Throughout Africa, courtyards are the setting for family activities, ceremonial events, learning, and worship.
The subject of diversity has recently become central in debates about curricular reform, pedagogy, and the composition of the faculty and the student body. An important related question involves the response of architects to diversity through the process and product of design. Through aesthetics, styles, and the organization of space, campus architecture has often been complicit in reproducing the dominant ideologies and social relations of society, undermining diversity and its critical possibilities. To counter, we examine the relationship between architecture and critical...
pedagogy with specific reference to campus design. As architects and as teachers of architecture, our interest is to move the theory and practice of our profession onto more critical terrain.

Cultural critic Dick Hebdige has raised key issues regarding the interrelation of ideology, social relations, curriculum, and campus design:

Most modern institutes of education, despite the apparent neutrality of the materials from which they are constructed (red brick, white tile, etc.) carry within themselves implicit ideological assumptions which are literally structured into the architecture itself. The categorization of knowledge into arts and sciences is reproduced in the faculty system which houses different disciplines in different buildings, and most colleges maintain the traditional divisions by devoting a separate floor to each subject. Moreover, the hierarchical relationship between teacher and taught is inscribed in the very lay-out of the lecture theatre where the seating arrangements—benches rising in tiers before a raised lectern—dictate the flow of information and serve to "naturalize" professorial authority. Thus, a whole range of decisions about what is and what is not possible within education have been made, however unconsciously, before the content of individual courses is even decided.¹

Like Hebdige, we feel that architecture unavoidably frames the world. It structures experience, reinforces assumptions about culture and politics, and orients attention toward certain types of knowledge and ideologies. In a world exceedingly complex, marked by alienation, uncertainty, and insecurity, much is inevitably learned through architecture. In the words of C. Richard Hatch, given "the complexity of modern life, and the narrowness of each individual's view from within it, architecture becomes crucial as a source of information." He continues,

In this context, architecture is the concrete manifestation of the institutions that make up society. Much of what we know of these institutions and their meanings we know from the large array of building types and styles we encounter. Architecture is... the reification of social roles and a set of three-dimensional statements about power relationships.²

Architecture is the housing of social relationships, the manifestation of institutional values, and the reproduction of certain ways of life. As such, it holds considerable power to direct consciousness and to act as an information system by which we map ourselves and chart our way. But such talk about architectural space in consciously political ways remains woefully undertheorized. In response, within our own work, we have been trying to frame the theory and practice of architecture in a more transformative light.

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Critical pedagogy begins with the recognition that schooling is a political process that has socio-cultural consequences. Schools can never be understood as neutral sites, removed from the conflicts of society. On the contrary, schools are inherently complicit in the political, social, cultural, and economic relations of society. Viewed within the frame of critical pedagogy, schools are places of struggle over meaning, truth claims, the organization of knowledge, the issue of how learning might be organized, teacher/student relations, and classroom practices.

The same applies to pedagogy and curriculum. All pedagogy, by its very nature, represents some theory and thus serves certain cultural and political ends. No longer is the curriculum understood as a neutral construct; it, too, is unavoidably political by virtue of the fact that it favors the knowledge, histories, stories, and ideologies of some groups over others. The national debate around “political correctness” is simply one indication of the extent to which the curriculum is a political battlefield, struggled over by differing groups, vying for the power of the high ground.

Recognizing the inherently political nature of teaching and schooling, critical pedagogy is interested in moving toward theories and practices that would organize pedagogy, schooling, and diversity around a transformative social project. There is a moral imperative here that distinguishes critical educational theory from what Kathleen Weiler calls traditional educational theory:

In general, traditional educational theory has taken the existing arrangement of society as given, not changeable in any serious way, and desirable. For traditional educational theorists, schools have been seen as the means ofrationally distributing individuals in what is conceived as a basically just society. . . . Critical educational theory, as its name implies, rests on a critical view of the existing society, arguing that the society is both exploitative and oppressive, but also is capable of being changed. . . . [W]hat essentially defines critical educational theory is its moral imperative and its emphasis on the need for both individual empowerment and social transformation.

The project of social transformation demands that critical pedagogy hold educators and students accountable as critical citizens to develop a moral vision grounded within a politics of difference. The concept of difference, originating in the more critical discourses of postmodern theory, is an important referent for critical pedagogy because it recognizes that human subjectivity is always layered, varied, complex, and never unified. Human subjectivity is always constructed and organized in relations of difference. That is, the self is variously defined by experiences of class, race, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and so on. For example, a person may be a woman in a patriarchal society, but white in a society of color, and middle class in a classist society.

