

MARIO GOODEN —

# The Problem With African American Museums

How does it feel to be a problem? This question exemplifies the struggle for social justice that opens W.E.B. Dubois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, a book of essays that delves into the question of "The Negro Problem"—the place of the Negro in American society. As black Americans have sought to define that place over the past decades, they have variously been "Negro," "colored," "black," and now "African American." That the phrase "African American" is used to describe Americans of African ancestry (the majority of whose ancestors were not immigrants to the United States, but rather were forcibly removed from their native lands and sold into slavery in Colonial America until the early nineteenth century) as well as to identify cultural production by black Americans is a recognition of the double consciousness of being both black and American. According to Dubois, the black American is born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in a world that yields him no true self-consciousness and in which he only sees himself through the revelation of the otherworld. "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness," writes Dubois, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." [1]

Yet black Americans have generally resisted the lenses of others' eyes in constructing self-consciousness, rather than merging the two selves. This resistance manifested itself in the New Negro Movement of the 1920s and 1930s, of which Dubois was the preeminent Negro figure, as well the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. The New Negro Movement gave rise to the Harlem Renaissance, jazz, and the work of such artists and literary figures as Aaron Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes. The Black Power Movement resulted in the replacement of the fraught word "Negro" with a celebration of blackness, embodied in the words of James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" as well as the profusion of visual symbols like dashikis, Afro hairstyles, and raised fists. Wherever they are situated within this interchange of "double consciousness" and its resistance, black Americans have always been aware of the potency of visual and rhetorical forms in the construction of self-identity.

Likewise, America has always been keenly conscious of black Amer-

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[1] W.E.B. Dubois, "The Souls of Black Folk—of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 364–65.

icans, and across the history of the struggle for racial justice, forms of black self-awareness seeped into the more broadly American cultural consciousness. Today the words “African American” are not used to identify jazz, rhythm, and blues, or hip-hop (each of which has been adopted by a multiracial, if still predominantly black, cadre of artists). Nor do the words “African American” inevitably precede the descriptions of works by such poets and writers as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, or Alice Walker. But this naturalization of blackness into American culture—resulting in a more postmodern black double consciousness that finds itself at the center of cultural production and while still marked by difference—did not bring about the merged, singular, and “better and truer self” that Dubois described the American Negro as longing for. [2] This black consciousness is embedded in the cultural expression of these works not in style or image, but rather in the manner in which they exist in relationship to all other modes of American cultural production. While the most expected kinds of artistic encounter may rely on opposition or confrontation, the embedded cultural relationships of African American forms like music and literature also exploit paradox, irony, subversion, and nuance translated through language, meter, syncopation, manner, and self-consciousness.

This expression of black self-awareness within American consciousness has not fully extended to black visual arts and architecture. Perhaps the gaze of mainstream culture (conditioned by centuries of white representation) is not yet able to unfocus on a concept of difference marked by racial otherness and its visual attributes. In *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum*, Bridget Cooks argues that “regardless of the intentions of the curators, exhibitions of art by African Americans are often perceived through the limiting ‘either/or’ paradigm; through a lens of either anthropological study or aesthetic value.” The anthropological gaze reflects curiosity toward the presence of otherness, and the “objective” distancing implicit in this curiosity perpetuates an age-old power structure of white cultural superiority. The aesthetic gaze presents art by African Americans—which historically has been absent and misrepresented in mainstream art museums—as being devoid of cultural context, objects to be appreciated for their representational or textural inventiveness but little else. As a rejoinder to these defaults, Cooks argues instead for exhibitions that “demonstrate the understanding of artistic merit and Black identity as interdependent instead of mutually exclusive categories.” She continues that because exhibitions have pedagogical roles and the visiting public internalizes institutional narratives of cultural history and art history, the museum gallery is a critical space for black representation and participation. [3]

The museum building itself is likewise a contested typology for African Americans, thanks not only to the historical absence of art by African Americans but also to the history of segregation and Jim Crow laws that prevented the presence of African Americans in certain museums, as well as the generally complex relationships in American history between race, space, and cultural identity. Hence, the conditions of this contestation problematize both the anthropological and aesthetic approaches that enter into the design of museums for African American art, history, and culture. These highly loaded acts of architecture require a thoughtful consideration of the complex relationships that persist, demanding more than just a higher aesthetic quality.

[2] Dubois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” 365. Dubois states that “the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.”

