



THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART



ON ARCHITECTURE

## Vol. 25, No. 2 - On Architecture

This issue of the *International Review of African American Art* surveys the work of the architects of the African Diaspora. Its distribution begins in mid-February 2015.

Not intended as a comprehensive survey, the issue covers a representative microcosm of this vast topic and is intended as the first in a series. This initial issue presents architectural renderings and the buildings, themselves, as forms of two- and three-dimensional art. It also covers multidisciplinary themes relating the built and landscaped environment to topics in history and the humanities, city planning and social justice. The content is divided into three sections: "Practice Profiles", "Multidisciplinary Practice" and "Public Projects."

### PRACTICE PROFILES

#### "David Adjaye/Conceptual Visionary" by Sharon Patton

David Adjaye is an architect who despite his respect for architectural traditions regarding design and construction, tests the boundaries of these norms and strives for new parameters of what is and isn't feasible. Some critics construe his imaginative seemingly improvisational use of materials and unusual exteriors and interiors as a cavalier attitude toward building. On the contrary, Adjaye uses technology to verify his concepts and plans. He also draws upon his art studies, his innate creativity and knowledge of current trends in the arts to assume an unencumbered, experimental approach to architecture. (Sharon Patton, Ph.D., is an art historian and independent writer based in Baltimore MD. She previously was director of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution and director of Oberlin College's Allen Memorial Art Museum.)

#### "Phil Freelon/Drawing and the Language of Architecture" by J. Michael Welton and David Brown

"Drawing is the language of architecture – you can't effectively express your ideas without it," says architect Phil Freelon who has won many design awards. The discussions about drawing in an age of computers are ongoing. To the student who says, 'I'm not good at drawing,' Freelon replies, "Wait a minute – What about the musician who's not good on his or her instrument?" In addition to his free-hand drawing, Phil Freelon's creativity and improvisation also reflects a deep love and knowledge of jazz. David Brown, who has studied relations of jazz, architecture and improvisation, comments on this aspect of Freelon's work. (J. Michael Welton writes about architecture, art and design for national and international publications. He also publishes a digital design magazine, *Architects + Artisans/Thoughtful Design for a Sustainable World*. David Brown is an associate professor and the associate director at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Architecture. He is author of *Noise Orders: Jazz, Improvisation, and Architecture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), a study of design implications of structures that facilitate improvisation in jazz. Current essays "Curious Mixtures" [*Music in Architecture—Architecture in Music*, Center, vol. 18, 2014] and "Lots will vary" [George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, forthcoming] advance that study in the context of discussing his current design research, "The Available City," which explores the urban design potential of Chicago's 15,000 city-owned lots. That design research has been exhibited at the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale and the Chicago Cultural Center.)

#### "Huff+Gooden: The Works in Architecture of Ray Huff and Mario Gooden" by Al Willis

Their recent works have increasingly aligned pragmatic buildings with provocative cultural positions and therefore simultaneously with the concerns characteristic of today's conceptual art. The architects thereby stimulate inquiry into the current relevance of the Modernist project, the relationship of fine art to architectural design, and the function of abstraction in cultural communication. Above all they invite critical examination of the complex interactions of people, things, creativity, and space. Such is the sophistication of Huff+Gooden's works, but also the accessibility of those works, that design connoisseurs as well as everyday citizens find themselves able to approach that examination both independently but also – and more significantly – together. (Al Willis, Ph.D., is an architectural historian and consultant based in Hermitage, Tennessee.)

#### "Laurence Chibwe/Designing Across Cultures" John Welch

Laurence Chibwe, award-winning black South African architect and principal of Afritects, has been in the profession over 20 years. His firm has both built and unbuilt projects in South Africa, and throughout the continent, that reflect a universal Minimalist aesthetic, often combined with improvisational post-modernist design features and accents. Afritect's architectural outcomes are innovative, daring and fluid. A recent award-winning example for the firm is the Soweto Theatre (2012) in Johannesburg. (John Welch, Ph.D., is an art historian and museum consultant based in Philadelphia, PA. He was formerly education manager at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.)

