Basic Design and the Semiotics of Citizenship: Julian Beinart’s Educational Experiments and Research on Wall Decoration in Early 1960s Nigeria and South Africa

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From 1961 to 1965, Julian Beinart, a young architecture lecturer at the Witwatersrand University (Wits) in Johannesburg led a series of one to two week-long basic design workshops—named Basic Courses in Visual Arts—in Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Rhodesia, and Kenya. Concurrently, he documented and analyzed the adaptation of the facades of the government-built houses of Western Native Township in Johannesburg. In both endeavors, Beinart was interested in the formation of a modern folk art that, although derived from various African traditions, also departed from them to create a shared urban culture.
Trained as an architect in Cape Town in the early 1950s, Beinart left for the United States to take postgraduate studies at MIT (1955-1956) and Yale (1957-1958). Upon his return to South Africa in 1959 he was appointed lecturer at the Wits, where he taught until 1964. In 1965, he returned to the University of Cape Town as professor and in 1967-1968 served there as dean. In 1969 he left again for the USA to take up a visiting professor position at MIT that soon became permanent. This article is concerned with the early period in Beinart’s career, between his postgraduate studies in the USA and his return to settle there. More broadly, this is a period characterized by the escalation of the apartheid state’s oppressive policies, on the one hand, and great optimism regarding decolonization in the rest of Africa, on the other. This disparity informed Beinart’s critical perspective, which began developing in the USA as a result of his exposure to the jazz scene and the budding civil rights movement, and which subsequently would change the way he experienced race relations upon his return to South Africa.¹ Similar to other left-wing Jews who played a role in anti-apartheid resistance,² Beinart became associated with the black intelligentsia in Johannesburg, who were veterans of the vibrant intellectual and artistic life of Sophiatown, a scene which produced such influential cultural products as Drum magazine.³

Beinart’s work during this period was greatly influenced by his studies at MIT under the instruction of Kevin Lynch and György Kepes, who emphasized user perception of the urban environment, architecture as a visual language, and the study of commercial advertisements as a communication system.⁴ His studies coincided with the research project “The Perceptual Form of the City,” which Lynch and Kepes co-directed from 1954 to 1959 and which resulted in Lynch’s seminal publication The Image of the City (1960). Kepes is known, alongside László Moholy Nagy, a fellow Hungarian émigré, for having reformulated the Bauhaus school pedagogy, particularly the Vorkurs, into “basic design” in the postwar American context. Author of the influential Language of Vision (1944), which became a standard in American art education, Kepes explored the cognitive functions of visual language as a foundation for the recuperation of humanism in postwar society. It is the marriage of Lynch’s “commitment to the values of ordinary people” and “environmental semiotics,” on the one hand, and Kepes’ pedagogy and research on the communicative functions of visual culture, on the other, that informed Beinart’s work upon his return to South Africa. In contrast to the highly industrialized society Lynch’s and Kepes’ work addressed, Beinart believed that the visual environment was more readily accessible to

² Among them were the architects Rusty (Lionel) Bernstein and Arthur Goldreich, who played key roles in the African National Congress underground resistance. Beinart denies, however, having had membership in any political party. Despite not being directly active in subversive politics, however, he was harassed for his liberal views and activities, which led him to leave South Africa. Ibid.
³ Beinart served on the editorial board of the Johannesburg-based magazine The Classic, edited by Drum veteran Nat Nakasa, alongside Nadine Gordimer and others. The journal’s first issue featured the writings of other Drum veterans including Lewis Nkosi, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Casey Motsisi, Can Themb, Richard Rive, and Leslie Sehume.
ordinary people in Africa, since they were not cut off from the basic components of their traditional visual culture in the same way as Westerners.

At stake in this article is the effect of the importation of these pedagogic and research methods to African countries during the period of decolonization and consolidation of the apartheid regime. The question I raise is how Beinart’s itinerary charged these design practices with social and political content, which otherwise remained mute in both Lynch’s and Kepes’ work. This socio-political content, it should be stressed, was not merely the derivative byproduct of applying Kepes’ and Lynch’s methods in African societies. Beinart’s basic design workshops and research into vernacular forms of expression articulated the persistence of the early twentieth century colonial primitivist imaginary (which even the industry-oriented Bauhaus was not completely immune to) in postwar modernist revisionist practices such as Lynch’s and Kepes’ in the USA, and Team 10’s in Europe. While Beinart’s work attempted to reverse the power-relations underlying these practices, his use of the terms “tribal,” “folk,” and “popular” reveal the discursive limitations of his approach. The use of the term “tribal” was symptomatic of the South African apartheid discourse. By using Kepes’ European-derived term “folk,” or the class-based term “popular,” Beinart attempted to defuse the “othering” embedded in the term “tribal” and open it to dynamic modern articulations. The fact of his refraining from the use of the term “vernacular” may be symptomatic of his resistance to attempts to lock African societies in any form of a distinctly local tradition.

Beinart’s workshops brought together the lineage of Bauhaus pedagogy with the lineage of art workshops set up by missions and colonial educators (which played a significant role in the development of arts education on the African continent). A key figure in the transition of the art workshop from its colonial to postcolonial form was Ulli (Horst Ulrich) Beier, an English German-Jewish émigré who took up a post in the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University College, Ibadan, Nigeria, in the 1950s. Responding to the political transformations in Nigeria and on the rest of the continent, Beier became an influential figure in modern African culture by founding Black Orpheus, a journal dedicated to contemporary African literature and art; by his involvement in the Mbari club in Ibadan, where he hosted Beinart’s second and third workshops; and by his establishment of a Mbari club in the neighboring town Oshogbo, where he facilitated the training of local artists.

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5 Ginger Nolan has recently suggested that the process of “unlearning” European traditions at the Bauhaus was aimed at reconstituting an imagined pre-modern state of union between man and his labor, as a panacea against modern alienation. According to Nolan, Marcel Breuer’s and Gunta Stölzl’s African Chair and Breuer’s later tubular steel chair need to be read in continuum rather than as a break in the history of the Bauhaus, as both expressed this desire for a lost union, which putatively existed in primitive societies. See Ginger Nolan, Savage Mind to Savage Machine: Techniques and Disciplines of Creativity, c. 1880-1985, PhD dissertation, Columbia University, New York, NY, 2015, p. 61, 289 n. 90. Another example of design primitivism can be found in Henry van de Velde’s competing design approach. See Debora L. Silverman, “Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part II,” West 86th, vol. 19, no. 2, Fall-Winter 2012, p. 175-195.

6 For an overview of these workshops see Valentín Y. Mudimbe, The Idea of Africa, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 159-165.
Another key figure who influenced Beinart’s educational experiments and research was Ezekiel (from 1977 Es’kia) Mphahlele, an exiled South African intellectual who also taught in the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University College, Ibadan, and was a founding member of Mbari Ibadan before going on to found Chemchemi, an equivalent cultural center in Nairobi, Kenya, where Beinart would conduct his last workshop. While Beier took on the role of a facilitator in the Pan-African discourse, for example by translating Francophone literature into English and introducing African Diaspora literature in *Black Orpheus*, Mphahlele took a more polemical stance in Pan-African debates by voicing a critique, drawing from his South African apartheid experience, of the philosophy of Negritude, as promoted by the Senegalese president, philosopher, and poet Léopold Senghor. At stake was the very nature of the dynamics that constituted African cultural identity. Beinart’s emphasis on the urban rather than ethnic or rural origins of African popular imagination drew directly from Mphahlele and other veterans of *Drum* magazine. This black South African intelligentsia posited its urbanity against any essentialist claims regarding African culture and identity, whether promoted by the advocates of Negritude or by the apartheid state. In this sense, Mphahlele’s and Beinart’s convergent activities in decolonizing Africa mark an important stop in the global itinerary of South African resistance to apartheid, a resistance whose intellectual, artistic, and political influence extended well beyond the apartheid state.

