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Heeding the Needs
Of the Third World

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Kelly Onwukwe has watched the introduction of Western-style shopping centers in his native city of Lagos, Nigeria. And he doesn’t like much of what he’s seen: copies of what one might find in the suburbs outside any U.S. city. Yet he also knows there are many Nigerians who like the idea of patronizing Western-style department stores to buy goods imported from the Western world. At the same time, these same people continue to throng to the traditional bustling markets. Given this reality, he has designed a regional shopping market for the Ikeja area of Lagos which combines the most appropriate elements of both types of market places. His aim: to improve the efficiency of the traditional-style market while preserving its vitality.

In his design, Onwukwe made it easier to maintain hygiene by introducing a good drainage system and ensuring an adequate water supply, for example, and to ease traffic patterns by placing delivery areas away from the market’s core. But he did nothing to change the individualistic touches that so enliven the traditional Nigerian market, the way “each stall is expressive of the person who owns it” or the way the placement of rows of goods encourages bargaining. Nor did he attempt to blot out the noises of the traditional market (“Mama, Begee, give me this!”) in a wash of Muzak a la Americana. Further, while he used material some might consider “Western”—concrete blocks—his structure has a decidedly Nigerian flavor. He used perforated concrete blocks, arranging them in patterns based on traditional motifs, and highlighted the building’s exterior with bold splashes of color.

Beyond drawing board

When Desmond Hayle was visiting his home in Kingston, Jamaica, last summer, he learned of a fire that had destroyed part of Eventide Home, an institution the government maintains for the homeless poor. Almost 150 elderly disabled women died when flames raged through one of the institution’s 100-year-old wooden buildings.

Hayle recently worked on a new facility for Eventide. He surveyed the buildings within the complex to determine which were substantial enough to remain—with remodeling—and designed new buildings to blend with the old and fit the irregular site on which the institution stands. In order to minimize fire hazards, he fashioned the new buildings from reinforced concrete produced by a local cement factory.
Because air conditioning is a luxury in his country, he devised ways to keep the buildings cool and comfortable in Jamaica's hot, humid climate by the use of natural ventilation. He also took into account the importance of maintaining security in the complex, of making all facilities accessible to the handicapped and of creating a truly homelike atmosphere so people both within and without the institution cease regarding it as a prison.

But he believes his responsibility as an architect goes beyond what emerges on his drawing board. It must be directed at a basic: improving the quality of people's lives. That is why he also suggested that the institution's residents be taught a trade so they can become prideful self-supporting members of society.

Onwukwe's design for an Ikeja market and Hayles' for Kingston's Eventide Home were senior thesis projects undertaken last spring at Howard University's School of Architecture and Planning. Such projects, which constitute one requirement for the Bachelor of Architecture degree, enable students to pull together the skills and sensitivities they have acquired in almost five years of study and apply them to a problem of special concern. Students must present drawings of their design, build a three-dimensional model of it and write a long paper explaining and justifying the architectural choices they have made.

That Onwukwe and Hayles are from Third World countries is of more than cursory significance. Today, about one-third of the school's students come from Third World countries and their presence has had a vital impact on almost every aspect of the school's life.

The foundation

Howard's role as a leading center for training Black American architects has a long history. In 1924, Howard Hamilton Mackey, a University of Pennsylvania-trained architect joined the faculty and began the long task of building a full-fledged architectural program. In 1950, that program became the first at a predominantly Black educational institution to be accredited by the National Architectural Accrediting Board.

"Howard Mackey disproved the notion that architecture was a profession of a white elite," observes Harry Robinson, dean of the School of Architecture and Planning since September 1979. "He showed that Blacks could make a large dent in the profession—and they have."

Today, Howard-trained architects are practicing all over the United States. What is less known, but forms a compelling backdrop for understanding the school's current milieu, is the story of Howard-trained architects who are practicing in scattered parts of the globe.

"You find Howard-trained architects all over the place," says Ghanaian-born Victor Dzidzienyo, a faculty member and alumnus who has been gathering information on his fellow alumni working in the Third World. "The products of Howard have become action-oriented people who solve problems on the spot."

