Designing Research Engagement in South Africa Urban Contexts

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Abstract

Design research or design led research has seen a growth in its international use and acclaim in the last few decades. Since commercial design organisation like IDEO have pushed the concept into the global spotlight, its use has seen an uptake in research and teaching practices across the world.

This is seen specifically in the global research field where international institutions, looking to broaden and diversify their research interests, offer their students and staff more opportunities to travel and conduct part of their teaching abroad. Visiting groups of researchers typically frame their intent to work abroad in order to contribute to learning around local social innovation and design led research in order to develop outcomes that could address local complex social issues. These engagements often result, sometimes unknowingly, in damaging and negative patterns of engagement between researchers/institutions and the 'beneficiary/stakeholders' that only reinforce existing systems of societal privilege – sometimes disguised as outreach or serving a social outcome.

Simultaneously, local institutions in South Africa are supporting a local version of this relationship in one part as an effort in competing with international practise, the other in trying to expose their students and staff to the complex realities of post-Apartheid South Africa. These engagements have the potential to create meaningful relationships between systemically powerful institutes, but instead often engage in shallow and very reductive programmes that do little to critically shift a local perspective or result.

This paper will outline the author's growing understanding of the issues related to design led development research and their relationship to the contexts they engage with. The paper will frame the emerging issues and unpack learnings from the author's experience from two different sets of interactions between institutes and local groups in South Africa. The paper will conclude with a set of emerging principles that are developing as key aspects for conducting a more considered and collaborative design research praxis in the Southern Urban realm.

Introduction: the how and why of space making in South Africa

South African cities are currently experiencing an unprecedented shift in growth and control as the country nears its fourth democratic election (Gotz,Wray & Mubiwa: Harrison et al 2014). The loss of majority political control held by the post-1994 ruling party to its opposition in three out of the five major metros, combined with the growing disillusion of the 'rainbow nation' articulated by student leaders in the *Fees Must Fall* protests, suggest a difficult future for a rapidly urbanising country. Specifically, the manner in which those that make and frame research within the city spaces metros engage with each other will become increasingly difficult; making it harder in the near future to meaningfully engage across polarised sectors of the city to address future urban challenges. A clear example of this can be seen in the complex socio-political manner in which the City of Cape Town is being forced to deal with the current drought with the residents of the city (Dailymaverick.co.za 2018) and how difficult it is now to work as a researcher or in the civil development sector in that region of South Africa.

The sharing of urban space in cities, articulated in Lefebvre's description of 'spatial practice', which according to Schmidt's reading on Lefebrve is the manner in which these shared spatial moments collide, interact and are filtered by the unique readings of the city at every moment – every day (Schmidt:2018; 36-37). Within these collisions of interaction, or lack thereof, belie an opportunity for what Pieterse (2013)

identifies as "*…an opening up of a fertile research agenda for more grounded and spatially attuned phronetic research…*".

Little has been done in the last 23 years of democracy to affect the *how* in which the spatial design and research disciplines are trained or practice to meaningfully address the way in which the cities, specifically, the public and shared spaces, are produced, managed or perceived (Bennett & Combrinck: Cirolia et al; 2016: 336). The training and research institutes and professions charged with guiding development agendas, or re-development [1] in the case of South Africa, are the very people who lived through decades of segregation with almost no recognition of the trauma they experienced (or perpetuated), nor emotional tools to deal with socio-cultural scars of South Africa's oppressive unbalanced history, which as collection of people have had almost no societal support in addressing (Biko 2011).

The author feels that this opening up, presents an opportunity for developing critical ways of engaging and researching the complexity of Lefebrve's above mentioned 'spatial practices' that occur at the intersection of "*... representations of space…*" (Lefebvre 1996). Local urban researchers hold a vital position in this belief, to shift the way design and research are used to understand South African city and the people who form the core systemic component of these spaces. These same researchers and designers need to reconsider their practices of engagement under recognition of what the representations of space mean - but at the same time cannot neglect the intersectional power of what positional difference means in the contexts they operate in (Le Roux & Constandius 2013).

