‘COMMUNITY’ AS THE BASIC ARCHITECTURAL UNIT: RETHINKING PRACTICE THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF ASF, ECUADOR.

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Abstract
Societies build for reasons, including and, beyond the need for shelter. The layers of meaning that make up the building process include status, power, social convention, values and ideas on aesthetics. This inherent layering of meaning through building ensures that every built work as a deliberate act – consciously or unconsciously – communicates meaning and gives shape and identity to those that build. While some contexts call for an occupation of open space as opposed to building, it must noted that in these cases the decision *not to build* can still be considered an architectural decision.

Architectural history traditionally deals with individual buildings, yet historically building rarely exists outside the creation of multiple structures within some form of collective. Here the daily face-to-face interactions of dynamic social networks and patterns of interaction in these collective spaces ultimately define what we recognise as settlement. To comprehend the values that underpin settlement, the expression should be seen through the ‘collective’ rather than an ‘individual’ form of expression.

How one intervenes in such collectives and how to provide a relevant and appropriate service that facilitates the needs and wants of multiple authors through architectural design has challenged the very principles upon which the profession is built. This need for more effective and considered approach to design has seen a global shift in practices and institutions to devise ‘alternative’ processes of design that acknowledge multiple authors, employ user-centered methods that ultimately allow for the ‘facilitation’ of collective expressions that aim to give way to shared and distributed decision-making in systems that should be critically participative.

From this position the authors propose that the collective or ‘community’ should be considered as the basic architectural unit of design when architects and designers work in dynamic contexts of housing and informal settlements. By embracing complexity and uncertainty, strict traditional design control is replaced by fluid design processes.

Lessons learnt while teaching the post graduate Alternative Practice module at the University of Johannesburg’s Architecture Department will be presented as well as experiences with the Architecture Sans Frontiere’s ‘Change by Design’ methodology workshop/training in Ecuador, Quito. The theoretical basis of this study draws from diverse literature sources, emphasizing the interdisciplinary nature of the topic of participative design and professional practice through collective authorship. The paper concludes by identifying ways to rethink spatial design practice based on concepts of co-production.

1. Architecture and the concept of ‘Community’

The notion that community spaces are authored by multiple voices is not novel. However, an individual author driving a built vision for a collective, especially in vulnerable or disadvantaged contexts, is often unchallenged because of the legal complexities and personal professional responsibility involved in building. In this paper, the notion of community is considered as the main element in architectural configurations – and architecture, in vernacular and informal settings, is considered as being indistinguishable from urban design. Thus the ‘architectural scale’ and the ‘settlement/urban scale’ are one and the same in the sense that vernacular settings and informal settings are almost always about the ‘collective’ and rarely about the ‘individual’ – be that in terms of formal expression or in terms of decision making structures.

A community has been defined as the daily network of face-to-face interaction, usually in a neighbourhood or settlement setting. These networks constitute a spatial and built context of a neighbourhood. The spatial demarcations are very strong in peoples’ consciousness and are reflected in their patterns of interaction, but it is not necessarily apparent in the settlement layout. This interaction implies frequent visits and assistance in the form of finances, food and most of the time a helping hand in ceremonial occasions. A community could be described as a form of “corporate unit” (Kenyon, 1991: 21). People derive their identity from the group corporate identity “a powerful impact on the everyday lives of its members and can exert considerable

pressure on people to conform to social norms." (Ferraro, 1998: 249).
To better understand the role of the built environment professional in dealing with such complexity, some of the concepts related to community and multiple voices and decision makers, agents of control, and the collective versus the individual cultural languages are further unpacked in the following sections. Much of this text and the concepts contained therein are based on the PhD titled 'Space, place and meaning' in a particular African region, and deemed relevant and applicable to many contexts in Africa and beyond in order to understand the collective "language" of the built environment (Osman, 2004).

2. Levels and agents of control and the collective "language" of the built environment
Control is exercised by groups or individuals in any cultural setting – across a range of "levels" from the very personal level (clothes, garment can be extended to include body, utensil and includes food systems) to the more communal levels (house, family accommodation and furniture – which an also extend to partitioning system – which indicates a small collective form of decision-making in the built environment. The "highest" level of decision making in the built environment is therefore that of the settlement or neighbourhood in a rural or urban context and in the city. Figure 1 below attempts to group these concepts together to showcase how this "higher" level, meaning that collective and communal decision-making contributes to a shared language and understanding that allows people to inhabit the same spaces. In other words, space and built artifacts act as mediators between individuals and their needs/aspirations in relation to the needs/aspirations of the collective, group or community.

