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sites of memory

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accommodation, resistance, and appropriation in african-american building

The African-American cultural experience can be linked to the development and dynamics of the African-American physical environment and institutions. In observing such relationships with the built environment it is possible to define an understanding and interpretation of community empowerment, neighborhood pride, and social identity within the African-American Diaspora. In the design dynamics of historically black institutions and neighbors a special sense of belonging, control, and ownership is developed by integrating strategies of accommodation, resistance, and appropriation. The role of these strategies in the design and transformation of African-American institutions informs the connection between design input, form, community empowerment, and identity. While accommodation suggests complicity of the dominant aesthetic, it also becomes a negotiated adaptation or a strategy for acceptance through building or environmental design. Accommodation combined with the strategies of appropriation and resistance provides the basis for an adjusted environment and increased cultural identity.

Environmental appropriation as resistance is the reclaiming or redesigning of an existing building or landscape to present a new identity through cultural expression. Appropriation claims and redefines a built environment, ultimately instilling in it a new sense of place and memory, defying its former past by adopting new cultural and social aspects. This resistance strategy is an assertive act opposing the authority of established design standards through the execution of adjusted or alternative environmental design concepts. Environmental appropriation and resistance are integral to the empowerment of communities to promote a cultural identity.

African-American builders, architects, and designers since the era of southern enslavement have carefully practiced the balancing act of accommodation, resistance, and appropriation in design and building. Slave artisans and builders were instrumental in the creation of the southern build environment. The role of slaves as the architects, artisans and builders of the plantations that they served is now being acknowledged by historians and scholars. These same enslaved builders

were also often the agents for the resistance and the destruction of the buildings of the southern plantocracy. Several historians of slavery have studied the complex relationship between domination and subordination, accommodation and resistance, as they relate to the demands of slavery. Historian Eugene Genovese asserts that accommodation itself breathed a critical spirit and disguised subversive actions and often embraced and produced its apparent opposite—resistance.[1]

Enslaved artisans and builders were often organizers of the resistance and arbiters of change. Resistance came in many forms, ranging from subtle African details and dimensions applied to building to planned construction flaws and the outright systematic burning of the very plantation buildings that slaves had designed and built. The most significant rebellions were often led by "invisible," literate, skilled slave artisans who had contributed to the creation of the South under slavery, yet their most visible role was as the architects of major slave insurgencies to tear down buildings and institutions, thereby disrupting the economy. Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and Sheridan Leary used blatant and powerful acts of resistance through destruction in order to make changes in slavery society.[2] There was indeed accommodation—the South was built after all—but when the same buildings were occasionally destroyed at the hands of the "complicit" laborers, there is a different story to tell. Resistance was played out daily on the plantation to varying degrees but this physical destruction powerfully illustrates the simultaneous accommodation and resistance in the building process and, more importantly, within the institution of slavery itself.

These environmental and cultural strategies continued to inform the design process after the end of slavery, most notably in black churches and educational institutions. These institutions offered opportunities for the African-American architect and in turn nurtured the architect's economic, spiritual, and intellectual development, and political thought and action by enlisting them in black owned or administered projects. African-American schools, such as Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (founded in 1868 and now known as Hampton University) in Virginia, were the birthplaces of a new professional African-American class. This generation of students was trained for assimilation but was also eager to lead and liberate the developing African-American citizenship. Hampton Institute also opened its doors to African-

and Native American men and women students. Between 1878 and 1923, thousands of American Indians representing over sixty tribal groups were enrolled at Hampton and participated in programs that inspired the federal government's late nineteenth-century boarding school system.[3] During this period the colleges were sites of highly articulated and prolific debates in the African-American intellectual community about the direction, leadership, and advancement of the African-American community, and, in the unique case of Hampton, Native American advancement as well. These debates were often framed by strategies of accommodation, gradualism, or conciliation versus that of resistance, opposition, or change for African- and Native Americans as a defense against and reaction to a racist society. At the same time, similar discussions abounded among the white founders and leaders of the African-American institutions about the proper educational, political, and societal roles of these institutions for the newly freed African-American population. These discussions were supported by ideas of assimilation, acceptance, paternalism, productivity, exploitation, and ethnical and proper behavior of the African-American students.

