

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



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Space (Un)veiled: *Techne* as a Means of Manifesting Invisible Cultures in the Beginning Design Studio

Architectural discourse of the past decade reflects a growing inclusion of issues related to minority groups. The historical invisibility of these groups, socially as well as in the studio curriculum, is the source of a number of articles and books calling for new studio pedagogies acknowledging these groups' contributions to the built environment.

However, in spite of this call the architectural legacy of African-Americans and other ethnic minorities remains absent from the design studio. While this legacy occasionally occurs in specialized courses relating to ethnography, material culture and race and architecture, it remains unexamined in the studio context. This is striking given the significant influence that Black and other minority creators have exerted in creative fields such as music and dance.

This paper proposes a curriculum for beginning design studios which attacks the problem of cultural invisibility. The curriculum centers on *techne* — artisanship as a mode of revealing. Studio projects will be presented which explore *techne* as found in the material culture of African-Americans: the vernacular landscape, the Black renaissances in the fine arts, and the roots of Black culture emanating from the African Diaspora. The Eurocentric aesthetic of *concealing* gives way to a multicentric mode of *revealing*.

abstract

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paper

Introduction

“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”¹ This line from Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* speaks for every marginalized person in America who has felt the majority gaze pass through them. Members of invisible cultures – ethnic minorities, females, gays and lesbians, the impoverished – inhabit a built environment which, for the most part, expresses the values of a mainstream which excludes them. A number of eminent architectural educators have written articles about invisibility calling for new studio pedagogies which acknowledge these groups’ contributions to the built environment.

However, in spite of this call the architectural legacy of these cultures remains invisible in the design studio. While this legacy occasionally occurs in specialized courses relating to ethnography, material culture and race and architecture, it remains relatively unexamined in the studio context. This is striking given the significant influence that minority creators have exerted in other creative fields such as art, music and dance.

This paper contains a curriculum for beginning design studios which attacks the problem of cultural invisibility. The curriculum centers on *techne* — artisanship as a mode of revealing. Studio projects will be presented which explore *techne* as found in the material culture of African-Americans: the vernacular landscape, the Black renaissances in the fine arts, and the roots of Black culture emanating from the African Diaspora. It will be shown that, within the right studio environment, the Eurocentric aesthetic of *concealing* gives way to a multicentric mode of *revealing*.

Promoting Visibility in the Design Studio

Invisibility plagues today’s architectural design studio despite attempts to eradicate it. Educator Brad Grant, in 1991, wrote one of the first articles on the problem of invisibility in architectural education. He stated, “Architectural education is influenced and directed by a Eurocentric cultural canon, used to facilitate conformity to Western political ideas and social and economic practice. Accordingly, many other social experiences and cultural expressions remain invisible — simply because people are not allowed to see.”² Other articles followed on invisibility and diversity in architectural education. The authors of these articles offer a number of types of studio activities designed to combat invisibility.³

Three kinds of activities are frequently mentioned in this literature: 1) precedent studies of built environments associated with invisible cultures, 2) ethnographic field studies which immerse students in behavior settings associated with invisible cultures, and 3) culturally responsive design projects.

Precedent studies which are culturally focused uncover aesthetic canons outside of prevailing theory. Students learn that marginalized cultures influence mainstream architecture in ways that are often unacknowledged. They learn that the aesthetic codes of these groups often contradict the Western canon, opening up new avenues of design exploration. Students come to understand how the Western canon links architectural aesthetics with hegemonic practices.⁴

Ethnographic field research also uncovers invisibility in the built environment. When students visit behavior settings associated with invisible cultures they are more likely to empathize with the members of those cultures. The students see the contradictions between the aesthetics of the subculture and the aesthetics of the Eurocentric canon. By experiencing “shared otherness,” the students understand a cultural world different from theirs.⁵

When students design culturally responsive places they engage aesthetic canons outside of mainstream theory. They apply the knowledge obtained from precedent research and ethnographic research. The students acquire the cultural sensitivity necessary in an increasingly multicultural world.

