

# Listen Without Prejudice: The Design Studio as a Discursive Learning Environment (or) Helping Students Learn in Architecture Education

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**Learning how to learn is an essential part of architectural education, but relies on the confluence of a number of elements: effective teaching, knowledge construction, and active engagement with new knowledge in the design studio. It is here that collaboration between learners and educators is fostered, through socialization processes embedded in this discursive environment. Challenges in ensuring constructive engagement are twofold: for students, coming into architectural education means having to adopt new learning approaches, and adapt to teaching methods and styles they were previously unaware of; while also having to engage with instructors, whose approach to teaching are at times ritualized, making use of methods and techniques largely derived from prior experiences as students. This can create an environment that runs counter to the discursive learning environment that we believe the studio to be, and hindering effective learning. How then can architectural education help students develop valuable learning skills, as a core element architectural education? This paper takes the position that listen to students and appreciating their needs is fundamental in aiding their transition into and through architectural education. Listening without prejudice, not being judgemental, and opening ourselves as instructors to further learning forms a key element in helping student learn. Appreciating that any discursive engagement is two-way, therefore allowing the voice of students to emerge is crucial in building not only their confidence, but generating dialogue as a core element of collaboration and sharing. The paper discusses activities undertaken in a school of architecture in East Africa, formulated to allow for discourse in a context where such engagements are not traditionally part of education; a challenge for architectural education whose signature pedagogical approach is premised on the ability to have open discussions. These activities were geared to improve interactions within the design studio, not only between students and instructors, but amongst students, helping dispelling some of the myths embedded in architectural education, and unclocking the black box of architectural education for instructors and students alike, and improving the quality of teaching and learning in the process.**

## INTRODUCTION

Released in 1990, *Listen without prejudice (Volume 1)*, George Michael's second solo album was to showcase his talent as a singer/song writer. The call to 'listening without prejudice' was essential to appreciate the different direction he was taking in this music collection. Although listening is recognized as an important trait for success, within the educational realm the ability to listen is often underestimated.<sup>1</sup> For architectural education, this is significant, as listening forms a key part of design studio engagement, helping students learn not only the pragmatics of building design, but also develop attitudes and ethical positions that determine how they act as designers. Unsurprisingly, the engagement between students and instructors is an important part of this process, and helps build confidence and competences through the socialization processes of architectural education. Listening is thus a crucial part of the socialization process, helping build oral genres, fostering collaborative engagement and the valuing of diversity, all embedded in what is regarded as culturally responsive teaching.<sup>2</sup> This is an important part of the discursive engagement within the design studio, and vital in learning to *BE* professionals,<sup>3</sup> more so as "... architecture, unlike medicine or engineering or even law, requires not only knowing something but being something."<sup>4</sup> However, within the studio setting, students often lament that their voices are not heard,<sup>5</sup> suggesting that the architecture studio as the epitome of a discursive learning environment may not be the case,<sup>6</sup> more so as listening is not a core part of the explicit curriculum. As such, the development of listening skills is often neglected, affecting the way students perceive communication in the profession, and consequently how they develop as professionals.

This paper takes a position that listening to students is fundamental to aiding the transition into and through architectural education. The paper discusses activities undertaken in a school of architecture in East Africa, activities formulated to promote listening to and by students, through the creation of a space for discourse, where such engagements are traditionally not part of education. The paper will address issues often hidden in architectural education but valuable in building confidence in students' ability to present and gain feedback from instructions, and subsequently how they listen to clients and users. The paper focuses on courses and students in the undergraduate (Part 1) program offered by the Faculty of the Built Environment at the Uganda Martyrs University (UMU), Uganda.

The undergraduate program, the Bachelor of Environmental Design had its first intake in 2000. Together with the professional Master of Architecture (Professional) degree, this is one of only four schools of architecture in Uganda. At the core of the program was a goal to explicitly addressing soft skills, skills often overlooked at the expense of knowledge acquisition, and considerably underrated compared to drawing of plans.<sup>7</sup> Students in the program come from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, a consequence of intake criteria that went beyond the high school leaving examination.<sup>8</sup> This reality made apparent the need to address oral genres, placing focus on teaching approaches to achieve this goal.