Edward Said makes claim in his seminal text, *Orientalism,* that "ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied" (Said 1979: 5). Some of the tools made popular by design thinking and social innovation, such as *rapid ethnography,* carry with them a history of "othering" (Campbell 2017) where researchers see those they research, who are different to themselves, as 'exotic' and developed tools of investigation that have dehumanised those being researched; reinforcing stereotypes and power imbalances. This is something that the social sciences have grappled with within the disciplines, yet is a relatively new conversation within the social design and innovation fields in South Africa. (Le Roux & Constandius 2013)

Realistically these types of engagement are often too short to really support or contribute to real social change and innovation and can undermined and disregard innovative work already being done by local individuals or organisations. The institutions involved need to recognise that they often have more to learn than to provide others involved and their involvement in these contexts have real implications beyond the project. These engagements can put a strain on the work individuals and organisations are doing on a daily basis impacting their livelihood and productivity, since the influx of new people require that they stop their work in order to educate and accommodate these new individuals into their lives and projects.

This privileged approach can dehumanise those involved, preventing any authentic and generative relationship from occurring across the social boundaries. Setton (2018), in work conducted with the author often refers to how relationships are a crucial ingredient in supporting social innovation and change since they help establish trust that leads to openness and successful collaborations between different people (orlisetton.weebly.com/process--method-design.html 2018). This disempowering of local people, lack of mutual benefit in combination with the growing popularity of these types of courses is contributing to local research fatigue (Bidwell et al 2010).

Despite the complexity of the above-mentioned challenges the author and their collaborators do not suggest swinging to an opposite extreme and shutting people out of the processes or different contexts, in fear of reinforcing the afore mentioned power imbalances. Instead the author (and their collaborators) feel one should engage in conversations that interrogate our behaviour and promote self-awareness in order to find generative ways to engage cross the social divides and contribute to authentic social innovation.

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[1] Re-Development: a term employed by the author to recognise the uneven development of South African cities since the geo-political formation of South Africa in 1652.

For all involved, there is a need to turn a reflective lens on themselves instead of those they wish to understand, which is often difficult and a personally uncomfortable process to engage with. It is also a process which requires that all involved make internal shifts before (and during) they start to collaborate with vulnerable contexts to in relation to research or 'development'.

Socio-Technical Design Support at the University of Johannesburg

Framing the context of engagement

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) is South Africa's largest day university with over 50 000 students (Uj.ac.za 2018) and the culminate result of the merging of several different Apartheid era racially and technically segregated universities, The Rand Afrikaans University, Technikon Witwatersrand, and the East Rand and Soweto campuses of the Vista University that were brought together in 2005 under the new banner of UJ (Campbell 2008). This merging of previously separate universities was an important statement to tertiary education in South Africa and sought to engage with the spirit of the 'African Renaissance' touted by the, then, president of South Africa who was the supporter of the merger amongst many others across South Africa (Campbell 2008); with the university stating its mission as "inspiring its community to transform and serve humanity through innovation and the collaborative pursuit of knowledge" (Uj.ac.za 2018) .

During this merger a new building for the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) was built. This was the first, and still only, Faculty of Design in South Africa and was envisioned to be a space of collaboration and cross disciplinary learning (Opper 2012), even the building itself was designed to be a space of mutual learning – seen in the large central atrium and 'flowing' movement system that linked all departments by a central universally accessible ramp.

Within the faculty, a newly launched masters' in Architecture began in 2011 and started to experiment with new ways of conducting research and teaching that actively took students into the field; the City of Johannesburg, and 'folded' the learning spaces with an aim to achieve a reciprocal relationship of learning and exchange between the two domains of the design studio and the "field" (Opper 2012). This was done to further push the limits of design research while critically grounding the students into their local context. These studios, that the author has been personally involved in the design, teaching and reflection in, worked to support local groups of people facing a socio-spatial challenges and aimed to productively blend teaching, socially engaged design support while tactically speaking to national and municipal systemic mechanisms of development.

The first iteration of the author's involvement in these studios, took place in Slovo Park where the author and his colleagues began working in 2010 and have remained socio-technically supporting the leadership structures since then. These engagements took the form of short quarter (6-9 weeks) long courses integrated into the undergraduate curriculum but managed by the author's organisation; 1to1 – Agency of Engagement (1to1.org.za 2018). Subsequently the author has additionally worked through various UJ led initiatives with residents and leaders in vulnerable or disadvantaged neighbourhoods which include the Informal Studio (IS) in 2012 and the Studio AT Denver between 2014 and 2017.

