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Front cover:

Modell of the Viva-housing project in Gothenburg presented by the cooperative Housing provider Riksbyggen.

Photo: Sten Gromark.

PHD REVIEW: LEARNING FOR FUTURE KNOWING NOW: INVESTIGATING TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGIC PROCESSES WITHIN A DESIGN FACULTY IN A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY BY BRUCE RANDAL ANGUS SNADDON

REVIEWER: DR. ELMARIE COSTANDIUS¹



The research project by Bruce Snaddon, the Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO), set out to explore and evaluate transformative pedagogic processes for sustainability in the specific context of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa. The work is presented in an exegesis and five original publications, some of which were co-authored. This study provides valuable insights for designer educators who want to reflect on and investigate their practice through research.

The way the thesis is structured contributes to a rich reading experience. This thesis reads as a narrative and a discussion between the author and the reader that opens up further questions on which to reflect. The thesis is experienced as a rhizome that describes the intertwined and often messy nature of design education in a social, political and economic context. The rich descriptions of various concepts and the variety of authors referenced advance the reader's understanding of the complexities involved in design education in South Africa.

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There are not many design lecturers in South Africa who experiment, explore and research alternative pedagogies in the design education field. It is therefore commendable that Bruce undertook this research process with the aim to improve design education locally, while it could possibly also have an influence globally. It is clear that Bruce has a wealth of experience in the field of design, and his own contribution is clearly articulated. The collaborations with other lecturers at CPUT evidently enhanced the research process, and the involvement with AHO has clearly contributed to this research through the collaboration on projects and exploration of design pedagogies.

The study investigated a range of design project cases over five years with undergraduate and postgraduate students, which aimed to enhance learning practices, as part of a wider pedagogical shift towards learning about sustainable design practices. The thesis focuses on how design educators can actively experiment with different approaches to design pedagogy that might enable a transition for design education towards long-term sustainability. The core strength of this research is the way in which theories and ideas are linked to pedagogical practice.

Bruce employed various theories and perspectives, such as socio-cultural learning theory and critical posthuman perspectives, as a lens and guideline to break with orthodox practices in design education and to rethink and influence design curricula at CPUT. The work is scientifically robust, and it is commendable in its rich, ambitious and thorough use of literature. A vast variety of concepts, such as performative and transformative learning, multidisciplinary, experimental and self-directed learning, and most pertinently posthuman perspectives such as nomadism, diffraction, difference, entanglement and flattened hierarchy (Barad, 2003; 2011; Braidotti, 2006; 2013; Haraway, 1997), was discussed in the thesis, which contributes to the nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in the research related to design education for sustainable development. Bruce describes nomadism (based on Braidotti, 2006) as seeking out the places and situations that are productive and eventful learning spaces where students' habitual learning spaces and practices are displaced that enable a shift in worldview and new understandings. Bruce also uses Barad's (2007, p. 381) description of diffracting, which holds that it is not merely about tangling or multiplying differences, but "about the entangled nature of differences that matter". Difference, from a posthumanist perspective, approaches difference not as the traditional Western approach of capturing, adjusting or eradicating difference, but as difference that matters, is multiple, contains meaning (Barad, 2007) and is celebrated. Entanglement is described by Barad (2007) as where human and more-than-human entities are not only interlinked in a way that they are joined as separate entities but realise the interdependent nature of their existence. A flattened hierarchy does not elevate any one aspect of the world above others, and for instance

the object–subject, human–nature and logic-affective divisions are not seen as polarised but entangled.

Bruce’s main contribution in this research is a diffracting, design-pedagogical framework that comprises a set of supporting modalities and navigational principles for design education, towards the aim of long-term sustainable design practice. Bruce’s diffracting, design-pedagogical framework comprises the following four modalities:

- Moving nomadically towards pedagogically charged contexts and situations
- Creating conducive and generative learning spaces that allow for sustainable design practice to be experimented with and experienced
- Exploring performative making of things and meanings, bringing matter and ethical matters into meaningful conversation with one another
- Attending to the effects of difference as learning phenomena emerge.

In the thesis, Bruce unpacked these modalities in detail, and used his own teaching practice as examples. The framework covers a set of mutually reinforcing modalities and navigational principles that include the opening up of spaces for self-directed learning, holding the learning space lightly so that it is shared more equally in what matters or what is valuable. Bruce’s emphasis on experimental, interdisciplinary and unfamiliar spaces for learning is of great value, especially in South Africa, where calls by students for curriculum renewal have been pertinent during the last decade.

