

Architecture
Authority, Identity, and Place in Knowledge Creation
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I am often asked, ‘How do you feel about being a black woman in a profession that is mostly white and male?’ and ‘You must have gotten a lot of support for you to be a black woman in a profession that is mostly white and male.’ Or I am presented with, ‘It must be very hard for you to be a black woman in a profession that is mostly white and male.’ Or ‘You must be very proud of yourself for you to be a black woman in a profession that is mostly white and male.’

My response, typically unreceptive, is to two things that I read as implicit in this line of questioning. First, the lack of acknowledgement that, irrespective of my race and gender, I am a qualified practicing architect who also is an academic. Second, no acknowledgement of the effort, learnings, networks, and experiences that I have had to design and cultivate, irrespective of my race and gender, to become the type of architect and academic that I am.

The frequency with which I am asked a version of these questions – in different places, by different people – suggests there is merit in unpacking the attitudes and beliefs that underlie what I think is a misalignment in thinking about that which I am – a black person and a woman – and that which I have become – an architect and academic.

What do these frequent questions and the misalignment that I read in them have to do with the production of knowledge? The short answer: everything. The surprise at the possibility of a specific demographic, black and female, being able to adequately navigate and develop in a discipline that is misunderstood as being the realm of another, white and male, suggests that we, as a society, do not allow ourselves to see anything beyond that which we know, have been told, and learnt.

This limits and disregards our ability to imagine other or alternate realities that are not derived from nor relate to an authoritative body of existing knowledge. If we cannot imagine beyond that which we know as authoritative knowledge, we cannot question its existence, we cannot

develop strategies to question the beliefs and systems that underpin this form of knowledge, and we cannot produce new knowledge. But if we can imagine beyond that which we know, then maybe we can produce knowledge that is new in a developmental and intellectual sense.

Over the course of this essay, I will provide a longer explanation to clarify why I think imagination is significant for any of us to participate in a project that encourages the production of new knowledge. I will attempt to do so by exposing the vantage point of my journey in my discipline, architecture, and its education. This is a vantage point enjoyed by any practitioner whose discipline promotes the development of a recognizable individual creative practice as the pinnacle of mastery.

I am a qualified architect who also teaches at a university. I make architecture, I undertake research on topics that relate to architecture, and I teach about both. These aspects of my practice inform my thinking in, and approach to, the discipline of architecture; they are important for how I think about knowledge in the discipline.

I started making architecture in a practice I founded with a colleague in 2013. Together, we designed and built buildings across a range of architectural typologies, from the conceptual (such as Esquared House in Johannesburg) through to the institutional (new Physics Building for the Science Faculty at the University of the Free State; UFS). In this process, I engaged with the limitations and opportunities in the construction sector that shaped my approach.

I learnt about the material and immaterial realities of South Africa, the place where I have practiced primarily. I learnt that if you want to have a good result, then you must consider the prevalent commonplace approaches to making architecture. I learnt about the importance of having insights into the everyday aspirations and norms of the people for whom you are designing. I learnt how to co-create; making a building is not a singular endeavour – it requires a team of people with a variety of peculiarities and skill sets.

My doctoral research is a good place to start describing my research and academic ambitions. Completed in 2019, my thesis was an attempt to apply that which I knew as a practicing architect in a place I was learning about: the university. The thesis used a spatial lens to read the implications of the transformation agenda in higher education in South Africa. The thesis tried to show tangibly how, because transformation policies did not consider space, place, place-making, and everyday activities in their framing, they did not adequately resonate with the lived realities of staff and students at higher education institutions. In its critique of transformation policies, the thesis showed how the conditions of place are important and significant for the higher education experience, in that they

significantly impact understandings of the concept of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

The experiment showed how space, place, and place-making at a higher education institution, in this case the UFS, spoke to social determinants such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity. The learning was that, when adequately considered, space, place, and place-making mediated and located the individual in their interactions, negotiations of their differences with others, and validated similarities and shared values about initiatives for redress and reform aimed at transformation at higher education institutions.

The results of the experiment and learnings from this research underlined a guest issue I co-edited with Professor Thierry Luescher for the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* volume 7(1) 2019. The issue focused specifically on the significance of space in the transformation process in higher education. The argument is that space, which is constructed by society and in turn constructs society, can provide conceptual tools for reframing existing policy and designing a new policy that aims for a broader and holistic transformative process. We highlighted how when we conceive of space, place, and place-making as more than a container that we fill with programmes and activities, we can realistically take on, in keeping with Lefebvre and others, the socio-cultural and political dimension in the everyday lives of staff and students at a higher education institution.

