A course in the history of African architecture

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This article is about the second semester of a new course that was first offered at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2000, namely Architectural Discourse. In this course the history and theory of architecture in Africa are studied and African cultural products are interpreted in terms of general patterns of change because of internal forces. In the essay the term "architectural discourse" is explained as a holistic way of studying architectural theory and history in relation to social and political factors and by using sources from a variety of disciplines. The term "culture" is explained and there is a discussion of how studies of local cultures are related to a globalized context of knowledge and information. The investigation of African cultural products from an African perspective is motivated.

The course is presented within the format of a grand, sweeping narrative with dignity and dramatic impact. The cultural products of the regions of Africa are discussed according to a strategy that considers the chronology of historical events. In conjunction with the general narrative strategy, architectural responses to local climates are interpreted, historical reconstructions of aspects of the material cultures are provided and guidelines for current architectural practices are derived from the histories of African cultural products.

Hierdie artikel handel oor die tweede semester van 'n nuwe kursus wat aangebied is by die Universiteit van die Witwatersrand in 2000, naamlik Diskoers van Argitektuur. In hierdie kursus word die geskiedenis en teorie van argitektuur in Afrika bestudeer. 'n Interpretasie van die kulturele produkte van Afrika word gemaak in terme van algemene patrone van verandering as gevolg van interne strominge. Die term Diskoers van Argitektuur word verduidelik in die artikel as 'n holistiese manier om die teorie en geskiedenis van argitektuur te bestudeer in verwantskap met sosiale en politieke faktore en deur bronne van 'n verskeidenheid van dissiplines te gebruik. Die term "kultuur" word verklaar en daar is 'n bespreking van hoe studies van plaaslike kulture verwand is aan 'n globale konteks van kennis en inligting. Die bestudering van die kulturele produkte van Afrika vanuit 'n perspektief voorsien deur Afrika word gemotiveer.

Die kursus word aangebied in die formaat van 'n grootse, veelomvattende relaas met waardigheid en dramatiese trefkrag. Die kulturele produkte van die streke van Afrika word bespreek deur 'n strategie te gebruik waarvolgens die chronologie van geskiedkundige gebeure in aanmerking geneem word. Tesame met die algemene beskrywende strategie word bespreek hoe tradisionele argitektuur aangepas is by die plaaslike klimaat, historiese rekonstruksies van aspekte van die materiële kulture word verskaf en riglyne vir huidige argitektuurpraktyke word verskaf deur gebruik te maak van die geskiedenisse van die kulturele produkte van Afrika.

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Introduction

This essay is about the second semester component of a new six-semester course, called Architectural Discourse. It was introduced in 2000 in the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand. Architectural Discourse is part of the modified three-year Degree of Bachelor of Architectural Studies (B.A.S.). A year of practical work and a two-year Degree of Bachelor of Architecture (B.Arch.) follow the B.A.S. degree.

As a whole, Architectural Discourse is a course about the history and theory of architecture. It is taught in such a way that the contents are studied from an African perspective. This approach is derived from the assumptions that the student composition in the B.A.S. course reflects the multicultural composition of the population of South Africa and that architectural courses are aimed at fulfilling the needs of local communities.

From a post-colonial South African perspective, the history of Western architecture is viewed with suspicion and questions are being asked about its relevance. Although it is acknowledged that there is a history of Western architecture, the stance adopted in Architectural Discourse is that there are other histories of architecture that need to be addressed as well. The history of Western architecture is perceived to be of secondary importance when one is trying to take control of the way that architecture is described to benefit people living and working in this country. Because of these considerations Architectural Discourse is presented from an African point of view.

In the first semester of Architectural Discourse, students are introduced to the concept that the history of architecture is a constructed artefact. The first semester consists of a process during which students explore different types of histories by doing practical projects. The approach is based on the premise that local and particular aspects of students' lives are used to introduce them to the history and theory of architecture. Such a procedure allows lecturers to accommodate and respond to differences in cultures and conceptual frameworks. In 2000 Fanuel Motsepe taught this semester course.

