Mary S. Hoffschwelle

The Rosenwald Schools of the American South


As Mary S. Hoffschwelle shows in compelling detail in *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South*, one of the Rosenwald schools’ unique aspects was their financing and administrative procedure, designed to encourage biracial community support for the school building program. Community matches, a strategy both men had previously used, lured state education bureaucracies into doing more for their black taxpayers. The black educator and the white philanthropist then engaged black Rosenwald Fund agents, black Tuskegee administrators, white state education supervisors, white state agents for Negro education, white county superintendents, black female teachers, white managers of coordinating philanthropies, and—ultimately and most importantly—black men and women of the American South who gathered the required match in land, material, labor, and cash (often after decades of doing just this all on their own for minimal results). The Rosenwald schools program was a triumph of “inter-racial cooperation” (the historical term) but never a simple process.

Negotiations could begin with rival black churches allying to approach white county supervisors to apply for Rosenwald funding. Traveling black teachers, supported by the Philadelphia-based Anna T. Jeanes Fund, could inform isolated black communities of the opportunity, but the county supervisors would have to select the school design—if they could be persuaded to act at all. Supervisors may have had to travel to hamlets they had never seen to verify the funding match and the site. Applications then went to the state level for approval and to black Rosenwald administrators on the Tuskegee staff. Projects could fail, of course: a foot-dragging county supervisor, fundraising fatigue, arson, or a community's understandable unwillingness to hand over its hard-won real estate to the white educational bureaucracy. Even though privately instigated, Rosenwald schools were to be public to force states to maintain them and lengthen school terms. That the process worked five thousand times is a testament to community tenacity as well as to professional dedication all along the line.

The buildings that resulted are best introduced by two pamphlets, both with plans, elevations, and the offer of free blueprints, the intent being to distribute the progressive designs widely. In 1915 Tuskegee published the first plan book, *The Negro Rural School and its Relation to the Community*, with help from James L. Sibley, an idealistic state agent for Negro education. Two Tuskegee-based black architects, Robert R. Taylor and William A. Hazel, produced the designs. Their schemes were mostly small and simple, but they were distinguished architecturally by banks of five or six double-hung windows that lit classrooms from the students’ left so writing arms would not shade the desk. The particularly appealing two-teacher Madison Park school was built with banked windows on the long side, surmounted by a pediment-like gable inserted into the roof, and flanked by rhyming smaller volumes at each end, at least one of which has a corner entrance porch cut into the block. The second plan book seems to have developed this formula, minus the pediment, in a series of small school designs that it disseminated widely.

In 1920, after Washington's death, Rosenwald moved the program to Nashville. This contested decision, which Hoffschwelle narrates in exemplary detail—as she does every element of the program’s history—was partly triggered by Frederick B. Dresslar, a school-building expert at the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, a white institution affiliated with Vanderbilt University. The change sacrificed the racial intimacy of black administrators in a famous black institute aiding poor black communities, as Washington intended, and it abandoned the flexibility that allowed the poorest to build, even if below standards.

The Nashville administration redid the designs for the second plan book, *Community School Plans*, published by the Julius Rosenwald Fund in 1921 and reissued in 1927, 1928, 1931, and 1944. Hoffschwelle credits Samuel L. Smith,
director of the Nashville program and a former student of Dresslar's at Peabody College, with the architecture of Community School Plans. Architect J. E. Crain probably did the production drawings to Smith's specifications or direction, and E. M. Tisdale composed the fetching perspectives. Continuing Tuskegee policy, the Nashville publication and blueprints were free to all, black and white. Both plan books prescribed movable partitions so that classrooms could be combined for community events, underscoring their civic relevance. The Nashville book has more variations than its predecessor partly because there are two versions of each size school (“one-teacher,” “two-teacher,” etc.). The need for classroom windows facing east or west, to get some sun but not too much (if facing south) or too little (if facing north), necessitated different designs. The banks of double-hung windows the experts required became architectural emblems of progressive education and civic responsibility because they were visually arresting and pointedly different from the small windows of the previous era's church- or cabin-based schools. That the Rosenwald schools required industrial rooms—making a “one-teacher” rather than a “one-room” school the correct designation—implied that black children would have less academic and more vocational instruction. But that single racial distinction wore away after 1917 when the federal government began funding vocational studies for all. The schools symbolized five thousand adventures in interracial cooperation, spread across fifteen Southern states, just when that was not supposed to be happening.

