

National Assoc. of Minority Architects

Personally and on behalf of the St Louis region I would like to welcome you and hope your time spent in St Louis has been productive.

I want to congratulate and thank the St Louis chapter of NOMA for hosting the meeting and honoring me with the opportunity to speak to you this evening.

For me this is particularly nostalgic because the forming of the St Louis chapter corresponds to the beginning of my public career and the founders were and remain friends of mine (David Mason, Richard Adkins, Bill Watkins). In fact the first community based planning effort I was involved in was the first Penrose Neighborhood Plan that Richard Franklin and I worked on over 30 years ago.

As I thought about tonight, and the honor and responsibility associated with being your speaker I struggled with the need to be relevant because of the profound regard I have for your profession.

I decided there were three critical issues, that have very synergistic relationship to each other;

- Your role in the development and evolution of public policy**
- And the need for a Black Aesthetic**
- How do you get paid**

The world may be flat as Thomas Friedman has famously concluded, but the spatial reality of modern life is the huge concentration of ever growing populations in a relatively small number of places.

In the United States the top 100 metropolitan areas now are now home to 2/3 of our population and over 70% of our GDP. They are the places where you find the workers and firms that fuel our economy.

In the “CITY” is where you find the human capital (the education & skills) that furthers innovation.

The “CITY” is where you find the infrastructure- transportation, telecommunications, and energy distribution systems that move people, goods, and ideas quickly and efficiently.

I'm always surprised when people are surprised by this reality. The entire history of the human race once we stopped being "hunter-gathers" has been the phenomenon of urbanization.

Over 2000 years ago Aristotle told us the "CITY IS THE SOUL OF A PEOPLE WRITTEN LARGE"

Now you may be sitting here wondering, "What this has to do with You" My answer is everything. Cities are not accidents they are conscious creation of humankind.

Because if that were the case, who then is the priest that would minister to this soul? The answer is the architect. The history of architecture is the record of humankind's march to civilization.

Think about this.

You see if a space traveler landed on earth from another universe and there were current signs of human life, what would be the basis for their judgments of the species that lived here?

It would be the buildings we left behind. What they looked like, how the space was organized, what materials were used, how they related to their physical environment and each other.

They would tell our space traveler everything important about how we lived, how we worked and worshiped, how we played and what were our highest values. They would speak to what is or was the Soul of these People.

John Ruskin, the 19th century art critic, noted, "Taste is the only morality....tell me what you like and I'll tell you who you are."

How do societies define taste in the built environment? It's defined by the work of architects.

So when the architect abandons the public square, when you don't fight for zoning, land use and design standards that are aspirational and speak to the angels of our better nature, then you have abandoned your calling and left our march to a higher better place to the vareries of chance.

FORM MAY FOLLOW FUNCTION, BUT FUNCTION DOES NOT DIDATE THE FORM.

The interlocker between form and function is the architect. The erection of structures devoid of beauty, where strength & utility is the sole purpose is properly the function of engineering. But tonight I'm speaking to NOMA, so it's only when you add the idea of beauty to functionality that a building or structure becomes architecture.

I just referenced Louis Sullivan. I want you to think about this for a moment. England has had hundreds of monarchs, some even great ones by any historical standard, but can you imagine London without Sir Christopher Wren? How about the great City of Chicago without Louis Sullivan?

Which segways to my second point this evening? The importance of the Black Aesthetic

Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, John Coltrane.

Now do me a favor and close your eyes for a moment (pause). Now, imagine how the 20th century would have sounded had they not lived.

Given the transformational social impact of music on this country, imagine the United States, without them?

You see in my opinion whatever passes for original American culture springs from the genius of the Black Aesthetic

You ask why I bring this up? In doing my reach for tonight was blown away by myriad types of architecture. The spoke to every human era, and every place on the planet. with a notable exception. There was nothing on Africa. And in the Modern canon or citations on America we were conspicuous by our absence

The great 18th century German writer Johann Goethe said, “architecture is frozen music”

If that is true, then where is our music? Where is architecture of the Sons & Daughters of the African Diaspora?

Now I know all too well the issues that have confronted and constrained the progress of Black Architects. This is not a discussion about history, but a challenge about the future.

You see as difficult as some of lives may be or have been. I would argue that no one in this room started their life where Louis Armstrong started his, or had overcome the demons that tormented Charlie Parker.

In the face of the most virulent structural racism, they produced, with all due respect to everyone else, what I consider to be the most extraordinary music the world has ever heard.

They took the black experience in America as the vehicle to produce music that spoke to the world’s common humanity. And the world’s most powerful country was helpless to stop the world from embracing it and them.

How could they do it? They understood and lived an eternal truth that Shakespeare sums up so well, “To thine own self be true”

What does that have to do with the last thing of making a living? With getting paid?

Those musicians I spoke about created music that came only from them. They did not copy or imitate the music of others.

In fact anyone who wanted to learn it, understand it, and play it had to come find them. People left the conservatories of European classical music to find 52nd Street in NYC

In other words they created a market for themselves and their work?

They enjoyed the material success that their genius deserved. (albeit not enough)

What can NOMA learn from this? If you really want recognition and success you must free yourself from the tyranny of dead ideas

You must fight for public policy that speaks to and supports what is best about cities,

You must produce a vision and an approach that exemplifies that policy in such a unique and compelling way- no barrier can stand against it.

Don't come into a mayor's office begging for crumbs from the table of minority participation.

Come in and fight for a vision of cities and neighborhoods that is so compelling that no Politian dare deny either you or the vision.

The musicians I referenced broke down barriers, transformed a culture and inspired a world because of their commitment to this music as the finest expression of them & us.

My challenge to you is to do the same thing? Embrace your work not as your job but, as your art. Now I'm grown enough to know we all have to accommodate commercial interests, but we don't have to embrace them!

If you have this courage, then like them you will command our patronage. If you lack the courage then you don't deserve it

I have been in the political arena for over 30 years, which means I'm a cynic on a daily basis, but I'm an optimist about life.

Dr King said the moral arch of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. And if you commit your life to good, the universe will grant you a good life.

And when those space travelers arrive and come to the place once called America, they will say, "A special people lived here, you hear it the music they left, and it see it in the "frozen music" of the buildings of their Cities.

THANK YOU AND GOOD NITE

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair....we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way

Just like late 18th century France, for the United States in the Age of Obama it's also the best of times and the worst of times. His historic election to the presidency redefined the possibilities of what it means to be an American as much as Neil Armstrong's giant step for mankind changed the paradigm of our understanding of the possibilities of what was possible in the physical universe.

Explain both..... (use the Dumbo tune)

Having stated the obvious, the question becomes what does that have to do with you as black professionals and NOMA as an organization?