

Architecture and agency: ethics and accountability in teaching through the application of Open Building principles

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Abstract

This paper will explore the notion of ethics in the built environment, and professional accountability, topics which are generally sidelined or given little direct consideration in teaching and practice. However, this status quo is increasingly being questioned. Built environment educators and practitioners need now to develop the intellectual and skill resources to address new questions, formulate a position, and set guidelines to be able to incorporate and make these 'measurable' in the performance of educators and practitioners, and for achieving a level of accountability.

The paper will present the general development of definitions in the field of ethics. It will then focus on architecture, where ethical considerations may have spatial implications, as spatial characteristics are a reflection of thinking on opportunity, access and equity. The city structured during apartheid modernism in South Africa provides one iconic case in point to how modern belief systems can often implicitly impact on practice, teaching and design decision-making strategies; powerfully and persistently manifesting—although little recognised—in patterns that reinforce ideas about race, poverty, power and privilege.

Ethical considerations also reflect on design decision-making strategies. Design decisions in the built environment are always 'value-laden'; they are a reflection of what we believe the role of the architect is and how we believe architecture needs to engage with the people it serves – or should be serving. These concepts are at the core of the University of Johannesburg's UJ_UNIT2, Architecture and Agency: Design, Make, Transform. Launched in 2015, UJ_UNIT2 is based on the premise that the built environment comes into existence and transforms as a social/physical ecosystem, where buildings and neighbourhoods are never finished, but rather transform part by part. The design process, thus, needs to include different levels of decision-making, facilitating distributed control of environmental decision-making among diverse agents and stakeholders.

'Open Building' as a concept resonates strongly with present-day South African concerns in the post-Apartheid era. The principles contained in Open Building thinking can be linked to some of the principles contained in the National Development Plan, Vision 2030, the newly launched (and perhaps wrongly termed) Master Spatial Plan, as well as a number of city level visions, such as the "Corridors of Freedom" in Johannesburg and similar public transport led transformation projects. Issues of participation, social integration, mixed use, mixed income, accessibility, choice and affordability are all principles that can be better facilitated and achieved through the use of an "open" approach to design and delivery in the built environment.

UJ_UNIT2 aims to explore the boundaries between architecture and planning, building and city, and architecture and infrastructure, towards a new way of designing and building in the interest of efficiency in design, finance, implementation, management and maintenance. At its core, UJ_UNIT2 is essentially about people, the relationships between people and the role that the built environment plays in managing those relationships and in achieving social cohesion, wherein the built environment functions as a 'mediator' and 'interface' between individual and collective needs.

This paper elaborates on the above, namely the valency of ethics across education, design, practice, within contexts and the discipline in general, as well as on the process of equipping architecture graduates to have a deeper understanding of how their future practice may contribute towards addressing some of the built environment challenges facing South Africa and the global South. The

topics presented in the unit thus link strongly to the wider social and ethical practice of the profession. It is hoped that this unit will ultimately contribute towards a transformation in education and in practice, with a well-articulated intellectual apparatus.

Keywords: architecture, ethics, imagination, agency, practice, education

Introduction

The paper describes the focus of an experiment in architectural education, UJ_UNIT2, being implemented at the University of Johannesburg as part of the newly launched unit system at professional Master's level. The paper's trajectory begins with an overview of readings on ethics in architecture and its relevancy today, articulating a position on the topic. Secondly, it locates this within the intentions of UJ_UNIT2, presenting its approach to 'agency' as a key element in ethical practice through the adoption of Open Building principles. This entails setting guidelines for developing ethical considerations in teaching – making this a vital and reflexive component of what is delivered in studio, as well as a 'measurable' component thereof (in terms of accountability rather than control). The discourse developed in the paper, which finds practical application in the UJ_UNIT2 studio, therefore opens conversations and offers a contribution on many levels within the architectural discipline.

Enquiries into ethics in the built environment and spatial design

The 'ethical turn'?

In a brief account of ethics in the built environment, Peter G. Rowe (1996, pp. 243–244) expounded on architectural ethics through the familiar Vitruvian triad of commodity, firmness, and delight; whereby 'firmness' was understood simply as a building that meets building codes and regulations, while 'commodity' and 'delight' were understood to relate to issues of public welfare, sustainability, culture and general well-being. By contrast, many works on ethics in the built environment since have illustrated the topic not through such familiar architectural categories, but through cross-disciplinary ones, especially philosophy.

Generally, in the field of philosophy since the 1970s, the traditional human-centered concerns of an "anthropocentric ethics" has transformed into an "environmental ethics" focused more on the natural than the built environment, to address the perceived imbalance of the former approach and fueled on by naturalistic and evolutionary readings of the world (Fox 2000, pp. 1–3). A significant early work exploring the architectural-philosophical crossover, and coming from a position of addressing this "blind spot" toward the built environment within environmental ethics, was the volume "Ethics and the Built Environment" edited by Warwick Fox, with contributions by "philosophers (especially ethicists) with an interest in architecture... and... philosophically orientated architects" (Fox 2000, pp. 2, 4). At the time, Fox (2000, p. 3) noted that "no field of enquiry presently exists that is clearly and explicitly devoted to the subject of what we would call *the ethics of the built environment*."

The volume covered three broad focus areas: first, "the green imperative of sustainability;" second, "building with greater sensitivity to people(s) and places," including issues of social inclusion, community participation, a process-orientated approach and *genius loci*; and third, philosophical explorations of "steps towards a theory of ethics of the built environment."

