


PERSPECTIVE

AN INTERIOR OF INCLUSION OR THE ILLUSION OF INCLUSION

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"Dear Architecture, I've been wondering why you don't speak to me. Is it because you don't see me? Are you ignoring me? Maybe it's because you really don't care for me; but whatever it is, you sure don't speak, that is, at least not to me."

- Craig L. Wilkins¹

I have been attending interior design industry events (conferences, symposia, lectures, etc.) for over 25 years now and I have to admit that, even after that significant time span, there are still times when I experience what I refer to as a "Negro moment." Negro moments occur when black participants become keenly aware that we still find ourselves either the only one, the first one, or one of a precious few in the room. I found myself in such a situation last year at the Northeast regional IDEC Conference in October where I was a panelist, and this year at the national IDEC Conference where I was the keynote speaker.

In instances such as these, black people often seek each other out. Negro moments can be the start of great friendships as two or more individuals understand that, in their rarity, there is great opportunity to advance a common goal of acceptance and therefore foster a much more inclusive atmosphere within that particular setting.

Often though, this situation can begin as one of great tension as black people, like any other group, are non-monolithic and some individuals might begin to feel a bit of pressure to join forces when the chemistry is not there. In that instance, some people may feel the need to distance themselves from others as the challenge to secure resources, set policy, or simply choose friends to coalesce with causes many significant anxieties. Negro moments still exist today, and they stand as testament for the few of us as clear indication of the lack of diversity within our ranks.

The subject of race is perhaps the hardest conversation in this, the most diverse country in the world. It's certainly not an easy conversation in the environmental design disciplines, and certainly not a healthy exercise in any forum as Derrick Bell reminds us that "the challenge throughout has been to tell what I view as the truth about racism without causing disabling despair."² Further, and more specifically, it seems immensely difficult to create a family of interior design professionals and students, commensurate with the demographic make-up of the society we practice for, especially from Black and Latino populations. Those voices remain all but silent as do the contributions many individuals from both groups have made in the environmental design fields of urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture, interior architecture, interior design, and interior decorating. Consider the following historical information on black interior designers.

Amaza Lee Meredith (1895–1984) may have been the very first significant black Modernist designer who practiced architecture and interior design.³ Rosemary Mitchell, the first black interior decorator in the United States, established a home furnishings store on the south side of Chicago in the 1960s. Calvin Ashford Jr. (1935–2008), perhaps the first black "celebrity" interior decorator, worked for an impressive list of individuals including: Diana Ross, Dionne Warwick, Whitney Houston, and Maya Angelou.⁴ Cecil Hayes has also had a robust career working for individuals in the entertainment and sports industries as well as authoring *9 Steps to Beautiful*

Living (2006) and *The Art of Decorative Details* (2007).⁵ Her work is featured in the Smithsonian Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum. There are many other notable trailblazers (e.g., Sheila Bridges, Courtney Sloane, Roderick Shade) who have yet to be included in the historical narrative of the profession. The list of black accomplishments in the environmental field can go on and on.

In the last few decades, a greater sense of urgency encouraged scholars to unearth the role of women in the development of the history of interior design. Unfortunately, as noted by the content of Turpin's 2007 review of literature, few of these designers/decorators were people of color.⁶ And, yet, he, along with John Potvin,⁷ recognize the importance of including all minorities in our understanding of the discipline's rich history. Why? Each story adds to the discipline's body of knowledge. It is particularly important for students, who are still in their formative stages, to see themselves reflected in their discipline's history and profession.

How does an organization of professionals and educators make a way for new "perspectives" and create "atmospheres" for young black individuals to comfortably exist in interior design firms and academic programs? Why hasn't inclusion been a significant issue within the interior design profession? Why have we failed so miserably in the past to bring focused attention to this problem while the profession of architecture, though experiencing similar low rates of inclusion, has nevertheless a definable history of concern in this matter?

