

# The Foundation: Design, Time, and Possibility in 1960s Nairobi

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Je suis mon propre fondement  
———Frantz Fanon, 1952

William Hance was the vice-president of the American African Studies Association (ASA) when he and a delegation of other Africanists visited the University College, Nairobi in 1965. While there, he met Selby Mvusi, a black South African artist and designer who had recently begun to co-direct a program known as the “Foundation Course” in the University College’s Faculty of Art and Architecture. A few months later, Hance circulated a letter to ASA members in which he reflected that conversations in Nairobi and elsewhere had convinced him the organization’s primary task was to aid and guide “development” on the continent. Mvusi had attended an early ASA meeting and remained on its mailing list. He read Hance’s letter and concluded that the American had misunderstood what the Foundation Course was trying to do.<sup>1</sup>

Mvusi dispatched a correction to New York. “Living as we do in a ... cross cultural and supra-national” world, cooperation across continents was a “necessity,” he wrote. He was grateful for the Americans’ visit, yet he worried that they were not viewing contemporary Africa in the right way. It was true that “development,” was an improvement over “anthropological approaches” to African societies; Mvusi’s experiences as an African artist on the international scene had left him deeply suspicious of art historians and other experts who

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<sup>1</sup> Mvusi to Hance, 10 Mar. 1966, Davinder Lamba Collection (hereafter DLC), Nairobi, Kenya, 1. Hance authored *The Geography of Modern Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

claimed that the only authentic African creativity was in the past.<sup>2</sup> He worried, however, that those focusing on “development” leaned too far in the other direction, overemphasizing the continent’s future, and obsessing over “quantitative approach[es]” to Africa’s economies and prospects. More worryingly still, experts like Hance tended to use teleological concepts to explain the continent’s passage from provincial “tradition” to universal “modernity.” Mvusi was concerned that international experts were missing the real, qualitative story he had learned from his experiences in South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Ghana, Kenya, and elsewhere: “the time-consciousness of a people whatever the facts of [their] social, economical and political circumstances.” Africans knew things about their time that might be obscure or opaque to international experts. The course wanted to train local experts—students in the Faculty of Art and Architecture—to recognize, understand, and build off of this knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

For Selby Mvusi, nothing mattered more than the present and what contemporary Africans were making of it. The son of a Methodist minister, born and raised in the Union of South Africa, he had been a student at the country’s leading tertiary institution for Africans, the University of Fort Hare, during apartheid’s early years.<sup>4</sup> He trained as an art teacher and taught in segregated government schools in Durban on the country’s east coast. Apartheid South Africa insisted that African progress would come only by attending to Africa’s past—an imagined age of rural vitality and tribal and racial unity, the “traditions” of which were supposed to determine the direction of black South Africa’s development. While many black South Africans struggled against apartheid’s laws, Mvusi struggled against the edict to look backward. As the 1950s progressed he painted increasingly abstracted reflections on city life and began to write poems that dispensed with an obsession with the heroic past.<sup>5</sup>

He left South Africa in 1957 to study art education in the United States, but soon realized that there too the “African” was too easily consigned to times other than the present. At the turn of the 1960s Mvusi spoke to UNESCO and the African Studies Association about African art, and in both cases he sat on panels with academic experts who described the continent’s

<sup>2</sup> By 1965, Mvusi had participated in numerous colloquiums and other gatherings dedicated to Africanist art history, where he had tussled with leading proponents of what Boas had called “salvage ethnography.” For more on that impulse during the 1950s and 1960s, see Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); and Sarah Von Beurden, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Identity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> For biographical information on Mvusi, see Elza Miles, *Selby Mvusi: To Fly with the North Bird South* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> For ways in which the apartheid government’s art program dovetailed with the temporal politics of separate development, see Daniel Magaziner, *The Art of Life in South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

present as one of “confusion, if not chaos.”<sup>6</sup> Like the apartheid government, most art history experts urged African creators to look backward, to the coherence of the rural past, now threatened. Mvusi forcefully rejected such claims. “Art serves life,” he wrote in 1960, and since Africa lived, it was necessary instead for Africans to cultivate “their relevant expression concerning the now.”<sup>7</sup>

Speaking to UNESCO a year later, Mvusi clarified his opinions on the relationship between creating and time. He admired what African artists had once achieved and insisted that they had done so as people of a time and place, “to propitiate their spirits.” The past mattered because it showed how previous generations of creators had articulated their humanity. But it did not define the future; instead, people’s active living did. “It is ... only by standing up to the challenge of our time that we truly extend and revitalise the values and ideals of our forebears,” he claimed. Mvusi wrote at the dawn of the 1960s, a decade that would see African intellectuals spin theories about “the African personality,” “African humanism,” “African family-hood,” and Négritude. Against such ideologies that looked backward to go forward, Mvusi focused instead on what he described as contemporary Africa’s “journey.” Africans were present, in both senses of the word; they too had their spirits to propitiate. To him, what mattered was not where they had been, or where they might go, but rather the pregnant, full experience of time that comprised the ever-unfolding now. This ongoing “journey ... was [the African’s] native land.”<sup>8</sup>

Mvusi continued to attend art history conferences while teaching art first in Southern Rhodesia and then in Ghana. His misgivings about art’s ability to capture Africa’s present only increased. Connections in the United States and Europe introduced him to the recently institutionalized discipline of industrial design, and in March 1964 he was invited to attend a workshop sponsored by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) in Bruges, Belgium. He was the only attendee from the global South. There he spoke passionately about the need for designers to be trained in the South to meet the particular needs of recently colonized societies. In Bruges he earned a host of new supporters, and by the end of 1964 he was drawing on these networks from Nairobi, where he sought funding and support to begin to teach industrial design at the University College. It was in Nairobi that Mvusi met Derek

<sup>6</sup> So argued William Fagg, the Deputy Keeper of the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum in 1961: *Africa and the United States: Images and Realities: Report of the Eighth National Conference of the United States National Commission for UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO, 1961), 58–60. See also my “Designing Knowledge in Postcolonial Africa: A South African, Abroad,” *Kronos: Southern African Histories* 41 (2015): 265–86.

<sup>7</sup> Mvusi to Evelyn Brown, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., MSS51615, Box 93, 10 Jan. 1960, 1, 1–2.

<sup>8</sup> Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa, Federated Union of Black Artists Collection (FUBA), Selby Mvusi, folder 9, Selby Mvusi, “African Art in the United States,” Oct. 1961, 2.

Morgan, who had been lecturing on architecture there for nearly a decade when Mvusi arrived. An Indian-born Briton, Morgan had studied at London's Architectural Association and with Buckminster Fuller as a Fulbright Scholar at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the early 1950s, before coming to Kenya in 1954. Like Mvusi, he was disillusioned with convention, especially regarding building and design in contemporary Africa.<sup>9</sup>

By the early 1960s, Morgan was already critiquing the Nairobi program for its failure "to train the student to evaluate present problems as events in an evolutionary continuum in which past actualities and future patternings are anticipatory and regenerative." The future was "ripples in a still pond," Morgan wrote. He wanted his students to discern the motive and the moment of the "stone thrown into water."<sup>10</sup> Morgan's critique came within the context of reappraising the Nairobi curriculum, which he thought was little more than derivative of tired European practices. He wanted his colleagues to revise the University College's architectural program to reflect its place and time. Architecture was a matter of "building-expressing-a-milieu," he wrote; it was the wondrous process by which "conceptual events"—ideas—are "actualised into space-time." To generate inspiration, architectural education needed to embrace the challenge of time. In other words, as Morgan put it, "If we are to live and work in the present, we cannot fall back on past methods."<sup>11</sup>

Although he and Mvusi came from dramatically different backgrounds, their intellectual journeys brought them to a similar focus on the "now," when the ideas were germinating, the stone was in hand, and the ripples were but a "conceptual event." Over the next three years Mvusi and Morgan schemed and collaborated to turn their critiques of past pedagogies and practices into a practical program for generating time-consciousness. This program was situated within a Faculty of Art and Architecture (which they wanted to rename the "Faculty of Comprehensive Design"), but it was only incidentally concerned with the making of things. Instead, the Foundation Course was an effort to recognize and identify in contemporary East Africa the "subject" who could annotate time. As Mvusi told the students, "The problem to be resolved—the commitment to be recognized—the question to be answered ... is what is Our Time?"<sup>12</sup> Across three terms of the academic calendar, architecture and design students would collectively try to figure out who and when they were: first by learning the rudiments of form and content analysis; then by placing themselves and their community within the stream

<sup>9</sup> This data comes from a biography prepared by Morgan's children and shared with me by Davinder Lamba, 26 Sept. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Morgan, "The Significance of History in a Methodology of Design Education," Dec. 1963, DLC, 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Selby Mvusi, "Design Lecture Series No. 3," DLC, 1 (n.d., ca. 1966).

of social and cultural developments stretching back centuries and ranging far from East Africa; and finally, by embarking on a series of so-called “man/environ” projects, which called for students to study how contemporary East Africans used and interacted with the spaces and objects they encountered in daily life. Gary Wilder has recently insisted that we situate Afrodiasporic intellectuals into the heart of twentieth-century efforts to produce “important abstract and general propositions about life, humanity, history and the world ... rooted in concrete ways of being, thinking, and worlding.”<sup>13</sup> This is the story of an experiment in education that sought to train students to think in new ways about the present. It is the story of the proposition that an African institution and African students could define for themselves new ways of being, knowing, and creating in their contemporary world.

