

not  
white

*diversity in beginning design education*



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## Is There a Black Architecture?

### Incorporating Theories of the African American Design Ethic into Traditional Architectural History Syllabi

The purpose of this proposed research paper is to provide educators of beginning design students with an approach to incorporating the African-American design experiences into the traditional architectural history syllabus. There are very few references and documents regarding the specific contributions of African Americans that can be seamlessly incorporated into the history sequence without being treated as if it were a separate and unequal history of black people. I have argued for the inclusion of African American art and criticism into the mainstream of history education, preferring that all students be exposed to this dialogue even if they are not particularly interested in African American studies, per se during their design education process. It is natural to assume that students who attend an HBCU would be comfortable with any discussion about the contributions of the descendants of African people in Western design and architecture. Finding the time and the resources to introduce these concepts and possible theories of design into the curriculum is an understandable impediment to executing a solution to this anomaly.

This research will indicate how a black design ethic was manifested in the Shotgun House in much the same way that the Greek Revival and Victorian movements indicated an expansion of a Euro – Centric concept of monumental, classical design in the Americas. It will also indicate how the working class black home builder was free to express the cultural aspects of their African folk memory in the design and utilization of this structure. The dialogue will present current theories that attempt to answer the question “Is there a black architecture?” by critically presenting ideas related to perceptions of the value of black material culture. Throughout this discussion, it will be shown how these patterns of transition and techniques of building within the African American community are similar to the development of the non-black contributions of the periods and styles that we commonly refer to as American Architecture.

abstract

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Barbara J. Mobarak was raised in Buffalo, New York. Following her graduation from Utica College of Syracuse University with a Bachelor's degree in urban studies, Ms. Mobarak attended the State University of New York at Buffalo, School of Architecture and Environmental Design where she obtained a Masters in Architecture in 1975. She was the first African American woman to receive a Masters degree in Architecture from that school which had evolved into an effective urban problem solving institute. The early years of her career enabled Ms. Mobarak to manage several multi-million dollar urban redevelopment projects in the public sector. Towards the middle of her career, she became a planning and design management consultant to several public and private clients. Throughout her many experiences, Ms. Mobarak has maintained an interest in architectural education, history and theory. In the mid 1980's she established a research project called the Tidewater Towns Preservation Project who's goal was to document the African American settlements in Maryland and Virginia. She documented over 30 houses in the historic settlement of Highland Beach, Maryland for the Maryland Historical Trust. Besides currently teaching at Morgan State University, in the past she has also taught design courses at the University of the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean Institute for Design Art and Technology as well as housing land economics at Fairfax County Community College. She is on the faculty of Morgan State University where she teaches in the undergraduate architecture program. Her research interests are related to formulating theories regarding Afro – Caribbean and Afro-American architecture.

## INTRODUCTION

A history sequence in schools of architecture provides the foundation for understanding the complexity and profundity of getting anything built. The impact that architects have on the civilization can be felt for a hundred years, even thousands of years. It is for these reasons that the history survey courses for non-history majors, ought to be progressive rather than conservative in approach. That is, our purpose in teaching is not to preserve the past, our purpose is to program the future. Certainly the patterns of form, style, function and technology that we discern from the past are filled with lessons learned, blunders, tragic mistakes and gems of beauty that need to be recounted. This research is proposing that we go a little further in demonstrating what is good and proper architecture.

The primary focus of the undergraduate architectural history courses that I teach is towards critical thinking. The facts of the historical events and periods speak for themselves; what is desired is that the student should transgress beyond the limitations of self and see history as a conduit through which he/she can shape the future. However, it is important to demystify the icons of architecture by illustrating the value that vernacular architecture has to the majority of the world's population. Particularly, for a predominantly African American working class design student, it is critical that they see the contributions that blacks have made to the built environment. It is important, therefore, that those of us who have the responsibility of doing the research begin incorporating what we find into our syllabi so that a progressive image of all people are given their true place in history. Our students are an aware, articulate and proud group of adults. It is a tragedy for the architectural profession to maintain a Euro-Centric architectural orientation when our world is demonstrably mostly black, brown and tan.

The shotgun house provides an excellent example of black architecture that can be used as a sledge way into any discussion about domestic architecture during the period 1800-1890 in the United States. I am hoping to convince you to make presentations like this a part of the survey curriculum by creatively inserting this data seamlessly into presentations made during this period in history. It is a fascinating journey.

By definition, the National Park Service, Secretary of the Interior describes the shotgun house accordingly:

“The shotgun house with its typical two to four room linear plan is an important vernacular building type found most often in the South. The long, narrow form – one room wide- gave these buildings their descriptive name. Sometimes two units were built together as a duplex, side by side, each having its own separate entrance. Shotgun houses are almost always frame buildings with gable ends to the street, sometimes with small open porches on the front. The interiors are modest in features and trim. The house is 15 feet wide and approximately 57 feet long with net usable space of 750 square feet”.

