The informal learning environment as a critical response to psychological exclusion: a study of the architectural learning spaces in post-apartheid South Africa.

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About the author

Dr Yashaen Luckan is an academic, research and professional practitioner in the field of architecture. He was born and raised in a historically disadvantaged community in apartheid South Africa. His lived experiences formed a critical position on systemic pedagogical, psychological and cultural exclusion through institutionalised learning environments. His decolonial work further extends to the field of inclusive cities and spatial transformation. He holds an Andrew Mellon grant for his project on Unsettling Paradigms, the decolonial turn.

Abstract - This study contributes to a critical global discourse about psychological and pedagogic exclusion, through colonial devices and systems, that lead to continuing socio-economic deprivation of marginalised communities in the global South. The research expounds a critical counter position to an entrenched colonial / apartheid model of the architectural learning environment in South Africa, which has continued to deprive historically marginalised communities psychologically, emotionally, and economically, albeit 30 years into democracy. The research builds on the author's previous works that critically examined how formal learning spaces socially, culturally, and psychologically excluded marginalised communities. A decolonial conceptual framework drew on the diverse lived and worked experiences of architectural practitioners, in socio-economically diverse communities, to examine the extent of psychological and pedagogic exclusion of the dominant learning environment, while forming a critical alternative. A mixed methods approach comprised a broad literature review and primary research in the form of an autoethnographic enquiry, based on the author's own lived experience of pedagogic exclusion and various engagements with historically disadvantaged communities, added depth of understanding at a psychological and emotional level. Supportive, community-based learning environments were found to be vital to meaningful skills development in marginalised communities. The outcome of the study was a proposed alternative model, based on the concept of the critical learning community, which reconceptualised the curriculum and deconstructed the learning environment.

Key words: Apartheid, critical learning community, decolonisation, psychological trauma.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South Africa is known for its people-centred democratic constitution and its various transformative frameworks. How then is it that most of the population face unfair barriers to career advancement? What does constant exclusion do to people psychologically and emotionally? What can be done about fixing the illness of a system founded on psychological violence through colonialism?

Systemic failures and unfair gatekeeping continue to fuel an apartheid condition of marginalisation leading to psychological and emotional trauma in addition to socio-economic deprivation. The very people tasked to implement transformation seem unable to transcend their conditioned, preconceived assumptions and opinions of knowledge generation and the knowledge society.

This paper examines the real challenges facing marginalised practitioners / communities at the coalface, and proposes an alternate model framed by concepts such as pedagogic inclusion, psycho-socio-economic inclusion, and deconstructing the learning environment.

