Abstract:

This article considers the history of an experiment in architectural education that took place at what is today the University of Nairobi, between 1965 – 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 on the one hand an experiment in architectural education in post-colonial Africa; and on the other, a serious attempt to think through the African experience of time, intended to equip students with the tools to recognize and respond to the unique conditions of the post-colonial African present. Based on archival sources – including those in private collections – and oral interviews, this article situates the Foundation Course within African intellectual history as an exercise in social theory and phenomenology. The article considers 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. The article traces the intellectual lineages of their concepts and explores their articulation within the post-colonial university, until the course was cancelled in June 1967. Mvusi died shortly thereafter; the article ends by considering how he had imagined the Foundation Course as a laboratory for both being and building in post-colonial Africa, by closely reading a paper he presented in New York on the course’s conclusions in October 1967, weeks before he died.

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

Je suis mon propre fondement - Frantz Fanon, 1952

In 1965, William Hance was the Vice-President of the American African Studies Association when he and a delegation of other Africanists visited the University College, Nairobi. 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 members of the ASA, 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 meeting of the ASA 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.1

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.

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It was true that ‘development,’ was an improvement over “anthropological approaches,” to African societies; Mvusi’s experiences as both an artist and as an African had left him deeply suspicious of Africanists who were obsessed with the passing of the past.² 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. He was concerned that international experts were missing the real, qualitative story his experiences in South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Ghana, Kenya and elsewhere had taught him: “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. Mvusi and Morgan’s Foundation Course wanted to train local experts – students in the Faculty of Art and Architecture – to recognize, understand and build off of this knowledge.³

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 University of Fort Hare (the country’s leading tertiary institution for Africans) during apartheid’s early years.⁴ 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, 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 backwards. 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.⁵

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; in both cases he sat on panels with academic experts who described the continent’s present as one of “confusion, if not chaos.”⁶ Like the apartheid government, most art history experts urged African creators to look backwards, to the coherence of the rural past, now threatened. Mvusi forcefully rejected such claims. “Art serves life,” he wrote in 1960; since Africa lived, it was necessary instead for Africans to cultivate “their relevant expression concerning the now.”⁷

² 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 (2015) and Sarah Von Beurden, Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Identity (2016). That impulse was frequently spatialized to valorize village life against the city. Among Mvusi’s interlocutors by 1965 were also local proponents of the same, including Elimu Njau, the founder of Nairobi’s Paa ya Paa Gallery, who that same year insisted that in postcolonial Africa, “the pendulum must now swing to the villages and true local life.” (Elimu Njau, “Paa ya Paa Gallery, 1965,” Nathan Shapira Design Archive, San Francisco State University (SFSU), no page number.)
³ Ibid.
⁴ For biographical information on Mvusi, see Elza Miles, Selby Mvusi: To Fly with the North Bird South (2015).
⁵ For the ways in which the apartheid government’s art program dovetailed with the temporal politics of separate development, see Magaziner, The Art of Life in South Africa (2016).
⁷ Mvusi to Evelyn Brown, Library of Congress, MSS51615, Box 93, 10 January 1960, 1, 1–2.
Speaking to UNESCO a year later, Mvusi clarified his opinions on the interplay between creating and time. It was not that he lacked admiration for African artists had once achieved. Yet he was insistent that the past be understood as having once been a present. When artists had created to ‘propitiate their spirits,’ they had done so as people of a time and place. The past mattered because it showed how previous generations of creators had articulated their humanity. But the past could 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 backwards 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, nor where they might go; what mattered was the pregnant, full experience of time that comprised the ever-unfolding now. This ongoing “journey ... was [the African’s] native land.”

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 on industrial design 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; 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 Morgan, who had been lecturing 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 at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the early 1950s, before coming to Kenya in 1954. Like Mvusi, he too was disillusioned with convention, especially as regarded building and design in contemporary Africa.

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.” Morgan’s critique came within the context of reappraising the Nairobi curriculum, which he thought 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 “building-expressing-a-milieu,” he wrote; it was the wondrous process by which “conceptual events” – ideas – are “actualised into space-time.” To generate inspiration,


\[9\] This data comes from a biography prepared by Morgan’s children and shared with me by Davinder Lamba, September 26, 2016.

