



## **Exploring experiential learning and community engagement for socio spatial justice: lessons from an international collaboration**

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# EXPLORING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR SOCIO-SPATIAL JUSTICE: LESSONS FROM AN INTERNATIONAL

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## INTRODUCTION

In the realm of architectural education, the nexus between experiential learning, community engagement, and socio-spatial justice stands as a transformative force, offering students a unique avenue to navigate the complexities of real-world challenges.<sup>1</sup> This paper delves into the collaborative endeavour between the Urban Citizen Studio (UC) at the University of Pretoria and the Reality Studio (RS) at Chalmers University of Technology that commenced in 2019. Through a combination of pedagogy, research, and community interaction, the UC/RS partnership seeks to transcend traditional educational paradigms by immersing students in the dynamic and often challenging landscape of informal settlement upgrade.



*Figure 1. Field visit to Melusi Informal Settlement, Pretoria, South Africa*

The imperative to address socio-spatial issues on a global scale necessitates a pedagogical approach that extends beyond conventional classroom boundaries.<sup>2</sup> By engaging students with the communities of Woodlane Village and Melusi informal settlements in Pretoria, South Africa, the UC/RS aims to instil a deep understanding of the multifaceted nature of socio-spatial challenges. Rooted in a transdisciplinary framework facilitated by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF)

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and the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT), the collaboration extends its reach through the innovative joint development of the ukuDoba method.<sup>3</sup>

The UC/RS underscores the broader impact on the discourse of architectural engagement with marginalised communities, emphasising the profession's potentially pivotal role in informal settlement upgrades.<sup>4</sup> International cooperation emerges as a conduit for high-level understanding and professional significance, encouraging a shared pedagogical approach despite diverse backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> The subsequent sections delve into the key findings, lessons learned, and the unique contributions of this collaborative initiative, culminating in a call to action for continued exploration of future steps in advancing socio-spatial justice through education and community engagement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Architects have an important role to play in creating inclusive and sustainable urban environments that accommodate the socio-spatial challenges of affected communities.<sup>6</sup> Architectural education is increasingly acknowledging its role in perpetuating or challenging these spatial inequalities and addressing socio-spatial justice as a guiding lens for a transformative pedagogy. Various courses such as those within critical spatial theory, urban planning, and housing discrimination equip students to understand how design reinforces or disrupts power dynamics within a built environment.<sup>7</sup> Studio projects addressing issues like affordable housing, accessibility, and community resilience empower students to advocate for equitable and inclusive spaces that serve the needs of all.<sup>8</sup> This aligns with Lefebvre's concept of "the production of space," emphasizing the social and political dimensions of built environments.<sup>9</sup>

Experiential learning is an important aspect to this transformation, with design-build studios, service-learning initiatives, and field immersion programs moving beyond textbooks and exposing students into the practicalities of design and construction, the intricacies of community needs, and the complexities of translating ideas into spatial outcomes.<sup>10</sup> This fosters adaptability, problem-solving skills, and a grounded understanding of how architecture impacts different people and places. As Ang<sup>11</sup> argues, navigating these complexities cultivates "cultural intelligence," a crucial skill for architects navigating an increasingly interconnected world.

Community engagement forms another crucial strand with architectural education no longer being solely about designing for abstract clients or hypothetical scenarios. Through the forging of collaborative partnerships with local communities, students learn to actively listen, co-create, and design spaces that meet specific needs and aspirations.<sup>12</sup> Participatory design workshops, community needs assessments, and collaborative planning processes empower residents and challenge the top-down, professionalised model of architectural practice.<sup>13</sup> Through engagement, students learn to advocate for marginalised communities, instilling a sense of social responsibility and ethical design practice, aligning with Perry's<sup>14</sup> framework for ethical development in higher education.