Dzidzienyo, himself, might be considered a case in point. He recently completed a special appointment as project manager for an international consortium charged with developing a master plan and construction development program for the new Ogun state government secretariat/new town complex in Abeokuta, Western Nigeria. By the year 2000, the complex is expected to house 90,000.

The design, based on the agba/a or family compound concept, features a series of interlocking low buildings surrounding central courts. These buildings make ample use of the local olumo rock for symbolic as well as practical reasons. Explains Dzidzienyo, "The history is that in the old days when the people were being invaded they were able to hide under-
neath these rocks. The rocks became their protectors.”

By using these history-tinged rocks and by building on the traditional agbala concept, he believes the architects and planners he directed were able to come up with architectural symbols that had significant—not merely decorative—meaning for the people who will live and work in the complex.

Dzidzienyo says he had no difficulty translating his Howard training to the Nigerian setting. “As I look back on it, the beauty of the training is that you are trained as an architect first and with the sensitivity that is developed through the curriculum you are able to respond to any need regardless of where you are.”

While the school has always attracted students from the Third World, primarily from Africa and the Caribbean, what is new in recent years is the rapid increase in their numbers. Of the school’s 336 students last semester, 117 were from Third World countries, with Nigeria (59), Iran (19) and Jamaica (11) having the largest representation. Other countries represented include: Ghana, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Trinidad, Bermuda, Guyana, Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Kuwait and Lebanon.

The school’s dean cites “new found wealth,” particularly oil, as one probable reason behind the recent influx of Third World students into the school. Coupled with this economic explanation is Howard’s long tradition of training students from the Third World. As one Nigerian architecture student put it, “Back home, you hear about Howard long before you hear about Harvard.”

Whatever the reasons for the high concentration of Third World students, it is a concentration that is readily visible to even the most casual visitor to the school’s brick building on the corner of Sixth Street and Howard Place.

The sounds of Yoruba frequently burst forth from the lobby, a favorite gathering place for Nigerian students. During a lecture, a student frantically takes notes—in Arabic. Displayed along a second-floor hallway are three winning designs from a competition; the winning entries were done by students from Jamaica, Guyana and Iran.

The dean pulls out a newspaper article about a student from Jamaica who designed a memorial for the Mississippi gravesite of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. In an office, a student from Sierra Leone helps his Ghanaian professor collate the syllabus for a course that will examine new towns around the world. A sign in the library reads: “Please. Por Favor. Bitte. S.V.P. Prego. Min fadlac. Jowo. Check briefcases with desk attendant at this point.”

The sign is but a tiny example of the ways in which the school is responding to the needs of an international student body.

Education for all

“The Black American student has special needs which we [at the school] have responded to since the 1920s,” says Robinson. “The fact is our Third World students have special needs which we must respond to as well.” Quickly, he outlines some of the concrete steps the school has taken to better serve its large Third World constituency:

- It has increased the number of faculty members from Third World countries in order to expose its students to the expertise of architects and planners who have intimate experience with the type of problems students will face when they return to their homelands to practice. Of the school’s 40 faculty members today, 9 are from Third World countries—3 from Ghana, 2 from Iran, 2 from Egypt, 1 from Trinidad and 1 from Jamaica.

- It offers some specific courses especially relevant to Third World architecture: Tropical Architecture; Tropical Architecture and Urbanism; Principles of Islamic Design; Landscape Architecture and Design (Developing Countries); Planning and Development in Africa.

- It endeavors to make room within the regular curriculum to address distinctively Third World needs. Thus a class on architectural structures might deal not only with steel and factory-made bricks but also with the hand-hewn earthen blocks so common in much of Africa. And in the design studios, where teachers meet with a maximum of 10 students for 9 hours each week, indigenous sites and/or needs are often taken into account.

- It encourages senior architecture students to pick a thesis project that relates directly to solving an architectural problem in their homelands. Hayle’s and Onwukwe’s are two such projects. Other thesis projects involve designs of a medical clinic, library and government building in Nigeria, an urban waterfront complex in Bermuda, an urban development project in Jamaica.