In the second semester of the first-year course, general patterns of change in African societies because of internal forces are studied. The scope of the course is from the Late Stone Age to the eve of the European conquest of Africa in the eighteen eighties. The author of this article taught the second semester course in 2000.

It consisted of 21 lectures, each of 90 minutes duration.[1] It was presented to a class of 70 students.[2] This essay serves to motivate the choices that have been made as regards the way that the course was formulated.

The course in African architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand is not unique. It replaces an existing course in African architecture. The whole course is now presented from an African perspective, instead of offering African and non-Western architectures as modules in a course otherwise consisting of Western architecture. Other institutions in Africa that provide architectural education also offer courses in the history of architecture from an African perspective. The University of the Witwatersrand is following this trend.

The second- and third-years of Architectural Discourse at the University of the Witwatersrand are not included in the contents of this paper. Readers of this essay may feel the need to place it in the context of the second and third-years of study. In the second-year the architectural histories of the cultures that interacted with African populations are investigated. The aim of the inquiry is to interpret architecture in relation to various belief systems, political aspirations and social conditions. It is studied to what extent African populations exchanged resources with cultures from outside Africa. The narrative structure for the course is provided by the general history of Africa from 1000 B.C.E. to 1880 C.E.. The history of architecture is grafted onto this historical context. Because of the African perspective adopted in the course, a significant part of the course is concerned with Muslim architecture.

In 2002 the new third-year of Architectural Discourse will be introduced. In the first semester twentieth-century architecture will be studied from an African perspective. In the second semester non-African and non-European architectures are included in the syllabus to enable students to adapt useful ideas and

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technologies for local purposes. The first and second semesters of the new Architectural Discourse III syllabus complement each other. Both investigate architecture of the Americas and India, for example. In the first semester it is treated in the context of colonialism and modernism, and in the second semester it is discussed in relation to their historical contexts.

Below, some of the theoretical motivations for the second semester of Architectural Discourse I are discussed and the general structure of the course is explained.

The term "architectural discourse"

The name of the course is Architectural Discourse. A discourse is a piece of language that is longer and more complex than a single sentence. The word "discourse" is derived from the Latin word *discursus*, which means to run from one place to another (Blackburn 1994: 107). In the context of the subject Architectural Discourse, the term "architectural discourse" refers to a holistic view of architecture, architectural history and architectural theory that allows for the existence of widely varying conceptual schemes (Honderich 1995: 202-3). The name of the course reflects the shuttling between conceptual schemes in the course and the interdisciplinary methods used in it. It also reflects an investigation of the relationships between architecture, architectural history and architectural theory and how they are influenced by social and political factors.

The presuppositions used in the production of architecture, architectural history and architectural theory are investigated in the course and the influences that class, race, gender and culture have on architectural discourses are studied. The meaning of the term "culture" is often contested and needs to be explained in more detail.

Culture

In Architectural Discourse, the term "culture" is defined in political and social contexts (Van Staden 1998:15-7). Culture is the traditions and beliefs of particular groups of people as manifested in their practices and material products (Blocker 1998: 413).

An aspect that is emphasized in the course is that African cultures and architectures do not possess a homogeneous and unchanging identity (Van Staden 1998: 18-25; UNESCO 1990-9, 1: 140; Bozdogan 1999: 210). A particular cultural group is often divided by various conflicts and therefore one should be sceptical about the idea of cultural unity. The conception that is advanced in the course is that a culture consists of an eclectic and complicated mosaic of local and borrowed practices, beliefs and aspirations. African cultures do not exist in isolation, but are characterized by interactions with other African and non-African cultures. They are also dynamic because they are constantly transformed in response to environmental changes.

In the second semester of the course the dynamic and eclectic natures of cultures are exemplified by the history of the kingdom of Kush in Nubia. Their culture was transformed from a distinctively Nubian culture at Kerma to an Egyptianized way of life during the New Kingdom (Kendall 1997; Davies 1991). Under the Kushite Dynasty the whole of the Nile Valley as far as the Delta was brought under the control of the Kingdom of Kush with their capital at Napata, where they adopted the Egyptian religion, style of dress and architecture (Török 1997). After the Kushites retreated from Egypt in 656 B.C. their culture became more unique, for example by placing a distinctive value on cattle. When they moved their capital city from Napata to Meroe, the Kushites developed their own language and form of writing. They combined disparate Egyptian architectural elements in their funerary

architecture, forming an eclectic mix of local and borrowed forms (Shinnie 1967).

