

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**

## Secrets of the Cloth

In Western Africa the woven cloth is a receiver and transmitter of multivalent layers of information, presented simultaneously. The weaver is placed into the position of an interlocutor of social and cosmological information. He speaks through aspects of the cloth such as symbols, color relation usage, the weave and material. An example of the central role the process of weaving holds as a cultural foundation of ordering the universe, are the Dogon people, located in the Bandiagara hills of Mali. At the core of their creation myth is the act of weaving.<sup>1</sup> The first and second words (of existence) are revealed in the form of a technical process, the process of weaving. The Dogon word for woven material is *Soy*, which also means word, which is also the word for the number seven the Nummo which brought the word.<sup>2</sup> For them creation was spoken/ woven into existence and through this story, the “word” and weaving are made one. Each time the craftsman produces a weave, he is re-enacting the creation of the universe. He is bringing forth communication between the heavens and humanity.

The third word is the development of the granary, the organizing element of a social order, which is formed from a woven basket turned upside down. The classification of a world order... Architecture, the development of society and the storage of agriculture the center of society.<sup>3</sup> The first social, architectural structure is the result of the weaving process.

It is important to start with the Dogon creation myth in order to establish the reverence afforded the craft of weaving within one of the many strands of West African culture that make up the patchwork tapestry of the African-American oeuvre. The Akan of Ghana, believe the universe was created by a supreme being, whom they refer to variously as *Oboadee* (Creator), *Nyame* (God), *Odomankoma* (Infinite, Inventor), *Anase Kokuroko* (The Great Spider; The Great Designer). Which leads us to a more colloquial example of this reverence for weaving; the word and the woven artifact are the countless “Anansi” the spider tales told throughout West Africa the Caribbean and South and North America, in communities of African descent. While the stories focus on the wisdom, trickery and craftiness of this cultural hero. The underlying lessons of the many parables are to convey a conceptual structuring of the world as many strands, within a web or cloth, that must be carefully spun and woven.

abstract  
Scott Ruff

---

Assistant Professor  
School of Architecture  
Syracuse University  
Syracuse, New York 13244-1250  
email: slruff@syr.edu

Originally from Buffalo, New York, Scott Ruff received both a bachelor of architecture degree and master of architecture degree from Cornell University. In 1992 he received the Alpha Rho Chi medal for leadership and service. In 1999 he received a the Eidlitz travel fellowship to do research in Nigeria. He gained professional experience as an architect from Foit-Albert and Associates.

Prior to joining the Syracuse School of Architecture faculty, Ruff taught at the Hampton University Department of Architecture, the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning, and the Cornell University School of Architecture, Art and Planning. He has been an invited juror at the University of Virginia and the University of Michigan. In 2003 Ruff formed Ruff Works Studio, a research/design studio. One of the main subjects of inquiry for Ruff and the studio is the research and cultivation of African-American aesthetics in spatial design. His seminar “Gender, Race, and Contemporary Culture in Architecture” is an exploration of identity and its relationship in the conceptualization and practice of architecture.

Ruff’s published writings include an article in *Thresholds*, “Spatial “wRapping”: A Speculation on Men’s Hip-Hop Fashion”, a book review in the *Journal of Architectural Education* on “White Papers, Black Marks”. Ruff has lectured throughout the United States; recent presentations include “Secrets of the Cloth”, “Education of an Architect: Through African-American constructs” and “Diversity in Architecture.”

### Ground Weave

In Western Africa the woven cloth is a receiver and transmitter of multivalent layers of information, presented simultaneously. The weaver is placed into the position of an interlocutor of social and cosmological information. He speaks through aspects of the cloth such as symbols, color relation usage, the weave and material. An example of the central role the process of weaving holds as a cultural foundation of ordering the universe, are the Dogon people, located in the Bandiagara hills of Mali. At the core of their creation myth is the act of weaving.<sup>1</sup> The first and second words (of existence) are revealed in the form of a technical process, the process of weaving. The Dogon word for woven material is *Soy*, which also means word, which is also the word for the number seven the Nummo which brought the word.<sup>2</sup> For them creation was spoken/ woven into existence and through this story, the “word” and weaving are made one. Each time the craftsman produces a weave, he is re-enacting the creation of the universe. He is bringing forth communication between the heavens and humanity.

The third word is the development of the granary, the organizing element of a social order, which is formed from a woven basket turned upside down. The classification of a world order... Architecture, the development of society and the storage of agriculture the center of society.<sup>3</sup> The first social, architectural structure is the result of the weaving process.

