AIA

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FACE OF THE AIA

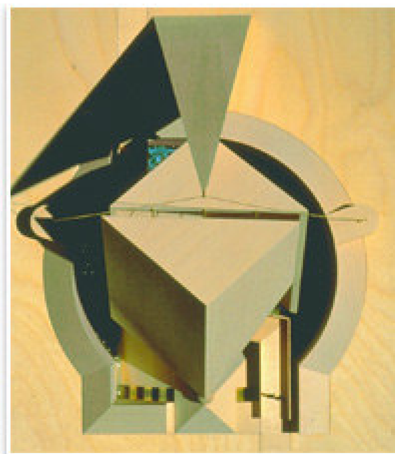
Discovering African Identity in African-American Architecture: Part I

by Stephen A. Kliment, FAIA

How do you . . . recognize elements of architectural identity in work by a particular racial or ethnic group? Is it even possible?

Summary: African-American architects constantly ask themselves whether there is such a thing as African identity in their architecture. In other words, would an observer, architecturally trained or not, spot/observe any African traits in the architect's use of materials, siting, detailing, ornament, forms, and space flow that might identify a design as the work of an African-American architect?

Some claim the question is fair, and that there are answers. Exponents argue that every racial or ethnic creative spirit, whether architect, musician, artist, fashion designer, or chef, cannot but bring some of their own racial/ethnic attributes to the created object.



Opposed are those who contend the argument lacks logic in the face of practical reality. For example:

1. What *is* African? Is it West African? Sub-Saharan? Caribbean? Antebellum South? East African highlands?
2. What elements or components of a design may be identified as demonstrably "African"?
3. How do you weave in the impact of evolution, say African 1707 vs. American 2007? Have demands of the user evolved to such an extent that ancestral elements once appropriate are no longer valid? If so, why look for African identity?
4. What is the role of the designer's racial or ethnic make up? Is an architect descended on both sides from African ancestors expected to or likely to manifest different design characteristics than one who has some Asian, Hispanic/Latino, or Caucasian ancestors?
5. To what extent do program, site, budget, and technological drivers outweigh race, above all in such a complex, team-oriented field as architecture?
6. What is the risk of African-inspired features being viewed as applied or superimposed, instead of stemming from the program? And if so, is that necessarily a valid criticism?

THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE

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Look for "Discovering African Identity in African-American Architecture: Part II" next month.

Did you know . . .

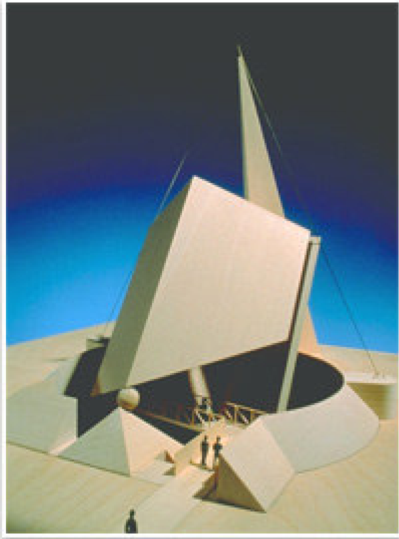
500 new hotels. In a move that places African Americans in the patronage driver's seat, the National Association of Black Hotel Owners, Operators, and Developers plans to build 500 new African American owned hotels by the end of 2010. NABHOOD hopes to open 122 of them this year, bringing the national total to 289. There are reportedly some 50,000 hotels in the U.S., so the present ratio of black-owned hotels isn't large, but the initiative is a strong upbeat sign. Let us see how many of the design commissions will go to black architects. Seldom has there been a greater opportunity.

African-British architect David Adjaye keeps drawing more limelight as a major exhibit of his work opens July 18 at the Studio Museum of Harlem. The show tracks 10 of his projects from start to finish. Adjaye has lectured in New York City, and the Harvard Graduate Scholl of Design this year had a show of his work that took up the entire spacious entrance hall.

Harlem's first tall office building since 1973 is to rise at 125th Street

This month's episode in the AIArchitect's *diversity series offers answers to these divergent views, relying on some of America's most resourceful African-American practitioners and scholars. Due to the breadth of the topic, you'll see it in two parts. Look for part II next month.*

Every race and culture that emigrates from one place to another and mixes with the cultures already there ends up preserving a few of its characteristics and losing others to the prevailing cultural norm. The process inevitably brings with it pressures and tensions—poles of identity—ranging from cool adaptation to a strong, often rebellious mode that seeks to incorporate those roots in every creative act.



