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Perspective Article

Between Cairo and Cape Town: Architectural Education, Decolonisation and the Question of Architectural Intelligence

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Abstract

This perspective article asks whether architectural education can deliver the transformation it declares, and what that question becomes once artificial intelligence (AI) enters the studio. The article distils two 2026 keynote delivered by the author, in Cairo and Cape Town, and reads them against the UIA Global Survey of 345 schools in 159 countries and recent work on decolonised pedagogy and algorithmic colonialism. The findings demonstrate that schools converge on accreditation, studio learning and sustainability but diverge significantly on agendas requiring serious and committed change, with decolonised pedagogy in only 29% of programmes. Because AI learns from the archives and canons decolonial pedagogy seeks to open, this implementation gap presents the challenge of being automated, with Euro-American forms returning as statistical defaults. The key contribution is that this article links institutional evidence to epistemic critique and distinguishes artificial from architectural intelligence, calling for situated, embodied, cultural and relational judgement. The limitation is that this is an argued position based on published evidence and does not present new empirical testing. Yet the article outlines responses including comparative prompting, absence mapping, bias auditing and community-governed datasets.

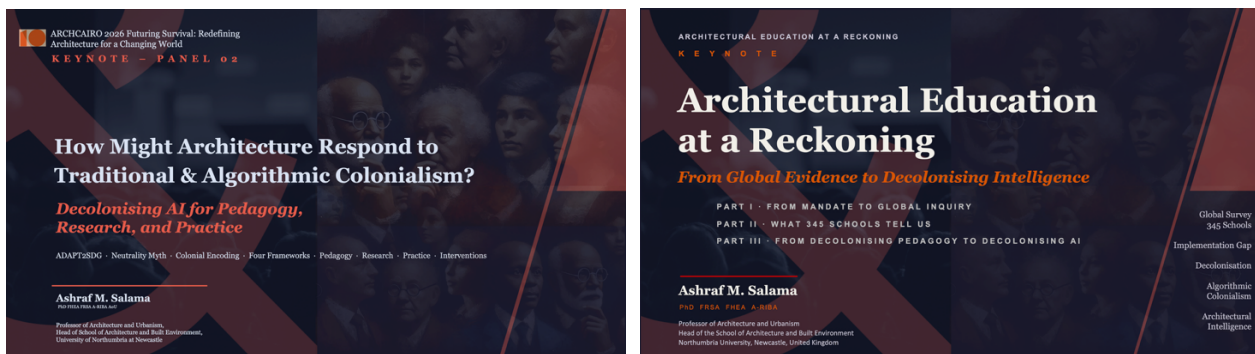
Keywords: Architectural education; Decolonisation; Implementation gap; Algorithmic colonialism; Architectural intelligence; Global South

Highlights

- Evidence from 345 schools shows shared norms but uneven committed change.
- Decolonised pedagogy reaches only 29% of programmes after decades of debate.
- Inclusion adds to the canon; decolonisation asks who had authority to define it.
- AI trained on inherited canons can automate colonial hierarchies as neutral defaults.
- Architecture must decide what kind of intelligence it needs.

1. Introduction: Two Cities, One Argument

In 2026 I delivered two keynotes at opposite ends of the African continent. The first, in April, opened a plenary panel at ArchCairo 2026, *Futuring Survival: Redefining Architecture for a Changing World*, at Cairo University, the leading university in my home country, and asked how architecture might respond to traditional and algorithmic colonialism. The second, in September, was delivered online to the SACAP Education Conference, *Architecture in Changing Times*, hosted by the University of Cape Town, and asked whether architectural education has reached a reckoning. The two talks form one argument approached from two ends. Cairo posed the epistemic question: whose knowledge does the discipline treat as authoritative, and what happens when that knowledge becomes training data? Cape Town provided the institutional evidence: what 345 schools actually do with the commitments they declare (Figure 1).



(a) ARCHCAIRO, Cairo University, April 2026

(b) SACAP, University of Cape Town, September 2026

Figure 1. The two keynotes from which this perspective article is distilled: (a) ArchCairo 2026, Cairo University, April 2026 focusing on the epistemic question of whose knowledge and whose machine; (b) SACAP Education Conference 2026, University of Cape Town, September 2026 focusing on the institutional evidence and what 345 schools deliver (Source: Author).

