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Reworking Power Geometries: South–South Exchanges and the Transformation of Global Architectural Flows

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Abstract

How did exchanges between the architecture, engineering, and construction sectors of postcolonial states challenge dominant patterns of North–South technology transfer, and actively begin to construct the substantive scaffolding of an alternative international order? This article proposes a theoretical framework for understanding South–South exchange as a distinct spatial practice in postcolonial architectural history, recovering previously unexplored patterns of circulation—construction technologies, professional expertise, contracting capacity—that connected allegedly peripheral geographies spanning from Southeast Asia and Africa to the Caribbean and Southeast Europe. It draws on Doreen Massey’s concept of ‘power geometry’, Anna Tsing’s theorization of ‘friction’, and Édouard Glissant’s ‘archipelagic thinking’ to develop three analytical movements: Geometries, Powers, and Archipelagic Relations. Together these map the lateral circulation of expertise, technology, and labor among postcolonial nations operating outside the North–South and East–West axes around which twentieth-century architectural history has largely been organized. The paper argues that the prevailing diffusionist model resembles a two-body gravitational system that forecloses the possibility of lateral force, and treats South–South exchanges instead as orbital anomalies, persistent deviations from predicted paths that reveal an unseen distributed gravitational field. Rather than organizing around a metropolitan vertex, this field constitutes what computational geometry calls an ‘unstructured mesh’: contingent, uncentered, and variable in its local density. The mesh’s topology traces across a range of exchanges drawn from the forthcoming edited volume *South–South: Non-Alignment and Cooperation in the Construction of the Global South*, which brings together contributions from a dozen scholars of postcolonial architecture. The case studies include triangulations in which prefabrication technology traveled between Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Angola, and professional expertise looped between India, Africa and Europe. The motivational fields and frictions that drove and transformed each exchange are examined in turn. The article culminates in a reading of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Afro-Asian Housing Organisation (AAHO) through Glissant’s concepts of relation and opacity—the right of postcolonial actors to participate in exchange without becoming fully legible to Cold War systems that demanded every alignment be declared. By challenging prevailing narratives that position the ‘Global South’ primarily as recipient rather than generator of innovation, the article contributes to a decolonial architectural historiography that shows how the political project of Non-Alignment was substantively materialized in the production of the built environment. Recovering these alternate forms of architectural flow demands a South–South historiographical orientation as a corrective to the field’s persistent centeredness, and offers historical

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insight no less relevant today for rethinking the potential, and the challenges, of contemporary transnational cooperation.

Keywords: global south; non aligned movement; power geometry; archipelagic thinking; architectural history; solidarity

1. Introduction

In her apartment in a prefabricated high-rise in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución, Dr. Gina Rey, emerita professor of architecture and urban planning at the José Antonio Echeverría Technological University, reaches for a framed black-and-white photograph. "Look," she says, "this is me with Fidel in Angola!" [1] The image, taken in March 1977, shows Rey alongside Fidel Castro and another prominent Cuban revolutionary, Celia Sánchez, accompanied by the chief of the Cuban construction brigades that were constructing homes for the newly independent nation. Rey had been in the country since 1976, eventually spending two years there working with a group of Cuban architects on territorial and urban planning, as well as teaching and helping establish urban planning institutions of the newly independent African state. Her own husband joined her on the sojourn; he would return for one more year in the 1980s, while she stayed back home to work on the master plan of Havana. Rey was one of approximately 50,000 Cuban civilian specialists, including teachers, doctors, architects, engineers, and construction workers, who worked in Angola between 1975 and 1991, alongside 400,000 Cuban troops. Their most tangible products were the *prédios dos cubanos*, the semi-prefabricated residential buildings that dot Luanda's cityscape to this day, built by combining Angolan labor and Cuban experience with *microbrigades*, a method of self-build responsible for much of the residential stock in Cuba [2].

Some months later in Luanda, Dr. Isabel Martins' eyes light up at the mention of Gina Rey: she remembers her warmly as one of the many Cuban professors who taught in Angola after independence [3]. Martins is herself now professor emerita, having taught for forty years at the Department of Architecture at Luanda's Agostinho Neto University. The two women have not been in contact for decades, yet the memory endures of a professional relationship forged in the first years of Angolan independence, when everything was being built from scratch amidst a civil war. Martins attributes the development of her department to "internationalization," naming Yugoslavs, Americans, Portuguese, and Germans among those who helped shape it, but Cubans hold a special place, not just for her, but also for many Angolans who remember the early days of independence.

What kind of architectural history can accommodate a story like this? Not one organized around the familiar axes of North–South transfer or East–West rivalry, in which the Global South appears only as a destination for expertise produced elsewhere. The photograph in Rey's apartment does not just capture an unusual moment in the history of modern architecture but encapsulates an entire world of exchanges that has remained invisible to scholarship. It represents a worldmaking project that sought to thoroughly rework the way in which architecture moved globally. Cuban builders in Luanda were reversing the direction of centuries of Atlantic extraction, sending expertise and labor from the Caribbean to Africa along routes that had once carried enslaved people in the opposite direction. In this, they were not driven by market logic or Cold War alignment but instead by an anticolonial solidarity whose institutional expressions, like the Non-Aligned Movement and the Tricontinental, had no precedent in the modern world.