Habraken explains that certain environments are sustained through the order achieved by various actors (Habraken, 2000: 29). He elaborates that a:

"…built environment may be described solely in terms of live configurations operating on different levels. In doing so, we describe it as dynamic form controlled by people; fully taking into account that built environment is the product of people acting." (Habraken, 1998: 28).

These actors:

"…communicate, negotiate, bargain and cooperate. Such direct interactions are necessary for built environment to remain in stasis, and they have their own conventions. Although agents may contest portions of a built environment, it exists to be shared as a whole. Hence, reaching formal consensus is an important aspect of the environmental game." (Habraken, 1998: 29).

2.5.4 The origins of artefacts

> *"The 'whatness' of an object can be learned through the 'whyness about an object is based on understanding or recognizing the cau*
> (Turan, 1990: 9)

Turan (1990: 9) explains how understanding the artefact through n into which material enters and its use as insufficient because it or appearance of an object. The social connotations embodied in any

Figure 1: Levels, control and the collective language of the built environment based on the elements of semiology, developed by Roland Barthes (1915-1980), portrayed by Hale (2000: 140) and Leach (1974: 49) and adapted by Amira Osman (2004).

Habraken refers to configurations under the unified control of a single agent as 'live configurations'. "Thus defined, a live configuration "behaves" like a single self-organizing entity." (Habraken, 1998: 18). The single

agent is the community as an entity. Both the 'body/garment/utensil' and 'partitioning are indicated as 'live configurations': they are under the control of a single agent, in this case the community. 'Utensil' is included as being that which is moveable, 'food' and 'furniture' are seen to be more under the control of a single agent rather than the community, even though social norms may place pressure to conform to some food types related to certain occasions. Kent explains the issue of control as follows:

"…low social complexity is a situation usually regarded in anthropological terms as synonymous with organization based on principles of kin-relationship, genealogy, and shared supernatural force rather than hierarchical stratification and separated central power. Individual members of such societies adhere to conceptual realities that emanate from implicit acceptance of group-exclusive supernatural and relationship unity, a relatively holistic world view that stresses communal rather than individual identity. On the domestic level this conceptual structure applies to the basic communal group and its living space, tending to downplay architectural segmentation of each domestic activity or activity sets." (Kent, 1990: 167)

In many cases, individual houses within a neighbourhood form a continuum and speak a similar visual language (subtle variations on typology), yet they are under the control of separate agents. This configuration cannot be seen as 'live'. Yet, the internal layout of the houses is a live configuration as it is governed by the social norms of the community as a whole. Control does not always imply ownership. The house belongs to one owner, but there are two live configurations at work in determining the characteristics of this house: the one exercised by the owner and the other one exercised by the community in the form of social norms.

These levels of control can be learnt through observation, but the underlying forces are not always evident. A cluster of houses may be wrongly seen as a unit. In reality, it is the whole neighbourhood that is the lowest denominator. Yet, these forces are invisible and can only be detected through understanding the socio-economic patterns, religious and social ritual and people's cultural attitudes.

"…Uniformity results from removing personal initiative from the creation of the artifact." (Habraken, 1998: 272). There is limited variety within a given typology. While the individual house is not easily identified in a vernacular setting, levels of control do remain distinct. To remain stable, an environment avoids horizontal relationships between live configurations (Habraken, 1998: 34). Within a single neighbourhood, individual houses are under the control of different agents. " Territory and its markers subdivide space, allowing similar configurations to coexist on the same level." (Habraken, 1998: 34). Homogeneity could lead one to believe that 'higher-level configuration' at work, dominating 'lower-level configurations', as intangible and unseen forces.

3. The meaning of artifacts in the built environment and the interconnected-ness of things – an eco-systemic analytical approach to the concept of 'community'.