- It is exploring student and faculty exchange programs with universities in Nigeria and the Dominican Republic as a means of formalizing its Third World ties and in hopes that eventually students and faculty can work, study and research abroad. In the past, students have traveled to Africa with the school’s former dean, Jerome Lindsey, to study indigenous architectural forms under an arrangement with a Ghanaian university. This year, six students and two professors (an American and a Ghanaian) visited Santo Domingo to study, photograph and record facets of the large-scale restoration underway in the city’s historic central district.

- It intends to hold a major conference on the built and unbuilt environment of the Third World and the architect’s responsibility in developing that environment. Meanwhile, through its regular faculty lecture series, it focuses not only on American architectural developments but also on such topics as “Images of Egypt,” “Chandigarh (an Indian new town project) and “Architecture and International Development.”
Public school model by Ottram Hussy, student from Jamaica
Underlying these concrete steps is the faculty’s growing awareness of its near-awesome responsibility: These teachers know that many of the students they are training today will (literally) be helping to shape the face of the Third World tomorrow. For many on the faculty this knowledge has spurred a process of self-examination as they find themselves confronting a critical question: What is the most appropriate form—or forms—for Third World architecture to take?

How each faculty member comes to grip with this question is a reflection of his background, his values and the nuances of his professional experiences. Consider, for example, the responses of three: Anthony Johns, Victor Adegbite and Khosrow Moradian.

Johns is American; Adegbite was born and lived most of his life in Ghana; Moradian was born in Iran but has lived almost all his adult life in the United States. All three received their architectural training at Howard University. Labels can oversimplify, but if one were to put a label on the respective stances the three men take towards Third World architecture one might label Johns’ stance “romantic,” Adegbite’s “pragmatic” and Moradian’s “political.” Behind these different labels are some similarities as well.

The romantic stance

“I am one who holds that, yes, Africanisms have a place within an aesthetic sky,” declared Anthony Johns at a recent faculty gathering. It was perhaps ironic that the meeting’s most eloquent plea for the development of an African architectural aesthetic came not from an African but from an Afro-American whose own architectural commissions have been confined to the Washington-Baltimore area. (Among Johns’ buildings are the town hall in Glenarden, Md., the Communications Arts Center at Bowie State College, Saint Judah Baptist Church in Washington and the College Center at Coppin State College in Baltimore.)

In an interview, Johns elaborates on his concerns. “In contemporary Africa I am not enamored of places like Accra, Lagos and Dakar,” he says. “Let me tell you why. Because from an architectural point of view they are a regurgitation of what I would call a typical American city—with their street patterns and buildings and the social problems that seem to have followed the architecture or vice versa. I’m more interested in a place like Bawku in Ghana, a trading center that doesn’t have the machine look of our modern cities. In fact, it looks like a rundown dirty marketplace. But I see the potential there for a new architecture and—I’d like to think—a better culture, a better culture in the sense that in my own visits to such villages made of earth and straw and bamboo I didn’t find crime and anonymity. To me, their beauty occurs in a different vein from that of our ‘nice’ buildings.”

For such views, Johns freely calls himself a “romanticist,” adding, “people like me want to slide back into the era of Timbuktu.” Romantic or not, these views have spurred him to advocate “moving towards that frontier where we really start creating an African architectural aesthetic.”

“The typical student we get from Africa,” he believes, “has been brainwashed to the European model. This seems to be the case for Africa in general because for years African nations have been sending youngsters to European and American universities and, understandably, the mindsets have come out Western European. However, we are getting more and more African students who recognize that fact and would like to search for the aesthetic architectural statement that sincerely and uniquely represents their culture. What’s happening, I think, is that the African mindset is changing; i.e., the Africans themselves are realizing that there is no majestic answer in Western European architectural notions.

“It’s not hard for even those who come here with a mindset that buildings should always be glass towers and steel cages to question that mindset when you confront them with the reality of how these glass towers and steel cages have failed us here. Wolf Von Eckardt [The Washington Post architecture critic] points out that our typical glass office building is in one sense a failure in that during the summer when the air conditioning system breaks down all the people have to leave the building. Certainly in that limited sense it is a failure and it is a failure in other ways as well. We can see some successes, true.”