This article proposes a theoretical framing to make such exchanges visible. We begin with the Cuban–Angolan case not as an anchor, but as one among the many examples of

such South–South exchange. In the broadest sense, South–South exchange names a capacious category, encompassing many configurations of lateral relation with distinct logics, geographies, and historical moments. Our concern is with one of them: the dense field of architectural relations that took shape through the Non-Aligned, Afro-Asian, and post-colonial networks of the Cold War era. We develop an analytical framework that attends to the specific geometries such exchanges produced, the sources of power that motivated and transformed them, and the quality of connection that held the network together as something more than a collection of bilateral encounters. In this way, we bring into dialog concepts from geography, philosophy, and the anthropology of globalization to argue that the architectural exchanges of the postcolonial world were not merely a marginal supplement to the dominant narrative of modern architecture but a distinct spatial practice with its own logic, its own generative capacity, and its own claim to historical significance. When we refer to these distinctive exchanges as “South–South,” we draw special attention to the hyphen between those two words, as a metaphorical figure that deliberately withholds the content of what it connects, and holds open a relation whose terms were never fully settled.

As Lakoff and Johnson have shown, metaphor is not ornament but the scaffolding of thought [4]. The central metaphors that structure our image of the Cold War are, coincidentally, architectural: we think about that geopolitical formation through bloc(k)s and walls, and even the term Iron Curtain is borrowed from the design of theater buildings, where it signifies the fireproof barrier between stage and audience. These are all figures of partition and boundaries, of solid masses set against one another, and they cannot picture a Global South that deliberately refused to harden into a bloc (It is worth remembering that the Non-Aligned Movement expressly declined to constitute itself as a third bloc). To represent such an object, we need a different metaphorical language, which we attempt to develop here.

The article begins with a theoretical overture on the ‘Perturbations in Power Geometries,’ which challenges existing scholarship and introduces the conceptual apparatus we propose for analyzing these stories of exchange. This is followed by three analytical sections where our proposed concepts are further substantiated through case studies drawn primarily from our edited volume *SOUTH-SOUTH: The Architecture of Non-Alignment and Cooperation* [5]. Building on the empirical studies of exchanges collected in that book, this article offers a theoretical reflection that opens outward from the volume asking what these cases amount to when taken together, and what larger theoretical territory they might open up. If the volume documents the exchanges case by case, this essay considers their aggregate implications as a provocation toward future scholarship.

2. Perturbations in Power Geometries

The history of modern architecture has been written largely as a story of movement along a few well-charted directions. Ideas, designs, technologies, and professionals traveled outward from the industrialized North Atlantic to the rest of the world, carried by the channels of colonialism, development aid, and market expansion. This is a long-standing “diffusionist” tradition in the history of modern architecture that recent scholarship has nuanced, while still following similar paths [6–9]. The Cold War complicated this picture by adding a second source: the continental landmass of northern Eurasia, as the newly formed socialist states projected their developmental models through built environments from Havana to Hanoi [10,11]. But even this complication left the fundamental direction intact. Whether the flow ran from the East or the West, it traveled from the North to the South, from the industrialized world to its supposed margins. The underlying assumption remained that modern architecture, whether as knowledge, labor, or material,

has a clear source and a destination, that it is diffused from certain clearly defined ‘centers’ to the fuzzy ‘peripheries.’

There is a logic of spatial organization embedded in this approach, echoing the pull of gravity and the mechanics of celestial bodies. The alleged centers of modern architectural knowledge radiate outward like powerful stars, simultaneously exerting a gravitational pull on a surrounding system of planets and asteroids, bodies denied any comparable force of their own. Rather than a neutral description of space, such a geometry encodes, in advance, a set of ideological assumptions about what initiates the movement and what follows. Geographer Doreen Massey called this “power geometry” [12]. Writing in the early 1990s against the celebratory rhetoric of globalization, Massey insisted that what mattered about the time-space compression driving capitalist modernity was not mobility itself but the differential relationship to it: who moves and who does not, who controls the flows and who is merely caught up in them, who benefits from movement and who is displaced by it. Power geometry, in other words, is the gravitational vector of the system described above, naming the unequal distribution of capacities that holds some bodies at the center and others in orbit around them.

Applied to the history of modern architecture, Massey’s framework illuminates the hierarchies embedded in what might otherwise appear as neutral processes of ‘diffusion’ or ‘transfer’. That a technology developed in one place should appear in another tells us nothing until we understand who initiated the movement, on what terms, and with what consequences for the capacity of each party to act in the future. But Massey’s model is limited to the forces it can already see, and those forces are organized around a two-body structure: those who drive flows and those who are driven by them. Even a generous subaltern reading extends this asymmetry only to a bilateral correction, where the periphery pushes back on the center. The fundamental geometry of the exchange nevertheless remains two-body, and the possibility that the scattered periphery could collectively exert a gravitational pull of its own remains structurally foreclosed.

Gravitational forces are themselves invisible; it is only their effects that can be observed. The analogy that best describes both our problem and our method is the discovery of Neptune. In the 1840s, the French mathematician Urbain Le Verrier and the English astronomer John Couch Adams independently inferred, from persistent anomalies in the observed orbit of Uranus, that an unseen body must be exerting gravitational force on the planet’s trajectory. The prevailing two-body model, which only saw Uranus orbiting the Sun, could not account for a third body that was bending the geometry. Neptune was not discovered by looking for the planet directly, but by taking the anomalies seriously and reasoning backward from effect to cause.