Techne in the Design Studio

The term *techne* originated in ancient Greece and is associated both with making art and making useful objects. As interpreted by philosopher Martin Heidegger, the essence of *techne* is that “something concealed comes into unconcealment.”⁶ Heidegger states that premodern architecture — as brought forth by *techne* — reveals the relationship between human beings, nature, and the sacred. Heidegger illustrates this in his description of a Greek temple:

“Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple’s firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air.”⁷

The temple manifests the phenomena of nature – storm, sunlight, sky and night – through its materiality and tectonics.

According to Heidegger, objects made by *techne* – such as the buildings and other material objects produced premodern cultures – have “four causes” to which they are indebted: material, form, use and maker. Design students can explore these causes in their studio projects.⁸

The materials of which a building is made reveal themselves by being directly experienced in a particular setting and moment. Premodern builders make construction materials by extracting indigenous raw materials from nature which they work by hand into usable form. These materials abide through the life of the building, transforming due to weather and wear. These traditional materials offer a rich sensual experience of mottled colorations and variegated textures which manifest the natural history of that

particular material in its particular place of origin. They reveal the phenomena of nature which are “first brought to light” by the materials. In the studio, students can explore this potential of materials to un-conceal. They can learn about materiality by, in addition to investigating architectural materials, reflectively and critically examine the materials and tools they use in their own studio work: drawing and modeling media.

Architectural form, the second cause of *techne*, reveals the “materiality of materials.” Form establishes a building’s character: how it touches the earth and rises to the sky, how it receives sunlight; and how its materials are joined. ⁹ Form is, according to Heidegger, indebted to material. In the temple, “The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak.” ¹⁰ Students can explore how form – as presented in the working and assembling of materials — reveals the nature of the materials.

According to Heidegger, architecture consecrates its use, the third cause of *techne*, when it evokes *dwelling*: “To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving.*” ¹¹ Architecture brings forth dwelling by “sparing and preserving” nature, community and human identity. In the studio, students can explore how dwelling informs the marriage of material and form, anointing the work of architecture.

The fourth and final cause of *techne* is the maker. The premodern builder engages materials meaningfully. During building “the corporeal body acts as a sensuous and thoughtful conduit linking the physical sensations of materially grounded activities with their social constitution [producing] awareness, understanding, knowledge, and material products.” ¹² According to Heidegger, dwelling proceeds building – the builder approaches the task in a spirit of “sparing and preserving.” Students can explore the role of maker on two levels: making architecture, and making presentation materials such as drawings and models.

Proposed Studio Curriculum

Techne as means of investigating cultural invisibility was introduced as the central theme of the first and second year design studios at Tuskegee University’s Department of Architecture in the spring of 2004. Eminent educator Booker T. Washington founded the Department 1893. The original campus buildings of this historically Black university embody a legacy of *techne* from its founding years when students made brick and constructed many buildings. *Techne* also appears in the work of another notable Tuskegee professor, George Washington Carver, who folded aesthetics into science, producing prescient work in agricultural sustainability. ¹³

Techne, by its very nature, uncovers and resists invisibility of all kinds, including cultural invisibility. When students consider *techne* as an aspect of culturally responsive design, learning is enhanced. Students combine the study of architectural precedents associated with invisible cultures with analyses of the types of dwelling that occurs in those cultures. This is especially relevant given the history of Diaspora associated with many marginalized ethnic groups. *Techne*-based ethnographies provide students with the opportunity to experience the materiality of invisible building technologies. Culturally responsive design becomes an act of placemaking – its objective to evoke the particular style of dwelling experience associated with the subculture which will use the building. Just as the architectural aesthetics of marginalized cultures falls outside of prevailing theory, the definition of “dwelling” for these cultures differs with the Eurocentric interpretation used by Heidegger and imported into architectural theory.

These studio activities center on a single question: How can dwelling for invisible cultures be achieved in the modern Western world? This query is part of a larger question facing architects today: Are dwelling and modernity compatible? Dwelling, as defined by Heidegger and the philosopher’s followers such as Norberg-Schulz, is only achieved through *techne* as premodern artisanship. This narrow interpretation forecloses any practical application of *techne* today. The curriculum proposed here calls for a broader, more complex definition of *techne*. It is based on the belief that new forms of *techne*, compatible with modernity, are possible. The key aspects of *techne*: its emphasis on materiality, its connection with dwelling, and, most importantly, its essence as a revealing, can be applied to a transformative critique of architectural modernity. The curriculum proposed here attempts to create platform from which students investigate new, more inclusive forms of dwelling and *techne*

