Redefining Architectural Education at an HBCU (Historically Black College/University)

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Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) play a critical role in attracting and retaining Black students to higher education within the United States. HBCUs have developed successful strategies that can provide powerful lessons for mainstream educators struggling to diversify their classrooms. The role of the HBCUs is as critical today as at their inception during the late 1800's. "HBCUs have provided undergraduate training for three-fourths of all black persons holding a doctorate degree; three-fourths of all black officers in the armed forces; and four-fifths of all black federal judges. . . . More than 80 percent of all black Americans who received degrees in medicine and dentistry were trained at the two traditionally black institutions of medicine and dentistry. . . . Fifty percent of black faculty in traditionally white research universities received their bachelor's degrees at an HBCU."[1]

HBCUs claim similar success in the field of architecture, fostering an ethnically and culturally diverse group of designers. It seems the HBCU architecture programs offer something the mainstream schools do not: of 123 total architecture programs, the seven accredited HBCU architecture programs currently enroll 45 percent of all Black students working toward architecture degrees.[2] Roughly half of all Black licensed architects in the U.S. attended HBCUs.[3] Architectural educators at HBCUs meet two quite distinct agendas: the mission of educating architects, and the mission of educating Black students. HBCU pedagogy must balance issues of ethnicity, race and culture in addition to the gamut of theoretical and practical topics required in architecture.

In May 1995, African American membership in the American Institute of Architects was steadily rising but comprised just one percent of the total membership. *Progressive Architecture* noted visibility as a serious factor deterring African Americans from entering the profession. "If black students hardly ever hear of a black architect, the most promising young people are unlikely to look to architecture as a career. . . . If clients rarely see or hear of a black architect, black architects are not going to have

the credibility they need."[4] Additionally, architectural history surveys generally overlook contributions of Black architects like Benjamin Banneker and Paul Revere Williams.[5]

Institutions classified as HBCUs maintain an African American focus, and only seven of the 105 HBCUs offer accredited architecture degrees. Their missions of social obligation reflect "a firm and strong sense of tradition and heritage." HBCUs, like other special mission institutions, offer students "the experience of being in majority status which aids the comprehension of majority/minority status in the larger world, the provision of leadership experience, and academic support programs which are not offered at other institutions."[6]

HBCUs appeal to Black students for numerous reasons. They "provide creditable models for aspiring Blacks to emulate," create "psychosocially congenial settings in which Blacks can develop," and serve as "transitional enclaves or quasi-sanctuaries through which Black students may move to the mainstream, without the damaging competition of a white majority or the dangers of many inner-city communities." HBCUs "offer insurance against a potentially declining interest in educating Blacks," and "are resources, economically and politically, to the communities in which they are based. In this respect, HBCUs are beneficial economically to the white community, and they also help whites politically by contributing 'to the expansion of an informed and responsible populace.'" HBCUs "contribute to the pluralism of American education, providing a wider freedom of choice for white and Black students." They also serve "as repositories for the Black experience" in working to "discover and preserve the Black cultural heritage."[7]

Over the past two decades architectural education has placed increasing value in diversity. This results in part from attracting more and more women to study a discipline that was traditionally offered by institutions limited to white male students. In Virginia, for instance, the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, and Hampton University all offer accredited

architecture degrees. Remarkably, of these three, only Hampton University widely admitted women prior to the 1970s . . . Hampton welcomed women since it's founding in 1868. Today women represent an overwhelming majority of the University's overall student body, and approximately half of its architecture students.

In today's architectural profession, Black women must display an incredibly wide array of strengths in order to break through still existing, invisible barriers. Black women face challenges due to both race and gender discrimination: they currently represent just 0.9 percent of all registered architects.[8] A Black female architectural intern described intense pressure: "I feel like I have to work twice as hard to gain others' confidence. It's a double-edged sword: once they see what you can do they expect that level all the time. If you ever say it's too much 'Hum . . . well, then . . . '" they seem re-assured of your inability. This woman enrolled in a mainstream architecture program, in a class where only two, of over 250 students, were Black. Many other Black students who received acceptance to mainstream universities instead choose the HBCU; today almost half of all Black students studying architecture in the U.S. enroll in HBCUs.

This colleague and I attended a program where educators proudly geared their efforts toward the 'cream of the crop,' conducting studios on the principle that excellence will flourish in an environment that avoids wasting resources on meeting minimum competency. Educating potential superstars proved infinitely more important than educating other segments of the studios: most students would learn through 'trickle-down,' students at 'the bottom' were given as little attention as possible.