Taylor and Levine (2011) sought to take this approach further: "...our study calls upon ethics as a branch of philosophical inquiry, particularly moral philosophy, but attempts to go beyond its specific

concerns and terms, erudite speculation and rhetoric... to describe design practices that are... directed toward images of a whole or fully integrated person” (Taylor and Levine 2011, p. 4).

In a different approach to a more philosophically orientated one, Fisher’s “Ethics for Architects” (2010) still made some reference to the former but more closely followed a codified professional route, by expanding on the six canons of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct and similarly defining six categories of “obligations” for architectural practice (general obligations, obligations to the public, to the client, to the profession, to colleagues, and to the environment).

Yet another approach in a more recent work, “Design and Ethics: Reflections on practice,” editors Felton et al (2012, p. 3) described their approach as one of “critical ethics,” a multidisciplinary approach “to create a space for critical engagement in which contrasting, contradictory views are a necessary part.” In contrast to Fox’s (2000, p. 3) earlier contention that “no field of enquiry... exists... devoted to the subject,” by now, twelve years later, Felton et al observed that “there is little disagreement that we are witnessing an ‘ethical turn’ occurring in professional and allied practices, including the design fields” (Felton et al. 2012, p. 3).

Even given this brief survey, it is clear that the current study and role of ethics in architecture is in a moment that is very much evolving, that there already exist various approaches toward it, and that these have already extended its scope well beyond that which it may once have been formally defined as a relatively narrow ‘code of practice’ (in education, a professional practice course was too often where the discussion on ethics got relegated toward).

This expansion, of course, has not occurred in isolation but has paralleled design problems presented by society that transcend ‘normal practice’. Architecture must now—necessarily—develop the intellectual and design tools and skills needed to be able to intelligently, and compassionately, navigate these newly opened terrains. More sophisticated conceptual and analytical apparatus would not only more sharply define architecture’s roles and responsibilities for itself, but also allow for education of design literacy to wider than the already initiated (significant works or architecture are usually also produced by knowledgeable and cultured clients)(Rowe, 1996, p. 246).

Urgent, ethical imagination

“If the centre has been found wanting... then what right has it to define, and so control, what constitutes the ‘margins’? In many ways the tenets of the centre are unraveling by themselves in front of our eyes... and so what we present are not merely reactions to established ‘mainstream’ practices but empowering examples... that provide pointers as to how one might operate not only in uncertain times but as a matter of principle.” (Awan et al. 2011, p. 27)



Figures 1 and 2: Cities and the extremisms of twentieth-century modernity: Tokyo, after the firebombing of the United States Army Air Forces, 1945 (Wikipedia contributors, 2015); and Houston, Texas, 1978, by Alex Maclean (Hardy, 2014).

With approximately 231 million people killed in wars and conflict during the last century (the most murderous in recorded history)(Kalantidou and Fry 2014)(Leitenberg 2006, p. 1) with accompanying mass devastation, and prospects for the current century already looking dismal hardly over a decade into it (see Figures 1 and 2); with the global environmental crisis; with an urban revolution in the global South (and a migration “crisis” in the global North); and with the force of globalised capital and its spectacular 2008-2009 economic collapse; and all with accompanying social divisions; we are faced with a multi-faceted crisis on the one hand—between the social, the political, the urban, the ecological and the economic—and times of extreme relativism and uncertainty on the other hand. Never before, it seems, has an ethical role in architecture seemed so relevant and so urgent, while concurrently being so problematised, peripheralised or pejoratively treated.

On the one hand architecture is often implicated in all of this, “sustaining the unsustainable” (Kalantidou and Fry, 2014), on the other hand 90% of the world’s population remains unserved by professional designers (Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, n.d.) Spatial design disciplines can at once be accused of being largely irresponsible and largely irrelevant. But it is also from here, in the words of Teddy Cruz, that architecture can bring an ethical and “urgent imagination” (Catling, 2014), to rethink unsustainable patterns and present new operational paradigms. Straddling the social and technical fields, perhaps architecture is better equipped, in terms of a unique skills set, to be the moral consciousness of the built environment professions?

Reduction or inspiration?

While few would seriously contest the pairing of the words ‘urgent’ with ‘imagination’, for new forms of architectural thinking and practice, the relationship between ‘ethics’ and ‘imagination’ appears to be less resolved. Fox (2000, p. 227), for example, touches on a central concern in many objections to an ethical approach in architecture: “... I ask (but answer in the negative) the reductionist question: Are allegedly ethical concerns about the built environment actually reducible to more familiar kinds of ethical concerns?”

Fox’s question stemmed from a philosophical standpoint around the very need for an ethics peculiar to architecture, but exactly the same questions may be raised from a design perspective: Is an ‘ethical’ approach to a design discipline not a ‘reductionist’ approach, for architecture reducing it in both scope and complexity? In other words, does it reduce architecture to a limited selection of predefined typologies, such as ‘community centres’, or predefined socio-economic environments, such as the poverty of shantytowns on the one hand or the corporate world of ‘social responsibility indexes’ on the other? Does it essentially divorce architecture from its intrinsic creativity: ‘the greater the ethics, the lesser the creativity?’ And does it ultimately result in an “architecture of good intentions” (Fisher 2010, p. 11) as Colin Rowe observed (as opposed to an architecture of depth and quality)?