Placing the argument between Cairo and Cape Town is deliberate. The axis cuts across the familiar binary of North and South, running through a continent whose schools carry Beaux-Arts, modernist, colonial and post-apartheid inheritances, and where decolonisation is neither a new nor an abstract question (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016; Salama, 2022). It also locates the author. I write as an Egyptian-British educator based at a UK university that benefits from the academic hierarchies examined here, and in English, the dominant language of the infrastructures I critique. The argument is therefore made from within these systems rather than from above them. Recognising that complicity is not a reason for silence; it is a condition for honesty.

Extending a companion paper on planetary architectural pedagogy (Salama, 2026), the perspective moves from promise to evidence to agency. Its claim is that architectural education no longer lacks values but the structures to deliver them, and that this gap now extends into the tools through which students learn to see and act.

2. A Discipline at a Reckoning

2.1 Four converging pressures

Four pressures now act on the discipline simultaneously. Climate breakdown has turned ecological literacy into a professional obligation. Computational tools and AI are changing how architects design, analyse, represent and, increasingly, decide. Decolonisation is questioning whose histories, methods and spatial knowledge are treated as authoritative. And the architect is being drawn into leadership, policy and collaboration far beyond the drawing board. These forces do not operate separately; they

collide inside curricula which are designed around much narrower assumptions of professional formation. Schools are aware of all four challenges, and the revised UNESCO-UIA Charter for Architectural Education identifies each of them (UNESCO & UIA, 2026). What remains uncertain is whether structures inherited from the École des Beaux-Arts, the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas, and transposed with uneven success to Cairo, Johannesburg and elsewhere, can absorb these challenges deeply enough (Salama & Osborne Burton, 2023). That uncertainty is the reckoning.

2.2 From mandate to global inquiry

Between 2023 and 2026, the UIA Architectural Education Commission responded with a connected programme of work in which each activity informed the next, moving from mandate to listening, to evidence and to action (Salama & Harrington, 2026a). A pilot survey tested a comparative method across 17 countries (Harrington et al., 2026). It already revealed a pattern of meeting points alongside uneven integration of decolonisation, health and Indigenous knowledge. A webinar series with over thirty speakers from all five UIA regions kept returning to four concerns: an inadequate inherited model, unavoidable transdisciplinarity, an expanding professional role and the centrality of regional context (Harrington & Salama, 2026). The third edition of the UIA Award for Innovation in Architectural Education showed that change was already under way, including at the University of Pretoria, whose winning entry joined climate justice, spatial justice and circular materials (Salama & Harrington, 2026b). Discussion could reveal what educators worried about; it could not show how widespread those conditions were.

3. What 345 Schools Tell Us

3.1 The convergence–divergence paradox

The Global Survey added scale. It examined 345 accredited programmes across 159 countries, reading nine institutional dimensions, from admission and curriculum to accreditation, faculty, pedagogy, sustainability and internationalisation, against ten thematic concerns (Salama, Harrington, & Patil, 2026; Salama, Patil, & Harrington, 2026). The data reveal a convergence–divergence paradox (Table 1). On established norms, architectural education is remarkably consistent. On agendas that demand committed and disciplined change, adoption falls away. The discipline has learned to speak the language of transformation more fluently than it has built the structures (human and physical) to deliver it.

Table 1. Convergence and divergence across 345 schools of architecture (compiled from Salama, Harrington, & Patil, 2026; Salama, Patil, & Harrington, 2026).

Indicator	Share of programmes	Reading
Integration of allied disciplines	99%	Convergence as reported; often loosely defined
National accreditation	92%	Convergence: established norm
Sustainability in core curricula	>90%	Convergence: established norm
Declared SDG alignment	88%	Convergence, often shallow in depth
Studio-based learning	78%	Convergence: pedagogical continuity
AI integration	44%	Divergence: largely tool-centred
Published quality-assurance metrics	31%	Divergence: transparency gap
Decolonised pedagogy	29%	Divergence: unfinished agenda
Health-focused design	26%	Divergence: unfinished agenda
Digital or hybrid studio formats	11%	Divergence: transformation lag

The studio makes the pattern clear. Most programmes still centre studio learning, which is no bad thing given the value of iterative making and critique, but only 11% have adopted digital or hybrid formats, and individual portfolio assessment persists even where collaboration is championed for responsive professional practice. Change is layered onto the inherited studio rather than reaching its assumptions about authorship and judgement. Even high adoption can mask shallow implementation, for example SDG alignment is declared by 88% of schools, yet in most it remains thin in depth. Sustainability offers a more hopeful reading, once a specialist concern, it is now part of the core in more than 90% of schools. Change is possible when accreditation, professional expectation, faculty capacity and public pressure align; where other themes lag, the question is what keeps them at the edge.