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.”

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?”

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 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 Afro-diasporic intellectuals into the heart of 20th 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.”

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’ that was later to become part of the Illinois Institute of Technology, where Morgan studied.

The latter was thus quite familiar with the legacy of Basic Design and the course that he and Mvusi proposed reflected familiar elements, by taking advantage

12 Selby Mvusi, “Design Lecture Series No. 3,” DLC, 1.
13 Gary Wilder, Freedom Time, 10, 11.
14 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 and Herbert Lindinger, Ulm Design: The Morality of Objects (Cambridge, MA, 1991).
of the University College’s photography studio to experiment with light, for example, or in studios devoted to understanding the essential characteristics of shapes.  

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 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.) Yet the Nairobi Foundation Course was also – and perhaps even more importantly – a departure from its Bauhaus-inspired precedents. As indicated above, the course culminated in a series of intensive studies of human and material interactions. The so-called ‘man/environ’ projects were in some ways 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. Yet Nairobi’s course built to something distinct. Where other basic courses (like AA’s ‘unit system,’ for example) were intended to get students creating as soon as possible, the Nairobi course wanted its students to understand what was going on around them, before they began to design. Its students would be students of contemporary African cultural and intellectual practices first, and only then professionals.

15 There are numerous accounts of Bauhaus’s influence globally. One of my absolute favorites is Martin Duberman, Black Mountain, 1972.

16 The University of Khartoum established a degree in architecture in 1957; similar programs followed in Ghana, Nigeria and in Nairobi, while Kenya was still under British imperial control. Yet in general the terms of architectural knowledge were still set by metropolitan expertise. Mvusi and Morgan taught at a time where architecture for the mass of the population was defined only in terms of rural development, mass housing, climatological conditions, infrastructure and other familiar concerns, which had begun to be articulated as ‘tropical architecture’ during the late-colonial era. On tropical architecture, see Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone, 1956; see 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, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Jun., 2006), pp. 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. The story of tropical and other derivative or alternative modernisms is reasonably well told; the story of architectural education on the continent is 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 has emerged only recently (Iain Low, “Educating Architects in Africa,” Journal of African Education, Vol. 68, No. 2, 2014, 162 – 164). A critical exception is the work 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. (For example, http://radical-pedagogies.com/search-cases/f01-school-of-architecture-kumasi/ (accessed October 11, 2016).

17 For a compelling account of Kepes’s theories and their application in modernist architecture, see Reinhold Martin, The Organizational Complex. KNUST’s program also included survey components, although these were focused especially on the program’s efforts to support the Nkrumah government’s development agenda (and concomitant need to resettled populations. See Miescher, “Building the City of the Future: Visions and Experiences of Modernity Akosombo Township,” The Journal of African History, Vol. 53, No. 3 (2012). 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 University Press, 2016); for KNUST’s work affiliated with the AA, see Hannah Le Roux, “Architecture After Independence,” in Manuel Herz et al., eds. African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence, 138 – 9. Max Lock used the ‘survey method’ to study African lifeways and building in Kaduna, Nigeria, for example; see Max Lock and Partners, Kaduna 1917 1967 2017, (1967).
As such, the Foundation Course is best understood not through the disciplinary logics of architectural and design education, but instead in terms of sociology and urban ethnography, at a time when the former was finding its footing in Africa and the latter was barely imagined.\(^{18}\) Even as African cities were becoming increasingly populated hubs of modernist architecture, in the mid-1960s social scientific knowledge about African societies was only haltingly moving away from colonial-era ethnographic functionalism to address new social dynamics.\(^{19}\) As scholars like Ulf Hannerz and Lynn Schumaker have explored, one of the best-known sites for such novel approaches was the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) in Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia), which had been testing Max Gluckman’s quip that “an African townsman is a townsman” since the years immediately following World War II.\(^{20}\) Gluckman, his fellow South African Phillip Meyer, and others had broken new ground by exploring African society along the continuum from the village to the city, even as Mvusi’s travels through the African art world revealed than many other experts were loath to accept such epochal shifts. Yet as James Ferguson has shown, RLI ethnographers frequently understood such changes in light of the linear progression from rural life to industrial and urban modernity, familiar from European and North American history. Their frames were more generous than most, but not attuned specifically to the uniqueness of time and place.\(^{21}\)

