

**Wilkins Craig L. 2007. *The Aesthetics of Equity: notes on race, space, architecture and music*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.**

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## **REACHING OUTSIDE THE BOX**

The modern repertoire of architecture and its practice is a series of creative statements coming from every corner of the world. One should travel as an explorer of the past, for example, to see impressive aboriginal and recent examples in African architecture: Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Burkina, Mali and Zimbabwe. The full continent of Asia, America's, and Australia plus the numerous island territories completes your understanding of the world's architectural innovations overlaid by cultural history, then and now. From the standpoint of a wide range of ethnic and sub-cultural groups, these patterns of architecture have been created through climatic, political, regional, economic, religious, and historical factors. Therefore, our appreciation of architecture involves its complex permutations not in terms of one place or group. Why then speak of architecture's many definable attributes as one tradition lacking inputs from across time and global implications?

Several authors have published books or articles on architecture's racial content and intent and the lack of African-American participation in the professional practice of architecture. With his "The Aesthetics of Equity," Craig L. Wilkins joins these writers. This book is about *architecture* as a professional performance but also as a concept understood in terms of its cultural qualities as both a noun and a verb. His discussion of architecture's *aesthetic* statements is interesting, provocative and inventive, promoting an abstract and materially embodiment of architecture's development, including its assumed importance as a cornerstone of Western civilization. His initial catalyst, Wilkins writes, was to investigate the link between race, space, music (hip-hop), and architecture.

The overall premise of the book, however, is that the discipline of architecture, as a focus of study and practice, has a "systematic and specific resistance to African-Americans at every level." The book is an attempt to provide a plausible explanation as to how these pieces fit into the American framework of architectural history and professional practice as well as the competing ideological perspectives on the development of an American cityscape and the major debates concerning race and gender in the cultivation of the American architect. William's manages to present architecture's dynamic personalities and assortment aesthetic principles as the invention and property of a pro-western mind-set. Yet, constructs of architecture, noun and verb, existed long before being highjacked and radicalization by the few who recently defined it as a disciplinary and interdisciplinary professional act requiring payment and peer recognition.

Wilkins criticizes the "static concretized understanding of architecture and destructs the systemic practices that have kept it from changing with the demands of a multicultural society." Examining the spatial, disciplinary and professional conditions of architecture

in terms of *equity*, he argues there is a deliberate impediment to the inclusion of diverse cultures in general and African-American participation in particular. He organizes his reflective thoughts through the writings of John Locke, James Mayo, Foucault and others, to shape a critical exposition of the built urban environment and the controlling attributes of cultural *whiteness*. He attributes the strength of his thoughts to the normative view of the world as almost entirely circumscribed by the system of beliefs imbued by the dominant culture (white and whiteness), which in the end determines people's actions, behaviors, and motives.

In describing the concept of *equity*, internally and externally, as defined by Wilkins, he suggests an interconnected cultural condition that involves professional design actions as a socialization function; that is, a marginalizing *whiteness* perpetuating the conflicts and limits to our understanding of what impedes African-Americans socially, politically, and in their learning and accomplishments toward becoming professional architects. These random arguments thread themselves along the traditional ethereal aspects of design functions, preference and meaning. His arguments are not completely satisfying.

Sympathetic to his theory testing are the numbers that testify to the scarcity of African-Americans when it comes to the how many are studying architecture, faculty teaching architecture, registered architects, and the books in print documenting the work of African-American architects. He deserves praise for raising, again, these serious issues. It must be said, however, that these arguments here are incomplete, since he does not directly address such issues or offer a factual enlightenment for the paucity of African-American success in these areas. A problem well defined is a problem half solved.

I do agree with Wilkins, in that there is an intuitive pro-western appreciation for western architecture. That reality is true throughout most of the world for most things *western*, including food, movies and music. Today's architects, perhaps, are too wedded to the immediate demonstrations of a non-exclusive art form created through critical structural alternatives of other mental and physical disciplines underlined by cultural prognosis. It seems mostly a complex *multicultural-societal-capitalistic* dialogue to make money regardless of the environmental consequences. It is not, however, something determined in fact to be exclusively and culturally *white*. There is much blame to share.

Architecture is a primary geometric and organic instrument for shelter, individuality, and exclusivity. Fortunately, some architects practice the activities of architecture for its formulation of a multi-level notational system to describe environments and attendant psychological processes over time. It is seen as an expanding universal relationship possessed with the articulations of many belief systems matched with differing climatic conditions, materials and technology plus the inspiring creativity and practical ideas of the many people's occupying different terrains north and south of the equator. Each attempt at architecture involves human resourcefulness plus the innovative possibilities of materials, shape, size, texture, color, layout, location, and orientation. Together this creates the aesthetics but also establishes and reinforces elements of the sub-culture in its physical and spiritual identifiers. Could it be that the actual reality of architecture and

practice is therefore greater than any one arrangement of aesthetic qualities for the individual's social rewards?

The concern for African-American architects is to determine what they have been told against what they need to understand in order to become greater than the norm, or whiteness. There is that demand for greater consideration of the liminal experiences: Moving from a time you know the rules and the expectations to a time when you must create new rules for yourself and expect the unexpected.

All architects should be constantly crossing a threshold of new ideas, new ways of thinking, learning how to speak their own voice, reaching outside the box for success. To do so, architects must allow moral relativism to prevail over the ethos of self-promotion. These are the inner struggles for a grand sense of duty for equity's sake, through and beyond the field of architecture. None of this should be beyond the possible directions of the profession as a human contrivance that includes the theories underlining social responsibility in thought and action.