

In an African school of architecture, on the African continent, teaching African students, what sort of material is being presented to learners, and how is it being interpreted?

A minor majority

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'Coming of age' is a term that brings with it a range of legal, moral, and emotive connotations, often accompanied by a mixture of pride at having reached the all-important threshold between adolescence and adulthood, and trepidation at what the threshold portends. The terms 'age of consent', 'age of licence', and 'age of majority' – often used interchangeably – give young adults legal and moral permission to drink, drive, vote, smoke, have sex, and marry (among other rights). Depending on context, the threshold from being a minor to attaining majority (adulthood) is marked by a ritual or a ceremony, giving the threshold cultural as well as legal significance. But thresholds, as we already know, are places of action, movement, change ... rarely comfortable or easy and seldom precise.

Re-reading Peter Carolin's *Leader* from 1995 brings with it a range of emotions, chief among them a sense of *plus ça change*. At thirty-one, when it was published, I was already a decade beyond my own legal coming of age. Yet, having started architecture in my late twenties, 1995 was also the

year I finished my architectural studies, reaching a kind of professional age of majority, and the year in which I began to teach. And, since much of this essay is concerned with architectural education in South Africa, where I now live and work, 1995 should also be noted as the year after the country's first democratic elections, which brought apartheid to an end and granted legal age of majority to some fourteen million non-white South Africans, the vast majority of whom voted for the very first time in their lives.

Thus, coming of age, race, postcolonial conflict, architectural education, and the imagination coalesce here, uneasily, it must be said, but profoundly intertwined. In a place where architecture and ideology came together under the banner of apartheid spatial planning, leaving a country so deeply scarred that it is doubtful it will ever recover, the past twenty-one years have seen a number of significant changes in the way architecture is taught, learned, and researched, but perhaps none more so than in the last two.



1 AP/Dennis Farrell at Open Source (<http://historycollection.co/35-pictures-nelson-mandelas-struggle-end-apartheid-south-africa/2/>).

While architectural research in other parts of the world may have travelled some distance from the somewhat gloomy picture painted by Carolin in 1995, it is safe to say that on the African continent, including South Africa, which tends to see itself as Europe's beleaguered southern-most outpost, it has not. However, the question of research in an architectural context cannot be separated from the larger political and economic questions that surround research and education in general. Most of the statements in Carolin's sixth paragraph hold true today: architectural research still has a bad name. Much of it has little to do with reality (here I substitute a word). State funding has all but dried up and much of what is published that qualifies as 'research' is so remote from teaching and design – and, by extension, design research – is viewed through a myopic lens of suspicion and mistrust. The link between research and practice is broken, but more disturbing (at least from my perspective), so too is the link between research and the imagination. And herein lies the rub [1].



#RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall

#RhodesMustFall was a protest movement that began on 9 March 2015, directed at a statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, arguably South Africa's premier university. The bronze statue of a seated Rhodes was sculpted by Marion Walgate, the wife of architect Charles Walgate, who worked on the design and construction of new buildings at the university in the 1930s. The campaign to remove the statue, seen as a symbol of institutional racism and colonial ideology, captured the headlines and received global attention. A month later, following a university council vote late at night, the statue was removed [2].

The protests sharply divided public opinion in South Africa and led to other allied student movements at other universities, both within South Africa and elsewhere in the world. Calls for a 'decolonised' and 'transformed' education began to gather pace as students, frustrated with the slow pace of change within South African academic institutions, brought teaching across the country to a halt. #FeesMustFall began six months later, partly aligned to the earlier protest movement, but focusing on student demands for 'free' and 'decolonised' education, unwittingly but correctly conflating the two terms [3].

Although both movements have largely disappeared from the public's everyday consciousness, their legacy has not. 'Decolonisation' and 'transformation' are the academic buzzwords of the decade, although the precise definition of what it means to decolonise any curriculum

² Tony Carr, 'Goodbye Cecil John Rhodes'.

³ Myolisi, "'Do Not Shoot!'", The Students Shout'.