2. THE APARTHEID MODEL OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Postsecondary education promulgated segregation and division through a bifurcated model driven by the Advanced Technical Education Act of 1967, which comprised two distinctly separate learning pathways with different curricula, pedagogies and learning spaces. The model inherently created a system that promoted freedom, on the one hand at the traditional universities, while it systemically instilled oppression through the confined limitations of the technical institutions (Fig. 1).
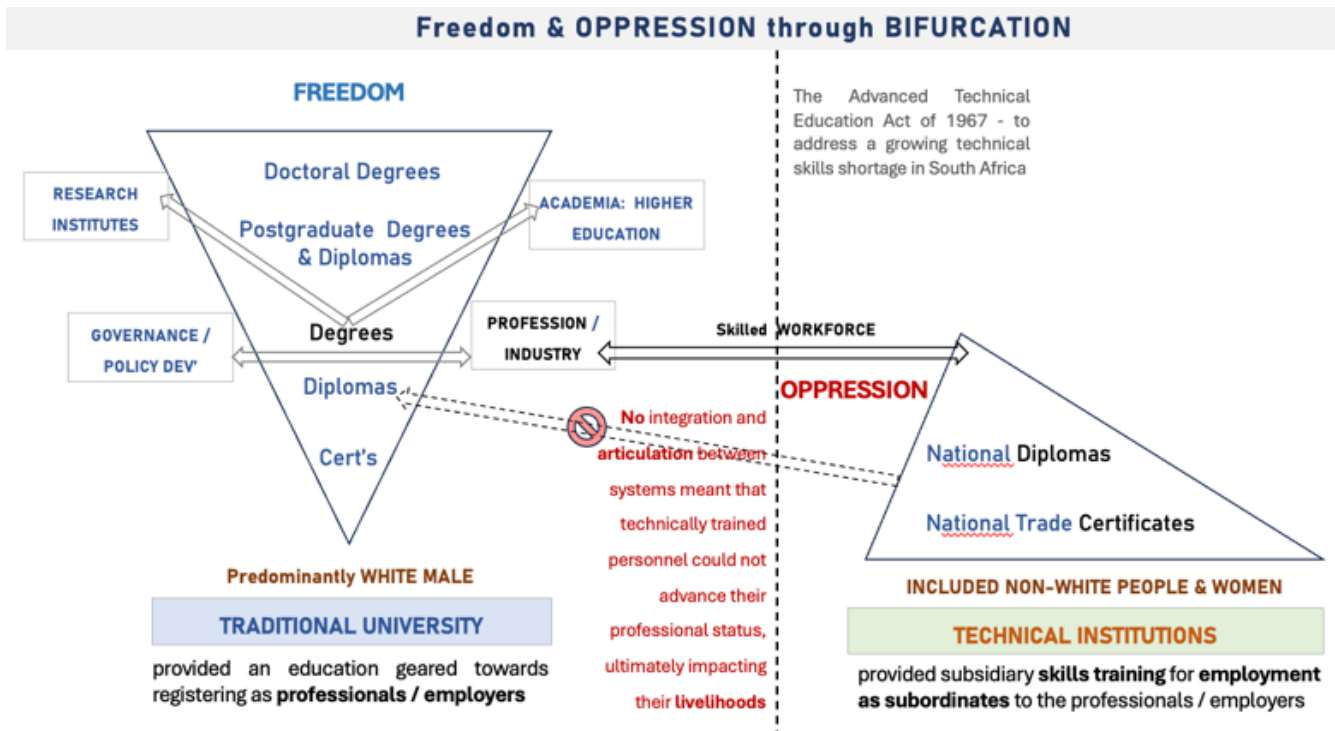
Fig. 1: The bifurcated apartheid model

The traditional university was the domain of the white male population, which would consequently develop the future heads of firms and industries. The technical institutions offered access to the wider non-white population and women, who would become the labour for employment in firms and industries.

The primary problem in the model was that it did not afford any possibilities of articulation of knowledge and skills gained in the technical institutes, to the traditional university curriculum. Note also that the technical institutions required students to undertake intermittent periods of work-based internship as part of the programme. University graduates could access various career opportunities, and the higher levels of qualifications afforded wider possibilities of engaging in different industries such as higher education and research. As the technical student advanced up the limited qualification structure, their knowledge and skills would become more specific to serve the needs of employers / industry.

While the advocates of such system argued that it was efficient, producing different skill sets that were equally valuable, the system did not inherently promote equality nor were the technical graduates respected as different but equal to their university counterparts. This model of systemic exclusion would hurt their confidence, and perceived self-worth / significance to their social contexts / communities.

3. THE BROADER IMPACT OF SYSTEMIC EXCLUSION

Historically marginalised communities continue to be deprived of high level skills sets to spatially transform their own communities meaningfully. External skills are

therefore imported to solve particularly nuanced problems in complex

socio-economic and cultural contexts. The appointed professionals would have had no lived experience within these contexts and would therefore not effectively develop the most responsive design proposals to enhance the spatial experiences of the community, nor empower them socio-economically, perpetuating the reality of dependency and deprivation. This further leads to an outflow of capital from the already disadvantaged communities to more affluent communities – counterintuitive to the objectives of redress and spatial transformation in South Africa.

The prevalent system of professional training inevitably invokes psychological insecurity and inferiority complexes, suppression of knowledge from lived experience in place, and dependence on external knowledge and skills, in marginalised communities, for their own advancement.