[3] Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 2–3.

While architecture certainly does overlap with the visual arts and the production of perspectival space, the current preoccupation with the image of architecture and its superficial aesthetics—its surfaces, symbols, and skin color—is a recent and postmodern phenomenon, and one that afflicts a number of major African American museums. Furthermore, instead of only serving as a form of remediation for the past injustices of exclusion (and thus the remediation of a perceived “problem”), these museums should also engage questions of cultural identity, social and racial justice, and American identity as a contemporary discourse. As such, their architecture should become a form of knowledge rather than displaying the knowledge of form, tropes, and superficial “africanisms” and token symbols of a mythologized African heritage.

Superficialities and generalizations regarding cultural identity usually play out through the constructions of stereotypes. Racist stereotypes of black Americans have long been part of a political and economic equation in American society that places whites on the plus side and blacks on the minus side of the calculations. The “othering” of blacks denies them the right to American history (unless accompanied by the qualifying prefix “African-”)—a historical and social exorcism. But white and black Americans have a complicated and shared history of intermingled bloodlines, black mammies nursing white babies, and the fact that the American economic system was built on the backs of black slave labor and their inventions—not to mention that political symbols like the U.S. Capitol and the White House were literally built by black slaves. Because of this joint history, white stereotypes of blacks have been constructed to deny to themselves their own blurred blackness. [4] Such stereotypes are frequently reiterated with the intention of maintaining white power structures and social hierarchies, as well as to induce a fear of black Americans at a time when black political power, visibility in mainstream popular culture, and intellectual discourse have in fact brought about tremendous social change in recent decades.

The instrumental power of stereotypes makes the self-stereotyping of black culture all the more ironic. This tendency can be seen in the consciously Afrocentric symbols of Kente cloth, Ashante stools, head-wraps, and occasional Egyptian iconography, each of which aims to fix a definition of what it means to be African American while seeking to recuperate the power of “Africa” as the majestic foundation of much of modern Western civilization. “Afrocentrism, a contemporary species of black nationalism, is a gallant yet misguided attempt to define an African identity in a white society perceived to be hostile,” as Cornel West has written. “It is gallant because it puts black doings and sufferings, not white anxieties and fears, at the center of discussion. It is misguided because—out of fear of cultural hybridization and through silence on the issue of class, retrograde views on black women, gay men, and lesbians, and a reluctance to link race to the common good—it reinforces the narrow discussions about race.” [5] The further irony is that Afrocentrism assumes that everything descended from Africa is homogenous, as if Africa represents a single ethnic group or a single country—the very same critique that is often leveled against the white European colonialists and empire builders that raped the African continent, exploited its resources, and devalued its diversity and the heterogeneity of African cultures.

Whether from the white or black perspective, such stereotypes lead not to fixity and order but to simplemindedness—one of the prime dangers of

[4] See Jesse Holland, *Black Men Built the Capitol* (Guilford: Globe Pequot Press, 2007), 3–4. “One of the things that I found was that actual African American slaves were used in the construction of the U.S. Capitol and the White House. Out of just about the 600 or so people who worked on the Capitol, maybe about 400 were African American slaves... Most people look at the Statue of Freedom now and they think, this is the statue of an American Indian on top of the Capitol. No, it’s not. It’s actually a statue of a freed slave with an American eagle helmet on top.”

[5] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 4.

lowest-common-denominator thinking in a society that privileges image over idea in politics, popular culture, and mass media. Likewise, the use of cultural stereotypes in architecture reduces a building to the flatness of its two-dimensional representation (image); a sound-bite or “one-liner” figurative symbol (metaphor); or an overused idea, depleted of its original intensity, uncritical, and no longer contributing anything new to the discourse of architecture (cliché).

Stereotypes have at times been deployed in the name of creating counterimages to the prevailing stereotypes of blacks. In a conscious effort to create an alternative image for the Black Power Movement—which emphasized black racial pride, black political and economic power, and the creation of black cultural institutions—many of its radicals began wearing African-styled dashikis, natural rather than processed hair, Afros, and kufis (brimless, short, round skullcap often knitted, crocheted, or made of kente cloth or mud-cloth). But while cultivated counterstereotypes may have helped produce a new subjectivity among black Americans, there remains the question of whether image alone has the agency to change not only social patterns but also relationships of political and economic power, as well as social and cultural relationships—all of which are multidimensional and interrelated. Self-identity extends beyond the two-dimensional surface of the mirror.

