

[DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2018.042.032](https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2018.042.032)

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THE CUB SPEAKS: NARRATIVES OF CITIES IN AFRICA FROM YOUNG GRADUATES IN JOHANNESBURG

Abstract:

There is a certain 'othering' when cities in the African continent are presented. Literature on cities in Africa is saturated by narratives by 'explorers and scholars' from the north, often decades past their youth. Very few, if any, narratives in academia are from young voices who have lived and experienced urban spaces in various parts of the continent. The question is, how does one change that in a pedagogical landscape built entirely on narratives or texts that are 'other' to these youthful African voices? How does one shift pedagogy in an inherently colonial and industrial curriculum?

This study applies postmodern theories in narrating and studying both historic and contemporary realities of urbanization of cities in Africa through the lens of the self and storytelling as valid research method. It shifts focus from set literature and prioritizes lived experiences from young voices, moreover, it presents these as authentic pedagogical approaches.

The study is interested in how young people narrate, represent and present their immediate contexts. Since 2016, propelled by the 2014/15 'fees must fall' student movement in South Africa which, amongst other things, advocated for the decolonization of education, the Department of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg introduced a lecture series focusing on cities in Africa within an existing module offering, but shifted the focus by inviting young and diverse voices as presenters.

In 2017, the series was taken out of the classroom into communal student spaces within the department to make it accessible to a larger interactive audience and to loosen the series from prescriptive curriculum structures. It is a work in progress, however what has come out from this two-year experiment, for the students presenting and participating in the series, is a yearning to hear more voices, the appreciation of various narratives and perspectives presented, and the need to expand such an experiment beyond the boundaries of the university campus.

Keywords:

Africa, Cities, Pedagogy, Postmodern, Urbanism

Introduction

“Until the lion learns to speak, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”

African Proverb

The use of oral storytelling in many societies in Africa has for centuries been a way of passing down the continent’s richness, heritage and traditions. In the years past, grandparents would gather their grandchildren sometime during the day or early evening when the chores were done, and share a tale or two to teach life lessons to the young. Often, these lessons would be masked in rich, figurative stories that transcended the tangible realms of life. The stories were passed on from one generation to the next, shaping life and relations in the world they lived in. When the explorers came with foreign languages and ways of living, the native ways were forever changed.

The proverb about the lion and the hunter is deeply relevant to colonisation in Africa. The native-lion could not initially speak the hunter’s language, and that is why the tale of the hunt glorified the colonist-hunter. However, the lion could still growl and roar, and he taught this to his cubs. By the time the lion learned to speak the hunter’s language, the hunter’s tale was known so far and wide that no one listened to the lion’s voice, and it got softer as he aged. Maybe it is now it is the turn of his growling, roaring, speaking cubs to narrate the tale of the hunt.

The question of who gets to tell the story is a fundamental one to understanding and unpacking what stories are told. What version of the story is legitimate? When motivating for a decolonised curriculum, it is informative to refer to Paulo Freire’s (1993) arguments in his seminal writings on pedagogy – *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* – that only the oppressed have the power to liberate themselves and their oppressors. We can contextualise the 2015 protests in South African Universities under the hashtag “#DecoloniseEducation” students as the oppressed because they have little influence with what is and how it is taught, with educators as the oppressors – the selectors and holders of knowledge – who are ultimately responsible for its delivery to students. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* allows us to imagine a liberated curriculum.

Until recently, within the Department of Architecture (DoA) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the urban design teaching syllabus had a western, modernistic view of urbanism. African urbanism and urbanisation had no presence in the syllabus, especially when I was an undergraduate student within the department. After graduating with a Master’s degree in Urban Design at a different institution, I returned to UJ to work as a lecturer, and in 2014 I began teaching an undergraduate teaching module: the Principles of Urban Design⁴ (PUD⁴). This module is the first time in their undergraduate curriculum that students actively engage with issues of urbanity. Therefore the ideals that are presented in this module fundamentally shape how students understand and respond to urban issues. However, I ‘inherited’ this module from other lecturers – other

'storytellers' – who focused on narratives from the west, even though the DOA is situated in South Africa, and therefore in the 'global south', which includes the cities of both 'developing' and 'under-developed' countries. Thus many of the students from the department (including myself) have, until recently, left the department with very little knowledge or understanding of the conditions that make up cities of the global south (especially within the African continent). This paper presents an ongoing experimental seminar series called Cities in Africa (CiA) that attempts to challenge existing approaches to teaching urbanism. The series is housed within the UJ DOA's PUD4 module, and started in 2016.