Our educators followed an established tradition of architectural elitism, patterned after Ivy League schools. "Fundamentally, the Harvard architecture studio is a 'high culture' WASP-Jewish parlor game exercise in socialization," explains graduate Melvin Mitchell, FAIA. "The design studio is the arena that sanctions the status quo of the cultural hegemony, aesthetic tastes, and financial-political power assumptions of the 'high culture' values of the elites of western society."[9] "Most world-renowned jet-setting American and European star architects are regular visitors to the Harvard design studios [and] are a critical integral part of the socialization process. By serving as 'one on one' critics [they] 'reveal truths' to the student acolyte about the thought processes that can result in world class 'signature' buildings (there is no interest in either the 'generic' or the 'vernacular' building)."[10] Mitchell, who recently retired from directing Morgan State's architecture and planning program, convincingly argues that architectural stardom itself is a white male construct, perpetuated by "the larger (also virtually all-white male) culture of institutions and private corporations who hire the star architect-masters."[11]

Mitchell emphasizes that a completely different approach is needed at the HBCUs, which "are not remotely equipped" with the "staggering wealth and resources" needed to emulate the studio pedagogy of Harvard and other Ivy League schools.[12] While "star architects have no problem hiring black Harvard graduates who fully absorb the culture of the studio and display the appropriate level of 'in the manner of the master' design skills," Mitchell states, "thus far, such employment has yet to translate into those black employees becoming star architects through patronage and commissions from the same clientele as their star masters." Their mainstream Modernist architectural approaches also seem to carry little relevance with the larger African American community.[13] While Black America's gross national product is greater than the world's tenth largest national economy,[14] architects have failed to convince this group to invest architecturally. "The very idea of the architect as a passive creature seeking out isolated contracts to design isolated free standing single purpose buildings has never held much relevance to the most pressing social, economic, and cultural issues inside of Black America."[15] The perpetuation of architecture as a tool to stardom seems limited and outdated.

Growing disconnects between American architects and their populace have promoted a fervent study of the dominant existing paradigm, revealing vast shortcomings. Critical analysis reveals a concerted shift over the past three decades, away from Modernism, toward more culturally responsive and relevant architecture. Modernism, on the whole, left little space for *culture-specific design* "which responds to and supports the specific cultural characteristics if various user groups," as urged by the socio-anthropologist Amos Rapoport since the 1960's.[16] Rapoport bemoaned, "The Modern Movement, for one, rejected this view *implicitly* by emphasizing 'universality' and ignoring context and cultural specificity. Others have questioned this position *explicitly* saying, in effect, 'let them adapt.'" HBCUs clearly address Rapoport's call for a "commitment to pluralism and the importance and value of helping a variety of cultures and groups to survive."[17] Cultural responsiveness requires carefully evaluating the ethics and values of both the designer and the user/client.

Robert Venturi's 1966 groundbreaking *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* introduced questions regarding the freestanding nature and the rejection of history espoused by Modernist architects. While Modernist architects fervently shunned history, Modernists in the other arts openly embraced history, culture, and ethnicity. For instance, Pablo Picasso's breakthrough *Mademoiselles d' Avignon*, widely recognized as the first Cubist work, derived from the artist's documented studies of West African masks and sculpture. "Architecture is distinct from the other arts in that it associated its own modernist avant-garde movements – its formalism and newness – with the myth of the machine," notes African American philosopher Cornell West. Whereas modernist literature stressed myth, modernist architecture valorized technology

and industry. In a cyclical development. modernist building production itself reinforced the kind of machine production. technology. and industry it sought to emulate. The modernist utopianism eventually collapsed into "a sheer productivism with a Plutonic formalism that sustains an architectural monumentality." West believes that the present intellectual and cultural crisis is "primarily rooted in the modernist promotion of what Louis Mumford called 'the myth of the machine.' This myth is not simply an isolated aesthetic ideology. but rather a pervasive sociocultural phenomenon that promotes expert scientific knowledge and elaborate bureaucratic structures that facilitate the five P's – power. productivity for profit. political control and publicity."[18]

