

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



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PROCEEDINGS of the
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Hampton University Department of Architecture

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Preserving the Past and Designing the Future: A Tale of Two Communities

This presentation explores the revitalization through design of two communities that experienced oppression. In the first example, students design a museum of African-American culture in Boley, Oklahoma, to reconstruct the town. In the second example, students design affordable housing in Khayelitsha, South Africa, a squatter settlement that resulted from apartheid.

Boley is a historic African-American town, located in Oklahoma. Blacks that migrated from south to northern and western communities in hopes of escaping oppression around 1900 established the town. A recent project had interior design sophomore studio class design the interiors of the Boley Museum of African-American culture. The design problem was to develop interiors for a museum and an accessible bed and breakfast annex to the existing two-story building on the site, which currently houses the museum collections and an inaccessible bed and breakfast on the second floor. At the beginning of the project, students were presented with case studies from African and African-American culture to expose them to design in cultural settings. Students made several trips to the site to meet with the clients and survey existing conditions. User requirements were developed to include a gallery space, gift shop, outdoor sitting, storage and support facilities, as well as restrooms. Word Analogies and concept squares (Leigh, 2000) were developed based on the precedent studies. These were transformed into three-dimensional abstract models that formed the basis for their concepts and design solutions.

South Africa estimates its total squatter population to be at least 5 million. The objective of this project was to design low-income housing in Cape Town, South Africa. Students were presented a cross-disciplinary survey of Khayelitsha, which focused on design and social issues. The survey explored housing the urban poor in Cape Town through case studies, field research, design aesthetics, analysis of local materials, skills, and construction techniques. The class had several video-conferencing sessions with the students and professors of Technikon University, Pretoria, South Africa. The sessions addressed South African design aesthetics, slums, and squatters, and also involved several design critiques sessions. The students were very sensitive to the issue of apartheid in South Africa and avoided approaching the design solution solely based on the stylistic influences of the apartheid government (Cape Dutch Style). In the design solutions developed, the recurring elements were traditional South African elements, pitched roofs, and natural forms.

These two projects illustrate how students use design to rebuild communities that have experienced oppression. In the case of Boley Museum of African-American culture, design precedents are drawn from African and African-American environments in an effort to revitalize this historical black town. The design proposal was included in a US Department of Transportation grant application by the Boley Economic Development and Redevelopment Authority (BEDRA). In the South African case, an identity free from oppression is proposed by limiting the influences of the Cape Dutch style of the oppressors. Thus restoring pride in the traditional heritage of this long oppressed community.

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abstract

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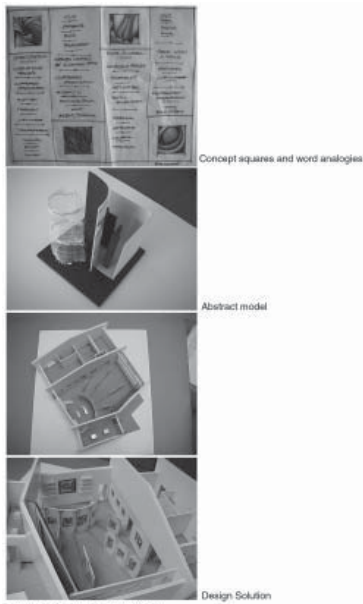


Figure 1 - Designed by Evie Williams
Figure 1.

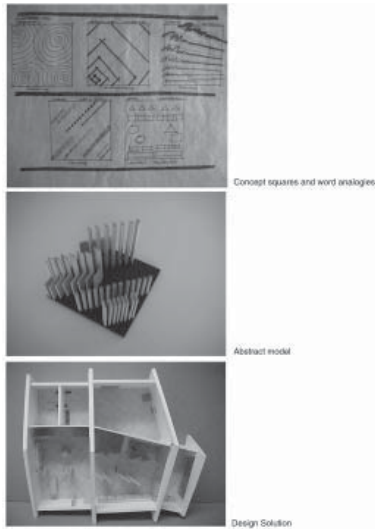


Figure 2 - Designed by Seth Cavin
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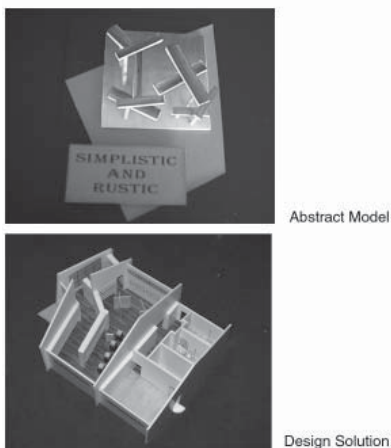


Figure 3 - Designed by Kayce Jones
Figure 3.

