

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

“An African View”: The photography of Denise Scott Brown

Noëleen Murray¹  | Svea Josephy²¹University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa²University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa**Correspondence**Noëleen Murray, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.
Email: noeleen.murraycooke@gmail.com**Funding information**

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Abstract

This article develops on the plenary paper we presented for the second Modern Heritage in the Anthropocene Symposium (MoHoA), held at the Bartlett School of Architecture(UCL) October 26–28, 2022. At the first MOHoA Symposium in Cape Town in 2021 titled *Learning from Steinkopf*, we invoked *Learning from Las Vegas* (by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izneour, published in 1972) to consider South African architect Roelof Uytendogaard's award-winning 1975 Steinkopf Community Centre building in the desert in South Africa. In the process of this research we pay attention to Scott Brown's multiple contributions beyond architecture and urban design. In this article we explore the extraordinary complexity and complicity of the life and work of Denise Scott Brown through her photography. She was born, brought up and educated in Africa, after which the major part of her career was in the United States, where she is known and celebrated as a great American architect. Our article follows her life and career through a consideration not of her architectural interventions nor buildings, but of her photographs, which have become the subject of more recent attention. As a woman who photographed at a time when the global field was almost completely dominated by men, her practice as a photographer spans many decades across the African and North American continents. Documenting her projects and sites, her photographs were intended as teaching materials for use in her lectures on architecture, planning, landscape and art history. We suggest that, viewed differently, her photographs speak to

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questions of societal modernity and inequalities that are also informed by her southern African experiences. In the 1990s Scott Brown claimed, "I have an African's view of Las Vegas." From our location as an architect and a photographer working in Africa now, in this research we learn from Scott Brown's Las Vegas, her images of the city and desert and her photographic archive.

KEY WORDS

Africa, anthropocene, Las Vegas, modern architecture, photography, road trip photography, Scott Brown, Uytendogaardt, Venturi

This article presents a journey into the desert as a way to highlight not only difficult pasts and precarious futures, but also the concealed, contested and creative interconnections between both, as we show how intellectual ideas in architecture and photography circulated between southern Africa and the United States since the 1950s. The work we are concerned with confronts the challenges posed by conventions of disciplinary knowledge as these relate to our thinking around the Anthropocene as "a reminder of the fundamental paradox that modern heritage is simultaneously of modernity and threatened by its consequences" (Denison & Vadwa, 2022).

In 2021, we presented "Learning from Steinkopf," at the inaugural Modern Heritage in Africa conference where we invoked the celebrated study *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izneour and first published in 1972, to consider South African architect Roelof Uytendogaardt's award-winning 1975 Steinkopf Community Centre in the desert in South Africa (Murray & Josephy, 2022; Venturi et al., 1972).

Much of our collaborative work has furthered our dialogue around the buildings of South African architect Roelof Uytendogaardt (who followed Scott Brown and others from South Africa to study at the University of Pennsylvania under Louis Kahn from the 1960s) (Chipkin, 2008). In visiting key sites of Uytendogaardt's architecture in South Africa we have sought to think about how *apartheid's modernities* have rendered these works and places complicated and tainted in the postapartheid (Murray, 2010). In documenting and photographing these key sites the idea of the road trip has become central to our methodology in making our own work.

As the process of our research evolved, we started to turn critical attention to Scott Brown's multiple contributions beyond the disciplines of architecture and urban design. Much like scholars such as Czarnecki (2008), Lee (2022) and filmmaker (Denise Scott Brown's son) James Venturi (Graham Foundation, n.d.), we explored the extraordinary Figure 1 on site recreation of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi iconic photographs from *Learning of Las Vegas*. Photographers Svea Josephy and Noëleen Murray complexity and complicity of the life and work of a woman born and raised in southern Africa who became one of the most recognized American architects of her generation. Our argument follows her life and career through a consideration of her photographs, which have become the subject of attention, as in *Denise Scott Brown Photographs, 1956–1966* at the Carriage Trade Gallery, New York in 2018–2019.