Lucien Kroll’s building at the University of Louvain consists mostly of dormitory space, with loft space on the top three floors and a library, meeting rooms, and child care center on the first two.

The office of the director of the medical school is directly across the hall from the nursery school, and when his window is open he will hear the children’s voices.
Pretenses to universality, a national interest, an American culture, and a common curriculum have the effect of repressing difference. Hence a politics of difference, as it might take form in institutions like schools, is more than what might be called a "politics of representation," which is simply allowing marginalized groups to have more "air time" in the curriculum. With the understanding that difference is organized within relations of power, the point becomes more than to validate minority cultures; it is to "provide a sustained critique of the institutional practices [of power] that exclude them while simultaneously engaging them for the possibilities they may offer for democratic public life." A recognition of difference in this way is not to be equated with liberal pluralism, because it is organized around a particular politics that reveals and critiques the relations between dominant and subordinate groups. Cornel West articulates this point well:

The new cultural politics of difference are neither simply oppositional in contesting the mainstream (or malestream) for inclusion, nor transgressive in the avant-gardist sense of shocking conventional bourgeois audiences. Rather, they are distinct articulations of talented (and usually privileged) contributors to culture who desire to align themselves with demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized, and disorganized people in order to empower and enable social action and, if possible, to enlist collective insurgency for the expansion of freedom, democracy, and individuality.6

Closely related to the politics of difference is the politics of voice. In the effort to effect a transformative project around a politics of difference, the concept of voice is a crucial theoretical tool. All forms of education, curriculum, and pedagogy are about someone's story. The question, of course, is whose story is most privileged in architectural education and pedagogy? Whose interests are being served? And whose voices are being silenced? The politics of voice suggests that coming to voice, within relations of difference characterized by asymmetrical relations of power, should be an empowering process. To empower, however, does not mean merely to sanction or affirm voices uncritically. Coming to voice, then, is the attempt to have people/students reclaim the authorship of their lives. This attempt demands that teachers take seriously the stories, histories, and lived experiences of their students—but in a process that affirms and challenges.

What does all this suggest for the way we might look at architecture, and more specifically campus design? We believe that critical pedagogy, with its heightened awareness of politics, transformation, difference, and voice, can deepen the possibilities for a more critical architecture. In light of these indices we now turn to two examples—one involving a single room and the other a massive building complex—in which architects have made controversial additions to the university landscape.

W e believe that design, as both process and product, can help shape the direction of pedagogy and education. The design of a classroom can be part of a process that questions and reevaluates the curriculum. In looking at the National Heritage Rooms at the University of Pittsburgh, we find architectural design connected to educational ideals in ways that encourage voice and identity while satisfying the functional requirements of classroom space.

The National Heritage Rooms Program is a collection of active classrooms conceived and designed as an interpretation of environments from ethnic groups or nationalities. It is meant to be a physical statement about the diversity of cultural heritages and learning. The rooms are located around the commons room of the university's landmark Cathedral of Learning. The Nationality Rooms Program was conceived during the great surge of European immigration to Allegheny County in the 1920s as a way to share and represent the heritage of these new members of the greater university community. The first group of what would eventually be twenty-three rooms, completed in 1938, included examples of Scottish, German, Swedish, Russian, and Early American styles. The Israeli (1987), Armenian (1988), African (1989), and Ukrainian (1990) classrooms joined the program after a thirty-year hiatus. Although the early nationality rooms were developed to represent national heritage, the recent rooms also place emphasis on diverse ethnic and world views related to education.