Hill & Co.

Dunn, B., Reynolds, S., and Spencer, C. (2001). *An Unofficial History of Boley, Oklahoma*. (Online) Available:

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Introduction

This presentation explores the revitalization through design of two communities that experienced oppression. In the first example, students propose a museum of African-American culture in Boley, Oklahoma, in an effort to reconstruct the town. In the second example, students propose affordable housing in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa, a squatter settlement that resulted due to apartheid. In addition to exposing students to cross-cultural and global design perspectives, both projects represent pedagogical models of integrating diverse theories in design creative thinking and problem solving.

Boley Museum of African-American Culture

Boley is a historic African-American town, located in central Okfuskee County in Oklahoma. The town was established by blacks that migrated from south to northern and western communities in hopes of escaping oppression around the turn of the century. It was founded in 1903 by T.M. Haynes as a Creek Indian community and began on 160 acres that was owned by Abigail Burnett McCormick. A recent project in the interior design sophomore studio class at the University of Oklahoma had students design the interior of the Boley Museum of African-American culture for the Boley Economic Development and Redevelopment Authority (BEDRA). Mr. Maurice Lee Jr. the client representative presented the goals of the museum as twofold “firstly to preserve the artifact and history of a very unique town and situation which only occurred in Oklahoma (up to 50 all Black towns in the state of Oklahoma). Secondly, it is to lure tourists to the town to booster our income. Without the museum, there is very little to see. With the museum, there is a super attraction.”

The design problem was to develop interiors for a museum and an accessible bed and breakfast annex to the existing two-story building on the site, which currently houses the museum collections and an inaccessible bed and breakfast on the second floor. The design challenge was designing a creative and economical solution that reflected African-American culture. At the beginning of the project, students were presented with case studies from African and African-American culture to expose them to design in cultural settings. Elements and symbols from traditional African environments were studied along with planning concepts, building forms, materials and construction technology. This had a major impact on their initial conceptual ideas since African-American communities derive much of their aesthetics from traditional African spaces. Students made several trips to the site to meet with the clients and survey the site. User requirements were developed to include a gallery space, gift shop, outdoor sitting, restrooms, storage and support facilities.

Word Analogies and concept squares (Leigh, 2000) were developed based on the precedent studies of cultural, historical, and traditional elements in African societies. These were transformed into three-dimensional abstract models that formed the basis for their concepts and design solutions. The following are the top three solution selected by the clients. One student’s solution was based on the sun and community (Figure 1). The major elements in the design were the gallery displays that radiated out of the gift shop like the sun. This is related to the nature of community in African and African-American spaces where there is a central focus from which other elements evolve. Display partitions are organized to move along a track on the floor, radiating from the gift shop like rays of the sun. They are all independent, yet still part of a whole, thus reinforcing community. Another student based his solution on geometric elements from textile patterns in African spaces. He started by analyzing

the patterns in two-dimension as a series of points and lines, and then transformed them to three-dimensional abstract forms by extruding the points and lines at different heights. This formed the basis for organizing his space. His final solution was based on a hierarchy of points and lines in space (Figure 2). Another student's solution was based on simplistic and rustic design elements (Figure 3). Figure 4 illustrates the final design option selected by the clients. Figure 5 illustrates lighting design developed for the selected design option.

Overall, this experience offered students an opportunity to work on a real life community service project, which integrates cultural issues in the built environment. This theoretical concept of utilizing diverse cultures as a basis for studying design elements and principles is critical for design education. In this case, African and African-American cultures are used to derive a solution for this historically black town museum. The methodology presents an approach of introducing diverse design precedents in design education.

Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa

South Africa estimates its total squatter population to be at least 5 million. In Cape Town, as in all of South Africa's major cities, there are several squatter settlements located near the few African townships in the city. The Western Cape province where Cape Town is located has a racial composition of 60% mixed race, 25% Caucasian, and remaining 15% are African. Founded in 1652, it is the oldest city in Southern Africa. During most of the apartheid era, strict influx control regulations were enforced to prevent large numbers of Eastern Cape Xhosas (Africans) from migrating to Western and compete with coloreds for employment. Some migrants eventually came to Cape Town illegally. Neither the government nor employers provided adequate housing for African workers. This led to overcrowding in single sex dormitories where family members mostly women and children would come to join the male worker in his room. Most women and children were illegal residents in Cape Town under apartheid law. Eventually, as housing shortage increased, Crossroads squatter settlement emerged as an informal township constructed from corrugated iron and other scrap construction materials.

