

Theme Panel: Institutional Support for African Architecture/Meaning of African Architecture

Abstract:

Setting the Agenda for African Architectural Discourse:

"you can only make sense of the future if you know where you have come from..." *West African proverb*

African architecture, its meaning, symbolism and theoretical underpinning, is often viewed in sharply contrasting ways; it is either referred to in a specific aesthetic and descriptive context; particularly in writing about traditional African built forms, or 'Vernacular' Architecture. In this case much of its theoretical underpinning and critical discourse has a basis in anthropology and archaeology, with limited contribution from or attention to the socio-political and historical contexts of African history in which such architecture is situated.

Contrasted to this is the parallel discourse on informal African buildings and social infrastructure, also considered 'architecture'. This is often described differently through documentary and sensational imagery. Most often viewed through the lens of widely published docu-photographic media; including magazines, coffee table books, and aid-appeal documents. These often show images of the 'shanty chic' settlements, (see Fraser:2002) either as valorised object's d'art, or the abodes of poverty-stricken masses.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Image 1 Flickr photograph of shanty housing in Soweto

emphasising colour and sidelining issues related to poverty and basic infrastructure provision.

In the latter case the images excel in producing the ultimate photography of heartbreaking destitution exemplified by the photography of shacks or tents in refugee camps showing homelessness (and indeed placelessness) of "biblical proportions".

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TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Image Two, Refugee Camp Rwanda

(...destitution of biblical proportion)

Between these two extremes there is the architecture of the everyday in Africa. This includes the proliferation of ubiquitous office blocks, which are strewn through most African cities, predominantly built in the short-lived, but aspirational post-war era. Also included in this everyday landscape are the few glazed-box tributes to 1980s post modernism. The number of uncompleted buildings in areas of prime real-estate are a reminder of Africa's failure to stay engaged with the top ranks of post-modern and contemporary architecture. These sites are also peppered through capital and principal cities on the continent.

Also included in this category are the mundane, residential buildings, which are not shanties, but often lack one or more of the basic amenities, such as access to water, electricity supply, they are also often planned in 'neighbourhoods' with limited social infrastructure such as schools or basic health services. In effect such architecture is lacking in the required attainment of infrastructure required to meet the development criteria agreed by international monitoring organisations such as the UNDP. This 'architecture' gains little publicity or comment, possibly because it is so widespread and non-spectacular in its ordinariness.

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are needed to see this picture.

Image 3 – Architecture of the everyday, market in Soweto
(informality in space and socio-economic transactions)

A significant and emerging category comprises the 'new' contemporary architecture that has gained a presence in the international architectural media. Buildings such as the new African Constitutional Court, and the Apartheid Museum, (Johannesburg), (Le Roux et al 2004, Findley 2006) the 1990s-built environmentally friendly office block in Harare, gained critical acclaim, both for their 'architecture' but also the critical issues of identity construction and sustainability that this new generation of buildings seek to address. (Pearce:1996) In the leisure category there is also the plethora of 'eco-chic' safari lodges which have all the international sustainability credentials needed to have a guilt-free holiday. Finally in this category is included the notable contribution of the Maghreb via its evolution of 'vernacular' buildings to functional architecture for schools, clinics and other infrastructure. Their significance has been recognised through the Aga Khan foundation's awards for architecture for such buildings in Senegal and Mali. (Shulman:2003)

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Image 4 Apartheid Museum, South Africa

This paper aims to make sense of these loosely defined classifications of 'Architecture', by delving into the essence of the varying discourses and debates related to each typology. It considers how and whether it is possible to develop a research agenda to investigate from a contemporary viewpoint, key African paradigms and processes. This, in turn should help inform our relationship with African Architecture; its viewing production and reportage. What underpins this agenda is the need to critically appraise current architectural education; teaching and research in Africa.

The proposer's academic base in Europe also underlines the paper's other fundamental aim, which is to consider means and ways in which genuinely collaborative research at postgraduate and higher level might be undertaken to work on this future agenda. Of particular importance is how such collaboration might serve to influence positively the 'global' view of African architecture, ensuring that the creativity and voices within the continent are heard and seen at international Architectural forums. Thus, in order to find out how this can best be geared towards producing well-informed, and educated architects and researchers, who can contribute to, and inform the development of critical architecture production and research in 21st Century Africa. The key aims of the paper are the following:

- To interrogate the underpinnings of current viewing, coverage and debates
- To question what the agenda is for the future
- To investigated possible ways to look at more 'original' research – collaborating with the 'West' - connections – collaborations – publications –, and finally
- To suggest a way forward – and ways to look at funding and institutional backing.