One reservation is needed about the most consistent figure of all. The near-universal integration of allied disciplines (99%) reflects what schools report rather than what their curricula and studios demonstrate. Observation of course content and studio practice suggests that the term is often defined loosely. In essence, engaging with other disciplines can amount to citing a book on philosophy, the social sciences or environmental psychology, rather than sustained collaboration with those disciplines in teaching, research and design. Convergence on paper may therefore overstate convergence in practice and reality, and the same caution applies to other self-reported indicators.

3.2 Regional capacity and the African evidence

Regional profiles complicate any simple deficit narrative. Resources shape what a school can do; they do not decide what it can imagine. The Americas hold influential design-build and social-urbanism traditions alongside sharp inequalities; Asia and Oceania often lead digital integration while engaging communities less consistently; much of Europe has robust formal frameworks with uneven transparency. African programmes often show strong community-responsive and climate-conscious teaching where facilities are thin, yet the survey records only ten African programmes among the 100 that engage substantively with decolonisation, and just five among the 152 that integrate AI (Salama, Patil, & Harrington, 2026). This does not show that African schools care less about decolonisation; much community-based teaching does decolonial work without naming it. It does show that the evidence cannot yet separate the two, and that more work is needed to document how African schools, in Cairo, in Cape Town, and in between, frame and operationalise this agenda.

3.3 The implementation gap

The evidence shifts the question from what architectural education should value, since schools already speak fluently about sustainability, equity and social responsibility, to whether they can deliver what they say they value. The implementation gap is therefore not a rhetorical matter; it is a question of institutional capacity. Four mechanisms keep it open. Declaring a commitment costs little, while evidencing it costs a great deal. New concerns arrive as electives, studio themes or a week within a module rather than entering the core. Faculty are rewarded more for research output than for teaching innovation. And the resources needed to redesign curricula and assessment are unequally distributed. Closing the gap would require accreditation that asks for evidence of outcomes rather than statements of intent, curricula that move new themes into assessed core learning, and reward systems that recognise pedagogical innovation. Until then, decolonisation can be everywhere in the conversation and still sit at the margins of the structure.

4. The 29% Question: Decolonisation Is Not Inclusion

4.1 The canon as an architecture of power

The 29% figure reads as a diagnosis. One reason decolonisation remains peripheral is that it is often treated as a content problem, solved by adding buildings, authors or geographies. Inclusion asks who is missing from an existing framework. Decolonisation asks how that framework was built, whose ways of knowing became dominant, whose methods were made to seem universal, and who had the authority

to define the field (Quijano, 2000; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The canon, in this sense, is an architecture of power. What is archived becomes visible, what is published becomes citable, what is taught becomes foundational, and what is repeatedly assessed hardens into professional common sense. A decolonising response therefore requires more than symbolic representation. It calls for a critical analysis of the absences, omissions and devaluations within the canonical narrative, and of the criteria by which the discipline decides what counts as architecture (Salama, Osborne Burton, & Patil, 2025).

4.2 From typology to practice at both ends of the continent

Earlier work distinguished three pedagogical positions: The first is the canonical-unquestioned, which treats the inherited frame as neutral; the second is the resistant-resilient, which admits excluded voices while leaving the frame intact; and the third is the decolonised-disruptive, which challenges the frame's authority, criteria and absences (Salama & Osborne Burton, 2023). Drawing on Southern Theory (Connell, 2007) and five international cases, including the Race, Space and Architecture collaboration between London and Johannesburg, the ADAPT2SDG typology synthesised twelve characteristics into five pillars aligned with ten of the seventeen SDGs (Osborne Burton & Salama, 2023; Salama, Osborne Burton, & Patil, 2025). Decolonised pedagogy becomes community-centred, culturally grounded, transdisciplinary and experiential, rethinking who knows, who defines the problem and who benefits from solving it.

