

## Making Time: Diversity and Undergraduate Education

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### Introduction

For many years now, it has been widely acknowledged amongst professionals and educators that the architecture profession has a diversity problem. Although many other STEM and STEAM disciplines currently suffer disparities in terms of gender and race, the architecture profession has some of the largest disparities in this regard. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, less than 29% of people working as architects and architectural interns are women, and 23% are racial minorities or persons of color. Indeed, schools of architecture are much better in this regard, with the National Center for Educational Statistics providing demographical numbers closer to those found within the U.S. population, though not by much; in 2013 43% of enrolled architecture students were women and less than 39% were persons of color. There have been several initiatives implemented by the various professional architecture organizations with the goal of improving these demographics, however true diversity however cannot be achieved only by increasing the enrollment numbers. To truly achieve diversity within the profession, we must recruit, enroll, retain and graduate women and students of color, all while addressing the specific needs and skillsets required for professional practice. One specific area which has proved difficult, particularly with students of color, is retention. Several scholars researching this subject are convinced that non-inclusive curricula is the culprit. After decades of architectural education and practice dominated by patriarchal, colonized views, architectural curricula has standardized a distinct narrative that is static in its portrayal of the makers and influencers of architecture. Due to this condition, addressing issues of race, class, and gender diversity have become some of the most significant challenges in undergraduate curricula.

In this paper, the authors discuss specific undergraduate research initiatives and projects that address the disparities faced by women and people of color, while also integrating diverse perspectives into a previously one-sided architectural discourse. More acutely, these initiatives link neatly back to concepts generally espoused in architectural education, like experiential learning, the temporal expression of space and architecture as socio-cultural expression. The authors seek to convey that the way to address diversity issues in their institution is by making time for them. Specifically, the authors promote:

**MAKING TIME** for conversations and explorations centered on diversity issues and the spatial experiences of individuals of color.

It's **MAKING TIME**, a time to teach basic construction techniques and present the conflicts that could happen between design and actual construction.

**MAKING TIME** as it relates to a specific group of marginalized women, stand still as a spatial tangible experience, and therefore adding historical context to a rarely ventured discourse.

MAKING TIME to understand the way space shapes people and thus has an effect on their view of the world, particularly as expressed through literature.

## **The Lack of Diversity Discourse in Architectural Education**

Within the profession, frank discussions are happening regarding the lack of women and people of color in the architecture profession. Several architectural and allied organizations are conducting the research necessary to fully define issue of diversity within the profession. The American Institute of Architects (AIA) has for several years released reports on Diversity in the Architecture profession. Additionally, AIA San Francisco has conducted studies that help outline the factors that lead to the stagnation or discontinuance of women in the Architecture profession, publishing its findings in an annual Equity in Architecture Survey Report. Several other initiatives have been implemented to address particular issues that contextualize the problem. Scholarships for minority and dis-advantaged students have been created by the American Institute of Architects and the National Organization of Minority Architects. Moreover, the National Architectural Accrediting Board, in its 2014 Conditions for Accreditation, requires that schools of architecture demonstrate, through student performance criteria, that curriculums are addressing architectural factors related to history, global culture, cultural diversity and social equity.

Realm A, A.7 and A.8 state:

*A.7 History and Global Culture: Understanding of the parallel and divergent histories of architecture and the cultural norms of a variety of indigenous, vernacular, local, and regional settings in terms of their political, economic, social, ecological, and technological factors.*

*A.8 Cultural Diversity and Social Equity: Understanding of the diverse needs, values, behavioral norms, physical abilities, and social and spatial patterns that characterize different cultures and individuals and the responsibility of the architect to ensure equity of access to sites, buildings, and structures.*

The National Council of Architectural Registration Boards aides in contextualizing the problem as well, providing statistics on licensure which specify the experience, testing and completion rates for specific demographics and minority groups. The 2017 *NCARB by the Numbers* report shows that while the numbers of women attempting and achieving licensure are on the rise, disparities still persist. Concurrently, the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture examines the issue through an educational lens, providing data that reveals disparities in faculty, administrators and researchers through its 2017–18 Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) Education Committee. This committee has been tasked with the Diversity and Equity Initiative, which aims to increase diversity of both faculty and student bodies.