#### "June Grant/'A Need to Make It' " by Juliette Harris

Architect June Grant's undergraduate training in studio art has supported her skillful use of new technologies. "I have a difficult time grasping the quality of a space just by the act of sketching. I have a need to make it," she says. She led the design team for the NASA Ames Research Center's Sustainability Base, a net positive energy building, and for GE's first Silicon Valley software tech office workspace. She is also recognized for providing a vision for sustainable integration of utility infrastructure into the urban fabric, particularly as it relates to low-income neighborhoods. Throughout, it is clear what Grant means by "smart design for smart buildings with intelligent interface." She sees technology as a means to strengthen the connection between architecture and social and environmental concerns. She recently has returned to independent practice and is focusing on her Oakland CA community. (Juliette Harris is an independent writer and editor. Her clients include the Hampton University Museum for which she serves as a consulting editor for the print IRAAA and editor of the IRAAA+ webzine.)

### MULTIDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE

#### "A Talk with Mabel O. Wilson" by Elizabeth A. Watson



Architecture issue cover design by Eric Mack, a visual artist whose style is influenced by architecture.

ADD CURRENT  
ISSUE TO CART

Mabel O. Wilson is an accomplished designer with many aspects to her practice. She is a senior design professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation where she also co-directs the Global Africa Lab and the Project on Spatial Politics. Her cultural history, *Negro Buildings*, was published by the University of California Press in 2012. Her art projects with Paul Kariouk and a photographic project ("Listening There: Stories from Ghana") with Peter Tolkin have been exhibited in museums and galleries. She has been a lead member of design teams selected as finalists in three national competitions. She also co-organized the "Globalizing Architecture" conference in 2014 for the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture. (Elizabeth A. Watson is an art historian who writes on art, architecture and film.)

## PUBLIC PROJECTS

### **"Creatively Challenged to Lead from the Edge/Black Women in Public Interest Architecture" by Bradford Grant**

Profiles of two young women in the San Francisco Bay Area provides a representative look at black women's leadership in public interest architecture. These women, and others involved in socially responsible architecture, are often energized and creatively challenged to be especially innovative and imaginative in the face of limited budgets, neglected community users and the stigma and status of low priority projects. (Bradford C. Grant is a full professor in the School of Architecture and Design, Howard University. He is also co-directory administrator of the *Directory of African American Architects*.)

### **"Unwrapping The Mystery of a Lost Community and Preserving and Extending Its Legacy" by Carmina Sanchez-Del-Valle**

The new Weeksville Heritage Center is the culmination of a process spearheaded by citizens united by the desire to document the history of the remains of a black township. Weeksville was founded in the 1830s by James Weeks next to the Bedford Stuyvesant and Crown Heights areas of Brooklyn. From inception in the 1960s to completion of the \$34 million Weeksville Heritage Center in 2013, project planning was collaborative. The architects, Caples Jefferson, developed a striking design for the Center while being required to maintain a dialogue with multiple constituencies. Unlike the efforts put forth to conserve the historic houses on the site, which brought together members of the community, this last part of the process was driven by representative organizations, governmental and non-governmental, public and private. (Carmina Sánchez-del-Valle is professor of architecture at Hampton University. She holds a doctoral degree in architecture from the University of Michigan and is a licensed architect. Her current projects include the mapping the Civil War era refugee camps in Hampton where the displaced African American population settled and the architectural visualization of their cabins.)

### **"Not Grandpa's Porch, Or Is It?: Musings on the New African American Museum on the Mall" by Michelle Wilkinson**

Wilkinson discusses design concepts for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), scheduled to open in 2016. Some of its forms emphasize public engagement and demonstrative inclusion. Other forms attend to ancestral homage. And even others are about the history of architecture itself. Embracing the spirit of African American resilience, the building expresses the museum's vision by using the languages and "typologies," as project architect David Adjaye calls them, of black cultures, ancient through modern and contemporary. The discussion is based on Wilkinson's conversations with project architect David Adjaye and reflections on the legacy of black builders and designers, including her grandfather. (Michelle Joan Wilkinson, Ph.D., is a writer, interdisciplinary scholar, and curator of Guyanese descent. In March 2014, she joined the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture as a museum curator. Her previous exhibitions include *A People's Geography: The Spaces of African American Life*, *Material Girls: Contemporary Black Women Artists*, and *For Whom It Stands: The Flag and the American People* for the Reginald F. Lewis Museum.)