This reimagining of architectural education through experiential learning, community engagement, socio-spatial justice, and international collaboration equips students with the tools and the ethical compass to not merely design buildings, but to actively shape a more just, equitable, and sustainable built environment for all. This transformative approach transcends technical aspects and fosters critical thinkers, engaged citizens, and architects prepared to tackle the complex challenges of a rapidly changing world.<sup>15</sup>



*Figure 2. The Unit for Urban Citizenship and Reality Studio collaboration team*

### **URBAN CITIZEN STUDIO**

The Urban Citizen Studio is a course presented by the Unit for Urban Citizenship (UUC) within the post graduate honours programme at the architecture department, University of Pretoria, South Africa. The UUC seeks to establish a culture of responsible and cooperative urban citizenship within the students and the communities that they serve, and strives to advance the education of civil engagement and participatory development within the framework of a complex emerging African urbanism.<sup>16</sup>

### **REALITY STUDIO**

Reality studio is a course within the Architecture and Planning Beyond Sustainability master's programme at Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden. In this studio, students embed themselves in a community and work with local mentors and partners to develop resilient and culturally appropriate design solutions that support a dignified human everyday life. Reality studio works in real-world 'extreme environments' and often in a foreign context of a low- or middle-income country where students co-create spatial design approaches and methods that deal with challenges such as urban poverty, injustice, climate adaptation, among others. The Studio is based on field studies combined with participatory design processes and prototyping, and it is structured around 3 phases: Pre-field study, Field Study, and Post field study.<sup>17</sup>

### **THE COLLABORATION**

The collaboration between the Urban Citizen Studio at the University of Pretoria and the Reality Studio at Chalmers University of Technology exemplifies an important initiative in postgraduate education, where experiential learning and community engagement converge to address the intricate challenges of socio-spatial justice. The partnership aimed not only to enrich the educational experiences of students but also to pioneer methodological advancements in addressing complex socio-spatial issues.

The foundation of this collaboration was laid through the "Stitching the City: From Micro-data to Macro-views" project, a visionary effort facilitated by the NRF and STINT. The aim of the project was to develop a methodological framework and digital platform for the collection and sharing of non-traditional spatial and socio-economic data.<sup>18</sup> The ukuDoba Method and handbook emerged as an outcome of this partnership, providing students with a step-by-step process for research design that includes research phases such as design planning, data collection, conversion, analysis, and interpretation. This methodological framework facilitates the conversion and storage of various data types digitally on an online platform, ensuring a robust and consistent approach to community

engagement. This endeavour was particularly unique in its integration of education and research, cultivating cooperation between the University of Pretoria, South Africa, and Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden. The collaboration unfolded under the aegis of the Planning and Design for Social Inclusion course in Gothenburg (2019-2021) and the Urban Citizen Studio in Pretoria (2020), hosting the project in both instances.<sup>19</sup> This also later formed an integral part of the UC/RS collaboration in 2023.

During the covid-19 pandemic year 2021, a hybrid and distance-based collaboration between Reality Studio and the Unit for Urban Citizenship took place. The initiative wanted to benefit from international travelling limitations and innovate with distance-based collaborations between courses in different parts of the globe where students work together in the same project in one specific context.

The partnership's initiation marked the establishment of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for research and education between the two institutions.<sup>20</sup> This pivotal step formalised the commitment of both institutions to a collaborative venture that extends beyond geographical boundaries. A notable outcome of this joint action was the initiation of a student exchange program, establishing a cross-cultural academic environment for students to immerse themselves in diverse cultural and academic settings. During the second half of 2022 four post-graduate students and one Phd candidate/lecturer from UP exchanged to Chalmers to participate in the Design and Planning for Social Inclusion course. In post-pandemic 2022 Reality Studio sent their first group to South Africa to work in close cooperation with the Urban Citizen Studio and the communities of Woodlane Village (also known as Plastic View) and Cemetery View informal settlements, Pretoria. This cooperation not only broadened the perspectives of participating students but also facilitated a robust cross-pollination of ideas and methodologies between the two studios. This ultimately resulted in the development of a formalised collaboration in 2023, where the two studios intersected, with common lectures, field investigations and group work, working in both Woodlane Village and Melusi informal settlements in Pretoria.

