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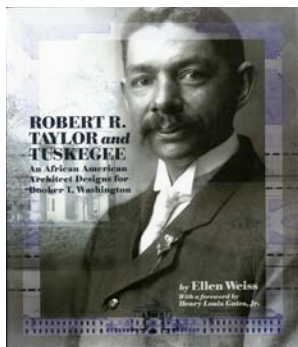
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Robert R. Taylor and Tuskegee: An African American Architect Designs for Booker T. Washington

Ellen Weiss
NewSouth Books, 2012
282 pages
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Ellen Weiss's book *Robert R. Taylor and Tuskegee: An African American Architect Designs for Booker T. Washington* is a much-needed study of the work of Robert Robinson Taylor (1868–1942) and his role in the architectural formation of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. Taylor was the first African American architect to graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the first academically trained black architect in the United States. In his foreword to the book, eminent historian-educator Henry Louis Gates Jr. stresses the importance of African Americans retrieving their histories, and Weiss's book does just that, deftly detailing the challenges black architects faced in the South after the Civil War, as well as underlining the importance of architecture's role in promoting racial equality. Architecture at Tuskegee was, as Weiss rightly notes, "a fist against the sky" (p. 87).

The book is a double biography of Taylor and Tuskegee, interweaving their histories and narratives and emphasizing the implications of race. The parallel stories of Taylor and Tuskegee allow Weiss to give necessary historical context to

fully appreciate both Taylor's and Tuskegee's challenges and contributions. The figure of Booker T. Washington looms large throughout, and Weiss judiciously records the range of opinions about him, often quoting his contemporaries. Weiss divided the book into two parts: the chronological narrative history of Taylor and Tuskegee and a catalog of twenty-five buildings designed by Taylor at Tuskegee. Each of these two sections would be worthy books in themselves, and combined they construct the detailed histories of the buildings on the necessary foundation of historical context.

Throughout the book, Weiss has included wonderful archival images of Taylor, the students, and the buildings that capture the growth and formality of the campus. It is Weiss's insistence on the power of architecture at Tuskegee that hammers home Taylor's importance. She is also careful to tease out the possible meanings of a building and describes Taylor's architecture in vivid language, often considering its propagandistic role as a constructed step toward racial equality.

If the name Robert R. Taylor rings a bell, then you are most likely thinking of this Taylor's son, Robert Rochon Taylor (1899–1957), who went on to build, finance, manage, and promote housing for African Americans in Chicago, and for whom the Southside Public Housing Project was named. But it is the elder Robert Taylor on whom Weiss focuses her attention. Born in Wilmington, North Carolina, Taylor's father was a former slave who was skilled in building and who became one of the wealthiest black landowners in the city. Taylor left home to attend MIT from 1888 to 1892, and upon graduation several schools offered him the opportunity to direct or teach, and he accepted the offer from Washington to go to Tuskegee.

The program at Tuskegee mixed academic, agricultural, and industrial

studies with the intention that students be equally proficient in skills of the head as well as the hands. Students attending the institute with the intention of becoming a teacher, for example, would have been prepared to not only teach children but also build the schoolhouse in which they taught. This idea was applied to Tuskegee's own buildings as students formed an integral part of the labor force in the construction and maintenance of the campus. The brickmaking industry at the institute, for example, provided building materials for the many new buildings, practical skills for the students, and the impression of "permanence and ambition" that the school wanted to project (p. 27). Students who worked on the buildings must have also gained a sense of pride and ownership in the institute.

Taylor's position at the institute was an important one. He was initially hired to teach drawing in addition to designing institute buildings. Weiss makes an excellent point when she notes the importance of drawing at Tuskegee. Drawing not only facilitated understanding but also the planning of the work, which would have resonated with blacks who recognized that "slave artisans worked under white direction alone and therefore did not plan their own work" (p. 42). Drawing, like architecture, held power, as both Washington and Taylor were well aware. In 1902 Taylor was appointed Director of Mechanical Industries, the largest division of the institute, and he continued to design for Tuskegee despite his administrative workload.

Taylor's academic training gave him an understanding of the "subtle art" of classicism in his designs, such as with Tuskegee's Carnegie Library. Not all of Taylor's projects were as monumental, however, and Weiss claims that if the design of the Madison Park School is by Taylor, it "could be his most influential work" (p. 128). The elegant yet simple school design made me wonder what Taylor's contribution

would have been without Tuskegee. Weiss includes Taylor's several projects outside the institute, in Ohio as well as the Birmingham Colored Masonic Temple, designed with his partner Louis H. Persley, then head of architectural drawing at Tuskegee.

One of the most interesting chapters is on Taylor's trip to Liberia in 1929. Accompanied by his second wife, Nellie, Taylor traveled to Liberia to help establish the Booker Washington Agricultural and Industrial Institute. Weiss gives a great amount of detail here, reflecting the copious archival information available. Charged with setting out a plan for the new school, designing buildings, establishing a curriculum, recommending people for faculty and administrative positions, and making contacts with the government and other agencies, Taylor had his hands full. One of the most moving parts of the chapter, however, comes from a comment made by his wife "that her American Liberian friends did not envy her Alabama home even if it had electricity and plumbing. They could not understand how anyone could live with Jim Crow insults and they judged themselves the more fortunate" (p. 152). It was here, curiously, in this moment of contrast, that the realities of racial inequality Taylor and all blacks faced in the early twentieth century in the United States were viscerally palpable.

I greatly admire Weiss's painstaking research, and her diving into archival sources, contemporary accounts, interviews, and personal papers, and citing them all thoroughly in the endnotes, gives the book a rich texture and Tuskegee a sense of place. The range of sources, however, begs for a bibliography to consolidate and allow browsing. Occasionally, I found myself a tad bogged down in the details Weiss presents, looking for the narrative to move forward, but the depth and layering of the history is critical here. Built in minute

increments of evidence—almost brick by brick, as it were—Weiss reveals the complexities of the racial, educational, professional, and aesthetic issues she addresses.

Taylor's focus on practice and not writing, as well as his reserve, makes it difficult for Weiss to flesh him out as a person in the early chapters, and it is not until the chapter on his return to Wilmington upon his retirement that Taylor's voice begins to really shine through. The inclusion of snippets of his writings here and elsewhere begs for an appendix of his writings to better grasp his thoughts and passions.

Weiss's book is a vital addition to architectural history, African American studies, the history of education, history of the South, and that of campus architecture. While Taylor may never be a household name among nonarchitects, he certainly deserves recognition in our surveys of architectural history and his designs for Tuskegee. We must include him and his colleagues to present the history of the profession in all its facets. Likewise, we must recognize as Taylor did the power of architecture as not just a setting for, but also an agent of, change.

Katherine Wheeler is an Assistant Professor of Practice at the University of Miami School of Architecture. Her book *Victorian Perceptions of Renaissance Architecture* (Ashgate, 2014) addresses the intersection of historiography, architectural practice, and education. Fellowships to support her research include grants from the Huntington, the University of Miami, and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. She received her PhD from MIT, her master's from the University of Virginia, and her BArch from the University of Tennessee.