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IT DEPENDS ON THE LENS: FILM AS EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AND DESIGN REPRESENTATION

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This paper presents a creative research project that combines architecture and film to promote inclusive and collaborative design environments in architectural pedagogy. The technique, called character-led design, explores the complex relationships among people, culture, identity, and architecture through the lens of filmic narratives. By emphasizing the lived experiences of characters in the design process, the research aims to create socially responsible and culturally sensitive designs. The paper discusses the pedagogic process, student projects, and feedback, highlighting the potential of character-led design to influence the architectural profession and contribute to decolonial education. The technique aligns with critical spatial practice theory and offers an inclusive and collaborative methodology for architectural design.

This paper introduces my creative research in architecture and design and explores the transformative work that I have been contributing to architectural pedagogy. My research is interdisciplinary, exploring a technique that combines architecture and film in the architectural design process, to achieve inclusive, collaborative place-making. The research is situated in the broad field of narrative in the design process, seeking to contribute new knowledge to architectural pedagogy and design theory. The technique can be extended beyond spatial design and applied more widely in other areas of learning and culture-based practices. In this paper, I will introduce my research and its background, and the technique for which I have coined the phrase *character-led design*. I will then discuss the situatedness of my research in relation to relevant projects, workshops, and strategies that employ similar approaches to architectural pedagogy, noting how my approach aligns with decolonial education's aims. The pedagogic process will be discussed through various student projects from the first-year design studio, where the character-led design technique was introduced, as well as anonymous feedback from students who participated in online questionnaires about the pedagogic process. To conclude the paper, the achievements of the character-led design technique will be discussed.

My creative research explores the diverse and complex relationships that exist among people, culture, identity, history, buildings, and landscapes through character-led design, to promote collaborative and inclusive design environments in the architectural design studio and in the design of buildings that students are attempting. As an architect, I was involved in several projects in commercial practice, and whilst working, I noticed the lack of consideration in the design process of the diverse and complex relationships that exist among people, culture and the places they inhabit. These social complexities seem to get stripped out in the design process and people and life are viewed as abstractions and or simplified objects within the architecture. I realised that the feelings, emotions, memories, subjectivities, and time attaching to buildings and places are most often not felt or considered during the design process nor seen in architectural representations. Representations of people are often part of architectural drawings, however, they are usually used to show the scale and programmatic functionality of a space. Architects have been known to customise their figure abstractions (Fig.1), but these usually form part of the architect's identity and drawing style.

The standard South African architectural curriculum, which is based on the British RIBA tradition and is a combination of universal and modernist Western thinking, has not been changed since it was first introduced and remains focused on preparing students to become employable professional architects. Yet if architectural students could learn to design more meaningful, socially-conscious places, acknowledging the diverse and complex aspects of life in the design process, and can show these aspects in architectural representations, could they then influence the architectural profession to promote more socially responsible and culturally sensitive designs? How could educators enable discussions in design studios to deal with and understand the complex and multiple viewpoints of students who come from diverse backgrounds?

I began to wonder about how architects could re-engage with the world in a collaborative, participatory manner to promote more socially conscious designs, rather than viewing people as abstract users of a space. According to Arturo Escobar, design is about the relationship between diverse forms of life and contrasting ideas about sociability and the world (2018). As an architect and educator, I responded by introducing character-led design into undergraduate projects to explore these complex relationships in the architectural design process, in order to promote a more socially responsible and culturally sensitive design practice.