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In calling their program the “Foundation Course,” Mvusi and Morgan drew from precedents at the core of midcentury modernist practice. The concept of a Foundation Course (alternatively known as “Basic Design”) was usually associated with Weimar Germany’s Bauhaus, where it was known as the *Vorkurs* and typically credited to Joseph Itten. That course equipped students with the fundamentals of design—material, light, color, shape—while also collapsing the distinction between art and craft to propose new aesthetic and ideological standards for the making of things. The Bauhaus was shut down by the Nazis in 1933. Thereafter, the *Vorkurs* took on new life in a sort of Bauhaus diaspora that stretched first to Great Britain and eventually to the United States, where the Bauhaus veteran designer Laszlo Maholy-Nagy instituted a basic design first-year course at Chicago’s School of Design. This “New Bauhaus” later became part of the Illinois Institute of Technology, where Morgan studied.<sup>14</sup> The latter was thus quite familiar with the legacy of Basic Design and the course that he and Mvusi proposed reflected familiar elements, for example by taking advantage of the University College’s photography studio to experiment with light, or working in studios devoted to understanding the essential characteristics of shapes.<sup>15</sup> To do this within the context of an African architectural school was a departure from recently established practice, at a time when the continent’s scattered architectural programs were more concerned with meeting national and international

<sup>13</sup> Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization and the Future of the World*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 10, 11.

<sup>14</sup> By the time Mvusi and Morgan’s course came on line, Max Bill, another Bauhaus veteran, had already reintroduced the Basic Design method to West Germany at the Ulm School of Design. The Ulm School of Design featured a “Basic Course” by the 1950s. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulm\\_School\\_of\\_Design#cite\\_note-7](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulm_School_of_Design#cite_note-7); and Herbert Lindinger, *Ulm Design: The Morality of Objects* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> There are numerous accounts of Bauhaus’s influence globally. One of my absolute favorites is Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1972).

development agendas and continuing to study how to adapt international building practices to “tropical conditions” than with individual students’ capacity to grasp the fundamentals of color. (University College Nairobi was the continent’s only design program, so there is no comparison to make there.)<sup>16</sup> Yet the Nairobi Foundation Course was also, and perhaps even more importantly, a departure from its Bauhaus-inspired precedents, in that it insisted that its project was ultimately about humanity, not material objects.

That I am able to reconstruct the Foundation Course at all is because Mvusi and Morgan were plugged into wide-ranging networks, which resulted in their work being deposited in far-flung archives, in Brighton, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., as well as in Nairobi and Johannesburg. Between the 1950s and the 1970s there were many architects, designers, theorists, and teachers who, like Mvusi and Morgan, were convinced that modernism needed to be checked to ensure that its technological achievements did not evacuate its humanity. The Foundation Course culminated in a series of intensive studies of human and material interactions. These so-called “man/environ” projects were continuous with recently articulated network theories associated with Gyorgy Kepes (another Bauhaus legatee) and others in that students were tasked with comprehensively mapping the web of material and intangible connections in which their subjects were embedded.<sup>17</sup> At the turn of the 1960s

<sup>16</sup> The University of Khartoum established a degree in architecture in 1957 and similar programs followed in Ghana and Nigeria, and in Nairobi while Kenya was still under British imperial control. See Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, *Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone* (London: Batsford, 1956); and also Rhodri Liscombe, “Modernism in Late Imperial British West Africa: The Work of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, 1946–56,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, 2 (2006): 188–215; and Iain Jackson and Jessica Holland, *The Architecture of Edwin Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew: Twentieth Century Architecture, Pioneer Modernism and the Tropics* (New York: Routledge, 2014). The story of tropical and other derivative or alternative modernisms has been well told, but the story of architectural education on the continent less so. The *Journal of Architectural Education* recently devoted an issue to African architecture and design, which suggests that architectural education and local interest in theories and practices of urbanism have emerged only recently; see, for example, Iain Low, “Educating Architects in Africa,” *Journal of African Education* 68, 2 (2014): 162–64. A critical exception is the work that Ola Uduku, Lucasz Stanek, and others have done to analyze the Architectural Association’s collaboration with the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana during the 1960s (e.g., <http://radical-pedagogies.com/search-cases/f01-school-of-architecture-kumasi/> (accessed 11 Oct. 2016)).

<sup>17</sup> Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003). KNUST’s program also included survey components, although these were focused on the program’s efforts to support the Nkrumah government’s development agenda (and concomitant need to resettled populations). See Stephan F. Miescher, “Building the City of the Future: Visions and Experiences of Modernity in Ghana’s Akosombo Township,” *Journal of African History* 53, 3 (2012): 367–90. On Ghanaian collaborations with international experts, including Fry and Drew and the Greek planner Doxiadis, see Vivian d’Auria, “More than Tropical? Modern Housing, Expatriate Practitioners and the Volta River Project in Decolonising Ghana,” in Ruth Craggs and Claire Wintle, eds., *Cultures of Decolonisation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). For KNUST’s work affiliated with London’s Architectural Association, see Hannah Le Roux, “Architecture after Independence,” in Manuel Herz et al., eds., *African Modernism: The Architecture of*

Kepes taught at MIT, where Kevin Lynch and others were insisting that the study of how people used cities was fundamental. Kepes, Lynch, urbanists like John Turner (like Morgan a graduate of the Architectural Association), elders like Morgan's own mentor Buckminster Fuller, and designers (and ICSID members) like Victor Papanek, were all part of a generation of thinkers who privileged the analysis of use—that which is necessarily local and contingent—over the universalist aspirations of high modernism.<sup>18</sup> Mvusi and Morgan joined these voices to insist that the twentieth century might yet be humane.

Given this concern with people, the Nairobi course is best understood not through the disciplinary logics of architectural and design education, but instead in terms of sociology and urban ethnography. While African cities were becoming increasingly populated hubs of modernist architecture, in the mid-1960s social scientific knowledge about African societies was slowly moving away from colonial-era ethnographic functionalism to address new social dynamics that cities engendered.<sup>19</sup> Anthropologists had already broken new ground by exploring African social change along the dynamic continuum from village to city (even if Mvusi's travels through the African art world

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*Independence* (Zurich: Park Books, 2015), 138–39. Max Lock used the “survey method” to study African lifeways and building in Kaduna, Nigeria; see, e.g., Max Lock and Partners, *Kaduna, 1917, 1967, 2017: A Survey and Plan of the Capital Territory for the Government of Northern Nigeria* (London: Faber, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> The Foundation Course was only one among a host of design and architectural educational experiments then taking place. Julian Beinart and Pancho Guedes barnstormed the continent in 1961–1962 bringing workshops on art, expression, and building to places like Ibadan, Nigeria, where Ulli Beier was collaborating with local artists to develop a new language of West African modernism. See Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism*, 161–62, 208–9; and author's interview with Julian Beinart, 2 Apr. 2015, New York. A South African, Beinart had been an instructor at the Witwatersrand University School of Architecture in 1962 when progressive students there demanded a new, survey approach to architectural education that they called “For Us.” See their manifesto in the author's possession (Hannah Le Roux, personal communication, 11 Oct. 2016). Beinart's own surveys resulted in his publication *The Popular Art in Africa* (Johannesburg: Institute for the Study of Man in Africa, 1963). See Ayala Levin, “Basic Design and the Semiotics of Citizenship: Julian Beinart's Educational Experiments and Research on Wall Decoration in Early 1960s Nigeria and South Africa,” *ABE Journal* 9–10 (2016): 1–25. Beinart was a Kepes student who was interested in discovering the elements of visual literacy that would help contemporary Africans transition from pre-industrial to industrialized societies (with rural Nigeria and urban South Africa on opposite ends of the continuum). For others working in a related vein, both before and after the Foundation Course, see Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960); Jan Gehl, *Life between Buildings* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2011 [1971]); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. (Malden: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]); John Turner, *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971). Many others could be added to this list, most famously in the United States including Jane Jacobs. For a sympathetic survey, see Andrew Blauvelt, ed., *Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Museum, 2015); see also Kenny Cupers, ed., *Use Matters: An Alternative History of Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> On modernism in African cities, see Herz, ed., *African Modernism*.



revealed than many other experts were loath to accept such epochal shifts).<sup>20</sup> Mvusi and Morgan wanted to institutionalize this knowledge by training East African architects and designers to make these assessments. They strove to place their space, its residents, its practices, and its needs at the heart of the intellectual work of an African university.<sup>21</sup>

In so doing, they recognized that, as James Ferguson put it, “cities are noisy.” In their din, received narratives like “modernization” and “development” are obscured, if not rendered obsolete.<sup>22</sup> In the decades since the latter’s work touched off debates about the historiography of African cities, numerous other scholars have turned their attention to African cities to tease out their distinct dynamics. Since 2000, scholars like Abdou Maliq Simone, Edgar Pieterse, Filip de Boeck, Ato Quayson, and research institutes like the University of Cape Town’s “African Centre for Cities” have done much to enrich our understanding of African cities and urban life in general. It is notable how much of this work tends in the directions that Mvusi and Morgan’s man/environ studies first proposed nearly a half-century ago, by exploring how African urbanism is, in Simone’s words, the study of “thickening connections” among people and things.<sup>23</sup> Simone demonstrates how African subjectivities evolve and proliferate as networks grow more intricate, in keeping with Achille Mbembe’s call to emphasize “historical contingency and the process[es] of subject formation,” rather than tired clichés about whom Africans ought or ought not to be (and thus what African cities ought or ought not to be).