The prevailing historiography of Cold War architectural exchange predicts certain trajectories: expertise flows from North to South, dependency is reproduced or partially negotiated, and buildings look more or less like what the exporting culture produces. The cases assembled here present persistent deviations from those predicted paths in ways that the North–South model cannot explain. These orbital anomalies point to a gravitational presence of the South–South relational network, which has remained invisible because the analytical frameworks were designed around a different set of assumptions. Our method, like Le Verrier’s, is to work backward from the anomalies, to ask what unseen body could have produced them, and to name it as precisely as the evidence allows. What that reasoning reveals is not a new star, or a rival center of comparable mass, but a distributed field whose gravitational pull escapes the diffusionist model.

Our analysis of that distributed field unfolds in three movements. The first is ‘Geometries,’ where we examine the geometrical figures that have been used to organize the historiography of architectural exchange and propose an alternative, the *unstructured mesh*, that more accurately describes the topology of the South–South network. The second

is ‘Powers,’ which not only describes the structural asymmetries that Massey has identified, but also the generative forces through which those asymmetries were negotiated, redirected, and sometimes transformed. Drawing on Anna Tsing’s insight that “friction” is not merely an impediment to flow but a condition of its productivity, we treat the awkward, unequal, and unstable character of interconnection across difference as the most essential quality of such exchange [13]. Finally, the third movement draws on Édouard Glissant to argue that the South was held together by ‘Archipelagic Relations’ [14,15]. Writing from the Caribbean, Glissant developed a spatial and political vocabulary that takes multiplicity as its starting point, one in which islands are connected to one another through movement across difference. The concepts of “relation” and “opacity” that emerge from this thinking offer a framework for understanding what held South–South together as a network [16].

Cold War architectural exchange in the Global South, we argue, cannot be adequately described by a bilateral North–South power geometry, because no such exchange was occurring in a simple two-body field. The South–South relational network operated as an unseen gravitational force, bending the trajectories of individual exchanges away from their predicted paths without necessarily being visible within any single one of them. Its constituent nodes were active agents managing their own terms of relation rather than simply occupying positions in a structure defined by capital and metropolitan power. The relation between them, represented by the hyphen in South–South, remains deliberately unspecified to account for a field of entanglement whose implications remain to be fully mapped.

3. Geometries

The geometry embedded in the diffusionist model, or the organizing spatial logic of the solar system identified in the previous section, has been described in many ways. The discourse on colonialism sometimes sees it as a “spoked wheel,” an imperial hub at the center radiating toward colonial peripheries. This geometry forecloses the possibility of lateral connection between colonial sites, since all roads lead back to the metropole. Scholars have challenged this radial image by showing the many lateral connections that linked colonial peripheries to one another; for example, Jiat-Hwee Chang has examined the genesis of tropical architecture precisely through the lens of networks [8]. Tony Ballantyne, writing about imperial knowledge circulation in the British Empire, proposed the figure of the spider web: a network with numerous lateral threads, still organized around a dominant center to which all traffic eventually returns [17]. Hannah Le Roux has described the emergence of tropical architecture in comparable terms as a radial network [18]. The spoked wheel was always a simplification, but even after the correction, the web remained organized around an attractor whose structural position overpowers all the lateral threads. The lateral exchanges between the nations of the Global South we wish to describe eschewed such overt hierarchy altogether, and so demand a different figure.

We propose that South–South exchanges are better understood through a figure that contemporary computational geometry calls an *unstructured mesh*. Unlike the web, an unstructured mesh has no predetermined center. It is organized around the triangle as its minimal stable unit, from which more complex geometries emerge through accretion and local negotiation rather than global prescription. The number of edges meeting at any given node (its valence) varies according to local conditions, emerging and dissolving just as contingently when those conditions shift. The overall form of the mesh is never fully legible from a commanding external vantage point. To adopt this figure is not merely to describe a different topology but to reconceptualize the behavior of flow itself: what happens when exchange occurs through a medium with no dominant center, no predetermined routes, and no structural bias toward any single direction of movement. The case

studies that follow reveal six properties that emerge from the unstructured mesh and its encounter with global architectural flows.

The first and most recognizable feature is the high-valence node, where an unusually large number of connections converge, and Egypt is the paradigmatic case. As Marwa El-Ashmouni and Ashraf Salama document, Egyptian expertise radiated outward in multiple directions during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, reaching across the Arab world to Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, and the UAE, across Africa to Mali and Niger, and in smaller flows to Latin America [19]. By the 1970s, an estimated 1.5 million Egyptians were working in neighboring countries, roughly a quarter of them in construction. Egyptian firms executed major commissions in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Libya, while individual architects shaped residential districts, ministries, and public institutions from Mecca and Jeddah to Kuwait City. But unlike the imperial metropole, which accumulated and consolidated its dominance across generations of institutional continuity, Egypt's regional position was held together by political alignments that could shift between one presidency and the next, by professional surpluses that could be absorbed or redirected as domestic economies required, and by firms that could be nationalized, spun off, and repurposed within the span of a decade. The valence was high but not structurally entrenched, and the node radiated only as long as the conditions allowed it.

Postcolonial Ghana offers an analogous high-valence node and an instructive variant. As Łukasz Stanek and David Kojo Derban have traced, its architectural reach across West Africa during the 1970s and 1980s was not driven by state-directed initiatives but instead by the graduating cohorts of the Department of Architecture at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi (KNUST) [20]. Established in 1958 as the first architectural school in sub-Saharan Africa, KNUST became a point of regional density in the mesh. Connections thickened there in response to the complexity of postcolonial professional demand across the region. Alumni contacts, informal referrals, and accumulated departmental knowledge of where opportunities existed constituted a gravitational field in miniature, with no headquarters and no diplomatic networks. These Ghanaian architects carried their training into Nigeria's oil-boom economy, into francophone Ivory Coast and Cameroon, and into Liberia, building a dispersed network of individual careers which collectively allowed for the redistribution of KNUST's pedagogical capacity across the region. Here too the high-valence node was contingent. Ghana's architectural reach expanded outward precisely because its own economic conditions had deteriorated in those decades, pushing architectural graduates into other national contexts. The mesh thickened at Kumasi because the surrounding conditions demanded it.

