

# CS STUDIO ARCHITECTS

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## PARTICIPATION - EMPOWERMENT - SUSTAINABILITY

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### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF OUR OFFICE AND CONTEXT IN WHICH WE PRACTICE



CS Studio Architects was established in 1989 by Urs Schmid and myself. Over the past 20 years we have worked with wonderful people. The work is the product of a collective effort. Our office is situated in Cape Town at the tip of Africa and about 9500km away from Austria. Austria has a population of 8.2 million with a 3.9% unemployment rate. In comparison, South Africa has an estimated 49 million citizens of which 6 – 10 million are refugees. The majority of the people live in urban centres. The unemployment rate is high at about 25. % of the economically active population while the adult illiteracy rate is about 30%.

#### Khyalitsha, Cape Town

In his book 'Moving the Centre' Wa Thiong'o Ngugi - a Kenyan writer - argues that *"Culture is the product of a people's history. But it also reflects that history, and embodies a whole set of values by which a people view themselves and their place in time and space"*.

This statement is central to the way CS Studio Architects practices. In addition, we believe that the only way to truly understand this concept is through the interactive process of participation.



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The user participatory design process of the German architect Gunter Behnisch, has influenced CS Studio Architects design process regardless of whether it is a large planning and urban design project or a small building. The production of buildings through a process of participation is a far more empowering architectural approach. The solutions are more appropriate and relevant to the specific context which creates more sustainable environments. Until 1994 South African architects were isolated from the rest of the world due to cultural boycotts. However, it is interesting to note that there are also other architects all over the world working in a similar way. We have mentioned Behnisch, but the work of Patama Roonrakwit and Anna Heringer is very inspirational and similar in method to our office.



Hawston Participations 2009

Architectural education and practice focuses on the design resolution and production of buildings as the ultimate goal or outcome. In our experience, we prefer to see participation as an important process during the overall design and production of a project. This can lead to human empowerment in turn can lead to life changing results. We have found that the process is the same across the world. Working with projects in America, Europe, South Africa and Asia.



AFRICA



AMERICAS



EUROPE



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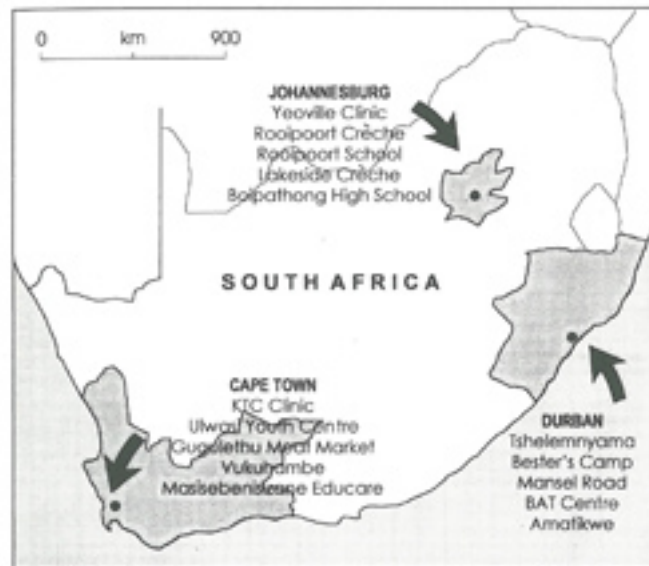
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In some of our projects we were approached to design buildings and through participation had to convince the client not to build anything or perhaps to undertake a much smaller intervention which can have an equally important or appropriate impact.

In 1996 the office was approached to build a commercial water front development on Robben Island, the prison Island where Mandela spent 26 years of his life. It took two years of intense interaction with many stakeholders to convince everyone not to build any new buildings on the Island. The Island has since been declared a World Heritage Site. It is also currently a top tourist destination linked to the legacy of the South African past. It was important to preserve the existing characteristics of the Island and it was important for our future generations to experience the significance of the land as it was. The spatial power and sense of history is far more powerful than any intervention would have allowed.

On the other hand, an example of where inappropriate solutions could have been avoided through participative consultation was with the 'Karretjie people' of the Karoo. Through a largely non-participatory process, the authorities decided to assist these people by building a school near a bridge where they always gathered. The little school was a total failure as the 'Karretjie people' are nomadic sheep shearers who move from farm to farm. If they were consulted, perhaps a more appropriate solution could have been found like a mobile school.