Working in productive uncertainty

Aformal Terrain (AT) is a collaborative and collective architecture/urbanism/landscape laboratory which closely engages with complex urban conditions (studioatdenver.blogspot.com 2014). AT focuses on integrating resources and skills towards promoting awareness and generating appropriate responses to the context of rapidly changing and often unstable contemporary urban situations. The approach of the collective is underpinned by people-driven methodologies for engagement, research, design responses and planning strategies. AT was conceived as more than just a single project, but a way of working. Each engagement with residents was framed differently, but the teaching and research project was conceptualised as a design led studio and titled: *StudioATdenver* and described as an "on-going teaching and learning course in collaboration with residents, community leadership and multiple stakeholders.".

The studios took place over 6-8 intensive weeks as an integrated design studio, that linked the 3rd year and masters students from UJ's Architecture Department and the Planning Department in a focused engagement with the residents and leadership. The studio pursued both practical and theoretical methodologies of design led research and aimed to develop a variety of possible outcomes form the process. The curriculum was driven by community-based planning principles sited in the works of Nabeel Hamdi (Hamdi 2010), that would ultimately build a collection of responsive and co-produced strategies for upgrade and improvement in what AT termed; *short*, *medium* and *long* term time frames. These were not fixed time periods, but place holder terms for later dates be applied to with the leadership.

During the different forms of engagement with the Denver leadership and residents, the nature of support was constantly adapted to respond to the changing needs of the local leadership in the face of national government interest to develop the settlement under the National Development Goals of upgrading over 400 000 well located informal settlement homes (nationalupgradesupport.co.za 2016), as well smaller emergency events in the settlement that included localised fires that left several homes destroyed and many families displaced. This ever-changing requirement in nature of support shaped the way the collective structured each brief and made available the limited resources of time and socio-technical support while employing various tactics of bridging student support and local government in addressing these issues.

Fig. 1 Students and staff of AT working with Denver residents (studioatdenver.blogspot.com 2014)

For example, the 2016 *studioATdenver* aimed to focus on the themes of Dwelling & Neighborhood (the physical), Planning (spatial, social and developmental) and Policy (broader strategies from government level). The intention behind this separation of scales, was to frame a critical investigation into a combination of high level systemic strategies for informal settlement upgrading while starting to suggest possible linkages with current existing bottom-up initiatives that were taking place on site.

Lessons from expectation & complexity

The experience of being involved these dynamic projects has exposed the author to the complexities of managing such diverse sets of expectations, stakeholders and requirements. The notable difference identified in this paper lies in the Studio AT Denver's 5-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was written by the University representatives and the Denver informal settlement leadership that attempted to create an accountable set of guidelines to maintain sustainable relationship between the stakeholders and beneficiaries.

This proved invaluable in negotiating the ever-changing nature of support and managing expectations. Long relationships and sustainable methods of engagement are crucial in this type of work.

During all of the described teaching and support projects many questions and heated discussions from students around the nature of the relationship of the project to the context and more importantly to the residents and their 'expectations' began to arise. The students and those involved were grappling with what their involvement meant and that they felt they were creating unmeetable expectations by their mere

presence on site. These questions, while intersectionally very difficult to discuss, were a rich source of debate and discussion and exposed many shortcomings of the design of these engagement from the course convenors and local government. The space for students and residents to engage with difficult to create and support, but vital.

The often-cited critique of international universities landing in foreign contexts and parachuting in with design projects was contrasted to our own role and we realised that we were actually 'local foreigners' in the context of historically disadvantaged people of South Africa.   We discussed at length the issues of benefit and the translation of value in these workshops and who was the true 'beneficiary' of this type of work.

One of the major projects to guide the engagement was the Positive Numbers projects which aimed to link the social enumeration of the local NGO's and government with the co-developed community action plan that the earlier studios produced with the students and the residents. (studioatdenver.blogspot.com 2014). This and the light public installation of a play space adjacent the meeting hall that the research used for several discussions and workshops. This was a way to leave a small symbol of the difficult work of the socio-technical support involved in these processes which as difficult to translate across the resident groups.