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7  Peter Benson, *Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986; Wole Ogundele, *Omoluabi: Ulli Beier, Yoruba Society and Culture*, Bayreuth: Eckhard Breitinger; Bayreuth University African Studies, 2003. The Mbari clubs were established in Ibadan and Oshogbo in West Nigeria and Nsukka in East Nigeria in the 1960s to promote Nigerian literature, art, music, and theater. The CIA front the Fairfield Foundation, which also funded the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom, supported many of the activities Beier and Mphahlele initiated, including some of Beiart’s workshops, without the recipients’ knowledge.

8  I thank Louise Bethlehem for bringing to my attention Mphahlele’s activities in Nigeria.

Basic Design and African Modernity

In a scathing review of Udo Kultermann’s *Neues Bauen in Afrika* (1963) published in the Cape Town-based journal *The New African*, Beinart criticized Kultermann for having written the book “in correspondence,” without a meaningful familiarity with the continent and with no indication as to “which buildings are done by overseas architects, which […] by Africans.”¹⁰ In this early critique of the first comprehensive survey of modern architecture on the continent, Beinart pointed out Kultermann’s limited perspective, which we would term today Eurocentric, based as it was on journals produced in the former colonial metropoles, as well as ignoring the positionality of the architects mentioned in the context of colonial (and lingering postcolonial) power relations.¹¹ More importantly, Beinart regretted the absence of critical questions such as “Is a new African architecture possible? What about an architectural *negritude* or an architectural African personality? One wonders whether Mr. Kultermann has heard of these terms.”¹² Notwithstanding his own debatable affinity to the continent as a white South African, Beinart asserted in these interrogations not only his situatedness in Africa as a source of legitimacy and authority, but also his fluency in Pan-African debates.¹³ Moreover, for a white South African writing in this interracial liberal journal, subtitled “The Radical Monthly,” at stake was not merely a contestation over architectural knowledge, but the creation of a platform for the dissemination of a shared multiracial African culture within South Africa, and on the rest of the continent.¹⁴ Writing in one of the very first issues of this journal some eighteen months earlier, Beinart addressed his readers in the first person plural pronoun when he asked: “Should contemporary African art go back to its roots? Do we know what our roots are in any case?”¹⁵

Operating within the all-white context of the Wits University Department of Architecture, Beinart traveled frequently to Lorenco Marques in Mozambique, where he visited Portuguese architect Pancho Guedes (Amâncio d’Alpoim Miranda Guedes). Identifying himself politically with the left, and with the history and cultures of Mozambique, Guedes

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nonetheless enjoyed a privileged colonial position. In the atelier he established in his house, he trained and employed black craftsmen and artists, and collected African art extensively with his wife Dora. While Beinart was too cautious to crown Guedes as an exemplary “African architect” in the article he wrote about him for the Architectural Review, what Beinart appreciated most about Guedes was the latter’s indiscriminate borrowing from both African and European traditions: “Amancio Guedes embraces all outside influence with alacrity. On the one hand, he may use primitive marks on corrugated iron shacks outside Lorenço Marques […] yet he can still remain obsessed with the sophisticated European Surrealist painters. He is as much involved with the curvilinear stone walls of Zimbabwe as he is with the metalwork of Victor Horta.” Notwithstanding his omission of the African sources of this European “sophistication,” or the clear division of labor in Guedes’ work environment between himself and his black assistants, Guedes presented to him an example of a charismatic master architect who absorbed African artistic traditions and talents through “a total artistic immersion.”

It is from this search for an interracial creative work environment, even if practiced in a colonial context, as in Guedes’ atelier, that the first workshop was born. It was held in January 1961 in Lorenço Marques in one of Pancho Guedes’ unfinished buildings, the pyramidal kindergarten. Although the choice of site was probably motivated by practical reasons, it was symbolically fitting and set the tone for the next workshops. First, it provided the setting for a collaborative “total work of art,” in the spirit of the British Arts and Crafts movement, which influenced Beinart deeply during his studies in the USA, and which had informed the early formation of the Bauhaus school in Weimar. Secondly, the choice of a building for a kindergarten emphasized the playfulness and lack of inhibitions that Beinart and Guedes attempted to generate at the workshop. This objective affected the make-up of the participants, who included, along with Beinart’s Wits students, South African black artist and educator Sydney Kumalo, several of Guedes’ protégés, the painter Valente Goenha Malangatana, Guedes’ children, and the on-site builders.

The non-hierarchical and welcoming interracial and inter-generational atmosphere was made possible by the absence of any technical prerequisites or prior knowledge. According

19 Ibid., p. 247-248.
to Guedes, “My idea was that you could communicate the adventures of modern times to people without complex historical descriptions; by making a series of celebrations of things like Surrealism, Dadaism, Constructivism and so on.”

Likewise, Ulli Beier referred to the “uninhibited, fresh vision” of young African artists as an advantage that needed to be groomed rather than stifled by formal education. “With the right kind of training,” he explained, “the ‘unqualified’ student could take a kind of a ‘short cut’ to art.”

This idea, shared by other late colonial and postcolonial art educators, was predicated upon modernism’s primitivist African origins, and the essentialist assumption that Africans had innate modernist capabilities, and therefore could bypass traditional training.

Following their successful experience in Lorenço Marques, Ulli Beier invited Beinart and Guedes to give a similar summer school at the Mbari Club in Ibadan that summer. In their advertisement for the summer school, they stressed that no qualifications or prior experience were required.

Due to Guedes’ last-minute cancellation, Beinart ended up conducting the summer school on his own. He arrived with a clear program in mind, which included a series of daily formal exercises for a week-long summer school, starting with two-dimensional exercises in black and white, gradually adding color and texture exploration, and moving through collages to the final day’s architectural exercise, “the making of space—the ideal house in Ibadan.”

However, he soon discovered that the students, comprising, as in the first workshop in Lorenço Marques, a mixture of backgrounds and abilities (painters, teenagers, schoolmasters, a forester, a housewife, as well as the premise’s janitor, a car salesman, and, finally, a blacksmith who joined spontaneously), could not follow the formal language he employed. In response, he resorted to action: “and then someone would start, often, I would myself, and then everyone reacted.”

