

A Critique of a Multicultural Art & Architectural Education from a Sustainable Afro-Centric Perspective

Abstract

The adaptability and sustainability of Art and Architectural Education from a multicultural curriculum is the premise of this paper. Specifically, we will narrow our critique to the African American culture in hopes of bringing awareness to the sustainability of a traditionally marginalized population. Our proposal highlights how properly designed art and architectural education programs can meet the specific requirements of an Afro-centric curriculum.

Generally, some form of a multicultural art or architectural history course becomes the usual strategy for introducing US students to non-European art or architecture. Unfortunately this strategy does not meet specific Afro centric education requirements or cultural needs. The content knowledge is incomplete and narrow. After reviewing the background of Afro-centric education at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) of Florida A & M University, Hampton University, Howard University, Prairie View A & M University and Tuskegee University, selected examples of multicultural art and architectural curriculums of these programs are discussed.

Finally, Afro-centric principles are presented that could be the basis for designing appropriate art and architectural education programs for African American students. These principles can also form the basis for introducing the art and architecture of other marginalized cultures, hence producing a sustainable and replicable educational curriculum for future generations of diverse populations.

African Centered Educational Goals

In 1940, W.E.B. Dubois wrote a new introduction to an earlier essay titled, "The Field and Functions of the Negro College." In it he said "When the Southern Negro College, now Fisk University, changed from a missionary school to a secular college, there was a tendency continually to say: We are not teaching Negro science nor Negro art; we are teaching Art and Science. To this I wanted to oppose a word of warning. I wanted to say in all kindness and cooperation: you are and should and must remain a Negro College; but, that involves no low ideals." ¹

Dr. Dubois then elaborates on the description of a Negro or African American University. This description is based on the culture of the African American and therefore, it uses a variety of the English idiom that is understood in the culture. This is founded on an oral history and on what has been termed by Dr. Dubois as knowledge of the history of their present condition." ²

The ultimate goal of this Negro education is for “black folk and their cultural patterns to exist in America without discrimination; and on terms of equality. 3 This would provide as valuable a contribution to modern society as it did to “medieval and ancient civilizations.”⁴

During this same period, Carter G. Woodson pointed out that “modern education” was developed in the interest of the very same people who “enslaved and oppressed weaker people.” One of the results was that “the Negro mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor.” The solution, Dr. Woodson suggests, is the “Negro should develop and carry out a program of his own.”⁵ He stated this in his book titled, The Mis-Education of the Negro, a very popular book before and after the civil rights movements in the 1960’s and from this philosophy HBCU’s in the 1880’s developed to educate African Americans.

Malcolm X added to this philosophy by saying, “Education ...is the means to help our children and people to rediscover their identity and thereby increase self-respect.⁶ Hampton University in Virginia was formed as a result of this philosophy. Also, Booker T. Washington started Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Ala., as a result of this self-help philosophy. Schools with such programs were started and the philosophical basis continues to be developed and refined even today. New generations of African American educators and their supporters are contributing to the efforts to establish schools and to implement African-centered policies and programs. Today there are still over one hundred HBCU’s.

In 2008, the state of America’s school system continues to be in drastic need of reform; but, there is hope on the horizon fueled by the Presidential race. The contrast between curricula of affluent, mostly suburban and white school districts with inner city schools causes Jonathan Kozol to observe, “...the prerogatives of class and caste are clear.⁷ He adds, “The story that is not told is the lifelong deformation of poor children by their own society and government. It is the result of the action by sections of institutions that determine health care, drug policies, merchandising and news coverage of the poor.⁸ He adds that textbooks he was given to use were “often insulting or psychologically oppressive for many thousands of African Americans and other under-represented school children.”⁹

In The Atlantic Monthly ¹⁰, social psychologist Claude Steele describes what could be called a racial “catch 22”. He says many African American students suffer from the stigma of being black. They are devalued because of white supremacist thinking. For these students, problems in schools or errors they make only make them angry and in some confirm feelings of inferiority. To be valued they must embrace white European values. Prof. Steel’s solution to the white supremacism that some black students face does not include the African-centered position. He proposes that American educators recognize and appreciate the contributions made by African Americans to America. He posits that this will result in the black students being “valued”. In addition, he thinks that integrated schools are a necessity. He claims that segregated schools make students more vulnerable when they eventually come into a wider society.

