

not  
white

*diversity in beginning design education*



Shannon Chance, AIA, Editor

PROCEEDINGS of the  
20<sup>th</sup> National Conference on  
the Beginning Design Student  
Hampton University Department of Architecture

**Copyright 2006 Hampton University Urban Institute**  
/individual articles produced and edited by the authors

Printed proceedings produced by Shannon Chance, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Hampton University.

**All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.**

Published by:  
Hampton University Urban Institute  
Department of Architecture  
Hampton University  
Hampton, VA 23668  
757-727-5440  
fax 757-728-6680

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chance, Shannon  
Not White: Diversity in Beginning Design Education  
(Proceedings of the 20th National Conference on the Beginning Design Student)  
compiled by Shannon Chance  
1. Architecture - Diversity 2. Teaching - Architecture 3. Teaching - Diversity 4. Teaching - Design  
5. Diversity - Design

**ISBN 0-9785172-0-2**

## Normalization through Education: A loss of Culture and Identity?

In San Antonio we are blessed with a demographic unlike most typical American cities. The south of Texas provides us with a student body that is largely Hispanic. For many students this is their very first experience in America, having just relocated from smaller towns in Mexico. Others are first generation Americans raised in traditional Mexican families. While multi-cultural student bodies are not unusual within a university setting, the number of such students is typically small and their particular ontology is easily sublimated to the larger whole. In other words, we often teach to the majority or teach to our own ontology without regard to the potential normalizing effect of such methods.

Upon coming to UTSA, I found myself in a studio setting that presented a significant cultural difference. At first, I thought it was business as usual, teaching to a curriculum that seemed tried and true. But, I soon began to suspect that the sense of *difference* that I had noticed somehow extended beyond the borders of any qualitative understanding. This started me thinking, is there a measurable *difference* between how other similar, but yet different, western cultures come to understand the built environment? Can a Hispanic ethos be made manifest through the design of young Mexican students if left to its own? Or, would it be lost in American academia by way of a self-referential pedagogy?

Looking at issues of scale, functional organization, materiality, permanence, and community, this paper will explore the cultural territories of a contemporary architectural design education. It is my position that local or site-specific vernaculars, whether predicates of indigenous forms, materials, or traditions etc., should be recognized and maintained as a means not only for greater architectural expression but equally as a conveyance of both culture and identity.

abstract

Kenneth G. Masden

---

Assistant Professor  
University of Texas San Antonio  
email: kenneth.masden@utsa.edu

Master of Architecture,  
Post Professional Degree  
Yale University, 2001;  
Bachelor of Architecture,  
Professional Degree  
University of Kentucky, 1982

Professor Masden is a design and digital media instructor, lecturer, and the 2nd Year Design Coordinator for the School of Architecture at UTSA. He is a NCARB Certified licensed architect, currently holding licenses in both Kentucky & New York. His design experience extends from residential design-build to a specialization in Urban Design and large-scale international complexes, with built projects in America, Italy, and Japan. While pursuing his graduate degree at Yale University, he worked in the office of Peter Eisenman as a Project Architect on the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, which is now under construction in Berlin. His primary areas of research are Digital Design and non-Western Urbanism, with an emphasis on Chinese traditional town planning. His specific interest lies in the ontological and behavioral aspects of urbanism, as the principle constituents of *place* through which culture and identity are conveyed. Throughout his career he has traveled extensively and lived abroad in both Europe and Asia, lending greater insight to his understanding of cross-cultural design.

### **Introduction**

Not knowing exactly how to go about assessing any such culturally specific design tendencies, I had to start by assuming that there was indeed a measurable difference. With that assumption, I set out to determine whether these tendencies were understood and administered consciously, or simply applied instinctively - if at all. I started my investigation by way of a design problem predicated on one of the basic components of architecture i.e. the "wall." Ideas of borders and boundaries are often understood to have cultural antecedents and the study of the "wall" represents a scale that is relative and manageable. In this project students were asked to consider their place in the world and explore how they as individuals come to understand and administer the process of design.

