Crossing Boundaries: Collaborative Architectural Practices in Late-Apartheid Cape Town

Historically, architectural practice in Cape Town, South Africa was a domain of the wealthy, white and powerful. Architects worked almost exclusively for the colonial or apartheid state, corporations that cooperated with the state, and private (white) individuals. In other words, architecture was a domain of the ruling minority—as it so commonly has been throughout history, across the world.

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Beginning in the late 1970s, however, this situation began to be disturbed, in small but significant ways. Architects and marginalized, black residents began to forge ties across the social and spatial divides built by apartheid planning and legislation. The resulting practices, which took place in pedagogical and professional spheres, fashioned new architectural constituencies and paradigms. Groups previously considered the mute subjects of design became both clients and collaborators. Architects were able to exercise their frequently suppressed political positions and claim both a practice of ethics and a place in the histories of apartheid resistance.

This paper is an overview discussion of a few of these instances, with a focus on the products of these moments of engagement. As I will illustrate, such insurgent practices generate knowledge applicable beyond Cape Town and its histories of anti-apartheid struggle. They speak broadly to relationships between architects and publics, to how the architectural profession fashions the framework through which they define themselves, and the extents of architectural practice. I will discuss how these limits include what is taught in architecture schools—and what is not—and the range of services architects provide. Rather than serving as an argument for undertaking participatory practices, this paper is an analysis of the normative boundaries that architects transgress through the course of 'engaged' practices. I will argue for a definition of 'engagement' that goes beyond expanding the cast of agents involved in design, into the realm of destabilizing the social and intellectual conditions through which architecture is typically inscribed. These include conditions of labor, politics, economy, as well as the types of knowledge that architects are expected to master and operationalize, as students and professionals. Ultimately, I will argue for conceptualizing architects not as neutral actors, but agents with privilege, which they have the capacity to strategically deploy for the advancement of social good.

ACT 1: THE PARAMETERS OF ARCHITECTURE

To discuss these developments I am going to examine two spaces of action: the academy—which in this case is predominantly the University of Cape Town (UCT)—and professional practice.

The first, the academy, is significant in the South African case as it operated as a relatively 'safe' space.[1] Professors and students were able to participate in university-based programs that disturbed apartheid without incurring significant political risks. The safety of the academy, as a space of political action, enabled architects to pose models that also , and in related ways, destabilized many of the foundational premises of architectural education in South Africa.

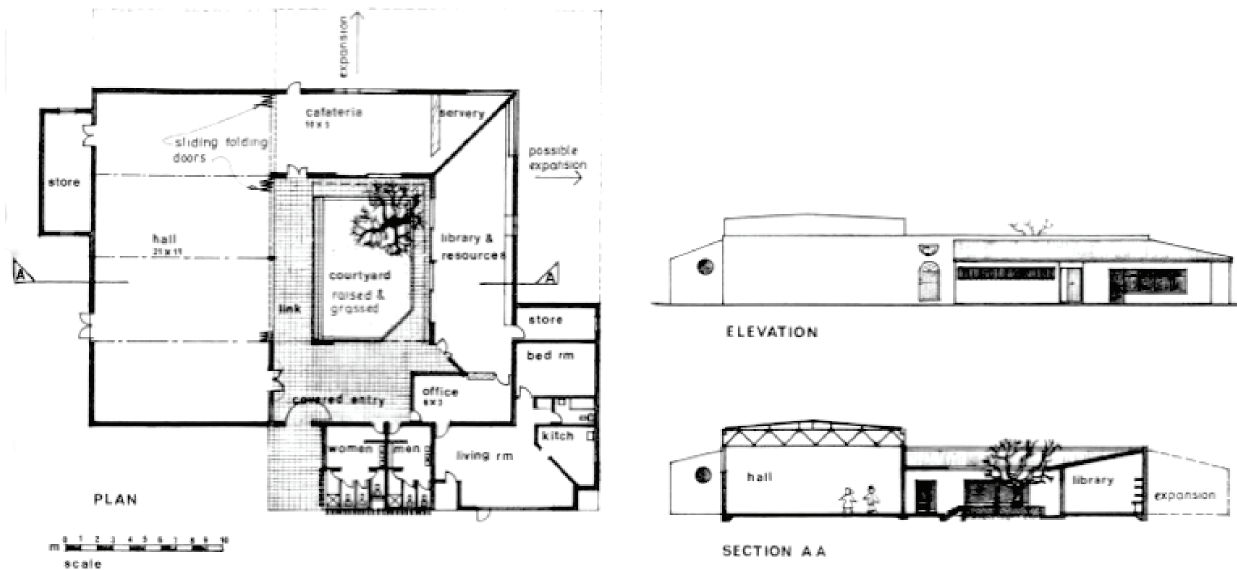
The process of forging new engagements began at the UCT Architecture School in the second half of the 1970s. In part the shift reflected national politics: the violent Soweto Youth Uprising in June 1976, when state police shot and killed numerous black students, galvanized many white South Africans to anti-apartheid action.[2] At the UCT Architecture School, it was also a time of leadership from Ivor Prinsloo, a Head of the School with progressive-leaning politics and an interest in 'developmentalism' that he encouraged faculty to pursue. For Prinsloo and his colleagues, developmentalism in part referred to the South African state's policies of "export-led growth and labour control"[3]. It also was a project of attending to 'underdevelopment', as seen in South Africa's rural areas and neglected urban periphery.[4] UCT professors turned their attention to their local context, the townships of the city's periphery as sites for architectural studios. These took students out of the traditional studio and had them designing real-world programs—community centers, crèches, teaching research centers—with real clients, budgets and challenges. These educations experiences diverged in numerous ways from then-traditional South African architectural education.