My journey as a researcher and academic precedes my current appointment as an associate professor at the School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Here, I would like to highlight my joining UCT in 2018 as significant for two reasons. First, my research, with my doctoral thesis started before the 2015–2016 student movements, highlighted some of the concerns that were at the core of the student-led protests, mainly space and objects in space that did not resonate with contemporary life in a post-apartheid condition in most South Africa higher education institutions.

Second, when I joined UCT after the 2015–2016 student movements that included the #RhodesMustFall and the #FeesMustFall movements (known as #RMF and #FMF in written and social media), I had to reckon with the aftermath of these concerns, which were, in part, a response to grievances and concerns around questions of decolonization, representation – specifically visual representations of symbols and signs that were conceived of and perceived to represent a colonial/apartheid era – access to higher education, and the various interrelated socio-political and economic issues prevalent in the country at the time.

These concerns were raised by predominately black students from historically marginalized backgrounds, politically, socially, and or

economically. The 2015–2016 student movements generated considerable attention across society. Adam Habib, the University of Johannesburg vice-chancellor at the time, is quoted as saying the student movements had ‘achieved in a matter of 10 days [concerns] vice-chancellors had been advocating for at least 10 years’ (Habib 2016).

What is significant about the 2015–2016 student movements in the knowledge project is that they placed knowledge production and the place where it is understood to take place, the higher education institution, on the national agenda. Numerous opinion pieces, articles, and books have been published, and I can say that the politics that grew out of the student movements had, and still has, a significant impact on how I have engaged while at UCT with questions of knowledge, its dissemination, acquisition, and production.

As an architect who also teaches at a university, how do I deliver on an education in architecture that meaningfully grapples with the politics and concerns about knowledge highlighted by the 2015–2016 student movements? How do I continue to teach about the abstract, placeless, and universal principles of design theory and practice that in the discipline of architecture are unmarked by historical difference?

How can I continue to reproduce the developmental building blocks of an authoritative knowledge system when the arguments presented, highlighted in student movements, among others, have questioned the beliefs and attitudes that have formed this way of thinking? How do I develop strategies that can constructively engage with questions about the relevance of authoritative knowledge in a context that does not fit in with the principles that underlie the beliefs and attitudes of a canon?

This in a time of socio-economic precarity, austerity measures at UCT, variable technological and social developments, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and social media, and the devastation arising from Covid-19.

I would like to suggest that to be able to engage practically with some of these questions, it is important to understand how we replicate and reproduce the beliefs and attitudes of authoritative knowledge within my discipline and need to be able to show where these beliefs and attitudes do not align with the reality of the conditions of the place in which I am located.

Typically, architectural education is underpinned by the following basic assumption: I was taught by ‘x’. And ‘x’, who was taught by ‘y’, disseminates knowledge that is primarily Eurocentric and Western, supported by beliefs and attitudes that claim ‘a’ as the canon and authoritative knowledge. The knowledge passed on to me by ‘x’ is a continuation of and development on ‘a’ that ‘y’ claims, guides and structures the building blocks of the discipline. Thus, my thinking and practice informed by teachings from ‘x’ develops and is shaped by how I reproduce, and even

imitate, the building blocks of ‘a’, that is, authoritative knowledge in the discipline.

In this approach, knowledge is not new – it is a continuation of what exists, what has been taught and learnt. The expectation is that I too will, in this tradition of teaching, thinking, and practice, replicate and reproduce the knowledge that has been passed down by ‘x’ and retains its beliefs and attitudes in ‘a’ as the canon. In this approach, knowledge does not deviate from the authoritative base ‘a’. Although not in itself problematic, this approach to knowledge production does not produce anything new. Furthermore, in this tradition, when the authoritative knowledge and traditions do not respond or speak to the contemporary concerns of a place, that are neither Eurocentric nor Western, then they cannot provide guidance or even orientation on substantive matters that are prevalent in that context.

I have learnt that an education in architecture should include diverse ways of thinking about and practicing architecture. But I have been taught and learnt that authoritative knowledge determines the value of what is good architectural thinking and practice. I know that it is fair and just that the emergent nature of informal settlements, a condition of most African urbanscapes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has merit and warrants consideration in an architectural curriculum.