A second feature is the closed loop, a sequence of edges where the starting and ending points are the same. As Dhaval Chauhan and Rupinder Singh document, by the mid-1970s the architecture department at the University of Nairobi became a multilateral site of exchange, drawing faculty from Uganda, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, Iran, and Israel alongside those from the Global North [21]. Two young Indian architects were among them: Kurula Varkey, a graduate of IIT Kharagpur who had worked in B.V. Doshi's office, and Neelkanth Chhaya, who had grown up in Kenya as part of the Indian diaspora before studying at CEPT Ahmedabad and returning to Africa in 1975. What made their dialog with Kenyan students possible was, paradoxically, the shared colonial apparatus both countries had inherited. As Chhaya observed, the building production systems, including by-laws, contractual terms, and PWD manuals, were virtually identical across India and Kenya, a legacy of the same imperial infrastructure. That common ground enabled a conversation between two postcolonial societies grappling with how to reconcile living building traditions with the modernism that colonialism had imposed. By the late 1970s, the University of Nairobi architecture program shifted its emphasis from Western architectural history to Kenyan settlement patterns, coastal Swahili urbanism,

and the social life of small spaces that European modernism had systematically overlooked. When Varkey returned to India in the late 1980s to become director of CEPT Ahmedabad, he brought this thinking with him, rewriting the CEPT curriculum along lines developed in Nairobi. A directed loop does not return to its origin unchanged. The expertise that moved from India to East Africa came back transformed by its encounter with another postcolonial context.

A third feature of the mesh is its triangular geometry. An unusually vivid example is the circulation of prefabricated technology between Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Angola, as demonstrated by Jelica Jovanović and Fredo Rivera [22]. It differed from large-scale systems like the Atlantic triangular trade, whose flows were unidirectional and whose value accumulated at a single vertex, the European metropole. The South–South triangular element was smaller in scale and non-systemic, despite all three countries belonging to the Non-Aligned Movement. The Yugoslav IMS *Žeželj* system arrived in Cuba in the late 1960s, not as an aid package but at the request of the Cuban side, on the unlikely recommendation of an American housing specialist who had fled the US under espionage charges [23]. The system was transmitted free of licensing fees, quickly adapted, and widely used alongside several others, imported or locally developed. In the following decade, both Cuba and Yugoslavia became heavily involved in supporting the newly independent Angola, with housing technology playing an important role. The IMS *Žeželj* arrived in Angola on the recommendation of Cuban experts who were simultaneously implementing their own semi-prefabrication. Its results were marginal, greatly outperformed by the relatively simpler Cuban system. The three sides of the triangle did not carry equal weight. The IMS system traveled once with success and once with only marginal effect, while Cuba shifted from recipient to transmitter between one leg and the next. Unlike the Atlantic triangle, no vertex accumulated value at the expense of the others. The flows ran along all three sides, unevenly and without a predetermined apex.

Some nodes do not originate flows so much as redirect them. The transit node is a structural position defined by its location within the mesh, serving as an interior point of high valence through which many paths pass, and whose geometry transforms what passes through it. As Ruslan Muñoz-Hernández has shown, Cuba received prefabrication expertise from the Soviet Union (including an entire panel factory in 1963), from Yugoslavia, and from a wider network of East European institutions and international technical-assistance programs [24]. It also drew on the proximity of the United States, whose post-modern graphic culture reached Cuban architects and designers across the Straits of Florida notwithstanding the embargo, and was repurposed into the visual language of Tricontinental solidarity [25]. Meanwhile, Cuba transmitted outward along the architectural lines of Tricontinentalism. Angola was the most substantial destination, but as Erica Morawski has shown, another was Vietnam, where a hotel built in Hanoi stood as a Cuban architectural export to a fellow socialist ally recovering from a long anticolonial war [26]. What Cuba transmitted, however, was never exactly what it had received. The systems that arrived in Luanda and Hanoi had been adapted to Cuban climatic conditions, labor regimes, and material constraints. Cuba transformed what passed through it rather than simply passing it on. This is what distinguishes a transit node from a source or sink.

Where the transit node transforms what moves through it, the boundary node is a type of interface that is defined by adjacency rather than passage. It is a point where distinct and otherwise separate networks meet, their edges coinciding in a single location that carries the material traces of each. This is a boundary in a sense quite different from the walls and blocs which we have discussed before, as it does not serve as a barrier that separates, but as a site of coexistence where distinct geometries share an edge. Colombo in the lead-up to the 1976 NAM summit, as Anoma Pieris has traced it, is a paradigmatic case [27]. The Intercontinental Hotel facing the National Assembly was initiated in the late

1960s under a pro-Western government, using American financing and architects. By the time it was completed it was housing delegates to an anti-imperialist summit convened by a government of opposite political orientation. The Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall was gifted by the People's Republic of China under yet another political alignment, and the Soviet Union contributed a bronze statue unveiled ahead of the summit. At the same time, the Commonwealth residue of the earlier Colombo Plan remained legible in the city's administrative and educational institutions. Each material presence was tied to a different political network with its own geometry, and the interface held them in coexistence without resolving them into a single coherent surface. What accumulated in Colombo was not the capacity to drive flows outward, but the layered material traces of successive and overlapping political geometries.

