

not  
white

*diversity in beginning design education*



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

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

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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**

## Deconstruction of Architectural Education

To interject diversity into architectural education for the beginning student is to deconstruct its “schools of architecture.” This literature is to form the basis for the introductory study of architecture without the use of its traditional signifiers and historical references. This paper proposes exercises of site, art, and audience selected and developed by the student, creator of human spatial planning for a diverse culture. The absence of formal text and the focus of authorship is a solution for the implementation of diversity in the cultivation of architecture.

The initial education of the architect commences within the confined walls of graphic studios where the beginning student is subjected to the language, artistic representation and vocabulary dominant in the field of architecture. Multiple exercises involving problem solving are distributed which focus on the development of graphical problem solving. To further expose the students to this new world order, core subjects include architectural history, physics and structural analysis. It is not the typology of the courses that are problematic within a field that is dedicated to providing physical spaces for the use for human “being,” but it is the absence of its cultural identity, hence the absence of self-study that is lacking in the first two developmental years of the architectural student. The teaching of architecture has historically evaded cultural theoretical applications thus ignoring diversity within the development of the physical environment.

In this global society where students emerge from various cultural backgrounds architectural pedagogy has failed to respond to this fact and continues to teach architecture that is absent of the very thing that provides its reason for existence - human “being.” The young student’s cultural identity is eradicated and he/she is simply transformed into a non-descript grouping used for the implementation of rules and regulations constructed on the foundations of historical texts mainly rooted in classicism for the completion of an assortment of exercises.

The student who is now captured in an out of body experience is left to solve hypothetical problems without the use of his/her personal cultural experiences. Thus, the architectural problem is foreign and unsurprisingly produces more of the same predictable physical solutions found throughout architectural pedagogy. Unfortunately, the student’s cognizance is forced to contain all the necessary life information to approach the problem from within and create a meaningful and perhaps original work of architecture based on cultural identity. The underlying theory of architectural investigations must provide the student with a sense of belonging, or nostalgia. If architecture is to respond to the existence of others, its educational exercises must include “self.” Cultural identity may have its roots in music, art and social interactions, however its very nature includes diversity based on gender, race, and age.

Throughout the 1990’s architects explored issues of cultural identity. Jewish architects such as Peter Eisenmann, Daniel Libeskind and Stanley Tigerman explored and embraced Jewish architecture utilizing the philosophy of deconstruction and liberating the field by introducing solutions that are something “other.” Eisenmann explains his disregard for classicism “as a Jew and an outsider I have never felt part of the classical world.” There is something apparent in the language of deconstruction that opens the door to diversity. If deconstruction allows Jewish architects to create dynamic, passionate kinetic architecture then surely it can be used to provoke

abstract

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Linda Montgomery possesses two professional degrees in architecture. She obtained her first professional degree in 1986 from Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia. Her second professional degree was received from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1994. She has worked for various architectural firms in the states of Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Texas. Currently, Mrs. Montgomery resides in Slidell, Louisiana with her husband and three children. She recently established a residential design office specializing in fine custom homes. As an assistant professor at Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, she teaches first year design studio, introduction to construction and architectural representation courses.

the same response from other diverse cultures as well. This awakening and self-seeking acknowledgement can be found in numerous books published in the 1990's concerning African architecture as well as conferences and discourses on architecture and identity.

To deconstruct architectural education is to challenge and break down its boundaries. It needs to be shaken up. It needs to be shattered in order to include the global society in which it aims to spatially contain. Various exercises must include the student as author and interpreter of "self" graphical text. Architectural pedagogy must contain a series of lectures based on principles, values, behavior patterns, beliefs and interest of "being" within the human experience. Architectural social tectonics becomes the underlying theoretical premise of the first two years of the beginning student. Hence, the evolution of autobiographical solutions and a studio atmosphere of inclusion rather than exclusion is the proposed approach to the understanding and increasing diversity in architectural education.

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### **Introduction**

To interject diversity into architectural education for the beginning student is to deconstruct its "schools of architecture." The various components comprising architectural pedagogy must be disassembled and reassembled to represent the global society that forms its foundation for existence. Members of this elite institution must begin to recognize, accept and include diversity in its faculty, students, instructional methods, studio environment and finally text. This paper proposes a solution that will assist in this development by way of introducing cultural identity into the architectural curriculum. The saying that "first impressions are the most lasting impressions" definitely applies to the introduction of formal architectural education by all students enrolled in the first two years of an architectural program. These are the most critical years of matriculation that often determine whether or not a student has the desire, commitment, discipline and passion to remain in such a demanding program. Architectural investigations must provide the student with a sense of belonging, nostalgia. Cultural identity and self-acknowledgement serve as the catalyst for the implementation of diversity for the beginning student.