Sarkar [1] calls out such psycho-economic exploitation as a form of capitalist exploitation that psychologically paralyses people in various ways, rendering them increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and dependence on the methods and devices of the exploiters [2]. Sarkar highlights some of the methods of psycho-economic exploitation: the imposition of restrictions on women which force them to be dependent on men; an unpsychological education system marred by vested interests and political interference, and the suppression of the indigenous language and culture of local people. He further affirms that this type of oppression inculcates inferiority and fear complexes which keep

people psychologically weak and vulnerable. The dire reality of epistemic marginalisation through colonial domination -the destruction of place-based knowledge systems, and social and ecological interrelationships, which De Sousa Santos [3] coins "epistemicide". Salama and Crosbie [4] refer to this condition as a consequence of the "legacy model", wherein in the dominant Western worldviews suppress, undervalue and negate alternative sources of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge.

Furthermore, this type of psycho-socio-economic suppression also translates into oppression in the workplace as evident in employer-employee, peer-peer, and client interactions.

The author's own experiences in all the categories of professional registration attest to this. At lower levels of professional registration, he could not procure the complexity of work to better his livelihood, and would face disrespect in the workplace for his views / positions on aspects of architectural design. Reprimands by employers for his contributions to design were met by statements such as *"...I pay you to work, not to think...".* During his tenure at an academic institution, without the highest professional qualification, he would be boxed into modules and tasks that he knew were far below his potential.

Such experience defines the crux of the exclusionary system: potentiality is disregarded; the qualification, and not the complexity of thinking through difficult socio-economic realities, ranked supreme. The author's inherent ability and potentiality would be suppressed because of socio-economic barriers and unfair gatekeeping, adversely impacting his career and professional confidence. In order to progress to higher qualification he had to make serious financial and social compromises and therefore took almost twenty years to eventually qualify as professional architect, while his privileged colleagues did it 5-6 years of full time study followed by two years internship and a board exam.

The author's lived experiences had one positive outcome that shaped his thinking and research focus; he developed strong bonds with others who faced similar challenges, many who were a decade or few elder. He was able to use his "privilege" of higher qualification to reconnect with those persons and their communities to find ways to advance their knowledge and skills. The reflective discussion, in section 6, examines the extent of psychological and pedagogic exclusion of marginalised communities in the architectural profession.

4. THE POST-APARTHEID MODEL OF REDRESS AND TRANSFORMATION.

The post-apartheid placed socio-economic redress and spatial transformation high on the agenda, which realised various policies and frameworks to drive redress, and transformation of higher education. The most significant transformative legislation was the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 [5].

The most pertinent objectives of the Act were to:

- Establish a single coordinated higher education system which promotes co-operative governance and provides for programme-based higher education.

- Restructure and transform programmes and institutions to respond better to the human resource, economic and development needs of the Republic.

- Redress past discrimination and ensure representivity and equal access.

- Provide optimal opportunities for learning and the creation of knowledge.

- Promote the values which underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom.

- Respect and encourage democracy, academic freedom, freedom of speech and expression, creativity, scholarship and research.

- Pursue excellence, promote the full realisation of the potential of every student and employee, tolerance of ideas and appreciation of diversity.

