BLURRING BOUNDARIES: BORROWING DIVERSITY

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When describing the exceptionally diverse environment at CUNY-New York City College of Technology, I am often reminded of its difference in comparison with the typical architectural school in the United States. Our student body in the School of Technology and Design is defined by its stark contrast to the traditional North American demographic. Comprised primarily of foreign-born or first generation students representing 100 nations and speaking 60 foreign languages, claiming that the world comes together at CityTech is hardly an exaggeration. This unique environment creates and sustains a globally-engaged learning environment. The institution has ranked consistently first in student diversity among all comprehensive colleges by *U.S. News and World Report* and near the top of all colleges in the United States in its number of African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic students enrolled in architectural and engineering technologies. The privilege of working at CityTech is linked to its contact with both New York and the broader world.

Due to its unique circumstances, this cultural context deepens understanding of the term diversity beyond merely racial boundaries. As a thoroughly heterogeneous community, the Department of Architectural Technology is perhaps more relevant as an incubator of variance at all points of contact including cultural, religious, ethnic, socio-economic, gender, and sexual orientation. If architecture is a reflection of identity, then establishing similar frameworks that allow radically different perspectives to co-exist, convene, collaborate, and create remains essential in our increasingly globalized world. Although CityTech students are exceptionally diverse, they lack basic connectivity to the North American experience, as well as an ability to comfortably relate to and engage with a more traditional demographic in architecture. So this notion of diversity becomes a completely different challenge for us.

Borrowing.

In Fall 2009, an opportunity to work with the University of Tennessee College of Architecture and Design arose. My colleagues Insook Choi, Mary-Jo Schlachter, and I invited UTK faculty member, Ryann Aoukar, to join our New York-based endeavor entitled ContextLAB. As a collaborative effort between CityTech's departments of architectural and entertainment technologies and UTK's interior design studio, students of architecture, interior design, and emerging technologies engaged in contextual re-interpretation of Manhattan's Lower East Side while imagining spatial implications on social interaction, commercial activity, and built form. Our collaboration initially produced an on-line and later in-person network of geographically-, racially-, and culturally-diverse students and faculty engaged in sharing information toward visualization of an equally diverse neighborhood's future. Architecture students in New York and interior design students in Tennessee employed two interconnected means--classic literature and films-derived-from-classic-literature as initial research inputs for spatial investigation. Students of emerging technologies simultaneously developed a virtual Lower East Side environment using advanced robotic infrastructure, video manipulations, and physical architectural materials. Their effort was ultimately realized as an interactive installation that embedded cultural site-specificity, varied perspectives, and emergent visualization technology into a thoroughly transformed architectural site model.

By mid-semester, students from the University of Tennessee and CUNY convened at New York City College of Technology for our collaborative mid-project review. One of our common charges for the project entailed mapping various cultural, commercial, material, and behavioral patterns in the neighborhood. At this point, a discernable divergence arose. Diverse perspectives of CUNY students offered a thoughtful window on dislocation and fragmentation inherent to the immigrant experience in America. With their feet planted in two worlds, CUNY students approached their analysis with a sensitivity atypically found at the undergraduate level. Their own perceptions of cultural ambiguity, layering, and change over time demonstrated intrinsic connectivity to similar patterns specific to the Lower East Side. In essence, CUNY students were analyzing those urban processes, shifts, and challenges impacting the assimilation of their own communities into the North American demographic fabric.

In contrast, lessons learned from our guests from UTK were many, particularly a clearer understanding of how mainstream American society relates to its own dense urban landscapes. In most of America, environments like the Lower East Side are considered exciting, edgy, and eclectic--places where escapist fantasies may be experienced in real time. Impressions of our Tennessee collaborators allowed CUNY students to gain better understanding of this distinctly American point of view—one that is primarily middle class and suburban. UTK's perceptions of our city provided a detached yet compelling counterpoint to the dialogue. In turn, *Brooklyn* introduced *Tennessee* to the real world issues at play on the Lower East Side, compelling each to readjust some of their own preconceived biases after our meeting.

Perhaps one of the most compelling emergences was the manner in which CUNY and UTK identified common 'moments' in their initial classic literature and film analyses. Serendipitously, CUNY students identified literary moments that were nearly identical to those film-based moments selected by students in Tennessee. This convergence underscored the universality of many of our sensibilities, while breaking down geographic, regional, and ethnic divides.

Blurring.

As a laboratory for cultural interchange, ContextLAB amplified discussion of the inter-relationship of marginalized urban ethnic space and the forces of advancing gentrification. It sought to energize a network of academics and students to think critically across the design disciplines by enabling discussion between two very different cities, three distinct communities, and four allied practices. In essence, our schools *borrowed* diversity by design. In doing so, we opened

up a stimulating conversation that realistically speaking would never have been otherwise possible.

In reflection, the contrasting demographic conditions that exist at our schools illustrate established regional immigration patterns that have shaped the specificity and uniqueness of each place. These experiences will perhaps never realistically inform daily life in either city or institution. Divergences including urban/suburban, foreign/native, ethnic/white, North/South, and coastal/mid-continental were obvious and valued. Yet new connectivity, enhanced by advanced technology, social networking, and face-to-face friendships allowed us to transcend boundaries that are in fact very real in American society, architectural practice, and the academy. By attempting to blur these boundaries, together we created a temporal shared space that allowed us to briefly imagine a future world where such limitations cease to exist.