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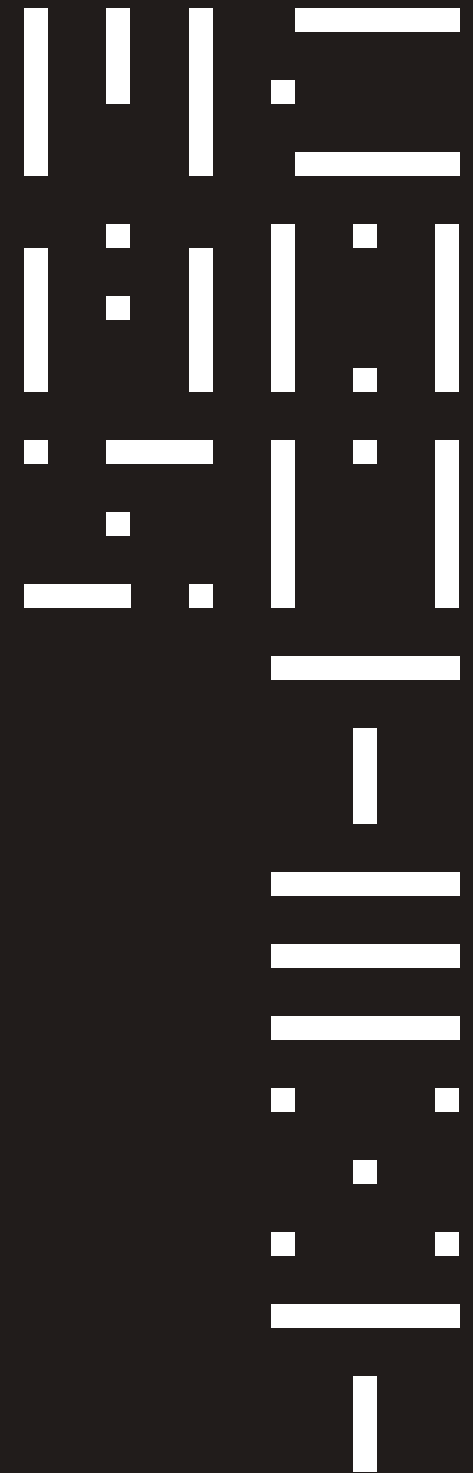
GALO CANIZARES

MAS CONTEXT

VIGILANT ISM



MAS CONTEXT  
ISSUE 33  
VIGILANTISM





MAS Context is a journal that addresses issues that affect the urban context. Each issue delivers a comprehensive view of a single topic through the active participation of people from different fields and different perspectives who, together, instigate the debate.

MAS Context is a 501(c)(3) not for profit organization based in Chicago, Illinois. It is partially supported by private donations.

MAS Context has printing support from Graphic Arts Studio.

ISSN 2332-5046

Welcome to the Vigilantism issue.

In this issue we explore spaces of vigilantism, both historically and today. What are the spatial dimensions of vigilante encounters, segregation, violence, and exclusion, or conversely emancipation, liberation, and inclusion? Threshold, circulation, private vs. public, and other architectural delineations of space have become the subject of much controversy as footage of sexist and racist policing of these spaces emerge. Beyond spatial dimensions, which regulatory, institutional, aesthetic, and material expressions of vigilantism does architecture condition? What is vigilante behavior in highly digital and post-digital space? In pop-culture? In new media? How do technology and design become means for cultivating and expressing those behaviors? How do contentious political movements respond to, and draw from, vigilantism? What are the micro-, meso-, and macro-level dynamics of sociospatial acts of violence? Can vigilantism ever be good? Liberatory? And what are ways aggressors, resisters, and witnesses take on characteristics of vigilantes?

To address these issues and more, vigilantism is a topic that needs to be explored.

Vigilantism is the thirty-third issue of MAS Context and our sixth collaboration with a guest editor. In previous guest-edited issues, our collaborations developed from a series of conversations that grew into the opportunity to publish issues that explored specific topics in depth. This issue had a different start as Miami-based architect Germane Barnes and Boulder-based architect Shawhin Roudbari approached us in 2020 with a proposal to explore vigilantism. While we hadn't worked with them in the past, we were immediately interested in their approach to the topic and their own work. It was an important and timely topic rooted in thorough research and a long-term commitment.

Germane investigates the connection between architecture and identity, examining architecture's social and political agency through historical research and design speculation. Mining architecture's social and political agency, he examines how the built environment influences Black domesticity. This past year, his work received the support and recognition from prestigious institutions: he was awarded the 2021 Wheelwright Prize from Harvard GSD, the 2021–22 Rome Prize Fellow at The American Academy in Rome, and the 2021 Architectural League Prize for Young Architects + Designers. It is a demonstration of the relevance of his ongoing research and the need to continue it with adequate resources and support.

Shawhin studies ways that designers organize to address social problems. He bridges sociological studies of social movements and race with architectural theory, working with sociologists and environmental designers and disseminating his work through architectural and sociological journals. Through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analyzing texts, he investigates ways activists shape and organize power towards justice causes. Shawhin is part of a team of researchers and designers at the University of Colorado Boulder's Program in Environmental Design that initiated DissentxDesign in 2018, a project that contributes to theories of contentious politics around race and racism in the spatial professions.

Their overlapping interests as well as their independent research made it the perfect collaboration to explore vigilantism. It is a topic that they have been discussing in weekly calls for over two years and took a new perspective during the summer of 2020 with the emergence of global social movements protesting police brutality and racially motivated violence against Black people.

As Germane and Shawhin will further explain in their text, they organized the topic through three manifestations of the role of the vigilante: the Aggressor, the Resistor, and the Witness. The contributions included in the issue explored those three roles

in a thoughtful, direct, and personal way. Along with the contributions, Germane and Shawhin selected a series of incidents published in the news, identified the objects that helped define the situation, and categorized them, creating an alternative way to inventory vigilantism. As you will see, some of the objects take on different manifestations of vigilantism in the same incident and others that we might consider neutral are far from that in the hands of a vigilante.

To help shape the visual identity of vigilantism, we have collaborated with graphic designer Bobby Joe Smith III, based out of Los Angeles. His thesis project at RISD "created a poetic refusal to the demands of a predominantly white, neoliberal, private academic institution seeking access and possession of Black and Indigenous knowledge with neither the ability nor intention to be responsible stewards of said knowledge." His interests and work are perfectly aligned with the topic and team.

As I have mentioned in previous guest-edited issues, these collaborations aim to create a structure to support our contributors, advance their work, and help disseminate their ideas. But it is also an opportunity for us to learn from the work of others as well as challenge and expand our understanding of architecture, the built environment, and society. Throughout our lives, we have all witnessed the actions of vigilantes and the never-ending incidents that are a manifestation of the structural issues we face. The question is then, what type of witness do we want to be when we know of and experience those incidents? How do we interpret and disseminate the information we have witnessed? What are the consequences of coming forward or remaining silent? None of us are neutral witnesses and what we do either deepens structures of racism or works toward dismantling them. When Shawhin and Germane contacted us last year with their proposal, we knew we had to take a stand and use our platform to explore this topic, include voices and perspectives that they found important to be discussed, and create another tool to continue their long-term commitment to the topic of vigilantism. Like them, many others are committed resisters and active witnesses fighting the actions, structures, and policies of the aggressors. Our spaces and institutions are not neutral, and neither should we be. ★

—Iker Gil, editor in chief of MAS Context





ARCHITECTURES

06



GERMANE BARNES

OF VIGILANTISM

07



AND

SHAWHIN ROUDBARI

One need only search “Key Fob Kelly,” “BBQ Becky,” or “Permit Patty” to find alarming patterns of the vigilante policing of space. The frequency and intensity of such interactions spark a needed examination of vigilantism and its role in architecture and urbanism.

Cities across the US have been deeply impacted by harmful covenants and policies that not only restrict space, but cause dangerous reverberation from which marginalized communities rarely recover. Our built environment is a battleground of homogeneity, inequity, and exclusion. Ultimately, that our desire for conformity and familiarity manifests as racialized encounters in public and private space should come as no surprise.

Ironically, we celebrate the vigilante in popular culture. Batman, Spiderman, and Wonder Woman are self-appointed figures who hoist the responsibility of civility, safety, and wellness on their shoulders. Naturally, our more overzealous and indoctrinated neighbors routinely attempt superhero cosplay, wearing the mask of vigilance with pride. Through carefully curated personas, citizens have been seduced by the legacy of heroism, deputizing themselves as protectors of the spaces we share.

This often results in a white figure creating unsafe racialized encounters. Historically, we have seen incidents such as these result in the bearing of strange fruit, the cop calls, the accosting, and the blocking of entryways today are no different. Whiteness has and will ever be reproduced through vigilantism. While many of the contemporary examples of architectural vigilantism result in public ridicule and in some instances unemployment, historically the most extreme examples end in death. Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy from the South Side of Chicago was accused of whistling at a white woman near a local convenience store. This was seen as an act of bravado and arrogance which ended in the brutal torture of an innocent child. Emmett’s story would be one that many young Black males were forced to learn as any similar spatial occupation in non-familiar territory could result in their death. Till is a tragic and iconic victim of the brutal force of this white vigilantism. Till’s presence in a white-owned grocery store, his violation of the racialized thresholds of space and conduct on an August day in 1955, and the display of his mutilated body in an open casket in Chicago all have profound lessons to offer us.

The architectures of vigilantism here span the scale of the neighborhood, the store, the street, and the home where Emmet Till’s presence signified disruption, agitation, and destruction. Aggression, resistance, and witnessing in their competing interpretations in this history, are visceral and traumatic, as well as creative and powerful. We find ourselves conflicted as we try to frame our understanding of the open casket—the visibility, confrontation, reckoning, and demand for justice it signifies.

Our initial interrogations of these incidents revealed three prominent and recurring manifestations of the vigilante: the Aggressor, the Resistor, and the Witness. Aggressors utilize prejudice and social majority affiliations to restrict access to space. Resistors use their politicized bodies, spatial positioning, and other means to assert their claim to the right to use space. Witnesses use spatial tactics and their relationship to confrontation to assert their role in interpreting and disseminating documentation.

Aggressors, resisters, and witnesses operate spatially and institutionally. Contentions over space, as architecture and as geography, play out in regulatory, bureaucratic, aesthetic, and material spaces. Collectively, the contributions of the featured guests bring insights into the ways architectural elements such as threshold, circulation, hierarchy, and access condition vigilantism.

In this issue of MAS Context, a motley range of perspectives frame new ways of conceptualizing vigilance and the architectures of vigilantism. Atelier Mey, Chat Travieso, A.L. Hu, Ashley Bigham, Emanuel Admassu, and Galo Canizares uncover racialized aggression in the form of civil infrastructure, activism, suburban planning, housing, and the right to destroy. Sean Canty, Sekou Cooke, Demar Matthews, Andrew Santa Lucia, and Krystina François tell stories of resistance. Domesticity, pedagogy, the occupation of spaces not intended for us, the occupation of institutions not intended for us, and the occupation of territories not intended for us exemplify the politics of resistance that these contributors guide us through in their essays. Finally, Jennifer Newsom, Joseph Altschuler, Zack Morrison, Jennifer Bonner, Laida Aguirre, Gary Richirō Fox, Jia Yi Gu, Cyrus Penarroyo, and Katherine McKittrick offer new forms of witnessing. Through documentation, choreography, reflection, whistle-blowing, and epistemological innovation, they reject a passive notion of what it means to witness. Under their guidance, we learn to see the act of witnessing as an emancipatory politics that transcends the reactionary politics of aggression and resistance.

The perspectives offered by this issue’s contributors span a range of territories across design and space-making fields. As guest editors, we challenge your conceptions of spatial practice and offer this issue as an entry point and incomplete understanding of racialized encounters within the architected environment. For some, this text will be a mirror to reconcile explicit and implicit realities of discrimination. For others, this text will act as a field guide to further the continued efforts of dismantling white supremacy. ★

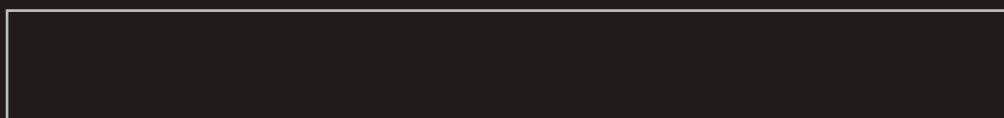
—Germane Barnes and Shawhin Roudbari,  
guest editors of Vigilantism

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	WHAT KIND OF VIGILANTE ARE YOU? INTRODUCTION BY IKER GIL . . . . .	04
	ARCHITECTURES OF VIGILANTISM INTRODUCTION BY GERMANE BARNES AND SHAWHIN ROUDBARI . . . . .	06
01.	BLACK COMPOUND ESSAY BY EMANUEL ADMASSU . . . . .	12
02.	ARCHITECTURE PERFORMING LIVE ESSAY BY JOSEPH ALTSHULER AND ZACK MORRISON . . . . .	30
03.	COLLISIONS ESSAY BY GERMANE BARNES AND SHAWHIN ROUDBARI . . . . .	54
04.	A SINGLE FAMILY ESSAY BY ASHLEY BIGHAM . . . . .	70
05.	LOOPTY LOOPS (#ALWAYS WIP) ESSAY BY JENNIFER BONNER . . . . .	88
06.	ARCHITECTURE IN THE AGE OF (SUPER) HEROES ESSAY BY GALO CANIZARES . . . . .	100
07.	DOMESTIC VIGILANCE AS AN AESTHETIC PRACTICE ESSAY BY SEAN CANTY . . . . .	120
08.	OCCUPY STUDIO: BLACKNESS, PROTEST, AND DIRTY-PINUPS ESSAY BY SEKOU COOKE . . . . .	136
09.	QUEER VIGILANTISM ESSAY BY A. L. HU . . . . .	150
10.	A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: IMAGE NOTES FROM MINNEAPOLIS PHOTO ESSAY BY JENNIFER NEWSOM . . . . .	174
11.	SURVIVING RESPECTABILITY INTERVIEW WITH KRYSTINA FRANÇOIS . . . . .	190
12.	THE RECONSTRUCTION OF APPROACHABILITY INTERVIEW WITH DEMAR MATTHEWS . . . . .	204
13.	DISCIPLINED IN THE HOUSE OF TOMORROW ESSAY BY ANDREW SANTA LUCIA . . . . .	218
14.	CONCRETE TERROR: RACE BARRIERS AND VIGILANTISM IN THE UNITED STATES ESSAY BY CHAT TRAVIESO . . . . .	236
15.	TACTICS OF CONTROL: RACE + WATER IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA ESSAY BY ATELIER MEY . . . . .	252
16.	THE OPEN LETTER AND THE SPREADSHEET: DIGITAL VIGILANTE PRACTICES IN ARCHITECTURE CONVERSATION BETWEEN LAIDA AGUIRRE, GARY RIICHIŌ FOX, JIA YI GU, AND CYRUS PEÑARROYO . . . . .	274
17.	THE ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS OF VIGILANTISM INTERVIEW WITH KATHERINE MCKITTRICK . . . . .	290



BLACK COMPOUND



EMANUEL ADMASSU

## 1.

I share the top floor of a three-decker with my partner and infant son in Providence, Rhode Island. As I write this essay, we are living through a global pandemic and shifting from a grotesque to a more palatable version of American hegemony. 2020, more than any year in recent memory, has felt like a year that has been lived digitally. Most of our days are spent indoors, but the physical environments we inhabit have been suspended and superseded by the meteoric rise of screen time: Zoom, WhatsApp, Signal, Instagram, email, and back to Zoom again—disembodied dispersals into grids of faces and scrolls of images. Every scroll leads to a new portal, a new disaster.

The three-decker (or triple-decker as it is more widely known today) is an emblematic working-class residential typology of New England. The one we occupy is a narrow building with one apartment per floor. It has bay windows that bulge out from the front façade of its rectangular volume, and its balloon framing is covered with wood siding and topped with a steep gable. A flimsy wooden fence wraps around the back and two sides of the building, leaving the front open to the sidewalk. Surrounded by a cluster of three-deckers, each window extends our view into our neighbors' yards, driveways, and gardens. At night we look through their windows into their softly lit interiors. We watch people cooking, dancing, tending to their gardens, walking their dogs, and washing their cars. A welcome set of distractions for a year of containment.

Three-deckers began to appear in New England in the late nineteenth century, shortly after the Civil War. They provided housing for immigrants who were arriving from Italy and Ireland to work in the textile mills and factories. Today, they mostly house immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, and Colombia working jobs that have suddenly been deemed "essential." Our daily walks have turned into surveys of neighboring three-deckers that are being swiftly renovated for young professionals moving to Providence from more expensive cities like Boston and New York, displacing the current residents and benefitting from "indefinitely remote" working arrangements.

Life in quarantine heightens one's awareness of our corporeal inscriptions within the regime of property: its inherent exclusions and borderizations shrink-wrap our bodies.<sup>01</sup> This compression is coupled with the arrival of a virus that has intensified existing fears of the outside. A space that is predominantly reserved for people who have been racialized, kept out for hundreds of years—

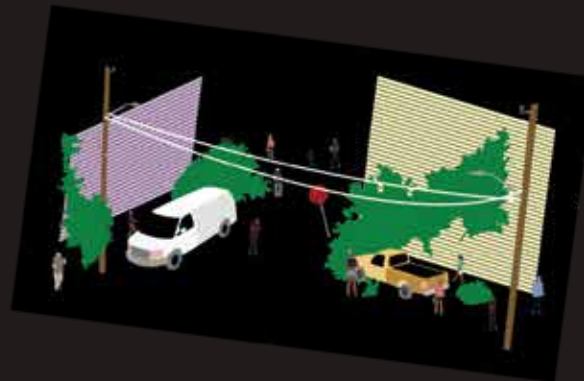
The Amharic word for territory, *dinber*, connotes an amorphous landmass demarcated by its natural features: trees, rock formations, topography, and shrubbery, outlining a general area of operation that requires constant care, attention, and maintenance. The kingdoms that were dispersed across the region that is now known as Ethiopia, from the Axumite to the Zagwe and Solomonic Dynasties, negotiated a series of overlapping *dinbers*.



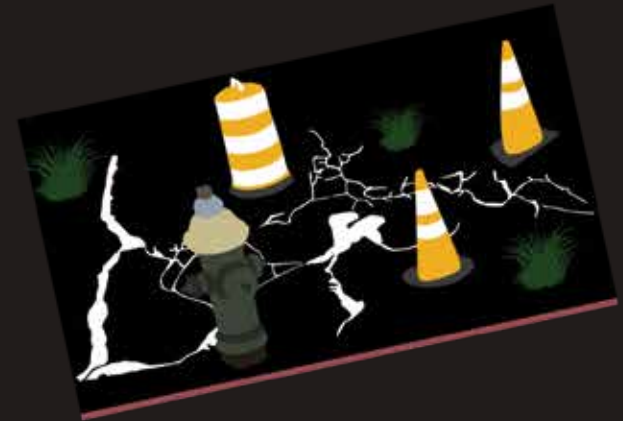
01. Achille Mbembe, "Bodies as Borders," in *From the European South*, issue 4, (2019): 10.

02. Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," in *Representations*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (University of California Press, 2005), 1–15.

16



17



03. Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 24.

outside of law, citizenship, and the body.<sup>03</sup> These are the tenets of a world order built on racial hierarchy and cyclical dispossessions.<sup>03</sup>

This viciousness is intensified by the volatility of the Black interior. Elizabeth Alexander writes about a generation of young people who are growing up consuming the relentless specter of Black death on their cellphone screens:

They always knew these stories. These stories formed their world view. These stories helped instruct young African Americans about their embodiment and their vulnerability. The stories were primers in fear and futility. The stories were

the ground soil of their rage. These stories instructed them that anti-black hatred and violence were never far.<sup>04</sup>

04. Elizabeth Alexander, "The Trayvon Generation," *The New Yorker*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation>.

Looking out the window, while holding my ten-month-old baby in my arms, I wonder if the merger between our digital and physical lives has eradicated spaces that were previously considered to be interiors, zones that could be defended from invasions—colonial or otherwise?

Cellphone screens and laptops perforate our three-decker with images of vigilantes negating Black life. Images that travel and connect multiple sites of death: a suburban street, an urban sidewalk, an apartment building, a parking lot. I scroll past protest signs, black squares, drone shots of streets with bold yellow letters, screen grabs of white text with black backgrounds, promising solidarity and confessing complacency. Big Tech profiting from broadcasting the premature endings of our lives. These are the territories, snippets of space and time, that are weaponized in the preservation of racial capitalism. Transforming the meaning of familiar, everyday environments, and making us feel like we are outside our bodies and the planet at large.

## 2.

My trans-Atlantic move from Addis Ababa to Marietta, Georgia, as a teenager felt like falling into the rift that exists between Africa and the Americas. I left the comfort of a compound house in a bustling African capital and entered into a quiet subdivision in a northern suburb of Atlanta. My

parents took a calculated risk. They sent me to live with my aunt and attend high school in the United States, with hopes that it would increase my chances of earning a college degree (it did). These are the risks often taken by parents who raise children in territories that function as extraction sites for European and American imperialism; places that are still trying to recover from Cold War politics and structural adjustment programs. But my move was also an embodied transition from a distant and relatively abstract understanding of one's place in the world to a direct confrontation with the hierarchies that shape and maintain it.

The racialization I experienced upon arrival offered jarring insights into the mundane violence of US suburban culture. A landscape of alienation built with strip malls, single-family homes, and cul-de-sacs. The high school cafeteria, the YMCA, the classmate's house, the soccer field, were all sites of racial trauma. Nonetheless, my aunt's house, and the houses of other relatives in the suburbs of Atlanta, offered sanctuaries, shields from the anxieties I felt elsewhere. We ate food cooked with spices imported from the motherland and engaged in rituals that reminded us of home. The houses looked just like their neighbors', built with the same materials: timber framing, insulation, vinyl siding, and stone veneer accents. A sameness that was briefly interrupted by our presence.

Inhabiting the rift also meant living in a subdivision with a name that recalls bucolic landscapes in England. A settler colonial fantasy linking whiteness to nature and purity. Subtle topographic clues suggest the end of one property and the beginning of another, limits further articulated through lines drawn by the asynchronous mowing of adjacent lawns. Ironically, the lack of physical barriers does not increase residents' potential to socialize. People have minimal interactions with their neighbors: awkward waves from car windows or nods while checking the mailbox. Mothers with strollers and pets walk around the cul-de-sac, hoping not to see other pedestrians.

Today, these geographies of white flight, where white people fled to as Atlanta became increasingly Black, are experiencing rapid inversions.<sup>05</sup> In other words, the suburbs of Atlanta are becoming increasingly Black, as the city, fueled by urban renewal projects (greenwashing neglect), is becoming increasingly white. Segregationist spatial practices are being updated in response to the fugitivity of Black life. The racial delineation between who lives inside and outside the perimeter of Interstate 285 is being blurred by the suburbanization of Blackness.

05. Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). 2005.







In describing African American spaces as practices of refusal, Tina M. Campt writes:

06. Tina M. Campt, "Constellations of Freedom: Assembly, Reflection, and Repose," in *In Search of African American Space: Redressing Racism*, eds. Jeffrey Hogrefe, Scott Ruff, Carrie Eastman, Ashley Simone (Zürich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2020).

A practice is an unfinished or ongoing process. It designates a durational temporality that functions as a process of preparation. Practice is also fundamentally social in nature, as it forms a core role in the formation of subjectivity. More specifically, in this case, it is the social process of preparation required to enact new ways of inhabiting freedom. "Practice" is, in this way, a form of prefiguration; it enacts new forms of Black sociality by allowing us to live the future we want to see, not at a distant point of time to come, but here and now in the present.<sup>06</sup>

By the time I arrived in the late 1990s, members of my immediate and extended family had already moved to the suburbs. They were/are part of an ongoing wave of Black people who have chosen to leave the city behind. By 2010, 87% of the Black population was already living in

the suburbs—housing more suburban Black people than any other metropolitan region in the country.<sup>07</sup> This is making the suburban house a prominent site of refusal.

07. Karen Pooley, "Segregation's New Geography: The Atlanta Metro Region, Race, and the Declining Prospects for Upward Mobility," *Southern Spaces*, April 15, 2015, <https://southernspaces.org/2015/segregations-new-geography-atlanta-metro-region-race-and-declining-prospects-upward-mobility>.

family—a franchise fashioned through gendered labor and redlined cities. But ongoing demographic shifts are unsettling these environments of possessive isolation. Spaces that were designed to exclude Black life are being actively transformed into loopholes for Black joy. Spending time with friends and family in the suburbs of Atlanta feels like a reclamation, a refashioning of single-family houses as boundless sites of gathering.

These shifts are also tied to what Achille Mbembe calls the "technological escalation."<sup>08</sup> An atomization of spaces and practices that previously needed to be centralized: recording trap music in the

08. Achille Mbembe, "Bodies as Borders," in *From the European South*, issue 4 (2019): 10.

closets of Atlanta's suburban homes, transforming domestic interiors into film sets, and remaking strip malls into cultural centers. These sites serve as ruptures, carving out temporal zones of digital and physical liberation, within consistent zones of suppression. They offer alternatives within the banal mendacity of the American suburb.

