

NETWORKING DIVERSITY

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Architects analyze, imagine, design, and preserve the spaces where we live, work, and commune. Recognizing the immense responsibility and influence over the built environment that architects possess, educator Booker T. Washington advocated for the post-Emancipation generation of African American citizens that erecting walls and designing new buildings would provide an invaluable hands-on curriculum. If students could build a new school, he reasoned, then its graduates would be prepared to build and lead a new America, one free from racial segregation, inequality and injustice. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, begun in 1881, would educate the first African American architects in the United States. Among its early graduates are the prolific New York City architect Vertner Tandy and William Sidney Pittman architect of the Negro Building at the Jamestown Exposition in 1907. At the turn of the century, the first professionally trained black architect, Robert Robinson Taylor, a graduate of MIT, would come to Tuskegee Institute to serve as director of "mechanical industries" program. He designed several prominent buildings on the picturesque Alabama campus. For decades Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have educated an extraordinary cadre of black architects who have given graceful contours to the civic and cultural spheres of Harlem, Chicago, Washington DC and cities and towns around the world.

Today communities where many African Americans live must contend with environmental degradation, imprudent redevelopment, and loss of cultural heritage. In response to these urgent matters and in the spirit of Washington, it is vital we educate architects who can thoughtfully respond to these needs and diverse constituencies. To accomplish this goal, the education of young architects requires a multifaceted curriculum that hones design skills, technological proficiency, and comprehension of history and culture. In the education of the architect this training coalesces in the core course of design studio in which students work intensely with one or more faculty on a multi-faceted design proposal. The Design Leadership Project uses this innovative learning environment to bring together educators and architects with African

American students of architecture and design attending HBCUs.

Educational experts estimate that the seven architecture programs located at HBCUs teach 45-55% of African American students matriculating in the United States (some place the numbers considerably higher.) The remaining percentage of African American students study at what the report, *African American Architects and Their Education*, characterizes as "majority" institutions. Majority institutions are also where most of the African American faculty in design are concentrated. As architect Melvin L. Mitchell characterizes the situation at HBCUs in his book, *The Crisis of the African American Architect* (2003), while their legacy is extraordinary and their creative spirit endures, the HBCU architecture programs are in a state of "crisis" due to devastating budgetary cuts, loss of program autonomy, and frequent changes in leadership. The Design Leadership Project seeks to forge new productive connections between these various groups and institutions.

The Design Leadership Project, supported by Dean Mark Wigley and the Office of the Vice Provost for Diversity Initiatives at Columbia University, opens new networks for the exchange of academic and professional knowledge between the campuses of these important African American educational institutions and other architecture programs around the country. Under the guidance of administrators at the HBCUs and with the participation of other universities, the Design Leadership Project brings faculty to HBCU programs each semester to give lectures, teach short-term charrettes and longer term participation in design studios. Teaching in collaboration with HBCU professors, visiting faculty explore new pedagogical approaches to architectural design and analysis and tackle pertinent issues of urban development, environmental change, technological innovation, and socio-cultural analysis.

For the pilot DLP studio in the fall of 2009 we worked closely with Dr. Richard Dozier, head of the department of Architecture at Tuskegee University. Mario Gooden from Yale University (now at the GSAPP) joined Tuskegee faculty

Rod Fluker for a four week period to work with a spirited fifth year studio. The students experimented with video as a medium to analyze the hidden histories in and around the historic town and campus of Tuskegee. Their research uncovered overgrown air fields important to the training of region's world famous Tuskegee Airmen and located the facilities used for the infamous medical experiments on poor local sharecroppers. These investigations initiated a series of architectural studies for a new hotel and visitor center adjacent to the newly opened Tuskegee Airmen Museum. I joined other review critics, Nat Belcher, associate professor from Florida International University and Derek Ham assistant professor from Florida A&M, to review the student's work. While visiting and touring the campus, which includes a chapel by Paul Rudolph, we gave presentations to faculty and students on how our education impacted on our professional and academic work. The following semester, Prof. Fluker and his colleague Kwesi Daniels joined us for final reviews at the GSAPP. This fall Assistant professor Yolande Daniels will be giving a lecture about the work of her practice studioSUMO at Howard University's Department of Architecture. And we are currently working with Hampton University and University of Virginia to initiate an exchange between their two programs. We plan to work with all seven programs and are seeking educational, professional and financial partners from around the country.

The Design Leadership Project's primary aim is to build beneficial connections that fortify and expand the contributions of these important and vital institutions (their students and faculty) to architectural education and the profession. While the DLP will begin with exchanges between architectural design programs, the scope of the project could be expanded to include faculty and students from the disciplines of planning, preservation, real estate development, history and theory, and landscape architecture. This important project creates greater opportunities for promising African American students in architecture and design so that they may become the future leaders in the field.