Assimilation

The all-American end of the scale was uncompromisingly defined in 1994 by an outside observer. Olufemi Majekodunmi, a Nigerian architect and that year's president of the International Union of Architects, told guests at a New York City National Organization of Minority Architects lunch: "The way [afrocentricity] was used denoted a self-conscious attempt to put an 'African' stamp on every building designed by an African-American architect, simply as a means of identifying the origins of the designer. I believe this attitude is both unnecessary and unfortunate, as it could restrict the otherwise fertile imagination of African-American architects if they feel always obliged to stamp their roots on their buildings, or that they must always 'identify' themselves, or more accurately their origins, in every building they design."

Mainstream firms of whatever racial composition see it the same way. A building and its form and finish are determined by site, climate, program, and the client's stylistic preferences if any. Only then, they claim, can the architect—any architect—impose or integrate ideological or cultural content.

After nearly 400 years in America, black Americans in general and black architects and builders in particular have built up characteristics that are as much American as they are African. Black architects, the assimilation party claims, don't need afrocentricity to prove their origins. To do so may result in a self-conscious attempt to be what they are not. Majekodunmi looks across the Atlantic Ocean and sees a black professional who has far more in common with American culture than with Africa.

Fields' America

Situated at the same end of the dialectic scale is Darell Fields. Born in Dallas, with master's and doctoral degrees from Harvard, and currently teaching at the University of Arkansas, Fields disputes the concept of a fixed African origin as driver of black design in America. He brings in instead the concept of diaspora, which assumes that African people in their migrations from Africa to their final destinations in all parts of the Western hemisphere abandoned many original cultural attributes and acquired a mass of new ones. "I can't know where I came from," he maintains, "so I don't pay it any heed."

He would rather live with the unique psychosis of a person who does not know his history than invent an artificial past. He thinks aggressively that there is no African-American tradition in architecture, and that you cannot go about trying to resurrect an artificial past when "there's too much to do in the present." Fields suspects any effort to identify black elements in modern

and Park Avenue. Vornado Realty Trust has chosen Swanke Hayden Connell Architects, a large Manhattan-based majority-owned firm, as the architect. "We hope they are successful in getting tenants," Harlem Community Development Corporation president Curtis Archer told *Architectural Record*. No word whether an African American architect was considered.

AIA Seattle's diversity scholarship has been named after outgoing longtime Executive Director Marga Rose Hancock, Hon AIA.

Boston Architectural College has named a full-time director of Human Resources and Diversity. Michael James was previously chief of Equal Opportunity and Diversity at Massachusetts Bay Community Railroad.

Images

Image 1: "Builders #2," by Jacob Lawrence, 1968. Photo: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, N.Y.

Image 2: Variations of pyramidal forms within a framing circle derives from forms found in many African countries. Rendering courtesy of Stull and Lee.

Image 3: The pyramid/circle forms in the Middle Passage monument design for Boston Harbor, by Stull and Lee are intuitive references to African architecture. Rendering courtesy of Stull and Lee.

Image 4: Darell Fields. Photo by Russell Cothran.

Image 5: M. David Lee, FAIA. Photo courtesy of the architect.

Image 6: Details of Triforate windows at the Church of Narga Sellase in Ethiopia. Photo courtesy M. David Lee, FAIA.

Images 7&8: Lee's sketches based on the Triforate window motifs for Northeastern University's John D. O'Bryant African American Institute. Renderings courtesy M. David Lee, FAIA.

Image 9: O'Bryant African-American Institute main façade, by Stull and

black-designed architecture because he mistrusts the visual apparatus used to make the judgment. In his 2000 book, *Architecture in Black*, published by Athlone Press, he sought to invent one using tools of cultural studies and Afro-American literary theory.

As a founder and editor of the magazine *Appendx* (now *APPX*), an erudite scholarly journal, he has even objected to the term African American—because it is misleading: “Those who call themselves African American will assume that they have gained greater specificity by using this term, when in fact it is full of assumptions and contradictions . . . the term African homogenizes Africa: it neutralizes and makes indistinguishable cultural and political determinants that make Libyans different from Egyptians different from Nigerians different from South Africans.”