### 3.

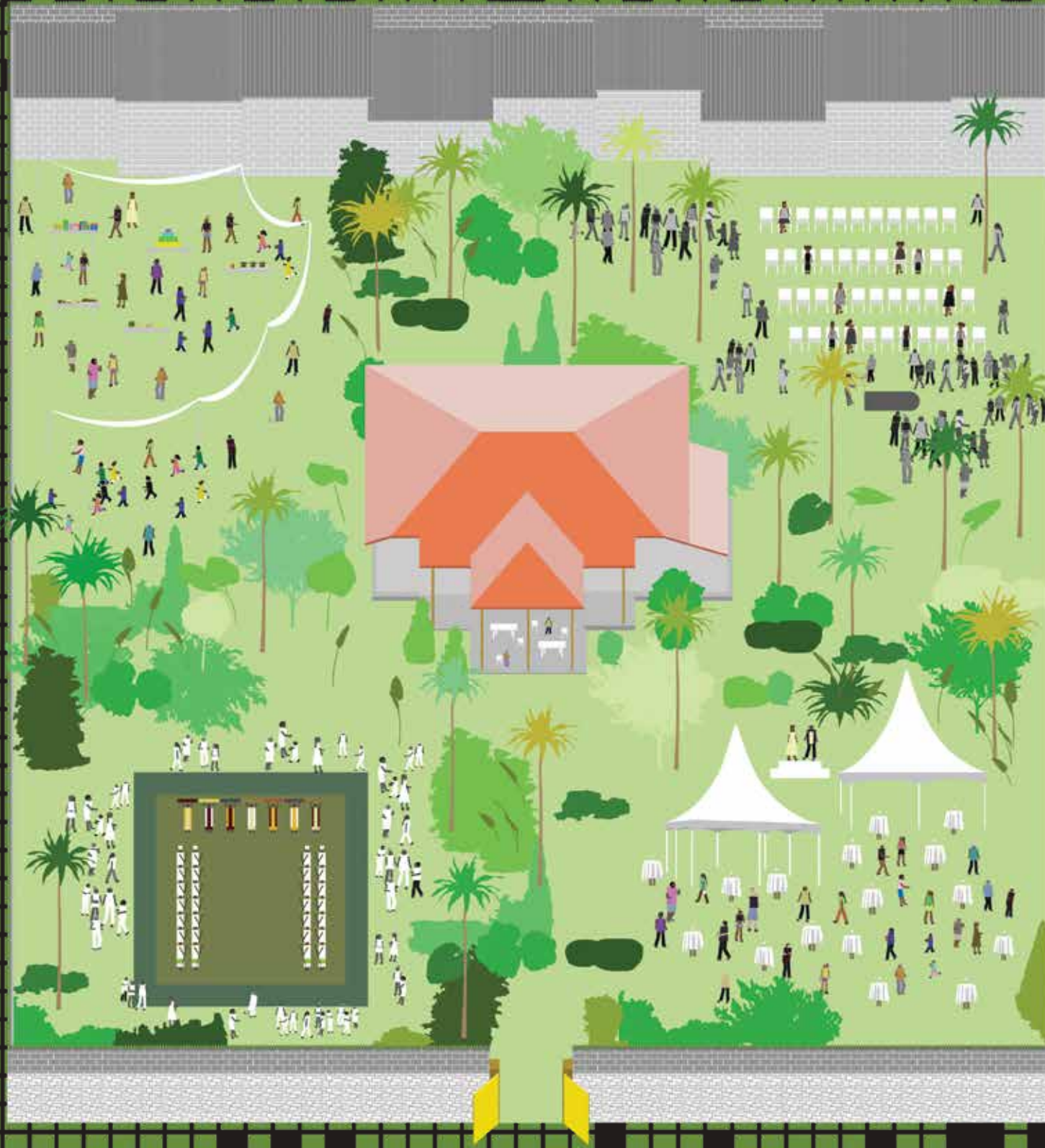
One of the core tenets of the contemporary regime of property is the assumption that we can inextricably separate ourselves from our neighbors. It is based on the anxieties born out of different forms of brutal domination, namely, the fear that those who have been dispossessed will eventually come back and reclaim their land and their bodies. But what if we operate from the basis that autonomy is an unachievable fantasy? What if we choose to dwell deeply within the infinite entanglements of the land, the ocean, the climate, and their unquestionable instabilities?

This sensibility seems to have been a given, something so obvious that it didn't warrant a discussion, in the compound house in Addis Ababa—the place I called home for the first decade and a half of my life. Built by my grandparents before the Italian occupation (1936–1941), it is a territory that refuses territorialization. A zone that is constantly penetrated by neighbors and friends, as well as relatives and their loved ones, providing intimate, communal environments for its long- and short-term occupants. I try to visit at least once a year, hoping the virtues of this place won't escape my intuition.

It feels like there are these things called individual subjects, walking around. It feels like I'm one. You know? It seems like everything is organized around that feeling. My language is organized around that feeling, a lot of my hopes and dreams are organized around that feeling, my pleasures, my pains... It seems like that but maybe it's not really like that. And maybe there's another kind of materialism that moves by way of another understanding of metaphysics, or a rejection of metaphysics, if what metaphysics always implies is individuation.<sup>09</sup>

09. Woodbine NYC, "A Conversation with Fred Moten 12/02/18," *YouTube Video*, 1:47:01, December 4, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6b5N\\_u7Ebs&ab\\_channel=WoodbineNYC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6b5N_u7Ebs&ab_channel=WoodbineNYC).

My grandparents modified and expanded the house to accommodate their growing family—a notion that seems to have always had a tenuous definition. A humble single-story villa built with eucalyptus framing, wattle and daub construction sits at the center of the compound. The compound is approximately ten times the plot of our three-decker in Providence. I have heard several stories of my grandparents' relatives coming to share their harvest from the countryside. I have witnessed weddings, funerals, birthdays, and religious holidays that required large tents next to the garden. It is a place that gains its ambiance from the voices of the people who come in and out, an identity built on invitation rather than exclusion, a space that makes it diffi-





cult, if not impossible, to feel alone. At any given time, there are anywhere between five and fifteen people in the compound.

Nonetheless, at its core, the compound house is a defensive typology. It offered spatiotemporal delineations for members of a nomadic society. As the seat of the Ethiopian empire became sedentary, compound walls began to transform into relatively permanent enclosures. Addis Ababa was settled shortly after successfully resisting European colonization in the late nineteenth century. Ironically, this sovereignty was achieved through a more regional form of imperialism, where Empress Taytu Betul and Emperor Menelik II consolidated a series of *dinbers* into a solidified border, forming a modern nation-state—a defensive response to the European scramble for Africa. Therefore, at its best, the compound house demonstrates the fluidity and openness of its nomadic beginnings, and, at its worst, it is an architectural materialization of all the failures we associate with nationalisms—their borders, omissions, and disposessions.

These protective spaces built in response to ever-present threats of infiltration—from colonialism to neoliberalism—achieve safety through a slow and deliberate cultivation of “fellowship.”<sup>10</sup>

10. Trinity Church Wall Street, “Sunday Sermon: Dr. Fred Moten, January 19, 2020, 11:15am.” *YouTube* Video, 14:06, January 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VevVQ9xeUNc>.

People arrive unannounced to congratulate, comfort, or simply check-in on family members—joy is shared, so is grief. There are weekly rituals that extend from the church to the compound, like gatherings for the Edir, a neighborhood-based mutual aid group that collects a small fee

each month, or gatherings for the Mehaber, another mutual aid group formed around monthly meals with friends. The money collected from these gatherings is used to pay for funeral services, medical expenses, and other emergencies of neighbors, friends, and their loved ones. It is linked to a larger tapestry of care.

Nevertheless, the communality maintained by the compounds does not fully negate the fragmentation of the nation-state. It simply juxtaposes the fragments—the land, the climate, the people, and their rituals. At times the compounds offer spatial antidotes to the intensifying ethnic divisions and wealth disparities sponsored by the “development paradigm.” It offers moments of amnesia within spaces that are constantly being reshaped by the pressures of global capital:

11. Sylvia Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” *Savacou*, no. 5 (June 1971): 94.

For they are caught in a collision and a clash that was inherent and in-built, and still is, between the plantation system, a system, owned and dominated by external forces, and what we shall call the plot system, the indigenous, autochthonous system.<sup>11</sup>

Ethiopia's origin story facilitates a certain form of blindness to the neocolonial entanglements that are eroding the edges of its inward-looking society. The compound is positioned at the apex of this contradiction: the urge to protect Black interiors while eschewing the violence of territorialization. Throughout Addis Ababa, speculative real estate practices are demolishing compound houses and replacing them with luxury residential towers. The ones that have survived such fates have been balkanized: there are armed guards, electric wires, cameras, and alarm systems.

But what exactly is the logical conclusion of sovereignty? Is it meant to erase the compound wall and replace it with something more ephemeral? Or is it meant to further solidify these partitions? The amorphousness of the *dinber*, the deterritorialization of land through various practices of commoning, requires us to experiment with other forms of relation. Maybe the most generative definition of vigilantism is not a nostalgic return but a relentless departure from settling. A practice that requires us to investigate how we can avoid reproducing the failures of the previous generation. The need to understand the difference between Indigenous sovereignty and settler colonialism; the difference between collective caretaking and propertied isolation.

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Being a member of the African diaspora means stretching oneself across, and at times, occupying all these realms: the inside and the outside, the rift and the boundary, the plot and the plantation. It is a collective practice built on the impossibility of a return; a commitment to imagining and building a world where Black compounds thrive. A world that is not built on internal or external forms of domination, but instead, on the need to remain uncertain and unbound, in Addis Ababa, Atlanta, Providence, New York, or anywhere else we choose to pass by, either through forms of reclamation or reconstruction, building Afrodiasporic spaces that value the intimacy of our interiors, the mutuality of our gatherings, the collectivity of our refusals, and the permeability of our *dinbers*. ★





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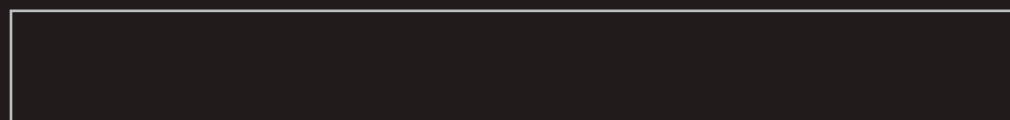
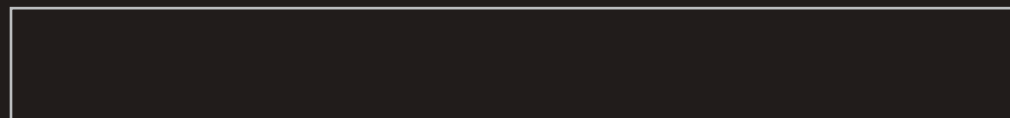


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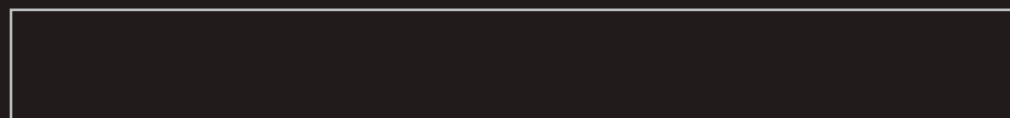


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# ARCHITECTURE PERFORMING LIVE



JOSEPH ALTSHULER  
AND ZACK MORRISON



“I never practice, I only perform”  
—Chance the Rapper<sup>21</sup>

What if architecture performed live shows? Whether hanging from its rafters, opening its doors wide to new audiences, or pirouetting into the public way, architecture’s liveness and liveliness offer its practitioners, teachers, and everyday users important tactics to resist the oppression of the status quo and remake the world according to liberated dreams and animated desires.

Whether we are paying attention or not, architecture is a starring performer in our everyday lives. It acts out cultural signifiers and power structures. It shapes our routines and provokes surprises. It frustrates us and it makes us laugh. It plays the role of the backdrop and the main actor, the show, and the audience. By explicitly designing and heightening the live(ly) performance of architecture, we might help reveal the underlying connections, overlaps, and solidarity among ourselves, others, and the built environment.

Mainstream understanding of architecture’s performance remains almost exclusively technical, with “performance” commonly referring to environmental building systems including HVAC efficiency, envelope responsiveness, or attributes of building materials. While the quantitative, thermodynamic performance of architecture is important, the qualitative, psychodynamic performance of architecture offers new potential to animate its cultural relevance and expand and diversify its audiences.<sup>22</sup> If architecture, as both a human community of practitioners and a nonhuman community of physical structures, hopes to build new audiences, perhaps it can learn from other cultural outlets that are particularly adept at engaging spectators and fans, such as theater, performance art, and sports. Could architecture inspire audiences to laugh hysterically, boo in disgust, applaud in standing ovations, or rush the court, and if so, what does that mean in an architectural context? This essay celebrates and speculates on new forms of theatrical, bodily, and athletic performance for architecture, with a special emphasis on architecture performing live to engage diverse audience types, especially those communities that have been systematically excluded throughout history.

In the Western/Eurocentric tradition, architecture is both conceptualized and constructed as a fixed, static, and permanent entity that is literally or figuratively planted in the ground as it transfers its “dead loads.” This “groundedness” suggests structural stability, moral integrity, and material and cultural permanence.<sup>23</sup> We believe this worldview helps reify authoritarian qualities of the built environment and belies the living qualities of all buildings—which in reality constantly breathe, consume fuel, emit exhaust, shift in their structural live loads, and reconfigure themselves over time in cooperation with human and nonhuman agents. While all buildings exhibit these vital, performative qualities, we also believe it is instructive to

distinguish between buildings' ongoing dynamic life cycles from the charged, live performances that architecture might also enact in specific moments in time and cultural contexts.

"Art that is 'live' can be distinguished from art that is part of an idea of the 'practice of everyday life' in terms of ordinary actions or interventions that are pedestrian and sometimes participatory. The latter approach has what might be described as a softer tone than that sense of charge implied by the 'live.' ... 'Liveness,' in sharp contrast, carries an intensity of being in the moment, a mutual presentness, even an element of physical risk."<sup>04</sup>

We are eager to amplify architecture's liveliness. Unlike many other "live art" and cultural practices that enjoy explicit venues for public performance, participation, and entertainment, architecture is all around us all the time. Without a proscenium, screen, or other "narrative frame" to contain it, the stuff of the built environment is often taken for granted as a given reality, obscuring the imagination and ideology that underpin any construction. Live performance tactics offer an opportunity to enact the human body in specific spatial scenarios that call attention to architecture's sometimes invisible politics and cultural imaginations. It pushes us to de-familiarize our everyday buildings and environments and rehearse new ways of living together.

Live, theatrical performance as a delivery mode for architectural ideas—"performance architecture" for short—is not new. One (of multiple) origin points for performance architecture is the work of Oskar Schlemmer, an important protagonist and faculty member of the Bauhaus. Schlemmer directed the Bauhaus stage department which became an ideal venue to explore the geometric relationships between the human figure, movement, and space. His performances, such as the *Triadic Ballet*, straddle costume design, choreography, and architecture. By designing wearable, locomotive forms that are powered by the human body, Schlemmer's work underscores and exaggerates the animate, lively qualities of built things. Schlemmer also created a multidisciplinary course called "der Mensch" (or "human being"), an intellectual space to speculate on a new vision for the human body in a rapidly modernizing world after the horrors of World War I. Schlemmer's Bauhaus performances in effect become a platform to rehearse a new design for the human species alongside a companion "species" of architecture.<sup>05</sup>



## RECENT RESURGENCE

"I see architecture as a performing art."

—Stanley Tigerman<sup>06</sup>

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in performance art as a medium to deliver architectural ideas and engage with new audiences. The critic Mimi Zeiger reviewed some of these recent practices in her 2018 article "Architecture Embraces Performance Art (Again)" and attributed the growing trend to pragmatic, phenomenological, and political reasons.<sup>07</sup> Architecture with a capital "A" is slow, exclusive, and bound up with existing power structures and capitalism. There is a desire among contemporary architects to deliver work with more immediacy than traditional building projects and to engage more directly with social issues by working more with live people and less through static representation.

Beyond the important pragmatic, phenomenological, and political motivations that Zeiger identifies, performance offers a disciplinary format for architects to take things into their own hands and test new spatial ideas among live contexts. For decades, the constructed pavilion has monopolized built architectural experimentation in western, elite settings. As a full-scale built construct that is liberated from strict functional requirements and building codes, but often still inhabitable by humans, the pavilion format provides architects with a useful outlet for experimentation and conjecture. Pavilions pervade the proliferating calendar of architectural competitions, exhibitions, and biennials accordingly.

Performance offers a compelling alternative to pavilions as a format for architectural experimentation broadly, and to bolster architects' self-initiated agency in experimentation specifically. Pavilion architecture can easily be crafted and delivered in a vacuum, often in a closed workflow from digital model to digital fabrication technology output; they may be sited in sensitive contexts, but they easily avoid their messy contingencies. Pavilions are often aloof, otherworldly, and exclusive—their exquisite frames often remain empty and devoid of bodies. In contrast, performance architecture is prone to be intimate, interactive, innerworldly, and inclusive—its dynamic frames abound with liveliness and highlight bodily action and



relationships. Performance architecture requires participation, typically by actors outside of the architect's primary purview; this integral necessity for collaboration pushes architects into social settings and communities of diverse others, producing an array of relational feedback loops and creative displacements of labor.

We will unpack four recent performance architecture case studies and speculate on their possible futures. Each case study defines and situates a different organizational and spatial relationship between architects/performers and audiences, from remote audiences that are strategically displaced from the action to audiences invited to encounter or join the performers on "stage," to audiences laboring to enact a performance with their own sweat and tears. We invite you to sit back and enjoy how these projects reposition and recast their participants and witness how these shuffled roles and augmented contexts might shake up disciplinary practice as we know it.

## 1.

### Remote Audience

*Makin' It*—a sitcom pilot by Studio APT


*Makin' It* is the 2013 pilot episode of a fictional sitcom TV series created by Studio APT, the architecture duo of Julia and John McMorrough. Architects don't usually make sitcoms, and so it should come as no surprise that the architects reveal that they designed the set before the script.<sup>28</sup> But by exploring the intersection of architecture and theatrical performance in an eighteen-minute-long episode (including commercials also crafted by the architects!), this project breaks new ground for architects to engage broader cultural (and comic) delivery modes to communicate spatial ideas.

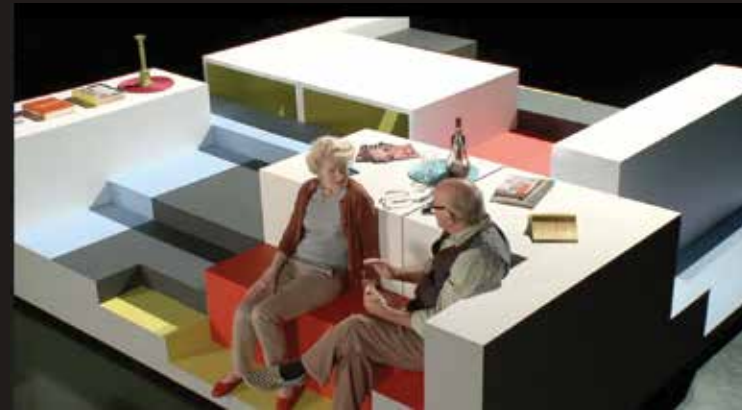
The sitcom features back-and-forth one-liners, often cheesy ones, between a fictional husband-wife architect team, Ruth and Hugh, who are struggling to find work. As possible alter egos of the McMorroughs themselves, the story perhaps plays out their own repressed desire to perform comedy, or even a more broad repressed desire for architecture to be funnier:

Hugh: "I even brought it up with my guidance counselor in high school. I said I wanted to be either an architect, or a comedian, and he advised me that I wasn't smart enough."

Ruth: "To be an architect?"

Hugh: "No, a comedian."<sup>29</sup>

Like all TV pilots, *Makin' It* is a proof of concept. This pilot does not test market value, but rather, it tests the potential of format and form. Studio APT leverages the self-initiated performance as a wide-ranging opportunity to experiment in crafting a suite of design deliverables adjacent to architectural  *Makin' It*. © studioAPT.





production, including script writing (akin to specifications), stage/set design (construction drawings), and film direction (project management and construction administration).

The centerpiece of the performance is the stage/set design. It plays the role of a third, nonhuman character in comedic companionship with Ruth and Hugh. Described as a “Platform for Architecture,” the stage is an abstract, rectilinear array of boxy surfaces calibrated at various heights for human activity, including sitting, standing, and using a table. The stage has no walls or backdrop, and can be approached in the round. The boxy surfaces approximate the standard dimensions of furnishings that populate typical domestic interiors, including the spatial approximations of a countertop (kitchen), a desk (office), and a couch (living room). For each act, the platform is rotated to orient a different domestic “region” toward the front. Each act also features a different camera angle that corresponds to a different architectural drawing convention such as elevation, axonometric, and perspective. In this way, the cinematography integral to the sitcom format, in tandem with the spoken dialogue, perform live to exhibit, narrate, and animate the specificity of the “Platform’s” architecture.

A live audience is noticeably absent from this act of performance architecture, a fact underscored by the inclusion of a boisterous laugh track. Because the remote audience is displaced in space and time from the actors, and is free to rewind, rewatch, and relive their favorite jokes, the audience enjoys a different kind of intimacy than would be otherwise possible in a more conventional live context. Comfortably seated in their homes behind screens, the anonymous audience does not build direct relationships with their fellow viewers; rather, by watching reruns in their pajamas, at-home viewers might cultivate an episodic fan-following of the characters and a connoisseurship of the architectural character in the starring role, the set, especially with the promise that there may be a full season of subsequent episodes.

The specificity of an audience for *Makin’ It* is less relevant than an appraisal of the audience-building potential posed by the existence of the fully realized pilot. Given that the sitcom is a story about architects sitting in architecture, written and directed by architects, this performance may be an ultimate meta-act for the discipline: it is a performance intended to build audiences of architects so as to motivate said architects to build new audiences. That may be this sitcom’s biggest strength and weakness: aside from the apparent weirdness of the very idea of architecture broadcast via a sitcom, the performance remains safely within its own formatted world; it neither

pushes the limits of comedy nor does it push the limit of how architecture itself might perform comedically. But as a pilot that also normalizes this new possible medium, it also paves the way for the more adventurous future possibilities.

## 2.

### Delineated Audience

*We Know How to Order* and *Marching On*—South Shore Drill Team and Marching Cobras of New York performances by Bryony Roberts and Mabel O. Wilson

*We Know How to Order* (2015) and *Marching On* (2018) are two distinct but related performances by Bryony Roberts (in collaboration with Mabel O. Wilson on the latter) that nurture artistic partnerships with local drill teams and marching band troupes to inject movement, joy, and power into public spaces. These performances celebrate Black youth’s agency to occupy and animate public spaces in American cities through live dance and music. At the same time, these performances confront and challenge the histories of systemic racism that sought to remove and exclude Black bodies and communities from these public spaces. While the scheduled public performances that culminate each project are temporal and ephemeral, they establish lasting precedents for how architecture (as a profession and a set of spatial techniques) can participate in partnership with communities to rehearse new worlds for those communities beyond the performance itself.

In *We Know How to Order*, Roberts works closely with the South Shore Drill Team to activate the static and authoritarian grid of Mies van der Rohe’s Federal Plaza in downtown Chicago. While trained as an architect, Roberts self-describes her role in these projects as the “art director,” a role that she believes involves siting and narrative-framing, crafting a visual language, and conceptualizing a relationship to an audience.<sup>10</sup> The siting of the performance itself performs a resonant narrative: by inviting Black youth to perform in Federal Plaza, a major midcentury civic investment in the city center, Roberts is invoking the history of disinvestment in Black and Brown communities on Chicago’s South and West Sides; moreover, because Federal Plaza houses the federal court system, the performance’s site reiterates the ongoing violence waged by the judicial system to the Black and Brown people who call those communities home.



The visual language of the performance is envisioned by Roberts in collaboration with the Drill Team's choreographer Asher Waldron, with the choreographer crafting the details of the performers' motion within and along the gridded arrays of terrazzo pavers. Traditional drill team routines and contemporary dance moves reveal the rigid geometric patterns of the existing setting while generating new patterns of distortion and celebration. The visual language also extends into costume design where Roberts invites the youth performers to inhabit the space on their own terms, in striking white, black, and green uniforms.

Gathering an audience along the periphery of the plaza to witness Black youth reclaiming and activating the core of this charged site is an architectural act of spectacle and context transformation. The audience (organized via the 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial) remains distinct and safely delineated from the performers but is invited to experience an extremely familiar vantage point in Chicago's streetscape in a way that dislodges the architectural landmark from its white supremacist underpinnings.

Roberts revisited performance architecture in New York with Mabel O. Wilson and the Marching Cobras to bring a performance to Marcus Garvey Park—this time rooted in the rich history of African American marching bands as a form of political and artistic presence in American public life. Roberts and Wilson reflect on marching bands as form a “camouflage” which enabled Black gatherings to inhabit the streets at a time when they otherwise would have been prohibited. They riff on this observation by designing elaborate, two-sided costumes that borrow from the visual language of military camo patterns to provide different color schemes for different movements and voices of the performances. The dancers and drummers begin the performance adorned in two different coded sets of muted, traditional colors; they flip their capes midway to reveal a shared and more vibrant contemporary palette.

The choreography of *Marching On* is more itinerant than its Chicago precedent, proceeding from the street to the park and back into the street again. In contrast to the Chicago performance in which the audience gazes from its safe distance at the spectacle of the “stage” beyond, in this case, Roberts and Wilson distribute the audience among more intimate pockets along the marching band's routes, prompting more personal and companionable encounters between the audience and performers, sometimes being staged at distance of only three feet from one another. While the audience remains delineated and distinct from the performers, this evolution from the Chicago performance suggests a flatter hierarchy among participants and the ways in which everyone occupies the shared public space in a new way through the routines of the performance.

In both of these projects, Roberts and Wilson reach outside of the typical techniques and deliverables of their architectural training to engage with performing troupes that have long established cultural



Top: *We Know How to Order*, Bryony Roberts + South Shore Drill Team. Performance at the Federal Center, Chicago Chicago Architecture Biennial, 2015. Courtesy of the designers.

Above: *Marching On*, Bryony Roberts + Mabel O. Wilson + Marching Cobras. Commissioned by Storefront for Art and Architecture, 2017-2018. Courtesy of the designers.

traditions and expertise in their crafts—but they still bring their specifically architectural and graphic sensibilities into these live mediums. By inserting themselves into the cultural narratives, they don't so much enhance the act of drill teams and marching bands with their new architectural siting and fancy costumes, but rather, they participate in emphasizing a particular spatial dimension into youth's understanding of their own performance medium and "own that legacy" with renewed enthusiasm.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.

#### Participatory Audience

*People Pavilion*—a wearable happening  
by Allie Rutherford and Laurence Payot


A collaborative and ongoing project led by the artist duo of Allie Rutherford and Laurence Payot, *People Pavilion* consists of a series of "structures" created via wearable extensions of the participants' bodies. Established in 2014 for the Warrington Art Festival, each iteration features a new set of wearable geometries that augment the human form and entice new ways of forming a temporary "pavilion" that respond to their participants and to their physical and cultural contexts.

As an ongoing artistic act, each physical manifestation of *People Pavilion* is unique while the underlying script remains consistent. Performers venture out into the city bedecked in costumes that augment their human bodies through geometry and color; the costumes are scripted to assemble and aggregate into various social configurations that facilitate new pockets of programming adjacent to everyday city life. Throughout the performance, the bodily extensions remain integral to the performers, such that the "pavilion" and those persons creating it coincide. For Rutherford and Payot, collaboration with the performers is a key component to determine the form and programming of each pavilion. The artists engage social tactics such as games, workshops, and prototyping with each group of participants to fine tune the specific script for each pavilion. In turn, the script operates more like an improv prompt than a comprehensive set of theatrical instructions.

