards where women, figures of colour and others are excluded.⁴ The monoculture of people being represented in architectural drawings is manifestation of a wider problem of architectural knowledge production and its modern/colonial heritage. For Anibal Quijano, 'coloniality of power' is intertwined with coloniality of knowledge and its social classification of the world.⁵ Othering and racialisation are at the heart of colonisation processes. According to Nnaemeka, hierarchical categorisation and fragmentation were part of the colonial process of racialisation.⁶ Contemporary forms of veiled racism operate by erasing the ethnic and racial differences created during long processes of colonisation keeping the established structures intact. Gender/race/class are the modern and colonial categories fragmented and put into competition as 'colonial difference' through which coloniality of power is enacted according to Lugones and Mignolo.⁷ Transitioning to a post-racial and post-ethnocratic society demands recognition of the colonial history where colonial difference is reproduced, concealing othered histories of minorities. Avoiding systems of classification and categories closes off trajectories of emancipation and empowerment for minorities within established structures. Rather than avoiding classification, decolonisation of categories should be understood as a process of untangling the disempowering systems of classification, erasing the margins and the minor conditions of living that dwell within. Hence we argue that redefining categories and forming an archive of human figures represented through an intersectional lens is a decolonial work. Then the question that can be explored further is as follows: can the Image Equality Project become a tool to support transitioning from 'colonial difference' to a mutualised understanding of difference learned from decolonial feminisms such as those voiced by Audre Lorde and Maria Lugones?

The sensibility towards the minor intersections at the margins – women+ethnic minority, Black+women, disabled+LGBTQ+ – needs time and effort to be visible and be represented within the visual story or scenario of an architectural project. The building user as an intersectional identity is not only a cutout image that is stored in the archive, but is part

- 2 Isabelle Stengers, *Another Science Is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Connie Pidsley and others, 'Anti Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' <<https://feministssoa.group.shef.ac.uk/?p=1628>> [accessed 18 May 2021].
- 3 Pidsley and others.
- 4 Lance Hosey, 'Hidden Lines: Gender, Race, and the Body in Graphic Standards', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 55.2 (2001), 101–12 <<https://doi.org/10.1162/104648801753199527>>.
- 5 Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America', *International Sociology*, 15.2 (2000), 215–32 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>>.
- 6 Obioma Nnaemeka, 'Racialization and the Colonial Architecture: Othering and the Order of Things', *PMLA*, 123.5 (2008), 1748–51 <<https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1748>>.
- 7 Maria Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism', *Hypatia*, 25.4 (2010), 742–59 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x>>.

of the spatial story of any student project. The Image Equality Archive acts as the link between these diverse spatial stories and the ongoing work of collective imagination for equality in representation of the user and habitation in architecture. Yet the archive has its risks and vulnerabilities. Representing diversity without understanding the context of minor intersections risks replicating established structures and stereotypical forms of representation. The archive supports open conversations around intersectionality and makes visible the minefield that resides within our imaginaries that will remain invisible if the subject of representation is left untouched. We also understand that figures inserted into the archive are tools for uncomfortable conversations. However, an image in itself will not be enough to initiate conversations. Because this is an ongoing process, the archive needs an institution or a body that can take care of the space of conversation, maintaining its safety and openness. The form of conversation should go beyond the human figure and clearly frame its relations with intersectional discourse through reflective practices on habitation and use.



Figure 2. Detailed Section drawing, inhabited by an ethnically specific group of housing dwellers and users, by Anu Shemar, 2020.

A View of the Way Ahead?

An anti-racist curriculum in the making demands a reflective practice of “category work” embedded into learning processes. According to Bowker and Leigh Star, ‘categorical work and boundary infrastructures’ are political technologies where communities redefine their boundaries and the manner of classification of actions, things and behaviours.⁸ Using the Image Equality Archive as an open source tool, students as a community can redefine their tools of representation, rethink categories that frame the human figure in architecture and take part in repairing fragmented and hierarchical classification of the human body. The archive then can be used as a stepping stone for an antiracist curriculum in a broader framework of actions and initiatives.

8 Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, Mass.: CogNet, 1999), 285-87.

The open source archive can be seen as a complementary tool which can transcend the programme and the brief of the architectural studio and expand its scope, challenging the pedagogical boundaries within and across schools of architecture. Achille Mbembe conceptualises the archive as a process for ‘an instituting imaginary’.⁹ The archive can potentially become a tool for ‘affective pedagogy’ through which we imagine and engage in collective and decolonial learning processes.¹⁰