As the collaboration progressed, it became clear that it was not merely an academic exercise but a transformative venture that engaged with communities in profound ways. The partnership was not a mere overlay of two studios; it was a co-creation of knowledge, experiences, and methodologies that embraced the complexities of socio-spatial justice. The UC/RS' focus on the two communities brought a nuanced understanding of their needs and aspirations.

### **Process followed in 2023**

Throughout the collaboration, students were organised into teams, typically consisting of at least one student from each university, a community member, and, in some instances, a researcher from an interdisciplinary background. This diverse composition fostered a rich exchange of perspectives and skills, reflecting the collaboration's commitment to cross-cultural and interdisciplinary learning.



Figure 3. Plastic View field research team consisting of students from each university, community members and interdisciplinary researchers

The fieldwork involved several days of immersive engagement within the communities, employing various methods such as observations, needs analyses, and collaborative needs assessments. The ukuDoba method guided the students in their endeavours, ensuring a structured yet flexible approach to understanding the spatial and social conditions of the settlements. Debriefing sessions after the fieldwork provided students with opportunities to reflect on their experiences, share insights, and refine their understanding of the communities' needs.

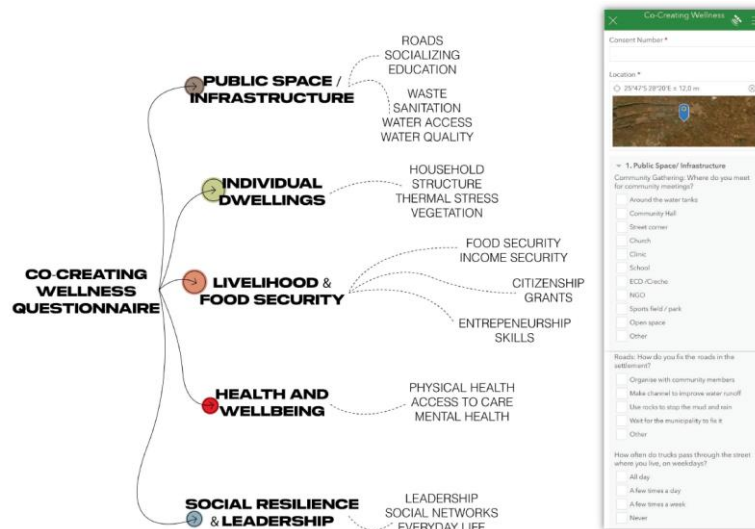


Figure 4. Design of the fieldwork questionnaire using the Survey123 platform as part of the ukuDoba method

Needs analysis workshops, adapted from Stanford University's product design program,<sup>21</sup> allowed students to identify both expressed and latent needs within the community, followed by guiding questions in order to uncover possible socio-spatial intervention points.

Back at the University of Pretoria campus, workshops were conducted with community partners, ensuring a continuous feedback loop and validating the collaboration's commitment to stakeholder engagement.<sup>22</sup> The workshops facilitated a dialogue between students (UC/RS), community members, and academic partners, creating an environment where the exchange of ideas and perspectives was not confined to the field but extended into the academic realm.



*Figure 5. UC/RS workshops with community partners at the University of Pretoria*

Themes began to emerge, reflecting a socio-spatial understanding that went beyond the surface observations.<sup>23</sup> Students identified key issues and challenges, categorising them into five central themes, which became the focus of subsequent discussions and design proposals, forming the basis for addressing the socio-spatial conditions identified during the collaborative fieldwork.

A connection was also made to a local arts collaborative, Botaki Ba Afrika, where an exhibition was co-created as an artistic manifestation of the students' experiences and encounters with the local community, the site and the stakeholders. The students were led through an Art Creation Session by members of Botaki Ba Afrika where they created works using the mediums of printmaking and weaving. This workshop culminated in an exhibition where the students were given the platform to showcase their creations and share their narratives with the local community.