The series is a response to many questions raised in the course of teaching this module: how do we respond to urbanism that is shaping cities in Africa without rehashing saturated macro-scale discourses about it? How does one shift the pedagogy of a curriculum to one that will develop architects who will function in different ways than previously envisioned? How do we transform the curriculum so that it trains students to be "problem posers" rather than the traditional roles of being problem-solvers (Freire, 1993)?

Perhaps a point of departure is first to understand the nature of these cities, using both macro/quantitative research (e.g. demographics, economics, politics and infrastructure) and more so, micro/qualitative research (the everyday lived experiences of urbanites). The director of the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town, Edgar Pieterse (2013), attests that there is a lot of scholarly work done at macro-scale, while the intimate nuances of telling the story of everyday life in African urbanism lacks scholarship.

Transforming a backward and colonial pedagogy requires significant reconsiderations of the kinds of values that are instilled in education, how these are practiced and what benefits they have on the objectives of education; a pedagogy that goes beyond rejection and replacement of what was inherited from colonisation. Finzi Saidi (2005) and Ashraf M. Salama (2013) argue that a 'critical pedagogy' approach is necessary for this to happen, wherein educators and students actively engage in questioning and challenging set beliefs and practices that dominate discourse.

This article argues for a type of critical pedagogy – one that brings the everyday narratives to the fore and shifts focus from teachers as bearers of knowledge, to students. This has occurred at DOA through a filmed series of dialogues, storytelling and seminar discussions on African urbanism, in which young voices are prioritised. These are then analysed to understand and unpack how young Africans – citizens of African countries, irrespective of race – view, represent and imagine urbanism in the continent, with the aim of shifting pedagogy on the subject.

The series is explained in more detail later on in the article and the outcomes of the two rounds are also explained. The attention here is the deliberate focus on young voices as the narrators.

The young and rapidly urbanising continent

Studies show that Africa is, demographically, a young continent. It is estimated that 59% of the continent's population is 24 years old, or younger (UNECA, 2016). This can be seen as an opportunity to engage more deeply with the youth. The CiA seminar series operates from the position that by focusing on the youth and issues that are pertinent to them, we may gain some insight into nuanced stories about urban living in Africa.

Over the past couple of decades, there has been an increase in research on urbanisation, especially of the global South. Africa is the fastest urbanising continent (Pieterse, 2013), and this has attracted research interest within the continent, and from the global North, with a growing number of students and institutions situating their research in many parts of the continent. The question then becomes: what narratives about Africa come out of these research projects?

The Other

Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2004) highlight the risks associated with othering of Africa that comes from both local and international scholars. They argue that the continent cannot be described in singular narrative:

The obstinacy with which scholars in particular (including African scholars) continue to describe Africa as an object apart from the world, or as a failed and incomplete example of something else, perpetually underplays the embeddedness in multiple elsewheres of which the continent actually speaks (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2004).

In view of this, should one refer to 'African cities' or 'Cities in Africa'? This is a question I have grappled with for a number of years. The statements seem to mean the same thing but paint very different images in our minds. I am intrigued by these images and where they come from. The constant othering of Africa as an exception – the 'unknown' and 'different from' – forms a large part of this article. By naming a thing we limit the chance of it being something else, and in differentiating it, we also tend to exclude. Perhaps this limited scholarly description of Africa is what has constricted pedagogy of cities in Africa.

Shifting Pedagogy

Urbanism on cities in Africa is concentrated with macro-scale issues, that is; discourses on demographics, economic and political makeup of urbanism in the continent (Pieterse, 2013). Dennis Koo Hok-chun (2002) argues that these are symptoms of a modernist pedagogical perspective, wherein issues are simplified, compartmentalised and unresponsive to change. Pieterse believes that this narrow mindset has caused

damage “by evacuating the scholarship of lived experiences of urban life”. It appears that Teddy Cruz (2013) agrees with Pieterse, asserting that “Today it is essential to reorient our gaze towards the drama embedded in the reality of the everyday, and in so doing, engage the shifting socio-political and economic domains ...”. With this as backdrop, I am convinced that different approaches to teaching and learning are necessary to advance discourse on urbanism in Africa. Perhaps we need to explore rigorous, critical approaches that appreciate the multiplicities of narratives within the continent.

