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Email to a friend

Research project spotlights African-American architects from U. of I.

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Editor's note: Dreck is the correct spelling of the architectural historian cited in the third paragraph.

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — After Rodney Howlett graduates from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a master's degree in architecture, he hopes to return to his home base near St. Louis to design churches.

In the meantime, he's devoted countless hours to collaborating on the design of a Web site aimed at spreading a different brand of good news. The site focuses on the noteworthy, but little known, achievements of the [U. of I. School of Architecture's African-American alumni](#).

The project recently sprouted offline legs. Through the end of February, a reformatted, interactive version is featured in the historical portion of the exhibit "Architecture: Pyramids to Skyscrapers" at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. The exhibit, curated by architectural historian Dreck Wilson, was organized as part of the museum's 2006 Black Creativity Program. According to the museum's Web site, the exhibit was designed to introduce museum-goers to "historical and contemporary African and African American architectural visionaries whose creations define and shape the world we live in today."

Before taking a course at the U. of I. with architecture professor Kathryn Anthony, author of "Designing for Diversity: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Architectural Profession" (U. of I. Press, 2001), Howlett said he could name only one African-American architect. Now, he's familiar with dozens of them and proud to walk in their footsteps.

"I learned that the University of Illinois has trained and raised up more African-American architects than any university in the United States except for the historically black colleges and universities," he said.

"I hope that after visiting the site people of all cultural backgrounds can name at least five African-American architects from memory," Howlett said. "That would be a huge accomplishment."

To date, more than 100 alumni have been identified and documented on the Web site.

Howlett's work was part of a team effort that included the contributions of former architecture student Tebogo Schultz, current doctoral candidate Nicholas Watkins and Web designer Brian Martinez. The team worked under Anthony's direction. The initial work was funded by a grant awarded by the Brown Jubilee Commemoration Committee in conjunction with a yearlong campus celebration of the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark Brown v. Board of Education's ruling to outlaw racial segregation in the nation's public schools.

Watkins documented archival and demographic material as well as survey responses from living alumni and current students. Along with individual histories, the Web site and exhibit include photographs of buildings designed by U. of I. alumni; archival materials from school publications that provide clues about race relations through the years, within the school, on the U. of I. campus and in the surrounding communities; and personal insights, anecdotes and recollections intended to inform and inspire current and future generations of African-American architects.

The project also references the U. of I.'s rich architectural history in general, which dates to 1870. The university was only the second in the nation to offer a program in architectural studies, and boasts the first graduate, Nathan C. Ricker, in 1873.

Its first African-American graduate was Walter T. Bailey, who received a bachelor of science degree in architectural engineering in 1904 and an honorary master's degree in 1910. Bailey assisted in the planning of Champaign's Colonel Wolfe School before being appointed head of the mechanical industries department at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he supervised planning design and construction of several campus buildings. He later designed the Mosaic State Temple Building and Pythian Theater Building in Little



Click photo to enlarge

Walter T. Bailey was the first African-American graduate of the U. of I. School of Architecture. He received a bachelor of science degree in architectural engineering in 1904 and an honorary master's degree in 1910.



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Pythian Bath House and Sanitarium in Hot Springs, Ark.



Rock, Ark., and the Pythian Bath House and Sanitarium in Hot Springs, Ark.

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Postcard from the Pythian Bath House.

Another pathbreaking African-American graduate of the school was Beverly Greene, the first African-American woman to receive a bachelor's degree in architectural engineering, in 1936. Greene went on to receive a master's degree from the U. of I. in city planning in 1937 and a master's degree in architecture from Columbia University in 1945. She broke through both gender and race barriers in 1938 when she was hired by the Chicago Housing Authority, and is believed to be the first African-American woman to receive a license to practice architecture in the United States.



[Click photo to enlarge](#)

Beverly Greene

Like Howlett, Watkins said he learned a great deal from his experience working on the project.

"I'm not African American, so I didn't go in with a preconceived feeling. It took going down to the University Archives and seeing images of Beverly amidst a sea of white male faces to appreciate the history. I had the feeling that segregation and racism were more of a quiet thing – subversive in their quietness ... cancerous."

Anthony, who contributed a co-authored chapter with Watkins on African Americans' "legacy of firsts" at the U. of I. architecture school to the forthcoming book "Remembering Brown at Fifty: The University of Illinois Commemorates Brown v. Board of Education" (U. of I. Press), said she hopes the Web project and museum exhibit serve a purpose that goes beyond simply bringing buried history to the surface.

"The overall message I hope it will convey is to light a spark – to capture the imagination and to inspire potential students and others who find this information, especially African-American schoolchildren who may be motivated by the information they find here, to pursue a career in architecture."

That's important, she said, because "despite the gains made by the historic Brown v. Board of Education court decision in the past half-century, the number of African Americans in architectural education and practice still remains astonishingly low, particularly in comparison to counterparts in professions in law and medicine."

Among the problems that need to be addressed, she noted, is one of representation. In "The Canon and the Void: Gender, Race and Architectural History Texts," an article just published in the Journal of Architectural Education, Anthony and doctoral student Meltem O. Gurel document their examination of history texts assigned at 14 leading architecture schools. Despite lip service within the field regarding "the importance of women and African Americans as critics, creators and consumers of the built environment," Anthony noted, "our analysis of these history texts revealed that contributions of women remain only marginally represented in the grand narrative of architecture. And for the most part, African Americans are omitted altogether."

The continued exclusion of these architects and their contributions from the canon does little to encourage women and minorities to pursue careers in the field, she said.

And no one brings that point home for Anthony better than Howlett, reflecting on what he learned through the Web-site design project and coursework with his U. of I. professor.

"Just being able to name African-American architects has had a great effect on me personally," Howlett said. "In order to succeed, you have to see someone who looks like you."



University of Illinois Photo

Architecture professor Kathryn Anthony, who contributed a co-authored chapter on African Americans' "legacy of firsts" at the U. of I. architecture school to the forthcoming book "Remembering Brown at Fifty: The University of Illinois Commemorates Brown v. Board of Education" (U. of I. Press), said she hopes the Web project and museum exhibit serve a purpose that goes beyond simply bringing buried history to the surface.

"I hope that people, especially African-American youth, walk away (after viewing the Web site or exhibit) knowing that they can do anything that they put their minds to. Most of the older alumni went through the program when segregation was at an all-time high, and they still made it through. We minorities in current-day society should take a lesson from them. Success is the honor we pay those who have gone before us."

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