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To cite this article: Daniel A. Barber (2020): Doors and Portals, Revisited, Architectural Theory Review, DOI: [10.1080/13264826.2020.1822301](https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2020.1822301)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2020.1822301>



Published online: 08 Oct 2020.



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ABSTRACT

This article explore some of the opportunities in the profession of architectural history emergent from the pandemic and intensified racial unrest. It aims to see the pandemic as an opportunity, a portal following Roy, as means to reconsider habits, practices, and commitments.

KEYWORDS

Climate change; cultural techniques; history and theory; racism; transformation

The current **conjuncture** is overwhelmed by three intersecting crises: the Covid-19 pandemic, centuries of racial oppression, and the looming disasters of climate instability. Architecture finds itself to be a crucial arena for mediating, and perhaps mitigating, these multiple complications. Some of these intersections are countervailing: we are, on one side, more deeply embedded in our interior spaces—what were once homes are now places for work, for schooling, and havens against the invisible virus; on the other, the righteous unrest in the streets calls with a searing urgency, drawing us into a re-energized urban realm striving to make voices heard. The pandemic has made us hyper aware of the barriers constraining this “inside.”

What are the prospects, in this conjecture, for increased liberation? Where are the necessary tools? In the USA, many are simultaneously heartened by the renewed insistence on equality and dismayed by the rank idiocy of national leadership, as we fall once again into exponentially rising viral cases. When thinking about the pandemic parallel to the Black Lives Matter protests, we are struggling to operate simultaneously with the *familiar* and the *unfamiliar*: racial oppression and police brutality have been normalized, but now are rendered in relief as protests and legislation searches for non-violent modes of social cohesion. A similar framework has been essential to the theorization of climate for the last decade or so:¹ hopes for the future abound, but are clouded by the now familiar anticipation of the unexpected—that, from here, it is difficult to know what will happen in the coming days, weeks, or months. The future, or at least collective ability to determine it, has been foreclosed by forces, geopolitical or geophysical, seemingly out of our control.² Through the virus, we are beginning to recognize a collective reliance on comfortable delusions, and work against it. At stake in particular, in architecture and in theory, is a renegotiation of this “we” and its constituents, now more firmly aiming to redress racial, gendered, and economic stratifications.

I am struck by the productive entanglement of two resonant voices: first, in his celebrated essay, now over a decade old, “The Climate of History,” Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that the epochal instabilities of climate change can “precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility”—an assumed temporal continuity, often the spectrum on which theory seeks to take hold, is no longer viable. Tomorrow may not look like today, and we don’t even know the terms of these possible transformations—the pandemic was, for most of us, something of a surprise. What, then, are the transformational possibilities of the recent protests, monuments coming down, emergent legislation around abolishing the police, and so on? “The mansion of modern freedom,” Chakrabarty also writes, “stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use.” A recognition of how architecture has been embedded in fossil fuels, Chakrabarty implicitly poses a challenge—how do we imagine a future, adequate to these forms of righteous unrest, in which mansions become housing collectives, powered by wind or solar energy rather than oil and coal?³

The second voice is that of Arundhati Roy, whose widely read reflections from early April 2020 on the chaos of India’s forced Covid migration invoke hope. She proposes that “the pandemic is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next ... [T]he lockdown,” she continues, “worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things”—things such as, in the USA, a dependence on migrant, compromised, and “essential” labor; a radically unequal health system; a racially biased and violent police force. “Our minds,” Roy writes, “are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality,” trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair,” she concludes, “it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.”⁴

One challenge for the history and theory of architecture, as likely for other fields, is how to focus research and teaching onto these ruptures—how to shepherd in this new world without pretending that we know what it will look like. How to, as well, acknowledge that some of these “doomsday machines,” in Roy’s terminology, “that we have built for ourselves,” are, indeed, buildings—Chakrabarty’s “mansions,” reliant on fossil fuels, exploitative labor, biased zoning, and the reduction of buildings to assets. Most of the theoretical debates of the last few decades, insofar as they have referenced buildings, have been concerned with buildings sealed from the outside and replete with fossil-fueled conditioning systems, often, when at scale, reliant on baroque investment, insurance and re-insurance mechanisms. At risk of belaboring these analogies, central to the task of architectural theory (still ...) is an analysis of these machines and the means to deconstruct them (literally), working toward an expansion of freedom and an opening on to a yet-unknown future.