Significantly, this was not a demonstration, but the setting of the tone for a group improvisation. Perhaps Beinart was influenced by the jazz music he promoted in South Africa, where he was among the organizers of the Moroka-Jabavu jazz festivals in 1962 and 1963. He shared his interest

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25 Ibid.
26 This accessibility was no doubt due to the location of the Mbari club. Consisting of a workroom, which they shared with a Lebanese restaurant, a small library, and a courtyard, Mbari was located in the heart of Ibadan’s urban life: “From outside came a constant din of highlife, hooters and the shouts of Yoruba soapsellers and into the club drifted a stream of fascinated watchers, salesmen, frightened children. It was like working in a market.” Ibid., p. 21.
28 Beinart was also involved in the production of albums recording these festivals and their cover designs. During this period he taught a course in the theory of jazz at the African Music and Drama Academy in Johannesburg.
with the Ibadan crowd in a series of lectures he gave on jazz, with one lecture, given at the Mbari club in conjunction with the summer school, dedicated to jazz in South Africa.²⁹

To the students’ great surprise, Beinart asked them to use ready-made materials, such as bottle tops, leaves, pieces of chalk, mints, sand and grit, in combination with household paint in primary colors and old magazines. These “shock materials” were poured or fixed onto newsprint or hardboard in what Beier referred to as “blitz techniques.”³⁰ Instead of the “ideal house” exercise, which he had originally envisioned as the culmination of the course, but failed to communicate to the students (realizing it was “anti-climactic” after the excitement generated by the collage exercises), they created three-dimensional installations, such as the tying of reinforced rods into a metal tree, or a mixed mud and cement sculpture.³¹ The use of unexpected formal exercises and ready-made materials to break artistic conventions was not new, since Beinart drew simultaneously from Kepes’ Bauhaus-inspired techniques and from prominent contemporary American artists, most notably Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings.³² In the African context, however, this choice took on a particular significance, as expensive art materials were scarce. In introducing these materials, Beinart hoped to free the students from formal colonial art education precepts regarding the proper materials and techniques that constituted art works. The use of cheap material and surprising techniques was intended to relieve students from colonially inherited technical and psychological inhibitions, as well as material constraints, in order to allow for a greater access to creative experimentation.³³

Like the Bauhaus in Germany and the New Bauhaus in the USA, so Beinart’s experimental workshops were subject to market forces, which in this case were not industrial but of the art world. Despite the workshop’s apparent success, described in the local newspaper as a “creative frenzy,” Beier thought that the exercises were too intellectual for the non-trained student.³⁴ In the next workshop he limited the participants to school administrators and art


²⁹  “Brilliant ‘cool jazz’ from Verwoerd’s boys,” Express (no date), Folder 189, Box 17, Subseries 497.R, series 497, RG 1.2 (FA387), Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Collection. The three lectures covered the history of jazz, modern jazz and jazz in South Africa. The last included rare recordings, some of which Beinart made himself, of Miriam Makeba and of the Jazz Epistles (Kippie Moeketsi, alto sax; Hugh Masekela, trumpet; James Gwangwa, trombone; Dollar Brand, piano; Johnny Gertze, bass; and Makaya Ntshoko, drums).


³²  Similarly to Jackson Pollock, these practices included dribbling from ordinary household paint tins, stirring them into shapes with sticks and poured sand, or pressing images onto the paint and sand with found objects. See ibid.


educators, and paired Beinart with Denis Williams, a Guyanese painter and archeologist who had taught at the Khartoum Technical Institute in Sudan. Like Beinart’s previous workshop, the program was comprised of a series of formal exercises, except that this time painting, Williams’ specialty, supplanted Beinart’s three-dimensional final exercise. Following this second Ibadan workshop, Beier entrusted Williams with conducting the next workshops in the Mbari club he established in the neighboring town of Oshogbo, while his wife and artist Georgina Beier continued to work with a selected number of students after the short workshops were concluded.35 This change of educators, I would like to argue, was the result of deep pedagogic differences, rooted in Beinart and Beier’s diametrically opposed objectives. For Beier, who wished to discover and groom a selection of exceptionally talented artists, there was no point in having “a series of identical, progressive exercises by 40 students,” as were produced in Beinart’s second workshop in Ibadan.36 Williams, who contributed in Makerere to the artistic development of Ibrahim el Salahi, then one of Africa’s most talented rising stars, was much better suited for the job, as he “did not worry these students with any form of theory or analysis. Instead he tried to stimulate them to produce images.”37 These included objects that would be recognizable and marketable as individualistic expressive works of art.

For his part, Beinart was not seeking unique artistic expression. Notwithstanding the description in the local newspaper of Beinart’s “magic circle of personal magnetism,”38 Beinart did not capitalize on an authoritative charisma in his teaching. Instead, he strove to liberate students from the limitations of authorship: “How exactly the work was done, remains a mystery. What is clear, however, is that the idea of creative freedom so communicated itself from one student to another, that in the end the best work had not been done by one or two, but by everyone.”39 Just as there were no master-student hierarchies in his workshops, there were also no “prima donna students or solutions,” he was happy to report.40 Despite the emphasis on dynamic collaboration and the elemental exploration of texture and form, the works produced by his students did not remain at the level of formal abstraction, to Beinart’s surprise. One of the most definitive conclusions he reached following the two summer schools he conducted in Ibadan was that, however formal the exercises might be, the students approached them figuratively.41 One example was Mr. Iseghohi (“a 45-year-old inspector of general subjects from Warri, he had come to the school by canoe”), who chose to fill a sheet of paper with birds instead of abstract

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38 News clippings, Folder 189, Box 17, Subseries 497.R, series 497, RG 1.2 (FA387), Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Collection.
40 Ibid., p. 23.
41 Ibid., p. 22.
markings. Another example was Ms. Soyinka, who “when asked to relate colors to each other, painted birds using strips of color to build up the bird forms.” This resorting to image making, Beinart explained, derived from existing folk traditions. Ms. Soyinka’s colored birds, for example, drew from the conventions of North Nigerian weavers “who embroider figures, often birds, on pillow-cases in strips of bright coloured cotton.”

Beinart did not consider this resorting to local conventions a pedagogic failure. On the contrary, he explained that his “shock” techniques “provided the catharsis which returned the students to the healthy foundations of folk art. This basic teaching merely released what they intuitively could do, but which, because of inhibitions and misconceptions, they never before did.” Beinart agreed with Beier that, in the African context, there is not as much “divesting” to be done as in Western institutions, since the students were hardly burdened by Western artistic conventions. Nonetheless he still thought that, in order for there to be true tapping into African creative resources, students needed to be shaken down by basic design, “not only to effect a quicker release, but it returns people to the visual roots of their society, and in doing so, seems likely to have a more lasting result.” Yet, this was not a call to “re-tribalize” urbanized Africans in “homelands,” as was the official policy at that time in apartheid South Africa. Significantly, Ms. Soyinka did not draw from her native Yoruba traditions, but from North Nigerian weaving she had probably encountered in Ibadan’s markets. For Beinart, the immediate environment which the summer school students drew from was already a mix of urban and rural traditions. Beinart sought to reconnect students to the resources available in their urban environment as a space where the various traditions coexisted and changed, not least because of their encounter with Western popular culture. If there was a short cut to art, for Beinart, it was via the urban African environment—not the bush, where Malangatana had withdrawn provisionally to reconnect with his primal creative instincts, following Guedes’ advice.

Understood in the framework of Pan-African politics, at stake was a critique of the cultural program of Negritude as was promoted in Senegal by Léopold Senghor, who sought to define a distinct African identity. Alongside Nigerian writer and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, the South African-exiled intellectual Ezekiel Mphahlele was among Negritude’s harshest critics. In a lecture he delivered in 1963, he positioned his South African experience against any romantic vision of Negritude, which he equated with “autocolonization,” as he termed...
In South Africa, he argued, black people’s struggle was performed in the urban realm “by integrating Africa and the West.” In a brilliant move overturning colonial hierarchies, and going against any kind of cultural and racial purism, Mphahlele contrasted South African blacks and whites based on their degree of cultural absorption and adaptability, as a condition for cultural resilience and vitality. “This is the sense in which I feel superior to the white man who refuses to be liberated by me as an African,” he concluded in this reversal of power.