### ORAL GENRES IN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

Learning in architectural education has to go beyond the formal curriculum, to incorporate the *symbolic*<sup>9</sup> and *societal curricula*.<sup>10</sup> These are embedded within genres, defined by Swales as “... a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes.”<sup>11</sup> Oral genres in this regard relate to oral communication, which is largely grounded in a specific context.<sup>12</sup> For architectural education, this is linked to the historic origins of the profession, which has determined the form and nature of interactions within contemporary architectural education.<sup>13</sup> At the core of this engagement is the architectural design studio and associated design review, geared to ensure the development of knowledge and skills necessary for the practice of architecture.<sup>14</sup> For the most part, oral communication in architectural education is focused on oral presentation rather than listening, which doesn't necessarily support embedded learning<sup>15</sup> and the development of listening as a valuable skill, particularly as this is generally not included as part of the formal curriculum. What is lost is an appreciation that a curriculum, is “... anything that shapes the student's learning experience”<sup>16</sup> in effect, both the implicit and explicit aspects of education, not just knowledge content.

As the signature pedagogy of architectural education the design studio is lauded as a valuable means of engaging with active learning. Embedded within this approach are ever-present hierarchical structures (and divisions) between the expert teacher, and the novice learner.<sup>17</sup> This preferences particular engagements above others, potentially blocking out discourse between the two, hindering development of important soft skills, while also drowning out the voice of students; blocked out by educational traditions that have come to define the communicative processes within architectural education.<sup>18</sup> For Iqbal and Roberts,<sup>19</sup> this is reinforced by instructors focusing on students who are easy to interact with, failing to put in the hard work of developing a repertoire with other students. In so doing, this reinforces the unconscious biases within architectural education that suggest what is perceived as the ‘appropriate’ decorum for architects. Particularly poignant are views of interactions within the design studio as akin to a ‘master-slave’ or ‘gods and servants’ relationship,<sup>20</sup> and one that is certainly not conducive to meaningful learning. This situated instructors as ‘all-knowing’ experts, while framing architecture studio discourse as a monologue, with students

compelled to listen to instructors but which is not reciprocated. For Stevens, this approach places students “... in a permanent state of insecure expectation,”<sup>21</sup> reinforcing historical power relationships within architectural education. What emerges are hegemonic approaches perpetuated by the system itself, in this case, reproduced (largely unconsciously) by the higher education structure.<sup>22</sup>

Within architectural education, teaching approaches are often ritualized, more so as instructors make use of methods and techniques derived from their experiences as students,<sup>23</sup> merely “... re-creating the historical rituals and traditions”<sup>24</sup> embedded within architectural education. Frequently this approach presumed the learner to be ignorant,<sup>25</sup> their background and experiences regarded as irrelevant to their education. For sub-Saharan Africa, this approach is derived from colonial education, which was geared to transform individuals to become ‘willing’ participants in the colonial administrative machine.<sup>26</sup> Over the years, students were conditioned to become passive receivers of knowledge, not to question instructors, and to regurgitate dominant positions, regardless of its validity. Instructors in effect were custodians of knowledge, and gatekeepers to success. Consequentially, student's came to appreciate that their voice was irrelevant, and thus set out to second guess instructors; giving solutions they believed were demanded by their instructors, rather than providing well thought out and reasoned responses.

Emerging postcolonial and decolonization discourse from sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>27</sup> has seen growing demands for empathy amongst architects, and to ensure architectural education is positioned to address local conditions. This acknowledges that architecture, as a profession needs to shed its elitist identity if it is to truly address the needs of the region. In the context of architectural education, this has seen calls to reframe educational endeavors, while also questioning the grand narrative embedded within architectural education. Developments of pedagogical approaches have thus been geared to ensure plurality within the architecture studio, although it also has to acknowledge the difficulty in moving away from the inherited approach, which actively discouraged subjectivity and contradictory perspectives. In this light, appropriately scaffolding student learning in architectural education needed to go beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge and drawing skills, to engage with oral genres as well, more so, engaging in the subtlety of listening.