This literature suggests a basis for the introductory study of architecture without the use of its traditional signifiers and historical references. It also explores the language and use of deconstruction theory to unveil the need for cultural identity in education and practice. The philosophy of deconstruction is a European paradigm. However, it lends itself to the study and inclusion of the "foreign" versus the traditional. Foreign in this case represents cultural identity. Deconstruction's existence in architecture has ruptured the boundaries of classical exclusivity thereby providing an open door to non-traditional methods of architectural design and problem solving, thus freeing the boundaries of cultural identity.

### **Deconstruction**

Deconstruction theory has been the underlying theory of choice for the advancement and recognition of such Jewish architects as Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Stanley Tigerman and Daniel Libeskind. The theoretical and physical solutions created by these excellent architects abstractly represent an autobiographical approach to and for the appreciation and representation of architecture. This approach, personal and familiar, provides the global society with an architecture that represents the "other." The "other" "is an architectural physical representation of cultural identity. This paper explores the absence of formal text and the focus of authorship rooted in cultural identity as a solution for the implementation of diversity and the cultivation of future architects. The means to such ratification is by way of borrowing the language embedded in the philosophy of deconstruction.

*"The safe and sound world of architecture no longer exists. It will never exist again. Open architecture means consciousness and an open mind. In fact, architectural history through the 20th century and into the 90s can be interpreted as a path from a closed to an open space. Architecture as it was proposed in the 19th century is over. We have to go for a complexity that mirrors the diversity of world society. Interlaced and open buildings have no divisions: they challenge the user to take over the space."* (Wolf Prix, Coop Himmelblau, 1995: 65)

*"Architecture Intermundium - which I founded as an alternative to both "theory and practice. Architecture Intermundium was and continues to be an attempt to get away from existing methods of production and discourse in the field - in short, to de-institutionalize architectural thought."* -(Daniel Libeskind, 1995: 15)

### **Faculty and Students**

There are 113 accredited schools of architecture in the United States. According to the National Architectural Accreditation Board (NAAB), 2003 National Faculty Data, "non-white" full time professors represent approximately 15% of its overall total. The number of "non-white" tenured faculty represents 12.5%.<sup>1</sup> Student population numbers for "non-white" remains in this low

percentage range as well. The first and foremost interjection of diversity in schools of higher education begins with the acceptance and recruitment of faculty and students from various cultural backgrounds. Architecture has always been a discipline that propagates the status quo. Throughout its history architecture has practiced the science of exclusion rather than the art of inclusion. This is evident in the number of licensed professionals, established offices, publications and recognition of “non-white” professors and architects. To understand and increase diversity in architectural education all schools of architecture must prepare for and accept a complete makeover. Traditions rooted in separatism and superiority must come to an end. Institutions must embrace diversity and its human resources. Both faculty and students must begin to reflect the global society in which it tends to enclose.

## Curriculum

Upon acceptance into a university, the initial education of the architect commences within the confined walls of graphic studios where the beginning student is subjected to the language, artistic representation and vocabulary traditionally dominant in the field of architecture. Architectural history courses give brief descriptions of the beginnings of architecture with a dominant emphasis on European architecture. Students are given multiple exercises, which focus on the development of graphical problem solving. To further expose the students to this “new world order” additional core subjects include physics and structural analysis.

It is not the typology of the courses that are problematic within a field that is dedicated to providing physical spaces for the use for and by human-being, but it is the absence of cultural identity, hence the absence of self study that is lacking in the first two developmental years of the architectural student. The beginning student is disconnected from what is familiar. Yet a year or two prior to graduation the student is taught to design for what is very familiar: Clients, local community, and the general public.