There are exceptions. Churches serving African-American denominations, or community developments with heavily diversified populations, or buildings erected in climates that parallel those of Africa, justify such racial intervention. But in America, such climatic regions are rare, and they run straight into what he sees as the cardinal flaw of afrocentric philosophy—the assumption that there is such an entity as Africa. The most cursory look at a map reveals a huge range of climatic, topographic, and demographic venues. Which one is most afrocentric? Nigeria and its Yoruba artifacts? Cameroon and its religious masks? The desert monuments of the Sahara and North Africa? The sphinxes of Egypt? The great prairies of East Africa? The heavily built up townships of South Africa?

APPX sees the relationship between architecture and blackness as a matter of fact, albeit a very complex one.

Hughes’s afrocentrism

Afrocentrism has many exponents, none more vigorous than architect, educator, and critic David Hughes. Along with a cadre of likeminded architects, Hughes claims that those African elements do exist, and that African designers have, if not a formal obligation, at least an implied one, to employ them in their work.

Brooklyn-born Hughes’ academic credentials include a bachelor’s degree from Columbia, a graduate fellowship at Princeton, a master’s in urban planning from the City University of New York, and a Fulbright fellowship. He has been on the Kent State University architecture school faculty since 1985. He argues in his book *Afrocentric Architecture: A Design Primer* [Greyden Press, 1994]. that African contributions to world culture have been stifled under what he calls “the social implications and political ramifications of a eurocentric hegemony that limited honest intellectual review.” Yet, he claims, architectural concepts such as form, monumentality, order, structure, detail, and hierarchy all have their origins in Africa. He cites the pyramids of Ancient Egypt and the abstract anthromorphism of West African ceremonial masks as having influenced the looks of buildings and the planning of spaces throughout the world.

The traits go beyond architecture. For Hughes, they include: life and customs, music, spirituality, genealogy, environment, and natural landscape, all of which the African-American architects must integrate into their designs. He cites the organic tradition of Africa, where the form of an object is derived directly from its function and from its physical setting. Art for art’s sake has no place. Quite the opposite: the links between a designed object, whether it is a knife, a mask, a building, or a ceremonial space linking buildings, arise strictly to accommodate the function of that object or place.

Grant, slavery and afrocentrism

A canny interpreter of afrocentrism as a symbol of African-American identity is Bradford C. Grant, associate dean of the College of Engineering, Architecture and Computer Science and director of the School of Architecture and Design at Howard University. In “Accommodation and Resistance: The Built Environment and the African American Experience” (in *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), Grant contends that American architecture has seldom been studied through the lens of race. He tracks African American identity through three stages:

- Slavery
- Post post-reconstruction, more commonly known as the Jim Crow era
- The era of civil rights.

Grant ascribes the era of strongest black identity to the long period of slavery. Only under slavery did black artisans, designers, and builders have undisputed control of building, at least

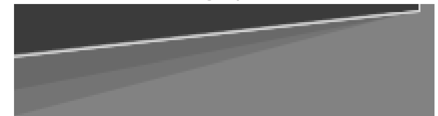
Lee Architects, based on the Narga Sellase form. Photo by M. David Lee, FAIA.

Image 10: Max Bond, FAIA. Photo by Fred Conrad, the *New York Times*.

Image 11: The Dillard University International Center for Economic Freedom, New Orleans, portico reflects the white brick classical buildings against dark green foliage typical at Dillard. Architect: Davis Brody Bond. Photo by Neil Alexander, Photographer.

Image 12: Dillard Center for Economic Freedom syncopated glass wall by Davis Brody Bond. Photo by Neil Alexander, Photographer.

Image 13: Louis Armstrong print in the Dillard Center lobby by Davis Brody Bond. Photo by Neil Alexander, Photographer.

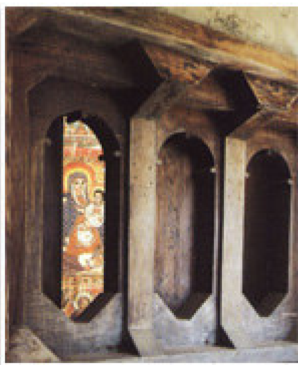


in the Southern states. "In a perverse way," he writes in "Accommodation and Resistance," "the most active period of African-American involvement in design and building was during the period of slavery. African craftsmen-slaves were the primary builders of the South, usually under the strict control of a 'master,' yet often in the role of 'supervisor-designer-builder.' As a consequence, according to Booker T. Washington, writing in *Up from Slavery*, white people lost the skill of building, and after emancipation had to rely for the design, construction and, furniture making on former slave-artisans.