These are but a few of the many questions that come to mind when one looks at the consistently low percentage of black and Latino membership and the lack of improvement in those numbers over the recent 50 years. To date, there has been precious little focus on the lack of equitable representation in the policies and strategies of the International Interior Design Association (IIDA), the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), or the Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC). Although, if one views the images of individuals, the Strategic Plans, the recent events and roundtable discussions or the commitment to diversity that presently exist on the websites of each of the three organizations, one might think differently. Many of the programs instituted toward bringing about membership equity in any one of these three organizations have only begun in the last 5 or so years. Moreover, the focus remains on policy over detailed action, and seems aimed toward providing financial scholarships and grants to those already committed within the profession with no real committed support systems across organizational boundaries, such as through community outreach. Historically, not one of these three institutions has offered any real and continual concern of diversity and inclusion prior to 2010, and two of the institutions use government agency statistics to determine their policies on diversity because neither has conducted surveys among their own ranks. Whereas, over the last 50 years the American Institute of Architects (AIA), for example, has funded at least four separate Diversity Committees, four Diversity conferences, retains a Diversity Officer and has compiled their own data and statistics on Diversity within their own ranks.⁸ But even this effort, as the data of that survey surely admits, has fallen short over the decades. Perhaps the results of the AIA Survey as well as other evidence suggests that inclusion is a much bigger challenge than most of us are willing to admit and therefore we as a body and as individuals must broaden our efforts toward evolving appropriate solutions to the problem.⁹

Certainly, our collective failure has not come because most of us are not decent people. And not because a large membership within our ranks are not aware of nor care about diversity. Rather it may be that the monumental depth of the problem of reaching equity for the disenfranchised has not been truly assessed. Likewise, our goals for alleviating a clear and ever-present atmosphere of exclusion have not ever been clearly defined. Perhaps an unthinkable, but nevertheless seemingly formidable resistance, both conscious and subconscious, to such a notion of equity within the profession hasn't been considered as properly as it might be. Perhaps we "problem solvers," as we love to think of ourselves, haven't really looked into the real depth of the problem of equity.

The truth be told, due to overwhelming evidence, I think it is safe to say that design professionals and educators wear rose-colored glasses when it comes to race. We prefer the "illusion

of inclusion.” We showcase in our program messaging, and produce video content for advertising as well as print images in our brochures and promotional materials that clearly show minority participation. But, we have never stopped long enough to truly assess the grave situation of underrepresentation, what is truly at the core of this problem, nor what is required to effectively remedy the situation over a reasonable time period. We seem to be, as a body, less concerned with delivering on a set of principles and goals that would truly make us representative of the society we represent than appeasing our own consciousness with token gestures that hardly ever sustain any momentum of change. Interior design professionals and academics espouse feel-good platitudes, in earnest I must admit, while holding marginal advances up as if they were landmark achievements that when honestly measured show little if any sustained reward or advancement. We want to have conversations, but we don’t want to be put on the spot. We want change as a body, but we don’t seem to want to be challenged inside our bubbles, and we certainly don’t want to be exposed for our own personal misgivings.

Leadership in our field often demonstrates a certain level of blindness to the clear and ever-present reality of underrepresentation existing at partnerships in firms and at full-time and tenured faculty levels in the schools as though it was “hidden in plain view.” Leadership is one of the main criteria in eliminating underrepresentation. Children need to see faces that look like their own in the welfare, governance, maintenance, and design of the places that they live, play and grow up in. I posit that in a multi-racial and diverse society such as we have in this country, a good rule of thumb might be that design professionals appear in roughly the same percentages as the people they serve. For this to be criteria, every major metropolitan area in the United States would have to undergo a sweeping change in membership demographic. Clearly, we are far away from any goal of this kind as reasonable as it may be.

A classic case in point is the architecture profession and its handling of black underrepresentation within the rank. Often referred to as the last bastion of white male dominance, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) has a track record on diversity awareness that far outdistances all other environmental design disciplines, especially interior design.