The extended path is the most diffuse of these features, a sequence of edges and nodes along which a specific content travels incrementally, reworked at each point of transmission and accumulating the marks of successive encounters. Unlike the predetermined routes of a structured geometry, the extended path is not prescribed in advance but emerges from the mesh's own topology, taking the shape that local conditions allow. It follows no fixed channel and it often leaves no built trace, only a tool, a code, or an archival trail. The final case, traced by Priya Jain with unusual precision, follows the genealogy of the under-reamed pile [28]. This was a foundation technique developed for black cotton soils, the expansive clay covering roughly a third of India's Deccan plateau and occurring across seventy-five other tropical and subtropical countries from Indonesia to Ethiopia to Brazil. Black cotton soil swells when wet and shrinks when dry, cracking any infrastructure built upon it. The Central Building Research Institute (CBRI) of India, established at Roorkee in 1950, took the problem as its specific charge. The technique they developed was not invented in India; it had been used in the expansive clays of Texas since the 1920s. What India contributed was a transformation born of necessity. The American method relied on mechanized drilling equipment the Indian construction economy could not support. That constraint forced a reworking, where a hand-operated under-reaming tool adapted to Indian labor conditions could deliver a thirty percent cost saving over conventional strip foundations. A second reworking followed in the mid-1960s, when the technique was deployed to Ethiopia through the Ethio-Swedish Building Institute, adapted again to local soils and incorporated into Ethiopian building codes. The extended path thus runs from Texas to Roorkee to Stockholm to Addis Ababa, with the technique reworked at every node and arriving in its final form bearing the marks of each encounter.

Taken together, these six features render visible a gravitational field that the preceding section could only infer from its effects. Each example reveals a perturbation, a systematic departure from the paths that the spoked wheel and the web may have predicted. Mapped collectively, those departures do not resolve into a new center or a rival star but describe a distributed gravitational field whose shape the unstructured mesh makes legible. But geometry alone cannot account for what animated it. What gave certain nodes their weight, what drove exchanges along particular axes rather than others, and what transformed knowledge at every point of transmission, are questions that the mesh can locate but not answer. They are questions of power, to which we turn next.

4. Powers

Power, in this context, is twofold. On one hand, it concerns *capacity*: the resources, professionals, technologies, and institutions that particular nodes had accumulated and could offer to others. Massey's power geometry maps this terrain with considerable precision, tracking the differential distribution of capacities within any system of spatial relations. On the other hand, power also concerns *motivation*: what drove exchange along

one axis rather than another, what ends it was meant to serve, and what forces threatened to dissolve it before it could take hold. Massey's framework, built for a two-body field, has less to say here. In a distributed, unstructured network with no single site of accumulation, motivation cannot be read from structure alone. What emerges here, alongside the commercial and institutional drivers, is something that the diffusionist model cannot accommodate: solidarity and affect. Distributed across the network as a motivating field, solidarity and affect exert their own pull on the trajectories of exchange. They are perturbations in precisely the sense established in the opening section: invisible forces registered only in the deviations they produce in paths that structure alone could not have predicted.

Colonial circulation had, in this respect, a clear and consistent motivation: extraction. Capital was both the means and the end. The infrastructure through which people, goods, and expertise moved had been built to concentrate value at a single destination. This remained the underlying logic even when architecture circulated for other ostensible reasons such as the projection of imperial authority, the settlement of colonists, the administration of territory, and the performance of a civilizing mission. Whatever the immediate purpose of any given movement, the overall system sought to return accumulated value to the metropole. South–South circulation did not entirely abandon commercial motivation. Construction firms still sought contracts, governments still balanced their trade accounts, and architectural labor was still compensated. But the motivational field was no longer organized around a single attractor, and what filled that absence was not simply a plurality of interests but something more historically charged. Some motivations were deliberately political, generating new projects of anti-colonial alignment and postcolonial worldmaking without a clear imperial analog. Others reactivated affiliations long predating the colonial period—religious, linguistic, regional—which could now be recast as infrastructures for contemporary cooperation. Taken together, these constituted solidarity not as sentiment but as a distributed motivational field capable of initiating exchange, redirecting it, and holding it together across distances and differences that could not be bridged by purely commercial or institutional logic.

Solidarity, however, is not achieved without resistance. To understand why these exchanges were always contested, always partial, and always threatened by the forces they were attempting to navigate, we need a third concept alongside capacity and motivation: *friction*. Anna Tsing, writing about the encounters produced by globalization, argued that connection across difference always involves friction, the “awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” [13]. Friction is not an obstacle to movement but its condition, the resistance that gives traction, the roughness that makes exchange possible at all. Without it there is only the fantasy of frictionless flow that the rhetoric of both globalization and South–South solidarity has sometimes projected onto its own operations. Applied to the South–South mesh, friction describes the transformative pressure that expertise, technology, and labor encounter wherever they arrive. The case studies reveal friction operating across three registers: ‘technical friction’, where a single system or object is transformed in the process of adaptation; ‘professional friction’, where architects and engineers trained in different contexts had to find working terms with one another; and ‘systemic friction’, where the lateral circuits of the mesh met the broader political, institutional, and diasporic structures within which they were embedded. Running beneath all three is a substrate of colonial inheritance, the shared vocabularies, standards, professional pathways, and institutional frameworks that made many encounters possible and simultaneously shaped what could be imagined within them. Several of the cases that follow have already appeared in the preceding section, read there for the shapes they produced. Approached now from the angle of power and friction, the same material yields different analytical content.