Her photographic archive dates back to her early travels in and around Johannesburg in the 1950s and the subsequent decades as she toured Europe and North America. Documenting her projects and sites, her photographs were intended as teaching materials for use in her lectures on architecture, landscape and art history. Reread through questions of racialized societal modernity, we argue that the collection of images is also informed by her southern African



FIGURE 1 On site recreation of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi iconic photographs from Learning of Las Vegas. (Photographers Svea Josephy and Noëleen Murray). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

experiences, as evidenced by a discussion of her "African view" of Las Vegas in an interview with Peter Reed (1991). Scott Brown's photographic archive and her images of the city and desert of Las Vegas, harbor vestiges of the position we recognize working in South Africa.

FROM LESS IS MORE TO LESS IS A BORE

Denise Scott Brown was born in 1931 in Nkana in the Copper Belt region of what is now Zambia. She moved to South Africa, to Johannesburg, at the age of two and, after attending school studied architecture at the University of Witwatersrand, from 1948 to 1952. She then attended the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. She married fellow South African Robert Scott Brown in 1955, together they traveled in Europe in the customary manner of a grand tour, documenting architecture through sketches and photography. They returned to South Africa in 1957 for a year of travel and work before moving to the United States of America (USA), to Philadelphia in September 1958 to study under Louis Khan at the University of Pennsylvania, where their focus shifted from architecture to urban planning (Scott Brown, 2018).

Their intention was to learn from London, Europe and Philadelphia and then return to South Africa to help make changes to South African urban design and consequently to South Africa's politics, recognizing the negative role that urban planners had played in the construction of apartheid (Reed, 1991). When Robert Scott Brown died suddenly in 1959, Denise Scott Brown (hereafter Scott Brown) decided to stay in the USA, going on to teach urban planning at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of California – Berkeley, the University of California – Los Angeles, and Yale University. She married Robert Venturi and moved back to Philadelphia with him in 1967. The couple visited South Africa in 1970 (Prinsloo, 1971).

Having been to the desert town of Las Vegas several times before, Scott Brown first took Venturi there in 1966. They returned in 1968 to study the city with Yale School of Art and Architecture graduate and undergraduate students from programs in architecture, planning, and graphics. This canonical enquiry found its form in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). We trace ideas she brought with her from South Africa at this time and what she called her "African view of Las Vegas" (Scott Brown, 2018).

Robert Venturi, the now deceased and contested hero of the American postmodern movement, helped reshape modern architecture by incorporating mannerist complexity, symbolism, layering of meaning, history, references to popular culture, formal complexity and powerful critiques of modernism into his work with partner Denise Scott Brown. She partnered in practice with Venturi in a husband-and-wife team that characterized many professional couples' mode of practice in a profession that remains patriarchal (Scott-Brown, 1989).

Venturi's (1966, 25) famous anti-adage was "less is a bore" (after Mies van der Rohe's earlier "less is more"). Alongside the powerful male figure of Venturi, Denise Scott Brown was for most of her career a less-recognized architect, yet in her own right she has become recognized as a key figure in modernism and postmodernism. Together their approach to architecture revolutionized thinking in the discipline and created a body of work less about buildings and more about projects, approaches, photographs, and studies that might now be considered in the category of heritage. Scott Brown is an architect and urban planner and has more recently also been recognized as a photographer.

LEARNING FROM SOUTH AFRICA

In his interview with Scott Brown, Barberie (2020) draws out the relationship between Johannesburg and Las Vegas, saying "I could see that you're drawing a line from Johannesburg

and Soweto to New York and Philadelphia.” Scott Brown did this important work in the United States but often links it back to what she learned about stylistic modernity in southern Africa, particularly Johannesburg’s highways, brash advertising billboards, industrial cooling towers, gold mines, and mine dumps.

In her Scott Brown (2018), Scott Brown says “I grew up surrounded by my mother’s ‘Africa of the mind’”, which gave her a ‘love of the *veld*’ [Afrikaans word for bushland] and a preference for occupying the outskirts, the edge of things.” Along the edge of things ran apartheid’s buffer zones of railways, freeways, national roads, and “buffer zones. Scott Brown describes modern Johannesburg as being “made up of houses, apartments and modernist office buildings. It also reminded visitors of a mid-west American town.” As a child, Scott Brown was fascinated by Johannesburg’s neon lights and says that “if Johannesburg had gateways at all, these would be its cooling towers and mine dumps” (Scott Brown, 2018). She connects Johannesburg with modernity, American influences, traditional/rural Africa, the influences of Portuguese Africa, the eclecticism of Rhineland architecture, red brick and English vernacular, the planned and unplanned areas of Soweto, Ndebele wattle and daub structures and Dutch colonialism—all in the landscape of the veld. While Scott Brown, Venturi and Izenour learned from Las Vegas in this way, we are particularly interested in *where* Scott Brown learned from.