Fifty years ago, the American Institute of Architects invited Whitney M. Young, Jr., who at the time was the president of the Urban League under President Lyndon B. Johnson, to be the first black keynote speaker at their convention, a practice that profession has been carrying on since 1867.¹⁰

Mr. Young read those mostly white male architects the “riot act” that day and placed upon them an indictment so large and so undeniable that one could not leave that convention without admitting, at least to some extent, that the best intentions to promote “NEW PERSPECTIVES” or a sense of “ATMOSPHERE” that would encourage a more inclusive environment in the field of architecture were led astray if not totally ignored. Why hadn’t those “PERSPECTIVES,” those “ATMOSPHERES” been born? Young explained,

We are a proud people. We like to kid ourselves into believing that we are good Christians, good human beings; but it isn’t true ... We are a racist nation, and no way in the world could it be otherwise given the history of our country. Being a racist doesn’t mean one wants to go out and join a lynch mob or send somebody off to Africa or engage in crude, vulgar expressions of prejudice. ... as a profession, you are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I am sure this has not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance.¹¹

After addressing his concerns for the lack of progress in race relations that architects had responsibility for, Young turned his attention to a general white American audience and their responsibility.

The Negro has been largely the victim, not of active hate or active concern, but active indifference and callousness. Less than 10 percent of white Americans wanted to lynch

Negroes, or 10 percent wanted to free them. Our problem has been the big 80 percent, that big blob of Americans who have been so busy “making it,” getting ahead in their companies... that they really haven’t had time to be concerned... Our sin, then, is the sin of omission and not of commission...¹²

What Mr. Young was alluding to in that instance was the fact that we professionals and educators cannot forget that we are first and foremost individual and human. His comments exposed the lack of self-commitment that many of us personally put forward in order to assure a more equitable society for ourselves and for our children. The American Institute of Architects has been at the forefront in setting a mission for inclusion among the environmental design disciplines. However, much of that effort has fallen short of established goals over the decades as their latest 2016 survey concludes.

Adopting strategies for creating proper perspectives and atmospheres must begin with establishing leadership and seeking role models who look like the people you are trying to include. However, past practices have proven that interior designers don’t seem to possess the necessary political will, as a body of professionals and educators. We will need to set meaningful goals to achieve optimum diversity in our profession. I have found that best practice strategies toward diversification include:

- A clear understanding of the importance of sustaining and maintaining atmospheres and viewpoints from the perspectives of those you wish to include, which means that representation must be consistent all the way to the top.
- Understanding the force of our opposition and the reasons for such stiff and perpetual opposition.
- Keeping one’s eye “on the prize,” our goals, in this fight and be aware of the tendency to retreat into a bubble as we secretly aspire to the trappings of society.

Interior designers committed to diversity must constantly remind ourselves that it’s not enough to pay lip service to the ideal of equal opportunity. It’s not enough to feel good about saying the right things about cultural diversity. It’s not enough, if after the talking is done, this profession and the organization that represents America’s designers do not mirror the diverse people we serve. Effective and sustained change begins with continuing honest and uncomfortable conversations as we set goals, understanding the problem at an appropriate depth level, and seeing ourselves as we really are and not who we aspire to be.

Linda Mvusi, renowned South African architect, believes that environmental designers must bring their A game at all times to the practice of architecture and urbanism when attempting to resolve problems of spatial design and aesthetic representation in her country and in sub-Saharan Africa owing to past practices of Apartheid and colonialism and the resulting effects of both on the lives of the people currently living there.¹³ Mvusi defines “A game” as one that places concerns for the socio-political impact next to, and sometimes above, those of form making and placemaking. I concur with her assessment that designers can no longer afford to think in traditional ways in order to resolve many of the larger issues facing the design profession and academia today.

It may be time to consider that none of the interior design organizations are equipped to effectively define and resolve the issues of lack of inclusion within their ranks. Each will need to seek outside professional help as the structural engineering industry has and AIA is now considering.

