

Interdisciplinary Relationships and the Relevance of Architectural Knowledge and Practice from a Decidedly African-American Perspective

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Much to the chagrin of the discipline, society has come to the realization that conventional perceptions of the architect no longer apply. In search of an accurate, meaningful definition of architect, society has begun to critically analyze the discipline's contribution. Examination in the current environment of cultural criticism has succeeded in penetrating the mystical, protective wall of the discipline and the crack in the fortress wall has shed light on architecture's complex struggle to retain a position of significance in today's culture, revealing to the world a schizophrenic nature. Society has found that the discipline has two rather distinct personalities and the lack of an acceptable resolution to this situation is the site of the discipline's cultural dilemma.

Current positions within the discipline on the definition and value of architecture and architect can be categorized as dichotomous, at best. The present architectural dilemma - *By what framework will the value of the discipline's cultural contribution be evaluated?*

As the discipline struggles to redefine itself and, concurrently, its position in current culture, we face a situation in which opposing architectural dispositions are competing to become the predominant nature of architecture's future. The disciplines differing temperaments position architecture as either a **private commodity/product** or a **public service/necessity**.¹ As this split personality is now visible in the architectural discipline, specific characteristics can be observed, but by no means limited to, in professional and academic areas in which they predominately manifest.

I will examine the characteristics of these two personalities in an attempt to form a new perspective with which to introduce architectural knowledge, in a significant, sustainable way, to the current cultural dialogue. This examination will have an additional focus for me as I will also examine whether *this personality dichotomy can be shaped/adapted/alleviated by African-American practitioners, educators and students.*

THE RIGHT(CORRECT) PERSONALITY Development

A product of the environment

The architectural profession, over the last 50 years, has for

the most part focused on itself as an entity *responding to* cultural contexts and this focus forms the foundation of the professional or "right" personality. Through the American Institute of Architects, the profession of architecture has attempted to respond to the ever increasing complex cultural constructs of accountability, liability and litigation by narrowing the scope of work/responsibility expected from architects.

As a result of narrowing services and expectations, the profession has been relatively successful in limiting its professional liability. While expected to design, the architect is no longer expected to substantially contribute anything beyond this phase of the project, even if willing and able to do so. Such low expectations leave architects free to attempt to refine personal philosophies of architecture or what Geoffrey Scott describes as "*that condition of building well...architectural style [allows] man to construct, within the world as it is, a pattern of the world as he would have it*".² The architect becomes the prototypical rendering of the artist in our society; the brash creative soul with a singular passion, sacrificing social responsibility, eschewing all else, pursuing an individual, specific, tortured vision of art, or in this case, architecture.

Dissent

The hero's perceived character flaw

In the process of narrowing the professional scope of responsibility, the architectural profession has limited opportunities for economic prosperity and more importantly, diminished the power, prestige and influence of architects externally. Over time, the profession of architecture has given birth to disciplines and professions that develop primarily *because of* our discarded responsibilities, at the same time the profession is whittling itself into oblivion because of the *very lack of* responsibilities.³ By ignoring or denying its traditional role in culture for the purposes of exploring self-contained visions of architecture, it is easy to envision that the conclusion of such a process will be the practice of architecture becoming purely a design service profession, inconsistent with the historical role of the architect in society.

By default or design, the profession of architecture has facilitated the shedding of its traditional responsibilities, allowing for allied professions to develop and dilute the significance of the practice of architecture, while simultaneously permitting the commodification of their work by others, reinforcing the “architecture as product” argument. Design services and expertise become a luxury that will go to the purchaser who can afford “publication-worthy” designs. Other consumers of this product, the ones who cannot afford this indulgence for themselves, will typically have to do without, employ others to gain their objective or participate/interact in some small way, with the recently purchased commodity of others.

