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an Art Proposal for the Bayview Branch Library

A Play of Forms: Creating an Institution of Self-Discovery

Bayview is a dynamic community, with less glitz and luxury than many areas of San Francisco but with no less history or emotional investment from its residents. Accessible to all the major highways and minutes away from downtown San Francisco, this community that borders the bay, the Mission, Potrero Hill and Hunter's Point is undergoing significant changes. Prominently an African American community for the last 50 years, in recent years it has seen an influx of multicultural residents and is one of many areas targeted by the tsunami of ongoing development. I see the new library as an important place that will serve as an important source of pride and identity for Bayview's longtime residents while also serving as a point of introduction and a rewarding destination for newcomers and visitors.

Libraries are repositories of history and culture, containing books, maps, and other media which allow a community to locate itself globally and historically, and to see what is universal about itself; the exterior of the space should serve a similar function, creating a sense of connection and inspiring a thirst for self-knowledge. Because there is often a strong sense after development and/or gentrification that the traditionally African American background of a community such as Bayview has been lost or rendered invisible, I began to ask myself: how can the exterior be treated so as to inscribe that heritage directly into the architecture? Is there a universal language that will appeal to the diverse population who live in the area? What kind of imagery or pattern will spur viewers to undertake further investigation, to seek their own heritage and history among the shelves of the library?

I decided to take my inspiration from several different kinds of textiles and patterns that primarily come from two different countries in West Africa, Ghana and the Congo. The most commonly known is Kente Cloth, worn in Ghana for ceremonial purposes. The other selections are Kuba Cloth also known as Congolese Raffia Cloth and Congo Velvet; this cloth is made of raffia (a natural fiber made from palm leaves). Congo Velvet was used as currency and is often part of a dowry, where as the Kuba Cloth or the Congolese Rafia is worn for ceremonial purposes.

I was struck by the strong similarities in the patterns of Kente and Kuba Cloth with patterns I have seen in Oceanic sculpture, Tampa Cloth from the South Pacific, and numerous types of hand woven cloth from Mexico, South America and Asia. These similarities are like the parallels in human traditions - we learn and gather information from one another - and to me, speak to a universal human tendency toward certain forms which may originate in Africa but are global in scope, resonating with people from every hemisphere and continent.

I have decided to use the glass walls surrounding the courtyard and the clad wall in that area for art. I will take the forms that play across the Congolese Rafia Cloth and sprinkle the pattern across the surface of the glass by sandblasting the images, giving a thoroughly modern form to a time-honored pattern. These images will appear as translucent figures on a transparent background, human-like forms which will seem to flow in and out of the space. The glass will be visible looking into the courtyard and from the courtyard looking into the library. (My design will not reduce the visibility through the glass, necessary for library security.) The Clad Wall facing the courtyard will remain wood, but the wood will be stained in various shades of brown to create patterns that are found in both Kente Cloth and Kuba Cloth. By carrying these patterns into the courtyard, it will bring a cohesive theme that will run throughout the space. The sense of human figures flowing in and out serves as a reminder that ultimately, what makes any institution truly shine and come to life is the community it serves.

Like the people in the surrounding community, eager for opportunity, this library is a diamond in the rough, waiting to be polished. Although the facility is small, it is a jewel. The sophisticated design warrants artwork that will both compliment the structure and act as a focal point for the space. It is crucial that the current Bayview community, whose roots in the area may go back for generations, feel that this is their library; there should be some aspect which immediately speaks to them in the language of history. My proposal invites a consideration of cultural pride and parallel histories, but it is also meant to demonstrate, in its use of contemporary techniques and by being incorporated into an institution of learning and discovery, that one does not have to be stuck in the past: that we can maintain a sense of history and community while still looking forward.

