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Black Success Is Never Simple: An Interview with Architect Curtis J. Moody

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CURTIS J. MOODY
African American Architect

Interview
Portfolio
BLACK SUCCESS IS NEVER SIMPLE
An Interview with Architect Curtis J. Moody

by Koritha Mitchell

This interview was conducted on June 6, 2013, at the Moody•Nolan headquarters in Columbus, Ohio.

MITCHELL: It really is an honor to meet and speak with you. I’m a professor of English at Ohio State University and now realize that you are responsible for many of the buildings in which I’ve had my most memorable experiences: the Hale Center, the Schottenstein Center, RPAC, and the Ohio Union. And that’s to say nothing of the many buildings around Columbus that help make this an easy city to love. I’ve noticed that the descriptions of your buildings often reveal a real awareness of cultural concepts. I’m thinking, for example, of the relevance of jazz, the Sankofa bird, Gullah culture and basket weaving, the talking drum, and the journey across oceans that created the African Diaspora. Given this awareness, featuring you in Callaloo is especially appropriate. The founder of Callaloo, Dr. Charles Rowell, is also an alum of Ohio State University and his journal engages and preserves the sort of cultural connections that help to fuel your work. You, Charles Rowell, and Callaloo all seem to appreciate the dynamic interchange of culture. So, we’re talking about the visual, the aural, the spiritual, the literary, and so much more whenever we’re talking about what you have created and what Callaloo creates. So, thank you for spending some time with our readers.

I’d like to begin with some reflection on your past. I understand that it was in Junior High School that you decided you wanted to be an architect. You didn’t quite know what that meant, but you knew that when buildings were being planned, there were drawings involved. What exactly attracted you to those building sites, and what about those drawings and everything else you saw ignited that desire?

MOODY: It’s always interesting to try to look back and think about how I came to make the decision to be an architect. I don’t think it was anything specific, other than an interest. At that time, I was young enough not to know the professions, not to know who did what. I just knew that I was interested in drawing buildings and for whatever reason that was just my interest. When I was in school, we were required to take industrial arts, and under industrial arts, you had woodworking; you had metal working; and you had what’s called “drafting.” And drafting consisted of drawing machine parts, and I can do that very well, but I just knew that I wasn’t excited about drawing a bunch of machine parts. When I looked through books and saw houses and buildings, I was excited about drawing those, and my teacher at the time, when I told him so, he said, “Well, you can get equal credit by drawing those.” And that’s what I did; I switched from drawing machine parts to drawing houses. And so that continued to spark my interest.
MITCHELL: So it really was in school itself. I had sort of visualized that you saw a building going up in your neighborhood or something, but it really was part of the curriculum. Okay, so once this desire was sparked, you spoke to your guidance counselor about it, and she very much discouraged you. She even told your coach that you were setting yourself up for disappointment. Would you share that story with our readers?

MOODY: Well, it is absolutely a true story. You know, you have to remember: when I was in high school, at that time, we weren’t called blacks. We were called Negroes and the teacher actually said, “No Negro is—we don’t know anyone that’s an architect.” She said that it’s a profession that normally caters to the wealthy. “Who is going to select a Negro architect?” she asked. And, of course, I didn’t know. It’s like, “You’ll be better served if you become a draftsman and work for an architect.” And you know, it wasn’t—I try to remember back—I don’t believe it was strictly her being prejudiced. I think it was genuine: why get your feelings hurt and try to reach for something you can’t obtain; this society is not open to you in that way. And she didn’t know of anyone who had done it. So, this dream of mine was not something she felt I could realize. I told her right then, I said: “I don’t want to work for someone. I want to be the person who draws those things.” She said, “You don’t have the grades for that.” And I said, “Well, I can get the grades for it.” I said, “If I’m committed”—I didn’t use those words—I just basically said, “If I really want to do it, I know I can do it,” and she said, “Well, you’d have to prove that to me.”

Of course, I was a “C” student. I was strictly a “C” student. But for a sport (I was playing all sports. I was playing on the basketball team. I also played football, baseball, and track. So, I could play any of ‘em), our eligibility requirement was a 2.0, and I, at that time, strove to be eligible. That was my motivation. All I need to do is get a C and I’m eligible. I gave no thought to working to get a better grade. Then, when she went and told my coach that he should talk to me because I was thinking about a career path that she didn’t believe would work for me, my coach came and he says, “Now, I don’t want to let you down, but are you sure about this?” And I said, “Yeah, I want to go to school to be an architect” (because I’d been told by that time what it was). He said, “Well, you’ve got to be really good in math.” I said, “I’m pretty good in math.” He said, “Well, you’re not getting good enough grades that you could be recommended to go into that area.” And I said, “Well, I’ll get an ‘A’ next quarter.” And he says, “Well, okay. Let’s see, let’s see, then I could be more positive.” I did that. I never scored less than a 97 on any test in algebra the next quarter. And I went and said, “See, I told you I could.” Then I went on from there. I told a joke about this once before. I kind of settled back to my old ways after that. I put forth the effort to make a point, then I went back to getting C’s.