– let alone a South African curriculum – is still unclear. In many ways, both the protests and the subsequent confusion over how to tackle the issue have brought many disciplines to their metaphorical knees. Curiously, however, and in ways I am still attempting to articulate, in the case of architecture, it had the opposite effect.

Transformative Pedagogies

In 2016, almost a year after the first #FeesMustFall protests began, at the Graduate School of Architecture, University of Johannesburg (GSA), in a not-so-subtle nod to Beatriz Colomina's ongoing research and teaching think tank, we made the decision to respond directly to the challenges of the recent protests. In many ways, the mood was similar to the nascent stirrings in the late 1990s in the UK and the US when a number of black and minority architects began seeking ways to articulate their perspectives in press and print. *White Papers*, *Black Marks: Race, Space and Architecture* (Lokko, 2000), *Architecture in Black: Theory Space and Appearance* (Fields, 2000), and *Sites of Memory* (Barton, 2001) were all published at the tail end of the 1990s, signalling a new urgency among black academics to insert issues of race and identity into architectural canon. With the benefit of hindsight, it now appears to have been a move that was almost twenty-one years out of step. Where those publications failed to make a significant mark on teaching – particularly on design teaching and research – in the 1990s, in post-apartheid South Africa in 2016, twenty-one years after the country's first free elections, the 'game' was suddenly on again. Far from being marginal to architectural discourse, race, identity, and decolonisation were now central concerns.

After a few weeks of intense discussion, the GSA's new 'framework' took shape. The following statement is an extract from a longer document that was presented to the University's Executive Leadership Group in a series of open seminars that sought to describe the ways in which different faculties and disciplines might grapple with the challenges thrown down by protesting students.

Transformative Pedagogies is a teaching and research programme that seeks to transform both the way we teach architecture and what we teach. South African universities are experiencing an upsurge in student activism, fuelled by two distinct concerns: insufficient funding for poor students and the cultural alienation of black students at historically white universities. Both are complex, contested issues but the legacy of apartheid spatial ideology and planning has left architecture as a discipline in a particularly precarious position. While the terms 'decolonisation', 'transformation', and 'curriculum' have become key buzz words, the definition of what it means to 'decolonise' or 'transform' a curriculum remains a grey area. There is no clarity about whose responsibility it is to undertake this process. It is crucial to develop shared understandings through continuous dialogue and experimentation about the meaning of both curriculum and decolonisation. Educational experience implies more than the

topics covered in any given course: it encompasses the attitudes, values, dispositions, and world views that are learned, unlearned, relearned, reformed, deconstructed, and reconstructed while undertaking a degree. The crude definition of 'decolonisation' involves replacing works from Europe or the global North with local theorists and African authors, a process that is meant to prevent universities from becoming mere extensions of previous colonisers.

But decolonising the curriculum is far more nuanced than simply replacing theorists and authors. If the word 'curriculum' encompasses a broader educational experience, universities first need to define how they approach the development and dissemination of curricula. Only then can they move forward with the process of decolonisation. However, the question of how postconflict and postcolonial societies like South Africa approach curriculum is particularly complex. At the GSA, we choose to address curriculum as both content and praxis: in other words, focusing not on individuals or the group in isolation, but rather through exploring how both individuals and groups create understandings and practices. We understand it as vital for all participants – staff and students – to agree that colonialism and apartheid robbed the country of ideas, skills, creativity, originality, talent, and knowledge. We argue that part of the difficult and challenging process of transformation must acknowledge this loss. It also involves conscious, deliberate, non-hypocritical and diligent interest by both black and white academics in indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, peoples, and languages. Theories must be generated that are informed by life as it is lived, experienced, and understood by local inhabitants. Universities need to introduce well-theorised scholarship emerging from, and underpinned by, the African local experience. We need to keep encouraging critique and problematisation of what is considered to be knowledge and the processes involved in generating it. And a decolonised curriculum needs to exist in dialogue and contestation with the Greek, Arab, and European worlds. It cannot be seen to be everything about all things.