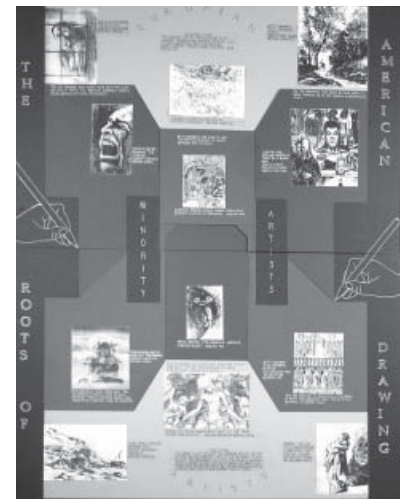


Figure 1: Tiffany Anderson: Comparative Studies Board.



Figure 2: Alana Hosey:

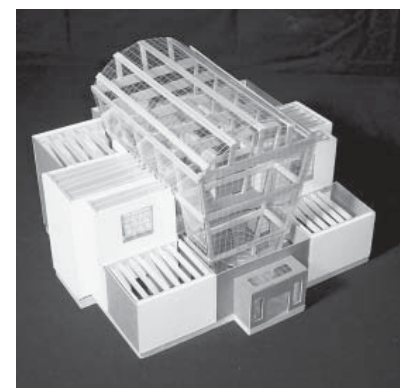


Figure 3: Ralph Gordon: Model.

The primary learning goal is for the students to be able to use *techne* as a basis for designing culturally responsive places. The learning objectives which must be met by the students in order to reach this goal are:

1. To understand the terms *techne*, invisibility, dwelling, and place
2. To understanding the Eurocentric male bias of the Western architectural canon: canonic buildings, theoretical treatises and educational methods
3. To understand of the four causes of *techne*
4. To be able to make empathetic ethnographies of behavior settings associated with invisible cultures
6. To be able to make precedent studies focusing on built environments associated with invisible cultures as works of *techne*

First Year Studio Curriculum and Projects

The first year studio curriculum emphasizes the *techne* of representational objects – the drawings and models which represent existing, imaginary or proposed works of architecture. The intentional objects of studio investigations are the artifacts directly made by students investigating the idea of dwelling. Materiality and tectonics are emphasized in relation to these arti-factual objects, as modes of revealing. This *techne of representation* manifests invisible cultures.

Project: “The Roots of American Drawing”

In the project entitled “The Roots of American Drawing,” the primary learning objective is for the students to understand how forms of representation such as drawing – as *techne* – can reveal truths about the contributions of minority ethnic cultures to American drawing.

The project was designed to expose the students to the ethnic diversity behind the history of American drawing. Defining ethnicity as “the shared cultural patterns that unite one group and distinguish it from others in the larger society...an expression of common experience based on race, nation, language or religion, or more often some combination of these,” the students’ charge was to make comparative studies between drawings by visible (Euro-American) artists and drawings by invisible (non-Euro-American) artists.¹⁴ (See Figure 1.)

Over the duration of the four week project the students also engaged in 10 hours a week of drawing exercises (drawing from observation) inside and outside of class. During these exercises the students practiced the techniques observed in the studies.

The projects that were the most successful in meeting the learning objectives showed a good analysis of the drawings and the role of ethnic identity in the making of drawings. However, most of the students limited their focus to the role of subject matter in the analysis of ethnic influence. The roles of technique and media were given scant attention.

The project itself, as a learning vehicle, was successful in introducing the students to the notion of invisibility by researching unrecognized works of drawing by minority artists. In future applications of this project a stronger connection will be made between the study of the techniques used by the invisible artists – as influenced by social context – and the application of technique in the students’ drawing exercises. This would allow the students to delve more deeply into issues relating to identity and creative expression.

Project: “The House Personified: Architectural Tropes in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”

In the project entitled “The House Personified: Architectural Tropes in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” the primary learning objective is for the students to understand how architecture, as it occurs in the literary imagination, can uncover invisible truths about the oppression of minorities.¹⁵

The students selected passages from Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* and made a series of drawings and an assemblage which interpreted the passages. Prior to this, the students researched African-American domestic architecture from the mid 19th Century time period in which the novel takes place. The students made drawings from archival photos of African-American wood-frame vernacular houses and made field sketches of houses in a historically black neighborhood near the Tuskegee campus, the *Greenwood* subdivision. (See Figure 2.)