General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the son of white missionaries and himself a former army chaplain, founded the Hampton Institute as a pragmatic and accommodationist educational institute for African-Americans and Native Americans. Armstrong envisioned a place for the "education of the hand with the education of the mind," a useful and practical educational philosophy, also known as the great Negro experiment.[4] He strongly believed in and promoted the significance of a "manual labor" education system and wrote, "We believe that when a manual-labor system is attempted, it should be carefully adjusted to the demands of scientific and practical education and that the training of the hand was at the same time a training of the mind and will."[5] The succeeding leaders of Hampton Institute continued Armstrong's manual experiential learning concept as a way of training and acculturation of early Hampton Institution students. As highlighted by Dr. Hollis B. Frissell, vice principal:

3 [illegible]

4 [illegible]

5 Francis Greenwood Peabody, *Education for Life: The Story of Hampton Institute* (Doubleday, Page & Company, 1918), 38.

> *The need for Hampton work seems to increase every year, and we are endeavoring to extend the school's influence by developing and carrying out General Armstrong's plan of giving these people a practical, industrial education which shall fit them to go out into the south and the west and help their people.... This school founded by General Armstrong soon after the close of the war, has always upheld industrial education as the surest means of fitting these people for useful citizenship.*[6]

The physical developments of Hampton Institute and other HBCUs reflect these institutions' seemingly contradictory commitments to producing leaders and liberators while also educating assimilationist and accepted workers. The original Hampton Institute and today's campus design and its buildings can be interpreted here with attention to the principles of accommodation, resistance, and appropriation. The mere existence of educational institutions for African- and Native Americans in the 1870s was a radical and liberating step, yet they also perpetuated a type of African-American subordination with a focus on appeasement, control, and the development of educated labor. The American Missionary Association and the Freedman's Bureau, formed in the post Civil War years, helped create institutions like Hampton by appropriating farmland and plantations.[7] The prevailing concept of segregating Hampton Institute encouraged the idea of physical appropriation, accommodation, and resistance.

Sited on the former Little Scotland Plantation, Hampton Institute was separated from the town by the Hampton River, which endowed the school with a sense of physical autonomy from the town. Armstrong combined the dual mission of "uplifting the Negro" and "civilizing the savage" by educating the "head, hands, and heart," the educational trinity that was the goal of Hampton Institute and the other HBCUs. Architecturally, Armstrong strove to design the campus buildings in the traditional, dominant institutional style and to maintain the aesthetic standards of the contemporary white campuses. He used architecture as a means of bringing acceptance, conformance, and acculturation to Hampton in the service of the mission of uplifting and civilizing.[8]

6 Keith L. Schall, *Stony the Road: Chapters in the History of Hampton University*, (?) 57–53

7 Armstrong, 15–23

8 "The Legacy Continues: A Photo Essay in Celebration of 125 Years of Hampton University History" (Hampton University Museum, 1993) 2