*Figure 6. Botaki Ba Afrika Art Creation Session*

The field studies were concluded with joint stakeholder presentations, involving both studios and the community field workers, emphasising a holistic approach to knowledge dissemination. This phase aimed not only to present findings but also to engage in a meaningful dialogue with stakeholders. Stakeholder presentations became a crucial platform for validating the collaborative efforts and ensuring that the perspectives of all stakeholders were acknowledged.<sup>24</sup>



*Figure 7. Stakeholder presentation at the Melusi Youth Development Centre*

The UC/RS' impact extended beyond academic outcomes into the realm of design impact. Each student group, drawing upon the insights gained during fieldwork and community engagement, developed design proposals that directly responded to the identified themes. The Community Action Plan process<sup>25</sup> from Hamdi's (2010) model, using the Now Soon Later framework, became an integral part of the design process. This method ensured that proposed designs were not detached from the reality of the communities but were rooted in an understanding of immediate, short-term, and long-term needs.<sup>26</sup>

The post-field studies phase saw the Reality Studio conducting an exhibition showcasing their design proposals. This public display not only validated the students' efforts but also served as a platform for community members to provide additional insights and perspectives. The collaborative nature of the exhibition highlighted the symbiotic relationship between academic inquiry and community engagement, reinforcing the collaboration's commitment to transparency and inclusive practices. Simultaneously, the Urban Citizen Studio embarked on a Co-Design process (2023 UP Hons Q2) that included small live-build projects in their subsequent studio, bringing design proposals to life and contributing tangibly to the sustainable development of the informal settlement communities. This hands-on approach demonstrated the partnership's commitment to moving beyond theoretical propositions to real-world impact. The co-designed proposals and small scale live-build projects not only aimed at serving the immediate needs of the communities but also became a testament to the transformative potential of cooperation with the community.





Figure 8. Project outcomes of the Co-Design process by the Urban Citizen Studio

## KEY FINDINGS

The culmination of the collaborative efforts between the Urban Citizen Studio and Reality Studio brought forth a rich tapestry of key findings, illuminating both the challenges and opportunities inherent in addressing socio-spatial justice within informal settlement communities. The depth and diversity of these findings underscored the potential transformative impact of experiential learning and community engagement, transcending traditional academic boundaries.

## Broader Impact on the Discourse

Central to the key findings was the realisation of the UC/RS' profound impact on the discourse surrounding architects' role in community projects, particularly in the context of informal settlement upgrades. The architects-in-training were not mere observers but active participants, negotiating the intricate layers of socio-spatial challenges. This dynamic engagement reinforced the crucial role architects can play in shaping and improving the built environment within marginalised communities.

## Integration of Research and Pedagogy

The joint studio (UC/RS) seamlessly integrated research and pedagogy, weaving together theoretical frameworks and practical real world problems. The outcomes of research were not confined to academic publications, but were vividly illustrated through the joint interpretations of students and community members. This integration not only empowered communities by showcasing tangible

results but also instilled in students an in-depth understanding of the reciprocal relationship between academia and real-world challenges.

### **International Collaboration**

The high-level understanding achieved through this international collaboration emerged as a central theme in the key findings. Professional significance was not restricted by geographical boundaries: Instead, it flourished through cross-cultural interactions and shared pedagogical approaches. The UC/RS' unique ability to foster intercultural and cross-cultural cooperation showcased the potential for global impact in addressing complex socio-spatial challenges.

### **Unique Contributions to the Field of Study:**

The UC/RS' contributions to the field extended beyond traditional academic outcomes, addressing disciplinary blindness; the initiative shed light on aspects often overlooked within architectural education. By preparing students to work in collaborative and culturally diverse environments, this partnership bridged the gap between academic training and the multifaceted realities of community projects.