As all institutional branches of the architectural profession are addressing issues of diversity and equity in their initiatives, it is clear that it is an important one for the sustainability of the profession. Though the ACSA and the NAAB are particularly concerned with diversity in architectural education, left broad are the specific ways in which diversity issues and discourse could be addressed through curriculum. Schools of architecture have varying pedagogies and differential demographics in terms of students' ethnicity, race and gender. As such, this discourse is fractured across the field of architectural education

and can easily fall victim to simple surface discussion that discounts context and the larger, societal systems that define these disparities. Creating opportunities for the discourse about diversity within the architecture profession to occur naturally, under the purview of studio exploration and through undergraduate research, ensures that the issue is not just about increasing the numbers of women and minorities, but also the contextualization of diversity in the architecture profession as a microcosm of a larger societal issue.

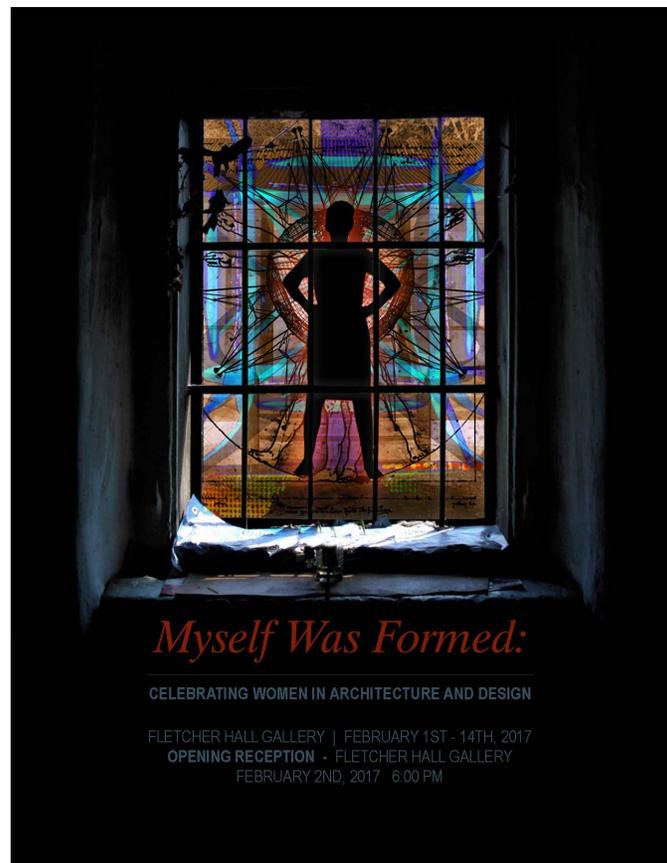
## How the Authors Engage the Diversity Discourse

The need for and benefits of diversity cannot be underestimated. Diverse perspectives are crucial to answering design problems that address the needs of an ever diversifying population. In working chapter highlighting *The Educational Benefits of Diversity*, Milem outlines how several studies conducted at colleges and universities around the country found that faculty emphasis on diversity increased racial understanding, overall college satisfaction and that rate of exposure to diverse groups of people and racial perspectives was a significant indicator of gains in critical thinking and cultural awareness. It is clear from the numerous amounts of recent articles written on the topic that diverse perspectives in working environments foster innovation and representation protects the interests of groups that could become marginalized. The onus for engaging in diversity discourse falls upon schools of architecture, both because it is at this point that minority and female retention into the profession is at its highest and due to the academic environment being well-suited to robust, diverse discussion and exploration. Therefore, the authors decided to address diversity in a two-part venture that highlights the achievements of women in the architecture profession while also addressing one aspect of the intersectional plight of another marginalized group; Black women.



Fig. 1: UL NOMAS Chapter Members at the opening reception for 2016 Minority Exhibition

For the last two years, the authors have received funding to lead undergraduate research that engages diversity issues and reveals diverse perspectives. These grants are open-ended and allow for research directions and implementation strategies that move beyond typical classroom engagement. As such, the authors developed opportunities for the UL Chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students (NOMAS) to perform research that explores rarely ventured biographical perspectives on architecture, history and literature. The research is then disseminated within our School, our College, our University, and the broader community associated with our city, via an exhibition held in the Fletcher Hall Gallery which is hosted within the College of the Arts.



## Description of the Project

The research project began with a frank and open discussion addressing the students' concerns about diversity within the profession and the little-known stories they are interested in researching. The authors helped in this regard, offering guidance and recommendations on resources and individuals the students may find interest in researching. During the first round of funding, students decided to focus on the achievements of Blacks and Minority Ethnicities within the profession of architecture as a focus of their biographical and precedential research. This first attempt was a straight-forward conducting of biographical research using the university library's resources and presented in poster format at an exhibition during Black History Month. Following the success of the research project and exhibition, the students felt bolstered to continue the endeavor of revealing the hidden examples of diversity and excellence within the profession.

