

## Diversity Through Engagement: Bridging the Gap Between the Community and the Campus

ISAAC WILLIAMS

University of Maryland

*...[Y]ou 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.<sup>1</sup> - Whitney Young, address to the AIA convention, 1968.*

Many efforts have been put forth by the AIA, NAAB, ACSA, and private organizations to diversify the architecture profession in the almost 40 years since Whitney Young's landmark speech. Still the goal of an inclusive profession, representative of the diverse communities it serves, remains elusive.

At the heart of Young's critique was a call to action, a challenge, to leave behind the inaction and recalcitrance that had characterized the profession and to get involved and become more relevant. Although Young was speaking to members of the profession at an AIA convention, the challenge to diversify the profession, and the opportunities for involvement with the community, begins with the academy.

This paper posits that by engaging the community, the academy can play an important role in diversifying the demographics of architecture education and the profession. In working with the community on projects of public impact, architecture schools can position the profession as relevant to a more diverse public, making the profession attractive to students from diverse backgrounds. This paper explores a model of university-community design partnership that offers opportunities to introduce architecture to young people of diverse backgrounds in ways that may lead those young people to pursue architectural education themselves. This model of university-community partnership benefits

the community, the architecture school, and the profession. The community gains access to design services, which it may not often have access to; architecture students are introduced to a process of consensus building, and partnership with the diverse communities whom they will serve in the future; and the profession is introduced positively to a wider range of people, providing a means by which it may diversify.

### THE SCHOOL / COMMUNITY DISCONNECT

Although many North American universities have been generally successful in diversifying student enrollment in the last 40 years, architecture schools continue to struggle to attract and graduate a diverse range of architecture students. The number of African American Master of Architecture graduates per year has not increased substantially since that number began to be tracked in 1990<sup>2</sup>, and although more and more women are studying architecture, the number of women practicing remains dismal.<sup>3</sup>

For example, at the University of Maryland in the fall of 2006, only 4% of students in the Architecture Program were African American, whereas African Americans make up 28% of the state of Maryland's population.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly striking given that the Architecture Program at the University of Maryland at College Park is located in a county with one of the largest and wealthiest African American populations in the country.

The disconnect between the demographics of the state and the campus is certainly not unique to Maryland. However, the implication is that while the brightest students of color, female students, and students of all economic backgrounds are

earning degrees in other disciplines, the discipline of architecture is being left behind. Although like many architecture programs, the University of Maryland Architecture Program is one of limited enrollment, the demographics of the students who apply and are accepted are not representative of the relatively diverse student body on campus.

The challenges to diversity facing the profession are not just a problem for those groups that are disenfranchised; they are a problem for everyone in the profession. Regardless of one's political or personal feelings on the value of diversity, the profession loses, and consequently we all lose if we are unable to attract talent from the widest range of students to our ranks. As the AIA's Diversity Audit report of 2005 points out, "... the barriers to diversity within the profession are remarkably similar to those identified as barriers to the growth of the profession in general."<sup>5</sup> We must ask, how can the architecture academy attract a wider demographic range of students, and the profession retain this diverse talent group?

One answer to these questions may lie in Young's challenge to the profession to "get involved." The communities surrounding many schools of architecture are brimming with real-world challenges and issues, and are populated by men and women of a variety of colors, ethnic backgrounds, and walks of life. Through engagement with our neighbors, we have the opportunity to make our work relevant to a wider range of people, and in the process invite the next generation of architects from the community to the campus. As John L. Wilson points out in *20 on 20/20 Vision: Perspectives on Diversity and Design*, a compilation of issues on diversity organized by the AIA Diversity Committee, and the Boston Society of Architects:

The responsibility of the profession, now, is to reformulate practice, so that it is more diverse in terms of clientele, project scope, design agenda, and includes community service. If we can do that, people from all walks of life will see architecture as a path to a more equal society, where their own background, the way they see the world, are unique assets.<sup>6</sup>

## THE ISSUE OF RELEVANCE

One reason often cited for the inability of the profession to attract a diverse group of aspiring architects is the perceived diminished social

relevance of architecture. As Young pointed out in his speech, traditionally the architecture profession has contributed little to pressing social concerns, and therefore has been irrelevant to the widest public. The impact of the architect's work in addressing pressing social issues, and shaping contemporary culture is vague at best to most, when compared to medicine, law, or even industrial design. What we do, and why our work is important is simply not clear to the vast majority of the public. This is exacerbated by the rare press coverage architecture receives, which tends to celebrate new work for strictly formal reasons, and not for the impact of the work in the community, or the ingenuity of its solutions to public needs. Students who are interested in solving problems other than formal or technological ones, may find it difficult to find their place in this cultural climate. As Dr. Sharon Sutton pointed out in an interview published in *AIArchitect*:

[There is a] serious question about the social relevance of the field. In my mind, [this] issue is the most egregious: what I perceive as a lack of substance in the field. We only train one kind of architect, yet we train myriad strains of lawyers and physicians. Since everyone in architecture has to be the same, this limits the appeal.<sup>7</sup>

For some would-be architects the role of architect shaped by the press, and reinforced by the education system Sutton describes, reduces the relevance and impact of the profession, and may encourage them to apply their talents in a field seen to have greater impact.

Young people want to do work that matters. Kate Schwennsen, FAIA, and past president of the AIA pointed out, "as a profession we need to be seen to matter and provide a venue for... young people to make a difference."<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Anthony suggests in *Designing for Diversity*, "[w]omen and minority students want a greater emphasis on the human side and social impact of the field."<sup>9</sup>

There are opportunities to make architecture relevant to more than just the affluent, or corporate clients, and for young people to make a difference in architecture. These opportunities lie in the sort of community engagement Young admonished when he challenged the profession to get involved.

### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: WORK THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Interestingly, in the very same year as Young's speech to the AIA, some architecture students were getting involved in their communities. The most notable example is the insurrection of 1968 at Columbia, where student activists eventually shut down the university, and architecture students and faculty went on strike in protest of the university's plans to construct a gymnasium that would encroach on Morningside Park in Harlem. The students and faculty stood up for the community, and at the same time made demands to diversify the faculty and student body at Columbia.<sup>10</sup> They clearly saw a connection between the university acting fairly with its neighbors and acting fairly on campus.

Perhaps an opportunity of this generation of students and faculty is to apply new media and technologies to projects that engage the community and raise awareness of what we do. The creativity, talent, and knowledge within the academy can be applied to the real challenges and issues in the communities that surround the academy. Of the 127 accredited ACSA full member schools, 85 are located in metropolitan cities with diverse populations. The diversity of people within the communities surrounding the school, and the "real-life" issues present in the community, offer architecture schools the opportunity to engage the community and promote awareness of architecture, often to the very individuals who are currently underrepresented within the profession.

There are already many programs in North America doing this. The American Institute of Architecture Students leads a program called Freedom by Design, which makes the homes of low-income elderly and disabled people accessible. In 2002, the National Endowment for the Arts identified 53 universities that host community design activities.<sup>11</sup> Many of these programs such as The Rural Studio at Auburn University, and Studio 804 at the University of Kansas have had tremendous success at designing and constructing architecturally innovative and affordable housing for low-income individuals and families. By concentrating on smaller, lower cost projects, these programs have been able to offer architecture students the opportunity to experience all aspects

of the architecture profession, from concept design through construction, and the opportunity to research and experiment with innovative materials and construction techniques,<sup>12</sup> all generally within one academic year. In this case the impact of the design is most significant in the lives of the individual or family who occupies the home, and secondarily to the community who may witness the construction and see the complete project as a innovative work of architecture in the context of the community.

There are also programs that partner with community organizations to approach larger scale projects that the school may or may not assist in building. Programs such as the Community Design Program at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, and the Yale Urban Design Workshop collaborate with community organizations to plan and design projects that are often not economically viable for architecture firms,<sup>13</sup> or offer opportunities for intense engagement with the community and other disciplines on campus that pedagogically benefit the architecture students who participate. These projects tend to have broad community impact, as the program for specific buildings may include community use, or the scope of the project may be more comprehensive such as the urban design of a neighborhood.

Although university-community partnership such as those mentioned above may indirectly expose young people in diverse communities to architecture, a model that explicitly seeks to introduce architecture to young people through engagement in both the process and product of the project offers the opportunity to encourage a wider range of young people to consider architecture as a profession. Through such community work, the profession of architecture becomes more visible and relevant to a wider public, and the perceived role of the architect is expanded, making the profession more attractive. Although the particular client group, program, and location will differ with each project, architecture schools can take on an active role in diversifying the profession by seeking in community design projects opportunities to engage youth.