In her Scott Brown (2018), Scott Brown also talks about her “own wayward eye,” which she explains is attracted by opposites, complexities, and contradictions—tensions between urban and rural, modern and traditional, Western and African, and her inner iconoclasm, and fascination with rule breaking. These competing tensions drove and energized her creativity and defined her understanding of architecture and, arguably, her understanding of photography. In describing her early fascination with Las Vegas, Scott Brown (in Barberie, 2020) says:

My parents went to Las Vegas in 1950 and they sent back photographs. They were very strange because of my mother’s inexperience. She’d just been on a game reserve in South Africa, and in one of her rolls of film of the Strip at night there’s a giraffe walking down it, so the two pictures are superimposed.

This almost hallucinogenic photographic coming together of the African game reserve and Las Vegas in Scott Brown’s childhood foreshadows the eclectic “wayward eye” that saw Las Vegas through an African lens. Perhaps having experienced them photographically, she was receptive to the similarities, parallels, complexities, and palimpsest that make up Las Vegas. It was perhaps photography that allowed her to experience this for the first time.

Scott Brown says she began taking photographs more seriously in the 1950s: “Bob [Scott Brown] and I were first looking for record shots, and then we got all involved with communication, streets and the way store signs behave, so we began taking those shots too.”

This points to an interest initially with photography as document, but gradually moving toward the idea of photography as communication and even photography as construction and constructed in documenting “systems and patterns” (Barberie, 2020) and realities that are stranger than fictions.

According to Barberie (2020), “Photography has been a key element of Scott Brown’s approach to architecture and urban design.” This is apparent in the integration of designs and photographic images in the double page spread from *Learning from Las Vegas* Figure 2. Barberie posits that Scott Brown has used photography “as a powerful tool to show systems and patterns,” and Scott Brown herself says that “Photography is crucial for ideas about architecture and urbanism” (Barberie, 2020). She insists, however, that “I have never thought of myself as a photographer. Only as an architect and an urbanist. But for seven decades I have taken photographs, and used photography, to illustrate the ideas behind what I teach, design and write” (Barberie, 2020).

In addition to photography as record, Scott Brown used photography as a tool to understand the world, a tool of artistic and personal expression. In a video entitled *Time, Space, Existence* (PLANE-SITE, 2017), she describes how “Photography has worked alongside architecture for me” and says that across her career “photography has changed from being a record making.” “[T]hrough all these methods of using it,” she concludes that “photography is a sub-discipline of architecture, as important as architectural history.”

While we and others such as Ayala Levin (2021) curators Angelika Fitz, Katharina Ritter of “Downtown Denise Scott Brown” at the Architekturzentrum Wien, (2018) and her New York exhibition at The Carriage Trade gallery (2018–2019) called *Denise Scott Brown Photographs, 1956–1966* have labeled her as a photographer, it must be remembered that this is our reading and our action, not hers. Scott Brown has adamantly positioned herself as an architect and urban designer who has used photography as a way of understanding the world and for teaching, not as a photographer. These images were not intended for galleries, magazines, and photobooks.

Ayla Levin's critique of Scott Brown's images imply that the images' anthropological and ethnographic meaning are racially inscribed. While Scott Brown's images certainly contain romanticization and nostalgia for her home continent of Africa in her thinking, we have deliberately explored her photography through multiple lenses of interpretation. One parallel lens is a feminist reading of the photographs. In the feminist reading of these photographs, Scott Brown is producing noticeably different photographs to her male counterparts. This difference, as we argue, is marked by her framing, gender, historical context, and the purpose for which these images were intended.

