

Shining a Spotlight on the Audience

Ruth Tay

Introduction

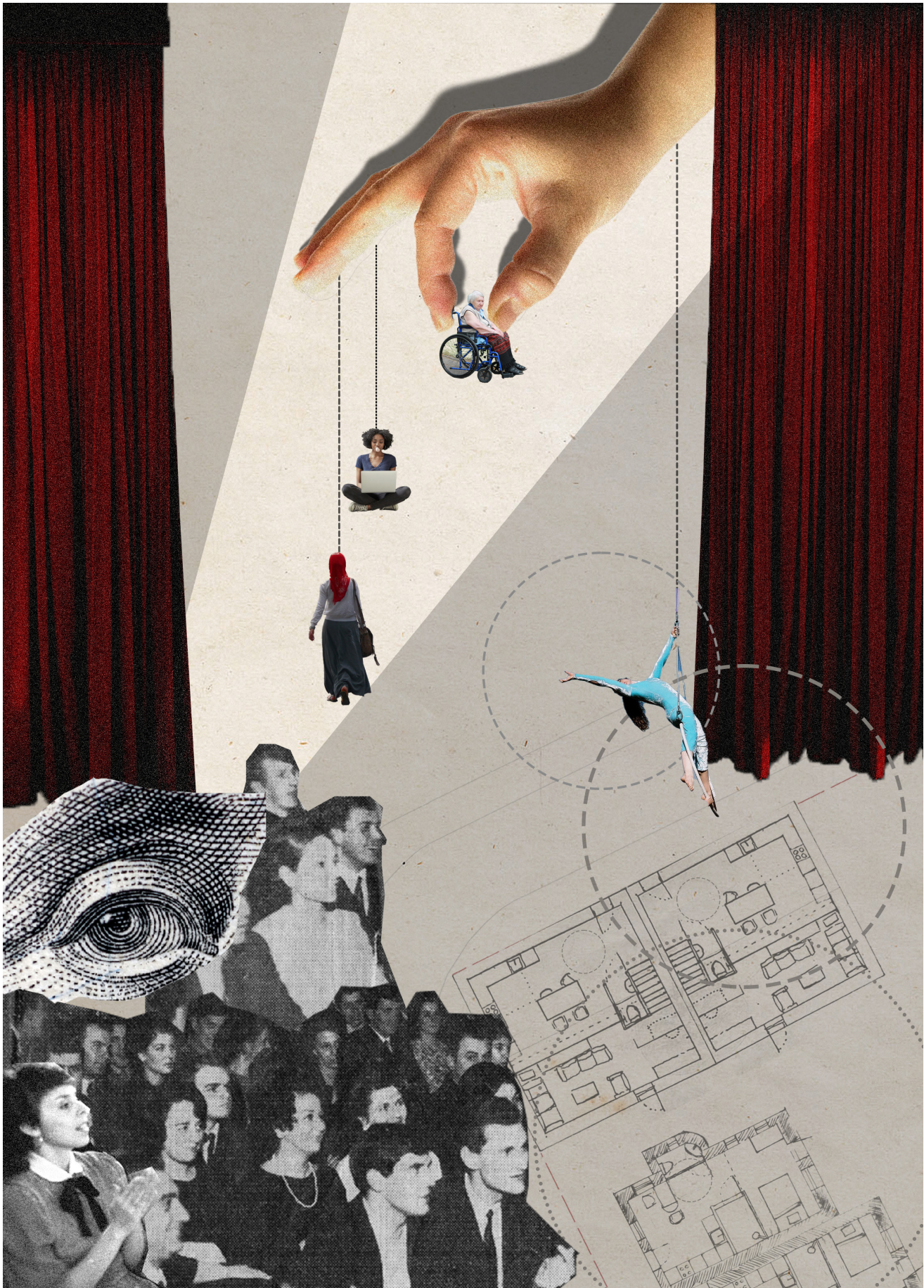
My collage explores the white saviour complex, and how this shapes the role we play as designers. The white saviour complex refers to well-meaning acts of philanthropy that reduce areas in poverty to a theatre where skilled white people can act as the hero, while ignoring the systemic causes behind the problems in these areas.¹ As Teju Cole points out, emotional validation is emphasised over transformative change.² ‘Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action’ led me to realise the tendency of our designs to perpetuate white saviourism. Sheffield’s reputation as a “Social School of Architecture” encourages designs that aim to alleviate the problems of the marginalised, without a critical understanding of the issues we are tackling.