"Yet." Vincent Scully admits. "there is hardly an architect or critic living today who has not been drawn to Modern architecture during his life and does not love thousands of Modern works of art. But the urban issue has to be faced. The International Style built many beautiful buildings. but its urbanistic theory and practice destroyed the city. It wrote bad law. Its theme in the end was individuality; hence its purest creations were suburban villas. like the Villa Savoie and Phillip Johnson's Glass House. These celebrated the individual free from history and time."[19]

By 1980. Geoffrey Broadbent identified some critical issues. Modernists had ignored *habitation* in favor of function and economics. and had vilified symbolism rather than recognizing the symbolism inherent in their own practices.[20] "Paradigm changes . . . are actually occurring at this moment." Broadbent explained. "And. as with all such changes in the past, those responsible for [spurring the changes. through both public criticism and research] have concentrated on precisely those aspects of the Modern Movement paradigm which have been causing the greatest distress: the social problems caused by housing families in high-rise flats. the notorious deficiencies of curtain walling in terms of heat loss. solar heat gain. noise penetration. and so on; the sheer bleak sterility of that International Style which. having been built right round the world. has severely diminished. if not yet finally destroyed. the sense of identity at any particular place."[21]

To sway the pervasive Modernist paradigm. pioneers must understand architectural history and arm themselves with tools developed over past decades. Their predecessors recognized Americans' general disdain for the Modernist aesthetic. and have worked to devise canons that better respond to social needs and desires. Cornell West warns that the first three major architectural responses to curbing Modernism. although provocative. have been ineffective due to the movement's "extreme nature." He explains "the call for irony and ambiguity that focuses on the symbolic content (not space or structure) in the populism of Robert Venturi. the forms of historic eclecticism in the postmodernism of Charles Jencks. [and] the plea for communication in the public art of James Wines' de-architec-

ture provide inadequate responses to this crisis." He claims the deconstructivist movement was successful. in injecting "a new energy and excitement into a discipline suffering a cultural lag." and awakening architectural criticism to "the depths of our cultural crisis."[22]

While Modernism still prevails. these initial attempts to broaden the movement's scope have sown fertile seeds for future growth. These seeds include Robert A. M. Stern's three primary design techniques: *contextualism* (deriving forms from surrounding conditions). *allusionism* (evoking historical references). and *ornamentalism* (applying surface symbols or relief).[23]

Bradford Grant defined a parallel set of architectural responses for incorporating the values of minority cultures within the architectural framework of a dominant society: *accommodation, resistance* and *appropriation*. Grant's terms describe the activities of early builders at the HBCUs. who attempted to gain acceptance from their mainstream communities while simultaneously protecting their cultural needs and identities through architecture. Builders created "a special sense of belonging. control. and ownership" with techniques for integrating their specific cultural arts *into* - and through relief. sculpture. and tile design. *onto* - architecture designed in the dominant mainstream aesthetic. *Accommodation* allowed for accepting the dominant aesthetic. while *resistance* and *appropriation* allowed for 'negotiating the terms' of accommodation.[24]

Understanding these two sets of techniques for culture specific design provides insight into the overwhelming success of Modern architecture in Ticino. In this Italian-speaking canton of Switzerland. strong cultural forces mitigate the Modernist goals of architects. Within the dominant Swiss vernacular aesthetic. the "high culture" Modernist architects beg accommodation. The citizens of this localized social democracy hold great control over architectural codes and regulations. New structures built within the medieval towns must meet strict standards painstakingly developed by each locale that dictate height. proportions. materials. and roof pitch – ensuring consistency through both *contextualism* and *allusionism*. Client expectations require the designs to provide for age-old traditions. like the pergola for outdoor dining. Constraints often lead to responses that cleverly balance concerns of the overall culture with the Modernist designer's intent.

Similarly. Duany and Plater-Zyberk's New Urbanist community at Seaside. Florida accommodates Modernism within an array of vernacular types. While Modernism sought to suppress the eclecticism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[25] Seaside makes room for even this self-purported enemy. within a tight set of codes akin to those found in Ticino. In valuing diversity Seaside's planners have allowed a range to flourish. Seaside has successfully reunited architects with the estranged urban planners and government policy makers who maintained their social focus during Modernism's lapse in recognizing

habitation issues. Scully enthusiastically praised Seaside. stating that clearly "the most important development of the past three decades or more has been the revival of the Classical and vernacular traditions in architecture. which have always dealt with questions of community and environment. and their reintegration into the mainstream of Modern architecture."[26] Seaside's designers consciously shaped and carefully regulated three-dimensional space within the built community. after studying the spatial configurations of vernacular communities. In doing so. they have begun addressing one of the two major issues – space and structure – that Cornell West indicates were overlooked during past attempts to develop a contemporary culture-based paradigm.

