

Sara Caples & Everardo Jefferson

Sara Caples ('74) and Everardo Jefferson ('73) are the Louis I. Kahn Visiting Assistant Professors this fall and will be teaching with Jonathan Rose, the Edward P. Bass Distinguished Visiting Architecture Fellow. Their lecture, "This Particular Time and Place," will be presented on September 10.

Nina Rappaport How did you choose Yale for architecture school, and how did your experience there form your approach to architecture?

Everardo Jefferson I went to Pratt and then taught in East Harlem, under the National Teacher Corps program. When I was accepted, I already understood formal principles of design, but at Yale, I learned the intellectual underpinning, philosophy, and grand tradition of architecture.

NR Who did you study with, and what was the atmosphere like?

EJ It was the beginning of Post-Modernism, yet still led by the second generation of the Bauhaus. I studied with King-Lui Wu, from whom I learned the simplicity of making spaces, of seeing spaces in plans that could become sections. I also had John Fowler, an architect from England, Cesar Pelli, who was a motivating force, and Kent Bloomer, who taught a course in how to explore form. But the strongest teacher I had was James Stirling—not because of his critique but rather the force of his personality. He created intricate compositions that were almost out of scale; we didn't quite understand them, but they had power. I still look at them.

NR Sara, how did you come to attend Yale for architecture, and who were the professors that inspired you most?

Sara Caples I spent my first year at a different architecture school; when Charles Moore sat in as a critic for one of my first studio presentations, there was something about his approach that I found very liberating. I was instantly interested in Yale and flew out a week before applications were due. I got in. Life changed!

Although Yale was just transitioning from its men's-school past, we women were never denied access to a great studio or teacher. It was ahead of many employers in that respect.

EJ After graduation, I went to work for Mitchell Giurgola until a recession hit, and I got laid off. I then worked in the Yale construction-management department for seven years. Returning to architecture to work for Ed Barnes, I soon decided I should go on my own. It is an odd trajectory: I see it as getting off the pyramid and then trying to get back on, greatly enriched by the construction experience.

NR How did you meet each other?

SC Both of us were in the first studio Cesar taught at Yale. When he was inducted as dean, we came back for the dinner, and Everardo and I discovered that both of us had just broken off relationships. It was the beginning of a long flirtation. I guess we're still flirting. We did competitions and moonlighting together for years. I think the reason Everardo came back into architecture, and why we eventually started our own firm, was the stimulus of wrestling with architectural ideas. Once we started working on our own, the dialogue intensified and grew with the input of our office colleagues. I think of architecture as unfinished business, which is part of its allure. Whatever your concern is, whether others think it is relevant or not, there is room to explore and enrich the work. That excitement still drives us.

NR A great deal of your early practice was focused on community buildings and buildings that build community. How have you been able to devote yourselves to this mission and carry it forward?

SC When we started, we operated outside of people's expectations—an office run by a black man and a white woman who were a couple. Our clients had to be open-minded, and that liberated us. We actively chose this path. Everardo's family immigrated

to the South Bronx, and he was educated through the New York City public school system. I'm a military service brat. So, both of us came out of populist traditions of service. Back then, few of our contemporaries were trying to do serious work in the tougher parts of New York's outer boroughs. Yet, we were struck by how much cultural variety was there.

NR How do you work within the diverse communities you serve? And how is your architecture improving its residents' quality of life and those who are served by the buildings and their programs?

EJ In our first project, a preschool for medically fragile children, we had to think about the process of treating a kid with AIDS, what the environment should be like, and how architecture can impact the teachers and the children. That is the richness of it. Sometimes, we have ten or twenty stakeholders. We figure out the layers of issues, listen to what they're saying, and parse it out. Issues of program often get confused with those of class and ethnicity. How do you bring all that stuff together harmoniously? That's our strong point: taking all this stuff and making it into architecture in which everyone can see themselves.

SC Our process is to try a lot of different schemes, iterating slowly and folding in the input of more people.

EJ Often, there's something we do late in the process that brings it to fruition in a different way. It's not a step-by-step process.

NR What was your design and community focus for the Marcus Garvey Houses Community Center, in the middle of a New York City housing project—one of the first of its kind in the city?

EJ Typically, architects would put up a blob here. We decided to construct a space-maker and break it up.

SC The idea behind Marcus Garvey was to reclaim the open space that was then a feral dog run that kept non-gang members away. We found that people were afraid to send their children to after-school programs because of the gangs and cross fire. So, we decided to have the building actively divide up the site, creating distinct, separate zones for different groups and generations so that the whole could no longer be controlled by teenage gang members. We created transparent zones divided by bulletproof glass so people could observe the positive activities of the center and feel safe about sending their children there.

NR You're applying, in a very direct way, the philosophy that architects can engage in issues of equity and be agents for change.

