

## Young African American Women Architects Sharpen Ties to Their Communities

by Stephen A. Kliment, FAIA

**Summary:** At work is a new generation of minority architects who experience, but are not deterred by the more subtle forms of exclusion and unequal opportunities that persist today. Their focus is to contribute to society by re-examining current processes, looking at other disciplines for insights, using the latest tools for communicating and delivering design, and becoming a force in the community.

### June Grant, RA

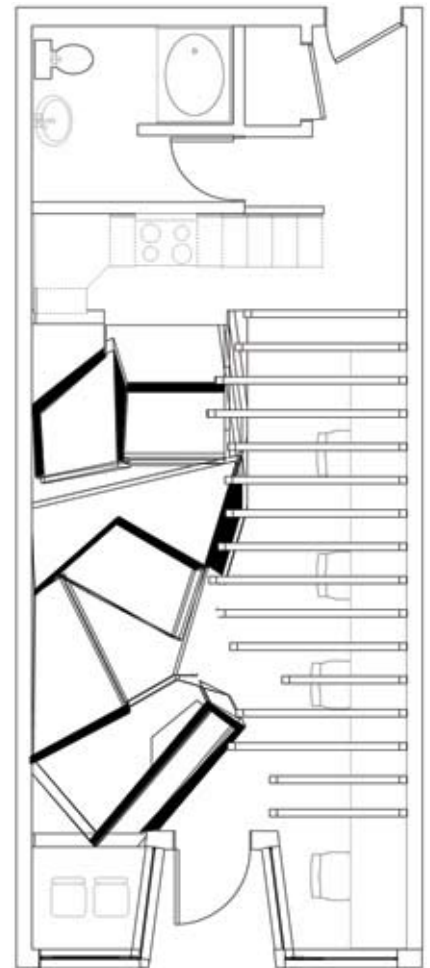


*June Grant, founder and principal of BLINK-lab, is such an architect. Born in Jamaica, she realized early its cultural restrictions, and sought access through emigration, as many before her. She ended up earning a degree in international finance from Baruch College at the City University of New*

*York, followed by a master's in architecture from Yale, followed by moving to Oakland to set up a small but active office in a peaceful old Black district. As this column was being prepared for posting, the Museum for African Art announced it had chosen Robert A. M. Stern, FAIA, a majority architect, to design the museum. This triggered in Grant the following reaction.*

JG: What I find disturbing is the Museum's Web site describes its mission as "increasing public understanding and appreciation of African art and culture" and further, that the 110th Street address is a nexus of African, African-American, and Latin cultures. It, further, proudly describes this location as Duke Ellington's old stomping ground. Yet, interestingly, Maya Lin, an Asian American, was chosen previously to design the interior of the SOHO location and now Robert Stern for the new home.

I can only express deep sadness. Museums and other civic buildings are, more than other building types, reflective of social values. It is a pity the appreciation of art objects does not extend to the ability of the living peoples of African descent. This missed opportunity to harness living talent is quite telling. For it can only perpetuate the invisibility still facing African American practitioners in all the professions. Recurring decisions such as the MAA's are not singular events but ones with far-reaching impact on the architectural community. The result is on a regular basis I receive incredulous looks from prospective clients and far too many students who have never heard of or

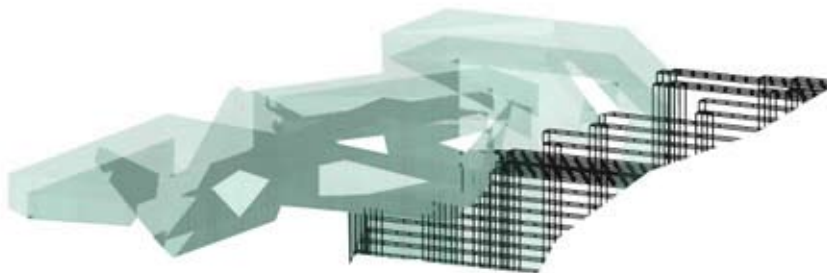


Blink Lab café plan by June Grant, Oakland.

even thought Black architects existed. Worse still, this has been my experience with educated middle-class adults and students! The landscape is changing, I agree. Phillip Freelon is a shining example (see Episode 2 in this series, which contains profiles of Freelon, along with architects David Lee and Michael Willis). But Phillip (long may he live) is not a building. A museum is a building whose structure will stand as testament of our times as to what we deem most valuable to preserve and carry forward.

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Blink Lab café plan by June Grant, Oakland.



