FADA DECOLONISATION CONVERSATION
9 June 2016, Con Cowan Theatre, Auckland Park Bunting Road Campus, University of Johannesburg.

Panel 1 (9:20-10:30): What does decolonisation and decoloniality mean in the context of art, architecture and design education and in terms of knowledge production?

**Decolonising Design Research through Participatory Knowledge Creation**

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Latin American Studies and decolonisation scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres defines decoloniality as “the dismantling of relationships of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world.” (2006:117). 309 years of patriarchal colonial rule and 60 years of segregationist legislation through apartheid are not easily overcome in 22 years of South African democracy. Although a rather opaque reflection of the lived experience of the majority of South Africans, our country is currently ranked on the Gini Coefficient as one of the most unequal societies in the world (The World Bank, 2006). Even as an oblique index, it helps provide a small glimpse into the social inequality that currently underpins South African higher education.

The traditional university model is one of commercialised knowledge. This takes place in enclaves that are not easily accessible for the majority of South Africans due to the current quality of school education, limited access to finances and through universities necessarily having to limit first year intake. As a second generation Scottish/English South African it would be hypocritical for me to preach on decolonisation. However, I have been actively involved in a collaborative interdisciplinary research project that has helped enable the co-creation of knowledge outside of the traditional university curriculum. I believe this is important to share with you since it is highly relevant to the decolonisation of knowledge by firstly opening access to the traditional university and secondly through recognition of knowledge situated outside its enclave.
Postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe recently highlighted that, “In order to set our institutions firmly on the path of future knowledges, we need to reinvent *a classroom without walls* in which we are *all co-learners*; a university that is capable of convening *various publics in new forms of assemblies that become points of convergence of and platforms for the redistribution of different kinds of knowledges.*” (Mbembe, 2015). The research project I am co-founder of is called Izindaba Zokdula, which means ‘Conversations About Food’ in isiZulu. The project utilises a range of human-centred multi-stakeholder engagement research methodologies in order to bring about sustainable change in the complex arena of Johannesburg’s food system. In 2013 a series of three public workshops were held, which included urban farmers, the city and other stakeholders. The workshops were facilitated to democratically define a strategic plan that would guide the activities of the research project. Four focus areas were defined, but two of these are most relevant to this conversation: the creation of a farmer’s school and the development of more appropriate small-scale farming technology.

Since the beginning of 2015 Izindaba Zokudla has offered a biweekly Farmers' School and Innovation Lab, at the UJ Soweto Campus. The school and lab utilise the university’s infrastructure to enable peer-to-peer and expert teaching on topics democratically chosen by the urban farmers attending the school. This brings highly relevant and localised education to between 150 and 300 urban farmers from across Johannesburg who would never have the opportunity to formally study at a university, and enables them to strengthen their own networks of association. In terms of perspective, the number of farmers attending this school is more than all of the students in my university department, and yet is categorised as ‘Community Engagement’ as opposed to ‘Teaching and Learning’.

Agriculturalist turned economist Anil Gupta from the Indian Institute of Management and founder of the Honey Bee Network (2016) questions:

“Why is it… that the designers of pedagogies and curricula, policies and programmes the world over neglect the need for learning from knowledge rich-economically poor people? Why are there so few papers on innovations by workers in [the] organised and unorganised sector compared to managerial innovations” (2012: 29).
In order to walk-the-talk, for the last 17 years Gupta has biannually walked a *Shodhyatra* [shod-yatra] or ‘journey on foot’ searching for knowledge, creativity and innovation at the grassroots in India (Gupta, 2016). Thus far Gupta has covered over 6000 km and partnered with various governmental organisations to contribute towards the largest open source innovation platform in the world (Gupta, 2016). The Honey Bee Network has documented and protected the intellectual property of over 200 000 innovations (NIF, 2015) as part of a *grassroots to Global* strategy for knowledge-based approaches to poverty alleviation and employment generation (Gupta, 2016).

At a much smaller scale than the Honey Bee Network, Izindaba Zokudla has utilised participatory design methodologies to co-design appropriate agricultural technologies with urban farmers. UJ Industrial Design students together with urban farmers have thus far developed a small-scale farming kit, off-grid food storage, a seedling growing system, a DIY water pump, a human-powered shredder and an urban bee keeping system, resulting in the registration of three provisional patents in 2015. Of interest to the recognition of knowledge creation, even at our insistence that the urban farmers directly involved in the co-creation of these technologies be listed as co-designers on the provisional patents, the university lawyers did not do so. It has however been verbally promised, that should full patents be applied for, this would be remedied. Based on our experience of the bureaucratic and drawn-out process of getting products to market through traditional technology transfer, we have recently been opting for more open source technological dissemination. This promotes the sharing of knowledge with the same openness that the farmers’ knowledge was originally shared with us. Such design research projects obviously benefit students through their experience of tackling real-world design problems and their resultant qualifications. However, it also acknowledges creative citizens who are applying their abilities and knowledge in order to develop new technologies that meet the needs of their local contexts. This represents a new and highly localised path to development. By working with and acknowledging the people who undertake such ingenuity, we oppose the imperialistic model of unacknowledged research gains by universities hidden behind a screen of ‘ethical’ anonymity.
I am the first to admit that endeavours such as Izindaba Zokudla are not without imperialistic, ethical, intellectual property and ego complexities. However, as per the suggestions of Maldonado-Torres, Mbembe and Gupta such undertakings reflect a mode of design research and teaching that breaks down the silos of the traditional university into something that is more authentic to our context; and hence important to consider in a conversation about the decolonisation of knowledge.

References:


