

White is a Race Too: A Conceptual Framework for Assessing Minority Inclusion in Architecture

CARLA CORROTO, PhD
Mississippi State University

INTRODUCTION

With the following paper, I present a conceptual framework for discussing cultural diversity in architecture developed from an ongoing in-depth research project on the status of minority populations in US architecture schools. My research questions assess how the inclusion of marginalized groups into the mainstream of architecture schools affects prevalent teaching practices. Turning that question around, I also investigate how prevalent teaching practices affect minority groups. Ultimately, I will argue that the inclusion of diverse peoples in architecture school has not changed the institution in measurable ways and that fact accounts for why there are so few non-dominants in the study and practice of architecture.

An Overview of Minority Categories – Setting the Terminology: To whom exactly, are we referring when we write, “minority” and what do we mean by “marginalized?” Sociologists and demographers classify minority as, “a category of people, distinguished by physical or cultural traits, who are socially disadvantaged.”¹ By using this definition, the opposite of “minority” is “dominant,” not majority. This is an important distinction. Depending upon context, the breadth of the term “minority” has expanded in recent years beyond people with particular racial and ethnic traits to include people with physical disabilities, non-heterosexual identities, and all women.

Sociologists also define “marginal.”² Marginal is the state of being part insider and part outsider to a social group. To understand the margin(s) we must also acknowledge its opposite, “the center.” The center may seem obvious, but it is often invisible to those who inhabit or are privileged by representing the center. People in the center of architecture are considered normative – they reflect the class, race, ethnicity and sex of the categorical heroes of architecture, those we

highlight in history class and prize in design studios. Their cultural values are reflected in how we teach (e.g. competition via individual evaluation) and what we teach (e.g. western architecture.) For those at the center, there is no disconnect between how they live and how they learn or teach architecture.

Dependent upon region of the country, more often than not, when someone in architecture says, “minority” they mean “race.” Moreover, they usually mean African-American. Because of essay length limitations and issues of meaning, with the following discussion I will limit my attention to racial minorities in US architecture schools. Although the dynamics and details vary depending upon category we are considering, with respect to minorities in architecture, my research finds that categorically minorities continue to be marginalized – part inside the culture of architecture, part outside of it. The important question is; what are the social processes and representations that keep especially racial minority populations on the borders of architecture?

Other than at historically Black colleges, in architecture schools the numbers of racial minorities persisting through to graduation continues to be very low. Based upon my qualitative research which remains somewhat anecdotal, the number of minority students entering architecture has increased; they just do not persist through graduation in the degree programs. Most schools have not kept consistent records and the collateral organizations (AIA, AIAA, ACSA, NCARB, and NAAB) have not centralized quantitative data regarding demographics and enrollment. Like the American Institute of Architects (AIA), many universities have instigated “diversity” committees charged with encouraging a more diverse student body and faculty, because at some level they recognize that architecture has not increased its diversity relative to the other professions and certainly not in proportion to the US population. Most often their strategies have taken on “supply side” rhetoric. That is,

they focus on the preparation of minority populations so that they *fit into* architecture schools. But how do we account for what some researchers have labeled the “revolving door” – minorities looking into architecture, even enrolling, and subsequently rejecting the field?¹

I posit that architecture schooling, or the “demand side” must take some responsibility, by way of its existing climate, for the extremely low numbers of minority students. That African-American students and faculty are few and far between has at least as much to do with a marginalizing culture and institutional racism as it does with the simple matter of “choice.” Conceding that administrators and dominants on the faculty have worthy intentions for the inclusion of “diverse” peoples, their good intentions mostly mask and co-opt the very complex social processes that render minorities on the margins (at best.) That racial practices reproducing racial inequality are largely invisible to those who now control architecture schools does not mean that racism is nonexistent.

Conceptualizing Race: Conceptually, the very simple and obvious answer to the question of why racial minorities continue to be marginalized in architecture is racism. Per usual, when a simple response is given to a complex social fact it merely introduces us to the issues.

