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Capa: Tower in the railway station of Ressano Garcia. Mozambique, 2019. Foto: Ana Silva Fernandes.

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In between on all levels – [Applied] Foreign Affairs¹

Baerbel Mueller*

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Since I started teaching at the University of Applied Arts Vienna in 2002, I have been responsible for the so-called “special projects,” such as student realizations and transdisciplinary courses. In 2011, I had the opportunity to establish the [Applied] Foreign Affairs lab within the Institute of Architecture. [A]FA investigates spatial, infrastructural, environmental, and cultural phenomena in rural and urban sub-Saharan Africa. This description might sound vague, but it implies an understanding of architecture and spatial practice as a very broad field, and illustrates how diverse [A]FA’s interests are, and how extensive its scope of (potential) projects is. I define the work in the lab – the same as I do in my own practice – as navigations in the field of architecture and urban research within diverse cultural contexts. Some projects are conceptualized as pure artistic research, others are based on design tasks or commissions, and some combine both. Most projects center on distinct questions, or clear missions, and culminate in field trips and residencies through which mappings, rural growth patterns, visionary art spaces, and relational physical interventions are produced. So far, [A]FA has been working on 11 schemes for eight distinct sites located in four countries within the scope of 16 onsite residencies. From an initial concentration on a pure interest in rural and urban sub-Saharan Africa within carefully selected project settings, [A]FA’s emphasis has shifted towards developing specific research methods, alternative project strategies, and decolonizing objectives within this very context.

A laboratory is per definition a facility that provides conditions in which research and experiments in a field of study may be performed, a place for testing, observing, and practicing. This is done in an applied manner – as [A]FA’s name and the logic of a lab implies. A purely academic, projective, and digital environment is what is left behind. From the very beginning of a new project, students are sent out to investigate, to test out on a 1:1 scale, and to encounter (spatial) situations in the world outside of university. To come up with another body of knowledge, new approaches, and alternative solutions, one needs to engage oneself with the unknown. This refers to both the work and professional contribution itself, as well as the encounter with the not-yet-familiar – and maybe forever foreign – (African) cultural context. To achieve this, the educational agenda is conceptualized as an alternating process of unlearning and learning. A kind of reset is needed to explore alternative, critical forms of knowledge production, other spatial practices, and new prospects for collaboration. Whenever possible, an experimental and playful approach is created and upheld throughout

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¹ This article was first written in 2019.

the entire process of a project, allowing for an open-ended experience, without too many constraints. Given briefs are intensely interrogated and reflected upon, often reduced or shifted into other directions. This might happen on a conceptual level, or a programmatic one, or is just manifested in a change of scale. To a certain extent, the respective project partner needs to be involved in this process. Invented projects follow their own logic and are translated as artistic research, temporary interventions, or events. Here, the starting points are self-defined topics, which cover a research interest of either [A]FA or that of an individual in the team. The specific “what” and the “how” are always interdependent. On site, the process of relating and making is conceptualized in a reactive and slowed-down manner. Thereby, openness, tolerance, and the breaking of routines are required from all parties involved. Conventional relationships between client, community, and architect; teacher and student and NGO; studio, university, and field are questioned, or subverted. Every process and outcome is generated by the individual commitments and specific constellations of all the actors involved. Conditions of uncertainty and fragility are deliberately embraced. At best, spatial and programmatic hybrids of diverse ownership emerge.

Besides rather speculative and experimental proceedings, projects are based on an interdisciplinary and transcultural approach. Again, the kind of interdisciplinarity which is considered productive depends on the respective project brief and collaborative frame. Around a core team of students of architecture, mostly students of related disciplines – or young professionals – participate. [A]FA has been working with students of landscape design, environmental studies, and water management on projects in rural settings, or when environmental and infrastructural topics are being addressed. For more experimental labs, art students of diverse disciplines have been selected, and young artists, who are based locally, or constitute the future users of the space in the becoming, have been invited to partake. But the reverse strategy has also been applied: artists have been involved in projects with a technical, infrastructural focus, as well as scientists in artistic ones. The interdisciplinary approach also manifests itself in collaborations with (local) academic and non-academic professionals and with colleagues from a diverse set of disciplines. Team sizes are exceptionally small. The largest [A]FA group consisted of nine individuals travelling to Ghana. Reasons for that are manifold: From the moment [A]FA was formed, it felt wrong to bring any larger groups of students from the North into a postcolonial context. This condition had to be negotiated, and was only fully accepted by the university administration when some of [A]FA’s tangible successes legitimized its relevance, and thereby its specific operational mode. Other reasons for small teams have been their better group dynamics, more balanced collaboration with local stakeholders, deeper individual engagements, practical advantages when travelling, and also, clearly, limited budgets. While an interdisciplinary *modus operandi* was actively chosen, a transcultural approach has been inherent in [A]FA’s work. In every single project, there is a local counterpart, and due to the fact that [A]FA’s geographic focus lies in rural and urban sub-Saharan Africa, collaboration is transcontinental, transnational, and transcultural. Thereby, a purely north-south constellation has never really materialized: Even though [A]FA’s home base is in Vienna, the core student teams have always been international or global. Altogether, the 37 students who have joined [A]FA to Africa have so far been from 22 different countries from all five continents. The scope of spatial knowledge resulting from this diversity of (cultural) backgrounds in the core team itself has been extremely beneficial and productive, and constitutes one of the strengths of [Applied] Foreign Affairs.

