

## CHAPTER 3: ARCHITECTURE - *THING*

*The design culture - cultivated in the academy; perpetrated by critics; and promoted by design publications, awards programs, even paper sessions like these - has an ambivalent relationship with the public. Why, given our dependence on clients and communities for support and approval, do we often seek freedom from them? Why do our notions of good design differ so much from that of the public, and what are the consequences of that difference?*

– ACSA News

It is my considered opinion that this particular moment of globalization<sup>1</sup> has placed the architectural profession in a critical point in its long and storied history. It has highlighted, even exacerbated, a curiously complex historical internal and external struggle to retain a position of substantive, not symbolic, significance in today's increasingly colonized, homogenized and commodified society. Leo Marx succinctly characterizes this conflict, embodied by the opposing views of architecture as a private commodity/privilege or a public service/necessity, when he states:

*[s]tar turns or commendable rehabilitations—that is the choice the profession offers its young aspirants today. The polarization is well-nigh total. At one pole is the discourse of necessity and utility...plain, stripped-down, affordable single-family houses in an urban setting. At the other pole is the discourse of art and celebrity...a perfect expression of the delightfully varied and rich sensuous life available to the privileged in America today.<sup>2</sup>*

This apparently mutually exclusive condition leads one to ask: *By what framework will the value of the discipline's cultural contribution be evaluated?*

The profession has attempted to respond to the ever-increasing complex cultural

constructs of liability and litigation by narrowing the scope of work/responsibility expected from architects. Retreating into the ideological realm of Kantian aesthetics in an effort to legitimize its practical product, the profession has focused—through awards, media recognition, public opinion and superstar status—on one, albeit indispensable, less than comprehensive aspect of architecture: design services. As Dovey states:

*The claim for the autonomy of architecture rests upon a separation of form from instrumental function. And it also rests implicitly upon a broader Kantian aesthetic of universal judgment, Kant's transcendental aesthetic is an a priori judgment which is at once both universal and subjective.<sup>3</sup>*

More than any other moment in recent history, architects are freer—theoretically, at least—to pursue design as personal ideology, as now the outline of what an architect is expected to, and will do, during the project has been increasingly weighted towards design only. While throughout history the above *modus operandi* has never been far from the architectural core, positioning the architect as “aesthetic expert” only results in the belief that s/he is no longer expected to substantially contribute anything beyond the imaging phase of the project, even if willing and able to do so. It is easy to envision

that the conclusion of such a process will be that the architect will eventually become purely a provider of design expertise—and then only for those who can afford it—inconsistent with the role of the professional in society. The practice of architecture—and the architect—is (*or should be*) too important to be limited to only one facet of the building process, but the fact that “*this happy if complacent aesthetic discourse is rewarded with most of the lucrative commissions*”<sup>4</sup> is an indication of the profession’s complicity in its own prostitution. Silence, in this case, is truly golden...or perhaps platinum.

The dilemma presented by the narrowing of the professional scope of responsibility is that in the process, the study and practice of architecture is giving birth to disciplines and professions that develop primarily *because of* its discarded responsibilities at the same time it is whittling itself into oblivion because of *the lack of* responsibilities. By default or design, since the end of World War II, architects have increasingly allowed the commodification of their work by others, reinforcing the “architecture as product” argument. However, the technical skills of the architect are no longer *necessarily* required to complete the modern building process as now “*we have engineers who design buildings, and construction managers who take over the management of the project.*”<sup>5</sup> Thus design becomes, not one of the things, but the only thing that the architectural profession offers. This process is well underway, further exacerbated by the desire of capital to be heard in a global market.<sup>6</sup> In the rush to limit the responsibility that certainly has been historically part of the concern of architects, this narrowing of professional concerns and responsibilities leaves the practice of architecture open to questions of professional legitimacy from a skeptical and increasingly alienated public. Much of that skepticism arises from the discipline’s close alliance with—if not slavish dependence on—a class-based elite who supply the financial fodder for their ideological indulgences. Unlike the disciplines of law and medicine, one must

remember that much like everyone *thinks* they have a sense of humor, everyone *thinks* that they have a sense of design creativity, and it is foolish to believe that they are willing to pay for the privilege of being told otherwise. The question I am forced to ask as I watch this divestiture of position and responsibility is this: *As the discipline whittles itself into irrelevance, what does this mean for current and future African-American practitioners?*

Despite the fact that “*African American architects and their buildings have always been invisible*”<sup>7</sup>, they have and continue to establish interesting and productive practices across the US. Still, despite their historical and contemporary success, we should not lightly gloss over the reasons for that invisibility. African-American practitioners are faced with several, very real systemic obstacles that are specific to them as a professional group. Below, I will outline only three of those obstacles primarily because they are so interdependent. They are, in no particular order: 1) a lack of acknowledged historical place within the profession; 2) a lack of recognition of architectural excellence as individual practitioners and finally; 3) a decided lack of opportunity to excel within majority owned firms. I will further illustrate how the current professional position, both internally and externally, adversely affects African-American practitioners in ways that do not exist for their non African-American colleagues.

1) *Acknowledged historical place within the profession*—a connection to excellence that is assumed by most of the dominant architecture community.

