An Autobiography by Robert Traynham Coles

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How did I, an African-American from a working class family in Buffalo, New York become a prominent member of one of the most elite professions in American and how did I manage to survive and thrive in it? Perhaps simply because I found something that I like to do at an early age,--Architecture, and pursue it with passion. I tell people that I don’t go to work, I go to play. It is a story worth telling.

My dad, a career postal worker, was upwardly mobile, and we were always the first African-American family to move into a neighborhood in industrial Buffalo. My Dad’s salary was higher than most in the neighborhood, and we enjoyed the best while growing up, even during the depression years. My three brothers and I were among only several attending the neighborhood elementary school, and at the 1800-student Technical High School I attended, enrollment was limited to only a dozen African-American students.

I was because the school discriminated against African-Americans, that I was shunted into a course called Building Design in 1943 during the height of the war years when there was no building. That turned me on to architecture. It was while I, the only African-American taking Building Design and leading the class, that I discovered that there was a world beyond high school. I decided to go on to college to study architecture. One day, my teacher took me aside and told me that I was wasting my time trying to be an architect, that I would be better off pursuing social work or the ministry. I gritted my teeth and vowed that I would be an architect, and the best darn one that I could be.

I spent the first two years studying architecture at Hampton Institute, in Virginia, where both my parents had attended school. After the first year, I recognized that although I was developing social skills, I wasn’t really learning anything about architecture. I had gone to an excellent high school, Buffalo Technical High School, where I had already learned many of the skills being taught at Hampton. There were no guidance counselors in my high school or college to assist me, but several of my college professors were helpful. They recognized that I needed a chance and they encouraged me to move on. But where?

Saturday afternoons, I listened to football, and Michigan, Minnesota and Illinois were playing. Knowing that they were state schools with low tuition, I applied to, guess what, Michigan, Minnesota, and Illinois, and was accepted to Minnesota and Illinois. Because I needed to work while I was going to school, and because I didn’t want to face the prejudice of a small southern town like Champaign-Urbana where the employment opportunities might be limited, I picked Minnesota. Although the quality of the school was not one of my criteria, it also had a great School of Architecture.
In 1949, there were few African-Americans at the University of Minnesota. Some out become famous. Journalist Carl Rowan, future Cleveland Mayor Carl Stokes, and Whitney M. Young, who became the Executive Director of the National Urban League. There were perhaps 100 African-American students on campus out of 33,000 students and many held court in the student union. The students were great. Some of the faculty were not, but teachers like Fred Knoepper and Robert Jones made it worthwhile. When I graduated from Minnesota, I was drafted into the Army, but with a physical disability, I was deferred. I decided that I should cap my education with a graduate degree, and applied to Harvard, M.I.T., Pennsylvania and Syracuse. Accepted by M.I.T. in September, 1954, I went to Cambridge for one of the greatest experience of my life. I thrived under the best teacher I ever had, Minnesota graduate Lawrence Anderson, who later became Dean of the School.

I had been away from Buffalo for 8 years, and although I returned to visit the city occasionally, it had changed and I had changed. For my graduate thesis at M.I.T., I did a combined research and design thesis about an urban renewal project that was planned for the neighborhood where I had attended high school. The thesis, “Community Facilities in Redevelopment Areas, A Study and Proposal for the Ellicott District in Buffalo, New York”, with the Buffalo Urban League as the client, was widely publicized in Buffalo. At the end of my graduate year, I won the coveted Rotch Traveling Scholarship awarded by the Boston Society of Architects, and joined a long line of University of Minnesota winners. I then realized what I great education I had received at Minnesota’s School of Architecture. The year’s travel in Europe with my wife and year old son gave me an opportunity to reflect on my education, to savor the present, and to consider the future.

Returning to this country after a year in Europe, I felt that I wanted to explore Boston more, and worked there for four years as an Intern Architect and Architect for Perry, Shaw Hepburn and Dean; Shepley Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott; and finally Carl Koch and Techbuild Homes. I completed my architectural registration in 1958. In 1960, with a wife and two children, I was about to build a house and settle in Cambridge, when I received a phone call from a firm in Buffalo stating, “We have the commission to do the thesis you did at M.I.T. and we want you to return to Buffalo for three months to help us get started.” Within the first year of commuting, I built a house in Buffalo and moved my family there. The project, the John F. Kennedy Recreation Center, was completed in 1963, and I went on to open my own architectural office.