### **A Design Vision for the Re-building of Detroit/"The wisdom of broader ribbons across the land" by Craig Wilkins**

Taking as his point of departure the success of Eisenhower's interstate highway effort, Wilkins suggests a greenway infrastructure project for Detroit that takes advantage of the city's current depopulation and reforestation. His plan combines new, existing and repurposed structures with wind farms, remedial water systems, open spaces, commercial and recreational zones, pollution-cleansing trees and vegetation, urban farms, walkways, motor-less transportation systems, wetlands, animal habitats, creeks, streams and the Detroit River, all tied together by a long, environmentally sustainable swath of green rolling throughout the city. In one fell verdant swoop, Detroit could recapture its past vitality and prominence as well as lead the way into the next century of urban habitation. (Activist, architect, artist and author Craig L. Wilkins, Ph.D., currently serves on the faculty of the Taubman College of Architecture + Urban Planning at the University of Michigan. The 2010 Kresge Artist Fellow and multiple National Endowment of the Arts and Graham Foundation for Advance Studies in Fine Arts grant awardee has worked, written and lectured nationally and internationally, most recently as the director of the Detroit Community Design Center (2006-2013). His most recent publication, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture and Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007) was winner of several awards, including the 2008 Montaigne Medal for Best New Writing. His forthcoming book, *Activist Architecture: A Field Guide to Community-Based Practice* (Association of Community Design Publications, 2015) focuses on the philosophy and practice of community design centers, a foundational and essential component in the nascent field of public interest design.)

## Parting Shot

Note on cover artist Eric Mack, a visual artist who creates architectonic imagery, and a second art work work by him.

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# THE WISDOM OF BROADER RIBBONS ACROSS THE LAND

A DESIGN VISION FOR THE REBUILDING AND GREENING OF DETROIT

CRAIG WILKINS



Woodward Avenue, 1909. Photo: Michigan Department of Transportation



Federal Highway Act at work in 1956. Photo: Missouri Department of Transportation.

OVER A HALF CENTURY AGO President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed a bill authorizing the largest public works project in American history. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 was the culmination of a thread of thinking about the commerce, defense and cultural needs of the country that began in earnest in 1919 but can arguably be traced back to the first paved roadway in America a century before, Woodward Avenue in Detroit. Opened in 1805, this one-mile stretch of pavement was a harbinger of how and why the country would develop over the next two hundred years. It was prophetic, this paving of Woodward Ave — a hint of both good and, not-so-good things to come. Facilitating, if not authorizing, the kind of mass exodus of a population from urban areas into the developing suburbs that ultimately helped to weaken and destabilize cities (like Detroit), Eisenhower's concrete vision "of broader ribbons across the land" was indeed both of, and ahead of, its time.

Today, the products of that vision are commonplace; indeed, it's difficult to imagine our world without them. They've shaped our neighborhoods, towns, cities, regions and nations, influencing every facet of our lives. This now ubiquitous web of hardened cement strands — that both knit and separate people, places and profit — has largely defined modern day culture and commerce in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Eisenhower's signature on the public works bill was simply the final, official recognition of what began over two centuries before pen hit paper: that if America was to remain a great nation, it had to prepare for an uncertain future it would later come to create. A preparation that, perhaps unknowingly, began in Detroit.

That uncertain future is now upon us, both clearer and less so. Clearer because we can see what that vision has wrought. Less so, because for a whole host of reasons — ranging from the question of climate change to the economics of peak oil to the social and cultural impact of auto- or fuel-based only transportation systems — the very idea of mobility — the *raison d'être* for Eisenhower's ribbons — has evolved over time. We're now in a moment where how, when, whether and on what one travels is constantly being reassessed. What was once considered "alternative" modes of transportation — electric cars, bikes, dedicated buses, light and commuter rail, etc. — are becoming more mainstream. National, state and municipal authorities are increasingly lobbied to develop broader plans for the transportation networks in their charge and are responding with increased investment in modes other than highways. Even America's Big 3 automakers — General Motors, Ford and Chrysler — are exploring unique, non-traditional ways to design and power their conventional, traditional products.



provides for several types of open and green space development in the city. However, while the DFC report provides excellent synopses of the various types of green (and blue) spaces that might be developed and the advantages of each to the city and surrounding communities, by design it does not prescribe any particular locations. In its role as an unbiased, facilitated examination and organized analysis of the once and current city, the DFC report simply provides for their possibility as one in a series of land use options in Detroit's overall future development. Fair enough — as the creation of the framework alone was indeed a Herculean task — but I'm not bound to such neutrality. I argue the development of a main, city-wide, substrative green spine that makes its way in all its variations from one side of the city to the other should be a fundamental development objective in creating a future Detroit.