Scott Brown produced color slide images as teaching materials, not as photographs, nor were they imagined as art works. They were intended to be projected in darkened lecture halls where they were often combined comparatively with other images, for the purposes of teaching. Here, the positive film of the slide film produced rich saturated, often warm color, its hyper real quality to compensate for what it loses in projection. What is remarkable about Scott Brown's color photography of the 1950s and 1960s is that “serious, artful photography” in that era was in black and white (Scott Brown, 2018 Soane Memorial Lecture) and almost no South African photography was produced in color. Color photography was considered to be the preserve of editorial and magazine work and in advertising, amateur photography, and press photographs. Documentary photographers favored the seemingly objective, cool look of black and white, whereas the press initially also photographed in black and white in the 1960s and 1970s then made the shift to the sensational effects of color when the technology allowed for it. In the 1960s and 1970s a number of US artist-photographers, such as William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, were already moving to color, but this was not to happen in South Africa for many years. It is for this reason, whether intentional or not, that Scott Brown's photographs of structures and landscapes stand out as an anomaly, as we argue somehow “ahead of their time.” Our reading of Scott Brown as a woman photographer suggests that she was doing something in the 1950s and 1960s that none of her male counterparts were doing in South Africa at this time at the height of racial apartheid.

In photographer David Goldblatt's *South Africa: the Structures of Things Then* (1998), Goldblatt concentrates on apartheid and how buildings, places and structures, alongside earlier colonial forms, mirrored the political forces in the buildings, bricks, cement, architecture, and town planning. Goldblatt's argument is that his photographs reveal how architecture and buildings reflected the perversions of South African society. Considered together and in a similar vein this was almost exactly what the work that Scott Brown was doing through her photography in Southern Africa, a decade earlier in the 1950s. While she was clearly creating teaching resources, what emerged is a cataloguing of structures and urban design that stands as a unique record documenting South Africa's colonial and apartheid spatial particularities. We have considered why the work is relatively unknown in South Africa and one reason is

perhaps because Scott Brown did not see herself as a photographer, and consequently the work has never been shown in a way that collates and narrates this aspect of her photography in South Africa.

The series of images were constructed for the purposes of illustrating her lectures, much like the way in which a photobook presents a storyline, where she presented arguments about architecture, buildings, and urban space performed in the space of the lecture hall. Without her presentation, the viewer is left with a series of vignettes, traces, a possibly unordered collection of slides as fragments of her thinking. In the photographic exhibition, *Denise Scott Brown Photographs, 1956–1966* at Carriage Trade in New York in 2019, the photographs are transformed from the lecture to the gallery wall, and although she was consulted, they were curated into a sequence that represented the images. As we argue, in our reading of the 1972 first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* as a photobook, the images have a shared story of a time, place and space that was the Las Vegas studio.

It appears clear that Scott Brown does not consider herself as a photographer, as she observes (Scott Brown, 2018): “In the 1960s and 70s serious, artful photography was black and white, and colour was used to document reality. This suited me just fine. Reality comes first for me” (Scott Brown, 2018). Her images of reality, produced as slides, have the hard, saturated color of advertising imagery. Color is indeed reality; we do not see the world in black and white. As mentioned in relation to the work of Egelston and Shore above, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a shift to color beginning to happen in the USA, bStephen Shore was included in the groundbreaking *New Topographics* exhibition in Rochester, New York in 1975 and he was at this stage the only photographer working in color, and Hilla Becher was the only woman of the 10 young photographers selected to showcase new directions in photography, particularly landscape photography in the USA. Shore's images for the *New Topographics* exhibition came out of a road trip from Los Angeles to New York, commissioned by Venturi and Scott Brown for their *Signs of Life; Symbols of the American City* in 1976 at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery. Shore (2018) says that for this commission he was “keeping in mind a list of different kinds of architecture that Scott Brown and Venturi had given me.” While Levin questions Scott Brown's “drive-by” shooting, arguing that she did truly enter and experience the landscape and places, we assert that this was an intentional and part of understanding America (and South Africa) from behind the wheel of a car. This “road trip” photography was the premise of *Learning from Las Vegas*.

In the pop and conceptual art of the 1950s and 1960s the car featured prominently in art which both celebrated and critiqued the brash consumerism of this period; for example, in *Automobile Tire Print* (1953) Robert Rauchenberg with John Cage produced a continuous print of a car tire over a long scroll of paper onto which Rauchenberg applied paint as Cage drove. Scott Brown's sojourn in California familiarized her with Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1963) and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1965), and Ruscha's work and the notion of “the strip” are referenced in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Scott Brown was also familiar with the work of Peter Blake, Roy Lichtenstein, and the notion of Pop and Pop Art, which fed directly into postmodern architecture, art, and photography.

