

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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**Towards an “Integrated” Design Pedagogy:
Exploring Architectural Displacements and the Location of Culture Beyond the Bauhaus Tradition**

Although there have been enormous changes in the profession of architecture, our perceptions of it and the people who practice it, the architectural curriculum is still based fundamentally on the values that were brought to America by the Bauhaus.

J. Max Bond Jr. FAIA

Over the last decade a handful of architectural schools have been engaged in an effort to reframe the architectural design pedagogy to enhance our knowledge of non-Western architectural history, theory and criticism. For a long time the vernacular building traditions of Africa, Asia and the Far east, etc., have been displaced among the oddities of architectural case studies, often defined as “primitive”. There are many contradictions between historical fact and an academic preference for the teaching of Greek and Roman tradition in literary discourses which constitutes Euro-centric empowerment. Martin Bernal has addressed this contradiction quite vigorously in his two-volume work *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, (1987). This paper will discuss the importance of non-Western architectural history, theory and practice as an integral part of the total global environment. My objective is to consider specific ways in which students and faculty can remodel the design studio culture to engage new and important ideas, which will enhance our education and the international practice of architecture.

abstract
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Akel Ismail Kahera received his B. Arch in Architecture from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn NY (1977), his M.Arch in Architecture from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1977) and his Ph.D. from Princeton University (1997). He published *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender and Aesthetics* (University of Texas Press 2002). He has also published a number of scholarly essays on History and Theory of Architecture and Urbanism. Kahera has practiced architecture for 25 years and is a partner in the firm Integrated Metropolis Architects, Austin Texas. Dr. Kahera is currently Professor of Architecture at Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas.

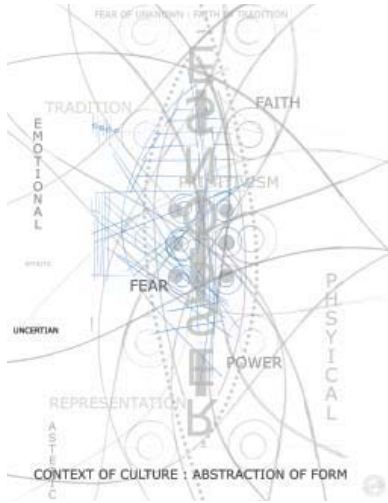


Figure 1 - Thomas Kulesia II, Analysis Diagram.

American architectural education, much like the study of architectural history is organized to offer important knowledge about Europe and America. Likewise much of the design research and studio instruction is a systematic enterprise that gathers knowledge about space conceptions that originate in the Greco-Roman world. It follows that in the early 20th century by some leap of faith Europe gave us the Bauhaus, and since then American architectural education has been largely dominated by the Bauhaus model.

Max Bond, the former dean of the college of architecture at City college of New York has observed that

*Although there have been enormous changes in the profession of architecture, our perceptions of it and the people who practice it, the architectural curriculum is still based fundamentally on the values that were brought to America by the Bauhaus.*¹

I employ this quote because it speaks to the topic of my discussion; it also speaks to an imbalance, which is based on race and as such on “whiteness” as a normative aesthetic condition, which grants Euro-centric reason the edge.² One only has to observe the framework of any number of current design manifestoes to realize the value that our culture has invested in this model over the last half a century. The fatal flaw in the Bauhaus model as a conceivable source of knowledge, so certain and so precise, is that it offers no substitute for the recognition of an alternative way of understanding aesthetic appreciation.

Over the last two decades a handful of architectural schools have endeavored to get us to turn our attention to non-Western aesthetic appreciation and to integrate this knowledge as an alternative to the Bauhaus model.³ For example, programs such as the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Art and Architecture at Harvard and MIT, and the Study of Traditional Environments at Berkeley, where formulated to study the building traditions of Africa, Asia, and the Far East, in order to introduce a broader understanding of architectural history, theory and criticism.