The arrival of the Yugoslav IMS Žeželj system in Cuba is the clearest case of technical friction. Settling into local practice through the late 1960s and 1970s, it accumulated adaptations to the conditions it encountered. As Jovanović and Rivera demonstrate, the 1967 contract that facilitated the transfer obliged the Cuban side to keep the system's structure, production technology, and assembly unchanged, but in practice the reworking began almost immediately [22]. Cuban engineers modified the system's key technical aspects, including the column-to-column joint details and the prestressing geometry, while retaining the core principles. Around that altered core, further adaptations accumulated. Ventilation shafts running the full height of buildings, terrazzo floors, and hollow modules producing the distinctive voided façades responded to Havana's tropical climate. Pressed sugarcane derivatives became partition walls as the sugar industry's expansion after the 1962 Soviet trade agreement produced surplus material. Palm trunks served as scaffolding and props. Cuba's *microbrigade* model, in which workers from client institutions collectively volunteered their labor for construction, organized the assembly under labor conditions significantly different from those in Yugoslavia. And in Santiago de Cuba, three eighteen-story IMS towers were painted in the colors of Yemayá, the Santería deity of the ocean. What arrived in Havana in 1968 and what settled into Cuban practice by the 1980s were not the same system, despite the contractual requirements. Technical friction had transformed what was originally transferred.

Professional friction surfaces in two cases that operated on opposite sides of a single question: whether colonial inheritance facilitated or obstructed lateral exchange. The first case takes us back to the Department of Architecture at the University of Nairobi in the 1970s, where Kurula Varkey and Neelkanth Chhaya taught alongside Kenyan colleagues [21]. What made their dialog possible was, paradoxically, the colonial apparatus that the two countries shared. As Chhaya observed, the building production systems were virtually identical across India and Kenya, a legacy of the same imperial infrastructure. This common ground became the platform from which a genuinely non-metropolitan conversation could begin. The opposite dynamic emerged when Ghanaian architects moved during the 1970s and 1980s to Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, and Liberia, finding that Pan-African ideology offered no protection from the social frictions of professional life in a neighboring state. Stanek and Derban describe these professionals as "black foreigners," whose trans-African mobility was real, but whose integration into host contexts was continually reworked through frictions that postcolonial aspirations could not resolve [20]. If read together, the two cases suggest that professional friction in the mesh was not uniformly productive or uniformly painful. It depended on whether the substrates available to the encounter, such as colonial inheritance, shared language, or ideological framework, could sustain the negotiation. Sometimes the inheritance enabled the conversation, and sometimes it could not bridge the unresolved contradictions.

Systemic friction operated at the largest scale, where capacity and motivation converge most visibly. It is what happened when the capacity and motivation of particular nodes encountered the structures that could amplify, constrain, or redirect them. Egypt's position in the Middle East illustrates how systemic friction could be generative. As El-Ashmouni and Salama have shown, Egyptian expertise radiated across the Arab world not through the mechanism of metropolitan dominance but through the convergence of three distinct elements: a surplus of highly trained professionals produced by nationalization policies following 1952; a neighboring Arab world flush with oil revenues and urgently building the institutional infrastructure of statehood; and Pan-Arabism as the motivating framework that gave the exchange its political meaning, with the Arab League as the institutional scaffolding that gave it operational channels [19]. The friction was systemic because no single element could have produced the exchange on its own. Professional surplus, regional demand, and ideological framework each depended on the others

to make the movement possible. The resulting exchange was asymmetrical in its distribution of capacity, yet without a metropolitan vertex at which value accumulated.

A different configuration of systemic register is visible in India's technical assistance relationship with Mauritius, where the circuits of postcolonial development ran along grooves cut by centuries of diasporic movement, colonial labor regimes, and sacred geography. As David Beynon documents, India recognized Mauritius as a priority partner for its technical and economic cooperation program (ITEC), supporting the island's ambition to become a hub between the Indian subcontinent and Africa [29]. This priority was inseparable from the demographic character of Mauritius, where a majority Indian-ancestry population, descended largely from indentured laborers transported under British colonial rule, gave India's assistance program a distinctive rationale. When in 1972 the Indian government consecrated the pilgrimage site of Ganga Talao with water brought from the Ganges, it made visible the connection between diasporic belonging and developmental infrastructure. Systemic friction here was the accumulated weight of colonial labor history, postcolonial state interest, and diasporic sacred geography bearing on every technical and professional encounter.

What distinguishes the power distributions of the South–South exchanges from those of the imperial web is not the presence of asymmetry but the absence of a single attractor around which asymmetries organized themselves. Power was distributed and accumulated locally rather than converging on a metropolitan vertex. The result was a field of differential capacities with no structural center, no overarching hierarchy, and no shared metropole, where motivations varied considerably from one node to the next. To write the history of the South–South mesh adequately requires analytical frameworks sensitive to local variation and distributed agency. But capacity and motivation together still cannot explain what held the network together as a network. That is a question of cohesion, of what Glissant calls 'relation', and it is what the final section addresses.