Ferguson critiques the RLI’s insistence that changing African societies could be understand by reference to European and North American precedents. “Cities are noisy,” he counseled; lost in their bustle, narratives like ‘modernization’ and ‘development’ will commonly obscure more than they reveal.\(^{22}\) In the decade-plus since Ferguson wrote, numerous other scholars have turned their attention to African cities to tease out practices that belie prefabricated frames. Since 2000, scholars like AbdouMaliq 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. Against a literature on the past aspirations and subsequent disappointments of Africa’s modernisms, this new generation of urbanists pursue

\(^{18}\) As the foregoing note suggests, the Foundation Course was only one among a host of design and architectural educational experiments then taking place. The South African and Mozambican architects 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 – 2, 208-209 and Julian Beinart, interview by the author, April 2, 2015, New York. Beinart had been an instructor at the Witwatersrand University School of Architecture in 1962 when progressive students there demanded a new, survey based approach to architectural education that they called ‘For Us.’ See their manifesto in the author’s possession (Hannah Le Roux, personal communication, October 11, 2016.) Beinart’s own survey’s resulted in his publication, The Popular Art in Africa (Johannesburg, 1963). The architectural historian Ayala Levin has written recently on Beinart’s work in Nigeria and elsewhere. See her “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). Beinart was a Kepes student who was interested in discovering the elements of visual literacy that would help contemporary Africans transition from pre to industrialized societies (with rural Nigeria and urban South Africa on different ends of the continuum). His theory was that visual language (design) was open and accessible to all, no matter their training and specialization. Morgan and Mvusi wanted to train experts on society, by contrast.

\(^{19}\) On spectacular modernism in African cities, see Manuel Herz, ed. African Modernism.


\(^{21}\) Ferguson, Expectations of Modernity (University of California Press, 1999).

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 207.
presence unfettered by linear modernity.²³ It is notable that such work tends in the directions that Mvusi and Morgan’s man / environ studies first proposed nearly a half-century ago, in exploring how African urbanism is, as Simone has put it, the study of “thickening connections” among people and things.²⁴ 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 of subject formation,” rather than relapse to tired clichés about whom Africans ought or ought not to be (and thus what African cities ought or ought not to be). The latter’s insistence on contingency and place leads him to “reinterpret subjectivity” – familiarly – “as time.”²⁵ Mbembe frequently 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.”²⁶ Contrary to theories of ascribed identity that objectified the African subject, thus constraining the possibilities of African humanity, Fanon forcefully contended that “I am endlessly creating myself … I am my own foundation.”²⁷ For Simone, Mbembe and Fanon, in other words the “journey” – not the origin, nor 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.²⁸ 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.”²⁹ Like his counterparts studying contemporary African cities, Gooden critiques this tendency in retrospect; Mvusi and Morgan critiqued it going forward.

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. So doing, they argued, were contemporary Africans identifying their selves to the posterity that trails behind the present.³⁰ The historian P.J. Ethington has insisted that we think seriously about how, being present both in time and in space,

²³ Among numerous works, see Pieterse, Simone et al., Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities (Jacana Media, 2013); De Boeck, Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City (D A P, 2006); Quayson, Oxford Street Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism (Duke University Press, 2014).
²⁴ Simone, For the City Yet to Come (Duke University Press, 2004), 137.
²⁷ Black Skin, White Masks, 204 – 205.
²⁹ Mario Gooden, Dark Space: Architecture, Representation, Black Identity, 13, 31, 58.
³⁰ On immaterial and material networks between people and things, see Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 77.
“all individuals are the creative authors of their own presence.”

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 then. Selby Mvusi called these phenomena ‘journeys,’ and together with Derek Morgan he sought to train students to see 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.  