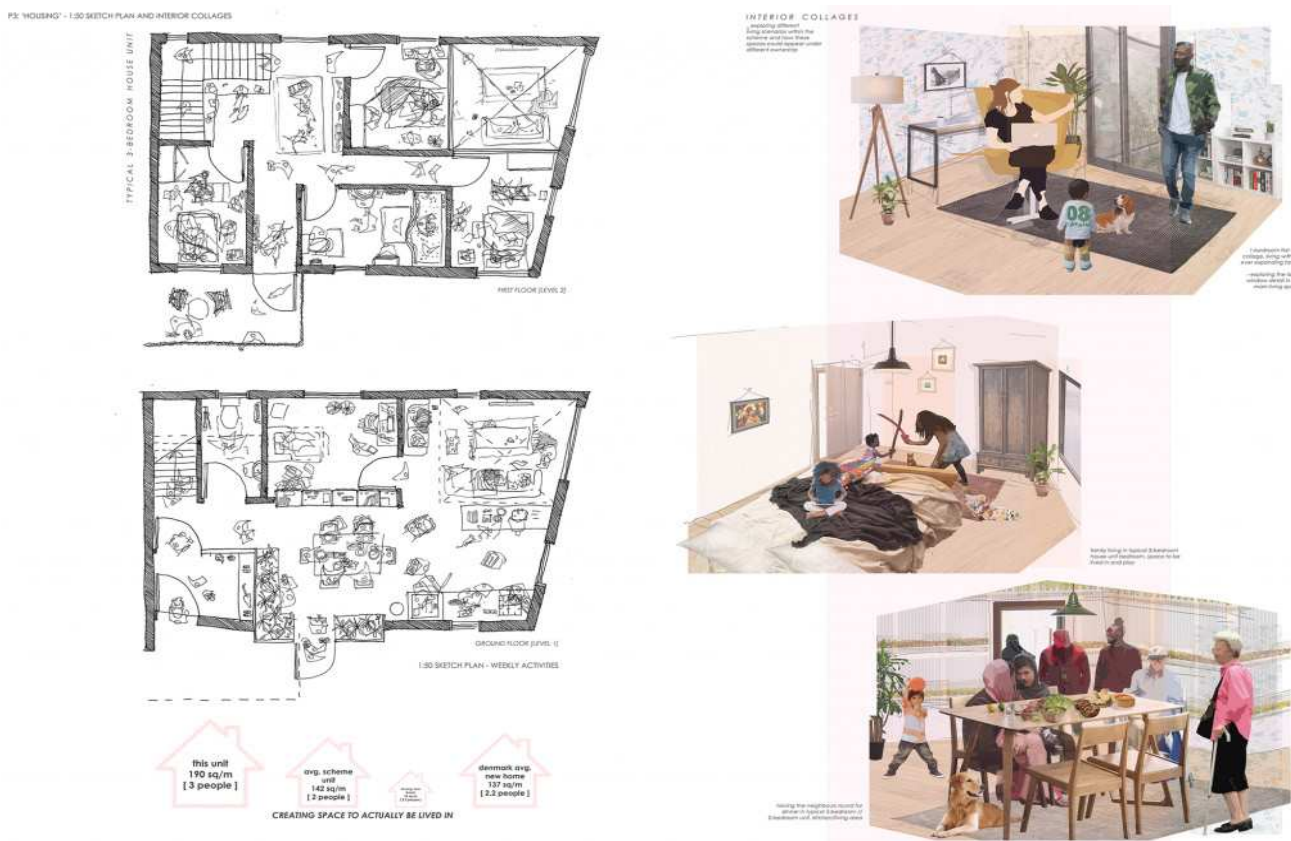


Figure 3. Perspective images and plan details, inhabited by a diverse range of family groupings, by Jasmine Yeo, (2020).

- 9 Achille Mbembe, ‘Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive’.
- 10 Pelin Tan, ‘Decolonizing Architectural Education: Towards an Affective Pedagogy’, in *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice*, ed. by Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal (Taylor & Francis, 2017), 77–92.

So, what kind of alternative socialisations and instituting practices can take form with the help of the Image Equality Archive? Can the open source archive and its intersectional framework become a tool for communities of students? Can architecture students’ unions take over the archive, curate it, link it to diverse programmes across the school and create transversal relations with other student communities? All these questions offer possible steps towards the creation of student architectural designs that have greater awareness and understanding of intersectional building users. But much more than a representational issue, there is the potential for the archive to be an easily accessible tool to aid the transformation of the architectural curriculum into one that is more inclusive, diverse and reflective.

Biographies

Emre Akbil is an architect and urbanist working to build speculative relations with social, political and ecological thresholds of architecture and urbanism to enact minoritarian and commons-based political creations. Alongside a group of architects and planners, he has initiated 'Imaginary Famagusta,' an urban practice that navigates the ethnocratic urbanism of Cyprus and produces spatial imaginaries for reconciliation through urban commoning. Emre is a University Teacher at Sheffield School of Architecture where he explores decolonial, feminist and ecological tactics in critical spatial pedagogies. He is currently co-leader of the MA in Urban Design programme and studio tutor in the second year undergraduate programme.

Leo is an architect and Senior University Teacher at Sheffield School of Architecture. Having led the MArch course and second year undergraduate programme, Leo now leads the third year undergraduate course. Leo's pedagogical approach is based on enabling students to engage in 'live' learning opportunities and experiences. To support this work Leo co-founded Live Works, the first university-led urban room and participatory design office, within the school. He is also the pioneer and resident of Open House Project, a self-build cohousing project in Sheffield.