Yet, the study of non-Western environments remains displaced among the anomalies of architectural education and scholarship. The imbalance remains in place because the displacement originates from an overwhelming bias: the belief that Greco-Roman conventions are superior, which promotes a Euro-centric view of the world. And it is this world-view, which controls our aesthetic values and the way we teach design today. Take for example the following statement in the preface to Spiro Kostof’s text, *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*.⁴

The great majority of buildings, so called *vernacular architecture* is the result of individual efforts—people who decide to build, settle for the common look of the community, and produce buildings in the accepted local way...we are not concerned with *anonymous architecture* of this kind. We are dealing with the profession of architecture, the specialized skill that is called upon to give shape to the environmental needs of others.⁵

Martin Bernal of Cornell University in his two-volume study, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*,⁶ refutes the commonly held belief of the Greco-Roman origins of architectural knowledge. But for the most part our architecture curricula, remains committed to the Greco-Roman paradigm as a privileged position in education.

1. Resisting absolute knowledge

In my teaching and writing I argue for a framework that locates culture within an integrated design pedagogy, which includes the study of non-Western environments.⁷ I propose this framework for two reasons: First, our aesthetic reasoning and our understanding of culture are in conflict because our education has been slow in responding to the infallible Euro-centric world; by that I mean it has been slow to the resist *absolute knowledge* that has been part and parcel of that worldview. Instead we pacify our anxieties with substitutes such as “sustainability” without thinking about or addressing the core of the problem.

Secondly I would like to challenge the fixation, which continues to depict non-Western architecture as inferior, by calling into question critical theories that advocate the legitimate value of ethnic-geographies and the inclusion of cultural diversity. This argument is not new it has only been forgotten: As early as 1957 Sybil Moholy-Nagy argued that the legitimate value of vernacular expression was critical to our holistic appreciation of architectural history and design. Her seminal study *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture* constitutes a visible marker in the study of culture, ethnic-geographies and vernacular habitats. Ironically Moholy-Nagy’s pejorative use of the term “anonymous” has led the academic community to confer an inferior status upon the genre of vernacular building types that are



Figure 2 - Marak Mask (Mali).

common to Africa, Asia and the Far east, ultimately these regions of the world remain largely excluded and have received little or no formal recognition.

I would also like to recall Amos Rappaport's careful study of vernacular habitats and dwellings, *House, Form and Culture* (1969).⁸ Rappaport's sought to define vernacular habitats and dwellings in an authoritative manner. His work was well received, although short lived, throughout a vibrant social and historical discourse that existed in our architecture schools in the 70's. Alexander's *A Pattern Language* followed Rappaport's work it and others offer an alternative epistemology of culture, space and habitat. These studies are immeasurably more diverse than the ideas put forward in *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*—a theory so divine that it turns architecture into a perfect tectonic system, and by the sheer weight of the assumed logic made it resistant to revision and readily accepted by educators and practitioners.

2. The Location Of Culture beyond the Bauhaus

Tom Wolf in his essay *From Bauhaus to Our House*, described Walter Gropius, as “white god no. 1”, its easy to see why. The exuberance of the Bauhaus model was embraced by *five guardian angels*, Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hedjuk and Mier - a group of radical individualists - who rejected the overwhelming social mission of architecture that came to prevail in America in the 60's and 70's. They remained faithful to the Promethean myth and they cleverly disguised the Bauhaus logic with a new spin resulting in hyper-rational proportions of *white purist forms* inherited from Le Corbusier and the Cubist movement. These five architects sought to create a new level of order and meaning; they were complete experimentalist who wanted to practice experimentation and to fashion architecture entirely on their own terms.

Prometheus had stolen the fire once again; the exuberant self-realization of the New York Five supported the idea of philosophical post-modernism. Like Greek Humanism it had prefigured western thought once more it was as though this new knowledge, generated by post-modernism thought would liberate us by lifting us above the savage world. Instead it diminished the authority of *Primitivism* and the concept of “reversible space and linear time” so valiantly described by Claude Levi-Strauss in his study of the West African Dogon.⁹

At this point vernacular architecture and its various manifestations in the academic discourse was ultimately diffused and any further discussion of the foundations of architectural design education or architectural history retreated from inclusiveness to a closed “hyper-rational” system based on the grid. Whatever emotion Picasso—one of the proponents of Cubism and *primitivism*—had at first verbalized towards the underlying premise of African art or anything connected to it was redundant. As you recall Picasso had expressed the idea of primitivism, which promoted the masking traditions of Africa as the source of cubism. Primitivism as a viable source of creative genius was resisted by the narrowly confined ideas of Hedjuk and others who while embracing Picasso undermined his fascination with African masks, and ultimately any meaningful appreciation of African Architecture in general.

