

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Presenting History: The Manipulation of Chronological Structures in the Development and Maintenance of Transformative Curricula

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Abstract

In this article it is argued that, through adjustment of the point of view from which history is taught and theorised in architecture schools, grand narratives of progress can be critiqued and manipulated at a structural level. This could provide more lasting transformative practices than those produced by attempts to subvert such narratives by slotting alternative details into the existing structure.

The restructuring of points of view in history curricula is approached from critiques of two devices through which historical events are considered to be of objective significance: the canon and the timeline. The fundamental definitions and justifications of these devices are briefly unpacked, after which a proposal is made for alternative structures in the production of content for history and theory modules at university level. A brief description of some of the structural teaching and learning devices of studio-based design courses serves to illustrate the diversity of modes of engagement available to managers, teachers and students in the discipline. Some of those devices are then transposed onto more conventional teaching and learning structures in order to test new possibilities for history and theory curricula.

The possible outcomes of a restructuring is briefly illustrated through an example of resulting ‘other timelines’ which are functional at the level of rendering history legible and comprehensible as a subject of study, but which could simultaneously move narratives of progress out of history and into the personal experience of students and tutors.

Keywords

academic development; architectural representation; chronology; curriculum; decolonisation; history and theory; timelines; transformation

Firing a Canon

Whenever one reads a text, one is by definition *not* reading a very large number of other texts. One is at all times selecting from a nebulous and interconnected field of texts because all subject matters, regardless of how clearly defined or autonomous they may appear, are connected to many others which, to compound the problem, are themselves connected to many more subjects and matters in their turn. The most common solution to this problem

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(that of defining the boundaries of a field of study) is the establishment and maintenance of a canon, a selection of particular examples that define an area. Through anchoring with examples, the canon can define a vague boundary which is simultaneously strong enough to identify all those texts that would fall inside its territory while also being diffuse enough to expand should a new anchor appear near or in its periphery. This quality has made the canon an enormously successful device in the production of order in the industries and faculties of knowledge. Since much of what we consider canonical in any field, however, is a historical inheritance, it becomes subject to renewed critical scrutiny in the South African context, where the call for the decolonisation of university curricula presents opportunities for the reinvention of the canons that define the activities of our fields.

Although decolonisation debates have already been substantially formed and interpreted by a large number of scholars and theorists, both globally and in Africa – Biko, Fanon, Said, wa Thiong’o, Spivak and Bhabha are probably the most well-known amongst them – its specific relevance in the design and delivery of university curricula was highlighted in South Africa during the popular political movements initiated by #RhodesMustFall in 2015. This resistance movement followed, generally, two lines of critique. Firstly, it argued that universities are perpetuating inequality through financial exclusion (Naicker, 2016), and secondly that, through teaching content that is primarily a colonial inheritance, students may be alienated from their own experience and that values true to this time and this place are thereby either eradicated, or rendered invisible (Pillay, 2016; Nordling, 2018).

The successes of that movement were most immediately felt in the first line of critique, which came to be known as #FeesMustFall. Since financial models of exclusion and access have a substantial recorded dimension, in the form of statistical records of disbursement, they are comparatively easier to adjust than curricular content (the second line of critique). Unlike financial bookkeeping, the records for curricular content are distributed amongst an enormous quantity of incompatible documents, presentations, texts and, often, the memories of individuals involved in teaching. The second branch of the movement is therefore significantly more complicated to untangle. This complication was made evident by the wide-ranging online mockery of the component of #FeesMustFall that splintered off in the form of #ScienceMustFall (Ally & August, 2018). Intended to critique the predominance of Western lenses on African subjects, the respondents often found themselves in the unfortunate position of having to recommend content to replace knowledge inherited from colonial sources. The direct engagement with content outside of one’s field is evidently a dead end (*Science must fall?*, 2016). It remains possible, however, for any number of disciplines to analyse and comment on the structural conditions of a field of knowledge. It is possible to study science, for example, historically and philosophically (Latour, 1993). In search of new canons, it may thus be useful to not only look at specific interventions in content, but at the underlying structure of a field.

