

DIVERSITY

Making partner in the majority-owned practice

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Summary: The subject of this month's diversity column is Ralph T. Jackson, FAIA, partner in the proper Bostonian firm of Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott, which contains in its name a descendant of Charles Bulfinch, architect of the Massachusetts State House, and the renowned Henry Hobson Richardson. Jackson, who was born in Richmond, Va., but moved north with his parents at age 4, survived a bumpy period of schooling and worked in a professional environment where his color was at first mistrusted. But by virtue of an influential mentor-partner at Shepley Bulfinch combined with his own personality—which included a singular talent for comprehending the client's real motivation in building—Jackson worked his way to principal after 15 years in the firm that he joined 31 years ago.

Ralph Jackson initially was brought on board Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott as a technician. He used the leverage of effective mentoring and collaboration to gain a full partnership in a long-established New England

firm, and become an effective voice to win and keep clients, getting his satisfaction through a project's ability to respond to client values through design.

At first, working in a professional environment in which his color was much distrusted. Jackson cultivated an understanding of his clients' goals, as well as the consultant "uniform." Except for the color of his skin, he looks and talks as a consultant to the establishment: he wears the bow ties, the blazers, and the attitude. He is ingrained into the culture and legacy of his office and the preoccupations of his clients.

Rocky start

Jackson grew up in Boston. An article in *Building Stone Magazine*, entitled "The Best and Brightest American Architects 2000," offers this scenario as Ralph's parents moved north in 1949, when he was four years old: "Equipped with few role models for overcoming the economic and racial barriers of the old South, they traveled to the culture of the post-war northeast with a naiveté that, in fact, served them and their son well. Their innocence about the potentially monolithic nature of cultural and economic impediments made the impossible possible, as it so often does for marginalized groups." His parents found an improved standard of living and a chance for their son to get an education.

The drawbacks of being black were balanced in Jackson with a great sense of optimism that followed him through a string of checkered educa-

tional experiences—all the way to a prized design partnership in one of the nation's oldest firms. His optimism, he points out, stems from identifying shared values that he and all African Americans have in common with the country's diverse races and nationalities.

He came to Shepley Bulfinch "because I have what I considered a talent, and that was working on buildings for clients of a certain kind. I had none of the connections that go with being able to pursue a life in that world. So I needed an organizational setting that provided me with the access and then to create a role for myself in that context. And when I first came in [1975], I'm certain the assumption was that I would be a technical person, solving technical problems." That promised a limited future for Jackson in the firm.

What overturned that notion was the opportune presence of a Shepley Bul-



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finch partner, the legendary Jean-Paul Carlhian. Carlhian had given Jackson a research project that called for an analytical approach, and he delivered to Carlhian's satisfaction. So Jackson joined the firm, and Carlhian became his mentor.

Early hurdles

Jackson went to Boston public schools, where he performed marginally. He had attended predominantly black elementary and junior high schools and from there went to Boston English, where he faced prejudice in the largely white high school.

After graduating in the middle of the Vietnam war, he enrolled at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston, at the time a two-year junior college. He flunked out after six months. He went on to Newman Prep, at the same time earning money unloading trucks, then returned to Wentworth, where he finished his degree and was accepted at what is now Boston Architectural College (BAC), an after-hours school with instructors drawn from Harvard, MIT, and local Boston firms. After winning a pair of design competitions there, he applied to schools of architecture at Harvard, Yale, and MIT. This was 1972, when the movement to admit minority students was still embryonic. Accepted by all three, he elected to go to Harvard. At that time Gerhard Kallmann, Michael McKinnell, and Werner Seligmann were all teaching studios. Shortly after arriving, Jackson decided



that "star" studios would not give him what he was looking for.

He found it at Harvard with an Australian architect, Professor Urs P. Gauchat, later dean of architecture at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Gauchat was offering studios focused on sketches, sketch problems, and exploring different forms. Ralph took the course several times and began to make out what he saw as unique patterns of thinking. Those patterns were based on expression of purpose, whether about a building or a book of matches, all of which eventually confirmed how he thought about objects and form.