Artifacts are approached in the sense that no 'thing' stands alone, but rather pertains to a whole setting of importance in its interpretation. The world is a collection of inter-dependent entities. Things are what they are by virtue of their relationship to each other. Things or artifacts are further broadened to included intangible concepts and values. After all, Heidegger does equate 'thinking' with 'dwelling' (Cooper, 1996:92). In 1954, Heidegger (1889-1976) wrote that: we build because we are *dwellers* (Krell, 1977: 326). Therefore artifacts/things, including buildings, make our existence/thinking evident.

The isolation and study of artifacts allows the researcher to borrow from a wide variety of sources and different schools of thought. This attempt "…to reconcile the subjective self with an objective world." (ibid, 259) is long-standing. Both Husserl and Descartes would examine an object by detaching it from its context and examining its essence. An object's essential attributes are thus identified through 'phenomenological reduction' (Hale, 2000: 96 and Urmson, 1960: 217) bearing in mind that "...the organisation of the environment is a mental act before it is a physical one…" (Rapoport, 1977: 15).

Heidegger's 'environmental phenomenology' introduces natural elements and philosophy to describe places, an approach elaborated by Norberg-Schulz (1980). Attention to the character of dwellings and how they are made is important in achieving a phenomenology of place. Phenomenological approaches bring the idea of existence, the notion of doubt/uncertainty, as well as faith in the correctness of choice and individual experience, to architecture.

This concept can be employed in this study by relating visible aspects of built culture to the particular location and people's understanding of place. *"The 'whatness' of an object can be learned through the 'whyness' of it.... knowledge about an object is based on understanding or recognizing the causes of that object."* (Turan, 1990: 9) Turan also explains how understanding the artifact through material, the form into which material enters and its use as insufficient because it only applies to the appearance of an object. However, there are many "codes" that make up a cultural context, as is demonstrated by the diagram below:

Place making and spatial movement extend personal body images
larger in space and time; they also reflect social relations and symbc
The maintenance of tradition, through the consistency of mea
language/code, or what has been alternatively termed the con
community structure, is served by the encoding of space with critical
and ordering devices. Ritual defines these spatial patterns and the sy
of ritual is thus acknowledged.

[12] This may be even clearer in very religious cultures with a patriarchal domina
aspect needs more research.

Figure 2: Codes that make up a cultural context, a framework based on Vagenes (1998: 124) and developed by Amira Osman (2004)

According to Kent (1990: 44-45), form, organisation and use of space are determined by naturally fixed, flexible and culturally fixed factors. This might be a limiting construct if one considers that climate and topography are considered naturally fixed elements. It is acknowledged by Kent (*ibid*) that each factor modifies the effects of the others. In this case it is seen that none of the factors are really 'fixed'. The difference between them would then be the rate at which they change.

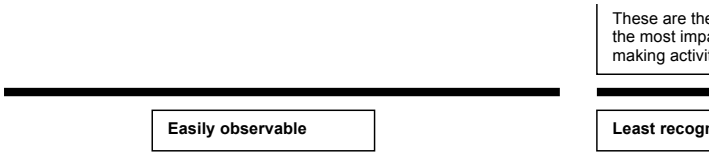


Table 2.3 Determinants of form, organisation and use of space (adapted b
Kent, 1990).

This construct is valuable in comparing to what degree differ
observable or not. Naturally fixed as well as flexible factors, which co
material, technology levels and economic resources are sai

Figure 3: Determinants of form, organisation and use of space (adapted by Amira Osman, 2004, from Kent, 1990).

The text and images in this section outline an attempt at trying to develop a framework for understanding the built environment – and in particular the roles of the 'collective' in decision-making. It is important to remember that they cannot replace the complexity of reality. It rather allows a window onto reality by deconstruction and synthesis into useable theoretical models. According to De Bono (1994: 66), "Absolute truth overrides the reality of complex system interactions." He explains how truth favours analysis and description rather than creativity and design (De Bono, 1994: 66, 113 and 128).

Despite obvious shortcomings, this framework can be used to better articulate a relationship between the 'traditional' and the 'informal', and it therefore offers great opportunities for understanding and writing about complexity.

4. The 'traditional' and the 'informal'

Many parallels can be drawn between the traditional and informal. In Rapoport's writings on vernacular architecture, he points out that "…evidence comes from many disciplines… it also makes available new approaches and new methods that "come with" these disciplines." (1990: 43). In earlier writings he also explains how the study of vernacular architecture may generate new fields of study "…at the intersection of two or more previously unrelated disciplines." (Rapoport, 1982: 10). He believes that the boundaries defining disciplines are sometimes arbitrary (Rapoport, 1977:4).