5. Archipelagic Relations

Having mapped the topology of the mesh and traced the motivational fields that moved through it, we can now turn to the third framework. Where geometry describes the shapes the network produced and power accounted for the forces that moved through it, Glissant's archipelagic thinking addresses the quality of connection that held the network together. Glissant wrote from and about the Caribbean, a geography shaped by dispossession, forced movement, and improvised coexistence, where belonging was forged across water rather than rooted in continuous land. From that position he developed a way of thinking about spatial and political connections that takes dispersal rather than unity as its starting point, and asks how something shared becomes possible across that dispersal without erasing what is distinct. The concepts of "relation" and "opacity" that emerge from this thinking offer a framework for understanding cohesion. Having examined the geometries and powers of the South–South mesh in some detail, we do not aim simply to borrow this framework but to enrich it through our case analysis, sharpening what relation and opacity mean when they are grounded in its specific topologies and power distributions.

Glissant develops his archipelagic thinking from the image of the sea, which he does not treat as an empty space between islands but as the active medium through which relation becomes possible. For the South–South network, that sea was constituted by two overlapping conditions. The first was the shared experience of colonial history, with its common legal vocabularies, technical standards, professional pathways, and institutional frameworks. The second was the active postcolonial desire for solidarity, the collective and often difficult decision made repeatedly across the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to convert a shared condition of subjugation into a shared project of worldmaking. So, the medium

emerged from what was inherited and what was willed in equal measure. Relation, in Glissant's usage, is not an outcome of proximity or structural position. It is the open, generative quality of connection between nodes that are distinct without being isolated. It is forged through movement across difference rather than by absorption into a common whole. The sea connects without dissolving, and each 'crossing' transforms what moves and the medium through which it moves. Identity and difference are preserved precisely because connection does not demand assimilation. It is this transformative quality of each crossing that makes opacity necessary.

Opacity, in Glissant's usage, is the right to participate in relation without becoming fully legible to the outside. It is the condition of participation without surrendering one's interiority to the demand for transparency that "continental" thinking imposes. It is also a structural feature of the topology itself, and it explains, in part, why the South–South network remained so difficult to see. It left no consolidated archive, no single institutional record, and no map of itself. The industrialized world had organized its international co-operation through multilateral institutions with real operational capacity, such as the Marshall Plan, the IMF, and the World Bank. The channels available to the Global South, like G-77, UNCTAD, and the NIEO, could articulate demands and declare principles, but they were frameworks for aspiration rather than mechanisms for allocation [30–34]. They could not match a Cuban prefabrication system with an Angolan housing shortage and enforce the connection. Such connections had to be made through more contingent means: bilateral agreements, personal relationships, and institutional improvisations drawing on locally available capacities. The resulting field of exchange was real enough to move equipment, materials, blueprints, and human beings across vast distances, but it was readable only from within. This was not a failure of organization but the condition under which exchange between newly independent states could happen at all, outside the surveillance of Cold War systems that demanded every alignment be declared and every relationship be legible within one of two frameworks. The Third World was, in this respect, an opacity project, to paraphrase Vijay Prashad's memorable definition, a collective refusal by newly independent states to be read on the Cold War's terms [30,35]. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) gave this refusal its institutional form, and that form had to be built.

An organization without a fixed home, rotating its summits among member states and each time requiring a different country to build or adapt the infrastructure to receive it, produces a particular kind of architecture. The conference center was that architecture, a programmatic type that barely existed before independence and that the movement's own logic called into being. Early meetings made do with borrowed venues. As Rina Priyani traces, the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung occupied the former cultural complex of West Java's colonial society, appropriated and adapted for the occasion [36]. The first NAM summit in Belgrade in 1961 used the National Assembly of Yugoslavia, and the second in Cairo in 1964 was held at Cairo University. By the 1970s purpose-built facilities were being commissioned under pressure of time and limited budget, and the exchanges through which they were produced were as negotiated and contingent as the political relationships they housed. As Mark Olweny and Anthony Wako argue, Zambia's Mulungushi Hall, built by the Yugoslav firm Energoprojekt in four months for the 1970 Lusaka summit, set the pattern [37]. Uganda's President Obote then commissioned a conference center from the same firm after seeing press coverage of the Lusaka project, with equipment and materials transferred directly from site to site. Energoprojekt's accumulated expertise then carried onward to Lagos, Libreville, and eventually Harare for the 1986 NAM summit.

Yugoslavia's role in this circuit clearly illustrates the opacity at the state level. Having broken from Moscow in 1948, Yugoslavia approached African clients neither as an

extension of the Soviet bloc nor as a proxy of Western development capital. It presented itself as a European socialist state that had helped found NAM itself, and its own refusal of Cold War legibility gave it a standing among African clients that neither Western nor Soviet partners possessed. Energoprojekt did not simply export Yugoslav modernism to Africa, but instead brought technical capacity in rapid construction and adapted it to the conditions of each site, responding to the local materials, labor and political expectations at every stop. What accumulated along this path was not a style but a negotiated, contingent expertise, that was internally legible and externally opaque.

Nowhere was the logic of the archipelago more purely embodied than in the Afro-Asian Housing Organization (AAHO). Founded in Cairo in December 1963, as Shivani Shede relates, the AAHO brought together over 250 delegates from across Asia and Africa to address the shared housing problems of the postcolonial world [38]. The gathering was held at the Arab League Headquarters, and attended by eminent figures including Hassan Fathy from Egypt, Habib Rahman from India, and Saba George Shiber from Kuwait. Even the Soviet Union sent delegates. The AAHO held five congresses over fourteen years, rotating among Cairo in 1963, Singapore in 1967, Dar es Salaam in 1970, New Delhi in 1975, and Accra in 1977, before dissolving when UN Habitat absorbed its agenda into a global governance framework that the AAHO's founding logic had implicitly resisted. The shift in rhetorical register across those fourteen years was itself a record of the archipelago, moving from political solidarity at Cairo to technocratic alternatives in Singapore to Tanzanian self-reliance to a frank acknowledgment at Accra that the housing problem had worsened despite fourteen years of resolutions. What held the AAHO together across that arc was not institutional strength, but the accumulated sense among participants that their problems were analogous in ways that made conversation genuinely meaningful.