Inclusion and exclusion

Jackson's African-American background has had a complex bearing on his outlook as an architecture student and architect. He was one who, with the first awakening of his racial identity, wanted to erase the past; he was more concerned with and took refuge in the present. As a friend described it, "Ralph sprouted full blown from Harvard. There was nothing prior to

that." Harvard offered a Eurocentric education. Says Jackson: "For me it was, like, 'can I erase what happened or where I'm from? Can I blend?' So I'm one of those professionals who goes through phases ... You move up and erase the path that you left behind and become more and more alienated from whatever your roots are."

The mindset is not unknown. You reinvent yourself and you create a kind of apparent life for yourself. The film *The Talented Mr. Ripley* showed Matt Damon mining that lode. "It has to do with us all having this one model of what one should be like. And it's white, male, upper class. And the question is: How can you get yourself to fit into that sort of pattern? It's difficult to do when you're black."

Sometimes when Jackson sits in a room full of white males—Irish, Italian, WASP, Jewish—he senses a kind of collusion that because they're successful and professional, they are in no way troubled by their roots or their cultural differences. But the reality, in Jackson's view, is that the obsession

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professionals cultivate to climb the ladder tries, at heart, to compensate for a sense of inadequacy all people tend to bring to the table. "To my mind, we've all suffered the fact that the doors were ostensibly closed to us. And then they cracked open, then a little more and a little more," he says. "But the notion that one wasn't a part of that privileged class informs everyone's self-image and everyone's behavior."

Jackson places the issue of exclusion on a far wider base than one based on race. Not many generations ago, in most northern cities, if you were Irish Catholic, or Italian, or Jewish, you came upon the infamous "Do Not Apply" signs. In the South there flourished the anti-immigrant Know Nothing Party. "The fact is that most of us are outside the privileged few. And when we're trying to scale the heights we can see the similarities between our [black] position and those around us."

View from the top

Having climbed the long ladder, Jackson at last found himself at the top—principal in a prestigious Boston firm. He was fortunate enough, when he came, to have somebody like Jean-Paul Carlhian as a mentor. What happened since? To become a partner, let alone a design principal, as Jackson is, in a firm that lives and dies on its service to the client, is no easy task. Out of the 22 principals, some 15 are managing principals and 7 are design principals. Managing principal candidates are easier to measure—business developed, repeat work, budgets met, schedules achieved. So promotion as a managing principal is more rapidly paced than promotion to design principal.

By 2006, Jackson had completed 31 years at Shepley Bulfinch, 16 of them as a design principal. It took him 15 years to go from staffer to associate to senior associate to principal. Jackson sees his election as driven by his professional achievements, not his skin

color. A design principal who followed him into principalship had been there longer; he was white, Harvard undergraduate, Harvard graduate—all the proper credentials. So the evidence points to the certainty that 15 years of preparation is what it took.

For a firm that lacks a distinctive formal style—and few firms that are run as a multi-principal practice nowadays have one—it is rare for projects to clearly bear one designer's stamp. In Jackson's case, African identity is undetectable to most eyes. Moreover, while Jackson's clients like design awards, it's not their primary concern. Instead, his office tower in the World Trade Center complex in Boston's Seaport District reflects his passionate belief that buildings respond to context. Perhaps in this the building embodies elements of his own journey: the tower blends in; it is made of traditional materials treated with a deep commitment to material quality; it has a sense of permanence. It also incorporates the client's values. So does Bates Hall (the upgraded reading room at Boston Public Library), the library at Fordham University, the Worcester Courthouse and the Georgetown Law Center. His design for the University of Denver Law School has made it into the country's first LEED Gold certified law school.

Does race affect design?

The riddle is how Jackson's blackness enters his designs in a tangible sense, if at all.