The Act facilitated the transformation of technical institutions to offer higher qualifications, equal in academic rigour to those of the traditional universities. The National Qualifications Framework and, subsequently the Higher Education Sub-Framework (HEQsF) [6], defined a single coordinated system that afforded various articulation possibilities (Fig. 2), a conceptually diametric model to the bifurcated model.
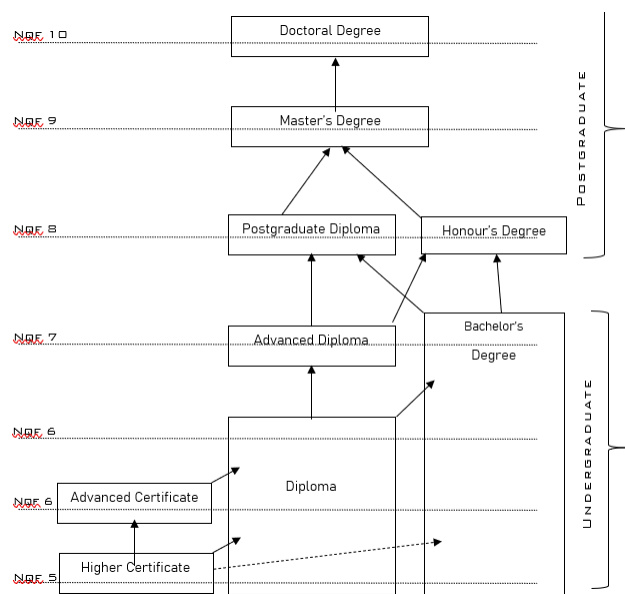

Fig. 2: The Higher Education Qualifications Sub Framework

Theoretically, the transformed frameworks could empower disadvantage communities, however, South Africa remains the most unequal country according to the latest statistical data. Why is this the case 30 years into the democratic dispensation?

5. THE PROBLEM OF SOCIETALLY DISCONNECTED THINKING AND PRACTICE

This paper contends that the post-apartheid system has failed to socio-economically and spatially transform the very communities that were marginalised. The apartheid system, and an overt reliance on colonial pedagogies, have effectively shaped the thinking, and conditioned the values of the decision-makers / gatekeepers who would have been schooled in such segregated system. There seems to be an intellectual inertia [1] among people in positions, who could effect positive change and achieve the objectives of redress and transformation. Could this be a deeper consequence of the depth of the colonisation of the minds of the powers that be, into singular worldviews [7], in post-colonial societies?

An alternative approach through the articulation opportunities provided by the NQF is not far-fetched, yet it remains an objective that has not meaningfully materialised to benefit architectural practitioners in marginalised communities, largely due to preconceptions, misconceptions and disinformation [8], [9] by the historical gatekeepers of architectural education and practice.

The author, through his engagement with the architectural industry liaison committees, advisory boards and professional associations, found that employers were still expecting the universities that evolved from former technical institutions to provide technically skilled labour.

Luckan [8] investigated the possibilities for meaningful systemic transformation by referring to the Department of Higher Education and Training Articulation Policy [10], the DHET *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Coordination Policy* [11] and the SAQA recognition of Prior Learning National Policy [12], which penned real alternative pathways to advance knowledge and skills despite socio-economic circumstances. However, untransformed institutional policies allowed selective / bias interpretation, which hindered the effective implementation of these policies.

The South African architectural profession developed a tiered structure of registration correlated to the qualifications framework [6]. An Identification of Work (IDOW) Framework [13], published by the professional body, would limit the type of work in the different levels of professional registration. The means to articulate to higher levels of registration, however, remains a challenge to marginalised communities. Those trained at the historically technical institutions would typically serve as draughtspersons or technologists, while the graduates of traditional universities, or the new universities of technology programmes, could register as professional architects. Most registered persons from historically marginalised communities, therefore, could only practice in lower registration categories and not procure work of higher complexity.

6. REFLECTIVE DISCUSSION OF ENGAGEMENT WITH MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES.

This reflective discussion is based on the author's previous experience through his continuous development programme (CPD) presentations, workshops and seminars to empower disadvantaged architectural practitioners from apartheid-born townships in South Africa. His engagement, with the only post-apartheid registered architectural voluntary association, Freedom *Architecture Consulting Empowerment* (FACE) provides an in-depth experiential understanding of the challenges of disadvantaged practitioners in their own marginalised communities. The reflective discussion references [9] and the author's experience engaging with this community of practitioners since 2019.

FACE consists of approximately 90 members who predominantly reside / work in historically marginalised communities. About 80% of the members have more than twenty years' experience, with about a quarter of the members having more than 40 years' experience. Most members have qualifications that place them in the lower professional categories, namely draughtspersons and technologists.