Deconstructing the Timeline

Amongst the most sensitive subjects in relation to decolonisation as a mandate, alongside the sciences, is the teaching and production of history. The proponents of decolonisation are operating with the awareness that the trajectories traced by the past through the present and into the future can be manipulated not only by speculative projections of what the future should be, but also by repositioning knowledge of history – the conceptual starting point of a trajectory, a timeline. The timeline is to history curricula what the scientific method is to science – a fundamental ordering device. The vicissitudes and implications of the idea of the timeline are elaborated in Figure 1.

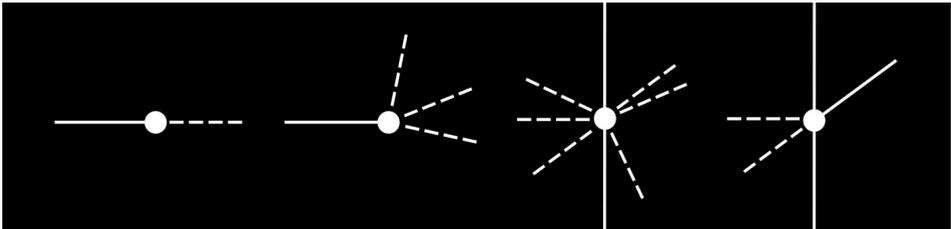


Figure 1: Some diagrammatic conceptions of conventional timelines

(Source: Author, 2018)

The convention of reading from left to right is maintained in the descriptions that follow. The present is represented by a circle with the past to the left and the future to the right. In the diagram on the far left, we are presented with the simplest conception of time in which the present straddles a known past and an unknown future. The past and the present appear to have a relationship, since the rationale of the line is maintained in spite of crossing through the circle.

In the second diagram, the idea is more complex and is represented through a crude summary of the concept of the rhizome developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). Accordingly, the future is represented not as a line but as a field of possibilities. In the diagram three lines are drawn but in reality, to the right of the circle is an infinitely dense field which could not be represented as a line. The function of the dotted line here is to indicate the paths that the present could follow through that field in defining the events that do occur, and separating them conceptually from the field of potentiality and the mass of possibilities that do not occur. Events are thus conceived to move from potentiality to actuality through the present moment. In *The Idea of Building*, Steven Groák elegantly spatialises this conception of the relation between the past and the future through an analogy with the body when he cites an unidentified South American language in which “the word for ‘the front of the body’ is the same as the word for ‘the past’, and the word for ‘the back of the body’ is the same as the word for ‘the future’”. They picture themselves walking backwards into the future, able to see the flow of what has happened, incapable of *conceiving* what is to come” (1992, p. 182).

The spatial nature of history (alluded to by the fact that events *take place*) means, however, that the past too must be represented as a dense field. In this instance, it is a field of the endless number of different places in which events have occurred (Massey, 1992). The third diagram illustrates such a dynamic environment for the past. It is now more dense, less like a line and more like a field due to the number of events that have taken place simultaneously (Žižek, 2014). In order to accommodate that representation, the present is now drawn as a vertical line separating two fields of possibility – a field of places to the left and a field of possible events to the right. The present is thus drawn as the intersection of space and time.

Since the present can redirect the movement of events at any moment, the past and the future are not represented as logically consistent in the third diagram. It is not assumed that there is a direct connection between events in the past and those in the future. While it may be true to say that the logic is very complex and thus generally unpredictable, it would be obtuse to argue that that means that there is no logical consistency in the passage of time. Accordingly, in the fourth diagram, continuity between the past and the future is restored, but the conventional hierarchy of known and unknown is reversed for the purposes of illustration. The past and the future are thus not considered to be entirely independent (though it remains possible in the present, through agency or coincidence, to redirect the path at any moment) and there is generally still understood to be a flow from the one side to the other, which happens in a more or less comprehensible or logical fashion. One could now theoretically select or follow a trajectory through the field of the past in order to change the future or one could speculate on a future, and find a past (or a place) for it that would make it logically consistent with reality.