In our offering for our keynote address at the *Modern Heritage in the Anthropocene Symposium*, we sought to address the questions of decolonizing, decentering, and reframing the recent past. Through our research into the archive of Scott Brown's photography we have been concerned with the dominance of male photographers, architects, and urban planners in the middle of the last century. The decentering of gender in the visual and spatial disciplines remains urgent and what is clearly identifiable is the manner in which Scott Brown, as a woman architect, was using photography as a medium of expressive and political potential. Scott Brown's use of the formal language of photography disrupted many of the artistic norms of the time: she was working in color; using the vantage of aerial photographs to make whole landscapes visible; and her interest in structures and urban design, informed by her “African

view,” drawn from road trips in South Africa. These formal and experiential methods became her trademark and as we argue, went on to influence her approach to reading Las Vegas from the road. In *Learning from Las Vegas* we read a simultaneously celebration and a deep critique of America and the same is true of Scott Brown's imaging of South Africa.

In a comparison between an image of Denise Scott Brown's depictions of what she titles *Social housing in Johannesburg* taken in the 1950s, and Goldblatt's *Incomplete Houses* (2006), there is a striking resemblance between these photographs. There are nearly 50 years which separate these images and yet Scott Brown's image has a contemporaneity, possibly due to its color. In Goldblatt's many images of structures taken during apartheid, it is only during the postapartheid era that one sees Goldblatt using color in his personal work. Goldblatt used color in his commercial and editorial work in the 1980s but it did not enter his art photography until much later. Equally a juxtaposition of Scott Brown's *Billboards* (1950s) and South African photographer Santu Mofokeng's *Winter in Thembisa* (1991) taken about 40 years apart, there are only small differences in subject matter. It is the color that changes the image and the context that shifts the reading. The image by Scott Brown in the 1950s showing the country in its first years of apartheid, with rapid urbanization, and billboards advertising products to an urbanized Black population. The image shows a point of view, taken at a crossroads, the camera angle, and the verge with the pole in the foreground suggesting it was taken from a car, a drive by shooting. In Scott Brown's image there is less of a sense of standing in the landscape that we get from Mofokeng's photograph, although from other works we have observed that Mofokeng also made use of the image taken from a car. Mofokeng's much later image is taken in the violent interregnum between apartheid and democracy, the township is named and recognizable as one of the most violent places of this time.

David Company's book *The Open Road: Photography & the American Road Trip* (2014) highlights the importance of the road trip to American photography in the 20th century, plotting how the nature of the American road trip develops from the imagery of Walker Evans to Robert Frank, to Stephen Shore and others. The concept of the road and road trip photography as a genre, grew exponentially with American industrialization, capitalism and modernism. In this way he describes how photography and the automobile grew up together and as young adults they took to the road in America to explore its vastness (Company, 2014). Post World War II produced what Scott Brown called the “look back in anger generation” of which she was part of the 1950s onward (Scott Brown 2018, Soane Medal Lecture). The 1950s Americans produced Beat Generation's music, literature, and art that imaged and represented this generation of discontented young people who took to the road to discover what they sought out as the real America. Authors such as Alan Ginsburg, William Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac, in turn influenced photographers like Robert Frank, who produced the seminal road trip book in *The Americans* (1958). *Learning from Las Vegas* references the road trip genre not only in its images, but in its entire methodology, using the strip, the parking lot, the automobile, the gas station, the diner, and drive-through as a way to read America, see [Figure 3](#) in which the density and visual overload of the strip in Las Vegas is emphasized. *Learning from Las Vegas* became a groundbreaking record of the road through the sequence of photo analysis in book form, a photobook of sorts.