Such ideas he frequently shares with his students. Johns, who in 1976 was a visiting professor at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana, was recently named chairman of Howard’s architecture department. In that position, he hopes to build yet another span in the bridge between Africa and Afro-America by seeking to establish an ongoing faculty-student exchange program between Howard’s architecture school and one or more African architecture schools.

Meanwhile, he continues to give his students architectural problems to work out which require them to imagine sites in Africa or the Caribbean. And he continues to emphasize the architectural validity of not only the contemporary glass and steel tower and the Gothic cathedral but also the traditional mud huts and mosques of Africa.

The pragmatic stance

Victor Adegbite, the acting chairman of the school’s department of city and regional planning, isn’t the least bit concerned if African cities start looking like American or European cities. “Cities are cities and cities are for human beings and human beings are human beings anywhere in the world,” he says as he sits behind his desk in his Howard office.

Nor does Adegbite think African architects should eschew Western technology.
Day-care center model by Andre Schwartz, student from Guyana
Responding to the critics, he scoffs, “What do they want to see—mud huts—to be convinced they are in Africa? Saying African cities shouldn’t use steel and glass is like saying that when people in Accra use antibiotics they are being ‘un-African.’ If people have the same bacteria as anyone else and antibiotics will kill that bacteria and save their lives why shouldn’t they use antibiotics?

‘I don’t have any problems using Western technology because I think Western technology’ is for everyone. To say that in designing we should not take advantage of Western technology is a luxury. It’s a romanticism. I’m scared to live in a mud hut [because of its vulnerability to earthquakes, floods, etc.] Why should I? What would I be trying to prove? Why not use technology? In fact, I have used it a lot.’

Adegbite, a leading architect in Ghana for 20 years before coming here in 1974, leans over and shows some photographs of his largest project: the State House complex built initially for the Organization of African Unity Conference in Accra in 1965. Constructed at a cost of $20 million and designed, built, furnished and equipped in a mere 10 months, it includes a 12-story executive suite; a conference hall complete with simultaneous interpreting booths and systems, lounges, bars, offices, a telex facility and a clinic; an exhibition hall; and a banquet hall for 1,500. It is an impressive complex, bringing to mind the headquarters of international organizations in Geneva, Rome or New York. He pulls out another photograph: “This is what the British built for us as a State House,” a modest building with a red tile roof. “And this,” he says, indicating the modern complex he designed, “is what a Howard University student. In Ghana, he designed a similar door made out of white-painted wood slats which he had installed in many of his homes and found ideal for controlling ventilation and light. Not all of his American-inspired innovations worked out as well.

In a recent meeting of the class he teaches on planning and development in Africa, he told his students of the hard lesson he had learned when he tried to duplicate Washington-style alleys in an early housing project he designed in Ghana. “I introduced alleys and lo and behold they were not maintained,” he exclaimed. “The city government just didn’t keep them clean. Grass grew up through the concrete; garbage piled up; rodents were attracted; people who were up to no good would hide out there. My brilliant idea [he laughs] was defeated. We were forced to reallocate the land and give each household responsibility for maintaining its own portion of what had been my ‘alley.’ After that I decided, ‘No more alleys.’”

In addition to teaching and working on a book about the Ghanaian new town of Terna, for which he served as chief development officer, Adegbite is serving as a consultant to the architectural firm of Brown and Wright on a project to design a new Ghanaian Embassy complex for the nation’s capital. “The design,” he says, “reflects what I mean about incorporating culture and anthropology with technology.”