Armstrong used leading New York and Boston architects like Richard Morris Hunt and James C. Cady, William Ware, and the firm of Peabody and Ludlow to design the buildings of Hampton Institute within the architectural status quo, and these architects used the Institute commissions as a distant site for their architecturally stylistic experiments. These prominent architects found the opportunity to practice, advance, and experiment with their architectural creative movements out of the critical spotlight of architecturally aware New York City and Boston. Along with these noted New York architects and their tendency to experiment, the students and faculty of the Institute's trade school, the early predecessor of the architecture program, also greatly participated in the design and construction of the Hampton campus and buildings. Students in the trade schools, as at other HBCUs, were required to participate in the design and construction of buildings, furniture, and landscape elements of the campus as part of their curriculum and studies or as the realization of Armstrong's philosophy of education and manual experience.[9] While professional architects were formally commissioned to design and experiment on the impressive Virginia Hall, Memorial Church, Ogden Hall, Huntington Library, and several other early buildings, the trade students and faculty actually detailed and constructed these and many other buildings on campus. This collaboration between the architects, the students, and the faculty as designer/builders produced a special type of design team. The combination of the prominent white New York architects working on the obscure and isolated Hampton site and the participation of the African-American students and faculty worked to create the physical environment of Hampton Institute. The physical campus became the product of the cultural interpretations and creative identity or the resistive expressions of the Hampton students and faculty joined to the experimental advances and design statements of the established white architects.

Throughout the campus carefully placed cultural markers can be found in the structural and ornamental details of the student- and faculty-built halls, alongside the more overt planning and designs of later African-American architects. From the playful repeating rhythms of Kelsey Hall's brickwork to the geometrically patterned brick panels of Armstrong Hall and the modernist buildings Harkness and Davidson Hall

9 Armstrong, 11

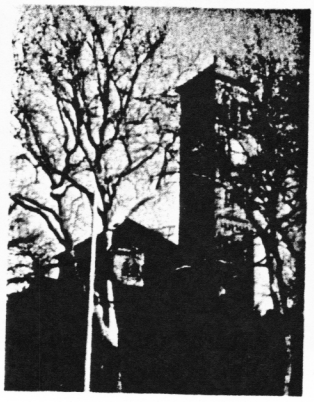
by the early African-American registered architects William Moses and Hilyard Robinson, these buildings collectively communicate a story of accommodation, resistance, and appropriation.

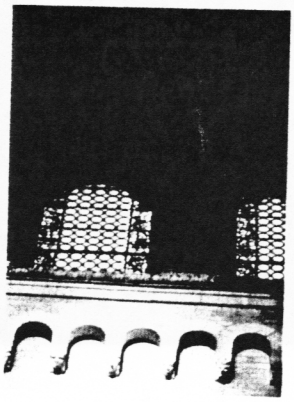
The overall design of the Memorial Church, for example, conforms to the dictated Romanesque Revival style of contemporary church design. The plan and style were intended to symbolize the permanence of Hampton and to promote decency, moral uplift, and respect for authority. Completed in 1866, Memorial Church was the original focal point of the campus and remains a landmark and architectural icon of Hampton University. James Cleveland Cady, of New York City, was selected as the architect by Elbert Monroe, the president of the Hampton board and Cady's friend and admirer. Cady's large practice was devoted to institutional and religious architecture. He had designed the Metropolitan Opera House, the United Presbyterian Church of the Covenant, the New York Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, and several other large New York churches and institutional buildings around the period of the planning and design of the Hampton church.[10] Cady favored masonry for construction and decorative materials and was greatly influenced by the Romanesque architecture styles. It is important to note that Cady's design allegiance was to Monroe, his patron and board chief, not to Armstrong, the founding principal, and that Monroe was not present during the construction of the church.[11] These factors allowed Cady freedom to address the cultural details of the church without the aesthetic scrutiny of the Hampton Board of Trustees.

While the general plan, design, exterior masonry work, and details of the church were inspired by the Boston architect H.H. Richardson and his Trinity Church, the interior details suggest an adjusted and more culturally specific aesthetic. Identity and pride are expressed in the corbel blocks of the arcade under the cornices at twenty feet and forty feet above the floor, revealing alternating reliefs of African-American and Native American busts—spaces traditionally reserved for classical gods or Anglo faces. The interiors are furnished with student-designed-and-built yellow pine pews and other handmade furnishings. Cady was much more concerned with the general space, volume, and plan of the church than with the elaborate surface details and decorations, enabling others involved with the building to design and construct of many of the details and espressions.[12] Memorial church represented the formal ideal of pat-

10 Norval White, and Elliot Willensky, editors, *American Institute of Architects Guide to New York City*, (Macmillan, 1978).