“Are there any African American architects? We can’t find them” is a comment often heard when people gather to consider architecture. Now, there are a myriad of conditions that contribute to the illusion of invisibility around African-American architects; far too many to go into here. Admittedly, some have been created by African-Americans themselves. For example, the initial edition of the celebrated

*Encyclopedia Africana*, a project begun by WEB DuBois and completed by noted Harvard scholars K. Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. almost a century later that purports to comprehensively cover the exploits of the African Diaspora, unforgivably contained no entry for the category of “architect”. No entry whatsoever. Imagine the outcry had the category of doctor or lawyer been omitted, yet, for architect, hardly a peep – or an apology – was heard. Further, one might also point to the fact that those African-Americans who have the desire and ability to employ an architect, don’t often enough look to the African-American architectural community to provide those services. But, don’t get it twisted. I want to be very clear that this, of course, is not a requirement and I am hardly arguing for a balkanization of professional design services along color lines. That would be foolish. Still, the lack of opportunities seized by the African-American service and consumer communities in this area demonstrates a certain amount of apathy on the part of both the practitioner and potential client pool that must be examined. My point is that as both a cultural and professional group, African-Americans bare some responsibility for their seeming invisibility in the field of architecture. However, having said that, below I will show that many of the conditions that contribute to that invisibility, and certainly the most significant ones, exist through no fault of their own. They are institutional in nature and indeed, have deep historical roots. In fact, history is where I’d like to begin this confutation.

For any profession to justify its control over a specific body of knowledge – be it medical, legal, architectural, etc. – establishing a notion of history, and a progressive history at that, is imperative. For the public, the belief that what the profession offers is a time-honored, ever-increasing and of course, essential service is key to its willingness to allow the monopoly to continue; for the professional, the belief that what they do is not only all of the above, but also both specific and special is critical to attracting future practitioners to perpetuate the profession. This is

a point I will return to later in this book, but put another way, in the legal arena, without Charles Houston there’d be no Thurgood Marshall. Without Marshall there’d be no *Brown v. Bd. of Ed.* In medicine, without Charles Drew there’d be no blood transfusion. Without transfusions, there’d be a lot less people around who might possibly read this piece. In each case, the ability of the professional to perform that *special* act was in large part, a *cumulative* effort. It built on a past knowledge base – a history, if you will – to reach that necessarily transformative moment that in theory is why professions exist. But, equally as important as having, is disseminating that version of professional history as well. It is through this process that we, as a public, have and trust professionals. History – the place where the expectations and aspirations of the two groups conflate – becomes both the repository of the past and the promise of the future. We hold both past accomplishments and future aspirations in the body of our professional practitioners. History is where the heroes and heroines are acknowledged, emulated and one dares hope, advanced. The profession of architecture is no exception; in fact, it might be more the rule than most. Yet, within its historical narrative, architecture has paid little attention to the presence, much less the contribution, of African-American practitioners. Bradford Grant, chair of the Hampton University School of Architecture has accurately observed that historians “*have not yet incorporated African-American contributions to American architecture into their work or into architecture curricula.*”<sup>8</sup> Given what history means to sustaining professions, the importance of this omission cannot be overstated.

Now, one might reasonably remark that the omission is not an omission at all; it is simply the result of the natural course of events and nothing more. Perhaps African-American architects simply have not yet created work worthy of note; that there may be no Houstons, or Marshalls or Drews within their ranks. However, Vincent Scully, professor emeritus at

Yale School of Architecture and one of the discipline's preeminent historians, disagrees. He writes that it is "*obvious that a good many black architects have been very good architects indeed – a great many of them in relation to their number*"<sup>9</sup>, which at the very least renders the previous supposition debatable, and quite possibly false. Thus, there must be some other reason to account for the fact that even today, a cursory review of the syllabi, debates and images that constitute the typical history survey course of the nation's architectural schools, not to mention professional seminars and conferences, will routinely be found wanting the mention of names like Julian Able, chief designer of Horace Trumbauer and Associates who designed much of Duke University; Hilyard R. Robinson, whose Langston Terrace Homes in DC won several design awards as well as high praise from Louis Mumford in the 30s; Vertner Woodson Tandy, who with his partner George Washington Foster, designed the St. Philip's Episcopal Church in New York City and the mansion of Madam C.J. Walker; Charles "Cap" Wigington, the first African American municipal architect in the nation, who designed an array of public buildings in St. Paul and six of the fabled Winter Carnival ice palaces of the 30's and 40's; and Paul R. Williams, who designed homes for Cary Grant, Frank Sinatra, the iconic tower at Los Angeles International Airport and was once called the most successful Negro artist in the United States by *Life* magazine in 1950; architects who produced work deserving of a place within the chronology of architectural history. Yet, within the annals of architecture, the work of these and other African Americans continues to be – to borrow from James Baldwin – evidence of things not seen.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, I think we all can agree that architecture, whatever else it may or may not be, is a highly visual profession. Buildings, neighborhoods and cities are all created through the interventions of designers and the resulting objects and landscapes, when done correctly, can certainly be called works of art. In fact, it

would not a stretch to say that indeed, this is exactly what the architect strives to create with every commission: art. But, the art world is no place for the uninitiated. It is not a place the majority of the public enters without a guide; without some assistance to make sense of what it sees. It is in this manner that the media and various other methods of mass communication play an important role in forming public opinion about what is architecturally significant. However, forms of mass dissemination – which include journals, magazines, newspapers, books, museum exhibits, public lectures, films and the like – that frequent the works of African-American architects are underwhelming at best. To date, there have been less than a dozen books in print documenting the work of African-American architects, one African-American architectural critic to have written for a major metropolitan newspaper and zero editorial positions at the major architectural publications, while stories in the most popular professional journals that highlight the work of African-American firms are few and far between. None of this is by accident. None. More than simple oversight, this is the result of a deliberate, almost willful ignorance. In this day and time, it is unconscionable that many architects, whom I have found generally to be some of the brightest and well-read people around, cannot name four or five African American architects that have a substantial body of work, or even a few of their most prominent commissions. Yet within both the academy and the profession, this is the rule, not the exception. A further example of this erasure, take the current employment and currency of the design buzzwords "New Urbanism" and "Community Design".

