

# Universal Method, Local Design: The JUST CITY Studio at Morgan State University

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## INTRODUCTION

In May 2017, the AIA honored Paul R. Williams with a Gold Medal. At the ceremony, his granddaughter advocated for an architectural education that is more just throughout ethnicity and genders, a call that was stated fourteen years earlier by Melvin Mitchell when he noted that “black America is entering the twenty-first century with a shortage of [...] black [...] architects.” Unfortunately, Mitchell’s question of “what those [...] missing black architects must do toward the furtherance of the cultural and socio-economic agenda of today’s Black America” has still to be fully answered.<sup>1</sup>

Though African Americans made up 13 percent of the total U.S. population, only 2 percent of licensed architects in the U.S. are African American.<sup>2</sup> In 2007, African-American women made up a scant two-tenths of a percent of licensed architects in the U.S., for just 196 practitioners.<sup>3</sup> It is important that “[black] schools ... be at the forefront of establishing the theoretical as well as practical rapprochement between black architects and the Black America they were spawned from [...]”<sup>4</sup> The time to assess of the educational development in black schools has arrived.

In Freire’s *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, education is a form of empowerment that liberates minorities from a standardized system of knowledge. The educator has to tailor the teaching experience through a deep understanding of the students. With this approach the educator can learn about the context the students live in, helping them visualize individual problems, advocating for their awareness and willingness to take a professional, creative and social stand.<sup>5</sup>

This approach is founded on the idea that real education implies a not hierarchical, horizontal relationship between the teacher and students, one that does not pour knowledge from teacher to students. As Freire says, “the teacher is no longer the one who teaches, but one who is taught in dialogue with students [...]. They become responsible for a process in which [everyone] grow.”<sup>6</sup> Developing Freire’s argument, we propose a relationship teacher - students that is circulation of knowledge between the teacher and the students, but also fellow students and communities. Education is carried on globally to prepare the learners to a reality that goes beyond their immediate surrounding.

Following Freire’s pedagogical principles, schools of architecture need to focus on a different approach to education, one that leads to their enfranchisement. Education should reconnect these individuals to the environment they live in while, at the same time, give them the opportunity to move beyond the expected path of architectural education.<sup>7</sup>

The paper presents three sections, each with a theoretical description that frames the pedagogical approach and the critical analysis of the studio. The conclusion lays down the final outcomes and the further development of the research.



Figure 1. MSU: students and faculty working in studio (photo credits: CCM)

## PEDAGOGY OF JUST CITY

We employed the Universal Method and Local Design by structuring the JUST CITY Studio in which we look for strategies, speculate on ideas that create space for citizens' self-development and design buildings that substantially contribute to equitable spaces.

In return, our students gain information on their role as African-American designers within the society, through:

- Component 1- A parallel exploration of two neighborhoods;
- Component 2- An international trip to learn about immigration;
- Component 3- A symposium exploring how redlining and gentrification shaped neighborhoods in Baltimore.<sup>8</sup>

## COMPONENT 1: PEDAGOGY OF CITY IN THE GLOBAL WORLD

Anna Rubbio believes that learning from a global studio is the premise for promoting social awareness among students, a mean to be exposed to different situations that generate "starter questions."<sup>9</sup> These questions allow the student to determine how design can be a tool of social justice. The exposure to an educational different culture also generates what urbanist Detlev Ipsen calls "cultural clusters." These clusters are the condition that occurs when two or more cultures shares the same space, while maintaining their separated identities. The same logic is applied to educational cultures. Our Global City Studio let the students know Rotterdam and its social and spatial condition and develop their own educational culture by learning from their overseas colleagues.<sup>10</sup>

Within the framework of a collaborative Studio between RAvB and MSU, we had explored urban and architectural strategies that are able to give citizens more relevance and influence in the development of their own living environment.<sup>11</sup>

A fundamental item of the curriculum is to have MSU Graduate students traveling to Rotterdam. This exchange occurred in March 2019: during this experience, MSU students visited the project site and entertained meetings with community and authorities. The main effort was to provide a design solution for the Rotterdam neighborhood of Hillesluis: students were tasked with conducting research into new building typologies and investigating how to use renewable energy to achieve social and inclusive urban projects.

Working with RAvB faculty and students was an added value to MSU students: although very similar in the curriculum, the RAvB combines an academic study with practical work experience. Students must work at a design office four days a week in combination with taking classes at the Academy. The knowledge, skills and attitude developed within the Academy can be put directly into use in practice; and vice versa, the professional skills students gain from working in practical situations can be applied within the academic study element of the program.