Rapoport's main premise is that it is not possible to use a single characteristic to distinguish among entities as complex as built environments and that "…multiple characteristics become more useful the less clear-cut the case." (Rapoport, 1990: 71. "A framework for studying vernacular design" by Rapoport, 1999: 60, is also referred to).

As in traditional contexts, people today continue to act on, and influence their immediate environment, this being especially evident in situations where people have difficulty to access "formal" city structures and markets. These initiatives are perceived negatively and labeled as "illegal" and "informal". However, they create an energy that should be celebrated and managed in efficient ways through innovative delivery, finance and technical systems – rather than being dismissed, eradicated or 'formalised'.

The traditional and the informal force us to ask questions previously excluded from institutional architectural debates. Learning from these contexts is more than imitating forms or spatial layouts; it is learning the process of negotiation and complex decision making mechanisms as well as the management of diverse and, sometimes, conflicting needs. This process implies the necessity to efficiently address issues of technical/spatial professional service as well as managing the social systems that impact on these – this approach calls for a slower process that through "incubation" that incorporates time as a crucial aspect to the development process.

Architecture oscillates between being defined as art production, as a professional service, as a community service. It is a profession that is constantly re-discovering itself, re-defining itself and re-establishing new roles for itself. As our ideas on architecture change, so do our expectations with regards to whom the profession engages with and how it provides a service to its clients – embracing sectors of society who have traditionally been excluded.

Heightened social responsibility, environmental awareness and debates around ethical practice are the prerogatives are leading the profession in directions relatively unexplored, as is the need to discover new markets and a renewed sense of relevance – largely through participative practice to generate impactful and sustainable interventions for the benefit of vulnerable community groups.

In this regard, capacitation and participation are often misunderstood by practitioners and stakeholders; capacitation speaks of actively building *capacity* by actively imparting needed skills, knowledge or elevating an individual (or group) into a stronger or more resilient societal or economic position. While participation alludes to only the inclusion of stakeholder's opinion or input into a project or a process.

Each action does not imply the inclusion of the other, as capacitation requires much more resources and planning than participation - to do both in a project is ideal but not always possible. This misunderstanding may seem inconsequential, but the difference potentially damaging to the long-term institutionalisation of participation practices in regards to measuring impact through socially inclusive design practice.

To better explain these concepts and new professional concerns, this study uses the case study of the ASF-UK experience and its support of grass roots decision-making processes as an alternative to conventional top-down decision-making in the built environment field.

5. The ASF- UK Experience

Architecture Sans Frontiere International (ASF Int) was established in 1979 during the global growing consciousness of social and environmental concerns, and in response to the unethical standards of mainstream architectural practice (ASF Int, 2016). The organisation was conceived as an independent network of not for profit design organisation concerned with social justice, cultural, environmental and human heritage aspects of the built environment.

ASF International aims to enable vulnerable, marginalised and poor groups of people access to architectural services, research and educational resources in order to enhance their resilience and challenge inequality (ASF Int, 2016)The organisation has various members and is made up of local chapters and similar focused entities connected through the Hasselt Charter, a public declaration on ethical architectural practice (ASF Int, 2016).

The Architecture Sans Frontieres United Kingdom (ASF UK) chapter has developed since it's over its lifespan to include a gamut of professionals outside of traditional architectural practice. The chapter prides itself on the

idea that the name Architecture Sans Frontieres allows for an interpretation that 'architecture' does not only include architects, but all those who create building and spaces i.e architecture. The chapter includes planners, sociologists and various other development practitioners in addition to a core of traditionally trained architects. ASF UK has declared its main purpose in making community and international development issues integral to the practice and teaching of architecture.

ASF UK has a particular focus on teaching, training and knowledge sharing as most of its members are involved in formal higher education teaching in various established UK institutes and practice these foci through intensive action-based learning workshops in their various initiatives. One of their core offerings is in the form of the *Change by Design* programme which constitutes a multilevel approach to development practice through volunteer based field workshops. The workshops are typically held in support of vulnerable grass-roots groups and aim to provide strategic spatial design support in the form of participative research. The *Change by Design* programme does not provide direct technical support but seeks to capacitate and build on existing local agencies (ASF-UK, 2014).

