

In our own words...

IN CELEBRATION OF BLACK HISTORY

28 days of personal perspectives

[Back](#)

February 24, 2009

10:30 am, [In Our Own Words](#) / [Our Stories](#), 648 words

Rohan Walters: Living by design



I was 14 years old in 1974 in Toronto, Canada. Our social studies teacher Ms. Macfarquar – the second feminist teacher of my life – invited the ambassador from South Africa to speak to our class. Unknown to him, she had shown this class of white adolescents two films smuggled out of Black South Africa; *The Last Grave of Mombassa* being one of them. These films depicted the horror of Apartheid and were deemed illegal in South Africa by the Apartheid government. These kids were shocked at the horror of state supported racism. Ms. Macfarquar instructed our class to ask the visiting ambassador of South Africa about the issue of race and politics without letting him know that we had seen these two films.

On the day of his visit, approximately a week later, the ambassador lasted about five minutes before a white kid whose favourite name for me was "spear chucker", stood up and told the ambassador of the shocking, disturbing and 'illegal' films we had been shown. The ambassador immediately walked out. He walked right by me as I was sitting curled up in a corridor off of the open space next to the classroom. I just wanted to be invisible. My developing young-black consciousness could not participate in his form of diplomacy. I did not know how.

Meredith was also a teacher who revealed to me she was involved in an organization who raised money to assist in the peaceful overthrow, if possible, of the Apartheid government. Unknown to me at the time she was to be a hero in my approach to life. Coincidentally, at that period in my life I was seriously contemplating changing my name to Mandela, going over to join the African National Congress and blow stuff up. I was in a state of constant disgust at the evident acceptance of injustice around me and in the world. Fortunately, Ms. Macfarquar and my first feminist teacher Ms. Comartin, although never saying it to me directly exemplified and discussed with me other alternatives to blowing stuff up.

These women were the smartest and wisest people I'd ever met in my young life. Their profound sense of justice and their ways of adapting to profound and subtle hatred, societal injustice with understanding, confidence, competence, patience, forgiveness and love has had a profound impact on my life.

These women conveyed to me one of the highest forms of architecture, that being the architecture of soul, the building of a conscious citizen! In other words, I became aware of the importance of the 'process of change' while simultaneously keeping one's eye on the prize – shared justice and beauty. 'The process' is as important as the goal! Architecture is not just about beautiful or functional buildings / cities; Architecture is also about the process of making that beauty and functionality.

Much of my present creativity began through the conscious and unconscious act of adapting to seemingly ugly circumstances in my life and trying to achieve sustainable beauty with understanding. Starting with the awareness that I am a divine spark in the universe, in the body of a human being, who happens to be male and who happens to be black on the planet earth in the city of Toronto.

After being a stay-at-home dad, I am building a design business based on the principles:

- (1) Something for something,
- (2) Value people and use things, not the other way around, and
- (3) Imagination is valuable and requires appropriate remuneration.

I continue to volunteer in my children's schools and elsewhere because I believe it to be critical to their development. Furthermore it is important, within this epoch of time, for black men to be and be seen in the school environment as caring and giving to all children as well as their own. I continue to mentor and speak to students of all races.



Rohan Walters - Architect & Principal Designer

www.SPACESbyROHAN.com

[13 comments](#)



Comments:

Comment from: Lina K. [Visitor]

What a beautifully written story!

The principles on which you built your design business couldn't be more on point. Too often creative people don't feel that their work is worth "something" and that all artists must starve. Creativity and talent must absolutely be valued and requires more than just proper remuneration, but also proper recognition. Congratulations on all your achievements.

24/02/2009 @ 15:45



Comment from: Anthony B. [Visitor]

There are so few prominent black figure heads, leaders, mentors of character as role models and the struggle continues. To educate the young, to change the thinking is a "process" and it should be our goal to for all of us to contribute towards building what architects like Rohan empower all of us to do.

25/02/2009 @ 17:46



Comment from: Peter Legris [Visitor]

Here here Rohan!
Very nice story, very well put. I am glad the Walters' spark is alive and shining.

25/02/2009 @ 19:16



Comment from: maureen loweth [Visitor]

Dear Rohan,

Thanks so much for sharing this. Here are a few things it made me think about:
- When I was growing up in St. Catharines, the diversity in my neighbourhood and city were represented largely by the Italians, Poles, Ukrainians and Germans who came to Canada after the second world war. There was only one black family with boys at my high school - and they were very handsome with big afros at a time when the Jackson 5 was gaining in popularity
-Of course, St. Catharines was an important spot on the underground railroad. There is a historical plaque dedicated to Harriet Tubman at the Baptist church. She visited this congregation a number of times on her journeys and lived in the area for some time
-You may also have heard of Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943). If I remember correctly he was from Niagara Falls, New York and was an educated composer and musician. About 10 years ago, Brainerd Blyden-Taylor started the Nathaniel Dett Chorale which is dedicated to Afrocentric music. They sang at the Canadian Embassy as part of President Obama's Inauguration. This choir is simply amazing. Get to a concert as soon as you can if you aren't familiar with their work already
-Lastly, the author of a book called I Found A Home in Glory Land spoke at George Brown College last year. She was asked to speak about George Brown as part of our 40th anniversary celebrations. Her book is a true story which is based on the lives of a former slave couple who settled in Toronto - in fact on the site where the old Sackville Schoolhouse now stands. They owned Toronto's first taxi business and became involved in Canada's first anti-slave coalition - started by George Brown! He was also one of the first financiers of the black community in Buxton, Ontario.

This seems like an especially important year to be celebrating Black History month with Obama now in the White House. None of these thoughts would have come to me if you hadn't sent your email.

Sincerely,

Maureen

25/02/2009 @ 19:21



Comment from: Gavin Baxter [Visitor]

Rohan - thanks

I read your story and immediately felt as if you had given me a very nice gift of hope and energy.

Please continue to inspire us.

Gavin

25/02/2009 @ 19:50



Comment from: Carrie Samuels [Visitor]

Rohan, you are right on point. Continue to be a bright star for our sons and daughters. They need to see us communicating our vision and with our self esteem solid and strong.
Carrie

26/02/2009 @ 08:59



Comment from: Robert Osbourne [Visitor]

Rohan,

Thanks for sharing your story, and some of your struggles. I have always admired your work, and the way you live your life.

Reading your piece, confirmed for me that you are not only a good designer, but a good and principled man.

Keep doing what you do.

Much Regards,

Robert Osbourne

26/02/2009 @ 08:59



Comment from: Daniel Karpinski [Visitor]

Thank you Rohan for shering this with us. It is a very moving story. I am proud to know you and I admire your dedication to design and to education by design.

Best
Daniel Karpinski

26/02/2009 @ 16:37



Comment from: Elaine S [Visitor]

You are a very caring, sensitive and valuable person. It is so important that you are setting such a fine example for young chidren!
Bravo!

26/02/2009 @ 22:00



Comment from: Alan Hall [Visitor]

Beautifully written, Rohan. Thank you. Having watched you work (and work) on at least one tough project, I now understand something of your immense patience, gentleness, and perseverance. As well as your sensitivity to harmony of design and space. Looking forward to continuing to work with you,

03/03/2009 @ 16:59



Comment from: John1239 [Visitor]

Very nice site!

10/04/2009 @ 19:18



Comment from: Venus [Visitor]

I rarely comment on blogs but yours I had to stop and say Great Blog!!

13/05/2009 @ 16:22



Comment from: carl [Visitor]

I rarely comment on blogs but yours I had to stop and say Great Blog!!

14/05/2009 @ 17:54