INTRODUCTION

Africa is a nation of singers and dancers, so Equiano suggested more than 200 years ago in his interesting narrative. (Equiano:1996) If we move the clock forward to the last century possible the most evocative descriptive literature on Africa remains resident in the literary reality of the village scene, by Achebe in *Things fall Apart*: (1958) and also Nwakpa in *Efuru*,(1966) and echos of the tradition in the urban writing of Abrahams, in *Mine boy*, (1958), Ekwensi, *People of the City*, (1966) and latterly Soyinka in the *Beautification of Area Boy* (1995). Now we are in the 21st century what are the millennial images that exist? Shanty chic or back to Refugee Camp city?

Architectural education in Africa exists within this context; despite the current renaissance in African architecture as evidenced with this seminal Ghana Conference, and earlier conferences in the decade, which have devoted panels or had significant papers given on the subject. ; (Docomomo, and SAH,) the teaching of the discipline, Architecture in Africa has seen little development in its ethos and delivery.

Architecture was introduced as a taught discipline in the 1950s, to the newly formed University Departments in much of East and West Africa, South Africa's architectural schools have a longer history, linked more closely with the British Architectural profession specifically. Prior to this, from the early 1900s there had been a cadre of local draughtsmen who worked with the army and Colonial Public Works Departments, (PWDs) under the direct or remote supervision of architects and planners based in Africa or sometimes in the UK. (West Africa Builder and Architect 1960-67) Architectural education, in comparison to Medicine and Law came relatively late to the African subcontinent.

Possibly, this explains why there remains a divide between the technical teaching of architecture, dominated by the requirements for good draughting and an emphasis on the technicalities of design. This is in direct contrast to the descriptive analytical architectural history teaching, which is directed by the anthropology-geography driven discourse on African Traditional Architecture. (Denyer:1978) Here the emphasis remains on the, recording, documentation, and classification of the 'species' of African architecture types and styles.

Whilst this description might be seen to be rather stark and binary, it does highlight the continued disconnection in Architectural scholarship in Africa. Contrasted to contemporary dialogue on Tropical Architecture elsewhere, in Latin America, Australasia and South East Asia, African architecture remains wedded to an historic past, and a technical-engineering dominated presence. Housing and planning studies, admittedly does have linking themes, moderated by the UN, Habitat and World Bank agendas on development, but the shelter agenda rightly focuses on planning and delivery and not on the aesthetics or the intrinsic analysis of contemporary architectural form in Africa.

As a European based African architecture academic, brought into the paper's perspective is the relationship of architectural education and research in Africa to collaboration and

practice in Western Europe. Its premise is that much of the research on African architecture is conducted in the West, with an unsurprisingly non-Africa focused agenda. The thesis being that with better collaboration there might be a more developed agenda for research and teaching collaboration in between African Architecture schools and partner institutions abroad to further these aims.

Architectural Education for Africa – a continuing dilemma

Architectural education in much of Africa is university-based, with formal curriculum and accreditation processes in place. In keeping with their colonial heritage, most architectural schools have continued with the curricula inherited from the inception of the courses, which had either been initiated by academics from France, Britain and other former colonies, or followed closely this format. The formation of national Architecture Institutes in West Africa, (1960) East, (1970) and more recently in the countries bordering South Africa, also has had an effect on the regulation of architectural teaching and education. Supra-national bodies such as the CAA and UIA also do have a peripheral influence on local education, through the conduct of competitions and annual regional conferences.

There are crucial issues facing Architectural education in Africa: Human Resources, technology, and infrastructure encapsulates the main themes. The lack of lecturers, and architecture teaching support staff such as technicians, is not a situation unique to Africa, most countries struggle to keep their best academics, in the emerging global academic employment market. Architectural lecturers and researchers have been wooed, or leave of their own volition, to teach in better conditions in the West. The difference with African, and the most needy schools elsewhere is that there is little home grown talent to retain as most academics now are trained abroad. Architectural education in Africa predominantly graduates architects who go into practice, there is little support for the development of local pathways into research and teaching.

Whilst there is the practical economic imperative for this to be the status quo, given the long nature of architectural training and the need for most students to earn enough to make a return on their families' investment in them, without there being a feasible economic pathway to architectural education as a profession, the quality and availability of architectural education is being severely compromised. The situation for architectural technical support staff, especially computer technicians is especially dire, as the skills that they have in CAD digital design makes them eminently employable in Architectural Practices, that are able to pay considerably in remuneration.