Hedjuk a solitary genius destroyed the altar but preserve the throne; he proposed instead the mask of Medusa, *Medusa* means “sovereign female wisdom”. Medusa was actually imported into Greece from Libya. The result of Hedjuk's solitary genius in my view is nothing but utter confusion which Francis Bacon correctly identified four centuries ago as the most fatal of errors, which “occurs wherever argument or inference passes from one world experience [Africa] to another [America].”

I admit that the post-modern mind in our literate society can deal with confusion while leaving the imbalance of power in place, unquestioned and in operation. Through architecture the post-modern mind has gained the power to map a new alien reality far beyond the Bauhaus. Through the written word, Hedjuk has demonstrated the means to construct narratives, images and rhythms immeasurably more complex than the ideas of the Bauhaus school.

At this point I would like pause to raise a number of questions related to my remarks thus far: first of all how do we re-locate architectural meaning and truth within in the imbalanced curriculum. And by that I mean how do we teach cultural diversity as a critical aspect of knowledge in view of the current notions of space, which actually impede any meaningful and substantive reasoning. Secondly what might a new integrated design pedagogy look like and in what way can we incorporate it within the design studio. Finally is it at all possible to dismantle the way the profession of architecture supports race, gender

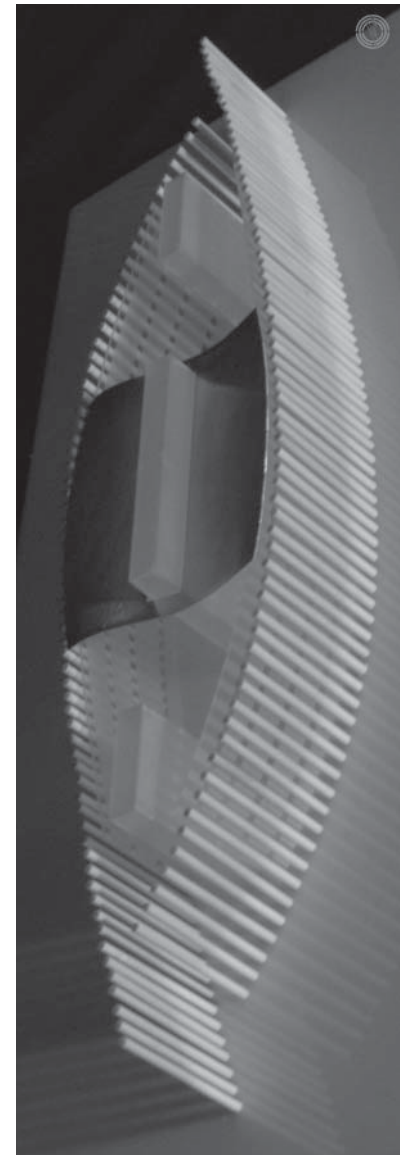


Figure 3 - Thomas Kulesia II, Translation Aerial Perspective.



Figure 4 - Thomas Kulesia II, Translation Computer Model.

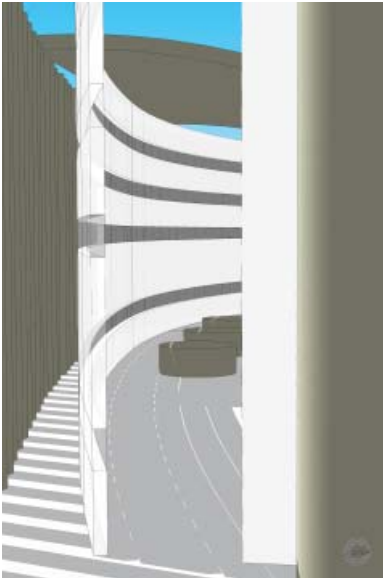


Figure 5 - Thomas Kulesia II, Translation Computer Model 2.

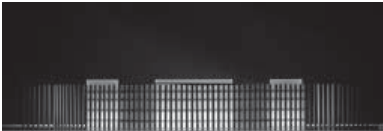


Figure 6 - Thomas Kulesia II, Translation Elevation.



Figure 7 - Thomas Kulesia II, Translation Exterior Perspective.

and ethnic bias, which ultimately impedes the study of non-Western environments.