The question of who saw the most 'value' from the project was difficult to translate and share amongst the various stakeholders. While some benefitted directly and the settlement sits in a different light with local and national government, the timelines to see change are long and hard to translate. (Le Roux & Constandius 2013)

An important emerging principle from AT lies in the recognition that designing the engagement to both support a learning environment while offering valuable socio-technical support is extremely difficult, but tactical systems of delivery and support are vital for this type of work.

Alternative Practice 2013 – 2017

The nature of praxis in South Africa

According to the UN Habitat Global Report (2017) Africa is urbanising faster and to a larger effect than Europe and North America currently are, or ever did. As a result of this phenomena, millions of people on the continent are forced to join the 'informal' housing sector each day to benefit from the opportunities found in the urban centres. In the face of this situation the demand for suitably skilled and effective spatial practitioners is becoming increasingly evident, while at the same time the built environment professions in Southern Africa tends to, above technical and aesthetic aspects, focus more on commercial profits as the industry demands.

On top of the global urban issue that face South Africa, the challenges of post-1994 psycho-spatial culture manifest most clearly in the cities that boast some of the most unequal living conditions on the planet, in spaces that are historically and spatially scarred by the systemic segregation of the populace that have been in place since the country's geo-political inception in 1652 and remain fundamentally unchallenged in the way we practice as city makers (Gotz, Wray & Mubiwa: Harrison et al 2014).

Within this reality, the social aspects, as well the architecture profession's responsibilities are often forgotten or marginalised, while research into technical, aesthetic and economic means of reducing the costs of construction remains important – but does little to alleviate the issues around access to housing and considered public space. The contrasting need to address 'gross inequality and dire need' (Everatt: Harrison et al 2014) contrasted with a lack of ability to engage creatively with the issues at hand are not a productive combination in South Africa.

There is a strong stigma that exists in the professional discourse in South Africa for the role of architects in the addressing the social ills and inequality of post-1994 South Africa. The author has been engaging in this since his master's dissertation in 2010 and has taken a strong position inactively engaging in its existence. While this topic is an entire dissertation on it's the own the author's assumption for the issue lies in a few critical points:

- The Architecture Profession remains largely dominated by South Africans of privilege and upper income groups of people who have little relationship to the lower income areas or population of South Africa
- Architecture as a profession is seen, and in the author's opinion, promoted as an elitist profession
- The is very little support in the professional fee structure, legal accountability and resource to support an active career in being an architect who works in 'poor areas'
- This work is seen as charity, a social obligation and a 'nice to have', not a key part of the re-development of South Africa
- The limits of seeing architecture and the role of the architect as a maker of buildings limits the approaches and tools of research and practice to effectively engage with the complexity of working in previously disadvantaged or 'poor' parts of South Africa.
- The critical reflection on the role of South Africans of privilege in post-apartheid is an emotionally and socially complex task that many students and universities are not prepared for nor want to take on the challenge.

Critical Practice

Within this reality, the newly formed master's programme at UJ within the Department of Architecture offered a module within the Professional Practice Course to students. The original 2012 course, under the original convenor: Dr Amira Osman, supported discussion on complex topics of urbanity and inequality in South Africa and fostered an environment of debate and critical thought to what Alternative meant in the South African context.

The author inherited the course as a newly appointed teacher and researcher in 2013 and began to adapt the original format to support more engaged and productive discussions on what practice, the role for architecture and an emerging sector of socially-engaged design in South Africa could be. The course sought to link into the major design projects of the master's programme and arm each student with a contextual understanding of what their current and future work could and does mean in the current situation.

This included the co-development of a manifesto for each student, the development of tools for socially engaged practice, a critical reflection of the various practitioners and practices that exist outside of the 'glossy' magazines of architecture. As the course began to develop as a support structure to the design studio, the author sought to challenge the built environment professionals' existing knowledge and perspectives of practice as well as design, to enable them to grow an intimate understanding of what a socially focussed lens of engagement could be.