Also, at this time, there was an openness to change amongst colleagues in the School of Architecture because of the #FeesMustFall student-led protest move-

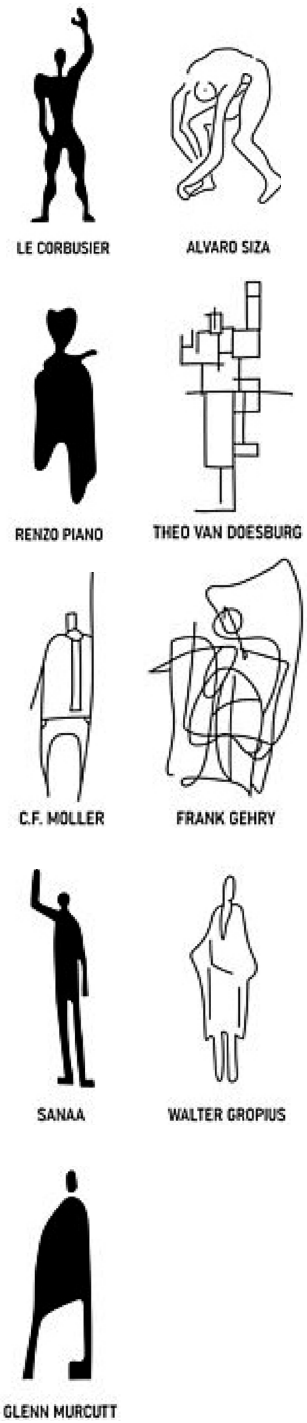


Fig. 1 Meghan2238, Famous Architect's Entourage, 2022, Various Sizes, https://www.redbubble.com/i/photographic-print/Famous-Architect-s-Entourage-by-meghan2238/70134700.6Q0TX

ment.[1] I was highly affected by the protests and was made aware that most students felt isolated and excluded because of the curriculum that we were teaching at the Wits School of Architecture and Planning. Without realising it, we were most likely excluding students because what we were teaching them was not relevant to their context. We were most likely teaching from the universal and modernist point of view that we believed was the only way to be, thus excluding other ways of being and other modes of situatedness in the world. I identified and responded to these problems by introducing the technique of character-led design to explore how character-led narratives from students in a class could enable a more inclusive and collaborative approach to a design environment.

Character-led design proposes a technique that combines architecture and film to assist with creating inclusive environments for learners and assisting them to consider the complexities of life in the design process. It focuses on the design of places from a character's lived experience in the form of a narrative. The form of narrative in this technique is the filmic narrative of screenwriting. Starting a design with a script requires characters to embody the places in which their emotional journeys unfold. A character-driven story is one in which the audience invests and believes. Syd Field claims that "[c]haracter is the essential foundation of your screenplay. It is the heart and soul and nervous system of your story. Before you put a word on paper, you must know your character" (Field 1982, 22).

There are existing filmic approaches to architectural design pedagogy. These include the workshops run by Dr Graham Cairns (2012), whose students explored film and directorial techniques in the UK and Spain to grasp how film directors view and employ space. Students used these explorations in their own design projects to uncover previously hidden potential in spatial layouts and arrangements. The workshops explored the relationship between film and spatial design to promote interdisciplinary design thinking in an educational context. They utilised a learning-by-doing approach that enabled the architecture students to address their own topics through techniques they were not used to, obliging them to reconsider their standard ways of working and thinking. Similarly, character-led design explores interdisciplinary design thinking in an educational context. But in character-led design, the emphasis is on developing an appropriate contextual filmic script, with character as the first step in the design process. These are techniques not usually employed in the architectural design process, and their inclusion aims to challenge students' standard ways of thinking about architectural design to develop future designers who are more socially responsible and culturally sensitive in their design practice.

Professor Nic Clear (2014) has led the use of the moving image in architecture and architectural education for over twenty years, developing skills and techniques through a variety of projects including documentary programmes and highly speculative 'virtual' conceptions of space. His speculative projects propose architecture 'as' science fiction to imagine what architecture in the near future might be like, drawing on the imagery of science fiction, including film. Similarly, character-led design focuses on the potential of film as a powerful medium through which to imagine and represent a parallel universe. Filmic narrative could be a method of designing a building using fiction rather than methods derived from ideas embedded in drafting plans, orthogonal grids, etc. The idea of designing characters, including indigenous characters, could make the process relatable for all designers. Through film, the same place could be read from the point of view of multiple characters, so that a single place can contain multiple narratives. Designing a building from a character's point of view should remind us that design is in a fundamental sense *for* the people who are going to be using and inhabiting the resultant building. Film can reach a wide audience and be understood without the use of spoken language. Film can convey meaning outside of the immediate optical system. It communicates more than just the spatial coordinates assigned to a place by sending signals to our

subconscious perception. Cities and urban sites in films are spaces within spaces that reflect our prevailing cultural norms, ethical mores, societal structures and ideologies (Koeck, 2013).