If the viral pandemic is a portal, so are the protests—both are openings into a future long anticipated by some, shocking to many. This portal is not a physical object, but can, allegorically, be subjected to numerous familiar frameworks for architectural analysis: first, what does it look like? Is it a physical door, or simply an opening? What is

it made of? Whose history does it reflect? Perhaps most simply and essentially—if the pandemic is a portal, does it have a handle? How does it open? Can it be closed?

Bernhard Siegert begins an essay in *Gray Room* as follows:

We have forgotten how “to close a door quietly and discreetly, yet firmly.” In his American exile Theodor W. Adorno diagnosed the decline of an elementary cultural technique [Kulturtechnik], something he felt to be nothing less than a prelude to fascism. One has to slam car doors and refrigerator doors, Adorno noted, while other doors snap shut on their own. Doors cease to be cultural media that preserve a “core of experience” and instead change into machines that demand movements in which Adorno, in all seriousness, saw “already the violent, hard-hitting, unrelenting jerkiness of Fascist abuses” at work.⁵

Siegert’s point, the cause for Adorno’s misgivings, is that the door had transitioned: no longer a physical object infused with culturally specific habits and expectations, now a technological device, with a fascist jerkiness that might premeditate Roy’s doomsday machine. For Adorno this is distasteful, a decline of high culture, a falling off of an abyss. For Siegert, it is an opportunity to assert “a different concept of culture ... a plurality of cultures that abandons a one-sided conception of human-things relations that privileges human beings”—a plurality focused here on a human/machine constellation, but that also resonates *within* cultural dynamics to permit the recognition of the value and vibrancy of multiple perspectives.⁶

“The concept of cultural techniques,” Siegert continues, reaching his main point, “comprises a more or less complex actor network that includes technical objects and chains of operations (including gestures, among other things) in equal measures.” The machine is not outside of us, but is part of our gestures, desires, habits and aspirations. Human agency is constituted alongside technologies and techniques—not before, above, or in reference to a stable concept of culture. As we change, our capacity to open and close doors changes with us.⁷

Siegert goes on to describe a door photographed by Marcel Duchamp in 1927. The layout of Duchamp’s Paris apartment was such that when the bathroom door was open, it closed the portal that led to the bedroom. “Duchamp’s paradoxical door is thus always simultaneously opened and closed”⁸—a seeming architectural anomaly that is something of a prelude, still following Siegert, to some compelling reflections by Robert Musil relative to the revolving glass door of office towers and shopping malls—“the only original door,” quotes Siegert of Musil, “conceived in our time.”⁹

The revolving door refigures the entrance without destabilizing the portal’s capacity for cultural distinction. This is magnified, increasingly since Musil’s reflection in 1926, by the importance of such revolving doors for the thermal stability of the interior. It “manifests,” as Siegert noted, “a conception of architecture as a thermodynamic machine.”¹⁰ The brushes at the edge of the revolving portal allow for ingress and egress while minimizing disturbance to the conditioned interior volume; it is a device of climate efficiency, and thereby feeds into the ubiquity of climate control systems. Musil’s interest was in the continuous flow of people this new door allowed, its uniform treatment of disparate subjects. “In former times,” Musil wrote in “Doors and Portals,” “the door was an entrance into the society of privilege, which was opened or shut in the face of the new arrival, depending on who he [sic] was; generally it decided his fate.”



Figure 1. MMM Roberto, Edifício Marques do Herval, Rio de Janeiro, 1953. The building, as with many in Rio, does not have a typical entry point, rather the pilotis open onto a court, where elevators ascend to the office floors and this “stair-ramp” descends to a sub-grade shopping area—an area which includes the one of the most celebrated bookstores in town, the Livraria Leonardo da Vinci, known in particular for a rich stock of volumes on architecture and architectural theory.

However, he concludes, “the great age of doors is behind us!” And then: “We don’t even slam the door in anyone’s face anymore.”¹¹ Again, the terror of the universalized “we.”