### LISTENING IN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

How can we as educators appropriately scaffold architectural education to help students develop valuable listening skills? In the broad scope of what constitutes architectural education, listening may seem trivial, however, when viewed in context of students' engagement within architectural education, this emerged as a crucial area for intervention. In the context of East Africa, and Uganda specifically, many students enrolling in architectural education are unaware of the role architects played in the design and construction of built environments, leave alone

appreciating the nuances of architectural education. Strangely, this did not translate to learning approaches that were open to learning, nor receptive to alternative positions and learning engagements. Quite the opposite, this situation frustrated discussions, and created confrontations that in some contexts were described as toxic, and not conducive to learning.<sup>28</sup> This included perpetuation of teaching approaches that presumed students to be empty vessels, to be filled with all the knowledge and skills to make them 'expert' architects, juxtaposed against student ideas of merely coming to architecture school to learn how to draw plans. This created an atmosphere that was difficult for instructors and students alike, not conducive to learning and not engaging with the development of architecture as a profession - contributing to the resolution of the numerous developmental challenges of sub-Saharan Africa. It also bolstered dependence on instructors, who at times passed down pre-digested knowledge as part of the educational process,<sup>29</sup> with student's experiences disregarded as part of the process. Validation of knowledge thus came from alignment with the views of instructors, rather than through collective engagement as an important means of affirming ideas.

Seeking to break the dependence cycle, and to give value to the student voice, several initiatives were implemented as part of a wider transformation of the architecture program at the Uganda Martyrs University, addressing identified challenges in teaching and learning. Changes engaged with knowledge content and pedagogical approaches, both key to addressing oral genres within the program. For the knowledge content, it was necessary to address how architectural knowledge was perceived and presented: often viewed as static and unchanging, passed on from instructor to students as doctrines and grand narratives. Architectural history and theory courses were of particular concern, largely presented as surveys of European architectural history, with scant regard for endeavors outside this canon. As with many architecture history courses across the region, there was virtually no engagement with African or Asian architecture. Within this approach, alternative positions, or those deriving ideas from the local context were considered inappropriate. Being taught with examples that bore little relevance to local realities resulted in blank stares and limited engagement from students who were clearly struggling to make sense of this information. Within the design studio and as part of design reviews, interactions between instructors and students were another area of interest. These activities were often monologues, exhibiting the power struggles between students and instructors; with students seeking to claim positions as competent designers, but having to navigate a landscape in which instructors asserted their authority as custodians of architectural cultural capital. Consequently, neither party engaged in meaningful dialogue, an overt embodiment of the embedded biases and prejudices present within architectural education, also reinforcing the idea that listening was irrelevant.

The quest to improve listening began with efforts to appreciate the background of students enrolling in the program; from their embedded knowledge and beliefs related to architecture and

architectural education. These were derived through non-confrontational show-and-tell sessions as part of intake interviews. Interview sessions were also used to initiate dialogue between instructors and students; building trust for incoming students, who were generally unfamiliar with interactive educational pedagogy. Through these interviews, in which students were asked about their favorite buildings, architects they know of, their travels, and extra curricula interests. This was to build a picture of engagements beyond their academic interests.<sup>30</sup> The interview sessions, and the information derived from these interactions were key to the subsequent transformation of two level one courses; *Culture, Climate, and Settlements*, and *Design Fundamentals*, both developed to address basic knowledge and skills, but explored through atypical approaches. In addition, a new experiential course, *Field Experience* was introduced to further explore issues outside the traditional classroom setting. The different approaches employed were geared to develop oral genres through engagement with activities that not only gave students a voice, but also implored instructors to actively listen to stated (an unstated) positions of students. Validation was not through the presentation of predetermined solutions, but rather through engaging in dialogue geared to uncovering the underlying processes and decisions that led to the solutions.