The technology now in place to assist with architectural teaching, although somewhat less cumbersome than the drawing board filled studios and need for physical libraries with accessible paper literature and data, remains elusive and bespoke to all but the best funded universities in Africa. Limited access to infrastructure such as electricity means that even when the high end computing equipment can be sourced, its use is dependent on the regularity of power supply, as well as the technicians required to provide the necessary technical support.

Researching the Elusive

Architectural Research has gained a higher profile over the last decade, with international exposure being given to the general Tropical Architecture theme through publications including those of Tzonis, (1999) Trulove, (2004) and recently Boon and Lay, (2006). Architectural historians have also filled in the breach with a phenomenal amount of research produced in the last decade on Africa's 'International/Modernist' era architecture in particular. High Profile exhibitions and conferences such as Africa 2005, in London, (V&A:2005) Documenta Platform 11, (Documenta:2005) and the Century Cities exhibit at the Tate Modern in London, (Tate Modern 2001) all engaged with African contemporary architecture in a public way, arguably for the first time since the 1970s works on Africa, such as Rudofsky's Architecture without Architects, (Rudofsky (1964): and Oliver's (1997) and Denyer's (1974) surveys on African traditional architecture, (Denyer 1978) and Koenigsberger et al's manual for tropical design. (Koenigsberger:1974)

With this newly enhanced interest in Architectural research, the research vista is far from bleak. The issue however is more critical than architectural education, when it is realised that most of this research is being conducted or directed from outside of Africa. Whilst it is recognised that there are limited facilities available in Africa for teaching let alone research, the issue here is how agendas for research are set, and what relationships and collaborations are in place for this to take place. Aside possibly from the older Architecture Schools in South Africa, the question must be asked as to whether research and architecture agendas set in the 1960s have developed further in the ensuing near half century.

In most of the cosmopolitan centres in British ruled Africa, Building Research institutes were set up, like their partner agriculture research institutes, to help publicise and spread research information and good practice to various parts of the then colonies. Kumasi, Lagos, and Pretoria, all had and still have this inheritance. Aside from the CSIR Pretoria, however the contribution of these institutions to research is arguably limited. The Craterre Earth Research centre located at the University of Grenoble also has research links with French West Africa, the countries of Mali and Senegal specifically, and once was linked with the Museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture (MOTNA) in Jos Nigeria.

The questions remains whose agenda is being served by the limited research being undertaken on African soil? in recent years there has been a move to develop and exploit sustainable building materials as part of the global agendas on climate change; the Research Institutes have been well placed to work on areas that they have had historical expertise. NBRRI, the Nigerian Research body, has worked in collaboration with the Canadian government to produce low-cost clay bricks for the local (Nigerian) housing market. This practical level of research has, and continues to work well, for Nigerian needs and the collaborators involved. The widespread take up of these research innovations remains low however, when compared with their commercial competitors, and their long term validity as original contributions and not derivatives or generic copies from IT or AT developments elsewhere remains to be seen.

Within the pure academic frame of reference for historical research, the picture is less rosy. Most PhDs, and further degrees are studied for and examined outside of Africa. The proportion of PhDs although increasing, is in no way able to meet with the demand for this level of qualification required of lecturers at African Universities, if they are to have internationally rated and comparable staff. More importantly there is little co-ordination of research being undertaken in African Architecture schools from within. The research that does go on is heavily driven by the interests of the collaborative partners involved with providing funding, staff and lead researchers for projects. It brings into question the true motives of many forms of collaboration, and its long term benefits to the locally-based Architecture Schools who are involved.

Arguably the most significant research that has taken place in African Schools of Architecture remains the documentation of traditional architecture begun in the 1950s and carried on through to the 1970s. Architects in practice in Africa are more likely to fly in consultants from the West to work out the energy modelling and optimum design for housing than work with local academics in Universities.

Whilst this might be a sign of the times, it is particularly problematic for Africa because as there are few, if any, contemporary identifiable themes or directions that can be said to direct contemporary developments in African architecture. This means in effect that anything goes, which at its best makes for the eclectic, but at its worst allows for the non considered adoption of style and function appropriate or otherwise by local and international architects engaged in designing Africa's growing new cities and towns.