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. 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 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 orderly, hygienic houses, as quickly and efficiently as possible, not just meeting metropolitan standards.

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 post-colonial Kenya was clear: he wanted the program linked to Civil Engineering, Urban Planning and Building Sciences; it was to be vocational and prospectively developmental. Architecture “is first of all deeply and fundamentally concerned with bring the applications of science and technology to bear upon the total problem of human settlement,” Gardner-Medwin

32 Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Tarrytown NY, USA, RF / RG 1.2 Series 475 Box 2, Folder 13, Robert W. July Trip Diary, April 1961, 22.
33 Morgan biographical information, shared with me by Davinder Lamba, September 26, 2016.
35 Robert Garder-Medwin, “Problems of the Nairobi Department,” October 30, 1964, University of Nairobi Archives (U of N), PUEA/11/1 - 14/File 1, 5 - 6.
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.36

This troubled Morgan. 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, the architect 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 literally to lose the thread of society’s concerns.37 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.”38 There was truth in what had developed over time, so the task of the architect was to create something new by learning from what was. In order for a novel concept – like 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, a 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; it could not and ought not to be the same thing everywhere, at all times.39 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, then deployed in space-time.40 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.41 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, he thought industrial design was particular

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37 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.’” d’Auria, “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 in Africans’ “transition to a [future] life” of industrial employment and nucleated families. (210)
40 For a recent celebration of the discipline, see Jessica Helfand, Design: The Invention of Desire (Yale University Press, 2016).
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 fully to participate in this process, because of a lack of funds and expertise, and especially because of prevailing ideas that non-Western peoples simply were not suited to contemporary technology and needed instead to preserve their traditional craft practices. Mvusi rejected such fearful conservatism. He knew all too well that there were those who 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 about the post-colonial decline of the ‘authentic’ Africa, but it “cannot solve problems.” It was 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.”

This is why design mattered. He defined it as “the plastic realization of time-consciousness.” The things people made demonstrated their mastery of time and place. “The truly excellent object is the object that most successful eliminates alternative interpretations to both its form and its function,” Mvusi explained. “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; they were ideas “influenced and related to other ideas.” 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 to create things that were “African in every respect” remained. 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, industrial design, at an African university, in a bustling city, in an independent state. “The African personality must be defined industrially,” he concluded.

Over the course of 1964 and the first months of 1965 Mvusi and Morgan collectively lobbied for a new program that would jointly train architects and designers to be students and creators of the local present. While this was going on, Gardner-Medwin was working more tightly to knit the Nairobi architecture program to then ascendant ideas about tropical architecture. He brought David Oakley, an AA graduate and specialist in tropical housing (having worked in Jamaica for the colonial government and taught in India) to serve as director of studies, hoping that Oakley's

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42 Ibid.
45 Mvusi, “Education of Industrial Designers,” 7, 18.
46 Ibid., 52 – 53.
47 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, “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, March 9, 1965, 1.
arrival would presage Nairobi’s development into a center for housing research and development.\footnote{Robert Gardner-Medwin, “Architecture, Design and Development,” 1 February 1966, University of East Africa archives, PUEA / 11 / 1 - 14, File 2, 3. Gardner-Medwin had first suggested 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,” September 29, 1964, U of N, PUEA / 11 / 1 - 14 File 1, 8.} He wanted the faculty to expand and fast, but since it was so small, Gardner-Medwin 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.”\footnote{Ibid., 5.}

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.”\footnote{Gardner-Medwin to Porter, June 8, 1965, U of N, PUEA / 11 / 15 - 24, 1.} 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, etc. 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.”\footnote{Director of Studies to Morgan, Mvusi, Maloba and La Briero, 24 October 66, DLC, 1.} Oakley’s goal was an efficient, pre-professional program. Education was a necessity, not an abstract indulgence - the architect needed to be working to solve society’s “actual problems” and soon.