Sadly, little of Africa and African identity visibly found its way into building, notes Grant: "Unlike the uniquely African-American influence in gospel music and other personal arts developed within the slave experience, architecture was much too visible, public and permanent to allow clear African motifs and references to be expressed." But not entirely so. He found subtle influences in the South, in and around the plantations and in the towns and cities. Examples showed up in ironwork and woodcarving and, according to Richard K. Dozier's "The Black Architectural Experience," a section in *African American Architects in Current Practice*, Jack Travis, ed. (Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), in features such as steep hip roofs, wide overhanging roofs, central fireplaces, porches, and earth and moss construction. Grant cites Carl Anthony ("The Big House and the Slave Quarters," Part I, *Landscape* 20/3, spring 1976, and Part II, *Landscape* 21/1, fall 1976) as spotting in the tidewater plantations of Virginia modest outbuildings that "seemed genuinely African in proportion, siting, or construction." Some of these, he felt, created "the visual effect of a piece of an African village with its multiplicity of dwelling units and granaries."

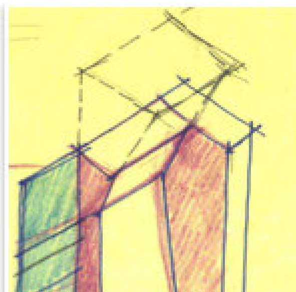
David Lee and the clout of Modernism

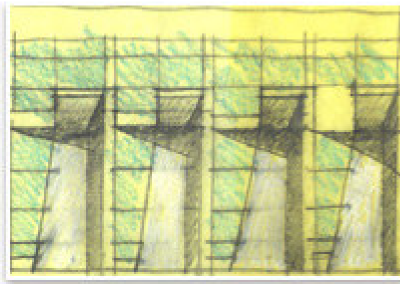
The real challenge for Black architects, argues Boston architect David Lee, FAIA, of Stull & Lee, is to identify not so much what binds them together as what separates them. "What seems to happen more often than not is that they just lump us together because we're black, and it doesn't matter whether you're a modernist, or a post-modernist, or a deconstructivist, or anything else. Nobody much cares or takes the time to say that [Charles] McAfee works in a certain kind of genre. His generation, and at 63 I'm on the cusp of that generation, were all basically products of Modernism, so a lot of what we have tried to do falls back on those Modernist principles."



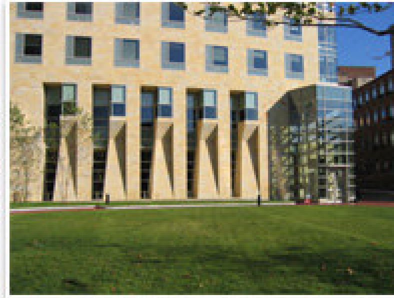
There could be a way for black architects, if so inclined, to better reflect African traditions in their future work. "It comes back to Modernism where any kind of decoration met the response: 'No, you don't do that.' Clean, white, maybe with some Corbusian introductions of color was the accepted rule. So if somehow you were to take a room like that and then put some kind of a Kente cloth pattern on it, that was seen as a decorative object and not necessarily part of the basic architecture."

But as he looks at the work of majority architects, Lee points out that by contrast whenever Western European themes are integrated into their work, no one seems to view that as pandering. If Robert A. M. Stern uses a set of classical Greek columns on a house, nobody thinks twice of it. If he [Lee] were to do that using African forms, he fears it would not receive the same sort of acceptance: "It has been hard for me to look at that because somehow I've always felt it wasn't enough just to have African-American decorations, and I always wondered if there wasn't something else more fundamental to being an African American that could get reflected in the architecture."





Lee had the opportunity to incorporate afrocentric forms consciously into the recently completed African-American Institute at Northeastern University, Boston. Here the formal language of a dramatic two-story stone colonnade is derived from his reinterpretation of Ethiopian architectural motifs (see illustrations). Lee used the colonnade as a device to give the Institute a distinctive afrocentric identity—all within the overall composition of a mixed use academic building.