The problem with the simplicity of these diagrams is apparent: the representation of a four-dimensional reality (Massey, 1992) in the two-dimensional medium of the drawing severely limits that which can be represented.

More complex forms of representation may be useful in the production of alternatives. One of the most evocative timeline drawings in architectural history was revealed in Charles Jencks' expertly timed mid-2000 publication of a drawing titled *The Century is Over, Evolutionary Tree of Twentieth Century Architecture*. In it, Jencks summarises many of the movements in architectural thought throughout the twentieth century along a semi-organic, blob-like construction containing ideas, their proponents and example buildings. The representation is remarkably complex, containing multiple values and their interactions such as the relative impact of ideas (through the blob size in the vertical dimension), their duration (blob length and colour), the relative impact of individuals, examples and key terms (through variations in the text size). In Jencks' words:

As can be seen in the classifiers to the extreme left of the diagram, it is based on the assumption that there are coherent traditions that tend to self-organize around underlying structures. These deep structures, often opposed to each other psychologically and culturally, act like what are called, in the esoteric science of nonlinear dynamics, 'attractor basins': they attract architects to one line of development rather than another. (2000, p. 77)

Frame/Work

What Jencks attempts with remarkable success in that exercise is a more or less definitive illustration of the content of a century of architectural history. That is not what this project is attempting, but the limits of that diagram can be taken as the start of another project, one where representation leaves the space of images, and enters the four-dimensional space of organisations (which includes images, persons and events). This is an attempt to develop what Fanon called the “the framework of an organization” when he said that “[a]ll this taking stock of the situation, this enlightening of consciousness, and this advance in the knowledge of the history of societies are only possible within the framework of an organization, and inside the structure of a people” (1963, p. 142).

Jencks’ exercise is useful because it points to the limits of definitive illustrations and shows some of the values that can be created by manipulating the limits and depths of both the canon and the timeline. It is through these devices that history takes on the appearance of objectivity and inevitability. But through the manipulation of those devices, and critique of categories like “other” (Žižek, 2014) – or what Jencks calls, in that diagram, “unselfconscious” – it can be made apparent that it is, in fact, politically constructed, subjective and retroactively malleable. What this project is proposing is to describe the structure of an organisation which produces critiques of history through the exploration of alternatives to these devices.

In this proposal it is recommended that, rather than positing specific content as anchor points for new canons, the details be almost entirely dictated by the idiosyncratic and unpredictable expertise and proclivities of individuals appointed to study and teach individual history and theory subjects, the framework being used only to determine the relative position of students and teachers. A more idiosyncratic order is succinctly defended by Søren Kierkegaard when he states that “[w]hen a classification does not ideally exhaust its object, a haphazard classification is altogether preferable, because it sets the imagination in motion (cited in Žižek, 2014, p. 36). Similarly, in a review for *The New Yorker* magazine, Christine Smallwood (2014) speculates on a variety of means of ordering the multiplicity of mutually exclusive possibilities involved in the activity of reading while subverting the canon. Smallwood describes a number of unusual methods for dislodging the prejudice of importance set by existing canons. One technique involved the apparently arbitrary selection of a shelf from the New York Society Library and completing all the books on it. Another, perhaps more poetic technique, is to rely on the chance meetings of the past and the idiosyncrasy of the books one has selected to purchase, but not yet read.

Such techniques, while they may seem somewhat whimsical on the surface might be of use in the reconsideration of historical curricula. Logic and coherence do, however, remain imperative. Should the structure be based on a truly arbitrary selection, it will be impossible to describe and summarise content for an audience interested in taking a course. In other words, if the only way to understand the content of the course is to take the course, it becomes impractical to implement as a university subject where content needs to be communicated at varying degrees of complexity depending on the audience for the information. The function of the course programme (or curriculum) could, however,

be shifted from the description of required content, to the production, maintenance and description of structures which make space for difference. They should ideally be well-defined and lend themselves to summary understanding while describing value clearly without either going into excessive detail or restricting the complexity or nature of the content that they contain. Such a structure could also be called an architecture. In order to teach history and theory of architecture, in other words, we first need an architecture of history and theory.