Discussion

Couch sessions

The philosophical foundation that sustains the right’s position attempts to counter this argument. Beginning with the premise that because architecture exists in the public realm, it can be concluded that architecture, the physical product, is always a public commodity. Therefore architecture is an artifact whose purpose is public consumption, and as such, even though the general public may not be able to purchase it, they can certainly enjoy it.

Critics contend that this position fails to recognize that the public can enjoy it only at the purchaser’s caprice, which may be swayed, but is ultimately not bound, by public opinion.⁴ Because public consumption is not just a reflex — it comes with contemplation — unless the client and incidental consumers interests parallel, the enjoyment counted on by the architect will never take place. “*And surely the forms, techniques, and styles of architecture are not reducible to the needs and interests of [exclusively individual] public or private patrons*.”⁵ Ultimately, critics question the profession’s polemical foundation: *Can the architectural profession economically justify its existence based on such limited terms of consumption?*

Diagnosis

The possible reality of a right dominated future

In the rush to limit the responsibility that certainly has been historically part of the concern of architects — and has arguably lead to its attractiveness and almost mystic-like position as a profession in the past — with this apparent withdrawal from society, architects are fast becoming irrelevant to the society of which they are part. 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 LEFT(OUT) PERSONALITY

Development

A product of the environment

The genesis of the academic of “left” personality centers on

repositioning the development and cataloging of architectural knowledge away from the self-referential personal perspective, towards a holistic, contextual cross-disciplinary inquiry.

The linchpin of this argument for the left is the assertion that the discipline has yet to develop a body of knowledge with which to objectively judge/police itself and the lack of this broad based objective foundation directly contributes to the current devaluation of the profession within a broader cultural context through the lack of empirical, or even historical, credibility.⁶ Outside of static historical mapping and cataloging of architectural artifacts, according to the academic position, objective architectural contextual knowledge is almost non-existent.⁷

The left seeks to establish an objective knowledge and evaluation base for the discipline of architecture, through a cross-disciplinary investigation of architectural historiography to place the development of architectural philosophies, past and present, in an overall objective cultural context that includes, among other things, the socio/political and economic cultural impact on architectural knowledge from their inception.

Dissent

The hero’s perceived character flaw

The primary flaw with the left view of architecture/architect lies in the fact that currently, architects and architectural critics *do not have the historical and analytical training to do [cross-disciplinary] analysis*.⁸ Nor are they encouraged to seek and develop along these lines. The reasons require examination. To paraphrase Franz Fanon, any education for a specific objective can be termed political, and as Cornell West states:

*“This...leads us to the crucial issue of the political legitimacy of architectural critics — namely why are they trained as they are, how are they reproduced and what set of assumptions about history, economics culture, and art inform the curriculum and faculties that educate them?”*⁹

Discussion

Couch sessions

The cultural crisis has as part of its agenda, the questioning of the structural patriarchy of society. Even in -- or because of -- this environment, one can expect a profession that is decidedly patriarchal, struggling with unresolved issues of class and race, to be slow to ingeniously question its position. The historical legitimacy bestowed upon the singular “practice” version of the architect as the discipline’s only valuable area of production has given certain cultural status and power to those who engage primarily in practice. Through the production oriented, patriarchal right perspective — which has traditionally been recognized by society as the ideal of what an architect is — this hesitancy results in the labeling of those who have chosen teaching and research primarily over practice as non-contributors or worse, as failed architects. This perception ensures that the “practice” version of the

architect remains in this primary position.

To counter this vision, the left way of thinking has needed to find alternate paths to obtaining power and a voice. A new architectural perspective has become to some a political necessity and the academic reformists will be required to engage in a concentrated, coordinated political reshaping of current educational pedagogy to ensure that the contributions to the discipline are not subject to the tyranny of the perceived majority.