*“Ever since I began architecture, I had abhorrence to conventional architecture offices. There was something about the atmosphere of redundancy, routine and production that made me allergic to all forms of specialization and so-called professionalism. By dropping the designations form, function, program and engaging in the public and political realm, which is synonymous with architecture, the dynamics of building take on a new dimension.” (Daniel Libeskind, 2003)*

The field of architecture for many of years has excluded diversity. Architectural pedagogy has historically evaded cultural theoretical applications thus ignoring diversity within the development of the physical environment. In this global society where students emerge from various cultural backgrounds architectural pedagogy has failed to respond to this fact and continues to teach architecture that is absent of the very thing that provides its reason for existence - human “being.” The young student’s cultural identity is eradicated and he/she is simply transformed into a non-descript grouping used for the implementation of rules, laws and regulations constructed on the foundations of historical texts mainly rooted in classicism for the completion of an assortment of exercises.

*“In order to get complexity in architecture you have to get rid of several things: first you have to get rid of architectural, historical laws;” ( Wolf Prix, Coop Himmelblau, 1995: 65)*

The student who is now captured in this ‘out of body experience’ is left to solve hypothetical problems without the use of his/her personal cultural experiences. Thus, the architectural problem is foreign. We should not be surprised that it produces more of the same predictable physical solutions found throughout architectural history. Unfortunately, constrained in the student’s cognizance is all the necessary life information to approach the problem from within and create a meaningful and perhaps original piece of architecture based on cultural identity. Solutions include the student’s life experiences. The adaptation of cultural identity must include “self,” the first step toward de-institutionalizing architectural thought. This cultural identity may have its roots in music, art and social interactions. However its’ very nature includes diversity based on gender, race, and age.



Figure 1 and 2: Scheme A. Students: Soloman Harris and Jonavan

*“It is precisely the realm of ideas-not of forms or of styles that presents the most promising legacy of 20th century architecture. The 20th century propels architecture into a world where meanings cannot be completely supplied by historical languages. Modern life brings with it the problem of the meaning of the larger whole.” (Stephen Holl, 1995: 50)*

*“The recent selection of Daniel Libeskind as one of two finalists in the Competition to redesign the site of the former World Trade Center in lower Manhattan is, at the most obvious level, a personal triumph that testifies to his status as one of the world’s most respected architects. But it also highlights the unprecedented rise to prominence in the last generation of Jews in the Western architectural profession.”*

*(Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, 2003)*

*“In the early 1980s already, a number of architects had begun to question the Vitruvian prepositions that underlie traditional well-made “anthropocentric” architecture. These include, next to Coop Himmelblau, Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas and Daniel Libeskind. These architects were catalogued under the header of deconstruction, a term that not merely emphasizes their familiarity with Jacques Derrida’s thinking, or under the header of deconstructivism,” (Bart Van der Straeten and Anneleen Masschelein)*

Jewish architects explored and embraced Jewish architecture utilizing the philosophy of deconstruction, created by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, a man of Sephardic Jewish descent. Bernard Tschumi, award winning internationally renowned architect and Dean of the Graduate School of Architecture at Columbia University, initiated Jacques Derrida into the realm of the practice of architecture in 1985. Mr. Tschumi invited Jacques Derrida to assist him with the design for a section of Parc de la Villette. Derrida’s resulting essay liberated the field of architectural discourse from its previous prepositions. If deconstruction allows Jewish architects to create dynamic, passionate, kinetic, culturally specific architecture then surely the philosophy and theory founded by members of other cultures can be used to provoke the same creative response. This awakening and self-seeking acknowledgement can be found in numerous books published in the 1990’s concerning African architecture, architectural writings by philosophers such as Cornell West as well as conferences and discourses on architecture and identity.

There is something apparent in the language of deconstruction that opens the door to diversity. Belonging, fragmentation, being, meaning, disconnection, connection, exile, translation, de-centered are just a few of its terminologies that are familiar to those who are “non-white.” The wordplay that is inherent in deconstruction makes for an interesting tool for diversity and the beginning student. This paper is not suggesting that schools produce deconstructivists. This paper isn’t an attempt to understand Derrida’s meaning of deconstruction. This paper is forming the basis for a new architectural vocabulary and school of thought that builds upon deconstruction’s premise. Borrowing and reconfiguring a comment from Peter Eisenman regarding his interpretation of Blanchot, author of *“When the Time Comes,”*<sup>2</sup> it is the introduction of the implications of an extension of the idea of deconstruction as a tool for adopting cultural identity in architecture. The adoption of deconstruction by today’s distinguished architects has intentionally or unintentionally allowed for the study and implementation of cultural identity in architectural pedagogy.