In the second round of funding, executed the next year, the students met once again to discuss how to build upon the previous research. Following this discussion, the theme of women in architecture was chosen as a focus of the students' biographical and precedential research. The students sought to expand upon the previous exhibition in a manner that could be more attractive to design students, engaging them more fully by presenting the uncovered history in a manner appropriate to the discipline. The authors suggested that the students focus on creating smaller, desk sized installations and interested students formed a group that devised their own set of rules and parameters for the research and the design, based upon their chosen architect. A second group of NOMAS members expressed a strong desire to design and build a full-scale installation. After a robust discussion concerning the feasibility of such a venture, the possible themes of the research and design focus of the installation, a collaborative opportunity is suggested.



Fig. 4-6: Images from opening reception of 2017 Minority Exhibition

The Gaines Center is a special collection in the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Edith Garland Dupré Library. Directed by Cheylon Woods, The Gaines Center holds a collection of literature honoring the works of Writer-in-Residence Emeritus Ernest J. Gaines and provides a space for scholars and

students interested in viewing his papers, manuscripts, and relevant works. Gaines' works draws on his life experiences growing up in the south, which were heavily influenced by his own grandmother and other strong, matriarchal figures. As the nature of the works found in this collection fit well with our chosen theme, it was decided that the full-sized, built installation could explore the concept of space from the perspective of Black women, as depicted through literary setting and spatial descriptions in chosen works. Woods was consulted as an expert on the subject, and suggested excerpts from several literary works that are explicit in their depiction of physical space and the descriptions of the behaviors and interactions of the women in those spaces. The students read the excerpts as a group and the discussion that followed revealed incredible insights on the lives of the characters, how their experiences reveal real-life constraints of women in the reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, and how those experiences are reflected contemporarily. These insights were then employed by the students in the establishment of spatial rules and symbolic architectural artifacts to be used in the design of the installation.

Over the course of four-months, the authors attended weekly meetings with members of the UL NOMAS to view and discuss the progress of their research and designs. The research and design process culminated right before the winter break and construction of the installations began at the start of the spring semester. Posters were created highlighting the accomplishments of women in design while the smaller installations employed a combination of biographical information and physical form to express the contributions of select women designers. The larger installation, which interrogated female space as portrayed in southern literature, was designed in three distinct yet intermingled parts, each conveying the differing female perspectives offered in the excerpts from three chosen works; *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* by Ernest J. Gaines, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. The students were adamant that the installation be presented as a three-act staging of spatial performance, contextualizing each characters' experience by allowing the user to become the performer and move seamlessly through interested spaces, interacting with symbolic architectural artifacts.

The installation begins with *Miss Jane Pittman's* space, which is built as a porch condition and represents both the character's described physical setting and implications of the spatial condition which in the chosen excerpt, presents a duality in its symbolic meaning. The space is simultaneously a place of power and vulnerability for the aging matriarch, who occupies the space as a figure of strength and wisdom to her community, while being undermined in the space by the repeated invasions of a persistent teacher seeking to write the story of the non-receptive Miss Pittman. The user then crosses a threshold demarking entry into a space representing the characters depicted in an excerpt from *A Raisin in the Sun*. The author, Lorraine Hansberry draws on her own real-world experience of her family's relocation to Chicago and the chosen scene depicts a family discussing a possible inheritance in their apartment kitchen. This space is charged with architectural artifacts, juxtaposing spaces in a manner that reveals the differing perspectives of three different generations of women. The character Beneatha, a young medical student, is strikingly defiant in her views and spatial movements, her education having given her a decidedly more feminist view on the roles on women in society. The character Ruth, a wife and mother whose role in the cramped home appears deferential to her husband Walter when considering her words, is revealed to have a more powerful role in the family dynamic once her actions and movements are considered. The third character presented in this setting is that of