It soon became apparent that comprehensive’ meant something different to Mvusi and Morgan. In late May 1965 they presented their initial ideas to a gathering of architects, government officials and others who were meeting to consider ways forward in East African architecture. The practicing architect and 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 imagine that after a year a student “may know and be know 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 results in atrophy of potential,” they insisted, contrasting the relative merits of ‘individuality’ and ‘professionalization.’\footnote{Ibid.}

They proposed instead to 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 the turn the microcosm of a world macrocosm - in turn the microcosm of Universe.”\footnote{The term is Quayson’s, Oxford Street, 30 – 31.} This was network theory – the idea that people and their objects were but “expressive fragments” of a tangled, overlapping web of connection.\footnote{Ibid.} They wanted their understanding of the concept to be captured in
the name of the Faculty, which they insisted ought to be called the ‘Faculty of Comprehensive Design.’ This 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.’ 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
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.

Gardner-Medwin and Oakley imagined the first year to be a place where 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 post-colonial world. What was true geo-politically 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 isolation. They reinforced this lesson on four levels. The first was technical: occasional lectures and studios on materials, on the quality and function of sound, sporadic discussions of climatology, focusing on the relationships between objects and human beings. The second, under the heading ‘form/content appreciation,’ was largely in the studio: looking at the forces that make up the material world - shapes, light, etc. 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 get them to 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

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58 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 (1972).
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.\footnote{59}

In 1965, the lectures began immediately. Mvusi and Morgan alternated, offering detailed notes on a wide range of topics. Not surprising their first topic was the present. In October 1965 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. “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 be afraid 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 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, 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.”\footnote{60}

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; the very fact of the progress from Greek to Roman civilization demonstrated that successful societies innovated and changed.\footnote{61} Ruptures always rent societies, new opportunities emerged, and no boxes remained intact. Greece bled into Rome,

\footnote{59}{Space precludes me from 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.}

\footnote{60} {Mvusi, “Social and Cultural Dynamics: An Introduction,” October 1965, DLC, 1 – 5.}

Hinduism transgressed into Buddhism, Impressionism yielded to the Fauves and Futurists, who in the early 20th century claimed that “just as our ancestors found their inspiration in the world of religion … so we must draw ours from the tangible miracles of contemporary life.” 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.” This was the takeaway of lectures that connected broad intellectual and social transformations across year and continents, to culminate by the end of the third term on 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 get accredited to build houses and post-offices. Morgan and Mvusi labored to convince their students that it was ok to be confused. In the mid-20th 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. They were not just students - they were historical actors doing the work of consciousness in time. Much of the evidence suggests that the student were powerfully inspired by their instructors’ faith that they were up to the task. The numbers were small, but growing. There were 12 students in the course the first year, and 27 in the second. Most were Kenyan, although there were significant numbers of Tanzanians and, especially, Ugandans enrolled. 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.

Even their instructors had to acknowledge that none 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. What records of student work survive suggest that many students did their best to figure out how to make the course’s concepts their own. 1965 - 1966 student Nduuru Githere 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 Kanyue contended, while “design is infinite” and ought to transcend what had already been done. It fell to a younger generation to make manifest “the invention of things that are still not yet invented,” as another student put it. 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,” a

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64 Mvusi and Morgan, “Urbanisation and Industrialisation,” April 1966, Miles, To Fly with the North Bird South, appendix, 104.
65 Davinder Lamba, interview by the author, Nairobi, May 15, 2015; Odoch Pido, interview by the author, Nairobi, May 12, 2015.
student 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.”

This was heady stuff. Davinder Lamba was a Foundation Course student in its second year. He was so inspired by what he learned there that he saved every piece 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 expected architectural school to be. Like many of his classmates, he struggled to balance the tasks assigned to him and the learning they required. Eventually he found his footing.

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 latter needed to defend themselves against the charge that “the students did not understand what was taught.” 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 underserved and densely populated area near the Nairobi city center. By making plastic noise, the students tried to capture “Nairobi as one whole.”

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,” as the 1965 - 1966 student William Ssenjobe concluded.

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

68 Davinder Lamba, interview, 2015.
72 “Foundation Course: 1955/66, Year One, Term One,” 1.
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.” 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.