Much like postcolonial, queer and feminist theories, the postmodern approach to critical pedagogy challenges educators to develop learning that recognises the complex contexts in which education is situated (for instance, issues of democracy, poverty, changing student profile, race, marginalisation, religion, sexuality, climate change, multiculturalism, multi-classism, urban slums, indigenous communities, xenophobia, migration etc). Modern architecture curricula fail to incorporate these complex issues, which are not so easily defined into solvable projects with clear methodological approaches. Their experimental nature takes away the power of authority for educators, a position that many are unable to relinquish in the interest of learning. A postmodern approach begins to redefine the architect’s/urban designer’s role to that of a responsive service to society by dedicating time in the curricula to address these sociocultural and economic issues.

Freire (1993) critiqued a ‘banking’ system of education in which teachers ‘deposit’ education into students, who are in turn seen as empty vessels to be filled. This criticism was part of a shift towards a postmodernist curriculum which prioritises three basic principles, namely:

- It seeks to empower both teachers and learners, creating an environment where they can engage in constructive dialogue.
- It encourages interpretation rather than explanation of knowledge (Cheng-Man Lau 2001: 37).
- It adopts developmental planning which allows for greater flexibility and modification.

This approach is not followed blindly. Health Sciences educator, Guofang Wan (2001), warns that in applying it, one also needs to be cognisant of its challenges to avoid “disastrous results”. Some of the challenges to bear in mind include the vagueness of the approach due to the fluid and changing nature of the context, chaos associated with the methodology and the challenges in assessment due to its process-driven approach (Wan 2001). However, compared to the current dominant modern curriculum, this approach is forward-looking and responsive to change. In terms of the power relations, a postmodern curriculum allows the academics and student to develop learning processes through continuous interaction and dialogue(Wan 2001).

Presented below is an experimental 'project' to test this type of pedagogical shift from tradition. Although the experiment does not represent the full transformation of the curriculum, it provides a pilot case study of a curriculum-contextual response to the urgent call in South Africa to decolonise the higher education curriculum. Moreover, it provides a platform for real and constructive dialogue between students and their lecturers; addressing complex emerging issues concerning the future of cities.

Cities in Africa Seminar series

The work of African Centre for Cities in the University of Cape Town, was particularly influential in the conception of the Cities in Africa (CiA) Seminar Series. However, the difference with the CiA narratives is that they are from young voices, from both lived experiences and interest in the cities presented, most of which formed part of a research subject in their graduate education.

Discussions around introducing African urbanity to the module started just before the students' outcry for decolonised education in 2015. By this time, the urgency to test how this would work in the curriculum had become pressing. The intention behind the CiA seminars was to give voice to the youth to narrate cities in Africa from their perspectives. Students and recent graduates were invited to present narratives on urbanity from their diverse contexts/cities in Africa under the theme 'views from within'. The theme evolved in 2017 as I was interested in the speculations of the future of cities in Africa if colonisation had not taken place. 'Alkebulan' or 'Al Kibula' is said to be a name given to Africa prior to European colonisation, and the theme for the 2017 module, 'Al Kibula Strands', came about as a way of evoking a pre-colonial African continent.

Figure 1: Posters advertising the Cities in Africa Series 2016 and 2017 presenters



Source: Author's Own.

The Cubs Speak

Keeping with the basic principles of a postmodern approach to pedagogy, the series is a platform on which both myself as a teacher and my students are learning through constructive dialogue with each other and the presenters. Moreover, drawing from within/personal stories encourages more interpretative dialogues and narration. Some of these narratives are discussed in the following section with the aim to highlight some of the complexities and commonalities that make up cities in Africa.

Figure 2: Part of a Poster advertising a series of lectures presented by Tuliza Sindi in the Cities in Africa Series 2016



Source: Prepared by Tuliza Sindi.