The answer may rest with the colleges, libraries, and courthouses at the core of his work and with their inherent concern for community and transparency. That is where he feels he can speak authentically to the need to express invitation and shared values across color and racial lines. His blackness shows in the spatial



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character, less in the stylistic design than in his sympathy with institutions' vision to prepare its men and women for a diversified future.

Recently, Cornell University commissioned Jackson to design the Africana Studies and Research Center. The project allowed him to transform the center's premises in an uninspiring former fraternity house and imbue it with a sense of scholarly stewardship of the African Diaspora. In massing space, color, and pattern, the center's award-winning design incorporates a sub-Saharan sense of craft and ornament.

He stands for the design component in architecture. In the past some saw Shepley Bulfinch strictly as a service firm. He sees a critical larger role. "You'd be surprised what injury can be done to the team with the notion that they're simply delivering service. I used to think it was all about the project, and that you didn't have to worry about larger issues, such as collaboration, companionship, motivation. But I found as I got older that unless I attended to firm policy and those larger issues, I couldn't be effective in delivering the project. You can't bury yourself in detail."

He remains a vocal advocate for diversity in the practice of architecture and has spoken widely on the subject, including a recent lecture at his alma mater, Harvard.

Jackson has the satisfaction of

looking out the window at Shepley Bulfinch's office in Boston's Seaport District in an office tower of his design. He could not have expected it when he joined the firm in 1975, but he was optimistic and tenacious enough to know that it was possible.

Reference:

Next month: challenges and successes of the woman minority architect.

Did You Know...

- There's no better argument for hiring minority staff as good business than the U.S. Census Bureau statistic:

Over the next 30 years, 90 percent of America's population growth will come from the minority communities of African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, Asians and women. It's safe to assume that a hefty percentage of that expanded population will be in positions of hiring architects, or reviewing the work of architects.

- It took 38 years from the year of Whitney M. Young Jr.'s famous AIA convention speech for the Institute to award its Young award to the **National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA)**. As the Institute's 2007 Firm of the Year award winner Jane Weinzapfel, FAIA, of Leers Weinzapfel, wrote in her nomination letter, "Although we have repeatedly acknowledged the relative homogeneity of our profession and our commitment to diversify it, we have failed to [increase significantly the number of African-American architects]." Through its educational and design award programs NOMA has served as a showcase for the work of the Black architects' community.

- Kudos to **Rick Lowe**, an Alabama-raised African-American artist who came to Houston's Third Ward to found Project Row Houses, a group of eight duplexes for visiting artists,

and to rehabilitate a score of decrepit shotgun houses dating to 1930. The eight units were designed by Rice University students to provide low rent accommodations.

- The show to see is within the classical precinct of the New York Historical Society on Central Park West, site of the exhibition ***New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War***. You are met at the entrance by great hanging bales of cotton, and spend the next hour absorbing how the aftermath of slavery—the show covers the period from emancipation to reconstruction—was as destructive in a social way as was slavery itself as it depicts the complexities and contradictions that manipulated the big city. The exhibit closes September 3.

- Watch for parallels between black and majority behavior patterns as they appear in Lawrence Otis Graham's book ***Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class***. Graham identifies social attitudes by elite black families toward blacks of different classes, as well as towards whites, that recall, if not racial discrimination, certainly high-class snobism.

Images:

1. Ralph T. Jackson, FAIA. Photo by Larry Lawfer

2. "Builders-19 Men," by Jacob Lawrence, 1979. Photo: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, N.Y.

3. The Eric E Hotung International Law Building (left) and the Sport and Fitness Center (right) at Georgetown University's Law Center form a quadrangle with two existing buildings. Photo: Peter Aaron/ESTO.

4. The communal level of the Sport and Fitness Center at Georgetown

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University's Law Center extends seamlessly into the International Law Building, creating a space for interaction and collaboration Photo: Peter Aaron/ESTO.

5. The Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, creates a new sense of identity using textures and form Photo: Albert Vecerka/ESTO.

6. The William D Walsh Family Library, Fordham University creates a space that is transparent and inviting Photo: Jeff Goldberg/ESTO.