Education, Design and Practice – Understanding skills in a Complex World

• Paper / Proposal Title:
An African Almanac

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• Abstract (300 words):

‘Architecture can be analogous to a history, a fiction, and a landscape. We expect a history or a novel to be written in words, but they can also be cast in concrete or seeded in soil.’

—Jonathan Hill

In Arabic, the term hijra هجرة refers to ‘immigrating’, ‘passing’ or ‘coming’, a word with both Latin and Arabic roots. Historically, it describes the Prophet Muhammad’s flight from Mecca to Medina, escaping persecution. Included in its etymology are the words for ‘departure’, ‘exodus’ and ‘journey.’ Interestingly, in Urdu, the term has also come to mean ‘fluidity of identity’ or a ‘third’ identity, of gender and culture in particular. In this definition, the body
is understood to be a literal site of transition, a vessel through which culture and identity journey, a place in which both are housed.

Traditionally, the role of architecture has been to confine or control space, shaping historical experience and social relations in static form. As a result, the history of peoples for whom movement, not stasis, is the predominant experience does not find easy or direct translation into form. Unit 12 is interested in finding forms of material and spatial representation for this most contemporary of human experiences. We believe there is enormous architectural potential in working with the migratory, the diasporic, the mythical, the performative and the narrative to create new spatial possibilities for these themes.

This year, acting simultaneously as story tellers, architects, time travellers and choreographers of history, students in Unit 12 visited the North Atlantic Coast of Morocco, historically one of the earliest ports significant to the history of both migration and settlement, to develop a new architectural vocabulary for these themes of migration, diaspora and hybridity.

Currently underway, and due for completion in October 2019, our studio’s Major Design Project of the year is a New Port Authority (NPA). In different forms, ports are the earliest point of contact with a new region for migrants. The history of the establishment of ports is also intrinsically linked to the history of slavery and of the formation and policing of borders. The port is a space of crossing, of transition, of crossover. It is also a highly programmed space, akin to an airport, where slippages of control, territory and access have consequences that far exceed the port’s actual geography.

This paper discusses and explores several projects from the Unit, from 2017, 2018 and 2019; focussing on the architectural languages, expressions, forms and methods of approaching our chosen subject matter.

- Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Digital collage and a forensic approach to space expose Sumayya’s particular obsession with deconstructing and reconstructing image and space. Whether unpacking the city through a microscope, or satellite imagery, Sumayya has a particular interest in exposing the parts of its constituency which are largely invisible. Her interests have admitted her into a host of prominent conceptual and investigatory projects, including a position as assistant curator and film producer for La Biennale di Venezia 2014 (South African Pavilion). In 2015, she co-founded the experimental architecture and research firm, Counterspace. Sumayya’s work and interests have granted her a host of award and project nominations, including nominations and
awards as shortlisted candidate (top 5) for the Civitella Ranieri Foundation architecture residency prize (2019) and Rolex Mentorship and Protege award (top 3), shortlisted to be mentored by Sir David Adjaye in the 2018/2019 cycle. She currently teaches design at the University of Johannesburg as co-leader of Unit 12, An African Almanac, at the Graduate School of Architecture, Johannesburg.

Counterspace is inspired by their location - Johannesburg - and aims to work with developing design expression particularly for Johannesburg and the continent - through urban research, publications, installations and architecture.

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Unit 12 was founded by Prof Lesley Lokko at the Graduate School of Architecture. After teaching with Prof Lokko for several years, Sumayya is now running the Unit, with a focus on narrative means to generate new architectural languages for Johannesburg and Africa, specifically for contested territories, issues of migration and diaspora.

www.unit12.africa