Above and beyond the “who,” the “where” and the “with whom” defines the real process and characteristics of a project evolution. In her article, “Migration from [a] to A,” Hannah le Roux reads [A]FA’s relationship to Africa as follows:

“There is nothing a priori about the social needs, the nation, the institutions, or even the toolkits of the projects [a]FA undertakes. Rather than bringing an agenda to Africa, [a]FA encounters on reading and reacting to situations. These moments tend to emerge from encounters between the north and south, pauses in the circulation of practices and people from Africa to Austria and back again. With both partners simultaneously using the projects as ways to escape, settle, consolidate, or experiment [...]. The specific objects of fascination of this lab are slippery things: the event, the social, the performative, textiles, liquids, wind, propagation, and education. These forces and the shapes they form are orchestrated by youth, but follow the wisdom of the experience of the elders with whom the lab typically seeks out an adoptive relationship. [...] Their collaboration with [a]FA hinges on the co-development of a sense of radical localness and absolute openness that lies between the affection for home and the dream of getting beyond its limitations. This apparent tension makes for unique, visionary, and yet entirely appropriate projects at each site.” (Le Roux, 2015).

Indeed, the appropriateness, impact, and sustainability of a project are strongly dependent on the sincerity and passion of the joint forces behind it. Thereby, each collaboration is of a very different nature and its parameters need to be set anew each time.

Ilustração 01 – [A]FA Haduwa Apata, Apam, Ghana: a transdisciplinary process



Photos: D. Aschwanden, J. Lanoo.

Working with a collective of artists in an urban setting is fundamentally different from partnering with village authorities and an NGO operating in the development sector. It is obvious that the kind of reciprocal engagement and communication, and the level of mutual understanding, are strongly affected by a whole set of factors, such as locations, educational backgrounds, and generational constellations. Going through an artistic process together with Ghanaian students of architecture – urban, on the same academic level, of the same age – is mostly balanced, inspiring, and fun. Mapping coastal erosion, investigating the environmental and economic problems of a fishing village, debating illegal sand mining on its beaches with unemployed fishermen – as a student coming from outside – is another story.

In a constellation like this, the common ground is way more limited, and the first challenges to overcome are assumptions, clichés, and prejudices from both parties involved – on “the other,” on poverty and wealth, on Africa or Europe. And often these behavioral mechanisms cannot be seen or decoded by the individuals involved. Expectations of “help” or “solutions” are almost categorical, and hard to fully overcome. To resist them in a productive way – while coming from outside – is especially challenging within contexts that are associated with the urgent need for development, and are heavily loaded with ideas regarding “help for the better.”

Decolonizing Strategies in Design-Build and Spatial Practices

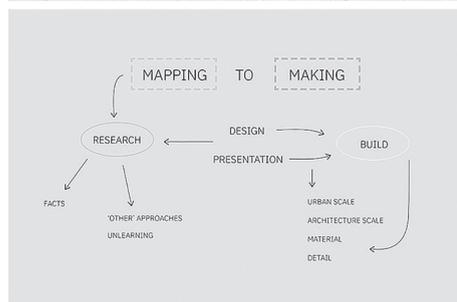
[A]FA tries to face these challenges by applying policies which subvert them:

Firstly, by avoiding working in constellations that originate from unequal power relations – which is definitely the case in the development sector, and when working on (design-build) projects within communities with serious needs. Instead, [A]FA introduces project settings where its outsider perspective, engagement, and expertise can create a beautiful and meaningful surplus. This is achieved by collaborating with artists who have a specific agenda within a challenging environment and who dream of, or work on, “other spaces.”