It is important to start with the Dogon creation myth in order to establish the reverence afforded the craft of weaving within one of the many strands of West African culture that make up the patchwork tapestry of the African-American oeuvre. The Akan of Ghana, believe the universe was created by a supreme being, whom they refer to variously as *Oboadee* (Creator), *Nyame* (God), *Odomankoma* (Infinite, Inventor), *Anase Kokuroko* (The Great Spider; The Great Designer). Which leads us to a more colloquial example of this reverence for weaving; the word and the woven artifact are the countless “Anansi” the spider tales told throughout West Africa the Caribbean and South and North America, in communities of African descent. While the stories focus on the wisdom, trickery and craftiness of this cultural hero. The underlying lessons of the many parables are to convey a conceptual structuring of the world as many strands, within a web or cloth, that must be carefully spun and woven.

Peggy Stolz Gilfoy, curator of the 1987-1988 exhibition *Patterns of Life: West African Strip Weaving Traditions*, states:

*Perhaps more than any other art form, textiles reflect the cultures from which they come. They are simultaneously personal, social, religious, and political, and they are valuable vehicles for the spread of ideas from one culture to another. In Africa their use and dissemination is documented for over two thousand years. African weaving is a vibrant medium that conveys the essence of an African aesthetic.<sup>4</sup>*

It is weaving’s inter-connected-ness with so many aspects of culture and the strength of its practice that make it an ideal subject for an investigation of African aesthetic principles transposed into contemporary architectural discourse. The obvious medium to study for a discussion of African concepts in architecture might be African architecture. But, much of contemporary African architecture is so influenced by European aesthetics that it is beneficial to study other contemporary African cultural productions, which have a stronger history of continuity with traditional aesthetic values, to better understand what some specific aspects of African aesthetics are. (See Figure 1.)

### Connection

The weaving process focused on in this document is known as strip weaving as practiced in West Africa. Most of the cloths studied are of *Asante* and *Ewe* origin and are commonly referred to as *Kente* cloth. This particular cloth is chosen because of its strong contemporary presence in the collective consciousness of so many people of African descent. It is also chosen because of the clarity and high level of skill in which the artifacts deploy aesthetic principles particular to cultures in the Western part of the African continent.

*Kente is an Asante ceremonial cloth hand-woven on a horizontal treadle loom. Strips measuring about 4 inches wide are sewn together into larger*



Figure 1: Ewe Men’s Cloth, Asasa Adanudo.



Figure 2: Kente Block: Proportion Study.

*pieces of cloths. Cloths come in various colors, sizes and designs and are worn during very important social and religious occasions. In a total cultural context, kente is more important than just a cloth. It is a visual representation of history, philosophy, ethics, oral literature, moral values, social code, of conduct, religious beliefs, political thought, and aesthetic principles. The term kente has its roots in the word kenten, which means a basket. The first kente weavers used raffia fibers to weave cloths that looked like kenten (a basket); and thus were referred to as kenten ntoma; meaning basket cloth. The original Asante name of the cloth was nsaduaso or nwontoma, meaning "a cloth hand-woven on a loom" and is still used today by Asante weavers and elders. However, the term kente is the most popularly used today, in and outside Ghana. Many variations of narrow-strip cloths, similar to kente, are woven by various ethnic groups in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa.*<sup>5</sup>

Kente cloth re-enters the collective psyche of the African-American culture during the Black power movements of the late 1960's and 1970's. This movement recapitulates the Pan-African ideology progressed during the 1920's by Marcus Garvey, whose motto was "Back to Africa", which meant literally taking Africans here in America back to the Western Coast of the African Continent. This second wave of the Pan African movement entrenched its self in the United States and brought more Africa to America, re-infusing the African-American population with material culture from the "Mother Land" of Africa, hair being worn in a natural way, e.g. afros, braids, and locks. The informing of traditional "Western" holidays such as Christmas/ Kwanzaa with African based ceremonies and rituals and the donning of traditional West African garments, such as *Danshiki*, Jewellery and *Kente Cloth*. The cloth reappears in single strip, full cloths and in pattern designs on printed fabric. People have used the cloths in various manners from wearing the single strip of cloth for celebratory or ceremonial occasions, tablecloths to patterns within everyday clothing and other commercialized paraphernalia.

These cloths take on an important role in the understanding and continued formation of an African-Diasporic aesthetic ideology because of its strong contemporary presence as a crafted material artifact whose tradition of development is still in tact, through the vicissitudes of colonization in Africa and slavery. Because of the contemporary existence of the weaving craft in West Africa it is possible to observe fundamental relationships between African Diasporic design principles and West African Design principles and seeing West African Aesthetic sensibilities as a precedent to many textile cultural productions in the Diaspora outside of Africa. (See Figure 2.)