This problem also extends to the use of Afrocentric imagery in the architecture of African American cultural institutions. In several recent African American museums, the use of visual symbols to render cultural identity remains two-dimensional at best. For museums like the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture in Baltimore (2005), the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta (2014), and the New Africa Center in New York (2015), blackness is found in the colors of black liberation (red, yellow, and black, colors coincidentally also found in the Maryland state flag), façades of alternating shades of sandstone or limestone, or façade patterns inspired by African woven fabrics. The frequent references in this kind of architecture to woven fabrics are most often drawn from Ghanaian kente cloth, made by the Ashante people of Ghana and the Ewe people of Ghana and Togo—Africa’s Gold Coast.

The paradox of kente cloth is that it has become immensely popular internationally as an indicator of black identity while only representing a limited range of African heritage. Only 14 percent of the slaves exported from Africa by the English and French between 1711 and 1810 were from the Gold Coast; far more came from areas like Nigeria (39.6 percent) and southwestern African countries like Cameroon and Angola (24.7 percent), representing twenty-five different ethnic groups in addition to the six major ethnic groups of the Gold Coast. Historically, kente was a royal cloth, but it also appears in many other important forms of regalia among the Ashante and Ewe, including drums, shields, umbrellas, and fans. Over the past forty years, the cloth has been transformed into hats, ties, bags, and many other accessories worn and used on both sides of the Atlantic. Individual kente strips are especially popular in the United States when sewn into liturgical and academic robes or worn as a stole. Kente patterns have developed a life of their own, appropriated as surface designs for everything from Band-Aids and balloons to beach balls and Bible covers. [6] The lack of conceptual or visual depth in each of these building envelopes is a

[6] “Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente Cloth and African American Identity,” exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum National Museum of African Art (1999).

lack of consideration for what could possibly be more than skin deep.

If graphical patterning is one surface-oriented cliché of African American museums, the use of historic photography is another. At the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis (the site of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.), the iconic photographs that mark the significance of the site challenge the architecture's ability to come to terms with the profundity of the events that took place there. Judge D'Army Bailey—the founder of the museum, which opened in 1992—said at the museum's opening that “the museum is a propaganda vehicle to create more soldiers and generals to carry on our fight for equality, by teaching them and showing them what we came through, who and what our leaders were. The major thrust of the museum is that the movement did not die in 1968, that others picked up Dr. King's work and carried on.” [7] But throughout the article in which Bailey articulated this mission (in an April 1992 edition of *Ebony* magazine), the museum is alternately referred to as a shrine and a memorial. The emotional climax of the museum is the balcony on which Dr. King was shot, while the historical climax resides in Room 307, where Dr. King slept. As visitors enter Room 307 and the adjoining Room 306, a glass etching of Dr. King's likeness and recording of Mahalia Jackson singing “Precious Lord”—Dr. King's favorite song—plays as visitors pass through the narrow glass-walled passageway that separates the rooms.

Herein lies the struggle that the architecture of this and other museums fails to come to terms with. Is the museum a propaganda vehicle that projects forward, or is it a memorial? How should the museum respectfully honor Dr. King's memory while at the same time translate the memories of the Civil Rights movement into action? How should the motel be transformed to expose future potentialities and overcome the site's incredible weight of emotion and sentiment?

Similarly, at the International Civil Rights Center and Museum (the site of the heroic 1960 sit-in at the “whites only” F.W. Woolworth store lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina), the famous photograph of four North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University students passively challenging injustice and inequality throughout the South by refusing to leave their seats challenges the museum's design. The nonviolent sit-in was a radical act of defiance that exceeds the possibility of photographic representation. Civil rights protesters routinely faced mortal danger at the hands of law enforcement, whether in the form of water cannons, dogs, or arrest, and it was within this state of normalized violence that the “Greensboro Four”—Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil—staged the first sit-in on February 1, 1960. They broke Jim Crow laws, challenged the racist legal system, faced taunts and physical abuse by white patrons, and confronted the threat of being thrown in jail or even the loss of their lives.