Returning to South Africa, where Scott Brown photographed buildings ranging from the colonial architectures of the early townhouse in Cape Town, the Cape Dutch farmsteads and in an ethnographic mode, such as Ndebele houses (Levin, 2021). Simultaneously there are photographs of modern infrastructure: roads, railway stations, petrol stations, cooling towers, and mine dumps, the emerging modernity of the industrializing apartheid city. In her photographic portfolio, the road is the vantage point for Scott Brown's documentation of South African space. Levin adds to this by suggesting that Scott-Brown's photographs of the Ndebele houses, for example, are an “ethnographic observation” and that “...it was taken from the safe distance of the car, like most of the photos in *Learning from Las Vegas*”



FIGURE 3 Spread of Learning from Las Vegas by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour (Photographers Svea Josephy and Noëleen Murray). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

(Levin, 2021: 244). She describes that “...while driving a car afforded the optimal vantage point for taking in American sprawl, in South Africa, where access to cars was racialised, the car functioned as a privileged site from which one could experience proximity without intimacy” (Levin, 2021; 244).

Denise Scott Brown's photographs of South Africa, while neither intended as an ethnographic exercise nor as road trip photography, nevertheless contain aspects of both. Recast in the 21 century, as we have attempted to do, the ethos of the experience of the road is there, along with elements of racialized social divisions of space and the pleasures of travel. Her images are at times removed, framed by a car window, where the road is part of the composition, and many of the images often show the outside space as glimpses of movement within the static frame.

LOOKING BACK: A VIEW INTO THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

Denise Scott Brown famously said that she learned from Le Corbusier to look behind the building, where architects consider the practicalities, rather than to only consider the aesthetics of the façade (Soane Medal Lecture, 2018). Scott Brown often photographed the backs of buildings, as they reveal more than the fronts. Our own African view adopts such an approach to the work of critique as we make sense of going behind the lens as well as being *in* spaces. We use our spatial skills and our skills of looking to “read” (in the hermeneutic sense) the postcolonial and postapartheid situatedness of the sites, structures, and buildings we work with. While this enables the urgent work of repositioning an archive such as Scott Brown's, we have also invoked the learning metaphor—as have others, including Scott Brown and Venturi's son, James Venturi, whose filmic “Learning from Bob and Denise” recently received funding from the Graham Foundation. If the aesthetic pursuit of the Western tradition of high architecture has always been betterment and beauty, their work insists on a “looking beyond,” and we hope that our learning from them is an understanding of beauty, the type of African view that underscores postcolonial and decolonial mapping of the subject (Garuba, 2002).

The formulation of the Cape Town Document on Modern Heritage (2022) underscores a critical urgency to reevaluate notions of heritage in the Anthropocene described so ably by our hosts “as the age of humankind's dominance and potential destruction of the singular world we live in,” with “the theme of modernity as a questionable fixed rational, architectural, artistic and historical register, decontextualised from genealogies of contestation, violence and erasure of the lives and cultural histories of the subaltern, along with their associated human and environmental trauma” (Denison & Vawda, 2022, 8–9).

In this moment of thinking about the Anthropocene from a location in and of Africa, we cannot help but propose a troubling of the stable notions of African heritage, especially in the context of the modern. As we know, profoundly complex backyards complicate the memorial and commemorative practices of the West behind the facades of the modern movement in Africa. We are indebted to Denise Scott Brown and others for this profound reminder.

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ORCID

Noëleen Murray  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2016-3651>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Noëleen Murray is a South African architect and academic. She holds the Research Chair in Critical Architecture and Urbanism at the Centre for Advancement of Scholarship University of Pretoria in South Africa. Her key academic books include *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Postapartheid City* (2007) and *Becoming UWC: Reflections, pathways and the unmaking of apartheid's legacy* (2012). *Hostels, Homes, Museum: Memorializing Migrant Labour Pasts in Lwandle South Africa*, co-authored with Leslie Witz, was published in 2014 and was awarded the Michael M. Ames Award for Innovative Museum Anthropology by the Council for Museum Anthropology of the American Association of Anthropologists.

Svea Josephy is Associate Professor in Fine Art (Photography) at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. She has exhibited solo creative work, including *Framing Documentary* (2001), *Twin Town* (2008) and *Satellite Cities* (2016), and been included in international group exhibitions, such as *Crossing Boundaries* (Qatar), *Format Photography Festival* (UK), *Chobi Mela V* (Bangladesh), *The Position of South African Photography* (Germany), *Shuttle 99* (Finland) and *DAKART 2010* (Senegal). Her research interests include southern African photography, documentary photography, contemporary South African lens-based practice, and postapartheid photography, particularly as it connects to the politics of structures, land, and space.

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