

Don't Just Build: Bridge the Gap.

Alida Vizcaíno & José Lobo-Fontalvo¹

Universidad del Atlántico, Colombia.

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Abstract

This article addresses issues of reading and interpreting construction from architectural, social, educational, and religious angles. We argue in this essay that reading the landscape of a city and the intricacies of a community is the same as reading a book. This reading act implies a very complex process that includes not only comparing and analyzing visual, historical, socio-cultural and verbal information to connect the dots of inequality. It also involves acting within a social realm to bridge the gap between the silenced voices of the disenfranchised and the voices of power holders. Two examples of social builders in regards to this topic have been provided.

Keywords: interpreting construction, reading act, subaltern groups, inequality, silenced voices, architecture.

¹ **Alida Vizcaino** has a BA in education with emphasis in the teaching of English and Spanish from the Atlántico University in Colombia. She completed an MA in comparative literature and a doctoral degree in education at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio. Dr. Vizcaino has publications in Colombia, the United States, and in Europe. **José Lobo** has a BA in education with emphasis in the teaching of English and Spanish from the Atlántico University in Barranquilla, Colombia. He has an MA in intercultural Communications from the University of Maryland Baltimore County and a doctoral degree in education from the University of Cincinnati. Dr. Lobo has publications in the UK, the United States, and in Latin America. Correos electrónicos: joselobo@mail.uniatlantico.edu.co y alidaviz8@yahoo.com

Resumen

Este artículo aborda cuestiones de lectura e interpretación de la arquitectura, las relaciones sociales, el ámbito educativo y religioso. Argumentamos en este ensayo que leer el paisaje de una ciudad y las complejidades de una comunidad es lo mismo que leer un libro. Este acto de lectura implica un proceso muy complejo que incluye no solo comparar y analizar información visual, histórica, sociocultural y verbal para conectar los puntos de desigualdad. También implica actuar dentro de un ámbito social para cerrar la brecha entre las voces silenciadas de los marginados y las voces de los poseedores del poder. Se han proporcionado dos ejemplos de constructores sociales con respecto a este tema.

Palabras clave: Intepretación, acto de lectura, grupos subalternos, desigualdad, voces silenciadas, arquitectura.

Initial Considerations

In this article, we are going to talk about the word *construction* from a multi narrative perspective. This means we are going to deal with it from architectural, educational, social, and political angles. We believe that this is an important topic because in both, developed and developing nations, we need to create *social bridges* to connect the dots and fill in the blanks between the haves and the have-nots across the globe. We thus consider that we should bring some understanding of the social practices that two successful community leaders have followed. Their work has in one way or another helped to alleviate *social inequality* in low-income localities in Barranquilla, Colombia. What do we mean by the word construction first?

The word construction has several meanings. For example, the Cambridge Dictionary defines construction as: 1. the work of building or making something, especially buildings, bridges, etc., 2. the particular type of structure, materials, etc. that something has, 3. a building, and in regards to language 4. the way in which the words in a sentence or phrase are arranged. In this article we are interested in the word construction not only from an architectural outlook, but also from the social, discourse analysis, and grammatical perspectives as well.

let's talk, initially, about building in regards to construction and architecture, and how we can understand the makeup of a whole city from linguistic and discourse analysis angles. We contend that the outlook that is given to towns, cities, and localities in the world needs a reading similar to the reading we give to a book. For example, in a book the authors give us the possibility to guess a word, a future event, or leave us in suspense regarding the end of a chapter. The reading of a city would lead us to wonder, ask questions, use our imagination about specific places, torn down buildings, the history of those individuals who are visible and those who have been made invisible.

In the same vein, Norkunas (1993, 2002), states that we can read monuments and museums as texts. Tourist sites can be understood just as we interpret a story. She asserts that museums are the perfect places to comprehend how history is created as well as to analyze issues of exclusion, ideology and power. Featherstone (1991) calls these problems inner-group struggles and interdependencies which lead to division and fragmentation within the capitalist world system. King (1991) observes that these building phenomena are more linked to an international division of labor that affects both developed and developing countries all over the globe.

We add to Norkunas's, Featherstone's and King's annotations that neighborhoods, towns, cities, metropolis, and mega polis offer multiple narratives that can be interpreted from social class, gender, and race perspectives, among other possibilities. These multiple-life-site stories chronicle the successes, failures, struggles of social builders, cultural constructors, and the accounts of all visible and invisible residents of both urban and rural areas.