The reading of the thesis opens up various topics and questions. I will discuss some of these issues that I engaged with and reflected on during the reading process. Bruce’s description of the outcomes of the different projects led to a very optimistic picture of design education forming in my mind. However, even though I agree that methods such as relational, co-creation, performative, self-directed and experimental learning in unfamiliar territories and diffractive pedagogies have the potential to open up underlying issues, the pertinent current social and political issues should not be underestimated and should also be explicitly engaged with. In teaching, learning and research, a deep understanding of the consequences of an unjust and humiliating historical system, and how these play out in society, also needs to inform design curricula. How, for instance, could the #Feesmustfall student protests, which also called for decolonised curricula, influence design pedagogy? The underlying issues, such as social justice, as framed by Nancy Fraser (2007) as misrecognition (participatory parity), misrepresentation and redistribution, are relevant in South African society specifically because of its colonial and apartheid history. What are the hegemonic practices that we keep in place by not deeply engaging in uncomfortable issues such as race, class and gender?

Bruce refers to Motala's (2018) research, which focuses on geomatics education that aims to disrupt the Western power position. In the same vein, we can ask how the power position of Western-influenced design education could be disrupted. Could we in South Africa, by not exposing ourselves to contexts in the rest of Africa, be perpetuating a Western hegemony without realising it? Although it is not possible to include all aspects of the power relations involved, what part of the agential cut (Barad, 2007) are we describing or leaving out? In South Africa, very often the affective aspects linked to a traumatic past for some, and an advantaged past for others, become sensitive issues to unpack, and are often left out of the dialogue in the teaching and learning environment.

The importance of new environments and unfamiliar learning spaces is strongly emphasised in the thesis, and it is paradoxical that the student protests of 2015–2016 forced learning out into different learning spaces, because it was not possible to teach in the studios during those situations. CPUT was also built on the District Six grounds where people were forcibly removed during the apartheid years in the 1960s. The concept of forced removal again becomes important; people are forcefully removed from the classrooms exactly where people were forcefully removed 52 years ago where CPUT is now built. Because of the historical events, the socio-political issues are multi-layered and complicated to negotiate in a teaching and learning environment in South Africa. We are aiming to create flat hierarchies and use diffractive methodologies in our teaching and learning environments, but how diffractive and flattened could they be to enable ethical and equal opportunities when working with these complexities?

It is important that we as researchers make our position clear, specifically in South Africa, because differences between African/Western knowledge systems and advantaged/disadvantaged related to racial issues matter and influence teaching, learning and research. I therefore wondered whether this research would have been different or would have had a different focus if the researcher or supervisor was not from a European origin – for instance, a black South African who experienced misrecognition and humiliation during the colonial and apartheid past. Would the research then have focused more on decolonisation or reparation of shame, anger or rage that stem from the injustices of the past? What could a decolonised design curriculum look like in a South African context? Where and how did the design that we currently teach originate, and how does it fit in with an African context? Bruce refers to Escobar (2016), who advocates for a world where many worlds could fit, and opening ourselves up for other knowledge production systems that could create spaces for diversity to enrich design education pedagogies.

Posthumanism proposes an anti-dualist approach and argues for seeing things as entangled in a more flattened hierarchy. However, both

posthumanism and indigenous theories (such as African indigenous theories, including ubuntu) developed ideas related to the agency of non-human things and an integrated way of seeing the world. For the indigenous thinker, the experience of the world is relational – nothing exists alone and there is no distinction between self and other, subject and object, rational and emotional, mental and physical. Rosiek, Snyder & Pratt (2019, p. 6) argue that in indigenous theories, non-human agency is taken as a given. It is not as in the Eurocentric perspective, where objects of our research wait passively to be discovered and described. In indigenous theories, authors would not try to justify the non-human, as it is already part of the ontological understanding of the world. Watts (2013) argues that in the Eurocentric perspective the focus is more on the abstract understanding of agency, instead of a lived and practical experience of non-human agency. There are researchers, such as Dernikos, Ferguson and Siegel (2019, p. 1), who refer to various authors and criticise the posthuman perspectives for being Eurocentric and not “fully attending to social inequalities ... and colonial violence (potentially) furthered by more-than-human relationalities”.

In conclusion, I refer to an important point that Bruce emphasises: Learning that is truly transformative is complex and involves mediated movement across learning thresholds that are anything but clearly defined and sequential, and is often a “long-term, chaotic, and contextual process” (Yee, Raijmakers & Ichikawa, 2019, p. 15).

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