The objective of this project was to have Interior design sophomores design low-income housing in Cape Town, South Africa. Students were presented a cross-disciplinary survey of Khayelitsha which focused on design and social issues. The cross-disciplinary field research was carried out in summer 2000 in five slums and squatters in Cape Town, South Africa. The survey explored housing the urban poor in Cape Town through case studies, field research, design aesthetics, analysis of local materials, skills, and construction techniques. Sample questionnaire included information on age, gender, ethnicity, status in ethnic group, educational level, employment, marital status, number of people in household, number of rooms, sketches of existing house, skills possessed, current building materials, proposed design, access to infrastructure, means of transportation, and prospects for better housing.

Students were presented precedent studies, results from the cross-disciplinary field research, and South African design aesthetics. In the initial design stage students developed schematic sketches of their proposals and had several video conferencing sessions with students and faculty of Technikon, an institution of higher learning in South Africa. In the sessions, students and faculty of Technikon critiqued the design proposals developed by the students. For example, most of the students initial design proposals were too elaborate for low-income type prototypes. They also based a lot of the stylistic influences on the style of the apartheid government in the case of South Africa. This was partly due to the fact that in their research, they came across the Cape Dutch architectural style of the apartheid government in the South Africa. A lot of the traditional architectural styles and influences in South Africa are undocumented and difficult to research. Therefore, students had difficulty finding design precedents on traditional styles in South Africa. After the video conferencing sessions, the student redesigned their proposals after recognizing the need to respond to the cultural, climatic, and material technology issues discussed during the video conferencing sessions. The final designs were presented and critiqued in a final session with interior design and architecture students and faculty of Technikon, South Africa (Figure 6). Reactions from both sides indicated that the experience was positive. The video conferencing sessions offered an opportunity for University of Oklahoma students to learn about low-income housing and design in cultural and international settings.

The several video conferencing sessions made the students very sensitive to the issue of apartheid in South Africa and avoided approaching the design solution solely based on



Figure 4.

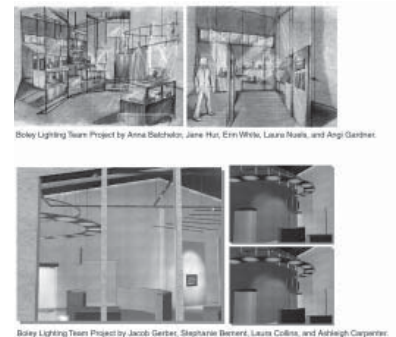


Figure 5.



Figure 6.

the stylistic influences of the apartheid government (Cape Dutch Style). Rather they wanted to develop solutions that reflected the inhabitant's African heritage. In the design solutions developed by the students, the recurring elements were the traditional South African hut, pitched roofs, and natural forms. Cultural-based design and low-income housing were a gray area for students on both sides. The video conferencing sessions offered an opportunity for the students to ask questions and develop a better understanding of the design problem. The South African faculty felt the experience provided an opportunity for their students to research undocumented traditional design styles. Professor Schmidt, the Technikon professor observed that in addition to being a very good educational experience for his students, the exercise was also an eye-opener and thought provoker for them. Annette Sadie, the South African technical facilitator noted it was a wonderful experience for their students who enjoyed every minute of the sessions. They were also curious as to when they could participate again. The South African team also observed that the Oklahoma team was shocked by the limitations of low-income housing in South Africa.

Another major evidence of the impact was in the design proposal developed by the students. Prior to the video conferencing sessions, University of Oklahoma interior design students had difficulty understanding scale, size, spatial requirements, and design aesthetics of a culture different from theirs. The University of Oklahoma students were also enlightened on global social, economic, and political issues. Prior to the project about fifty percent of the class were unaware of apartheid in South Africa. The experience gave the students a global perspective of design and wider perception of the built environment.

Conclusion

These two projects illustrate how students use design to empower and rebuild communities that have experienced oppression. Cross-cultural design studio experiences are imperative for students who intend to practice in a culturally diverse nation and an ever-shrinking global village. In the case of Boley Museum of African-American culture, design precedents are drawn from African and African-American environments in an effort to revitalize this historical black town. The design proposal was included in a US Department of Transportation grant application by the Boley Economic Development and Redevelopment Authority (BEDRA). In the South Africa case, an identity free from oppression is proposed by limiting the influences of the Cape Dutch style of the oppressors. Thus restoring pride in the traditional heritage of this long oppressed community.

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