As part of the *Design Fundamentals* course, one contextual project compelling students to engage with a familiar yet often overlooked element in contemporary design - *Body Ornamentation*. Traditions often dictate the nature of ornamentation worn for cultural performances, and often presented through historicized examples. The project compelled students to reflect on any of these elements as a driver for their personal adaptations for wearable architecture. As an added twist, and reflecting a key element of ingenuity and adaptability, students were encouraged to make use of 'found objects' in their designs, which they had to build and model as part of the final assessment (See Figure 1 and 2). The project presented a means for students who are generally reserved, to explore authorship and ownership of design elements, often denied during the early levels of architectural education. This was also a means to build an appreciation and understanding of African art and artifacts, which over the years had been presented in a negative light, as showcased by the derogatory reference to Music Dance and Drama (MDD), as *Musilu Dala Dala*, roughly translated to mean "For the Totally Stupid."<sup>31</sup> The project was geared to enable students to view indigenous elements as a valuable source of design inspiration.

Building of these explorations, in *Culture, Climate and Settlements*, history of architecture was deliberately framed as contextual rather than canonical,<sup>32</sup> seeking to avoid an approach that ignored local contextual issues, leading to a disassociation between design and place. The course was set up to dispelling presumption of a single historical narrative, seeking to validate the multitude of perspectives that existed, many having developed simultaneously. As part of this process, the course placed emphasis on exploration of sites across the world for the research based project 'Reflections of the Past', based





Figure 1. Body Ornamentation photo shoot, UMU. (© Nina Hamilton)

around themes including: Dynastic Tombs; Grand Gardens; Places of Pilgrimage, and; Sculpture and Ornament. This allowed for exploration of sites from across the world, enabling the comparison of design drivers, as well as the social, cultural, and environmental considerations that scaffold these projects. It also avoided a single narrative approach often taken in the study of architectural history. Sites in Africa such as Meroe, Nubia (300BCE – 450CE); the Great Mosque at Djenné (13th century CE), and; Kasubi Tombs, Buganda (1890CE+) were thus explored, alongside similar themed sites, such as the Temple of the Warriors at Chichén Itzá, Mexico (7th-13th centuries CE), Chartres Cathedral, Chartres, France, (1194-1220CE), or the Tomb of the Ming Dynasty, Hebei Province, China (1409CE+). This was critical in presenting African historical sites as part of architectural discourse, despite these being absent in mainstream architectural history. Such explorations served to validate student's histories, providing a basis for active participation in discussions that included their traditions and cultural practices as part of architectural discourse.

While on the surface, both *Design Fundamentals* and *Culture, Climate and Settlements* had expressly different agenda with relation to the explicit curriculum, underlying these was the need to ensure instructors listened to students. The *Body Ornamentation* project proved particularly emotional as it brought out personal stories and deeply held convictions that could then be appropriately interrogated. By designing and making wearable ornaments, students were also made aware of the narratives behind artifacts used in different settings, and began to appreciate their value beyond mere decoration. Carrying this through to architecture, the assignment *Reflections of the Past* as undertaken in the course *Culture, Climate and Settlements* allowed students to study architectural endeavors from an advantageous position, one that related to them, and not alien notions of what constituted 'real' architecture. This allowed instructors to draw out expressive ideas while developing rapport with students, through the individual recitals, which were useful in assuring students that their ideas were indeed valued, bringing forth stories that in some cases



Figure 2. Body Ornamentation photo shoot, UMU. (© Nina Hamilton)

were believed to be inconsequential, but were found to be relevant to architectural discourse through this project.<sup>33</sup>