EJ What is interesting is that, using the power of architecture, we have so many tools to make beautiful spaces to solve all these problems. Delight is important in whatever we do, along with commodity and firmness. We're old-fashioned about those values.

SC Clearly, we're Modernist architects, with an added element of populism responding to communities we've worked with. They're so tired of chaos and disorder, and the idea of beauty—their definition, not ours—is very important to them. We design because that the general public can interpret as beautiful. As Everardo used to say, "Make it so my mother could love it."

EJ That's why we use light. My mother was Panamanian, and even if she didn't understand the texture on the wall or the space, she understood the powerful optimism of daylight. We also hope that architectural cognoscenti take pleasure from our designs. There has to be something for everyone, like a good movie.

NR Which of your current projects are oriented most toward an investigation of the formal, tectonic, and visceral, or experiential, qualities in architecture?

SC All of them, whether they're charter schools or museums. Take the Louis Armstrong museum. The museum welcomes deep jazz fans from all over the world and celebrates an artist who played hot, not cool, jazz. Situated across from Louis' house in Corona, Queens, this new building has to respect its unassuming residential surroundings and provide a gradual sense of discovery of the place and the man. From down the street, the structure curves into view with a brass canopy and an undulating curtain wall embedded with mesh. As you get closer, you discover transparencies in what initially appeared as shimmering material. The visceral experience of someone approaching and moving through the building is of paramount consideration.

EJ The sensory, culturally specific cues are an extension of the explorations we started on projects such as Weeksville Heritage Center, where African patterns occur at many scales, in two and three dimensions, and even in the shadows. And at the Queens Theatre, the inverted golden dome is read as celebratory by a broad range of Queens' ethnic groups; the spiraling

curves of our new pavilion responds to the joyous circularity of Philip Johnson's New York State Pavilion.

NR How are you addressing design issues that combine both the social and the developer's interests and maybe tweak the normal zoning code, in a recent project?

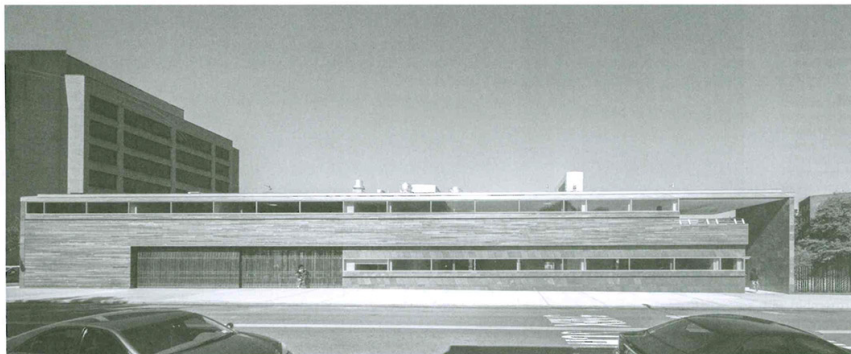
SC Ninety-five percent of the children attending our new six-story charter school on St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem are eligible for free lunch; twenty percent are on the autism-Asperger spectrum. We're trying to create architectural amenities such as taller spaces and plentiful daylight, but also areas of sensory stillness desired by the special populations we're serving. We have come up with strategies for stealing light from side lot lines and manipulating opportunities within zoning and building codes. On top, there will be twelve apartments with spectacular views to provide the financial engine for the whole deal. It is about working with a responsible, committed developer and finding ways to enrich the neighborhood socially in an open marketplace—and succeeding.

NR How will a project like this inform your program and site for your Yale design studio? How will you work together with the Bass professor, Jonathan Rose, and how was it arranged?

SC Bob Stern was the matchmaker, and we are thrilled. Jonathan's record of work is truly exceptional: socially committed, sustainably designed projects by some of the world's leading designers. What a great opportunity for the students!

SC The Mart 125 studio site is in central Harlem, on 125th Street, right across from the Apollo Theater. It's a dynamically changing neighborhood that is now rapidly gentrifying. There is nostalgia for the former funkiness, which is a big issue of designing in Harlem.

EJ Harlem has a myth—Duke Ellington lived here—but there are few markers. Gentrification is okay but we have to leave signs of the past. The challenge for the students is to deal with both the history and the possible futures. The program is a hybrid, too: partly residential, housing for jazz artists, and partly cultural uses with spaces for several different entities, including film, performance arts, and media arts. The students will be challenged to create sustainable, detailed, and specific designs that explore the richness of these juxtapositions.



1



2



3

1. Caples Jefferson Architects, Weeksville Heritage Center, Brooklyn, New York, 2014.

2. Caples Jefferson Architects, Queens Theatre in the Park, Queens, New York, 2012.

3. Caples Jefferson Architects, Louis Armstrong Museum, Queens, New York, 2015.