Patterned after a palace of a Ghanaian high chieftain, the marble-faced building will have stages to hold talking drums, pedestals for sacrificial libations at welcoming ceremonies and an elliptical staircase built around a giant mahogany or teak tree trunk. It will be furnished with ornately carved traditional Ghanaian furniture, including gilded three-legged ceremonial stools. “The particularly Ghanaian flavor of the embassy reflects the new cultural independence of Third World countries,” wrote Sarah Booth Conroy in a
Third World architecture is architecture that most of the people live in—"houses"—if you made out of tin cans. As an architect, I can call them that—boxes or Chase Manhattan or to design big buildings for prestige. What I mean by either to work for the so-called foreign countryside; they are poor, illiterate, uneducated, with thick adobe walls, tall wind-towers and domes designed to pull in wind and release hot air, small holes set at the center of each dome to let in light. "People have been building like this for 3,000 years," he says. "These builders could take a local material that was cheap and build houses that would be comfortable on a hot summer day. The way they dealt with climate was fantastic. The form and shape of the building was exciting. But structurally these buildings are very weak. In an earthquake or flood, hundreds, thousands are killed.

"What buildings like this need is the kind of structural system we learn about here [in the West]. As architects we need to marry this technology with local traditions. That way we will get a building that's comfortable, cheap and will last long but will not disregard local skill, local materials, local character."

He sums up what has become an impassioned lecture by adding, "We [in the Third World] should not reject our history as being backward but not follow it blindly either. I'm not against Western technology. But we have to make Western technology serve the Third World just as the Third World has always served the West."

Except for two brief return visits to Iran and travels to India, Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China, Greece, and Tanzania, Moradian has remained in the U.S. since he received his B.A. from Howard in 1967, working first for several D.C. architectural firms and since 1972 at the university. He says he felt he could not practice the kind of architecture he believed in under the Shah's regime. In the summer of 1979, with the Shah now deposed, he went back to Iran to study traditional architectural forms and to design an apartment building with ground-floor shops for the city of Yazd in southern Iran. The resulting building, made of adobe-covered sundried brick and buttressed with a steel framework, represents that marriage of local tradition and Western technology he so strongly advocates. Whether the building will ever be constructed is now in doubt but Moradian expresses hope that now that the American hostages have been released relations between the U.S. and Iran will normalize. "But again," he reflects, "when there is
revolution, when there is war, architecture plays a secondary role."

He is unsure, also, about whether he will ever return to Iran to live permanently, pointing out that he has spent half his life in the U.S. and has strong attachments to both Washington and Howard. "However," he says, "I can serve [Iran]. I will do research. I will write articles." And he will teach.

One afternoon, Moradian met with some of his students to introduce the project for the semester: to design a school for a rural area in a hot dry tropical climate. "The goal is the same as for the building you did last semester for a hot/wet climate—to keep the heat out, to keep it comfortable," he explained. "All the cooling must be provided naturally."

Because it was the beginning of the semester, he set aside time to show a series of slides to help his students become "sympathetic to the plight of the masses." Images of the tents of displaced Palestinians were juxtaposed against the towering skyline of a proposed redesign for Jerusalem. Modern private homes of wealthy Iranians stood in sharp contrast to the tin-can dwellings of the poor. Clean-lined, well-landscaped vistas of Reston, Va., a new town outside Washington, were followed by those of boarded-up public housing projects in inner-city Washington.

As the slides flashed by, he delivered his simple but hard-hitting message: "As architects we are needed."

The debate

When you sit in a class taught by a Moradian or an Adegbite or a Johns, when you talk to students like Desmond Hayle ("The architect's responsibility doesn't end at the drawing board.") or Kelly Onwukwe ("I don't think it's right to just import Western culture as a whole and impose it on the Nigerian people. You must be selective in what you adopt."), when you consider Harry Robinson's list of the steps his school is taking to accommodate its Third World students, you think that, surely, the Howard University School of Architecture and Planning is evolving into a leading center for Third World architecture.

Yet the faculty is currently engaged in a lively debate about whether this is the case or whether this should be the case.

Ahmed Elnaggar, who was born in Egypt, calls what is occurring in the school today a "restructuring." "It's almost like building with blocks," he says. "As an outsider you might not see or even envision yet the possibilities because you can only deal with one or two blocks at a time. But that structure—a new commitment toward the Third World—is being created here at Howard University School of Architecture and Planning.

"We are talking about the essence [of that structure] when we say that we take the student and help him get reacquainted with his environment or when we say that one of our basic concerns is to get the student to understand his own situation early in the game so that he feels pride in his country and his region. That is the sensitivity that I equate with Howard."