There's much to be said for a very strong and healthy urban green space, in this case one that undulates through the city in

varying configurations and sizes for varying uses, connecting commerce and communities, building economy and camaraderie along the way — too much in fact to include here and well-documented elsewhere. But imagine a mash-up of Chicago's lakefront, New York's High Line, Minneapolis' Chain of Lakes and Detroit's own Belle Isle, all on steroids, undulating, widening and contracting as it moves through Detroit's neighborhoods, peeling back buildings to reveal athletic fields, urban and wind farms, big and little ponds to fish and slow brooks to follow revealing long-lost waterways, canopied, tree-lined paths to walk, bike or catch, say, a trolley, active places to commune or quiet spaces to rest.

This new, signature jade bracelet would undoubtedly spur both new and rehab construction along its sinuous path providing the kinds of live, work and play options that are destined to attract a variety of current and new residents and others to experience and perhaps settle. Businesses, of course, would inevitably follow

and the creation of a singular or series of greenways would provide employment and training for thousands of workers for at least several decades. That's a career and one that, should Detroit become the model for future urban living, can be pursued in other locations both locally and nationally.

By thinking holistically about how we might best inhabit our cities in the next century, knitting together the social, cultural and economic principles of environmental and material sustainability this single continuous slice of urban fabric could be the catalyst that changes the nature of the urban experience in the country. How often does the opportunity for a city to provide jobs, housing, energy, clean air and water, alleviate traffic congestion, strengthen neighborhood connections, create new and varied public spaces, opportunities for urban farming and gardening, all while rebranding itself as the model of 21st century urban experience come about? With a single project no less? If there was any place primed for such a grand-scale prototype, it's Detroit. We have the space; we have the water; we have the people; and we have the expertise. What remains to be seen is — and this is critical — if we have the will. The resources necessary to make this admittedly loose concept a winding, emerald reality — and to say they are considerable would be an understatement — are all predicated on that answer. But clearly there's successful precedent for taking such a risk. David A. Pfeiffer



Rendering of an integrated open space and greenway system for Detroit and beyond by Stoss Landscape Urbanism



Rendering for the restoration of Bloody Creek on Detroit's east side by Detroit Collaborative Design Center



And while all this increased energy has produced at the very least a heightened awareness to perhaps the end of the Eisenhower project (indeed, the last road to be completed under the act was in the 1980s) and at most a smattering of reports, guidelines, proposals and a few actually implemented projects, one might argue that with respect to a new vision, it's 1805 all over again.

You may wonder why I'm telling you this rather mundane story. Simple. If, metaphorically-speaking of course, we find ourselves once again in 1805 — with a similar chance to make an initial, foundational foray in shaping the development of the nation for the next couple centuries — for the remainder of this essay I'll propose we fast-track our way to a new Eisenhower-esque solution. And that such a solution, once again, begin right here in the city where I live, work and play, Detroit.

## A Band of Green

When Eisenhower's highway initiative was underway, Detroit was the world's unquestioned leader in auto production. That lofty status resulted in a great deal of capital concentrated in a relatively small geographical area. As a result, the country's then fourth largest city was considered a model American metropolis, home to a pristine park system, a lively cultural scene, exceptional schools, a healthy multi-ethnic and differentially-educated middle class as well as the highest percentage of home and auto ownership of any city in the nation. Unfortunately, most of those claims can no longer be made. While today Detroit alternates with Tokyo for the title of the world's largest auto producer, it is far from its heyday in terms of population and prestige, particularly in terms of quality of life. Currently, over 70,000 homes within its borders sit empty in decay. After taking office in 2008, former mayor Dave Bing vowed to demolish 10,000 homes during his term. The final tallies of that four-year effort vary, but it's safe to say the mayor's earnest effort fell somewhat short, perhaps at best reaching a little over 8,000. Still, eight or 10, such physical devastation has left a good deal of the landscape fallow and awash with refuse. At least 25 square miles of the City of Detroit — some say up to 40 — can now be considered to suffer one or both of these conditions. That's a lot of open space and waste. A lot. Neither are particularly sustainable conditions for any city, given the economics of landfills, infrastructure maintenance and municipal services to name but a few, but in a cash-strapped city like Detroit it can be beyond environmentally, economically, socially and culturally devastating; it can truly be soul- and/or life-threatening.