Multiple Narratives

In real life, builders and developers create stories not with lexicon but with houses, buildings, bridges, parks, low-income, middle class, and well-to-do neighborhoods. Everywhere we go, a multiple-narrative story is recounted through the organization or

disarray of social and architectural elements within these sites. For instance, in many towns and cities, architectural accounts have thorough and coherent sentences observed in their good hospitals, clinics, high quality schools, public markets, sports centers, etc. However, some localities leave many blank spaces and are full of confusing phrases such as run-down clinics, bad bridges, aqueducts in poor condition, streets full of potholes, full-of-debris-public markets, etc. It is incredible to see that some localities are neat, tidy and orderly in the neighborhoods for the rich and powerful. Yet, this is hardly fulfilled in low-income communities.

While in the civil engineering and architectural planning of cities there are successes and failures, in education, on the other hand, the same things happen. Teachers indeed have in their classrooms not only books, but students that resemble texts. These students come not only from wealthy or low-income neighborhoods but also from either coherent or incoherent homes. This means that students might have either functional or dysfunctional backgrounds no matter their economic status. Not only are these apprentices influenced by their relatives' good or bad examples in their homes at first, but also by their neighborhoods and their communities in space and time.

Following up on the previous comment, teachers should learn to read their students, metaphorically speaking, because they are like living walking books that can be easily comprehended; others, on the other hand, can be understood with great difficulty.

In addition, parents, the first builders of the cultural and emotional lives of their children might educate them in coherent or incoherent ways. For example, they may nurture them physically and emotionally. They generally also teach them to talk and provide them with enough previous information to get them to be good learners at school. They instruct their children to defend themselves and succeed within an economic system that is day and night changing rapidly.

However, there are parents who may raise minors in dysfunctional families, and their kids may be victims of physical and psychological abuse. Sons and daughters in these cases are not provided with a complete array of communicative skills to be able to defend themselves in situations of conflict.

Third, the same holds true not only of architects and engineers, but of government administrators. They direct the future of cities or small towns. Through their good or bad policies, they also direct the lives of their countries' constituents. For example, closing a government health or education program may condemn a whole community to a life of social and economic uncertainty.

On the other hand, a well-intended and organized government plan can help low-income children, women, minorities and non-minorities elevate their economic prospects. Creating these programs might positively impact the future of some if not most of those individuals who would not have been able to make ends meet had they not been provided with these good opportunities.

Indeed, teachers, architects, engineers, and doctors build in the lives of community members, but all of them are affected by the decisions of those who hold the political reins of the nations. These we have called: the constructors of social builders, similar to the creators of the creators as Bourdieu calls them, referring to the creators of artists (1993).

The difference between creators of artists and constructors of constructors is the subject of another article. However, it concerns us how a builder leaves good or bad marks in a city, in a neighborhood, in the souls of a group of students, in the patients of a hospital, or in the future of the inhabitants of any nation.

A builder models through his work effort, and makes a difference in his/her job. A builder gives life to the needy, saves a city from the waters, removes people from the darkness through critical reading, rescues the sick from the claws of death, raises from dust incredible buildings with historical and artistic value, rediscovers the past looking for the truth, lets all the voices speak even if they sound dissonant, sits at the table with the poor, the rich, the middle class, with the person of color, with the indigenous, with the unprotected woman, with the homeless, among other possibilities. In one sentence, s/he sits with his/her past, present and future in constructive dialogues, with genuine good conversational topic-setters, and with sincere conversational endings. All this adds coherence to the life of the builder.

On the other hand, a destructive builder fosters hatred, creates division, uses violence if necessary, feels no compassion for his patients, for his students, for the inhabitants of any neighborhood. S/he feels no pity for the victims of war, for the abandoned, for the despised, for those s/he disagrees with, and for the displaced and immigrants.

We can attest to the fact that the word construction is not a simple word that has to do with architecture or engineering only. It is a word that takes many shapes and fits everything. All the people within a society build or destroy starting with our children, friends, patients, students, clients, viewers, readers and voters, users of social media, among many possibilities.