In conjunction with South Bank University, London, we undertook research into the concepts of participation, empowerment and sustainability and how the links work in 3 of our provinces in South Africa. The outcomes were interesting as the same issues tended to cause success or failure.



## THE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF PARTICIPATION ARE:

- Changing peoples mindset
  - Encouraging individual participation and group work
  - Developing the inner creative energy of everyone participating
  - Installing a sense of self belief
  - Understanding the context
  - Understanding the political dynamics
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## SUSTAINABILITY DIAGRAM

**SOCIAL**  
CULTURAL PRESERVATION  
PREVENTING OPPRESSION  
ENCOURAGE HUMAN CREATIVITY  
RESTORE HUMAN DIGNITY

**HOW?**  
INTELLECTUAL SHIFT  
HOUSEHOLD QUESTIONNAIRE  
INTERVIEWS  
GAMES  
WORKSHOPS  
PUBLIC MEETINGS

**ENVIRONMENTAL**  
MINIMISE CARBON FOOTPRINT  
LOCAL MATERIALS AND SKILLS  
NATURAL LIGHT AND VENTILATION  
RENEWABLE ENERGY  
RECYCLING MATERIAL



**HOW?**  
INTELLECTUAL SHIFT  
HOUSEHOLD QUESTIONNAIRE  
INTERVIEWS  
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PUBLIC MEETINGS

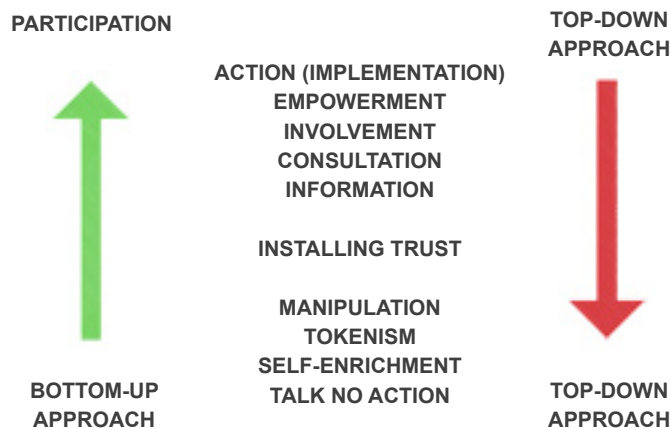
**HOW?**  
INTELLECTUAL SHIFT  
HOUSEHOLD QUESTIONNAIRE  
INTERVIEWS  
GAMES  
WORKSHOPS  
PUBLIC MEETINGS

Sustainability for us has three equality important components. Unfortunately, too often environmental sustainability which is technology driven (“Green architecture”) is viewed as the only aspect relating to sustainable architecture. The diagram below describe a view.

However, despite the strong interest in empowerment, participation and sustainability, these concepts are generally vague and poorly defined, causing confusion over expectations and over the evaluation of outcomes of the participatory process.

In this lecture and context, it is important to clarify that our understanding of sustainability is geared more towards the longer term viability of development projects as apposed to the more popular conception of environmental sustainability. (of natural resources for example) It therefore refers to the establishment of socially sustainable conditions.

## PARTICIPATION: WHAT ARE ITS AIMS AND HOW IS EMPOWERMENT TO BE ACHIEVED?



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The traditional approach to participation implied the 'involvement' of relevant parties in a top-down decision making process. The emphasis is usually on initiatives with outsiders identifying needs and planning responses and ultimately results in the failure of participatory involvement as a development approach, as very little learning takes place and the ownership of development is never taken. The second approach - which is one widely implemented by our office - is characterised by the notion of 'empowerment'. This involves action at the grass roots level, creating self awareness and the transformation of society, leading to a negotiated power-sharing in. We can therefore refer to empowerment as "the self organisation of the poor as a means of surviving, preserving some dignity and gaining control over the means to a livelihood". (Friedman 1996) Differently put, it refers to a 'means-oriented' rather than 'ends' oriented approach.

## WHAT DO WE IMPLY BY EMPOWERMENT?

This is a concept where its definition varies with context and over time. The World Bank Group (1999) views empowerment as the transfer of control over decisions and resources to communities or organisations. By implication its importance is therefore seen to lie in improving a community's negotiations with external agents, with other words "the process of helping a group or community to achieve political influence or legal authority" (Barker, 1991). The outcome is a notion of empowerment which focuses on the intellectual and social assets of communities or organisations.