### **Student reflections & Preparing Graduates for Contextual Approaches:**

The UC/RS addressed the imperative of preparing graduates to navigate contextual approaches and student reflections indicate that they did not only gain theoretical knowledge but a deep-rooted understanding of the communities they engaged with. The individual reflections indicate that students felt that they have been equipped to approach architectural challenges with sensitivity and responsiveness.<sup>27</sup>

### **Problems, Issues, or Difficulties:**

The findings accentuated the delicate balance between assessment expectations and the potential for students to take collective ownership of outcomes. The risk of overshadowing the collaborative nature of the project by individual assessment expectations emerged as a challenge. Alignment of pedagogical approaches, assessment criteria, and outcomes is crucial for effective collaboration. Consistency within this will ensure a cohesive learning experience, fair evaluation, and attainment of shared goals.

Furthermore, aligning outcomes is essential to ensure that students achieve the intended learning objectives and competencies. When outcomes align, students from different institutions work towards common goals, promoting synergy and cooperation. This alignment allows for meaningful comparison and benchmarking of student achievements, facilitating continuous improvement and refinement of collaborative initiatives.

Issuing a single brief, rather than different briefs across institutions, is crucial for maintaining coherence and unity within the partnership. A unified brief provides clarity and direction, ensuring that all participants are working towards a shared vision and objective. This consistency minimises confusion and ambiguity, streamlining the collaborative process and maximising efficiency.

In essence, the key findings encapsulated the multifaceted nature of the collaboration, revealing not only the positive outcomes but also the challenges inherent in addressing complex socio-spatial issues through experiential learning and community engagement. The partnership stood as a dynamic process of discovery, where the richness of findings mirrored the depth of engagement and commitment invested by both students and communities.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the collaboration between the Urban Citizen Studio and Reality Studio represents not merely an academic endeavour but a journey to expose students to multifaceted realities of community projects that pushes the boundaries and landscape of architectural education into real world situations. Through the lens of experiential learning and community engagement, this initiative has unearthed deep insights into the complexities of socio-spatial justice within informal settlement communities.

The key findings underscore the UC/RS success in contributing to a deeper understanding of the role that architects can play within community projects and marginalised communities. The integration of research and pedagogy emerges as a cornerstone, illuminating the reciprocal relationship between theoretical frameworks and practical applications. This synthesis empowers communities through tangible results, such as the five themes identified through the stakeholder engagements and valuable data from the Co-creating Wellness Research Project, while still equipping students with a holistic comprehension of real-world challenges.

International cooperation adds another powerful layer to this transformative approach. By connecting students across borders, disciplines, and cultures, these collaborations push the boundaries of design thinking, spark innovation, and foster a broader understanding of global challenges and opportunities. Student exchange programs, joint design-build projects, and virtual design studios promote culturally responsive design, address global challenges collaboratively, and build a network of architects and changemakers committed to a more equitable built environment.

Lessons learned and contributions extend beyond the academic sphere, encapsulating personal and professional transformations. The partnership's emphasis on negotiation as a crucial skill resonates with the dynamic nature of socio-spatial challenges, where diverse perspectives converge for collective impact.

While operational challenges and issues surfaced, the recognition of these complexities underscores the need for adaptive approaches and clear communication. The delicate balance between assessment expectations and collective ownership calls for ongoing refinement to ensure assessments align with the collaborative ethos.

As this collaborative project concludes, it leaves a lasting imprint on the educational landscape of the two studios for future partnership. The friendships forged, networks established, and knowledge exchanged transcend beyond the project and leave a lasting impact. The call to action resonates, urging a continued exploration of future steps in advancing socio-spatial justice through education and community engagement.

Learning from this collaboration, the two studios continuously strive to propel architects-in-training towards a future where the fusion of academia and community impact becomes the norm, paving the way for sustained transformative endeavours.

In essence, this partnership embodies the ethos of experiential learning, illustrating that education extends beyond classrooms, echoing the sentiment that architects, armed with knowledge, empathy, and negotiation skills, can be catalysts for positive change within the communities they serve.

## NOTES

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