Character-led design aligns with Jane Rendell's' *Site Writing* (2019) and critical spatial practice theory. They share the objective of exploring and reconfiguring the relations between subjects and sites, and respond to the need to form more ethical, inclusive, and collaborative spatial theories and practices in the design process. One of the *Site Writing* projects on Jane Rendell's website is "Site Stories: Explorations of Urban Spaces through Drawing and Animation" by Tenna Doktor Olsen Tvedebrink and Tina Vestermann Olsen (2022). This pedagogical workshop took place at Aalborg University, Denmark, in 2022 and focused on undergrad students' attention to stories that are revealed in surfaces and details in selected urban and historical sites. The workshop challenged the traditional and factual understanding of the materiality of urban space through artistic, fictional, and embodied experiences. Students were taught to experiment with their understanding of materiality, reminding themselves that humans are sentient bodies and narrative beings so as better to understand how to design future urban spaces. The workshop also created a space where students made their own surprising discoveries and explorations about site thinking. They explored different drawing techniques and discovered the valuable potential of animation as a tool in the creative design process. The animations were workshopped in collaboration with ANIDOX (Anidox 2021), who aim to expand narrative horizons and embrace outsider voices using the power of new media platforms, such as animated films. Similarly, character-led design makes use of animation, film and filmic narrative techniques in the creative design process. Through the creation of a filmic script and character design, the designer experiences things through other people's eyes, walks in other people's shoes, and therefore becomes more sensitised to the question of how a future built intervention could affect the people concerned.

How does character-led design align with decolonial education's aims? During the #FeesMustFall protests, students presented decolonisation "in the form of an emphatic Afrocentrism delivered in charged language" (Jansen 2019, 54) as shown in the quotation below.

> The current curriculum dehumanises black students. We study all these dead white men who presided over our oppression, and we are made to use their thinking as a standard and as a point of departure. Our own thinking as Africans has been undermined. We must have our own education from our own continent. We cannot be decolonised by white people who colonised us. Decolonisation advances the interests of Africans, instead of advancing Eurocentric interests. (qtd. in Evans 2016)

Jansen (2019) states that the academic response to 'decolonise the curriculum' involved little critical engagement and that decolonisation became a test of political commitment to transform universities. The meaning of decolonisation should be critically reviewed to formulate a relevant response to it. But how do we critically review the decolonisation of our curriculum now that decolonisation has emerged as a political slogan on university campuses? Jansen (2019) believes that crude notions of replacing Western content with African content, or filling in forms that state how the curriculum was decolonised this month, are not likely to be the appropriate critical response. The university curriculum will always embrace legacies from the past, the needs of the present, and visions for the future. Jansen (2019) maintains that there can be no clean break from the past, and that the relationship between knowledge and power is complex and cannot be resolved by a moment focused only on decolonisation. Critics are, however, rethinking the framing of the postcolonial condition as a centre-periphery problematic, rather than a decolonisation impera-

tive. Do the character-led design explorations in the first-year design studio projects address this rethinking and reframing of South African knowledge production in terms of centre-periphery rather than decolonisation?