This capsule summary must serve to introduce the fine-grained narrative that Hoffschwelle has pulled from many state and Rosenwald archives, a daunting amount of digging. The Rosenwald Schools will be valuable to historians of architecture, philanthropy, education, the South, and race relations, and it could also serve contemporary adventurers in ameliorative public policy. JSAH readers will regret that there is not more to learn about a 1928 Rosenwald-funded but unbuilt project by Frank Lloyd Wright, but this is not for the author's want of trying. Hampton Institute rejected the design because, according to Wright, it was not Colonial. Hoffschwelle does tell us that Wright thought it like the Imperial Hotel—“another modest excursion into the nature and feeling of an alien race” (143). After the program closed in 1932, due to the Depression and greater needs felt for teachers than buildings, the Rosenwald Fund quietly erected the last school in Warm Springs, Georgia, as a favor to Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Who were Robert R. Taylor and William A. Hazel, the black architects who helped form a Rosenwald design vocabulary? We now have a reference volume for them and 166 others in African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865–1945, edited by Dreck Spurlock Wilson and two associates. The entries range from 250 to 4,000 words, and each is accompanied by two photographs (one portrait, one building), notes, and a works list. The editor wanted to include 250 subjects but could not find appropriate authors. Most authors are local or regional scholars; several are descendants, one a widow, and three the subjects themselves. There are entries for nine women, eight early architecture programs, and seven exposition buildings. Still another expo structure, a primeval log hut for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, was “Negro” only by implication, and it had black advocates for reconstruction at the time of the 1933 Chicago exposition. One entry introduces the National Technical Association, a professional organization for black architects, engineers, and applied scientists.

The result is rich fare that should instigate future scholarship on African Americans in architecture. Only Clarence W. Wigington of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Paul R. Williams of Los Angeles have so far been the subject of monographs. While many early practitioners such as Hilyard R. Robinson, Julian F. Abele, Amaza Lee Meredith, William S. Pittman, and Vertner W. Tandy have been mentioned in other histories, their entries here are fuller.

As might be expected, the earliest black architects were building craftsmen or contractors who took pride in designing. Brick mason Plympton R. Berry (born free in 1834) was the designer-builder of sixty-five buildings in Youngstown, Ohio, including a mansion for the governor. Some had other professions. Calvin E. Lightner was a licensed mortician who built in Raleigh. DeWitt S. Dykes knew brick masonry by age fourteen and wanted to be an architect. He became a Methodist minister instead because his father feared that the black community could not support the profession. Dykes is credited with seventy-two church plans built under others' licenses while he was a denominational administrator of building construction. He then completed an International Correspondence School certificate and registered as an architect in Tennessee at age sixty-seven, leaving himself sixteen years to practice. Some designers trained in black offices or, occasionally, white ones. Increasing numbers earned certificates and degrees in minority and majority institutions—Cornell's count over the decades is worth some attention. Howard University was the first minority institution to inaugurate a bachelor of architecture (1919).

Race-specific tales abound, as one would expect: Leroy Hilliard used his earnings as a dining car waiter and Lionel Hampton relied on his income as a saxophonist to study at the Armour Institute. The Ku Klux Klan organized a cross-burning and probable arson attack on a county home for the poor that Thomas W. Boyle had designed for the white firm that employed him. Many worked for white architects. Julian F. Abele's high-end work for Horace Trumbauer is well known, but there were others. Booker T. Washington III worked for Harrison and Abramovitz and then Emery Roth as a construction supervisor. Some were principals in their own firms. Photographs and building lists for John C. Norman of Charleston, West Virginia, Golden J. Zenon of Omaha, and...
Walter L. Roberts of Pittsburgh suggest practices of distinction. Then there were those in government jobs, with or without civil service protection, as specialists in technical matters, housing, or, in one case, planning in developing countries. Black architects took on the same range of tasks that white architects did, of course, but in this book they have the historian’s notice.