MITCHELL: And that’s what youth is, right?

MOODY: [Laughing] Yeah, that’s right.

MITCHELL: Next, I’d love to hear you talk about Columbus as both your home and as your hub—it seems to me. You grew up in Columbus, you earned your Bachelor of Science in Architecture at Ohio State University, and now you’re responsible for the existence of many of the buildings in the city. I imagine that this very much feels like your city. Can
you talk about how you view the city, how your view of the city has evolved over time? And please feel free to begin in childhood and kind of walk us through how your vision of this city has evolved.

**MOODY:** Well, let me tell you something that is just part of our business life and what we find. I wish I could say this was my city. I do not look at it that way, and part of it is because I compete every single day. I compete for projects that most people don’t know, and it is very, very tough in this city to win projects in general. We’ve got some very nice, high-profile projects, but there are equally that many and more that we’ve pursued, did not win, had our feelings hurt. And it’s like, we’ve done some things, but our aspirations are much broader. We could’ve done so much more, and there are so many other opportunities that we haven’t gotten yet. We haven’t found the correct strategy/process. So, we feel good about the buildings we’ve done, but we’re a long way from being able to call this city “our city.”

**MITCHELL:** Wow! Well, that’s sobering! That reminds me of something I’ve heard you say in other interviews, that when it comes to truly iconic buildings in Columbus, the contracts have often gone to non-Ohio businesses. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean when you talk about *iconic*?

**MOODY:** I’ll give you an example that you’ll be familiar with: The Wexner Center [for the Arts, which is on the Ohio State University campus]. It was an international design competition. It was designed by Peter Eisenman out of New York. When you hold a design competition, most people think that anybody can pursue it. Not true. In a design competition, there is still a pre-screening committee deciding whether they think the work you’ve done reaches a level that they can believe that you have the creative abilities to be a part of the design competition. The other thing is: a lot of very creative firms can’t, or choose not to, enter design competitions because they cost you a fortune. It is not cheap. You get a stipend, but it is a very small percentage of the work that goes into it. And you have to weigh whether you can stay in business and actually afford to participate in a competition where you’re not receiving any revenue that will cover the cost that you’re going to put into it. Hence, most African American firms don’t participate in many competitions, period, because their business plan can’t afford it.

Now, that’s the context for understanding that we are still in a society right now—and this is 2013—in which, if you ask for the top ten architects in the nation, from a design side, a creative side, an African American architectural name does not come up. There is one individual, his name is David Adjaye, who is actually born in Africa and grew up in London, who has started to reach a level that his name is recognized as one of the finer designers. But amongst African American architects, there is none that is being sanctioned by our profession to reach that. Now, the rationale is that the buildings that we’ve designed, in some cases, have not necessarily met the measurement of being an outstanding, national iconic building. Our firm is working to change that.

So anyway, when I’m talking about iconic buildings, when I’m talking about clients, typically, art museums, art galleries, museums themselves, really pursue that imagery. So
you know if you can get a client that is normally a museum, normally an art gallery, that they’re looking for the building to make its own statement. When I work for a typical office building client, that client is more, “Just make sure that I have the square footage I need to house my people; that it works very efficiently for us; does not cost me an arm and a leg to operate; and it looks good.” But they’re not looking for it to make the most unique design statement that can be made. Now, we have one client, though, who changed that. He absolutely wanted—

MITCHELL: Is this the Connor Headquarters building, which has already won an international award?

MOODY: Yes, this is the Connor. He changed all that. But most to date, before him and after him, are really more conservative. And our approach is that we practice responsive architecture, and that has its positives. The positive is if you come to us as a client, whatever your dreams and aspirations may be, we have great abilities to fulfill your dreams. And that’s at any end of the spectrum. If you say, “The building I’m imagining I’d like to have I haven’t seen before; I don’t think anyone’s done it before.” Well, we’re the firm for you, because we’re interested in creating something no one’s seen before, and we have the talent to do so. Now, on the other hand, you could say, “You know, I’ve got a business, I’ve got an image that I need to project as a business, and it can’t be that I’m not affordable. I have to project an image that the product I sell, and all that, is in this certain range, but you definitely feel good when you come into my building.” Well, we can meet that too. We will respond with the design that is indicative of your desires. Many architects have what they call a signature—we call them signature designers. And the signature is what they have been noted for. For example, they may use the same material every time they design a building. Frank Gehry is one; he uses titanium. He just loves it. So even if he’s on an all-brick campus, he’s got a titanium building that he does, and it’s going to be a lot of form, very artistic, and people pay him for that. They say, “That’s a statement we want.” When you hire him, you’re not looking for a brick building, you’re looking for something like he’s created before, and that’s his signature, and then you have a number of others like that.