I also have to ask, how can institutions such as the MAA and Studio Museum of Harlem, which exists for the sole purpose of promoting African and African American Art, not extend this commitment of “exposure” to encompass the art of design of its own building?

**SAK: You have two business-related degrees, and a graduate degree in architecture. Why architecture?**

JG: The built environment has been a fascination for as long as I can remember—neighborhoods, people, intersection, and movement. Architecture was all I have ever dreamt of pursuing. When I arrived in the U.S., I discovered that as a permanent resident I did not qualify for financial support, which I would need during graduate study. I needed a plan. Lacking the architectural background and financial support to prepare for entry into an architecture program at the graduate level, I studied for a second degree in international finance, with a minor in studio art. My plan was to graduate with honors, work at a well-paying job, save for graduate school, and sculpt nights until I received my citizenship papers. Having a business and sculpture background has been a vast asset.

**SAK: Did you at Yale encounter stereotyped attitudes regarding women students and other minorities?**

JG: In my graduating class, I remember one Mexican Chinese American

[he was born in the U.S. with one parent from Mexico and the other from China]; no Native Americans. The Asian population was well represented. This I noted but it was not my essential concern. My intent at Yale was to enjoy three years studying what I had waited for all my life.

At Yale, I encountered a far more serious issue than stereotype. My chief concern and source of aggravation and disappointment was and continues to be how Euro-focused and insular the architecture program was. To an immigrant such as myself, with a strong grounding in world art, history, and economics, this small window through which I was asked to view the world was simply frustrating and oppressive.

In my innocence, I expected Yale to be a place of broad exploration and dialogue—looking at topics from the widest angles and across disciplines. Instead, I found very little if any research and a singular view—European. African, Indian, and Islamic art, architecture and cities were deemed of no educational or design import from the school’s view. Where would Picasso be without the objects being brought back from Africa? We know Kahn did not find his voice until he traveled and acknowledged there was something outside of rigid functionalism. The experience at Yale was useful, but the discussion surprisingly narrow. In short I encountered not so much ill-willed stereotyping, but a lack

of interest in a global discovery. At a prominent architecture school that was cause for concern. An exception is Rem Koolhaas who, through his continued published research, is forcibly lifting the veil at all architecture schools.

**SAK: Your firm is called Blink!**

JG: I wish there were a mystery to the name but there is none. The original was “Think,” but that was a bit pompous. I remember one of my first instructors at Yale declaring: “*there is no room for whimsy in Architecture!*” So out of rebellion came “Blink!” If you wish, you could make the association that B relates to Borderlessness (an international citizen); “link” the means. And that would be true. When I first started to craft the idea of my studio, it was clear that my interests were so vast I needed to go beyond traditional architectural thought; a lab/research type environment, questioning concepts and developing ideas.

One output is my project to open a café adjacent to my office. My lab became interested in the two-for-one deal. I explored the program concept of both an existing architect’s office (my own) and a new office-mate—the coffee tasting room. One fertile ground for research was to investigate visitor behavior by restricting each group’s movement to its own area. Space limitations and movement patterns led to a double structure allowing for liberal storage and a dramatic space that draws street interest.

**SAK: Why Oakland?**

JG: When I lived in New York, it was home base as I discovered Europe. I settled in the Bay Area to discover Asia and be a part of the state’s “can-do” spirit. I chose Oakland instead of San Francisco because it’s culturally diverse, with accessible politicians, available large spaces, and no fog. My

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office is a peaceful old African-American neighborhood in Oakland. From my window I see life in action and my neighbors see me. The neighborhood is devoid of cafes. Indeed, it lacks most typical urban infrastructure—no banks, no supermarket, no corner store. But it does have easy access to mass transit, a famous African-American bookstore, relatively low crime, and a high percentage of home/office businesses, artists, teenagers. But most importantly, my office is a storefront zoned for commercial retail and has a large front sidewalk and large trees.

**SAK: Where do you expect to be five years from now?**

JG: 100 percent virtual and mobile. I've always imagined myself working from any place in the world. The intent is not to be bound by geography and to fully exploit technology. The operating structure has changed over the past year. A year ago, I had two staff members but I was so exhausted from managing their in-house production, I realized a need to associate with skilled outside collaborators, not staff. With a Tablet PC instead of a laptop, I am now able to sketch my ideas directly on the screen and tap into a network of specialists locally and abroad almost simultaneously. No more insane keyboard-mouse-screen/email/fax coordination. At just two pounds and a great graphic processor, my Tablet has freed me to focus on what I prefer to do ... active instant analysis and design.

So far, most clients, especially city planning authorities, have been highly responsive to this direct hands-on digital way of communicating. I am having greater success negotiating solutions, without diluting strong architectural and urban concepts.