Figure 1. Youth from the Riverdale community working at the Riverdale Center for Educational Partnership. (Photograph by Sonia Keiner Flynn)

### RIVERDALE CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

A project I am currently leading explores the possibilities of introducing architecture to young people of diverse backgrounds through engagement with the community. The project partners the University of Maryland Architecture Program with a middle school, a community organization, and the University's own special outreach unit. This cooperative of organizations is given form in the Riverdale Center for Educational Partnership. The design team from the Architecture Program includes three graduate students, the Dean in a supervisory role, and myself.

The Center for Educational Partnership (CEP) is in Riverdale, Maryland, a diverse community about 2 miles southeast of the University of Maryland campus. The building, formerly a Prince George's County public elementary school, was acquired by the University of Maryland in the early 1980s. It is located directly across a park from William Wirt Middle School. Students from William Wirt along with youth in the Riverdale community are invited to participate in programs at the CEP. This project offers new opportunities for the University of Maryland and the Architecture Program to make meaningful connections to this neighboring community, particularly through engagement of young people, who are the primary users of the building.

Like many universities, the relationship between the campus and the community is at times strained – from the usual noise and nuisance complaints from the community after a football game; to the distrust and disrespect students at times have for

community members. This distrust, which is evident at times among campus students and community members alike, may grow out of fear of the unknown and stereotypes.

Interestingly, the tensions that arise cannot be separated from issues of race and class, which are also at the heart of any discussion of diversity. Although the University has made great strides in the last 15 years or so to diversify, the campus is still seen by the community as an enclave for middle to upper middle class young people (as most college campuses are), while the surrounding community in College Park and Riverdale is working class, and quite a diverse mix of colors.

Our approach from the beginning of the project has been to avoid viewing the community as an other – as a disadvantaged group in need of change, in contrast to ourselves as the experts – but rather to see ourselves as part of the community. We therefore are in a position as a partner to be more open to the sort of inquiry and discussion that leads to a richer vision of how the building could function. We are actively seeking and developing opportunities for university students to work with community youth in collaborative engagements that may break down the fear and stereotypes that can divide the university and the community.

The two lead community organizations involved are the Maryland Multicultural Youth Centers (MMYC) and the Engaged University (EU). MMYC is a nonprofit organization that provides a wide range of programs to assist youth that focus on increasing academic achievement, acquiring career skills, increasing awareness of and commitment to the community, avoiding risky behaviors, and adopting healthy lifestyles and habits.

The Engaged University is a special outreach unit at the University of Maryland focused on university-community partnerships. As part of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, the EU has developed numerous successful community programs, and is currently running a bike repair shop, a community garden, and summer enrichment programs for community youth including breakdancing, theatre, drumming, organic gardening and cooking, capoeira, bike recycling and cycling, and photography at the Riverdale CEP, all of which engage

university students with community youth.

In partnering with MMYC and EU, who have both been quite successful in engaging youth of diverse backgrounds, to develop the program for the building we have come to realize the tremendous potential in not just developing the design for the building, but also in developing programs that introduce architecture to the diverse youth they work with. In terms of diversifying our applicant pool in the future, we see this project as a tremendous opportunity to provide, for many, a first impression of the discipline of architecture that begins with their own experiences in the community.

### *Design Process As Method Of Community Engagement*

Our initial scope of work was to develop a vision and conceptual design for the adaptation and reuse of the existing building into a community center. When we were asked to join the project, the building had been under-utilized as a printing and storage facility. In the design process, we found that defining “community center,” and “partnership” both in programmatic and physical terms, was central to designing the architecture for the building. We sought an architecture that was informed by and representative of the ways in which the building and its attendant site could foster community interaction, and partnership.

To arrive at a conceptual design for the building, we became an active partner with MMYC, EU, and the University’s Facilities Management group in developing a program that served the space needs of MMYC, and EU, and provided opportunities for synergy between the programs. The size of the building and the challenges it presented were too great for us to consider the project as a design/build; rather our role would be to lead the research, planning, and design of the project. We conceived of the project at two scales: the large scale rehabilitation of building infrastructure, including MEP systems and building envelope, and smaller scale interventions that offered the possibility of being constructed by the Architecture Program in concert with the community. These smaller scale interventions include a gallery wall that activates the main corridor in the building and integrates seating, display, and a counter for