We don’t have one. Long ago, we determined that our signature has to come from our client’s aspirations, and that’s a more difficult task, because it means that I have to be as well versed in Colonial and Georgian architecture as I am in contemporary. And that’s not an easy thing to master. However, at our site, because we roam, we’ve got a design studio, we’ve got lots of different areas of talent. We can do that.

MITCHELL: Responsive architecture is very interesting to me because part of what I want to understand is how you balance all the things that you’re trying to do. Balancing in terms of artistic vision and function, artistic vision and the environment, artistic vision and technology. How do you balance all those things? I guess if you could just talk about how you see architecture as art, especially when you’ve created this model whereby being responsive to the client is also at the core of what you do. How does the art part factor in all of this?
MOODY: Well, first of all, we believe architecture is art. Architecture as art? We believe it is art. When you think about it, architecture creates every environment that you work in, live in; you don’t get away from us. We can create atmosphere, we can create the perception of something. So, we influence you visually. What we do is we impact how you see things by the spaces we create—not just the buildings, but the spaces between the buildings because we create plazas; we create parks; we create special places; we create gathering places; we create places that help you socialize, that you want to talk to others, bring people together, all those things, in and outside of our buildings.

Of course, there are levels. The levels are, if you’re talking about much more artistic expression, you’re talking about where I’m using the word iconic. The desire there is to make you stop and notice because it does something different. It means that you don’t look at it as you do any other building. You look at it as something that you wonder what it is, what’s happening in that building; you see things that you wouldn’t see in a similar building that is not iconic. And typically how we express art in a higher level is part of that process, and that’s where we start to—the way we do it in our company is we start looking at sculpting the building versus strictly designing it from a functional aspect. We have to merge the function and the form in a way that catches your eye. It is not just to house a function; it is to create an expression, which is a piece of art. That’s what I’m speaking to when I say iconic.

If it’s strictly a building that houses a function, that’s going to have certain artistic expressions but what we looked at is very limited: we may have strip windows, we may have clenched openings for windows. It’s still an artistic expression, but it’s not one that you would remember. It becomes background and you don’t really look at it much. You just pass by. It’s a building. The artistic expression is still there because it guided our creation, but not everyone will notice it.

MITCHELL: I love the way that you’re revising my question. Not architecture as art. Architecture is always art. Yes, I see. Even when functional concerns seem to outweigh the artistic, that’s more about what viewers are equipped to perceive as laypeople. I appreciate your emphasis on artistic expression in terms of what you aim to do (to express) while creating and in terms of what the various aspects of the buildings express. This reminds me that when I looked at your portfolio online, it was clear that you shape how the sun is going to reflect through your buildings. This is striking because it isn’t only visual art that you create; you engage all the senses. The choices about sunshine had a lot to do with not only how the lighting makes people feel because of how it makes the space look but also how it makes people feel in terms of temperature. And to hear you talk about the space between buildings reminds me of a similar thing. You create different visual effects with how space is configured between buildings and those configurations can make a person feel a certain way as they experience them but it also very much affects how things sound as one experiences those spaces!

MOODY: And it is absolutely an effort we make. A good example for you would be the RPAC [Recreation and Physical Activities Center]. The predecessor to the RPAC was a recreation building that we demolished. When I was a student at Ohio State, I had used that building. A typical approach at that point was that you would design a gym, you
would design a pool, you would design spaces, and you would design the space as a self-contained space. And then you would have a corridor that connected to it and then a passageway into the space: a regular door like this room. But to get to the space you would normally, someone would tell you: go down that hall, turn left. And then you go in those doors and that’s where you are. Well, what we tried to do is create a high level of transparency, meaning that you visualize what’s happening in that space before you get to it. You don’t have to go down the hall—you could see that there is a pool over there. Over there, you could see gymnasium space. You could see someone is walking around a track up there. We don’t separate those or hide them. We bring them out and create visual connections, and the reason we do that—again, talking about senses—is that an individual’s activity level goes up if they notice others being active.