Teaching, Research and Learning in Architecture – joining the Global Imperative

The question may be asked, does this matter in the least? Indeed in the laissez-faire dictum that governs much of contemporary living and culture, there is the globalisation view that suggests that all cultures are now accretions of media and its mediated views of the world about us; in which case we need not bother about developing intricate agendas and discourses on the specificities of culture in the built form. The modern literature movement with its move to the use of abstracted literary devices such as magical realism, have been central in developing this art form.

Whilst it may be a valid response, the contrary more conservative view is that culture does matter, and even more so when it is being bombarded by externally driven powerful forces which influence the media. The happy medium that we search, hypothetically at least, is one where there is a general agenda or ethos that is continually reviewed and changed through contact with the wider global media. How do we achieve this? The second part of this paper addresses this question with suggestions as to how this might take place. The ideas are theoretical but do have support within the ambit of British academic practice within Architecture Schools. There is strong emphasis placed on collaboration and research linkages; including consortia arrangements and research and teaching pooling.

Teaching to deliver Future Talent

“Education, education education”, was the motto of the Labour Government in the UK in the mid -1990s to emphasise its focus on improving the delivery and quality of education for the country. It is contended that the Architecture profession in Africa requires a dose of this treatment to improve and inspire the students going through the many architecture courses and programmes now available in much of Africa.

Despite still remaining less popular than the other professions, such as Medicine, Law and Engineering, Architecture as a subject remains in demand. However due to the substantial economic returns to be had by Architects in practice, it is difficult to entice indigenous Architects into being involved in Architectural education or its development. The part time tutor structure that works well in the UK does not translate as successfully in the African context.

For most schools of architecture, students have to make do only with full-time Architecture teaching staff, the more established of whom have their own practices. This limits student contact with the local profession, as this tends to be mediated by the relationship of established staff with professional bodies and the practices that such staff run. Furthermore there is little evolution of better teaching practice, as there is less translation of part-time tutor positions to full time, and little new input into teaching, research and its connection with emerging trends in the profession.

Furthermore few schools in Africa retain links with Schools abroad either inter-continentially or internationally, thus there is limited exchange of ideas at student or teaching level. The one exception to this rule might be the Association of Southern African Architecture Students, who have a biennial congress located at different Architecture schools in Southern Africa.

To deliver ‘talent’ it is important that there is the cross-fertilisation of ideas, through both students and teachers, as well as access to different ‘world views’, via different environments, which are best brought about by access to travel and cultural exchanges by students and staff in Architecture schools. Teaching is also demonstrably enhanced through shared information and research-practice forums. In the UK the Cardiff based CEBE, performs this function, whilst the RIBA also has an education section that is actively engaged in continuing professional development.

These support structures, specifically for teaching are in their embryonic stages in Architectural education on the African continent, the development of these is fundamental to producing credible future architects.

Researching the Research and Delivering Relevance:

In academe, research ability and output remains the gold standard in appreciating the integrity of tertiary institutions. African Universities have struggled to retain the standards that they achieved in their heydays in the late 1960s where they had equivalent intellectual manpower and facilities to their Western European counterparts. Today the picture is dismal. Research does take place, but often it is directed from elsewhere with African universities being junior partners in the process. There are key problems with thi;

firstly it means that research objectives and directions are determined by others, whose interests must clearly dictate part of its direction.

Secondly, without taking the lead in organising and conducting research, there is limited high-level experience or training that is acquired by participating African Architecture schools. Thirdly, and finally the results of the research findings do not always get shared or reported back to the collaborating African University Departments that have been part of the process. Thus in effect there is no developmental or full feedback loop even where research of relevance has been carried out.

How does this impact on Architecture and its development in Africa? Clearly any form of research collaboration is good for African Architecture schools, however Schools and their Collaborators need a clear view and strategy to ensure that these collaborative efforts achieve their full potential for both sides. (Huxham:2005) In collaborative theory a key tenet is that both parties should only become fully engaged when each is fully aware of the motives explicit and implied of the other party(ies). Development theorists have also, for long suggested that it is for the recipients to take a critical view and responsibility for 'help' or 'aid' to ensure that this is not either mis-directed or more often less altruistic or relevant to local need than it might appear to be.

Some African architecture schools have the more structural problem of being too small or remote to deal autonomously or effectively with potential collaborations. The idea of African regional research networks, in which pools of Architecture schools are able to share and develop their expertise would seem a way to tackle this problem. This also applies specifically to West Africa and other parts of Africa where there are linguistic issues at play; most West African networks remain fixed within the colonial language silos – Franco-phone countries remain within the ambit of French research and funding, the same applying to Anglophone countries. The smaller, former Portuguese colonies of Guinea Bissau and Cabo Verde, are both linguistically separate and remote from the two major Anglo-French linguistic blocks.

