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The ALANA Center and Belonging on Vassar's campus



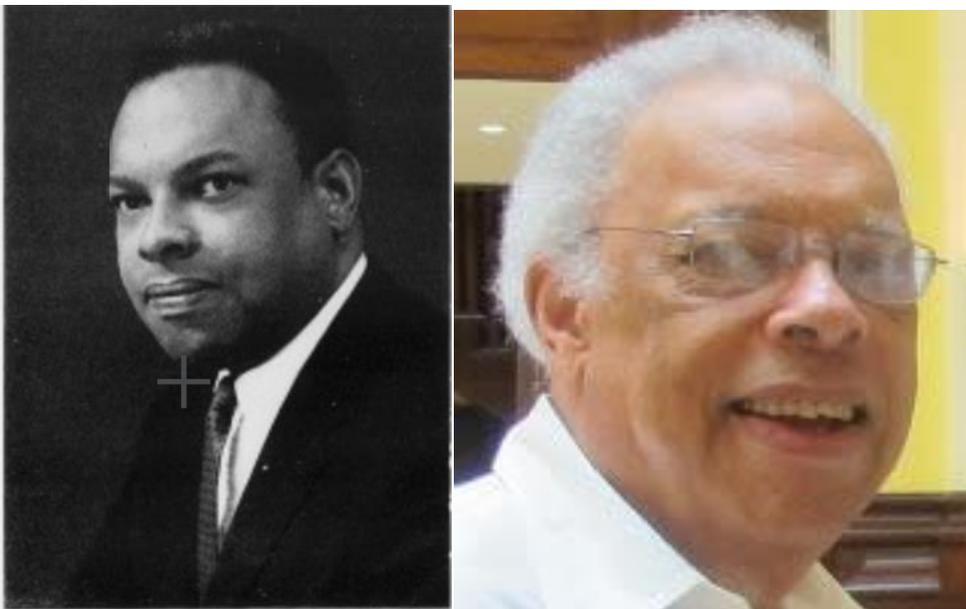
Vassar College alumna, Karen Van Lengen wrote an article titled Pedagogy and Place where she spoke about the interactive and interdisciplinary link between pedagogy and landscape at Vassar; “the landscape was understood to be a dynamic and integral part of the educational and emotional experience of the college.” (Van Lengen, 2019). Campuses are essentially like cities in microcosm and hence, require not just academic buildings but other buildings too. The buildings are used by organizations, clubs and unions leading to the collegiate spirit, characteristic of American colleges (Turner, 1984). One such important building is an intercultural center. This essay will look at the evolution of the intercultural center at Vassar College as well as if and how it fosters belongingness both physically and emotionally.

Unity in diversity is and always will be an integral part of a progressive college like Vassar. Diversity is important in any college campus demographic because interacting with people from different backgrounds, teach students, at their impressionable age, the realities of the multicultural

world in which they will eventually be living and working (Umbach, 2006). It is important to remember that this notion of diversity is not only limited to race and gender but also to sexual orientation, religion and even the perception of jocks, meaning that most people on the campus, from students to faculty to administration, grapple with having to fit in and belong (Varma, 2005). In 2004, co-coordinator of multicultural recruitment at Vassar College, Krystal Tribbett stated that, “one of the purposes of this residential community is to make everyone involved more aware of the world and society. It’s to make people more aware of people from different backgrounds. Everyone in the Office of Admissions is out there trying to recruit people from different backgrounds, different perspectives.” But, ALANA director, Ramos argues that the inclusion of students is more than just recruitment. It is about the student’s experience once they matriculate. She says, “that’s the flip side of recruitment. Vassar admits students and faculty from diverse backgrounds, but then there is an institutional responsibility to provide an affirming learning environment (Varma, 2004).” Intercultural centers are important in making sure diverse students fit in and belong in predominantly white institutions. In her book, *Cultural Centers in Higher Education*, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2012) represents cultural centers as spaces that mediate hostile environments, provide community and reinforce cultural values among students of color that extend into the broader campus community.

The ALANA center (African-American/Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American) at Vassar College has been housed in several places under multiple names. It began as the Intercultural center (ICC) in the basement of Lathrop House in 1976. Then, as the number of minority students at Vassar College increased, there was a push for a bigger space for students of color. The famous Main Building takeover in February 1990 led to the relocation of the ICC to Blegen House at 37 Collegeview Avenue until a new home could be designed and renovated.