Large portions of Detroit remain sparsely occupied. Photo: Alex S. Maclean

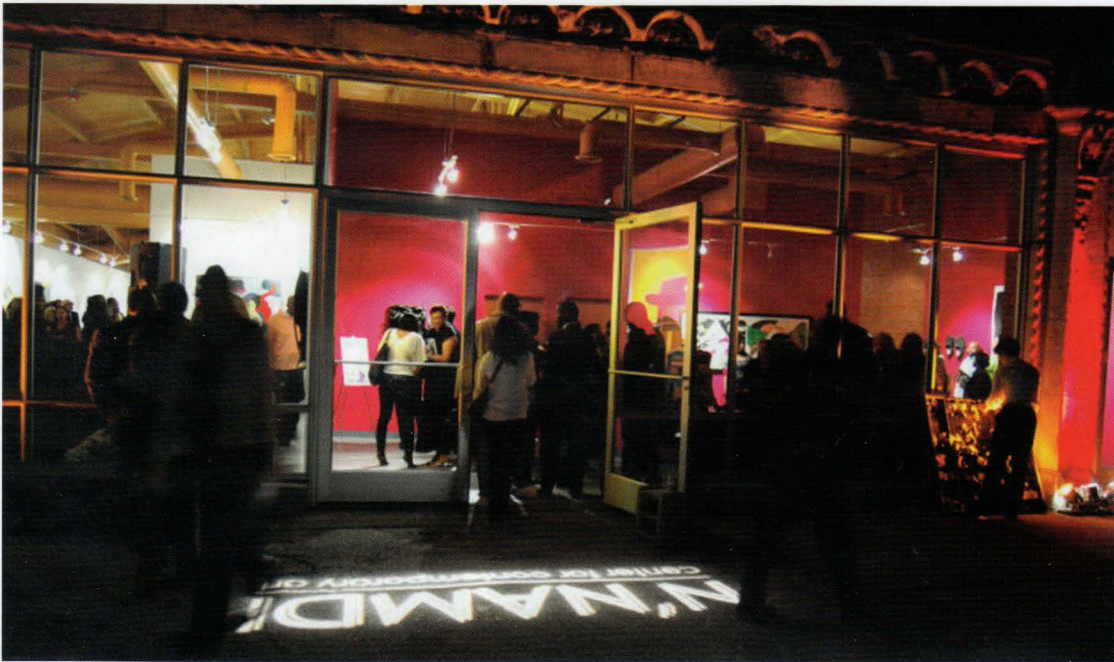
So what to do, not only with the now-cleared land but also with the tons of debris left from the on-going demolition?

In brief, to turn Detroit into the gold standard of 21<sup>st</sup> urban living it could and should be, I propose another kind of public works project. Taking as my point of departure the success of Eisenhower's highway effort, I suggest the undertaking of a greenway infrastructure project for Detroit. The project would take advantage of the city's current depopulation and reforestation and combine new, existing and repurposed structures with wind farms, remedial water systems, open spaces, commercial and recreational zones, pollution-cleansing trees and vegetation, urban farms, walkways, motor-less transportation systems, wetlands and animal habitats. It would reconnect lost creeks and streams with the Detroit River and would be all tied together by a long, luscious, environmentally sustainable swath of green rolling throughout the city. In one fell verdant swoop, Detroit could recapture its past popularity and prominence as well as lead the way into the next century of urban habitation.

Far-fetched? Probably, but not as much as you might think.

Much of what I've been arguing over the past decade has recently been independently documented in the Detroit Future City (DFC) Strategic Framework report. Developed over three years of technical analysis and community engagement, "drawing on the best local and national talent as well as the insights of tens of thousands of Detroiters" as its website explains, the framework





N'Namdi Center for Contemporary Art in Detroit. Photo: Tyler D. Griffis

Many of those creative-types are finding their way to Detroit. The draw of like-minded enthusiasts together with the infrastructure with which to live, work and play — the rents are still low, work spaces are readily available, the atmosphere collaborative, rapid-prototyping and fabrication labs are accessible, the landscape is ripe for experimentation and implementation, the

observes in the National Archive's *Prologue Magazine*, "[d]uring the decades of its construction, the interstate highway system was the largest public works project in American history — pumping billions into the nation's economy all over the country. Today, it still has an economic impact because of the continued maintenance and repairs needed for the roadways."

It's been done before; it can be done again.

However, until then Detroit designers continue to work towards that 21<sup>st</sup> century model in subtler and gentler ways. Yet even in these smaller interventions, notions of sustainability are often central to the work.

## Sustainable Social Entrepreneurship

Two things can be said for the myriad of design philosophies and methods currently being employed in the city. The first is designers in Detroit have embraced the idea of social entrepreneurship with a passion far beyond what might be expected — and given the conditions of the city it might be expected very much. The second is for all the variations across disciplines, genres, media and individuals, there's a certain amount of grittiness that's common to the work across the board. Let me take these one at a time.