Because most dominants in architecture believe that they do not hold racist beliefs, understanding how race comes into play in schools, from an individual perspective, is not necessarily constructive. Most diversity task force mandates in architecture view racism as ultimately a psychological occurrence to be examined at the individual level. The research and action that develop from this agenda determine institutional levels of racist beliefs by surveying individual members of the department to determine levels of racism and perhaps administering sensitivity training. This implies that racism is not part of the social structure, but is characteristic of individuals who hold beliefs that are “prejudice.” The analysis and narratives that follow code racist beliefs as ignorant or irrational and therefore they are views of the under-educated. The solution is to teach the racism out of them. Or they label the racist at “sick,” suffering from a psychological malady that must be “cured” through counseling or psycho-pharmaceutically led away.⁴

Further, racism is defined as a behavior that results from a belief.⁵ If there is no racist behavior, then racialized attitudes are not present. With this thought process, racism is a free floating thought noticeable in negative action toward the minority student or faculty member. There are actually some architecture departments in the United States with classes and studios that have no students of color in attendance. Therefore, because there is no one to direct racist actions toward, the psychological perspective would code that social arrangement as free from issues involving race. It is necessary to remember that race is not biologically determined, but socially construct-

ed. Racial categories change as a function of history, politics, and cultural contact.⁶ Instead of speaking of different races, we should speak of racialized groups – groups that our society defines by attaching social significance to particular biological traits, such as skin color.⁷ Given that architecture is part of a society that organizes itself along racialized lines, race comes into play even when a minority individual is not present. White is a race too and in this society it is the normative race. As whites participate in university architecture departments, they are experiencing the results of a racialized system that privileges them, even if there are no Black students present. Probably, especially if there are no Blacks present.

In all racialized social systems the placement of people in racial categories involves some form of hierarchy that produces definite social relations between the races. Whether in deference or confrontation, we each know our “place.” The race placed at the superior level tends to receive greater economic compensation and access to better jobs, occupies a controlling position in the political system, is granted higher social estimation (e.g. is viewed as “smarter” or “better looking”), often has license to draw physical (segregation) as well as social (racial etiquette) boundaries between itself and other races, and receives what Dubois calls a “psychological wage.”⁸ The totality of these racialized social relations and practices constitute the racial structure of a society.

Understanding racism across architecture involves conceptualizing at the institutional level. From that perspective, racism is a combination of prejudice and power that allows the dominant race to institutionalize its control at all levels in educational organizations or professions. The notion of prejudice here is not necessarily open hostility or acknowledged as anti-African-American. It may take the form of privileging dominants’ culture. From this perspective, to uncover contemporary mechanisms and practices that reproduce white advantages involves stressing the social and systemic nature of racism and the structured nature of dominants’ advantages. However, we need a rigorous conceptual framework that allows us to study the operation of racially stratified architecture. We also must recognize that as social relations between the races become institutionalized they form a structure as well as a culture that affects social life, whether individual members of the races want it or not. Good intentions are simply not enough to produce racially inclusive schools of architecture.

Two Examples in Architecture School: When regarding race as an *organizing principle* of social relationships that shapes the identity of individual actors at the micro level, and all spheres of social life at the macro level, we may begin to understand how marginalization occurs.

Studio at the Macro-Level: Architecture schools still embrace centering the studio experience as a focal point of the curriculum. While on paper it may make sense to organize

professional education so that learning is synthesized in such a manner, the reality is quite something else. As we all recognize, the recently debated architecture “studio culture” based on the charette model, encourages if not expects very long hours of toil in studios on campus.⁹ Although I referred to this as studio “culture,” it is more than a set of values, attitudes and beliefs. It is a structural pre-condition for earning an architecture degree that has remained in place despite theoretical changes in architecture or changes in technology, among the myriad of other changes to the economy, society and architecture. “Charetting” has persisted without fluctuation despite research on learning styles, the effects of sleep deprivation, or multicultural diversity.

I submit that the studio, at a macro-level, is one fragment that negates the inclusion of minorities in architecture. For success in architecture, institutions require students to spend extended amounts of time isolated from the larger society, with architecture students. They are separated from their families, their “other” friends, and their communities. For many African-American students, this is tantamount to requiring that they deny their sense of self, their connection to their identity, and often their strength.

Architecture school as an institution reflects the interests of dominants. What segment of our society has no responsibilities outside of personal career advancement? To maintain one’s place in a family or a community takes emotional work and “face time.” We cannot (cell) phone-in our participation. For racial minorities, separating oneself out of what constitutes our identity insures that we cannot succeed in architecture because communities are a necessary means of support and strength. I suggest that we must rethink how studios are organized, planned, and executed, not to eliminate a studio environment but to enhance the environment to include flexibility and our communities.

Studio at the Micro-Level: In completing my research, I found multiple examples of how race organized design studios at the inter-personal level. In one university, as faculty were hand-picking students and placing them in studio classrooms, professors sorted out African-American students. These students were designated to different studios so that there was one Black student per class. At another institution, white faculty expressed their displeasure in witnessing how the African-American students usually sat together at lectures and in studio. They wondered aloud as to why the students self-segregated and formulated plans for their dispersal, relaying that their intentions would “help” white students learn about “others.” No one asked why the white students sat together. The result was to assign seats in lectures and in studio.