MITCHELL: Ah, I see. In this way, part of what we can appreciate about something like RPAC is the degree to which the art of architecture is first an expression from designers; then, the building itself and its many elements offer an expression; and, as people experience that expression, they are encouraged to express themselves too. The building was designed to convey the importance of activity, and it inspires activity in people who encounter that expression. And this does not result only from the visual; it’s also about how visitors feel in terms of temperature, for example. I have noticed that your design process involves gauging temperature, sunshine, air flow—all kinds of things.

MOODY: Well, you talked about several things. Let’s take light. We have to look at it as a 24-hour building, and we have to look at light and then darkness. When you see the building at night, how is it perceived? If we want it to be a lantern, we light it from the inside. Or, do we light it by passageways? All of those things are considerations. But you talked about something that is part of it as well. The atmosphere of the building, how we cool or heat a space, that’s part of how we address the senses. I mean, if a space has pools, we want to maintain a certain temperature because, of course, you’re in there and you’re only in swim clothes and therefore how you feel is a big deal.

On the other hand, we’re using a lot of things just as any artist would in designing or creating any kind of picture, any piece of art, a drawing. We could use texture; we could use color; we could use all of those things. Well, you’ll notice in our building (taking the RPAC again), we didn’t have to have a red bridge going across there. We could have just as easily used plain glass, but the red expresses something a little differently; it’s like a little splash. “Boy, this really needs some color.” So, we did it. We have brick, but we have glass; at the base of the building, we have copper at one point, so we changed texture. And we do that in order for the building to read a little differently, and that’s part of an artistic study: Questions of when do you employ texture, smooth versus rough. When do you create horizontal versus vertical, angle versus not, color versus not? All that is part of creating an aesthetic that has to be looked at, like anybody that’s an artist that’s looking at their painting. Whatever they’re creating is an abstract; we’re doing the building the same way. What we’re trying to do is create it in a way that it looks pleasing to the visitors and participants. They don’t necessarily know what we went through to create it; they just know it pleases them.
MITCHELL: Exactly. Well, the other thing about art—and architecture being art—that really strikes me is that whenever Americans consider art, whether it’s painting, poetry, or performance, the classic tension that we always think of is balancing artistic concerns with financial ones. Now, there is no dividing the artistic from the financial when you’re designing a multi-million dollar building, so I really wonder how you think about aesthetic concerns and practical, economic ones.

MOODY: That’s a big, big challenge for our profession in general. I’ll give you a couple of examples: the criticism of the signature architects, and this is worldwide not just nationwide, the criticism is that, when you have a signature, that the cost of that signature is a number, and the client that just hired you, their number might not match up with the signature number. So, do you compromise and design to that budget, or do you have the client raise more money and go up to your budget? And what is happening all the time is some firms simply say, “No, you’re going to have to raise more money if we’re going to do your building because that’s just what our buildings cost.” In our case, we’re serving a very broad, diverse clientele. We do not take that position.

Our objective is to figure out how we can practice responsive architecture. How can we stay within the client’s parameters? So, what we did is say: our response has to include the budget consideration. If we’re tasked with creating an iconic, award-winning building, we have to work to create it within the budget parameters. That means that even though our heart was set on designing a titanium building, the budget says you can’t do that, and therefore we have to design an iconic brick building, and that’s where we go. That’s our approach.

MITCHELL: Ah, you really accept it as part of the creativity that you have to bring to the table. You don’t experience it as some kind of limitation, you say: this is part of the creativity that my firm is prepared to bring and capable of bringing. Working within the client’s parameters has become proof of your firm’s creativity and talent. That’s powerful!

MOODY: And a parallel example in the art history world would be taking a person who does sculpture and saying, “Okay, we’re going to give you a budget to create a piece for us.” And the person that is going to create it says, “Okay, well what are we talking about in terms of budget?” And they say, “Well, this is all I got.” The person has to think: well, I can’t use what I would like to use—maybe metal—I really like to work in metal, but the tonnage I would need to create the piece I envision, this budget won’t allow. So what I’m going to have to do is I’m going to have to create something, and I’m going to have to use a lighter, less-expensive material in order to create. Now, understand: there are some who have limitations and will say, “I can’t do it, because I just work in metal.” But if I applied responsive architecture to an artist, that artist would say, “I’m very creative, so I’m going to use wood. It’s light. I can get it in shapes and forms I want. I can bend it, warp it. I can still create the imagery, and that is what the budget can allow. I’m going to go to work on creating the most interesting piece I can, out of wood.” That’s us. We don’t approach projects with our minds made up (here’s what the building’s going to be; these are the materials we’re going to use). We want to understand their budget and their parameters because
that matters. Ultimately, our goal is the same, regardless of the challenges certain parameters might present: to come up with the most creative and innovative building we can.