The author's various engagements with the community highlighted personal impacts on practitioners, beyond professional work, which included psychological and emotional stress, and trauma due to an exclusionary professional learning environment. The general informal feedback during his presentations and workshops, and his previously published research [9] on this community revealed the following psycho-socio-economic stresses:

- Intimidation from peers with higher qualifications.
- Declining levels of professional confidence over time.
- Disregard form their colleagues when contributing their ideas to conceptual design discussions.
- Anger and resentment due to constant disregard.
- Feeling of being inferior and unable to express themselves in the workplace.
- Undermined as some of their ideas were taken and used by senior colleagues, without acknowledging them.
- Feeling of wanting to leave the profession / not belonging.
- Their qualifications did not allow them to procure complex work, therefore they could not benefit from higher paying work, leading to financial stress that affected their family livelihoods.
- Feeling undervalued as they would not be considered on public projects. They could not even do work of a public nature in their own communities.

These practitioners, already burdened by the need to support their families from limited access to work, have no viable option other than formal training and

professional mentorship, neither of which has been accessible to them. While highly qualified graduates easily gain public confidence, and entitlement by default, marginalised practitioners must constantly apply much greater effort, connect with others, self-learn and build resilience to deal with the psychological and emotional traumas they face daily through no fault of their own. The research found, however, that they were eager to learn and actively seek opportunities to advance their knowledge, yet the prevalent "democratic" systems still excludes their circumstances.

The engagement with this township-based association reaffirmed that much learning happens out of the formal learning environment, in the community spaces of engagement and practice. This community formed a strong support base by focusing on CPD programmes, many of which the author presented, focusing on higher level skills development. They also assist each other through their social media, and they engage on any opportunity for learning that may be available in the profession. However, their support of each other is limited due to their own limited levels of knowledge and skills.

This raises a critical and urgent need to find a mechanism to upskill such communities to be able to perform professional duties with higher levels of skill that can benefit their livelihoods while positively impacting their spatial transformation; an alternative system is needed to meaningfully emancipate marginalised architectural professionals. Ideally, such system would empower diverse communities to challenge hegemony, the colonial curriculum and learning spaces that are socially disconnected from their contextual realities.

7. FORMING A CRITICAL ALTERNATIVE: AN INCLUSIVE SPATIAL MODEL FOR ADVANCED PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

The paper proposes a critical alternative through a conceptual framework defined by pedagogic inclusion, the social learning experience, the spatial learning experience, and decentralisation through deconstruction of the formal learning space. Wellbeing, welfare and a supportive, holistic learning environment connected to the global knowledge community are key to the alternative model.

At the core of the model is an agenda that promotes welfare, including psychological indicators of wellbeing [14]. Inayatullah [15] aptly expounded the concept of the quadruple bottom-line, to include the interdependence of social, economic, environmental and spiritual spheres of holistic coexistence, arguing that the triple bottom line cannot measure the immeasurable happiness / wellbeing indicators that directly relate to a deeper worldview defined by values and ethics. To affirm the critical importance of interdependence and coexistence, in nuanced place, as key indicators of wellbeing, Bjonnes [14] cites the Russian Naturalist Petr Krapotkin who, in the early 1900s, observed that the survival of species depended more on co-existence / cooperation than competition.

This paper proposes a model fundamentally based on pedagogic inclusion, connecting with community (people) in place (context) and time [16] (Fig. 3).
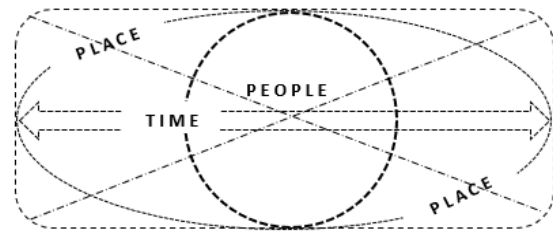