The better student projects reflected thoughtful analyses of how Morrison used literary technique to imaginatively recreate a void in the historical record, the lifeworld of female slaves in America. However, some of the drawings and assemblages were less successful in communicating invisibility than the written explanations and tended to be disjointed from the accompanying text.

The project itself, as a learning vehicle, successfully exposed the students to how works of literature can use the poetic imagination to illuminate truths about oppressed cultures. In future applications of the project more time will be spent teaching the students how to make express their ideas in drawings and assemblages. This will be linked with their drawing exercises.

Second Year Studio Curriculum and Projects

The second year studio curriculum focuses on the *techne* of architectural objects, the built environment itself. The intentional objects of studio investigations are *places* – existing and proposed – as sites of dwelling. The roles of materiality and tectonics are emphasized as modes of revealing. This *techne of architecture* thus becomes a means of manifesting invisible cultures. The projects designed for the second year studios focus on using *design* as a form of *techne* to resist invisibility.

Project: “The Museum of African-American Art”

In the project entitled “The Museum of African-American Art,” the primary learning objective is for the students to be able to use the design process to uncover the contributions made to American art by the artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

The students designed a small museum housing a collection of artworks by African and African-American artists. They developed the building’s form, particularly its structural system, to express truths about African-American experience. Prior to designing, the students researched the Harlem Renaissance, focusing on painting, drawing and print-making.

The students began the project by researching the Harlem Renaissance and presenting their analyses in a presentation board and a paper. Next, the students selected two-dimensional works of art by members of the Harlem Renaissance and processed the images into architectural *partis*. The *partis* were developed through a systems design process focusing on the integration of space, enclosure and structure. The students made final presentations boards and a model. While the students were in the early stage of design, the class met in the worship space of the Tuskegee Chapel designed by Paul Rudolph. This space, which has towering brick walls bathed by sunlight entering through clerestory windows, embodies the idea of *techne*. Following a brief lecture on John Ruskin’s writings on the honest use of materials, the students reflected on the meanings of the Harlem Renaissance and developed concepts for expressing these meanings through materiality. (See Figure 3 and 4.)

The project generated several spirited group discussions. The better projects show a depth of thought concerning the meaning of the Harlem Renaissance which was successfully translated into space and form. However, some projects were based on shallow concepts and simplistic interpretations of the artworks analyzed. Many of the *partis* resorted to formalism without any real analysis of the Harlem renaissance as a social context.

As a learning vehicle the project engaged the students’ interest in the problem of invisibility. It also led to an understanding of the expressive power of architectural form. In the future, the social context of the Harlem Renaissance, and how it affected the art work, will be emphasized more strongly.

Project: “Sethe’s Hut”

In the project entitled “Sethe’s Hut,” the primary learning objective is for the students to be able to use the design of a diminutive building to explore issues of invisibility connected with an icon from the theory of architecture — “the primitive hut.”

The project “Sethe’s Hut” was designed to introduce the students to issues of invisibility at the scale of the detail. The students designed free-standing open-air pavilions made of local natural materials. Pre-design analyses were made of human scale and African-American vernacular architecture.

The students began by researching African-American and African vernacular buildings with a focus on tectonics – the material units and the details for joining materials. The students presented their findings to the class for discussion. The studio took a sketching trip to a group of early 20th Century Tuskegee Institute agricultural buildings.

As a preliminary exercise the students, working in pairs, drew measured elevation drawings of their partner’s body. The drawings were used to study human scale while making conceptual collages of the front of their “hut”. For their final presentation the students constructed large-scale models of their final design. (See Figures 5-8.)

The students were strongly engaged by this project. The better student projects reflect a clear formal relationship with native African and vernacular traditions while avoiding the temptation to resort to the picturesque. Less successful were the human figure drawings. Also, the collage phase produced trite picturesque images which were dropped during the development phase.

As a learning vehicle, “Sethe’s Hut” was extremely successful in getting the students excited about tectonic expression and in investigating African-American vernacular architecture. Future applications of the project will place more emphasis on the invisible meanings hidden in the notion of “primitive hut.” Also, more structure will be provided on the vernacular architecture studies – especially the idea of *techne* as embodied in the materials and tectonics of the case studies.