6. Ecuador Case Studies

In 2013 ASF UK established a project connection with a group of local partners in Quito, Ecuador including Universidad Politecnicia Salesiana, El Institute de Altos Estudios Nacionales and El Comite de Desarrollo de Los Pinos (ASF-UK, 2014). Jhono Bennett, one of the authors, attended this workshop in 2013 and documented the process through photography and notes.

The chapter developed a 2-week participative workshop that would support these groups in two different sites through socio-spatial research towards a development strategy. ASF UK would not provide physical technical support, but would bring 35 participants to Quito to engage with the community stakeholders at local and governmental scales to capture and articulate the different group's needs, visions and aspirations. The team would then give strategic advice, based on this information, through a detailed reporting process and the deployment of 2 interns from the programme to translate the research into action alongside the identified community groups.

The format of ASF's Change by Design methodology has developed over several years and has been tested across the world from London to Nairobi. The approach attempts to support and grow existing movements from grass roots groups while using the position of the workshop participants as the 'outsider' as a means of striking strategic relationships with difficult partners, government entities or local groups.

The methodology is broken into four stages: *Diagnosis,* where the workshop examines the local context, urban trends and the policy environment; *Dreaming*, an exploration of new spatial and procedural imaginaries; *Developing,* whereby the workshop translates the research into clear strategies and 'solutions' and finally *Defining* the agreed and way forward through the prioritisation of options and the negotiation of differences. (ASF-UK, 2014).

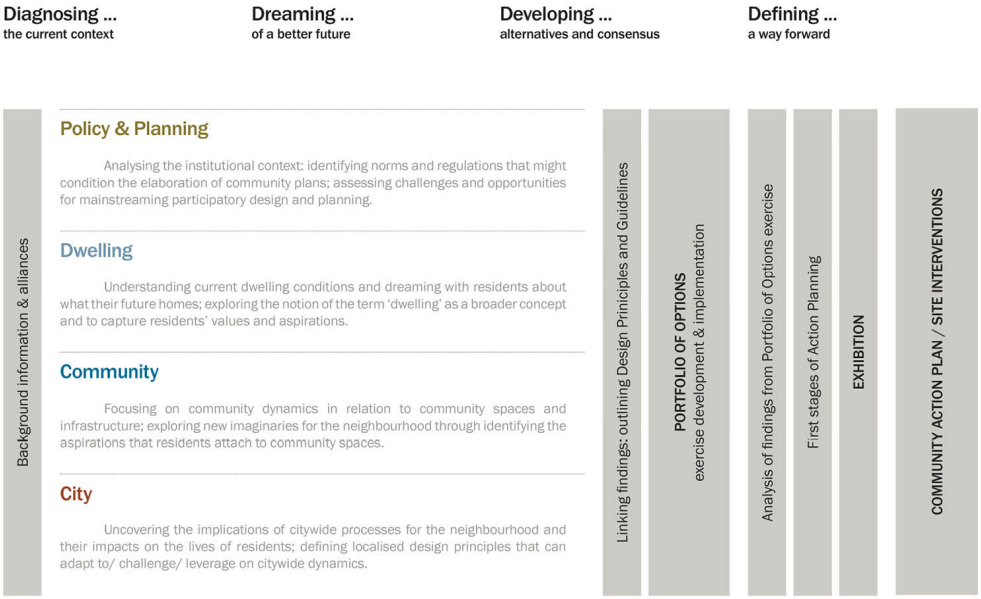


Figure 4: ASF-UK Change by Design - Methodology Diagram (ASF-UK, 2014).

In Quito, the social structures of the *barrios* allowed the methodology a good grasp on supporting existing groups and making some strategic connections amongst local partners. The people of Ecuador have a long history of civic movements and the site of Atacucho has been engaging with the government for over 40 years to gain support for their development.

There is a local cultural practice in Ecuador, known as a *minga,* where people of a 'community' are called together to form work parties and address a specific need of a neighborhood such as building a staircase, unblocking a drain or cleaning a certain area. These are typically followed by a large social gathering where the day is celebrated and social ties further developed. These ties are crucial in regard to community mobilisation and are very strongly seen in the self-investment of a community center that hosts a free clinic, a meeting hall, youth programmes and even a local bank that provides loans and business support. The bank has its own local currency that can be traded at various local retailers.