The costumes that construct the *People Pavilion* are ever evolving. In its first iteration, designed in collaboration with architecture students, each actor wore a two-tone pyramidal shell. By aggre-



gating this simple unit, multiple performers create a rich variety of pavilion forms. For example, the units produce an emphatic line, a fortified tower, an articulated field, and an intimate enclosure that each respond to various public spaces within the city. In later iterations, fabric and pliable poles (akin to poles in camping tents) create butterfly-like arrays of circles sprouting from each performer's backpack that quadruple the spatial footprint of any individual performer's body. These costumes-merged-with-stage-pieces leverage translucent, soft materials to play with light and attenuate sound. Huddling together allows the performers to create both visually and acoustically distinct spaces.

 *People Pavilion* (Streetland), Allie Rutherford and Laurence Payot, 2014.  
© Bob Moyler, courtesy of the designers.

Moving collectively, the actors of *People Pavilion* seek to create, test, and explore various forms of social space. Often the most memorable moments of the performances occur within the temporary interiors created by aggregations that carve out enclosed pockets of intimacy from the crowded activities alongside. To program these interiors, Rutherford and Payot again rely on collaboration with the actors to craft stories, songs, and choreographies that initiate solidarity among the participants and passersby. In some instances, the action is facilitated by relationships with existing organizations, including local choirs. As singing emanates from the pavilion, it entices others from the public to join in and become part of the act. For Rutherford and Payot, creating welcoming social spaces within and distinct from the corporate and commercial hardscapes of the city advances a feminist urbanist agenda. In this way, the action and intimacy of the spaces are prioritized over any specific geometry or form.<sup>12</sup> It is in the combination



of both physical (geometric/formal) space and social (programmatic/collective) space that *People Pavilion* shines as an example of a welcoming and inclusive performance.

*People Pavilion* is a performance bolstered by audience participation. While the geometric arrays created by the costumes produces a kind of “otherness” among the primary performers, the fact that each actor retains at least some visible parts of their familiar human body prevents the performance from feeling unwelcoming or exclusive. So too, because the performances occur in accessible public spaces, they invite a shared sense of ownership and co-creation from passersby. As the performance ensues, more and more members of the audience are emboldened to participate. Ultimately, *People Pavilion* blurs the boundary between “pavilion” and “not pavilion” and “body” and “not body” through deliberate and calibrated acts of radical inclusion.

#### 4.

##### Action Audience

*Bronzeville Bustle 5K*—an architectural footrace  
by Could Be Architecture

This is where our Chicago-based design practice, Could Be Architecture, enters the story. In October 2019, we organized the *Bronzeville Bustle 5K*, a mashup of an architectural tour and an athletic footrace that took place in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood as a partner program of the Chicago Architecture Biennial.<sup>13</sup> The project treats the planning and implementation of a 5K run as an architecturally performed act and involves the coordinated participation of many collaborators, community partners, and co-creative agents.

The script of the *Bustle* centers on designing the race’s route through plan drawing. While the typical 5K (3.1 miles) length is relatively small in relation to the scale of a city, we leveraged this simple spatial constraint to “connect the dots” among the largest number of architectural attractions between predetermined start and end points (established by engaging community partners that generously allowed event participants to access parking and bathrooms).<sup>14</sup> The result is a meandering, circuitous line that makes it difficult to achieve a record-breaking finish time due to the number of turns, but that enables the greatest interface with the architectural character (and

characters) of the neighborhood. Landmarks along the route are selected based on their curb appeal and capacity to prompt further investigation or a second look during or after the race. The banner graphics identify the names of buildings alongside abstracted elevations drawings of the architecture that they point toward. In this way, the scenography exhibits a “split screen” quality: the runners visually experience the architecture via the perspective of the actual buildings and the elevational abstraction of the graphics simultaneously.


Because we prioritized the quantity and quality of architectural attractions over the intuition or ease of the map directions, we inadvertently neglected to design and fabricate adequate directional signage (typically a top priority when organizing a race), and rather focused on the graphic design of banners and interpretative signage that point out the architectural attractions along the route. As a result, a few runners accidentally veered off the designated course, but discovered even more architecture during their unscripted, ad-lib detours. While the oversight that spawned these deviations was not intentional, the resulting expanded route variations underscore the city’s own role in shaping our movements, especially when we are confronted with new ground and shifting loci of control.

From an organizational point of view, constructing a 5K doesn’t differ radically from an architectural project—draw a plan, procure a permit, and you are off to the races (pun intended). But we could not have constructed the race alone. With the help of an expeditor (to secure the permit), a race coordinator (to administer the registration and racer times), and most importantly, partnerships with community running organizations (including Black Chicago Runners and Men Run Deez Streets) the *Bustle* served as a social condenser that brought together a diverse and collaborative group. By converging upon this single act of athletic-architectural performance, bodies and communities co-occupy the public space of the city in agential and liberating ways (that echo the presence of marching bands in the streets in Roberts and Wilson’s project discussed earlier).

While conventional performances typically distinguish the actors and the audience as two distinct groups, the format of the 5K conflates the two: the performing runners simultaneously become a new audience for architecture and vice versa. By mashing up an architecture tour with an athletic event, the performance instigates an intersection of two audiences—fans of architecture and running as cultivated through a particular neighborhood culture—that may not have shared solidarity previously. On one hand, the architectural enthusiast experiences the urban fabric at a new speed, pace, and perspective, and on the other hand, the avid runner experiences the familiar thrill of the sport (competition, adrenaline, and fitness) from a shifted architectural point of view.

However, this neat simplification does not necessarily articulate two distinct groups, but rather, it suggests a spectrum along which participants might identify in overlapping and intersectional ways. By conflating the identities of performers and audience, the act of performance may shift any individual participant's identity along that spectrum or open up alternative vantage points from which to experience the space of the city. The 5K likely did not convert architects into runners or runners into architects, but seasoned runners might now find new ways to curate their runs—not by pure mileage, but by visual textures, spatial agenda, and cultural exchange. Or conversely, architects, designers, history enthusiasts, and city planners might begin to envision the city from the vantage of a new user group that experiences the city at a radically different pace.



 Bronzeville Bustle 5K, 2019.  
© Black Chicago Runners, courtesy  
of the authors.

## A PERFORMATIVE NEAR FUTURE

"The revolution will not be televised...The revolution will be live."  
—Gill Scott-Heron

While no architectural project can be completed without collaborations (with builders, engineers, clients, etc.), conventional project delivery modes in the US privilege the architect at the center of this exchange, exercising a perceived or real upper hand. Live performance architecture suggests an alternative practice modality that plays out on a more equitable playing field (or stage) by stretching, expanding, and multiplying the roles of the social, political, and aesthetic action that is required to put on a "good show."

Performances require actors, whether they be thespians, dancers, musicians, or athletes. By partnering with film crews, drum lines, choirs, and community running organizations, for example, performances push architects to test their disciplinary capacity to engage in interpersonal exchanges, organizational structures, relational aesthetics, and group dynamics. So too, the exchange with architects pushes performers to heighten the spatial ramifications of their artistic practices. This prerequisite for non-hierarchical collaborations opens the door for a more equitable practice and points towards speculations that could adjust future modes of operation.

The following six tactics provide a framework for how to propagate live performance architecture in near future practices to offer new modes of spatial liberation:

1. **Fabricate the Frame:** performing live (as opposed to just being alive) requires a narrative threshold that separates the imaginative "fiction" of the performance from the status quo of routine life and the everyday built environment. This might take the form of conventional theater apparatuses such as stage, scenography, scenery, set pieces, or props; or augmented architectural and urban features such as brightly painted window frame, an exaggerated stoop, an artful barricade to block off regular street traffic, or an exuberant sign.
2. **Structure Spontaneity:** performances require a script, stage directions, or rules (in the form of text, graphics, or other spatial delineations), and live performances specifically

require this set of instructions to welcome unexpected, ad lib, improvised, or other spontaneous actions alongside scripted ones. Like in jazz, rules provide an underlying structure that emboldens improvisation. Spontaneity produces an “in the moment” quality integral to liveliness. If an audience cannot anticipate exactly what is going to happen next, it makes them eager to be more present in the now.

3. **Assume Collective Risk:** because the actions within a performance happen at a set time and place, there is a shared understanding (between performers and audience members) that live performances are an unfolding experiment that may not go according to script. Like democracy, all performances require the collective participation of all those involved to maximize the potential for impact. Live performances assume the possibility of physical, organizational, or emotional risk. Unlike a misplaced wall that is simply corrected behind the closed doors of the construction site, the possibility of an unsilenced cell phone or a missed cue occupy require real-time reactions and a collective cooperation to acknowledge the error, but make it seem as if it was an intended part of the show. Embracing the potential for things to go wrong, or even for people to get hurt, raises the stakes for architecture's social efficacy—without risk, architecture may be able to be merely “performative” but its live performance will not deliver substantial, lasting change.
4. **Feed the Feedback Loops:** live performances thrive on feedback among performers and audiences, often in real time, and at every phase of a performance's development. Even conventional audience reactions including clapping, cheering, booing, heckling, thrusting thumbs up or down (physical and virtual), posting emoji, flag-waving, sign-hoisting, and laughing might occur more intentionally and boisterously in architectural and urban contexts in ways that feed that creative development and social enactment of spatial ideas and architectural proposals.
5. **Magnify Mob Mentality:** live performances help produce a heightened collective consciousness and shared emotion among its audience(s). By stimulating simultaneous reactions among a group, live performances initiate particular moods, emotions, and sentiments to transcend the individual and spawn a swarm. This “mob mentality” prompts decentralized decision making and the possibility for collective actions.



↑ Top: *Ragdale Sings* is an amphitheater made out of undulating “talk tubes” that delineate five pockets of performance spaces while broadcasting sound to the perimeter. Audience members “talk back” to performers while performers can direct sounds and instructions directly to peripheral audience members, initiating live, real-time exchanges.

↑ Above: *Re-Staging Oskar Schlemmer* restages the Bauhaus production of the *Triadic Ballet*, soliciting an ongoing mix-up of the animate and the inert, suggesting multiple and overlapping relationships between human and nonhuman charisma. © Could Be Architecture.



6. **Augment Otherness:** in the current political and cultural moment, hard lines are being drawn to define and reward ideas of normalcy by spotlighting and punishing an expanding profile of "others." Live architecture offers a celebratory medium to transform otherness into a powerful performance—not just for rethinking the status quo, but to become a platform that inspires new ways to construct what is thinkable.<sup>15</sup> Just as our world demands nonbinary and more inclusive ontologies for relating to people's gender, race, and cultural affiliations, so too, live performance architecture envisions a nonbinary spatial world that diffuses the oppressive distinction between subjects and objects, performers and audience, and people and architecture. In its place, we might initiate a flat(ter) ontology that welcomes, affirms, and empowers companionability among lively people, creatures, things, and buildings.

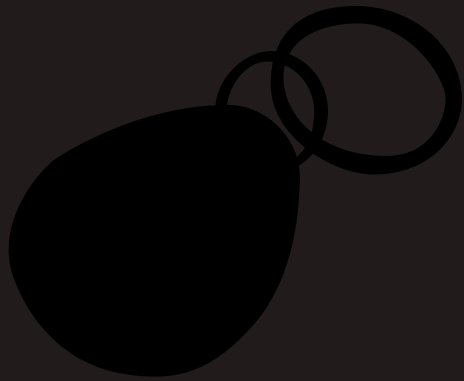
Ultimately, performance is a hinge that links disciplinary representation and action in the world. By scripting, testing, and performing relationships among bodies and the built environment, performance architecture offers an opportunity to rehearse the enactment of a more liberated world.

Architecture has left the building. Time to get to work! ★

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11. Mabel O. Wilson in "Marching On: The Politics of Performance," *YouTube*, Storefront for Art and Architecture channel, 5:34, April 18, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcOJ9ZoNLqQ&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcOJ9ZoNLqQ&feature=emb_logo).
12. Ailie Rutherford and Laurence Payot, interview by the authors, Jitsi, September 10, 2020.
13. Bronzeville is a historic Black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. Bronzeville became a key landing ground for African Americans who moved to Chicago from the south during the Great Migration between 1910 and 1920, and in turn, it is particularly renowned for the confluence of Black culture that thrived there during that time. Bronzeville was the home of celebrated Black cultural figures including Gwendolyn Brooks, Ida B. Wells, Rube Foster, Sam Cooke, Minnie Ripperton, and many others. It remains a vibrant Black neighborhood today.
14. There is no shortage of 5K races or architectural tours in Chicago; however, almost all of the existing running events are located in the city's so-called "front yard" including the Loop, the lakefront, and the Near North Side. Part of the ambition of staging the *Bustle 5K* in Bronzeville was to produce a running event in a part of the city's South Side that is often neglected by institutional or corporate-sponsored race organizers. Similarly, most architectural tours focus on the more touristy areas of the city—especially the downtown boat tours.
15. Joseph Altshuler and Andrew Schachman, "Department of Architectural Improvisation," unpublished essay, 2018.

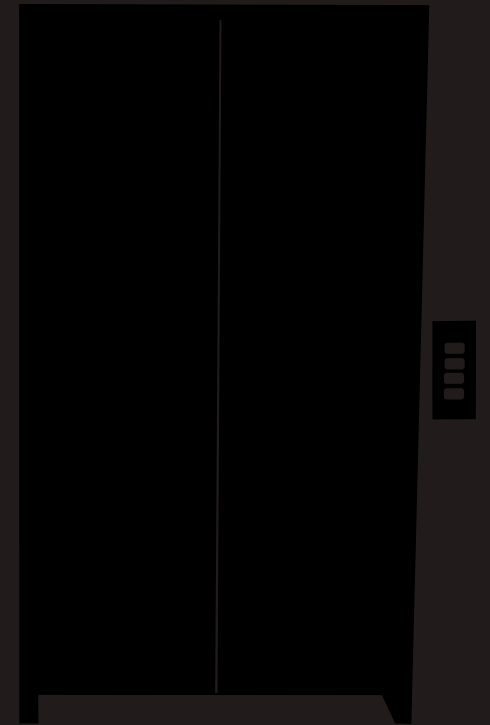




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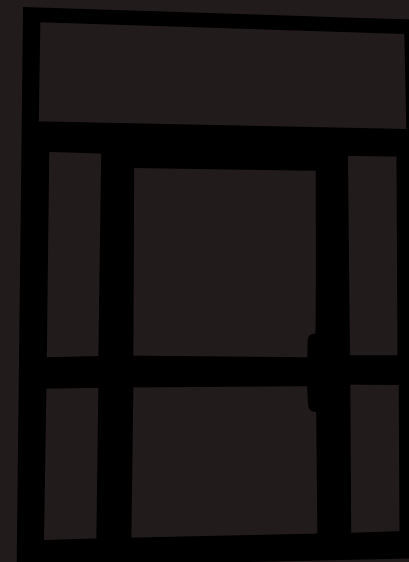
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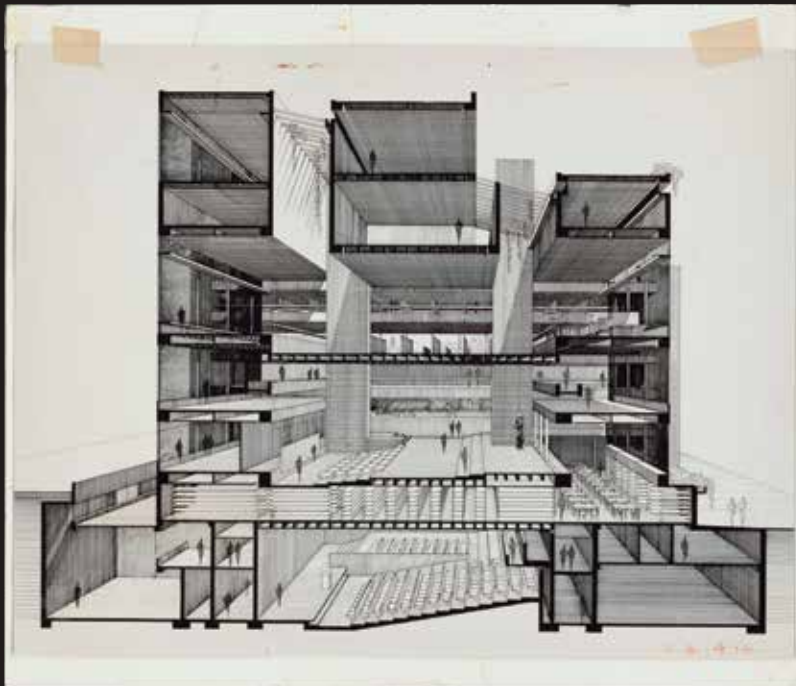



COLLISIONS

GERMANE BARNES

AND

SHAWHIN ROUDBARI



 In what ways do architecture schools serve as spaces of policing and enforcing white hegemony? Art and Architecture Building, now Rudolph Hall, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Perspective section. Source: Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018645176/>

Mario Gooden testifies that “Blackness is a spatial act.” As a society we demand that those who identify as Black be hyper-aware of their surroundings. The vilest of these demands are often implicit, systemic issues that allow aggressors to hide behind a veil of ignorance. How does one prove ambiguity? Surroundings may be a term too shallow to fully encompass the acute awareness required to survive an architected environment designed and constructed to stratify races. Why must a Black family feel unsafe in a park? Why must a Black man feel unsafe while watching birds? Why must a Black woman feel unsafe while asleep? Why does the mere occupation of space by a Black body create animosity, fear, and aggression?

Perhaps answers can be found when we recognize spaces that are racialized as white. White spaces in the US have in their DNA a set of racialized assumptions about who belongs, who is in control, and what sorts of actions are permissible. There is an implicit obedience within these spaces that welcomes the assimilated and refuses the abstract. Some of these governing rules are expressed through the design of thresholds and the designation of public vs. private spaces of the self vs. other, the manipulation of hierarchy and circulation, as well as aesthetic choices and their symbolism. Other modes of implementation include bureaucratic documents, aggressive collectivity, and colorblind interactions.

To better understand the racialization of everyday architectural spaces, we must understand ways black occupation and white hegemony collide.

## 1.

We define hegemony as consensual and as internalized participation in systems of domination. Take racism as a system of domination where one group of people takes advantage of another group and justifies it by some arbitrary measure, example the shade of your skin. When we buy into the difference in ability, intellect, and values based on this measure, we consent to this system. And when we adopt or internalize the values and fears of the dominant group, we render the system hegemonic. Hegemony is different from more overt forms of domination. And the subtle difference is a key to understanding our role, as architects, in confronting the racism inherent in what we do and what we make.

Dominant groups normalize their worldviews through establishing cultures that reproduce their control over oppressed groups. White hegemony calls attention to how ideas of whiteness, white dominance, or white supremacy are baked into culture and assumed to be normal. From the early formations of whiteness, settler colonial elites and their descendants have built institutions that reproduced habits, values, practices, and discourses (collectively, cultures) that served to benefit their interests at the cost of the livelihoods and lives of others.

A lot of whites and non-whites take for granted cultural norms—without acknowledging their racist underpinnings and the fact that these norms were forcefully, violently, at times overtly and at times covertly, shaped to concentrate power and domination. We are all subject to the influential power of white hegemony. Even whites working on anti-racist agendas carry white hegemonic ideologies.<sup>01</sup>

Consider the policing of aesthetics in architecture school. Those of us who are students and teachers in architecture schools learn to perform to white architectural standards and behaviors. The white hegemony of studio culture is a forceful reminder of how we consent to and internalize hierarchies, work practices, aesthetic choices, and design thinking that are all rooted in the history of whiteness and its connections with colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and directly, racism.


In architecture schools, white architectural standards and behaviors are maintained and enforced by more than just white students and faculty—and this is what makes it hegemonic. The racism of studio culture is one matter, but the hegemonic whiteness of that culture is another, entirely more insidious matter. We make painful adjustments in our own taste, cultural values, and design genius to conform to standards set by the ghosts of a white power elite.

Sociologists Matthew Hughey and Carson Byrd are direct in acknowledging these entrenched operations of white hegemony. They show how “assessments of whites (by both whites and people of color), in any given locale or context, depend on a larger shared ideal of what whiteness both is and should be” and importantly, they continue, “[this] is policed through implicit and explicit social and cultural markers of authentic belonging.”<sup>02</sup> It is this idea that we police who belongs and who doesn’t that hegemony helps us understand. Indeed, white hegemony is maintained by our own vigilantism.

White hegemony is driven in part by fear of the diminishment of white identity. Caroline Knowles, a sociologist of race and ethnicity, tells us that “non-white performances of lifestyle attract censure and heighten fears.”<sup>03</sup> To protect against a sense of invasion, in response to a racist fear, white individuals internalize a sense of difference and superiority. The construction of the idea of whiteness draws on this dynamic.<sup>04</sup>



Architecture participates in the perpetuation of white dominance. Take a walk through any architecture school and you will likely find countless renderings of new urban developments in trending neighborhoods and branded districts with mostly white people enjoying mostly white activities in mostly white spaces. (Think of the countless craft breweries in revitalized industrial neighborhoods branded as arts districts that we see in pinups at our schools.) If these projects don’t serve to police shared ideals of whiteness, in our schools, our profession, and the spaces we design and construct, then what does? Images of “American domesticity” are iconic. They too help produce a hegemonic idea of white culture and

 In what ways do architecture students internalize, and consent to, white hegemony in our designs, renderings, and colorblind attitudes around who does and who does not belong in the spaces we imagine? Collage by Ana Colon Quiñones, *Dissent by Design*, background renderings by others.



virtuous families. More than a backdrop to normative ideals of kinship and domesticity, architecture is a critical part of using the built environment to reify and deepen white hegemony.

White hegemony is often unacknowledged or invisible, and that is what makes it insidious, with lasting, harmful effects. But when we scrutinize the behavior of white users of space, this hegemony comes into view. Sociologist Elijah Anderson reminds us that “when encountering blacks in the white space, some whites experience cognitive dissonance and, if for no other reason than the need to set the dissonant picture straight, become confused or disturbed, or even outraged at what they see. In the interest of consonance, they try to put the black person ‘back in his place’—at times telling him in no uncertain terms to ‘go back where you came from.’”<sup>65</sup> In other terms, Anderson explains

how “in the white space, small issues can become fraught with racial meaning or small behaviors can subtly teach or remind the black person of her outsider status, showing onlookers and bystanders alike that she does not really belong, that she is not to be regarded and treated as a full person in the white space.”<sup>66</sup>

These dynamics play out consistently in the spaces we design, and they are perhaps most visible in the everyday institutional spaces we create: overtly in our prisons, and covertly in classrooms, courtrooms, museums, and the social spaces of our cafes, our retail experiences, and our restaurants. In these spaces, we design what Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick calls “[a] material spatialization of ‘difference.’”<sup>67</sup>

■ In what ways are public spaces policed by white hegemonic conceptions of who belongs in white space and what forms of cultural expression are permitted? Collage by Ana Colon Quiñones, *Dissent by Design*, background images by others.





📷 The auction block at Green Hill discussed by Katherine McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds*. Source: Historic American Buildings Survey, Creator, and Orville W Carroll, Boucher, Jack E, photographer. Green Hill, Slave Auction Block, State Route 728, Long Island, Campbell County, VA. Campbell County Virginia Long Island, 1933. <https://www.loc.gov/item/va0279>.

In her analysis of the slave auction block, Katherine McKittrick helps us broaden our thinking about the architecture of white hegemony both historically and spatially. For us, it is an architectural expression of the roots of white vigilance in the US. The auction block and slave quarters at the Green Hill plantation in Campbell County, Virginia are sited beside each other. The colorblind perspective calls the first an assembly

of stones arranged as a platform and the second as a basic gable-roofed shelter. But they are much more than that. McKittrick analyzes the auction block as “a site of public-racial-sexual domination and measurable documentation.”<sup>98</sup> She writes about how “racial positionings—of the auctioneer, the buyers, the onlookers, the enslaved—hold steady this domination through the gaze, the exchange of money, and bodily evaluation.”<sup>99</sup> She calls the auction block a “technology that ‘scales’ the body... that displays black bodies in relation to the wider landscape.”<sup>100</sup> In doing so, as a platform, or a plinth, the auction block situates the white gaze of the buyers, with the seller, and the hegemonic image of the plantation.

Now, if we consider a comparison of the figures of the suburb vs. slave quarter, what conclusions about the architecture of white hegemony might we draw? If we consider a comparison of the figure of the suburb against the image of the auction block, what conclusions about the materiality of hegemony might we draw?



📷 The slave quarters at Green Hill discussed by Katherine McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds*. Source: Historic American Buildings Survey, Creator, and Orville W Carroll, Boucher, Jack E, photographer. Green Hill, Slave Quarters, State Route 728, Long Island, Campbell County, VA. Campbell County Virginia Long Island, 1933. <https://www.loc.gov/item/va0281>.

To collapse the four posts and two platforms of the auction block into inert materiality is not to speak of architecture—it is to speak of six stones configured. But as architectural elements, these six stones have meaning, history, and are arranged to further racist violence enacted by the system of slavery. The same can be said about the slave quarters. The same, we argue, can be said about the suburban home.

McKittrick gives us this salient reminder:

“It becomes very clear that this structure—whether it be a tree stump, a stage, or a table—is created by those who are on, around, and even distanced from, the selling point. The processes and acts that produced the auction block demonstrate the ease with which race, ownership, and profit culminated on the auction block and continually substantiated the economic and ideological currency of blackness, whiteness, possession, and captivity.”<sup>101</sup>

Ruha Benjamin, writes that “if we consider race as itself a technology, as a means to sort, organize, and design a social structure... we can understand more clearly the literal architecture of power.”<sup>102</sup> Architecture’s role in perpetuating and entrenching racism in the US must be acknowledged in order for architects to address the violent power of white hegemony.



## 2.

We share a passage that has affected our thinking together on this idea of vigilante architecture. This passage, from Claudia Rankine, underscores how our experiences of hegemony in architecture are holistic. We encounter typological, elemental, tectonic, and aesthetic aspects of our built environment simultaneously. The experience of white hegemony is compounded. Rankine writes:

“The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?

It’s as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that’s right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry.”<sup>13</sup>

Consider ways the elements of this house are coded. The side gate, the back entrance, the path bordered with deer grass and rosemary, the locked state of the gate, the front door, and its bell are given significance in this passage. Architecturally, to us, these represent threshold, private vs. public spaces, controlled access, paths, and communication. To folks for whom these architectural elements give the feeling of exclusion, the objects and their material characteristics are laden with racialized signifiers and mechanisms of control. To those whom these elements give a welcoming feeling, these objects are also racialized: they keep the bad people out and they keep the fragile dominant group safe from the diminishment of their markers of white identity.