Or by refusing certain design commissions, and instead offering applied or participatory research on given issues which an institution or community needs to deal with or become aware of. There is only a very fine line between listening and learning through mapping and making, an imposed and patronizing form of intervening. [A]FA claims that the process of relating and creating must be much more about questioning than stating.

Reflecting on some of the aftermaths of the design-build movement in the Global South, [A]FA has also introduced stricter working strategies that favor more balanced power

Ilustração 02 – [A]FA New Guabuliga Market, Ghana: from mapping to making, with local labor forces



Photos: [A]FA.

relations when it comes to realization projects. Design-build is not *per se* a social approach in architecture – especially in the context of Africa, where there are enough examples in which design-build projects have even caused harm. Today, it is no longer justifiable to allow students of architecture to fly somewhere far and remote in order to gain personal hands-on experience by taking over the shovels themselves, only to learn how to build or apply certain building techniques. Students working with [A]FA are encouraged to step into the roles of researcher, designer, consultant and communicator, rather than maker or construction worker. Within environments where professional craftsmen and (un)skilled workers are available, fully capable of doing manual labor, local manpower should not be replaced by students of architecture, or guests. In this way, the socio-economic implications are healthier, local empowerment can be fostered, and a win-win can evolve for all parties involved.

Collaborative, transdisciplinary, and transcultural approaches further imply the necessity to work in a reactive and slowed-down manner. It is very much about time and presence. Thereby, one's own presence needs to correspond with the given rhythms of daily life, the local culture, and available resources. A key factor is a generous time frame, and when it comes to built realizations, continuity as well. [A]FA has been quite successful in creating and maintaining long-term relationships, engagements, and projects. But its biggest challenge is still facing the notion of time – on many levels. As architects and researchers, we always come from outside, and we always operate within a (tight) timeframe, which has potential, but is also very limiting. Hardly ever do we speak or operate from within or over extensive periods of time; even more so when coming from a far. Compared to other professions – such as social sciences or anthropology, for example – what is considered a long (field) research phase for architecture or architectural education is laughable. In addition, labs such as [A]FA, most design-build units, and transnational life projects

Ilustração 03 – [A]FA Lagos Legacy, Ebute-Metta Lagos: creating shared (event) space instead of designing



Photos: A. Gaestel, K. Joannides, drawing: Toms Kampars.

run parallel to semester studios in academic settings. Therefore, students have limited capacity and time to fully engage, and are constrained within the tough framework of their compulsory curriculum. This is especially unfortunate, as the transformative experience and biographical impact gained from these kinds of projects can be tremendous, and truly sustainable. Of course, local collaborators or “clients” and users should always be beneficiaries who profit equally.

After about two decades, the design-build approach has reached an impasse in terms of repeating operational modes which are not acceptable anymore – and never really have been. It needs to emancipate itself from the good-will intervening that accompanies neo-colonial attitudes, just like what is occurring in the architectural world in general. The so-called “social turn” in architecture has its negative repercussions when it comes to projects transferred to or located in the Global South.

“Neo-colonialism is an urgent issue but one which most of the profession is ill-prepared to interrogate. In order to address the underlying questions of the appropriateness of architectural concepts and their technical implementation, local and foreign experience needs to come together in an unbiased way to negotiate the challenges of intercultural communication. This is an indispensable prerequisite if such cooperation is to have sustainable and productive results.” (Berlanda, 2015)

Who tells whose story? Who builds whose buildings? How to enter a space (which is not yours)? How to connect? How to break stereotypes? How to create a shared space, professionally?

A Plea for the In Between

Operating in postcolonial contexts requires decolonizing strategies; and “othering needs to be translated into bridging” (John A. Powell, 2018). We need to recalibrate relationships in which difference continuously emerges, and counternarrate the common binary of self and other. Edward Glissant’s concept of relation, which moves beyond the oppositional discourse of the same and the other, with a new vision of difference as an assembler of the “dissimilar,” might serve as a conceptual starting point for alternative practices.

Applying this aspiration to the fields of architecture and spatial practices, the first thing we need to do is shift our focus from the product to the process. In this way, unlearning, embracing co-creation with paradox, recognizing “contingency as an opportunity rather than as a threat to architectural practice” (Morrow and Brown, 2012), and operating in between on all levels – with all the potentials and limits this implies – need to be incited. The normative models of architectural education and practice need to be hybridized and radically transformed if we are aiming for a new kind of connectivity, a universal discourse with regional cohesion, and alternative spatial imaginations. These paradigms should not only be thought through, but also translated into new kinds of architecture and spatial practices.

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