“We need to ask ourselves,” says Educator Enid Lee, “What is it that the students are experiencing as a result of their interaction with the curriculum material?” If the students are not acquiring skills, knowledge and attitudes that help them see themselves in a positive relationship with other human beings, then we have a problem. 11

It is generally recognized that there is a problem. Educator and writer Dr. Jacob H. Carruthers describes a solution to that problem. He calls for a “massive infusion” of African – centered material in “all disciplines and grade levels....in development of basic skills and cognitive thinking.”¹²

That is what Dr. Molefi Kete Asante calls “Afrocentricity”, it is looking out from one owns center.” Dr. Asante goes on to state that a “revitalized scientific and artistic tradition will emanate from our own people once the perspective of Afrocentricity is understood and accepted by the creative and recreative minds of our people. 13

Starting to focus on the broad aspects of a curriculum, Dr. Dubois wrote, “The Negro University expands towards the possession and the conquest of all knowledge. It seeks a beginning of the history of the Negro in America and in Africa to interpret all history; from a beginning of social development among Negro slaves and freedman in American and Negro tribes and Kingdoms in Africa to interpret and understand the social development of all humankind in all ages.”¹⁴

ART & ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION GOALS

What about Art and architectural education for African Americans. Studies have shown that hands-on, student-centered education is especially beneficial. Art and architectural education, in particular, is unusually helpful in this way. It is learn by doing. The arts and architecture discipline can provide cohesiveness between disciplines and provide insight and understanding of other disciplines. Students become active participants in their education when they reflect on their reactions to what they learn and then restate those reactions in visual terms. It is in this way they also learn fine workmanship and standards of quality. Donald Schon discusses this in his book about architectural practitioners when he argues that the professional education of an architect should be centered on enhancing the practitioner’s ability for “reflection in action”. This is explained as learning by doing and developing the ability for continued learning and problem solving throughout the architect’s career. And he shows how art and architectural schools can use this approach to prepare students to handle complex and unpredictable problems with confidence, skill and care. He uses the art and architectural studio as a model for “reflection in action”. He states, “Architects, landscape architects, interior or industrial or engineering designers make

physical objects that occupy space and have plastic and visual form.” A student in these studios makes a representation, an image of something to be brought to reality, whether conceived in visual, spatial, or plastic terms. Designing in a broader sense involves complexity and synthesis. This is a tangible reflection in action. Artists also make things and are in this sense, designers. The studio is where this action takes place and where the goals are realized.

Also, art and architectural education are unique in that it has an emotive quality. Students identify and explore their emotive reactions in two ways: in viewing or experiencing art and architecture or in designing or producing art and architecture. The importance of this design process is what educator Paulo Freire refers to when he states: “In apprehending the material, the student can become a producer of knowledge”.¹⁵

In fact, educational philosopher John Dewey said the “prime function” of the arts is to make ordinary learning capable of full assimilation.¹⁶ He added that art is the “living union of thought and the instrument of expression”. Also, student’s art work is “the highest point of refinement of all the work carried on.”¹⁶

The National Endowment for the Arts published a pamphlet describing “principles and characteristics of excellences” in arts education. Among such principles a quality art education provides; 1) a heightened experience and understanding of all aspects of art, (history, theory, philosophy), 2) recognition that all people contribute to the aesthetic and cultural fabric of the community, 3) a connection to cultural roots, thereby improving their connections and contributions to the general society and 4) a recognition of the different cognitive and learning processes that different culture possess.¹⁷ These last three principles contribute directly to bringing awareness to the African American culture and other marginalized cultures in America. HBCU’s have a natural tendency to highlight African American contributions in Art and Architecture more so than non-HBCU programs. And of the HBCU’s, those institutions with an Architecture program provide the greater awareness. HBCU’s such as Florida A & M University, Hampton University, Howard University, Morgan State University, Prairie View A & M University, Southern A & M University, and Tuskegee University.

