Book review

Standing Items: critical pedagogies in South African art, design and architecture, edited by Brenden Gray, Shashi Cullinan Cook, Tariq Toffa and Amie Soudien

Nan O'Sullivan

School of Design
Victoria University of Wellington
Te Herenga Waka
Wellington, New Zealand

nan.osullivan@vuw.ac.nz

David Hakaraia

School of Design
Victoria University of Wellington
Te Herenga Waka
Wellington, New Zealand

david.hakaraia@vuw.ac.nz

Abstract

In this review of *Standing Items: critical pedagogies in South African art, design and architecture*, edited by Brenden Gray, Shashi Cullinan Cook, Tariq Toffa and Amie Soudien, book reviewers Nan O'Sullivan and David Hakaraia explain how this book casts light on discussion points, awkward conversations, skewed demographics and pathways to radical change in these disciplines in South Africa.

Standing Items: critical pedagogies in South African art, design and architecture is a book of essays that casts light on discussion points, awkward conversations, skewed demographics and pathways to radical change. Although the aim is stated as wanting to confront, examine and expedite creative and socially conscious approaches to pedagogy in South African art, design and architecture education, the urgency for the criticality expressed in this publication expands beyond the one country or even the one continent.

At a 2018 DRS conference Renata Leitao pointed to a root cause halting art, design and architecture education's shift when she stated, "The leading role of the modern man entails that we live in a planet with only one storyline: the heroic story of the modern man" (Leitao, 2018:7). Leitao's argument was followed by Arturo Escobar's explanation that, "This one storyline is conceived from the perspective of the Euro-American experience and exported to many world regions over the past few hundred years" (Escobar, 2015:4). This publication contributes to the drawing of a line in the sand where acceptance of, and explanations as to why, colonized and colonizing pedagogy needs to change are no longer enough. Each chapter requires the reader to pause, take stock and dig down into the uncomfortable recognition that a global undertaking of recalibration is nigh within the heavily Euro-centric, Euro-American and hegemonic disciplines of art, design and architecture. The commitment to the concerns portrayed by the authors is more than apparent within the text, it is quite rightfully confronting.

The editorial team's work with *STAND* (*Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Art and Design*) and their academic backgrounds evidence their experience of decolonising education in these fields. Their willingness to support curriculum change, create opportunities for academics, students, and practitioners to express their views as a part of these socially conscious changes is evident. In parallel to the process undertaken to write *Standing Items*, this review is also a collaboration of thoughts and responses to this interdisciplinary and multimodal publication. Indigenous Design lecturer and my colleague David Hakaraia of Ngapuhi and Ngāti Paoa, in Aotearoa New Zealand, offers important perspectives and understandings from the standpoint of indigeneity. To describe the 'standing items' addressed in the chapters the introduction includes words like decolonization, unsustainable, paucity, inequality, entrenched poverty, corruption and failure. The references to, Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) which describes far-reaching changes to education by forging dialogue 'with' the historically, politically and economically oppressed sets a framework of resilience, rebellion and restoration that underlies and I would offer, drives this publication.

Comprising of three distinct sections *Standing Items* critically addresses the pedagogy of art, design and architecture (stripped of its capital 'A'). Although the Euro-centricity and the dominance of American influence is widely recognized alongside the need to decolonize curricula content, context and communication, the uniqueness of this work is the definitive focus on the historic and systemic inequities, injustices and struggles within the South Africa's pre and postcolonial and postapartheid education system. Hakaraia, speaking from his own indigenous perspective, that of a New Zealand Māori, noted that the activism demonstrated and demands for change experienced in South Africa are very important. These efforts create important space within pedagogical institutions for indigenous and marginalized peoples to contribute their voice (hopefully in their own languages) to the discourse of what art, design and architecture can be and should be in a post-colonial world. *Standing Items* is a forthright contribution to conversations currently being brought to the fore by

many who have been or are still disempowered. The commitment towards the elimination of racial, social and gendered struggles and injustices, apparent in their own lived experiences and that of their ancestors, bought on them by colonial power structures, is clearly visible in this publication as it seeks to underscore and address these 'standing items'.

In the first section; 'Policy, discourse and rhetoric', authors Robyn Cook, Sidogi, Khan and Königk convincingly undertake an opening offensive, introducing some of the larger issues (within even larger issues) that are ripe for dismantling and change. In particular, Cook's article 'Design Thinking, Neoliberalism, and the Trivialisation of Social Change in Higher Education' is a timely addition to the growing critique of design thinking as a codified and commodified model for expedient and economically viable social change. Drawing on efforts by design practitioners and educators in Aotearoa, that include Katariana Davis of Maurea Consulting and the Design for Social Innovation Programme academics at Te Herenga Waka Aotearoa, the models that Cook critiques, fail to address *whakawhangatanga* (authentic and meaningful connections), *manaakitanga* (respect and reciprocity) and perhaps the biggest failing of these approaches is the lack of *rangatiratanga* (self-determination) that needs to be afforded the collectives seeking or needing change to occur.

Section two, 'Educators' reflections on alternative pedagogies' expands on the previous section but is wholly individualised. Being more personalised towards the pedagogical undertakings, queries and attempts to introduce and impact the relationships within education in a positive and self-determining way. The authors within this section, Cook (Shashi not Robyn), Plessie and Sturgess make very clear the autonomy required to plan, execute and sustain change for oneself and one's student cohorts. Cook's use of the terms 'deficit' and 'surfeit' thinking to rekindle personal interests around 'renegade knowledge' (Engels-Schwarzpaul, 2016:11) and Gattegno's 'silent approach'. These approaches illustrate internal institutional rebellion seeking change. This includes the recognition of reciprocal relationships in education in which the knowledge and everyday experiences of those within the learning cohorts is as valued as that which is offered by the teacher and is accommodated in the teaching and learning space. (Gattegno, 1963:80). Using the 'silent approach' the teacher steps back to enable new knowledge to emerge from the diversity of the student cohorts (O'Sullivan, 2017:610).

'Theoretical interrogations and explorations' is the third and final section. The authors cast a broad stroke across the disciplines represented as a part of *Standing Items*. Their commentary and investigations of art, design and architecture's education and historical theories and their impact on societies, social semiotics, discourse analysis, critical pedagogy and thinking around tradition, modernity and decoloniality bring much to the discussions, many of which are awkward, which these disciplines urgently need to undertake. Importantly, Toffa and Gray offer pathways and practices that can be undertaken within architecture and design to address and transform the inequities currently practiced and replicated within the systems and curriculums again and again over both time and space.

Steve Biko's influence and determination is consistently apparent within the words of each of the authors who contributed to this publication. Although the language used positions this work predominantly in academia, each writes seeking to charge forward – offering and demonstrating ways in which South Africa can give itself a more human face. The reader is made acutely aware that there is no stepping away from the resolve, resistance and rebellion required, by all, to do this work and *Standing Items*, deserves commending for leaning into, well into, the winds of change.

References

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