

Translating Africa's Infinite Pasts: Architectures of Myth and Reality

"Aboudramane's vision is of Africa, an Africa as black and as embracing as a thunderstorm at night, an Africa with the colors of the day and the darkness, an Africa whose beauty hides in the heart of its rituals, its rustling forest, its silent sleeping villages. He vibrates with this Africa, and his sculptures are an attempt to hold on to its memory."

Jean-Louis Pinte, Home and the World: Architectural Sculpture by Two Contemporary African Artists

This presentation focuses on and celebrates the ambivalent meanings of the "myth of Africa" through architectural forms and their material reality. The work examined here is visionary, but also tangible, and includes the designs of architects/artists who create the image of Africa by mixing references to myth, reality, and the cultures of colonial, postcolonial, and diasporic pasts. While juxtaposing the architectural sculpted works of Aboudramane from Cote d'Ivoire, now living in France, and Bodys Isek Kingelez of Zaire, I argue for a rich aesthetic that can reconcile the African World with its complex history and connection to the West. This aesthetic relies on the inherent hybridity of African spiritual and material traditions, as well as accommodating the differences of location, vision, and narrative form.

The presentation employs as well Paul Gilroy's concept of the "fractal" and "rhizomorphic" character of transnational African cultures, and shows how we can bring together complex identities: the indigenous Africans, those living in Diaspora, Immigrants, and Expatriates in spaces and forms that express their complex visions of Africa in the world today. These diverse visions come together, for example, through the architectural works of Muhsana Ali, an expatriate African American now living in Senegal, Amadou Kane Sy, a Senegalese artist, and myself, coleman a. jordan (ebo), an African American Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Each project of these artists and architects explores the connections and disconnects between variously located African cultures. In dialogue with the works of Aboudramane and Bodys Isek Kingelez, these projects specifically target the myth and reality of race – as signified by the "black" skin. At the same time, they position Africanness as a process of becoming and in transit amidst globally divergent identities, histories, and experiences of the present.

African presence within modernity is a troubled and complex identity whose resilience survives contradictions and residue from past colonial connections as well as a history of African slavery.¹ Matters that are troubling are the non-reciprocal hegemonic Western cultures towards the African. The term "African," itself is a monolithic distinction of the largest inhabited continent widely used in the modern world to define blackness as separate from the European in ranks of class via humanity. This generalized deductive attitude towards all Africans on the continent and worldwide, ignores the operative transnational diverse and individualized cultures to their specific experiences.

For example, Nigeria alone has at the least 33 different ethnicities within its state that are different culturally through language and traditions; this condition when compared to a West European country, would make Africa the least monolithic in context.

Without restating these well-studied histories, I wish to show representations using the rhizomes of memory, resilience, contradictions, and historical residues that allow the "African" to rethink her or his space and detail within their relationship to the modern. As a catalyst for discussion of these sometimes fractal rhizomes, I have chosen an exhibit of works by the artists, Aboudramane and Bobys Isek Kingelez. Both of these artists use the forms of architecture as their means for expression. The pieces that I will discuss are from a 1993 exhibit at the Museum for African Art in New York City entitled, "Home and the World: Architectural Sculpture by two Contemporary African Artist." Although their styles and mediums are very different in approach, they both display an Afrotopia that resides within their soles. Although it could be said that these pieces are autobiographic in their search for meaning, the use of architecture as the social realm of the familiar, "echoes a reality" that makes their culture and art accessible and coherent to the viewer. Also, the scale in which they choose to work allows the viewer to step into the psychological mindset of what the artist holds dearest about their culture or in Aboudramane's case, cultural displacement and longing for. For example, each of the works by Aboudramane in this exhibit is at a scale that proportionally one could use two hands in which to hold and peep inside openings formed by windows and doorways to imagine what life must take place within its walls. His work places us in his world that in reality, only exist in a mythical realm of cultural hybrids and differences. The precision, delicacy, and presentation of his sculpture is like that of a precious gem on display. However badly this gem wants to be an installation piece for it viewers to walk and view inside, there is a rarity and a humbling quality to these gems; they want to be covered over in a glass box for protection, so not to disturb or lose there space. These objects need preservation to hold on for the sake of what I believe to be Aboudramane's connectivity to his home and culture in Cote d'Ivoire as he himself deals with the complexities of being an expatriate in France, the former colonizing country of Cote d'Ivoire.