The awareness of interactions between African cultures and between African and non-African cultures imply that tensions exist between local and global conditions. These tensions are acutely felt in the present day and are discussed next.

The local and the global

The current globalization of economies takes place within and across diverse cultures (Van Staden 1998: 19-21). The globalization of trans-national corporations involves the flows of technologies, money, information and media across national boundaries. A seeming paradox is that globalization forces trans-national companies to abandon universalistic ways of thinking and to regard local differences with more care. This is partly because trans-national companies have to engage in business transactions with a diversity of populations in different places. Hence one can interpret emerging fields such as multicultural studies and intercultural communication in diverse disciplines as consequences of globalization.

The project in Architectural Discourse can be described as an attempt to link culture-specific studies and multicultural studies within a globalized context of knowledge and information. Hence the local is treated as interrelated with the global.

The contents of Architectural Discourse are not conceived primarily in opposition to the former hegemony of Western architectural histories. Instead, the possibility of the agency of African architects, architectural historians and architectural theorists is emphasized. An attempt is made to take responsibility for the creation of the destinies of local architectural practices. This is done by imagining possible futures for African architectures, derived from interpretations of how current habits of thinking have come about historically.

There are pressures on South African universities and professionals to be global players. They have to work worldwide, but often with fewer resources than their international competitors. The competitive advantages of South Africans include using unique local knowledge when negotiating with international collaborators in order to avoid international uniformity.

The emphasis on being in Africa is noteworthy in Architectural Discourse and is discussed in the next section.

Architectural Discourse in Africa

The course is presented in an African institution and therefore an African point of view is adopted. It is recognized that many different points of view exist about African architecture, architectural theory and architectural history.

In the second semester of Architectural Discourse an attempt is made to describe and interpret African cultural practices in relation to African concerns and beliefs. African societies are not studied in isolation, but in relation to the intermingling of cultural groups and exchanges between them (Bozdogan 1999: 209).

An attempt is made to resist the description of African architectural history in Western terms. According to the aesthetic attitude adopted in Western interpretations of architecture, the autonomy of architectural form is emphasized, the ethos of individual creativity is promoted and the canonical status of buildings by great masters of the past is confirmed (Bozdogan 1999: 207). An example of authors who apply Western aesthetic attitudes to buildings in Africa is Van Buiten and Folkers (2001: 30-1) who write about the essence of architecture that is applicable everywhere, also in Africa. "Stripped to its essence, quality is good durable shelter against the often oppressive climate, built for little means and yet expected to last for generations as there will be no resources for care and maintenance". Their description of the

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essence of architecture goes against the nature of Hausa architecture, for example (Moughtin 1985: 48-58). Traditional Hausa architecture is characterized by a constant cycle of organic change, instead of durability. Their houses are built to last only for the lifetime of the occupant, after which the unused buildings are demolished and their places are returned to agricultural use within compounds.

The essay by Van Buiten and Folkers (2001: 30-1) is also an example of the assumptions that Western architectural practices are hegemonic and that African architectural practitioners lack the ability to act independently. They write "Missionaries and whites in general are currently being kicked out of Africa ... Who will take over their role as hard working and dedicated professionals, assisting the population in building up economic services? And in the architectural profession, who will design and coordinate buildings of quality?"

In contrast with the biased views of architects such as Van Buiten and Folkers, African populations often appreciate their buildings in relation to communal traditions, beliefs, practices and aspirations (Wilkenson 1998: 387; Blocker 1998: 412-3). The notions of quality, durability and an aesthetic attitude in relation to architecture are foreign to many African societies or are interpreted in ways unique to particular African communities. In the second semester, therefore, Western conceptions of architecture are largely neglected in favour of an interpretation of African architectures in terms of historical reconstructions of concepts employed by their builders. Such a historical reconstruction consists of an attempt to describe the architectures and concepts of populations in the context of ideas available to them.

