

'[...] the self or subject is always an outcome of a community or a collective, and the construction of subjectivity is always undertaken in the process of that doing. Becoming an individual, a specific subject, is a project too, and one that cannot ever be considered completed.'<sup>1</sup>

In a manner similar to the development of my design proposal I have elected to structure this reflection as a series of negotiations in research methodology, architectonic and social relevance. Certain negotiations are matched by a 'confession'. Confessions made not in unproductive self-criticism but rather to acknowledge and celebrate the modest steps I have made towards a situated and Critical Spatial Practice. The term Critical Spatial Practice is attributed to the feminist architectural historian and cultural critic Jane Rendell. It attempts to understand how creators of space can act as active political agents, and how space can facilitate political agency itself. It is a practice explored in a book series of the same name edited by Nikolaus

Hirsch and Markus Miessen which reflects on the question of 'what, today, can be understood as a critical modality of spatial practice'<sup>2</sup>. It is these writings in addition to Helene Frichot's 'How to make yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool' and the generous input of my mentors: Rachel Keeton, Gilbert Koskamp and Jorge Mejía Hernández that have catalysed the negotiations detailed below.

#### **Relationship between research and design**

I have seldom considered research as anything more than a precursor to design: information curated and edited in order to substantiate a defined outcome. The dogma of 'research-

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concept-implementation'<sup>3</sup> common in architectural education rejects the potential of contingency and contradiction for the convenience of clarity. I began my graduation year in a similar manner: with an idea of the project I wished to develop and the narrative required to embellish it with meaning. I was focused on knowing and presupposing (that which aligned with my desired outcome) rather than learning and questioning.

The short time I spent in Tanzania changed everything.

The abstract diagrams and schemes of my initial research, which had kept the Sino-African Development Paradigm at a distance, became real. Despite my critique of the generic, copy-paste protocol of the Special Economic Zone I too had been seduced by the idea of a tabula rasa. No longer a line on paper, I was compelled to confront the realities of the SEZ: clumsily scrawled numbers and hastily drawn ticks on the walls and doors of those resettled. What was revealed to me was not the slick, streamlined coordination of a master plan but rather a territory layered with the strata of the past and busy with vital activities. It was this reality that I elected to respond to.

I allowed myself to become part of composition, complicit - a 'modest witness (of the deeply interested, and not the disinterested kind)'<sup>4</sup> who understood the limitations of her knowledge and skills and the necessity of opening up her research method to a variety of actors and environments. I elected to 'follow the material'<sup>5</sup>: to

allow for an iterative and reciprocal relationship between research and design to unfold.

Thus the **research-project** completed cannot be neatly divided into a period of investigation that in turn elicited a (design) response. It should rather be considered as a dialogue, a perpetual negotiation and renegotiation of the objective(s) and values of the project in relation to an environment in flux.

**Relationship between the graduation topic, Design as Politics and 'A City of Comings and Goings'**

When Gregory Bateson claims that, 'We are not outside the ecology for which we plan - we are always inevitably part of it'<sup>6</sup> he dislodges the researcher from a neutral position of privilege. Bateson urges us to reconsider research as always intimate to a subject or object of enquiry. Rather than consider **Design as Politics** (which implies that certain practices are more political than others) is it perhaps not more productive to, from the outset, accept that **Design is Politics** and in doing so assume responsibility for acting (or not acting) in and with any environment?

Critical spatial practice entails judgement, the responsibility of taking up of a position that has consequences.<sup>7</sup> Being cognisant of these consequences, rather than result in paralysed inaction, should engender a critical vigilance and awareness of the repercussions of our practice. For Miessen assuming a position is productive.

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It articulates a border, 'a clearly distinguishable field of operation'<sup>8</sup> that may be altered, transgressed and even abandoned.

This research-project has required of me to take up a position. A position which, enthused with new information and insights, I have revisited and continue to re-evaluate.

My initial reading of the Sino-African development paradigm was limited to that of crude caricatures: helpless Africa and a menacing, neo-imperialist China. Further research and my fieldwork led me to reconsider the Sino-African dynamic as an unavoidable and necessary phenomenon. Rather than succumb to binary oppositions I elected to focus on the **potential** of the Sino-African Development Paradigm. I believe this potential lies not in consensus or naïve win-win proposals but in the provision of a site of productive confrontation (and thus political action) between the village of Mlingotini and the proposed Bagamoyo Mega Project.

Influenced by the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe on agnostic pluralism I have come to assume a position (and politics) that values dissensus and difference. This revised position has required a reorientation of the objectives of the project from the pursuit of clearly defined solutions to the identification and cultivation of moments of possibility and potential. It is a position aligned with the ethos of the graduation studio 'A City of Comings and Goings' which views migration (in this instance the migration of urban development protocols such as the Special Economic Zone)

as an unavoidable and productive force that should be nurtured rather than curtailed.