We conclude that our grammatical constructions may be complete, incomplete, incoherent, contradictory, positive, or negative. By the same token, when we build in any area of our lives, we all become constructors. However, some society members have more power than others to become constructors of builders, not only materially but also socially, spiritually, culturally, and politically. We all must therefore build and contribute positively to the emergence of ever-changing new identities from each corner of the world, i.e., from the core of our homes, jobs, businesses, neighborhoods, villages, towns, cities, and nations.

Therefore, we should not just build with sand and cement, but also with scalpels, dry-erase markers, excel worksheets, technology, etc. We all need to weave the social fabric of communities and societies.

Examples of Social Builder in History

Alberto Assa

An example of a social and educational builder was professor Alberto Assa. He was born in Haydarpaşa, Turkey in 1909. He arrived in Barranquilla, Colombia after fleeing the Franco

regime in Spain for many reasons. In Barranquilla, Alberto Assa founded the Institute of Modern Languages, and he also built from the ground up the Teachers' College of Modern Languages, which in the 1970s came to be recognized as one of the best in Latin America. He created the Pestalozzi High School, which he described as a "complicated delivery." He served as Foreign Language Program director and dean to the College of Education of Universidad del Atlántico. He also served as principal to the free-of-charge-private high school Instituto Experimental del Atlántico.

Based on what Alberto Assa was able to accomplish during the years he lived in Colombia, he became a social constructor because he was able to bridge the gap between underserved students and secondary schools and also higher education institutions. With his proactive behavior, he was also able to help his students to find scholarships to study in North America and Europe. He was also able to help them find jobs in government and private Colombian companies. How did he accomplish all this?

Initially, with a strong willed personality, he was able to get CEOs in private companies to make donations towards his entrepreneurial educational pursuits. Local sponsors, business people, consuls, and ambassadors were invited to attend concerts and art exhibitions that he organized on a monthly basis. The main goal of these events was to enlighten and educate

low-income students who had been historically disenfranchised by the national and local governments of Colombia.

To get his voice heard by the haves and have-nots in Barranquilla, Alberto Assa, under the pseudonym of Cassandra, wrote in a local newspaper. With his outspoken style, he critiqued the government, teachers, politicians, administrators, and stakeholders in general.

In his own words, he wholeheartedly stated in one occasion:

“After so many ups and downs in several attempts to provide absolute free education at different levels and practice the much needed democratization in the field of education and culture, I believed that the time had come to give up new

experiments, all the more so as a few months after the disappearance of the Teachers' College of the Caribbean, the looting of its beautiful rooms began, including all our efforts, and painful funding that had cost us enormously. The salons of Goethe, Shakespeare, Moliere, Dante Alighieri, Caro and Cuervo, Pestalozzi, and Andrés Eloy Blanco disappeared. Its curtains, fine furniture, libraries, paintings also vanished - among those paintings stolen was one by Gómez Jaramillo and one by Cecilia Porras. Many of the institutions' books were also looted. All this failure left us with the fatal destiny of everything being lost after nearly ten years of constant struggle. This would have been demotivating to anyone (Assa, 1994: translated from its original by the authors of this article.)

It is important to mention that during Professor Assa's lifetime; the local government took over the administration of some of the institutions he founded. For example, among these places we find the Pestalozzi Institute, now administered by a local school district, and the Caribbean School of Modern Languages, currently administered by a local state University. These two educational pillars are still standing even though their quality standards have decreased enormously.

A third standing pillar is the Instituto Experimental del Atlántico. This institute is now administered by some of Alberto Assa's teachers, and they are working their fingers to the bone to make it succeed against all odds. It maintains intact professor Assa's vision and mission, as well as its educational quality. This high school serves low-income youngsters who would not have otherwise been educated in the learning of foreign languages, science and the arts. Unfortunately, they face economic challenges because the private donors in Barranquilla are always making cutbacks to their donations.

Why do we consider professor Assa a social builder or a person who bridged the gap between low-income populations and the structures of power? In a few words, professor Assa was able to set up educational institutions that served high school, college, and vocational foreign language students. His vision was to provide high quality education to

low-income learners at no charge. Our data collected, transcribed, and analyzed indicate that even though professor Assa's proactive personality was met with a lot of resistance by local government administrators, he was able to maintain his social mission by working hand in hand with private organizations, North American and European embassies, and members of the community such as teachers, assistants, and academic volunteers.