NOTES

¹In his winning entry to ‘Dear Architecture,’ Wilkins describes misgivings through the lens of a disenfranchised (child) city dweller, illustrating a missed connection felt by one (young, black) resident towards

- his (her) surroundings. See Craig Wilkins, "Dear Architecture," in *Dear Architecture*, eds. Matthew Hoffman and Francesca Giuliani (Blank Space Publishing, 2015), 11.
- ²Derrick Bell, *Faces at The Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), ix.
- ³See Dell Upton's *Architecture in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 273 and Mary Harding Sadler's, "Amaza Lee Meredith," in *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865–1945*, ed. D. S. Wilson (New York: Routledge), 280–282.
- ⁴Robert Mitchum, "Calvin Ashford Jr.: 1935-2008." *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 2008.
- ⁵Cecil Hayes, *9 Steps to Beautiful Living* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2006) and *The Art of Decorative Details* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2007).
- ⁶John Turpin, "The History of Women in Interior Design: A Review of Literature," *Journal of Interior Design* 33, no. 1 (2007): 1–16.
- ⁷John Potvin, "The Pink Elephant in the Room: What Ever Happened to Queer Theory in the Study of Interior Design 25 Years on?" *Journal of Interior Design* 41, no. 1 (2016): 5–12.
- ⁸ASID, "ASID Strategic Plan: FY 2017-2020," 16–18. Accessed June 12, 2018. http://www.iida.org/resources/content/7/8/5/2/documents/Industry-Roundtable-19_v5.pdf; IIDA, 2017 IIDA Foundation Diversity Award. Accessed June 12, 2018 <http://www.iida.org/content.cfm/diversity-award>; AIA, "AIA Diversity Survey 2016". Accessed June 12, 2018 https://www.architects.org/sites/default/files/AIA_DiversitySurvey_2016.pdf
- ⁹Teresa L. Dover, Brenda Major, and Cheryl R. Kaiser, "Diversity Policies Rarely Make Companies Fairer, and They Feel Threatening to White Men," *Harvard Business Review*, January 4, 2016. Accessed June 12, 2018. <https://hbr.org/2016/01/diversity-policies-dont-help-women-or-minorities-and-they-make-white-men-feel-threatened>
- ¹⁰Whitney M. Young, Jr., Unedited transcript of the speech made to the American Institute of Architects in 1968," in *20 on 20/20 Vision: Perspectives on Diversity and Design*, ed. Linda Kiisk (Boston: Boston Society of Architects, 2003), 9–22. Accessed June 12, 2018. http://www.economia.uniroma2.it/Public/YICGG/file/readinglist/2/2_AIA_Achitecture_2020.pdf
- ¹¹Whitney, 14, 16.
- ¹²Ibid, 12.
- ¹³Linda Mvusi, "Creative Ghettos," interview by Kwanele Kunene, Creative Ghetto, March 20, 2018, podcast, 56:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7IAJ7kzPLc>

BIOGRAPHY

Jack Travis established his namesake design studio in June 1985. Since that time he has completed proposals or has been involved in over 100 projects of varying scope and size. Clients include Spike Lee, Wesley Snipes, John Saunders of ABC sports, Giorgio Armani SPA, and Cashmere of New York. Mr. Travis encourages investigation into Black history where appropriate and includes forms, motifs, materials, and colors that reflect this heritage in his work. He has appeared in all of the prominent design publications as well as the New York Times, New York Newsday, and the Daily News, and on shows including CNN's Style with Elsa Clinch and London's BBC television program Building Sites. Mr. Travis has taught at Parsons School of Design, Pratt Institute, the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, and The School of Visual Arts (SVA).

Mr. Travis founded AC/DC Studio (Afri-Culture/Design-Culture) in 1994, which seeks to collect, document, and disseminate information on "Black Culture" as it relates to "Environmental Design Culture." He is also associated with mentorship programs including, Walks of Life and the prestigious Learning Through Art & Architecture. In 1992, Travis edited, African American Architects: In Current Practice, the first publication to profile the work of black architects in the United States.

Past appointments include an advisory position with the National AIA Task force on diversity and membership of Central Harlem's Community Board 10, in Manhattan. He acted as "Cultural Design Consultant" on two of the largest projects in Harlem, The Kalahari Condominiums with Frederic Schwartz Architects, New York, NY (2004–2009) and the Harlem Hospital New Patient Pavilion with HOK Architects, New York, NY (2006–2011).

Jack Travis is a Fellow in the AIA, and 2006 inductee in the Council of Elders of the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA). He was awarded the AIA Fellows Mentor of the Year in 2015.