One of the more favorable paths has been the development of a body of work that is cross-disciplinary in nature and useful in implementation. Because of, or in spite of, the patriarchal nature of architecture, it should not be a surprise that much, if not most, of the significant work done in forming the foundation of, and building a solution to, the academic's argument has been done by women and people of color in the discipline. Regina Davis, LaVerne Wells-Bowie, Sherry Aherntzen, Kathryn Anthony, Julia Robinson, Linda Groat, Jennifer Bloom and Sharon Sutton are names that immediately come to mind.¹⁰

Diagnosis

The possible reality of a left dominated future

Such work has received little notice outside of academic circles, where the dissemination of information and ideas is tightly controlled by those allied with the goals and objectives embodied on the right. Unfortunately, the left's contribution is disregarded by the "old guard" as rhetoric, sound and fury, signifying little, if not nothing. Even so, because theories not tested and implemented are just thoughts, not enough to revive cultural status alone, it is not difficult to envision a future of left domination reducing the discipline to little more than Talk-a-ecture.

The reality of the future

In summary, the current struggle of the right & left personalities is leaving in its wake an established base of practitioners slowly being regulated to the past, maneuvered to the nether regions of the architectural profession due to a shedding of responsibilities; a new generation of practitioners being trained in areas of the profession that may not even be a part of the profession when they graduate, at the expense of incorporating the concerns of a changing society; competing for positions that through the compliance of the profession, are becoming scarce with the proliferation of trade schools (drafting, CAD) and two year colleges (drafting, architectural technology); and a dwindling economic base. Overall not an encouraging picture for the future of the study and practice of architecture, a vision made even more acute, when one examines the effect of the current condition on a specific group of architects, the African-American.

INFLUENCE OF MULTI(PL)-PERSONALITIES ON AFRICAN-AMERICANS

Adaption of a right nature results in...

In the current atmosphere of divestiture on the right, the areas

targeted for disposal are the areas broadly and commonly labeled *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.

That the area of production technology has been traditionally open to African-Americans is the direct result of a number of issues. Partially because of the type of early training received from the Tuskegee model of industrial education, and partially due to the perception of African-Americans in society, African-American architects historically were allowed to demonstrate their ability to fill only the technical positions within the profession.¹¹

Contrary to popular belief, there are numerous African-American architectural firms, staffed by African-American architects, interns and students that design and do it well. The firms of Devroux & Purnell, Stull & Lee, Charles McAfee & Associates, RAW Architects and others that would take a few pages to mention immediately come to mind. Regrettably, while their architectural expertise is an undeniably demonstrated truth, it is **not** generally recognized and acknowledged.¹² Quite unfairly and to the expense of the discipline, the perception of the majority of African-American architects has remained limited to that "technical" opinion of their educational foundations, even for students who were eventually allowed to attend, and continue to attend, majority institutions. Judged in this bright, but highly specific light by educators, employers & clients, African-Americans traditionally have found it immensely difficult to display their versatility within the constraints of the architectural firm, habitually being placed in the production technology areas of the practice as draftspersons, technical coordinators, and construction supervisors/administrators. Unfortunately, these are the very areas that are now being divested from the term "architect", allowing for yet another new "discipline" to develop. ***The right results in the established base of practitioners being regulated to the past including a disproportional number of African-Americans.***

Adaption of a left nature results in...

For the students at many HBCU's, the fact that the technically proficient educational paradigm has persisted until quite recently at some institutions and continues at others, is problematic. For students at majority schools, well, they face their own peculiar set of educational problems. Arthur Symes, Ph.D., former administrator at the New York Housing Authority and former Dean of Southern University School of Architecture, in his 1976 dissertation states that African-American students that attend majority programs "...typically have to decide which values to hold on to and which ones to give up. Sometimes they just give up altogether".¹³ In 20 years, there has been little evidence that the educational situation has been improved.¹⁴ Both situations do not bode well for preparation into the areas that may remain open in the profession in the near future. By adopting standard educational values, African-Americans are acqui-

escing to their market obsolescence. *Adaptation of the left results in the new generation of practitioners being trained to compete with trade school and two year colleges upon graduation in areas of the profession that are becoming professionally obsolete, a dwindling economic base and a less than accepting professional mentality particularly for African-American architectural students.*

INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS ON MULTI(PL)-PERSONALITIES

Model of Survival

Framework for solution

As far back as 1976, the current crisis had been foreseen and documented by Dr. Arthur Symes in a landmark survey. Because of the unique status of African-American architects -- interacting on several cultural levels almost simultaneously -- he found that in this "twoness" (first documented by W.E.B. DuBois in the seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*) the seeds of an effective integration of left and right personalities were being developed.¹⁵ From his research, including interviews with such noted African-American architects as Louis Fry, Sr. & Jr., Harry Simmons, Melvin Mitchell, J. Max Bond, Harold Mackey and Sir James Robinson, Dr. Symes outlined a more interactive architectural educational direction that would consequently lead to a different mode of practice incorporating both left and right characteristics. The areas he lists as essential interdisciplinary knowledge necessary for a complete architectural personality: *Economics, Sociology, Psychology, Law, Urban/Local Politics, Gerontology, Business and Real Estate*. This type of educational background can serve as a model for the discipline in general, as it is no longer just a theory. It has already passed an essential test -- the test of implementation. All of the afore mentioned architects, sans the late Harry Simmons, Jr., are still in practice today.

As the classic definitions of architecture and practice are shifting, African-American contributions to this emerging definition must be acknowledged as significant, by the general and African-American communities in particular, if they are to have any legitimacy at all. This path suggested by Symes has a very solid historical foundation.

The philosophy of the discipline, and with it society's view of the profession, has undergone a fundamental shift over the past centuries. The now obsolete vision of the architect was initially widely disseminated in the first century A.D. and was firmly entrenched during the Renaissance. The architect, as a rule, was at once a design and structural expert, experienced in the arts (i.e., painter, sculptor, collector) and sciences (i.e., mathematics, etc.) and well read in philosophy, ethics and law.¹⁶ The architect in this time period, is at once cross-disciplinary in knowledge and application and is rewarded by becoming culturally indispensable for this very reason. This architect in this culture is a perfect amalgamation of the current professional and academic positions. Much like Symes' architect.

To regain the position of cultural significance enjoyed until recently by the discipline, I believe calls for the acceptance of both personalities; the left *cross-disciplinary inquiry for the development of an objective knowledge base and the refining of architectural artifacts produced in a context of conflict* of the right. The integration of the left and right must result in significant contributions of philosophies and artifacts to the current and future cultural contextual dialogue. Because society no longer holds the humanities (artist, sculptor, painter) in the highest of its esteem, the disciplines chosen to integrate within an architectural knowledge base must be chosen for their significance to the *study and practice* of architecture as well as its cultural significance.

Architecture must put the establishment of a broader definition of the practice AND the establishment of an cross-disciplinary mode of study and criticism — *focusing on the interrelated issues of Economics, Sociology, Psychology, Law, Urban/Local Politics, Business and Real Estate* — assimilated in the context of an ever expanding base of computer technology and access to information, as the centerpiece of any discussion on the future of architecture as a viable cultural entity.

Because of such, it is ever vital that African-Americans take the discipline's unifying direction a step further as we have always understood that the professional must — and this is critical — make their communities a viable place to practice architecture. As Symes has acutely stated, "*Architecture is not set apart from the environmental and social problems; it is a part of them. There are no 'Architectural Problems' per se*" and one primary objective in educating for the next century should be to allow for the employment of holistic thinking when developing solutions to the built environment, particularly African-American communities, *concurrently* with developing the institutions that will facilitate the implementation of such holistic design solutions.¹⁷ As such, the education of the future architect could be described as becoming less to become more. Less of what the profession is currently defining as "architect" and more of what of what the society/community needs in an architect.

The architectural profession has been carving out smaller and smaller positions in society and it has done so in relative secrecy. Now, as other related cultural concerns have brought this defection to the attention of society, the traditional boundaries of the architect — and with it, architecture — no longer exist and society at large has no idea where the new boundaries have been established. A redefining of these cultural boundaries is long overdue.

