

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



Shannon Chance, AIA, Editor

PROCEEDINGS of the
20th 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

Individual Identity in a Group Assignment

In the Florida A&M University beginning design studios, first year studio assignments are traditionally done by individual students. Group activities and assignments are typically incorporated later in the curriculum. This format creates serious misconceptions and problems as it (1) fosters the belief that individual students are competing against other students, and (2) perpetuates the myth of the builder working in isolation in his/her individual exploration. The existing process constrains possibilities, experiences, and ideas that could potentially create a multitude of outcomes.

An effective and efficient way to promote the communication of a diverse range of architectural ideas is through the structuring of group assignments that encourage individual identity. As Graduate Teaching Assistants in the first year design studio, we served as project facilitators for the first 12 weeks. For the final project, we designed an assignment that utilizes individuality to facilitate the exchange of ideas and expertise.

Diversity (through the form of group assignments) can mitigate critical issues of studio culture, specifically, individual awareness, and the exchange of ideas. The project was designed to engage these issues of studio culture, with a specific focus on abstraction, media, and connection. The student project was developed in two phases.

The first phase of the project was an exploration of space-making through materiality. Seventeen students were broken into five material groups that reflected their media: molding, wood, metal, glass, and paper. Each student within a material group was responsible for creating one space making object and its appropriate drawings (plan and perspective). However, the collective work of each material group was intended to function as a library of pieces that would demonstrate the range of possibilities intrinsic to that material group.

The second phase was an exploration of composition and context. Students were divided into three teams of five to six people. Every team received at least one representative from each material group to create a diverse team of material experts. As a team they used their individual pieces as a kit of parts to create one cohesive object. Keeping in mind connections and joints the team designed the method for integrating the pieces into a single object based upon the properties of the materials. The team created this new field by researching context, surrealism, color media and architectural rendering. The final result was a spatial model composed of individual object explorations, placed within an appropriate imaginary context through detailed drawings (section and color sketch).

abstract

Daisy-O'lice Williams

Karen E. Williams

Florida A&M University
School of Architecture
1936 South Martin Luther King Blvd
Tallahassee, FL 32307
850.599.3244

Daisy-O'lice Williams

2nd Year Graduate Student Faculty
Daisy-O'lice I. Williams is currently working as a Graduate Teaching Assistant while pursuing her Master of Architecture degree at Florida A&M University. Her thesis research focuses on the interaction between media, process, and product during schematic design. In addition to research in graphic theory, and experience in design education, Daisy-O'lice has actively pursued interests in historic preservation and understanding architectural landscapes abroad. Educational studies have included travel to various parts of Spain, St. Martin, and most recently Cuba where she worked as a research assistant.
email: daisyolice@hotmail.com

Karen E. Williams

2nd Year Graduate Student Faculty
Karen E. Williams is a second year Master of Architecture (M.Arch.) student at the Florida A&M University (FAMU) School of Architecture. Ms. Williams graduate assistantship assignment involves team teaching a first year design studio. She is a member of the Alpha Rho Chi Fraternity Inc, American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS), Tau Sigma Delta Honor Society and Golden Seal Honor Society. Her thesis focuses on learning from natural systems as a means toward developing building enclosure systems. She endeavors to be an international architect, focusing on environmentally conscious theatrical design, the effects of globalization and urban sprawl.
email: aries215@hotmail.com



In December 2002, The AIAS created a taskforce to evaluate the condition of studio culture in architecture schools across the nation. Amongst their findings, was a concern expressed for the insufficient presence of programs that respected and promoted diversity. However, what exactly is diversity? Diversity, as outlined by the call for papers for the 2004 National Conference on the Beginning Design Student entitled, *Not White: Diversity In Beginning Design Education*, referred to two aspects of diversity: (1) “a wide range of people” or cultural diversity, and (2) “a wide range of architectural ideas” or intellectual diversity. The goal of this paper was to address intellectual and cultural diversity through the content and structuring of two first-year studio projects. Project 1 *Space-makers*, a fall semester project, looked at collaboration and individual identity as proponents for intellectual diversity. Project 2, *Exploration of Generational Icons*, a spring semester project used movies as a subject matter to integrate current culture into the design studio. The results of these projects led to the formulation of three major key points relating to intellectual and cultural diversity in the beginning design studio:

- 1) Group projects are effective vehicles for introducing a diversity of architectural ideas into studio culture.
- 2) Self-Awareness is paramount to maintaining an atmosphere of diversity. A group project context *can* reinforce individual identity.
- 3) First year design projects should promote the critical analysis of current culture and architectural precedents through synthesis.

