Education of an Architect: Through African-American Constructions

Scott Ruff
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/arch_design

Part of the Architecture Commons, and the Art and Design Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/arch_design/33

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of the 18th National Conference on the Beginning Design Student by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.
Education of an Architect: Through African-American Constructions

Scott Ruff
Syracuse University

I could not conjure my God in this place, and it seemed
His failure. Surprise... overwhelmed me.
Lorene Cary, Black Ice

Since the time I entered architecture school a simple question
has worked, first my sub-conscience and soon my conscious-
ness.Where am I' in this thing called architecture? It is proba-
bly a small question for many something that enters the
thoughts of most students for brief moments, but quickly
passes, never to become world shattering. Possibly because
many of these students come to see themselves within their
heroes, icons, and mentors, through the history that is taught
and the theories and methods that are espoused and imple-
mented, they find validation in merely 'doing', following the
plan. But as an African-American growing in self-awareness
but not in presence I began to feel strangely less as each day
within my curriculum passed. I had come to a place (architec-
ture) where I' (an African-American) was and is virtually non-
existent as a culture. This seeming impasse greatly affected my
work and me. Although most architecture programs present
architecture through some level of abstract processing, those
processes are not with out cultural linkages and some expect-
ed cultural outcomes based upon the instructor's and the
institution's self referential knowledge. As the above quote
poetically expresses, I found my self overwhelmed by the
notion of me not belonging. The projects didn't speak to me,
and even with brief moments of clarity, when a slight connec-
tion presented its self to me; my guides, the translators (the
instructors) did not and possibly could not understand, from
where I was coming and due to my inexperience, I couldn't
understand either. So I struggle(d), greatly, to conjure my God,
to find myself within architecture, collecting small disparate
shards of ideas and material culture that don't all come
together; but offer a way, a passage. Presented here are a few
pieces of what I believe can be connective material that starts
a process of re-educating myself and educating others with an
awareness of 'self' fused into an introduction of architecture to
both African-American and Non- African American students.
These projects are by no means isolated within African-
American tradition but are probably more akin to the
hybridization of ideas, such as Negro Spirituals as developed
by the turn of the 20th century, Fisk Jubilee Singers, blues, jazz
and a host of other American developments that find their
origins strongly based within the black resistance to complete
cultural assimilation and erasure.

This presentation documents and positions a series of proj-
ects, developed over a three year period (1997-2000), while

I 18th National Conference on the Beginning Design Student, Portland, Oregon - 2002 195
Although students are accepted into the architecture program without a portfolio, it does not currently include what many other programs of this nature call a design fundamentals year; a course that teaches basic 2D and 3D composition and theory. Nor does it include a drawing class. The students take two courses within the department of architecture: ARC 101 (Design Studio) a 6 credit hour course and ARC 113 (Introduction to Architecture) a 1 credit hour lecture. Initially when this curriculum was implemented ARC 101 was no more than a glorified drafting course. This approach meshed well with the rest of the Departments extremely pragmatic and functionalist curriculum. Through out the early to mid nineties the first year saw a series of faculty who sought to slightly alter this approach to design and introduce small design problems based in “Order and Space”. Through the incessant use of its pedagogy and main tactic of giving beginning design students “a kit of parts”, the students generated provocative abstract spatial compositions based upon a predicted set of outcomes and basic drafting skills but not a strong ability to conceptualize and synthesize ideas into architectonic space. These factors along with no freehand drawing class within the first year were two factors that the faculty found to be extremely problematic in not only the first year students but also within the upper division work as well. The first year studio had to be a “meta-course” one that could encompass the basic skill building, composition and critical thinking skills, all of which were deemed equally necessary. The general structure, of the first year studio evolved into a three part set of goals; observation, interpretation, and transformation. My personal emphasis in the class was placed on critical thinking, craft and skill building.

Cultivating cultural diversity and self-identification within the processes of the beginning design student was also a primary component within the mix of the new provisional curriculum amendments. Each of the works presented, accept for the strip composition project, evolved from what I have termed an “improvisational studio”. They were developed as a direct response to observations, interactions and conversations with the students in the class. Even the strip composition project, which was born out of work done within my own graduate thesis work, transformed as a result of contextual campus politics. So, many of the project descriptions were initially given orally, responding to local and cultural events. Initially I was quite uncomfortable with this improvisational method, but later found it to be quite useful in teaching the students to listen with intensity and to enquire with intentions but not expectations. The studio itself as well as each individual project are like “Deluzian constructions”, attempts to generate new paths and connections surrounding a question of identity and essence (aesthetics) in the art of building, in the process of transformation. Deluzian Constructions are works, that John Rajchman has said:

“where abstraction functions not through a self referential code but through informal diagram, not by emptying all contents but by releasing other spaces, mapping other territories, not by reducing sense but by multiplying it, densifying instead of rarifying, lightening instead of purifying, complexifying rather than reducing... it is a question of constructing free spaces of unregulation, undetermined by any prior plan, which so loosen an arrangement as to allow for sensations of something new, other affects, other precepts. It is a question of an operative abstraction working within an incomplete "virtual" architecture always to be invented anew.”