Picture the therapist’s house as a detached home in a white neighborhood—maybe not unlike the suburban home shown referenced above. Such architectural elements speak volumes to those who have experienced racist encounters like this countless times in their lives.

At a basic level, by mere association, specific types of residential architecture, designed with particular architectural elements, and coded with intentional aesthetics, are connected to experiences of racism. At a less symbolic level—but a more spatial and functional level—forms of architecture are embedded in centuries of white hegemony. Everyday spaces of homes, classrooms, and courtrooms reflect this oppressive baggage. White hegemony is maintained by white vigilance and Black occupation challenges/frustrates white hegemony. This is poetically and painfully expressed in Rankine’s work. Vigilance as such, becomes a point of connection for us, between architecture and hegemony.

## 3.

If we can agree that white hegemony is the static version of American systemic ideologies, then it stands to reason that Blackness operates as its glitch. The inherent sensibilities associated with public space are entrenched with barriers intending to contain ethnicities. Historically Black neighborhoods, both rural and urban, are planned with the idea that those residents will not stray into unwanted environments unless asked. The authors’ hometowns of Miami, Florida and Boulder, Colorado, like almost all cities in the US, are among those governed by these rules. In Miami, Black migrant labor was utilized to build the city once Julia Tuttle convinced Henry Flagler to extend the Florida East Coast rail line to the southernmost point of the continental United States.<sup>14</sup> A population originating from Georgia and the Caribbean, by way of the Bahamas, were critical in the creating the contemporary metropolitan city. However, while these constituents were born from and near water, their primary residences in Miami were located farther from the Atlantic than any other ethnicities’ homes were.

Miami Beach, Florida, an artificial island constructed by landfill, was inaccessible to those with more melanin. A city dependent upon the influx of individuals from other locations would not extend the same invitation to people from other locations that literally built the city. Informal racial enclaves due to restrictive covenants and housing policies would later become fixed borders of Black Miami. To operate outside of those boundaries would often result in detainment by local law enforcement. Commensurate with prejudiced institutional

frameworks, local citizens often adopt the field guide of racialized spatial politics. The Arthur McDuffie riots and Travon Martin tragedies, perpetrated more than thirty years apart, are glaring examples of what happens when Black presence and white space collide.

The argument we are making through all of this is that architecture maintains hegemony through vigilance. What if, to protect white identity, we not only police one another, but we police aesthetics and aesthetics police us, and what if just as we police space, our spaces police us? Can our very architecture be an expression of vigilantism? We propose to deconstruct vigilante architecture by asking, what is aggressive, where is resistance, what and who bears witness? How are these three expressions of vigilance embedded, coded, and reified through architecture? The examples of the slave auction block, suburban home, parks, and the waters and beaches are a sampling of vigilante spaces that maintain or challenge white hegemony.

When coupled with the mere presence of Blackness, many interactions escalate to verbal or even physical altercations deemed appropriate by the deputization of white hegemony. If Blackness as a spatial act is the testimonial, then the pulpit upon which this declaration occurs is resistance and the practice of Black refusal. We argue that this collective refusal empowers the disenfranchised and begins to dismantle the systems that propagate the current hegemonic conditions. ★

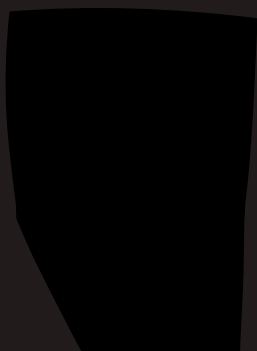
## ENDNOTES

01. Matthew W. Hughey and W. Carson Byrd, "The souls of white folk beyond formation and structure: bound to identity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, volume 36, issue 6 (2013): 974-981.
02. Matthew W. Hughey and W. Carson Byrd, "The souls of white folk beyond formation and structure: bound to identity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, volume 36, issue 6 (2013): 977.
03. Caroline Knowles, *Race and Social Analysis* (London: SAGE Publishing, 2003), 24.
04. We recommend James Baldwin's essay "On being 'white' and other lies," for his insights on the idea of "becoming white" to maintain social and economic standing. It highlights the power of the fear that drives hegemony. James Baldwin, "On being 'white' and other lies," *Essence*, April 1984, 178.
05. Elijah Anderson, "The White Space," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, Volume 1 Issue 1 (2015): 14.
06. Anderson, "The White Space," 14.
07. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xvi.
08. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, 66.
09. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, 66.
10. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, 68.
11. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, 72.
12. Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), 91. Though Foucault did not figure explicitly in this analysis, his conceptions of the spatial operations of power (e.g., the panopticon) and governmentality undergird the axioms about architecture and power that this sociological analysis relies upon. Our focus on the power relations that perpetuate racialized difference, which empower whites at the expense of racialized minorities, is less about the abstract operations of power in space and more about the expression and perpetuation of racism through architecture.
13. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).
14. Edward N Akin, "The Cleveland Connection: Revelations from the John D. Rockefeller-Julia D. Tuttle Correspondence," *Tequesta*, no. XLII (1982): 57-61.





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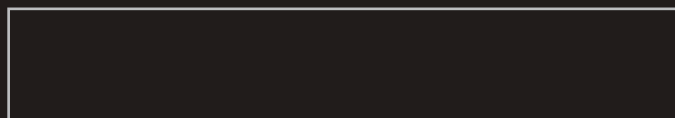
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A



SINGLE

FAMILY

ASHLEY BIGHAM

“The Democrats in D.C. have been and want to, at a much higher level, abolish our beautiful and successful suburbs by placing far-left Washington bureaucrats in charge of local zoning decisions. They are absolutely determined to eliminate single-family zoning, destroy the value of houses and communities already built, just as they have in Minneapolis and other locations that you read about today. Your home will go down in value and crime rates will rapidly rise.”

—Donald Trump, 2020<sup>21</sup>

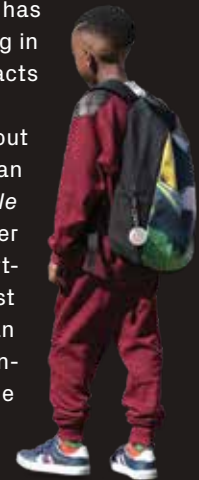
“‘House’ shall mean and refer to a building situated upon any Lot designated and intended for use and occupancy as a residence by a **single family**.”

—Homeowners Agreement, Brentwood, TN<sup>22</sup>

The US suburbs are most easily identified by the unflinching legal definitions of two terms: “single” and “family.” Beyond the formal, material, and typological variations found in the suburbs, these two words form the core continuity of the US landscape through its most popular domestic architecture. Suburban formal tropes, vernacular shapes, and regional styles have been hallmarks of designers’ interest in the topic, often without considering the legal definitions which create the formal and spatial characteristics we most often associate with suburbs. In addition, these legal definitions promote the single-family home as an economic instrument, one which prioritizes home equity over social equity, collective access, or individual desires. A direct, immediate way to produce profound architectural change in the suburbs would be to redefine what—legally and architecturally—constitutes a *single family*.

In addition to municipal zoning policies that prioritize the real economic value and perceived social value of the single-family house over other housing typologies, single-family zoning has recently been weaponized by politicians who use “suburbs” as a code for a socioeconomic or racial identity.<sup>23</sup> These invocations of the suburbs only increase a cultural assumption that suburbs are a space of retreat or fortification, commensurate with *othering*. In architectural terms, suburban fortification occurs on multiple scales from the video security doorbell to the neighborhood security guard booth. Enclave suburbs heavily screen visitors through the use of gates, fences, checkpoints, or surveillance equipment policing bodies of inhabitants and visitors with private security forces.<sup>24</sup> This policing is not limited to physical spaces and behaviors, but also to matters of design. Suburbs encourage design conformity through their coding, restrictions, or at times solely through social pressure. Conformity, as it manifests through social, economic, and legal structures, has become so entangled with the design of space and housing in America that it is often difficult to separate architectural acts from issues of racial and economic segregation.

For many, the suburban question today is less about its spatial definition and more related to the suburbs as an identity, and by extension, those who *choose to* and are *able to* access it. Single-family zoning excludes people who prefer to or must live in less expensive housing typologies (apartments, duplexes, or condominiums). It is too broad to suggest that single-family homes are always more expensive than multi-family typologies since real property value is dependent on many factors, but an often-overlooked concern is the lack of typological diversity within individual neighborhoods. Zoning, which promotes a plurality of housing



options, and therefore prices, could have the effect of offering people of different income levels access to the same shared resources. Intentionally or casually, suburbs camouflage inhabitants within a particular socioeconomic class. Across the US, there is a broad diversity of economic classes and ethnicities who live in suburbs, but within any particular suburb standardization of home size, styles, and age help maintain consistent home prices, excluding meaningful socioeconomic diversity within those communities. Suburban legal structures have also historically reinforced racial divisions. As noted in Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law*:

"Today's residential segregation in the North, South, Midwest, and West is not the unintended consequence of individual choices and of otherwise well-meaning law or regulation but of unhidden public policy that explicitly segregated every metropolitan area in the United States. The policy was so systematic and forceful that its effects endure to the present time. Without our government's purposeful imposition of racial segregation, the other causes—private prejudice, white flight, real estate steering, bank redlining, income differences, and self-segregation—still would have existed but with far less opportunity for expression."<sup>05</sup>

In the US, the single-family home is considered the pinnacle of the consumption economy, and the US has maintained a relatively steady percent of homeownership over the past fifty years despite fluctuations during the housing bubble in the early 2000s.<sup>06</sup> Homeownership as a financial instrument to create generational wealth is a phenomena relatively unique to the US, and has been encouraged by political leaders and financial institutions alike since the 1930s through mortgage and tax policies—policies which often discriminated on the basis of race and gender.<sup>07</sup> Since the 1926 landmark Supreme Court case *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.*, courts have upheld single-family zoning laws on the basis that they are able to "promote a local community's fiscal interest by excluding or limiting alternative forms of housing."<sup>08</sup> The ruling held that a zoning ordinance is a reasonable use of "police power, asserted for the public welfare."<sup>09</sup> Furthermore, this ruling established the enduring link between maintaining or increasing a home's monetary value and the right of the government to police its density, form, and definition of family unit. In the US context where home equity is often an individual's greatest financial asset, there is immense pressure to continually increase home value. Thus, home equity, the most common argument used to promote single-family zoning, is valued over all other domestic desires

including a neighborhood's economic or racial diversity. In this way, single-family zoning is a legal instrument primarily used to promote private financial interests over collective issues of social and economic equity.<sup>10</sup> As urban planner Bernadette Hanlon has written, "The exurbs are, at their worst, an urban Ponzi scheme."<sup>11</sup>

From an economic point of view, it is clear why homeownership prioritizes the *single*-family home as a method of wealth accumulation. How, then, does that definition affect what constitutes a *family*? Although suburbs are still associated with midcentury ideals of the nuclear family in the cultural imagination, a recent US census shows that only one in five households comprise married couples with children.<sup>12</sup> Due in part to the decades of feminist and LGBTQ+ activism and scholarship, definitions of family today are much more expansive than they were when US's postwar suburbs were constructed.<sup>13</sup> Common conceptions of family might include individuals who are related by biology, cohabitation, adoption, or marriage in a variety of combinations: intergenerational or extended biological households, divorced couples sharing childcare responsibilities, same-sex couples with biological or adopted children, cohabitating partners, etc. In addition to these commonly discussed formations, anthropologist Kath Weston describes the concept of a *chosen family*, a non-biological kinship bond chosen for mutual love and support, as a kinship structure equally fundamental to, and not in competition with, biological kinship.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, extended definitions of family are not applied equitably. As Dorothy E. Roberts powerfully states: "White childbearing is generally thought to be a beneficial activity: it brings personal joy and allows the nation to flourish. Black reproduction, on the other hand, is treated as a form of *degeneracy*."<sup>15</sup> Reproduction and caregiving are important to discuss not only in a consideration of the social conception of *family*, but also in terms of real economic incentives for homeowners and educational opportunities for children who live in single-family suburbs. In the US, public schools are funded in large part by property taxes. This encourages wealthy suburbs to create or maintain high-performing schools (and provides the resources to do it) as a tool to maintain high property values.<sup>16</sup> Once again, the financial incentives to create neighborhoods, and by extension schools, with a homogenous socioeconomic and racial constituency, are paramount. According to research by UCLA's Civil Rights Project, "Black and Latino students tend to be in schools with a substantial majority of poor children, but white and Asian students are typically in middle-class schools."<sup>17</sup> In a family unit which includes children, housing takes on additional pressures as a proxy for a child's educational access and success, either as a perceived or real outcome.<sup>18</sup>

As the 2020 coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) exacerbated and made more visible the challenges and holes in our political and social systems, it also hastened new conceptions of family units.<sup>19</sup> Existing kinship groups expanded into “quaranteams,” informally known as “the group of people you *choose* to live with during a coronavirus quarantine.”<sup>20</sup> Throughout the spring and summer of 2020, quaranteams were formed by a variety of commonalities including shared childcare needs, shared geographical location, shared health risks, or shared leisure activities. Very likely, familial relation was not the primary qualification when seeking one’s extended “team” of individuals. Negotiating and discussing individual and collective spatial relationships became the norm. Once-awkward conversations over a shared exterior space or bathroom became necessary, and surprisingly commonplace. Much like the impact of previous pandemics, architecture will forever be changed by the social and health impacts of COVID-19. In this time of ongoing societal transformation, designers should seize this moment to architecturally and legally redefine the dwelling unit and increase spatial sharing in the US suburb.

Given these conditions, it is clear that terminology like “a single family” no longer reflects many Americans’ lived experience of the domestic landscape. Efforts by architects to redefine the assumptions around family and housing in the US have been consistently hindered by legal definitions of family, local zoning codes, financial pressures of increasing home equity, and a system which tethers property taxes to public school funding.<sup>21</sup> While each municipality may define *family* in different terms, a common understanding of the term for zoning purposes is as follows:

Family: An individual or any number of individuals related by blood or marriage; a group of not more than five individuals not so related; a group of not more than ten members of a religious order who live together in a single dwelling unit; or a group of not more than ten adults, the majority of whom are 60 years of age or older, who live together in a single dwelling unit, are all capable of self-preservation without assistance in the event of an emergency, and do not need to live in a supervised environment.<sup>22</sup>

There have been recent attempts to change single-family zoning in some cities, but there is still great resistance to redefining zoning ordinances to increase density in single-family neighborhoods. For example, California lawmakers nearly passed a bill in 2020 which would legalize duplex housing in all neighborhoods currently zoned for

single-family houses as a way to tackle the lack of affordable housing and climate change.<sup>23</sup> Although this law ultimately did not pass as lawmakers cited pushback from some residents of single-family neighborhoods, it is clear that such changes to zoning ordinances would allow density to increase in some of the most economically segregated neighborhoods. Separating the concept of US suburban housing from the core organizational idea of the “single family” is the first step in creating more equitable housing options in America, options which not only represent the varied cultural practices and diversity of family units, but also offer possible futures for how kinship structures might remake architectural typologies.

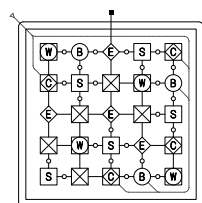
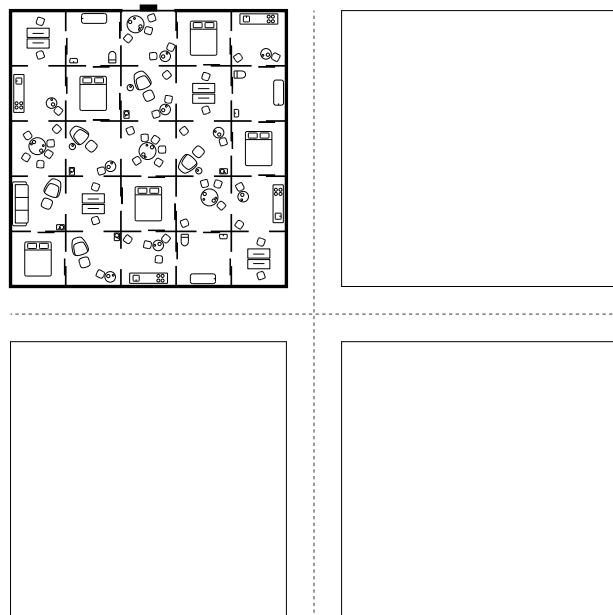
Beyond the legal definitions, what are the architectural frameworks for redefining *a single family*? Architecture is imbued with the agency to construct relationships among people, materials, and spaces. Architecture is both reflective and projective, a balance between reflecting the desires of inhabitants and designers and projecting broader ideologies. Architecture’s agency can take many forms; it might manifest in the organization of a building, program or space adjacencies, infrastructural or material constructions, manipulations of scale, or constructed views. The single-family home is a well-known typology, a set of spatial conventions, formal structures, and repeatable attributes. In real estate terms, it is often referred to by style or size—Cape Cod, Arts and Crafts, ranch, A-Frame, shotgun, neocolonial, bungalow, 4-bedroom, 2-bedroom, split-level—but these designations generally begin with the assumption that a house is a detached structure designed to be shared among a family unit of 2-6 people with a single kitchen, distinct individual rooms for sleeping and bathing, private entrances, on-property enclosed parking, closely mown lawns, and private exterior spaces. These typological assumptions of the contemporary single-family home are promoted by real-estate marketing, popular culture, and societal assumptions regarding family structure. However, it is useful to remember that many of these conventions are relatively recent in their development, and often specific to postwar development in the United States. Just as the existing practices quickly became commonplace, designers can employ similar techniques to challenge the future of US housing typologies. We now have the opportunity to imagine new conventions, introduce new structures, and insert new assumptions that reflect evolving domestic relationships, both spatial and societal.

The following projects present alternatives for both notions of “single” and “family,” offering radical reconceptualizations and new architectural typologies for US housing. *138 Model Homes*, a project by Brittany Utting and Daniel Jacobs of HOME-OFFICE, presents an alternative catalog for the suburbs inspired by the history of the



TYPE: SQUARE, ENFILADE

023/138



OCCU: 005  
 ROOM: 025  
 EDGE: 016  
 %PRV: 032  
 %PUB: 068

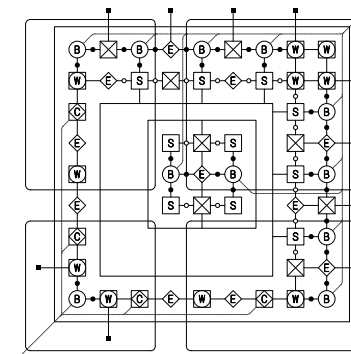
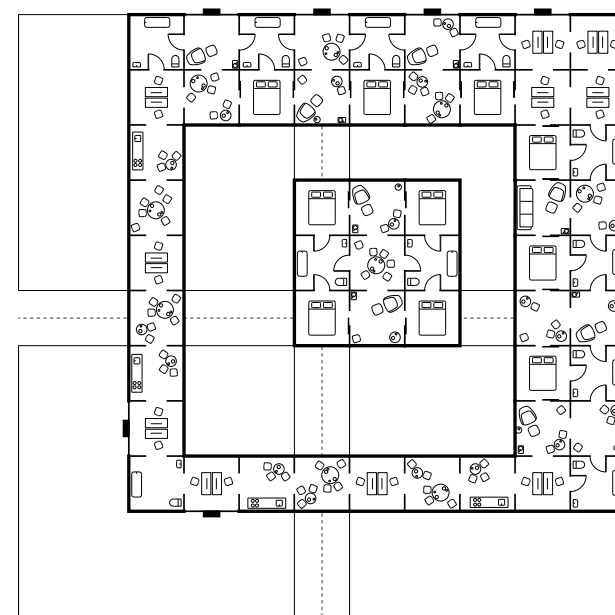
DOOR: 023  
 HALL: 000  
 ENTR: 001

FAR: 1.0  
 %LOT: 100  
 %EAS: 000

THE HOUSE WITHOUT KINSHIP STRUCTURES

TYPE: FRAME-OBJECT, ENFILADE

046/138



OCCU: 010  
 ROOM: 056  
 EDGE: 054  
 %PRV: 038  
 %PUB: 062

DOOR: 044  
 HALL: 000  
 ENTR: 010

FAR: .39  
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 %EAS: 020

THE HOUSE FOR TEN RELATIVELY FRIENDLY SUBJECTS THAT LIVE AND WORK TOGETHER

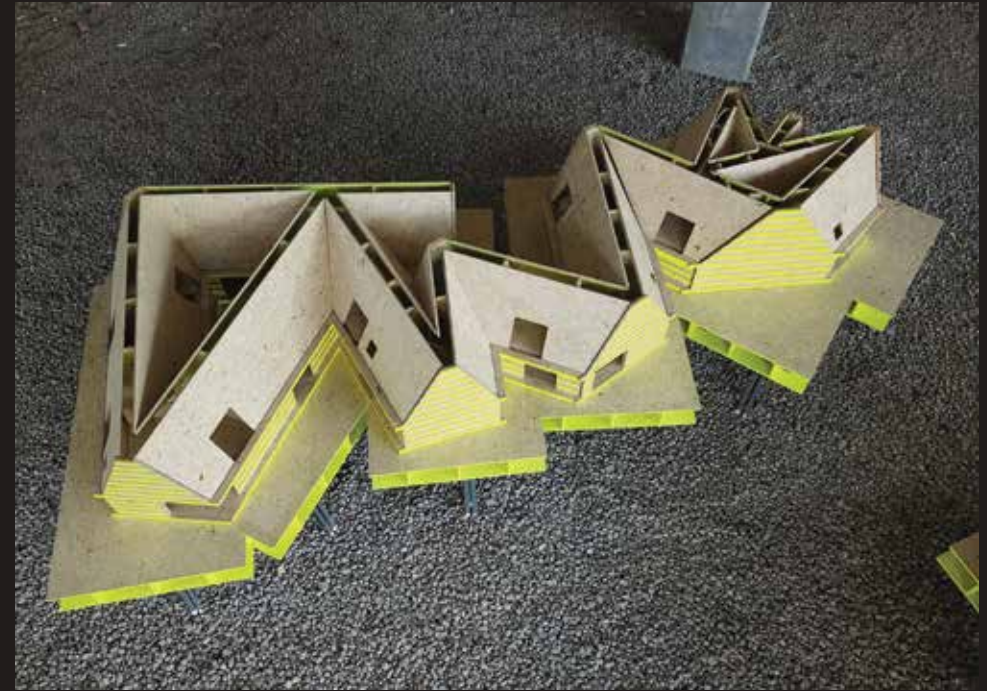


“model home” as a fascination of both architects and developers. It organizes inhabitants’ relationships to each other solely through social and spatial characteristics including work, leisure, levels of intimacy, and cooking habits. These new socio-spatial organizations are based on non-biological kinship structures or groupings of subjects whose sole relationship is spatial. In this project, familial relationships are not a primary driver or base condition for spatial relationships. *138 Model Homes* is a “combinatorial game” adding and subtracting generic square rooms void of programmatic designations beyond interchangeable furniture pieces. The proposal flattens programmatic importance of individual rooms; all rooms are equal in size and shape (even the bathrooms), eschewing consumer designations like “master bath” or “guest bedroom” which promote hierarchy of occupants and spaces.

Another typology for domestic sharing, *A Long House* by Outpost Office, a design practice codirected by myself and Erik Herrmann, physically bends and folds back on itself, creating awkward niches, communal landscapes and strange domestic overlaps designed to absorb social nuances. Each dwelling unit consists of alternating open spaces and closed infrastructural elements which can be combined to create units of different size or units which can grow or contract with its inhabitants. The exterior form of the building does not exclusively register the interior configurations or the boundary of individual units. Instead, units can be shared horizontally and vertically in a multitude of sectional configurations. An upper level offers large open spaces which can be used for shared resources such as home offices, spaces for childcare, or as connections between unconnected ground-floor units. Additionally, the shared roof line ties units to each other at moments where there is no physical connection on the ground floor. The variety of unit sizes accommodates inhabitant groups which could span from a single person to large groups with various social or familial connections. The design suggests how architecture can provide spatial affordances and constructive ambiguity, in addition to concrete form.

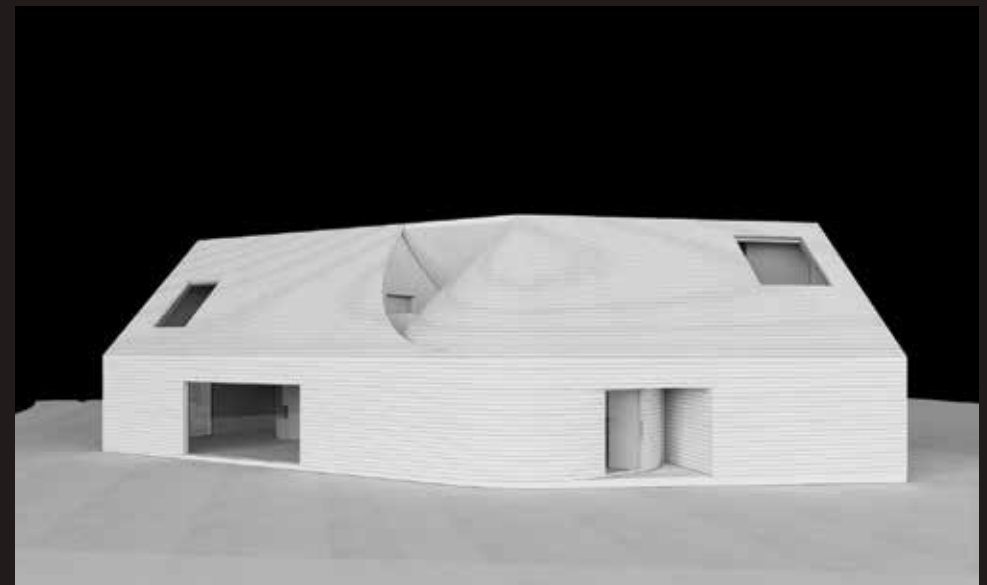
*Concord House* by Studio Sean Canty conceals density with a design which includes a single-family residence and two additional living units within a single building envelope. The building’s massing does not specifically articulate a distinction between units and disguises its density within a singular form. The formal continuity and subtle bend of the *Concord House* beautifully masks the additional dwelling units and creates the appearance of a single-family home, camouflaging a multi-unit typology within a single shell.

With a more direct approach to formal camouflage, *Safety Not Guaranteed* by Outpost Office highlights the ongoing fortification of



↑ *A Long House*, 2020.  
© Outpost Office.