On the foreign collaboration side – the questions are reversed but essentially the same – What is the true nature of the collaboration?

- What data or information is needed and for what purposes
- Who will ultimately benefit from the research and how is this benefit distributed to collaborators?
- What future links will the event or episode deliver?
- Finally and most importantly has this been communicated clearly to collaborative partners – could there be collaborative fatigue for example?

These are by no means all the questions that need to be addressed, however they are the fundamental issues that underpin what must become an ongoing discourse on collaborative research and working at both international and trans-national level.



Image three:

Graduate research students from KNUST

working with Ola Uduku on DfID project researching into school design and educational quality in Kumasi, August 2007

Conclusions:

Architectural Education in Africa – a 21st Century Agenda

A grandiose idea maybe – but a pragmatic response, it is suggested to a problem that cannot be ignored and for which a solution must be found. This paper sought to identify the main issues related to education delivery and style, and also to its relationship to the wider architectural research community. It also identified areas of focus, such as research collaborations and suggested means by which these might be strengthened and improved.

Developing on from the previous suggestions and findings discussed earlier and as a conclusion to this paper, is the proposal for an encompassing 21st Century Agenda for Architectural Education in Africa. This is a proposition and yet to be fully worked out in practice. However the theoretical underpinning to the Agenda or manifesto is clear. African Architectural education needs a clearer focus and strategy if it is to differentiate itself on its own terms, from the various images exotic or otherwise that the media and the non-Africanist- public understand of African architecture. Also, for continuous development and reinvigoration, African architectural education needs regular input from other players in Architectural education and the profession within and outside of the Continent.

The Agenda proposal cannot be the ‘magic bullet’ that seeks to deliver the full solution to the problems with African Architectural education, its practice, delivery and

development. Instead it seeks to set out a number of propositions, in manifesto format that African Architectural education should strive to achieve. In doing so it also diagnoses the symptoms that need to be addressed in the long run if the Architectural education project in Africa is to be more than an aspiration, and establish a form of transformative teaching practice.

The agenda that follows therefore sets out a set of ideas, framed as a manifesto, which should be the basis for a more developed and detailed agenda of action for Architectural teachers, researchers, practitioners and future students in the 21st Century.

An Agenda for Architectural Education in Africa

Preamble

Architectural education in Africa deserves support and attention; if tomorrow's Architects are not given a comprehensive and relevant education, our housing, and entire built environment, is likely to have an uncertain future. As a profession, architects are as important as doctors and lawyers; if we appreciate the necessity for all nations to provide their citizens with basic shelter, and viable built infrastructure for communities, within cities and urban areas, then we need to ensure we have the personnel to deliver this. Without a knowledgeable and able local Architectural community we effectively devolve this role to others who may be sympathetic to African needs, but do not have the first hand experience which African architects have of living and being part of the architectural environment.

Key Points

– A relevant Education

Architectural education for Africans should be relevant, pragmatic and transformational. Africa's architectural heritage is rich, its present architecture defies stereotypes and easy analysis. The challenge for the future is to ensure African architects are enlightened enough to challenge the present, and draw on contemporary and past references and resources to evolve a relevant future architecture for the next generation of Africans. Education must in essence be pragmatic as, few African states have the resources or finances to fully and adequately fund all that is required in architectural education, thus collaborations and alliances must be part of the curriculum and the way Architectural education is delivered. The links between practice and classroom also need considerable reinforcement both through teaching and also through curriculum.

- True Research sharing and Opportunities

Africa remains a vast resource for researchers of all disciplines. Architectural research outside of the Western world is enjoying a resurgence. African researchers in Architecture need to be central to this new discourse, and not remain on the periphery, with African research remaining in its early post colonial silos. To make this effective researchers and research needs to benefit from collaboration and investigation at trans-

and inter- national levels. Research funding may be difficult, but the real difficulties lie in retention of research staff and sharing of research. Research is not a difficulty but needs to be transformed by African researchers and their collaborators into an opportunity.

- Part of a wider globalized community.

Finally we must consider African architectural education and research part of a much wider mosaic, of architectural teaching and research that is global in its reach. Most importantly it should contribute to an evolving discourse on a post-modern engagement with regional and comparative architecture, which must be international in outlook and coverage to respond to the needs of an increasingly mobile and transnational profession.

Dr Ola Uduku
Edinburgh 30th May, 2008.

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