Similar in concept to all the heritage rooms, the central purpose of the African Heritage classroom is to expose the history and diversity of African culture, and encourage an African world view as revealed through visual/physical design. After years of planning, the nationality rooms committee selected the local African-American architect William J. Bates to design the classroom with Dr. Laurence Glasco, professor of African-American history at the University of Pittsburgh, and other members of the university community. It was decided that the room should reflect a "trans-African" idea of nationality rather than the expression of any one ethnic group. At the same time, since the majority of African-Americans have ancestral ties to West Africa, the committee looked especially to West Africa for references. In an effort to represent the designs of Africa, Bates and the design team engaged the work of Yoruba master carver Lamidi Fakeye from Nigeria and fine arts professor Kwaku Andrews, a master carver from Ghana. The resulting design process became a collaborative venture involving architect, historian, craftspeople, community organizers, and students from the African and African-American university communities. As is customary in Africa itself, the design process emphasized the interrelated nature of ideas, community, and production.7
The classroom’s unifying concept is the 18th-century Asante temple courtyard. Throughout Africa, courtyards are the setting for family activities, ceremonial events, learning, and worship. The courtyard seems to be an important “trans-African” environment. The courtyard, as a place for learning and of keeping traditions alive, evokes the idea of classroom. The classroom is organized with double-tiered seating, or benches, built into the back walls surrounding a small courtyard-like area with traditional chieftain stools scattered around the center. Large bas-reliefs surround the room with openwork window screens on the window walls, all referring to traditional African environments. There are frieze symbols on the upper walls, relief carvings on the doors, seats, chalkboard, and “furniture,” all depicting the spiritual, historical, religious, and other elements of the African culture and landscape. Colors, details, symbols, though not always constructed of traditional materials, are correctly described and reproduced, giving the room a “living museum” authenticity and quality.

As in the African tradition, all surfaces of the classroom are articulated, not just for simple visual enjoyment but for the more profound motive of transmitting stories and ideas. The designs and details imbue the classroom with information rich in meaning. This synthesis of tradition, ideas, and utility in African culture corresponds to the western concept of visual beauty. The African Heritage Room does not depict the European colonial or postcolonial periods of Africa. Because information about Africa has often been from a colonial perspective, the absence of this history can now allow for critical examination and reeducation.

Educational concepts can be discerned in the African Room, where the class sits in a courtyard arrangement for learning. (In the Chinese Room, for example, all sit around a moon-shaped teakwood table, before a slate portrait of Confucius.) Thus the classroom as courtyard or as a moon-shaped table can help facilitate a process of reexamining the ideas of learning, teaching, and curriculum. It seeks to recognize or establish a politics of “voice.” The planning of the African Heritage Room coincided with the onset of critical debates about curriculum revisions and multicultural education, and embraces these issues in its design. Beyond the normal function of the classroom, the African room, like the others, is central to several important and connected educational activities. Scholarships for summer study in Africa, as well as special exhibits, concerts, lectures, African holiday observations, and hospitality for African scholars are some of the extended activities programmed by the planning committee in connection with the African room. The collaborative design process and the associated educational activities augment the room as a strong point of entry and link the African-American community to the university. The room, combined with its pedagogical goals, stimulates an international view while providing intercultural exchange.

Admittedly, the Heritage Rooms are just a beginning because, from the frame of critical pedagogy, concerns still remain. For example, although the rooms depict the “voices” of other nationalities, this representation runs the risk of essentialism—the attempt to portray nationalities or ethnicities (difference) in a supposedly pure or authentic way. The fact that the African Room stands for an entire continent is evidence enough of how multiplicity is made singular. The pursuit of authenticity in the representation of ethnicity, nationality, or culture can be a dangerous thing, because, to take the African room as an example, it can reify one notion of Africanness and thereby make other groups in Africa and in the African-American community nameless and invisible. But, given these concerns, the Heritage rooms nevertheless do expose dignity,
heritage, and a multicultural perspective that encourages a reevaluation of the roles of dominant groups in the physical translation of the changing curriculum.

In 1969, an extraordinary experiment in campus design began under the leadership of Belgian architect Lucien Kroll. Kroll's entry into the project came one year after the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium had already relocated some facilities of its medical school to the outskirts of Brussels. Constructed were a large hospital, support facilities, and residential buildings in an architectural style and arrangement of space that was uncreative, rigid, and institutional. After this initial phase the university administration consulted with the students (recall that this was just after the protests of May 1968) who promptly rejected these new buildings. Inspired by the events of the previous year, medical students were strongly questioning the role of medicine and health in society, conceptualizing alternatives, and forming new ideas about medical practice. They did not like the buildings already constructed, seeing them as representative of the institutional practices and values they were trying to overcome. The students put forth proposals of their own: that buildings should not be of single use; that whenever possible functions should be broken up and integrated with the fabric of the surrounding neighborhood; that proposals from community residents should be considered and acted upon.

These proposals were rejected (of course), but the administration allowed the students to propose the architect. Lucien Kroll was hired.