For Beinart, it was precisely this ability to absorb Western cultural influences onto the foundation of a strong African visual culture that he promoted in his summer schools. Comparing the deep rootedness of visual culture in Africa with the relative newness of the literary tradition (bracketing out Africa’s oral traditions), he privileged visual culture as a pre-scriptural form of communication that could serve as a substrate for cultural formation even where non-literacy prevailed. Drawing from Moholy Nagy’s and Kepes’ reformulation of the Bauhaus Vorkurs into the basic design course in the USA, Beinart’s summer school pedagogy had very little to do with vocational or artistic training in the narrow sense. Rather, it subscribed to a more general approach of liberal arts education that saw the training of visual cognition as a basis for the cultivation of subjects capable of participating in society as citizens. Referring specifically to the German Bauhaus, he explained, “We are not concerned, as the Bauhaus was, with throwing away things, but with making personal decisions as to what is best to retain and what is best to renovate. It is more a problem of fusion than reconstitution.” From this perspective, Beinart’s pedagogical tapping into ethnic visual resources was not driven by an exploitative quest that would lock Africans in an immutable “Africanness.” On the contrary, this mode of teaching aimed to provide Africans with the confidence to make “personal decisions as to what is best to retain and what is best to renovate.” This decision-making process was to occur in stages, and was to “help Africans define what they want to say, personally at first, and finally together as they create a common culture.” As we shall see next, in South Africa, where citizenship was bestowed differentially, it was less a question of what Africans wanted to say, and more of how and where they said it.

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55 Ibid.

The New Folk Art of Western Native Township

In parallel with his workshops, Beinart set out on an ambitious project: documenting each and every one of the decorated facades of the two thousand standardized government housing units in Western Native Township in Johannesburg. By the time Beinart returned to South Africa, the legendary Sophiatown he had heard of from the Drum veterans had been thoroughly erased, making room for a white neighborhood. Having grown up in the environs of Cape Town, Beinart never experienced Sophiatown firsthand. However, he must have found in the neighboring Western Native Township traces of its cosmopolitan urban culture, whose mixed-race short-lived golden age has been compared to the Harlem Renaissance. The open wounds of this recent shared history and culture ("WNT was the place to go home to, Sophiatown a place to have a ball") invested Western Native Township not with an aura of nostalgia for a bygone past, but with the urgencies of the present, as its inhabitants faced a similar impending eviction away from the city center.

What began as a chance encounter, when Beinart dropped off a group of jazz players in the township, an area into which whites would not typically venture, grew into a five-year project that at its peak involved twelve research assistants and included extensive photographic documentation, analytic drawings, surveys and interviews, research in municipal archives, mnemonic drawings made by tenants and builders, and the computation of these findings into charts, graphs, and maps. Beinart’s ambition to turn this research into a book and defend it as a dissertation at the University of Cape Town was never fulfilled. In lieu of a book, he published the project in various journals and edited volumes, and presented it in exhibitions at the Mbari club in Ibadan (September-October 1961) and the Institute of Contemporary Art in London (February-March 1965).

On the face of it, such an extensive research project, one which received support through university grants and permission to research in municipal archives, cannot but raise the suspicion of complicity with the apartheid regime. The sheer scale of the data accumulated and the extensive use of photography bring to mind the role of photography in classification, governmentality, and the rise of the social sciences in conjunction with

59 For Beinart’s most extensive account of WNT, and what is perhaps the earliest historical overview of non-white urban displacement in South Africa, see Julian Beinart, "Government-Built Cities," op. cit. (note 58), p. 189, 191.
60 In his correspondence with Denis Duerden, the founding director of the Transcription Centre in London, Beinart mentioned that he received official approval to research WNT, and the Ernest Oppenheimer Memorial Award in 1963 to do so. He received additional grants in 1965 and 1968 from the Fairfield Foundation. The latter was a covert CIA funding arm that supported many African cultural activities, including the publication of Black Orpheus (see note 7). It is generally agreed that its recipients were unaware of the CIA’s involvement. See Beinart and Duerden correspondence, The Transcription Centre Records 12.13, Harry Ransom Center, University of Austin, TX.
modern state control. Yet, as photography historian Allan Sekula warned in his seminal article on photography’s complicity with state policing, “The Body and the Archive,” the use of photography is not predetermined by the nature of the apparatus itself.\(^{61}\) (Incidentally, Sekula uses as a cautionary tale the story of the black South African photographer Ernest Cole, whose photographic work of black South Africans’ lives the apartheid police tried to co-opt before he left for exile in the USA.)\(^{62}\) Similarly, in her analysis of the work of social scientists under the apartheid regime, historian Grace Davie claims that such a body of work cannot be reduced to the machinations of the state. Rather, she argues, just as the state was selective of the data it chose to use or ignore, so were social scientists working either for state departments or academic institutions free to interpret their data critically, against the state.\(^{63}\) Architects, like their colleagues in social sciences, found that with the consolidation of apartheid they were placed in a professional predicament, since the main sphere where apartheid’s policies were implemented fell under their purview in the field of town planning. Architects who sought to professionally influence social matters in the years leading up to apartheid did so primarily via research into “native townships,” with the aim of raising the standards of living of black South Africans. Ironically, with the rise of apartheid, they found a sympathetic ear with the government that supported their research into rational planning and reducing the costs of housing because of government desire to make segregation cheaper.\(^{64}\)

Like other architects of his generation, Beinart criticized architectural modernism’s prewar ethos of rational planning and its functionalist emphasis on minimum standards. Instead, he introduced questions of symbolism and emotional attachment, or, in his words, what differentiated between “a house to live in and merely a shelter.”\(^{65}\) While the previously commonly-held beliefs in rational planning and the mechanical objectivity of architectural functionalism were widely debated and criticized in the postwar aftermath of the modernist movement, primarily in the context of urban reconstruction in war-torn Europe and urban renewal in the USA, this critique had a specific resonance in 1960s apartheid South Africa. What Beinart referred to as “shelter” was the standardized “matchbox” houses the state provided en masse for urban black South Africans, equipped with nothing but the most rudimentary provisions. Here, the difference between a house and a shelter was not a mere theoretical architectural conundrum, or a class-based demarcation. This distinction

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correlated with the classification of populations, in which the category of “basic human needs” and their “minimum standards of living” were applied. To put it simply, the very definition of “human” was subject to a racial hierarchy, and so were “basic needs.”

Beinart’s initial impulse to document the township’s decorated facades can be linked to two other contemporaneous architectural practices of documenting the lives of black South Africans. The first is the photographic and architectural drawing explorations of the wall paintings and structures of the Ndebele rural homesteads, begun in the late 1940s by the Pretoria architect Adriaan Louw Meiring and the photographer Constance Stuart Larrabee. The stark colors and geometrical patterns of the Ndebele’s structures, along with their geographical proximity to Pretoria, made them attractive to white artistic circles in their pursuit of a locally defined aesthetic—despite having been already a modern product of the Ndebele’s relocation to white-owned farms—akin to other colonial settler societies’ “settler primitivism.” In the field of architecture, the most notable architect to undertake such an exploration of African artistic cultures, similar to Guedes’ in Mozambique, was the Pretoria-based Norman Eaton, as exemplified by the rich repertoire of African resources he actively sought and collected.