From our experience and for the importance of this article, we agree with Somerville (1998) that empowerment can take place at distinct organisational levels, through households to communities. In both cases, we accept empowerment as being an increase in influence and control through an acquisition of knowledge and skills. It is in this connection that participation is important.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable development cannot be static. It can be suggested that sustainability can only be measured as sustained change. However, we also accept that we need development which addresses present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. We therefore define 'sustainable development' as the ability acquired and held by communities over time, to initiate and control development, thus enabling communities to participate more effectively in their own destiny.

## SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT (CONTEXT WITHIN WHICH CS STUDIO ARCHITECTS PRACTICE)

Traditionally, people lived in settlements consisting of round huts, 'rondawels' or wattle and adobe constructed structures. This life style is in harmony with nature. There are many lessons we have learnt through observing these vernacular solutions. The following have particularly influenced the work of CS Studio Architects:



- i) The placing of the buildings in relation to each other and the fact that the spaces outside are the important social spaces.
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ii) Understanding local conditions in terms of customs, materials etc.



iii) The sensitive manner of painting and decorating dwellings to give cultural identity.



As South Africa became more industrialised during the 60's and 70's, the government instituted policies which controlled the movement of Africans out of white cities, unless they were employed. They only allowed African men to live in hostels which were located on the periphery of cities, where they provided a labour pool for the mines and growing industrial areas. Over time woman illegally joined their husbands and informal settlements started developing around the hostels.

Today 10 kilometers away from our office there are kilometres of informal structures. Sanitation is a major problem where rows of shared taps and toilets behind concrete pole fenced walls have only recently been provided.

It is not the crisis of the situation and inability of the government to deal with the problem which we want to comment on, but rather the lessons we have learnt by working in this environment. There are many similarities to the settlements in rural areas.

i) The spaces in between the shacks are the social interactive spaces.

ii) The small shack (12m<sup>2</sup>) inside is so creatively finished furnished and inhabited.



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## GLOBAL CONTEXT

Global realities like natural disasters for example hurricane Katrina and Tsunami is requiring architects to develop different skills from what our traditional architectural schools are empowering us with. In South Africa as in the rest of the world, architectural education is predominantly based on a Western European model. After teaching for 10 years I realised that there is a major crisis in architectural education which relies predominately on computer generated imagery and ignores cultural values. The Finish philosopher architect Juhani Pallasmaa writes “The gradually growing hegemony of the eye seems to be parallel with the development of Western ego-consciousness and increasing separation of the self from the world”.

In Boston at a conference last year 80 people attended workshops on how to listen to people. I realised that the lessons the most marginalised of people taught us, is now needed by and should be implemented by architects who want to truly find dignified solutions.

We believe that participation provides freedom from dominance and allows us to share and reciprocate our understanding of the world.



## PROJECTS

### CRADOCK MASIZAME, LINGELIHLE, ESTERN CAPE



This project is the cornerstone of our participatory work and where we were taught most of what we implement in our practice today. In 1982 while I was an architectural student an African man named Wilson Soci contacted the University of Cape Town for assistance.

Wilson and 8 African women working as domestic workers who came from Cradock, a rural area 800km from Cape Town, decided they wanted to build a skills training centre back home to empower their community.

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As this was during the height of apartheid and during the 'declared state of emergency' we had to meet in secret. Most of the people we worked with were also detained. Five of the leaders from the community were killed in 1985 by the SAP. Participation became a way of life as it allowed one to fight apartheid in a far more social sustainable manner. Today, the day-care centre, library, clinic, 6000 houses, etc. stands as proof of this.

Something that came under my attention then, was the important African custom of slaughtering, which was part and parcel to the celebration and blessing of the new building. Seeing 13 sheep being slaughtered and thousands of people joining in the feast made me realise how removed we were from understanding indigenous cultural practises.

## KOMAGGAS, NAMAQUALAND, WESTERN CAPE



In 1986 the Komaggas rural 'coloured' settlement which is 700km north of Cape Town, approached us to do a community centre of which the first phase was a multi – purpose hall and childcare facility. The settlement is located in the middle of nowhere and is often isolated due to floods. In the workshops people insisted that their traditional nomadic "round hut" vernacular be reflected in the building.

This we achieved in the design of the section and in the ordering of the planning. A further request was to use as many local materials and resources. All the blocks were therefore made of a mixture of River sand and cement.

The acoustic wall hanging at the back of the hall is designed by a local artist and is a representation of the village. The wool was sourced from local sheep and was spun by the women and coloured with natural dyes. In all, it consists of 23 carpets woven by the local woman's group.