Thomas Avermaete's essay titled *Death of the Author, Center and Meta-Theory* (Avermaete, 2017) addresses the centre-periphery notion. Planning historiography faces a major challenge because of the bias of the various Euro-American historiographies of urban planning. There is an enduring divide between "First World" cities, which are viewed as models that generate theory and policy, and "Third World" cities which are seen as problematic places requiring diagnosis and reform (Avermaete, 2017). Scholars have privileged and idealised London, New York and Tokyo as the three leading cities from the Global North, in investigating and historicising the relationship between cities and processes of globalisation. There is a need for a more geographically balanced history of urban planning. Several theoretical and methodological issues surface when the notion of widening the geography of urban planning histories is addressed. How does one create a methodology that considers the relationship of urban planning strategies between the metropolis and its colonial territories? "[H]istoire croisée" (Avermaete 2017, 482) is a method of history writing that focuses on the interactions among cultures, traditions and disciplines. The method aims to include more negotiated perspectives, rather than focusing on cultural influence and the simple reception of culture.

In engaging with the multidimensionality of the history of urban experience, challenging and less familiar sources and methods should be explored, including film. Avermaete claims that "film can capture the personalities, motivations, reactions, and conflicts that are all so important in understanding the relation between different actors in urban planning. Digital media will in the near future undoubtedly also open new possibilities for the investigation of multiple, unequal, and transdisciplinary forms of authorship in the realm of planning" (2017, 480). Character-led design's inclusive collaborative approach could not only respond to the decolonisation and centre-periphery focus in the South African university context, but also respond more broadly to the need for an inclusive collaborative methodology to counter the top-down design approach that has dominated planning strategies and the architectural profession.

In responding to the demand for a decolonised curriculum made by the protestors, I grappled with the notion that I, as a non-indigenous person in South Africa, needed to engage with indigenous methodology and decolonising methodology. I discussed this with a colleague, who is indigenous to South Africa, and we agreed that my engagement with these questions demonstrated a willingness and an openness to recognise the necessity for change, which is just as necessary as having indigenous role models in architectural design pedagogy. I recognised that there was a vulnerability that the educator needs to address in the sharing of personal lived experience between student and educator, which should be an equal exchange of knowledge (Sendra, 2020). My learning experience while teaching character-led design allowed me to become more vulnerable, to become open to listening to and learning from the stories and experiences of students, rather than telling them how things ought to be. "Instead, vulnerability can foster a self-reflexive, safe, and inclusive learning environment, where class members' interactions are based on mutual respect" (Sendra 2020, 69).

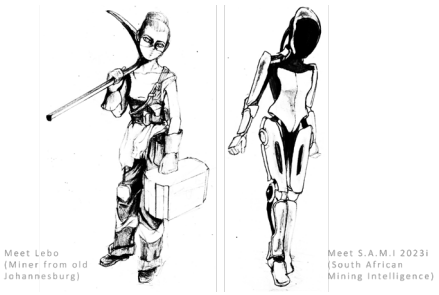


Fig. 2 Mmabatho Grace Mokalapa, AlterNative Johannesburg Project Character Design, 2022

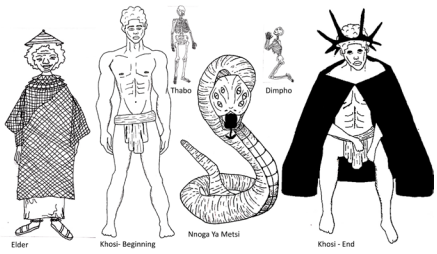


Fig. 3 Group 04 Students, Kgoro Ya Kuruman Project Character Design, 2022



Fig. 4 Mmabatho Grace Mokalapa and Liam Hildebrand, Inside Out House Project, Land Character Design, 2022.

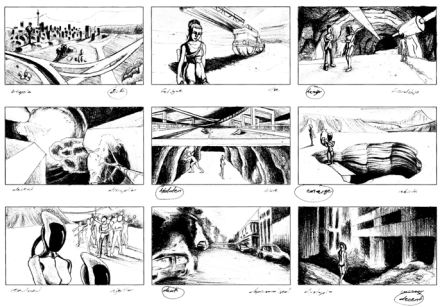


Fig. 5 Mmabatho Grace Mokalapa, AlterNative Johannesburg Project Storyboard

In the first-year design studio, the aim is to start the design process from the personal story of a student and not exclusively from traditional top-down teaching. The students design characters who experience and embody the world of the stories, which are also created by the students. The brief, in a sense, becomes student-led and enables a collaborative discussion with the educators. The characters, the narrative, and the world that the students create become the foundation of the design, from conceptual phase through to final phase.

