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A PHD IN PRACTICE-BASED DESIGN RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE AT WITS UNIVERSITY

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How does the new PhD in practice-based design research in the School of Architecture at Wits position itself? This paper is an account of the author-practitioner's exposure to the long history of engagement with design research in the school through the example of architects such as Pancho Guedes and others.

The call for papers for this conference asked: what is artistic research in Africa? This paper sheds light on the potential for artistic research broadly and in my own architectural design research more specifically when approached within contexts of African philosophy and thinking.

The circles of influence of architectural design research carried out at the Wits School of Architecture begin within the context of Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa, Africa, and extend to the context of architectural design research globally. Architectural design research is defined by Murray Fraser as "processes and outcomes of inquiries and investigations in which *architects use the creation of projects or broader contributions towards design thinking* as the central constituent in a process which also involves the more generalised research activities of *thinking, writing, testing, verifying, debating, disseminating, performing, validating* and so on."[1]

Architectural design research, internationally, has followed a number of different paths, from the practice-based model of RMIT in Melbourne, Australia, which has spread to Europe and Asia, to activist and feminist practice models. However, as it has spread further to the historically based model, "In contemporary discourse and practice it is familiar to discuss design research as if it is new to architecture. But this is to ignore the history of the architect," noted by Jonathan Hill.[2] By this, Hill means that the history of the architect reveals numerous people, from Andrea Palladio to Le Corbusier to Rem Koolhaas, who had a productive and multi-directional relationship between thinking, writing, drawing, building, which (as per Fraser) is defined as design research. This is arguably the historically based model of design research.

In terms of the African context, Achille Mbembe, in his *Critique of Black Reason*, speaks of "*situated thinking*, born of lived experience that was always in progress, unstable and changing."[3] This situated thinking is akin to the arts or design researcher, thinking of their practice, their lived and embodied experience. Selby Mvusi, a South African artist who taught at the Faculty of Arts and Architecture, University College, Nairobi, put it succinctly when he proposed that, as an architect, you can only build once you are "total and present and constituted of a multitude of relationships. Comprehend this, bring it inside you and allow yourself to be comprised of it, *then* you can build."[4] He spoke of being comprehensive, which was "a relationship built of the productive tension between made of something and knowing something."[5] Mvusi once told his students that "the problem to be resolved—the commitment to be recognised—the question to be answered … is what is *Our Time*?"[6]

So, what does it mean it to do architectural practice-based design research in Africa, South Africa, and at Wits University, *here* and *now*, at this place and time?

The next circle of influence centres around the Wits School of Architecture where a pedagogy firmly rooted in design, theory, and history, as well as in practice was established—with a number of top practicing architects teaching at the school, from Rex Martienssen to John Fassler, Pancho Guedes, Peter Rich, Mpethi Morojele, Jo Noero, and Lindsay Bremner. The link between design practice and pedagogy was strong and, by extension, as per Hill, architectural design research was always present, even if only implicitly.

I arrived at Wits as a student in 1990—to the John Moffat building, designed by Fassler in the modernist style—when Guedes had just left, after 15 years as Head of the School of Architecture. As per Revel Fox, Guedes' time would be remembered as an "exciting and notable epoch, and a high point in the teaching of architecture anywhere."[7] His influence was felt throughout the school, through the lecturers that taught us, to the older students who had been part of the Pancho era. He was the proverbial ancestor in the room, speaking to us through others. Guedes, first a student at

Wits, was later to become head of school. As a student at Wits under the modernists Martienssen and Fassler he was persuaded that architecture was, above all, an art, integrating other plastic and design arts such as painting, sculpture, and interior, landscaping, and urban design.

Like the architects Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, and Steven Holl, Guedes painted, sculpted, designed, and constructed buildings,[8] and like them, Guedes used all these activities in a number of ways:

- as heuristic devices—to discover and learn something for himself, as Aalto did
- as an exploration of architectural qualities of space, as Holl does
- as a mode through which to bring the qualities of composition and form from painting and sculpture to architecture, as Le Corbusier did
- but also, as a type of intuitive exercise, where intuition and representation are interchangeable; he sculpts his architecture and architects his sculpture

As one of his students noted, "Pancho taught us to invent buildings from dreams; to go beyond working consciousness into the realm of magicians and sorcerers. He inspired us with buildings he'd dreamt into reality."[9]

He set up an open studio in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) with craftsmen, artists, painters all working together on architectural projects. The artist Malangatana, who gained prominence as a Mozambican muralist, was part of the group. This communal practice of architecture can be seen to be embedded, or in some way arising, from the African Ubuntu philosophy of "I am because you are," visualising a community built on interdependent relationships, stressing unity, harmony, mutual respect, and individual responsibility to the collective.