The college employed African American architect, Jeh Vincent Johnson, senior lecturer in Art, to design the building. He would have been very suitable for the job of designing a space for communities of color on this campus given that the Eleanor Roosevelt Val-Kill Award lauded Johnson's commitment to social awareness in architectural design and his belief that designers must recognize their social responsibilities and promote fairness and humane values through their work (Anderson, 2010). Johnson is a distinguished figure both, in the Vassar community (he was a senior lecturer in the Art Department from 1964 to 2001) as well as in the world of architecture. He was one of the twelve founding members of NOMA- the National Organization of Minority Architects which aims to use the creation of buildings as “a voice to speak against apathy, bigotry, intolerance and ignorance; against abuse of the natural environment; and for the un-empowered, the marginalized and the disenfranchised (Noma, 2019).” He also co-founded the New York Coalition of Black Architects.



Jeh V. Johnson

Johnson describes himself as a “sociologically-trained architect.” He places a lot of emphasis on the people who will inhabit the buildings he designs. In his teaching he encourages

his students to think about the human value of their designs. In his private practice he works on low-income housing and places a lot of emphasis on the values of the inhabitants (Cruz, 2002). He wants the houses to evoke positive feelings in their owners due to: “1) a sense of uniqueness, distinction, or singularity, growing out of the unique way a family lives, out of its size and its interests 2) the treatment of architectural elements in an expressive way, suggesting artful choice 3) A sense of place, captured usually by relating the shelter in some special way to its setting—taking advantage of a view, fitting to the site—this could be stated differently as a sense of correctness about the total relationship between the setting and the house (Johnson, 1970).” Johnson says that as an architect, he is suggesting community by using these site plan devices but not creating it because no one can “create a real live community with purely physical means, but one can suggest and provide places, and establish functional relationships that will nourish the growth of community feeling- the feeling of a “sense of place” in terms of people (Johnson, 1970).” He ends by saying, only time will tell if our buildings are successful community building tools. It has been about 25 years since Jeh Johnson designed the ALANA center at Vassar college. It is important to now look at it and think about how it leads to belonging and caters to the students who use it.

The students have always thought the location of the center is important and have wanted it to take center stage on campus. From the beginning of the ICC, the members of Lathrop house had to vote as to whether they wanted the Center in their basement. They voted no and gave the following reasoning: “a lot of people in the dorm are against the placement of the ICC in Lathrop. This is not to say that people disagree with the concept of the ICC. There is a need for it. But a lot of people think a special interest group should be in the college center (Hart, 1979).” Hence, it is

evident that the students did not enjoy having such a crucial center locked away in a basement. Nor were they happy with having it be inaccessible off campus.

The site, after discussion with organizations of color, administration and the architect, Jeh Johnson, for renovation was the old heating plant where the coal bin was located. It is a set of buildings along Fisher Passageway, directly behind Main building, where the college's service facilities were concentrated. President Fergusson had dubbed this area, "Vassar's Backyard." The Backyard has become a bustling center of campus life with the Susan Stein Shiva theatre, the Powerhouse Theatre and the ALANA center (Van Lengen & Reilly, 2004). However, the somewhat removed presence of the ALANA center is something that has been alluded to in multiple articles by students (Modi, 2001; Agbede, 2005). It makes it feel as though the center is not a priority for the college but it is important to remind ourselves that Vassar College is one of the first colleges to have such a center and that definitely goes to show the value that the college places on diversity and inclusion.



Coal in the heating plant



A meeting in the ALANA Center where a multitude of programs and events take place.

The newly renovated Intercultural Center was opened in the spring of 1993. The increased size and number of spaces allowed for both educational and social programming simultaneously. It also meant that different groups could inhabit the center at the same time. The idea of balance

between different groups and also different types of programming was central to Ed Pittman and Jeh Johnson's vision for the center (The Miscellany News, 1992). The interior of the ALANA center today, has a community room which is the main space in the center with a high ceiling and big windows. It also has a conference room, kitchen, and offices. However, they are neutral spaces used by multiple student organizations with rich cultures for events, gatherings and meetings. When discussing the concept of dorms at Vassar, Duncan (2019), another Vassar alumna stated, "that dorms are inherently social spaces but the architecture of that space can alter the opportunities for social encounters and self-expression." The neutral spaces could have an effect of suppressing self-expression by these incredibly diverse organizations. However, in this instance, the ALANA center is successful at inculcating a feeling of belonging. Johnson while talking about another project he worked on at Vassar, the redesign of the New Hackensack Building said, its adaptable design meant that it could "do anything you wanted it to (Cruz, 2002)." The students of the ALANA center use their rich cultures to make the space their own while they are occupying the space. Here, the architecture's adaptability allows the people to form a community and also, the neutrality allows for dialogue between people of different cultures who might be facing similar difficulties building a bigger, stronger sense of togetherness.