The second semester of Architectural Discourse is a study of the relationships between architecture and cultures, physical contexts and politics in Africa (Bozdogan 1999: 207). It involves an investigation of how architectures are produced in historically specific times and places, within given cultural, political and institutional contexts. It includes attempts to write histories of architecture that can serve to formulate architectural strategies that are suitable for current African conditions.

The principal aim of the semester course is to study architecture as products of cultural practices of people belonging to particular social groups. The approach of the course corresponds with the method followed by some recent writers of African histories. The particular histories that provide the narrative framework for the course are *African history from earliest times to independence* (Curtin et al. 1995) and *General History of Africa* (UNESCO 1990-9). According to the narrative that is adopted, general patterns of historical change are studied. The culture and behaviour of ordinary people are emphasized and are related to social, economic and intellectual trends. Architecture is interpreted as evidence of people's changing ways of life, instead of searching for architectural essences (Bozdogan 1999: 210).

Because of the emphasis on the lives of ordinary people, Architectural Discourse does not consist only of a history of the exploits of outstanding figures (UNESCO 1990-9, 1: 9, 24-5). It is also not exclusively a history of the buildings of the ruling and privileged classes. An attempt is made to include the cultural practices of the whole of Africa and of all social groups. On the one hand, allowance is made for societies that are dominated by strong central governments and the monumental buildings that are often manifestations of these political situations. On the other hand, modest dwellings built by people belonging to village democracies are studied in detail.

The historicist approach is avoided in the course, according to which changes in architecture are interpreted as related to human development (UNESCO 1990-9, 1: 139; Van Staden 1998: 21, 24). Authors who live in industrialized nations often

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emphasize technological development and progress as essential processes in society. In Architectural Discourse it is recognized that local practices are altered in response to particular changes in circumstances. The effects of such changes cannot be predicted in absolute terms and thus it is not always clear what constitutes development. The needs of cultural groups differ and there is no general path of development that can be prescribed for all of them (Biakolo 1998: 12).

Interdisciplinary methods

Architectural Discourse is written by using many sources of information (UNESCO 1990-9, 1: viii, 1-6, 29, 141; Biakolo 1998: 6-9). These sources are used in combination to test the reliability of data. The sources of information about architecture as products of cultural practices of people belonging to particular social groups include general histories, art histories, architectural histories, cultural histories, archaeology, anthropology, aesthetics, physical geography and climatology.[3]

It is found that information is readily available. Many sources are of a recent date, indicating that African cultural history as a field of study has become increasingly popular since the nineteen nineties. The majority of books are from Western origins, rather than by African scholars. At the time of writing, general histories of African architecture are scarce. In 2000, this need was partially addressed by A history of art in Africa (Visonà et al. 2000). As the title of the book indicates, it is primarily concerned with art history and the history of architecture is brief.

In the absence of a suitable handbook, handouts were issued in the class with summaries of the lectures and with bibliographies. African history from earliest times to independence (Curtin et al. 1995) was prescribed.

General narrative structure of the course

The intention in the semester course is to provide a convincing narrative with a grand, sweeping and coherent quality in order to impart dignity and dramatic impact to the history of African architectures. This type of narrative has already been written in general histories of Africa. African history from earliest times to independence (Curtin et al. 1995) is chosen as a suitable medium onto which the desired architectural narrative can be grafted.

The narrative goes over the African continent twice. It starts with an overview of the earliest history of Africa, from the Late Stone Age. The spread of languages, food production and iron working are described. Climatic changes are discussed to stress variations in global environmental conditions that people had to respond to.

Once the spread of farming and iron working has been described from North Africa to the Sahara, West Africa, central Africa, eastern and southern Africa, a more elaborate narrative is provided in which these regions of the continent are covered again. In this second survey of the continent, specific attention is paid to the cultural products of populations living in the various regions, in particular to their architectures. The sequence from North Africa to the Sahara, West Africa, central Africa, eastern and southern Africa works well in terms of a chronological order of events, because it corresponds broadly with the spread of technologies and languages. In conjunction with the broad historical narrative, three specific strategies are used to provide more detailed interpretations of the architectures of various populations. They are:
i. the interpretation of the architectural responses to climates,
ii. historical reconstructions and
iii. deriving guidelines for current architectural practices from the histories of African architectures.
These strategies are discussed next.