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Whereas Guedes and Eaton incorporated these art forms into their modern architectural production, A.L. Meiring and Constance Stuart Larrabee documented the Ndebele architecture for its intrinsic value. As John Peffer and Elisa Dainese have pointed out, implicit in Meiring and Larrabee’s search for the authentic “other” was a lament for the Ndebele’s encounter with modernity, which led putatively to the contamination and gradual disappearance of local cultures. As was often the case in ethnographic research, photography embodied the paradoxes of this imperialist nostalgia. Actively enabling the Western gaze and the cultural encounter that would threaten the existence of local cultures, it mechanically captured and ossified these cultures in a timeless archaic present. Although the impetus for Beinart’s documentation was the precarious existence of wnt’s wall decorations (in this sense, he acted out of a preservationist impulse similar to Meiring and Larrabee) he nonetheless emphasized—as he did in his workshops—the urban rather than the ethnic origin of the wnt and the Ndebele’s decorations in both symbols and painting material. Instead of regarding their imagery as contaminated by Western mass culture and consumer society, Beinart referred to it as “a new folk art,” which could serve as an index of “detribalization” rather than a medium to excavate traces of ethnic identity.

This interest in a “new folk art” as it emerged from advertising was spurred by Kepes. Responding to the shattering of humanistic values during World War II, Kepes sought a “positive popular art” that would create a new union between man and environment, arguably akin to the one found in pre-modern societies. While Kepes developed his theory of reintegration of man and environment in response to, and in collaboration with, the highly saturated technological and scientific environment of the American military-industrial complex, Beinart identified a new unity in African societies’ adjustments in their rapid transition to modernity. Similarly to Kepes, who found in advertisements a positive force mediating these processes in American culture, Beinart did not consider mass culture a threat to black African authenticity. If, according to Kepes, this mediation involved the participatory engagement of the beholder, in the context of African modernization, it

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72 Beinart documents this as part of a process: “For the first twenty years of the township’s life, houses were decorated with mud and cowdung murals as if they were still tribal huts. It was only when their past had become blurred […] that the second generation produced the plaster and wall painting decorations.” Julian Beinart, “The Environmental Game,” op. cit. (note 65), p. 34.
75 Reinhold Martin, The Organizational Complex, op. cit. (note 74), p. 51-79.
76 Ibid., p. 62.
provided the substrate for the activation of a local visual response, as found in the cases of the Ndebele and WNT wall decorations.

Experiencing Africa’s rapid modernization in the context of decolonization, especially as he witnessed it in his visit to Nigeria in 1961, Beinart believed that South Africa, as the most industrialized country in the continent, should have led this massive continental cultural change were it not for the repressive apartheid regime. His emphasis on the urban sphere as the site where African modernity could be forged derived from a particularly South African experience of the apartheid government’s policy of de-urbanization and re-tribalization of black South Africans in separate “homelands.” Against state ideology and policies, the Sophiatown intelligentsia resisted the locking of Africans into timeless traditions and their systematic dispossession from the urban environment. As mentioned above, this resistance extended to Pan-African debates on Negritude, via Mphahlele’s apartheid-informed critique. By the time Beinart carried out his research in WNT, the stakes of Mphahlele’s resistance to any romanticized vision of tribal culture had become a

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77 Julian Beinart, interview by the author, op. cit. (note 1).
very tangible reality, as exemplified in the Ndebele village documented by Meiring, which, upon his recommendation, became a tourist attraction for which the state provided a regular supply of paint and building materials. Serving as an ideal type of Ndebele rural living, the village displayed to local and international tourists not only the benevolence of the state in preserving African cultures, but also a living justification of the necessity to do so under apartheid’s “separate development” policy, an ideology of separation that associated race and cultural development. Deeply influenced by Mphahlele’s politics, Beinart proclaimed poignantly, “post-tribal society cannot produce tribal art: it does not want to, no matter how much sentimental bystanders or deprived nationalists may want otherwise.”

The second contemporary practice of architectural documentation focused on the urban living conditions of black South Africans. Far less artistic or romantic, this approach complemented social science surveys of urban poverty, which in South Africa, like other colonial and contemporary American cities, was construed as a racial problem. One such survey on furniture, commissioned by the National Building Research Institute and conducted by architect Betty Spence and social worker Anna Mokhetle, was published under the title “How our Urban Natives Live” in the South African Architectural Record. Although the results of this survey can be interpreted, as done by Davie, as a critique of the state, they nonetheless provided ample data that could serve the state’s intrusive gaze into the domestic lives of its black urban population.

In stark contrast to these exoticizing and voyeuristic projects, Beinart’s research, some fifteen years later, focused exclusively on the street facades of the houses, their “faces,” as he referred to them. These were the sites where WNB’s residents changed their houses’

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80 When Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd was elected prime minister in 1958, he promoted the term “separate development” as a substitute for “apartheid.” The term now came to designate a “multinational” rather than a “multiracial” society. See Anne McClintock and Rob Nxon, “No Name Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida’s ‘Le Dernier Mot du Racisme,’” Critical Inquiry, vol. 13, no. 1, Autumn 1986, p. 143. This change of terminology can also be interpreted as a response to the pressures of African states’ decolonization in the rest of Africa, beginning a year earlier in Ghana. This model ostensibly did not deny “development” on national grounds, but differentiated it in a semblance of cultural relativism. The discourse underlying Verwoerd’s thinking, whose key advisor was the anthropology professor W. W. M. Eiselein, can be traced to the development of the field of cultural anthropology in Afrikans-speaking universities. See John Sharp, “Two Separate Developments: Anthropology in South Africa,” RAIN, vol. 36, February 1980, p. 4-6.
appearances, as it was there that they could improve their houses the most with the least monetary investment. The original 400-square-foot houses residents received were made of cheap brick walls that were left unplastered. The houses were handed over with neither floors nor ceilings, nor with any fences or trees.\textsuperscript{84} Residents had the options of either having the municipality extend the house backwards, which involved an increase in rent, or enclosing the front porch.\textsuperscript{85} Another option, whose cost was four times as much as the original government-owned house and which only one percent of the population could afford, was to alter the structural arrangement of the house.\textsuperscript{86} The majority of the residents gave precedence to the space in the front, where the kitchen and single entrance were placed, and which they could alter on their own by hiring a local builder. As anthropologist James Holston commented regarding the self-built houses of Brasília’s working class, in this economy of means, in which the maximum effect was gained in the most public part of the house, the inhabitants did not follow “the choice of the necessary” attributed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to the tastes of the working class, but rather directed their investment where it could be seen and appreciated by their neighbors.\textsuperscript{87} Beinart followed the residents’ logic and took photos only of what they wished to present. Even his drawings, which did employ the penetrating architectural gaze via axonometric studies, were not voyeuristic in the same sense as in colonial orientalist depictions,\textsuperscript{88} but respected the limits of the walls. In his drawings of the street facade, he emphasized the limits of the street perspective,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., p. 196.
\item James Holston, “Autoconstruction in Working-Class Brazil,” Cultural Anthropology, vol. 6, no. 4, November 1991, p. 458-460. Holston found that sometimes people would invest first in facades, all the while living in shacks behind them.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
and even left the windows opaque, as if they were two-dimensional parts of the façade’s composition.  