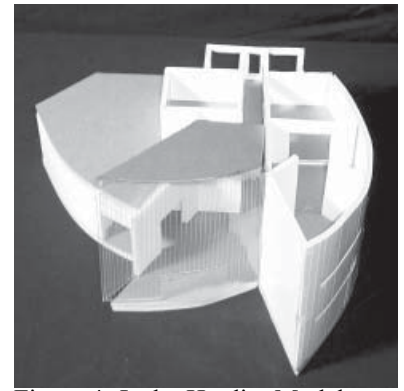


Figure 4: Japho Hardin: Model.

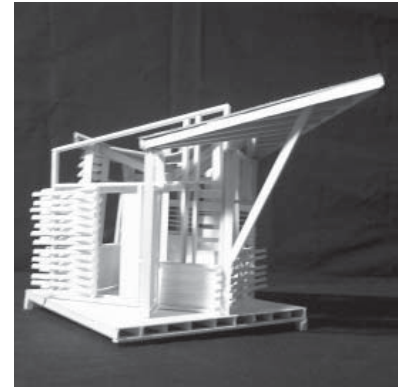


Figure 5: Eric Barnes: Model.

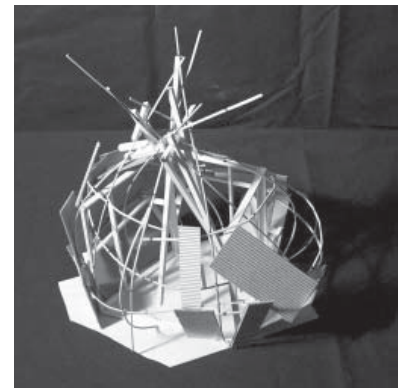


Figure 6: Eric Barnes: Model.

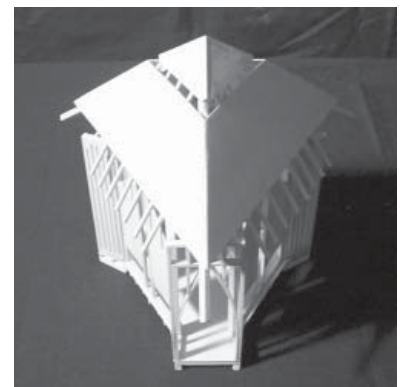


Figure 7: Japho Hardin: Model.



Figure 8: Joshua Moore: Model.

Conclusion

The first and second year students participating in this trial curriculum are engaging with the issues of invisibility, *techne* and culturally responsive design. They passionately participate in studio discussions of these topics and apply their thinking to their course work. As reflexive pedagogy, the curriculum development generates meaningful faculty dialogue which feeds back into the development process. That the issue of cultural invisibility generates such strong interest clearly indicates a desire, by faculty and students, to place more emphasis on culturally responsive design, as a celebration of dwelling.

NOTES

1. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1990): 3.
2. Brad Grant, "Cultural Invisibility: The African American Experience in Architectural Education," in Thomas A. Dutton, Editor, *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991): 149.
3. See Thomas A. Dutton, "Architectural Education and Society: An Interview with Max Bond, Jr.," in *Voices and Lesley Naa Norle Lokko, Editor, White Papers, Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000).
4. Grant, 158.
5. Grant, 152, 161-162 and Dutton, 89.
6. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977): 11.
7. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971): 42.
8. Heidegger, *Question*, 6-8.
9. Richard Weston, *Materials, Form and Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). For more on character and the built environment see Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980): 63-69.
10. Heidegger, *Poetry*, 46.
11. Heidegger, *Poetry*, 149.
12. Marcia-Anne Dobres, "Meaning in the Making: Agency and the Social Embodiment of Technology and Art," in Michael Brian Schiffer, Editor, *Anthropological Perspectives on Technology* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001): 50.
13. See Donald E. Armstrong, "Brick Making and the Production of Place at the Tuskegee Institute," *Proceedings of the ACSA 2001 Southwest Regional Conference*.
14. Dell Upton, Editor, *America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups That Built America* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1986): 7.
15. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc, 1998).