SYSTEMS TO FACILITATE A MELDING OF THE MINDS

How this definition is to be established is yet unclear, but significant dialogue must take place between the leading proponents of the aforementioned differing personalities. I would suggest that during this process African-American

architects, students and educators challenge their academic and professional organizations, the Coalition of Black Schools of Architecture (COBAS), the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), and the Organization of Black Designers (OBD), among others, to begin the process of developing a *coordinated objective plan, establishing a dialogue in their respective areas of influence and expertise*. Such organizations, and others with similar common objectives and goals should be uniquely positioned to speak to these issues in a broad context within the discipline, enlisting the cooperation of the AIA and the ACSA in the implementation of a left/right personality. The greatest danger to the success of this objective is allowing it to become a one issue, one segment concern and solution, thereby condemning it to remain in the predominately African-American organizations. It must become part of the larger agenda of the majority counterpart organizations if it is to do the discipline any good and more importantly, it must be a concentrated and coordinated effort.

CONCLUSION

Society has arrived at a point in time where significant cultural investigations are occurring and disciplines are reevaluating and realigning their perspectives, shaping and being shaped by a transforming global society. This reexamination signals the moment that the discipline of architecture should be compelled into a concerted effort to close the real and perceived gap between professional and academic production. It is imperative that one position for the discipline is established that will at once begin to give a clear position for the discipline and legitimize our cultural contribution, and African-Americans must make a concerted effort to be at the forefront of this redefining of the discipline. Franz Fanon said in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth* that “Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it”.¹⁸ Our mission has been identified. Fanon has defined our paths. But there has been little indication of which path the discipline in general, and African-Americans in particular, will choose to follow.

The survival of the discipline hangs in the balance on how this situation is, or isn't, addressed and resolved.

NOTES

- ¹ Emilio Ambatz. *AIA Journal*. (May 1978). David Barret. “Ethical Implications and the Architect”. *Faith & Forum: Journal of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art & Architecture*. (Fall 1993). Vol.XVIII. Cornell West. *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*. Routledge: New York, 1993. p.46. Support for the private personality comes from Ambatz's statement that “Architecture is not the answer to the pragmatic needs of man (that is the task of building), but the reply to his passion and imagination...The architect's task...remains the same: giving poetic form to the pragmatic”.

The public personality is supported by David Barret's rationalization that “[Architects are] first attracted to the profession by a resonance with beauty... [but] In this cynical, dog-eat-dog world, this quality is often devalued to the point that we succumb to this bottom line mentality that sees architecture as a commodity that has value only if the numbers work” and described by Cornell West as — [T]he trap of economic determinism — of reducing the grandeur of precious architecture to the grub of pecuniary avidity”.