3. Towards an integrated pedagogy: The legitimate value of Ethnic Spaces

Perhaps there are no patented answers to all these questions but I am sure you will agree with me that diversity in architectural education is too important to ignore, therefore there is an imminent need to correct the imbalance which has thus far determined the way we teach design. We also need to consider specific ways to remodel the design studio to engage new and important ideas, which will enhance the education of students.

It is for this reason that I argue for an *integrated approach*, which considers alternative aesthetic expressions to promote an integrated understanding of architectural space. I believe that by selectively modifying the language of design theory to conform to an integrated approach will effectively respond to alternative aesthetic values and the location of culture. This belief is not far fetched, because fluency across the geographical cultural boundaries already exists, we just need to grasp it in a way that will provide a clear view of the world as it really is; not as though it is seen through the narrow lens which leads to a myopic response.

On the other hand I am fully aware that any design curricula enhancement may be interpreted as extreme and subversive, which is exactly why the title of this conference “Not White” is so timely and relevant. However, we must set aside our academic anxieties, because the ideas that I mention are intended to reshape the widespread hegemonic rhetoric and the influence of post-modern architecture discourses—especially those ideas that give primacy to architectural text only while they neglect ethnic, social, and cultural concerns. The radical post-modernist and post-structuralist believe that we can know nothing because their *god* Derrida, the creator of deconstruction has said so, when he declared, “there is nothing outside the text.”

Well at the risk of being labeled as an apostate I reject Derrida’s expression. I would like to re-insert the authority of the African mask into the design pedagogy. For me the African mask is the ultimate polar antithesis of the Derrida’s expression; it is not concerned with text but with meaning, symbolism and power and a spiritual universe built entirely within a cultural ethos. And to demonstrate this belief I asked my students to study the mask as an architectural problem. My aim in proposing this assignment (see Appendix I) is to deal with a re-assessment of the tectonic conventions and the usual difficulties that we find in teaching beginning design pedagogy.¹⁰

There are a number of conclusion that can be drawn from the study of the mask which can stimulate a student’s knowledge of design principles: First, the aesthetics of the mask and the interpretation given to it is confirmed by means of novel analysis and experimentation. Second there is an attempt to abstract the information into form that is both simple and aesthetically pleasing: the combination of which is called elegance. Finally, I also recognize the value of the mask’s form in general and the architectonic expression in particular.

The problem deals specifically with a re-evaluation of the aesthetic reasoning that are applied or taught in a design studio. While there exist an appreciative capacity to escape from the narrow interpretation of African expression, sincere academic appreciation remains inherently rigid or absent for fear of corrupting what we already know. There are reasons for this dilemma: it threatens our understanding of ‘truth’ and it could undermine the appeal of western aesthetic expression. Once again, if we set aside our academic anxieties it would not be difficult to embrace the elements of the African mask or for that matter and non-western cultural object or space conception.

So perhaps we can think of the problem in another way, which does more than depend on the impetus provided by power of what we already know. This takes us into unpredictable new directions and the new knowledge provides an additional test of the original principles that led to its discovery. Complexity is what interests us in the end not simplicity; the African mask is one way to understand it.

This broad pedagogical approach to architecture allows the studio to explore a global, cross-cultural approach to such issues as vernacular tectonics and ecological sustainability, while engaging itself locally in the array of historical and cultural factors shaping the built environment. This change in attitude towards architecture brings some diversity into the field and facilitates the growth and development of an architectural vernacular that would reflect the current needs of clients while taking into account the advancement made over the years.¹¹

I admit that my confidence in the mask as a design problem seems overwhelming but it offers the boldest example of a way to get students to discover, thereby plunging them into new terrain perhaps in so doing they will grasp and appreciate a deeper understanding of diversity in our world. And it is this appreciation that will prove to be significant and will make sense.

APPENDIX I

Beginning Design Assignment:

Problem 1: Design a small exhibition pavilion on a site on Campus (15x20x30 ft. building envelope) to display West African Art. The architecture of the pavilion must be inspired by the symbolic, structural and aesthetic principles of a particular West African Mask.