The AAHO's defining characteristic was its explicit refusal to participate in the aid economy. Unlike the Colombo Plan, UNESCO, or the World Bank, each of which organized housing as a problem the North would help the South solve, the AAHO positioned itself as a circuit of exchange among equals. This was opacity at the institutional scale. The AAHO chose to operate outside the terms that the Northern development apparatus had recognized as legitimate, and in this way remained invisible to it. The professional relationships formed across fourteen years of congresses outlasted any resolution or funded program the AAHO produced. This was relation in Glissant's sense, open and generative, whose effects continued to shape practice long after the organization itself dissolved. The continental system eventually absorbed the agenda, and in this way dissolved the very quality that had made it distinct. What the AAHO left behind was not an archive but a network, the trace of a relation that refused full institutionalization and consequently survived in private papers, professional friendships, and buildings whose genealogies have to be read off their construction rather than retrieved from files.

What the NAM and AAHO cases suggest is that the archipelago operated simultaneously at multiple scales. At the regional scale, the Arab world was bound by the shared language, Pan-Arab ideology, and the institutional scaffolding of the Arab League. At the oceanic scale, the Indian Ocean Rim was connected by diasporic and cultural filiation accumulated across centuries. At the genuinely global scale, NAM assembled connections from scratch, creating frameworks within which states with otherwise little in common could identify themselves as sharing a condition. These scales overlapped and reinforced one another. A single node could be positioned simultaneously at the intersection of Arab League, OAU, and NAM fields, each constituting a distinct claim on solidarity and a distinct set of peer relationships. Returning to the astronomical analogy, the orbital deviations in this case accumulate not because any single unseen body is massive enough to produce them alone, but because several gravitational fields exert simultaneous pull. The

anomalies are only recognizable as anomalies when the full, overlapping field is taken into account.

Read together, the NAM summits and the AAHO reveal what the three analytical frameworks make visible only in combination. Geometries described a topology that was contingent, uncentered, and thickened where local conditions demanded it. Powers accounted for the forces that moved through it: the differential capacities, the motivational fields, and the frictions through which what traveled across the network was transformed at every crossing. And the Archipelagic Relations addressed what made those crossings meaningful, the sea of shared colonial experience and willed solidarity that connected the islands without dissolving them, the opacity through which each node managed its own terms of participation, and the generative, unpredictable quality of connection that persisted across everything.

6. Conclusions

The architecture of South–South exchange can only be understood through an investigation of its invisible triangulations. What Le Verrier and Adams inferred from anomalies in Uranus’s orbit, we have tried to infer from anomalies in Cold War architectural exchange. For each of the cases discussed in this article, the actual process was always contingent, operating within the productive friction generated by the meeting of incommensurable systems, traditions, and interests at specific places and moments. The apparently bilateral North–South transfers were reshaped by the gravitational pull of emerging fields and networks in the Global South. Even in the cases of South–South exchange there were often Northern inputs that had been transformed beyond recognition. Neither of these invisible triangulations could be detected by the prevailing diffusionist model.

We have tried to explain these perturbations and shifts through a reworking of geometry and power in archipelagic relations. But none of those analytical categories can singularly explain this phenomenon, because what moved through them was never quite reducible to them. It mixed solidarity, aspiration, and necessity in proportions that shifted from one transaction to the next. Here we use the hyphen in South–South to open the space of Glissant’s “relation” without specifying its content, marking neither solidarity nor contradiction alone but an irreducible entanglement of both. This is the condition under which lateral exchange occurs in an unequal world. And it is what the three analytical movements of this paper have, taken together, attempted to describe: a topology of contingent nodes, a field of transformative frictions, and an archipelago of opaque islands in sustained, generative, and genuinely unpredictable relation.

The scholarly implications of this work extend well beyond the cases this article and the related volume examine. The regional networks we have traced, from Pan-Arab and Pan-African to Indian Ocean and Afro-Asian, are not exhausted by the cases assembled here. Nor does this configuration exhaust South–South exchange itself, which reaches well beyond the Non-Aligned and Cold War moment into other periods, actors, and logics of relation. What we have traced, rather, is one historically significant manifestation of that larger field, and the first instance its spatial practice assumed sustained material expression. Each case opens onto the wider scales of the architectural consequences of the Non-Aligned Movement, the G-77 and NIEO, and the professional mobilities that connected Latin America to Africa to Southeast Asia through circuits that existing scholarship has barely begun to map. The archives that capture this hidden history are distributed, partial, and often housed in private collections. This is itself an expression of the opacity we have theorized, and it is a constitutive condition of South–South exchange.

Most importantly, we need to acknowledge that the networks examined here were not the final expression of a postcolonial aspiration that subsequently failed. Such aspirations have not yet ended. As the Global South asserts growing economic and political

agency in the early twenty-first century, the experiments in lateral cooperation of the preceding half-century take on renewed significance. The cases assembled here have only begun to trace a form of relation whose historiography is still being written, and whose unseen gravitational field has only just begun to be recognized.

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