Architecture—which has a long history of being used to perpetuate spatial dichotomy and marginalization—has since the 60's overtly viewed the urban condition as an inevitable illustration of the pathologies of its residents, becoming a place to mitigate, not to cultivate. As such, architecture and urban design are not viewed as having the power for social *change*, just social *control*, not

only of space, but identity and basic humanity. Many of the architectural interventions in the urban environment from the late 60's to the early 90's demonstrate this phenomenon all too clearly. Fortunately, there were a few committed architects, mostly African-American, working in the same urban sites that nurtured the both the Black Power and Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 60's who had a different view of the urban. Rooted in the ideological foundation that refused to accept that African-Americans were without power over their identities and environment, these architects and architectural collaboratives worked to empower marginalized people by helping them to recognize the value of the social, political and economic capital in their spatial environment and employed its physical manifestation—architecture—to develop and create spaces that represent this power. bell hooks elaborates on why such an active engagement of space was historically critical to the Black community at the time:

*Many narratives of resistance struggle from slavery to the present share an obsession with the politics of space...Indeed, black folks equated freedom with passage into a life where they would have the right to exercise control over space on their own behalf, where they would imagine, design, and create spaces that would respond to the needs of their lives, their communities, their families.<sup>11</sup>*

The process and product of these architectural collaboratives were embedded in the self-help, self-defining, pro-Black principles of the Black power/Black arts movements of the time. Their situating architecture as a product of participatory design processes and activities helped them address and record the struggle for Black identity born out of inner city social relationships with the built environment. Architect and historian Dr. Richard K. Dozier writes

concerning the catalyst for these young activist-practitioners:

*With the continued development of the community workshop, an even greater need emerged: not only did urban communities desperately need the technical resources supplied by the workshops, they also needed that deep sensitivity to interpret accurately and to communicate their desires. With the rise of urban advocacy emerged the full-time urban technician who could interpret accurately the communities' needs: The CDC.<sup>12</sup>*

Architecture for these activist-practitioners was viewed as a community-empowering cultural product; a product employed against an erasing oppressive spatial paradigm embodied in the inhumane housing projects of Pruitt-Igoe, Cabrini Green and Robert Taylor that authorized and sanctioned the wholesale movement of people and erasure of communities. Many of these activist-practitioners were survivors—and to certain degree—beneficiaries of the urban rebellions of the time and their objectives were inarguably shaped by these events, bringing a sense of urgency to their work. In addition, this was also a moment in American history where African-American students were able to access higher education—particularly majority colleges and universities and especially Ivy Leagues institutions—en masse (*relatively speaking*). Particularly conscious about employing their talents in African-American communities upon graduation, for these young architects that sense of urgency led to the establishment of, among other things: the community design, planning and educational organizations: The Black Workshop in New Haven; the Black Architects' Collaborative in Chicago (which existed at the same moment during the 60's as the BAM organization AfriCobra); the Architects Renewal Committee of Harlem (ARCH), (located in the same site as

Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BART/S)); and the Urban Workshop in Los Angeles (which, along with the Afro-American Association and Maulana Karenga, represented sites of resistance and self-empowerment in the Los Angeles African-American community). Unfortunately, this important contribution by African-American architects in the development of educational and professional architectural theory and practice has been conveniently and insidiously erased, forgotten and finally appropriated by non-profit (Association of Community Design) and for-profit (Congress for New Urbanism) communities alike—a process that once again dislodges the African-American practitioner from any professional or disciplinary position within the architectural teleology or any benefit from their pain-staking and ground-breaking work.

It is curious that, with many of these ground-breaking practitioners still working in the profession, the “official” history of community design was written by Rex Curry, director of one of the more prominent CDCs, the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development in Brooklyn, and currently considered one of the elder statesmen in the field. This version of the CDC history for the Association of Community Design's (ACD) website and updated for the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture's (ACSA) *Sourcebook of Community Design Programs at Schools of Architecture in North America*, completely erases the African-American initiative and influence that catalyzed and energized this movement throughout its inception and beyond. For example, Curry's account of the CDC makes several problematic assumptions about moments of CDC significance and as a result, leaves huge gaps in the account of the CDC movement and its participants:

*Although community design practice began as early as 1964 (with the Architect's Renewal Committee of Harlem - ARCH), a national network*

*was not established until nine years after Young's address. In June 1977, the directors of community design centers met formally for the first time at the AIA's national headquarters in Washington DC, and incorporated the following year...The first survey of community design was done in 1970 by the Community Design Resource Center, School of Architecture and Planning at MIT...Roughly fifty Community Design Centers (CDCs) were listed in the MIT project. Coincidentally in May of 1971 The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture published a directory that found 67 centers. And, in that same year 74 centers could be found in the 1971 CDC Listing - Community Design/ Development Centers, published by the CDC Director - Community Services Department of the AIA....Subsequent directories were produced when the Community Design Center Director's Association (CDC/DA) was formed in 1978. The CDC/DA Survey 1987, found just 16 design centers. What happened?*<sup>13</sup>

While Curry's account acknowledges the existence of the Architectural Research Committee of Harlem (ARCH) in 1964, his history effectively begins with the 1970 survey of CDC's, as if what transpired between those two moments is of no consequence to the CDC movement; as if the movement itself did not gain legitimacy until its first survey was conducted in 1970, if not the 1977 meeting at the AIA headquarters. This appropriation of CDC history by the ACD is deeply troubling. What are been inexplicably erased are the early years of the CDC movement, which were, in large part, spearheaded by practitioners of color. For example, note the different perspective on the CDC movement provided by Richard K. Dozier in

the AIA publication entitled *Community Design Centers Information*:

*1965 - Urban Workshop in Watts, California, is established by two young black architects. First CDC to be operated as a full-time professional firm... Their skills were used in developing a communications system for the community explaining various aspects of urban renewal, urban planning, and transportation networks. The major objective of the Urban Workshop was to eliminate the negative structural characteristics and growth dynamics of communities in South Central Los Angeles as a base from which to design and implement new approaches to community and regional planning...1966...the Urban Planning Studio is established as New York's second CDC; the first Puerto Rican CDC... [its] major goals were to establish a process whereby interdisciplinary teams including community members, students, and trainees as well as sociologists, economists, lawyers, architects, and planners could work for the total environmental control of East Harlem. Also, to help increase the number of indigenous architects and planners in East Harlem and to help professional schools recruit Puerto Rican and black students...1967 - Architects Workshop in Philadelphia is established and becomes the first AIA charter-supported CDC...Sept., 1968 - Black Workshop at the Yale School of Architecture is formed—the first all-black group of architecture students to organize in a major white school. The Black Workshop's thrust was developing an architectural curriculum that would deliver the resources of the university to the*