*“The best evidence of this trend — and the most significant in light of the current competition to shape the future form of Ground Zero — is the architectural movement known as deconstructivism. Emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in no small part due to the efforts of two of its leading proponents, Libeskind and Eisenman, deconstructivism was a radical movement that cited the massive rupture in Western civilization caused by the Holocaust as grounds for rethinking and “deconstructing” the entire discipline of Western architecture. Sharing the postmodern belief that the Holocaust’s specifically modern origins require the abandonment of the “project of modernity,” Libeskind and Eisenman in their many theoretical writings argued that the Nazi genocide provided compelling reason to abandon traditional architectural practice and to instead embrace an architecture of fragmentation, de-centeredness and loss that reflected the reality of the postmodern, post-humanist, post-Holocaust world.” (Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, 2003)*

Recently and paradoxically, the world has seen the rise of many architects due to their abandonment of traditional architectural practice. This abandonment invoked passion and desire in the works of these select architects. It is evident that this passion and uncovering of creative possibilities within architecture must continue in the works of future architects as is evident in the fact that these master architects are also instructors at prominent schools of architecture.

*“What brings a different dimension to Blanchot’s author is the fact that between the terms self and language he inserts a third term, an excess he terms passion.” (Peter Eisenman 1991: 202)*

This trilogy, self, language and passion are interwoven into the studio culture. The beginning student unknowingly becomes part of a continuous group session whereas the instructor takes on the role of an extractor. The extractor engages in conversations that seek to expose the student to his/her inner graphical and architectural passion. This passion may be rooted in religion, art, text, music, film, dance, etc. never the less it is self-awareness. It is familiar to the student and instills a sense of belonging. The extraction is shared with all participants allowing for the communication and understanding of those who are non-white. The result of this type of group communication and open discussions dispels cultural myths and stereotypes thereby allowing for acceptance and the

introduction of race and identity as part of the studio environment and exercise.

*“The magic of architecture cannot be appropriated by any singular operation because it is always already floating progressing, rising, flying, breathing. Whatever the problems - political, tectonic, linguistic which architecture exposes, one thing I know is that only the intensity and passion of its call make it fun to engage in its practice.” (Daniel Libeskind, 2003)*

## Methodology

An example of the exercise mentioned above comes from two studio exercises conducted at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The first exercise titled “The Wall” focused on the sculptural development of space via models, perspectives and sketches. Students were instructed that today’s influential architects dismissed the idea of “building types” and therefore design structures that must be experienced rather than predefined. Students had to select six objects based on their personality; passion would serve to define the proposed function of their spaces. Objects were placed in areas hidden from the eye, which in turned forced the viewer/observer to seek the meaning engrossed in the models. The results of this exercise included objects such as jewelry, skates, hardware, crucifixions, basketball, and furniture. Transferring these objects as they relate to the functions of architecture the objects/models represented a jewelry store, skateboard arena, repair shop, churches, basketball arena and a high rise resident. The outcome of this exercise did address several of NAAB’s student performance criteria such as verbal and writing skills, graphic skills, research skills, critical thinking skills, human behavior and human diversity. The project also introduced students to one another, provided an approach to architecture that they could relate to and could understand. As a result the students produced autobiographical solutions.

The second project involved the addition to Southern University Museum of Art. The museum is located on the Baton Rouge campus. The site was selected because of its access to all students for the study and development of the project. Students were given a tour of the museum and instructed to select an artist, art, and or sculpture that he/she personally found as inspirational. Students were asked to write a brief description as to why the particular artwork was selected, name of the artwork and title of the artist. The students were then divided into four groups: Site model, site analysis/design and two groups for the design of the structure/addition. The idea behind the use of group projects was to allow interaction amongst the students. It also transformed the studio into its own audience. The audience was immediately aware of the purpose, design premise and its representation. Therefore, the audience was responsible in ensuring that the project was not only completed in its entirety but was responsible for its outcome. The group became a true representation of audience participation.

Upon evaluation of this exercise, the most interesting outcome lies in the solutions for the physical structures. The solutions represented a combination of the student’s selected artwork of inspiration. Such artwork included representations of Moses and the burning bush, Goree’ Island-door of no return, Congo woman supporting a child, a mahogany statue of a very tall woman, and the curves of a woman camouflaged as hilltops in a landscaped painting. The students were allowed to freely develop the project according to the artist’s work as well as the addition of other artworks the student found to inspire their solution. It was apparent that the students took ownership of the design and its abstract representation. This was evident in the student’s ability to quickly defend the designs intentions.