Emanating from these formative courses was an environment conducive to the development of oral genres, through active discursive engagement. By listening to the stories evoked by the projects, which provided the basis for design explorations and an understanding of indigenous architecture, the possibility of a deeper engagement with learning was apparent. This could then be built on through the creation of places where oral genres were explored: spaces where the authoritative domineering instructor was deemed obsolete. Such a space was provided via two activities: first, the *Back Seat Instructor* sessions, and second, the *Field Experience* course undertaken by first-year students. As part of the *Back Seat Instructor* sessions, the interaction between students which prioritized, while simultaneously breaking the stereotypical hierarchy of presentation in which instructors took prime position at the front (See Figure 3). The *Back Seat Instructor* design review sessions, compelled students to actively participate in peer review, with instructors deliberately relegated to the periphery during these reviews. Students undertook and completed presentations without interruption with their peers providing feedback on presentation approaches; a chance to develop skills they had learnt through peer critique. The instructors' engaging in these sessions was directed at processes, rather than the outcomes, providing constructive feedback designed to encourage reflective engagement and geared to help students articulate their thought processes. Through this approach, students were able to see their views and opinions as having merit, particularly if these were supported by thought out processes, and contrasted with confrontational approaches, which dominated traditional review sessions. By not dominating review sessions, instructors enabled students to take ownership of their design processes, building confidence in the ability to express ideas, and being less afraid in the critique received. The value of this approach was evident in subsequent activities, particularly with the *Field Experience* course in which students explored social and cultural sites across East Africa, through activities that obliged them to interact with different communities (See Figure 4). The



Figure 3. Back Seat Instructor session, UMU. (© Mark Olweny)

various journeys undertaken were key to exposing students to creative traditions and practices that are often difficult to bring into a classroom setting. Both these activities were important in bridging tradition with contemporary culture as part of architectural education at the Uganda Martyrs University.

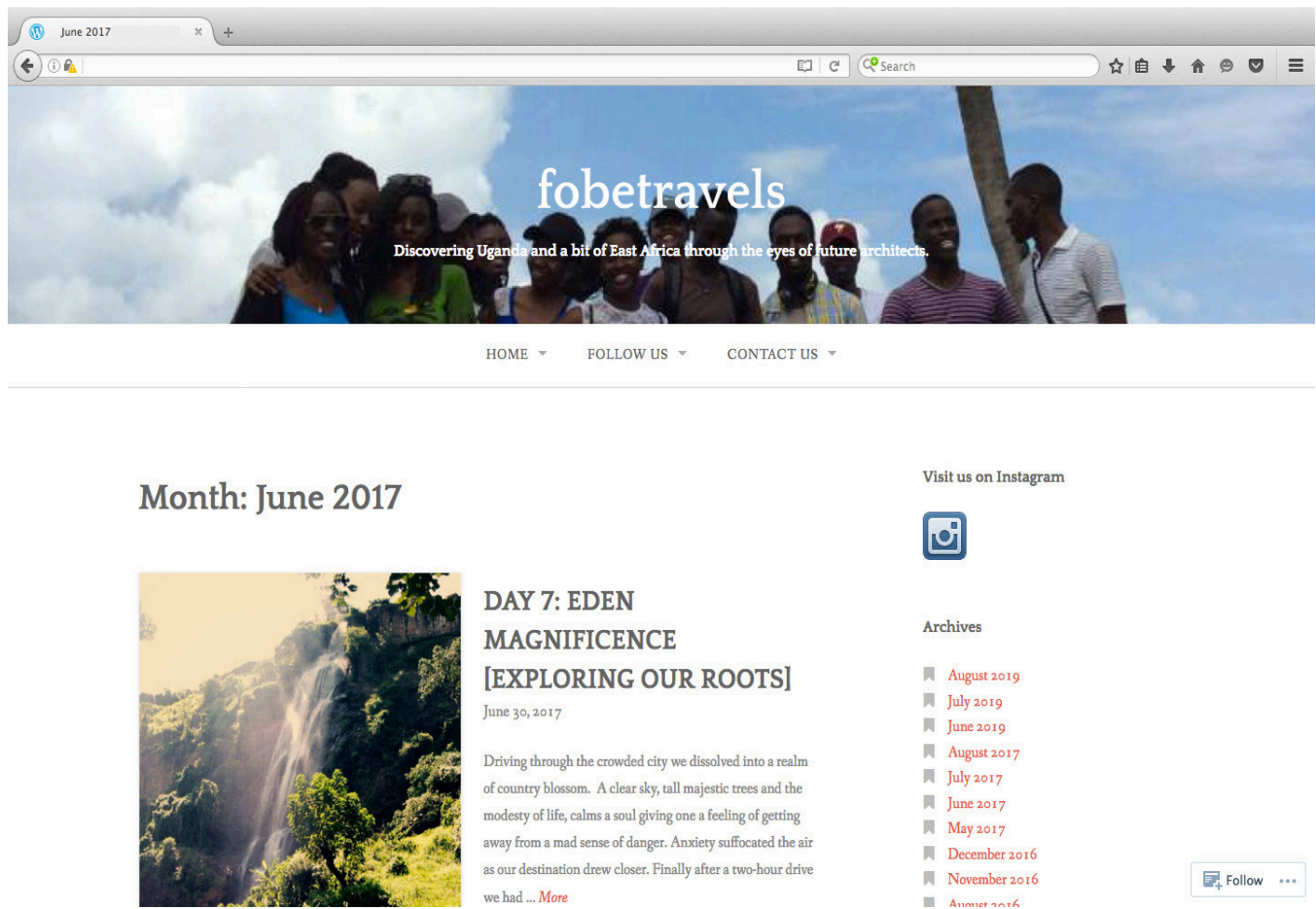
## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Listening itself is not new, but has been considerably neglected within the architecture curriculum. In this example, the ability to listen to students went beyond the formulation a streamlined approach to oral genres in architectural education, emerging as an opportunity to engage with values as a core element of being an architect, acknowledging that a key purpose of architectural education is about the formation of values.<sup>34</sup> This also linked to the idea of being, or in this case, becoming an architect, as noted by Barrett:

It is vital that students are able to ask themselves the following questions: Where do I situate myself? Why? How do I define the problem? What is my professional identity? Who am I? What type of a professional do I want to become? What is my chosen style of working? How does this link to my sense of personal and professional identity?<sup>35</sup>

While I could claim it was all smooth sailing, there were a few challenges along the way. Most prominent was the resistance to the changes from both students and instructors. The new approach challenged long held beliefs about learning and teaching in in general, and for architectural education specifically. Placing emphasis on students and their ability to actively engage with learning required a significant shift: for students this necessitated a change from passive learning approaches, whereby teachers provided them with all the information. For instructors this pedagogical shift demanded greater effort to engage with and review assignments, acknowledge that different views added value to the educational experience. This also meant acknowledging the epistemological biases embedded in knowledge systems (in this case to architectural education) were a hindrance to the development of an inclusive architectural education. The transformation of architectural education to one that better reflected the context in which it is being taught, with "... a horizontal rather than vertical array of knowledge ..." was thus effected. This approach also acknowledged the value and importance of oral traditions in architectural discourse, while simultaneously challenging perpetuation of grand narratives as the basis of architectural endeavors.






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Figure 4. UMU Field Experience blog. (© FoBE)

Through these processes, architecture education opens itself to becoming more inclusive, breaking down ever-present stereotypical viewpoints. It also has to acknowledge that there are different paths to success in architectural education.<sup>37</sup> Listening without prejudice, not being judgmental, and opening ourselves to further learning as instructors, forms a key element in helping student learn. Listening to students provided an opportunity to review the transition of students through architectural education, and to address tacit elements often ignored in the educational process. Working with alternative ways of engaging students made it necessary for instructors to be open to alternative viewpoints, acknowledging (by both instructors and students) that neither have all the answers. It is this vulnerability that invites alternative perspectives, an openness that promotes empathy, compelling students (and instructors alike) to reflect on their design process and propositions, facilitated through the ability to listen to different points of view.

## ENDNOTES

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