Devi Dee Mucina specifies the African philosophy of Ubuntu as a position that communicates that self-reflection and the making of meaning occur in a social-relational world, and investigates the interweaving arenas of embodiment, time, space and action.[10] Moyra Keane put it best when she said that the western world view emphasises thinking over being while, in the African phenomenology of Ubuntu, identity centres on the ideas that I am because you are, or I am because I participate.[11] This is fundamentally different from the Cartesian "I think therefore I am," which points to the separation of mind and matter, and the abstraction of thought: hence, to objective epistemologies. "Ubuntu points instead to participation, interdependence and collectivity, and hence to subjective epistemologies, where intuition, revelation and inspiration are all valid ways of knowing."[12] This shift from objective to subjective epistemologies, is particularly relevant to arts or design research, which is largely self-ethnographic and draws particularly from practice, including all those subjective ways of knowing that Keane lists—intuition, revelation and inspiration.

In his last lecture in New York, before his death, Mvusi resurrected Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity, which seems very much like the scientific proof of Ubuntu—that what governed human societies was the relationship of attraction, repulsion, inequality, or equivalence.[13] However, he went further and, in a post-colonial statement, rejected the binaries of the developed versus the underdeveloped world, of African versus western; he said that the chronology of progress was a fiction and that we in Africa were never going to be "developed"; that we, like anyone, will only continue to grow or else die.[14] Like Mbembe, Mvusi focused on the journey, the process, rather than the origin or destination. In a way, this is what arts and design research is: a focus on the journey, the process, a way of making this subjective epistemology visible.

Ubuntu, however, goes beyond the relation of people to each other; as Chrisna du Plessis puts it, "Ubuntu describes the African view of humanity and its place in the greater order of things … Ubuntu visualises a community built on interdependent relationships and regards humanity as an indivisible part of the ecosystem with a communal responsibility to sustain life. The emphasis is not so much on human rights but on human responsibilities."[15] The values of Ubuntu are:

- oneness/unity—that all life is interconnected and interdependent
- harmony
- respect
- responsibility

Essentially, du Plessis sees the connection between Ubuntu and the values of sustainability.

In his interracial creative studio atmosphere, where architecture, arts, and crafts came together, even if practised from a colonial context, Guedes claimed for architects the rights and liberties that painters and poets held for so long. Together with Julian Beinart, a lecturer at the Wits School of Architecture, Guedes led a series of basic design workshops across Africa, which were non-hierarchical, interracial, intergenerational, and multi-disciplinary. The first workshop in Mozambique in January 1961 was initially formulated as an informal course for Wits School of Architecture students. However, the students ended up being joined by workers who were completing construction of the workshop venue—the Piramidal Nursery School—including Malangatana who, only months later, held his first solo exhibition.[16] "The aim of these workshops was to create, for a short time, an environment of complete liberation and intense work, in which young people with different backgrounds and varying amounts of previous training could find personal solutions to set problems."[17] The workshop/summer school was to be replicated across Africa, with five workshops all in different countries. They were unified insofar as they sought to train visual cognition, with Beinart privileging visual culture as a pre-scriptural form of communication, closer to Africa's oral tradition.[18]

At the next workshop at the University College in Ibadan, Nigeria, in conjunction with Ulli Beier, who held a post at the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University College, the original formal programme was adjusted to suit students who came from several different backgrounds. For some students, and some non-students, the workshops became much more of a group improvisation, as Beinart noted, "and then someone would start [an exercise], often, I would myself and then everyone reacted."[19] The work produced was therefore collaborative—and countered the notion of a single author to a work, or individual artistic expression. "How exactly the work was done, remains a mystery. What is clear however, is that the idea of creative freedom so communicated itself from one student to another that in the end the best work had not been done by one or two but by everyone."[20] The workshops were run by Beier and became more formal with limited participants, with the intention to discover and groom a selection of exceptionally talented artists. The Ubuntu spirit of the first workshops was lost in favour of a more formalised pedagogy. The refrain by Beinart that "the best work had not been done by one or two but by everyone" is true of architecture; it is a field where the architect, client, and builder, as well as various consultants, in essence, have to work together with a shared vision towards a completed work. The principle of Ubuntu—"I am because we are"—was physically reflected in the workshops, and is a true reflection of architectural practice.