There are, be forewarned, errors aplenty. Lawrence Reese’s (or Reece’s) name flips repeatedly throughout his entry. Richard L. Brown’s biographer needs to learn some basic architectural history. (Howells and Stokes were based in New York, not Seattle, and there is no way that “Louis eighteenth-century” describes the building shown [82].) And I was mighty surprised to learn that an undergraduate paper read seven or so years ago had morphed into a “Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1990” (239).

But I hope that readers will overlook such gaffes in favor of the compendium’s many virtues. The essays have a consistent narrative pace and an even tone in part because, like obituaries, the authors go through each life—birth, parentage, siblings, education, marriage, children, career(s), and death (naming parentage, siblings, education, marriage, and burial ground)—in a way that evokes the social matrix from which talent emerged. The result is engaging reading that shades our understanding in telling detail.

_African American Architects_ invites further research, and it suggests the boundaries of its kind of summarizing, dictionary history, which lack the conceptual scope to address the ever-nagging contemporary question: why, given the historical record of talent, determination, effort, and achievement collected in this volume are there so few black architects working today?

_Ellen Weiss_
_Tulane University_

Nicholas Warner
_The True Description of Cairo: A Sixteenth-Century Venetian View_

In January 1383, Ibn Khaldun, the great Arab historian, arrived in Cairo from Tunis. His reaction to the city, often quoted, captures the sentiment of an era. He wrote, “I beheld the metropolis of the world, orchard of the universe, hive of nations, iwan of Islam, throne of royalty, bursting with palaces and iwans within, shining on the horizon with khansabs and madrasas, illuminated by the moons and stars of its learned scholars, which appeared on the bank of the Nile, river of Paradise, flowing with the waters of the sky.”

Many medieval scholars similarly wax lyrical about Cairo’s vast expanse, diverse population, and architectural splendor. Some, like Ibn Shaddad (thirteenth century), Ibn Duqmaq and al-Maqrizi (fourteenth–fifteenth century), and Abu Hamid al-Qudsı (late fifteenth century), show a genuine interest in the form of the city and sometimes even an expert handling of its particular architectural and spatial qualities; in fact, each of them makes buildings the backbone of one key book in his historical oeuvre. But, like their predecessors and their successors until the nineteenth century, they never provide any graphic representation of the city they are describing or of its major monuments.

Thus, there is no exaggerating the importance of the rare images of Cairo that came down to us from Renaissance Europe, especially those like the mid-sixteenth-century map and views printed by Matteo Pagano, _La vera descriptione de la gran cita del Cairo_, that seem to have paid special attention to fullness of representation. These maps provide a relatively contemporary and more or less complementary visual counterpart to the myriad urban and architectural nuggets preserved in Arabic historical treatises. They also reveal how premodern Western visitors perceived the medieval city, which, contrary to the frequent assertions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators, has changed significantly since then. In fact, it is only with the evidence of these maps that we can begin to loosen the grip of the plan of Cairo rendered by the savants of the Napoleonic _Expedition d’Egypte_ (1798–1801) on our imagining of the medieval metropolis and to challenge its habitual use as a base map for any historic reconstruction today.

These are two of the main reasons why Nicholas Warner’s study of Pagano’s map, _The True Description of Cairo_, is such a welcome event. Another, and perhaps a more palpable one, is the sheer beauty of this monumental wall-sized image (measuring 6½ by ¾ feet, on twenty-one sheets). A fourth is that this view printed in or before 1549, but seemingly depicting Cairo as it stood towards the end of the Mamluk period in the 1490s, is the earliest surviving Renaissance view of the city in the aerial oblique mode. A fifth reason, which concerns us most here, is the meticulous care Warner has expounded in depicting and analyzing every single detail in the map or associated with it and in comparing it to every known map of Cairo and other neighboring cities from that period. They are all lavishly printed and their features reproduced and evaluated. Here though, acknowledgment has to go to the publisher as well, the Arcadian Library of London, which spared no expenses in printing this stunning three-volume study of the map and its context. Despite its steep price, the publication, which is the second in a new series, speaks for itself as a wonderful fulfillment of the library’s mission to “promote the cultural transfer between the Levant and Europe through exhibition and through publication.”

In the last twenty years, Warner has systematically and passionately immersed himself in the study of the topography of