↓ *Concord House*, 2020.  
© Studio Sean Canty.



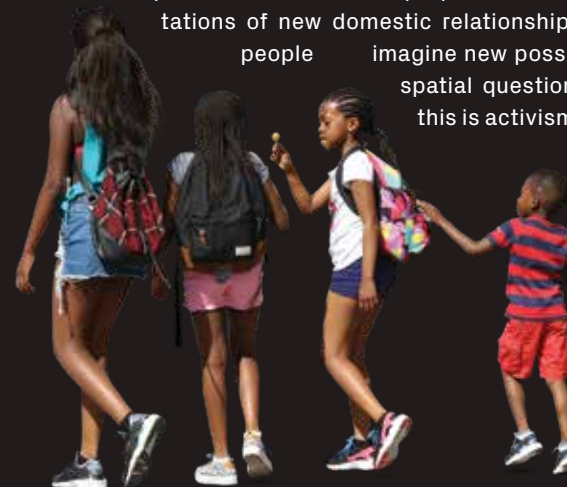


 *Safety Not Guaranteed*, 2016.  
© Outpost Office.

the US suburb and simultaneously suggests that those same formal tropes found in typical suburbs—aggregated gable roofs, pink and brown brick patterns, inward facing organizational strategies—are used to increase density rather than define separate family units. In this project, the suburban house takes on sectional transformations akin to military fortifications in an attempt to blur the boundaries between individual family units. The result is a continuous, incessant form which never acknowledges the beginning or ending of a single home. Despite the structural challenges faced by proponents of increasing density in US's suburbs, these projects highlight only a few of the many architects who are already preparing for housing beyond *a single family*.

Legal definitions of *a single family* and the financial pressures of home equity have limited our understanding of kinship structures and domestic spatial organizations. But architecture provides affordances and opportunities; design can reflect the delicate messiness and wonderful fluidity of our social interdependence. As we disentangle the competing legal and architectural definitions of family, designers will be better equipped to reflect a nuanced, expanding constituency. Architecture can offer typologies of housing which do not assume any typical number of inhabitants or kinship structure. It can challenge assumed relationships between inhabitants of adjacent dwelling units and suggest physical strategies for economic diversity. Architecture might even provide experiential benefits which rival economic incentives. In addition to architects, there are activists, lawyers, planners, and politicians who are already working on the topic of housing equity, but architects are uniquely positioned to support and contribute to those efforts by providing spatial research, radical propositions, and visual representations of new domestic relationships. Architects help

people imagine new possibilities and define spatial questions. In architecture, this is activism. ★



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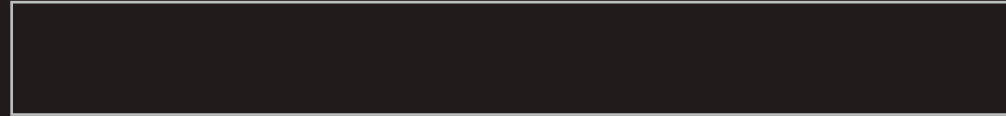


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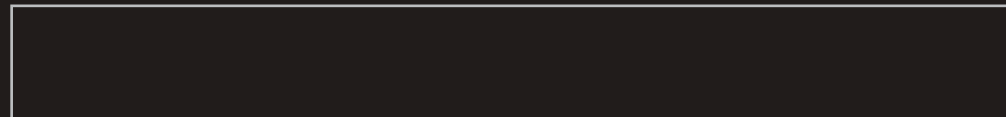


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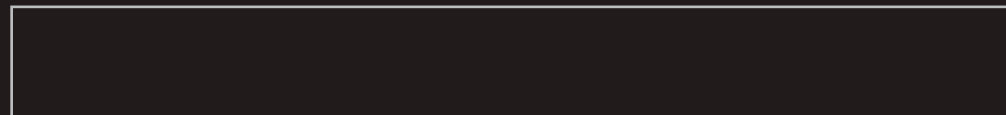
LOOPTY



LOOPS



(#ALWAYSWIP)



JENNIFER BONNER



## SUMMER 2020

90

Jennifer Bonner / MALL recounts her experience in rural Alabama twenty years ago. As a witness to Samuel Mockbee's vigilantism at the Rural Studio, she was also a participant in its experiment. Two decades later, a professor and Harvard-trained architect is a trainee again: she speculates on locating an architectural project anew. Bonner's reflections probe her own white privilege, Mockbee's dissent (pushback against status quo), and vigilantism.

91

The editors of this journal have tasked a group of contemporary architects and scholars with a challenging assignment. I want to be very clear and upfront: this is **hard**. To write about topics on vigilantism and

**GB:** What makes this task hard?

**JB:** It is hard because as a female architect, I have been conditioned to not engage in stereotypical gendered norms such as being "emotional." During interviews I am asked to personally reflect on a design process or topic. My tendency is to overshare, leaning on emotional, visceral examples, which often leads to an auto-corrective tendency to scrub the personal during the editing process in favor of the intellectual. To a certain extent, this writing assignment asks for a personal reflection.

architecture is sure to be a soul-searching effort for several of the contributors. How does our work engage **vigilantism**? Am I a vigilante?

**GB:** How do you define vigilantism?

**JB:** I have never really given the idea of a vigilante that much thought until I read your prompt for this publication. My reading of a vigilante is connected mostly with someone who "takes matters into their own hands."

As a white female who teaches at an Ivy League on the East Coast, my work can only be viewed from a point of privilege. I can certainly think of a list of architects before me who have taken matters into their own hands, and in meaningful ways successfully shifted discourse in the discipline, but how has my work contributed to these efforts? These questions and many others swirl around in my mind as I immediately connect the assignment on architectural vigilantism with the summer of 2020. At various points throughout the summer, like most, I couldn't sleep. When Rayshard Brooks was shot and murdered in a Wendy's parking lot in Atlanta on June 12 while peacefully pleading with law enforcement to walk home, I stared at all of my screens, wishing I was there, in-person, screaming with rage, joining the protests. Those sleepless nights were further compounded by the daily hateful political discourse instigated by the 45<sup>th</sup> President and coupled with the isolation of the coronavirus lockdown. In July, I joined a reading group

at Harvard GSD led by Naisha Bradley, a scholar of diversity and inclusion, where a small group of colleagues read Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. Sitting in a Zoom room full of privilege, myself included, a visceral realization began to unfold. The murder of Rayshard Brooks, in combination with the crystal-clear awakening that racism is wild and rampant in our country, rattled me to my core. The discipline of architecture is not immune to this behavior: **systematic racism** exists in

**GB:** This is quite the cliffhanger. In what ways does systemic racism exist within architecture? In what ways do you benefit from it?

**JB:** My thoughts on this are contributed to the writings of DiAngelo: **+** Schools of Architecture are statistically led by white people. DiAngelo states, "This system of structural power privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group."

**+** Schools of Architecture engage in behavior of "anti-blackness." In DiAngelo's words "Anti-blackness is rooted in misinformation... It is also rooted in a lack of historical knowledge and an inability or unwillingness to trace the effects of history into the present." The architectural canon does not center around Paul Williams, but Mies van der Rohe.

our profession and academia.

The summer of 2020 was not dissimilar to events that happened exactly fifty-six summers ago on June 21, 1964. James Chaney, a Black civil rights worker from Meridian, Mississippi was murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>01</sup> Brooks, like Chaney, was murdered. Architect and educator Samuel Mockbee, from the same hometown as Chaney, was rattled.<sup>02</sup> Overwhelmed by the injustices of the US South, Mockbee did not actively take part in the civil rights movement. Instead, he became an activist in his creative work.<sup>03</sup> Through a series of public lectures, writings, paintings, and sculptures, Mockbee began to define his architectural project with urgency. A series of large murals funded by the Graham Foundation, three dimensional constructions with sets of steps and doorways, served as a backdrop for a collection of photographs with families from a small community in Eutaw, Alabama. Published in 1998 in *Architectural Design's* "The Everyday and Architecture," Mockbee wrote about the ambitions of this work: "I am interested in what might prompt and make possible a process of entering a taboo



landscape, in my case, the **economic poverty of the Deep South**; also in

**SR:** Did Mockbee also ever explicitly address race? Either way, that might be interesting to weave in. If he was foregrounding poverty over race, or connecting the two, or otherwise, that perspective could be productive here.

**JB:** Mockbee usually included the book, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men", by writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans in most of his academic lectures. The book centers on writing and photography of poverty found in rural west Alabama during the Great Depression, specifically portraits of white tenant farmers. He primarily spoke about poverty, which reflects the injustices of race in the rural south. I believe if Mockbee were to have fronted "race", he would have had more resistance from patrons, donors, and academic administration.

developing a discourse beyond merely looking at the effects of poverty but also at how architects can step over the threshold of injustice."<sup>04</sup> The murals served as a representational device for crossing a threshold and engaging a community. In his words, "it's about stepping across a social impasse into an honesty that refuses to gloss over inescapable facts."<sup>05</sup> Half a century ago, Mockbee was confronted with a tragic event that steered his practice and pedagogy. And here we are again, a generation of architects, in a similar position, at the critical juncture of asking ourselves how we might take matters into our own hands.

## ALABAMA'S VIGILANTE

In the early 1990s, Samuel Mockbee and D.K. Ruth established Auburn University's Rural Studio, a design-build program for architecture students located in rural West Alabama assisting underserved communities with housing, public space, and community centers. Expanding upon his theoretical work and writings, Mockbee began to connect the injustices in the Rural South with a proposal for a new educational

model. To put it plain and simple, Mockbee was a vigilante. This kind of vigilantism was connected to dismantling pedagogy of a traditional design studio that fit neatly within the confines of a semester and encouraged the invention of an architectural project that required him to take matters into his own hands. Fed up with the idea that Auburn students would spend time in a study-abroad program, he thought the **Grand Tour** was an expired, out-of-date, and intellectually bankrupt

94 **GB:** What is the Grand Tour?

**JB:** In sixteenth century England, recent graduates would travel through Europe for two years to experience architecture, art, and culture. These “tourists” were young, elite men who traveled from London to Paris, Rome, and Venice—the cultural centers of the time. Similarly, in most schools of architecture there is an option to take a study abroad program during a Bachelor degree. As an educator at Auburn University, Mockbee questioned the idea that students would spend a semester in Europe looking at architecture when there was something more urgent to study in the state of Alabama. These were a few of his early motivations for beginning the Rural Studio, a program where students left Auburn’s campus for a semester to live in rural West Alabama. Rather than traveling to Europe, he convinced students to get in their cars and travel three hours to Hale County.

model for education that was available to only a few. (*I should actually verify this with someone, but as Southern storytelling seems to go, elaborations on Mockbee often become the real story.*) With eyes on Hale County, Alabama, Mockbee believed education should happen “in our own backyard”—specifically in the Black Belt Region, not Tuscany. It took hard work while also absorbing a lot of risk to initially establish a program that would allow students of architecture to leave the comforts of a university to live in Alabama’s most impoverished small towns, population 200. A vigilante has tenacity, determination, and grit—Mockbee’s doggedness materialized in 1993 and remained intact until his untimely death in 2001. Setting up an architecture program in the middle of the state without resources is no small task. It took perseverance to partner with local nonprofits and governmental agencies to establish collaborative relationships, fundraise, and secure the general trust of locals. It took exuberance to convince twenty-somethings to skip SEC football games and instead search high and low



for **weird building materials**, think, discarded tires, car windows from a

**GB:** Why these materials?

**JB:** In rural communities, not only is there a lack of capital to make building improvements; there is a lack of resources and access to basic construction materials which requires driving long distances to larger towns. Mockbee doubled down on the students’ imagination. His pedagogical model encouraged invention of unique wall assemblies, challenging conventional materials. These efforts were partly due to small budgets, but also because his interest in material innovation demonstrated in his own architectural practice, Mockbee Coker.

junkyard, hay bales, and corporate office carpet tiles. It took a certain kind of stubbornness to hire young faculty without any teaching experience and team them up with inmates from a local state prison out on work release to engage in shared responsibilities and projects. (*Even when local community members didn’t agree with a white girl driving two Black inmates around town daily in a Ford F-150 Dually. The group in the truck was AJ, Big Selma, and myself.*) Mockbee was interested in challenging social norms in the lives of middle-class white kids from suburban Alabama. He mixed constituencies, projects, and dialogue with race, architecture, and space. He forced individualistic thinking into a collective DIY spirit. He set up relationships between clients who we designed homes and community centers for and students studying architecture. It wasn’t always easy. Sometimes an uncomfortableness lingered as students desperately tried to play it cool, but in actuality, most had never personally been that close to poverty coming from a place of privilege. Students, namely white, now stood in the homes of Black clients, dried in a bedroom with a new roof, or built a handicap ramp. (*No, it wasn’t all the glitzy fish-scaled, aluminum license plates (imitation Gehry) and cardboard bales (shredded Gehry). Many of the Rural Studio projects also provided residents with basic living conditions such as warm, dry rooms, plumbing, and accessibility for the elderly.*)

What other lessons can be learned from Mockbee’s vigilante project? Most tend to default to writing about the Rural Studio as a social project, the narrative circling around sustainability and the do-goodism of this pedagogical model. I argue that the largest contribution of Mockbee’s project on the discipline was none of these narratives. Now, with thirty years’ distance to the first built works, I suggest Mockbee’s project was a demonstration to students and the architectural profession on how to push back on the status quo. His project, at its core, denied the confines of a typical design studio (*sit here, draw that*) rather encouraging exploration (*find it, test it, build it*). He certainly did his part to blow up traditional modes of education, architectural references, and creative

starting points. As a designer and educator, he started with immediate objects and context surrounding him whether that was overgrown roadside kudzu or a sculptural awning detail on a nearby shed. His project showed students how to take matters into **their own hands**, whatever

**SR:** How might this have influenced you as an architect? And was it successful?

**JB:** Personally, I can say that this unique educational model in some respects instilled confidence in me to be a self-starter. Not to follow “accepted” modes of practice, but to question them outright. An example of this in my own work might be the decision to look at sandwiches (yes, sandwiches!) as a starting point for architecture. This line of inquiry was precisely the moment in my career when I felt a heavy-handed seriousness to how architecture was being discussed during my initial days teaching at Harvard GSD. Surrounded by murmurs of “she can’t do that” and “well, this is not going anywhere”. A new stream of work emerged in my practice influenced by these lessons learned from Mockbee and the insight to make a creative space around myself to explore new work freely and without prejudice.

that looked like to them. It was certainly not based on a style, technique, or technology. It was open and malleable.

One of the hardest things to do for a young architect is to set up one’s architectural project—to define a working method around a set of ideas—that begins to guide practice. And just as you think you might have figured it all out, the architect at any age becomes a trainee, again, back to learning, decentering, and reimagining how to work within contemporary culture. The architect’s arc of a career can be characterized as long and slow, almost too slow. Yet, by recognizing the cultural events that surround us, the reflective educator or architect has the capacity to preemptively question methodology, a list of a studio’s final deliverables, a historical canon propped up by narrow-minded historical accounts, representational norms, or mutually agreed upon aesthetics passed down by a non-diverse group of taste makers. Architecture is at another crossroads: the architect can follow the long career arc with minor deviations (*stay on course as planned*) or consciously insert jarring loopy loops with shape shifting trajectories. At MALL (acronym for Mass Architectural Loopy Loops), the loopy loop is an intentional detour, *not* a trivial loop where you end up right where you started. To instantiate radical shifts in the discipline, influential detours and substantial loopy loops in what is otherwise a smooth arc, become an absolute necessity. What we do know is that a collective effort is underway to shift power structures in

our practices and institutions, and acknowledge the single authorial voice will not direct the way. Now, it is more likely to come from a collective DIY that looks different. Loopy loops should not be misinterpreted as a trivial and childish way to engage a critical discourse on how architectural projects will proceed, but rather as a means of figuring out what **matters**.

**GB:** How does this inform your search for process as the once again trainee?

**JB:** Architecture is an exciting discipline to me because there is no “correct” way of making a building, formulating an idea, or engaging material. This open-ended context creates enormous room for innovation and the imagination. It seems like in moments of racial injustice and substantiation of the status quo, architects and the architectural project reexamine itself. ★

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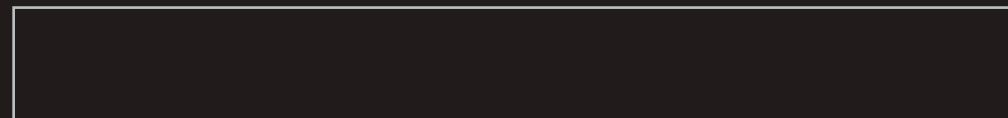
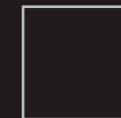
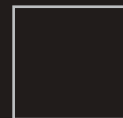
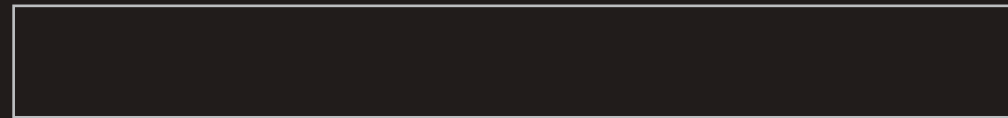


ARCHITECTURE

IN THE AGE OF



(SUPER)  
HEROES



GALOCANIZARES

“Damage is a form of design, and the traces of damage inflicted by political violence—a façade stippled by the spray of bullets, a penumbra of smoke around the hole where a door or window once was, or a pile of rubble no longer identifiable as architecture at all—are at least as significant as any of the elements from which buildings are constructed for living, for the living.”

—Andrew Herscher<sup>01</sup>

“Humans are odd. They think order and chaos are somehow opposites.”

—Vision<sup>02</sup>

In 1975, the poet and vocalist Gil Scott-Heron, accompanied by musician Brian Jackson and the Midnight Band, sang the chorus, “So tell me why, can’t you understand / That there ain’t no such thing as a superman / There ain’t no such thing as a superman.” According to comic book scholar Adilifu Nama, what Scott-Heron meant, in short, is that Superman does not fight for the Black man.<sup>03</sup> While the first impulse might be to disagree and suggest that Superman fights for all humankind (he is, after all, portrayed as Earth’s global protector), Nama’s point is that Superman preserves the status quo. Politics and economic woes remain largely unchanged by the extra-terrestrial immigrant Kal-El, and while he may rid Metropolis of lawbreakers and sinister bandits, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color might have a hard time trying to flag down Superman to help with, say, systemic racism or redlining. Neither fighting for progressive values nor proactively advocating for marginalized communities, DC’s first superhero, “a virtually indestructible white man flying around the world in the name of ‘truth, justice, and the American way’ is not a figure black folk should waste time believing in.”<sup>04</sup> For those oppressed and cast aside, Superman is nothing more than childish fantasy, a sentiment echoed in Marvel’s 2018 feature film *Black Panther* when sympathetic villain Killmonger, death imminent, laments, “Can you believe that? A kid from Oakland walking around and believing in fairytales?”<sup>05</sup>

Superheroes in both comic books and film have historically been regarded as humanity’s saviors, heroic vigilantes fighting for juvenile notions of “good versus evil” centered around simplistic moral axioms. These figures are typically anti-theft, anti-murder, anti-lies and feel compelled to step in when law enforcement cannot aptly resolve these conflicts. This was certainly the case with Marvel’s Captain America, who was illustrated punching Adolf Hitler in his debut issue in 1940. Yet, the two comics powerhouses DC and Marvel each approached the production of heroes differently. DC privileged less corruptible personalities, strong morals, and extraterrestrial magic, whereas Marvel’s heroes were typically average citizens cursed with powerful abilities with some exceptions.<sup>06</sup> As superheroes grew up, so did the representation of their moral values, but DC and Marvel’s distinctions remained largely intact. The 1960s, often called the Silver Age of Comic Books, saw the introduction of fallible heroes such as Marvel’s Fantastic Four, The Hulk, Iron Man, Black Panther, X-Men, and DC’s Justice League of America. Not only were Marvel’s “reluctant superheroes” troubled and insecure; they were also called upon to face less obvious foes like civil unrest and the Vietnam War. By the time Scott-Heron wrote “Ain’t No Such Thing as Superman,” both DC and Marvel comic book heroes were deeply ingrained in the Amer-

ican cultural imagination. Still, the values they represented remained nebulous. For instance, some protagonists actively fought against the US military-industrial complex, while others kept it afloat. Superheroes' inherent fallibility was eventually addressed in 1986 with the introduction of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (DC Comics), a tale of heroes whose "super" status, in contrast to most other DC storylines, engendered more complex questions than simple answers regarding superpowers, humanity, and morality.

Depicted as rogue vigilantes, *Watchmen*'s heroes stood against their morally superior god-like predecessors. This raised a key question for the genre as a whole: when superheroes fight, what exactly do they fight for? What values do they embody? Captain America and Superman purportedly fight for "justice," yet that sentiment is often construed as "the American way." From this perspective, as Nama suggests, heroes fight for and uphold "white racial superiority and American imperialism,"<sup>27</sup> a notion evidenced most clearly in DC and Marvel's whitewashed team rosters.<sup>28</sup>

But as the superhero genre made its way onto the screen, it also brought with it a material component. Superheroes require cities to save and property to protect. Inevitably, the fights for supposed justice generate much collateral damage, making architecture—or rather the destruction of architecture—a significant component of their narratives. Beyond a simple action movie trope, this architectural violence has become the ideological visual language of the superhero genre on screen, a kind of reification or materialization of the values put forth by the story. Aided by high fidelity visual effects and simulation techniques, damage and destruction are core components of today's heroic movies. Although a few recent feature films address the ramifications of this destruction (see: Disney's *Incredibles* and Marvel's *Captain America: Civil War*), this ideology relies on a victory-at-all-cost mentality that positions all damage as collateral. In other words, it is centered on the premise that demolishing buildings and leveling downtowns are okay if the story ends with victory for the heroes. However, as the following will make evident, *collateral damage* is not an objective phrase; it is as much a political descriptor as an architectural one.

If Marvel's comic book narratives were a response to social unrest in the 1960s, today we can identify a similar link between superhero movies and contemporary social justice issues. Ideological paradigms are not limited to canonical documentary images such as the destruction of Pruitt-Igoe and the World Trade Center or burning police stations in the spring of 2020. Fictional images like the destruction of New York and the imaginary country of Sokovia in the Marvel Cinematic Universe also contribute to those paradigms. Because

ideology (defined here as the perpetuation of specific values, myths, and principles) is both social and aesthetic, it provides a structure to critique how images of destruction are communicated to the public and how popular culture reflects and, at times, glosses over pressing social matters. Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018) was as much a response to a lack of Black superhero films as an adaptation of the original comic; *Watchmen* was as much a deconstruction of the superhero genre as it was a satire. Oscillating between reality and fiction, this essay outlines the means through which collateral damage is politicized and presented as an ideological mechanism on the screen and in real life, a mechanism that depends wholly on who is narrating the story and its vehicles of dissemination. Whether as movies, news stories, comic books, or 3D visualizations, images of architectural destruction contain within them a panoply of cultural associations ranging from implicit racism to white hegemony to imperialist legacies that must be unpacked.

## COLLATERAL DAMAGE

In the wake of September 11, 2001, images of destruction flooded media outlets. Chaos and resilience were simultaneously portrayed by photographs of a crumbling metropolis, a city shaken to its core. From an architectural perspective, we can say that the dominating material image of the years following 9/11/2001 was that of rubble and smoke, heightened by US media coverage of debris from Ground Zero to Baghdad. As the focus shifted from search and rescue to revenge, images of the damage done to New York had a double duty; they had to both symbolize American unity—New York's reconstruction and tidying up—as well as fuel a collective desire for retribution—the US's quest for vengeance in the Middle East.

Collateral damage per se was not experienced on the day the World Trade Center towers fell. It was, however, quite prominent in the Iraq War. This is largely because, as Andrew Herscher has written, "damage inflicted in war is either strategic, in the service of the war's



Image of the World Trade Center site in downtown New York City taken by NOAA's Cessna Citation Jet on September 23, 2001. Consider this image against the powerful visual effects in Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012). Photograph from Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

end, or collateral, an accidental by-product of the intent to achieve that end.”<sup>99</sup> Damage and destruction are not neutral signifiers of some objective reality but are instead highly subjective and motivated descriptors. The attacks on New York were labeled terrorism by some, and collateral damage by others, revealing damage’s “double status” as a

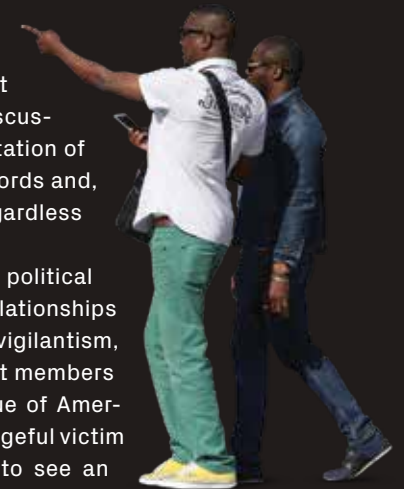
“signifier whose meaning is wholly determined by the chain of signification it is inserted into.”<sup>100</sup> In short, what is or is not collateral damage depends entirely on who is telling the story and why they are telling it.

Narrators in stories of destruction reveal their motivations by isolating right and wrong, good, and bad, into clear camps. Take, for

example, Marvel Studios’s 2012 depiction of another attack on New York. The general formula for the portrayal of destruction in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) follows a similar logic: bad guys do terrorism, good guys do collateral damage; bad aliens are non-humanoid monsters, good aliens are human-passing heroes. In Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers* (2012), bad aliens have come to disrupt the flow of life and it is up to Nick Fury’s reluctant crew to return it to normal. In the process of kicking these invaders out of Earth, much of New York is damaged along the way. But death and destruction are mere casualties of war. As with the American narrative of the war on Iraq, our heroes’ good intentions far outweigh the material value of the city. Similarly, in the 2015 follow-up feature, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the team—upon confronting a villain who turns an entire city into an Earth-shattering asteroid—must make a quick value judgment between the cost of citizens’ lives and the physical city. In the end, the imaginary city of Sokovia is decimated, but at least the heroes saved as many lives as they could. Both films paint collateral damage as an unfortunate yet necessary side-effect of saving the world.

