

**JOE MCGONEGAL:** This is the Slice of MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, writer for the MIT alumni association. If you're as much of a fan of Downton Abbey as I am, you'll notice that one thing the Crawleys don't do much of is listen to the radio. Though it's likely that groundbreaking technology may come along in season five. What we do witness in the Crawley family is the disintegrating of much of Victorian England, something the founding of BBC Radio in 1927 helped to hasten. Our guest this week, Shundana Yusaf, talks about the radio's influence in such aristocratic settings as Downton Abbey in her new book, *Broadcasting Buildings: Architecture on the Wireless, 1927 to 1945*, published this month by MIT Press. Yusaf, who earned her Master of architectural studies at MIT in 2001, is assistant professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Utah. Professor Yusaf's research examines architecture's role in the media and media's role in architecture. *Broadcasting Buildings* not only explores what radio, of all media, did for architecture, but it speaks to the way that broadcasting has brought architecture into critical debates about democracy. I asked Shundana Yusaf what stories this book tells that no other book before it has done.

**YUSAF:** One of the first things that I would say is about the role of radio, because radio-- There's a lot of work that has been done on different medias in relationship to architecture. Radio is one of those mediums because it's a old medium, it's non-visual. Nobody has kind of touched upon it. I wanted to actually work on British architecture because I'm actually interested in post-Colonial studies. So, Britain was one way to actually have larger, global topics being included into it. And so BBC, which has constantly came up in my work, and I thought that I should really look closely at what BBC did for architecture. Because, even today, when I'm traveling and the only television station that I can see is the English station, BBC station, that I can understand. Like in France or Germany.

It's always programs on architectural history. Why were they doing programs on architecture? I was really, really surprised. And I was thinking, why would architects want to talk about architecture on radio? Because it was such a tedious process at that time. There's a whole transformation that is taking place in the economy that is transforming architecture's role in society.

**MCGONEGAL:** You can't read this book without thinking about Downton Abbey.

**YUSAF:** And Downton Abbey is a perfect example of what all the transformations that I'm talking about,

what is happening. Because now these houses are becoming white elephants because people, they actually saw such debt duties, a tremendous amount of debt duties, that the Parliament imposed upon the aristocracy and the countryside. So, these become a burden for the families. And as you see in Downton Abbey, too, the ownership is transforming as well. So, it's becoming these middle class people who are taking over these properties. And the aristocrats are selling them, moving their properties into something else, some kind of liquid assets. And then the conservation of these sites become a huge, huge problem. The architects take lead on that. It's not the other classes of people, but it's the architects who become champions of conservation.

But it puts them in a very strange situation. Conservation means that you have to promote the protection of properties that in popular culture are seen as symbols of historical injustice. And suddenly now you have to revamp them and package them as the heritage of the people who have been subjugated.

**MCGONEGAL:** Americans see that in the National Register of Historic Places. But that wasn't until later, right?

**YUSAF:** That was later. But in England, you have the National Trust, that becomes a much larger thing, has already emerged. You have an equivalent phenomenon in Britain taking place.

**MCGONEGAL:** What about other challenges in writing this book?

**YUSAF:** Well, there are two types of problems that occurred. One is just every PhD student is an older student. And, especially in architecture. I have a few years of architectural experience, so I was married, with a child, and my husband was in Thailand, and I had a one-year-old baby. And I was traveling across the world constantly between archives, between Bangkok, where my husband was, and London and Princeton. So, I was just like, four months one place, four months another place, four months third place. But intellectually and methodologically, I had a very big challenge that I didn't know how to write a history of institutions. But one of the things that I do in this building, which is what happened at MIT, one of my readers Mark Jarzombek, who's now the acting assistant dean at the school. What he said to me is that one of the things that you need to do is to look at BBC not just as a medium of communication, but look at it as an institution of art.

And bang! The minute I thought of it as another museum without walls, suddenly a lot of things fell in place for me. I started comparing what is a traditional museum with walls, what kind of conditions does it create for us to appreciate art and architecture, and what kind of conditions

a radio produces for us. Which is like, I'm sitting with my slippers, cigarette in my hand, with rollers in my head and I can listen to a radio program. Right?

**MCGONEGAL:** It's not how we usually dress for the museum.

**YUSAF:** It's not. You will go in your pajamas to the museum, right? It's a very different context. Plus, when you listen at home, you're listening in a context in which the necessities of everyday life are still impinging upon you, right? But the museum isolates from all that. You look at a work of art as a work of art first. In the domestic conditions, it has to make meaning in this very mundane, everyday sense.