These more tangible critiques apart, moreover, there are also concerns of its cognitive implications, such as those raised by Sylvia Lavin, Chair of Architecture at UCLA, who feared that an ethical turn meant a ‘slide back’ into “nineteenth century moralism” and “religiously based instruction” (Owen 2009, p. 3).

While this form of critique is admittedly not without some foundation (the rhetoric linked with participatory design approaches and community engagement exercises does tend to become almost “evangelical” in character), the ethical in architecture, in the view and praxes of the authors, is extensively more dynamic and multivalent. “Quality not charity,” as Alejandro Aravena of the Chilean practice Elemental put it (Catling, 2014).

On the contrary, rather than opposing an ‘architectural ethics’ on its own terms and merits, perceptions that a turn to the ethical would mean a turn to ‘superficialisms’ or reductions could itself be attributed in some part to our “technological world” and its associated “technological mentality” (Pérez-Gómez 2006, p. 67), where universal truths and legitimacy are based on applied and

measurable sciences, that has reduced meaning in architecture to the provision of basic shelter and necessities to the poor and needy on the one hand or to commodity and status symbol on the other, with poor regard to local specificities, traditions and cultures, and the nuanced language of history and the humanities.

In this sense the critique then is unjustified, being in essence a response to a technological discourse, established and pervasive, rather than an ethical one, evolving and emergent. 'Meaning' in architecture, then, may better be found not conversely in a flight into pure poetry and abstraction necessarily (or alternatively into a post-ethical *realpolitik*, *a la* Rem Koolhaas)(Owen 2009, p. 2), but somewhere more in a coalescence, between the measurable and the immeasurable or, like Alberto Pérez-Gómez (2006, p. 67) argued, between the transcendental and the temporal.

Many philosophers and theorists, furthermore, have argued that imagination and ethical action are inextricably linked. Aristotle defined the work of art as a *mimesis of praxis* (or a representation of ethical human action)(Pérez-Gómez 2006, p. 69). In his essay "Ethics and Poetics in Architecture" Pérez-Gómez (2006, pp. 69, 71–72) argued that architectural work is a process of embodied making, and as such can be a vehicle for ethical production: "Contrary to the view of many critical theorists who may believe that there exists an irreconcilable contradiction between ethics (associated with democracy, rationality and consensus) and the poetic imagination, ...the lack of imagination... may be at the root of our worst moral failures. Imagination is precisely our capacity for love and compassion, for both recognizing and valorizing the other, for understanding the other as self, over & above differences of race, gender, culture & belief".

Through hermeneutical readings of nineteenth and twentieth century European philosophy, Amato (2011, p. vii) for example also argued similarly that "in developing the capacity to envision new relations, responses, and realities, we are able to take that first vital step towards creating or enacting them" and therefore "regular meaningful engagement with creative works and activities that cultivate the imagination ... also increase our possibilities of being with and for others in ever more responsible and inspired ways."

Education and ethical thinking

In considering the place of ethics in architectural education, where the focus of the ethical approach is, and where the most appropriate place is within the broad scope of architectural education to cultivate that focus is important. Here the field of ethics in philosophy can assist and enrich architectural education with its systematic conceptualisation of the topic for effective didactic purposes, although placing architectural ethics *solely* in the realm of philosophy would be limiting and somewhat artificial, especially given architecture's probably epistemologically unique core integrative form of 'design thinking' (Rowe 1996, p. 243).

In philosophical terms, ethics generally entails the descriptive study of what ethical views people *happen* to hold (descriptive ethics), the study of the views people *ought* to hold (normative ethics), discussion *about* normative ethics such as the meaning of terms or semantic and epistemological issues (meta-ethics), or the application of normative ethics in specific practical situations (applied ethics). In normative ethics moreover, the heart of ethics, the focus of the ethical approach can be on either the character of the actor (virtue ethics), on the principle that leads to action (principle or duty ethics), or on the outcome (consequentialist ethics)(Fox 2000, p. 222-223).

Architectural education in turn, to continue with the current systemisation, can be said to consist of three general clusters of knowledge: history and theory, design and technology, and professional practice. Considering then the fields of ethics and architecture together, the domain of history and theory—the traditional domains of thinking, reading and writing—is therefore probably the area most suited to cultivating an ethics of character or principle; while the domains of design and technology—which entails practical contexts, action and outcome—are probably more suited to the ethics of principle and outcome. But this is only a broad schema, useful as a general overarching guideline. With closer attention to detail there are many more overlaps, nuances and complexities,

revealing the need for an ethical project in architectural education to be treated with sufficient intellectual vigour and scrutiny.

Design, like history and theory for example, is also a way of thinking about and knowing the world, while history and theory also implicates design, by allowing design practices to be scrutinised from a variety of other perspectives which can be more normative or value-specific (Rowe, 1996, p. 245). Even outside of academia, in conventional practice, as Fisher (2010, pp. 10–11) observed, different aspects of ethics are relevant at virtually every stage of the project, from the receipt of a commission through to post-occupancy evaluations.

Despite the limitations of philosophical categorisation for architecture, their sophistication does point to a lack of sufficiently complex and critical approaches to the issue of ethics in the built environment. Rather than an ‘ethical stifling’ of creativity, *translated* within an architectural process they can better function as a springboard of imaginative and intellectual inspiration, and the development of new methodologies, which is its fuller and intrinsic potential.