I. PROJECT 1: Space-Makers: An Investigation into Collaboration

In the Florida A&M University beginning design studios, first year studio assignments are traditionally done by individual students. Group activities and assignments are typically incorporated later in the curriculum. Even then, this concurs with the AIAS Task Force statement that “group projects are most often limited to pre-design activities of research, analysis, and site documentation. The synthetic processes of design, in which negotiation and collaborative skills are most critical and difficult, are limited to individual effort”. This format creates serious misconceptions and problems as it fosters the belief that individual students are competing against other students, and perpetuates the myth of the builder working in isolation in his/her individual exploration. The existing process constrains the scope of possibilities, experiences, and ideas that could potentially create a multitude of outcomes. An effective and efficient way to promote the communication of a diverse range of architectural ideas is through the structuring of group assignments that encourage individual identity. This project was designed to engage students in the collaborative process, with a specific focus on materiality, and expertise. The student project was developed in two phases.

The first phase of the project was an exploration of space-making through materiality. After compiling a thorough list of typical model making materials, the list was broken down into five major categories based on material properties. Seventeen students were distributed within these groups. The final categories of groupings were: wood, molding, paper, metal and glass. Each group considered a wide range of materials and manipulation within that category. The materials within the categories were as follows:

Wood group- all types of wood

Molding group- plaster, clay, soap, mold, and wax

Paper group- museum, chip, foam board, vellum, Mylar, regular paper, corrugated board

Metal group- copper roll, aluminum roll, mesh, metal, wire, metal rods, heavy metal

Glass group- plexiglass, acetate, plastic, craft plastic.

Each student within a material group was responsible for creating one space making object and its appropriate drawings (plan and perspective). The collective work of each material group was intended to function as a library of pieces that would demonstrate the range of possibilities intrinsic to that material group.

The second phase was an exploration of composition and context. Students were then divided

into three teams of five to six people. Every team received at least one representative from each material group to create a diverse team of material experts.

As a team they used their individual pieces, made from varying materials, as a kit of parts to create one cohesive object. Keeping in mind connections and joints the teams designed their method for integrating the pieces into a single object based upon the properties of the materials. The final result were, spatial models composed of individual object explorations. These spatial models were placed within an appropriate imaginary context expressed through detailed drawings (sections and color sketches).



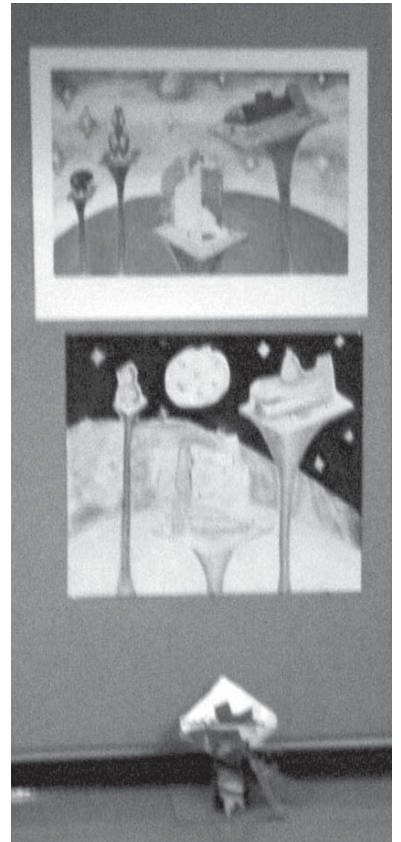
Overall, this first year end of the semester group project served as an efficient way to, **(1) introduce a range of architectural ideas**, and **(2) promote self-awareness through identity within a group context**.

1. A Range of Architectural Ideas: Materiality

In the beginning design studio, it is important to expose students to a range of fundamentals skills and techniques. The structuring of this project integrated a diversity of student types with a diversity of concepts such as abstraction and interdisciplinary information. However, the chief objective was to establish an awareness and understanding of materiality in the participants.



Prior to this project, model building materials was an area that had been a challenge to instruct because material inclusion into a project usually applies to final presentation when students are working outside of the studio. It was in the instructors' experience that as a result, students typically learned to use different materials through persuasion, informal experimentation, or out of class observation. It seemed they rarely experimented with materials from fear of questionable results. Thus their work lacked variation. Not only was there monotony in material choice, concepts like structure and form were learned in isolation from materiality.