They took radical action to bring about radical change. In his discussion of the blues and its emphasis on the tragic struggles of African Americans, Cornel West links the heroic actions of ordinary people reacting to the radical contingencies of everyday life to history of American pragmatism. This is a form of cultural awareness that is intimately tied to historical consciousness, always viewing oneself as embedded and embodied and also indebted to those who came before. So there is that sense of radical conditionedness on the one hand and, on the other, a sense of freedom, but still with that context of radical

[7] “King Memorial: Memphis Motel Becomes a Shrine,” *Ebony* (April 1992), 56.

conditionedness, especially to oneself. There is the sense of trying to muster the courage to be oneself, the courage to wrestle with the truth about oneself, the truth about America, the truth about the world and the courage to fight for justice. [8]

Hence, the protesters' actions—in the context of radical conditionedness—were in fact acts of freedom. Therefore the problem for architecture and its expressions does not reside in the museum's objecthood or representational imagery, but rather in the ways that it enables action and event.

Yet another means of rendering cultural identity in African American museums over the past thirty years has been the use of certain iconic metaphors as signifiers of "Africa." Such metaphors include domes (hut), ziggurats (pyramid), stool (throne), crypt or vessel (tomb), and crown (headdress). They are used with the hope that the implicit and explicit attributes of the objects will invest the buildings with positive connotations (cultural heritage, legitimacy, and value) and make them "recognizable" and more acceptable to the general public than if they were rendered in the language of architectural abstraction. They do not speak to politics, socio-spatial relationships, or even historical specificity.

The design for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) relies upon its association with the image of the tiered capitals of the caryatid veranda posts at the Ogoga's palace in Ikere, Nigeria. (This is not a distant historical reference—the capitals were carved from wood by Olowe of Ise, a Nigerian artist, in the early 1900s.) [9] At the Ikere palace, the inverted pyramidal capitals were situated on the heads of posts representing the king and queen, although other veranda posts carved by Olowe placed tiered capitals upon warrior and even servant figures. At the NMAAHC, the use of the tiered, inverted pyramid is intended to invoke an honorific status, as well as to recall African American church hats, once an iconic symbol of black women and their "Sunday Go To Meetin'" finest wear. Another possible reading could be found in the tiered column's striking resemblance to Brancusi's *Endless Column* of 1938, although there is some dispute as to the extent of the influence of African art on Brancusi's work. That there may be multiple references for use of the inverted pyramid at the NMAAHC does not undermine the central intention of the metaphor, which is meant to connote something recognizable, imageable, and somehow "African." This metaphor, however, inevitably relies on an architectural fragment that has been removed from its historical and cultural context—thus ironically becoming only self-referential.

Furthermore, the museum, sited at the foot of the Washington Monument, only timidly acknowledges its panoptic relationship to the events and government institutions that are woven in the shared landscape of black American identity and the National Mall—the executive order emancipating the slaves, the legislation of civil rights, the adjudication of laws affecting civil liberties and rights, and the Great March on Washington of 1963. That the surrounding icons of government institutions within this network of relations were constructed with black slave labor is not a part of any discourse concerning the site's strategy or the architectural design.

While the use of de-historicized architectural fragments that aspire to something recognizably "African" is marked with the scent of architectural postmodernism, the use of *modernist* architectural clichés in projects like the

[8] Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Civitas Books, 1999), 23–24. Cornel West sets the foundation for the link between the history of American pragmatism and how black Americans deal with radical contingencies and the struggle for justice in his 1993 essay, "Pragmatism and the Tragic," published in *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993), 31–32.

[9] A photograph taken by Eva L.R. Meyerowitz in 1937 (the year before Olowe died) and published in 1943 in her article "Wood-Carving in the Yoruba Country Today" illustrates the veranda post in situ. The exact year they were carved and installed is unknown. See Roslyn Adele Walker, "The Ikere Palace Veranda Posts by Olowe of Ise," in *African Arts*, vol. 24, no. 1 (January 1991), 77–78 and 104.

August Wilson Center for African American Culture in Pittsburgh (2009) is no less suspect. The design of the building relies on a symbolically curved wall, this time turned vertically to resemble a three-story-tall sail. The height of the sail-like wall bestows “iconic” status on the building. It does not mark the entry to the building; rather, it is a visual marker intended to be part of the vista from a nearby intersection. Nor does the three-story curved wall contain a significant public space or triple-height volume, as might be expected from its prominence or intention to invoke the memory of a slave ship. The curved wall is very much a façade, an image of a tall sail that is not only a cliché of contemporary iconicity but also a cliché of modernist architecture.