As to the emerging ethic of social entrepreneurship, most designed products are currently simply variations on a popular theme (think iPhone 4, 5, 6, etc). It is a practice increasingly referred to as design with a little "d". But recent trends suggest a good number of designers today are looking to do something more substantive, more meaningful than produce slightly differentiated objects. They want to practice design with a big "D" — to design lifestyles, service industries, businesses and environments. In other words, they want to make a difference.

foundation community — lead by Kresge and Knight — visionary and supportive; there's even a network of programs, training workshops, institutes and incubators established specifically to develop, launch and support start-ups — The N'Namdi Center for Contemporary Art, Ponyride, TechTown Incubator, Detroit Creative Corridor, Green Garage, and Bizdom, to name but a few — has made Detroit an ideal city for those who have designs on changing the world.

The notion of grittiness is a bit more difficult to explain. Take, for example, an abandoned structure like a factory or warehouse, an abandoned space like a lot or school yard, or discarded objects like a glass or plastic bottle. Typically such objects once emptied are believed have fulfilled their intended purpose and having done so, are now obsolete. In general, Detroit designers are a bit less likely to accept that conclusion at face value. There's too much of what has been labeled obsolete laying about the city — a label not limited to objects but often used to describe individuals, neighborhoods and communities as well — to ignore.

Viewed through the twin lenses of necessity and opportunity, infused with the entrepreneurial ethic that permeates the air, this material is often quickly reimagined as infinitely ripe for use and it's this attitude of salvaging or repurposing — whether real or abstract — that infuses the best of Detroit's design offerings. The grittiness of design might simply be another way of referring to the act of salvaging, the logic of repurposing and the aesthetics of making-do; the refusal to accept current conditions — and the powerlessness such acceptance implies — and to make something out of nothing; something transitional, maybe even transcendent. In any event, whatever you want to call it — grittiness, necessity or something else entirely — this city's design community has it in spades.

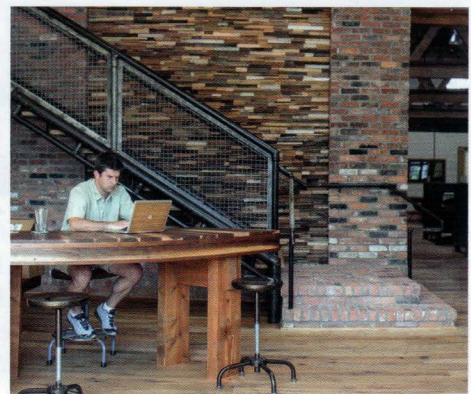




The Green Garage, housed in a former 1920 Model T showroom, is a community of social entrepreneurs supporting sustainable businesses focused on the triple bottom-line through its Green Business Incubator. Photo: Michelle and Chris Gerard.



The interior of the Green Garage illustrates some of the make-do design approach so prevalent in the D. The space incorporates reclaimed and recycled pipes, wood and bricks from its previous incarnation as well as material salvaged from a nearby defunct Cadillac dealership and Detroit brick manufacturer. Photo: Michelle and Chris Gerard.



Several tables and desks in the space are also made of discarded or waste materials repurposed for the space. Dickerson by Design, a design firm housed in the Green Garage, created this sidecar table. Photo: Michelle and Chris Gerard.

## Hip Hop Principles

Much of what makes up that grittiness parallels, if not follows to the letter, the admittedly loose and still-evolving principles of the nascent hip hop architecture movement — reusing discard objects, using materials for unintended purposes, rewriting former definitions of the good, the useful and the beautiful in space and place, inviting users to create their own environment, etc. — of which I've discussed elsewhere previously, including in the pages of this very journal. (1995; 2008) Of those brief *IRAAA* ruminations, one statement bears repeating: *Through the dire material conditions that lead to its birth, the hip hop ethos transformed existing, often discarded, materials into new and creative uses... Such philosophies and strategies of re-use are now being used by architectural designers to develop structures for new communities.* (2008) Below are brief outlines of three such efforts of my own as director of the former Detroit Community Design Center, which follow that particular ethos here in the D.

## Projects

**Door Stops.** In today's America, outside of cities heavily invested in public transportation like Chicago, New York, Los

Angeles, Washington DC and few other major metropolitan areas, being dependent on public transportation is often a problem. Due to the lack of investment in, and efficiency of, various kinds of transportation like regional and local rail, public and private motorized and non-motorized mobility to name a few, public transportation — primarily in the form of buses — has become a very real physical burden and barrier to goods, services, employment, education, and leisure activity for many urban residents. Transit riders in Detroit know these conditions all too well. The public transportation system — long opposed by the nation's largest automakers — has been in steady decline over the past three decades.