<sup>20</sup> See Karen Hansen, “Urban Research in a Hostile Setting: Godfrey Wilson in Broken Hill, Northern Rhodesia, 1938–1940,” *Kronos: Southern African Histories* 41 (2015): 193–214; and especially Andrew Bank, *Pioneers of the Field: South Africa’s Women Anthropologists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). See also Ulf Hannerz, *Exploring the City: Inquiries towards an Urban Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Lynn Shumaker, *Africanizing Anthropology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); and Max Gluckman, “Tribalism in Modern British Central Africa,” *Cahier D’Etudes Africains* 55, 1 (1960): 634–54.

<sup>21</sup> For debates about this scholarship, see James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); as well as his, “Mobile Workers, Modernist Narratives: A Critique of the Historiography of Transition on the Zambian Copperbelt,” pts. 1 and 2, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16, 3 (1990): 385–412, and 16, 4 (1990): 603–21; “Modernist Narratives, Conventional Wisdoms, and Colonial Liberalism: Reply to a Straw Man,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20, 4 (1994): 633–40; and “Urban Trends on the Zambian Copperbelt: A Short Bibliographic Note,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 22, 2 (1996): 313. See also Hugh Macmillan, “The Historiography of Transition on the Zambian Copperbelt: Another View,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19, 4 (1993): 681–712; and “More Thoughts on the Historiography of Transition on the Zambian Copperbelt,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 2 (1996): 309–12.

<sup>22</sup> Ferguson, *Expectations*, 207.

<sup>23</sup> A. Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 137. See also Pieterse, Simone et al., *Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2013); De Boeck, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Ghent, Belgium: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2004); Quayson, *Oxford Street Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).



Mbembe's insistence on contingency and place leads him to "reinterpret subjectivity," familiarly, "as time."<sup>24</sup> Mbembe theorizes this by going back to the 1950s to engage Frantz Fanon, who in the early-1950s shrugged off inherited categories of black subjectivity in favor of what Mbembe describes as "a situated thinking, born of a lived experience that was always in progress, unstable and changing."<sup>25</sup> Contrary to theories of ascribed identity that objectified the African subject and constrained the possibilities of African humanity, Fanon forcefully contended, "I am endlessly creating myself ... I am my own foundation."<sup>26</sup> For Simone, Mbembe, and Fanon, in other words, the "journey," not the origin, or the destination, is "the native land."

Selby Mvusi had encountered Fanon's work via Janheinz Jahn in the early 1960s, decades before a new generation of African urbanists began to apply the concept of subjectivity as time to the analysis of African contemporary life.<sup>27</sup> At the University College Nairobi, he and Derek Morgan argued that the inarguable materiality of the built and used environment granted them access to contemporaneity and thus subjectivity. Nairobi's Foundation Course denied the objectification of the "African" by insisting that its students study the material objects and the physical space in which and with which black people lived. Mvusi and Morgan anticipated the African American architect Mario Gooden's recent call for an "architectural liberation theology," sensitive to how structures have "instrumentalized subjectivities," for good and for ill. Writing of urban American housing projects and other examples of mid-century modernism, Gooden notes that such projects "did not address the subjectivities of their users or inhabitants, but rather project[ed] paternalistic views of their subjects through the abject lenses of poverty, class and race."<sup>28</sup> Like his counterparts studying contemporary African cities, Gooden critiques this tendency in retrospect; Mvusi and Morgan critiqued it going forward. Their course was about inculcating a sensibility: only once they understood what was going on around them would students be "licensed" to design.

Like Gooden (and Fanon), Mvusi and Morgan understood that previous practices had objectified people of color and they rejected such calcification. Their course sought instead to explore how their contemporaries were making their selves as they made, used, and brought both objects and other people into thickening networks. By so doing, they argued, contemporary

<sup>24</sup> Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14, 1 (2002): 239–73, 242.

<sup>25</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 161.

<sup>26</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 204–5.

<sup>27</sup> Selby Mvusi, "Social and Cultural Dynamics: An Introduction," DLC, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Mario Gooden, *Dark Space: Architecture, Representation, Black Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 13, 31, 58.

Africans were identifying their selves to the posterity that trails behind the present.<sup>29</sup> The historian P. J. Ethington has insisted that we think seriously about how, being present both in time and in space, “all individuals are the creative authors of their own presence.”<sup>30</sup> He argues that by paying close attention to human and material interactions in time and space, historians can discern the phenomena of unfolding subjectivity, both now and in the past. Selby Mvusi called these phenomena “journeys,” and together with Derek Morgan he sought to train students to sense the human presence around them, and only then to cast their stone.

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This experiment in unfolding subjectivity began as an exercise in bureaucracy in a still-colonized university. In the early 1960s the University College Nairobi’s Faculty of Art and Architecture was run entirely by Europeans, primarily British expatriates. There were typically no more than a few dozen students enrolled in architecture, a visitor observed, “evenly divided between Indian [East Africans of Asian descent] and African.” Their instructors were “aware of the need for research dealing with tropical architecture in terms of African needs and solutions,” but the school was young and small and offered a “standard” architectural education, designed to incorporate colonial students into the best practices of postwar British architecture.<sup>31</sup>

Morgan was one of those expatriate instructors. He had followed an old girlfriend to Nairobi in 1954 and worked in private practice for two years before taking up a position at what was then the Royal Technical College in 1956. Over the next eight years he offered lectures in line with the best practices of accreditation by the Royal Institute of British Architects.<sup>32</sup> This continued across the dividing line of 1963, when Kenya became independent and the rechristened University College Nairobi affiliated with the University of East Africa. In the early 1960s, the architecture program established a relationship with the Liverpool University School of Architecture, which was intended to bring Kenyan students to do post-graduate work in the UK, while also funding British and other expatriate lecturers to work in Kenya. With this, the Nairobi program came under the sway of Robert Gardner-Medwin, the director of the Liverpool architecture faculty, who very quickly began to insist that African architecture ought to be about getting African bodies into

<sup>29</sup> On immaterial and material networks between people and things, see Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> P. J. Ethington, “Placing the Past: ‘Groundwork’ for a Spatial Theory of History,” *Rethinking History* 11, 4 (2007): 465–93, 476.

<sup>31</sup> Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Tarrytown, N.Y., RF/RG 1.2 series 475, box 2, folder 13, Robert W. July Trip Diary, Apr. 1961, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Morgan biographical information, shared with me by Davinder Lamba, 26 Sept. 2016.

orderly, hygienic houses, as quickly and efficiently as possible, not just meeting metropolitan standards.<sup>33</sup>

In 1964 he formed what became known as the “Gardner-Medwin Report Group” to advise Nairobi on the way forward in African architecture. From his perspective, the task of architectural education in postcolonial Kenya was clear: he wanted the program linked to Civil Engineering, Urban Planning, and Building Sciences and it was to be vocational and prospectively developmental.<sup>34</sup> Architecture “is first of all deeply and fundamentally concerned with bringing the applications of science and technology to bear upon the total problem of human settlement,” Gardner-Medwin instructed his Nairobi colleagues. Architecture was about delivering solutions to pressing material problems. It was a practical science and African architecture programs like Nairobi’s were where practitioners would learn to apply rigorous technique to practical problems.<sup>35</sup>

This troubled Morgan, since his own training had emphasized an individual architect’s capacity to discern and respond to contemporary challenges, not exogenously generated quantitative metrics. As we have seen, Morgan pictured the architect standing in a present, balanced on the past, and moving actively towards a future. In order to anticipate, architects had to sense what was happening around them. It was foolish and unnecessary to imagine a total break from what had come before, as advocates for the tropical approach frequently counseled; to do so was to lose the thread of society’s concerns.<sup>36</sup> In the mid-1960s, he elaborated on this in a radio program on the prospects of Kenya’s built environment. He urged his listeners not to neglect what they already knew. “Those of you who are out in the country must make every effort to ask about and inquire into local knowledge,” he suggested. Morgan explained that “every belief that has stayed on through time has stayed on because of some element of truth in it.”<sup>37</sup> There was truth in what had developed over time, so the task of the architect was to create something new by

<sup>33</sup> Gardner-Medwin was a significant figure in postwar British tropical modernism. See Hannah Le Roux, “The Networks of Tropical Architecture,” *Journal of Architecture* 8 (2003): 337–54; Iain Jackson, “Tropical Architecture and the West Indies: From Military Advances and Tropical Medicine to Robert Gardner-Medwin and the Networks of Tropical Modernism,” *Journal of Architecture* 18, 2 (2013): 167–95, as well as Gardner-Medwin’s obituary: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-professor-robert-gardner-medwin-1590411.html> (accessed 7 Sept. 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Robert Gardner-Medwin, “Problems of the Nairobi Department,” 30 Oct. 1964, University of Nairobi Archives, Nairobi, Kenya (hereafter U of N), PUEA/11/1–14/file 1, 5–6.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of the Gardner-Medwin Report Group, 22 Dec. 1964, U of N, PUEA/11/1–14, 1.

<sup>36</sup> As Vivian d’Auria has shown, other tropical modernists working in Ghana were less sanguine about starting over entirely and instead saw in local building practices a “wealth of experience designers could selectively choose to revisit to encourage ‘development’” (“More Than Tropical?” 206). Although these experts did not so easily dispense with the past, they did so confident in their own abilities to identify those few “traditional” elements that would be useful for Africans’ “transition to a [future] life” of industrial employment and nucleated families (ibid., 210).