*community, as well as provide a way to educate black architects to social reality...Oct., 1968 - AIA establishes the Task Force on Equal Opportunity chaired by David Yerkes as a response to Whitney Young's charges...April, 1969 - Task Force on equal Opportunity issues "Guideline for Community Design Centers." The AIA's first document on CDC's answered questions about the conflict of the CDC and the profession...March, 1970 - AIA sponsors the National CDC Conference at Howard University, Washington, DC...June, 1970 - AIA hires Vernon Williams, graduate architect from Chicago, as CDC director...While in Chicago, Williams' experience included CDC work with the Black Architects Collaborative.<sup>14</sup>*

What the ACD document—which is widely considered the official history of CDC's—erases is: the first CDC developed as a professional office; the first CDC created by Latino activist-practitioners; the first all-black group of architecture students to organize a CDC at a majority school; and the first African-American hired by the AIA as a professional staff member (head of its CDC department). In short, there are numerous important moments within the time frame of the official ACD/ASCA history mark significant, if not critical, contributions by people of color in this area of the profession of architecture that simply were left unacknowledged. One must wonder, to employ Curry's plaintiff wail, "what happened" in his own narrative—or more importantly—why it happened.

This erasure is not limited to the community based non-profit arena, it is also prevalent on the larger commercial professional playing field as well. In the for-profit arena, the CNU has appropriated many of the principles originated, developed, proposed and promoted by the architects and communities working in the

original CDC's as their own creation—or at the very least, as its intellectual property. Of the 14 principles “developed” for inner city neighborhood design published in conjunction with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development entitled *Creating Communities of Opportunity. Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design: Hope IV and the New Urbanism* at least 8 of the detailed definitions incorporate core objectives (underlined below) with little or no acknowledgement of the original CDC's: Safety and Civic Engagement, Economic Opportunity, Neighborhoods, Infill Development, City-wide and Regional Connections, Mixed Use, Dwelling as Mirror of Self and last by not least, Citizen and Community Involvement.<sup>15</sup> The CNU is just one more example of professional organizations that have become active in community development—not out of any particular understanding of classic professional responsibility or even legitimate concern for the urban environment—but as funds have been made available for this type of work. The following passages from Dr. Richard K. Dozier, NOMA, AIA and Charles Smith, NOMA, AIA—two men who were involved in the beginning of the CDC movement and have been in various ways connected to it over the last 30 plus years—will demonstrate, the profit motive has all but erased the African-American presence in an area in which they arguably pioneered. Again, Dr. Dozier writes:

*As the urban panacea programs developed with the new community participation aspects, communities soon realized that without technical resources, they had little, if any, effective input or control over their communities' development...Few communities saw architecture and planning as effective means of voicing their concerns about their own control mechanisms. But architecture and planning were the vocabulary of the new 20-year, long-range planning*

*documents presented to them by the local planning authorities. And in order to have input into these plans, the communities had to organize and acquire these skills—this new vocabulary. They readily learned that without technical expertise they were unable to develop alternate plans or negotiate effectively for changes in existing plans...Thus, the need for a full-time community technical community advocate developed.*<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, while there has remained a need ever since, any effort to respond to that need on anything other than an ad-hoc basis had been dormant for at least a decade. It has currently reemerged with a sense of urgency, but now with a completely different face. Charles Smith, an original member of the Black Architect's Workshop formed in Chicago in the late 60's, recently noted this phenomenon in a conversation with me in January 2000:

*A good case in point. Public housing in Chicago is getting ready to go through a mass transformation, matter of fact, throughout the nation. There was an RFP put out just recently which we submitted for, they're trying to select architectural firms or architects for community advocacy, so that when the plans come before these advisory councils, they'll have some technical expertise on their staff who are being paid by, paid by the...ah...I think it is the MacArthur Foundation, that will allow them to have people there who can review those architectural drawings and development packages so they can understand what it is those people are saying they're gonna get when they tear down all their high-rises. And they need that technical expertise.*



*But there were no architects running around saying, 'I'll volunteer for you...I'll do this for you through the community design centers', so the MacArthur Foundation and groups like that had to put some monies there to make people get interested. Now the problem is, although we submitted, over three weeks ago, we haven't heard one word, one way or another, whether or not we were selected.*

*The criteria is gonna be 'who's making the selection'? And when they make the selection, how many African-Americans or minorities are gonna be selected to provide that kind of consultation or are they gonna do the traditional thing, go right back to the status quo?...And I suspect, just my suspicion again, because I haven't heard anything saying we received your package, we're reviewing it, 'cause they said to us that they needed to make...a decision right away, that that's what's going on. I don't beg folks to hire me.<sup>17</sup>*

Indeed.

Still, there have been concerted efforts to address the textual and visual omissions for sometime and there are indications that these efforts have not been in vain; that the tide may in fact, be slowly but inexorably changing.