Through these loosely configured problems, that sit tangentially to other modes of study and investigation, the student is able to construct their own language(using the five elements of architecture point, line, plane, mass, space, as a safety net), at what ever depth of interest they can handle, continually exploring the essence of their desired objective, which is to articulate an idea, a story, a notion architectonically.

The African-American sub-theme that exits within each of the exercises attempts to inform and help the students cultivate aesthetic practices and principals from the cultural identity of the campus and of the studio itself. The African-American principles that are utilized are extracted from a number of, specific although not exclusive, cultural sources such as music, dance, literature and oratory and textile design. Some of these principles are poly-rhythmic composition, Break line composition, Distortion as a preferred technique for abstraction of such things as the human form and language, high contrast in color choice, a tendency towards asymmetry, isolation within composition as well as a tendency towards pluralistic/ multivalent organization systems just to name a few.

Hand Jive-The slapping of hands against the body to produce a sonorous rhythmic pattern/ composition usually done while dancing or playing.

Hand Jive Spatial was used to transition the students from a four-week session whose primary emphasis was skill building and secondary emphasis was composition and design to a design focused portion of the semester. The project is introduced verbally as a freehand drawing exercise. The students were asked to define a volume with their hands and to document that volume through a series of architectural drawings that describe the nature of the space. This volume could be as well or loosely formed as desired and as large as desired. Most of the drawings document, very clearly, the form of the hands. At the end of the class the students are handed the design assignment, which asks them to model their volume in three manners: liner, planer and mass. The proceeding week, with the support of lectures and desk critiques, the student’s investigations lead to studies that explore the tectonic relationship of structure(bone), surface(skin), mass(flesh) and space(void). As the studies evolve some students move into constructing composite tectonic compositions, while others find understanding through a their series of investigations. Each composition is to be documented in plan section and elevation, which is an area that again some students begin to explore the possibilities of their proposal through this new set of abstractions.

Poetry Readings is a project that is born out of the general population of the student's interest in highly structured spoken word. This observation was clarified.
through a casual conversation, which became the subject of a full class discussion on Rap music, the Hip-Hop movement and the strong Oral / Story telling tradition within African Diasporic cultures. The project, which had been in the back of my mind as a method of form generation in my own work was introduced not as Rap but as poetry. Allowing the students to have a sense of control over the material in which they would become extremely intimate over the course of two weeks. The project description and hand out again being extremely simple and not cluttered with esoteric notions that were beyond the entering students interests and to some extent their grasp, many of the complex issues being addressed through group discussion and one on one conversation.

The Strip composition project and the reading of Mama Day, by Gloria Naylor were actually integrated into one project that covered approximately 6 weeks at the end of the second semester of first year design studio. This longer more involved investigation evolved from a need to fall in line with a Hampton University campus wide tradition/policy known as the campus reading. Each year the university chooses a book to be read by the entire freshman class. This reading is then to be integrated into a lesson or a series of lessons within each of their courses. In the past the architecture department had not truly engaged in this tradition, but due to current campus politics it became a good ideal for the department to participate in at least one of its courses. First year design studio became the laboratory for this experiment. Having already established a schematic syllabus, which was flowing quite well, the task became how, was the story and its references going to be integrated into the curriculum of the studio. After much thought a project that dealt with techtonics as its main focus (the strip composition project) became the framework on which the narrative would hang.

The project was introduced to the students approximately one week after the beginning of the campus reading of Mama Day. Through a long discussion about the story and some of the literary and creative mechanisms found within the text to help the students understand how this process can be understood as an extended version of the poetry readings done in the previous semester. A project description was handed out that paraphrased that lecture/discussion and explained what they were to do with this information.

This final project, Mama Day was presented during a NAAB Accreditation visit, which included observers from China. Some of who sat on this review. After the presentations the question was raised by one of the observers, “Do you (the faculty) feel that some of the first year work is too conceptually complex?” The answer to such a question is yes and no. Yes, the work is extremely conceptually loaded, but no it is not more than the students can handle. Although these projects do not have large prescribed introductions based in established philosophical texts, they are not one liners. They are done in a manner, which seeks to completely immerse the student into the practice of rigorous critical thinking and critical translation. Teaching the students how to learn and think architecturally, not confining them to preconceived notions of what one is. Since each exercise had an open range of difficulty; they became ideal for dealing with students that had various levels of development. In this way each project and studio became much like a vertical studio or a one room school house.

The evaluation of these projects by the overall school faculty found that while the projects were ended at an extremely abstract point in development, the faculty, could see the strengths the students had gained. They were extremely engaged in their work. They exuded a confidence in the ability to do anything. Each individual understood with great clarity and detail the conceptual content of their work. Also, because of the complexity and challenging nature of the compositions the students had to push themselves in the realm of aggressive descriptive geometry and material craft and usage.