## THE SHOTGUN HOUSE DESIGN ETHIC

Research on the shotgun house is becoming more substantial and reliable. There is still a need to compile the papers presented at symposiums into a comprehensive anthology because they are difficult to obtain, but the bibliographic references are indicating that the proliferation of this house form has influenced the American landscape. The early pioneers of this research include Vlach who began to trace the shotgun house from Louisiana back to the sugar growing plantations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. His well documented and publicized treatise continues to illustrate that the building systems and form can be traced to West Africa.

As we are well aware, the African was uprooted from the homeland as a result of the slave trade. The African's memory of “home” was able to flourish in the Caribbean where most African people were transported while en route to the United States. These people who stayed in the Caribbean achieved some level of autonomy due to both their need to cloister in order to protect their communities from the brutality of colonialization, as well as to work collectively towards uplifting their status as former slaves.

At the turn of the century, New Orleans had a population that had the following distribution: 1/3 bonded blacks, 1/3 white, 1/3 freed black. Most of the freed blacks were from Haiti. The Haitians brought the shotgun house with them. At this period of American history, being poor was the condition of most of the population. The houses of these pioneers,

settlers, were not perceived in the negative light of “ghetto housing” or “low class” housing as the stigmas that have been assigned to them by the middle class to black urban or black rural enclaves. Certainly, the occupants of vernacular and working class housing did not possess these negative stereotypes and would not be uncomfortable with their being considered a part of mainstream American architecture.

Research further indicates that the shotgun house builders in Haiti had carved African motifs into their exterior framing. The shotgun houses in New Orleans contributed to the expansion of gingerbread trimming which became identified as a Victorian motif. The use of wood also contributed to the proliferation of shotgun houses among the poor and working classes. It became possible to extend the interior space of the shotgun house by adding the porch to the front and often, the back of the house. Thus, the southern porch became a desired feature all over America.

#### CONTEXTUALIZING THE SHOTGUN WITH THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

The basic form of the shotgun house responds adequately to its function as a home for low-income and working class populations at the turn of the century. Descriptively, it is a vernacular house, a little cottage in appearance, one bay wide, gabled roof, and a sequence of rooms extending in a row behind each other. It is well suited for environments where a lot of the production work takes place outside of the home and where socialization is best carried out in the front and back yards.

The context of the shotgun house is dominated by the social phenomenon of economic exploitation. Although we usually speak of architectural history from the landowner’s or elite’s point of view, vernacular architecture occurs because its users are responding to the residual effects of growth or change within the higher income classes. Certainly, the second contextual element regarding the shotgun house, per se is its response to the hostility of aggressive racist spacial ideologies. The shotgun house then, becomes a good and proper fit for both urban black neighborhoods and rural black settlements. They become both a symbol of defiance against annihilation as well as a place where cultural memory is given berth.

During this period (1800-1890), there was also the development of African American material culture among the middle class and elite blacks. We are beginning to ferret out the designs of black architects and builders notably within the wonderful research recently published by Jack Travis. Although this is the tip of the iceberg, it is not too soon to suspect that the architecture of the black elite would imitate the acceptable, mainstream styles of the period. That is, the black elite would design houses, public buildings, and commercial structures within the Greek revival, Gothic Revival, French Provencal patterns and styles of the mainstream. These architects, although trained primarily in black schools of architecture, would design and build what their client’s wanted, or within the practice of the profession at the time. This is the primary argument given for there not being a “black architecture” in America, since the form, style and construction technology was based on the American/European derivative.

There are at least two reasons why the folk memory of Africa was lost to the black elite –

To be African or of African descent was suppressed by the mass culture.

The African building technology and patterns of decoration were not openly taught to designers.

The pro-African intellectual was an enigma and would have been attributed to a “Back to Africa” dialectic which to most people meant “going backwards”. Fortunately, the literary renaissance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed to a re-awakening of the African American spirit and with that we should see an increase in the interior decoration of spaces with African and Caribbean art, colors, and motifs. There is much room for more research here, as well.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the working class blacks were free to remember their African forms. The popular culture of dance, music, fashion is demonstrably rhythmic, colorful, geometric, and “dark” – all derivatives of an African design ethic.

We have been taught to believe that the revolution in the departure from European classicism didn’t occur until Frank Lloyd Wright started moonlighting. Since we believe this, we have stopped looking for innovations and alternative design solutions that may have

been hidden in other classes of architecture during that period. As research continues to trace these design elements, indicating the form, pattern, and style of spaces designed by African Americans, we will be more comfortable in attributing those elements to our African/black roots. The shotgun house becomes a place that is connected to that memory and becomes no less a romantic association with the growth of domestic architecture in America than the log cabin, the carpenter gothic, the cape cod or salt box house, or the little bungalow. The spaces occupied by the working class African descendent should be regarded in architectural history with the same reverence and romance as the spaces occupied by European settlers and pioneers; the Swedes, the Germans, the English and so forth. The only means by which racist ideology can be obliterated from design education is to move the center of inquiry away from the Euro Centric point of view - as Bell Hooks aptly illustrates in Art On My Mind: (we need to construct) "... an inclusive understanding of radical subjectivity that allows recognition and appreciation of the myriad ways individuals from oppressed or marginalized groups create oppositional cultural strategies that can be meaningfully deployed by everyone". (Sic, p.66)