This interest in the vernacular transformations of the spaces between the house and the street is reminiscent of the revisionist discourse of the modernists who formed the Team 10 group in Europe, which Beinart implicitly alluded to in his article on Guedes for the *Architectural Review*. However, as in the case of the workshops, where he was more interested in the process than in any finished artistic products, in this research project he was not interested in a Team 10-like operative exploration of new architectural forms that could be put into practice. Deploying his architectural skills in a quasi-anthropological manner, he was not interested in how inhabitants used the space in innovative ways, based on their rural traditions, but in how, as he observed, they transformed it according to codes of domestic bourgeois respectability. As Beinart commented, “here was an opportunity to make an outside living area to replace the enclosed porch, to furnish it with gardens,

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89 I am grateful to Martin Hershenzon for this observation.
90 Guedes became a member of Team 10 at the 1962 Royaumont meeting. Team 10 was highly influential at the Wits Department of Architecture at that time, as is evidenced by Peter Smithson and Aldo van Eyck’s contributions to the catalogue of the 1963 student exhibition *For Us*. See Patrick Jones and the Department of Architecture, University of the Witwatersrand (eds.), *For Us*, exhibition catalogue, Johannesburg, 1963.
Fig. 6. Decoration as acts of resistance.  
On the left: A view of the transformation of the house from the bleak standardized house to a colorful and gardened environment. On the right: wall decorations grouped according to “families” of form.  

paving and pergolas and surround it with hedges, gates, and sculptured gateposts cum letter-boxes.  

In addition, although he shared with Team 10 the idea of multiple viewing points over the city, which coordinated aerial views with street-level views, Beinart differentiated between the gaze of the state (some members of Team 10 were agents of the state, working in the French North African colonies) and the gaze of the residents themselves. In a photographic collage that appeared in one of his journal articles, Beinart juxtaposed aerial views of the monotonous native townships with a linear strip of the standard houses provided by the state. In this superimposition of the two perspectives—the bird’s eye view and the bare street facades, Beinart created an analogy between the anonymous matchbox house and the ordering gaze of the state. The state’s ordering gaze, however, also marked its own limits, as it could not break the spirit of its inhabitants. Against this black and white homogenizing gaze, Beinart assembled colorful horizontal strips of individuated house facades. These were produced to distinguish the houses, either to amplify the resident’s status or to direct visitors more easily to their houses. As Beinart observed some twenty years before Holston’s

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93 This technique recalls the frame-house facades photographed by Bernard and Hilla Becher concurrently in Germany, initiating their famous “anonymous monuments” typologies.
Basic Design and the Semiotics of Citizenship

seminal study of Brasília’s urban hinterland, although the decoration of their houses served to individualize the residents, this practice of individual expression was part of a group dynamic, a form of communication and participation in a multi-ethnic community.

While the decorations seemed random and highly diverse at first impression, Beinart found that upon a closer look, they were in fact “highly controlled and limited to variations of very simple geometric forms,” which, in the spirit of the growing fascination of MIT’s faculty for systems and computerization, “constantly mutate to include other distinct families of shapes, all building up a seemingly complex but yet essentially simple system.” These geometric forms combined with recognizable images could rarely, and only ambiguously, be traced back to any rural origins. As his studies showed, the distribution of various “families” of symbols that included the circle family (watch, cogwheel, the sun), rectangle family (razor blade), and diamond family (butterflies or trees) corresponded to neither tribal origin nor class. Similar to the jazz improvisatory group dynamic he emulated in his visual arts workshop, where he proudly proclaimed that no teacher-student hierarchies had prevailed and no prima donna students had stolen the spotlight, the wall decorations were often produced as one neighbor’s response to another, while limiting themselves to a set of unwritten rules: “I am sure these people could have individuated like crazy, but there is less evidence that they wanted to compete.” Like Kepes, Beinart was less interested in the meaning of the visual language than he was in its spontaneous, self-generating structure. As a condition for communication, this “spontaneous limitation of language” served as evidence of people’s inherent sociability and their ability to cooperate and self-organize.

This emphasis on visual communication as a condition for sociability distinguishes his analysis from Holston’s, which focused on the competitive character of this exchange. Furthermore, Beinart’s analysis of WNT wall paintings offers a more nuanced interpretation of the general category of “popular art” in Africa, as defined by anthropologist Karin Barber. While Barber identifies its audience as the mass urban population at large, the segregated urbanity of apartheid South Africa created the conditions for what Beinart characterized as a closed-circuit community of producers and consumers of signs, which allowed for inter-ethnic communication and the forging of new community ties and forms of identification that could develop into a cohesive body-politic. To support this point, Beinart links this form of communication with more explicit forms of self-organization developed in WNT, such as the first African cooperative store, an African Boy Scout unit, dance bands, a vigilance guard to combat juvenile delinquency, and a women’s organization.

96 Id., “The Environmental Game,” op. cit. (note 65), p. 34.
100 Reinhold Martin, The Organizational Complex, op. cit. (note 74), p. 61.
preventing women from throwing dirty water into the streets (as the municipality provided neither waterborne sanitation nor individual water supply). \(^{104}\) “It was a community of people who spontaneously associated with each other in order to preserve themselves,” he explained. This heightened sense of communication extended also to the community’s standing at the local municipality, which before apartheid (the township was established in 1918) was attentive to its leaders’ demands. \(^{105}\)

Characterizing this dynamic as one that is generated by individuals unbound by ethnic linkages and traditional hierarchies, Beinart enlisted this spontaneous self-organization as an argument repudiating concerns over the effects of urban alienation resulting from the loss of traditional ties. \(^{106}\) Unlike in Kepes’ postwar America, Africans did not need a designer-mediator to help them integrate into urban life. “Decoration is a primordial form of participation,” \(^{107}\) Beinart stated, resorting to an essentialist claim reminiscent of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ racist association of decoration with primitive instincts. According to him, Africans, like other societies in transition to industrialized modernity, were not yet fully severed from this primordial visual culture repository. \(^{108}\) Citing his contemporary, the Yoruba art specialist William Fagg, Beinart considered this visual culture as universal rather than specifically African. \(^{109}\) This was an opportunity to apply Kepes’ theories of a visual-based “new humanism” not only to Africa, but also to other parts of the so-called “developing world.” Beinart turned this less privileged position in the civilizational scale as drawn by the West into an advantage and, in turn, capitalized on his own proximity to African cultures in order to claim a privileged “southern” perspective. Significantly, however, and unlike European primitivism, Beinart did not portray his imagined “tribal man” or modernizing Africans as the passive producers or custodians of a visual tradition, waiting to be tapped by Western artists and designers. Rather, he attributed to them more agency and critical judgment the closer they were to their visual tradition. \(^{110}\)

Although cheerful and playful, this mediation was not an expression of appeasement that would ameliorate political struggles. Rather, it was precisely this cheerfulness that was at the heart of the residents’ struggle for rights in a white-dominated society that had


\(^{106}\) I refer here to developmental discourses of international aid organizations such as the UN, which cast rapidly expanding third world cities as a threat to social and political stability that could be putatively ameliorated by a gradual rather than abrupt transition into modernity. See M. Ijlal Muzaffar, *The Periphery Within: Modern Architecture and the Making of the Third World*, PhD dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, 2007, p. 268-320. Via the spatial policies of apartheid, the South African state wished to reverse African urbanization.