**MCGONEGAL:** What about accessing BBC archives? That's a pretty well-preserved place.

**YUSAF:** The thing is that the BBC has split its archive into different places. And so, the sound archives are in the British Library, the written archives are in Caversham. Problem is that German bombs took care of most of the stuff that was in London before 1945.

**MCGONEGAL:** Does the end of the war play into why this book ends in 1945? It must.

**YUSAF:** Absolutely. Because in 1945, the BBC transforms the rule of radio programming in producing this kind of educating the masses in high art. That project tweaked by producing rather than one integrated, national broadcast, or national program, into three different types of broadcasting. So, BBC wanted to come down to art without giving up on their academic ideals. And so they produced a radio station especially for academics.

**MCGONEGAL:** How about your MIT education? How was it put to good use in this book?

**YUSAF:** Before I came to MIT, I was truly a kind of an architect. And what I learned at MIT was that there was not one way of doing architecture. Just building buildings was not one way of doing, practicing architecture. Writing and criticism and research and scholarship and teaching are other forms of architectural practice. The other thing is that I realized a whole new way that architecture is part of a kind of cultural politics. But also creating a community of people who are in as much pain as you are about learning, who are not really trained to write. Because most of us are trained to draw and think in spatial terms, and now, not to give up on all that education and training, but to bring scholarly endeavour to architectural education. Mixing the two was really what I thought that I learned at MIT.

**MCGONEGAL:** Talk about, what are you reading right now that's exciting you?

**YUSAF:** I've given up on the kind of reading that one is able to do, the luxury that one has when one reads a novel from beginning to the end. Very few books that I can do that anymore. I'm writing about Robert Smithson's spiral jetty. That is an amazing earthwork that he did in 1970 here in Utah. So, I was reading a brilliant piece by Ann Reynolds. Her article was called "At the Jetty," in a book, *Robert Smithson: Spiral Jetty*. It's one of those examples where an artist is trying to just move out of the museum, to do art in areas which are outside the city, outside the museum, in the landscape. And in America, there's no better place than Utah.

**MCGONEGAL:** Good. And you're currently working on *A Monograph on Utah's 100 Most Representative Buildings* to *A History of Six Sufi Shrines in India, Pakistan, and Iran*. I think you're probably the only academic focusing on both Pakistan and Utah at the same time.

**YUSAF:** Exactly. Yeah. I'm the only one who's doing that. But Utah makes sense because I'm interested in questions of globalization and the challenges of that. And media studies goes hand in hand with that. So for me, it's like using the same lens, just focusing it on different parts of the world. I was on leave last semester, and I was in Iran. And I went to one of the six shrines, two of them are in Iran. And so I went to Bayazid Bastami's shrine. And there, there was this very eloquently dressed Imam who was sitting inside the precinct of the shrine, the tomb of Bayazid Bastami, and he was reading Quran. And guess where he was reading the Quran? He was holding his phone and he was reading the Quran on the phone.

Because now the Quran is considered to be a sacred book, which you're not supposed to put on the floor, you have to have it on a higher platform, you're supposed to cleanse your body before you read it. So, there are all these rituals that go with reading the Quran. But when it's in the cell phone, does that mean that now you have to treat your cell phone like-- So, the materiality of that having gone, I think all these rituals are going to transform. And once these rituals transform, the role of the space is going to transform. So we have to create new terms for talking about space. Even though it's exactly, physically the same space.

**MCGONEGAL:** What about topics that you'd like to see your peers cover more of in the field?

**YUSAF:** When I came to Utah, I had to teach a world survey course. And I had never taught a world survey course, and I thought, oh, God, this arranged marriage that they're imposing on me. But I've fallen in love with the political agenda of the world history. We have a brilliant textbook, actually, at MIT. My advisor, Mark Jarzombek, has written a book that I use in my class on

global architecture. But there's a kind of agenda of how we can provincialize Europe and America, Euro-centric, Euro-Atlantic worldview and the values that it brings to the study of cultures of the world. I think that we have a fabulous opportunity in the world history approach.

And one of the things that I'm doing in my next book, which is Iran, India and Pakistan, is to bring the lessons from that. And I would love more people to provide models for that way of writing. Discipline has to move in that direction because we are in the age of globalization.

**MCGONEGAL:** Shundana Yusaf is the author of *Broadcasting Buildings: Architecture on the Wireless*, available now through MIT Press, on Amazon.com, or at your favorite local bookstore. Shundana Yusaf, thanks for joining us.

**YUSAF:** Thank you so much, Joe.

**MCGONEGAL:** Tune in to our Slice of MIT Alumni Books podcast by searching for MIT Alumni on iTunes or Google Play. Follow us on Twitter @MITalumni, and read other alumni news and profiles on our blog at [alum.mit.edu](http://alum.mit.edu). Thanks for listening.