Both ends of the continent offer evidence. In South Africa, a pedagogy of care adapts Freire's (1970) dialogical model to post-apartheid institutional conditions, positioning care and solidarity as core pedagogical values (Felix, 2026). In Egypt, schools are reworking curricula around sustainability and the SDGs (El-Kholei & Yassein, 2023), alongside long-standing efforts to situate Middle Eastern pedagogies within a globalising discipline (Salama, 2022; Harriss et al., 2023). Neither example imports a model from elsewhere; each starts from its own institutional and spatial conditions.

5. When the Canon Becomes Training Data

5.1 A tale of two students

A new participant has now entered the studio. AI is trained on the archives and canons the field has been trying to open, so the question of whose knowledge is taught becomes the question of whose knowledge the machine learns (Patil & Salama, 2026a, 2026b). Consider two students preparing for the same kind of studio review on the same evening. The first, in a European school, types "modernist housing, high-quality design" into an image generator and within seconds receives white cubic volumes, clean lines, ribbon windows and pilotis. The images look familiar because they are: they echo the precedents in his/her history lectures and on his/her reading list. The tool confirms what the curriculum has already taught him/her to call good design.

The second student, in Lagos, types the identical prompt and receives images in a near-identical architectural language (Figure 2). Nothing in them recalls the courtyard houses of Kano, the tropical modernism of Oluwole Olumuyiwa, who wove modernist principles into Yoruba spatial concepts, or the deep verandas and screened façades that make buildings habitable in a humid climate. Were he/she in Cairo, Hassan Fathy's earthen domes and courtyards would be equally absent; in Mumbai, there would be no stepwells or jaali screens. To see his/her own architectural heritage, he/she must identify it explicitly, and even then the results tend to treat it as a style to be applied rather than a body of spatial knowledge. The lesson he/she absorbs is subtle but corrosive since what he/she knows is a special case, and what the machine returns is the norm.



(a)



(b)

Figure 2. A tale of two prompts: the same prompt, “modernist housing, high-quality design”, entered in two different continental contexts returns (a) and (b) in a near-identical architectural language of flat-roofed, glazed volumes raised on slender supports, differing mainly in materials and setting (Source: Author, AI-generated images prepared for the ArchCairo 2026 keynote).

Neither student has done anything wrong, and the tool has not malfunctioned. During training, the model did not learn architectural history or cultural context; it learned which visual features co-occur with labels such as “modernist” or “high-quality”. Outputs follow what has been documented, photographed, published and labelled most heavily, so historical asymmetry returns as neutral-seeming probability. The consequences are material, because students form design sensibilities, researchers assemble scholarly records and practitioners shape environments in which millions live. The same logic reaches practice: building information libraries often lack categories for mashrabiya, jaali or earthen construction, and a naturally ventilated design in a tropical city can be scored as underperforming by software calibrated to temperate standards (Patil & Salama, 2026a).

5.2 The neutrality myth and the feedback loop

The myth of neutrality does not survive contact with how these systems are made. Algorithms are situated, built by particular people within cultural and commercial settings; datasets are selective, holding what societies had the power to record; and outputs inherit those histories (Mohamed et al., 2020). Bias settles in at every stage, from collection and labelling, often carried out by low-paid annotators in the Global South (Patil & Salama, 2026a), through training to deployment, well before a user types a prompt. Scholarship on the continent identifies this condition as the algorithmic colonisation of Africa (Birhane, 2020). Additionally, language compounds this scene. Echoing Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (1986) critique of linguistic imperialism, English dominates training data and leaves many non-English architectural concepts computationally illegible or on the margin at best.

The loop then feeds itself (Figure 3). Students learn with skewed tools, practitioners produce work that is documented, researchers rely on what is easily indexed, and all of it returns as training data for the next model. Education sits inside this loop, which also makes it one of the few places where the loop can be broken.

6. From Artificial to Architectural Intelligence

6.1 Four lenses

The greater challenge is not just the fact that these systems carry bias but that the discipline may be narrowing what it means by intelligence. AI excels at processing, pattern recognition and scale. Architectural intelligence is situated, embodied, cultural and relational; it lives in the reading of a site, in community memory, in craft, in responsibility, and in the judgement to recognise when optimisation is the wrong question. Processing is not understanding, pattern recognition is not wisdom, and scale is not justice. The most consequential effect may be the quietest: students who abandon an idea because a tool cannot process it, reading the tool's limitation as their own concept's inadequacy.