Tuliza Sindi is a recent graduate from University of Pretoria, South Africa. She was born in Kinshasa and made her way to Johannesburg with her family when she was four years old. She has never been back. In her presentation on 11 August 2016, she attempted to piece together what she remembered of Kinshasa with what she's been told about it, and what she imagined with what was experienced (Sindi, 2016). Her inquiry explored the city through those imaginings and pieced together 'stop-frames' of memories, hopes and disappointments, while exploring their trajectories, through photographs. She did this without losing sight of unpacking the traumatic historical past of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Her fond childhood memories of Kinshasa revolved around the Fanta and French bread her mother used to give her as a treat, and the boats along the Congo River. She gave us food for thought in her concluding statement, "After all, is a city not but a mere accumulation of all our fears and dreams?" (Sindi, 2016).

Figure 3: Part of a Poster advertising a series of lectures presented by Afua Wilcox in the Cities in Africa Series 2016



Source: Composed by author using images supplied by Afua Wilcox.

Afua Wilcox's presentation on 25 August 2016 was on the subject of her Master's in Architecture thesis (from the University of Witwatersrand), in which she dove deep into a series of mappings "showing how Swazi culture and traditions have affected Swaziland's built environment". The presentation was woven with captivating imagery and concepts of possible architectures through which such understanding could emerge.

The presentation challenged the definition of "city" and posed the question of whether or not indigenous cultures are important in the moulding of cities in Africa. It compared the concepts of the city as a colony with the city as a pure expression of culture. Wilcox's

architectural project proposed a series of temporal and seasonal spaces that responded to the various annual gatherings in Lobamba (Swaziland's traditional, spiritual and legislative capital city).

She considered how cultural decisions affect African cities, especially in the context of Swaziland (Wilcox, 2016). Her presentation took a brave stance that engaged with the socioeconomic challenges of the Kingdom of Swaziland, and its ideologies around class, gender, religion and rich heritage, through the lens of a young Swazi maiden considering what the cities of Lobamba and Mbabane mean to her (Wilcox, 2016).

Figure 4: Part of a Poster advertising Israel Dare's lecture on Lagos, Nigeria presented in the Cities in Africa Series 2016



Source: Composition by author using images supplied by Israel Dare.

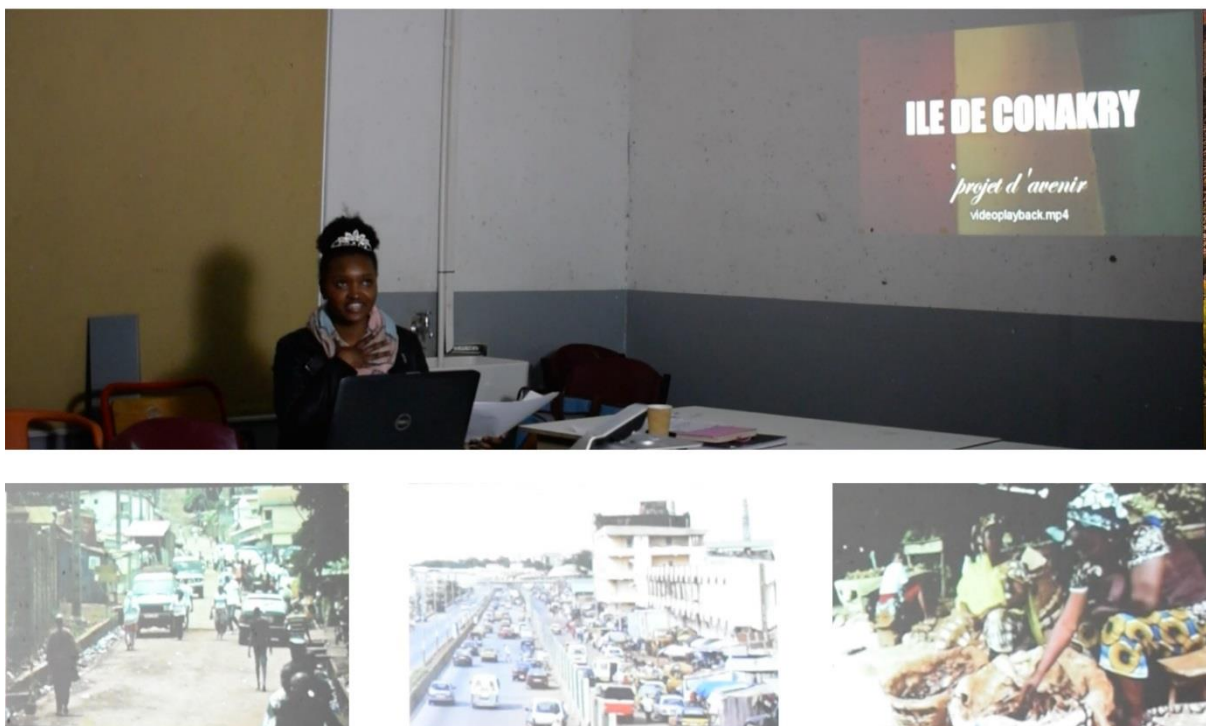
Israel Ogun Dare focused his presentation in September 2016 on the cultural and religious nuances of the everyday life of a Lagosian. Drawing from personal stories, he unpacked his lineage through his names, and their cultural connotations. He also spoke about the hustle and bustle of Lagos, about its resilient nature, its complex property economies and its delicacies. He examined the untold story of how Nigerians are seen as religious people, and how this singular act has shaped how Lagos is experienced, irrespective of religious backgrounds (Dare, 2016).