### **Project Statement**

"Walls have been the principal architectural agents of the dichotomized mentally of either/or, timeless or temporary, public or private, visible or invisible, speakable or unspeakable." Patrick Pinnell

"At times walls manifest a power that borders on the violent. They have the power to divide space, configure place, and create new domains. Walls are the most basic elements of architecture, but they can also be the most enriching." Tadao Ando

It is said to be a fundamental premise that Western thought and "permanent" enclosing walls have reciprocally formed each other. Medieval walled cities were created for safety; property lines/walls/fences were intended to define what is yours and what is mine. Territorial markings of tribes and community colors, all work to define who we are and where we come from. Other boundaries are less tangible; they permeate the space around us in invisibly layers that unknowingly guide us through our lives. Issues of physical size, skin color, sexuality, culture, religious, or political beliefs are also at work defining who we are.

As we begin to design the world around us these issues, coupled with our own unique ontology, work to give shape and form to what we create. In this exercise students will be asked to consider all such boundary conditions in temporal, situational, and social terms. Students must consider what actually constitutes such boundaries i.e. their form, site, and program. And, must work through the predispositions of their respective clients i.e. themselves.

Individual studios will work independent of each other in more specific terms, as defined by each studio professor. The success of this project lies in the ability of individuals and groups to create an environment that works to more clearly define who we are as individuals while equally and effectively situating itself within the larger context and idea of community.

### **Process and Preconceptions**

This project was intentionally developed to help provide a clearer understanding of what students actually knew about themselves, their culture, and identity. It was meant to detect tendencies or traits that were at work guiding individuals through the early stages of the design process. Many had never really thought about their own ontology and when asked to do so, none could truly assess or explain what if any predilections they possessed. As is the case with so many of us, these students had never been actively aware of themselves or their surroundings, in any way that would now pertain to the process of design. Most had never really engaged their culture or traditions from a conscious position of knowing how that might affect their perceptions, pre-conceptions, and preferences.

Not wanting to lead or bias them, by way of an extended discussion on the issue of culture and identity, I decided to begin the design process offering only a modicum of direction. From the results of this exercise it could be said; if students demonstrated any pre-conceptions at all it was the tendency to design toward an American standard or ideal. It was evident that most were trying to design within the context of western popular-culture. In fact when asked, many said they had come to America specifically to learn how to design in just that way. Few embarked on any kind of independent thinking and for the most part looked outside themselves for direction.

This outcome seemed to suggest that these students, as with most fundamental design students, learn most effectively when being lead. At this particular stage in their development they don't yet possess the skills and abilities necessary to put forward their own ideas in an architectural form. And therefore, most are not in a position to begin to assess the extent at

which the predisposition toward a particular set of design elements, ideas, or ideals might affect their design. The problem, one seemingly inherent in the architectural education process, is that by the time students are able to communicate through architecture they have already been indoctrinated into the architectural ways, stylistic genre, and ideological dogmas of their professors.

I am sure there are many other ways to look at this issue and for the most part there are similar conclusions that can be drawn about the contemporary education of an architect. My goal however was not to put forth a polemical argument against Architectural academia, it was simply to find a way to better understand the implications of my own teaching, as it affects individuals outside my particular ontology.

### **Culturally Specificity**

If culture and identity are indeed the predicates of place, and one's sense of self is determined by one's place in the world, it would seem important to consider the origins of each student and the architecture specific to their culture when trying to develop a pedagogical position. It is our responsibility as educators to structure our design instruction in such a way as to draw from a student's own background, to carefully and consciously bring each individual to an understanding of design through their own set of values and traditions.

“What appears to influence most the form of dwellings and their attendant space is the vision held by a people. Built forms, including houses are symbols in a system of visual communication of that ideal. In any culture, the forms that communicate symbolically are specific and may include only selected elements not the sum of human-made or natural artifacts. Once constructed, built forms have a permanence that imprints on and influences future generations, even though the current generation may not know the reasons for past constructions.”<sup>1</sup>