Kingelez, on the other hand, uses scale as a bold gesture for presentation. Kingelez is the Robert Roark of architect's; he is Ayn Rand's "fountain head" of Zimbabwe. His objects are unapologetic, boastful, and rich in cultural celebration. These colorful pieces such as his Kinshasa Label, reflect the period of Lenin's palaces of culture to be placed all over Eastern Europe in the early 20th century. Whereas Aboudramane's pieces express the poetics of a single object focused on the expression of one open space in which to contemplate; Kingelez's expression is about many spaces within a more corporate realm and he does not allow you to see inside his windows and doorways. There is a more formal approach to his work that makes it not necessary to access from the inside but to notice the outside presence and stature. His work is a "polyglot" of power from early expressions of

modernity to the African symbols and mythology. The symmetry that he uses to construct an authoritative axial presence in his buildings can be cut into a horizontal section to expose a symbol that is not a footprint of a Palladian villa or Greek temple, but an African footprint of, for example in Ghana, may be equivalent to an adinkra symbol. The parables attached to these symbols express a clear understanding of a self and collective identity.

His sculpture can be viewed as playful and harmless as presented by an artist. His work viewed as if he were an architect, assumes a more demanding look at a progressive "Zimbabwean" culture that is has a quality of both past and present. There is a timeless quality about his work that is either then or now. It too like Aboudramane's work, wants to be preserved; however, in Kingelez's objects it is difficult to tell if they are preserved from a industrialized past or a futuristic approach to the present.

"The architecture of identity begins with individual acts of self-representation."ⁱⁱ

The artistic expressions in the structures and forms created by Aboudramane and Kingelez liberates the African architect who has been trained from a traditional Western or post-colonial stylized manner. Their work in this exhibition is about home and the world, as stated in the title. The latter part of the 20th century in Western cultures has seen a rise in the issues of identity studies. It would seem only natural as the influx of immigrants and migrants from Western Europe's post-colonial era begin to find their voice; making what might be experienced as in Aboudramane's case a home-lessⁱⁱⁱ situation into a home-full place that somehow redefines home in the 21st century.

In my own work as an architectural designer from America, my identity continues to reside in the realm of African American consciousness. This distinction between nationality is inconvenient, but until as a "black" architecture Therefore,

"What does architecture have to do with blackness?" The question reveals the false assumption that architecture has nothing to do with this troublesome entity. In this case, everyday reality does not readily correspond to intellectual adaptations of reality. This situation represents a psycho-historical form of denial that functions to maintain a separation between things once joined. This denial is a fiction fashioned from history, an intellectual/philosophical product intended to erase the fact that architecture and blackness as we know and practice them were born into the world together. Their relationship can be traced through philosophical, historical, and semiological territories. To comprehend this relationship, a formal apparatus is necessary. Through careful consideration of this ancestry, a dominant and provocative threshold can be found existing somewhere between the two.

Darell Wayne Fields, *Architecture in Black 1*

Autobiography is usually thought of as seizing the authority of authenticity. But in order not to be authoritative, I've got to speak autobiographically. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies." 2

In the much-quoted passage from *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B Du Bois states: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line." My work explores the complex lines that—in black and white—outline the spatial relationships between socio-historic underpinnings of African American identity and its expression and representation in contemporary architectural design in the United States. More specifically, the architectural project presented here interrogates the links between western design and the legacies of the African Diaspora.³ Like Darell Fields, I bring architecture and blackness together, for I believe that they have been inextricably connected throughout American national history. Like Stuart Hall, I wrestle with the problems of identity politics as an African American in the predominantly white academic field and profession of architecture. Inspired by Leslie Kanés Weisman's claim that architecture is akin to language in its social constructedness⁴, I seek narrative expression through spatial explorations that probe issues on individual and national scale: memory, guilt, rage, national versus racial or ethnic identity, the debt that "white America" owes to its "Others" of color.

The "color lines" I am interested in crisscross the Atlantic following the history of the multinational slave trade. They permeate our history, language, and social space; they run through American cities, the halls of academe, and our imaginations. They are often invisible, and yet they inform the organization of space and the ways we perceive built forms; they draw contours around each individual life. Because of this last condition, my work cannot escape autobiography. Given its location between architecture and African American Studies, it is also challenged by interdisciplinarity. William L. Andrews states that "autobiography holds a position of priority, indeed many would say preeminence, among the narrative traditions of (Africans) and black Americans." Indeed, "ours is an extraordinarily self-reflexive tradition."⁵ I would like to argue through this project that a similar self-reflexiveness ought to become an important feature of the "education of an architect." If we are to ever get beyond exclusive, hegemonic pedagogies and professional practice that replicates them, we must learn how to engage in what bell hooks terms "recalling" ourselves.⁶ Such a shift in how we view architecture implies a decisive revision of how we define our whole discipline and our roles and identities in it. In "Race and Architecture" Cornel West states: "The future of architectural criticism rests on the development of a refined and revisionist architectural historiography that creatively fuses social histories of architectural practices and social histories of technology in light of

sophisticated interpretations of the present cultural crisis.”⁷ My work arises from this crisis, retraces the color lines inscribed into architecture, and proposes ways of spatial healing for the nation.⁸