Lagos is one of the fastest-growing cities in the world. According to Dare (2016), Lagos is driven by the popular saying “Eko oni baje” which refers to working around the clock to make ends meet.

Based on the success of the first seminar series, it was clear that a platform of this kind was necessary within the DOA and needed to be opened wider than the class or module in which it was situated. Furthermore, it was necessary to cast the net even wider to attract more voices to discourses that are about Africa, to tell stories about our immediate contexts, to appreciate them, problematise them and inspire solutions for them.

Therefore, in 2017, the DOA ran a second series under the theme ‘Al Kibula Strands: beyond numbers and figures’ in which we asked students to look beyond the statistics from the various policy documents and reports to find strands for possible future imaginaries for the continent. In essence, we asked them to be speculative and forward looking. Students from the Graduate School of Architecture (GSA) at UJ heard the call and signed up to participate in the seminars, both as presenters and as the engaged audience. Two of these six sessions are discussed below. The intimate and personal narratives in these two presentations expressed an understanding of the complex sociopolitical contexts that many African states have in common. These students also dug deeper to articulate, so vividly, the everyday and its imaginaries.

Figure 5: Aisha Balde presenting at the CiA 2017 on Parallel Cities in Conakry, Guinea



Source: compositing and images by author, from Aisah Balde's presentation.

Aisah Balde (GSA) and Mohamed Toure (University of Baltimore), both originally from Guinea, teamed up to collate their version of the capital of Guinea, Conakry. Aisah Balde then presented the research. In their abstract, they questioned the idea of the “African Dream” – a dream based on western ideals. They also interrogated the urban planning decisions in Conakry that were based on cycles of detailed master plans from western planners and superimposed on vastly different contexts, without any consideration of the cultural and climatic factors. To the two, the disregard for context in the planning of Conakry is a strand that needs to be revisited in order to make development more responsive and resilient. Ideals of collectivism, cultural norms, understanding of the tropical climate and informal economies at play in the streets of Conakry are missing in the numerous master plans for the city (Balde and Toure, 2017).

Figure 6: Euridice Paiva and Steffen Fischer seminar session on ‘The Next meal’ set in Luanda, Angola presented in the Cities in Africa Series 2017



Source: Images and slide extracts provided by Steffen Fischer and Euridice Paiva.

Euridice Paiva and Steffen Fischer are both students in the GSA. Paiva is from Angola, and Fischer is from South Africa but grew up in Angola. Their presentation, structured along a timeline, weaved their personal experiences growing up in Angola with in-depth historical accounts to narrate their view of Luanda, the capital of Angola. Titled “The Next Meal”, their presentation unpacked what they believe is the strand that is significant to Angola’s past, present and future: agriculture.