Could screenwriting be a narrative form that might be linked to the decolonising methodologies of storytelling? Linda Tuhiwai Smith refers to storytelling as a potential indigenous research project: "Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place" (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 146).

In the character-led design technique, the worlds that the students create could be real but aligned with new or alternative paradigms, or they could be imaginary. The notion of alternative paradigms is consonant with Walter Mignolo's concept of the pluriverse (Mignolo 2018). According to pluriversality, the world is not a unified totality but an interconnected diversity that we can choose to inhabit. This way of thinking sets us free to think decolonially about the pluriversality of the world rather than its universality (Mignolo 2018). In line with the aims of decolonial education, then, the character-led design technique was introduced into various projects in the first-year design studio.

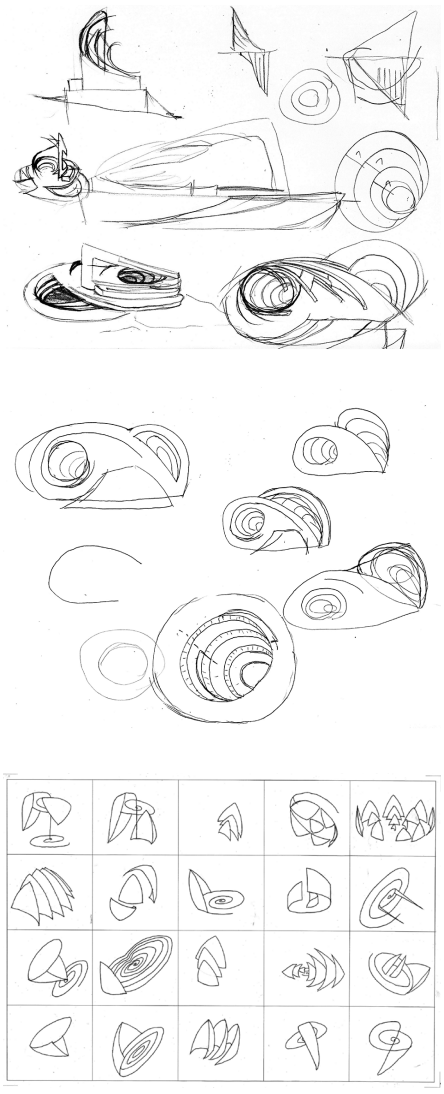


Fig. 6 Mmabatho Grace Mokalapa, AlterNative Johannesburg Project, Concept Sketches, 2022.

The pedagogic process of the character-led design technique begins with writing a script about a context, real or imagined, through the eyes of characters that students have created. This enables students to think deeply about their context, as well as reflect on their beliefs and way of thinking within this context. The film script is an entertainment narrative that introduces conflict and climax into a character's journey (Grimaldi et al. 2013). The main function of this type of narrative, for the designer, is to include someone else's history, identity, and connection to a place in the design process. Such character-led narratives support the design process by including multiple voices, the voices of potential users as well as the voice of the designer. In sum, character-led design aims to achieve a design that is inclusive and collaborative by exploring empathy, identification, and memory through imagined character stories, in the form of a script that draws on the personal stories of students from diverse backgrounds.

The three-act linear script structure in screenwriting, which is usually 120 pages long, is severely condensed in character-led design, so that students write a one-page script comprising three paragraphs devoted to the beginning, middle and end of their story. The paragraphs may include several scenes to tell the story. The scene headings indicating whether the character is outside or inside, at a specific location, during a specific time of day, are vital components that students are required to include in their scripts. These scene headings enable students to imagine, through writing, the interior or exterior of places, the context and site that their character will inhabit, and the temporal and spatial dimensions that their character will experience. Writing a script as the first step in the design process is different to receiving a standard curriculum design brief, which might include a narrative about a context that has been written

by the person who has prepared the brief. The characters in that context would most likely be abstract users whose opinions have not been considered.