In addition to spatial freedom,

research requires financial support. Therefore, to limit client-dependency, BLINK! is intended primarily to design, build, and own its own ideas. If we as a profession are to remain valid in the eyes of society as a whole, we might have to take on greater financial risk. That's why I'm building a for-profit cafe in my office.

### Zevilla Jackson Preston



*Practicing on the opposite coast from Oakland is another young African American woman architect. Zevilla Jackson Preston is principal of J-P Design, Inc. (JPD), a 13-year-old practice situated in a Harlem storefront on West 131st Street. The office is a single space subdivided by vertical industrial corrugated siding that gives it a gritty, no-nonsense scale. A blond wood conference table is inlaid with African symbols.*

*It is in every way a neighborhood community office. Jackson Preston has four daughters—the middle two are 12-year-old twins. Not too many years ago, she had to break in midafternoon to pick up her girls from the*

*school bus. She still holds that she's a mother first and an architect second. She started her career in the office of Roberta Washington, long one of New York's most active Black women architects. As a young architect, she felt that her own community, Harlem, along with many other communities of color, were vastly underserved by the architecture profession. Like June Grant in Oakland and architects of color in other cities, she set out to provide the kinds of quality-of-life services she felt only a concerned architect could provide.*

**SAK: How did you end up starting your own firm?**

ZJP: I was a fast learner and working on my own as a design consultant just three years out of college (City College of New York) after short stints with Roberta Washington and Harry Simmons. When I came out of school the initial idea was not to work for a large white firm. My thought was: "You're Black, you go to work for a small Black firm." True or not, that was the perception. At that time [1990] my experience had been that white firms didn't hire young Black people fresh out of school coming from schools like City College. If you came from MIT, Cornell, or Harvard, maybe your chances were greater.

I was fortunate enough to find a firm like Roberta Washington. If I stand on anyone's shoulders, it's the Roberta Washingtons of this world! Being a firm owner, I understand that it takes a special principal and a special firm to invest in the development of a young person by taking time to teach a young architect what they themselves had learned from someone else, and not being so busy they're not willing to pass it on.

**SAK: What does your current practice consist of?**

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SOBRO Venture Center by Zevilla Jackson Preston, Harlem, N. Y.



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**ZJP:** I think of JPD as a small firm with a large practice. Over the years, JPD has developed a diversified portfolio of brownstones, multiple dwellings buildings, community facilities, institutional offices, and even streetscapes. (I'm a designer on the team that developed the huge Frederick Douglass Circle, now under construction at the northwest corner of Central Park and partially paved with decorated quilt tiles as symbols of stops on the Underground Railroad.) I'm working on a hospice project for the Abyssinian Development Corporation (Sheena Wright is the CEO) and a supportive housing living complex for Bronx-based SOBRO.

**SAK. What's the potential impact of African cultures on American designers?**

**ZJP:** African culture is the oldest culture on earth. Historically, it has always been a point of origin for much that happened in other cultures, including architecture. People don't go to Africa and see modern architecture, but I do. I look at ancient buildings and see a lot of Modern architecture—walls, rhythm of openings. Shortly after David Hughes' book came out

*[Afrocentric Architecture: a design primer. Columbus, Ohio: Greyden Press, 1994], it confirmed for me that I feel totally different from most people when I think of what Afro-centric architecture is. I was taken by the fact that Hughes could show people of any race using artifacts from the African continent, and they would end up designing a form strictly based on such objects. He would call that Afrocentric design. That's where we parted. I didn't agree with his premise. For an architectural form to be truly based on one's culture, one had at some point to live that culture.*

Afrocentric design happens in plan, not necessarily in form or in elevation or through any sort of appliqué. I believe that African people live differently from Western cultures. The spaces tend to be more communal and more adaptable as indoor/outdoor rooms. In New York City, we have immigrant populations whose ways of living are more closely derived from the architecture of non-Western cultures. Yet they live in apartment buildings in New York City designed from a Western perspective of the nuclear family. Yet many families with non-Western

roots—and not because they're poor, it's just because they live like this—run up and down stairs carrying a pot of food, from one "house" to the next, from one household to another. That's about how people live; it's not about economics. So they do their best to adapt, in the standard multiple dwelling building, to a communal way of living that is not supported, embraced, or encouraged by the architecture.