Paiva and Fischer addressed serious topics such as colonisation of Angola, the slave trade, the civil war of 1979-2002, nepotism within the political system, white privilege with lighter topics, such as their fond childhood friendships. They also shared their experiences of the Mercado Roque Santeiro market which was eventually relocated to a different space, leading to its eventual failure. This was effortlessly done without losing the thread of their agricultural strand, and they concluded the presentation with what they believe is missing in the development of Luanda: a bottom-up approach that puts the views of *Zungerais* (informal traders) at the forefront, instead of the top-down superimposition of city planning ideas (Paiva and Fischer, 2017).

Interpretations of narratives

The impact of the CiA series was so evident in 2016 that a project based on the CiA2017 series was assigned to all the students enrolled for PUD4 in 2017. Students were assigned to one of the presented cities, and had to respond to the project based on the city assigned to them. The project asked the students to reflect on the presentations in the series and carefully curate a series of maps/drawings/moving images that traced the following:

- The precolonial morphology of the city assigned to them (archival/historic research)
- The 2017 morphology of the city, unpacking the strand the city has in common with another architectural design project that was running at the time – Future Johannesburg (a comparative exercise)
- The 2030-2050 future morphology of the city speculating on the influence the strand would have on the development of the city (projection, innovation, imagination)

The projects presented below are by three students concerning different cities, and express the diversity in their interpretation of the presentations and the brief, the diverse topics/strands woven into their narratives, and the variety of representational media used.

Figure 7: Exploring the past, present and future of Conakry, Guinea through the strand of hack-architecture



Source: Tshepo Ngwenya.

Tshepo Ngwenya's architectural design project explored what he called "Hack-Architecture", a somewhat transgressive response to poorly maintained, leftover spaces. Like a cyber hacker, he proposed a series of interventions that made use of these spaces in a way that was different to what they were intended for. His research on Conakry revealed the city's love for football. He noted that despite their "relatively poor international performance, football is enjoys a somewhat of a religious status" (Ngwenya, 2017). Children will often take a net out and block the whole street, stopping the traffic, to play. He believes there are lessons to learn from this "hacking" of space when planning for future cities in the continent. He speculates spaces that are flexible, temporal and communal as drivers of future cities (Ngwenya, 2017).

Figure 8: Exploring the past, present and future of Windhoek, Namibia through the strand of Fem-Urbanism