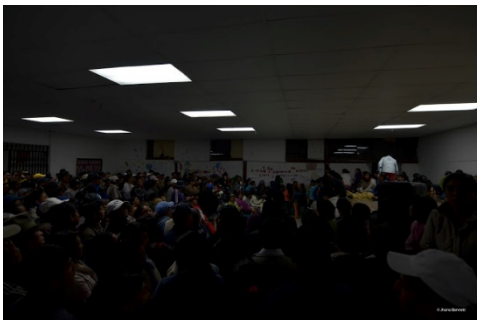



Figure 5 & 6: Atacucho depicting community structures and context by Jhono Bennett.

The local government in Quito has implemented a spatial development programme titled *Ben Vivir* or *Good Neighbourhood*, where they aim to support the in-situ development of local groups with key technical and financial assistance. But, as in many countries with such levels of inequality and corruption these programmes do not always reach those who require it for political and socially stigmatic reasons. The local groups requested that ASF assist them in their journey towards formal development.

In Quito, the team worked with the Universidad Politecnicia Salesiana and the El Institute de Altos Estudios Nacionales who provide support to various grass roots residents of poor neighbourhoods. For the 2013 workshop they set to work with two sites: a suburban neighborhood, Atacucho and a rural site, Los Pinos. The participants were made up of volunteers from across the world, with a special provision for a large contingent of local volunteers to build local capacity and allow for a project life after the workshop.

The programme began by exposing participants to the context of Quito with several site visits and a series of informative lectures from local residents, academic and government officials. The group was then broken into two site groups, and further broken into ASF's four scales of engagement: Policy, City, Neighbourhood/Community and Dwelling. The facilitators then led the participants in the *Diagnosis Stage* through discussions with local groups and began a series of action-based participative research exercises to develop understandings of both sites through the four scales (ASF-UK, 2014).


Figure 6 & 7: The ASF-UK Diagnosing exercises in Atacucho by Jhono Bennett.

These exercises then culminated in a community workshop for the *Dreaming Stage* where the gathered research was presented back to local residents and the meeting used to collect input from community members around how they would like to move forward with this information in regards to their own development strategies.

These suggestions, research and input were then re-organised into another series of participative exercises

and the workshop participants worked to channel this information into a series of spatial, systemic and programmatic suggestions through a *portfolio of options* towards in support of the community guided development strategies. This made up the *Developing Stage* and were again work-shopped with local residents and presented in a final community meeting to understand where development interest lies and allow for the *Defining Stage* to culminate in the compilation of the report and a series of exercises with the deployed interns over the next 5 months.


Figure 8 & 9: The *Developing Stage* action research on site by Jhono Bennett.

The workshop did not promise to develop technical solutions to the issues being faced by residents of Atacucho or Los Pinos, instead it unpacked what already existed in the community in a shareable product that was accessible to both residents and external partners. With this body of work, the workshop then engaged the residents with potential ideas based on the initial participative research and allowed a space for the leaders and residents to decide transparently and together a way forward. This approach of process based action research is a vital part of the ASF methods and methodology.

ASF's methods of engagement are typically immersive, critical and action based. (ASF-UK, 2016). Learning from site and employing participative research methods as a way of gaining a quick deep understanding of context and simultaneously aiming to build technical capacity in the groups they work with. Participation is not a tick-box exercise, but a means of quickly, effectively and deeply supporting a vulnerable group.


Figure 10 & 11: Community presentations conducted by ASF-UK at the workshop's end by Jhono Bennett.

7. **Lessons for South Africa**

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) was established in 2005 during a strategic presidentially led merger of the former Rand Afrikaner Universiteit, the Technikon Witwatersrand and the Soweto Vista Campus. Today UJ is the largest comprehensive university in South Africa with over 48 000 students and 90 different departments.

During this merger a new Design Faculty was developed and sought to house various design-based disciplines under the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture. It was here that a new masters in architecture was placed and in 2011 began its first enrolment. The degree was conceptualised to develop a new take on post graduate architectural education and allowed the professional practice course for the first year master's students an official module title under 'Alternative Practice'. The initial curriculum was developed in 2013 and took the first batch of students through a seminar-based course that asked the students to present on several pre-determined questions around housing, informality and urban development in South Africa. Questions such as "*Do community based organisations really have a community behind them*?" would be used to kick start a conversation around the future professional roles that the students might find themselves in (Osman, 2012).