MITCHELL: So, your approach is basically: *I’m just that creative! Go ahead, bring me the hard ones.* So, then I want to link this to something I learned while preparing for our conversation. You have said that your background in athletics has influenced the way that you think about your work: that you’re competitive, you’re not scared to go against the heavy competition, that that’s one of the ways that it has influenced you. Are there other ways in which athletics influences your art as well as your business?

MOODY: Several ways. We’re fortunate: we specialize in collegiate athletic facilities around the country. Some of it is because of my background in athletics and my having an interest in those facilities, but I can’t undersell developing a competitive spirit in business. I can only speak to what helps me, and I’m not saying what other CEOs or other heads of architectural firms are doing, what all motivates them, but I run into some of the most aggressive, competitive firms in the country, and they all seem to be highly motivated, and they all seem to be competitive, so I’ve got to believe that they had that talent. But for me, and I look at comparing it to my early careers in sports, and I had the ups and downs, like any athlete does. I had the individual sports. I had the team sports.

And what I saw happen in the team sports, which is pretty much more indicative of business, is the ability to work in diverse situations and meet diverse challenges, and not everybody can handle that. What happens is, diverse people bring on so many diverse ideas that, if you’re entrenched in “we only do it this way,” then you have trouble letting go, and you can’t hear that person bringing a different approach; you just can’t deal with it. From a competition standpoint, you tend to learn you’ve got to deal with diversity and diverse things. You’ve got to react when you didn’t want to. Also, sports require you to do things that you thought were only physical, but are absolutely mental. One of the things that happens when people talk about great athletes, they always talk about physical attributes. And I think that today, they’re getting a little bit smarter, understanding that it’s not all physical. There’s a mental connection. There’s an ability to think and do things that their physical attributes allow them to do, but there’s an ability to understand the situation more than the next person. And in business, every day that we go after a project, every project we pursue, it’s normally not you get handed a project (we love that to happen, where you may have a client that gives you the next one because you did great on the last one), but normally, somebody makes an announcement that they’re going to build a certain kind of thing. And if you have the qualifications, you can submit your qualifications. And if you submit your qualifications, you have to be competitive in preparing the material, you have to be competitive in why your strategy and your approach is best for that client, not somebody else’s, and when you interview, you have to basically state that.

The other experience athletics gave me: when we were competing at junior high level, in high school, in college, you go in and you’re the underdog, and the team you’re playing is the number one team in the nation, and everybody has already predetermined that it’s not even a game; it’s over. You lost. And you’re sitting there, “But we haven’t played yet.” Well, you don’t need to. The game’s over. You can’t beat those guys. But through it
all, you find out that there are certain circumstances in which you can beat them. There are a lot of things that you’ve got to do to prepare, but you can do it. And so I’ve taken that into my career as an architect and said, “I’ve always been in the situation where I wasn’t the biggest, strongest athlete on the floor, or on the field, or on the court, but I can make a difference, if I do things a certain way.” Now, I’ve got to make a difference in the business world as an architect by adjusting and adapting to the business circumstances, just like I had to do in the competitive world of sports. That’s the kind of philosophy I have when it comes to business. And I believe it has helped me. I’m more likely to pursue an opportunity that others have already predetermined that I can’t do. I take a different mindset, and that comes from my being competitive early.

MITCHELL: We’ll stay sort of on this same theme because, even though we’re talking about competition and not always being the automatic favorite, it does seem to me that, at least from my perspective, you’ve won a whole lot of awards. You’ve earned a lot of recognition. Your firm has earned a lot of recognition. I’m interested in how you think about the relationship between art and awards? In the same way that finances can’t be the be-all, end-all of determining your artistic vision, it seems to me that awards probably can’t either because you can’t determine that you’ll get them all the time. Nevertheless, you have earned them so often that I wonder, as your career has developed, how have you thought about your artistic vision in relationship to the recognition?