Student collaboration allowed for a comprehensive investigation of materiality as a multi-faceted concept. Overall, materials became the means to explore, enclosure, texture, skin, layers and connection. The group format of this project served as an efficient method for introducing an extensive amount of materials and their properties to every student in just one project. It also provided a venue to explore the relationship of these numerous materials to one another. Although in the first phase, each student was not able to use each material within a category, they could witness in close proximity the application of the other materials. In phase two, students were required to communicate amongst one another about the properties and behavior of materials in other categories, thus acquiring ideas for future reference. Their goal was not simply to create objects for aesthetic satisfactions, but to demonstrate material capabilities by creating objects that would communicate rather than just please. In this manner, the process of discovery became as important as the product.

2. Individual Identity and Self-Awareness through Collaboration

Often beginning design studios do not introduce projects that encourage students to cultivate character by investigating their own identity. This forfeits valuable opportunities for self-reflection and growth. However, in their 2002 report, the AIAS Studio Culture Task Force outlined the importance of identity. They pledged that "individual learning, personal development, and mastery are crucial requisites of studio education". Unfortunately for many design environments, the creative process has remained a polarized issue where individual identity and collaboration are mutually exclusive. The myth prevails, that collaboration with other students, means giving up the best ideas (AIAS Taskforce). The AIAS Taskforce attributes some of the difficulties in merging individual skills with collaborative skills to a lack of purpose. "Student designers are nascent and insecure in their capabilities. They often bring similar rather than complementary, skills and knowledge to a team project." One goal of this project became to create a collaborative environment that programmed individual identity and expertise into its structure.

After twelve weeks of projects, observations, and evaluations, the facilitators designed

the groups and teams for the last project based on observed technical ability, and social temperament. Students exhibiting a keen understanding of materials, abstraction and form were divided amongst the teams to work with materials which required more patience or exploration in effort to form complimentary relationships.

The phases of the project had different layers of comfort associated with group work and individuality. In phase I within the material groups, most people were novices handling the material for the first time. This discomfort was balanced by the availability of advice from other group members. Students in a material group were to sit together and brainstorm about the possibilities of manipulating their material. Each student decided which form of the material would work best with their skills and interest. This freedom allowed room for demonstration of individuality through preference. In this phase, the students did not have to share a design task. Groups were formed for the sole intention of students beginning to learn to communicate their design ideas effectively, and gain confidence in viewing classmates as intellectual resources. Their identity was defined by the aspect of the material that they chose to explore. Since each student chose a different aspect their identity could be clearly expressed without competition. As the students experimented, they became comfortable with their personal techniques and abilities without the added pressure of a shared design task.

Within the final teams in phase II, each student then functioned as an expert of a certain material. By pre-establishing their identities in phase I, students exhibited confidence in having advanced specific knowledge about the properties of that material. Their role was clear. He/she was responsible for making his/her piece an intricate part of the final group object. However to maintain democracy, individuals were forced to re-evaluate their own form with objectivity in terms of strength, compatibility, size, and craft. The entire group had to collaborate as a unit in deciding upon the most appropriate way to arrange and join their pieces to make one cohesive object.

In this project, individual identity was cultivated by explicitly establishing expertise amongst students. Each participant had a clear role and brought different resources to the group. This project mimicked the architecture profession by defining the design process as a collaborative process between peers of equal yet differing intellectual backgrounds and expertise.

II. PROJECT 2: Exploration of Generational Icons

Cultural diversity plays a vital role in design. Social experience based on age, race, gender, and heritage can serve as a tremendous source of inspiration and information. Therefore, it is critical that studio projects are programmed to allow students the space to express their cultural identity as well as their own conscious reflections on current collective culture, even at a beginning design studio level.

Project 2, Exploration of Generational Icons was designed to encourage students to make a connection between the academic architectural world, and their own previous personal and cultural experience. It was introduced in three phases. In the first phase students delved into the visual language of two iconic films of their choice. In these investigations they identified colors, patterns, materials, and forms that were representative of the visual character of the movies. From these explorations they composed one sample board per movie. Each board contained a five color study, four material samples, two pattern samples, and two form samples. The results were two distinct visual libraries based on film.

In the second phase, students chose their most informative movie board to act as a reference palette to aid them in the selection of an appropriate architect or architectural style. This decision was based on observations about similar form, materiality, and pattern found between their movie palette, and architectural works of the past, and present. Students then created an 11x17 digital composition of images and various related text on their chosen architectural precedent. At this point their visual library contained the following: 5 colors, 4 material samples, 2 pattern samples, 2 form samples, *and* 1 architectural precedent (digital composition).