The decolonisation of buildings and of public spaces is not a frivolous issue and is inseparable from the democratisation of access. As the Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe says, *when we say access, we are also talking about the creation of those conditions that will allow black staff and students to say of the university: 'This is my home. I am not an outsider here. I do not have to beg or to apologise to be here. I belong here.'* Such a right to belong, such a rightful sense of ownership has nothing to do with charity or hospitality. It has nothing to do with the liberal notion of 'tolerance'. It has nothing to do with me having to assimilate into a culture that is not mine as a precondition of my participating in the public life of the institution. It has all to do with ownership of a space that is a public, common good. It has to do with an expansive sense of citizenship itself indispensable for the project of democracy, which itself means nothing without a deep commitment to some idea of public-ness.¹

To achieve this, a new set of pedagogies must be conceived of, a set of creative practices that make it impossible for official structures to ignore or marginalise: we call these ‘transformative pedagogies’ and it is our intention to develop these as the basic building blocks of a new curriculum. Diversity – of medium, perspective, approach, and context – is key. The question of what constitutes an authentic African architectural culture is still premature. At the GSA, we believe protecting the space in which such a culture may develop and mature is our fundamental and main priority.²

Safe Space

If coming of age signals a new maturity (and possibly confidence), then it seems fitting to include a different type of contribution to a refereed journal, following Carolin’s invitation to ‘shape this journal and make it relevant, readable and controversial’.³ *Safe Space* is an initiative of *Transformative Pedagogies* involving thirteen students, three tutors, a facilitator and a filmmaker [4, 5]. Filmed over sixteen weeks, it follows the thirteen students as they attempt to negotiate their way around the difficult questions of race, identity, gender, and power that lie beneath the surface of every conversation and every confrontation in contemporary South Africa.

The documentary is organised in three phases: *monologue*, *dialogue*, and *catalogue*. Monologue centres on the self, the individual and is intended as a reflective, reflexive process. Dialogue looks at the

individual’s relations with other people and the wider society at large. Catalogue brings the series to a close, displaying and cataloguing the work, ideas, and references the series uncovered. Each phase was divided into three sessions, held in different locations around the city of Johannesburg, from the GSA Studios and an inner-city theatre to the Women’s Jail at Constitution Hill, a symbolically refurbished public park. At each session, students were presented with a short brief and asked to respond, either through drawing/making, or through role-play and dialogue. Briefs were designed to act as catalysts for the conversations – often difficult and painful – that followed. As with any ‘live’ research project, there were particular ethical responsibilities to be negotiated: the documentary’s ‘rules of engagement’ were designed with a psychologist and a facilitator and included broad guidelines around respect, tolerance, honesty, and vulnerability. The format of each session remained identical: brief → exercise → output → discuss. Ranging from *The Mirrored ‘Self’* to *The ‘Me, Myself & I’ List*, each brief took on a range of issues in the imaginative tradition of architectural briefs the world over: how to condense and structure exercises that would hopefully lead to new insights, new forms, and new meanings.⁴