Firstly, these programs were distinctive because they were, at their core, collaborations with the future users of the buildings. These were not the hypothetical, conceptual projects that students typically approached in an autonomous fashion[5], with designs driven by their own interests and criticism from their studio instructors and jurors. Users brought both their needs and their knowledge to the projects, and together the students and users produced new (architectural) forms and knowledge. The 'reality' of the projects meant that while students had limitations placed on their design imaginaries, they were forced to wrestle with new challenges typically not encountered in design studios. As seen in the example of Teachers Resource Center (TiRA) (Figure 1), the projects that were produced were quite modest. Architectural innovation was almost solely a function of social content. The challenges the students faced were to design buildings that could be built within locally available technological capacities and financial means. These generated new questions and areas of knowledge and expertise, bringing into question what makes a building a work of architecture? What knowledge does an architectural educator impart? In a field that is normatively concerned with creativity and innovation[6], what does it mean to produce a building that is simple in form and application of technology, but that addresses complex, real-world political, economic and social conditions?

Today, design-build or otherwise 'engaged' studios are common in the United States. However, tracing how such practices came into being in the Cape Town case provides analysis relevant to our localized, contemporary pedagogical practices. Like many US schools, through the 1960s and beyond, UCT based its curriculum on a Beaux Arts model, teaching students historical styles and methods of reproduction. Although modernist approaches began to be introduced in the 1960s, the School maintained alliances with figures and intellectual movements in Europe rather than in the local context. The shift to collaborative studios not only refocused the students' design challenges, they contested normative precedents and the epistemic base of intellectual affinities. Linking 'developmentalism' with architectural education

in Cape Town drew out questions regarding the cultural values embedded in ‘European’ and ‘African’ architectural vocabularies. Such questions continue to be heatedly debated as architects strive to create architectural languages that reflect the culture and politics of the post-apartheid condition.[7]

The expansion of education also spilled over into the students’ political consciousness and identity. Designing in township spaces brought students into working relationships with spaces and social groups that typically dwelled at the periphery of their lives. Almost all UCT students at the time were white and from distinctly privileged backgrounds. Few would have ever had spent any time in townships. Contact with township residents was limited to the ‘white’ spaces of the city: in the figure of the black domestic workers –maids and gardeners—working in their homes[8]. Collaborative studio projects such as TiRA forged new social connections, modestly bridging the divides produced through decades of race-based planning, legislation and architecture. Students became aware of the living conditions faced by the nation’s black (and Coloured and ‘Asian’), poor majority, preparing them for ‘engaged’ professional careers.