What Kroll inherited was considerable: the program called for 40,000 square meters for studios, twenty apartments, two hundred rooms for single students, two hundred rooms for grouped apartment living, a theater, a restaurant, a nursery school and kindergarten, places for worship, a post office, a metro station, and offices for student services and administration. Despite the breadth of the program, Kroll initiated a participatory design process. (Kroll will not take a commission unless he can work with those who are directly affected by the design.) He spent months working with a representative team of students, faculty, and administrators to develop the program and to initiate the design.

From the very start, the group's intention was, in Kroll's words, "to express the diversity of individuals and not the authority of institutions." This intention is manifest everywhere in the final design. Kroll states:

The building forms are not static. Walking through the site they change constantly, always in an unexpected fashion. The materials of the windows, their colors, curtains, balconies, and plants increase the sense of diversity. They reinforce the individuality and the autonomy of the occupants, and not the power of the central administration.

This richness of diversity is not merely on the surface. For example, Kroll spent considerable time
convincing structural engineers to investigate structural design in more creative ways. For one building Kroll proposed “a plan of wandering columns,” a system where columns were not arranged in the normal grid. Kroll felt that the regular grid of equal bays was too conformist, that it “risked producing unimaginative behavior.” In this way, Kroll built diversity right into the core of the building that guards against uniformed space planning in any future renovations.

Other examples abound, with the result that the entire complex is a living testimony to Kroll’s urging that construction workers go beyond the norm, be creative and inventive in their use of material and the organization of their work. Arguing that there is value in seeing the brushstrokes of the painter, Kroll challenged mechanical engineers to make sculpture with their air ducts; carpenters to apply patterns and textures to concrete formwork through the use of plants and saplings; and masons to interchange wall material, to configure how buildings meet the ground, and to design ground sculptures that would become the play structures for the nursery school. Participation also extended to the students. In the dormitories, partitions were designed to be movable, encouraging user involvement. In the upper sections of some buildings, three-story volumes were left open to allow students to design their own loft systems with a kit of parts designed by the architect. As a result of participation extended to workers and students, the whole feel of the complex is one of individual initiative, changeability, facilitation, and involvement.

Beyond the mixtures of colors, textures, patterns, materials, and constructional systems, the message of diversity is also read through the organization of space. Kroll states, “No architectural volume can be said to be dominant [the composition is not hierarchical]. There are many important places, many centers, each connected to and integrated into the others by an elaborate network of circulation.” For Kroll, the non-hierarchical composition of space and function offers an opportunity to comment on the connection between space and power. Understanding that power is nearly always reinforced by space, Kroll organizes space to effect a critique of power, to challenge it and redistribute it so as to draw attention to the individual and those normally eclipsed from its sources. For example, the office of the director of the medical school is directly across the hall from the nursery school, and when his window is open he will hear the children’s voices as well as the sounds from the apartments for married students which are directly above.

Viewing the medical university buildings through the frame of critical pedagogy reveals remarkable convergence between Kroll’s participatory design process and the restoration of politics, transformation, difference, and voice. There is no doubt that Kroll understands architecture as a form of cultural politics. As he states, “Ours is primarily a political project and not an aesthetic one. It is more or less ungeometrical, anti-authoritarian, anarchical (architectural), that is to say, human—as organic as a family of plants, and as ecological.” Through a participative design process, Kroll encourages the multiplicity of voices that are always a part of any building to speak out and engage. But Kroll is not interested in just any talk, nor does he see the building itself as the final goal. He problematizes voice and moves beyond building design, because his guiding interest is critical democracy and emancipation. He uses participation to change people, to have them engage the cultural, political, and economic conditions that circumscribe their lives in order to change those conditions. Kroll believes it possible that the thinking and making of architecture, aesthetics, space, and construction can be organized to provide a critical reading of ideology, culture, and power. Kroll is not naive or idealistic, because he is cautious about the power of architecture itself to alter consciousness and/or the social relations of power. But he is direct in claiming that this is his intention:

The role of the architect is far from neutral. Clearly, the architect’s sketches are not going to change society, but, in a certain sense, they can serve as a detournatur, an obstruction, an alibi, and can suddenly throw light on hidden mechanisms . . . The sketch becomes as much an instrument of institutional analysis as the speech: there are sketches that stir things up and others which comfort, sketches which quietly encourage initiatives among those who have lost the habit and others who are immobilized.

In different ways, and with varying degrees of success, the nationalidity rooms at the University of Pittsburgh and the medical buildings at the Catholic University of Louvain critique conventional notions of campus design. Organized around concepts of diversity and toward a transformative politics of difference, these projects give partial voice to those not often heard in school and society.

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NOTES

5. Ibid.