The students group at the time was made up of eleven students who brought interesting and unique perspectives to the seminar sessions around their given topics due to their own experiences in South Africa and with the additional exposure to 'alternative' contexts within the master's course curriculum.

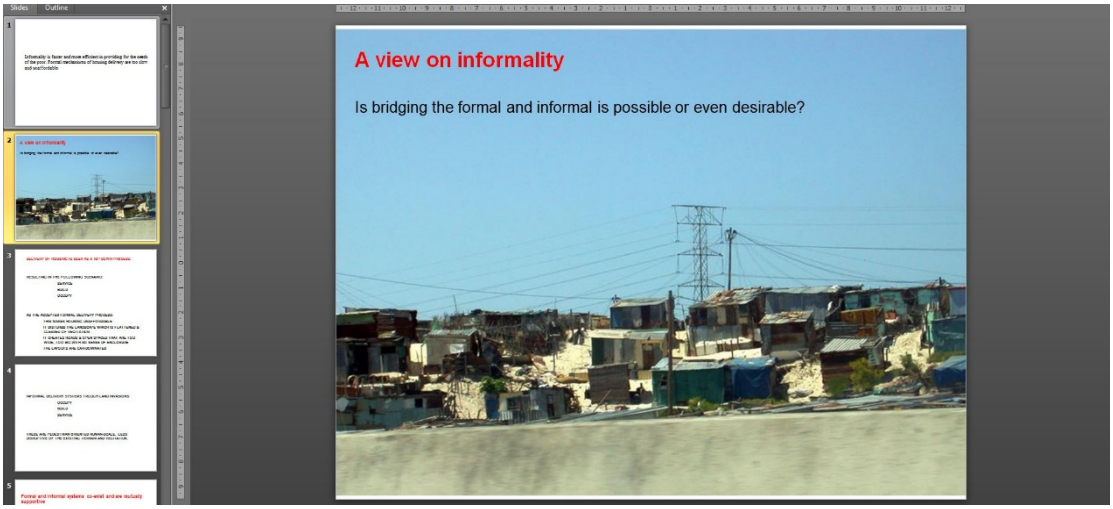


Figure 11: Slide from lecture on 'Alternative Practice' (Osman, 2012)

Subsequently the course came to focus on the articulation of experience-led practice around the growing term: *Socio-Technical Design*. Students were asked to engage with the term, and through their own backgrounds develop tools and critique on the term.

The results of this enquiry have were captured on a digital platform, allowing the student's work to be accessible more widely while recognising their contribution to this discourse. (Bennett,2016). The digital platform additionally allowed the following year's students a resource which they could access and to which they could contribute. Each year the course is tailored to respond to the curriculum of the larger school and equip the students with critical and experiential knowledge around the developing discipline of socially engaged spatial design in South Africa. The course still maintains a space for healthy debate, critical opinions and personal experience to be shared and supported.

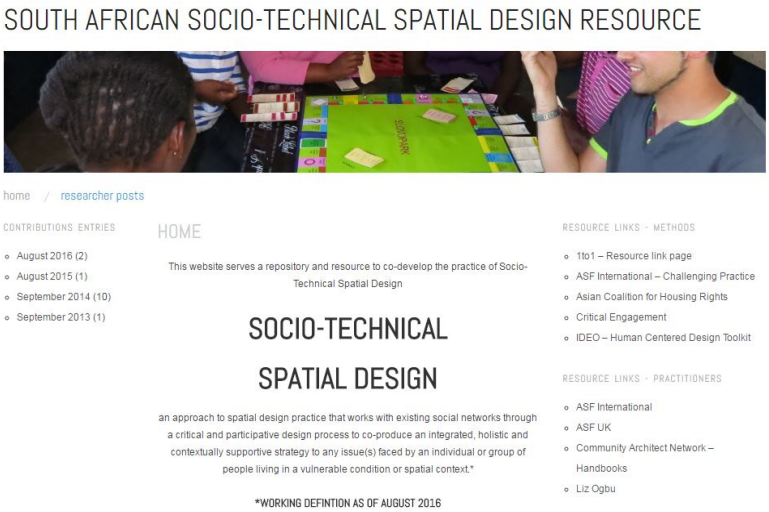


Figure 12: Screenshot from the Socio-Technical Spatial Design Website (Bennett, 2016)