Frank West, a member of the faculty for 24 years, doesn't like the word "restructuring." "I'd say we are building on a basic foundation that has been here since the school's inception. The student body is changing and, naturally, we are addressing ourselves to this. If we refuse to change, we're not going to grow. But I don't agree with the thesis that we're here mainly to accommodate Third World students. Third World students just happen to gravitate to this particular program because this program is meeting their needs. We're here to meet the needs of any student who is interested in the profession as it stands."

Patrick Jadin, like West, an American, argues: "I don't think there necessarily has to be a restructuring because within the framework of the education here as it stands the needs of specific individuals can be met very well. Each student can take what he is given and apply it to his own condition." Adds Egyptian-born Sam Simaika, "I believe architecture is architecture and the difference between what is done here and what is done there [in the Third World] is a matter of regional differences."

But for others the "architecture is architecture" argument serves to deny the unique heritages of a student from Africa, the Caribbean or the Middle East. Consider, for instance, the "architecture is architecture" viewpoint when it comes to presenting architectural history.

"The traditional history of architecture text is in fact nothing more or less than the history of architecture in Western Europe, with rare exceptions," agrees Anthony Johns. He has proposed that the school, at the very least, add a course on African architecture to its curriculum. (No such course presently exists in any structured sense.)

For now, Johns sees the School of Architecture and Planning as just "beginning the journey" in formalizing its commitment to the Third World, particularly to Africa. But he says he also senses "a greater and growing awareness at the school of the fact that in educating our African students, particularly, in the main we have glossed over their aesthetic cultural heritages."

"I believe our potential for becoming a center for Third World architecture is much greater than anyone else's. I think I would rather emphasize our potentials."

The dean of the school expresses few doubts those potentials can be realized. "You have to realize that we are just beginning to come out of a deep freeze," he says. [This is his oblique reference to the most recent period in the school's history which was marked by a bitter struggle between Robinson's predecessor and students and faculty and saw dramatic student protests and demands for that dean's resignation. Given this turmoil, program-building took a back seat. What's more, under a new curriculum installed during
that period, the school’s accreditation expired. The old professionally-oriented curriculum, which shaped so many of the country’s leading Black architects, is now back in place and a new accreditation visit is set for October.

Considering again the school’s response to the pull of Third World architectural needs, Robinson says, “I personally see that this can be the center for Third World architecture and planning in this country.” Robinson continues. “But I also think a balance has to be struck between the proportion of Third World and American students—given our capacity. And the whole issue here is capacity—the space available, the money available, the allocation of resources.

Then, too, he points to a frequently overlooked factor: the alumni experience. Regardless of whether the Howard University School of Architecture and Planning is formally dubbed “a center for Third World architecture” or “a center for training Third World architects,” the fact is that its graduates can be found today practicing all over Africa, the Caribbean and the Middle East.

A list of such alumni would include two men who have sons currently enrolled in the school: Aaron Milton, whose firm, Milton and Richards, is the oldest and largest in Liberia and has done work all over West Africa and in Libya; and Harold Morrison, a leading architect under the Hugh Shearer government in Jamaica.

It would also include such names as Patrick Delatour, director of the Citadel restoration project in Haiti; Felix Chuwuma Obinani, director of architecture and planning for a new federal capital in Abuja, Nigeria; Lloyd Hylton, an architect/planner in Sierra Leone; Mwangi Wangundo of the town planning division in Nairobi, Kenya; Simcha Afek-Shpak, an architecture professor in Haifa, Israel; and Kamran Diba, a prominent Iranian architect (under the Shah) whose design for a new town adjoining the ancient Persian city of Shushtar was praised in a recent issue of Progressive Architecture.

Such a list would also include American-born architects who have or are practicing in the Third World—people like James Smith and Bob Bennett in Nigeria, Richard Fitzhugh in Guyana, Thomas Leonard in Honduras and Gregory Moore in Saudi Arabia.

Regardless of where they are practicing today or where they call home, the school’s graduates have been the recipients of the special Howard legacy. It is a legacy Dean Robinson describes in crystal clear tones: “You take students where you find them and you help them to get where they have to be to be architects.”