

## Design research: reflection on past practice embedded in local research traditions

The School of Architecture at Wits, has a long history of practice based design research as defined by Hill as a productive relationship between practice, drawing, writing, building and teaching (Hill 2013). The production of interlinked design and texts has characterised the school since the 1930s where “drawing may lead to building but writing to drawing or building to drawing and writing” (Hill 2013), which as per Hill is within the tradition of design research from Palladio to Le Corbusier to Koolhaas.

The school of architecture at WITS has arguably had three seminal periods. The Modernists of the Transvaal Group as dubbed by Corbusier (Herbert 2013) who collaboratively designed many of the campus buildings in the International Style in the 1930's was arguably the first seminal period. The second period, from 1975 to 1990 with Pancho Guedes' 15 years at the helm of the school, advanced on the early modernist tradition but sought to embrace both African and European traditions and draw from a local artistic and material culture to explore what only later was termed tropical modernism. Pancho claimed “for architects the rights and liberties that painters and poets have held for so long”. In the last period, Post-Apartheid from 1994 to date WITS developed an increasingly close relationship to the city of Johannesburg, arguably started with Lindsay Bremner's series of articles that were later collated into the book “Writing the City into being”.

Current local research trajectories are thus influenced by this local design research traditions which are collective, collaborative, intersecting modernism with local artistic and vernacular material culture within political landscape of the city of Johannesburg.

Underpinning all these research threads is the local culture of thought and philosophy. In the vein of Epistemology of the South (De Sousa Santos 2014), the local Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu or “I am because you are” is very different from the Western Cartesian “I think therefore I am” which posits an abstraction of thought and the separation of mind and matter, and hence to objective epistemologies. “Ubuntu points instead to participation, interdependence and collectivity, and hence to subjective epistemologies, where intuition, revelation and inspiration are all valid ways of knowing” (Keane 2005). These ways of knowing so intrinsic to process and embedded in a social-relational world are evocative parallels to Cross' “designerly ways of knowing” (Cross 1982) and very pertinent to the subjective ways of knowing explored in design research.

The artefacts presented embody the retrospective reflective research process and explicate the collaborative philosophy of Ubuntu sharing many embodied, subjective ways of knowing.



Figure 1 Drawing in studio with students

The first artefact is a series of videos and drawings which record a design project in the vein of Blythe's synthesized reflection model “reflecting **on** the body of work” through an exercise of “**social reflection**... that takes place in non-hierarchical and multiple iterations and exchanges between body, world and language and by social means” (Blythe 2013). The social means was a conversation between myself, my undergraduate design students and a design lecturer colleague. This collaborative education model is not only rooted in Ubuntu, but also in Freire's (2018) notion of “walking alongside” the students in a co-responsible model of education of, as well as in Schon's demonstrative method of design pedagogy where the teacher and student enter into a reflection dialogue.



Figure 2 Poster of reflective exercise- in situ in the studio- authors own



Figure 3-6 Social reflection- conversation with students and colleague around the reflective exercise in the studio- Wits

The exercise proved fruitful drawing out myriad fascinations and common threads in my body of work. A deep and recurring engagement with the local “highveld” landscape, topography and water especially as expressed in section, that emerges within the critical regionalism and local material culture grounding at WITS, and is developed through formative engagement with the work of the Porto school of modernists at the FAUP ( Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto) including Siza Vieira and Souto Moura.

The other insight gained was that this exercise obscured or did not reveal all types of knowledge as it was after all just a snapshot of favorite or memorable projects from a body of work that spanned more than 20 years and 270 projects. In drawing an archive timeline, the second artefact, I attempted to reveal other types of knowledge.

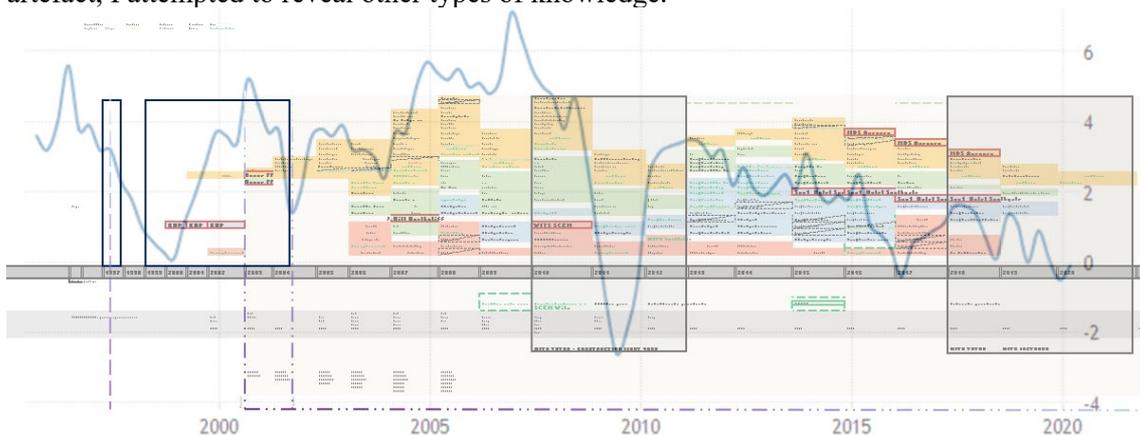


Figure 7 Archive timeline- my design "diverse"practice over last 20 years with a SA GDP overlay

The timeline revealed more quantitative knowledge on my practice tracking projects by year and type, showing a focus on residential(yellow) and hospitality(blue) projects, as well as a thread of landscaping(green) projects that overlap with these. It tracked the projects and revealed the property and economic cycles of boom and bust over the last 20 years, as well as the inherently collaborative nature of my practice, where close and recurrent relationships were developed with some clients and close female colleagues running other practices, as well as with certain contractors. These collaborations were reflective of a more open and democratic

practice, where the architect is not the sole purveyor of design knowledge but rather facilitates “participation, interdependence and collectivity” (Keane 2005). The architect is both “central and marginal simultaneously” (Hughes 1998) by virtue possibly of her gender, the philosophical grounding of core Ubuntu values which are a core part of the Wits tradition where there is a recognized need for solidarities, and run counter to architecture as an individualistic and competitive pursuit as framed so often in modern capitalist countries.

Both the timeline and the reflective drawing/curating/ pedagogical exercise are revisited, adding, subtracting, re-arranging, re-mining for further insight, “looking within creative work for something, that you’re not sure what it is, perhaps you don’t necessarily find it at all, maybe what you find is its’ direction, which is its’ future” (Lowe 2019).

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### Design Driven Research

My design research is currently at a curatorial stage of reflection **on** a body of work (Blythe 2013) based on Schon’s ideas of the reflective practitioner (Schon 1983), merged with the “social reflection” (Blythe 2013) which so closely mirrors the social-relational philosophy of Ubuntu. The practitioner reflects on the body of work, and draws connections between their own projects, as well as with precedent projects of other architects as evidence of a “community of practice” (Van Schaik and Johnson 2019). Then the practitioner invites a local community, in this case students and a colleague into the conversation, both to question but also possibly to illuminate further tacit knowledge. Methods of reflective practice based design research include drawing, photographing, analyzing, curating as well as the performative “reflective conversation with a unique and uncertain situation” (Schon 1983, 130).

### Keywords

Practice based design research; reflection

## Bio



Figure 8 Sandra Felix self-portrait

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Sandra Felix is a design lecturer in Architecture at Wits, and a practicing architect with 20 years' experience. She is researching towards her PhD in Architecture at Wits on practice based design research at the intersection of her own practice and design pedagogy and a transformative and feminist critical spatial practice agenda.