But this condition has no line of enquiry in the authoritative knowledge system that determined my education about thinking about and practice in architecture. I know that knowledge is dynamic and should speak to the desires and wishes of people in their everyday. But I am complicit in authoritative methodologies that govern thinking about design theory, design, drawing, and the eventual articulation of architectural design.

This disconnect between the education I have received and what I know, like the implicit understanding in the line of questioning I often experience, demonstrates the misalignment between authoritative knowledge in the discipline and the nature of the person and place in which I exist, the Global South (Bhan 2019). For clarity, in this essay the term “Global South” refers to an urban condition that Edgar Pieterse and others refer to as one in which the majority, who hold the political, economic, spatial, and ecological vulnerability, are housed in informal, self-built, makeshift shelters. The southernness in the term Global South refers to a condition of place; it is also a method of thinking about the world in a way that calls out the dominance of authoritative knowledges, systems, and practices.

The term “Global South” is a useful line of enquiry to deal with the authoritative understanding of knowledge about place-making as being predetermined by universal principles of design, namely, form, space, and

order. It places on the knowledge agenda, a condition that is imagined, made, understood, and experienced as mostly precarious and emergent (also known as informal, rogue, and chaotic). The conditions in the Global South, in which I, my peers, and my students practice, are misaligned with the authoritative knowledge that governs the discipline.

Frequently this misalignment has focused our knowledge endeavours on the geohistorical processes of colonialism and globalizing capitalism, in effect hindering our ability to deploy and exploit the opportunities, systems, and insights of the southernness of place. Worse, the disregard for the southernness of place in the development of knowledge about place-making has limited our ability to think creatively about the conditions that define and make the place in which we exist.

The task here is not to explain the misalignment; rather, it is to suggest that perhaps in the schism, it creates there is an opportunity to produce something new: knowledge. When we exploit the opportunities that emerge out of the misalignment between that which has been designed and cultivated as authoritative knowledge and that which simply and irreducibly is, we produce another kind of knowledge – knowledge that can actively reconstruct, negotiate, and contest a problematic past, a real present, and an imaginative and speculative future.

It is important to acknowledge that the universal authoritative knowledge that currently guides the discipline is limited in its ability to accurately read and capture the realities of other or alternate contexts that do not align with the beliefs and attitudes that underpin that system. The limitation of this knowledge system is an interesting reference point from which to start thinking about knowledge production. Thinking that grounds itself in the process of creating knowledge from experiences of the everyday, it locates itself in the situatedness of place, moving the production of knowledge beyond predetermined beliefs and attitudes.

By taking on the insights and understandings found in the characteristics of the conditions that make a place, we make the space from which to create possibilities that do not limit themselves to, or within, a canon. This happens when knowledge is not created from an ideological position that seeks to replace or deconstruct the canon but rather from a way of thinking that acknowledges the canon of authoritative knowledge as being limited in its application in, and response to, the realities of other and alternate conditions.

When we question the limitations of what we believe and recognize as authoritative through the lens of the realities of the conditions in a place in which we, as any number of individuals who commit to something that can be understood as a society, we make space for imagination. From this place,

we can start to see the merit and innovation in the characterizations of these conditions in the places in which we exist, not as other or alternative to the canon, but as devices from which to develop strategies. It can take us beyond what we know, what we have been taught, what we have learnt.

When we think imaginatively in ways that in their situatedness move beyond the beliefs and attitudes of authoritative traditions, we realize in ourselves and others speculative opportunities from which to produce new knowledge. In this process of imagination that does not seek to replace nor deconstruct the existing knowledge tradition, we can create a space from which to engage with authoritative knowledge systems without being bound to the beliefs and attitudes that describe this system. It allows for the emergence of pathways of thinking that are neither acknowledged nor validated in authoritative knowledge systems. The imagination that allows for other and alternate ways of thinking can engage creatively with conditions of place to bring together the ambitions of a discipline and identity to be found to produce something that does not exist – new knowledge.

The emergence of speculative pathways of thinking, when grounded in the conditions of place, sets up a conceptual frame from which to think about the multifaceted nature of actions and interactions that define the everyday. We gain insights into the conditions of place and outline a framework from which to develop building blocks for multifaceted ways of seeing and understanding the world. This, in turn, enables us to intelligently respond to concerns and matters that impact the everyday lived reality of those people who find themselves in a space that does not align with what we have been taught, learnt, and know. Knowledge that is based on the multiplicity of the realities of the everyday, and the conditions that make and define that can, in its variation deviates from the traditions, beliefs, and attitudes of the authoritative.