MOODY: For me, the question is what is the benefit of an award? Well, if you really look at what it’s supposed to be, an award is supposed to be a recognition that you have achieved something that demonstrates that you are tops in this. It’s a measuring stick. That you are not just okay; you are better than okay. That’s what an award is supposed to do. Basically, it is that you are not average, you’re exceptional. I say, well okay, but is there any benefit beyond that? There is. First of all, let’s take a city, Columbus being one. If an architect designs an award-winning building for this city, especially a national award or international award, the benefit to the city is that it becomes part of the tourist attraction. So it’s more likely that you will have people who will remember, who will recognize Columbus, will maybe visit Columbus, because of all the other things that are offered, but also because, “You ought to see this building that is there.” So, through being recognized, through your buildings and your architecture being recognized, you could help the city in its tourism and other things. If you are a politician, that kind of building enhances your success as well because not only did you do a building, but you hired or you selected a group that did an award-winning building. It’s not one of those normal, run-of-the-mill buildings; it got an award. It’s a reflection on them, so they feel, “We must be pretty smart, because we hired so-and-so who designed an award-winning building.” And what you’ll see is—especially millionaires, billionaires, whatever—you normally see them participating in the art world, more often than others. They are connoisseurs of art. Therefore, they are also the ones who are normally looking for the recognition that the architect they brought in designed a building that you might not have gotten had you hired somebody else. So, they like to be involved in bringing an architect that has that kind of talent, so that gets back to awards. In our case, getting back to the earlier statement I made about competitions, in order to be known as a high design firm, a very innovative, creative, design firm,
you’ve got to continue to parlay recognition. It’s got to be enough recognition that others acknowledge that you absolutely have the skills, the talent, that anybody that’s going to be looking to design an award-winning, iconic building, they want you on that list. And if you don’t have those awards, it’s very tough to go in and tell somebody, “We are great. We are really good!” because it’s self-promoting. The awards are peer recognition, others telling someone else, “Yeah, we think that what they’ve achieved here is noteworthy.” And that’s why I think the awards are beneficial to a practice like ours. We continue to work to win awards because we believe it’s a reflection of our abilities, and we hope our clients see it that way.

MITCHELL: What you’re underscoring really is that, at the end of the day, no matter how much we like to act as if art occupies a transcendent realm, the truth is that it’s still social. The awards are a marker of just how social art is, and therefore how political it always is. Without recognition from others, especially one’s peers, all kinds of limits emerge for the artist that may keep them from being able to offer their contributions to the public at large, that may keep the public from ever appreciating what they could do.

It would be great to hear you talk a bit about—again I’m just struck by the cultural awareness of your work. I gave those examples in the beginning, the Sankofa bird, jazz, and things like that. So I wondered if you would talk a little bit about how you think about the cultural impact of your work. I’ve noticed that you’ve done lots of museums, and when you talk about dream projects, sometimes those are dream projects that involve African American history. So if you can talk about how you think about the cultural impact of your work and also if there is anything you would want to share with our readers about how literature has influenced the way that you think about your work.

MOODY: Well, a good example: the Sankofa bird. That was research. We basically started—this is a number of years ago—we were pursuing the national African American museum on the mall, and they go through a process and evaluations, and they had short-listed us. And that short-listed group, if you were fortunate enough to be in the group, you were then the competitors. So, we were short-listed to the group. We thought, “Okay, African Americans. We can’t just be about who we are today. We’ve got to go way back.” So we started to look at our roots. We did a lot of research, which means reading everything, and we looked at African art; we looked at how it contributes to the dialect; we looked at language. We thought, if we were designing this building, and you happened to walk up on it, what would make you say, “I see African influences”? We were trying to research what that would be. Then we said that it’s a bigger thing. It’s African American, so it can’t just be the continent. It has to be American. What’s American? Jazz.

Music is such a big influence in our culture, so it has to be part of the dialogue. We have to see music in our building, and if we chose one kind of music—a lot of people today would say rap—but we chose jazz as a mainstay because we could see the influence of jazz around the country and how it basically allowed a number of us to be seen outside of our small cities, and took us international. So we started looking at it in our research. As for the Sankofa bird, we understood the bird actually is flying forward, but looking back and reflecting on history and the past. And we said, “That’s us,” so we’ve got to be able to address this. One thing about competitions is you may lose, but you put so much into the
project that the concepts you developed remain with you. In our design, we actually had a Sankofa nest in the building, and what we did was we created these walkways way up in this atrium space that kind of overlapped; it looked like a nest. We called it the Sankofa nest. It was actually made out of high technology materials that are only available in the twenty-first century, so we were trying to make a historic and a contemporary connection. Anyway, we were doing all kinds of things.

But to really get into cultural aspects: they’re still fundraising now, but a good example is the African American museum in Charleston. We did a lot of research on Charleston the city for that project. One thing we found amongst it all is that if you are doing anything for our culture, if you miss art and music, you are not making any connection at all. Those two things are dominant to reflecting our culture. And our buildings should do that.

In Pittsburgh, in our competition there, we tried to make the building move. We wanted the building to have movement so people would feel that it’s moving. We actually designed lights that beat to the music. We had music going and the lights would move with the music and sound. We had it pulsating, and so we had all kinds of ways we were trying to express culture, our culture, in song, music, art. Art is acknowledged by many around the country, outside our community as well, very easily. You can’t mistake African art. That is something that we try to reflect in our buildings. But again, when we are able to do that has a lot to do with our response to our client’s directives.