Multicultural Art Education

Multicultural education can be described as a program of art and architecture based on anthropological awareness of other cultures, a knowledge of the art and architecture created by other societies and the concepts and practices in general education.²⁰ Multiculturalism reflects a broader range of views than is often assumed and includes an inclusive view of diverse societies. An example from the National Art Education Association will clarify this point. Incidentally, the association is the largest organization of art educators in the United States.²¹ In its quarterly-issued *Advisory*, an art teacher describes her lesson plan.

Embracing visual humor in the curriculum is also embracing multiculturalism, as visual humor in the curriculum may be found throughout the world. For example, many contemporary Native American and Africa American artworks utilize satire. In your teaching of other world cultures ask, “How does this culture utilize visual humor in either paradox or satire”?

A response to this kind of art lesson by educator Enid Lee: 22 “They make welcome signs in several languages and have a variety of foods and festivals. My problem is not that they start there, my concern is that they often stop there.”

A small but vocal group of art educators who are more or less radical in their criticism of such approaches participate freely in art education forums. Dr. Patricia Stuhr, Professor of Art Education at Ohio State University writes:

Tokenism not only trivializes the aesthetic production Of all sociocultural groups; but, what is worse it avoids confronting the real challenge of critically apprehending the meaning of the object, artist, and process in the sociocultural context. 23

However, the majority of proponents of multicultural art education believe, as Dr. Carruthers has pointed out in his criticism of the movement, 24 that the United States society is formed by the interaction of many cultures which has formed a common culture.

The National Endowment for the Arts contains contradictions in its policy. These examples are based on this flawed common culture view. In its pamphlet, An Education in the Arts 25, the NEA describes a number of art education projects it funded and offers them as examples of excellence in arts education.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Center is described in the pamphlet as a link to all ages and races. In addition, it provides diversified dance training, and views the perfect dancer as having ballet feet, legs and a modern dance torso. It combines the style of Katherine Dunham with West African, East Indian, Spanish, yoga and jazz. This reflects their view that all culture are equal, therefore none are dominant, in our common culture.

For its mentoring program for traditional arts, the NEA funded another group, the New York Folklore Society. For example, of two projects for African Americans, one is a program for mentoring in African American quilting and sewing, and the other is mentoring the method for the African American hot iron hairdressing style, the predecessor of the modern chemical methods...long treasured by older

African American women. These projects are described as outside the loop folklore.

In addition, the NEA includes the American Croatian project called Ethnic Dance of Zivili. The dance troop is ...

“celebrating its unrecoverable past. In doing so, however, it is at the same time celebrating the virtues of the United States its hospitality and curiosity and its belief in diversity, the opportunities it offers for self-renewal. Zivili’s animating spirit may be ethnically specific national pride, but no American, whatever his or her heritage is likely to feel excluded from participation in the troop’s festive spirit.”

This is an example of a project description resulting from the inherent contradictions of its stated policy. The Eurocentric assumption of the writer is clear: it is based on the unstated fact that the reader and the dance troop are white and ignores everyone else. It would not have been written the same way about an African American dance troop, and that does not seem to occur to the writer of the article.

Educator Louis Derman-Sparks quotes Carol Brunson Phillips describing teachers who use misguided efforts to eliminate or ignore cultural differences. “The teacher’s assumption is that children who clearly are of a different culture will be unable to take advantage of the opportunities of social equity in the country. Derman-Sparks adds, “There are serious dangers here under such a misguided approach, education is used to eliminate cultural habits and thereby curing their alleged cultural deficits” 26.

Ms. Derman-Sparks describes two more misguided approaches. First is what she labels as a color denial curriculum. She quotes a teacher as saying, “I don’t know what color my children are, I never notice. They are all just children to me. I treat them all alike.” In response, Ms. Derman-Sparks says, “By implicitly setting the dominant culture as the norm, we end up equating we are all the same with we are all white. It reinforces white children’s ethnocentrism and it mis-educates children of color by denying their life experiences. This also happens in the teaching of Architecture history. When introducing architectural history and defining it in terms of western and non-western architecture we equate history to a European and non-European value system of design. Another example is the “Tourist-Multicultural curriculum. This is a improvement; but it frequently deteriorates into a visiting of the other culture as in a museum visitation where cultures are on display. This does not give the student the tools they need to empathetically and fairly interact with diversity. 27