In 2016, Marvel finally addressed the Avengers’ carelessness with the built environment. As if to provide a meta-critique of its own reliance on explosive visual effects (VFX), *Captain America: Civil War* had the heroes face a villain worse than sinister aliens or murderous robots: their own ethical values. With the plot point of the Sokovia Accords, a holdover from *Age of Ultron* and a means to hold the superhero squad accountable for their destruction, Marvel Studios introduced the role and politics of collateral damage into their universe.<sup>11</sup> The team is confronted with images of their own destructive recklessness causing a rift between those who wish to be above the law and those who agree to be held accountable. The Sokovia Accords could be likened to *Watchmen*’s Keene Act of 1977, a fictional law that outlawed vigilantes and superheroes. But despite its emphasis on legislation and open discussion of ethics, *Civil War* upholds a heroic interpretation of vigilantism. The Avengers eventually skirt the Accords and, much to the audience’s delight, save the world regardless of the criminality of their actions.

As its title suggests, *Civil War* is a highly political movie. Much of it revolves around the power relationships between governing bodies and superhuman vigilantism, manifested primarily as an internal battle amongst members of the Avengers. It also reinforces Nama’s critique of American imperialism when the main villain, Zemo, a vengeful victim of the attack on Sokovia, proclaims he wants “to see an





empire fall.”<sup>12</sup> Presumably referencing the Avengers, this statement serves a metaphor for renegade imperialist impulses like the post-9/11 war on terror. Moreover, Zemo’s portrayal as a terrorist and not a heroic vigilante further cements the role of the narrator as the judge of right and wrong. In a parallel story, we might regard Zemo as a hero avenging the death of his family and the Avengers as rampant destroyers of the built environment.

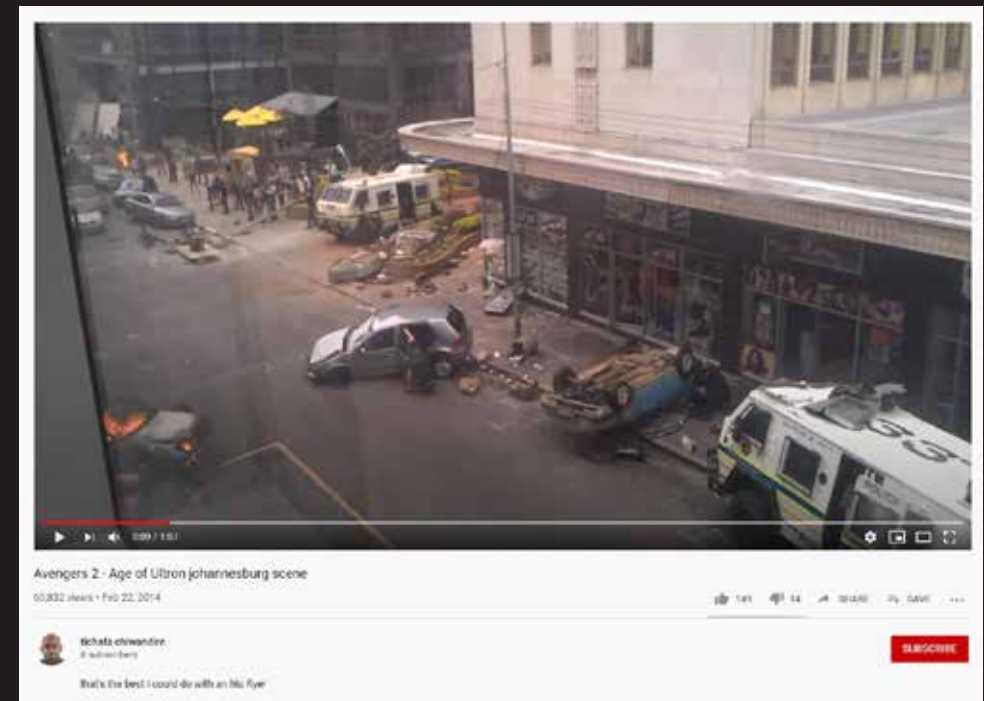
Images of destruction are thus a productive medium for placing good and evil in any narrative. Together with the phrase collateral damage, narrators establish plainly who is right and wrong. Upon further inspection, however, these images rarely tell the whole story. As media scholar Scott Bukatman has pointed out, “superheroes are a trivial and unconvincing lot . . . nothing really changes through their actions.”<sup>13</sup> Organized crime always resurges in Gotham, and Spider-Man always has a new enemy to face. In the case of the MCU, the Avengers are not proactive seekers of justice, but rather reactionary vigilantes always responding to threats. Here we see Nama’s assertion that superheroes preserve the status quo in full effect. Throughout all Avengers films, the team is portrayed as a collection of reactionary heroes fighting to regain normalcy without regard for injustices endemic to that normalcy. Though not mentioned outright, it is implied that normalcy in the MCU parallels real-world conditions such as social inequity and white racial hegemony. Our heroes focus on fighting aliens while largely ignoring the “practice of white supremacy” that on top of perpetuating anti-Black racism, as Cornel West remarks, “has left its indelible mark on all spheres of American life—from the prevailing crimes of Amerindian reservations to the discriminatory realities against Spanish-speaking Latinos to racial stereotypes against Asians.”<sup>14</sup> Instead of avenging social injustice, the cinematic heroes are concerned with suppressing threats deemed too overwhelming for law enforcement. Historian Daniel Immerwahr describes this as another swerve from their original depiction in the comic books. “*Injustice*,” Immerwahr notes, “is a word barely heard in the Marvel movies—only *Black Panther* explores the theme. The other films are obsessed with a different word: *protection*.”<sup>15</sup>

For the MCU, this constitutes two distinct narrative angles epitomized respectively by Tony Stark’s dream of a “suit of armor around the world”<sup>16</sup> and King T’Challa’s reflection on African diaspora. The phrase *collateral damage* thus starts to unravel if we pull at each individual’s motivations. This requires asking how damage should be perceived, how it is justified, and who has the right to destroy.

## THE RIGHT TO SMASH

The real and fictional attacks on New York City represent the means through which architectural destruction is politicized and how images of rubble and crumbling buildings are inherently tied to privilege and inequity. Despite attempts at oversight, our pop culture heroes are afforded the privilege of no accountability. For example, Captain America coyly encourages Hulk to “smash” as he wishes whereas protesters in Minneapolis in 2020, calling for justice in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, are depicted as “thugs” and “looters.”<sup>17</sup> The narratives of heroism and resilience that accompanied the World Trade Center attacks and the alien invasion in *The Avengers* are no longer applicable when marginalized citizens are inflicting damage.

Again, it is the cinematic portrayals of destruction that best illustrate this double standard. For instance, it is by no means a coincidence that two of the most destructive scenes in the Avengers



YouTube user Tichafa Chiwandire enthusiastically captures the Marvel production crew in downtown Johannesburg filming *Captain America: Civil War* on their smartphone. Bystanders admire the simulated destruction caused by Iron Man and The Hulk. YouTube screenshot. Source: YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrMgPtcyJPA>.



canon take place in Africa. The first, from *Age of Ultron*, depicts the destruction of downtown Johannesburg by an out-of-control Hulk. Filmed on location in the South African city, the sequence follows Tony Stark in his Hulkbuster suit attempting to subdue the recently agitated Hulk. As both rampage through the city, we see glimpses of Johannesburg's architecture, a panoply of colonial structures and modernist high-rises. The fight culminates in a skeletal building under construction, which, after a quick scan by Stark's computer, appears to be empty of civilians (i.e., safe to destroy). Stark collapses the entire tower on top of Hulk, subduing him back to normal. The second sequence, from *Civil War*, takes place in Lagos, Nigeria. Although filmed in Atlanta, Georgia, another prominent Black area, the series of events depicts a traditional informal market disrupted by the Avengers chasing down what is left of Hydra. When the villain prepares to self-destruct, Scarlet Witch picks him up and throws him toward a neighboring building causing an explosion that kills hundreds. Lagos is the last straw that forces the United Nations to draft the Sokovia Accords.

The episodes in Johannesburg and Lagos reveal two subtexts of superhero destruction in the MCU: (1) the Avengers follow a kind of American imperialist doctrine abroad, and (2) African cities are not afforded the privilege of revenge. The former is characterized by the large discrepancy between damage caused outside the US (*Age of Ultron*, *Civil War*) and damage caused within its borders (*The Avengers*, *The Winter Soldier*). Though not officially a government agency, the team's actions appear to echo those of the US military after 9/11, particularly with their peacekeeping rhetoric and Western savior complexes.<sup>18</sup> The latter subtext is exemplified by the films' antagonists. While the attacks on New York and Sokovia spawn villains like *Spider-Man: Homecoming*'s Vulture—a displaced contractor working on post-alien cleanup—and the previously mentioned *Civil War* instigator Zemo, the only African justice-seeking antagonist we encounter is *Black Panther*'s Erik Killmonger. But Killmonger's quest to avenge his father and disrupt the aforementioned status quo features significantly less destruction than those of other villains. Collateral damage in *Black Panther* is minimal, and when compared to *Age of Ultron*, almost negligible—a car, a wall here and there. Wakandan heroes and villains are not given the same right to “smash” as Hulk and the other Avengers.

It is difficult to ignore the significance of a movie about African diaspora displaying significantly less destruction than its counterparts featuring white heroes. Whether intentional or not, the lack of grandiose collateral damage in *Black Panther* implies that audiences can handle plenty of destruction, but not if it is generated

by Black superheroes. This is a social phenomenon that extends well beyond the superhero genre and the screen in general. Despite attempts to rectify these biases, Hollywood's fraught history of portraying Black people as thugs and criminals still seeps through.

## HEROES AND VILLAINS

If the cinematic representation of the right to destroy touches on a racial divide, then this double standard is exponentially multiplied in the contemporary moment, specifically in the case of public protests. Despite the peaceful nature of most Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations in the spring of 2020, the dominant narrative stemming from these events turned towards the violent exceptions—images of individuals taking it upon themselves to rid cities of monuments to racism and calling attention to injustice by damaging property.<sup>19</sup> The destruction of confederate statues and storefronts took center stage and was framed by many media outlets as “looting” and “riots” that had gotten out of control. This was a powerful narrative maneuver. As Antonia Malchuk has pointed out, “when a protest is labelled a riot, it invites the automatic judgment of lawlessness and irrational, illegal behavior begging to be quashed.”<sup>20</sup> These descriptors of unrest during protests bypassed the purposes and complexities behind the demonstrations and immediately generated weighted narratives and knee-jerk political reactions. A *Fox Business* article covering a damaged Target store in Minneapolis described it as a “store that was looted by rioters.”<sup>21</sup> Another piece in *USA Today* declared that “some criminals used George Floyd protests as cover for looting.”<sup>22</sup> That these articles skirt any mention of collateral damage should be expected. As we have seen, collateral damage is a descriptor only afforded to soldiers, white Avengers, and white vigilantes.

But who is telling these stories? Because the construction of heroes and villains in both news stories and superhero movies depends wholly on the narrator, it is necessary to investigate these viewpoints. We may consider Marvel (owned by Disney) the narrator of the



Strip mall engulfed in flames in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 29, 2020. The rhetoric of “people versus property” was a major talking point during the BLM demonstrations. But if *The Avengers* had caused these flames, who would be considered heroic? Photograph by Hungryogrephotos, <https://www.flickr.com/people/188619396@N05/>, Public Domain.

Goodwill in St. Paul, Minnesota, on May 28, 2020. Framed against the backdrop of tear gas and militarized police, the damaged “goodwill” operates as a billboard calling attention to injustice. Photograph by Hungryogrephotos, <https://www.flickr.com/people/188619396@N05/>, Public Domain.


US Bank in St. Paul, Minnesota on May 28, 2020. In 2008, US Bank received \$6,599,000,000 in bailout funds while the poverty rate in St. Paul as of 2018 was 19.9%. Citizens’ frustrations are expressed on the architecture. Photograph by Hungryogrephotos, <https://www.flickr.com/people/188619396@N05/>, Public Domain.

Avengers opus. Having an American corporation describe canonically American values and how they might heroically disseminate across the globe further reinforces the films’ imperialist actions and motivations. In news media, our narrators are less abstract. Today’s US news outlets constitute a highly politicized landscape of information. It is therefore unsurprising to see organizations on the side of governing bodies, who are actively against BLM values, spin protests and political demonstrations as “riots.” In both cases, narratives are supported and exaggerated by framing images of architectural destruction and property damage against a rhetoric of violence, sometimes necessary, other times not.

Caught up in these images of collateral damage are questions concerning human lives versus property and law enforcement’s role in upholding justice. Again, we must understand that these images are fragments of a larger narrative. A conclusion that emerges upon closer inspection of BLM protest imagery is that protesters, like superheroes, rarely engage in unrest for the fun of it.





 Demolition of Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in 1972. Much has been said about Pruitt-Igoe, yet the dominant narrative tends to unjustly blame the residents for its decay, despite records of clear mismanagement and underfunding. Charles Jencks also made it a point to emphasize race when describing the complex's failure. Photograph: US Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

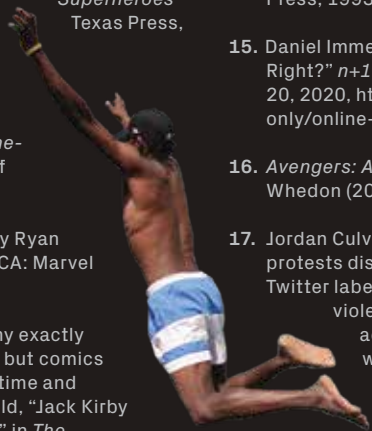


According to Malchik, “they do it because they feel they have no other choice” for communicating injustice. Damage done to capitalist establishments directly addresses the failure of capitalism to benefit non-white communities, toppled statues shed light on the remnants of confederate ideology in the US, and stealing material goods from already profitable retailers calls attention to the original theft of land and people in American history. Seen from this perspective, images of boarded up storefronts and burning police stations signify collateral and necessary architectural damage from a war on injustice.

Like the canonical photographs of the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, these images engender powerful narratives about social order and ideology. However, they rarely tell the whole story. Consider, for instance, Charles Jencks’s famous reference to the Pruitt-Igoe demolition. An often-rehearsed quote from his *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* states: “Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32pm . . . when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme . . . [was] given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite.”<sup>23</sup> What is typically omitted is the second part of the quote where he states: “Previously it had been vandalized, mutilated, and defaced by its black inhabitants.”<sup>24</sup> The imagery that Jencks conjures up is eerily similar to right-wing narratives on protest activity. Might we ask instead, why the communities felt compelled to damage? What were they calling attention to? While modern architecture (by way of specific racist and negligent urban planning policies) certainly failed the residents of Pruitt-Igoe, the photographs of its destruction also fail to communicate the complexities inherent in architectural unbuilding, which as we have seen goes beyond heroes and villains.<sup>25</sup> There is always more to architectural damage than can be presented in an image. We need only probe further. ★

## ENDNOTES

01. Andrew Herscher, "The Language of Damage," *Grey Room*, No. 7, On 9/11 (Spring, 2002).
02. Vision, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015).
03. Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).
04. Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011): 10.
05. *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler (2018; Burbank, CA: Marvel Studios).
06. It is difficult to explain why exactly this distinction emerged, but comics scholars have noted this time and again. See Charles Hatfield, "Jack Kirby and the Marvel Aesthetic" in *The Superhero Reader*, eds. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, Kent Worcester (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).
07. Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011): 10.
08. This is also addressed and exaggerated in *Watchmen* with its alternate history in which the US annexes Vietnam after the war. See Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New Edition) (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014).
09. Andrew Herscher, "The Language of Damage," *Grey Room*, No. 7, On 9/11 (Spring, 2002): 68–71.
10. Andrew Herscher, "The Language of Damage," *Grey Room*, No. 7, On 9/11 (Spring, 2002): 69.
11. While the emphasis here is on the motion pictures, which deviate from the comics, it should be noted that in the comic book series *Civil War*, the mechanism for holding heroes accountable is the Superhuman Registration Act.
12. *Captain America: Civil War*, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (2016; Burbank, CA: Marvel Studios).
13. Scott Bukatman, "A Song of the Urban Superhero" in *The Superhero Reader*, eds. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, Kent Worcester (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 171.
14. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 5.
15. Daniel Immerwahr, "We're the Good Guys, Right?" *n+1*, April 26, 2018, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/were-the-good-guys-right/>.
16. *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, directed by Joss Whedon (2015; Burbank, CA: Marvel Studios).
17. Jordan Culver, "Trump says violent Minneapolis protests dishonor George Floyd's memory, Twitter labels 'shooting' tweet as 'glorifying violence'," *USA Today*, May 29, 2020, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/05/28/george-floyd-donald-trump-twitter-jacob-frey-thugs/5281374002>.
18. US Military recruitment campaigns often use Marvel-like rhetoric in their media. Department of Defense Hollywood liaison Phil Strub also worked with Marvel during the filming of *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010).
19. As I write this on January 6, 2021, a large gathering of white supremacist demonstrators are storming the US Capitol building in Washington D.C. Footage on cable news networks and online shows moments in which Capitol police officers willingly let violent insurrectionists (who are seeking to overturn the 2020 election results) into the building. Windows were smashed, doors were vandalized, and four people were killed. Yet, these violent white supremacists were not met with the same police force as the BLM demonstrators in the summer of 2020. While the two events are largely incomparable, this double standard cannot be ignored.
20. Antonia Malchik, "Riot acts," *aeon.co*, December 3, 2019, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-history-of-riot-shows-the-importance-of-democratic-tumult>.
21. Daniella Genovese, "Looted Target store in Minneapolis to be closed through late 2020," *Fox Business*, June 1, 2020, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/lifestyle/target-minneapolis-riots-stores-closed>.
22. Dennis Wagner, "Peaceful protests got hijacked," *USA Today*, June 15, 2020, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2020/06/15/criminals-used-george-floyd-protests-cover-looting-police-say/5324881002/>.
23. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 9.
24. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 9.
25. For a further examination of the history of Pruitt-Igoe, see *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, directed by Chad Freidrichs (2011; Columbia, MO, Unicorn Stencil Documentary Films).







DOMESTIC

VIGILANCE



AS AN



AESTHETIC

PRACTICE

SEAN CANTY

“Aesthetics then is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming.”  
—bell hooks<sup>01</sup>



Vigilance implies the building of sensorial knowledge of a place, prior to taking action on what one is seeing, prior to moving into the role of the vigilante. As a nuanced form of vision and visibility, vigilance is a way of seeing that is focused on a specific environment and sustained over a period of time. Shifting focus from the actions of the vigilante towards this critical mode of perception considers how aesthetic practices can employ vigilance to uncover the unseen and, in turn, this focus underscores the impact that this uncovering can have on social relations and the way they shape the physical world.

The slow, site-specific aggregation of sensorial knowledge that vigilance relies upon is central to the practice of artists, who are aptly situated to be purveyors of both sight and criticism. Using the writings of bell hooks as a lens, this piece reconsiders how the work of Theaster Gates, Amanda Williams, and Rachel Whiteread reframes our perception of domestic spaces and how this reframing can begin to suggest an oppositional aesthetic. By working with existing domestic spaces and transforming them, these artists focus our attention on the shape of everyday life. Each artist, in turn, asks how a different understanding of domesticity can challenge our existing ideas about how we live together without prefiguring solutions. Instead of considering vigilance as a first step in reinscribing a new type of order within society, can we learn something from the ways of wielding this knowledge towards subversive acts?

In bell hooks's work, the domestic space becomes the focus of a close reading of her own life and the aesthetic habits of members of her family. Hooks highlights how her family members were actively involved in shaping their domestic environment. Often, this involved making household items from scratch and repurposing existing materials. In *An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional* and *Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary*, hooks talks about how beautiful objects, despite their connection to different aesthetic styles, enhance life. hooks says:

“Our grandmother, Baba, made this house a living space. She was certain that the way we lived was shaped by objects, the way we looked at them, the way they were placed around us. She was certain that we were shaped by space... Look, she tells me, what the light does to color! Do you believe that space can give life, or take it away, that space has power?... She has taught me how to look at the world and see beauty. She has taught me “we must learn to see.”<sup>02</sup>

01. bell hooks, “An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional,” *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry*, vol. 1 (1995): 65, doi:10.2307/4177045.

02. bell hooks, “An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional,” *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry*, vol. 1 (1995): 65, doi:10.2307/4177045.

The connection that hooks's family members had with their domestic spaces reflected the value of their time and labor rather than the cost of items purchased to fill the space. By learning to see the result of this labor as its own aesthetic, one that has value born of something other than industrialized processes, hooks begins to outline a type of oppositional aesthetics. Depicting the care and attention that her family members gave to shaping their space, hooks outlines a world where consumption is antithetical to the relationships they cultivate.

Domestic architecture is an important environment for learning to see hooks's oppositional aesthetics. In *Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics of the Ordinary*, hooks articulates how African Americans in the south were often economically deprived and excluded from access to meaningful work. Through a confessional narrative and anecdotes of traditional Black folk culture, hooks depicts the ways that many African Americans cultivated meaning and imagination through the appreciation of the ordinary and a recontextualizing of existing objects within domestic spaces.<sup>03</sup>

As hooks describes, in some of these homes, beauty is a "force to be made and imagined."<sup>04</sup> hooks talks about how vital this was to her grandfather, Daddy Gus.

To him, beauty was present in found objects, discarded objects that he rescued and restored because, as he put it, "spirits lived there." His room—a luxurious, welcoming place for his children—was full of "treasures." Entering that sanctuary of precious "beautiful" objects we were embraced by an atmosphere of peace and serenity.<sup>05</sup>

For hooks's grandfather, the value of these objects was self-generated. Instead of seeing these objects as valuable because of their monetary or exchange value, Daddy Gus imbues them with value through the act of collecting and an appreciation shared with other members of the family. In many ways this approach, motivated by economic deprivation, is depicted as an artistic practice by hooks.

The intimacy and the interiority of these domestic spaces actively shapes an aesthetic practice that hooks uses to better understand the world outside of these homes. Reconsidering these anachronistic practices of our elders is—for hooks—a form of resistance to the ways that media and capital socialize our daily lives. hooks's admonition to turn our focus to the ordinary emphasizes oppositional aesthetics as a form of resistance to consumerist culture,

white supremacy, and capitalism. Moreover, hooks's meditation on the ordinary amplifies the way media and capital mediate our relationship to aesthetics by promoting consumption and capitalist forms of luxury reinforcing hegemonic structures in need of change.<sup>06</sup> This mediation disables one's ability to see beautiful objects and beautiful spaces as a redemptive form of creative practice and self-determination. hooks's domestic vigilance, the closeness of this particular interior gaze, trains her to see the world outside of domestic spaces not just as distinct, but as potentially lacking.

This idea of oppositional aesthetics is central not only to hooks's approach to seeing and reseeing spaces of domesticity, but also to the practice of artists like Theaster Gates, Rachel Whiteread, and Amanda Williams. Each of these artists has considered the home as a site for their work, centering vigilance in their approach, and articulating a practice of oppositional (or anti-) aesthetics in response. As Hal Foster elaborates, "anti-aesthetics signals a practice, cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in politics, or rooted in a vernacular, that is to forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm."<sup>07</sup> By training their sight on the domestic, Gates, Whiteread, and Williams each tease out aesthetic experiences from the radical transformation of found spaces. The act of reclaiming an existing domestic space (often a home) plays with the value of domestic spaces that hooks considers in her work: the attention to these spaces, the care given to their transformation, and the development of an aesthetic through artistic practice.

The work of Theaster Gates foregrounds the house as both a medium and typology which can engage the complexities of the social, political, and formal by recasting the house as a museum. The *Dorchester Projects* is an ongoing project that Gates spearheaded through a series of urban interventions. This body of work transforms abandoned and underutilized houses into community works of art. Unlike a traditional house museum, whose histories and subjects were situated in whiteness or within a particular ideal of American life, the buildings in Gates' *Dorchester Projects* foreground black domestic spaces.

With the *Dorchester Projects*, Gates reimaged the surrounding neighborhood—largely abandoned, neglected, and economically disadvantaged at the time—through a strategic and nimble set of renovations. Using humble and reclaimed materials, Gates slowly transformed his studio house—and nearby houses—into a small cultural complex. Each house, and its respective façade, is subtly altered through common materials and finishes offering those

03. bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry*, vol. 1 (1995): 65–72., doi:10.2307/4177045.

04. bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," 66.

05. bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New Press, 1998), 121.

06. bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New Press, 1998).

07. Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: a Preface" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 3–15.

who pass by clues of ordinariness and its internal programmatic exceptions. The façade of the *Archive House* is re clad in vertical striation of pallet boards, each weathered differently, giving the effect of a quilted tapestry, or a serially stacked collections of books spines on a shelf. The façade of the *Listening House* presents a muted one-story brick façade with three small strip windows. The façade of the *Black Cinema House* is another brick building with a mannered set of exterior elevations, contrasting its red brick against black painted bay window which occupies the second story corner of the building. While each of these houses retain the scale and exterior shape that reflects the fabric of the neighborhood, the cladding of the facades and rhythm of apertures break with the surrounding urban fabric.

In Gates's work, houses become homes for cultural production and experience. As Mabel O. Wilson articulates in "Home Schooled/House School," the poetics and politics of blackness, space, and property are interrogated in each structure in Gates's *Dorchester Projects*. Gates uses these existing structures to both transform and house fraught histories of black life that are typically discarded, lost, or forgotten. Wilson cites the tomes of European philosophy and history that maintain that peoples of African descent had no history worth telling. Thus, the representation of Blackness in both the spaces

of domesticity and institution were made elusive through the exclusionary operations of systemic racism.<sup>08</sup> Cultural programming is at the heart of the complex taking space in the *Listening House*, the *Archive House*, and the *Black Cinema House*.


This intentional infusion of public life into formerly private spaces catalyzed these disenfranchised homes of Black life for renewed value, purpose, and redemption. By opening these houses up to a wider audience, Gates also makes the personal scale of the domestic something that can be collectively experienced.

As an expression of vigilance, the house museum is interesting for the way it blends multiple ways of seeing: the attention of a museum-goer's gaze and the distraction of the familiar gaze. Within the institutionalized domestic space, the scrutiny of the detail, lingering with an aesthetic experience, is ascribed to the ordinariness of the domestic, wherein attention is often reduced and dismissed as we begin to take the domestic for granted, or view it less critically. Although the house museum is at the core of the development of contemporary institutional and cultural typologies, the intimacy of these spaces creates a specific context in which to consider how our comfort level with spaces of domesticity can divorce us from an understanding of how these spaces shape our everyday life. In *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*,

08. Mabel Wilson, "Home Schooled/House Schooled," in *Theaster Gates: How to Build a House Museum*, eds. Kitty Scott and Theaster Gates (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018), 115–119.



Patricia West explains:

 Dorchester Projects, Chicago, 2009.  
© David Schalliol.