**SAK: What then are your design principles?**

**ZJP:** As an architect I care most about pushing the mundane, ordinary envelope of the spaces that city dwellers live in every day so the architecture can embrace people and their lives, not run counter to them. New York is spending so much money on housing and doing all of it the same way, because no one is suggesting any other way. Finding answers to design challenges in the built environment that affect the ordinary person, not an elite class, is what excites me about architecture. Change only comes through looking at what's out here critically, writing about it, forcing people to discuss it. Then you start to see progress.

There must be a market for experimental apartment buildings that have nuclear apartment units, along with common kitchens and common dining rooms and common living rooms, and the extended family can rent it. The apartment building then begins to look like a dormitory facility that you might get on a college campus. What's wrong with that? And as for housing for the elderly, perhaps you don't really need it. Maybe what you need are extended living environments where you can live with your family in an apartment building and have a separate smaller efficiency unit for an elderly person who's part of their unit. Why do we have to shut off elderly

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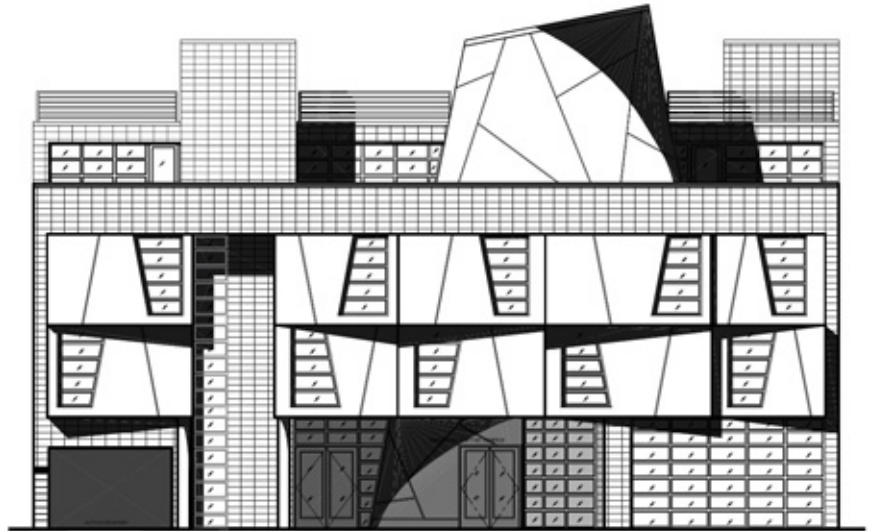
people in separate buildings? Try telling these things to HPD [Department of Housing Preservation and Development, a New York City agency].

### SAK: How do you deal with the business side of architectural practice?

ZJP: When I compare myself to my contemporaries in majority firms, I don't believe that we think about design in proprietary ways the way I found a lot of majority architects do. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it. But if we forget about running a business, and just want to have a love affair with architecture, then why drive yourself crazy running a firm.

But if you're really running a business, then it's about making dollars that result in profit. Some time ago, I was watching a news item about sitcoms, and I was amazed that actors were being compensated \$750,000 per episode. Why doesn't society put that kind of value on architecture?

I am disheartened by the low dollar value placed on architectural services in the markets that I work in. I realize that architects must value themselves if the larger society is to value us.



Abyssinian Hospice elevation by Zevilla Jackson Preston, Harlem, N.Y.

Architects are in charge of a really powerful gate. To be the gatekeeper for the built-environment is an awesome task.

### SAK: Who is the Black architect's patron/client?

ZJP: In my community, I believe this role is filled by local not-for-profits and the Black church. When you think of most of the development that's been done in Harlem, it was through these institutions. Even the Black church set up local development corporations, such as the Abyssinian Development

Corporation mentioned earlier, to make it happen.

There never was a Black "patron"; there were Black artisans who built homes all over this country. It came out of the tradition of being enslaved. Those skills remained and were passed on from one generation to another, so you have people who are talented in various building skills. [Thomas Jefferson's virtuoso carpenter Henning was so much in demand that Jefferson rented out his services to other plantation owners.—*editor's note*] If there ever was a patron, it was the plantation owner. That's the only historical patron I can see from the broader American experience.

Today countless architects of color have proven themselves to be capable and talented in many ways that has resulted in financial success. Each of these successes is paving a way for those who will come after. You're looking at a class of people who have actively been pursuing architecture on their own terms in modern America for only 50-75 years. It may be another 50 or 100 before we see the changes we would want to see. [See *The Trailblazers*, the second episode in this series. <http://www.aia.org/aiarchitect/>



Brownston renovation by Zevilla Jackson Preston, Harlem, N.Y.