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Of course, these pedagogical moments are encapsulated in the temporal framework of academia, with learning fragmented into consumable, semester-long periods. Additionally, the popularity of these community-based studios waxed and waned over the years. However, even though the majority of the students that participated in such initiatives went on to join or lead traditional architectural offices, the collaborative studio experience broadly impacted that generation of students’ careers. In an issue of Architecture South Africa focused on the UCT class of 1984, many members of the class—even those with the most mainstream practices—noted that one of the most significant aspects of their education was developing a consciousness of the local political-economy and a set of architectural ethics.[9] Additionally, there was a clear cohort of students—and faculty—that took this learning and applied it to real-world professional practices. Those are the subjects of this paper’s next sections.

Figure 1: The Teachers Resource Center in Gugulethu, Cape Town was typical of the work produced in the design studios. Drawings courtesy of John Moyle.

ACT 2: TAKING IT TO…THE PROFESSION

While the first ‘engaged’ studios took place in the 1970s, it was more challenging to realize such participatory practices within the realm of professional practice, particularly under apartheid. Yet, a small but vibrant tradition of engaged participatory design was initiated by Cape Town architects, beginning in the 1980s.

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One of the first local architects to practice in a participatory manner was Carin Smuts. Smuts had been a student at the UCT Architecture School during its period of introducing engaged studios. She took the ethics and practical lessons she learnt in those studios and used them to develop a practice renowned for participatory design. From her first project, a collaboration with domestic workers in a small rural community (Cradock) in the Eastern Cape Province, she has consistently applied participatory practices in projects that include community centers, crèches, schools, health centers, and a market for informal vendors, as well as more traditional residential and institutional projects.[10]

For Smuts, engaging in participatory design is a project of personal and professional ethics. She sees participatory design as involving typically silenced members of South African society. Her work illustrates a project of bringing architecture to those that typically cannot afford it, and the belief in architecture's potential as a space of upliftment. The distinction between the two goals is subtle but important: one concerns who has access to architecture—who are the publics that architecture serves. The second concerns the work that architecture can do, in bringing improvement to people's lives. The ideal of architecture's social value is often a precondition for Smuts' participatory architectural practices.

Additionally, Smuts operates from a suspicion of the architect's authority and centrality. In part her belief builds upon her political position, which insists upon respect for the wisdom of the client, particularly those she refers to as 'African'. She argues that her architecture is so formally 'expressive' out of respect for her clients' cultural heritage (Figure 2). Beyond aesthetics, her position is similar to the self-critique that became popular amongst architects in the 1960s, particularly in the US. This position, a response to the authoritarianism that accompanied modernist practices in the first half of the twentieth century, has been characterized as a 'crisis of confidence', but was more centrally "a radical reevaluation of how professionals work, and for whom"[11]. Strong parallels lie between the community design centers that sprouted up in American cities in the 1960s and 1970s and Smuts' version of collaborative design. Both uphold a belief in the limits of professional technical knowledge to solve problems, and in the value of public input. Both Smuts' and the 1960s community architects collaborate with socio-economic, racialized, and gendered groups that have been historically excluded from the design process. In this way, the collaborative process both expands the participants in architecture and illuminates (architectural) histories of inequality.

ACT 3: A DIFFERENT TYPE OF COLLABORATION

Smuts, however, is not the only Cape Town architect known for engaging in collaborative design practices. One of the other most noteworthy examples is not a single office, but a design project that brought together migrant laborers with architectural and planning academics and professionals. This project, the upgrading of the City of Cape Town's migrant labour hostels, illustrates what is at stake when divides are crossed and collaboration goes beyond design.