Education consultant Enid Lee describes a similar approach, saying “Teachers might develop a unit on Native Americans or Native Canadians or people of

African backgrounds and have a unit that is studied from one period to the next period; but, it's a separate unit and what remains intact is the main curriculum, the main menu."²⁸

Dr. Curruthers states, It is not enough to examine the civilizations that developed in Africa, the Near East, China, India, the civilizations of the Mayas, Incas and Aztec; but, education must retell the story of the world. ²⁹

It is clear that there is a range of multicultural art programs, some more sophisticated than others. In a more radical approach, art educator Dr. Patricia Stuhr describes what she calls multicultural and social reconstructionist. It is centered on four practices.³⁰

- a. Democracy must be actively practiced in school.
- b. Students learn how to analyze their own circumstances
- c. Students learn social action skills to increase their chances for success with the first two recommended practices.
- d. Coalescing, or getting the poor, people of color, and white women to work together for the common good of society.

Dr. Stuhr adds, "A goal of multicultural social reconstructionist education is to reform society toward a more equitable distribution of power and resources in the United States and improve academic achievement for all students." This is one of the more radical of multicultural and social reconstructionist programs. Dr. Stuhr admits that there is drawback to implementing such a program. For example, she points out that such a program demands substantial curriculum revisions. It would involve in-service training....units or lessons taught in this manner may take longer... Some may be disillusioned by how few meaningful actions students are actually able to contribute towards the resolution of problems.³¹

Another specialist in developing art education curricular is Dr. Jane King McFee. In her review of radical multicultural art programs, she says, "Teacher's education must radically change if classroom teachers are to be aware of cultural diversity and the different strata of the dominant culture, as they are affected by change". Furthermore she adds, "Teachers experienced in only one culture are ill-prepared for teaching in multicultural classrooms, as most classrooms are today".³²

This raises the question: what is the use of radical, social reconstructionist, multiculturalism; if it comes with all these major problems? Dr. Carol Lee of Northwestern University steps back to examine these radical programs and suggests what she thinks is possible in a present public schools.

1. Foster the development of the skills in literacy, numeracy, the humanities and technologies that are necessary to negotiate economic self-sufficiency in the society

2. Instill citizenship skills based on a realistic and thorough understanding of the political system and support such citizenship skills by promoting questioning, critical thinking skills and teaching democratic values
3. Provide historical overviews of the nation, the continent and the world, which accurately represent the contribution of all ethnic groups to the storehouse of human knowledge. 33

These three points contain significant improvements in curriculum content; however, they still fall far short of African-centered goals.

African Centered Art & Architecture Education

Art education has always been part of the description of Afrocentrism. Dubois states that “there must be creative activities such as we understand under art and literature.³⁵ Dr. Harold Cruse adds an important point He says ”It is the Negro creative intellectual who must take seriously the idea that culture and art belong to the people, with all the revolutionary implications of that idea.”³⁶ In an African-centered education, Carter G. Woodson, sees the opportunity of the Black artist as a world reformer. Will he see it and live or continue the mere imitation of others and die? ³⁷ Synthesizing the principles described by leading African centered educators can further develop an approach to African centered art education. Educator Agyei Akoto states, “Creative critical thinking, comprehension and decision and decision making in the arts, literature and the social sciences can be developed using information and examples from the African historical and cultural experience. In using experiences from the real world, the subject area is demystified and brought within the realm of the possible for the student and facilitates creative critical analysis and the discovery of social relations. 38

Professor Molefi Kete Asante adds essential points when he states; “No longer will our art mimic white art and be separate from the people; it will retouch the essence of our souls and be spirit and body, force and energy, shape and sound. The Nomo (power of the spoken word) of these coming artists is pan-Africanist, defined by acceptance of the past, with a different consciousness, augmented by Afrology as a discipline and therefore significantly productive.”³⁹

Dr. Carol Lee describes a historical model of ethical character, Maat, which she says is centered in the African experience. She adds, “Pedagogical practices must be developed that support the continued development of this historical paradigm.” Dr. Lee then describes an effective African centered pedagogy that incorporates Maat, which can also be a specific guide for developing an art education curriculum:

1. Legitimizes African stores of knowledge;
2. Positively exploits and scaffolds productive community and cultural practices;

3. Extends and builds upon the indigenous language;
4. Reinforces community ties and idealizes service to one's family, community, nation, race and world;
5. Promotes positive social relationships;
6. Imparts a worldview that idealizes a positive, self-sufficient future for one's people without denying the self-worth and right to self-determination of others and
7. Supports cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness.