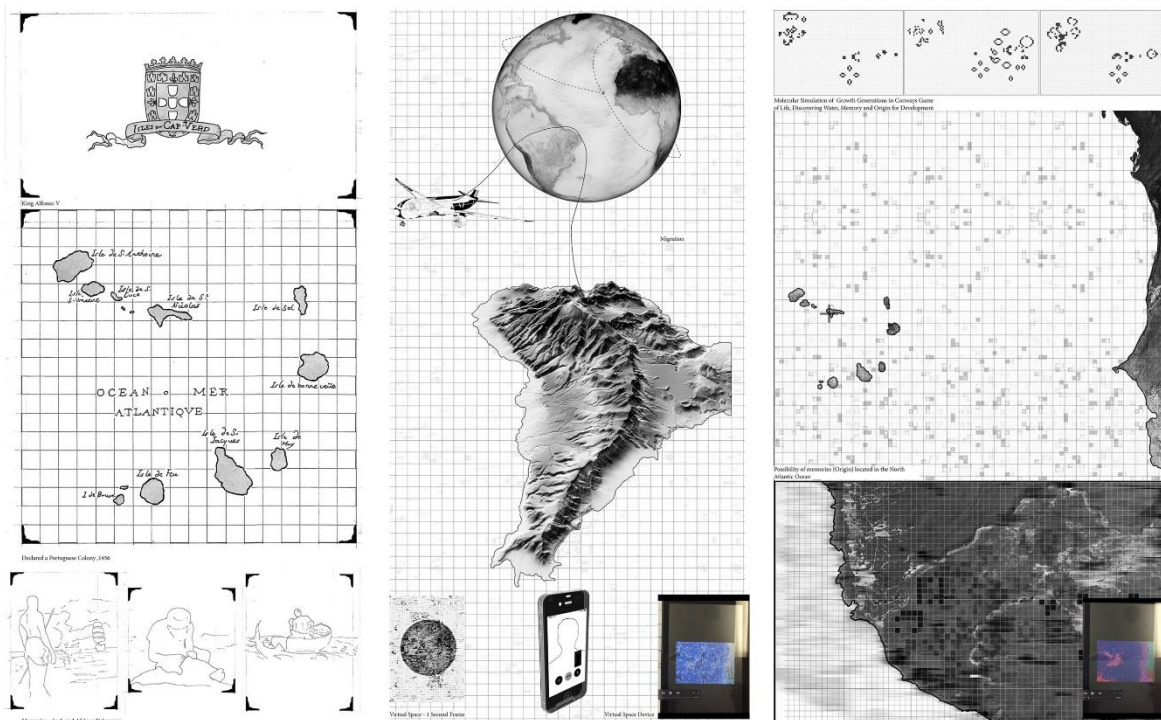


Source: Tonia Murray.

The stories of how the bodies of native African women were exploited in circuses, human zoos and museums in Europe inspired Tonia Murray's project. Reflecting on

Namaqualand, home to the Khoi and the San people, Tonia Murray (2017) asked about the role of African women in urban spaces and their identities in future cities. Her architectural design project is set in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, and it responds to the challenges and infrastructural needs of sex workers. Murray (2017) compares contemporary tales of the objectification of the female body to those found in history, such as the story of Sarah Baartman whose body was subject to curious gazes and exhibited for public scrutiny.

Figure 9: Exploring the past, present and future of Cape Verde through the strand of Virtual Space project title: Search for Origin



Source: Kyle Weedman

According to Kyle Weedman, the discovery of this group of the Cape Verde islands has two narratives, depending on who is narrating the story. If one asks the Portuguese, the name of Antonio de Noli may arise, however oral history also points to Arab and African fishermen as the early inhabitants of the islands (Weedman, 2017). For Weedman, these contrasting narratives were a point of departure for his project which was interested in the search for origin in the digital era. The lack of job opportunities in Cape Verde has, as in many parts of the world, lead to migration, and thus, to communicate we enter the virtual realm. Kyles' architectural design project is interlaced with migration and digitalisation. He speculates on the future of Cape Verde based on a digital game Conway's Game of Life (a mathematical game that stimulates molecular transformation and growth with algorithms) in order to explore and locate a water source (Weedman, 2017).

Conclusion

What is presented here is an ongoing experiment to shift pedagogy on African urbanism at the University of Johannesburg's Department of Architecture. It is not perfect; it is a work in progress. The Cities in Africa seminar series began in 2016 as a response to the lack of scholarship on African urbanism within the department and to begin answering the call to decolonise the curriculum (Booyesen, 2016). The series shifts pedagogy from a colonial, unresponsive, modern approach to a more flexible, open postmodern approach (Koo Hok-chun, 2002). This allows students to become authors and contributors of the knowledge narrated, thereby, widening the scope of inquiry.

Africa is a young and rapidly urbanising continent, and this should be viewed as a catalyst for narrating and speculating about the futures of its cities. CiA revealed that students capable of engaging with the complexities of cities without being overwhelmed by it. The presenters of the series, and the students who interpreted the presentations through the projects, were able to shift between micro- and macro-scales in their narratives. They were able to engage with socio-political issues and intimate narratives simultaneously. They appreciated the opportunity to look at environments around them as sites of inquiry. The DOA hopes to grow this series of seminars and ground this work so that it becomes one of the core references in African urbanism discourses and is more "relevant to realities of local contexts" (Luckan, 2017: 175).

In 2018, the theme of the series is "Lessons from the East", wherein we hope to engage with more young graduates from cities within East Africa and their relationships with the global East in term of city morphology. The series asks what forms these relationships take (politically, economically, socially and otherwise) and what spatial implications they have in the development of cities. We are going beyond the borders of UJ by forming relationships with two other schools of architecture and planning in Gauteng Province, the University of the Witwatersrand and the Tshwane University of Technology. We hope that these relationships shift, challenge and encourage robust dialogue amongst schools of architecture in the within the Gauteng City Region. The aim is to tell our stories, in our versions, using our tools. Perhaps in future, this experiment will bring about multiple perspectives of the tale of the hunt.

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