Scully has criticized both Modernism. *and* the pedagogy developed to teach it. "Neo-Modern Architecture in its present [1994] 'Deconstructivist' phase, though popular in the schools – why not. it offers the ideal academic vocabulary, [is] easy to teach as a graphic exercise and [is] comprised and complicated by nothing that exists outside the academic halls – has been failing for a long time in the larger world of the built environment itself."[27] Melvin Mitchell certainly supports Scully's claims. Mitchell describes Colin Rowe and the *Texas Rangers* 1950s efforts to develop a "highly teachable" pedagogy at the University of Texas at Austin. "Most knowledgeable scholars [agree that this] pedagogy was a conflation of theories and graphic techniques of twentieth-century cubist painter Picasso. modernist architects Le Corbusier. Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe. and visual aspects of Gestalt psychology." While the typical architectural studio is engrained with this pedagogy. Mitchell asserts that the exercises themselves do not actually necessitate 'studio' methods. they could be taught on-line. through graphics lab textbooks, or in standard classrooms.

"Without full and proper context. Rowe's pedagogy will only continue to retard the progress of students seeking roles of *effectiveness* in culture specific community development." states Mitchell. warning against haphazardly applying the approach at HBCUs. "The 'Colin Rowe studio' approach to architectural education holds relevance for the typical HBCU architecture program *only when fully comprehended, and placed in proper historical, social, cultural, and Information Technology based context* by those attempting to apply this methodology. This pedagogy is largely confined to formal and spatial technique while purporting to be non-ideological on critical social. economic. and cultural issues confronting the next generation of African-American architects."[28]

Mitchell's comments ring true for all educators who wish to promote culturally sensitive design. develop more inclusive pedagogy. or provide greater choice to students seeking architectural education. As second-year studio instructors in Hampton's Architecture Department. Ron Kloster and I are currently developing ways to integrate social, economic. and cultural issues into projects that will also develop the students'

formal and spatial understandings. "New Urbanism. and movements like it. become the vehicle for the students' skills to be used in socially meaningful and constructive urban designs." explains Kloster. New Urbanism can be applied to new and existing communities of all income levels and ethnic compositions. making it particularly powerful at the HBCU. New Urbanist canons can be used to help address the pressing housing needs of Black America.[29] Mitchell proposes that HBCUs utilize information technology now in place "to concentrate on the actual political. financial and cultural dynamics of urban redevelopment." He adds, "molding and shaping a faculty that will facilitate this is that challenge confronting the HBCU design school leadership."[30]

While faculty and students at the increasingly diverse mainstream schools press for dialogue on culture. race. gender. and identity. popular models of architectural education often suppress individual identities. According to Mitchell. "the highly ritualized 'design studio culture' pedagogy has never truly been essential to the achievement of the *Texas Rangers* objectives." The studio boot camp. widely criticized by feminists and behavioral scientists as inhumane. serves today to promote "other hidden 'boot camp' indoctrination and socialization agendas."[31] Most outside activities (including Greek organizations. sports. and even family obligations) are strongly discouraged by many architectural educators. These activities provide essential support to many students: participation increases self-esteem among Black students. who "say that at mostly white schools. simply being in the minority exacts a psychological toll."[32]

Architectural educators often fail to recognize Blackness at all: they sooner face issues of gender. and even sexuality. than broach conversations involving race. Not only do mainstream faculty typically avoid candid discussions of race: many avoid creating *any* situation with the Black student that could *possibly* be viewed as offensive. Subsequently, educators don't always provide equal challenges to Black students. As in past decades. it remains quite possible for the Black architecture student to receive an education of equal quality – due to combined support and challenge – at a lower-ranked HBCU.

Low visibility of Black students in the architecture studio continues to impair mainstream schools from attracting Black students. With few Black role models included in traditional history classes, and few Black faculty – male or female – on mainstream faculties, many perspective Black students fear their school performance will suffer through wavering identity and self esteem. As noted earlier: low visibility of architects in Black communities deters many talented students from even considering architecture as a possible career.

