



*Dr. Carla Jackson Bell, Dean of the Robert R. Taylor School of Architecture and Construction Science (TSACS) and Professor of Architecture at Tuskegee University, is a trailblazer. She is the first African American woman Dean of an Architecture and Construction Management school in the United States. Additionally—of only twenty African American women who are tenured architecture faculty in the nation—she is the first woman to become tenured in Tuskegee’s Department of Architecture. Under Bell’s leadership, Tuskegee’s architecture program earned the maximum eight-year term of re-accreditation from the National Architectural Accrediting Board for the first time in the school’s history, and the Construction Science and Management program became accredited for the first time.*

## PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

by Cynthia Mwenja, PhD

### Anti-racism in Architecture at Tuskegee University

Bell is in appropriate setting for distinguished firsts: TSACS is named for Robert Robinson Taylor, who was both the first African-American architect accredited in the United States and the first African American awarded a degree in Architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—which was itself the first architecture program established in the United States.

Taylor worked within the framework laid out by Tuskegee founder Booker T. Washington: “learning to do by doing.” Together, they developed an integrated and collaborative method of teaching architecture and construction science that melded theory and practice—their program embodied “design/build” from the beginning. As Dr. Kwesi Daniels, Head of Architecture at Tuskegee, points out, the students were trained to go into African American spaces that didn’t have resources and find or make them as needed. This method, rooted in sustainability, intentionally teaches students by solving problems in the classroom to use in the field, with no separation or hierarchy between the two.

#### Teaching Anti-racism in Architecture

Attention to the ways that architecture expresses social construction have to do with social justice and equity, Bell says. Architectural is designed for people, and “ethnic Americans” experience inequalities in the built environment.

Daniels offers a grounding to understand the anti-racist architecture education embraced by the school: If racism is discrimination on the basis of race, then anti-racism naturally opposes that impulse. These ideas—both anti-racism and racism—are socially constructed, and architecture is inherently connected with one or the other because architects construct the environments for societies. Bell’s anti-racist work at Tuskegee continues her previous work as Director of Multicultural Affairs in Auburn University’s College of Architecture, Design and Construction, where minority representation in the college grew from eight to eighteen percent during her tenure.

Bell’s edited collection, *Space Unveiled: Invisible Cultures in the Design Studio*, emphasizes the need for inclusive cultural perspectives in architecture curricula and design studio practices. Bell puts her theories into action in

her courses. She enhances Tuskegee’s rigorous architecture program by including culturally diverse perspectives and considering issues of social equity in courses such as the Freshman Design Studio and Thesis Capstone. She delves more deeply into these ideas—as well as the community and social responsibilities associated with them—in her Ethnic Americans and the Built Environment class. Daniels says that these classes teach “anti-racist design that promotes inclusion” and they inhabit the “intersection of architecture, race, and education.”

#### Initiatives

In 2017, TSACS worked with architecture firm Perkins and Will to establish a two-week intensive visiting-scholar program with a focus on preparing students for design careers. In highlighting matters of cultural diversity and social equity, this program not only supports students with professional development, it also helps them to understand and define diverse perspectives that are often overlooked in architecture education.

Bell’s innovations aren’t limited to such two-week intensives, however—she has established a multidisciplinary African-American



Booker T. Washington Home / Photo courtesy Tuskegee University

studies minor funded through a National Endowment for the Humanities grant that she wrote and administers. Daniels says that the minor has allowed the faculty to develop a curriculum grounded in Tuskegee's history, showcasing the relevance of that history today. As Bell stated when the minor was announced, students in the program "will explore ways of thinking, researching, and writing about the diverse experiences of African-Americans and human culture."