Houses and Museums store things. One contains collections of objects, provisions used in the rituals of everyday life; the other stores collections of often obsolete objects that emblematically represent and shape the character of cultures and nations. A house cradles intimate individual and familial memories, while a museum hosts collective memories and official history.<sup>09</sup>

The various iterations of house museums created by Gates tap into this unsavory history, subverting historical strictures by way of creative practice. West elaborates, saying: "The American house museum began as a public commentary controlled by disenfranchised, though politically engaged women. This typology gained social and cultural traction and eventually would realign with the interests of male politicians, museum professionals, and businessmen, giving the house museum its modern cast, shaped by political circumstances and historical contexts."<sup>10</sup> At their origin, house museums interrogated the relationship between power within domestic relationships and how these imbalances were projected onto the larger representation of US history. Gates's reconstitutive

09. Mabel Wilson, "Home Schooled/House Schooled," in *Theaster Gates: How to Build a House Museum*, eds. Kitty Scott and Theaster Gates (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018), 115–119.

10. Patricia West, *Domesticating History: the Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1999).



project seeks to highlight the legacy of redlining, which undervalued homes of African Americans in cities across the US. By reclaiming the homes of African Americans, Gates projects them back into this landscape, an attempt to add these stories back into the larger narrative.

The process of remaking, renovating, or altering something necessitates starting from a point of reference. This doubling of an artifact brings the opportunity to do things differently a second time around, to syntactically recode, distort, or transgress an original while still drawing reference. As in Gates's work, Amanda Williams and Rachel Whiteread both create work that acts on an existing artifact (through color and the process of casting respectively) to undergo a particular kind of transformation. Existing domestic spaces are recoded as attention is focused on the shape of these spaces and their relationship to the urban context.

Amanda Williams's *Color(ed) Theory Suite* (2014–16) doesn't seek to rehabilitate or reinhabit abandoned or neglected properties of Black life. Rather, her work draws attention to the role of color as a cultural, political, and social construct. For this series, Williams identified vacated and condemned houses that were

then repainted in colors whose unnatural hues reflect the everyday products pulled from her experience growing up in the South Side of Chicago. The work calls attention to the way color


is used to market products to Black consumers and the role that those colors play in formulating a shared aesthetic experience. Williams, along with friends, family, and members of the community, performs a reconnaissance of abandoned domestic spaces and structures that are slated to be demolished by surreptitiously recoloring them. Williams explains the series, saying:

The practice of discriminatory housing lending created this landscape to begin with. That trauma that comes after years and years and years of disinvestment, of being lied to, of not really having control over how your environment gets shaped, or your ability to own your environment. These were fully intact blocks and neighborhoods, and so to know what isn't there, is as important as noting what is there... It really tells that entire story through these colors in these isolated structures that say everything from "I'm still here" to "Will you remember me when I'm gone?"<sup>11</sup>




11. "Amanda Williams. *Color(Ed) Theory Suite*. 2014-2016," The Museum of Modern Art, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/290/3760>.



 *Color(ed) Theory*, Amanda Williams.  
© David Schalliol.





 *Color(ed) Theory*, Amanda Williams.  
© David Schalliol.

Williams's decision to leave the exterior of these houses intact, while applying color that creates a sharp contrast to the surrounding urban fabric, acts as a beacon to draw attention to these houses. Citing Wilson again:

Such histories include the insidious systems of segregation that legislated where black Americans were able to live and work, consigned by both law and force to the undesirable, polluted and suspect spaces, kept at a distance from white Americans. By extension, such racist practices precluded and made it difficult for black Americans to own both land and property, relegating home as a provisional construct in the black imagination.<sup>12</sup>

Picking up on themes that both hooks and Gates engage, Williams uses paint to recode these abandoned homes through a creative act, while referencing patterns of consumption that often code and shape the spaces inside.

It is the question of what remains that is asked in Rachel Whiteread's work, including *Ghost*, *Untitled (house)*, or *Untitled Domestic*. Each casts spaces or architectural elements of domesticity in concrete. The resulting forms are uninhabitable. From the outside, viewers' attention is drawn to the shape of the home's interior. By perceiving the space of the home as a solid form, unadorned and unornamented, the outline of the home's shape comes into sharper focus. The protrusion of bay windows on the front facade and the striation of the west facade where volumes are cut away from the edge of the home to accommodate light wells speak to the negotiations that are made to bring light and air into the home in relationship to an assumed urban neighborhood surrounding the home. While not legible on the form itself, this reading of the forces shaping the form of the home references zoning codes whose legal constructs are embedded social, cultural, economic, and historical aspects of a community's self-image.<sup>13</sup> Whiteread's piece acts similarly to the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, who drew attention to the US suburban dream as an overt use of domesticity as a political tool to aid in postwar development and restore certain ideological values of family and home.<sup>14</sup> In each case, home is doubled and opposed through creative critique. Their work taps into a long history of artists questioning and undoing the politics of domestic space.

12. Mabel Wilson, "Home Schooled/House Schooled," in *Theaster Gates: How to Build a House Museum*, eds. Kitty Scott and Theaster Gates (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018), 115–119.

13. Imogen Racz, "Gordon Matta-Clark, Splitting, and the Unmade House," *The I.B. Tauris Blog*, January 26, 2015, [theibtaurisblog.com/2015/01/26/gordon-matta-clark-splitting-and-the-unmade-house/](http://theibtaurisblog.com/2015/01/26/gordon-matta-clark-splitting-and-the-unmade-house/).

14. Imogen Racz, "Gordon Matta-Clark, Splitting, and the Unmade House," *The I.B. Tauris Blog*, January 26, 2015, [theibtaurisblog.com/2015/01/26/gordon-matta-clark-splitting-and-the-unmade-house/](http://theibtaurisblog.com/2015/01/26/gordon-matta-clark-splitting-and-the-unmade-house/).



These critical acts of looking at and reframing spaces of domesticity draw attention to the structures that foreground exclusion, discrimination, or abandonment. Moreover, by working through a medium and within a discipline, these artists aim for a level of engagement with their mediums that is a type of mastery. As Kerry James Marshall asserts, this element of mastery can become a way to use a high degree of technical control and critical self-evaluation to expand the framework of disciplinary aesthetics and knowledge.<sup>15</sup> For some, like Gates, we are able to rediscover through an active lens of vigilance, the beauty laid bare by remaking, reforming, and reprogramming spaces of abandonment and neglect. For others, like Williams and Whiteread, sustained attention to domestic spaces calls attention to the structures and practices that shape domesticity. By moving a range of domestic spaces back into our field of vision, it prompts the question—what other models of vigilance might move the needle forward to more inclusive spatial practices? Perhaps we can find a way to look for these close to home. ★

15. "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry," YouTube video, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 7:35, May 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2bmHE7MRQU>.

✚ *House*, Rachel Whiteread, 1993. Commissioned and produced by Artangel. Photograph by Edward Woodman.



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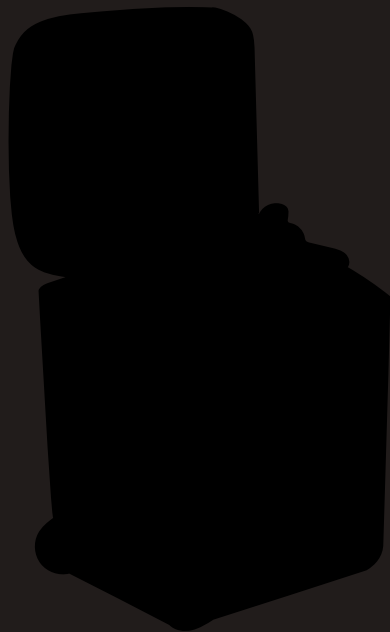
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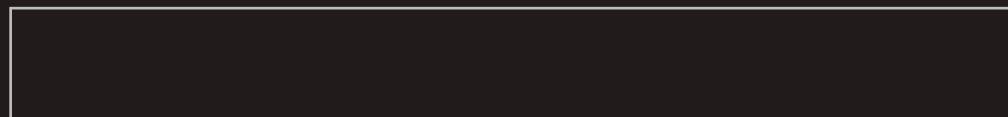
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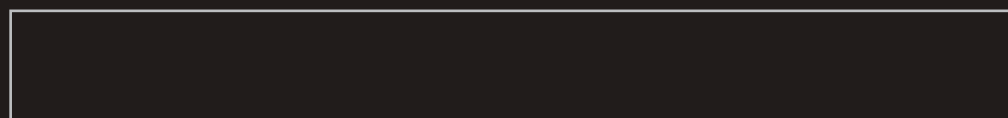
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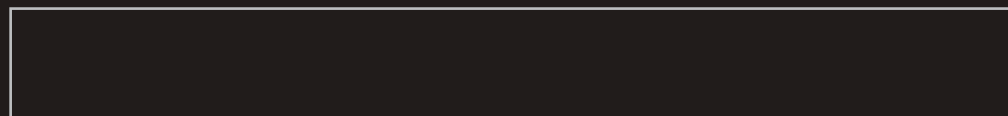
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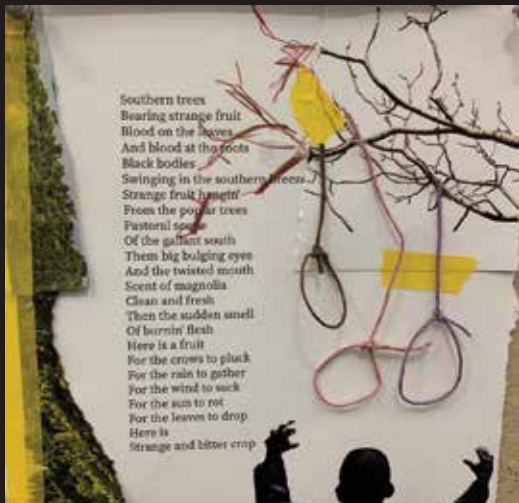


PIN-UPS



SEKOU COOKE





Collage, Pin Sangkaeo.  
 Courtesy of the author.

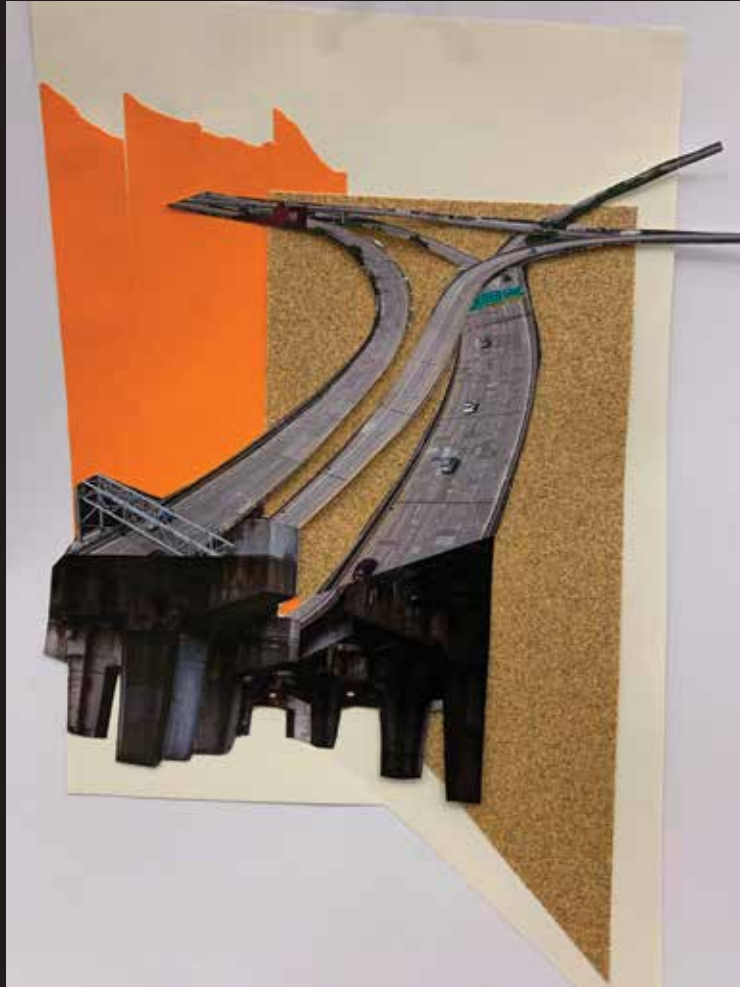
In thirteen years of teaching architecture studios, fall 2019 was my Blackest semester. Not in terms of student demographics, of course (the odds of me having even one Black student in my class is less than one in forty), but in terms of the studio's subject matter. Blackness as a subject—in all its most culturally, socially, and politically provocative senses—took a front seat instead of its usual tangential role as a byproduct of my own Blackness. In response to a course-wide coordinator-prompted theme of “biopolitics,” I chose to focus my third-year undergraduate studio section on mass incarceration, its effects on Black families in America, and the connection between those themes and the history of the marginalization of Syracuse, New York's Black citizens. Little did I know that later that semester these same themes would be amplified across the entire Syracuse University campus after a rash of racist graffiti on dorm walls triggered prolonged student protests and ignited the “NotAgainSU” hashtag. This was also almost a year before Jacob Blake<sup>01</sup>, Breonna Taylor<sup>02</sup>, and George Floyd<sup>03</sup> captured the public's attention as they fell victim to police violence in the form of public executions.<sup>04</sup>

At the time, I lacked these specific motivations we now reflect on as a discipline. Regardless, I was emboldened by the research I was doing into hip-hop culture and its intersection with built environments, public space, and Blackness for the manuscript *Hip-Hop Architecture*. I was also mentally preparing for participation as one of ten architects and designers in the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) exhibition *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*, which would also require research into Syracuse public housing and the use of public space within Black communities. The original goal of using Blackness as a design tool within the studio course was to refine a thesis for my MoMA submission. The entire experience, however, served to reinforce my presuppositions that being Black in any predominantly White institution is inherently political and that using Blackness as the subject of architectural pedagogy is overtly provocative.

The course, “Respatializing Blackness: A Transition Beyond the Carceral State,” heavily referenced Rashad Shabazz's *Spatializing Blackness* and foregrounded Blackness in its research questions and design techniques, as well as its site and program. Where Shabazz asks, “How does the American carceral state shape Black communities?,” the course asks, “Can architecture proactively respond to Black parolees' reintroduction to their former environments?,” seeking an appropriate architectural response to Shabazz's thesis. It then uses Southside Syracuse (home of the nation's most concentrated poverty rates for Black and Latinx Americans) as its site and asks students to imagine a transitional living facility for recently incarcerated Black men.<sup>05</sup>







Collage, Junzhi "DJ" Deng. Courtesy of the author.

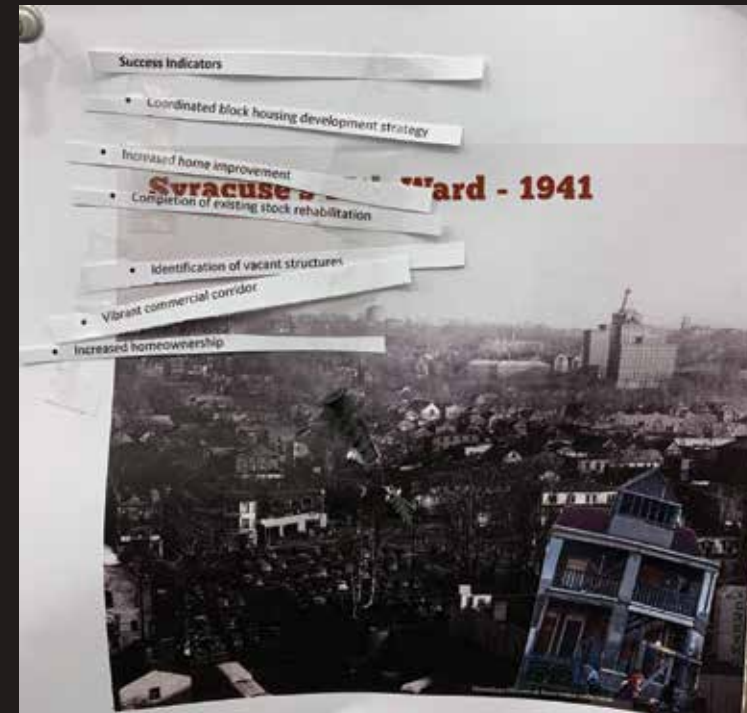
In addition to Shabazz's text, readings from Ta-Nahesi Coates, Adrienne Brown, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Ana María León, and Charles Davis II foregrounded class discussions and early design studies.<sup>25</sup> This list was an intentional departure from what typically constitutes canonical or foundational texts for students at this level. As divergent as it may have seemed to teach a studio on urban design and public space without referencing Kevin Lynch (*The Image of the City*) or Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*), curating texts around ideas of social justice and racialized space was well in keeping with the coordinated studio-wide theme of biopolitics. The course bibliography was also in keeping with current calls to move beyond texts that view architecture

and design solely through a Eurocentric lens. Coates' essays "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration" and "The Case for Reparations" were particularly illustrative of the conditions and contexts within which students were asked to situate their work.

American politicians are now eager to disown a failed criminal-justice system that's left the US with the largest incarcerated population in the world. But they've failed to reckon with history. Fifty years after Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report "The Negro Family" tragically helped create this system, it's time to reclaim his original intent.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to divergent content, context, and texts, I was particularly intent on challenging typical research and design methodologies in the studio. Collage was a key tool in translating nontraditional starting points into a digestible visual language. This process produced some of the more visceral imagery of the semester and grounded students in the personal and poetic aspects of the design process. Imagery ranging from Black families being torn apart and recon-

Collage, Pin Sangkao. Courtesy of the author.



nected with an adhesive bandage, to nooses attached to trees juxtaposed against the lyrics of Nina Simone's "Strange Fruit." Syracuse and its history of marginalizing and repeatedly displacing its Black residents was also interrogated in this phase. As such, depictions of city-wide divisions caused by the introduction of Interstate 81, the erasure of the 15th Ward (a historic site of Black prosperity in the city), and the subsequent impoverished state of the current Black enclave, the Southside, show up in many of these student collages.

"How do these make you feel?" was a question I posed during our first pin-up session.

"Angry!" was one response.

"Is there an architecture of anger? What does it look like?"

I had never before experienced questions and responses of this nature in a classroom. This confirmed my original intention of challenging norms and my suspicion that we were entering uncharted waters.

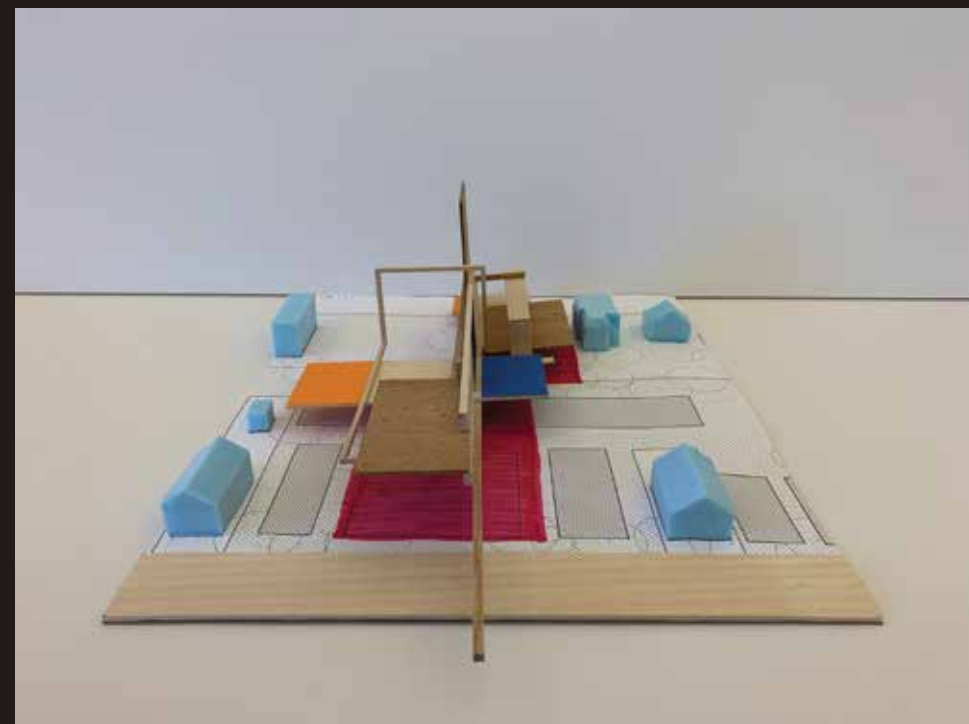
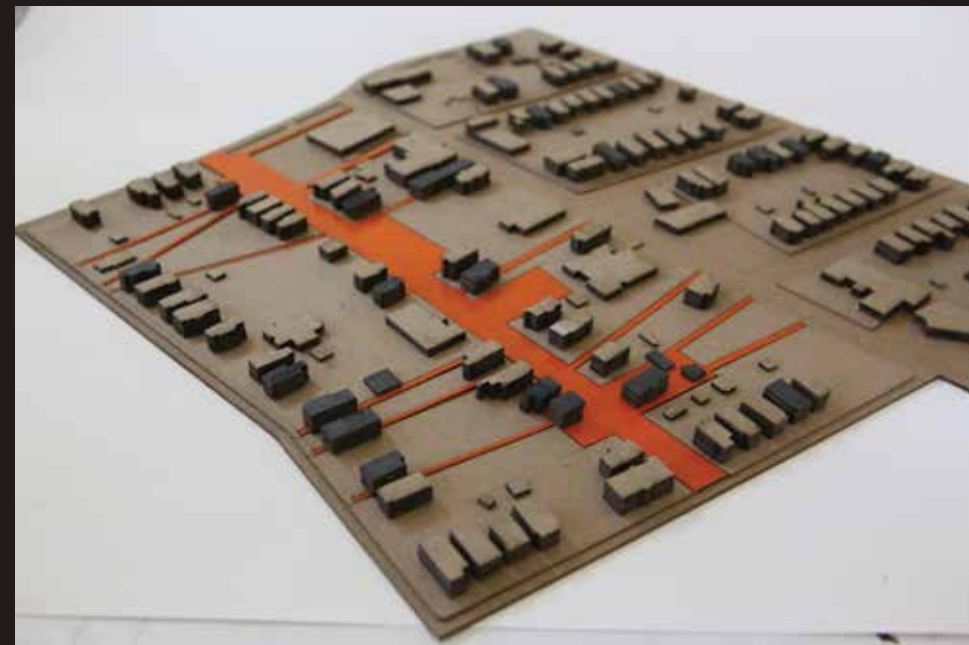
As the final studio in the undergraduate core sequence, the course had a heavy responsibility not just to research and design, but to the development of complex programs and urban-scaled solutions. Once collective focus shifted from individual collages to the consideration of more specific urban interventions in the project site, students grappled with translating their radical attitudes into a design for the neighborhood as well as for the building. Organized into groups of four, they first looked at designing master plans for blocks or strips within four separate mixed-use areas of the Southside, each plan meant to identify potential locations for their individual building designs and strategies for approaching any future development. Proposals ranged from repurposing vacant buildings into sites of intervention and reconstituting empty lots into thoroughways for pedestrian travel to creating sites of memory and reflection within the shared backyards of adjoining lots. These block-scaled strategies paved the way for a series of provocative building designs encoded with the same DNA of their earlier collages.

Typically, this is where a presentation of research work or a studio project would be more descriptive of its findings. The merits of

its products would be weighed against the validity of its research questions or the fulfillment of stated project goals. A more detailed analysis of the students' work would be used to formulate a new argument for global impact on design pedagogy. What was to happen next redirected the emphases of the studio, the overall focus of the

Block intervention concept model, Junzhi "DJ" Deng. Courtesy of the author.

Block intervention concept model, Luis Lopez and Yuanting "Clara" Peng. Courtesy of the author.





“Dirty pin-up,” Luis Lopez and Yuanting “Clara” Peng. Photograph by Luis Lopez, courtesy of the author.

harbinger of imminently changing realities.

By week thirteen of a fifteen-week semester, after several days of on-campus protests, multiple school-wide listening sessions between the students and the dean, and one quite dramatic account of a white supremacist manifesto being Airdropped to phones at a university library, there were several internal debates about how to complete the semester’s work in an environment where some students and campus community members feared for their lives. First-year reviews were cancelled and converted into an exhibition of student work. Some faculty reduced final requirements or gave extensions to self-identified “affected” students.<sup>98</sup> Others decided to experiment with online teaching tools like Zoom, Blackboard Connect, and Conceptboard (many of which we are all now too familiar with) to reach the students showing up to class, those hunkered down in their dorm rooms, and others who decided to leave campus altogether.

My approach was a bit different. Instead of dividing my class into students who wanted to keep on working, students who were drawn to go protest, and students who felt safest at home, I took the opportunity to convert the last two class sessions into open discussions about racism in America, our privileged position in academic institutions, and how these ideas had already been explored in our studio’s research to that point. In a small side room on the fourth floor of Slocum Hall, my students and I began those conversations. (How

semester, and the general climate of the university. Instead of complete derailment, these campus-wide events reinforced the studio’s approach, attitude, and assertions all intuitively chosen as a



Review set up in the atrium of Slocum Hall. Photograph by Luis Lopez, courtesy of the author.

many of history’s most impactful conversations were had in small rooms like this one?) Together, we made a few decisions.

First, no new work would be produced for the rest of the semester. This was likely the most procedural of our decisions. It allowed us to avoid inequities that might arise between those able to separate their work from the events that surround them and those fully distracted by concerns over their personal safety. It also allowed for a recognition of the work already done as the most important part of the semester. All else was mere window dressing to impress critics and bolster self-worth.

Next, no one would worry about grades since everyone would receive maximum points for their work thus far. This went hand-in-hand with the first decision. If you are no longer worried about your grade, then you can forgo any last-ditch effort to produce a set of glitzy presentation drawings. Another entrenched inequity was challenged here, one that enables those with additional financial resources to outspend their classmates on 3D prints and wall-to-wall glossy plots. No grades meant that the coherence of the argument was privileged over the beauty of its presentation.

Next, we would still hold a final review with guests, but we would fundamentally transform its format. Instead of a standard review, we had what is called a “dirty pin-up” (something I had only seen a few times before and never in a final review setting) where everything being worked on, everything being referenced, and everything still under development is posted on the wall without being concerned with how it looks or whether the thoughts are complete.



This approach revealed itself to be a perfect methodological call back to the collages done earlier in the semester.

Finally, our most important decision was to stage the review as an interactive public event in the middle of the first-floor atrium—the veritable agora of Slocum Hall. Anyone entering or circulating through the building would be confronted by work atypical of third-year undergraduates and indeed more provocative than most work produced in the school. Additionally, instead of having anyone stand in front of their work to defend it against an intellectual onslaught from our learned panel of invited experts, everyone sat around the work and had an open discussion about all that had transpired and our role as architects within this new ecosystem.