<sup>37</sup> Derek Morgan, “A World of Our Own,” “School Broadcasts” file, DLC, Nairobi, Kenya, n.d. [ca. 1965], 3.

learning from what was. In order for a novel concept, such as a new type of home, to “become full of meaning,” it was necessary to “look through” a real, existing house and to “think ... so that you can build a new kind of house ... to meet the new kind of problems that living today [brings.]” To be an architect was to be a historian, sociologist, and futurist. Architecture, was a “significant statement of principle”; buildings communicated to the people with whom they shared space. As a course of study, he thought that architecture meant learning from what was and plotting from the present to the future, and it could not and ought not to be the same thing everywhere, at all times.<sup>38</sup> There was knowledge in Kenya and a Kenyan experience of the now that was distinct and separable from global theories. In Mvusi he met someone for whom this conviction was a profound political and ethical concern.

By the time he arrived in Nairobi, Mvusi was convinced that the design and construction of useful objects (up to and including buildings) was a central challenge in the postcolonial African “now.” Design was “a fundamental human necessity at all times and at all levels of human existence.” Design was what separated people from animals. To adopt Derek Morgan’s language, design was a “conceptual event,” an idea held in the mind and then deployed in space-time.<sup>39</sup> One could not ignore context and content when thinking about how to make something; the materials were what they were, you were who and where you were. Or, as Mvusi put it in 1964, “there cannot be any ‘escapist idealism’ about context” when thinking about creating.<sup>40</sup> The material world was all that there was to work with, yet at the same time the material world was there to be pushed and probed by the boundless possibilities of the human imagination. In this, Mvusi thought industrial design was particularly promising since it represented the marriage of the human drive to create with the capacity of industrial processes and contemporary technology.

In his ICSID presentation, Mvusi worried that Africa and the “low income world” in general was being denied the opportunity to fully participate in this process because of a lack of funds and expertise, and especially because of prevailing ideas that non-Western peoples simply were unsuited to contemporary technology and needed instead to preserve their traditional craft practices. He rejected such fearful conservatism. He knew all too well that some people reacted to the contemporary moment by “tenaciously holding onto old established and known modes of culture.” To his mind, such an approach was “misguided, [and] most definitely misplaced.” To preach the values of aesthetic convention “may solve conscience”—it might comfort those concerned

<sup>38</sup> Morgan, “Significance of History,” 1–9.

<sup>39</sup> For a recent celebration of the discipline, see Jessica Helfand, *Design: The Invention of Desire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Selby Mvusi, “Design Development in Africa Today,” in Elza Miles, *Selby Mvusi: To Fly with the North Bird South* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2015), app., 9.

about the postcolonial decline of the “authentic” Africa—but it “cannot solve problems.”<sup>41</sup> In the twentieth century, “people within the many cultural systems that are existing in the world today must themselves adapt science and technology ... in order to build into their own cultures an appropriateness to contemporary processes. This they will have to do or die.”<sup>42</sup>

This is why design mattered. He defined it as “the plastic realization of time-consciousness.”<sup>43</sup> The things people made demonstrated their mastery of time and place: “The truly excellent object is the object that most successfully eliminates alternative interpretations to both its form and its function.... It is an object responsibly made. It is an object that allows and conforms only to responsible use of itself. It is not just the right object, it is an object originally conceived of and made for the right reason.” “Right objects” were not just ideas, but were ideas “influenced and related to other ideas.”<sup>44</sup> As we have seen, Mvusi had spent the late 1950s and early 1960s giving talks on African art in which he repeatedly cautioned against giving past creative accomplishments too much authority over the present. He appreciated what the artists and craftspeople of the past had achieved, but the challenge remained to create things that were “African in every respect.” The present demanded its own objects that would be “the means and the avenue of self-expression which, expressing the same spirit of Africa [as in the past] today express it [in] twentieth-century ... terms.” Hence the goal was industrial design, at an African university, in a bustling city, in an independent state. “The African personality must be defined industrially,” he concluded.<sup>45</sup>

Over the course of 1964 and the first months of 1965, Mvusi and Morgan lobbied for a new program that would jointly train architects and designers to be students and creators of the local present.<sup>46</sup> While this was going on, Gardner-Medwin was focused on knitting the Nairobi architecture program to then-ascendant ideas about tropical architecture. To serve as director of studies, he brought in David Oakley, an Architectural Association graduate and specialist in tropical housing who had worked in Jamaica for the colonial government and taught in India. He hoped that Oakley’s arrival would presage Nairobi’s development into a center for housing research and

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Selby Mvusi, “The Education of Industrial Designers in Low-Income Countries,” 1964, San Francisco State University, Shapira Design Archive (hereafter SFSU), Shapira Collection, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Selby Mvusi, “Educating Designers Today: Prescriptive Perspective not Perspective Prescription,” 16 Sept. 1965, SFSU, Shapira Collection, 1–2.

<sup>44</sup> Mvusi, “Education of Industrial Designers,” 7, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 52–53.

<sup>46</sup> For Morgan’s lobbying, see “Second Report by Professor R. Gardner-Medwin, Appendix C,” June 1965, U of N, PUEA/11/15–24, 1. On Rockefeller, see “Grant in Aid to the University of East Africa for Use by the University College, Nairobi, Kenya toward the Costs of the Appointment of Mr. Selby Mvusi as Lecturer in the Art Department,” RF RG1.2, series 476R, box 8, folder 84, 9, Mar. 1965, 1.

development.<sup>47</sup> Gardner-Medwin wanted the faculty to expand quickly, but since it was so small he conceded that it made sense for all first-year students to take a basic course together, whether they were interested in architecture, land development, or design. A foundation year would give “students a clearer idea about the direction of their studies,” after which they would “be streamed into courses given by the three ... departments of the faculty.”<sup>48</sup>

Derek Morgan was responsible for the training of first-year architecture students. Gardner-Medwin was somewhat skeptical of him, while recognizing that he “had done a lot of independent thinking” about how to begin to teach architecture and, as far as was known, his conclusions were “not impossibly radical.”<sup>49</sup> Once it was decided to train the incoming 1965 students together, Morgan and Mvusi were “given a free hand to collaborate on the new course,” over the objections of lecturers in land development, who worried that the course might prove impractical for their students. From Oakley and Gardner-Medwin’s perspective, a combined course was what was practical, in that it would provide a “comprehensive” foundation for the professional work that architects, designers, and developers do. As they understood it, “comprehensive” entailed the basics of physics, ecology, mathematics, development economics, materials, et cetera. Their perspective, Oakley later reflected, was that a “comprehensive” education would “assist the student to be operational in the [respective] field ... as soon as possible.”<sup>50</sup> Oakley’s goal was an efficient, pre-professional program. Education was a necessity, not an abstract indulgence, architects being necessary to rapidly solve East Africa’s “actual problems.”

It soon became apparent that “comprehensive” meant something different to Mvusi and Morgan than it did to Oakley. In late May 1965 they presented their initial ideas to a gathering of architects, government officials, and others who met to consider ways forward in East African architecture. The practicing architect and the aspirant industrial designer demonstrated little loyalty to their respective disciplines. Unlike Oakley, they argued that “comprehensive” meant deferring specialization and thus professionalization for as long as possible. Although they did anticipate that after a year a student “may know and be known to have potential individuality in a given base area,” the point of the common first year would be to confirm that “siphoning off from a narrow structure of disciplines and processes is wasteful.” Specialization “too often

<sup>47</sup> Robert Gardner-Medwin, “Architecture, Design and Development,” 1 Feb. 1966, University of East Africa Archives, PUEA/11/1–14, file 2, 3. Gardner-Medwin had first suggested a shared course in 1964, in part due to the faculty’s small number of students. See “The Social Task of Architecture in East Africa Today,” 29 Sept. 1964, U of N, PUEA/11/1–14, file 1, 8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Gardner-Medwin to Porter, 8 June 1965, U of N, PUEA/11/15–24, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Director of Studies to Morgan, Mvusi, Maloba, and La Briero, 24 Oct. 66, DLC, 1.

results in atrophy of potential,” they insisted, and they contrasted the relative merits of “individuality” and “professionalization.”<sup>51</sup>

They proposed to instead teach a course based on educating students “in and by and for East Africa. The Faculty within the College is then a microcosm of the East Africa macrocosm—in turn the microcosm of a world macrocosm, in turn the microcosm of Universe.”<sup>52</sup> This was network theory, the idea that people and their objects were but “expressive fragments” of a tangled, overlapping web of connection.<sup>53</sup> They wanted their understanding of the concept to be captured in the name of the faculty, which they insisted ought to be the “Faculty of Comprehensive Design.”<sup>54</sup> This name never caught on (it began as the Faculty of Art and Architecture in the early 1960s and evolved into Architecture, Design and Development by decade’s end), but they held fast to their understanding of “comprehensive.”<sup>55</sup> Mvusi summed it up in a long-form poem he and Morgan distributed to students at the beginning of the course’s first term. It read in part:

In advocating comprehensibility  
in design education and practice  
we should guard against  
present-day counter-actions  
to and against  
[the] proliferation of self-extending specializations  
if today’s specializations  
is felt to be [*sic.*]  
socially atomizing ... the cause is in both  
vested interest in past-sectionalist commitment and  
escapist delimitations of consciousness-commitment to  
responsibilities particular to this time.<sup>56</sup>

Gardner-Medwin and Oakley imagined the first year to be a period when students were confirmed in their specialties, and there set on their way to careers to come. That was obviously not how Morgan and Mvusi saw things.

The Foundation Course’s first task was to disable students’ expectations that they were going to be trained to become expert in ways preordained by professions. When writing to William Hance, Mvusi had talked about a linked and co-dependent postcolonial world. What was true geopolitically and economically was true of all things. Their goal was to get their students to understand that specialization was dangerous because nothing made sense in

<sup>51</sup> Selby Mvusi and Derek Morgan, “Educating Architects for East Africa,” 20 May 1965, DLC, 1–4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> The term is Quayson’s, *Oxford Street*, 30–31.