In brief, the Hostels Upgrading was an effort to upgrade what had been barrack-like, single sex accommodation precariously tied to employment status, into permanent family housing.[12] The hostels had been where men—and only men, although there were separate women's hostels—lived while working in the city. The state only authorized temporary passes for (most) black men, declaring that their employment and residence in the city could never be permanent, and that their families must stay in their rural homelands.[13] The upgrading project was initiated in 1985 by a group of hostel dwellers, in an effort to both improve their living conditions and demonstrate against the basic conditions of urban life under apartheid, which rendered life in cities precarious, marginal and devoid of the many of the most basic amenities (Figure 3). By agitating to improve their living conditions, and for the right to live with their families, in permanent homes, the project tied apartheid policy to labor, space and the sphere

Figure 2: Guga S'Thebe, a Community Cultural Center in Langa, Cape Town by CS Studio, exemplifies the formal 'exuberance' of Carin Smuts work. Photo by Author..

of the domestic. Such a joining of issues was conceptually dynamic; what additionally makes the project so significant was the relationship that developed between the built environment professionals—the architects and planners—and the hostel dwellers.

From the beginning of the project, the relationship between the two sets of parties was one of equals. While apartheid rendered them tremendously unequal and divided, their partnership worked to disturb such conventions. This can be seen in both the design process and in the catalog of related activities in which the architects and planners participated.

As a design process, the Hostels Upgrades followed the script of many participatory designed projects. As the technical, architectural demands of converting the hostels to family housing went beyond the capacities of the hostel dwellers, a pair of architectural professors from UCT were approached to assist in developing ways to upgrade the hostels (Figure 4). They did so first in consultation with the core organizing hostel dwellers, then publically presented the plans to a larger cohort of hostel dwellers—at times generating heated debate with their designs. Once a scheme was agreed upon, funds were raised (more on that below) to build a set of demonstration units, which were opened to all hostel dwellers to tour and comment upon. The feedback generated was broad in scope—ranging from the social equity of the number of bedrooms of each unit, to more aesthetic and formal features. The feedback was then used to inform another iteration of designs, which were eventually built, though predominantly not until the mid-1990s. The results were modest but solidly built family apartments that met their residents' basic needs and were arranged in ways that promoted social interaction. Buildings that had housed hostels of numerous sleeping rooms and single kitchens and bathrooms were converted to apartments, with new buildings strategically located between the old in ways that created 'outdoor rooms' (Figure 5). The 'upgrades' were not only incredibly physically improved, but enabled families to live permanently in the city in ways previously inconceivable.

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However, what was arguably even more noteworthy about the project was that collaboration did not stop at the design. Rather, the architects and planners were involved in a range of activities that took place around trying to realize the upgrades, including negotiating with the state, internally governing the upgrading process and fundraising. For each of these, the architects took on roles that strategically deployed their racialized, class-based social status, and thus destabilized the very conditions of privilege that distinguished them from the hostel dwellers.

Figure 3: The Hostels prior to upgrading provided the most minimal amenities, inside and out, and were barely maintained. Photo courtesy of Architects Associated.

ENDNOTES

1. In light of the recent protests taking place across South African—and American—universities, it is important to qualify this statement. While university professors, and to a lesser extent students, enjoyed freedom of expression on campuses during apartheid in comparison to off campus, there were historic limits to the radicalization accepted on campus that persist today. Being considered a 'liberal' institution in South Africa, as the University of Cape Town was throughout apartheid, does not equate with promoting meaningful racial equity. The legacy of such limits has been vocally articulated by students in recent months, from the 'Rhodes Must Fall' to 'Fees Must Fall' campaigns, both of which address the persistence of discursive and material ways in which black and poor students are excluded from universities.

2. See http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising for a thorough discussion of the events and outcomes of the uprising.

3. Noel Castree, Rob Kitchin, and Alisdair Rogers, "Developmental State," *A Dictionary of Human Geography* (Oxford University Press, 2013), http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199599868.001.0001/acref-9780199599868-e-391?rskey=fXB5bS&result=2.

4. In architecture, this sort of study was exemplified by John F. C Turner, *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); and Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture* (Albuquerque: UNM Press, 1964). It also applies to groundbreaking studies such as Bryan R. Roberts, *Cities of Peasants: The Political Economy of Urbanization in the Third World* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978); and Janice E Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

5. Magali Sarfatti Larson, *Behind the Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

6. See Peggy Deamer, *The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

7. A thorough, case-grounded exploration of such issues is the subject of Jonathan Noble, *African Identity in Post-Apartheid Public Architecture: White Skin, Black Masks* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011).