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In this century you'll see for the first time Black people with a significant amount of wealth in their hands. So if this patron is to emerge, it should happen now. So where is it? You have to remember, we fight against this psychological thing that "White is right." There's a common saying among Black people that "the White man's ice is colder." Unfortunately, many of the decision makers are still in this mold of "get the White architect so it will be done well." And that's not always true.

It will take one or more well-known, high-profile patrons to search for a skilled architect and hire one who "happens to be Black" for Black architects to become more visible in high value/high margin markets. Look at Johnny Cochran in the O.J. Simpson trial. Whatever one thinks about it, before Johnny Cochran won that case, you would have a hard time convincing a person in real trouble who could afford the best attorneys that they should hire a black one. Johnny Cochran's win and the high profile nature of the case broke that barrier wide open with one case, boom.

That has to happen architecturally. A Black architect must get that opportunity to be the architect, not a joint venture, not in partnership with, not a design consultant, not a design team member, but as *the architect*. Given that opportunity and doing the job well can potentially break down barriers in the architectural profession as Johnny Cochran did in the legal. [An ironic note : on February 8, 2007, the trustees for the new Museum of African Art announced selection of Robert A. M. Stern to design its new high-profile building in East Harlem.]

As always for African people in this country, it's about breaking down

barriers. Until that high profile commission changes perceptions, Black architects will have to continue to walk the road of our ancestors. We can break down barriers by doing well the work that you're fortunate enough to get—to change perceptions by holding up exemplary work. When one Black architect fails to rise to a design challenge, the road is made harder for those who have to come after them. As an architect who is Black, I realize that I continue in a long tradition of paving a way for those who will follow me.

what you're trying to do, do a good job for them, and then other people call.

### SAK: What next?

ZJP: Over the past year I have been reducing my workload in order to take stock of the long haul. I'm preparing an active marketing effort using promotional materials such as a brochure, a PowerPoint presentation, a revamped Web site aimed beyond the realm of Harlem to a more global marketplace that includes China and South Africa.

After 13 years, my biggest struggle is the financial solvency of the practice and developing it to a point where I can build wealth and compete on the open market with larger majority firms for professional talent. From the beginning, I understood that architecture was a profession where people matured late and success came late in life. Now that I am midway through my professional life, I am more eager and restless about what comes next. My work is now out there. It must speak for itself, and my firm must foster new markets that can financially sustain the practice.

SAK. Meanwhile there's a building boom in Harlem but much of the work is being picked up by majority architects earning high fees and much of the work is mediocre both in visual and social terms. Yet local qualified Black-owned firms with a thorough understanding for the community and who know how to push the envelope don't seem able to capitalize on current opportunities.

### Reference

**Missing.** The Museum for African Art, whose president is Elsie McCabe, an African American, has awarded the plum commission for its new building to Robert A. M. Stern, FAIA. The

Brownston renovation by Zevilla Jackson Preston, Harlem, N.Y.



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### SAK: To do good work and have it recognized, you have to get work. How do you do this?

ZJP: As with any profession you have to have your ears to the ground. You have to know your market. You like to know about the work before others know about it. Most of my work in those 13 years has come through the Department of Housing Preservation and Development through referrals, not through active marketing campaign. It's about getting the first one or two jobs and having people appreciate

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choice was largely praised by the majority press, which ignored, however, the deeper implication of withholding the commission from any one of a group of African-American architects who have consistently shown they are able to handle large projects and provide inspiring designs.

The decision is a callous slap in the face to architects of color, who one would think had a special affinity for capturing the cultural and design nuances that such a project demands. That does not mean that an architect who is not Black could not handle the project, and Stern is a designer of great talent. Jewish architects have designed Christian churches, and Christian architects have designed synagogues. But withholding this unique opportunity is a sad reflection on how far we still have to go in the advancement of African American architects in our society.—SAK

### **Arthur Ashe's legacy to architects.**

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Arthur's widow, has done all architects of color a service by issuing a Web site commemorating her late husband's contributions to Black self-confidence. Jeanne, the daughter of the late celebrated Chicago architect John Moutoussamy, an early partner of color in a white-owned firm who designed the headquarters in the Loop for Johnson Publishing, publishers of Ebony magazine, once told this reporter that Ashe never saw himself as a role model. Instead, he advocated self-confidence and perseverance. Using the metaphor of tennis, he once said: "There are lessons that one can learn out there all by yourself on the tennis court. There are no substitutions, no time outs, and no coaches. You have really to learn to depend upon yourself, you have to learn to become self-sufficient. You have to learn how to make instantaneous decisions that

are going to affect the result of the rest of that match. Life is like that." Amen. Check out the site: [www.arthurashe.org](http://www.arthurashe.org). —SAK