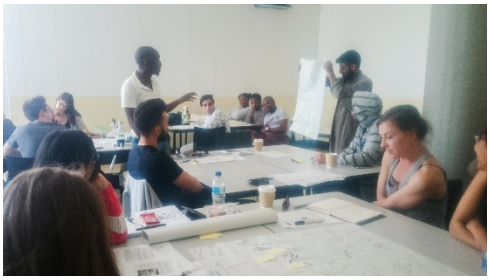
In 2016 the module supported Architecture Sans Frontieres International's *Challenging Practice* course. The course focuses on ASF's critical and action based learning practices of exposing participants to live tools that allow for co-production and employ experience based learning to convey content. In the United Kingdom, the course is RIBA accredited and highly recognised by practitioners.

The course typically takes participants through two intensive days of examining ASF case studies, and allowing participants to role-play the process of engagement where they are given tools by the facilitators to understand the contexts, develop a strategy together and communicate the strategy back to various

stakeholders. The UJ facilitators adjusted this to take place over a four-week period, and include supportive lectures on socially engaged design practice in South Africa.

Figure 13: Critical debate in 2016 Alternative Practice: *Challenging Practice* workshop by Jhono Bennett.

The module was well received by the students and staff and created an action based learning space that allowed students the freedom to critique socially engaged practice and support debate around if or why architects should do such work.



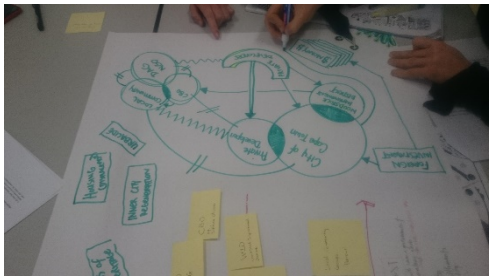


Figure 14 & 15: Student group work and discussion from 2016 Alternative Practice: *Challenging Practice* workshop by Jhono Bennett.

This course has exposed the desire for students of Architecture to engage with socially engaged design practice, but the missing knowledge and moral understanding of this type of work. The course does not focus on technical design solutions, but rather on the processes of understanding and co-development of ideas. The module has grown over the last four years and become a critical teaching space for future spatial designers in South Africa.

8. **Conclusions**

Spatial-design projects that work with vulnerable groups of people are often measured by the value of their innovation through the designed "product", which serves as a tacit means to evaluate such a project by conventional design standards while alluding to the potential social impact.

As described in this paper's case studies, by gauging the impact of design through the artifact alone, outside the system that produced it, the value is often lost as is the saleable impact that the processes hold with it. This ultimately de-values not only the design artefact but the process by failing to set a precedent for other designers to follow a process-driven rather than a product-driven path.

For this reason the need for spatial designers to conduct their work through eco*systemic thinking* processes of research and action. This paper has therefore presented an ecosystemic understanding of the built environment and its manifest artifacts, inclusive of space and the intangible concepts of social structure and cultural beliefs. A framework and a theoretical background has been offered to understand the interconnected concepts of architecture and community, the levels and agents of decision-making and the collective language of the built environment, the meaning of artifacts and the relationship between the vernacular and the

informal.

This has provided a framework that underpins the analysis of the ASF_UK experience and the tools and methods employed to translate the complexity of the built environment and collective decision-making. This approach is further explained by referring to the case study of ASF_UK's work in Ecuador and lessons are finally extracted from this experience for South Africa, with particular reference to the applications possible in the "Alternative Practice" module in the final year of the professional master's degree.

This paper has enabled a re-think around concepts of community as a basic architectural unit, and the employment of project-specific design tools and methodologies in the execution of projects, as well as the documented narrative that should accompany them. The ASF methodology exemplifies this in its approach. Although untested in implementation, the design-research workshops have been very successful in achieving this in the pre-engagement phase.

By doing so, designers make their work more accessible to not only other supportive role-players but government bodies and most importantly the beneficiates of their projects who should be able to meaningfully use the lessons learnt through participatory processes beyond the narrow confines of project timeframes.

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