

Book Review

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Educating citizen designers in South Africa

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Introduction

Today, with decolonisation on the rise in the West, comes a timely compendium titled *Educating citizen designers in South Africa* edited by Elmarie Costandius, an associate professor of Visual Arts and coordinator of the Master of Arts in Visual Arts (Art Education) at Stellenbosch University, South Africa and Herman Botes, acting director of the Visual Communication Department at Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa. *Educating citizen designers in South Africa* proffers critical citizenship design education to confront the civic ramifications of historical colonialism and apartheid in contemporary South Africa. Together, Costandius and Botes lead a theoretically-fueled conversation with a group of design scholars from various South African educational institutions – including the University of Pretoria, The Cape Peninsula University of Technology, the University of Johannesburg, along with the editors' respective universities – on what constitutes critical citizenship design pedagogy in present-day South Africa. The co-editors state vaguely, and in a somewhat limited way, that the book aims to 'contribute to the critical citizenship discourse by offering a South African perspective' (Constadius & Botes 2018:iv), but they contribute something more important than that, two-fold. On the one hand, *Educating citizen designers in South Africa* disseminates findings from educational research on critical citizenship pedagogy in design; and in so doing it contributes a cross-disciplinary research perspective to a global conversation on critical citizenship in design already underway. For instance, in the west, key texts that have emerged over the past decade and a half include *Developing citizen designers* (Resnick 2016) and *Citizen designer: perspectives on*

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design responsibility (Heller & Vienne 2003). On the other hand, *Educating citizen designers in South Africa* also contributes to social transformation efforts locally (in South Africa) as well as on a global scale.

Educating citizen designers in South Africa begins with a preface, penned by co-editors Costandius and Botes, that speaks to the role of design education as a critical practice in South Africa; a place, they write, that is still ‘challenged by its past’. To say ‘challenged by’ is an understatement though. The Apartheid period between 1948 and the 1990s was one in which the South African government – controlled by a white minority – deployed an appallingly oppressive system of colonisation and ‘*baasskap*’ in the form of racial segregation. Today in South Africa, in what Costandius and Botes (2018:i) refer to as an ‘era of globalization’, they argue that:

The field of design is a fertile ground upon which to contest boundaries of social inclusion. Social and racial division speak through various layers of South African reality. This can be from the turmoil in the country’s political realm, to its fragmented social geography and the lived experience and internal consciousness of its citizens.

The preface and the edited collection as a whole give a peep-hole view, particularly for those on the outside, into South Africa’s post-Apartheid context that still views ‘white as the norm and black as the other’ (Costandius & Botes 2018:5). Moreover, approximately two decades since the end of Apartheid, *Educating citizen designers in South Africa* attempts to answer an urgent need for a new pedagogical framework informed by design, educational, and critical theory; one that can transform the detrimental effects of a deep-seated bias in the consciousness and cognitive development of South Africa’s young adults, particularly college-level students who are predominantly white.

The preface is followed by 11 case study chapters on research in design education that flesh out the concept of critical citizenship design in concrete objectives, project-based curricula inclusive of civic engagement and fieldwork, and critical thinking. While the contributors share a common discipline – design – there is still a high degree of diverse perspectives due to the many sub-disciplines of design represented in this edited collection, including graphic design, visual communication, industrial design, design-for-development, design entrepreneurship, urban design, and architecture. In the first chapter, Costandius teams up with Neeske Alexander, a recent graduate student, to propose barriers to critical citizenship education that include power relations and structures, stereotyping and prejudice, and hegemonic whiteness. These barriers are accompanied by strategies to confront them that include dialogue and discussion, community engagement, reflection, and design as a medium for learning.

While the discussion of methodology in this chapter seems convoluted and is thus mostly inaccessible for replicating, the literature review that grounds the hypothesis is multinational, cross-disciplinary, and theoretically rigorous, utilising prominent literary, design, and educational theorists such as Dewey, Foucault, Freire, and Schön to support the arguments. Some of these texts, as well as others, are also cited in subsequent chapters, creating a unified theoretical framing and conversation around the topic of the book. One wonders, however, why prominent Black scholarship like that of bell hooks, Stuart Hall, Angela Davis, and Toni Morrison was not part of this grounding.

The primary theoretical framing for the book converges around a paper titled 'Towards a framework for critical citizenship education' (Johnson & Morris 2010), which functions as a thread that binds the individual chapters together, as most of the case studies rely on it to explain critical citizenship education. Chapter 2, written by co-editor Herman Botes, would have probably been a better first chapter in the edited collection, as it does a splendid job at introducing and explaining Johnson and Morris's (2012) critical citizenship educational framework. Through this chapter, the reader comes to understand that critical citizenship pedagogy can be viewed as a kind of top-down response to a bottom-up, youth-inspired, civil unrest that characterises present-day South Africa. But for exactly that reason, more should have been said about the challenges in this chapter. It is not the case that a wealthy white elite clings to power and privilege because they are innocently uneducated about it; nor that their opposition has been unable to make the change simply due to factors that education will magically change, for example.

The pursuit of transformation in South Africa's educational system started with former President Nelson Mandela's establishment of the National Commission on Higher Education, another kind of top-down initiative that has been foiled by continued racism, which is arguably the reason why South Africa has taken so long to contribute to the global conversation around critical citizenship. A sustained future of transformation in South Africa must unite the power that ended apartheid with equally transformational education praxis. With that goal in mind, statements such as the following description of Chapter 7, written by Fatima Cassim of the University of Pretoria, seem to be seeking a normalcy that only offers limited acknowledgement of the challenges at hand: 'we can teach design students the importance of imbuing their work not only with good design values; but more significantly with critical citizenship values' (Costandius & Botes 2018:iii).

Educating citizen designers in South Africa ends abruptly with a chapter that provides a perspective regarding moving forward. However, an index would have been a far more useful ending to such an intellectually-dense volume. Despite this shortcoming,

Educating citizen designers in South Africa could serve academia well as required reading in masters and doctoral level graduate programs in design, such as the Master's of Design in Integrative Design at the Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan that frames its pedagogy around equity and access. Specifically, on the undergraduate level, select chapters – particularly Chapter 2 – could serve as required reading to introduce, explain, and promote critical citizenship.

References

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