In the character-led design technique, the educators and students work together to develop the students' narratives into design briefs. Educators are the facilitators of the project, and students are participants, though these roles frequently blur and the atmosphere becomes collaborative. The challenges of introducing this kind of filmic narrative into the architectural design studio are faced, first, by the teaching team, who are unfamiliar with screenwriting and filmmaking processes. Secondly, the students are required to undertake a large amount of writing, and their writing skills are usually not strong. Additional writing assistance may therefore be required to develop these skills.

The next step in the character-led design pedagogic process is inventing characters, including indigenous characters, to make the design process relatable to all the students in the architecture class (Fig. 2). In more current iterations of the character-led design technique, the character design has been extended to include other beings, not just people, an innovation stemming from the worldview of indigenous knowledge systems (Fig. 3). The students are required to consider beings which include animals, mythological entities, and even the land. The land is recognised as a physical entity, a historical and cultural entity, as well as a spiritual being. Students are therefore required to stretch their imaginations and drawing talents in order to create believable entities which represent aspects of the environment as sentient beings, thereby (for some) adopting a different worldview (Fig. 4).

Once the script has been created and the characters have been designed, the next step in the pedagogic process involves the visualisation of the script and characters in the form of a storyboard. The storyboard (Fig. 5) is a visual translation of the scenes. Students learn that the frames in a storyboard usually follow a structured linear temporal sequence from left to right, top to bottom. Each frame captures a major event in their story, maintaining a flow in the overall narrative while serving to summarise other events. The drawing for every frame needs to consider the setting, the characters, their postures and positions, the angle of the shot if one were holding a camera, the foreground, middle-ground, background, the time of day or atmosphere, and objects and elements that might be relevant and important to that part of the story. The storyboard sets up the *mise-en-scène* within the frame, revealing the main story and back story at the same time. Creating storyboards from a written script could be compared to the urban design visual approach known as serial vision (Cullen 1961), where a designer imagines the physicality of a building and the urban landscape through sequential sketches, which are drawn in a way that imagines a walk from one end of an architectural plan drawing to the other. In the character-led design technique, the sequential sketches are imagined and drawn from the script. Central to the sketches are the presence of the characters and their relationship to the physicality of an imagined building and urban landscape. The storyboard is a visual script that enables the students to imagine the worlds that they are creating through their stories and characters.

Once the storyboard has been developed, the exploration of conceptual sketches (Fig. 6) and conceptual models (Fig. 7) is iterated, and feedback is given by educators in the architectural design studio until a convincing translation of the narrative into architecture is achieved.

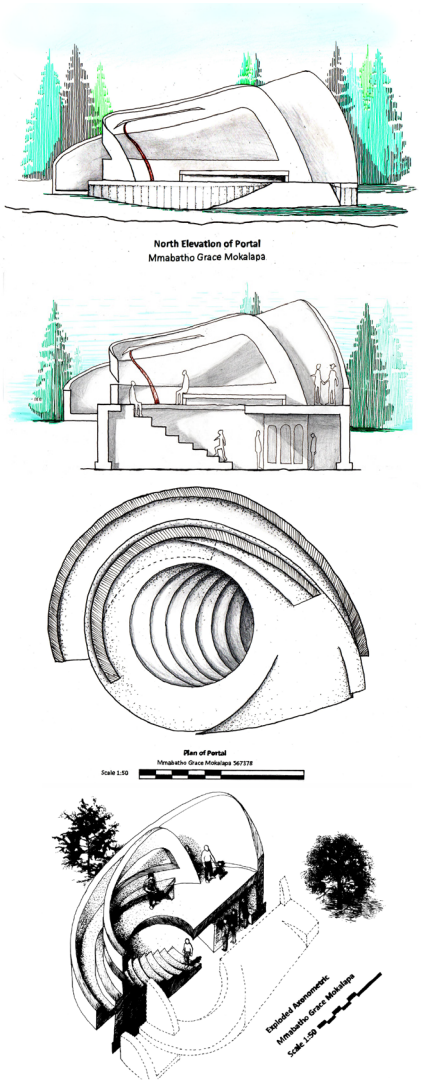


Fig. 8 Mmabatho Grace Mokalapa, AlterNative Johannesburg Project, Final Architectural Orthographic Drawings, 2022.