After looking more closely at my surroundings I discovered that there were several unique architectural elements at work shaping local Hispanic communities and their architecture, all of which have contemporary antecedents in Mexico. The colors, forms, materials, textures, spatial organizations, and specific geometries of architecture within these communities, serves purposefully to maintain the unique culture and the identity of these people. The aforementioned principle elements are often referred to as “*Arquitectura*.”<sup>2</sup> While there are other more numerous characteristics at work in the shaping of these environments, these elements are found consistently in Hispanic communities throughout the country constituting an explicit system of preferential selection. Social and historic influences have lead to a specific predilection toward primary geometrical forms, polychromatic color, elaborate textures and patterns. Upon entering such a community one might notice “several patterns that suggest a peculiar Mexican-ness; the almost continuous extent of front property enclosures through a variety of fence and wall types, and a sometimes riotous use of brilliant colors on the house exteriors”<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists have argued that the recent peasant background of many Mexican Americans in the southwest contributes in large part to the persistence of such traditional folk-behavioral patterns.<sup>4</sup>

### **Elements of Design**

The circle and square, and their 3-dimensional derivatives, can be seen in both historic and contemporary Hispanic designs. Geometry serves not only as a proportional element but also as a method by which to locate windows and doors, and as a system for laying out ornamental patterns. Colors like purple, blue, yellow, and turquoise, which once held symbolic meaning now simply reflect the desire within these communities to maintain a sense of identity. Traditional plasterwork, painted murals, and pattern tile work used on many Hispanic structures, offer a substitute for the desire of rich natural materials such as marble, onyx, or cantera. Ornamentation also plays a significant role in the expression of these buildings.

The disposition of space and functional organization has specific cultural precedence as well. Historically, Hispanic residences were inwardly focused designed with a courtyard or a perimeter wall. The functional layout was not only situated along very distinct public and private lines, but equally along both social and gender based divisions i.e. the kitchen still remains the wife's domain where social interaction with her friends takes place.

It should be further noted that there are also culturally specific differences with respect to issues of permanence and mobility. Unlike the mobile existence of their western brothers, the Hispanic culture is still very regional in character. Family is very important and children seldom move beyond their own neighborhoods as adults. Many Hispanic girls often do not accept scholarships to universities outside their communities because it would require leaving their family. This regard for permanence manifest itself in what they build and where they live. The idea of permanence therefore, becomes an important element for consideration in their design process.

### **Conclusion**

All of these traits can be traced back through Europe and the Middle East, and most are the predicates of social or religious values and beliefs. As a series of archetypical elements they strengthen the Hispanic culture by providing a greater sense of identity. Though, too often they are overlooked or marginalized by people outside the Hispanic culture. Hispanic students themselves sometimes don't see the value in such an architectural heritage and opt instead for the fashionable trends of their newfound peer group.

It is important to understand the value of these cultural bias and/or predispositions. If we are to successfully impart the knowledge of design and architecture to our students, we must be aware of the processes at work shaping their ideas. Working with students of a different ethnic, social, or religious background requires that we sometimes look outside ourselves for the answer. I have learned a great deal from my students about culture and identity as well as about myself. The dialogue of difference fostered by teaching in San Antonio has already begun to find its way into the development of design projects and has enriched the experience for all of us. From the standpoint of contemporary architectural education, the specific set of design elements associated with the local culture suggest a more formal and traditional way of approaching design. Since our curriculum combines a four-year bachelor degree with a two-year master degree, there will be plenty of opportunity for students to seek out contemporary theory and design if they are so inclined. It is my hope that fundamental design students through a greater awareness of themselves can develop a better appreciation for the process of design, one that resonates more soundly within their own ontology.

### **REFERENCES**

- <sup>1</sup> A. Rapoport, "House, Form, and Culture," Englewood Cliffs; Prentice-Hall 1969, p. 47.
- <sup>2</sup> J. Jimenez, "*Arquitectura*," The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States, *Acequias* - Dual Nationality, Oxford University Press, Vol. 1, 2005, pp. 87-91.
- <sup>3</sup> D. Arreola, "Mexican American Housescapes," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 78, No.3 (Jul., 1988) pp. 299-315.
- <sup>4</sup> A. Paredes, "El Folklore de los Grupos de Origen Mexicano en Estados Unidos," *Folklore Americano*, Vol. 14, 1966, pp. 146-163.