On the first day, the team visited the project site in Hillesluis, a distressed area, home of many working-class immigrants. The employment rate is low, crime is high, and public services are weak compared to the rest of Rotterdam. The team visited a community services organization which tries to integrate different ethnicities who are self-sufficient and tend to isolate themselves from the rest of the neighborhood and the city.<sup>12</sup>

The site being studied by the MSU students is a long strip of grass with few amenities.<sup>13</sup> It is a rare patch of open public space in the area. Students were challenged to address the various needs of communities surrounding the site.

The main project's question was: what can we design for a community that self-isolate itself from the greater Rotterdam?

On day two, the MSU delegation visited three Dutch-based international offices: MVRDV, GROUPE, and De Urbanisten. The Students learned how the Dutch government and private enterprises approach the design, organization and distribution of affordable housing.

In the afternoon, Nicole van Gils presented Rebel's Social Impact by

Design strategy that facilitates innovative partnerships and new forms of cooperation to make communities more resilient.<sup>14</sup> Here, students participated in a short workshop on how to integrate segregated communities: using the site visit of Day one and the visits of Day two, students were able to compile great ideas catering feasible spatial and social solutions.

On the third day, students visited Amsterdam with RAVB Professor Petersma. He guided students and faculty on a four-hour tour in which they learned about affordable public housing and private property mix strategy, sustainable developments that use the landscape to harvest energy, and collective initiatives of groups hiring architects to design 'co-housing'.<sup>15</sup>

Fundamental conversations were entertained, and students could see links with their own project site in Rotterdam: Dutch long tradition on affordable housing is the starting point to a JUST neighborhood. Students understood that the American approach to "the Project" would have not be the preferred design solution as it does not positively empower its residents.<sup>16</sup>

## COMPONENT 2: PEDAGOGY OF CITY CITY AND THE COMMUNITY

The JUST CITY Studio wants to push the exploration of the problem of urban spatial and social segregation deeper into a pedagogical challenge, one that brings our students in direct contact with a spatially stressful situation.

To fulfill this second goal, JUST CITY Studio will test how to design for and with immigrants in Italy.

Steve Badanes<sup>17</sup>—explains that design-build pedagogy teaches students "the logic and poetics of construction."<sup>18</sup>

Using this pedagogy, a studio can teach materials, methods, political, cultural, and social implications of a project. By adapting this pedagogy within the theoretical framework of Freire, we develop an implementation of design-build in which the community is not only the "client," as traditionally seen in the design/build studio, but it is inserted in the cycle of formation teacher/students/community. Thus, the community of reference teaches students about a societal and spatial problem that, in turn, develops students' awareness of themselves.

On the wave of spatial integration and social awareness, MSU "Global Design in Local Italy," Summer Session 2019 offers students the opportunity to experience the phenomenon of Global Citizenship and brainstorm on how design can create more just spaces and communities.

The elective deals with the understanding of urban realities in Treviso vibrant with immigrants striving to integrate in the native community, in combination with global economy and integration.<sup>19</sup>

In collaboration with a local, non-profit organization, whose mission is to facilitate cultural assimilation, our students designed and built a temporary installation manifesting the necessity of global integration.<sup>20</sup>

This public action represented a point of interchange where people thrived as individuals and families, and in healthy communities.

On five locations, the students and their companion immigrants, staged a variety of group games leading to a final soccer match. During the two hours interaction, people of all paths of life joined the activities. T-shirts, banners and flyer were designed carrying the message: Tutti Giocano (All Play).

To support the course, the following actions were taken:

Urban Design Seminar: Conversation around various site visits casting light on what makes city culture unique and how urban areas respond to social and spatial problems.

Graphics/Representation Workshop: This exercise introduced principles of thinking spatially through location, access, urban resources, and environmental parameters.

Installation: Major activities of the Treviso trip have been to observe, understand and translate the multiple inputs of the place, the community and the parallel reality of the immigrants.



Figure 2. RAvB and MSU working together in studio (photo credits: CCM)

Our first activities were to get a deep understanding of the place. We invited the students to sniff every corner of the city and organized a spontaneous survey on how the locals use the city. Of relevance was how much the city is used as an extension of citizens' living rooms and how diverse, pedestrian friendly, activities take place in public areas.

The second level of the students' observation focused on people: overall very homogeneous, Trevigiani like to keep to themselves and treasure their distance from immigrants.

This was further confirmed during our first meeting with a group of young immigrants who gave us a lesson on perception. There are different ways to look at things: perception of security, of privilege, of not belonging to a place. What does it mean to truly feel at home? Why are the immigrants not welcome?

We are not able to share hence we call for the necessity to brainstorm all together and design better and accessible places.

A friend from OMA<sup>21</sup> once said that "it is the difference that makes us equal": today, we must design exactly for that diversity leading to equity among people and the spaces we share.