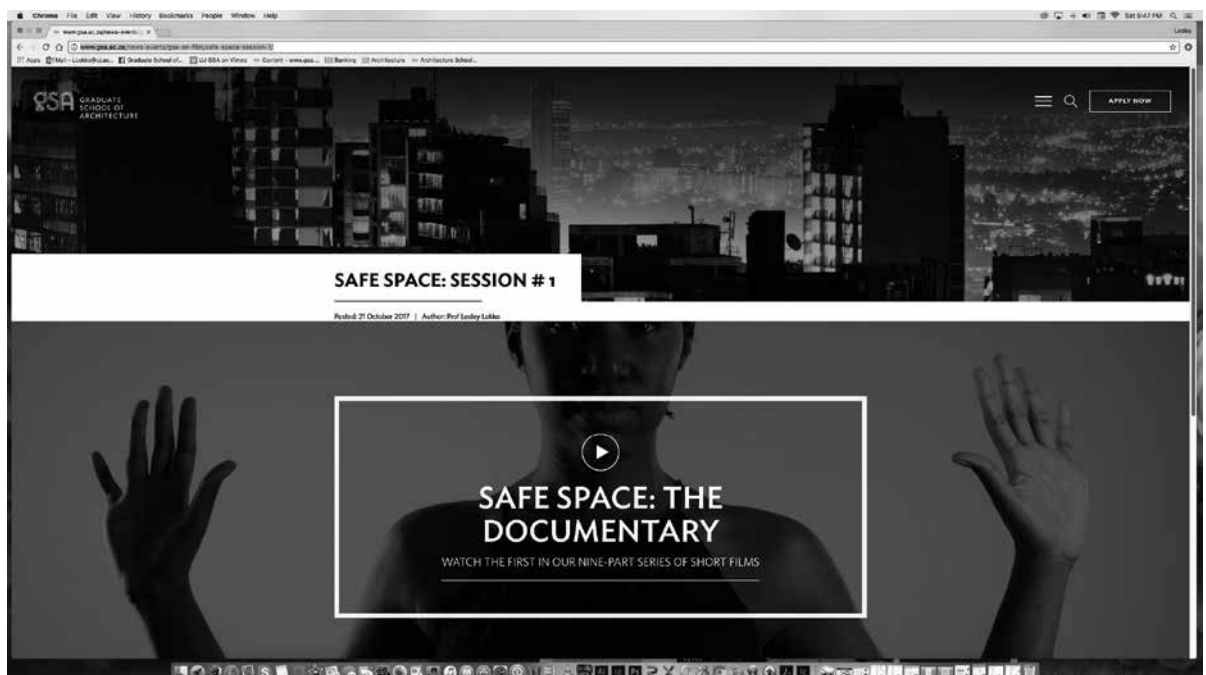
Although *Safe Space* was initially conceived of as an hour-long documentary in the tradition of great architectural biopics that bring together the personal, professional, and political, such as Nathaniel Kahn’s 2003 film, *My Architect*, or Tomas Koolhaas’s 2016 documentary, *Rem* (both, incidentally, father-son homages), after the first two sessions, it became clear that the documentary could work both as a *series* of short releases and



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4 *Safe Space* Documentary, opening credits.

5 *Safe Space* Documentary, Session #1.