Ssenjoke’s lecture materials had included Mvusi’s essays on “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, Mvusi 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.” Which was to say: if you did not know a place, a people and their time – and really know it – you would never be able to design for it. So the Foundation 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 / environ 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 - the man as thinking agent along one, the environment - both built and natural - along the other. 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.” 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. (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, telephonists, and lecturers were among the possible candidates.) Such ‘researches’ marked a further step towards applying the course’s theories to the design of new things for East Africa.

73 Morgan to Nisa Mvusi, August 11, 1969, DLC, 1.
74 Mvusi, “Educating Designers,” 17.
76 Ibid.
A few weeks later the assignment’s second phase made the link to design more explicit. In mid-March students returned to their initial subjects (if they had families), or found a new subject (if their first did not). Peoples interacted with objects and especially with other people within a space. This assignment was more explicitly architectural - students were charged with considering the ‘home’ in all of its relations and complexity. The home is a “given series of relational spaces,” Mvusi and Morgan instructed, “an architecture of given function- relation-field coordinates.” 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.” Students mapped these, for “24 hours of a working day and 24 hours of a Sunday,” 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,” etc. 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.

The project’s third phase made the Foundation Course’s critique of earlier approaches even more explicit. 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 which cultural preservations 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 an object of study and analysis. (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.)

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 imprecisioned [sic]” analysis; they had only been consider en masse, whether regarding “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; it was thus their responsibility to “comprehend the processes at hand” in the present. Architects and designers needed to learn so that in 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

78 Salmed Hameed and Isaac Mruttu, interview by the author, Nairobi, June 16, 2016.
81 Personal communication, Davinder Lamba, September 23, 2016.
their 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.”

So the students packed up and travelled 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.” They accounted for how the structures they saw had changed and they asked questions about the ones that no one 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 “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.” They considered how the building was situated - along which roads and watercourses, surrounded by which crops and animals, connected by which intellectual, social, political and economic networks, to which pasts and presents.

Only then would they themselves be ready even 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.” They subsequently presented that object 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. 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, with the built environment. Their studies were supposed to reveal a community’s time-consciousness. Now, as the third term closed, it was students’ time to capture all that they had learned in physical form.

By producing something tangible, students would prove that the program could work, which was critical to ensure its viability. In June 1966, 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 ‘tensegity’ structures,” Gardner-Medwin reported. The end of year exhibition was mostly 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 “been well supervised and for the most past competently carried out by the students,” but

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83 Ibid.
he worried that there had been too little connection between what students did with their hands and what was going on in their heads.  

A year later the Foundation Course ran out of time. At the end of year exhibition students were limited to 'project reports' – narratives of what they had seen, illustrated with sketches or photographs, not models of what they themselves intended to make. The actually existing 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 word.” 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 let down after a year of such intense and methodical learning. Moreover, because of how slow they had moved, Morgan and Mvusi were only able to give their students five days to complete the assignment.

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 heart of their curriculum. Across 1966 - 1967, he continued to air his concerns. 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; rather, they seemed to be training students to work “against [the field].” There was too much theory, the syllabus was “too analysis-oriented and fact-loaded.” As such, it risked freezing “the student into design impotence.” 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. 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 interested in architecture or design, future students 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 that “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. Mvusi went back to the

87 Davinder Lamba and Diana Lee Smith, interview by the author, May 15, 2015.
88 Faculty Minutes, May 18, 1966, DLC, 1 - 5.
89 Memorandum, Oakley to Staff, October 23, 1966, DLC, 1 - 3.
90 Oakley to Mvusi and Morgan, October 24, 1966, DLC, 1 - 3.
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.” 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. Mvusi lost control of his vehicle and it rolled; he survived the initial impact, but died before he could be treated at a nearby hospital. While Mvusi’s 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; 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.” Morgan scrambled to save Mvusi’s papers, while also appealing 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 resigned from the university shortly thereafter.