Textually, the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) has been in existence for over 30 years and, like the American Institute of Architects (AIA), has recently begun to publish its own professional journal. The Center for the Study and Practice of Architecture has published two separate volumes of *The Directory of African American Architects*, identifying thousands of African American architects registered to practice in this country. There are also several new tomes being published that focus on African American architects and their work in addition to general books written by

African American scholars as well. *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945* edited by Dreck Wilson and Dr. Wesley Henderson is an invaluable resource that will hopefully become an indispensable resource for survey courses around the country. Visually, the 2006 exhibit highlighting African and African American architectural visionaries, "Architecture: Pyramids to Skyscrapers", was curated by Wilson at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. In 2004, Studio Museum of Harlem curator Thelma Golden organized an exhibit entitled "Harlemworld" and invited over a dozen black architects participate. It was the first such endeavor since the 1993 and 1994 traveling exhibits entitled "Design Diaspora: Black Architects and International Architecture 1970-1990" curated by Carolyn Armenta Davis and the "African American Architects and Builders" organized by the late Vinson McKenzie, respectively. These are believed to be the first major shows featuring African American architects since the Harmon Foundation artist awards – which included the work of such African American architects as Hilyard Robinson, Louis Bollinger, Paul Williams and John Lewis Wilson – ended in the late 1960's. And finally, in the institutional realm, in what may be arguably the most significant event of the last few decades, at this past general convention the AIA selected Marshall Purnell of the Washington DC architectural firm Devroux & Purnell as its president-elect. In an organization that expressly barred membership to African American practitioners until 1923, Mr. Purnell will become its first African American member to lead that organization in its 150 years of existence.

If the above shows anything, it is that caution must be exercised against confusing invisibility with an absence of presence; they are not the same thing. Despite conditions that have worked to obscure and in some cases erase all traces of their existence and achievements, African American architects have not only been present for centuries, in many cases they have

thrived. As illustrated above, they've had a rich, if hidden, history in the study and practice of architecture and within the offices of Devroux & Purnell, Stull & Lee and the Freelon Group, as well as with sole practitioners Darryl Crosby & Melinda Palmore, Michael Willis, Jack Travis and Walter Williams in addition to practitioner/educators Nathaniel Belcher, Coleman A. Jordan, David Brown, Mabel O. Wilson, Mohammed Lawal and Darrell Fields—not to mention Walter Hood and J. Yolande Daniels, both recent recipients of the Rome Prize in design from the American Academy in Rome—that history continues. Thus, in light of this briefest of accounts – believe me, I could go on – it should be clear to most reasonable people that the question “Are there any African American architects? We can't find them” is empty of any credibility whatsoever. Any further use of it is disingenuous and, arguably indicative of something far less innocent than the simple ignorance the speaker would have one believe. If African American architects indeed can't be found, it isn't because they don't exist. It's because you aren't looking, which, of course, logically leads to the next obstacle.

2) *Opportunity to excel*—a belief that African-Americans are not readily qualified for advancement to the highly visible positions of power within the office, profession and discipline.

If, as Kant argues, the artistic genius is *required* to eschew accepted rules, cannot be defined by objective means and is *obliged* to top the previous design or designer, then the position of designer is by far the most prominent and powerful position in traditional professional practice. It is the position that most shapes both the face of the office and the form of the environment and they do this—are *required* to do this according to Kant—from a very subjective, personal, experiential position. What the designer thinks of the world—and their/our position in it—is written on the landscape, frozen in time and presented for consideration. As has been mentioned before, the will to form is the will to inform; that the motivation to build something is

really about the desire to say something. It is a statement that is critical to consider here, because, subtle though it may be, the lack of confidence in the aesthetic sensibilities of African-American architects is really rooted in a concern about what a building designed by an architect of color might say; that what they might say through their work is inherently different and thus, inherently inappropriate, if not inferior to what non African-American architects might say—especially when it comes to highly visible projects. This belief is often masked in the question, “Don't you want the best for the project?” This seemingly innocent question embodies two very problematic, interconnected assumptions. The first is that it presumes the speaker knows what is best – or at least, best for African Americans – and the second is that it takes for granted the best cannot possibly be African American. A stretch you say? I think not.

It should come as no surprise that in the arts in general, and especially within the field of architecture, there are those whom lay claim to arbiters and guardians of the high concepts of design and thus, act as gatekeepers into that specialized realm. It isn't often that the gatekeepers – who commonly determine what is considered historically and culturally significant; in short, what is “best” – have been particularly interested in artistic forms of disparate cultural producers, at least not when produced from a disparate cultural perspective. Hegemony is the *de facto* order of the day, a hegemony defined and enforced by the gatekeepers; both art and artist must look the particular part as construed by this cultural elite. Certainly there are always exceptions, but often in such cases, the disparate is considered “other”, if not “primitive”, “raw”, “vernacular” and the like – all terms that tend to solidify the hegemonic boundaries, not dissolve them. And if, as Dovey writes, “*forms of domination, based in cultural capital, are [often] made to appear as pure aesthetic judgments*”<sup>18</sup>, then, seemingly benign claims to what is generally positioned as “best” are often very specific claims to “what we think is best”

and, what we think is best is always what makes us most comfortable. “*Control of the arts is obviously control of culture,*” says Bond, a fellow in the American Institute of Architects and supervising architect of the World Trade Center Memorial, and where the artistic expression afforded by significant architectural commissions is positioned as ultimate symbol of professional success, decisions made under the auspices of purely neutral aesthetic judgments often serve to enforce what Bond deems as “*the right to rule, if you will*”<sup>19</sup>; the right to know better, the right know what’s “best”. If what Dovey and Bond suggest is accurate, then that appropriated right is also the right to choose who will, and more importantly, who will not succeed, ultimately expanding the notion of cultural imperialism to professional imperialism as well. Does the freedom and power to inform exist for people of color within the professional realm? Certainly. But, more to the point, is it available to African-Americans on an equal basis as their non African-American counterparts, in the offices of the majority or even in their own practices? Certainly not. This leads us to an additional problem: the problem of recognition.