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Architectural responses to climate

The first strategy is to describe the geographies and climates of the various regions, in order to provide a physical context in which the architectures of different populations can be interpreted. A specific aspect of the course is to explain traditional built responses to climatic conditions. This is done to enhance the use-value of the course. An understanding of how comfort can be achieved in various climates and knowledge of how architecture can serve to temper climatic conditions are useful for designers working in the present day.

The architectures of three extreme climatic zones are used as case studies. The first is North African settlements in hot dry climates (Koenigsberger et al. 1973; Konya 1980). The second is the composite climatic zone of the savannah country south of the Sahara desert and north of the forest in West Africa, where Gurunsi architecture in Burkina Faso is studied (Bourdier and Minh-Ha 1985). The third is the village of Ganvie in the Republic of Benin, which is a good example of a traditional architectural solution of the problems presented by a warm humid climate.

Historical reconstruction

A second strategy to teach the history of African material culture is historical reconstruction, which is to use the available evidence in an attempt to recreate the worlds in which certain populations lived. In cases such as the history of the San in Southern Africa, many resources are available to facilitate the historical reconstruction of their world. They include rock art in Southern Africa and the interpretations of and guides to rock art by authors such as David Lewis-Williams and T. A. Dowson (Dowson 1992; Dowson & Lewis-Williams 1994; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989; Lewis-Williams 1996; Lewis-Williams & Blundell 1998). Students are able to view San rock art in the Rock Art Research Centre of the University of the Witwatersrand, and in museums such as Museum Africa and the African Window Museum. To read the novels that Sir Laurens van der Post wrote on San culture can contribute further to create a rich and detailed interpretation of their world. The film "The Great Dance: a hunter's story", directed by Craig Foster and Damon Foster (2000), serves as a further aid to describe an aspect of the life of the San. Students who exploit these resources enrich their lives by the experience and by creating vivid depictions of possible worlds in their imaginations.

The imaginary worlds that students are encouraged to construct are cerebral images derived from reliable historical evidence, rather than unreal or illusory worlds. An imaginary world is a representation formed in the brain of phenomena not present to the senses. Imaginary worlds are constructed to encourage creative responses to experienced problems. These responses should be informed by a vivid knowledge of historical alternatives and may lead to the abilities to create and rehearse possible situations and to combine knowledge in unusual ways (Blackburn 1994: 187). The creation of imaginary worlds facilitates the flexible rehearsal of different approaches to problems and is wrongly thought of as opposed to reason.

Using the vocabulary of Rorty (1999: 161), one can advance reasons why students should create imaginary worlds. By engaging in such activities, students can learn about phenomena that are different from and may seem greater than the things that they are familiar with. In the process they should become aware that there is more to their lives and to the world than they could have imagined without doing the course. They should learn to play off different possible worlds against each other when searching for solutions to the architectural and other problems experienced by their clients once they have qualified as architects.

Deriving guidelines for current architectural practices from the histories of African architectures

The third strategy used in teaching the course overlaps with the previous one. It is to derive strategies for current architectural practices from the study of the histories of African architectures. The study of the histories of African cultural products produces many useful guidelines for current architectural practices. These guidelines are often strategies for practice, rather than about architectural forms. An instance of the interpretation of the history of architecture in terms of present-day interests is the lecture on the Luo of East Africa (Curtin et al. 1995: 115-20; Andersen 1977: 129-46). They have adapted to different environments and economic activities. During their interaction with other cultures the Luo have woven together diverse cultural practices. As a result of a multiplicity of influences from various cultures the Luo have created a mosaic of cultural practices in different places and over a long period. Traditions and rituals were transformed and given new meanings in the process of passing them on to younger generations. The ability of the Luo to create a diversity of cultures that changes in response to local conditions and interactions with other populations serves as a model for current-day South African architects.