An architectural cliché need not already exist in order for a design element or relationship between elements to become a cliché in the context of cultural identity. Such is the case for the competition-winning design for the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, where the original design of the building was based upon the image of interlocking arms of civil rights marchers in the 1960s. This symbol of solidarity between people of diverse cultures and backgrounds is primarily represented in the plan outline of the building, and would only be visible from the sky. The exhibition spaces in the design were located in one arm and the administrative functions in the other; this arrangement failed to yield a meaningful programmatic interlocking, and the public circulation begins at the space between the two *L*'s rather than establishing a sequence that would begin at one *L* and flow to the next. The appropriation of the shapes from a famous image trivializes the radical acts of civil disobedience and the radical reshaping of socio-spatial relationships brought about by the Civil Rights Movement. Yet the “evolution” of the design into its final built form is even less conceptually ambitious. Opened in 2014, the building is primarily comprised of two curving walls leaning inward toward each other. In plan, the figure resembles a hut with openings at either end, while in section, it resembles a double lean-to structure. The curving walls are clad in alternating colored metal panels to resemble a woven African fabric.

Two particularly notable African American cultural institutions do not rely upon cultural stereotypes or architectural imagery steeped in metaphor and cliché, and these projects offer a way forward for a building type that will continue to be an important part of a larger project of cultivating black self-awareness. These are the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (1993) and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta (1984), both by the architect Max Bond Jr.

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute—an interpretive museum and research facility dedicated to human rights more generally—occupies a significant urban site bordering the 16th Street Baptist Church and the Kelly Ingram Park. The 16th Street Baptist Church is the first African American church in downtown Birmingham, and the site where a bomb killed four young girls attending Sunday School on September 15, 1963. Crowds gathered to protest this bombing in the nearby Ingram Park, a scene made famous with images of guard dogs unleashed on marchers. The design of the building acknowledges its relationship to the park by pulling back from the street to create a wide sidewalk, and by forming a public space at the corner of 16th Street, which allows a cross-axial view of the church. Movement through the building begins at an interior courtyard where the domed roof of the entrance

hall echoes neighborhood churches without overwhelming them by establishing an independently iconic presence. The circulation builds through a sequence of exhibition spaces, and the building only reasserts its presence at the conclusion of the sequence where two windows bring light into the final gallery (where one window frames a view of the 16th Street Baptist Church and the other looks onto Kelly Ingram Park, reminding the visitor again of the histories that are deeply embedded on the site).



Top: Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Max Bond Jr., 1993.

Bottom: Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Max Bond Jr., 1984.



In Atlanta, an open courtyard with reflecting pool surrounded by a vaulted colonnade sets up a sequence of movement whereby the visitor is always aware of the space's relationship to the King Memorial, a sarcophagus faced with white Georgia marble inscribed with an epitaph taken from Dr. King's Mountaintop speech—"Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I'm free at last"—set on a circular brick island in the center of the reflecting pool. While visitors are always aware of the memorial, they are never too close. The visitor's perception of the memorial (and of the memory of Dr. King more generally) are defined through specific perspectival views, reflections of the memorial itself, and the play of light and shadow between the surface of the pool and the darker interior surfaces of the vaulted colonnade.

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change are only two among the large number of African American cultural institutions designed and constructed over the last few decades that do not use cultural stereotypes to communicate cultural identity through design. Yet these two examples were constructed over twenty-five years ago. Hence the questions remain: Why does architecture continue to prop up and to perpetuate African American stereotypes and "Africanisms" through imagery, metaphors, and clichés? Why do these cultural stereotypes persist? Even if these stereotypes are due to a long history of "othering" black Americans (largely by their white cousins, who remain loath to acknowledge their own indebtedness to African and African American culture): Why does architecture not interrogate this condition to produce architectural works of merit, instead of mythologizing the notion of "Africa" and using skin-deep aesthetics to assert legitimacy and to mark out a symbolic legacy?

In reference to the black film historian Thomas Cripps, Michelle Wallace's "Why Are There No Great Black Artists?" asserts, "we are in danger of getting wasted by ghosts...by 'black shadows on the silver screen,' by effusions and visual trances that haunt us because we refuse to look them in the eye."

[10] Perhaps we in the field of architecture refuse to look beyond these ghostly reflections in our own pupils. This lack of critical design and discourse—what Wallace calls "the visual void" in black discourse—ironically perpetuates black American invisibility in architectural design.

[10] Michelle Wallace, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture," in *Dark Designs & Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 191.

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