As I have mentioned above, contrary to popular belief there are numerous African-American architects and firms that design and do it well. Unfortunately, while this is the undeniably demonstrated truth, it is not generally acknowledged. As a case in point, in a city that has probably the longest history of African-American practitioners and perhaps the largest number of African-American registered architects in the US, consider the recent comments by Benjamin Forgey, critic and columnist for the *Washington Post*:

*There are two reasons to celebrate Pepco's new headquarters building downtown. One is the architecture. With its boldly curved main facade of sparkling glass, the building does honor to its notable setting and kindles renewed respect for something*

*often dismissed as a lost cause—the commercial glass box. The other reason is the architecture firm, Devroux & Purnell, a 24-year-old Washington partnership. The building is a first for the firm, and also for the city—partners Paul Devroux and Marshall Purnell had never before designed a downtown building here, and neither had anyone else of their race. Surprisingly—astonishingly—the Pepco headquarters is the first downtown building in this majority black city ever known to be designed by African American architects. Or, after all, maybe not so surprising. As slave labor, African Americans helped to build the White House, the Capitol and other major monuments of Washington architecture. As professionals, African American architects have managed to thrive in Washington for 100 years, despite the city's rigid segregation through much of the 20th century. But as the experience of Devroux & Purnell and other black-owned firms attests, in the architecture profession, segregation lasted well beyond the desegregation of public schools in the 1950s and the passage of the civil rights laws in the 1960s.*<sup>20</sup>

Brad Grant offers us yet another example of this phenomenon:

*Ironically, for African American architects, their mainstream formal work becomes anonymous and is made invisible. For example, the architecture practice of distinguished African American architect John Moutussemey was so invisible that even his design of the North Pier Towers was ignored in the architectural and planning community*

*of Chicago. This forty-plus-story project is the largest tower next to Mies van der Rohe's Lake Shore Towers. In an architecturally sophisticated city, this seemingly controversial project received little attention, due in part, to the lack of attention afforded African American architects.*<sup>21</sup>

Little is done to recognize and develop the rich resource African-Americans represent within the discipline. In fact, it is often just the opposite.<sup>22</sup> Practitioners of color, on a comprehensive scale, must daily contend with the reluctance of majority employers, past and present, to promote African-American to positions of representation within and without the firm simply due to perceptions of aesthetic acumen. This leads us to the last point I want to cover: where do these perceptions come from?

3) *Institutional bias*—African-American (graduate) architects are typically only offered, and therefore left to accept, the majority of initial positions in the profession in the area of production technology. And there they typically remain.

Through its efforts to limit liability, the areas that the profession is currently divesting itself of in its headlong pursuit of the big brass design ring are the areas labeled as production technology. It should come as no surprise that these are the very areas that have traditionally held the greatest opportunity for African-American entry into the profession (*although they have always been the most difficult positions, and perceptions, to shed*).

*You can teach a man to draw a straight line...and to copy any number of given lines or forms with admirable speed and perfect precision...but if you ask him to think about any of those forms...he stops; his execution becomes hesitating...he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives to*

*his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man of him for all of that. He was only a machine before, an animated tool...And observe, you are put to stern choice in this matter. You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot do both.*<sup>23</sup>

Partially because of the type of early training received from the Tuskegee model of industrial education, and partially due to the perception of the African-American in society, African-American architects historically have been allowed to demonstrate their ability in certain positions within the offices and the profession, but not others.<sup>24</sup> W.E.B. DuBois explains the objective of this particular educational direction so readily embraced by the principal academy for the study of architecture for the majority of African-Americans—our historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) schools of architecture—as such:

*The industrial school founded itself, and rightly, upon the actual situation of American Negroes and said: "What can be done to change the situation?" And its answer was: "A training in technique and methods such as would incorporate the disadvantaged group into the industrial organization of the country."*<sup>25</sup>

As a result of this early primary objective at HBCU's—where as recently as 2004, only 18.8% percent of all African-Americans studying architecture were enrolled in the 7 schools that provide architectural education—the perception of the majority of African-American architects has been limited to that historical view of their educational foundations<sup>26</sup>, adding credence that something other than one's educational institution—and its perceived standard of excellence—is at work in the assessment of one's skills, quite possibly the result of an

*“exercise [of] control through the manufacture of illusions about race and ethnic relations.”*<sup>27</sup>

Viewed through this ideological lens by educators, employers and clients, African-Americans traditionally have found it immensely difficult to display their versatility within the constraints of majority architectural firms, habitually being placed in the production technology areas as draftspersons, technical coordinators, and construction supervisors/administrators. Ironically, as more African-Americans enter the profession, these are the very areas that are now being divested from the term “architect”, and shipped overseas. These conditions are even more exacerbated today by the production of more technical school graduates than the profession can absorb and the volatility of the economic cycle, which translates into more competition in the now devalued areas that have traditionally been an entry into architecture. All this, while the discipline of architecture, in definition and practice, is moving to embrace as its standard position in society—design and design development—the very area that African-Americans have been traditionally shut out.<sup>28</sup>

University of Melbourne professor Paolo Tombesi places this whittling process into the much larger context of globalization.<sup>29</sup> He argues that the same process that has led to the post-industrial demise of manufacturing production in the United States and other industrialized nations—cheap skilled labor in developing countries—has now caught up to service production as well. He states that because of the *“socially complex and uncertain environment of the building process, architects are required to produce, issue, and transfer design information at a constant pace”*<sup>30</sup>, a pace that is almost always out of the control of architects. Tombesi argues that the lack of application autonomy—the fact that architecture’s production is not only determined by a certain amount of fluidity and change that demands rapid responses, but also

directly determines the application procedures and timelines of allied industries—has until recently required architectural production to be a localized industry. But no more. He points out that the advance of technology—and the overt acceptance of the UN sanctioned globalization of service industries in general and design services in particular—has begun to rapidly decrease the necessity of such contextual and locational proximity. Through this now increasingly possible separation of the phases of the architectural process—the Cartesian separation of mind and body appears once again. This Cartesian dynamic has been described by former US Secretary of Labor and Harvard professor Robert Reich in his influential book *The Work of Nations* as symbolic analysis—the abstract thinkers—and the routine producers—the task performers.<sup>31</sup> Here, Tombesi places that dynamic in architectural terms by arguing that the “intellectual labor” phase, the intangible commodities of conceptualization, creating and problem-solving, etc.—and the people that do it—becomes the service marketed to the client, with the “physical labor” phase, the tangible commodities of drawings and other technical and physical materials—and those who produce them—are rendered solely *“instruments at the service of the architect.”*<sup>32</sup>

With this separation, architecture, it seems, is on the move. Like Nike, it is heading to where the labor is cheapest. Unlike Nike, it is riding the information highway to get there. While the exporting of services and administration of skills from afar is not new to the architectural profession, it has been rare. Now, it is poised to become the norm.