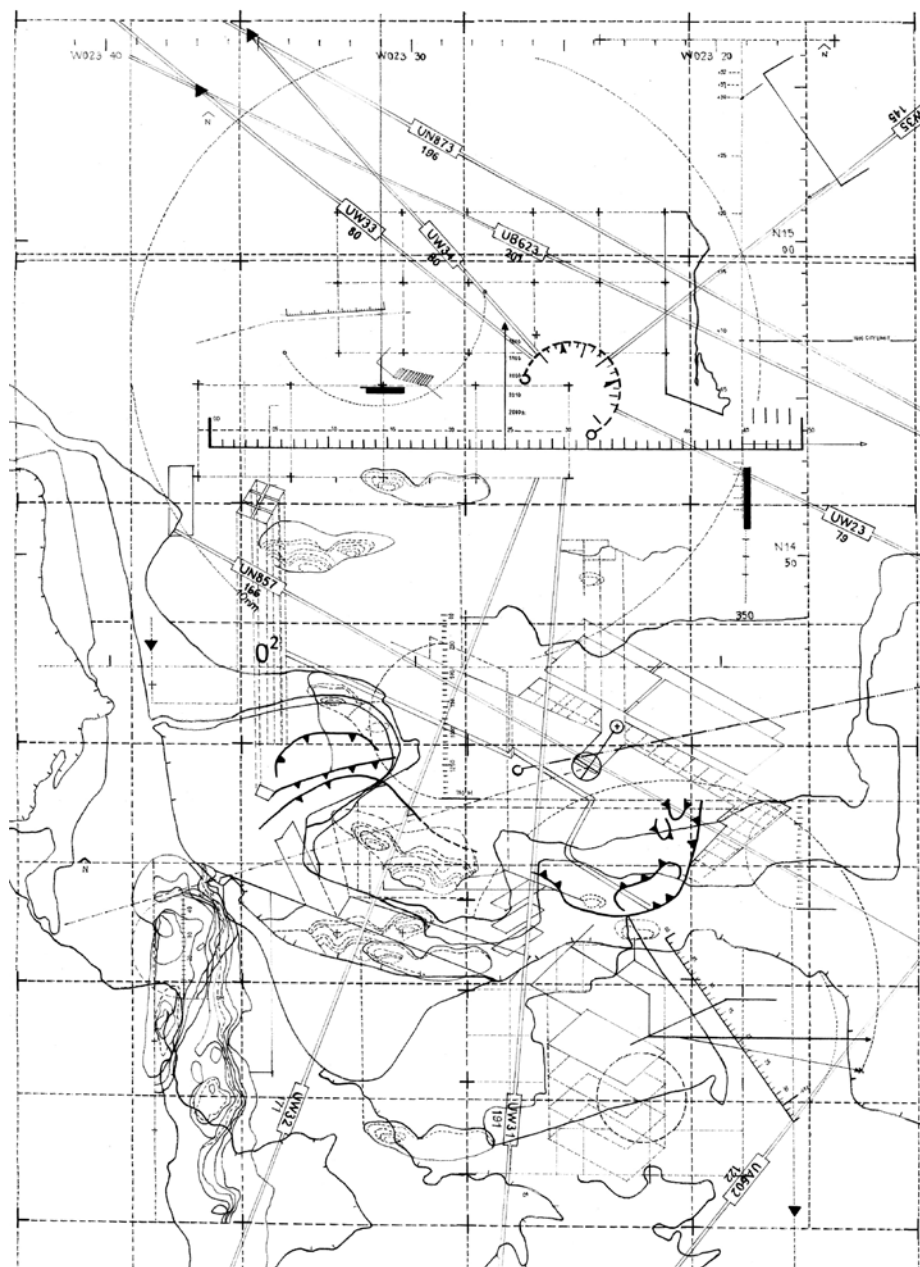
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as an hour-long film.⁵ Due to the complexity and richness of the issues students brought to the table, so to speak, we found the emphasis shifting from 'fly-on-the-wall' to 'toolkit', allowing the film to be seen as a pedagogical tool for anyone (school, tutor, lecturer, student) wishing to do the same, or similar. While the focus of the series was ostensibly a series of difficult conversations and exercises about race, power, and class (or class privilege, which, in South Africa at least, is the same thing as race), the real transformation that occurred happened offstage over a much longer period of time than originally anticipated, and in an unexpected place: the imagination.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's 1986 opus, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* centres (even today) around what he calls 'the quest for relevance', the 'search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe'. Wa Thiong'o's 'field' is literature, not architecture,

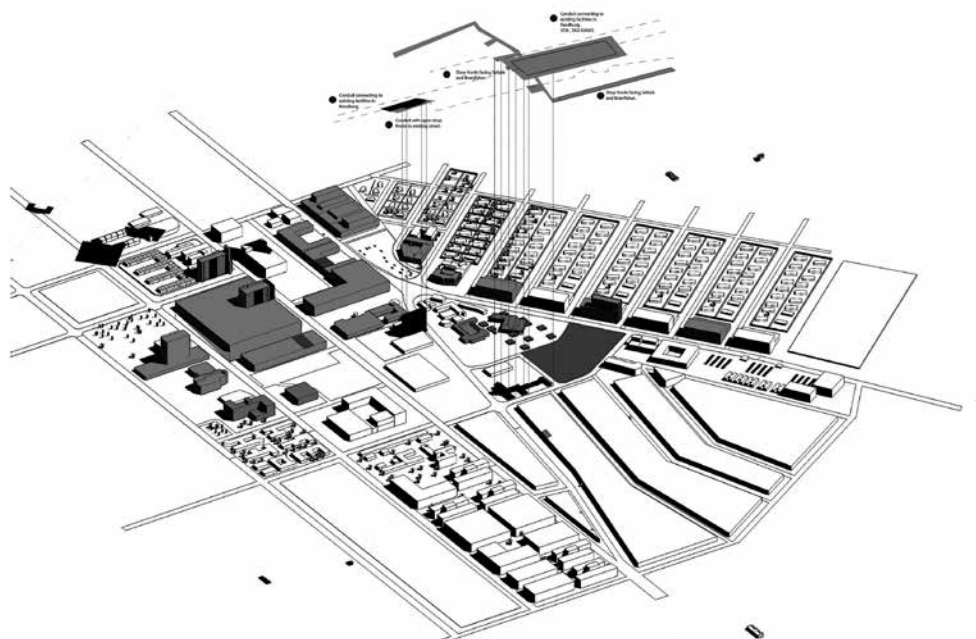
but the structural underpinning of his quest for relevance remains true for all disciplines: what is the choice of material and the interpretation of that material? As with literature, so with architecture: in the context of an African school of architecture, located on the African continent, teaching African students and in light of the political realities of the day, what sort of material is being presented to students and how is it being interpreted? What is the role and scope of the imagination in producing alternative visions/versions not just of Africa's past but crucially, of its future? And finally, and perhaps most interestingly in the context of an essay appearing in this publication, at this time: *how has a documentary toolkit become a transformative form of architectural research?*