Reflexive Traditions in Architectural Education

Architecture is a text, but it is also a technology and a social service. Its pedagogy has therefore always performed complex manoeuvres between satisfying the demands made upon it by a profession, the academy, the expectations of students (and their benefactors) and a historically grounded, cultural discipline. The most potent medium for the production of these manoeuvres is the design studio. As a medium of instruction, the studio is non-directional (or, rather, re-directable) making it more dynamic than traditional auditorium-style lecturing.

The classroom setting within which lectures typically take place has a clear and often very useful directionality and hierarchy, which is balanced by the architectural studio where freedom of movement leads to more reflexive teaching and learning practices. What students learn in a studio setting is determined through the interaction of lecture content, briefs, their own interests and talents, as well as the proclivities, talents and frames of reference of tutors and fellow students. Any canonical development is thus necessarily filtered and manipulated in real time, making it an ideal format for decolonising curricula. It is, however, highly laborious and expensive to teach in this medium since it generally takes on a format that approximates that of a conversation, which is highly limited in the possible number of participants. Though techniques for economising these conversations abound (group work, elaborate briefs, reading lists and critique) such instruments tend to be poor substitutes for inclusive and reflexive conversations between tutors and students. Therefore, though it may be tempting to simply absorb history and theory completely into design studios, the purpose of this article is rather to speculate instead on some of the means by which reflexivity can be increased within more conventional lecture settings.

The requirement for increased dynamism in the programme derives from a specific problem that arises when history and theory are taught as subjects parallel to the design studio. While architecture can be studied as a historical phenomenon, it is no longer considered appropriate that it be practised historically. In other words, in the studio, the logic of instruction is a-historical – students require and benefit from expansive frames of reference, but they are never (or almost never) mimicking historical forms in their exercises. Their experience with the production of form is always contemporary because, through the medium of the studio, students are active participants in the development of the discipline and historical forms are not given superior status. Though the historical practice of architecture is possible, and was popular during the prominence in the 1980s and 1990s of the style of architecture generally known as ‘Postmodernism’, it is now understood that

one loses substantial opportunities for new identity formation. In addition, it produces a problematic dualistic hierarchy between theory and practice. In the first instance, one cannot study architectural history until one can 'do' architecture and in the second instance, one cannot 'do' architecture without knowing the selected history.

Keeping in mind the means of identity production described by Michael Smith when he stated that "identity and difference are socially produced in the here and now, not archaeologically salvaged from the disappearing past" (1992, pp.513), the Department of Architecture at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) is in the process of testing and developing a series of new and reconsidered structures in the history and theory subjects. The descriptions that follow are the first iterations of these structures and the first speculations on how new structures can be represented and implemented.

Theoretical Structures

The Theory and History programme at TUT is divided, according to long-standing and deeply ingrained traditions, into horizontally stratified layers of one year's duration each. This structure is not in question since disrupting it would prove too substantial in its consequences for other structures extant in the system. The proposed new structures at TUT will allow for the essential, underlying principle of an incremental increase in complexity to remain the order of the field, but the timeline is radically transformed and the grand narrative of progress is removed.

The effects of any structural changes to an organisation will only be evident over time, and are therefore described and approached as a project, rather than a curriculum. With close observation and minor adjustments, the proposal will be refined in real time while quality-control procedures such as peer review, regular reports and substantial feedback sessions will help to prevent illegibility. Content that does not fit into the incremental, horizontally stratified structure can be resolved either by adjustments to the structure, or by circumventing the stratification through, for example, guest lectures in some years from tutors who primarily manage and develop other years.

The first structural/chronological adjustment to the History and Theory programme at TUT is an alteration of the title. Architecture schools, when they don't attempt to separate history and theory entirely into autonomous subjects, tend to name their History and Theory programmes just that – history, then theory. A switch to Theory and History marks a reversal in the order and an important re-conceptualisation of the programme, shifting focus from the history of architectural theory to the theorising of history through the medium of architecture. In other words, theory is not seen as an object of study parallel to history but is instead considered technologically, as a device through which to view, approach and appropriate history.