Conclusion

During the second semester of Architectural Discourse support is gained for the hypothesis that guidelines for the interpretation of architecture and for architectural practices can be obtained from a study of the history of African material cultures. When such guidelines are derived from a study of the history of African cultures, they are particularly appropriate to apply locally.

In the second semester course African architectures are interpreted as products of interactions between African populations with different beliefs and aspirations. The meanings of African architectures are socially, culturally and contextually determined. Social conventions - of which architectures are products - change over time and are different for distinct populations.

Collective interests and aspirations motivate communal actions, which include architecture. Populations derive their interests and aspirations from their perceptions of their histories and how they desire those histories to develop. Populations often attempt to overcome aspects of their existence that contradict the historical outcomes that they desire for themselves. This striving towards a better life gives a sense of destiny to activities such as architecture.

In the course evidence is found of the seemingly infinite number of ways in which African people create architectural significance for themselves. This evidence supports the hypothesis that architecture is not based on an essence but that it is derived from a diversity of human beliefs and practices. An aim of the course is to make students ironic about their own beliefs - in particular about architecture - by exposing them to a diversity of cultures and architectures that are different from their own. One learns to tolerate and appreciate differences when confronted with a large number of feasible alternatives. Different populations have different perceptions about what is desirable in architecture. Their perceptions about architectural values are derived from their particular histories, beliefs and objectives.

The Academic Development Centre of the University of the Witwatersrand evaluated the performance of the lecturer. Some of the results are relevant for this essay. The course was well received by the students. Most of the students agreed that their interest in the subject was stimulated and that they were motivated to read or do extra work related to the lectures. Most of them also agreed that they were prompted

to reconsider many of their former attitudes by doing the course.

Notes

1 The syllabus of the second semester of Architectural Discourse I is as follows:

- Roots of African cultures: Early Stone Age, Middle Stone Age and Late Stone Age; the language map of Africa, race, the drying-out of the Sahara, the Berbers and the architecture of hot-dry regions; West Africa south of the Sahara in the Late Stone Age, the expansion of the Bantu group of languages before the Iron Age; the Iron age, the spread of farming and iron in eastern and southern Africa, the central cattle pattern.
- Northern Africa: geographical framework.
- Egypt: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom.
- Nubia: the Kingdom of Kush, Kerma culture, Lower Nubia under Egyptian rule, the Kushite Dynasty, Napata, and Meroe.
- Aksum.
- Nomadic architecture.
- West Africa: Darfur, Ghana, Gao, Kanem, Takrur, the Gurunsi; the Kingdom of Mali, the Dogon, the Songhai empire, Borno; the Hausa city-states; Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, the Kingdom of Ife, the Kingdom of Owo, Esie, the Kingdom of Benin; the Kingdom of Asante, the Kingdom of Dahomey, the village of Ganvie.
- East Africa: the Maasai, the Luo.
- The Zimbabwe ruins.
- Southern Africa: the Khoisan, the Zulu, the Xhosa, the Swazi, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Ndebele.

2 Evaluation takes place by means of an assignment, tests and an examination. The examination is three hours long and is open book. An external examiner ensures that the examination questions are reasonable and that the marking is fair, consistent and accurate. He or she monitors the content and standard of the course and the distribution of the marks.

To pass the course, students will minimally be required to demonstrate an ability to discuss African architecture in coherent ways. They should be able to communicate their understanding of architecture by using the terminology that is part of the conventions of architectural history. Students should also be able to write academic papers by using accepted scholarly conventions.

To excel in the course, students will be required to demonstrate an ability to interpret African architecture in relation to cultural and intellectual trends. They should also be able to interpret the history of African architectures in the light of present-day interests and concerns. To excel in the course, students must be able to utilize concepts employed in historical African architecture in order to improve current and local architectural practices. When they write essays about the history of architecture these students have to excel in providing creative and novel interpretations of the subject matter, and they must demonstrate an ability to employ architectural and theoretical concepts imaginatively.

3 The sources that are listed in the bibliography are references that are cited in the text. It is not a bibliography of African architecture. There is a useful annotated bibliography of African art in Visonà et al. 2000: 529-36.

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