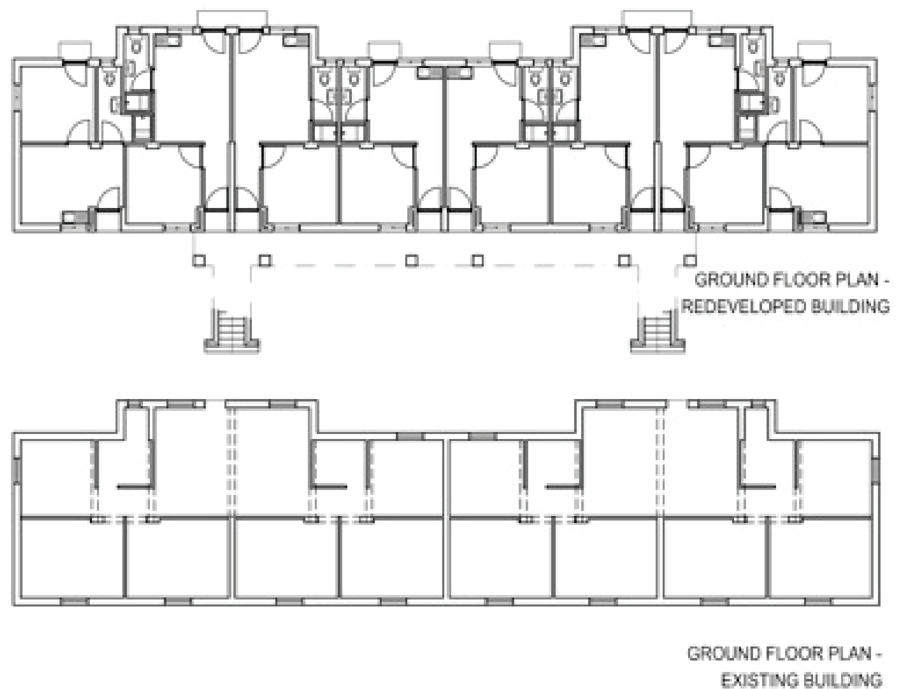

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Figure 4: Plan of a typical hostel, prior to upgrading, below, and 'upgraded' building above. Plans courtesy of Architects Associated.

The first of these roles was intervening with the state, on behalf of the hostel dwellers. The hostels were state owned, so permission to upgrade needed to be secured from the local authority. Problems arose when the hostel dwellers were coerced into meeting with representatives from the local black authority, who were considered by most black South Africans to be puppets of the apartheid state. For the hostel dwellers to continue to directly participate in such negotiations would have been political suicide—and in such violent times might have led to bodily harm. The solution realized was for the architects to act as the hostel dwellers' representatives, taking over meeting with the authorities and keeping the project proceeding. Doing so was a strategic deployment of their professional status and racialized privilege. As respected professionals, they had the skills and status to work effectively with the state. As white South Africans, therefore considered outsiders to the anti-apartheid movement, they incurred no political risk in working with the state. In essence, they deployed their privileged status as white professionals, enabling them to safely and strategically further the project and participate in action that contested some of the basis premises of apartheid.

When the hostel dwellers decided to move to the background of the public negotiation process, they also decided to form a Trust that would govern the upgrading process. The core architects and planners involved in the project were asked to join the hostel dwellers as Trustees, indicating the degree of cooperation and egalitarianism between the architects and hostel dwellers. As Trustees, the architects straddled two worlds: they were both participants in the project and professionals whose knowledge and social status—which reflected their dual status as outsiders to the hostels—benefited the project.

Additionally, the architects and planners initially involved were all academics at UCT, so had access to the University's institutional amenities. These they took advantage of, creating an institutional 'home' for the project's archives and resources, and to hire a fundraiser. The latter used her connections to international donors to secure the money necessary to build the first phase of the project. Again, privilege was a resource mined for the benefit of the project.

Collaboration, therefore, went far beyond the client/user/hostel dweller participating in the architectural design process, which is the typical limit of participatory design. In this case, the architects and planners collaborated with the hostel dwellers in the much larger project of realizing the project, in ways that bridged political action and architecture.