MITCHELL: And is there anything that you would say specifically regarding books that have been influential for you?

MOODY: I would say that definitely there are always aspects of different books that might have made, and still make, us think about an approach that we take for a building here and there. But it’s hard to pick out a story and say, “This has caused this or that.” It’s more of, sometimes you pull from something, and it’s something that you read years ago. I never know. We have this belief that the creativity we bring can’t be boxed in. A lot of people say, “out of the box,” but we don’t have a box, period. We believe that influences can come from anywhere, so it can come from a book, it can come from something you tell us. It can be anything.

MITCHELL: Yes, just a really dynamic process. I guess the last thing I’ll maybe gesture towards is some of the impact that your concern with the environment has on the artistic work that you’re doing. I recall, for example, that the wind around Ithaca College influenced the way you designed their Athletics and Events Center, and sustainability is also at the heart of what you’re doing. And I assume that all of this is also connected to technology. If we need to take those two apart, then that’s fine. But I just wanted to hear you talk a bit about art and environment and sustainability.

MOODY: There is the belief, and if you really talk to engineers for instance, the engineering belief centers on it works. If it works, that’s beauty. We as architects believe the working part is something that you have to look at as a separate thing. Once you can make something work, and that’s the technology side, you have to present it, and that’s the artistic side.
So, we’re more likely to take an engineering solution to technology and then treat it with the artistic expression that we think it deserves. When it comes to sustainable design in today’s world, green architecture and all that, we have the ability with our technology today, that we can definitely, from an energy standpoint, draw from our environment in many different ways: whether it’s solar, whether it’s rainwater harvesting, and all of those kinds of things we can use to make a sustainable building that is more healthy for us, that basically minimizes our operational costs. Sunlight is healthier for individuals anyway. A lot of people believe in putting people in a box, hiding them away. Quite frankly, you’re better off flooding the building with light, doing it in a way that basically you have fewer sick people, all that kind of stuff.

The technology that we have today allows us to do it and still control the environment. I’ll give you the good case of the Connor Building. The Connor building has lots of glass like we have in our office here. The difference is, when we did this building, the glass that we were able to put in Connor’s wasn’t available. Here, I have to pull down all the shades at a certain time of the day because the sun, when it moves over, is bright. In Connor’s building, the glass will do it by itself. When the sun moves, it will darken enough that it will do it all by itself. He doesn’t have to push a button. As the sun rotates, the building will darken and reduce the bright sunlight glare into his spaces. That’s technology, and that’s sustainability. He gets all the natural light he needs and the building on its own protects him from direct sunlight because it shades him when it needs to. We mix sustainability and technology, and we do it in a creative way that looks good. So, it’s not strictly an engineering solution of yes, it works. It’s an engineering solution that works, and by the way, it has an artistic expression to ensure that it’s pleasing to the senses.

MITCHELL: Lovely! Well, I appreciate your time and won’t take too much more of it. One of the things you taught me today is that there are built-in barriers to non-white firms entering design competitions. You didn’t put it exactly this way but one thing is clear: Competitions, which allow firms to be recognized as leaders in the field, are structured in a way that requires the kind of excess capital that—simply based on the discrimination throughout this nation’s history—is more likely to be in the hands of whites.

Especially given this context, one of the things that strikes me is this: you’ve had success in earning awards, you’ve had very consistent recognition, but that has not always translated into an advantage. I often say that when members of marginalized groups achieve, they encounter aggression as often as they encounter praise. I call this know-your-place aggression because someone is always trying to put us back in our “proper” place. It seems to me that your experiences confirm this—from the Ohio State University professor who tried to prevent you from graduating, who questioned your integrity, claiming that you couldn’t complete your last two classes without cheating, from that all the way to the southern university that ranked the Moody•Nolan portfolio number one for their project until they saw that you weren’t white.

Those examples show that your successes have always come with a heavy helping of insult and injury: people not only questioning your ability, but also your integrity by accusing you of having lied about being responsible for the buildings in your impressive portfolio. What I’ve also noticed is that you often speak about these experiences in terms of taking a negative and turning it into a positive, but I would like to know what exactly
that means to you. Does it mean that acknowledging that it is a negative is an important first step? That we don’t just leap over that so we can turn it into a positive, but that we pause and we acknowledge the ugly? Acknowledging that racism is part of your experience and therefore your success isn’t a result of your having escaped racism, and your success doesn’t prove that the country has become fair in its dealings. I’m just wondering if that is part of what you mean when you advise other people to take a negative and turn it into a positive, and the way that you see this entire firm as epitomizing that.