I joined the American Institute of Architects in 1961, attended my first convention in 1964 in St. Louis and the second convention in Portland in 1968, where only a half dozen African-Americans were present. Having heard Whitney Young give his famous keynote address and challenge the profession to become from involved in the urban crisis, I have attended every convention since.

In 1964, I met the Rev. Richard Prosser, a Presbyterian minister from Chicago who came to Buffalo to take over the operation of a settlement house in nearby Lackawanna, New York. It was he who brought about the change in my community. I headed the drive to bring Social Activist Saul Alinsky and his Industrial Areas Foundation to Buffalo to form an action organization that could be a voice of the neglected minority community. As President of the Eastside Community Organization, I led the drive to raise 150,000 to fund the organization. Two
years later, I organized and was the President of the Community for an Urban University, to see if we could get New York State to build the billion dollar expansion of the University at Buffalo in downtown Buffalo as opposed to twelve miles away in the suburbs. Even though the effort was not successful, it created a dialogue about the role of a public university. In 1970, mindful of the need for architects to assist community groups, and with the help of my first Intern Architect, Howard University graduate Charles E. Ruth, Jr. who developed a graduate thesis about Community Design Centers at the new School of Architecture at Buffalo, I used his thesis research to found the Community Planning Assistance Center of Western New York (CPAC) and served as its President for three years. With an initial grant of $50,000, the organization’s budget increased to $250,000 in 1982 when government funding was abruptly halted.

While attended the Detroit Convention of the American Institute of Architects in 1971, I was one of a group of African-American Architects in attendance who were invited to the office of Nathan Johnson, who had the largest architectural office in the area. We felt that we were not getting anything out of the discussions at the AIA Convention, and had our own discussions about matters that were important to us, like the development of low income housing, the practice in the inner city, and working with public agencies. A group decided to meet in Nassau in the winter and explore the idea of forming our own organization. A meeting was held in Chicago in June 1972 attended by about twenty Architects, who formed the National Organization of Minority Architects. I held every office from Newsletter Editor to Vice President of the organization. In 1980, I turned my attention to the AIA.

In 1974, I was appointed Deputy Vice President for Minority Affairs for the AIA, the highest position held by an African-American in the AIA. In 1981, I was appointed Theme Chairman for the Minneapolis Convention. The Convention was the high point of my professional life, as it was then I was elevated to Fellowship and was also awarded the Whitney M. Young, Jr. Citation. In 1995, I became the first African-American Chancellor of the American Institute of Architects 2000 member College of Fellows, the highest rank that members could achieve. In 1997, the University of Minnesota College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture honored me with the Alumni Achievement Award. That same year, the City of Buffalo honored me in a City Hall ceremony as their “Citizen of Distinction.” In 2004, the New York State Association of Architects conferred on me their highest honor, the James William Kideney Award for a lifetime of notable contributions to the profession, the professional society, and the community.

I’ve been in the profession of architecture for over 40 years, and still am. My first is the oldest African American architectural firm in the northeast. Major building projects that our firm has been associated with include the $50 million Frank Reeves Center for Municipal Affairs, completed in Joint Venture in 1986 with VVKR and Devrouaux and Purnell; the $27 million Health, Physical Education and Recreation Complex at the State University of New York at Buffalo; the $40 million Providence Railroad Station, completed in 1986 in Joint Venture with Perry Dean Stahl, Rogers, Ammann and Whitney, and Baker and Conlon; the $200 million College of Staten Island for the City University of New York, where we served as Associate Minority Architect with Edward Durell Stone and the $20 million Ronald L. Brown Ambulatory Care Facility at Harlem Hospital in Joint Venture with URS Consultants in New York City. However large these projects are, the most satisfying, I feel, is the 2200 square foot residence
that I designed for my family on Frederick Law Olmstead’s Humboldt Parkway in Buffalo in 1961 where my wife, Sylvia and I still reside.

I believe that because architects have the ability to see things as they can be, they have a special task which goes beyond simply designing the physical environment. They must be activists involved in the social and political life of the community. They must address their efforts to change in these areas as well, so that people can make the needed adjustments to an increasingly challenging and rich urban world. They must in their works, build the demonstrative alternative to the way we live today. They must be initiators as well as implementers—leaders more than followers. They must truly be revolutionaries who see their architecture as a broad movement to enhance the quality of life of urban people.