<sup>54</sup> Gardner-Medwin, “The Faculty Horizon,” 1 Feb. 1966, U of N, PUEA/11/1–14, file 2, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Mvusi and Morgan, “Educating Architects,” 1–4.

<sup>56</sup> Mvusi, “Educating Designers Today.” The letterhead referenced the “Faculty of Comprehensive Design,” thus rendering an ongoing debate a *fait accompli*.



isolation.<sup>57</sup> They reinforced this lesson on four levels. The first was technical: occasional lectures and studios on materials, on the quality and function of sound, with sporadic discussions of climatology, focusing on the relationships between objects and human beings. The second, under the heading “form/content appreciation,” was pursued largely in the studio, looking at the forces that make up the material world—shapes, light, and so forth. Students spent time in the university’s photography studio, for example, a practice Mvusi in particular embraced not for the purposes of social realism (as much of the literature on African photography would suggest), but because of the ways in which photography was suited to the exploration and analysis of the perception of light. Students spent more time still in lectures on “social/cultural analysis,” designed to help them see how human minds—consciousness—had and continued to organize the material world into meaningful social forms. Finally, once Mvusi and Morgan got their footing in their second year working together, the Foundation Course culminated in a three-staged project, which applied this expansive learning to reinforce the conviction that they were to be taught “in and by East Africa”: the “man/environ” project, on which the 1966–1967 students embarked during their third and final term.<sup>58</sup>

In 1965, the lectures began immediately. Mvusi and Morgan alternated, offering detailed notes on a wide range of topics. Not surprisingly, their first topic was the present. That October, Mvusi lectured on the pregnant possibility of the current moment, reflecting especially on how the ubiquity of machines might provide the infrastructure for new humanisms. Drawing on the British literary theorist F. R. Leavis, Mvusi recognized the ascendance of the machine age. The “industrial phenomenon,” he announced, “cuts across both town and country and thus becomes the form-content defining agent of our time.” Contemporary Africa was part of this process and Africans thus needed to make and speak to time. In his introductory lecture he drew from Jawarhalal Nehru’s call for nations to allow “the wind from the four quarters to blow in.” Setting the stage for the lectures to come, Mvusi said that Africans needed to be open to all that there was and had been, rather than being afraid that the “winds” would “blow the culture out.” Society would be fine: “Culture ... is living people. Culture is you me, here and now. There are no longer any

<sup>57</sup> Their criticism of specialization was shared by Morgan’s teacher, Buckminster Fuller, whose essay “The Prospects for Humanity” Morgan and Mvusi distributed to their students. The essay was later reprinted in a collection of Fuller’s essays, the title of which clearly laid out the stakes: *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity* (New York: Overlook Press, 1969).

<sup>58</sup> Space precludes my considering the full range of teaching that took place during the Foundation Course in this essay. There were lectures by the Hungarian S. V. Szokalay, which considered thermal and aural considerations when building. Mvusi also taught technical subjects, including the composition of structures, which ranged from analysis of sub-atomic structures to contemporary building materials, as well as lectures of how human vision operated and interfaced with design.

static, intact, ‘primitive’ cultures ‘out there’ ... We are ‘here’ and ‘everywhere.’”

Mvusi urged his student not to bother with cultural-preservationists who “appoint themselves critics of the business of living.” Such critics failed to realize that, “hidden behind rites and rituals, behind laws and social mores, behind art and design ... is this system-time tie-up.” He explained that at all times, and in all places, people had developed social, ideological, and material practices to meet the challenges posed by the present. Such actions gave “meaning and significance to action and interaction”—they made the material world legible and society orderly—but in their very invention, they “undermined all fixed concrete concepts concerning the culture itself.” Culture was not a finite value, but an infinite one, bounded only by human invention. As he saw it from the vantage point of East Africa’s 1960s, the only difference was scale. Cultures, he claimed, “like techniques, are learned.” Nothing about being “African” was natural. Instead, “Africanness” was a made phenomenon. “To grow and progress whomever and wherever we are, we need not only to understand ourselves, we need also to understand others as well, because we are irrevocably joined together.” Comprehensivity was the one, immovable value of “our time—our age!” It did not matter from whence the wind originated or to where it came; what mattered was “just the wind!”<sup>59</sup>

Just the wind: this approach to comprehensive knowledge carried over to lectures like that on “Graeco-Roman society.” Mvusi and Morgan used the study of classical European history to convey an essential point: “Whomever, from whence-ever, and why-ever we are at any place and at any time, it remains necessary and indeed most imperative for us to ask yet one major question: ... to what end and effect are we what We are?” Greek and Roman peoples had repeatedly asked themselves that question, whether consciously or not, and the very fact of the progress from Greek to Roman civilization demonstrated that successful societies innovated and changed.<sup>60</sup> Ruptures always rent societies, new opportunities emerged, and no boxes remained intact. Greece bled into Rome, Hinduism spawned Buddhism, and Impressionism yielded to the Fauves and Futurists, who in the early twentieth century had claimed, “Just as our ancestors found their inspiration in the world of religion ... so we must draw ours from the tangible miracles of contemporary life.”<sup>61</sup> All epochal shifts had been the result of peoples’ creative efforts to innovate. The collective lesson was “surely [that] our fate today, as then, lies not in our stars but with ourselves.”<sup>62</sup> This was the takeaway of lectures that

<sup>59</sup> Selby Mvusi, “Social and Cultural Dynamics: An Introduction,” Oct. 1965, DLC, 1–5.

<sup>60</sup> Selby Mvusi, “Social and Cultural Dynamics: Social and Cultural Reality and Systems: Systems of Ethics in Graeco-Roman and West European Culture,” 1965, DLC, 1–5.

<sup>61</sup> Selby Mvusi and Derek Morgan [?], “Design Lecture Series: Italian Futurism, 1910–1914,” 1965, DLC, 1.

<sup>62</sup> Mvusi, “Systems of Ethics.”

connected broad intellectual and social transformations across years and continents, culminating by the end of the third term in lectures dealing with the nature of urbanization in the “underdeveloped world.”

The lectures were richly detailed, dense with learning, and enormously complex for any student, let alone a few dozen first-generation university students who had thought that they were going to earn accreditation to build houses and post offices. Morgan and Mvusi labored to convince their students that it was alright to be confused. In the mid-twentieth century, “It is no longer accumulated knowledge we are after; on the contrary it is now the very act and process of knowing that now constitutes [the] supreme value.” Students were learning, which was precisely the point. “Learning is action / action is learning,” their lecturers explained.<sup>63</sup> They were not just students, they were historical actors doing the work of consciousness in time. Much of the evidence suggests that the students were powerfully inspired by their instructors’ faith that they were up to the task. Their numbers were small, but growing; there were twelve in the course the first year and twenty-seven in the second. Most were Kenyan, although also enrolled were significant numbers of Tanzanians and, especially, Ugandans. The majority were the first in their family to attend university. Some were interested in architecture, or in design, but many more ended up in the program because the standards for admission were lower than those for law at Dar es Salaam, or education, medicine, and liberal arts at the region’s best-known higher education institution, Makerere in Kampala.<sup>64</sup>

Even their instructors had to acknowledge that none of them had been in a course like this one. Reflecting on the Foundation Course’s first year, Mvusi and Morgan conceded that many students had been “at first puzzled” by the sort of learning the course demanded. They commended the students for maintaining “open-hearted attitude” to the work at hand.<sup>65</sup> What records of student work survive suggest that many did their best to figure out how to make the course’s concepts their own. Nduuru Githere, a student from 1965–1966, embraced the challenge of breaking with past architectural practices. “Fear is the element that makes people ... still look on the old Greek Architecture with worshipping delight,” he explained, “they fear change.” A classmate agreed, noting with approval how the Futurists had once called for “war on the past.” Traditionalism was safe and thus dangerous, their classmate Patrick Kanye contended, while “design is infinite” and ought to transcend what had already been done. Another student wrote that it fell to a younger generation to make manifest “the invention of things that are still not yet invented.”

<sup>63</sup> Selby Mvusi and Derek Morgan, “Urbanisation and Industrialisation,” Apr. 1966, Miles, *Selby Mvusi*, app., 104.

<sup>64</sup> Author’s interviews in Nairobi with Davinder Lamba, 25 May 2015; and Odoch Pido, 12 May 2015.

<sup>65</sup> Selby Mvusi and Derek Morgan, “Review Paper 1 Foundation Year—Art & Architecture (Common First Year),” June 1966, DLC, 4.