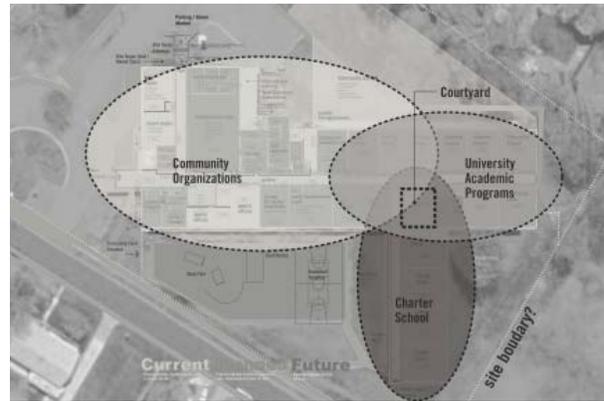


Figure 2. A Vision of Partnership: Architectural and Programmatic. This diagram was used to map the various entities that will occupy space at the CEP, and illustrates the spatial and programmatic overlap centered at the existing courtyard. It is this overlap of programs, space, and activities that is at the heart of our vision of “partnership.”

the community bakery; and a combination bike repair stand and green market stand.

We immediately saw in this task the opportunity to engage the community and the constituent groups in the design process, and therefore share with them the importance of architecture, and the value of our work. To do this, we held design workshops with MMYC and EU where we collected information on programs desired by the community, and overlaid these with programs that are already taking place in the building, and programs MMYC and EU hoped to offer in the future. MMYC and EU were pleasantly surprised by this inclusive process, and their expectations about our role as “architecture consultants” changed. Rather than providing quick, reactive, technical solutions to a

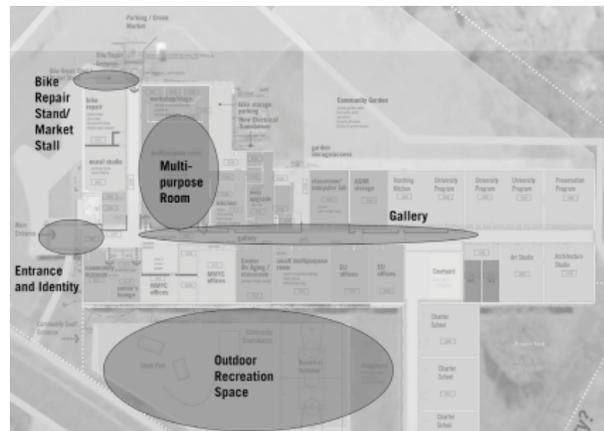


Figure 3. Smaller projects within the larger project

few isolated problems with the building, they began to see us as partners in re-imagining what the building could become, and new ways to use the building to meet their needs, and the needs of the community.

Since MMYC and EU had already conducted several community meetings, and was already administering some community programs in the building, these organizations became critical to our understanding of community needs. By working collaboratively at the workshops, we were able draw on the expertise of MMYC and EU and find new synergies between programs and uses, and evaluate the adequacy of spaces available for the programs desired by the community.

By showing the community, MMYC, and EU the broad range of services architects provide, we are hopeful that even one young person from the community might begin to imagine him or herself as an architect assisting their community in the future.

#### *The Building as a Representation of the Community*

The interior of the existing building was quite bland – anything but representative of the lively community. Working with EU, we are developing murals, artwork, and installations that celebrate the local culture and rich history of Riverdale, Prince



Figure 4. Rendering of digital mural along Gallery. The wall will display a mural composed of digital photography taken by youth in the community. The wall has been designed so that community youth can also assist in the application of the mural to the wall. (Image by Carl Lostritto, M.Arch 2008 University of Maryland)

George's County, and the state of Maryland. This offers a great opportunity for the University to engage community youth, and local artisans, and connect the building to its context.

We seek for the entire building to become an inhabitable text that vividly portrays the history and culture of Riverdale.

For example, we are presently developing a digital mural program where Maryland Architecture students are working with local students to digitally photograph important places in Riverdale. An EU staff member, who is also a professional photographer, will teach students about photography. A local artist, who has completed several murals in the community and teaches at William Wirt, will teach students about mural making. Architecture students will then lead workshops on the use of photo editing and graphic design software for the composition and production of the murals. Architecture students, community youth, and local artisans will then partner in the concept, production, and installation of the murals.