Some studies indicate that 40% of Detroiters do not own a car. In fact, of the city's current population of approximately 720,000, 55% are at some level dependent on public transportation. The underfunded transit system averages 125,000 riders daily, one third of which are 55 or older. Young or old, every rider has a story to tell about bus travel in Detroit, with wait time being the most common theme. Rarely do those tales reflect well on the system. Waiting for the bus in Detroit has become a poor man's version of the X Games: an exercise of extreme skill, endurance and patience. Often these long breaks in the daily commute are not in the most



scenic of the city's landscapes; so, this is where our project begins. A collaboration between designers, artists, riders and community residents, Door Stops — part of the Detroit Community Design Center's Seats and the City initiative — intended to fill neglected public spaces with a series of seats placed selectively where there's a need to make transit space more communal and humane.

Door Stops are infused front and back with large displays of public art in the form of murals depicting life in the city as interpreted by local area artists — with a focus on artists from the community where the seats will be placed — making for an easily identifiable, safe and pleasant waiting area for transit riders. Further, we designed them to be easily replicable, allowing for other designers and artists to contribute to the citywide project using our primary framework. As functional architecture, these structures provide the tangible benefits to riders of weather protection, location identification and respite. As pieces of public art, they provide opportunities for local artists to contribute their work to a constantly changing civic landscape.

Together, as both artistic and architectural object, the seats create an interactive, community-driven narrative by providing an opportunity for artists, riders and residents to create their own public spaces, lessening the problematic symbolism accorded to public transportation and the residents who use it; a choice that ultimately comments on the state of transportation and the quality of the public realm. Door Stops bring the citizen back into a position of prominence in the decision-and place-making process by giving her/him the tools to make desires visible. A very small tool, yes, but one that addresses a number of immediate and long-term, tangible and intangible concerns; one that begins small but has the ability to aggregate into a larger, cumulative impact. It is functional art/architecture that is mobile, cultural and above all, local; aimed at spurring a larger discussion about public space and returning design considerations to the discussion about urban development. This project has received international design awards for both social justice and street furniture design for all participants.

**Budō.** Another project employing this design philosophy is this Detroit café owned by hip hop aficionado and entrepreneur Aaron Moore. Located in the Sugar Hill Arts District in Midtown, between the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts and set to open late 2014, Budō's spatial construction includes available and repurposed materials, artistic creativity and people.



Poster for the Hip Hop Inspired Architecture exhibit, curated by designer and critic Michael Ford, which opened during the 2014 American Institute of Architecture, is part of a larger research project by Ford and like-minded colleagues to document the origins and influences of hip hop in the design professions. Photo source: Michael Ford



Creating a communal, weather-mitigating gathering space for Detroiters currently between permanent shelter. Photo: Damon Dickerson



Initial Door Stop installation on Detroit's east side, one of 17 Door Stops fabricated by the Detroit Community Design Center. Project design and photo: Craig L. Wilkins

To wit, the walls are crisscrossed with various colors of blackboard paint splashed to and fro. The wooden-slat screen wall — reminiscent of the deteriorating conditions of many of the city's older home wood and lath-built partitions — are fabricated from found, salvaged and/or waste wood from construction sites. The vertical metal supports are simply old railings or plumbing supports salvaged from bathrooms, factories and other industrial sites. The recovered chalkboards come from closed city schools severely damaged by weather and/or vandalism. The painted walls, chalkboards and video screens all act as canvases for the creative expression of the patrons. Through this purposeful and highly-encouraged act, the patrons create their own space daily. For example, each graphic opportunity (wall, board or video screen) might be offered to professional artists, students or patrons in any combination, for any length of time, changed as many or as little times as desired. Each chalkboard can be hung, removed or added in different locations along the wooden screen wall and each video screen can be relocated to any flat surface in the space. In this manner, the café changes constantly — a new space with new meaning — making it a destination for viewing and/or creating new art and friendships. I don't think it's much of a stretch to say that Budō's success may literally be, written on the walls.



Additional materials embedded in the screen wall — corrugated metal panels, window frames, safety glass panels, etc. — are also salvaged from various sites and can be added or removed depending on the desires of the owners or artists. Finally, the larger tables are made with doors reclaimed from the city's long vacant office spaces while the smaller ones are made from wooden magazine holders painted various colors. In keeping with the Hip Hop aesthetic, very little in Budō is conventional; much is improvised, more is repurposed and almost everything is salvaged.