Dr. Lee adds that the challenge is to enact them in ways that are culturally accurate, politically viable, developmentally appropriate and subject matter sensitive 40.

Conclusion

In today's public schools, colleges and public universities, multicultural art and architectural programs that seriously challenge Eurocentric and mainstream cultural beliefs do not typically become implemented. In my observations and narrow research, the HBCU programs and some privately funded public schools, colleges and universities are the only place that can fulfill the needs of an Africa-centered curriculum. Additionally, the architectural programs of Florida A & M University, Hampton University, Howard University, Morgan State University, Prairie View A & M University, Southern A & M University and Tuskegee University have and are teaching African American students an appreciation of its art and architectural cultural uniqueness.

Notes

1. W.E.B. Dubois, The Education of Black People, Herbert Aptheker, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 83
2. Dubois, Education , p. 93
3. Dubois, Education , p. 150
4. Dubois, Education, P. 151
5. Carter G. Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro, (Trenton NJ: Africa WORLD Press, 1990) p. xii
6. Woodson, Mis –Education, p. xii
7. John H. Bracey Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, Black Nationalism in America (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc., 1957) p. 421
8. Jonathan Kozol, Savage Inequalities (New York: HarperPerennial HaperCollins P, 1991) P. 76
9. Kozol, Savage p. 191
10. Jonathan Kozol, Where Ghetto Schools Fail (The Atlantic Monthly, Oct., 1967, <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/95dec/chilearn/kozghet.htm>, 3/21/2k) p. 2
11. Clause M. Steele, Race and the Schooling of Black Americans (The Atlantic Monthly, April 1992, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/race/Steel.htm,3/1/2k>) pp. 7 -17
12. David Levine, Robert Lowe, Bob Peterson, and Rita Tenorio, eds., Rethinking Schools (New York: The New Press, 1995) p. 15
13. Jacob H. Carruthers, Intellectual Warfare (Chicago: Third World Press, 1999) p. 87.
14. Molefi Kete Asante, Afrocentricity, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1991) p. 1
15. Dubois, Education p. 95
16. Paulo Freire, Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to those who Dare Teach (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press-Perseus Books Group, 1998) p. 31

17. John Dewey, The School and Society: The Child and the Curriculum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) p. 86
18. Jon Dewey, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education, (New York: The Free Press, 1997) p. 238
19. Gary R. Larson, An Education in the Arts, (National Endowment for the Arts, 1998) pp. 3 – 7
20. Ronald W. Neperud, ed., Context, Content and Community in Art Education, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995) P. 15
21. Sheri R. Klein, Invitations Into Art Through Visual Humor , (NEAE Advisory, The National Art Education Association, Winter 1999)
22. Levine, Rethinking Schools p. 11
23. Neperud, Context p. 197
24. Carruthers, Intellectual p. 90
25. Larson, An Education pp. 16 – 30
26. Levine, Rethinking p. 19
27. Levine, Rethinking pp. 19 – 20
28. Levine, Rethinking p. 11
29. Carruthers, Intellectual p.91
30. Neperud, Context p. 194
31. Neperud, Context p. 218
32. Neperud, Context p. 190
33. Mwalimu J. Shujaa, ed., Too Much Schooling Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1994) p. 308
34. DuBois, Education p. 153
35. Dubois, Education p. 100
36. Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure Black Leadership (New York: Quill, 1984) p. 96

37. Woodson, Mis-Education p. 180
38. Mwalimu, Too Much Scholing p. 334
39. Levine, Rethinking p. 61
40. Mwalimu, Too Much Schooling p. 297

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