We are also working with the University to identify academic programs that would benefit from having satellite space in the Riverdale community. The Architecture Program is seeking to establish a community design studio in Riverdale to engage in real world projects that address community architectural needs. Another example of a university program, already planned to have a presence at the Riverdale CEP, is the Center on Aging, a program of the School of Public Health. The Center on Aging will use space in the building to conduct interdisciplinary research on the capacities of older people and the needs of the growing population of elders in Riverdale, along with providing services to this population such as healthy lifestyle education, and counseling on obtaining prescription drugs at lower cost. We saw in the location of this program at the center the opportunity to foster an intergenerational sense of community, connecting young people with elders. Therefore the space for this program is also being designed to function as a lounge for seniors in the afternoons when research is not being conducted. We have also designed this space to be adjacent to the community museum, offering seniors the opportunity to share their knowledge about the community with younger ones who visit the museum, reinforcing

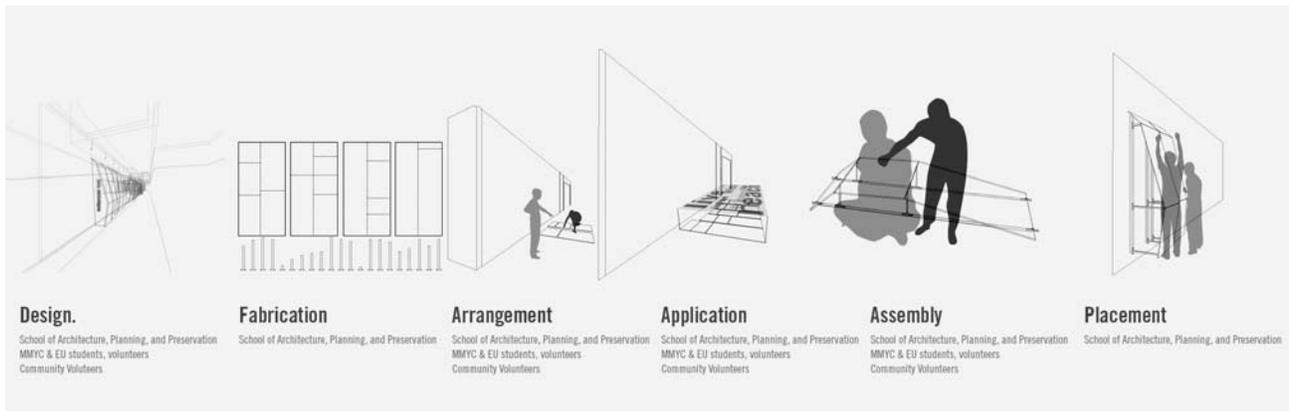


Figure 5. Gallery mural wall: Community design and construction process. The gallery wall has been conceived of as a prefabricated system that supports partnership between School of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation students, MMYC & EU students, and community volunteers throughout the design and construction process. (Image by Carl Los-ritto, M.Arch 2008 University of Maryland)

the tradition of transferring communal knowledge through storytelling.

The inclusion of programs, and architectural elements that are representative of the community is our attempt to make the architecture of the CEP relevant to the community, and inspiring to the diverse group that visits the building. We are hopeful that our increased presence in this community, and the relevance of design to improving this facility will also make the profession of architecture appealing to the youngsters who visit the building daily.

## CONCLUSION

There is no question that among the collateral organizations in architecture, creating a more diverse, inclusive profession is one of the foremost goals. Our experience at the University of Maryland working with the local community has led us to believe that a step towards a more inclusive, diverse profession, is to engage the diverse local communities in which our schools are located. Community engagement makes the profession more visible and relevant to many groups who traditionally have not had access to architects, and offers the opportunity to introduce architecture and the value of design in the built environment to children at an early age. Our experience has also shown us the value of partnering with community organizations who are experienced and skilled at developing programs that engage youth, particularly youth of color, who as a group

are underrepresented in architecture. The programs that community organizations, like MMYC or the EU, develop and administer can be great attractions for the very youth we want to reach, and there is no reason that architecture should not be presented alongside the other arts programs to these youth.

Although this project is just the start of what we hope will be a sustained engagement with our neighbors, our experiences at the University of Maryland working with the local community have helped us to understand more clearly what Whitney Young meant when he said, "The truth is that there is nothing noble in being superior to somebody else. The only real nobility is in being superior to your former self." We have come to realize the opportunities that abound when one works with the community rather than for it; when one sees oneself as partner with the community rather than an expert; and perhaps most significantly, when one embraces the diversity of gender, ethnic, and generational differences in the community, and the differences of opinion that lead to new, rich solutions to real problems.

We believe the School is becoming superior to its former self through engaging youth of diverse backgrounds in the community, and in the process, inviting the next generation of architects from the community to the campus.

## ENDNOTES

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