## ULWAZI YOUTH CENTRE, LANGA, WESTERN CAPE



In 1989 parents from the township of Langa which is located 10km from Cape Town, contacted us to help with the youth gangsters who had killed 38 children and attacked the public at random. Our first meeting was very daunting as the smell of drugs, alcohol and glue surrounded us.

The project acted as a catalyst to improve the life of the youth living under appalling conditions in hostels and informal structures. They were frustrated and destitute which lead to gang activity.

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All the gangs, youth organisation and interested parties were invited. It took two years of weekly meetings and weekend workshops to finalise the Ulwazi Youth centre. Many drawings were drawn and models built.



After the interactive process, the killings stopped, the drug, alcohol and glue abuse stopped and the first couple of years saw many people's lives changing.

Unfortunately, no one is currently funding the project and as a consequence it has been vandalised. It is also a reflection on the instability of the participation and empowerment process as one can not assume social partnerships and allegiances within communities to be permanent, as the focus of strife may shift.

## GUGULETHU CENTRAL MEAT MARKET, WESTERN CAPE

In 1986 the meat traders selling meat on an open piece of land among some hostels in Gugulethu approached us to assist them to formalise their market, as they were sitting in the hot sun and cold rain since 1960.



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The police would often come and confiscate all their products as the market was illegal. It took over 170 letters to various funders in the business sector to raise 90 000 Euro. Eventually we raised the money from five different funders. One institution called the DBSA was only prepared to offer a loan at a high interest rate. The first presentation of our 'beautiful European market' with an adjacent square was rejected.

After further consultation, interactive models were built and used to present our ideas and were easy to understand. We were then requested to do a protective layer of small shops and public toilets along the two back sides and to open the market to the two streets. This would provide better observation and security. In addition, the community also requested a fuel station roof.

## GUGA S'THEBE CULTURAL CENTRE, LANGA, WESTERN CAPE



During 1996 the Langa Development Forum asked us to work on a Cultural Centre. Firstly, house hold surveys were undertaken to establish the needs of the community. There after workshops were held with various local organisations. This was taken to large public meetings until a project committee was elected, who worked with us on the project.

The older people wanted a traditional 'rondawel' while the young people wanted a contemporary structure which related to their mobile phone and BMW aspirations.

The building incorporated the lessons learnt over the years and juxtaposes small boxes and the circular cone while footpaths invite visitors into the spaces.

The spaces in between, for example the foyer, are where over 300 000 tourists last year engaged with local people from Langa and South Africa. This building is one of the more succesfull examples where skills were acquired and held by communities over time, to initiate and control their own development, thus enabling them to participate more effectively in their own destiny.

Guga S'thebe kudala Usophulele means serving platter, this is a Xhosa idiom to invite people to share. The mural in the entrance forecourt depicts Table Mountain the township and the Guga S'thebe. The building is 820m<sup>2</sup> and cost R3.5 million (about 350 000 Euro) to construct and was completed in 1999.

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## ZOLANI MULTI – PURPOSE CENTRE, NYANGA, WESTERN CAPE



Zolani Multi – Purpose Centre is located Nyanga opposite a bus and taxi rank. A group of disabled people working from a temporary structure requested us to build them a workshop. We organised a big public meeting with the help of the Nyanga Development Forum's help.

In the meeting it was established that the existing community centre, one of the few built during apartheid, was far too small for their current needs. The old people that received a small government pension had to stand in the rain and sun for up to 5 hours before they received a 45 euro monthly pension. (Today's 70 euro).

The new facility has an estimated 20 000 (twenty thousand) people using it on a monthly basis. Over 10 000 (ten thousand) pensioners received their pensions in a hall where they can sit down and also receive their food parcels.

## WESBANK PRIMARY SCHOOL & MULTI – PURPOSE CENTRE, WESBANK, WESTERN CAPE

Wesbank Primary School site is located among 10 000 RDP houses with no public buildings or schools. (Roof Plan/ Aerial shot). The community meetings were therefore held on an open field. The first three meetings were cancelled by us as people started having political arguments. We realised that over a period of time, such as the life of a construction project, both the issues and the constitution of communities may change. However, once we managed to focus on the needs of the children, the interactive design process could only start.



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## LAINGSBURG MULTI- PURPOSE CENTRE, WESTERN CAPE

This was a particularly intense process as the people really engaged and enjoyed the way of working.