These were students animated with the potential of their time. Exams revealed students grappling with the ideas their lecturers had introduced, such as the necessity of being comprehensive, in pursuit of the interrelationship between all things. “The more we study the infinitesimals of the microcosm,” one wrote, “the more we realize its relation to the macrocosm.” To solve a “microscopic” problem through design was to see “the macroscopic scale” in miniature. Forms, whether houses or objects of industrial manufacture, only make sense depending “on [their] behavior within a given system.”<sup>66</sup>

This was heady stuff. Davinder Lamba was a Foundation Course student during its second year. He was so inspired by what he learned that he saved every scrap of paper he could find that related in any way to the course. Since the 1960s, he has continued to reflect on the lessons he learned from Morgan and Mvusi in his own private practice as an architect and the founder of the Mazingira Institute, an environmental justice organization in Nairobi. Yet even he had to concede that being a Foundation Course student made him “woozy.” It was not at all what he had expected architectural school to be.<sup>67</sup> Like many of his classmates, he struggled to balance the tasks assigned to him and the learning they required. Eventually he found his footing.<sup>68</sup>

Comments like Lamba’s raise a critical point. Other instructors worried that Mvusi and Morgan were doing little more than indoctrinating their students. At the end of the 1965–1966 academic year the two had to defend themselves against the charge that “the students did not understand what was taught.”<sup>69</sup> But other evidence suggests that students had grasped and been inspired by their lessons to act in the world. During the second year of the program, for example, the entire class gathered on a landing in the college’s Gandhi Wing and “spattered” a wall with buckets of paint. They did so to demonstrate that art, as design, was a historical event. “It was our intention to produce ‘plastic noise.’ It was our intention to structure disorder.” But not only that; in their “structured disorder” the students wanted to capture the ineffable truth of life in Nairobi, the randomness and unpredictability of a place that was “both order and disorder,” the tension between “the manicured gardens of Muthaiga,” a leafy suburb and “the dirt and squalor of Kariokor,” an under-served and densely populated area near the city center. By making plastic noise, the students tried to capture “Nairobi as one whole.”<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Various, “Foundation Course: 1965/66, Year One, Term One: The Social and Cultural Significance of Design (World, Africa, Kenya) Today,” DLC, 1–3.

<sup>67</sup> Author’s 2015 interview in Nairobi with Davinder Lamba.

<sup>68</sup> “Minutes: Faculty of Architecture, Design and Development,” June 1967, U of N, PUEA/11/15–24, 1–4.

<sup>69</sup> Mvusi and Morgan, “Review Paper 1,” 3.

<sup>70</sup> “The Writing on the Wall,” no author, n.d. [ca. 1967], SFSU, Shapira Collection, 1–2. Davinder Lamba, personal communication, June 2016.

The 1966–1967 students were better positioned to do so. The Foundation Course’s first year had been about identifying the problem of defining “our time” in light of all that had been, socially and culturally, and what materially was. The second year took the next step in figuring out what exactly “our time” meant in contemporary East Africa. Before coming together, Mvusi and Morgan had argued that theorists of architecture and design needed to learn from the masses of their contemporary society. Practitioners ought to be generalists, who were better able to comprehend how the local microcosm fit into an ascending series of contexts. Architects and designers need “to make researches that will help ... to produce things related to the social and cultural ways of the people,” the 1965–1966 student William Ssenjobe concluded.<sup>71</sup>

Research proposed both a political and intellectual agenda. While the Foundation Course was underway, the university administration was contracting with the United Nations and Danish overseas development organizations to organize a “Housing Research and Development Unit” to be based in the faculty. Oakley and Gardner-Medwin shared HRDU’s goal of producing prototypes for mass housing in East Africa. Morgan and Mvusi were less generous, mocking the “absurdity of reiterating in a title a function”—research—“that is integral to worthwhile academic approaches.”<sup>72</sup> Moreover, as they saw it, the HRDU was not actually going to “research” what went on in Nairobi; instead, the development practitioners who ran it were going to deal in abstractions manufactured from the best knowledge of international experts. The Foundation Course, on the other hand, was going to deal in experiential data, earned through careful attention paid to the lived phenomena of contemporary East African life.

Ssenjobe’s lecture materials had included Mvusi’s essays “The Things We Buy” and the “Things We Make,” which together challenged students to assess the agency and subjectivity hidden in objects of quotidian use. East Africans used things that had not been manufactured with them in mind. In his presentation to ICSID the year before coming to Nairobi, Mvusi had defined “right objects” as “an idea, equally influenced and related to other ideas.” Africans were using poorly suited objects because ideas generated from their various contexts had too infrequently been in conversation with those of designers and architects. In his remarks, he suggested that “in setting up a programme of education for industrial designers, the time and place a people occupy must be defined to the same degree that design itself is defined.”<sup>73</sup> Which was to say, if you did not know a place, its people, and their time, and really know them, you would never be able to design for them. So the Foundation

<sup>71</sup> “Foundation Course,” 1.

<sup>72</sup> Derek Morgan to Nisa Mvusi, 11 Aug. 1969, DLC, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Mvusi, “Educating Designers,” 17.

Course's culminating task was to guide its students to figure out where they were.

Beginning in February 1967, students embarked on a three-part series of "man/envirom interaction" projects, in which students closely observed how human beings interacted with their material environment. This project built off of an assignment they had done earlier in the term, in which students conscientiously mapped how they used time and objects over the course of a normal day. Now they were putting what they had learned of their selves into dialogue with others. The first stage was to trace the life of "individual man and his environment ... over the extent of one typical working day, as well as a typical Sunday." Mvusi and Morgan imagined all of life to be plotted along two axes, along one the man as thinking agent, and along the other the environment both built and natural. The assignment was ultimately to demonstrate "by this study of live interactions, your grasp of the many related factors and simultaneous situations that control an individual in his day-to-day experiences in, and with, his environment."<sup>74</sup> Put in practical terms, this meant that students shadowed a person from the time of their waking until the time of their rest; they were to be at their subject's home when they began their day and to follow them on their commute to work; they were to observe and critique the structures and objects with and through which their subjects made their way in the world. Such "researches" marked a further step toward applying the course's theories to the design of new things for East Africa.<sup>75</sup>

The assignment's second phase, a few weeks later in mid-March, made the link to design more explicit. People interacted with objects and especially with other people within a space, and this assignment was more explicitly architectural: students were charged with considering the "home" in all of its relations and complexity. Students returned to their initial subjects if they had families, or found a new subject if their first subjects had none. The home is a "given series of relational spaces," Mvusi and Morgan instructed, "an architecture of given function- relation-field coordinates."<sup>76</sup> A home was not only a building designed well or poorly; it was not just one anonymous structure among many thousands of the same. It was, as two students later reflected, "a package for human activities and human relationships."<sup>77</sup> Students mapped these for "twenty-four hours of a working day and twenty-four hours of a Sunday,"

<sup>74</sup> Derek Morgan and Selby Mvusi, "Man / Environ Project One: Individual Man and His Environment," Feb. 1967, SFSU, 1–4.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* To mitigate the inherent awkwardness of the assignment, the enquiry was limited to people who worked for the University College in some capacity. Cleaners, nurses, telephone operators, and lecturers were among the possible candidates.

<sup>76</sup> Derek Morgan and Selby Mvusi, "Man / Environ Project Two: The Family and Its Home Environment," Mar. 1967, DLC, 1–3.

<sup>77</sup> Author's interview with Salmed Hameed and Isaac Mruttu, Nairobi, 16 June 2016.

except for the hours of sleep, although “the hours of retiring and waking for each member of the family should be recorded.” The task was to record everything and to report back “by way of written observations, diagrams, charts, maps, photographs, plans of rooms, plans of buildings, tape recordings, sketches,” and the like. With these assignments, the Foundation Course was finally and totally dispensing with all the racial, economic, and other pretensions that had governed approaches to African architecture and African art/design since first those activities became professional concerns, in favor of the then and there.<sup>78</sup>

The project’s third phase made the Foundation Course’s critique of earlier approaches even more direct. Most of the students had not been raised in Nairobi or in East Africa’s other major cities. Most had come to the city from smaller towns and communities, the supposedly threatened “rural” societies that development specialists like Hance were seeking to grow economically and cultural preservationists were hoping to preserve in amber. Mvusi and Morgan mocked “the caricature of the country cousin” that persisted in experts’ conviction that “rural society is ... distinct and separate from its urban counterpart.” But they conceded that there were “obvious disparities” in rural peoples’ access to technology and other resources, which necessitated studying smaller communities in their own rights, as systems of relations connected on scales both immediate and expanded. When students went home for the Easter Holiday, they were assigned to adopt a “characteristic and typical rural homestead” and the people who circulated therein as objects of study and analysis.<sup>79</sup> Students from cities like Nairobi “adopted” a home, like two Kenyans of Asian descent student who spent their holidays studying a Maasai *moran* and family group, while bunking with a family in their *manyata*.<sup>80</sup>

The assignment itself was a rejoinder to popular opinion that denied rural peoples’ subjectivity as producers of contemporary consciousness. More than any other community, rural Africans had been subject to “unenlightened and imprecised [*sic*]” analysis; they had only been considered en masse, in terms of “mass housing, mass literacy, mass education and mass culture.” Mvusi and Morgan pitted comprehensive understanding against such dangerous generalizations. Architects and designers built the future, and so it was their responsibility to “comprehend the processes at hand” in the present. They needed to learn so that through their buildings and designs they might play their part in leveraging technology and systems processes to bring “meaningful existence to rural man.” Only by first understanding relations in all their

<sup>78</sup> Morgan and Mvusi, “Man / Environ Project Two,” 1–3.

<sup>79</sup> Selby Mvusi and Derek Morgan, “Man / Environ Project Three: The Rural Family and Its Home Environment,” Mar. 1967, SFSU, 1–5.