*The existence of sharp wage differences casts a broader light on the global trade of professional services, suggesting an altered future relationship between work and labor. The access to foreign professional markets gives firms not only the opportunity to export services to these*

*markets, but also to import, if necessary, the work of cheaper labor resources.*<sup>33</sup>

This produces the painful dichotomy of more people of color in the making of architecture but not the creating of “architecture”—the intellectual component (*of which the apex is design*) at least for the time being. Tombesi seems to suggest that eventually, the economies of scale will tip the balance of power to those locations that can produce world-class work (*having been educated in the universities of the US and Europe*) but for a fraction of the cost (*labor being cheaper than that of the developed world*) which may indeed be true, but I am forced to ask, what will the nature of practice be by the time this sea change occurs and where, if anywhere, will African-American practitioners fit in?

Granted, we could—and should—look at this as an opportunity to begin on the ground floor, already at the table, for the development of these new, or specialized fields that support the architectural profession. And I surely expect that some of the largest construction management firms, interior design firms and the like, will either be started by or employ many African-Americans in the future. But we should not ignore the larger issue that if this process continues unchecked, those people who have been trained as architects, call themselves architects and in fact have licenses will, in fact, not be practicing what is being increasingly narrowly defined as architecture—design services. If architecture—as it is currently being narrowed—is defined by design only, then it is clear that for the most part, design is becoming even more, both in perception and practice, the province of white male architects, not only in the US but the world over. Despite evidence to the fact that African-American practitioners design and do it well, architect Harvey Gantt has argued, “[e]veryday our competence is on the line”<sup>34</sup>, when it is considered at all.

Certainly, poised as we are at the dawning of this new era, African-American architects may be able to overcome, sidestep and otherwise maneuver around this disturbing trend and I have listed but a few above that have already begun to do so. Further, some, through an integration of the practice of architecture with the various disciplines and professions significantly utilized by current society, may even be able to use this shift in position to their immediate and long term advantage. To those people I say: Well done! for they have seen the future and have decided that they will be more than a part, but a player. But, for the next generation of African-American architects, particularly the ones being educated at the historically Black colleges and universities, what does this trend/movement mean for their career opportunities?

For the students at many HBCU's, the fact that the technically proficient attitude has persisted until quite recently at some institutions and continues at others, does not bode well for preparation in the areas that may remain open in the profession in the near future. For students at majority schools, they face their own peculiar set of problems.<sup>35</sup> So what do we have? An established base of African-American practitioners who are slowly being relegated to the past, maneuvered to the nether regions of the architectural profession and a new generation of African-American architects being trained in areas of the profession that may not even BE PART of the profession when they graduate, competing for positions that are becoming scarce with the proliferation of trade schools (*drafting, CAD*) and two year colleges (*drafting, architectural technology*) in the US, the emergence of both the means (*technology, educated work force*) and the opportunity (*trade agreements in and between developing countries*) to transfer architectural services abroad, a suspect, ever-changing economic base and a less than accepting professional and market mentality. Overall not an encouraging picture for the future of African-Americans in

what is narrowly being defined as the practice of architecture.

## NOTES

1 Craig L. Wilkins and Paolo Tombesi. "Introduction." *Journal of Architectural Education*. (Winter 2005) p.3.

*[W]e ultimately chose to frame the specific terms of architectural globalization as a geographic growth in architectural practice and education markets due in large part to advances in both communication and information technology, supported by international trade agreements that open local markets to global competition and demands conformance of educational and professional qualifications among regions.*

2 Leo Marx. "On Architectural Theory Today." *GSD News*. (Summer 1995). p.6.

3 Dovey. *Framing Places*. p.68.

4 Marx. "On Architectural Theory Today." p.6.

5 Thomas Dutton. "Architectural Education and Society: An Interview with J. Max Bond, Jr." *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*. Thomas Dutton, ed. (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991). p. 92.

6 Dovey. *Framing Places*. p.121.

*It is the cultural and not the technical capacities of architects which make them indispensable to this market—using cultural capital to produce symbolic capital...The market for new images requires imagination and architects are the imaginative agents of capital development.*

7 Grant. "Accommodation and Resistance." p.213.

<sup>8</sup> Bradford Grant. *Directory of African American Architects*. Bradford Grant and Dennis Mann, ed. (Cincinnati: Center for the Study of Practice, University of Cincinnati Press, 1996). p.9.

<sup>9</sup> Vincent Scully. "The Architecture of Healing." *African American Architects in Current Practice*. Jack Travis, ed. (New York: Princeton Press, 1992). p.11.

<sup>10</sup> Melissa Mitchell. "Research project spotlights African American architects from U. of I."

<http://www.news.uiuc.edu/NEWS/06/0209architects.html>

*In "The Canon and the Void: Gender, Race and Architectural History Texts," an article just published in the Journal of Architectural Education, [Professor Kathryn] Anthony and doctoral student Meltem O. Gurel document their examination of history texts assigned at 14 leading architecture schools. Despite lip service within the field regarding "the importance of women and African Americans as critics, creators and consumers of the built environment," Anthony noted, "our analysis of these history texts revealed that contributions of women*

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*remain only marginally represented in the grand narrative of architecture. And for the most part, African Americans are omitted altogether."*

11 bell hooks. *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics*. (New York: The New Press, 1995). p.147.