**PlayGrown.** In 2003, State of Michigan Freedom Trail Coordinator and Grand Valley State University faculty member and Saginaw native Michelle S. Johnson decided her work and travel schedule cut way too much into her playtime, an activity she took very seriously. Believing hers was not at all an isolated experience, she established PlayGrown — dedicated to creating play experiences for teens and adults.

Situating the notion of play within the pantheon of the arts and as a means to social equity, Johnson began commissioning small interventions throughout the landscape of Kalamazoo. Bringing the lessons learned from those creative responses to vacant space to the D, PlayGrown is currently in search of a site to build a large-scale installation intended to “reintegrate ‘play’ into physical exercise in a Detroit community [where ‘play’] is sorely lacking.” Utilizing new and repurposed materials scattered across the city to create a lively, multi-generational play space, this installation will encourage visitors young and old to engage in multiple acts of “swinging, sliding, zipping, climbing, hanging, crawling, bouncing, walking and/or running” in a manner that both stimulates the mind and recycles the spirit.

We were invited by PlayGrown to submit for consideration our thoughts on any one of the core activities. We chose to focus on

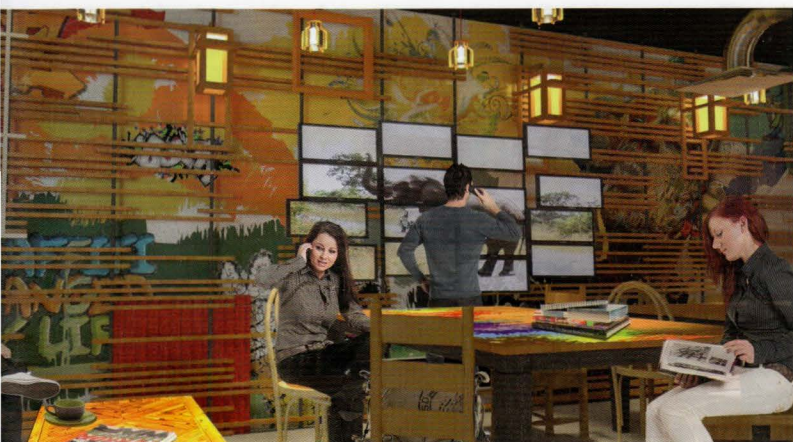


Proposal for PlayGrown climbing wall installation by Craig L. Wilkins

climbing. Our proposal was to create a climbing wall made from discarded auto parts — seats, steering wheels, pedals, etc. — in homage to Detroit's primary contribution to the rise of American commerce and ingenuity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Should PlayGrown locate an appropriate site, we will further develop some version of our concept as part of the initial installation.

In his 2014 American Institute of Architects Gold medal acceptance speech Shigeru Ban remarked on what I've held as a truism for over two decades: a new social and ethical imperative is at work in the field of architecture, one that will ultimately lead to an expansion of design into the areas of social, economic and environmental justice. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this essay, but it's safe to say I'm convinced such an expansion will be a, if not the, driving force in the field for the next century, at least. In fact in ways large and small, it's already happening. Design professionals are slowly but steadily reinventing themselves, developing the skills to research, create and develop solutions to self-identified problems as well as the ability to create income-generating businesses to produce, fund, market and distribute those solutions to appropriate markets. The trend will continue with the next generation of practitioners, who will be uniquely qualified to apply their skills in areas outside of traditional design realms. For designers feeling this kind of make-do, discipline-blurring practice is right up their alley, take note: we have lots of alleys down in the D. Come explore some for yourself...

Activist, architect, artist and author Craig L. Wilkins, Ph.D., currently serves on the faculty of the Taubman College of Architecture + Urban Planning at the University of Michigan. The 2010 Kresge Artist Fellow and multiple National Endowment of the Arts and Graham Foundation for Advance Studies in Fine Arts grant awardee has worked, written and lectured nationally and internationally, most recently as the director of the Detroit Community Design Center (2006-2013). His most recent publication, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture and Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007) was winner of several awards, including the 2008 Montaigne Medal for Best New Writing. His forthcoming book, *Activist Architecture: A Field Guide to Community-Based Practice* (Association of Community Design Publications, 2015) will focus on the philosophy and practice of community design centers, a foundational and essential component in the nascent field of public interest design.



Concept for Budō café by Craig L. Wilkins