Another adjustment involves the use of some techniques derived from studio-based teaching in the development of organisational structures. Since it is not practically feasible at this point for each student to construct her or his own theoretical structure and historical narrative, the proposed structure focuses its attention instead on the relationship between tutors and the content that they teach. Occasionally, it appears that the content of a course

could be objectified (through lecture notes, slides, course guides and even essays) which would institutionalise the intellectual property produced by employees of the university, and would make tutors somewhat interchangeable. The reality is, however, that the notes and slides are highly specific to the person who developed the course, and can be esoteric and inaccessible for anyone tasked with replacing them or standing in for them. This would be interpreted as a weakness by more bureaucratically and economically minded managers, but it also presents an opportunity in the context of transformation, where bureaucratic instruments themselves become subject to critique. The task at hand, then, is to develop a structure that allows for individual idiosyncrasy which would, in turn, more or less automatically transform the content. It requires a substantial amount of curricular invention from individual tutors, but allows each tutor to exploit her or his strengths in the production of order in order to compensate for the possible lack of continuity, or reduced continuity.

The etymological origin in English of the word *theory* links it to concepts of vision and manners of seeing (theatre is derived from the same root). In keeping with this original conception of theory, the first four years of study serve as an introduction and investigation of means of constructing and wielding different lenses on history. The lenses are named and conceptualised as representative of an incremental increase in complexity but reflect the idea that that which increases in complexity is not the object which is viewed, but the viewer or the lens through which the object is viewed instead. Accordingly, a student may progress through 'levels' of knowledge of increasing complexity, but history is no longer assumed to be a narrative of 'improvement'. The first four years are thus named using adjectives rather than nouns, and describe a way of seeing – an order, rather than an object which is viewed. In the fifth year, the focus shifts from the construction of lenses (or perspectives, and/or points of view) by tutors to the self-conscious construction and manipulation of perspectives by students themselves in preparation for a minor dissertation in the sixth year.

As an example of how this would translate into teachable content, a brief unpacking of some possibilities from each year will serve as examples. In the first year, the lens is called *Geometric*. This does not mean that students only study the geometries prevalent in architectural history, but instead that the order by which the content is arranged is a geometric order. In other words, should one take the example of the circle as an ordering device, one could place architectural artefacts from the Renaissance next to Iron Age circular settlements of Southern Africa or circular buildings in the 21st century in the same lecture, providing students with context for each, and allowing them to mix intuitively as a montage. This a-temporality will resolve many conflicts between the history subjects and those in the fields of design and construction, while simultaneously opening up history courses to minor insertions of radical novelty in the production of content.

The course progresses from this very broad introduction to an *Elemental* conception of architecture in the second year, based on the extensive work by The Office for Metropolitan Architecture (Koolhaas, 2014) in which architectural elements are dislodged from one another and each is studied in the context of its own history as a technology,

rather than within the generic context of political history or styles of architecture. What exactly is considered to count amongst the 'elements of architecture' will, however not be dictated by that text and will instead be decided, studied and expanded by tutors and students.

In the third year, elements are given order through the investigation of *Sequential* techniques. There, time, and its relation with space, become the background for investigations of, for example, literature, cinema and film making, music and its notation, or the plan as an essentially sequential device. In the fourth year – the exit level for an undergraduate degree – students study the history of architecture through a *Political* lens. Here, architecture could be studied in its relation to power, identity, and/or the idea of a nation or city (urban design is explicitly introduced into the design curriculum at this time) with the background of an awareness of architecture as an embodiment of relationships and hierarchical values. The fifth year is the first year of postgraduate study. It precedes a one-year thesis in which theory, construction and design are fully integrated. Titled *Organization* it allows for the lens to become a self-conscious object of study as students begin to experiment explicitly with the production of visualised points of view through analysis of architectural representation and its histories, taking the previous four years into account.

The example above is based on the current staff distribution of the department and their expressed research interests. It will be updated as staff join the department, leave it, or change the trajectory or framing of their research.