Moreover, “architectural education and practice,” as Fisher (2010, p. 12) suggests, “would not only benefit from a greater understanding of ethics but might also benefit ethics as well.” Fox’s concluding words to the volume on “Ethics and the Built Environment”, (Fox 2000, p. 228) which highlights both the relevancy and an inadequacy in the general state of the discourse, in many respects still stands today: “These questions are obviously being pursued in various implicit and *ad hoc* ways at present (...) What is now to be hoped for is that this field of enquiry becomes a vigorous, inspirational and practically fruitful contributor to life in the twenty-first century.”

Human rights, humane service: Architecture and agency

In the field of housing and human settlements, there has been a shift from a needs-based approach to a right-based approach, articulated by UN HABITAT as follows: “A human rights-based approach involves moving away from assessing the needs of beneficiaries towards empowering and building the capacity of claim-holders in asserting their rights.” (UN Habitat n.d.)

The concept of ‘human rights’, in their current form, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The President of the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed in 1948 that this was “the first occasion on which the organised world community had recognised the existence of human rights and fundamental freedoms transcending the laws of sovereign states” (Cole 2012, p. 1).

Mike Cole, a professor in Education and Equality, listed several subtle and oblique observations regarding this discourse. First, Cole argued, all were “social constructs” closely associated with particular contexts and histories, reflecting either their own particular social systems or the crucial terrains of struggle between conflicting social forces, not uncontested universals but themselves arising from particular systems and contestations (Cole 2012, p. 5).

Secondly, while also observing that people were affected by equality-related issues in the various institutions in society in which they interacted, Cole identified that much of the issues within human rights discourse in fact had ‘personal parameters’, whereby people were affected individually (Cole, 2012, p. 6). A human rights discourse thus parallels, and so must also be read within, an age that is often fiercely individualistic, whereby many freedoms are in essence personal freedoms, pursued for private ends. Without taking away from its advancements or from activists who campaign on behalf of disenfranchised groups, it is nonetheless also a discourse which most commonly is engaged with on an individual level, characteristically centering the self.

But these incisive observations, more curiously, at times appear to undergo a certain shift of focus when they enter as a discourse into the architectural domain. Perhaps due in some part to the particular nature of architecture as a ‘public art’ and ‘social act’—social in method, purpose and use (Kostov, 1995, p. 7)—that where it is developed within the discipline the language of its individualist parameters can often shift noticeably to ‘the public’ or ‘the community’ rather than the individual.

Driven by content but shifted in focus, this shift from the human to the humane ultimately, as argued by Awan et al (2011, p. 29), should be an act of enablement, of agency or “spatial agency.” According to Awan et al (2011, p. 32) “agency is intractably tied to power,” but instead of power exerted over another, “in relation to spatial agency ... the agent is one who effects change through the *empowerment* of others, allowing them to engage in their spatial environments in ways previously unknown or unavailable to them, opening up new freedoms and potentials as a result of reconfigured social space.”

Significantly, the agent/architect acts with and on behalf of others, on equal terms and as part of a mutual enterprise, between “expert citizens” and “citizen experts” (Awan et al., 2011, p. 32).



Figure 3: Meeting of Two Cultures by Sandile Goje, 1993 (MOMA, 2011).

Even if it is seldom actualised in reality, this architectural alchemy is the possibility and promise of the agency of architecture, as a service that enables and centres the agency of others, opening up a space which invites new combinations between process and product, between the informal and the formal.

The apparent idealism of such ‘architectural activism’— and those of similar mould—is not entirely as separate from the spirit of ‘real world’ architectural practice as it may at first appear, but rather draws from and amplifies some of its essential makeup. Arundhati Roy argues that: “...this term “activist”—I’m not sure when it was coined. To call someone like me a writer-activist suggests that it’s not the job of a writer to write about the society in which they live. But it used to be our job. It’s a peculiar thing, until writers were embraced by the market, that’s what writers did—they wrote against the grain, they patrolled the borders, they framed the debates about how society should think” (Naqvi n.d.).

A similar retrospective could be said of architecture. Controversies apart (though duly noted), modernism was still a strong statement on society, and its manifestos meant to advance the cause of the social role of architecture. The profession was seen as an economic and political tool that could be used to improve the world through the design of buildings and urban planning, and this was a driving force of the movement.

Rowe (1996, p. 242) also alluded to architecture’s essential “sense of fiduciary duty, of something held or given in trust that places the client’s interests before those of the professional, and the interest of society above both,” which “lies at the heart of all professional activity.” There may perhaps also lay something deeper in the commonly used expression of ‘providing an architectural service’.

Awan et al (2011, p. 29), in their powerfully argued book “Spatial Agency,” confess to a sentiment—but also a resolve—probably shared by many who may be frustrated with the conservative tendencies of much architectural practice: “It would have been easy enough to be relentlessly damning about the limited preoccupations of the profession, but as we progressed through the research, this negative turn was replaced by a much more buoyant approach, inspired by the examples in the book, which leave us in admiration for their mixture of canniness, bravery and optimism.”

It is in this spirit that humane agency is intrinsically a part of architecture’s latent and charismatic potential and possibility, as much as it is the positing of a ‘new’ course within it. The exploitation of the former and the pioneering of the latter in the advancement of knowledge, moreover, is always also a part of the intellectual apparatus of academia, “by which the discipline takes its bearings and advances itself (...) even if the actual work is being performed out in the field” (Rowe, 1996, pp. 245–246). “Many ecological concerns, for instance”, recalls Rowe (1996, p. 245), “as well as appreciations of cultural differences and understandings of historical continuities and of the likely spatial effects of globalization, have roots in academia”.