The name of the intercultural center has been up for discussion multiple times over the years. What exactly does intercultural mean? Merriam-Webster defines intercultural as, occurring between or involving two or more cultures. The word could be applied to any or all cultures and hence, how can this center be for students of color and not for other students too making the name intercultural center misleading. The center's important purpose should be made clearer and its name should reflect that purpose (Miscellany News, 1992).

The main goals of the center include providing support to students of color and the fostering of cultural, social, education, and creative expressions within various communities at Vassar (Padilla, 2004). The Intercultural Center was, thus, renamed ALANA (African American/Black, Latino, Asian/Asian American and Native American) Center in 1998 to clarify its role on campus as a safe space for minority students. Ed Pittman stated, that “the name change would resolve ambiguity about the ICC being a place that is expected to reach out to everyone and will solidify the understanding that it is a place specifically for minority students (Duggal, 1998).”



The concepts of belonging but also of exclusivity that arise from having a place like a cultural center are especially intriguing to me. A place such as the ALANA center is necessary because students find a lot of support in being able to come together and meet around their culture and history and their often distinct and unique experiences on a college campus like Vassar. Many times students of color feel isolated as a side effect of being a minority on this campus. Hence, the students must share their experiences within their own community before outreaching to other communities. Pittman, recalls his experiences with the intercultural center, “you could go and talk with fellow students who shared similar experiences and feel affirmed and reassured that you were thinking the right thoughts and it was okay to be who you are (Heydweiller, 1992).”

The flip side of this comfort is that, “black students seem to form friendships primarily with black students, and the same applies to Latinos and other students of color (Musakwa, 2007).” In other words, cliques form because of the inward and exclusive behavior of some of these minority groups which reveals something amiss in the college’s social dynamics. The possible reason for the cliques is that minorities feel more comfortable around each other. ALANA students must realize that by excluding themselves and forming cliques, they are fostering a racially divided campus, they are fostering a racially divided campus (Musakwa, 2007). By changing the name of the center, did we lose the intercultural property of the college?

Some people believe that the center can be thought of as an artificial barrier creating divisions between the students. Dean Jackson, in 2005, begged student of color organizations to abandon the center for a more “inclusive” campus (Johnson, 2005). On the contrary, "there's a common misconception that the ALANA Center only welcomes students of color," says Padilla (2004). "While the Center was established to address the specific needs of these students, it is definitely not a 'white-free zone.' Many of the activities hosted in the Center, in fact, aim to create dialogue across racial and ethnic lines and open up spaces on campus that can be shared by students of all backgrounds (Padilla, 2004).” It has come to be embraced as a center that is “not exclusive to students of color but specific to students of color (Duggal, 1998).”

Since then, the Center has been visible in sponsoring cultural events, lectures, forums, art exhibitions, and academic and career-related seminars. The Center also provides meeting spaces for student of color organizations, administrative support for academic and personal advising for students of color, and advocacy on college life concerns (The Miscellany News, 1999). Therefore, striking the balance between being a haven for students who need it but also a space for educating and increasing social awareness within the entire community at Vassar. This education and support

occurs on three levels, within the groups of color, between the groups of color and within the larger Vassar community.

The college has progressed in so many ways in terms of inclusivity. Past articles talk about tackling the admittance of men into a former women's college and how to make the campus inclusive to both men and women during the transition (Smith, 1984), the socioeconomic divide (Mezzacappa, 2008), the acceptance of the LGBTQ community on the campus (Lohr, 2013), and as seen as the various examples above, the integration of people of color into the campus. In each of these situations, representation, recruiting and belonging are central. However, it is pertinent to discuss the campus climate from the point of view of other minority groups on campus. The ALANA center works along with the Women's center, LGBTQ center, Office of International Services, Office for Religious and Spiritual life and Transitions to build an atmosphere of togetherness and inclusion in the face of diversity on campus. However, one group is still waiting for representation- students with disabilities. Though there exists an office of Accessibility and educational opportunity, "this office does not adequately create a safe space for discussions of disability at Vassar but rather provides academic and housing accommodations as per the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is an individualized space wherein people are attended to one at a time and hence, do not interact with other people with disabilities (Newman, 2010). Hence, when thinking of further directions in building community and a sense of belonging on campus, a need for a non-medical, social space for these students would be the next step in building the idea of togetherness at Vassar College.

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