The suggestion here is that if we pay attention to the conditions of place, we can learn to speak and think about it, and bring into existence, other and alternate perspectives that acknowledge the limitations of authoritative knowledge and the challenge of defining other and alternate perspectives.

Not enough is written about alternate histories and commonplace manifestations of architecture beyond those found in the discipline's authoritative knowledge. There is an urgent need to generate enquiry, concepts and theoretical vernaculars that can shape, variegate, and emergent discourses about the discipline of architecture, while acknowledging the growing move in the discipline towards thinking and practice that speaks from a position that does not merely react or respond to the existing

authoritative knowledge system. Writing this essay, I recognize and know that I must do more.

I was recently sent a document that argues that while the discipline of architecture is real, it is not realistic (Belderbos & Verbeke 2004). The argument positions the architect's relationship to the real, which is not realistic, as being concerned with, among other things, the representation of the aesthetics and practicalities of material (structure) and immaterial (space) form.

This line of enquiry resonates with something I have repeatedly said to students. As architects we do not build buildings, we make drawings of imaginations from which others build the building. This is significant because it highlights three important things for an education in architecture. First, that as architects, the drawings we make can intuitively *represent* something beyond what we know and who we are.

Second, because the drawings we make are realized by others, we can catalyze the *imagination* for other and alternate perspectives. Third, because of the first two points, the drawings we make can contribute to a collective *narrative* that aims at something that does not yet exist.

In all fairness architects are not the only practitioners or creatives who use drawings as representations of ideas and imaginations, but we are uniquely positioned in that our drawings have distinction in their realization as built form in the real world the constructs society and is in turn constructed by society. The proposition is that the translation of architectural drawings, when realized in the built form, can create new spatial knowledge about a given place.

The idea that built form is a realized representation of imagination that can contribute to a collective narrative is intriguing. For an education in architecture, it sets up a premise from which to think about the dynamic complexity of contemporary society and the disparate concerns of shelter as a relationship between spatial form and social action. It reinstalls the discipline in both the formal and the emergent realities of settlements, towns, and cities. It allows for pathways in which to experiment with other and alternate approaches of theorizing and modes of practice that speak to the specificity of the ambitions, aesthetics, and space of the everyday. It breaks away from the abstractions of theory in favour of deriving observations and explanations from a materialist reading of place. It makes possible lines of enquiry that grapple with the richness and extensiveness of life, its experiences, and relationships to the particularities of place.

Unbound by the geographies of knowledge, the imagination can mobilize the specificities of place to creatively generate and visualize everyday

forms of social practice and more universal forms of theory. It allows for cultivating a relationship between forms of knowledge, that is, a relationship of neither contradictions nor validations. Imagination bridges the contradictory requirements and demands of what we know to produce knowledge that relates to who we are. For a student, lecturer, or architect, this is empowering.

An education in architecture that is aimed at producing new knowledge cannot distance itself from the everyday activities of place, especially if it is to be relevant in the complex urban dynamics of the Global South. It must be able to situate the lived experience of the everyday, it must move beyond that which we have been taught, learnt, and known to be architecture, realizing through creative imagination, a reality that speaks to, and with the conditions in a specific place in which we, as a society, exist.

When we see ourselves in the unpredictable messiness that is our lived experience, then we can imagine a journey of epistemic discovery that can critically engage conceptually with the ubiquitous nature of innovation, be it in spatial design, technological advances in building, digital fabrication and AI, manufacturing processes and the embedded characteristics of building materials. We create in this state of creative imagination a space from which to explore without explanation another way of thinking from which we generate knowledge that is not bound to the limitations of authoritative knowledge nor a materialist reading of the place in which we find ourselves.

Reinforcing the significance of the socio-political nature of the conditions of place, when we allow ourselves to imagine, who we are, who we have become, we can realize through the lived reality of our beliefs and attitudes another form of knowledge that does not yet exist. When experimenting with the unknown, nothing is certain, what we know and who we have become is precarious, and because it is precarious, it can be reimagined, recreated, or completely discarded. We can become something else entirely.

In the process of imagination, there is no failure, no success, the only expectation is to create something. Something that in its relationship to place can provide direction and alignment for us to be able to deal with contemporary substantive concerns. This process of imaginatively thinking about knowledge is a device through which we can change the beliefs and attitudes that bind us to authoritative knowledge, it is a strategy from which to create new knowledge. In the imagination, knowledge is not held; it is not disseminated from teacher to student, master to apprentice; it is a collective made in an intelligible, visible way that relates to different and differentiated life worlds.

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