Circling back to Adorno’s anxiety: the revolving door has no latch, handle, or recognizable human interface (fig. 1). It is, as Siegert quotes an early advertisement, “Always Closed.” It is all machine, a vital part, as a definitive barrier, of Roy’s “doomsday” prognosis, evidence of “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live,” now following Benjamin, that “is not the exception but the rule.” Is this what we are trying to escape, this constant state of structural panic? Or this endless return to familiar theoretical tropes, caught up in their own biases and situated misgivings. The revolving door reveals the ongoing catastrophe of daily life *before the pandemic*; note in particular Benjamin insisting that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us” about the delusions of any non-emergency condition—“we,” here, refers to the tenured professoriate, the architectural theorists who are, in the face of racial unrest, augurs of climate disasters, and the widespread discomfort, at best, of the pandemic, coming to terms with the recognition that the stories we tell, stories of architecture, are discursive sites for the unveiling of centuries of oppressions. Our celebrated buildings constructed by slave labor; office

towers dedicated to resource extraction; housing estates that offer a minimum condition for existence. “We,” as Benjamin continues, “must attain a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight.”¹² The chemical experiment of the pandemic, following Roy, is a leeching out of the toxins behind the wall, as a growing stain of embedded bias and systemic racism emerges; we, as a discipline, must resist the urge to just add another layer of paint and hope it goes away.

Who goes through this portal, escaping the doomsday machines we have built? Architecture, as a profession and a discipline, is a mansion built on a foundation of exclusion. Theory has been an essential gatekeeper: what one has read, with whom and in what context, is essential to letting someone in, or seeing them out. The architecture profession’s racial inequities have been the subject of much discussion in the USA these past few weeks—around 2% of registered architects are Black Americans. The percentage of Black PhDs in Architectural History and Theory is even smaller; when we get to faculty, tenured faculty, school leadership positions, vanishingly (literally) few. Some (far from all) US schools are beginning to reassess the pathways and decisions that lead an individual to study in the field, then in to practice or advanced research. That this happens alongside continued celebrations of participation in biennials, or the hosting of a Pritzker winner, for example, is an abstract contradiction that is not yet being confronted. “Business-as-usual” persists despite and alongside the urgency of the moment. “Still far more outdated than the door,” Musil muses, “is the doorframe”—for us, the institutional apparatus of architectural academia can now revel in the outdatedness of practices put in the past, and focus on a future that emerges, with no small relief, as unfamiliar to the present.

So, one vibrant task for theory: open the door, materially and symbolically. Read and reflect on material seen to be outside the disciplinary purview and strive to bring those writings, perspectives, and individuals into play, to insist on new forms of discourse; to make discursive space for voices that have been implicitly or explicitly maligned or ignored—gendered and racial voices, to be sure, but also the range of perspectives from the dynamism of world cultures, a dismantling of the implicit frame of “western thought” as essential to any way forward.¹³ Perhaps Roy’s portal is an indelible opportunity to be achieved through knowledge and consciousness, rather than scaffolded by buildings and frames, opened with levers. We, as theorists, have some catching up to do—reading, listening, learning—to play our part in the coming transformation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Notes

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2. Jennifer Wenzel, “Evicted from the Future,” *Alienocene: The First Outernational* (2016): 1–15.
3. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 197–222; 197, 208.
4. Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal,” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020.
5. Bernhard Siegert, “Doors: On the Materiality of the Symbolic,” *Grey Room* 47 (Spring 2012): 6–23. Siegert is quoting from Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1997), 40, with a slightly modified translation. See also Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), esp. 192–205; and Reinhold Martin, “Unfolded, Not Opened: On Bernhard Siegert’s *Cultural Techniques*,” *Grey Room* 62 (Winter 2016): 102–15.
6. Siegert, “Doors,” 7–8.
7. Siegert, “Doors,” 8.
8. Siegert, “Doors,” 11.
9. Siegert, “Doors,” 15, quoting Robert Musil, “Doors and Portals” in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (London: Penguin, 1995).
10. Siegert, “Doors,” 18. Siegert also references the original appellation of “the new revolving storm door,” resonating with these more heightened climatic distinctions.
11. Musil, “Doors and Portals,” 59–63, 62.
12. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writing*, v, 1938–1940 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.
13. See, for example, Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019); and Arturo Escobar, *Design for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).