The character-led design technique also creates new opportunities to present the architectural project. The student's designs are expressed in different forms of presentation, including the characters and the imagined worlds from the narratives created by students (Fig. 8). Film and animation become new, emotive ways of showcasing an architectural project (Fig. 9). In the films and animations, the students create and experience the journey of the world they create through the to-scale characters inside their models. The architecture becomes both a product of the narrative and a background for the narrative; it also becomes one of the characters (Fig. 10). Film adds the additional layer of audience, the viewer, who is not involved in the design process, but experiences the presented narrative.



Fig. 9 Michel Kalongo, Kgoro Ya Kuruman, Animation Screenshot Interior



Fig. 10 Michel Kalongo, Kgoro Ya Kuruman, Animation Screenshot Exterior

Anonymous student questionnaires have been run in the first-year architectural design studio since character-led design was introduced. The surveys include questions regarding the student's thoughts and perceptions of the effects of the character-led design technique. The answers reveal that students become more aware of the environments that they are in when making films about these environments, that film frame captures and highlights aspects of life and place that we may usually be blind to, and that storytelling enables the sharing of diverse positionalities, which are usually not considered in teaching environments. Below are some answers from the anonymous student questionnaires:

"...creating a narrative that connects architecture and the user..."

"... look at architectural drawings in animation helped with understanding proportion as well as spatial use..."

"... trying to tackle difficult social, racial, and economic topics through our stories..."

"... learning how people actually connect with the architecture around them..."

"This course taught me to analyse buildings and architecture in terms of history and culture which was very useful because one must be sensitive to an area's history when designing buildings for it in the future."

The achievement of the character-led design technique is that it has changed the way that first-year architectural students learn about designing spaces. The students achieve spatial designs with qualities determined by ambience and meaning, not only by the length or height available, or the generic users of a building, or the statutory constraints of a site. The character-led design technique initiates a design in three dimensions and includes the movement of a character who is sentient, and who occupies and moves through spaces in time, which is different from designing on paper in two dimensions using only architectural orthographic projections and abstract figures to indicate scale. The design occurs through the unconscious stages of a story: a character who inhabits a world where the story begins, where a crisis may occur that catapults the character towards inevitable change, and a resolution where the character and the original world must change. These spaces, conceptualised from a story, are without preconceived ideas about what a specific type of building should look or feel like. The spaces are different because they are derived from people's intuitive understanding and spatial culture from their life experience. It is the spatial atmosphere experienced by the sentient character that is incorporated into the design process of the architecture.

Film suspends a person's disbelief, and often the viewer is emotionally invested in watching a film. This does not happen when a person looks at an architectural orthographic projection or presentation. When a student presents their design through a film, these affective layers become part of the architectural presentation, which makes people more sensitively aware and encourages the designer to be more empathic. Also, the client who funds an architectural design project is usually not the person who uses the building. By presenting an architectural project through an emotive film, the client should have a better understanding of what the users of the building require and need.

In conclusion, the character-led design technique could have applications in various fields including architecture, film and scenography, community-based architecture and film projects, and decoloniality in education.

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Notes

1 The #FeesMustFall student-led protest movement began on 14 October 2015 in South Africa at The University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Students reacted to a national announcement about university fee increases and protested for free tertiary education and a decolonised curriculum. The protests were impactful, universities were shut down, coursework and final exams could not continue. It took some time for negotiations between students and the government to be concluded, before the universities reopened (Malaba 2021).