Critical race theorists have identified how African American students rely on each other to help translate the dominant’s culture. To many minority students architecture, with its

attendant value structure, is a foreign language. Similar to white students, they choose to associate with students like themselves, friends/colleagues who share their values, beliefs, and ideas and with whom they feel comfortable. Effectively removing everyday means of interpersonal support is yet another process that renders marginal minority populations in architecture. The semester following the seat assignments at that second university, half of the African-American students switched majors.

Another latent affect of dispersing minority students is that they may never organize to take collective action. The racializing influences at institutions are often subtle. Consciousness raising and recognition requires speaking your experience to someone who shares your reality. As we learn from social movements, effective change occurs more often when there are many people organizing for change. Dominants assure their place when there is no one to confront them and otherwise dispute their practices. In effect, prevalent teaching is not challenged and minority voices left unheard. We have not yet experienced what influence minorities could have in architecture.

Some Concluding Remarks: Simply adding minority students and faculty to architecture and stirring does not redress the structural issues of marginalization. Therefore, I believe that diversity campaigns should not celebrate when/if the numbers of racial minorities increase in architecture, without corresponding shifts in the institutions—however those shifts are formulated. It is not a reasonable solution to expect minority students to fit into dominants’ culture and structure without that institution changing, at least somewhat. Unfortunately, very often when changes to the structure are suggested, the response is to represent those suggestions as lessening architecture’s “rigor.” I suggest that deploying the term “rigor” is not a neutral observation, but a very carefully chosen strategy. Encoded in rigor is a long enacted system that reinforces architecture’s dominant values while standing in for a form of systemic racism. Equating making an institution more responsive to diverse ways of knowing with lessening its rigor is a hugely successful campaign for eliminating difference.

The purpose of this paper is to trigger a serious discussion of how race shapes the institution of architecture. Like the elephant in the room no one will discuss, more often than not, we are loath to speak out loud about race in architecture.¹⁰ I surmise that whites are uncomfortable and do not want to unknowingly “offend.” The lack of racial terminology extends to the content of courses as well. Regardless of verbal acknowledgement, race is still organizing the content of classes. If architecture does not speak out loud in its classrooms and studios about race, negative stereotypes will persist for the dominants. Relying on popular cultural images to represent African-Americans is certainly not what critical thinking in higher education is about.

In contrast to earlier eras (e.g. the Jim Crow period) racial practices that reproduce racial inequality in contemporary US architecture schools: (1) are increasingly covert; (2) embedded in normal operations of institutions; (3) avoid direct racial terminology; and (4) are invisible to most whites. Recognizing these issues at the conceptual level will help us redress conditions in architecture so that each student and teacher will truly have an equal participatory experience in education.

NOTES

¹ The term "minority" suggests that these categories of people usually constitute a small proportion of a society's population. But there are exceptions. For example, Black South Africans are a numerical majority in their society, although they are grossly deprived of economic and political power by whites. In the United States, women represent slightly more than half the population but are still struggling to obtain opportunities and privileges enjoyed by white men.

² Robert Park. *The city*. Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, Roderick D. McKenzie (eds): Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1925.

³ Jerry A. Jacobs. "Working under Different Rules" in *Work and Occupations*: 1995, 22, 3, Aug. 353-360.

⁴ For further explanation read: Margaret Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins. *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*. (Gelman NY: Wadsworth, 1995); Peter I. Rose *They and We: Racial and Ethnic Relations in the United States*. 5th edition. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994).

⁵ For further explanation read: Herbert G. Blumer. "Reflections on Theory of Race Relations," in *Race Relations in World Perspective*. A.W. Lind (ed.) (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press 1997); Joseph Whitmeyer. "Why Actors are Integral to Structural Analysis," *Sociology Theory* 12, (1999): 153-165.

⁶ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation." *American Sociological Review*, 62, June (1997): 465-480.

⁷ Joe R. Feagin and Clarence Booher. *Racial and Ethnic Relations*. (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002).

⁸ William E. B. DuBois. *Black Folk. Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race*. (New York: Henry Holt, 1962).

⁹ See the *Studio Culture Task Force* from the AIAS, 2002.

¹⁰ Not every academic has avoided the topic: Please see D.W. Fields. *Architecture in Black*. (London and New Brunswick: The Athlone Press, 2000) and L.N.N. Lokko (ed.) *White Papers, Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2000).