In 2016 the author linked his organisation's affiliation to the United Kingdom chapter of Architecture Sans Frontiers's (ASF-UK) Challenging Practice, after being involved in the teaching of the course in the UK in 2015. This adaption of ASF-UK's module to the South African context was a turning point in the module as this allowed for a more engaged method of teaching that followed the facilitated learning style of the ASF-UK group and actively aimed to give the students in the module a platform to grow or critique ideas to together:

"Challenging Practice is a short course methodology that exposes practitioners of the built environment to the complexity of working with communities, government agencies and other spatial stakeholders through an intensive two-day action learning process. Challenging practice is an independent-learning programme that seeks to enable built environment practitioners to engage reflexively with the challenges of inclusive and sustainable urban development. Challenging practice is based on principles of active, dynamic, action-based learning. The programme is grounded in theories of situated knowledge and reflective practice and places a strong emphasis on the ethical component of action-learning." (asf-uk.org 2018).

STAGE A of the ASF-UK's Challenging Practice was adapted by the author to the South African context to expose students to the broad approach of ASF International by introducing them to core concepts of 'critical' spatial design development practice or *Socio-technical Spatial Design Praxis*. The module of the course aimed to equip students with knowledge and skills to operate outside of the context of conventional office

practice and the ability to address the socio-spatial complexity of post-apartheid South Africa. At the same time this module sought to give space for critical dialogue around the socially engaged design practice while exposing students to a proven curriculum of ASF-UK's Challenging Practice that actively supports critical design praxis.

The course began with carefully structured debate that, after introducing the concepts of socially engaged design practice in South Africa, asked the students to take an opposing position around the question of 'Should Architects in South Africa practice socially engaged design – or just *do their job*?'. The important aspect of this approach was to force the students to occupy a personal political position and vocalise this in a shared format – in this case the classroom.

By asking the students to occupy the opposite position to what they think is the 'better side' it attempts to force a critique on their position and build a critical reflection point for themselves later in the course. The way the debate is hosted is intended to be focussed, light and constructive and was facilitated by the author who set as strict time limit and assisted getting the students to physically change and occupy different spatial sides in the typically rigid classroom setting. Both years that the debate was hosted the content and process was a rich and exciting activity that set a strong tone for the remaining sessions in the 6-session quarter long module.

While the debate exercise does not address these issues, it allows for a 'safe' moment to air these views and opinions and when facilitated well can carry the most difficult parts of the above points towards emotionally digestible places.

The remaining modules were used to unpack the ASF-UK Challenging Practice module which consists of two full day workshops that take the participants through a series of tools, exercises and discussions around a case study of a previously completed ASF-UK Change by Design Workshop (CBD). These CBD Workshops are two week long immersive field exercises that are tactically designed to support local NGO's and grassroots groups with a socio-spatial challenge that employ a rigorous and established methodology (asf-uk.org 2018). A conscious decision was made by the author and his fellow teaching collaborator to first use a case study from London; a 'first world' context to break the stigma that socially engaged tools and practices are only for developing contexts – this is crucial in dealing with the existing stigma of this type of work in South Africa. The second case study is then one set in Cape Town, a local but not too familiar site for all students.

This choice of case study brings the application of the tools and practices home, with the first case study giving an easier test bed to learn the tools and be exposed to the facilitated method of teaching and co-learning in an action research format.

This is a very different style of teaching to the way the students are typically taught, and this adjustment is crucial. The way of teaching is heavily dependent on visual methods of discussing and sharing ideas and requires students to speak from these co-develop tools as part of creating a shared student-led understanding of the issues.

Fig. 2 Challenging Practice students engaging in the Example Figure: **a** part 1, **b** part 2 (Slifka and Whitton, 2000)

The second case study is again completed with a short charade debate where students are asked to take on the personas of various stakeholders in the Cape Town Case study and try reach a consensus of how to deal with the issues of the local context outlined in the case study. This 'drama-debate' format in both years has yielded rich content with students being intimately exposed to the complexity of taking a position in the debate that would translate to real action. This debate exposed the limits of technical design in the face of local and national politics, human engagement and where power lies in the situations. In 2017 the author and his teaching partners used a 'score – card' tool to analyse the debate and offer a debriefing of what the complexity of these challenges typically brings from our experience in the field.