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; he was willing. In 1969 he came and turned his attention to ‘Africanizing’ the discipline. Odoch Pido was a student of Shapira’s. He relates 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.” When the University of East Africa split into three separate institutions in 1970, his efforts were rewarded. The design department produced the symbolic language for the occasion, including all of the posters and other printed material. The best known element of this was the academic regalia Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta’s 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. The regalia included one of Kenyatta’s favored pillbox hats, in leopard skin; there were also leopard skin accents on the robes themselves. Thus was ‘Africanizing’ design achieved. Shapira had known Mvusi, but he was more interested in designing things to fit a packaged idea of ‘Africaness’ 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 graduates of Otto Koenigsberger’s course in Tropical Architecture at the AA in London took over for Derek Morgan. One of these was Diana Lee-Smith, who began to teach in 1967.

94 Miles, Selby Mvusi, 47.
95 Lamba and Lee Smith, interview, 2015.
96 Miles, Selby Mvusi, 45.
97 Odoch Pido, interview by the author, June 14, 2016, Nairobi, Kenya.
98 Shapira to Goldsmith, December 20, 1972, University of Brighton Design Archives, ICSID collection, 3.
Nairobi in 1969. Upon her arrival she met both Morgan and veterans of the Foundation Course. She too was a Fuller enthusiast and put her students to work designing and building geodesic domes. She also preserved the third part of the Man / Environ project, so in 1970 - 1971, students went again to rural areas from the ways in which communities had socialized space. A year later she too left the University. Foundation Course graduates like Nduuru Githere found what jobs there were, which usually meant going to work for the Kenyan Ministry of Works. It was one thing to be inspired; it was quite another to find ones 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.”

Morgan tried intermittently to find a publisher for he and Mvusi’s lectures, in part to raise money to help support Mvusi’s widow and children. He was not successful. 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. Upon leaving Nairobi himself, Shapira brought copies of many of Mvusi and Morgan’s writings back to California. Today one of Shapira’s students preserves those documents in a design archive at San Francisco State University. The whole set of man / environ assignments are there. Only in 2016 were Mvusi and Morgan’s essays published for the first time 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 a chapter in Africa’s intellectual history, which was a collaboration between partners from such different backgrounds, who came together, determined that from Africa might come a new way of studying, learning from and understanding the built environment.

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 in 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 to leave the people bewildered?” Ssenjobe had asked, before going on to suggest 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; 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 physical world. For his part, Oakley saw massive problems that

102 The words are Davinder Lamba’s, interview, 2015. Interviews with others in the first generation of Kenyan architecture attest to this. See Salman and Mruttu, interview, 2016; also James Waweru, interview by the author, Nairobi, June 17, 2016; Ruben Mutiso, interview by the author, Nairobi, June 16, 2016.
103 Morgan to Nisa Mvusi, August 11, 1969, DLC, 1.
105 Miles, Selby Mvusi, 41.
specialists needed to keep in check. Architects in the tropics should train students for an architecture that “will be … practical,” in places where “the daily actuality is one of chaos,” Oakley wrote. 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 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; he did not expect them to learn anything meaningful from people and communities who did not seem to share ‘our time.”

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 Mvusi travelled to New York to present at a conference on mass communication and human relations, called Vision ’67. Henri Cartier-Bresson was there; Buckminster Fuller was there; Umberto Eco was there; and Mvusi was there, “painter and lecturer, University of East Africa, Nairobi.” 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, relationships - of attraction or repulsion, of inequality or equivalence - governed human societies. Taken as one thing, alone, nothing makes sense, 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 and not dismissed as either inauthentic or archaic. Contrary to those who saw only binaries - developed/underdeveloped, rural/urban, African/Western, 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; it was to be. The chronology of progress was a fiction. “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 reformatory and more transformative, of ourselves and correspondingly more creative of life generally.” Only by eschewing models and one-size-fits-all schemes could there be 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 he had hoped his students would achieve. Mvusi penned this essay mere 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. In New York, he did: “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 what he had already suspected - “we must see and feel ourselves to meet fully the challenges of our time if we are

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107 For more see http://siudesign.org/vision_67.htm (accessed on September 22, 2016).
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.  

108 Mvusi, “Problem Growth or Growth Problem,” Miles, Selby Mvusi, appendix, 31, 34, 35.