Fig 3. A people-place-time interdependency model

It is defined by the principles:

o Placed-based knowledge generation through the inclusion of multiple lived experiences
o A responsive / agile curriculum
o Interdisciplinary Engagement
o Alternative Learning Pathways
o Deconstructing the Formal Learning Space

Pedagogic inclusion would allow the lived experiences of people in diverse contexts to be included in the curriculum and learning space development. It is taken as given that the diverse local contexts are situated in a broader global context and that the learning community must be characterised by a dialogical relationship with global discourse, concerns and practices while advancing knowledge generation and knowledge transfer from diverse nuanced global South contexts. Such learning community can thrive on interdisciplinary engagement, as the critical issues facing global South communities cannot and are not being effectively addressed by the mainstream professional education model. It is founded on the notion of an inclusive community of learning, which Luckan [9] defined as a critical learning community – promulgating collaborative thinking and practice towards pedagogic inclusion of heterogenous communities to form a diverse critical learning community (Fig. 4) that can effect continual curriculum transformation through contestation of learned and lived experiences.
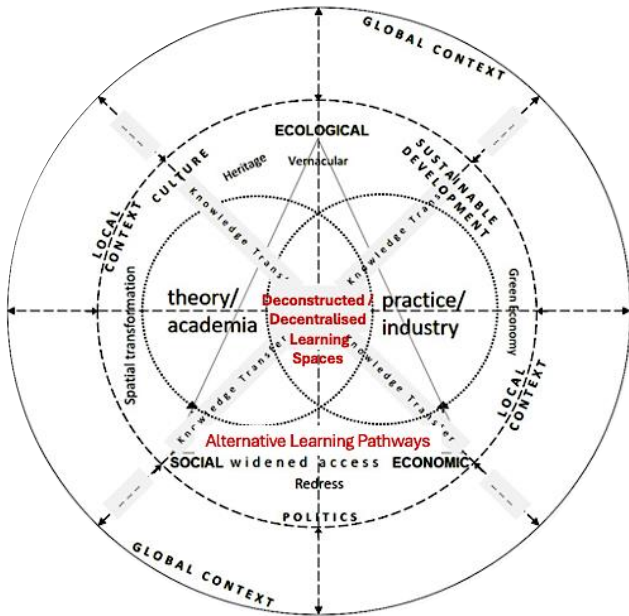
Fig. 4: The Critical Learning Community (adapted from Luckan 2021)

Inclusive pedagogy also requires concerted appreciation and inclusion of diversity which can be facilitated through alternative learning pathways such as the recognition of prior learning [7]. The linear curriculum confined by the institutionalised linear learning pathway cannot address the challenges facing global south communities. The communities themselves can be empowered through the affordance of alternative learning pathways that draw on their lived experiences, and consequent innovative thinking to build resilience in difficult complex contexts. Pedagogic inclusion will therefore inevitably challenge the fixed, global North dominated curriculum, to naturally catalyse a continuous decolonisation of the "curriculum".

The critical learning community must however transcend / break the shackles of institutionalised learning space to become pedagogically inclusive, interdisciplinary engaged and connected to people and place as generators of knowledge – a deconstruction of the formal learning environment is necessary. The nuanced contexts of living, being, engaging and practicing can thereby become the laboratories and studios of experimentation and exploration to develop responsive and meaningful solutions. Social and spatial learning experiences are vital to such learning environment, to reveal layers of cultural narratives in diverse places (Fig. 5)
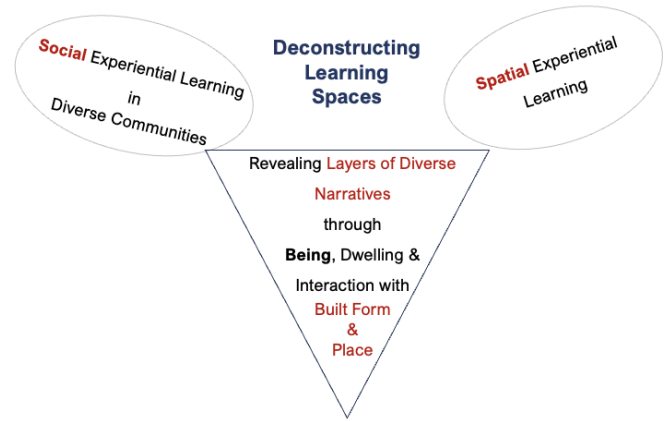

Fig 5: Defining the socio-spatial learning environment

The paper expounds the idea that the learning pathways and the learning environment, both need to be reconceptualised to afford accessibility to continuous learning as, when and where needed.