Other Timelines

Each of the lenses outlined above will produce a different concept of the timeline. It is not within the scope of this text to describe any course content in detail, or to draw a comprehensive representation of any of the courses, their content, or resulting timelines. As illustration, however, Figure 2 serves to summarise roughly the type of timeline that a lens like the *Geometric* (left) and *Elemental* (right) could produce.

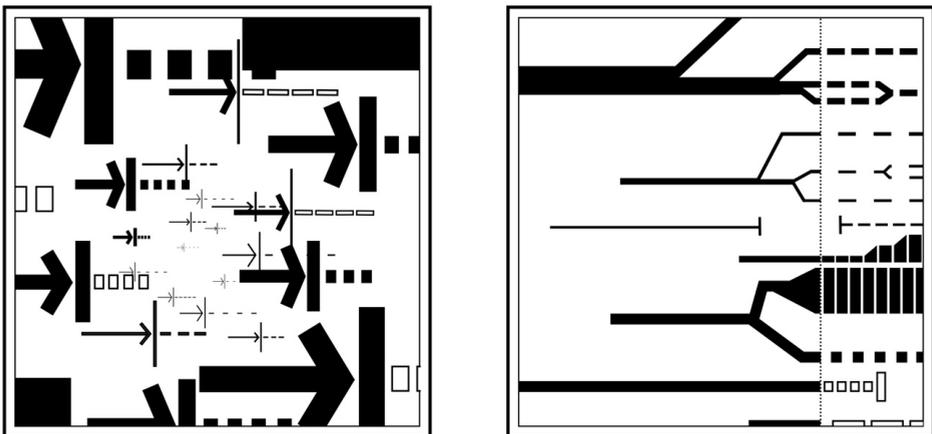


Figure 2: A multiplicity of coexistent histories are revealed when the primary order of history is adjusted to an a-temporal mode such as geometric shapes in architecture (left) or architectural elements (right).

In the alternative timelines above, the convention of reading from left to right has been retained, meaning that the past is generally to the left and the future to the right of the present which is described by a vertical line. Each arrow in the frame on the left represents an architectural artefact, event or person. The logic of the relations between individual artefacts is determined idiosyncratically through association with geometric shape, in the production of each lecture and its content, and they are placed in a three-dimensional space according to the order of that logic. The duration, intensity and impact of individual geometric components (circles, squares, or spirals, for example) vary somewhat, depending on the subjective will of the tutor and students.

In the diagram to the right, the timeline resulting from the second-year course, *Elements*, is roughly described. In it, the different artefacts of study maintain their own relative timelines and are located in a field from which the tutor selects details to discuss in class. They have different trajectories, lengths, pasts and futures and are relatively independent of one another in the abstract space of the diagram.

In both images, the present is drawn as a vertical line, introducing the explicit study of possibilities for the future. The study of history is thereby reframed as a study of the past, present and future – as well as their interactions.

Identity and Continuity

Architecture schools are in a continuous process of negotiation between the mutually exclusive and competing possibilities of a well-defined and well-illustrated identity on the one hand and the mandate to conform to predictable and consistent standards on the other. Standardisation allows interoperability between institutions while identity allows unique, place-based education. The drive towards standardisation is a response to artificially produced, place-based inequalities which will be perpetuated if left to develop naturally and so should not be dismissed. Architecture is, however, a place-based discipline (buildings, like events, take place) and the productive potential of place-based identity also should not be dismissed.

In order to tread the fine line between equality and difference (and, for that matter, possibility and definition) one could focus on the dual nature of architecture for at least a conceptual solution. The moveable components of architecture tend to be its conceptual dimension, which is mutable through reinterpretation and description, as well as its organisational component (people arrive at and leave architecture, defining it as they occupy it). By focusing on giving definition to these immaterial components of architecture (people, procedures and concepts), architecture schools may be able to not only bridge discrepancies between bureaucratic processes and practical reality in its own curricular programmes, but could also contribute more broadly to debates in education and politics. Architectural thinking can contribute recommendations for changes to the procedures by which rules (form) are followed, when not making recommendations for new rules. To say, in other words, what is *in* the book but not to say it *by* the book.

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