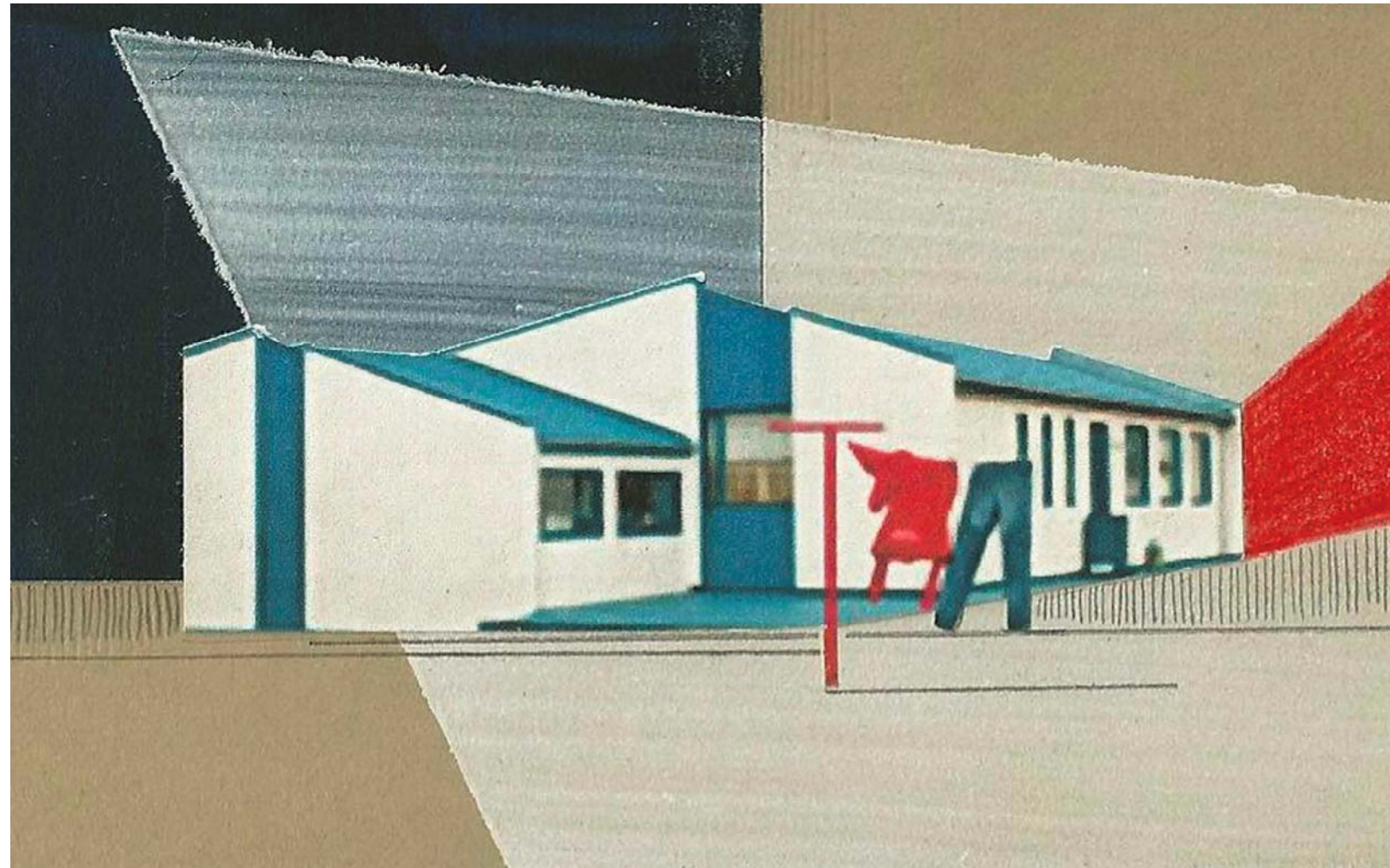


The little campus that could

COMMUNITY AND CONTEXT IN MEMPHIS

by Emily Grandstaff-Rice FAIA



It is no secret that the profession of architecture has a way to go to reflect the gender, ethnic, and racial composition of the United States, circa 2018. The percentage of African-American licensed architects has remained woefully low at almost 2 percent, whereas the most recent census counts African Americans at 12 percent of the population.

Despite this bleak picture, some schools are dedicated to developing architects from underrepresented populations. The seven accredited Historically Black Colleges and Universities educate 43 percent of all African-American architecture graduates. As licensed professionals, architects bank on the high standards of education, training, and public responsibility, yet we often fail to serve communities that don't have access to professional design.

In 1987, the firm of Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown developed a new masterplan for the city of Memphis, Tennessee, that included establishing a local accredited architecture program to better serve the city through professional design services. Through their work on the Center City Development Corporation, the principals observed a rich fabric of cultural patterns in the city. With its unique mix of African-American

culture, stories, Elvis, the Mississippi River, and historic cobblestones, downtown Memphis was at a crossroads on issues of equity, place, and the public realm—as well as where to invest its time and funding. Fast-forward 30 years, and few of the ideas included in the plans were formally adopted. Rather, “the ambitious and impressive plan was largely ignored,” according to Tom Jones of Smart City Memphis—except for the plan to develop future design talent in and for the city.

Enter the University of Memphis, the little school that could. In 2003, after an independent peer review of the school's architecture courses, work began toward building an accredited graduate degree. In 2015, the program gained accreditation. Through the support of the university leadership, local architecture community, some key developers, and major donors to the program, the program has become known for its community-based curriculum, recruiting students who better reflect the race and ethnic population of the city. Since the only other public option for students was more than 500 miles away, the University of Memphis addressed a specific need. Although masterplans rarely cite the future training of designers, this key addition acknowledged that to fix a city, human capital can be just as powerful as built structures.

The true success of the program is that more than half of the architecture students and graduates are from underrepresented races and ethnicities, such as Mario Walker, Class of 2012, who has been working at Self+Tucker Architects in Memphis on everything from neighborhood planning and streetscape development to all ranges of housing and mixed-use development.

Such results take dedicated work, but the future success of the school's graduates and the impact of their vision on the city of Memphis is shaped by their collective energy, cultural awareness, and commitment to community-based projects.

American towns and cities consist of layers of history, with scars and fissures sometimes left open for decades. We continue to struggle with systematic governmental policies leading to de facto segregation that date back at least to the New Deal, with urban-renewal divisions that cannot be easily stitched back together. The key to creating new vision for our cities is to acknowledge that architects and planners need to bring more people who are rooted in their communities to the drawing table, people whose voices society clearly has not yet heard. ■

EMILY GRANDSTAFF-RICE FAIA, a senior associate at Arrowstreet, was elected at-large director of the American Institute of Architects for 2018–2020.

LEFT
Detail of untitled collage; mixed media.