## Analysis

The formal analysis of the cloth begins by using a swatch of a single Asante cloth and clarifying the most basic weaving compositions used. The swatch spans across three strips of composition. This study abstracts the cloth into two different, yet related 3 dimensional constructs, one that translates the patches of color into lines and planes and the other which translates the compositions into planes and solids. In *Kente* study 1, the colors are abstracted into thin planes of the same thickness. The planes are then placed at varied heights and depths, each according to its related color. In *Kente* study 2, the lines and blocks of color are abstracted into solid forms, to establish a composition of massive objects. From a study of proportions is found four basic patterns used in the particular cloths analyzed. Within each strip of cloth there is a basic repeated composition 'block'. Its horizontal to vertical relationship is 2:1 fig. This proportion is then broken down into two adjacent squares of proportion 1:1 and 1:1, articulated by a change in color between the two squares. The third block subdivides the two adjacent squares into a horizontal rhythm of 3:1:1:3 or  $\frac{3}{4}$ :1/4:1/4:3/4. The third block composition uses the same 2:1 rectangular space and sub-divides its length into three areas of color separated by two slightly larger spaces 1:1.5:1:1.5:1. The final block is a continuous grounding of color or stripped composition, within the 2:1 proportion.

## Break-Line Composition

One of the most intriguing practices at play within this tradition of strip weaving is the principle of "Break-line Patterning" or as will be referred to here as Break-line composition.<sup>6</sup> One of the identifying characteristics of a good cloth is the play of, off beat phrasing in the unfolding of the overall design. Break-line composition is expressed in at least three major ways: Through slight or dramatic shifts in pattern alignment of adjoining strips. In the use of deliberate clashing dissonance of high effect colors, in willful contrastive, bold arrangements. And the seemingly random placement of design elements, a placement that is in fact a well-planned aesthetic system informed by cultural and personal mores.<sup>7</sup> Peggy Stolz Gilfoxy dispels the notion that this preference for break-line composition as an accidental occurrence or a lack of skill. She explains how there are times within the compositions where alignment and continuity is desired in order to further bring out the skill employed by the artist of improvisation.

*"It is important to credit the influence of the type of equipment used in West African weaving on textile design. Perhaps one of the reasons narrow-strip looms originally developed and continue to be used today is that they can produce nonsymmetrically designed cloths. The final composition is not a case of happenstance, but it is rather a carefully orchestrated rhythmic placement of design elements."*<sup>8</sup>



Figure 3: Mossi weaver, Burkina Faso, c. 1900. Image from *Patterns of Life*.

proximate alignment and non-alignment.

*Why the frequent seemingly imperative suspension of expected patterning? ... To keep spirits away. In Senegambia it was important to randomize the flow of paths, since "evil travels in straight lines." And the Mande themselves coded, in discretionary irregularities of design, visual analogues to danger, matters too serious to impart directly.... Nevertheless, those pilgrims of the Mande concept of **fedenya** (individuality, with all its attendant dangers)- hunters and warriors, heroic wearers of off beat textiles- continue to venture into disordered regions, mirroring them, deflecting them with their dress, and come back, as Mary Douglas has memorably phrased, a parallel accomplishment, "with a power not available to those who have stayed in control of.... society."<sup>9</sup>*

In this context break-line composition might also be understood as a spiritual talisman like the "Islamic Hand of *Fatimma*" a diverter of the evil eye, or in western terms a deflector of the gaze. The contrasting colors, constant shifts and breaks in expected pattern and the dance of figural objects, cause the eye to see but not rest upon the cloth or its wearer. (See Figure 3.)

### Equipment

The form and structure of a *kente* cloth are tightly bound to the tools and methods of its production. The small width size of each strip is a direct result and reference to the horizontal looms employed by the traditionally nomadic craftsmen. The tools enable the weavers the ability to deploy their craft within many arenas and institutions of the culture. It also affords them the ability to put into practice the techniques of Break-line composition.<sup>10</sup>

*The West African narrow strip loom consists of upright poles to hold the superstructure and horizontal elements to control the path of the weaving thread. Warp threads are fastened at one end to a bar...next to the weaver and at the other end to a heavy dragstone..It is this tensioning device, along with the narrow width of the finished cloth strip, that distinguishes the West African men's loom from other looms.<sup>11</sup> (See Figure 3.)*

This very unique and particularized machine allows for an extreme efficiency in its use of space, storage, economy, time, climate, local, and cultural mores, it "ensures security and the isolation of the cloth from offensive spirits."<sup>12</sup> Also the equipment for the craft is not very expensive "is a great boon" in an area where material and economic resources are scarce. As stated by Peter Adler and Nicholas Barnard in *African Majesty*.