During the second week tour of Treviso, students discovered that Treviso has multiple form of immigration for specialized labor coming from rich countries as well as for manual labor from poor countries. However, the word 'migrants' is mainly used to refer to the second category.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of the second week, the group opened a dialog with the immigrants and started processing ideas into designs. Since the get-go, the process has always been human-centered: each

iteration involved the participation of people enthusiastically acting on the space.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, on week three, we reviewed students' ideas and, together with the immigrants, we used our time to figure out how to implement the pop-up in the city by observing what was already in place.

Our last week in Treviso was about post-occupancy: a video of the ex-temporary situation was made. We had the time to observe how that worked in space, what was the locals' response to it, and whether it triggered the conversation on shared cultures and spaces. Our conclusion is that there is already a lot of talk over Global Citizenship and on whether we can move from the concept of it toward a sincere act of oneness. Reality is that, spatial and social integration are difficult concepts: it remains relatively easy to relate to one (similar) culture while, even without any intention of being selective, it take a great deal of tolerance to associate with cultures that are unknown to us.

Global Citizenship Studio is the promotion of human honor and dignity, understanding, amity, co-operation, trustworthiness, compassion and the desire to serve while respecting the diversity of cultures and peoples.

Have we been up for the task? We were always aware time was tight and the project challenging. Yet, we tried and just because we asked ourselves important questions, we know we had succeeded fully.



### COMPONENT 3: PEDAGOGY OF THE JUST CITY

The pedagogy of the JUST CITY exposes the students to their environment learning from its racial urban segregation and social urban inequity. As noted by Gabriel Kroiz<sup>24</sup>:

...throughout the Beginning Design Curriculum of the Undergrad Program at Morgan, [...] students [gain] knowledge from their immediate environment and from an inclusive field of practitioners, thinkers and activist has proven successful. [...] In the upper years, the curriculum shifts towards real design challenges facing Baltimore, Seminars in African Americans and The Built Environment, Events like Architecture of the HBCU's Conference and Conversations on Race and Equity in Design as well as a Professional Development curriculum geared towards internships and advanced education that continue to prepare a multicultural cohort to pursue their careers in a multicultural world."<sup>25</sup>

We developed this research by opening the curriculum to a broader audience: the city residents and the students from Rotterdam. The symposium became an open laboratory where MSU students could learn about themselves and their city by other's opinions and point of views.

Component 3 consists on a one-day symposium on Redline in American Cities. It saw the participation of students from Morgan and from Rotterdam and offered a past to present journey of the transformation of place, race, and class in urban America.<sup>26</sup>

We explored how redlining and other policies, practices, and investments had created systemic disparities and inequalities that not only perpetuate our most pressing social challenges but impede the full potential of democracy to-date.

The activity was laid out in four parts, all of which worked in conjunction to provide a context for the history and legacy of redlining: lectures, panel of experts, exhibition "Undesign the Redline" and brainstorm of ideas about it, and discussions.

The impact of the symposium reached out academics as well as students from Baltimore and from Rotterdam, providing the circular education that we developed from the Freire approach to teaching. A symposium testimonial from Lori L. Rubeling, Professor of Art and Design, Stevenson University, states:

"The City of Baltimore governance is a too-perfect example of just what happens to the 'other' whose citizenship is 'less-than.' [...] In Baltimore] institutionalized racism and bigotry are sustained by the city's 1908 residential segregation laws. The April 18th Baltimore Redlining Symposium offers us an opportunity to be a witness to redlining and gentrification injustice and inspires us to frame citizenship in new and inspiring ways to help us realize the ideal that all citizens are created equal."<sup>27</sup>

Students got also inspired by the symposium and acquired a genuine sense of hope in the future practice of design. As future professional designers, they want to create spaces that promote a just society, and while there are many resources out there on the subject, the symposium provided "a safe space to have candid, non-judgmental conversations among people coming from the side of good will."<sup>28</sup> As Naomi Wong Hemme stated "[We all] hope SA+P [MSU] continues to lead this type of symposiums, and perhaps

organizes sessions that dove into how designers and planners can create just communities or help remedy systematic injustice-from access to healthcare, healthful food options, to social connections."<sup>29</sup>

Rotterdam students provided another significant insight, from a European standpoint. For them, the knowledge of the city was built around concepts such as improvement leading to progress and community's improvement. Concepts like gentrification were incomprehensible to most of them. However, their view provided a different interpretation of gentrification, one that implies that any urban transformation is a positive, community-oriented evolution, a strategic plan to improve all lives.

Urban redlining is a concept most of us only learned of during this symposium: before that the knowledge of the city was built around concepts such as renewal leading to progress and community's improvement. Concepts like gentrification were incomprehensible to most of us.