11 Thelma B. Brown, Memorial Chapel "The Culmination of the Development of the Campus of Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia 1867-1887," (Master's Thesis, University of Virginia n.d.) 104.





from left: **Exterior detail of Kelsey Hall women's dormitory; Front view of Memorial Church showing the Richardsonian architectural style.; Interior details of Memorial Church showing African and Native American busts.**

terns, space, and styles envisioned by Cady, Monroe, and Armstrong while participating in and allowing a display of resistance details that worked quietly within a conformist shell but spoke loudly to those who looked up once inside.

Seventy years later, Harkness and Davidson Halls, womens' and mens' dormitories, built at Hampton Institute in 1954 and 1956, respectively, present us with similar cultural design revelations as with the Memorial Church. These two buildings are the embodiment of the European international movement or the modernist style developed and imported by European modernist architects at the beginning of the twentieth century. Harkness and Davidson Halls were designed by Hilyard Robinson of Washington D.C., one of the early African-American architects working in the Bauhaus style. Robinson and his modern buildings represent the beginning of Hampton Institute's continuing tradition of commissioning established African-American registered architects and architecture firms for many of its major new buildings. Robinson's two dormitories are noted for their well-designed connection to the exterior spaces and their concern about technology, scale, and modernist aesthetics.

The international modernist style is about the rejection of cultural and site specific references in favor of a universal aesthetic language and function for the architecture. Robinson believed in and utilized the modernist theories because of their universal values and, as an African-American architect, he could assimilate his own architectural language and connect to a shared American identity.[13] While the overall

12 Thelma B. Brown, 117.

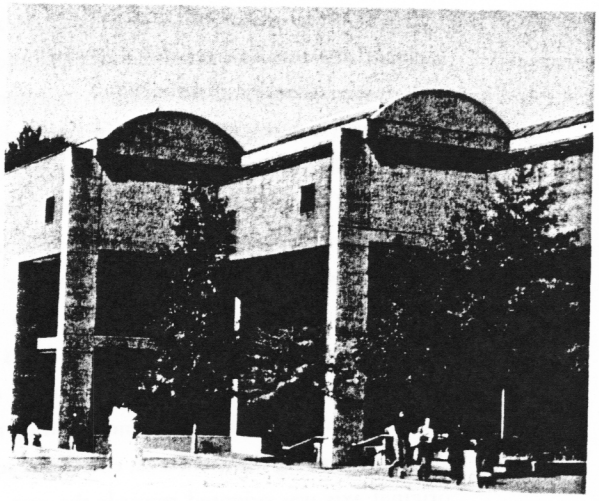
13 Bond, Max, Jr., "Still Here", Harvard Design Magazine, Summer 1997, 52.

plan and exterior design accommodates the prevailing aesthetics, when we look closely at the interior detail that we find, again, culturally expressive design details. The interior lobby ledges are topped with ceramic African-American cultural figures as a repeating detail in the rhythm of the modernist style. Robinson's design clearly has a commitment to and accommodates the prevailing modernist style while celebrating the special African-American context and aesthetics in the details of the building's design.

The debates over the African-American social and aesthetic direction through appropriation and accommodation continue today, reflected in the education and politics of race, space, and the built environment. Cincinnati's Revelation Baptist Church is a dramatic example of a type of empowerment through environmental appropriation. Revelation Baptist Church is located in the African-American West End neighborhood. The West End, once a largely Jewish neighborhood, experienced the typical American urban tradition of ethnic movement and migration in the 1960s and 1970s when segregation was lifted and "white flight" began to concentrate African-Americans in the inner cities. Revelation Baptist Church was originally the Wise Temple, a synagogue which closed its doors in the early 1970s. Shortly aftrwards, the African-American Baptist movement took over the space. Upon this transition the structure underwent a major renovation by the architect Jack Roy Gore, with emphasis on reorienting the main axis, entry, and seating of the original temple. The temple's original axis was oriented towards the east as is common in some Jewish traditions. The African-American Baptist church has no similar tradition with regard to siting or axis, thus the congregation and axis could face any direction. This new design reclaimed the space for a Baptist congregation. The church symbolically and physically became an integral part of the African-American community. It was no longer the "Baptist Church in the temple." Through appropriation the church has built its own identity, closely connecting with the neighborhood, and African-American Baptist theology and style.