Failing to attract and retain Black students to pursue the discipline. Architecture loses in countless ways. The Schools lose these students' contributions to enrich studio dialogue. The

Profession loses the students' contributions to architectural design. to reaching out and educating an increased spectrum of the public. and to attracting a wider client base. Society at large loses when inadequate diversity in educational settings fails to offer a full dialogue. and prevents architects from learning about of a full range of design needs.

Educators must periodically reevaluate both their paradigms and pedagogues. in order to address the changing needs and aspirations of society. and to educate an increasingly diverse student population skillfully and humanely. HBCUs have a rich history and a longstanding commitment to educating a diverse student body: educators can learn from their successful records in attracting and educating Black students in an array of disciplines, including architecture. Architectural educators must rise to the call and address issues that other disciplines have been tackling. They must join the contemporary movement toward transforming "curricula to correct past exclusions; to better prepare students for increasingly complex and diverse communities and workplaces; and to provide students with the most current and intellectually comprehensive understanding of history. culture. and society."[33] Through closer scrutiny. educators will recognize that the failure of existing pedagogues and paradigms "rests upon certain governing myths (machine). narratives (Eurocentric ones). design strategies (urban building efforts) and styles (phallocentric monuments) that no longer aesthetically convince or effectively function for us. This 'us' is a diverse and heterogeneous one – not just architects and their critics."[34]

NOTES

[1] United States Department of Education. *Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Higher Education Desegregation* [online]. Office for Civil Rights. 1991 [cited 20 October 2001]. Available from the World Wide Web: (http://www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/docs/hq9511.html).

[2] Mitchell. Melvin L. *The Crisis of the African-American Architect: Conflicting Cultures of Architecture and (Black) Power.* (New York: Writers Club Press. 2001), 214.

[3] Conversation with Bradford C. Grant.

[4] Grant. Bradford C. and Dennis Alan Mann, eds. *Directory of African American Architects.* (Center for the Study of Practice: Cincinnati. Ohio. 1995), 13.

[5] Grant and Mann. 9.

[6] Frierson. Cynthia L. "Perceptions of African American Educators toward Historically Black Colleges and Universities" [online]. [Cited 20 October 2001]. Available from the World Wide Web: (http://www.eric-web. tc.columbia.edu/hbcu/perceptions.html).

[7] Mixon, Gloria A.. et al. "The Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Future in the Balance" [online]. *Academe.* (January/February 1995) [cited 20 October 2001]. Available from the World Wide Web: (http://www.eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/hbcu/report.html).

[8] Conversation with Bradford C. Grant.

[9] Mitchell, 183.

[10] Mitchell. 181.

[11] Mitchell, 182.

[12] Mitchell, 183.

[13] Mitchell. 182.

[14] Mitchell. 87.

[15] Mitchell. 198.

[16] Rapoport. Amos. "On the Cultural Responsiveness of Architecture." *Classic Readings in Architecture.* Eds. Jay M. Stein and Kent F. Spreckelmeyer. (New York: WCB McGraw Hill. 1999). 329.

[17] Rapoport. 333.

[18] West, Cornell. *The Cornell West Reader.* (USA: Basic Civitas Books. 1999). 458.

[19] Scully, Vincent. "The Architecture of Community." *Classic Readings in Architecture.* Eds. Jay M. Stein and Kent F. Spreckelmeyer. (New York: WCB McGraw Hill. 1999). 65.

[20] Broadbent. Geoffrey. "Architects and Their Symbols." *Classic Readings in Architecture.* Eds. Jay M. Stein and Kent F. Spreckelmeyer. (New York: WCB McGraw Hill. 1999). 100.

[21] Broadbent. 98.

[22] West. 458-9.

[23] Broadbent. 115.

[24] Grant. Bradford. "Accommodation. Resistance. and Appropriation in African-American Building." *Sites of Memory: Perspectives of Architecture and Race.* Ed. Craig Evan Barton. (Princeton Architectural Press: New York. 2000), 109.

[25] Venturi. Robert and Denise Scott Brown. Steven Izenour. "Historical and Other Precedents: Towards an Old Architecture." *Classic Readings in Architecture.* Eds. Jay M. Stein and Kent F. Spreckelmeyer. (New York: WCB McGraw Hill. 1999). 81.

[26] Scully. 65.

[27] Scully. 65.

[28] Mitchell. 179.

[29] Mitchell. 198.

[30] Mitchell. 184.

[31] Mitchell. 177-8.

[32] Mixon.

[33] Humphreys and Schneider.

[34] West. 460.

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