The works that follow consist of spatial explorations of African American identity that combine sculpture, architecture, and visual and narrative contexts of the Black Atlantic.⁹ As bell hooks says, “It is the telling of our history that enables political [and architectural, I must add] self-recovery.”¹⁰ In these projects I explore what I call an Autobiographic Design, one that takes a social and historical approach to architecture and examines the ways in which it can facilitate a reconciliation of African American identity today with its (in)visible and violent past. The social construction of space and language pointed out by Weisman is crucial to understanding the role of autobiography in recovering and designing (re)presentations of African American architecture. I show that our stories and identities need to be recovered and told—both through language and spatial constructs. While emphasizing what Toni Morrison claims, that the past is more infinite than the future. iii

The “call-and-response” sequence reflects oral, spiritual, and performative traditions of African and African American heritage. They construct a space for active communication. The well-known call to “FREE YOUR MIND!” echoes in this space as a reminder of what unity ought to mean to all Americans. As Randall Robinson states in *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, “Until America’s white ruling class accepts the fact that the book never closes on massive unredressed social wrongs, America can have no future as one people.”¹⁴ that we should learn from the past in order to embrace our present identities, I argue for designing structures that construct American identity as “reconciling” with and reflecting inclusive and egalitarian spaces for a diverse, multivalent, and healing society. The journey I present here is an autobiographical account of my search for an architecture that expresses and constructs identity beyond the stereotypes of “race” and hegemonic “culture,” while also celebrating what LaVerne Wells-Bowie calls “rooted[ness] in actual cultural experience and racial memory.”¹¹

A table - an object where a meeting or congress takes place,

where/upon treaties and truces are made.

A chair - an object where contemplation is allowed to happen, with others

or one’s own self; a place of respite.

The site - the Low Country, South Carolina (i.e. Charleston, Beaufort, Sullivan’s Island)

The Table and Chair create a personal space of reconciliation. They are

forms derived from and re-visioning in the present two groups of ancient West African

nsibidi signs.²¹ Of this nsibidi script/text created by the Ejagham people of southwestern Cameroon and southeastern Nigeria, one set denoted danger and

extremity--what Robert Farris Thompson calls the "dark signs"--and the other represented human relationships, communication, and household objects--or

"material-ideograph."²² By combining semantic, graphic or script-related and metaphorical elements of both groups, I specifically reinterpret a "dark" symbol that communicates, "all this country belongs to me" into an open one that I interpret as, "this country belongs to us." Its openness means to evoke a reflection or a mirror and to invite the viewer into and beyond that which we literally cannot see on the surface. The material and form used in the objects unite three basic elements: earth, air, and water that are meant to honor and mourn death of ancestors, while simultaneously celebrating life and vitality. The rusted metal plate is a metaphor symbolic of the nsibidi proverb, "where there is mud, water is nearby." This proverb I interpret as a plea for survival if one is dying from thirst (and thirst connotes more than just desire for water given our current, turbulent, self-inquiry deprived post-9/11/01 times). At the same time, the partial grid pattern of metal rods puncturing through the plate signifies a structural interference or communication—between western culture, or a "classical order," that is both supported by and supporting the more natural (or indigenous) and mythical realms of order. The original symbols were usually etched into the ground--they scarred its surface like script and drawing to convey trespassing, for instance. The symbols

I chose to work with are those of unity, meeting place, journey, and belonging.

The table and chair are designed to create a space of contemplation or an altar bridging the pain of the past and the beauty, joy, and life force of black people in

the present. Many of the symbols I use in this project crossed the Atlantic with the Ejagham people who were enslaved in places such as the Caribbean, South

America, as well as the Southern regions of North America. Hence the forms in my project signify on multiple levels and invite the viewer to engage in her or his own "figurations" and "re-memorations." Many of the symbols bear striking resemblance to other indigenous cultures such as Native American symbols and can be read with a cross-cultural context. Because it has been inspired by my travels in several African, European, and Caribbean countries, the installation also has deep personal meaning by representing what I had to un-learn and re-learn about identity as an American of African descent.

Although the African experience differs from parts of the world, it is Western modernity that "broke the world in half" by defining the hegemonic powers of

race. There are common themes between all Africans and all beings and this common ground presents our forms with many aesthetic differences.

ⁱ Slavery in parts of West Africa continue to exist mostly through child enslavement.

ⁱⁱ Home and the World: Architectural; Sculpture by Two Contemporary African Artist, Introduction, p 13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Home and the World, p 15.