*Time in hand to work is cheap in Africa; it is the raw materials, more often than not imported, that are expensive. The narrow- strip production of West Africa, and in particular that of the Ashante and the Ewe, must be the most labor intensive weaving, per square inch of produced cloth, known to man.<sup>13</sup>*

### Techniques

General weaving techniques frequently used in the making of *kente* are utilized as architectural techniques for the three architectonic interventions presented.

- **Inserted weft.** Additional weft threads inserted in the structure in such a way that they deflect the ground weave.
- **Supplementary weft.** Nonstructural weft added over the ground weave to create a pattern. (See Figure 4.)
- **Tapestry weave.** The linking together of wefts of adjacent color areas each time they meet.
- **Weft wrapping.** Weft threads are carried manually over a group of warps and then wrapped around part of the group. (See Figure 4.)

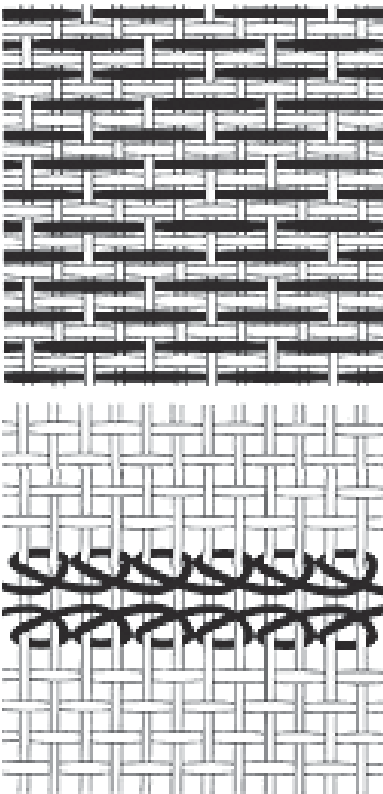


Figure 4: Weaving techniques,(left to right) Supplementary Weft and Weft wrapping, from *Patterns of Life Glossary*.

## Deployment of the Weave

**Appropriated Space: Exhibition stands**, is an installation of temporary stands for the display of architectural models within a two-story space. The conceptual approach to the project was to employ nomadic tactics. A mode of building similar to the weaving looms used by West African craftsmen. A functional device able to be easily transported by a single individual; made of easy to acquire materials and able to adapt to many different site conditions but also able to be anchored to the site, both physically and conceptually. The connection or no-connection detail of the stands to the railing are a study in joining by adjacency, friction, balance and gravity, soft connections, the way a weave holds together. (See Figure 5.)

**Appropriated Space: Column and Beam**, is similar to Appropriated Space: Exhibition stands. It employs ideas of nomadism and appropriation. It is an installation placed into a rental apartment. Again a mode of construction which could be carried and implemented by one person was a key factor in the elements used in the project.

**S1W** is a small two-story side entry colonial style home located in Syracuse New York's eastside. The basic program for the spatial appropriation of the house through strategically placed interventions is the redesign of the main entry foyer, the kitchen, a lavatory, the living room, storage space in the bedrooms and studio. The design, while addressing many practical issues, is conceptually based in an architectural theory of weaving. The primary strategy utilized in this appropriation looks at the spatial intervention as an African artifact, ascribing to an understanding that most African artifacts are also functional tools within the society: art, craft, history, religion and function are bound together, in one object, linking it to the culture. Within this basic strategy is employed a set of tactics that reference Black culture from multiple perspectives. The tactics found in this design use architectural translations of design principles and techniques found in the weaving tradition such as break-line composition, weft wrapping and supplementary weft. (See Figure 6.)

The three projects shown in this presentation are small low-tech projects, much like the horizontal weaving looms, highly conscious of their particular economy of means and time, for installation. Each altering the perception of space or enhancing the function of the space through, rhythm, repetition, variation, break-line composition, line and surface. Each, like the *kente* cloths, incorporates ideas born from the techniques and principles of weaving with other more abstract concepts that make reference to African-American cultural experiences. For example, S1W and Appropriated Space intentionally employ concepts found in the language of Ebionics, multiplicity and transposition of conceptual meaning/reading such as bad, dope, fresh, hype, all meaning good and emphatic embellishment like "mo' better". This list of parallel references to language or cultural narratives could go on and only speaks to another aspect of the concept of weaving, the interweaving of many ideas into one composition. But that discussion presents aesthetic concepts not strongly easily explained through the craft of weaving and possibly over complicates one of the principles that are best shown through the cloth.