MOODY: That’s a really deep question in a lot of ways because we’re going through something right now that epitomizes exactly what you’re talking about. A couple of things. One is that what I do, and how I do it, has to do with my own personal faith. Some of how I go about things is a reflection on that. Okay, beyond that, the negative/positive thing is real. I have a term around here—guys kid me about it because it’s one of those statements you make and they say, “That’s crazy.” I talk in terms of the real reality. And what I mean by that is that there’s a perceived and then there’s a real. The real is, no matter what you think, not everybody out there loves success; not everybody out there, when they see you being successful, automatically says, “Great job! What a wonderful accomplishment. It’s right for you to have been successful.” And it doesn’t always come out in ways you would expect. Good case in point: we’ve been one of the more fortunate firms in receiving good PR, articles and things. You might think that means that when we pursue a project, it’s clear sailing. People assume that others see us and say, “We heard about you. Great, you’re in.” No, we’ve seen so many situations where it’s been turned around: “You don’t need any more work. We read about you.” And you interview for the project and you say, “I really want to do it.” And they say, “Well, by the article we read, you’re doing fine. You don’t need our project.” And you say, “Wait a minute. I need it just like the other firm.” No . . . One time, I was on a plane with a lady, she had read something, and my being an African American architect, she says—it was a white lady—she says, “Well, you’re helped by all these federal programs, so you don’t need any other help.” That was her attitude. How many people out there, that’s the attitude they have? As a minority firm, you’re being helped by “all” these federal programs, so who cares that there is discrimination; you’re getting “all” this other stuff. That could not be further from the truth, but you can’t convince people everywhere in the world who think like that.

The real reality is there are attitudes before you get there that you don’t have the time or the inclination to deal with, but they affect you. It’s like a committee being formed of people who predetermine you’re not the firm: We’re happy to have you here, and we’re happy to be able to say we interviewed an African American firm, but that’s the extent of it. We’re not going to award you this project. And a lot of people would look and say, “Well, with your success, that can’t be happening to you.” It absolutely happens to us! Sometimes, I’m like, “Oh, I can’t wait! This is the most wonderful project we’ve ever seen. Can’t wait!” And sometimes it’s those projects in which the attitude is there and they say, “We just don’t think this is right for you.” And you’re thinking; it’s ideal!

But, you can’t get through it. It’s beyond what you bring to the table. It is an attitude that comes with the history of those individuals that are on the committee, what they’ve read, and again, sometimes you’re doing too well in the world. And, as you know, we have an African American mayor in this city; we have an African American president, and
some might think that means that if you’re an African American architect, you go to those places and you’re going to be fine. No, because under each of those are groups of people who say, “We’ve got enough. We’ve got an African American president. Why do we need to hire you? No one can accuse us of being prejudiced because we’re already covered. Look at what we got!” It’s the same way with the city and the mayor. So, agencies within the city are not really looking to improve because, in essence, they figure, “We have our milestone. We already have this covered. We don’t need to do business with you because we’re already covered.” And that’s a reality of 2013. I would put it like a drug rehab program, or even smokers, or alcoholics anonymous—when I see things on TV about it, the first thing I hear is “admit the condition.” If you don’t think that you’re a drunkard, or whatever, you will keep saying, “I’m okay. I don’t need help.” What you have to do is admit that this is a problem. Well, it’s the same thing in life and this profession.

When it’s a tough situation, admit that it’s a tough situation. Don’t act like it doesn’t exist. If there are attitudes out there that are not conducive to wanting to see you succeed, just recognize it. Then say, “Okay, what’s my next step? If I can’t overcome this exactly the way I had hoped, what is my next move?” That’s where I say trying to find the positive has to come in: “If this is going to hurt me this way, how can I make it into an asset in another way?” It’s a challenge to do so, but I take it as a good challenge. I work in a lot of situations to try to find ways to turn the situation around, so when I see attitudes that are not necessarily very conducive to hiring a firm like mine, I say, “Hmm, how do I change that?” And sometimes, it may seem selfish, but I’ve had the attitude, “I hope I do the building next door to yours because when people see the building we did, versus what you did, you’re going to wish you had hired my firm.”
The Ohio State University Ohio Union, Columbus, Ohio, 2010.
Curtis J. Moody, FAIA, NCARB, LEED AP, Principal-in-Charge of Design.
Prairie View A&M Student Recreation Center, Prairie View, Texas, 2015.
Curtis J. Moody, FAIA, NCARB, LEED AP, Principal-in-Charge of Design.