### Elaboration on research method and approach

Engaging a practice that advocates for an appraisal of context above the a priori imposition of predetermined ideas and a critical and continued repositioning of the researcher has proved challenging when developing a research approach and method. Frichot states that

'as the material we deal with and the local worlds of sense we engage with on an everyday basis are composed of a mix of predictable and wildly contingent events, things end up getting rather messy and methods need to adapt to situations of sensory-worldly flux.'<sup>9</sup>

This is not intended to bring the usefulness and relevance of scientific methodology into dispute but rather to highlight the value of an adaptive methodology that is responsive rather than prescriptive. When we place an array of tools in dialogue with local histories and stories we allow for the possibility of diverse readings of a given context. This flexibility should be met with equal parts discipline and vigilance: an awareness of the relevance of a tool or method and its socio-political legacy. It is only through such knowledge that we are able to subvert a tool deploying it to new and generative means.

During my fieldwork the most valuable experiences were often unplanned. The series of interviews I conducted during my visit to the village of

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Mlingotini present a turning point in the development of my research-project. I approached each interview with the understanding that concomitant to the power of being heard there exists the danger of being counted. How would I engage the information offered to me differently? I sought to avoid constructing a narrative of my own design – taking time to listen to rather than speak for a community and to value the pre-existing and emergent qualities thereof.

I have extended these first tentative attempts at establishing an ethics of care and respect into the development of a design proposal that seeks to build upon existing material and social practices. The implantation of three footholds that correspond to present modes of occupation are embedded in both their materiality and construction within an anticipated Sino-African territory.

In a similar manner I have sought to welcome others into the development of my design proposal. By inviting into my project the work of colleagues Floortje van Sandick and Michelle Bettman, the influence of James Stirling's proposal for the experimental housing project PREVI (1968) and the beauty of Aldo Van Eyck's Sonsbeek Pavilion (1966) I have sought to deviate from a lineage of architectural production, 'which persistently returns to the architect as single author'<sup>10</sup> whilst acknowledging the value (and shortcomings) of my own situated-knowledge.

In doing so I have exposed my practice to other worlds and subjectivities and have been compelled to negotiate the normative values of traditional architecture – in particular issues of authorship, aesthetics, control and agency.

This practice is neither novel nor original but part of a growing community of far more accomplished spatial practitioners who are colonizing the margins left open by generic spatial development.

**Elaboration on the relationship of the the graduation project to a wider social, professional and scientific framework – addressing the transferability of the project results**

I wish to conclude by reflecting on the transferability of the 'project results'. In doing so I believe it necessary to make a momentary distinction between process/practice and design outcome. If by transferal of 'project results' it is meant a finite and determined set of design principles then I must protest! Implicit in actions of transferral, translation or transposal is the violence of stripping a context or territory of its specificity. If anything I hope that my project has revealed the failures of generalised planning principles (as embodied by the copy-paste planning protocol of the SEZ) advocating rather for a localised and idiosyncratic response to a given context.

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This is not to say that I wish for this research-project to remain speculative. I agree with Miessen when he claims that theory

'does not float above everyday life in a detached way: it comes from some place, and it is the responsibility of analysis to return it there.'<sup>12</sup>

And so, if by the transferability of 'project results', it is meant a means of spatial practice – in this instance a way of thinking through the Sino-African Development Paradigm in a critical and spatial manner then this is precisely the objective of this research-project. It is my intention that the work I have completed be passed on from hand to hand not as something complete but rather as a set of ideas and values that should be built upon (by myself and future collaborators), taken apart, interrogated – even hijacked becoming part of other practices, sites and collaborations.

<sup>1</sup> H., Frichot, *'How to Make Yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool'*, Baunach, AADR, 2016, p.p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.studiomiessen.com/critical-spatial-practice/> (accessed 20 February 2018)

<sup>3</sup> M., Miessen, 'Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice', Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2016, p.p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> H., Frichot, *'How to Make Yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool'*, Baunach, AADR, 2016, p.p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> H., Frichot, *'How to Make Yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool'*, p.p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> H., Frichot, *'How to Make Yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool'*, p.p. 40

<sup>7</sup> M., Miessen, 'Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice', p.p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> M., Miessen, 'Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice', Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2016, p.p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> H., Frichot, *'How to Make Yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool'*, p.p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Mouffe, C. in Hirsch, N & Miessen, M. (eds), *'The Space of Agonism: Markus Miessen in Conversation with Chantal Mouffe'*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2012, p.9

<sup>11</sup> M., Miessen, 'Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice', p.p. 31.