To answer that question, I return to the opening paragraph of this article. *The link between research and practice is broken, but more disturbing, so too is the link between research and the imagination.* In his excellent 'Introduction' in *Design Research in Architecture:*



6 The Territory In-Between, Unit 12, GSA.

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7 Rogue Economies, Unit 14, GSA.

an Overview,⁶ Murray Fraser asks a series of highly pertinent questions around the relationship between architectural research and the act (or art) of design. What is the role of design research in the types of insight and knowledge that architects create? What does knowledge actually consist of? How can we prove it is new?⁷

From my perspective as the series creator, the success of *Safe Space*, as early as it is to call, lies precisely in the intersection of wa Thiong'o and Fraser's questions. The search for new, relevant material has also presented us with new insights and confidence into how that material is sought, pursued, investigated, and – eventually – produced. It's a small but telling detail that, in the recent Africa Architecture Awards, held for the first time at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art in Cape Town in September 2017, two of the four final grand prizes were awarded to GSA students who had participated in *Safe Space*. Two of this year's four finalists in the Rolex Foundation Mentor &

Protégé Awards scheme are GSA students or tutors. Clearly, the 'experiment' to find transformative ways of talking about and producing architectural canon has spread to other parts of the school's overall culture. That heady cocktail of race, politics, protest, and the imagination has produced an appetite for risk-taking that has largely been absent from African architectural education and discourse over the past few decades. Again, it's early days. Two or three winners do not yet constitute a sea change, much less a revolution. But something is stirring 'on the ground'. It is stirring in short films, intense conversations, and initiatives springing up across Africa and its diaspora. It is clearly stirring in the imagination of young architects – whether students, recent graduates, or young practitioners. Africa is the world's youngest continent with a median age of 19.8⁸ compared with Europe's 41.2 and the US's 37.6.⁹ We're just under the age of majority, just coming into our own [6, 7].

Twenty-one years in the making. Worth the wait.

Notes

1. A. Mbembe, *Decolonising Knowledge and the Question of the Archive*, from a public lecture given at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Online: <<http://wiser.wits.ac.za/content/achille-mbembe-decolonizing-knowledge-and-question-archive-12054>> [accessed 28 October 2017].
2. For a longer and more comprehensive reading of Transformative Pedagogies, see: <<http://www.gsa.ac.za/news-events/newsworthy/transformative-pedagogies/>> [accessed 1 December 2017].
3. To 'read' the following contribution to this article, please click on the following link:

<<http://www.gsa.ac.za/news-events/gsa-on-film/safe-space-session-1/>> [accessed 1 December 2017].

4. See Appendix A for a sample of *Safe Space* briefs.
5. To view all nine episodes of the documentary, please go to: <<https://vimeo.com/239302318>> [accessed 1 December 2017].
6. See M. Fraser, ed., *Design Research in Architecture: An Overview* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 1.
7. Ibid.
8. See: <<https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21679781-fertility-rates-falling-more-slowly-anywhere-else-africa-faces-population>> [accessed 1 December 2017].
9. See: <<https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-09-08/these-maps-show-where-world-s-youngest>>

and-oldest-people-live> [accessed 1 December 2017].

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