Like the plantations built and destroyed by slaves, the early HBCUs, the recycled African-American churches, and other modern examples of African-American cultural institutions and buildings, contemporary design practices have coalesced around the negotiated process of design resistance and appropriation. The Martin Luther King Center for Non-Violent Social Change and the Audubon Ballroom project, along with several other contemporary designs from J. Max Bond Jr., now a partner at Davis Brody

Bond in New York City, continue to build upon these concepts. These important buildings were conceived to appropriate the cultural and historic site and experience. The King Center, located in the heart of one of Atlanta's National Historic Site and Preservation Districts, is a comprehensive environmental memorial, tied to the African-American historic district as an urban institution. It contains the library and archives for the world's largest collection of primary source material on the Civil Rights Movement. It is also the burial site of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The King Center opens up to Auburn Avenue, a major avenue through the African-American neighborhood, to allow a view of the white marble crypt of the Reverend King for all to see and experience. There are no architectural barriers to seeing or approaching the crypt from the street. This arrangement becomes a symbolic urban gesture of openness, particularly appropriate and consistent with King's memorial.



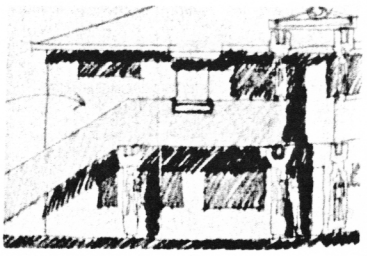
Interior view of Revelation Baptist Church with realigned axis.; *right:* **Exterior courtyard of the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change by J. Max Bond, Jr.**

> *The architecture of the center reflects the non-violent nature of Dr. King's work and the continuing civil and human rights movements. The formal organization of the spaces, the elegant proportions of the building, the introduction of a reflecting pool into the complex and carefully chosen materials each possess a spiritual, cultural, and in some cases economic relationship to the . . . goals of the Center.*[14]

Architects William Stanley and Roland Wiley, African-American architects, each with established practices in Atlanta and Los Angeles, respectively, are just two examples of several designers working with the negotiated realms of accommodation and resistance. Their work dislocates the African-American architect from the larger cultural group as a means of resistance. In my own experience, designing the Casa Umoja and Fair Oaks Senior Center, in the San Francisco Bay Area, I worked to appropriate cultural aesthetics and to offer a resistive design direction by incorporating geometry and materials that recall the elements of the African-American and Latino neighborhood of the Center. By striving to make this design process a standard and by incorporating specific, cultural aesthetic expressions, we can begin to operate in the context of the African-American experience and influence American art and architecture in practice. Critical architects of color can align with this design philosophy to extend the forms of resistance even as they accommodate, often unavoidably so, the mainstream design order.

The cultural strength of African-American institutions, sites, and communities lies, in part, with the designers' and builders' ability to negotiate the terrain of accommodation, resistance, and appropriation. The ability to conceive and understand African-American sites of memory would be incomplete without an examination of the appropriated space and their means of mediating a resistance while accepting the dominant order. Appropriation, accommodation, and resistance then become integral parts of the empowering process and enable positive, forward-thinking community design while providing cultural and community identity. It is both the making of these resistive buildings and the recognition of the resistance that empowers individuals and communities.

14 Davis, Brody Associates, "FAIA Application to the AIA," (New York: Davis Brody and Associates Architects, 1994).



Front sketch of Casa Umoja, by the author