\(^{107}\) Julian Beinart, “The Environmental Game,” *op. cit.* (note 65), p. 34.


marginalized them, treating them as a transitory and expendable workforce, and rendering their lives superfluous.\textsuperscript{111} For Beinart, if the political battle had already been won by the state, it had not been won in the city itself. Here the battle was waged between the residents and their meager material resources. Responding to the contemporaneous urban renewal discourse in the US, which naturalized the removal of African-American populations from American downtowns by using organic terms such as “urban decay,” Beinart argued, “[S]lums are places where the power to resist is less than the natural tendency to decay.”\textsuperscript{112} Confronting the depoliticizing effects of this discourse, Beinart implicitly criticized the studio his colleague at the Wits, Wilfrid Mallows, conducted in the Western Native Township, which emphasized the role of the architect in facilitating this change.\textsuperscript{113}

In contrast to Mallows, Beinart downplayed any need for professional intervention, emphasizing instead the resilience of the inhabitants in making their environment more habitable, against all odds. Although interest in the agency of the “user” in processes of design had become widespread by the 1960s,\textsuperscript{114} Beinart associated it in\textsuperscript{wnt\textsuperscript{115}} with a particular form of resistance: “\textsuperscript{wnt\textsuperscript{115}} was a community of resistance: in \textsuperscript{wnt\textsuperscript{115}} people rebuilt the fronts of their houses and what they put on the faces of their houses was a language of resistance.”\textsuperscript{115} Closing off the yard with a fence, gardening where no trees were planted, and investing money in decorating a house facade—this mimicry of bourgeois practices symbolized to him acts of resistance that defied the capitalist logic of slums or public housing, since these were investments in houses that their residents could not own under apartheid. As one resident claimed following eviction, the municipality’s refusal to compensate the original tenants for their investments was a way of “penalizing” the tenants for having “MADE USE OF THE GROUNDS AND DERIVED COMFORT OF THESE IMPROVEMENTS [sic].”\textsuperscript{116} Deriving pleasure and comfort that cannot add to the value of the house defied the logic of necessity, even more so than in Holston’s analysis of the Brazilian homeowner working class.\textsuperscript{117} Comparing \textsuperscript{wnt\textsuperscript{115}} to the American suburbia of Levittown, Beinart explained, “[I]t is one thing to wait until you can achieve your goals, it is another to know you can never achieve them [under the apartheid regime]. Then you have to compress your frustrated ambitions into what you have now and you make your possessions look like those you will never possess.”\textsuperscript{118}

For the residents of \textsuperscript{wnt\textsuperscript{115}}, the immediate reference was not Levittown, but the wealthy Johannesburg suburb Parktown, which was also how they nicknamed \textsuperscript{wnt\textsuperscript{115}}’s decorated

\textsuperscript{113} E.W.N. Mallows, “Western Native Township,” \textit{in} Patrick Jones and the Department of Architecture, University of the Witwatersrand (eds.), \textit{For Us}, \textit{op. cit.} (note 90), p. 10.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Id.}, “Government-Built Cities,” \textit{op. cit.} (note 58), p. 196-197.
houses.\textsuperscript{119} The seeming cheerfulness of the improvements and their wish to resemble white suburbia, Beinart warned, should not be construed as escapist gestures, but rather as a volatile and “violent playground.”\textsuperscript{120} At the same time, these gestures had an ameliorative effect, as they could make civic demands easier to digest domestically and internationally. Following his study of \textit{wnt}, representatives of an Indian neighborhood also facing the threat of eviction sought Beinart’s services in making a case to the municipality on their behalf.\textsuperscript{121} Aware of the possible political international repercussions of such claims, Beinart entertained the idea of approaching the \textit{un} with the case.\textsuperscript{122} Even before that, one of his research objectives was to use the study to further research into “racial attitudes,” as developed in South Africa by social psychologist I. D. MacCrone, head of the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand from the 1930s to the early 1960s. A Freudian, MacCrone believed that the rational uncovering of unconscious reasons for race antagonism would help resolve them.\textsuperscript{123} Perhaps Beinart assumed that if more whites could see the neighborhood, they would realize that their black counterparts were not so different from them after all. Alongside this pacifying objective, it can be argued, in the spirit of Mphahlele’s radical proposition that whites will be “liberated by me as an African,” that the \textit{wnt} community, rather than commodity-based suburban imaginaries, presented a critical mirror image to white suburbia in both South Africa and the \textit{usa}.\textsuperscript{124}

\section*{Conclusion}

Beinart’s research and educational activities uniquely triangulate the postwar reformulation and dissemination of modernist design pedagogy, South Africa’s apartheid, and the challenges of cultural decolonization in sub-Saharan African states. His experiences traveling from South Africa to the \textit{usa} and back, and between South Africa, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rhodesia, and Kenya, informed and politicized his educational philosophy and his complementary view of the African city. It was particularly his South African experience of apartheid, as it was consolidated via his association with black South African intellectuals, which radicalized both his association of the city with education and his views of what was at stake in employing basic design methods in the processes of modernization in African societies.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{119} Ibid.
\bibitem{120} Julian Beinart, “Western Native Township,” \textit{op. cit.} (note 48), p. 185.
\bibitem{121} Julian Beinart to Dennis Duerden, February 28, 1964, The Transcription Centre Records 12.13, Harry Ransom Center, University of Austin, TX.
\bibitem{122} Ibid.
\bibitem{124} Ezekiel Mphahlele, “Remarks on Negritude,” \textit{op. cit.} (note 50).
\end{thebibliography}
As Beinart observed, “[I]t is an interesting commentary on apartheid in South Africa that the authorities legislate against allowing people to come to the city, and once there, against allowing them to learn.” Viewing education as inextricably bound with the right to the city, he attributed to his basic design courses a civic function. They were aimed at capacity building, such as decision-making, expression, and communication, as a basis for social participation and citizenship. The creation of this “new folk culture” can be construed as an ameliorative gesture that would help absorb the “shocks” of modernization and create a false apolitical harmony. Such an interpretation was certainly entertained in a period when aided self-help dominated the construction of housing in the so-called developing world, as evidenced by Doxiadis Associates’ interest in Beinart’s WNT research.

However, in my reading, it was exactly against such harmony that Beinart proposed the city as an ultimate learning machine. While Beinart’s propositions drew from contemporary disciplinary discussions concerning ordinary men’s ability to shape their environment, when he presented his thesis at the 1965 Vienna conference of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, Reyner Banham observed that his propositions seemed profoundly subversive and shocking. I would like to suggest that it was not simply the “idea there could still be something left in design for the ordinary consumer to do,” as Banham explained it, that caused the stir. After all, Bernard Rudofsky’s influential “Architecture without Architects” was exhibited at the MoMA the previous year. Rather, it was the politicization of these practices that threatened the design community. In contrast to the longue durée vernacular building traditions that Rudofsky celebrated in his ethnographic images, where the built structures were harmoniously infused with their natural surroundings, Beinart focused on the most alienating aspects of the modern city, as was expressed in the extreme conditions of apartheid urbanism. His suggestion to turn the city, and the conflicts it potentially embodies, into a perpetual learning environment with impermanent buildings that “can be changed by people, even destroyed,” was also a socially conscious answer to the celebration of throwaway consumer society as portrayed, for example, in the contemporaneous playful urban imaginaries of the British group Archigram.

If it was the tension between modernity and tradition that energized Beinart’s workshops, then in his research in WNT it was “the tension between shelter and dream” that produced the dual character of the township as a “violent playground.” It is through this tension that African societies’ creative vigor could be sustained in the face of the forces of globalization.

in the decolonizing African states’ transition into consumer societies, or the battle over the rights in the city, in the case of apartheid South Africa. Importantly, this resistance should not be read as a violent one in the physical colloquial sense. Beinart’s use of the term retains its modernistic aesthetic sense of an attack on the senses, a temporary shock that does not result in alienation, but, on the contrary, produces a heightened aesthetic experience of the everyday. It is thus not surprising that, in a tour of WNT he gave to Tristan Tzara in 1962 in conjunction with the latter’s participation in the First International Congress of African Culture held at the National Gallery in Salisbury, Rhodesia, Tzara commented that “had he seen this forty years before, he would not have invented dada.”