After spending two years in the Guedes' inspired Wits School of Architecture, I moved to the Faculty of Architecture at Porto University (FAUP), Portugal: a school very much in the grip of Álvaro Siza Vieira's influence. He had just received the Pritzker Prize—arguably the highest honour for an architect—and the school had just occupied a new series of buildings, designed by Siza, on the banks of the River Douro, in Porto. A particular combination of poetic modernism and critical regionalism, as practised by Siza, held sway, and all students were expected to be diligent followers. Coming from the Guedes' dream world at Wits, where "poetry, fantasy and art were seamlessly brought together,"[21] it was a shock. FAUP took the madness of Guedes' Wits and disciplined it, made it more rational, and capable of being defended to the staunchest modernist.

The experience also gave me an appreciation for the city as an organism, and the collective responsibility of all architects, architectural students, and inhabitants for the quality of places. Every project began with intense drawing sessions of the city. Every line of the drawing needed to be defended in terms of what it contributed to the embodied experience of the city. Drawings were expected to be reflections of the design concept, following Marshall McLuhan's "the medium as message."[22] This particular focus on drawing as one outcome of architectural work, and not just a building, was an extension of Guedes' assertion that "Architecture is art and that making buildings is less important than making drawings."[23]

Upon returning to Wits in 1995, the site of the School of Architecture in its urban and political context had come to the fore, under the influence of, among others, Lone Poulsen and the soon-to-be head of school, Bremner, who wrote extensively, eventually compiling her essays into a book entitled *Writing the City into Being*. The phenomenological themes inherent in Guedes' architecture (Guedes was of his time and place) as Christian Norberg-Schulz put it "… all places have character [and that] to some extent the character of a place is a function of time …"[24] continued to be taught at the school, with Iain Low, introducing students to contemporary architectural phenomenology, such as Juhani Pallasmaa's *Eyes of the Skin*, which extended Norberg-Schulz and Gaston Bachelard's work. Also, to architects whose work has "applied their own experiences and studies of a particular culture and context to the design of buildings, in the hope of replicating those experiences in others,"[25] these architects included Siza, from whose university I had just returned.

This was my journey to professional practice, one embedded in phenomenology, both African and global, and in the city, and influenced by many who came before me. My architectural practice-based design research commenced with an understanding of the global precedents of design research and has continued to an autoethnographic study of my ancestors, my community of practice.

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Notes

1 Fraser, 'Introduction', 1–2; emphasis added.

2 Hill, 'Design Research', 15.

3 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 161; emphasis in original.

4 Miles, Mvusi, and Johannesburg Art Gallery, *Current of Africa*, appendix, 31, 34, 35; emphasis added.

5 Miles, Mvusi, and Johannesburg Art Gallery, *Current of Africa*, appendix, 31, 34, 35.

6 Quoted in Magaziner, 'The Foundation', 602; emphasis added.

7 Guedes and Guedes, *Viva Pancho*, 4.

8 Guedes and Guedes, *Viva Pancho*, 1.

9 Guedes and Guedes, *Viva Pancho*, 2.

10 Mucina, 'Ubuntu Orality as a Living Philosophy'.

11 Keane, 'Understanding Science Curriculum and Research in Rural Kwa-Zulu Natal'.

12 Keane, 'Understanding Science Curriculum and Research in Rural Kwa-Zulu Natal', 47.

13 Miles, Mvusi, and Johannesburg Art Gallery, *Current of Africa*, appendix, 31, 34, 35.

14 Magaziner, 'The Foundation', 626-627.

15 du Plessis, 'The Real Sustainability Challenge'.

16 Levin, 'Basic Design and the Semiotics of Citizenship'.

17 Beinart, 'Visual Education for Emerging Cultures', 196.

18 Levin, 'Basic Design and the Semiotics of Citizenship', 87.

19 Beinart, 'Basic Design in Nigeria', 21.

20 Beinart, 'Basic Design in Nigeria', 21.

21 Guedes and Guedes, *Viva Pancho*, 8.

22 McLuhan, Fiore, and Agel, *The Medium Is the Massage*.

23 Quoted in Guedes and Guedes, *Viva Pancho*, 10.

24 Norberg-Schulz. 'The Phenomenon of Place', 420.

25 Munoz, 'Quick Tour through Phenomenological Thinking in Architecture'.

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