THE CRISIS OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARCHITECT

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The United States of America has a population of approximately 320 million people, of which 13% are black, yet it currently has only approximately 2 000 licensed African-American architects. South Africa, where black people constitute nearly 80% of our population of about 55 million, has just 307 registered black architects and 84 black candidate architects (excluding the other categories of registration for which there are no equivalents in the USA).

The crises of the African-American architect: Conflicting cultures of architecture and (black) power focuses exclusively on the situation in the States. However, it is broadly organised along two narrative streams that align with our prevailing concerns: the lack of black architects and the definition of Afrocentrism in architecture. The author, Melvin Mitchell, is a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, with qualifications from Howard University and the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Apart from practising architecture, he is also an academic.

He writes that when he was young, he and his friends responded to the US inner-city turbulences by propagating the view that the 'exploding black urban ghettos of America should be replanned and designed by black architects and planners'. He advocates that black architectural practices should become involved with design-build and development in affordable housing, and that the focus of black architects should be on community development and urban housing. Furthermore, Mitchell is adamant that 'architects are cultural agents'; that black architects should promote black social and economic development. On the question of why there are so few black architectural

students, he is explicit: 'It makes no sense to study architecture if prospective students are told that architecture is not about money, but about personal self-satisfaction'. He explains: 'Salaries are from one-half to one-fourth of those paid to new graduates of professional programmes of similar duration and difficulties such as law, business, computer sciences, engineering or the medical sciences.' The situation in South Africa is very similar.

In the book, he makes a bold claim: 'I am saying simply that what black architecture looks like is the architecture that Wright and Le Corbusier were making between 1905 and 1960 in Europe and America'. The question of a black architecture is at present particularly relevant as Africa is geopolitically and economically increasingly prominent in a global context. The concept of an African Renaissance is no longer purely idealistic. It is inconceivable to have an African Renaissance without developing architecture with an African identity, and Mitchell proposes that the attempt must be made 'to reconstruct a meaningful African-American and African architecture for the twenty-first century'. Interestingly, he goes further: 'My lingering suspicion [is] that, as a person of West African descent, I indeed have as much claim to ownership in the Picasso-Cubist inspired architecture of Le Corbusier as does any person of European descent.' He continues by claiming that Afrocentric architecture evolved to its 'logical aesthetic conclusion in Le Corbusier's voluptuously curvilinear chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut' and that Chandigarh, in India, is 'openly black-African inspired'.

This book challenges current orthodoxies, and it succeeds in being provocative. The author argues his case with such conviction that the book offers an eminently appropriate agenda for further debate in South Africa. It should be read by every South African architect, black or white, practising and/or academic. ∎

1 *Mitchell, M. 2003.* The crises of the African-American architect: Conflicting cultures of architecture and (black) power. *New York: Writers Advantage.*