In an age of individual freedoms but collective crisis, of personal liberty but global calamity, the project of the humane, the ethical, and the imaginative could not be more urgent. And like the word ‘ethic’ suggests (from the Greek *ethos*), as does the synonymous ‘moral’ (from the Latin *mores*), both etymologically rooted in the notion of habitual or customary conduct, the ethical dimension in architecture needs not only to be developed multivalently within the discipline (including the tools and skills needed to realise it), but if it is to seriously challenge a status quo that leads to projected multivalent disaster, then it must also become a more normative and ‘evolved’ part of architectural apparatus.

When the centre is discredited and unravelling, there is no longer “alternative”—and hence marginal—practices vis-à-vis “mainstream” practice, as Awan et al (2011, pp. 26–27) so astutely observe, there are only more ethical and humane ways of thinking and being in the world.

Defining an ethic within architectural practice and education

The process of ethics and the ethics of process: ethics in shifting eras and paradigms

An important factor for educators in architecture to consider is the reality that many architects graduating today will not practice architecture within the expected, conventional and limited parameters previously taken for granted. Many architects will exit architecture school and create, invent and innovate new roles for themselves. It is perhaps a moral obligation of academia to support them in this process. In education, these shifts in thinking have led UJ_UNIT2 to focus on an approach which is supported by various ‘methods’ rather than ‘solutions’; where systems, type and form are all understood as outcomes of unwritten/unspoken transactions and agreements between people, as reflections of a combined social understanding of the built environment and how it governs social interaction and vice versa.

Bjorgvinson et al (2012) described several significant shifts that have recently taken place in architectural thinking and practice; namely how design focus has shifted from the work space to the public realm, and how this shift led to new modes of production which required ‘alternative’, ‘innovative’, bottom-up and long-term collaborative practice. Political shifts were also described, towards “engagement with publics around controversial issues” as compared with “design with predefined groups of users” (“publics” here implying the blurring of traditional distinctions between public/private and state/market). Furthermore, Bjorgvinson et al showed how these shifts have all led to a move towards processes/strategies rather than projects, and how “agonistic democracy” challenged authority through “engaged publics”. In this regard, this paper’s authors draw from their years of engaged experience at the Malmo Living Labs (MML) working with groups such as a grassroots hip-hop organisations and multi-ethnic women, all first and second generation migrant

communities.

These collaborations led to an engagement with intangible aspects such as the marginalisation experienced by certain social groups in the city – leading to solutions that allowed for them to ‘be seen’ and ultimately toward ‘legitimacy and visibility’. Correspondingly, the authors also developed a focus on ‘social innovation’ rather than, what they refer to as, ‘a narrow focus on technical innovation’. These ‘constructive controversies’, moreover, proved more likely to generate ‘creative innovations’ vis-à-vis ‘rational decision-making’. Thus, what this paper calls for is the establishments of “networks of working relations ... that make technical systems possible.” This is a key shift away from a rubric of projects with design and technology components to a way of thinking about the social systems that facilitate production: “...co-creation as a collective interweaving of people, objects and processes”.

Privilege, power, and positioning

The above approach relates strongly to ideas articulated by Habraken many years ago around society and production: “...production is shaped by social structure and society organizes itself around production...” (Habraken, 1985). Acknowledging the built environment as a social ecosystem, UJ_UNIT2 recognises that architectural design holds an unjust position of power. The unit therefore attempts to employ critical processes that articulate the various values held by the variety of its local stakeholders (rather than centering on those of the designer).

Since existing systems (reflected in space and form) have been established and transformed gradually over time as a corollary of social organisation, it follows that it is vital to avoid major disruptions through the introduction of alien or incompatible values and forms, which may ultimately be rejected in any case (much of this, like the spectacle of modernist utopias, was created over the last century). Kendall (2015) articulated this principle thus: “... TYPES are a primary nutrient in the cultivation of the built field. Ignorance of the types that grow well in [a particular context’s] soil mean that we (architects) will always be at a disadvantage if we try to make new interventions grow healthy roots in this particular soil. When we don’t know these types, and try to make new ones, it’s like a gardener being ignorant of the soil and the plant types that thrive in that soil, and who, trying to be creative and inventive, attempts to make new flowers never seen before. The chances that they will fail to take root are large!”

The critical positioning of ‘design’ as well as the designer within such complex spatial conditions necessitates a cultivation of certain ethical approaches. This shifting of the role of the designer is, in effect, a call to the adoption of new modes of practice and education and, consequently, also to new methods and forms of representation. The latter is particularly crucial, not only because conventional architectural and planning representation falls short of offering a useful means of designing with such complexity, but moreover it is often perceived to be alienating to those whose environments it represents and hence reinforces the distance between the professional and the user (as opposed to encouraging user agency, whether individual or collective). New forms of representation therefore need to be accessible to the stakeholders served by the profession.

Adopted processes of architecture need to establish trust between the professional and the communities being served, they need to avoid unnecessarily disrupting existing systems and they need to engage with complexity rather than try to “sort out the mess” (Hamdi, 2010). Again borrowing from another field, McGarry (2013) explained how “methodological approaches for writing and analysis” aimed to establish trust with participants, to “do no harm,” to avoid easy categories and acknowledge complexity, to aim to “demystify” process and to resist the urge to romanticise participants’ voices. Each one of these principles is equally valid in architectural practice.