The specific practical approach, to skills development in marginalised communities, that this paper recommends is as follows:

- Deconstruct the traditional curriculum to afford multiple entry and exit points and facilitate incremental, needs-based learning.
- Develop short modules as CPD that can be micro-credentialled and accredited towards RPL for upgrading professional registration category / achievement of a formal qualification.
- Take the learning spaces into the communities for more engagement with their realities and potential to identify impactful situated projects.
- Foster a learning environment that thrives on mentorship and sharing of knowledge and practical experience.
- Promote engagement with learning technologies to open the community to the global knowledge society.

8. ANTICIPATED PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE MODEL ON MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

The model significantly places people in place at its centre; it is founded on the affirmation that people in difficult, harsh and challenging contexts would have developed high levels of creative thinking to solve the constant problems they face on a daily basis. It affirms that marginalised communities have a naturally reflexive mode of response to the general indeterminacy of their circumstances and are generally more able to respond to shock through sharing knowledge, skills and resources through stronger community relationships. The model promotes the inclusion of these attributes, that would have developed through loved experience, in the curriculum and assessments. The inclusion of diversity is promoted by allowing the learning projects to be learner-driven and situated in their own communities, whereby their work can easily translate into agency for socio-economic and spatial transformation of their own communities.

In so doing, the model can directly heal the trauma through the psychological violence of a colonial / apartheid model in the following ways:

o Enhance a feeling of belonging and feeling valued in the profession that would be responsive to and respects the knowledge gained in place through lived experiences.
o Have their ideas and opinions considered in a system that is receptive of different conceptual positions and worldviews.
o Build confidence in practice as their work has meaningful impact on their own communities. This also enhances a sense of belonging and significance in the community.
o Form micro communities of support to constantly enrich the intellectual wealth of the community while being there for each other in times of uncertainty / crises.
o Enhance the quality of their spatial experience through higher level of knowledge transfer through practice in their own communities.
o Enhance significance and meaning of their work by keeping community capital expenditure in the community and for the benefit of the community.

In addition to the generally expected benefits of the psychological and emotional wellbeing of the practitioners, the community, including children, the elderly and vulnerable people will greatly benefit for a generally better quality built environment, produced by practitioners who would have been "schooled" by inclusion and respect for diversity and the needs of the community. This raises urgency to formulate decolonial methodologies and process in professional education and practice.

9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper examined a critical problem of systemic exclusion that severely impacted the psychological and emotional wellbeing of architectural practitioners in marginalised communities. The study, based on a community-based reflective analysis through an autoethnographic inquiry found that the inherent attributes and potentialities of marginalised communities are still being disregarded albeit in a post-apartheid / democratic dispensation. The paper also highlighted the lack of effective implementation of transformative legislation due to unfair gatekeeping through selective implementation of such, that continued to perpetuate a systemic exclusionary model of professional education. The author's previous work, lived experiences and an extensive period of engagement with disadvantaged communities, critically influenced the design of an inclusive model for professional education. It was found that the concept of the critical learning community, supported by a deconstructed learning environment, could directly heal the trauma of psychological violence of a prevalent colonial / apartheid model of professional education in South Africa.

The paper recommends that the model present be adapted in different contexts to critically challenge hegemony, and systemic exclusion through policy reform, to effectively be able to implement the objectives of transformative legislation in South Africa and be upscaled to impact global communities grappling with colonial exclusion in the professions. It is also envisaged that this model be a precursor to a critical global discourse on decolonial methodologies for spatial transformation in global South communities.

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