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Figure 5: An 'upgraded' courtyard of former hostels, arranged as an 'outdoor room'. Photo by author.

CONCLUSION: CROSSING BOUNDARIES

While the practices I have been discussing are noteworthy for their social engagement, particularly in the context of apartheid's final years, their greater significance lies with what they say about professionalism, boundaries, and the role of boundary crossing in collaborative architecture. Like all disciplines, the architectural profession tends inscribes itself with boundaries[14]. These regulate what *is* considered architecture versus what is *not* architecture, validating some practices and spaces, and erasing out others from the domain of architecture. Such boundaries claim some projects as works of architecture and some simply as 'buildings'. Boundaries address architectural agents—*who* may be an architect and *who* may serve as a client—as well as architectural 'subjects'. By subjects I am referring to the sets of knowledge considered part of a 'legitimate' architectural education, and to the value system imparted through architectural education and professional associations. The history of the architectural profession is one of increasing distinction between itself and other fields, notably construction and engineering.[15] It has done so, in part, by drawing boundaries around itself. This refers to architectural practices in Cape Town and globally—including in the U.S.

In addition to bounding itself through legitimating discourses and spheres of action, the profession is inherently bound by its social status. While in theory anyone may enter architecture school and become an architect, subtle cues and disciplining practices favor the success of some over others. In addition to these exclusionary mechanisms, one of the basic conditions of architectural professionalism—just like most all 'professions'—is its socially elevated status. This quality of privilege particularly comes into play when architects step outside the boundaries typically drawn around the profession, such as seen in the Cape Town cases. In each case I discussed, the privilege of the architects and architectural students serves as a category of difference distancing them from their collaborators.

In light of such boundaries and distancing devices, it is clear that the Cape Town cases are instances of boundary crossing. From the township studio projects, to Carin Smuts' version of 'deep' participatory design, to the Hostels Upgrades, each instance destabilized normative ideas of what architecture is, whom are architectural actors, and what is the 'work' of making architecture. These practices destabilize the supposed autonomy of architectural design: the notion of the solitary architect—or even architectural firm—operating as a creative genius. They challenge the normative focus on architecture's formal qualities, and instead illustrate how design engages with conditions of economy, labor and politics. They illustrate that although architects may be privileged members of society, such privilege can be strategically deployed to disturb the very structures that produce inequality.

The practices undertaken in Cape Town bring to light what it means to architecturally 'engage', particularly with socially marginalized groups and spaces. They show that doing so involves more than simply expanding the way one designs or the projects one takes on; it means to address the very conditions that bound and define architecture.

8. For a powerful analysis of these racialized spaces, see Rebecca Ginsburg, *At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

9. The May/June 2010 issue of *Architecture SA*.

10. Her awards include the 2008 Global Award for Sustainable Architecture and the Grade de Chevalier dans L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French Ministry of Culture in 2015.

11. Mary C. Comerio, "Community Design: Idealism and Entrepreneurship," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 1, no. 4 (1984): 227.

12. Information on this project primarily comes from interviews I conducted with the project's participants and reports. The reports were predominantly conducted by the Urban Problems Research Unit at the University of Cape Town and include Western Cape Hostel Dwellers' Association, "Western Cape Hostels Housing Upgrade Programme," Working Paper No. 36 (Occasional Paper No.23) (Cape Town: Urban Problems Research Unit, University of Cape Town, May 1987); Susan Liebermann, Tevia Rosmarin, and Vanessa Watson, "History of the Western Cape Hostels Upgrade Project" (Cape Town: Urban Problems Research Unit, University of Cape Town, April 1993).

13. A set of laws, collectively known as the pass laws, was one of the most hated and protested features of apartheid legislation. It limited movement around the country for blacks, and particularly limited movement to and permanent residence in cities. For an overview of the system, see http://www.sahistory.org.za/south-africa-1806-1899/pass-laws-south-africa-1800-1994

14. Michel Foucault, "Orders of Discourse," *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (1971): 7–30.

15. A large body of literature addresses this history. See for example: Margaret Crawford, "Can Architects Be Socially Responsible?," in *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture*, ed. Diane Ghirardo (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 27–45; Spiro Kostof, *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).