<sup>80</sup> Personal communication, Davinder Lamba, 23 Sept. 2016.



diversity and complexity could a designer begin to induce change and progress. There could be no more pressing task than that of helping the poorest and supposedly most isolated segments of society to articulate their selves in time. “The problem, now, is to start.”<sup>81</sup>

So the students packed up and traveled from Nairobi to embed themselves with a rural family. They documented the house forms they discovered, dispassionately and analytically, whether the buildings were familiar to them or not. They asked how the structures were built and “how the whole process from initial decision to build to final occupancy [was] organized.” Students accounted for how the structures they saw had changed and asked questions about ones that no longer stood. They witnessed a structure’s “day to day use” and indexed the objects and activities it contained. They applied their learning about climate and heat and insects and wild animals, and about “how the house form communicates visual, tactile and spatial effects [and] how it fulfills ... physical, psychological and mystical needs in terms of ‘sheltering’ in its broadest sense.” The students considered how the building was situated—along which roads and watercourses and surrounded by which crops and animals—and how it was connected by different intellectual, social, political, and economic networks, and to particular pasts and presents.<sup>82</sup>

Only in this way could they ready themselves to think about building. Students sketched, tape-recorded, and photographed (depending on their access to the requisite technologies). They were expected to bring some small piece of their site back to Nairobi, an “object that aroused your interest and seems to be of relevance to the studies you have covered in your theory work.” This object they subsequently presented to their cohort, before putting “forward design proposals of [their] own for objects and spaces of human interaction.” This was to be the culmination of the Foundation Course. By then students had been exposed to radically unsettling theories about what architecture and design meant globally and in East Africa. They had struggled to understand the history of human invention and the relationship between all things that designers captured in objects and architects in buildings. They had studied how urban and rural individuals and families moved through time and space, interacting with each other, with the past, and with the built environment. Their studies were supposed to reveal a community’s time-consciousness. Now, as the third term was closing, it was the students’ time to capture all that they had learned in physical form.<sup>83</sup>

By producing something tangible, students would prove that the program could work, which was critical to ensure its continued viability. In June 1966,

<sup>81</sup> Mvusi and Morgan, “Man / Environ Project Three,” 1–5.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Mvusi and Morgan, “Man / Environ Project Three,” 1–5.

Gardner-Medwin and Oakley had renewed the Foundation Course for a second year, while also critiquing the lack of practical work done under Mvusi and Morgan's instruction. Over the course of 1965–1966, design exercises had been “mostly based on making models and drawings of Buckminster Fuller’s “tetra-hedrons” and “tensegrity” structures,” Gardner-Medwin reported. The end-of-year exhibition consisted mostly of photographic experiments, 2D design projects, and small geodesic domes (small enough that they could be repurposed as headwear, as contemporary photographs reveal). The external examiner thought that the work had “been well supervised and for the most part competently carried out by the students,” but he worried that there had been too little connection between what students did with their hands and what was going on in their heads.<sup>84</sup>

A year later, the Foundation Course ran out of time. At the end of the year exhibition, students were limited to “project reports,” which were narratives of what they had seen, illustrated with sketches or photographs, not models of what they themselves intended to make. The actual objects they displayed were modest, either “a book jacket or a record sleeve.” The assignment called for students to be “more than a little conversant with the subject matter of the book or the recording,” so that they could develop designs and eventually objects that “bear relation with the space-time objects that author or performer has embodied in his work.”<sup>85</sup> It was an interesting assignment and students took it seriously, recognizing that the theory was the same as that undergirding the man/environ project. But it was also a letdown after a year of such intense and methodical learning. Moreover, because of how slowly they had moved, Morgan and Mvusi were only able to give their students five days to complete the assignment.<sup>86</sup>

This failure to deliver ultimately sounded the course's death-knell. Oakley had begun to express his displeasure with the course before its first year had concluded. Unlike designers, he reasoned, architects and land developers “would be entering professions whose regulations were tightly bound by statutes.” The faculty was right to “integrate course-work,” but he was not convinced that it ought to be at the heart of their curriculum.<sup>87</sup> Across 1966–1967, he continued to air his concerns.<sup>88</sup> The faculty's task was “to assist the student to be operational in the field and work with it ... as soon as possible” and it was his opinion that Morgan and Mvusi were not doing this, but instead

<sup>84</sup> Robert Gardner-Medwin, “Curriculum Paper 3, Appendix A,” 4 June 1966, DLC, 1–3. For more on domes in Africa, see Walter Peters, “Buckminster Fuller and the ‘Indlu’ Geodesic Dome Project, Durban, 1958,” *Architecture South Africa* 36 (2008): 36–41.

<sup>85</sup> Selby Mvusi and Derek Morgan, “First Year Course: Two-Three Dimensional Object / Environ Project: A or B,” 22 Apr. 1967, DLC, 1–2.

<sup>86</sup> Author's interview with Davinder Lamba and Diana Lee-Smith, 15 May 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Faculty Minutes, 18 May 1966, DLC, 1–5.

<sup>88</sup> Memorandum, Oakley to Staff, 23 Oct. 1966, DLC, 1–3.

seemed to be training students to work “against [the field].” There was too much theory, and the syllabus was “too analysis-oriented and fact-loaded.” As such, it risked freezing “the student into design impotence.”<sup>89</sup> If students were too busy learning, how could they build?

Such critiques hung over the students and instructors during the second and third terms. After the third term ended without students being able to model what they had learned from their research, Oakley cancelled the course.<sup>90</sup> Over the holidays that ensued, the faculty erased the Foundation Course and instead embraced the task granted to it, of playing “some part in making the development plans of East African governments a reality.” Whether future students were interested in architecture or design, they were promised employment in the “gigantic tasks of construction” facing the region, “as architects and town-planners; as building surveyors and technologists or managers of schemes for housing and land settlements.” The faculty assured secondary school students, “There will be attractive job opportunities in these fields.” The charge to study time-consciousness and capture local subjectivity in material form was conspicuously absent.<sup>91</sup> Mvusi went back to the design department as a lecturer in industrial design, and Morgan returned to architecture. Privately, Oakley expressed his hope that this new arrangement would bring Architecture and Design more in line with Land Development, which he thought “the happiest and most academic of our departments.”<sup>92</sup> This was to be the status quo for the 1967–1968 academic year, before things came to an even more tragic end.

In early December, Mvusi drove his brother-in-law to drop off the latter’s girlfriend north of Nairobi. By the time they set out to return home it was late and the road was poorly marked, and Mvusi was killed when he lost control of his vehicle and it rolled.<sup>93</sup> While his family scrambled to deal with all of the complications that a death in exile entailed, Morgan mourned in his own way. The faculty was chronically short on space, and soon after Mvusi’s death his office was cleaned out to make room for someone else. Students remembered the shock of seeing their instructor’s files just “piled in the hallway.”<sup>94</sup> Morgan scrambled to save Mvusi’s papers and appealed to the university’s Academic Board to recognize what Mvusi had begun in Nairobi, and to reinstate the Foundation Course. There is no record of a response. Morgan shortly thereafter resigned from the university.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Oakley to Mvusi and Morgan, 24 Oct. 1966, DLC, 1–3.

<sup>90</sup> Anonymous, “On Developments in the Faculty of Architecture,” May 1968, U of N, PUEA/11/15–24, 3; see Gardner-Medwin to Porter, 13 Dec. 1966, U of N, PUEA/11/15–24, 2.

<sup>91</sup> “Draft Announcement to the Schools,” [June–July], 1967, U of N, PUEA/11/15–24, 1.

<sup>92</sup> Oakley to Porter, 17 Oct. 1967, U of N, PUEA/11/15–24, 1–3.

<sup>93</sup> Miles, *Selby Mvusi*, 47.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Lamba and Lee-Smith, 2015.

<sup>95</sup> Miles, *Selby Mvusi*, 45.

Architecture and Design continued to be taught. Colleagues from Nairobi reached out to a UCLA professor of industrial design named Nathan Shapira to fill the void Mvusi had left. Shapira had visited Nairobi and knew Mvusi, and he was willing. He arrived in 1969 and turned his attention to “Africanizing” the discipline. One of his students, Odoch Pido, told me that Shapira’s understanding of “African design” was limited to “the picture of it, how it look[ed], more than what it meant to the people who used it.”<sup>96</sup> When the University of East Africa split into three separate institutions in 1970, the design department produced the symbolic language for the occasion, including posters and other printed materials. The best known element of this was the academic regalia that Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta wore as he assumed the position of University Chancellor, which was designed by the Design Department’s recently hired textile lecturer S.M.A. Sagaaf.<sup>97</sup> This regalia included one of Kenyatta’s favored pillbox hats, in leopard skin, and there were also leopard skin accents on the robes themselves. Thus was “Africanizing” design achieved.<sup>98</sup> Shapira had known Mvusi, but he was more interested in designing things to fit a packaged idea of “Africanness” than in studying how best to capture contingent, unfolding thought in plastic form.

Architecture managed to retain some elements of the Foundation Course, at least episodically. Over the course of the 1960s, Danish architects designed a new building for the faculty, now renamed the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Development. Many first-generation architects continued to be trained at the University of Nairobi, mostly by expatriate lecturers. At the end of the 1960s, two associates of Otto Koenigsberger who ran the course in Tropical Architecture at the Architectural Association in London took over for Derek Morgan. One of these was Diana Lee-Smith, who began teaching in Nairobi in 1969. Upon arrival she met Morgan and also veterans of the Foundation Course. She included many parts of that course in the one she taught, including teaching her students to design and build geodesic domes. She also preserved the Man/Environ project, and in 1970–1971 students returned to urban and rural areas to document the ways in which communities had socialized space.<sup>99</sup> But

<sup>96</sup> Author’s interview with Odoch Pido, Nairobi, 14 June 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Shapira to Goldsmith, 20 Dec. 20, 1972, University of Brighton Design Archives, Brighton, UK, ICSID collection, 3.