The kind of shock Beinart attempted to induce in his workshops aimed to reconstitute the students’ imagination, so that they could experience and respond to the richness of their urban environments more fully than colonial precepts would allow. Similarly, he evoked the right to the city in South Africa against the state’s enforced artificial harmony: “The authorities believe in the country: to them it equals tradition and peace. But all over Africa people believe in the city. They want it: for them it means growth even if it involves conflict.”

Like the creative energy Beinart’s shock techniques produced in the workshop, WNT residents’ colorful wall paintings were an aesthetic eruption that not only interfered with the visual propriety of the city, but also defied the very fundamentals of its political economy.

Abstract

From 1961 to 1965, Julian Beinart, an architecture lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, embarked on a series of basic design workshops in Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Rhodesia, and Kenya. Inspired by his MIT instructors Kevin Lynch and György Kepes, Beinart was interested in the development of a new popular visual language, one that would mediate African societies’ transition to postcolonial modernity. Concurrently, Beinart documented and analyzed wall decorations made by the residents of the government-built houses of Western Native Township in Johannesburg. Home to black Africans who were subject to racial segregation and displacement policies that predated the apartheid regime, the Township’s residents faced another eviction in the early 1960s. By using photography, analytical drawings, and diagrammatic maps, Beinart created a counter-archive against the state, in which he interpreted the residents’ beautification and improvement of their houses as acts of resistance; an expression of civic pride where the urban poor performed citizenship under extreme social-economic duress. Analyzing the decorations as a system of communication that transcended ethnic traditions, Beinart used them as an “index of de-tribalization” that could set the ground for the creation of an African urban modernity.

130 Beinart to Duerden, December 27, 1962. The Transcription Centre Records 12.13, Harry Ransom Center, University of Austin, TX.
132 This language of resistance that Beinart identified in WNT was not an isolated case in South African history. For example, the 1980s saw the formation of a “people’s parks” movement in the townships, which involved landscaping, gardening, wall painting, and sculptures. Among the political slogans, one could find there evocations of faraway places via names such as “Las Vegas Park” and “Lancaster Park.” See Steven Sack, “‘Garden of Eden or Political Landscape’: Street Art in Mamelodi and Other Townships,” in Anita Nettleton and David Hammond-Tooke (eds.), African Art in Southern Africa: From Tradition to Township, op. cit. (note 67), p. 191-210.
Zusammenfassung


Schlagwortindex: Afrikanische Moderne, Negritude, Apartheid, Volkskunst, Dekolonisation, Zwangsumsiedlung, Stadterneuerung
Geographie: Afrika, Südliches Afrika, Südafrika, Simbabwe, Ostafrika, Kenia, Mosambik, Westafrika, Nigeria
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Ehemalige Gebiete: Rhodesia
Genannte Personen: Beinart Julian (1932-)
Africanos negros víctimas de las políticas de segregación y desplazamiento de las poblaciones desde antes del régimen del apartheid, se encontraron ante una nueva expulsión en los años 1960. A partir de la fotografía, del dibujo analítico y de planos esquemáticos, Beinart fue creando unos archivos contra-estatales, interpretando el embellecimiento y la mejora de las casas por parte de los habitantes como actos de resistencia: una expresión de orgullo cívico mientras que su condición de ciudadanos se desarrollaba en condiciones de coacción socioeconómica extremas. Analizando las decoraciones como un sistema de comunicación que trascendía las tradiciones étnicas, Beinart las consideraba como un « índice de des-tribalización » que podía servir de fundamento para la creación de una modernidad urbana africana.

Indice de palabras clave : modernidad africana, negritud, apartheid, arte popular, descolonización, desplazamiento de poblaciones, renovación urbana
Geografía : África, África austral, Sudáfrica, Zimbabwe, África del Este, Kenia, Mozambique, África occidental, Nigeria
Período : siglo xx
Antiguos territorios : Rhodesia
Personajes : Beinart Julian (1932-)

Résumé
De 1961 à 1965, Julian Beinart, enseignant d'architecture à l'Université du Witswatersrand à Johannesburg, mena en Mozambique, au Nigéria, en Afrique du Sud, en Rhodésie et au Kenya une série d'ateliers sur les fondements du design. Inspiré par ses professeurs à MIT, Kevin Lynch et György Kepes, Beinart se pencha sur le développement d'un nouveau vocabulaire visuel populaire pouvant servir d'appui dans la transition des sociétés africaines vers la modernité postcoloniale. Simultanément, Beinart entreprénait l'inventaire et l'analyse des décors muraux réalisés par les habitants de Western Native Township à Johannesburg, une zone entièrement constituée de maisons construites par l'État. Les habitants du Township, des Africains noirs qui subissaient des politiques de ségrégation et de déplacement des populations dès avant le régime de l'apartheid, se trouvèrent face à une nouvelle éviction dans les années 1960. Beinart, se servant de la photographie, du dessin analytique et des plans schématiques, créa des archives qui allaient contre l'État, dans lesquelles il interprétait l'embellissement et l'amélioration des maisons par les habitants comme autant d'actes de résistance ; une expression de fierté civique alors que la citoyenneté était pratiquée dans des conditions de contrainte socio-économique extrêmes. Analysant les décors comme un système de communication qui transcendait les traditions ethniques, Beinart les considérait comme un « index de dé-tribalisation » qui pouvait servir de fondement à la création d’une modernité urbaine africaine.

Index de mots-clés : modernité africaine, négritude, apartheid, art populaire, décolonisation, déplacement de populations, renouvellement urbain
Index chronologique : xxe siècle
Territoires anciens : Rhodesie
Personnes citées : Beinart Julian (1932-)

Ayala Levin
Dal 1961 al 1965, Julian Beinart, docente di architettura all’Università di Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, si dedica ad una serie di workshop di progettazione di base in Mozambico, Nigeria, Sudafrica, Rodesia e Kenya. Ispirato dai suoi insegnanti del Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Kevin Lynch e György Kepes, Beinart si interessa allo sviluppo di un nuovo linguaggio visivo popolare, tale da poter conciliare la transizione delle società africane verso la modernità postcoloniale. Allo stesso tempo Beinart documenta e analizza le decorazioni murali realizzate dai residenti delle case costruite dal governo nelle township occidentali di Johannesburg. Un nuovo esproprio ai danni degli abitanti delle township fu realizzato all’inizio degli anni ’60 in questo luogo di abitazione degli Africani vittime della segregazione razziale e delle politiche di espulsione che precedettero l’apartheid. Grazie alla fotografia, al disegno analitico, ai diagrammi, Beinart crea un anti-archivio contro lo stato, nel quale l’abbellimento e il miglioramento delle case da parte dei loro abitanti viene interpretato come un atto di resistenza, un’espressione di orgoglio civico attraverso il quale i poveri delle aree urbane esercitano il loro diritto di cittadinanza in un quadro di coercizione socio-economica. Analizzando le decorazioni come un sistema di comunicazione che va al di là delle tradizioni etniche, Beinart se ne serve come “indice di de-tribalizzazione”, in grado di porre le basi per la creazione di una modernità urbana africana.

Parole chiave: modernità africana, negritudine, apartheid, arte popolare, decolonizzazione, espulsioni, rinnovo urbano

Indice geografico: Africa, Africa del Sud, Sudafrica, Zimbabwe, Africa orientale, Kenya, Mozambico, Africa Occidentale, Nigeria

Indice cronologico: xx secolo

Territori antichi: Rhodesia

Persone citate: Beinart Julian (1932-)