- ² Geoffrey Scott. *The Architecture of Humanism*. Doubleday: New York, 1914/1954. p.65
- ³ Construction management, engineering, interior design, and landscape architecture are all professions that can trace their origins back to the architectural discipline.
- ⁴ Donald Watson. “The Notion of Critical Practices: Role for Educators in Continuing Education”. *A Community of Diverse Interests: Proceedings of the 82nd Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate School of Architecture*. Washington, DC: ACSA Press, 1994. As read in this piece. To paraphrase Donald Schon “architects are expected by their clients and constituents to in fact be instrumental to clients purposes, and not reformative of them”, where “reformation” is defined as the ability to include concerns not expressed by the client.
- ⁵ Cornell West. *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*. p.46.
- ⁶ Sharon Sutton. “Architects & Power”. *Progressive Architecture*. May, 1993. p.65.
- ⁷ As support for their contention of subjective architectural inquiry, academics site the traditional development of architectural knowledge in which architectural ideologies are developed by individual architects in the process of producing artifacts. Typically, these philosophies are developed from a personal, internal knowledge base and rarely consists of anything more than a static historiography of architectural knowledge with a subjective internalization of the past used to interpret and react to historical forms, thoughts and artifacts. From this base, philosophies are refined through architectural artifacts produced in a context of conflict; the personal architectural philosophy v. the socio/political and economic cultural constraints. This leads to a myriad of individual, subjectively developed architectural ideologies, all equally valid, with the most significant variable being the number of opportunities to refine such ideologies through the production of architectural artifacts and the amount of personal documentation that is disseminated to the public. At present, subjective criticism and research is presented as justification *expo facto*.. Typically this presentation of architectural ideological justification is done by less than objective means — by the architects themselves — through forms of dissemination that are either controlled by, or dependent on, architecture and the architect for its very existence and legitimacy and render its critical autonomy and credibility questionable, at best, and bankrupt at worst.
- ⁸ Cornell West. p.47.
- ⁹ id.
- ¹⁰ Sherry Aherntzen & Kathryn H. Anthony. “Sex, Stars & Studios: A Look at Gendered Educational Practices”. *Journal of Architectural Education*. 46 (October 1993). Kathryn H. Anthony. *Design Juries on Trial: The Renaissance of the Design Studio*. Van Nostrand Reinhold: New York, 1991. Linda Groat. “Rescuing architecture from the cul-de-sac”. *Journal of Architectural Education*. 45 (May 1992). Julia Robinson is currently doing research documenting perceptions of, and responses to, various spatial archetypes. See “Myth and Architecture”. *Journal of Architectural Education*. 44 (November 1990)., among others. Sharon Sutton. “Architects & Power”. *Progressive Architecture*. (May 1993).

- ¹¹ W.E.B. DuBois. *Crisis*, August 1933. Excerpts from an address to the annual alumni reunion at Fisk University, June 1933. W.E.B. DuBois explains the objective of this particular educational direction so readily embraced by the principle academy for the study of architecture for the majority of African-Americans — the historically Black colleges and university's (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'
For more information on this architectural education process, please refer to: Richard Dozier. Booker T. Washington and his influence on Black Architects. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Michigan. 1989. Also, extensive research has been conducted by Auburn School of Architecture's Head Librarian Vinson McKenzie and Tulane University's architectural historian, Ellen Weiss.
- ¹² Which African-Americans have been successfully combating, through the development of institutions that recognize and reward African-American design excellence — The National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) and the Organization of Black Designers (OBD); journals and books that respect and advance African-American architectural scholarship and design philosophies — Appendix, CITY and David Hughes' *Afrocentric Architecture*, and; African-American architectural historians who are uncovering and documenting past African-American architectural achievement — Vinson McKenzie, Michael Adams, Wesley Henderson, for example.
- ¹³ Arthur Lee Symes. "Architecture and the Black Community: Towards the development of a relevant architectural education". Doctoral dissertation. University of Michigan, 1976.
- ¹⁴ Mark Paul Fredrickson. "Gender & Racial Bias in Design Juries". *Journal of Architectural Education*. 46 (October 1993).
Sherry Aherntzen & Kathryn H. Anthony. "Sex, Stars & Studios: A Look at Gendered Educational Practices". *Journal of Architectural Education*. 46 (October 1993).
- ¹⁵ Symes goes on to say that for African-Americans, this particular paradigm is especially important as it is essential to their very architectural survival:
"[I]t can be concluded that the educational process for future Black architects should include that following three components: a) interdisciplinary knowledge relative to the primary forces that affect the environment of urban Black people; b) prerequisite awareness and sensitivity to Black culture; and c) in-depth knowledge of pressing conditions of the Black community".
- ¹⁶ Donald Watson. "The Notion of Critical Practice".
Watson details Vitruvius first century definition of architecture as: "encompassing *layout of cities, building types, climate, orientation, materials and details, and fundamentals (order, symmetry and proportion), all conceived within the first principles or "conditions of building well" .utilias, firmitas and venustas*".
- ¹⁷ Symes.
- ¹⁸ Franz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. p.206.