Professor Assa's educational philosophical beacon in turn was to defend educational quality against those who wished to perpetuate traditional educational, political, and cultural social practices in the cultural "ideological battleground of the Modern World System" as Wallerstein, (1996, p 31) described.



Instituto de Lenguas Modernas,

ILM fundada por Alberto Assa



Escuela Superior de Idiomas Fundada por Alberto Assa

Cyrillus Swinne



Fotografias de Cyrillys Swine at his school and Nursing home

A Dutch catholic priest by the name of Cyrillus Swine, or Padre Cirilo, as everyone knows him in the La Paz neighborhood, arrived in Barranquilla in 1977. With a happy, loyal, and outspoken personality, he felt attracted to this city because of the joviality of its people.

However, what struck him the most about Barranquilla were the stark marked differences between well-to-do individuals and the low-income populations living in the outskirts of the city. This and the theology of liberation that he had read about in the Netherlands clicked in his mind, and he thus decided to fight for the socially neglected in his adoptive city. What is then the liberation theology?

The liberation theology in Latin America was described by Phillip Berryman as cited in Marian Hillar (1993) as:

1. "An interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor;
2. A critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it;
3. A critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor" (2).

Padre Cyrillus Swinne said in his own words: "Do not pray so much because there is more to do" (Semana, 2014). With this motto, he has built a retirement home for low-income elder citizens, a community library, a synthetic indoor soccer field, a clinic for disenfranchised children, among other things. Father Cyrillus has done all of this because he felt welcomed in the city and because he feels that Colombia is a country that has lots of social and physical illnesses. Among these he mentions: poverty, corruption, and all sorts of health problems. He thus invites everyone to create a healthier society so that they *all* may live life with dignity. He believes we have to deal with issues of education, health, and recreation to properly solve the social ills of Colombians, and specifically of the Barranquillero community (Padre Cyrillus Swinne interview on the W Radio, 2013).

Padre Cyrillus's words remind us that social struggle should be led not with weapons and explosives, but with honest, frank and peaceful community work. His words match the

words of Pope Paul VI when he mentioned in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* in regards to wild capitalism:

"[It is a system] ... which considers profit as the key motive for economic progress, competition as the supreme law of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right that has no limits and carries no corresponding social obligation".

"We know ... that revolutionary uprising - save where there is manifest long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country - produces new injustices, throws more elements out of balance and brings on new disasters"(Pope Paul VI as cited in Marian Hilar, 1993, p. 4).

Padre Cyrillus work summarizes in practice what we as human beings should do in life. We need to participate more in community work by dirtying our hands with social and cultural activities to help those in need to be part of an active capitalist economy that under no circumstances is going to stop or postpone its profit margins or its financial losses. Professors, medical doctors, engineers, nurses, architects, technicians, among others, need to provide, not only quality services but also work hand in hand with disenfranchised, silenced and abused communities so that they may be involved in "full legitimate participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1998, p. 29) in society.

Conclusions

As a conclusion, to connect the ideas of cultural struggles and exploitation with social building within a capitalist world system, we agree with Norkunas's annotation (1993, 2002) that individuals can interpret monuments and museums as texts or stories. According to her vision museums are the sites to figure out how the history of exclusion, ideology, and

power has been created. It is in those places where we can see that inner-group hostilities have led to unavoidable segmentation within the capitalist economies. We also conclude that individuals such as Alberto Assa and Cyrillus Swinne were able to read not only buildings and edifications but they were also able to read the culture of their localities as if they were reading a book. They were able to read between the lines of the messages of some

city administrators and many international government dignitaries. Both Assa and Swinne attracted the attention of power holders who, in turn, helped them create schools, college programs, clinics, libraries, classical concert events, art exhibitions, indoor- soccer fields, old people's homes, etc. Yet, these social builders' actions were at odds with the ideology and the actions of most government city managers. These social struggles (King, 1996) as part of an ideological battleground (Wallerstein, 1996) were appeased because Assa and Swinne talked some administrators into helping them help low-income people by reserving and giving these CEOs places of honor in cultural events in exchange for their financial contributions.

Based on the data collected, we state that social and cultural struggles can be resolved by finding a common ground through dialogue between power holders and working class individuals. This dialogue can be triggered by individuals such as Assa and Swinne, as well as others who may be interested in working honestly for their communities.

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