Once in Baltimore, the reality of different urban structures that are driven by financial and racial circumstances dawned on us and got us curious. How were we unaware of such a significant concept and, most importantly, such a massive driver of urban design? Is there a "White L" and "Black Butterfly" in Baltimore?<sup>30</sup> Today, we believe cities evolve following a financial logic, and now, the structural organization of cities is still influenced by racial circumstances that are so challenging to resolve. Now we believe that designers should challenge by providing a different perspective on how to design cities for people.

It is important that this conversation is entertained in an academic setting: this is where the new generation of designers is forged. This is where we can train them on the concept that justice is possible not as an option but as the only way to move forward.



Figure 3. MSU working together in Treviso (photo credits: CCM)



Figure 4. MSU tagging T-Shirts in Treviso (photo credits: CCM)

## CONCLUSION

Morgan's Mission describes the goal to serve "the community, region, state, nation, and the world."<sup>31</sup> The JUST CITY Studio aligns with all five goals.

Around the world, cities are challenged by waves of immigrations. Designers need to find tools to improve the quality of urbanism, to empower communities, and to foster inclusivity.

By disclosing this global reality to our students, we hope to shape a generation of American designers of diverse backgrounds who, together with decision-makers, will be able to address the needs of Americans everywhere, along with others around the world.

Kroiz points out that Hampton University pedagogy is oriented toward the aspiring black architect:

...In the tradition of the HBCU, our program explores questions of identity in design as well as other cultural, social, and technical issues in architecture. We provide the educational framework for the emerging leadership roles of the African American architect in the profession and in society.<sup>32</sup>

Embracing the same transparency of Kroiz, JUST CITY studio wants to be a manifesto of a new pedagogy that supports and facilitates both Freire and Morgan's principles. By using globalization as a source of cultural exposures, students acquire different perspectives and approaches to the problem of social justice in the city. In order to achieve this goal it is necessary to include in the learning experience students from different contexts and with communities affected by social and spatial injustice.

Specifically, JUST CITY look for:

**Cooperation:** provide students with global education and exchange worldwide to prepare Americans for a global environment and attract future leaders from abroad to study, learn, and exchange experiences.

**Unity:** constructive contact between our students and students/communities of foreign origin. Especially among the program's African American students, the experience of international travel is a significant step towards joining the professional world. In the discipline of architecture, knowledge of other cultures is the basis for both intellectual development and development of technical expertise.

**Organization:** establish contact with other institutions places Morgan in the vanguard of American universities, for whom international engagement is too often superficial or one-sided. This 3-Components Studio promises to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between various organizations, cities, and societies for which design of the built environment is so critical.

**Cultural synthesis:** will be served by introducing Morgan's students to the exciting historical and artistic realities. The intention is that the inspirational cultural environment all around will spark Morgan students' imaginations and cultivate in them new conceptual models for application to their own communities, in Baltimore, in Maryland, and throughout the United States.

Within the Universal Method, Local Design approach our team ought to support, maintain and develop international exchanges, professional symposiums on just and equitable design for communities and seek direct results via temporary Pop-Up

Intervention through multi-disciplinary partnerships. Our work with students is a commitment to active participation to generate more sustainable and equitable infrastructure for cities.





Figure 5. MSU at Tutti Giocano Event in Treviso (photo credits: CCM)



Figure 6. Undesign the Redline (Photo Credit: CCM)



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&\* '\h'hdg.## k k "h'ci h' VY'Vt'a #k UHW]3 1; f+] 'd[ LCA "

&+ 'Gna d'cg]i a 'hYgh]a cb]U'Z'ca '@cf]'@Fi VY' ]b[ 'ZDfcZYggcf'cZ5f'h'UbX' 8Yg] [ bZ'GhY' Ybg'cb1 b]j Yfg]hm"

&, 'Dcgh'Gna d'cg]i a 'hYgh]a cb]U'Z'ca 'B'Uca ]K'cb[ ' <Ya a Yz'7'UbX]X'UhYzA UghYf'cZ5fW]hYVh' fY'UhA cf[ Ub'GHUHY' 1 b]j Yfg]hm"

&- 'Dcgh'Gna d'cg]i a 'hYgh]a cb]U'Z'ca 'B'Uca ]K'cb[ ' <Ya a Y' hYgh]a cb]U""



Figure 7. MSU at Tutti Giocano Event in Treviso (Photo Credit: CCM)

30 Professor Lawrence Brown.

31 "Mission," Morgan State University, accessed June 8, 2019, [https://www.morgan.edu/about/mission\\_and\\_vision.html](https://www.morgan.edu/about/mission_and_vision.html).

32 "Department of Architecture homepage," Hampton University, accessed June 8, 2019, <http://set.hamptonu.edu/architecture>.



Figure 8. MSU at Tutti Giocano Event in Treviso (Photo Credit: CCM)

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