<sup>98</sup> Numerous pictures exist of Kenyatta in these robes. See <http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-jomo-kenyatta-independent-kenyas-first-president-after-1963-in-the-16021984.html> (accessed 22 Sept. 2016).

<sup>99</sup> Morgan and Lamba to *East African Standard*, 18 May 1975, DLC, 2. Also see author’s interviews in Nairobi with Diana Lee-Smith, 15 May 2015; Alan Simu, 15 June 2016; and Salman Hameed and Isaac Mruttu, 22 June 2016. Lee-Smith’s students’ work was synthesized in Lee-Smith and Lamba, “Man-Environment Interaction: The Rural Family and Its Home Environment in East Africa,” unpublished MS., 1974. This chapter was eventually published in Robert Obudho, ed., *Urbanization and Development Planning in Kenya* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1981).

a year later she, too, left the University.<sup>100</sup> Foundation Course graduates like Nduuru Githere found whatever jobs were available, which usually meant going to work for the Kenyan Ministry of Works.<sup>101</sup> It was one thing to be inspired, but quite another to find one's footing in Kenya's nascent community of professional architects. Rather than critique and imagine what architecture might be, most struggled "to survive in the system as it was."<sup>102</sup>

Morgan tried intermittently, but unsuccessfully, to find a publisher for his and Mvusi's lectures, in part to raise money to help support Mvusi's widow and children.<sup>103</sup> Nathan Shapira was also impressed by Mvusi's theories on industrial design, even if he applied them only in an attenuated way. He incorporated many of Mvusi's ideas into lectures he gave on design in the developing world across the 1970s, always crediting the South African.<sup>104</sup> When Shapira himself left Nairobi he took copies of many of Mvusi's and Morgan's writings back to California. Today, one of Shapira's students has preserved those documents, including a full set of the man/environ assignments, in a design archive at San Francisco State University. Mvusi's and Morgan's essays were published for the first time in 2016 as an appendix to a biography of the former. The biography misidentifies Morgan as the "Dean of Architecture" at the university and notes only that he cooperated with Mvusi's initiatives. It thus misses an important chapter in Africa's intellectual history, this collaboration between partners from such different backgrounds who came together determined that from Africa would come a new way of studying, learning from and understanding the built environment.<sup>105</sup>

It is thanks to the foregoing personalities and archives that Oakley's cancellation of the course was not the final word. From London in 1970 Oakley published the lessons he had learned from decades spent working on tropical architecture. *The Phenomenon of Architecture in Cultures in Change* took as one of its epigraphs an excerpt from William Ssenjobe's 1966 exam: "Why should the modernists take the trouble to invent new shapes and forms just

<sup>100</sup> It is worth noting that Lee-Smith and her partner, Mvusi's former student (and archivist) Davinder Lamba, carried on the networked traditions of the Foundation Course by leaving Nairobi to teach and learn environmental studies, including with Marshall McLuhan at the University of Toronto. They later established the Mazingira Institute, which is based on Foundation Course precepts. Lee-Smith and Lamba interview, 2015. On McLuhan, see also Andrew Blauvelt, "The Barricade and the Dance Floor: Aesthetic Radicalism and the Counterculture," in Andrew Blauvelt, ed., *Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Museum, 2015), 23.

<sup>101</sup> See his obituary: <http://www.carltongrayfuneral.com/obituaries/obituary-listings?obId=41206#/obituaryInfo> (accessed 23 Sept. 2016).

<sup>102</sup> The words are Lamba's from my 2015 interview with him. Interviews with others in the first generation of Kenyan architecture attest to this. See the author's interviews with Salman and Mruttu, 2016; James Waweru, Nairobi, 17 June 2016; and Ruben Mutiso, Nairobi, 16 June 2016.

<sup>103</sup> Morgan to Nisa Mvusi, 11 Aug. 1969, DLC, 1.

<sup>104</sup> Nathan Shapira, "Industrial Design Education for Developing Countries," Dec. 1973, SFSU, Shapira Collection, 2.

<sup>105</sup> Miles, *Selby Mvusi*, 41.

to leave the people bewildered?” Ssenjobe had then suggested that designers and architects needed “to make researches” in order to “produce things related to the social and cultural ways of the people.” In the context of the Foundation Course, this had made one kind of sense, but here Oakley used it to make a different argument. The phenomenon Mvusi and Morgan had perceived was a time and place where Africans might master their own physical world. For his part, Oakley saw massive problems that specialists needed to keep in check. Architects in the tropics, he wrote, should train students for an architecture that “will be ... practical,” in places where “the daily actuality is one of chaos.” It was architecture’s responsibility to counter chaos with order. Oakley had worked closely with Selby Mvusi, for whom time brought the poorest rural Kenyan into dialogue and fellowship with the richest urban European. It was thus notable that Oakley saw this chaos as most evident in the concept of time itself. “In the newly developing countries of the tropics, the past may more readily be measured in space,” Oakley taught. “It is one mile, ten, twenty, a hundred ... miles down the road.” Architects were supposed to plot the future, and he did not expect them to learn anything meaningful from people and communities who did not seem to share “our time.”<sup>106</sup>

For two years Oakley’s colleagues and students at the Faculty of Art and Architecture at the University College, Nairobi, had disagreed. So the last word goes instead to Mvusi. Two months before he died, he traveled to New York to present at a conference on mass communication and human relations, called Vision ’67. Henri Cartier-Bresson was there, as were Buckminster Fuller, Umberto Eco, and Mvusi, who was listed as “painter and lecturer, University of East Africa, Nairobi.”<sup>107</sup> He presented a paper entitled “Problem Growth or Growth Problem,” in which he related what he and Morgan had learned from two years of the Foundation Course. The paper began with Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, and argued that, just as in physics, human societies were governed by relationships of attraction or repulsion, of inequality or equivalence. Nothing makes sense if it is taken as one thing, alone, as he had so urgently told William Hance. In a critical passage, Mvusi theorized what would happen if Africans’ contemporary “thought-processes” were taken seriously instead of being dismissed as either inauthentic or archaic. Contrary to those who saw only binaries such as developed/underdeveloped, rural/urban, African/Western, or traditional/modern, Mvusi insisted “underdevelopment is not monolithic. Neither is it exclusive nor static. It is itself active and dynamic, and is forever pacing development.” To be poor and rural and African was not to be behind, but rather to be. The chronology of progress was a fiction.

<sup>106</sup> David Oakley, *The Phenomenon of Architecture in Cultures of Change* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1970), 1–9.

<sup>107</sup> For more, see [http://siudesign.org/vision\\_67.htm](http://siudesign.org/vision_67.htm) (accessed 22 Sept. 2016).

“We are never going to be ‘developed,’ we will only continue to grow, or else die.”

This sounded fatalistic, yet Mvusi was hopeful. If practitioners interested in human communication actually listened to what was being said, “then there arises the possibilit[y] of formulating such conceptual models.” By listening, we would understand what was, not what we thought was, and “we would thus be less reformative and more transformative, of ourselves and correspondingly more creative of life generally.” Only by eschewing models and one-size-fits-all schemes could people make true, creative progress. If practitioners took the time to learn, they would see consciousness of and in time and learn how to represent and improve it in space. “We would be in the position of making the present historical.” This is what Mvusi had hoped his students would achieve.

He penned this essay a few weeks before he died. Like most of his and Morgan’s writings, it was long, dense, serious, baldly theoretical, and somewhat bewildering. It was also romantic. He was a minister’s son, who rarely invoked the divine, but in New York, he did so: “If all that is is the handiwork of God, then it can be said that we attain to a much more significant and meaningful relation to and with the very person of God” when we take the time to comprehend phenomena. “Development” was a fiction, but “every experience is an occasion for growth. Growth is regeneration of consciousness through experience.” From New York in October 1967, he looked across the world to Nairobi and forward in time. The Foundation Course had further convinced him of what he had already suspected: “We must see and feel ourselves to meet fully the challenges of our time if we are to sense ourselves to be comprehensive of time—which means seeing ourselves to be fully alive.” There was that word again. “Comprehensive” was itself a relationship, built of the productive tension between made of something and knowing something. To be comprehensive was to be total and present, and constituted of a multitude of relationships. It was to be a measureless value, like a home, or a family, or a life. Comprehend this, bring it inside you, and allow yourself to be comprised of it, Mvusi urged his audience, and then you can build.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Selby Mvusi, “Problem Growth or Growth Problem,” Miles, *Selby Mvusi*, app., 31, 34, 35.



**Abstract:** This article explores the history of an experiment in architectural education that took place at what is today the University of Nairobi, between 1965 and 1967. Organized by Selby Mvusi, a South African industrial designer, and Derek Morgan, a British expatriate architect, what was known as the “Foundation Course” was both an experiment in architectural education in postcolonial Africa and a serious attempt to think through the African experience of time and equip students with the tools to recognize and respond to the unique conditions of the postcolonial African present. Based on archival sources, including those in private collections, and oral interviews, the article situates the Foundation Course within African intellectual history as an exercise in social theory and phenomenology. I examine the content of Mvusi and Morgan’s intellectual partnership and project by tracing their individual trajectories, and especially the pedagogical scheme they developed at Nairobi, which came to focus more on humanity in dialogue with the material environment than on material objects themselves. I trace the intellectual lineages of their concepts and explore their articulation within the postcolonial university until the course was cancelled in 1967. I conclude by considering how Mvusi imagined the Foundation Course as a laboratory for both being and building in postcolonial Africa, drawing from a conference paper he delivered just weeks before he died in 1967.

**Key words:** postcolonial studies, architecture, industrial design, African art, University of Nairobi, art history, design history, urbanism, education history