McGarry (2013) further elaborated on the values driving this approach: “It explored ethical engagement as a shared responsibility and shared authority between research and research participants, or in this case Responsible Participant and participant citizens. The practices that I engaged with and explored in this work did not see the participants as vulnerable subjects without

their own moral intuition, but rather sees informed consent being developed through a process that is constantly negotiated by all those involved in the practice as it evolves.”

UJ_UNIT2: an experiment in architectural education

‘Levels’ of practice: individual and collective, tangible and intangible

In its approach, UJ_UNIT2 has adopted the concept of Open Building which manages distributed control of environmental decision-making: “It is also about change. Healthy environments are never finished. Time enters. Like living organisms, living environments replenish themselves part by part. In that process, who decides about what, and when? These are the central questions of Open Building. Some decisions have to be shared (we live with other people after all and share *some* values and environmental aspirations). Other decisions have to be personal (we are individuals too, with our own motivations and dreams and possibilities). Thus Open Building architecture shows the imprint of both. If this were not the case, the result would be prisons (devoid of individual freedom) or anarchy (everyone for themselves). Neither extreme, of course, is a desirable one. But mediating and managing these potential extremes is neither a task for engineers, nor for policy makers. Rather, given its social and spatial complexity, and the knowledges and skills this entails, it is most appropriately an architectural task” (Kendall et al. 2015).

The UJ_UNIT2 assignments have aimed to encourage students to consider the relationships between systems, infrastructure and people, and to consider individual and collective needs and how these are mediated through built form. Students have been encouraged to pay particular attention to ‘levels’ of the built environment (the urban level, the building level, etc.) as well as to detect the methods of negotiation that happen in the built environment – as well as how that negotiation is facilitated (or hindered) by the spatial and structural qualities of the area.

Further to its principle of co-production, UJ_UNIT2 has also operated in an ‘in-house’ dialogue with the STUDIO **AT DENVER** and other initiatives at the Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture (FADA) at the University of Johannesburg. The UJ_UNIT2 project briefs have been deliberately and carefully structured to enable the achievement of a balance between the physical and the socio-cultural conditions. However the briefs also acknowledged that built form—carefully considered—may facilitate and support socio-cultural processes. In this way, the unit has embarked on these dialogues with an aim towards tangible and intangible systems and outputs.

The coordinators of the STUDIO **AT DENVER** embodied a similar approach in terms of thinking on multiple levels of the built environment: “In our approach this top-down would need to include spatial development frameworks, development plans, National Upgrading Support Programme (NUSP) reports etc. If we are able to quantify and summarise the province's/city's stance on the site this will inform the formulation of design proposals to be both radical and realistic as an interpretation/response to local government intentions” (Eric Wright in Kendall et al., 2015).

There was also a concern with regards to looking, “... too heavily to the physical aspects of context. The [later] immersive process will call for cultural and social sensitivities. We suggest including time frames for (*limited*) *transformation* immediate, medium term and long term strategies/goals” (Eric Wright in Kendall et al., 2015). This led to UJ_UNIT2 developing a framework for Denver that envisioned small scale, immediate interventions through to larger, longer term spatial strategies.



Figures 4 and 5: Denver, Johannesburg: density, form, scale as a starting point, prior to immersion in context.

Each brief was carefully designed to allow students the freedom to develop their own stance on design practice, supported by the experience, tools and methods of the unit co-leaders. Students were encouraged to critically engage users in context in order to foster their own techniques of engagement, while grounding this experience with specific literature and theory suggested by the unit leaders.

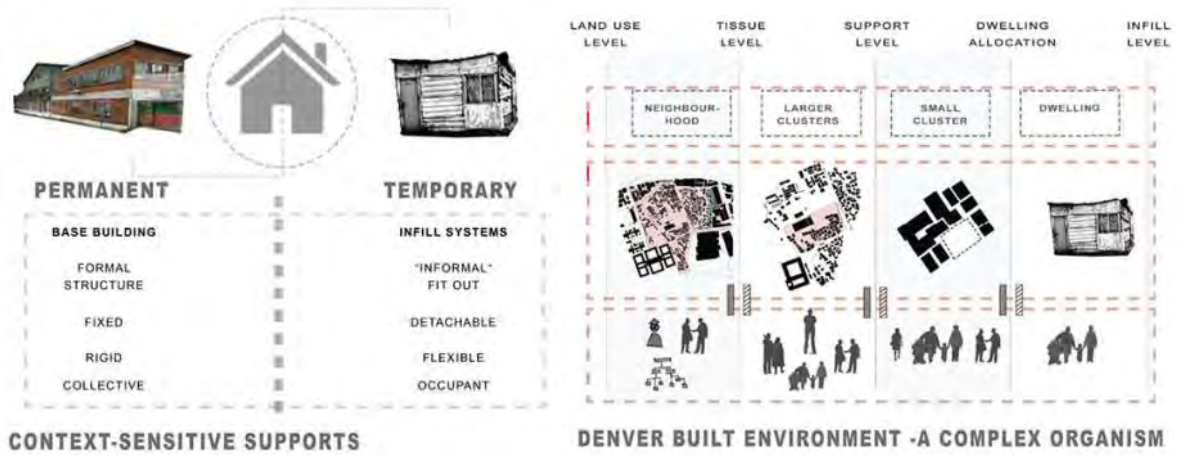
The UJ-UNIT2 ‘education experiment’ is intended to raise new questions, and in the process to discover ‘other’ ways of practice. Through an intensive engagement with urban form, students are encouraged to develop skills in design, density, form, scale, services, materials and technology, prior to an actual social immersion within a neighbourhood – after which prior developed forms are re-assessed and refined based on a deeper understanding of context.

