

**ARCHITECTURE**

# Michael Ford's 'Hip Hop Architecture': Transforming a majority white field one child at a time (photos)

Updated Apr 27, 2017;

Posted Apr 26, 2017

1

701  
shares**By Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer**

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Michael Ford had a life-changing moment when he went on a school trip from Cass Technical High School in Detroit to the architecture school at University of Detroit Mercy.

It was there that Ford, who is black, met Professor Dan Pitera, a self-described "political and social activist masquerading as an architect."

Pitera took Ford aside and said: " 'I'm going to see you one day in one of these classes.' "

As Ford recalled over breakfast Friday at the Urban Farmer in downtown Cleveland, Pitera inspired him to earn a master's degree in architecture at Detroit Mercy in 2006.



"Not only that, when I graduated, he brought me back as an adjunct professor, and we co-taught some design studios together."

## Doing for others

Just as Pitera lifted him, Ford wants to do the same for others like the child he once was, but on a national scale.



An unbuilt, conceptual design of low income housing by Michael Ford.

Ford also thinks it's high time that hip-hop culture, launched in the 1970s in the United States by black and Hispanic rappers, musicians and graffiti artists, should transform architecture, a profession long dominated by whites.

An instructor in architectural technology at Madison Area Technical College in Madison, Wisconsin, Ford brought his message here last week at the invitation of the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects.



## ADVERTISING



He lectured at Rustbelt Reclamation, which makes furniture from recycled wood, and spent part of Friday urging students at John Hay High School's program in architecture and design to stick it out and become professionals.

"The students that I'm talking to are the people and the bodies and minds we need," Ford said. "They are needed, not just wanted."

### **Going nationwide**

Through his writing, teaching and national speaking, Ford aims to dissolve barriers that have discouraged black children from becoming architects, city planners and urban designers.

He has a book coming out soon on the need for diversity in the design professions, and the damage caused by modernist slab towers forced on minority neighborhoods after World War II that fostered crime and social isolation through design.



## Why hip-hop?

Ford thinks that hip-hop culture, from rapping to break-dancing, is the ultimate critique of midcentury modern vertical slums, and one that could be translated positively into new buildings and city plans.



Michael Ford created a limited edition modern furniture line, "Remixed," based on Detroit clothing designer Al Wissam's high stitch count leather designs.

"Hip-hop is the voice of the voiceless," he said. "It gives a story to people not commonly listened to, including people such as myself."



While African-Americans such as Cleveland's Robert P. Madison have surmounted racial barriers to become an architect, the profession remains generally off-limits to blacks, decades after the civil rights era.

---

## **A closed profession?**

Last year, the 2,108 black architects listed by The University of Cincinnati Directory of African-American Architects accounted for 1.9 percent of 110,168 practitioners in the United States listed by NCARB, the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards.

That's far less than the black percentage of the total U.S. population, which is 12.3 percent.

The Ohio numbers are worse. The Cincinnati Directory lists 62 black architects in the state, less than 1 percent of the 6,593 licensed total practitioners listed by the Ohio Architects Board.



Ford, an American Institute of Architects associate, is taking the multi-part licensing exam in Wisconsin, the required step to full professional status. At age 34, he's just over the national average age for licensure.

## Why so low?

Ford blames institutional biases in part for the abysmally low numbers of black architects.

"History and theory courses [in architecture schools] usually focus on Europeans and their contributions and herald them or uplift them as the greatest thinkers in architecture," he said.

Hip Hop Architecture: The Post Occupancy Report of Modernism | Mi...



"If you can imagine being an African-American student who goes through five or six years of college never seeing a face that looked like you, that could be pretty disheartening."



## More than a style

By promoting what he calls "Hip Hop Architecture," Ford is advocating an attitude and an approach more than a style.

Much of it has to do with communicating with city residents on the receiving end of ideas imposed by white architects nurtured on the work of modernist designers such as Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.



Michael Ford's "Break Dance" seating.

Ford's own design work ranges from plans for a jazzy residential tower made of stacked shipping containers to structurally bold and elaborately stitched leather chairs.

"I'm trying to avoid all of the 'isms' that got us in trouble, from modernism straight to racism," he said.

Through his BRANDNU Design Group, Ford is promoting a loose-knit group of like-minded practitioners nationwide, and he's organizing free, weeklong summer camps in Hip Hop Architecture for children.

### **Summer learning**

Kids will be taught to compose rap poems about the places in which they live, and then to design communities of the future using software provided by San Francisco-based Autodesk, plus 3-D printing technology.

Ford wants to add Cleveland to the five camps he has lined up so far this year in Detroit; Atlanta; Austin, Tex.; New York; and Milwaukee.

His devotion to Hip Hop Architecture in general, and children in particular, is motivated by intellectual passion and his early encounter with Pitera in Detroit, but also by personal loss.





---

It was six years ago that Ford's wife, Gail Ford, went a week beyond the due date of her pregnancy.

"We went to have the labor induced, and our son's heart stopped beating," he said. Since then, the Fords have not been able to have a child.

And that got Ford thinking about the children of others.

"When I'm speaking to kids, I'm often thinking, 'What would I be telling my kid? How would I encourage my own child?' "

His answer: "I think there's a reason why I don't have a kid, so that I can go out and connect and encourage other kids to be what I would have hoped my son or daughter would be."

---



---

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our **User Agreement** and **Privacy Policy**

© 2018 Advance Ohio All rights reserved (**About Us**).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Advance Ohio

**Community Rules** apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

[▶ Ad Choices](#)