Arguably, the concept of weaving is one of the cornerstones of the West African Diaspora collective consciousness. From Africa to Europe to the Americas weaving is found within the cosmology and the folktales of most if not all cultures of African descent. It is also just as clear that the textile arts play a major role in the social tradition of these same cultures. This is what makes a cultural production such as *kente* cloths powerful resources for the study of African aesthetics. They are graphic embodiments of the same creative values, mores and spirit found in African music, dance and religion. It is made plain in this document that through even the basic study of these cultural creative productions it is possible to inform and develop contemporary architectural practices grounded in the knowledge of Africa.

A tectonic intention of the project is to work in conjunction with the existing house composition, "not to willfully destroy the old for the new". This objective is most clearly displayed in the relationship between the new and the old structures. Each of the new installations lightly and or minimally engages the existing structure.

Economy of the work is addressed through resource, material and means. Starting



Figure 5: Appropriated Space: Exhibition stands.

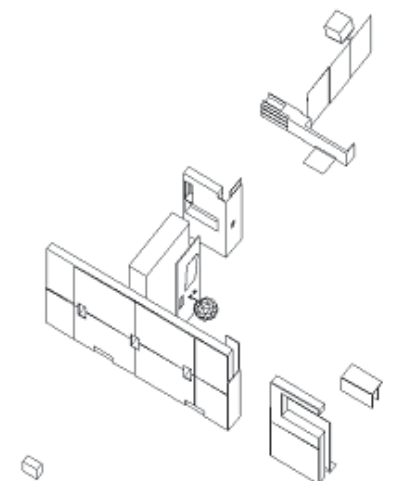


Figure 6: S1W Axonometric of Interwoven interventions.

with little to no money, much of the demolition, rough work and the intricate architectural connections were done by the designer and the client. Metal work and fine cabinetry were sub-contracted.

Programmatically, the project questions the architectural notion of “serving vs. served” space. Closets, serving tables and holders become focal points in the house, not hidden away behind walls or minor accent pieces of furniture. The fragments within the composition are precariously defined between Architecture and furniture. An example of this is the serving table in the Dining room space of the house. It is at once a service piece, usually something to overlook or look through, becomes a sculpture like piece in the space, drawing attention to its location as well as its self. This relates to the difficult to name and position cultural heritage of African-Americans. Avoided in this intervention are cliché reference to two dimensional pattern and contrasting colors. The focus instead is on a study of African based concepts incorporated into contemporary programs and form.

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmeli: An introduction to Dogon religious ideas* (International African Institute 1965, London), pgs. 28-29

-The first word, When Nummo speaks, what comes from his mouth is a warm vapor, which conveys, and itself constitutes, speech. This vapor, like all water, has sound, dies away in a helicoid line. The coiled fringes of the skirt were therefore the chosen vehicle for the words which the Spirits desired to reveal to the earth. He endued his hands with magic power by raising them to his lips while he plaited the skirt, so that the moisture of his words was imparted to the damp plaits, and the spiritual revelation was embodied in the technical instruction.... Thus the earth had a language, the first language of this world and the most primitive of all time.... The words were breathed sounds.

-The second word, At sunrise on the appointed day the seventh ancestor Spirit spat out eighty threads of cotton; these he distributed between his upper teeth which acted as the teeth of a weaver's reed. In this way he made the uneven threads of a warp. He did the same with the lower teeth to make the even threads. By opening and shutting his jaws the Spirit caused the threads of the warp to make the movements required in weaving. His whole face took part in the work, his nose studs serving as the block, while the stud in his lower lip was the shuttle.

As the threads crossed and uncrossed, the two tips of the Spirit's forked tongue pushed the thread of the weft to and fro, and the web took shape from his mouth in the breath on the second revealed Word.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg.28

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pg. 31

He (the first ancestor) took a woven basket with a circular opening and a square base in which to carry the earth and puddled clay required for the construction of a world-system... This basket served as a model for a basket-work structure of considerable size which he built upside down.. this frame work he covered with puddled clay made of the earth from heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Peggy Stoltz Gilfoy, *Patterns of Life: West African Strip-Weaving Traditions*, (National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C. 1988) pg. 11

<sup>5</sup> Sankofa Publications Web site

<sup>6</sup> Peggy Stoltz Gilfoy, 46

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 47

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 46

<sup>9</sup> Robert Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* pgs. 221- 222

<sup>10</sup> Peggy Stoltz Gilfoy, pg. 46

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pg. 11

<sup>12</sup> Peter Adler and Nicholas Barnard, *African Majesty: The Textile Art of the Ashanti and Ewe* (London 1992). pg. 30

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pg. 30