In 2018 the course was further adapted to allow for moments of open dialogue, action learning and a co-productive workshop with invited local experts to build an ethical framework that can apply to South African design practice. This workshop was designed to engage with a group of what Liz Ogbu terms 'Citizen Experts' (youtube.com 2014) to co-produce a *Code of Engagement* for socially engaged design practice in South Africa.
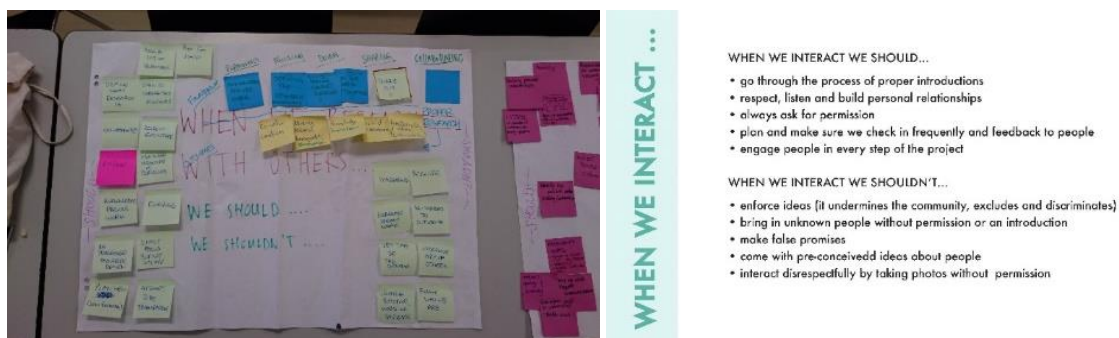

Fig. 3 Example co-developed Code of Engagement (UJ Students & Author, 2017)

The workshop was designed with Orli Setton, a trained graphic designer, and aimed to develop a critical reflection in design research for the students, and brought students, community leaders and NGO representatives around the same table and to co-develop a series of principles with which future socio-technical practitioners could use.

Based on a visual, 'brainstorming' method, groups with representatives from all levels of practice and community engagement developed a list of *do's* and *don'ts* for participative urban planning and design – ideas which perhaps seem integral to certain represented disciplines, but less to others. The result was a strategy for holistic practice that takes more factors into account than merely physical development fabric. The workshop was divided into 5 incomplete statements to which participants added the do/don't conclusions. The statements prompted the participants to determine what we should and shouldn't do when practitioners:

- Design
- Build
- Share
- Interact
- Research

The major conclusion drawn from the first two queries; those of designing and constructing, could be the importance of communication during the development process – effective communication which often means listening and not speaking, is the major tool for participative processes in urban planning. Such a system for communication also increases the likelihood and efficacy of scaling up systems and processes – creating a resilient and long-lasting practice from development.

Fig. 4 Students working with Citizen Experts (Author, 2017)

The second and third statements dealt with how this communication should take place. It highlighted the often-overlooked issues of social stigmas and preconceptions that practitioners should not necessarily know about but be aware of the possibility of their existence.

The final statement addressed the often-contentious issue of ethics and research as researchers are often accused of exploiting communities during research based around participatory practices (Bidwell et al 2010). The statement allowed non-academic participants in the workshop to, in a safe space, be probed into the practices they feel could be incorrect/unethical when dealing with communities. It also allowed those from an academic background to shed light on the correct practices to make research valuable and useful – to generate resources for future application and not merely to generate a product.

The outcome of the workshop took form as a resource of *Codes of Engagement* that can be accessed by students, community and technical people to share on a global platform and can form the basis of future workshops and programmes. The codes can be accessed on a globally accessible website (1to1.org.za 2018)

Lessons from lessons

The module has developed since 2013 and been given a flexible brief to support a discussion on what 'alternative' practice means in South Africa. These have been carefully documented and shared on a digital platform that gave each student an accredited author position and a hyper-link back to their own profiles while attempting to build both a digital dialogue and physical space. The course was also tactically linked to the author's involvement in his co-founded non-profit entity, 1to1 – Agency of Engagement, as both a platform and link to the real work that the social enterprise has been conducting since 2010. Many students in the programme have done work in the field through 1to1 or the author's teaching collaborator's organisation: Urbanists for Equity.