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As stated in ‘Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action’, the subconscious coaxing towards a ‘creative saviour complex’ means that architects are cast as social heroes, a role that is patronising towards the subaltern communities for whom we design. Instead, we should be practicing solidarity and allowing more people to have control over their built surroundings.

In the collage accompanying this text, the stage curtains and predominantly white audience represents the performative nature of Sheffield School of Architecture as a seemingly progressive school in

- 1 Julio Cammarota, ‘Blindsided by the Avatar: White Saviors and Allies Out of Hollywood and in Education’, *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 33:3 (2011), 242-259, <DOI: 10.1080/10714413.2011.585287>.
- 2 Teju Cole. ‘The White-Savior Industrial Complex,’ *The Atlantic*, 21 March 2012, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>> [accessed 19 June 2021].



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front of a wider academic circle. The role of architectural journalism and publications as the audience is pivotal to this performance. We must stop applauding virtue signalling and support serious reflective evolution. I have reflected on my acting role in this performance, having class privilege but lacking white privilege. It is easy to bask in applause under the pretence of a “socially conscious” design, but when you can be cast as both the oppressor and the oppressed then you begin to probe the structures behind these roles. My power to influence the built environment rests entirely on my skills and the financial support of my family. If either of these things were to vanish, it would be up to an architect to “consult” or ignore my views.

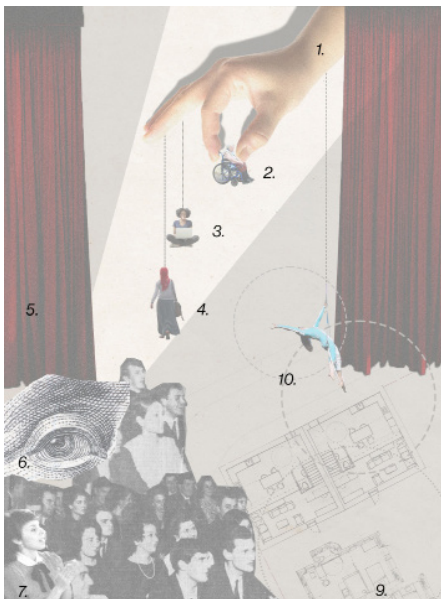
Moving in certain circles yields access to better job opportunities, represented by the accessibility circles in this collage. High costs and time pressures of the main path to qualification hamper working-class and BAME students’ access to architecture, as discussed in the ‘Call to Action’. These circles also refer to the extra and invisible hoops minority students have to jump through in university or professional life. This can be partly addressed through mentor schemes or other new systems but first we must acknowledge the intersection of class and race instead of pretending we are a post-racial society.

Sheffield School of Architecture also has a role in shaping our view of the Black and Asian communities for whom we frequently design. What role do disenfranchised communities play in the design process? Often they are flimsy paper cutouts pasted on a finished render to effect the appearance of diversity – replaceable background extras in a composition arranged by a white hand. Casting minorities in a victim role renders them powerless; waiting for an architect, unable to effect real change themselves, is a false narrative. Users have been designers and builders for millennia, but as architects we have hoarded agency over the built environment. Destroy this false dichotomy between the passive user and the designer who holds power and expertise over people’s heads. Whoever holds the pen wields power, and it is time to pass it on.

Non-engagement with these issues while profiting from them is naïve complicity. We cannot design solutions to problems that we do not fully grasp. Deepening understanding through a humanities curriculum rooted in current issues that address race, more equitable design processes, and widening participation in architecture can go some way towards dismantling the white saviour complex in design. This is not a performance, the decisions we make have concrete consequences in reality.

Biography

Ruth Tay is currently completing BArch Part 1 at Sheffield School of Architecture, with interests including decolonisation and urban permaculture. Raised in Leeds with Singaporean-Malaysian roots, dual identities and exploring complexity have been at the forefront of her mind for the large part of her youth. Since 2019 Ruth has been involved in Students for Climate Action campaigning for sustainability in architectural education. Outside of university she enjoys gardening, playing the violin and making jewellery.



Collage references

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2. Senior Guidance, Senior older woman in wheelchair outdoors, digital photograph, Flickr, 27 June 2017 <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/146515428@N03/35529164806>> [accessed 14/12/2021]
3. No title, architectural cutout, Non Scandinavia, no date, <<http://www.nonscandinavia.com/>> [accessed 30/05/2021]
4. No title, architectural cutout, Non Scandinavia, no date, <<http://www.nonscandinavia.com/>> [accessed 30/05/2021]
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