12 Richard K. Dozier. *Community Design Centers Information*. Richard K. Dozier, ed., Vernon A. Williams, coordinating ed. (Washington, DC: AIA Publications, 1972). p.5.

13 Rex Curry. "The History of Community Design." *The ACSA Sourcebook of Community Design programs at Schools of Architecture in North America*. (Washington, DC: ACSA Press, 2000). p.53-4.

14 Dozier. *Community Design Centers Information*. p.5-9.

15 *Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design: Creating Communities of Opportunity. Hope IV and the New Urbanism*. A Collaboration of the Congress for New Urbanism and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. p.4-5. As detailed in the document:

*The Inner City Task Force of the Congress for New Urbanism has developed a set of design principles that have proven effective in inner city neighborhoods. These principles have been tested in several HOPE IV projects. They are proposed as a set of working principles to be further refined and tested through use.*

1. *Diversity: Provide a broad range of housing types and price levels to bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction - strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.*

2. *Safety and Civic Engagement: The relationship of buildings and streets should enable neighbors to create a safe and stable neighborhood by providing "eyes on the street" and should encourage interaction and community identity. Provide a clear definition of public and private realms through block and street design that responds to local traditions.*

3. *Economic Opportunity: The design of neighborhood development should accommodate management techniques and scales of construction that can be contracted to local and minority businesses.*

4. *Neighborhoods: Neighborhoods are compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed use with many activities of daily life available within walking distance. New development should help repair existing neighborhoods or support the creation of new ones and should not take the form of an isolated "project."*

5. *Infill Development: Reclaim and repair blighted and abandoned areas within existing*

neighborhoods by using infill development strategically to conserve economic investment and social fabric.

6. *Local Architectural Character*: The image and character of new development should respond to the best traditions of residential and mixed use architecture in the area.

7. *Accessibility*: Buildings should be designed to be accessible and visitable while respecting the traditional urban fabric.

8. *City-wide and Regional Connections*: Neighborhoods should be connected to regional patterns of transportation and land use, to open space, and to natural systems.

9. *Streets*: The primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use. Neighborhoods should have an interconnected network of streets and public open space.

10. *Public Open Space*: The interconnected network of streets and public open space should provide opportunities for recreation and appropriate settings for civic buildings.

11. *Mixed Use*: Promote the creation of mixed use neighborhoods that support the functions of daily life: living, retail, employment, recreation, and civic and education institutions.

12. *Dwelling as Mirror of Self*: Recognize the dwelling as the basic element of a neighborhood and as the key to self-esteem and community pride. This includes the clear definition of outdoor space for each dwelling.

13. *Design Codes*: The economic health and harmonious evolution of neighborhoods can be improved through graphic urban design codes that serve as predictable guides for change.

14. *Citizen and Community Involvement*: Engage residents, neighbors, civic leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, developers, and local institutions throughout the process of designing change for neighborhoods.

16 Dozier. *Community Design Centers Information*. p.5.

17 Interview with Charles Smith of Smith and Smith Architects, 4 January, 2001 in Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>18</sup> Dovey. *Framing Places*. p.38.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Dutton. "Architectural Education and Society". *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*. p. 88.

20 Benjamin Forgey. "Breaking Down Washington's Glass Wall: Pepco's Downtown Building A First for Black Architects." *Washington Post*. March 30, 2002; p.C01.

21 Grant. "Accommodation and Resistance." p.213.

22 Even when recognition occurs, it is typically not for any prowess in the area of design. For example, one of the few feature articles to focus on an African-American architect in recent memory of *Architecture* ((July 2002) p.39-40.) magazine highlighted the work of Mohammed Lawal, principal and principal designer for KKE Architects in Minneapolis. Despite having won numerous awards for their design work, the primary focus of this article was on Lawal's "community" work with the Architectural Youth Program (AYP); a program that works with underrepresented and at risk kids in Minneapolis in an effort to introduce them to the design professions. Ignoring the design expertise of KKE's Lawal to highlight his "social" work only serves to reinforce the notion that the importance and contribution of African-American architects is still essentialized in the area of "community service". In the same edition, the work of another African-American architect, Paul Baulknight, was mistakenly credited to another firm. The extremely rare emergence of African-American work in the popular media makes this carelessness even more problematic and, perhaps more importantly, endemic.

23 Jon Ruskin. *The Stones of Venice. Volume the 2nd*. (NYC: Hurst & Company, 1851). p.162.

24 For more information on this architectural education process, please refer to: Richard Dozier. *Tuskegee: Booker T. Washington's Contribution to the Education of Black Architects*. Doctoral Dissertation. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1989). Also, extensive research has been conducted by Vinson McKenzie and Tulane University's architectural historian and Ellen Weiss as well.

25 W.E.B. DuBois. *Crisis*. (August 1933). Excerpts from an address to the annual alumni reunion at Fisk University, June 1933.

<sup>26</sup> NAAB 2004 Statistical Report.

27 Essed. *Understanding Everyday Racism*. p.187.

28 This, in fact, is already occurring, sanctioned, although indirectly, by the American Institute of Architecture's efforts to decrease liability. This pursuit of liability-less architecture has caused this architectural imbalance to be exacerbated.

29 Paolo Tombesi. "Super Market: The Globalization of Architectural Production." *Harvard Design Magazine*. (Fall 2002/Winter 2003).

30 Id.

31 Robert B. Reich. *The Work of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

32 Tombesi. "Super Market."

33 Ibid. p.7-8.

34 As quoted by Dennis Alan Mann. "Making Connections: The African-American Architect." *Faith & Form: Journal of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art & Architecture*. (Fall 1993). p.23.

35 See Fredrickson as well as Aherntzen and Anthony above.