On the other hand, there is the way architects of a certain vintage, black architects included, have been trained. "In some of the public housing my firm has been involved with, we found ourselves between a rock and a hard place," says Lee. "HUD and the other housing agencies have their limits in terms of how large rooms can be and what's affordable and so forth. Attempts by black architects to incorporate any level of cultural or social identity into housing tends to be frustrated by the agencies that are underwriting the very high cost of such housing." And if the truth be told, Lee argues, "housing built for low income people should be commodious and well built because they're going to use it a lot more than the people who are going away to Vermont for the weekend, and to the symphony Friday night. I mean these people are there 24/7."

Max Bond: "Afrocentrism isn't just a style"

New York-based Davis Brody Bond partner Max Bond, FAIA, has mixed feelings about African identity. He disagrees with people who talk about afrocentrism as though it were simply a style: "African architecture and African art are much more than a style. They are in fact a function of the culture and of the material circumstances of that culture. Thus, say, to ask African-American students to design an office building . . . on 125th Street in 'an African style' is at best confusing. Because if you look at the genesis of so much African art, you get enormous differences, depending on a particular tribe. Just like the distinctions between architecture in Scandinavia, Holland, and Southern Europe. They are all European, but very different.

"African art varies from tribe to tribe, from village to village. There are certain themes that run through, but there are great differences, so afrocentrism, to the extent that it implies a unitary culture, is an oversimplification. Next, it ignores the material aspects of culture, which is part of a whole bunch of things—climate, history, available materials."

Bond's crowning criticism of afrocentrists is that they tend to view African culture as fundamentally static. African culture today is not what it was a hundred years ago, he argues, and like any culture it is constantly evolving: "But the afrocentrists always hearken back to some mythical African

village that must have been on
the West Coast of Africa only, and probably ceased to exist. It wasn't in the sahel [a climatic transition zone of tropical Africa south of the Sahara between the desert and the savanna, which supports a limited agriculture] because that doesn't seem to strike them as African architecture. It was a village in the hot, humid zone of West Africa, untouched by Europeans, unchanged for the last 300 years. The place doesn't exist." Identity is far more complicated than that.

The other factor troubling Bond is that the movement appears to deny the history of blacks in America. As Nigeria's Majekodunmi has argued, African Americans at this point are no longer Africans. "That's not to say," says Bond, "that there is not empathy and relationship. I've lived in Africa, in Ghana, and I worked for the Ghanaian government. Though they recognized a common heritage, they didn't think I was an African. Our cultures have evolved. Afrocentrism undervalues the incredible amount of cultural creativity of African Americans here in America. So why should we pretend to hearken back to a culture that existed maybe in some village 300 years, when there is a tremendous, powerful culture here, now, of which we, in fact, are a part." Though not necessarily, Bond adds wryly, in a material way.

False premises

Thus, a lot of the premises about African identity are in fact false, Bond contends: "If you look at current African art—painting, sculpture—you can see all kinds of evolution within the art. So there are roots there in African culture, but there's a tremendous evolution. Some of the shows at the Museum for African Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem are revealing in the evolution that has taken place in the way the art has absorbed influences." It shows how African art and African culture have always responded to those influences; for instance, colonial influences and tribal painting in Northwest Africa. "Much of the content of the art is about the impact of modernization and of other cultures on Africa."

In sum, argues Bond, African-American culture is rooted in African culture but has evolved as people responded to a new, fast changing environment, and acted together with other cultures. African Americans have had a great impact on what is considered "American" culture. So have evolving African cultures.

"So I'm not opposed to the fact that people recognize their heritage, but I'm bothered by oversimplification of the influences that have shaped modern culture."

Bond rejects Majekodunmi's precept to African Americans that "you're Americans. Why deny it?": "We are Americans but there is a strong African-American cultural tradition. That tradition, I believe, is represented in my work." (See the Birmingham Institute.) To Bond, that is what counts.

So it's hard to find any particular set of attributes unique to black architecture in America. It's not so much for lack of materials, colors, and textures, but simply because black designers want to be accepted in the general architectural community. So they end up designing in the same stylistic vocabulary as majority firms. "You look in the magazines," says Lee, "you see what gets published, what is held up as a standard for the profession, and you have to be influenced by it."

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