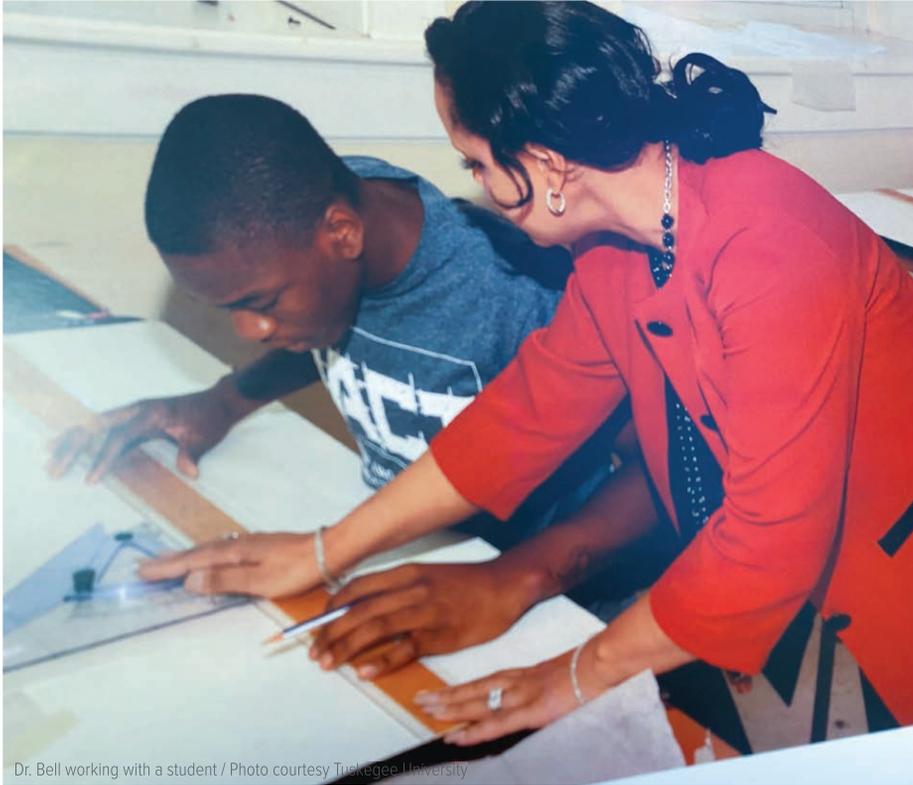
Dr. Charner Rodgers, Associate Professor in Tuskegee's Department of Construction Science and Management and Senior Program Director of Industry Relations and Recruitment, welcomes the opportunity to establish innovative programs under Bell's leadership. Rodgers points to one

such initiative, Drakeford House, in the Tuskegee area. This historic preservation project of a Victorian house built in the 1890s allows architecture and construction sciences students to learn "not only the why but the how" of historic preservation. Students are also participating in a similar project, beginning with the windows of Tuskegee's Willcox E Trades building.

Another initiative that Rodgers points to is the series of "build days" students have been able to take part in, collaborating with Square Foot Ministry. Under Bell's leadership, Rodgers says opportunities like these help TSACS faculty members to enact Tuskegee founder Booker T Washington's ideal of "learning to do by doing."

Perhaps the most ambitious project has been a class collaboration between

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Dr. Bell working with a student / Photo courtesy Tuskegee University

Tuskegee and Auburn to develop a space in Selma. In developing this project, Daniels says that, even though they knew the magnitude of the work in melding groups from a HBCU and a PWI, it was imperative “to help students see how space has been constructed to create a racialized environment.”

While the design of environments can exclude people in many ways—such as spaces that are built to limit or exclude wheelchair access—the racially exclusive aspects of architecture may be less obvious. In the Selma class, students were taught the history of racism in the United States as well as the “complicity of architecture in its maintenance,” Daniels says. One of the biggest drivers of racial inequities in housing was the establishment of zoning laws, which explicitly defined “Negros” as “undesirables” who were limited to inhabiting red-lined zones.

African Americans were also explicitly excluded from obtaining mortgages under the original Federal Housing Act; white people accessed these funds to move to the newly designed and built suburbs. These suburbs excluded African Americans with racially-restricted covenants tied to the deeds.