This has demonstrated that this work has merit in the field and can lead to a sustainable career and realm impact in the field. The hope in this course lies in scaling up the reach of the offering and extending the course into the professional sphere of local architecture bodies and possibly beyond into the aligning discipline sofa engineering, planning and the construction industry. The work in this sector needs a professional recognition from local practitioners and to be de-stigmatised for it find institutional place in the practice of South African city making.

The emerging principles from the UJ Alternative practice course comes from the unexpected ***pushback*** of the ***students and the difficulty in discussing the position for architecture in addressing the re-development in South Africa. Especially in a country with such a recent history of legalised oppression.***

Paper Summary

As a white south African born in 1987, my experience of the systems that divided and departed our country are limited. It was only in my master's years of architectural study did I become aware of the systems that allowed me to get to the point that I was that and how ingrained these are within our country's socio0spatial nature. As a result, I have come to realise that while my understanding of the city is grounded as a local person and a South African the racial and class divide will never allow me to see the city as my fellow

country people do. This intersectional realisation makes firm the need for this reflection of outside visitors to projects for local people as well. As local researchers we are afforded the privileged spaces we are just as guilty as those who parachute in and leave with the findings they have uncovered. The difference lies in that we must live in the context that we have extracted this from and therefore are afforded the potential and arguably redeemable space and time to work on setting up a different type of relationship.

The contemporary framing of the discourse on African urbanism, and in particular urban spatial-design and research practice, has been primarily dominated by a macro-economic, political and ' developmentists' lens (Pieterse: Pieterse & Simone 2013), this reading of such a fluid, unprecedentedly urbanising (UNFPA 2007) and dynamic field of research inquiry and applied practice is "… dangerous in how it overshadows the necessary nuance and grounded discovery of more phenomenological, interpretative and relational accounts of social and cultural dynamics and phycological dispositions…" (Pieterse: Pieterse & Simone 2013).

When the author has previously been requested to support a learning or research led visit to South Africa from an international university, the question of who's version of a South African city or experience should we frame lies at the forefront of the pedagogical concept. The framing is made more complex due to the global readings of the *South African city* and made more difficult to unpack due to the palimpsest of internalised negative perceptions, stigmas and unequal development of over 400 years of colonial and Apartheid 'development' (Malaza: Harrison et al 2014).

While it may seem inconsequential discussing the nature or manner in which spatial systems (or cities) are researched, much South African post-colonial and post-Apartheid critical writing and discourse proactively challenge the idea of *how* we see and discuss what we accept as our given city spatial condition (Malaza: Harrison et al 2013), as this actively feeds into the collective phyco-cultural application of making and use of city spaces– an often-understated force in city making (Weitzman 2017). Within this growing discourse on *what* scholars write, discuss and publish of on the research of South African cities, there is a distinct gap in literature on *how* we apply these readings and understandings within the praxis of design and engagement.

The way we practice as designers and design researcher from the onset to the way we distribute the resources allocated for the precis and value peoples time and efforts is crucial in recognising the social and spatial justice aspects of this work. The challenge lies in how we practice this and engage with ideas and systems of unlearning and distributive power:

"The underlying ethos of these studios should not be one of entering an informal context and superimposing values of formality – but rather demonstrate a willingness to understand and 'un-learn' conventional professional practice in order to respond in ways that respect inherent energies and capacities of informal contexts. This approach ensures a key aspect that would ensure the sustainability of interventions made by a sense of ownership and authorship by the partner and recipient communities." (Bennett & Osman 2013)

Design alone will not save our city spaces, but design and design research give a frame work for action and reflection to propagate better ways of working with and for people through visually accessible means. Co-design and other collaborative approaches to research and praxis offer a frame work offers a strong starting point, but intersectional politics are crucial to explore in this work and should not be overlooked as an extra nice to have.

This papers end with a call from Pieterse and Simone's (2013) *Rogue Urbanism* for scholars to investigate and theorise the specific ways in "…which various levels, orders and dynamics of spatial organisation and territory are literally fleshed out, animated and rendered new through the unpredictable combination of spatial practices and imaginaries that invariably collide with cities…".

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