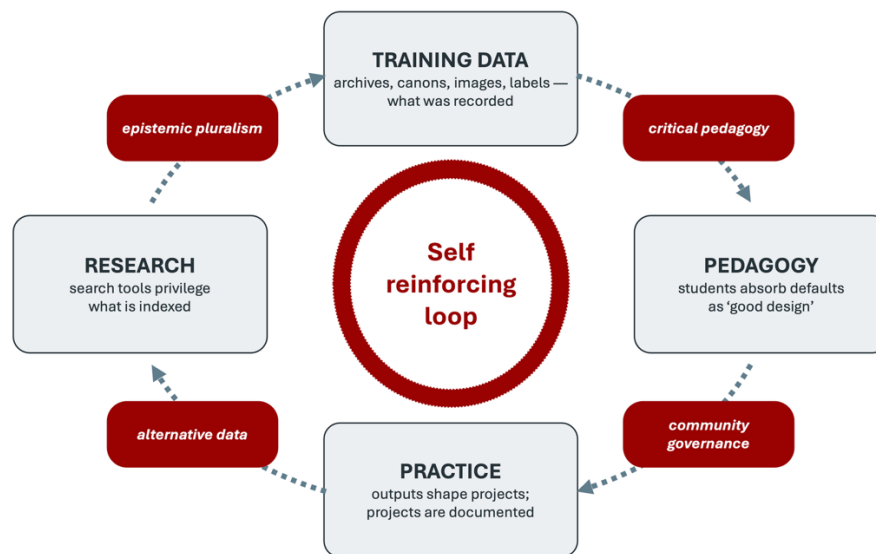


Figure 3. The self-reinforcing loop of algorithmic colonialism across pedagogy, practice and research, with points of intervention (Source: Author, adapted from Patil & Salama, 2026a).

Four lenses help protect this intelligence: decolonial theory, which exposes how claims of universality mask power (Mignolo, 2011); architectural historiography, which traces colonial classifications into training data; data justice, which foregrounds extraction, invisible labour and uneven benefit (Benjamin, 2019; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020); and Indigenous data sovereignty, which places authority with knowledge holders and accepts that some knowledge should not be digitised at all (Carroll et al., 2020; Smith, 2012). No single lens is sufficient; they collectively challenge claims of neutrality and bring marginalised knowledge to the surface or the core.

6.2 Practical responses and shared responsibility

Within the preceding milieu, key practical responses emerge. Examples include comparative prompting across contexts, absence mapping of what a tool cannot return, bias auditing of datasets and outputs, and community-governed datasets. In this context, responsibility should be distributed. Educators can make bias clear and identified before it becomes habit, researchers can seek the scholarship search engines skip, practitioners can retain situated judgement, developers can treat a dataset as a portrait of whose world was thought worth modelling, and students can be reminded that their intelligence did not come from a machine. None of this argues against AI. It argues against surrendering architecture's own ground to it.

7. Conclusion: Promise, Evidence, Agency

Architectural education has made ambitious commitments to sustainability, equity, collaboration and social responsibility. Yet the evidence is equally clear, these commitments remain unevenly embedded, while decolonisation persists at the margins of institutional structures and learning. The challenge now is one of agency. As AI becomes integral to pedagogy, research and practice, schools must decide not just on which technologies to adopt, but also on which forms of intelligence to protect, cultivate and recognise. The future of architectural education will still depend on whether it adopts new technologies but whether it retains the capacity to determine what forms of intelligence architecture needs, and whose intelligence counts, will be come of critical importance.

Three implications can be identified. First, the evidence base must itself be decolonised. Survey instruments should recognise community-responsive and place-based teaching as decolonial practice, even when schools, particularly in Africa, do not describe it as such. Second, accreditation and validation systems offer the strongest means of translating declared values into assessed core learning, as the progress of sustainability demonstrates. Third, critical engagement with AI must be integrated into studio and research training while tools and habits are still taking shape, rather than deferred to a later ethics module. These are institutional choices, not technological determinants.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author co-directs the UIA Architectural Education Commission (EDUCOM) and co-authored the survey reports and publications discussed in this article.

Use of Generative AI

Generative AI (Claude, Anthropic) was used to assist in articulating they key messages from the author's keynote presentations and essays. The author takes full responsibility for it.

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