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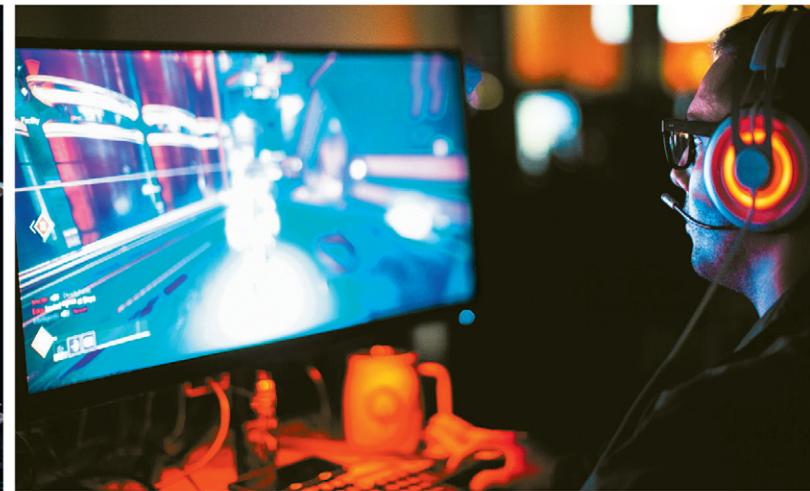


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After the students were shown the ways that modern urban planning and construction had been founded in racism, they considered this question: “Anti-racism—opposition to racism—is social integration—what does that look like in architectural planning?” Bell, Daniels, and others moderated these tough conversations

about racial space creation, alternating class meetings between Tuskegee, Auburn, and Selma. They also guided students in addressing questions such as “Who gets to be considered part of the community where a building will be placed—who are the stakeholders who have a voice in the design decision-making?” “Who

may have been overlooked in design decisions because they didn’t have money or credentials?”

As students began to tease out answers to the questions of inclusive, anti-racist design, they began to find their way towards preliminary answers. One student unified the space in his design with a singular lighting strip that ran throughout the space, breaking down differences between areas for “servants” and those being served. Another student created a design that could be constructed collaboratively and inclusively by local citizens. Yet another student created an S-shaped garden design with seven plots to represent seven aspects of the history and culture of Selma. In each of her initiatives, Bell has fostered situations in which students can more fully understand the cultural and social contexts, as well as the ramifications, for their designs.

### Pandemic Experience

When the pandemic hit the U.S., Bell was serving as Tuskegee’s interim Provost and VP for Academic Affairs, focusing on faculty development as well as student retention and recruitment through academic mentoring. The Provost’s office oversees institutional effectiveness, the library, graduate students, bio-ethics, deans and faculty—and online and distance learning. Bell says that, at the start of the pandemic, only twenty-five faculty members (out of three hundred) were trained to teach online.

Like many other schools, Tuskegee extended spring break by one week to allow time to train faculty to teach online and get acclimated to the necessary online applications, including Blackboard and Zoom. Currently, the students have returned to campus, but about half of the class offerings are still being taught virtually. Tuskegee has been able to hire some teaching assistants to help with the newly adopted hy-flex model—though they have needed some training, too. The school was also able to provide computers for students and technical support for faculty teaching virtually through pandemic monies that became available.

### Leadership and Vision

Bell focuses on being a faculty advocate for transformative change to “promote the understanding of an inclusive cultural perspective,” and the faculty who work with her appreciate her vision and supportive approach. Rodgers welcomes Bell’s style, saying that Bell is

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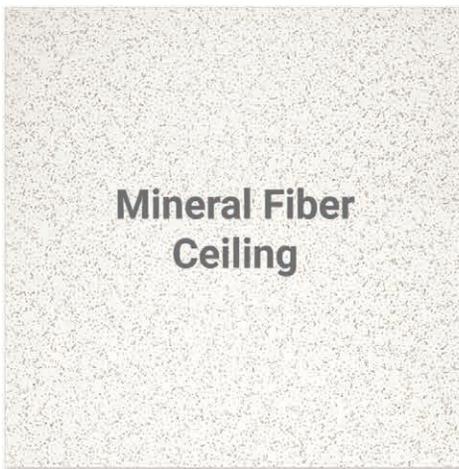
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Photo courtesy Tuskegee University

both “an unselfish leader” and “phenomenal at getting stuff done.” Bell also encourages faculty members to pursue opportunities for themselves, such as the grant Rodgers won to develop a minor in Construction Science and Management.

In a field where both women and African Americans are underrepresented, Bell stands out. Under her leadership, Rodgers envisions Tuskegee becoming a household name when people think about architecture and construction science programs—a fitting goal for one of the oldest programs in the country. Bell’s goal is simply to “promote non-traditional teaching philosophies that will appeal to a larger demographic, especially African American women.” With the incredible groundwork she has already laid, she is well on the way to her goal.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dr. Cynthia Mwenja teaches Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Montevallo.

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