UJ_UNIT2 studio outputs: different process, different products

Students developed a competency in ‘time-based design’ and the exploration of capacious typologies in architecture. The social systems of production are addressed through understanding many times intangible processes of negotiation, transaction, territory, ownership and deal making. Students are empowered to formulate positions that will allow them to be better-equipped to influence higher-level policies and translate these into lower level project interventions.

The ‘artefacts’ produced in the unit are also different from a more ‘conventional’ architectural studio, in that the intangible processes, which translate into space and form, must be understood, analysed and graphically communicated. Given this new and complex terrain, the authors (coordinators of UJ-UNIT2) therefore are also still in the process of developing a terminology to better describe the studio outputs: ‘agency architecture mapping’ and ‘socio-technical spatial design’ are still tentative headings.

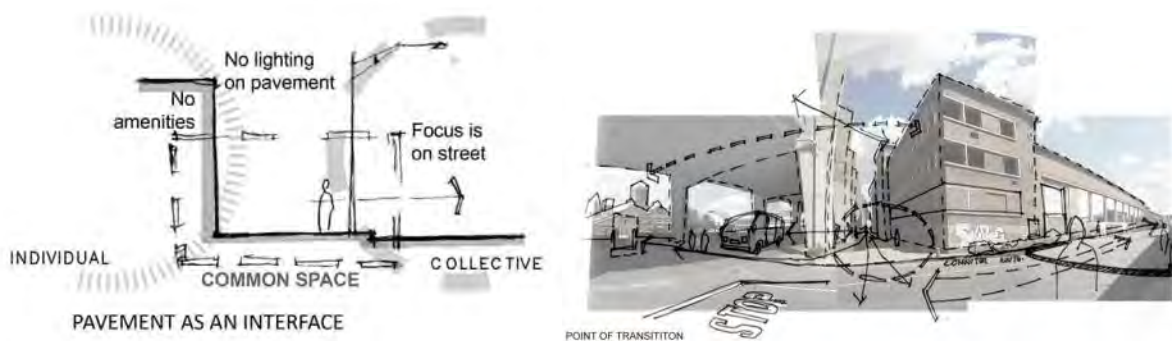
The unit also draws upon a number of other fields, including information architecture and development studies, as the idea of translating data and social relationships into spatial and technical interventions resonates strongly within these fields, as well as the shared concern of dealing with extreme complexity without over-simplifying solutions (albeit in different forms and with different focus areas). This is demonstrated with a few examples in the images below.



Figures 6 and 7: Explorations on Denver, Johannesburg and “occupant agency through design” by UJ_UNIT2 student Simon Ngubeni.



Figures 8 and 9: understanding systems of the built environment – diagram representing the dynamics of Bjala Square in Jeppestown, Johannesburg by UJ_UNIT2 student Andrea Relling.



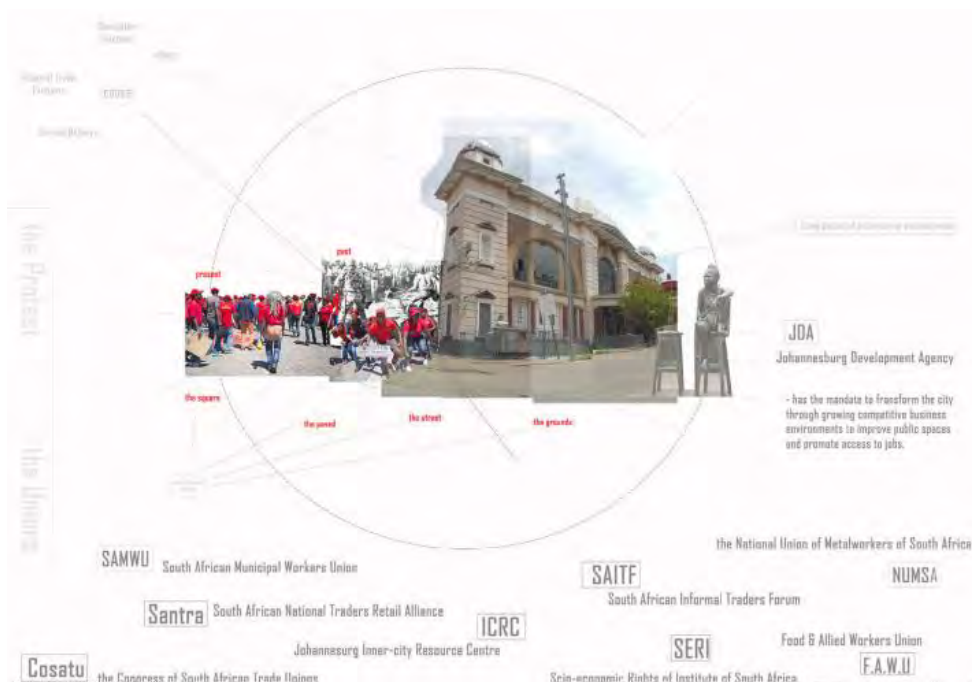
Figures 10 and 11: understanding how the built environment mediates between the individual and the collective to develop decision-making strategies – Johannesburg explorations by UJ_UNIT2 student Simon Ngubeni.