The solutions were divided into Scheme A and Scheme B. Scheme A incorporates various African art forms in its fenestrations. Windows symbolically represent the sun. Inside, there is a stairwell that leads to a rooftop door with a view that overlooks the Mississippi River. This door mirrors the door found on Goree’ Island. It is the door of no return. Scheme B, with its flowing rooftop forms, depicts the curves of a woman. The silhouette form of the addition reflects the form of the artist’s work titled Moses and the Burning Bush. The tallness of the addition represents the mahogany tall woman. This scheme strategically locates the window openings based on the position of the building on the site. The artwork of Moses and the Burning Bush reflects light in various colors. This scheme chose to reflect natural light in the galleries where lighting would not damage the artwork.

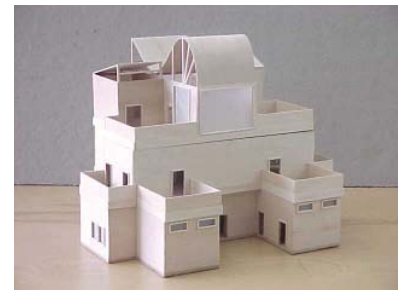


Figure 3 and 4: Scheme B, Students: Akeisha Tircuit, Jennifer Wilkins and Mara Shaw

It is apparent that neither scheme depicts deconstruction architecture as practiced by deconstructivist. It was never the intentions of this paper or the assignment to create a work representative of deconstruction. Deconstruction simply provided the methodology. Due to the transference of the language of deconstruction, students were able to solve an architectural problem that provoked passion and illustrated cultural identity. The exercise automatically included diversity in its assignment by the inclusion of its diversified student body, religion, and African and African American art.

*“Deconstruction is understood to be unproblematically architectural. There seems to be no translation, just a metaphoric transfer, a straight forward application of theory from outside architecture to the practical domain of the architectural object.....just a literal application, a transliteration. Architecture is understood as a representation of an abstract idea.” (Mark Wigley, 1993: 2)*

## Summary

As an African American woman who had practiced architecture for a number of years before returning to graduate school, I often felt isolated from the theory of architecture, culture, and myself. I was fortunate to work in some very high-profile firms on large-scale projects. However, I found the rigid structure of architectural problem solving to be non-motivating. I felt disconnected. I was fortunate to enter University of Illinois in Chicago while under the leadership of Stanley Tigerman. Mr. Tigerman encouraged and allowed me to pursue an autobiographical approach to architectural problem solving. As I read readings of deconstruction, viewed the works of deconstructivists, and read various architects applications of this theory, I became motivated and interested in this new approach to design. I knew there were others out there that felt unrelated to the traditional laws of architectural design. Deconstruction was the language needed to express my architectural cultural identity. My graduate projects included African American “family” housing, an artist’s office building, a triangular form, (significant in African history), that produced various facades depending on the approach to the site and my most personally rewarding and celebrated project, A Memorial to Commemorate Slavery. The language of deconstruction: Binary oppositions; slavery vs. freedom, black vs. white, nostalgia vs. belonging, fragmentation vs. whole, trace, erasure, difference, etc. were all used to justify and assist my exploration into architectural cultural identity.

To deconstruct architectural education is to challenge and break down its boundaries. It needs to be shattered in order to include the global society in which it aims to spatially contain. Each participating component: Faculty, student, and studio exercises, must be willing to address discourses that are based in culture. Various exercises must include the student as author and interpreter of “self” graphical text. Architectural pedagogy must contain a series of lectures based on principles, values, behavior patterns, beliefs and interest of “self” the human experience. Thus, the evolution of autobio-graphical solutions as well as a studio atmosphere of inclusion rather than exclusion is the result of accepting identity. Architectural cultural identity is the proposed approach to the understanding and increasing diversity in architectural education.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> National Architectural Accreditation Board, 2003 Statistical Data, <<http://www.naab.org>>

<sup>2</sup> Peter Eisenman, “The Author’s Affect: Passion and the Moment of Architecture,” *Anyone* (1991): 202-208.

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