Lena, the elderly mother of Walter and Beneatha, and the matriarch of the family, who remains silent yet watchful throughout the scene, despite the discussed inheritance being rightfully hers. The interactions, or lack thereof, between the women reveal how quickly views on gender shift between generations while also revealing the subtle power dynamics that occur due to race, gender and age. Finally, the user moves into Celie's space, which portrays the intricacies found in the excerpt chosen from Walker's *The Color Purple*. Celie's space is reflective one, a bedroom space as, in the chosen passage, the protagonist offers humorous a narrative that cannot hide her abject confusion over the power dynamics exhibited between her step-son Harpo and his new wife Sophia. Celie's space is about her beginning to question the implied spatial boundaries that have been defined by her own marriage, as a consequence of witnessing Sophia's total disregard for those same boundaries and, in the face of Sophia's rejection of the gender roles of the time, Harpo's continued acceptance of Sophia. The unique interactions and spatial dynamic between these characters is also presented through spatial arrangement. The students coined the installation *H.E.R. House*, an acronym for Hope, Empowerment and Reclamation and representing the intent of the installation. The installation, the Hope Empowerment Reclamation (HER) House, is a "structure in process" which explores the relationship between the portrayal of black feminine roles in literary space and actual physical space.

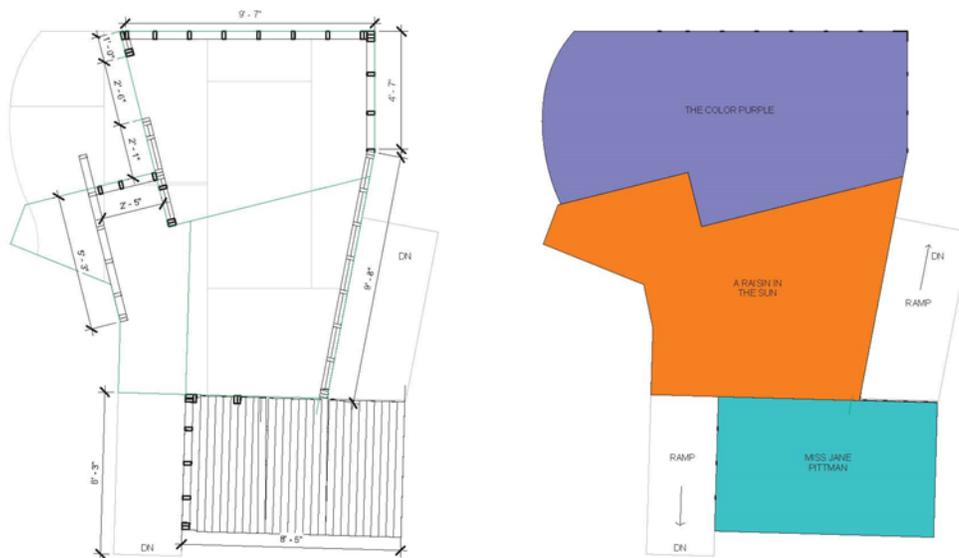


Fig. 7: Installation Construction Plan and Spatial Arrangement Diagram



*Fig. 8-12: Installation Construction, Exhibition, Gaines Center Programming and Final Images*

Despite its unconventional design focus, the space was designed using principles of Universal Design so that users of all physical capacities could have equal access to the spaces. The installation was likewise designed to break down into three distinct parts that could be transported, as the project inspired programming in another location, the Gaines Center, to take place after the minority exhibition during women’s history month. The minority exhibition became a central topic of discussion during its tenure in the Fletcher Hall Gallery and the Gaines Center programming that resulted from the research project was highly attended, allowing the installation to serve as a stage for poetry selections, musical selections and dance performances celebrating the achievements of women.

### **The Conclusions Gained and the Impact on Student Learning**

The impact of this project, both on the students conducting the research and the school of architecture and design as a whole cannot be denied. Aside from its facilitation of a diverse discourse and the engaging aspect of undergraduate research, the project highlighted the achievements of women and challenged student ability to visualize experience while also addressing accessibility needs. Additionally, the installation’s role in the planned programming created a learning opportunity that explored interplay between design and construction, which allowed students to better understand how the decisions they make as designers get executed during construction. The research project also led a larger position; that discrimination against women, and the definition of traditional female roles, can

also be viewed as a spatial problem. Spaces that have traditionally been considered female—predominantly domestic spaces—have been conceived of, designed, and constructed from a male standpoint. Resultantly, spaces occupied by women are created without adequate consideration of their female users. The exploration and re-visioning through the installation allowed the students to address these intricacies and the minority exhibitions and other resultant programming provided an engaging means of educating future generations of designers about the importance of diversity and social equity in the design professions. As a result of their research, analyses and work, a shift has been observed within our school, one that identifies the pursuit of diversity and diverse perspectives as progressive and necessary aspects of architectural education.

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