Laingsburg is a rural town 280km from Cape Town. Like all rural towns, white and coloured communities do not integrate. The local municipality approached our office to work with the local residence. Many workshops were held and the wealth of information and layers of history, environmental aspects and symbolism which everyone wanted to have represented was overwhelming. We decided like to focus on two of these.

- i) The flood in 1981 which killed 120 people and destroyed most of the town.
- ii) The inclusion of a windmill as a symbol of the Karoo
- iii) The use of a train carriage which could be used as a restaurant.
- iv) Using local talent and local recyclable material to make all the handrails



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## HELDERSTROOM PRISON VILLAGE, CALEDON, WESTERN CAPE



Helderstroom prison is a maximum security prison located 200km from Cape Town. The brief required from us to provide a village with housing for families, single quarters and all other facilities. During the participatory process we were asked to provide an environment totally different from the prison.

The planning layout again reflects the lessons of the “spaces in between” which enhances social behaviour. One example of the lack of understanding of African life is the phenomena of the extended family. Taking this into consideration, the government norms for a single person are 11m<sup>2</sup>.

The single quarter's room consists of 11m<sup>2</sup> and is planned using the knowledge gained from the informal settlements and the way people occupied their shacks. Their rooms are occupied by a woman, three children and a care worker. There is also a place to cook, to watch TV and to sleep.



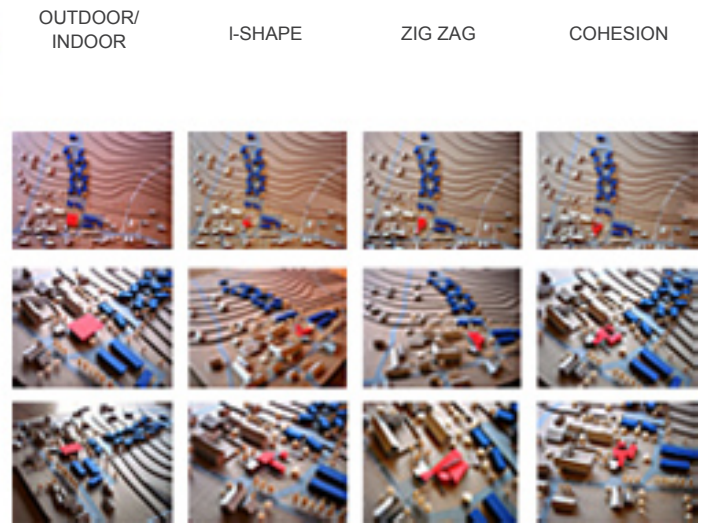
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## FOLLAINVILLE – DENNEMONT

As with the students in Boston, during this interactive process we found that participation can work in any context.

Workshops were held with adults and children and drawings were done to illustrate their future vision of Follainville – Dennemont. The main issue was to have a social space for adults and parents to enjoy and to link with the school and other public buildings.



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## HAWSTON TOURISM GATEWAY PROJECT, OVERSTRAND, WESTERN CAPE

Currently we are working with one of the most complex communities in the Western Cape. It was traditionally a fishing village, established 150 years ago, but over time became the home to drug lords, prostitution and abalone poaching.

The first workshop was attended by 40 people. We first diffused the gangs, by arranging in silence only mimicking in which month and date of the year they were born and sorting them into new groups. During an interactive drawing exercise with the community participants, the levels of creative solutions were very exciting. Some solutions included a tall windmill with an aquarium, a big whale, etc. Follow –up workshops and a workshop with children were also undertaken.

During the last public meeting, 180 participants attended and we were given the mandate to proceed with a ‘floating whale’ concept.



## FINDINGS

It would be naïve to think that all participatory processes run smooth. We have found a direct link between participation, empowerment and sustainability.

We found in South Africa that the follow impact on the participatory process:

- Cultural diversity
  - Drugs and alcohol
  - Political dominance and ‘in fighting’
  - Lack of skills and efficient management
  - Lack of sustained financial support – running costs
  - Poverty
  - Illiteracy
  - Lack of political will from the state
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The lessons learnt in South Africa are appropriate in a Global context as there is so much migration of people across the world. Many natural disasters are calling for the involvement of planners and architects to tackle complex contextual situations. We believe that through participatory processes where people are empowered, sustainable solutions will emerge.

## CONCLUSION

The world today needs facilitators to act in a manner to restore a balance not only in nature but in the built environment too. We believe that by listening through a process of participation architects can produce culturally appropriate humane and dignified solutions.

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