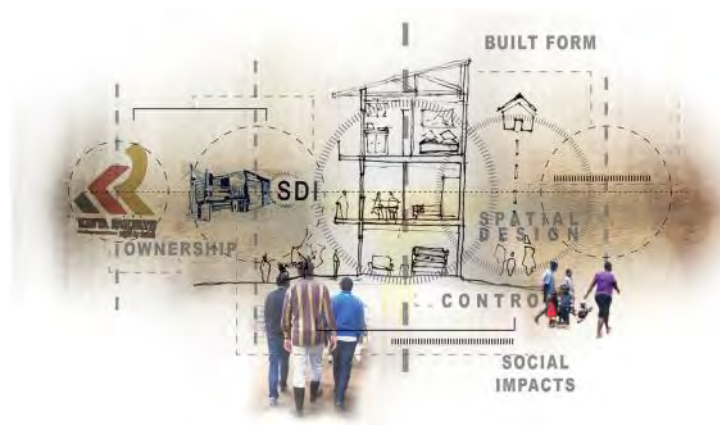
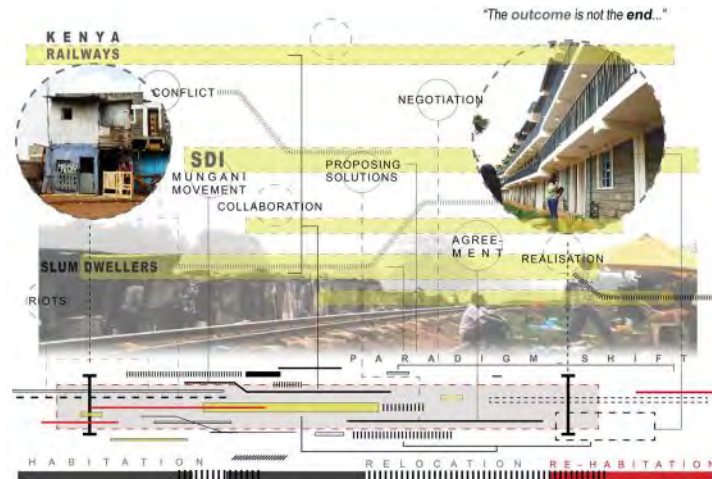
Figure 12: prior to developing design interventions, mapping the dynamics of interaction between different user groups in the spaces adjacent to and beneath the infrastructure of an inner city context of Johannesburg – a diagram by UJ_UNIT2 student Sibusiso Lwandle.



Figures 13: explorations by UJ_UNIT2 student David Pratt into the importance of well-located, safe and sufficient space for traders to set out their goods and to have good interaction with pedestrians.



Figures 14, 15, 16: explorations by UJ_UNIT2 Mfundo Magongo student into the use of public space in various contexts in Johannesburg – the student has a particular interest in public space and protest.



Figures 17 and 18: understanding how “negotiation, transacting and deal-making” processes impact on the development of informal settlement upgrading projects in Nairobi, Kenya by UJ_UNIT2 students Simon Ngubeni and Kashiya Mbinjama – this project is a negotiation between the railway agency in Kenya and the squatters that inhabited the line in certain sections of Nairobi.



Figures 19: a portrayal of the railway project in Nairobi by UJ_UNIT2 students Manuel Simon, Clara Senatore and Sibusiso Lwandle: an attempt to understand how people are using the railway line and how these dynamics might be better managed.

Conclusion

The paper has questioned some of the many objections and obstacles to ethical thinking and practice in architecture (alternative as marginal, ethical as reductionist or dogmatic, etc.), offering its own positioning, development of processes, and examples of application.

The paper also discussed how considered collaboration and application of other fields such the field of ethics in philosophy, information architecture and development studies, have the potential to enrich (not override) various aspects of architectural education. The point is worth noting, for many a well-intentioned design professional, perhaps feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of the built environment in South Africa and other similar contexts, can shy away from the core architectural skills set—the production of space and form—believing it to be inappropriate or insufficient in certain contexts. Despite its stance regarding equity and the engagements of Open Building dynamics, the unit yet affirms the role of architecture, for design and building can possess profound potentialities: to empower, to educate and to facilitate; or to alienate, disempower and disadvantage. This all is part of the complexity and the challenge that UJ-UNIT2 has embraced; for engaged practitioners and teachers must recognise their own positioning, identify where design has the most impact and value, and then direct their creative focus on the architectural scale while still recognising the complexity of the higher levels of intervention.

At its core, UJ-UNIT2 is essentially about people, the relationships between people and the role that the built environment plays in managing those relationships – with the built environment as a ‘mediator’ – between individual and collective aspirations. Thus, UJ_UNIT2 consistently oscillates between the spatial/physical and the socio/cultural. This is further presented in the context of the discourse of human rights and what happens when this is brought into architecture. The authors argue that this is not simply an extension of familiar ethics, but rather takes on its own particular character, such as ‘enabling agency’.

UJ_UNIT2 promotes a very particular approach to the concepts of ‘agency’ as well as the familiar rubric of ‘community engagement’. The unit’s focus on Open Building means that buildings and space are designed to allow for use and re-use over time. Since Open Building projects have been designed with a view for increased capacity for adaptation and change, resonating with different people over time, these buildings have been described—in a word that appears almost alien in a discipline with, often, over-intellectualised terms of reference—as being “lovable” by Open Building practitioners (Geiser, 2006). Mediation, positioning, relevance and time, however, all are concepts that need to become part of mainstream practice rather than a continued peripheralisation within the architectural discipline. This surely is, indeed, an ethical question; and one at the very core of debates on the relevance of the profession today.

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