- Naula (Guinea) Mask blend shark, crocodile, antelope and human feature in a baroque style. The masks appear in harvest ceremonies;*
- Bwa and Ko (geometric designs on masks have meaning: the checkerboard pattern represents the separation of dark from light good from evil and male from female);*
- Marka (Mali) Metal plating decorates boys' initiation masks;*
- Eastern Pende is distinguished by geometric motifs in red, white and black pigment. The helmet mask represents the power of the chief; the masks are used in inauguration ceremonies*
- Bwa and Ko (Burkina Faso) welcome the growing season and the end of the rains*
- Mbangani (Zaire) used in initiation or circumcision ceremonies*

GENERAL NOTES FOR Problem 1:

- A translation is a shift and is specified by a direction and distance.*
- A rotation is a rotation and is specified by its center and an angle.*
- A reflection is specified by a line of reflection— a mirror.*
- A motion is a movement, action or gesture*
- Two parts of an image are congruent if there is an isometry (equality of measure: a geometric transformation such as the rotation of a plane in which the distance between any two points is preserved*

Additional NOTES

- The first task is to analyze the mask to decipher its aesthetics principles (prepare power point presentation of your analysis).*
- The second task is to translate these principles in to an abstract architectural composition that remains faithful to the original themes, meaning and symbolic aspect of the mask.*
- The final task is to compose the design of the pavilion using the aesthetic vocabulary of your analysis of the mask, prepare a set of drawings—plan, sections, elevations, isometric and build a model.*

NOTES

- ¹ <http://hsainfo.drury.edu/notes-online/diversity/articles.php?lng=en&pg=73> date down loaded October 23rd 2003
- ² For an extensive discussion of this point see Craig Wilkins, A Nig(g)er Runs Through It, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2003, 30 and passim.
- ³ Two notable examples are the Aga Khan Program for the study of Islamic Art and Architecture at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The Center for the Study of Traditional Environments at U. C. Berkeley.
- ⁴ Spiro Kostof, (ed.) *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, University of California Press, Berkeley (1977).
- ⁵ Kostof, *The Architect*, xviii, italics mine
- ⁶ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena The Afro-asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, (1987); In addition to Bernal's work see, R. A. Schawaller de Lubiz, *The Temple in Man: Sacred Architecture and the Perfect Man*, Inner Traditions Limited, Rochester Vermont (1981)
- ⁷ For example see Akel Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender & Aesthetics*, University of Texas Press, Austin TX, 2002.
- ⁸ His study is followed by Bernard Rudofsky's Rudofsky *The Prodigious Builders* (1977), a revised expansion of an earlier work by the same author under the title, *Architecture Without Architects*, which focuses on this type of architecture as a tangible expression of a



Figure 8 - Thomas Kulesia II, Translation Interior Perspective.

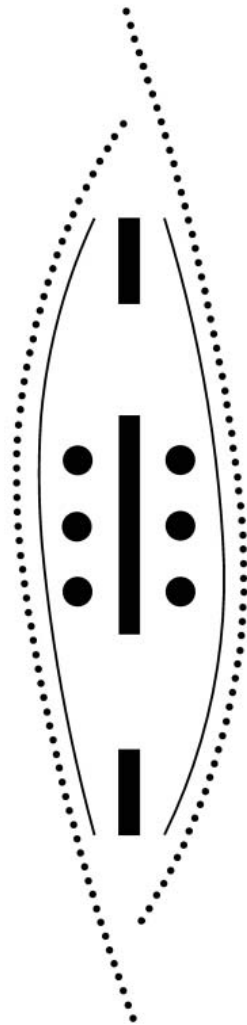


Figure 9 - Thomas Kulesia II, Translation Plan.

way of life and an art of building, yet it confirms Moholy-Nagy's pejorative use of the term "anonymous."

⁹ See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, Penguin USA (Paper); Reprint edition, 1992; *The Savage Mind*. University of Chicago Press, 1966, et.al.

¹⁰ The objective of the Assignment: Exploring the visual framework and interpretive grammar of non-Western art/architecture form, space and aesthetic themes. The framework (i.e. your response to the problem) should address congruence, translation, rotation, reflection, isometry, motion, etc. Your design/composition/ translation should enable you to build a specific 'genre' of architecture in response to the problem.

¹¹ <http://hsainfo.drury.edu/notes-online/diversity/articles.php?lng=en&pg=73> date downloaded October 23rd 2003