In the third and final phase of the project, students used their visual libraries to design a habitable space using concepts and construction materials from their palette. There were no specific programmatic requirements for the space concerning function, or scale. Instead students were instructed to use their design to address closure and enclosure, mass and void, entrance and openings, scale and proportions, structure and organization, and light. The students used their movie palette, which became a site analysis of sorts, and architectural precedent, to help mitigate these issues.

The overall focus of this project is addressed by key point **(3) design projects should engage students in the critical analysis of current culture and architectural precedents.**

3. A Synthesis of Current Culture and Architectural Precedents

The AIAS Studio Culture Task Force outlines the importance of students exploring the relationship between the built environment and the larger cultural context. However, beginning design studios rarely contain subject matter that is reflective of current culture. Students are taught applications in visual technique concerning color, figure-ground, massing, extrusion, etc. without much reference to its application to real life. As a result, students learn visual technique in isolation from their everyday world. Project 2, Exploration of Generational Icons allowed students to actively and assertively dissect their visual world, while enhancing their visual thinking through traditional structuring of critical analysis.

A primary goal of this project was to build the students' ability and skills needed in visual thinking about the world around them. Students explored form, materiality, patterns, and color. However, permitting students to choose movies for study, along with the familiar content of the movies, allowed them to manipulate the information with more authority. Instead of assigning the students the task of analyzing unfamiliar architectural works born from unfamiliar cultures, they critically dissected information which proved to be less intimidating, and more manageable because they could relate to it. A flexible project structure further empowered the students by giving them the opportunity to make choices about what was appropriate and worthy subject matter for study. The films chosen embodied aspects of the values and ideals of their generation and culture, as well as appealed to their own personal identity. This allowed students at beginning design level, to begin to understand the relationship between visual expression, emotional content, and culture. After review of their "site analysis" for one of their movies, students then chose an appropriate architectural precedent to add to their visual library. The confidence gained in the first phase continued on into this second task. Instead of blindly selecting an architectural precedent, students sifted through styles and typologies in search of something that would fit their needs. This forced them to take a more critical approach in looking at architecture of the past based on concepts and ideas from today. Their final design of a space became the ultimate manifestation of their synthesis of thought.

In Project 2, Exploration of Generational Icons, movies acted as a link between the entertainment culture of the students' current world, and the subject matter taught in architectural studio. Students learned strategies and methods of visual thinking that they could immediately apply in thought to their current social environment. Proving, that both the components of everyday life, and the visual techniques learned in academia, belong to the same visual world.

III. POST-PROJECT REFLECTIONS

This paper offered methods for addressing intellectual and cultural diversity in the beginning design studio based on three key points: 1) Group projects are effective vehicles for introducing a diversity of architectural ideas into studio culture, 2) A group project context *can* reinforce individual identity, and 3) First year design projects should promote the critical analysis of current culture and architectural precedents through synthesis. These strategic concepts were explored in two first year design studio projects. An evaluation of the experience was completed by the students and instructors.

Project 1, focused on materiality, and expertise by engaging students in the collaborative process. Working in a group setting gave students an opportunity to make conscious connections with their peers regarding architectural ideas and material methodology, while maintaining a sense of self-identity. Students expressed that they were able to communicate their ideas better because they felt more comfortable with their own talents after developing expertise. In addition to this increased self-awareness, many commented that they received a keener understanding of their own habits after working closely with peers. Groups that experienced an uneven distribution of work load gained an appreciation for time management, accountability, and resourcefulness. Moreover, materials used and concepts learned during the project became a new source of expertise for future explorations.

Project 2, explored fundamental design concepts by focusing on an aspect of current culture's social environment: film entertainment. In this project, students formulated a visual library of information through gradual steps. This information was synthesized and connected to architectural precedence, before being utilized for the design of a habitable space. The familiar content of film served as a device for students to connect learning and architecture to their personal experience and previous knowledge. Students gained the understanding of important visual techniques by critically analyzing informal subject matter with interest and confidence. In post-project review students revealed they have begun to apply a deeper level of visual thinking to life beyond the classroom. Many commented that they now look at movies from a different perspective. Since the project completion, they experienced instances when they found themselves watching movies while simultaneously recording the color palettes and architectural details captured in the films. Overall, this project embodied a referential process for synthesizing everyday life with architectural education.

In conclusion, the issued by the AIAS task force served as a useful foundation in identifying and correcting misconceptions concerning studio culture. The format and outcome of the two projects presented proved to be a valuable learning experience for both instructors and students. Insights to studio culture and diversity were gained through the presence of collaboration, self-awareness, and current culture in the structuring and content of design projects. As a result, both students and instructors yielded a rich and diverse studio experience.