Each adjustment to its traditional format elevated our review from the level of public presentation to public protest. Our corner of the campus, often regarded as immune from the general concerns of the rest of the university, now stood (or sat) in solidarity with those occupying the Barnes Center, the epicenter of the #NotAgainSU movement. The School of Architecture was, for a brief moment, no longer isolated or exceptional.

Within the context of a university confronting its relationship with its minority population, the studio made incisive public commentary about the reflexive relationship between the carceral state of the country, the conservative tropes of architectural education, and the corporate structure of their sponsoring institutions. The university, the discipline of architecture, and the prison industrial complex share similarly prevalent challenges in their relationships to Blackness. In one studio in 2019, at

least, Blackness was no longer seen as a subject for distant study, but as a lens through which to critique existing pedagogical precepts and to create new realms of design practice. The

students, their work, their attitudes, and their decision-making exposed the first layer of discomfort lying just beneath the surface of traditional architectural decorum and discourse. In the year that has followed, many more sensitive layers have been removed more rapidly and more painfully, like bandages from wounds yet to be healed. What they will reveal at the core of our discipline could dictate its ultimate relevance. ★



## ENDNOTES

01. On August 23, 2020, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Jacob Blake, an unarmed Black man, was shot in the back seven times by police officer Rusten Sheskey while reentering his SUV after a traffic stop with three of his sons in the backseat. He somehow survived.
02. On March 13, 2020, police officers Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove, all dressed in plain clothes, forcibly entered the home of Breonna Taylor and her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, in Louisville, Kentucky. After Walker fired a warning shot at the would-be intruders, Mattingly, Hankison, and Cosgrove opened fire, killing Taylor.
03. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was arrested after a store clerk alleged that he paid using a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill in Minneapolis, Minnesota. During the arrest, officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck pinning him down to the pavement in front of his SUV for a period of eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Floyd died shortly after in an ambulance headed to the emergency room.
04. The widespread protests, civil disruption, and public attention on police violence and social justice in the US began shortly after Floyd's death in May 2020 and continued throughout the summer months of 2020. The studio brief for "Respatializing Blackness" was written in August 2019.
05. Paul A. Jargowsky, "The Architecture of Segregation: Civil Unrest, the Concentration of Poverty, and Public Policy," *The Century Foundation*, August 15, 2015: 11.
06. The entire reading list on the course syllabus included: Aaron Gordon, "The Highway Was Supposed to Save This City. Can Tearing It Down Fix the Sins of the Past?" *Jalopnik*, July 30, 2019; Sahra Sulaiman, "Nipsey Hussle Understood Cities Better than You. Why Didn't You Know Who He Was?" *Streetsblog Los Angeles*, August 15, 2019; Adrienne Brown, "Architectures of Habit," *e-flux architecture*, May 15, 2018; Ana Maria León, "Spaces of Co-Liberation," *e-flux architecture*, May 17, 2018; Ta-Nahesi Coates, "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," *The Atlantic*, October 2015; bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional" in

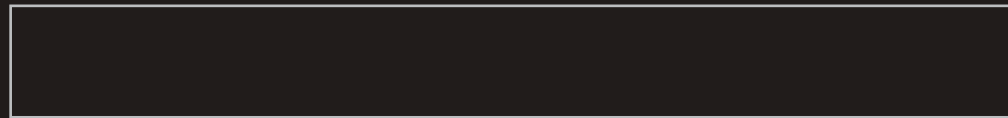
*The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production*, eds. Joan Livingstone and John Ploof (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); Charles Davis II, "Black Spaces Matter," *The Aggregate website*, Volume 2, March, 2015; Rashad Shabazz, "Carceral Matters," in *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Ta-Nahesi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June, 2014; Toni Morrison "The Site of Memory," 1995; bell hooks, "Gangsta Culture—Sexism and Mysogyny," 1994.

07. Ta-Nahesi Coates, epigraph to "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," *The Atlantic*, October 2015.
08. In the wake of the protests around racist graffiti found in dorms on campus, students were considered to be "affected" by administrators if their ethnic, religious, or national identity was among those targeted by the graffiti's sentiments. As reported in various articles between November 11 and 25, 2019, by *The Daily Orange* (the student-run newspaper that first reported on the incidents), the graffiti included racial slurs directed at Blacks and Asians and at least one included a swastika. The manifesto that was allegedly airdropped was the one written by the Christchurch mosque shooter earlier that year. As a result, the students, staff, and faculty fearing for their safety primarily included members of the university's African American, Asian, Asian American, Jewish, and Muslim communities. "November Hate Crimes," *The Daily Orange*, accessed January 1, 2021, <http://dailyorange.com/tags/november-hate-crimes>.

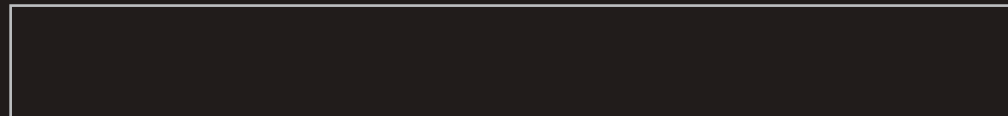
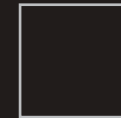




QUEER



VIGILANTISM



A.L. HU



It was a Friday evening in August 2020, and I was late to meet with a friend. Saje and I agreed to meet despite the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic because we had only ever met virtually on Zoom and Morningside Park was between our apartments. Sweat soaked through my mask as I rode my bike through the Upper West Side to Harlem. I'm alert to my surroundings not just on roads, but also when I hop off my bike to walk through the park. Thoughts were running through my head, as just in July at least six transgender women were murdered in the United States, adding to a year already full of tragedy.<sup>21</sup> Despite increased acceptance of queer people in mainstream society, violence against queer people, particularly trans women of color, had risen in the last six years and was at an all-time high.<sup>22</sup> As I walked past a pair of police officers, my eyes flashed into a defiant glare while my heart raced—the realities of police brutality were made clear this summer, so I knew their presence did not guarantee my peace. My gaze softened to focus on a trotting dog further away; a little closer, children swung from monkey bars.

At last I saw Saje, sitting on a short wall, hunched over, staring at her phone, legs tucked underneath her. I made a greeting noise. Saje looked up to see me enthusiastically waving. Upon recognizing my pink hair, her body unfurled: her spine straightened and she used both arms to wave back. I felt a rush of happiness and relief that Saje, who is a Jewish trans woman, was safe and sound. I apologized profusely for being late to our meeting place, attributing my fear to recent transphobic violence, and we started to share our experiences of being trans with each other. We followed threads of conversations ranging from Burning Man to NYC neighborhoods to tarot to pets until the streetlights blinked on, the moon rose over the rooftops of brownstones, and fireflies faded in and out of the darkness. Before we said goodbye, Saje reassured me that she felt comfortable and safe walking herself home, but I asked her to send me a message on Signal as soon as she got home. This was our first in-real-life meeting, but I was invested in her safety as she was now a part of my queer extended family.

In light of recent and ongoing violence against trans women, I was worried about queerphobic vigilantes—people who enforce the “law” of cis-gender heteronormativity through inflicting bodily harm on queer and transgender people. To better understand their motivations, it helps to conceptualize gender as an act of social performativity. Judith Butler, noted queer theorist and feminist philosopher, posits that the expectations placed upon gendered subjects are idealized and reinstituted through the daily performances of life, forming socially accepted gender norms with the status of universal “law.”<sup>23</sup> When a person's performance of gender does not match the gender they were assigned at birth, their existence becomes socially

unacceptable, unrecognizable. Visibly queer and transgender people challenge the social power of norms that underwrite the gender binary; moving through the world requires a certain amount of caution.<sup>94</sup> When this “law” is violated, its reproduction as a social norm is threatened and “enforcement” looms. Because gender is a regulatory social norm that shapes (and is shaped) by laws, whether explicitly in legislation or implicitly through cultural traditions, “enforcement” may take the form of policing, social ostracization, or even death.<sup>95</sup> The “law” of binary gender roles is “enforced” by the vigilante: someone who takes “justice” into their own hands. A sobering statistic: since 2012, an average of 22 transgender and gender non-conforming people lost their lives annually for refusing to perform and reproduce accepted gender norms.<sup>96</sup>

But queer people are not merely victims. To draw vigilantism away from its violent connotations and reclaim its connection to justice, I argue for a “queer vigilantism” that destabilizes notions of gender norms, expands the meaning of community, and transforms public spaces into safer spaces. What becomes of a vigilante who questions the types of laws they uphold, the methods that they use, the community they are impacting?

Through analysis of two events in the history of queer activism, I argue that queer vigilantism requires a culture of care rather than violence and breaks the binary between public and private space.

Because queer narratives have never been mainstream or culturally dominant, gaps and fuzzy areas in queer history are rampant, while more palatable stories are retold until fully mythologized. Prioritizing singular events obfuscates the collective nature of queer actions and uprisings. Two under documented queer protests—one that predates 1969’s Stonewall Uprisings and one during the infamous summer of 2020—may be considered premature or insignificant amidst the rest of queer history, but are illustrative examples of queer vigilantism.



## CONTEXTS: GENE COMPTON’S CAFETERIA RIOT (1966) AND RECLAIM PRIDE MARCH (2020)

In 1966, daily life in the United States was being tumultuously transformed by the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power movement, and youth-oriented counterculture, as well as multiple high-profile assassinations. In the Tenderloin, a neighborhood in downtown San Francisco sandwiched between a shopping district and an office district, the tensions between the queer folks—drag queens, cruisers, runaway teens, hustlers—and the police were reaching a boiling point.

On a weekend in August, management at Gene Compton’s Cafeteria, located in the Tenderloin at the corner of Turk and Taylor Streets, called the cops on a noisy group of queens. This was not a new course of action for the employees of Compton’s, since the 24-hour cafeteria was a popular place for queer folks to gather in the neighborhood. The police were used to roughhousing residents of the Tenderloin—a “vice” district that the police monitored and controlled—and were especially vicious to “street queens” who had little power to seek justice.<sup>97</sup> The effects of urban renewal and redevelopment in the mid-60s turned the Tenderloin into the last remaining enclave of affordable housing in downtown San Francisco. Newcomers were starting to displace trans women. Increasing street “sweeps” favored the interests and property rights of businesses like Compton’s.

In the book *Transgender History*, noted historian Susan Stryker describes the scene, pieced together from recollections of people who were there that fateful August night:

A surly police officer...grabbed the arm of one of the queens and tried to drag her away. She unexpectedly threw coffee in his face, and a melee erupted. Plates, trays, cups, saucers, and silverware flew through the air at the startled police officers, who ran outside and called for backup. Compton’s customers turned over the tables and smashed the plate glass windows before pouring out of the restaurant and into the streets. The police wagons arrived, and fighting broke out...all around the corner of Turk and Taylor. Drag queens beat the police with their heavy purses and the sharp stiletto heels of their shoes. A police car was vandalized [and] a newspaper stand was burned to the ground...<sup>98</sup>



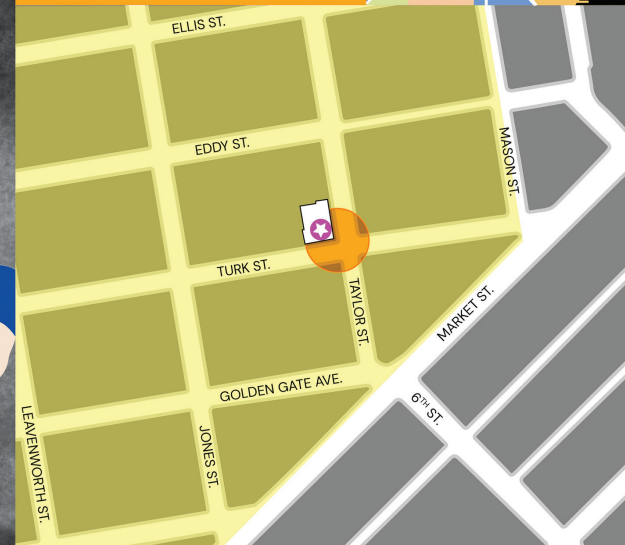
# Gene Compton's

## Gene Compton's



**Figure 1 (right, below).** Map of the Tenderloin neighborhood showing location of Gene Compton's Cafeteria at Turk and Taylor Streets.

**Figure 2 (left).** The riot spills out into the street. Golden auras encircling the queens represent their relationships and connections with one another during the riot.



**Figure 3 (right).**

Compton's Cafeteria was a place to see other people and to be seen as well.





2020 had begun with the 45th President's impeachment; a renewed, cautious hope that comes every four years with the General Election; and the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In early March, people across the nation began to practice mutual aid work to fill in the gaps of inadequate government response to the pandemic, even as social gatherings were banned to curb the spread of disease. Before long, organizer-created Google Documents with links to local and national resources went viral (no pun intended) and evolved into "how to start a mutual aid group" toolkits.<sup>10</sup> By early May, dozens of neighborhood-based and citywide mutual aid groups were operating in New York City, centering the needs of the neediest and providing neighbor-to-neighbor support through exchanges of food, money, and skills.<sup>11</sup> That energy to act collectively and in solidarity with one another continued even as COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths fell sharply in New York City.

On May 25, 2020, police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, murdered George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man.<sup>12</sup> This was neither an isolated incident nor an outlier—106 Black people had already been killed by police officers earlier in 2020,<sup>13</sup> including Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man who was pursued and murdered by armed white residents of a coastal South Georgia neighborhood on February 23,<sup>14</sup> and Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency medical technician who was shot eight times when officers raided her apartment in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 13.<sup>15</sup> For a nation that continues to suffer from the trauma of the long history of unaccountable violence against Black people, and was in the throes of a deadly pandemic that disproportionately affected Black people, Floyd's killing was a flash-point that reignited the fire of civil disobedience. The first weekend of June, an estimated half-million people protested in the streets of 550 cities and towns across the US.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, June 2020 would not be a year for a normal Pride Month filled with parties and floats. Corporations and politicians would not march side by side with queer folks down a police-protected parade route—only partly because the parade had been canceled due to COVID-19 concerns by Heritage of Pride, the nonprofit organizer since 1984. The very first Pride March in New York City was the June 1970 Christopher Street Day Liberation March, which commemorated the first anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, a series of riots against police brutality that kickstarted the LGBTQ liberation movement.<sup>17</sup> Over time, as mainstream acceptance of queer people grew, the marches became parades with many organizations, businesses, and politicians supporting the festivities by providing funding and supplies. At the same time, the parade had grown into an increasingly elaborate production. Corporate revenue helped take the financial

burden off advocacy groups and community-based nonprofits, but the presence of Fortune 500 companies at the march sent a different message about economic and social justice.<sup>17</sup>

In 2019, Reclaim Pride Coalition, a direct action group that grew out of a "resistance contingent" of Heritage of Pride, successfully organized the Queer Liberation March, a corporation-free alternative to the Pride Parade. The Coalition criticized involvement of a contingent of gay New York City police officers to march in uniform, and many were opposed to police barricades and surveillance. The march's slogan was "No Cops, No Corporations." In 2020, Reclaim Pride Coalition took their activism one step further by calling the march the Queer Liberation March for Black Lives & Against Police Brutality. Renaming the march codified refusal of police "protection" and honored the Stonewall Rebellion, which, like the riot at Compton's Cafeteria, was a direct response to police violence against queer people. Calling out that the march was for Black lives countered the perception that the Pride Parade was a spectacle for and by white queer folks and made the march a protest in solidarity with people who had suffered the most at the hands of the police, in 2020 and in years past.<sup>18</sup>

On Saturday, June 28, the Queer Liberation March for Black Lives & Against Police Brutality stepped off from Foley Square at 1:00 pm. Tens of thousands of queer people marched west to Church Street, north toward TriBeCa, and then up 6th Avenue to the historic Stonewall Inn, the location of the 1969 Stonewall Uprising (the events of which precipitated today's Pride Marches). Many held bold signs that spoke truth to power: "NONE OF US ARE FREE UNTIL ALL OF US ARE FREE"; "BLACK TRANS LIVES MATTER"; "DEFUND THE NYPD."<sup>19</sup>

As marchers headed west toward the end of route and a rally in Washington Square Park, tensions with police officers began to heighten. An officer moved to arrest a marcher for drawing on a police car with a permanent marker and the crowd responded with chants of "Let him go!" An officer yelled, "Get out of the street!" and shoved marchers back with his baton.<sup>20</sup> Protestors pushed onwards, chanting, "Whose streets? Our streets!" in verbal and physical defiance. The police escalated by attacking protestors with pepper spray, shoving a woman on a bicycle to the ground, and punching people with impunity.<sup>21</sup> Instead of vacating the street in fear, fellow protesters remained on the street to take care of each other, chanting "Go home!" at the police.<sup>22</sup>

The irony was not lost on Jake Tolan, one of the March's organizers, who commented: "Fifty-one years after the Stonewall Rebellion, the [New York Police Department] is still responding to peaceful, powerful, righteous queer joy with pepper spray, batons, and handcuffs. Thank you, Commissioner Shea and the entire NYPD, for continuing to show us why you should be abolished."<sup>23</sup>



## CULTURE OF CARE / WE KEEP US SAFE

“Care,” in this context, refers to relational care—*care with* (acting in solidarity) rather than *care for* (providing and receiving care) or care about (emotional investment and attachment). Furthermore, practices that constitute a “culture of care” do not apply only to family members (chosen or not), but are extended to communities, peers, and strangers. Joan Tronto, scholar of the ethics of care, defined care in this broad way: it is the things we do “to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”<sup>24</sup> In queer vigilantism, practicing care with others is a bedrock, often existing *before* an “act” occurs.

For trans women and other queer folks living in the Tenderloin in the 1960s, care was survival. Because housing and employment discrimination barred transgender people from finding places to live and work, they often resorted to survival sex work. A high concentration of trans women lived in the Tenderloin because police would often pick up queens from other neighborhoods and drop them off there.<sup>25</sup> A silver lining to the harassment, violence, and discrimination that trans women faced was that 24-hour restaurants in the Tenderloin, like Compton’s, became (relatively) safe community gathering spaces. Even in the midst of such an uncaring time and place, people could go to Compton’s day or night, not only to be nourished by food but also to see and be seen by other people. Their fellow community members were their chosen family, making sure that “everybody’s OK, everyone made their coins, everybody’s coming down off drugs and didn’t overdose, and that you didn’t go to jail that night.”<sup>26</sup> The safety that this community care created was particularly essential for trans women whose blood relatives had abandoned them. Networks of relational care were created by the vigilance of Tenderloin’s trans women for and with each other, providing the foundation for queer vigilantism.

It is not surprising, then, that the trans women at Compton’s that night were highly vigilant. Not all of the trans women and queer folks at Compton’s came from the same places or families, but their near-universal experience of societal rejection, as well as near-constant harassment by the police, heightened their collective vigilance, especially in safer spaces like Compton’s. An unexpected show of defiance

by one community member sparked others to throw dishes and cutlery, upturn tables, and spill out into the street—almost as if people had been waiting for an inciting moment to finally protest together. These acts of solidarity were made possible through the accumulation of vigilance in response to cumulative abandonment, oppression, and violence against the community. Collective safety was made possible, against all odds, through the vigilance of queers for each other.

What seems like a “violent” response by the trans women does not negate the spirit of queer vigilantism because it was used by the most vulnerable to project bold disobedience, non-conformance, and rebellion against police brutality. Whereas violence is the point incited by the traditional vigilante, a queer vigilante resorts to physical altercations to protect themselves and their community in the response to systemic harm. The police were not there to protect but to harass the trans women, so the queens protected members of their community with what they had—which manifested in throwing dishes as well as utilizing their long-standing culture of care to enact collective action in a moment’s notice.

Fixation on the queens’ so-called “violence” against law enforcement ignores and erases the everyday, very real violence that trans women have experienced in a society that abhors their very existence; it robs the protestors of agency to materially change their living conditions. To oppose or reject traditional vigilantism does not require “nonviolence” in the traditional sense—that is, conforming to romanticized and ahistorical notions and optics of “peaceful protest.”<sup>27</sup> Instead, queer vigilantism requires care that is cultivated within a community long before a collective act of solidarity occurs, whether that act involves violence or not.

For the 2020 Queer Liberation March, practicing a culture of care was required in all forms of communication. The Reclaim Pride Coalition is made up of a wide range of activists of different ages with varying experience from different grassroots organizations, including folks from the direct action movement AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP); the nonprofit Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Elders (SAGE); and the NYC Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Their structure is staunchly democratic: at weekly meetings, members of the Reclaim Pride Coalition convene to hear proposals, discuss and debate them, and vote on them. Anyone who is at the meeting can vote. If a proposal receives anything but an overwhelming majority, it is given more discussion and another vote. Every voice matters; after a vote passes by an overwhelming majority, members accept it and move forward. Voices are heard and accounted for. A culture of care is clear in the system that Reclaim Pride Coalition set up to communicate with each other to achieve consensus on direct actions, very much in the tradition of ACT UP.<sup>28</sup>

# POLICE IN PRIDE IS PINKWASHING ONGOING STATE VIOLENCE

△  
@QUEERMARCH  
#QUEERLIBERATIONMARCH



Figure 2 (top). Scene at The Stonewall Inn.

Figure 3 (bottom). Signs at the march showing fierce anti-police sentiment and solidarity with Black lives.



Figure 4 (top). One of the groups in the march.

Figure 5 (bottom). Many marchers held signs calling to defund the NYPD and disarm the police.



Figure 6. Map of the march route, which started at Foley Square, headed north. (The originally-planned route was longer, but organizers shortened the march due to the high heat and humidity.)

Figure 7. Peaceful protest. People marched with masks, flags, incense, and signs, and danced with joy in the streets.

BLACK  
Trans  
Lives  
Matter

Figure 8. Confronting the police. Despite disinviting cops, the march had a heavy police presence.

Figure 9. Police brutality against protestors.

Figure 10. White allies linked their arms together to create a barrier that the police could not cross, practicing community care in the streets.



In practice, this led to radical external-facing changes that made the march not just an LGBTQ pride parade, but an act of protest in solidarity with Black lives. While the organizers renounced rainbow-washing by corporate sponsors like the year before, the coalition also decided to refuse police presence and “protection” at the 2020 march. (All police attention and interaction were unwanted. Nevertheless, an NYPD helicopter surveilled the march and officers lined the route on the ground.) The march’s name, “Queer Liberation March,” was appended with “for Black Lives & Against Police Brutality.” The coalition achieved consensus on a proposal by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color organizers, revealing that care did not merely apply to process and structure, but also to relationships with people and movements.

Despite the inevitable presence of internal conflict among members of Reclaim Pride Coalition, acting in solidarity was the priority for the collective. This internal culture of care was transmuted into an external communications strategy that constituted queer vigilantism. In the weeks leading up to the march, a Statement of Purpose was featured prominently on their website to transparently communicate the mission, values, and goals of the 2020 march. On June 23, one week before the march, a post with three images titled “COMMUNITY AND SAFETY NOTES” was published to the @queermarch Instagram account.<sup>29</sup> Besides detailing spatial logistics of the march (where to show up and at what time), the post set expectations on marchers’ behavior and offered caring alternatives where needed: center and protect Black Trans / queer folks, people in wheelchairs, and elders; wear a mask and socially distance; pass out masks and hand sanitizer; come with a friend, but if you are alone we will march together; and consider wearing a hat or bring an umbrella to keep yourself cool, but there will be street medics available for first aid. On the day of the march, @sethmrosen tweeted “I saw 99.9% of people at today’s @queermarch in masks. Super impressive.” @queermarch quote-tweeted and added: “WHO KEEPS US SAFE? WE KEEP US SAFE!”<sup>30</sup>

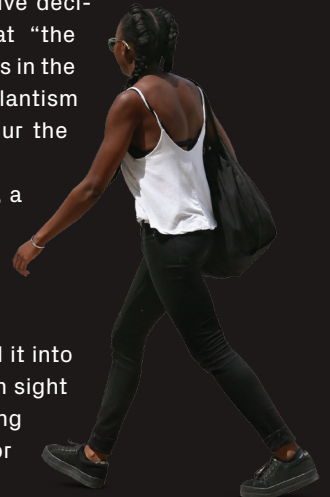
The posts across platforms reinforced the internal culture of care that had brought the march into existence and extended it to a public community of participants. Care was used in public social media messages to maintain transparency and expectations; take charge of the narrative; and preempt disruption. Queer vigilance kept the event safe and accessible, especially for those who have experienced systemic harm. While traditional vigilantism occurs in discrete acts of violence, acts of queer vigilantism materialize with fluidity at the scales of interpersonal, intraorganizational, and external communications in order to prevent violence from happening.

## TRANSFORMING SPACES THROUGH CARE

From reproductive labor and housework to empathic listening and nurturance, cisgender women and femmes traditionally bear the burden of providing care within their relationships, and it is more often than not at home in the “domestic sphere,” invisible, and unpaid.<sup>31</sup> Cisgender men, on the other hand, are expected to provide for their families by making money through public labor—and to remain stoic and rational when under pressure—“caring” as an absence of emotion.<sup>32</sup> These normative gender roles dictate the space in which the roles are performed, producing another binary between private and public space. Even typical queer spaces are private—bedrooms, bathrooms, interiors of bars, and nightclubs.

However, just as the male and female gender roles make up a false binary, the dichotomy of private versus public space is not as clear-cut as theories make it out to be. Public space in many industrialized Western countries is often car-dominated, consumer-focused, and under constant surveillance. Private spaces are no longer private as technological innovations and the internet-of-things products mine, store, and sell users’ personal data.<sup>33</sup> It is inadequate to analyze public and private spaces by mere typology because capital, management, and control add inseparable layers of complexity. A non-normative reading of care (private space) versus labor (public space) requires taking those social complexities into account, as well as recognizing the agency of individual behaviors and collective decisions in transforming types of space. By asserting that “the personal is political,” a rallying call by second-wave feminists in the late 1960s to challenge the nuclear family, acts of queer vigilantism use, in public, what is typically performed in private to blur the edges of the spheres.<sup>34</sup>

The riot at Compton’s started inside the restaurant, a publicly accessible meeting and social space managed by the restaurant’s owners. The Tenderloin neighborhood was a place where transgender folks could be themselves, but they were not exempt from police harassment; in fact, the high concentration of queer people in the Tenderloin turned it into something of a “gay ghetto.”<sup>35</sup> Trans women were a common sight in streets of the Tenderloin in 1966, be they queens soliciting sex work to afford to spend nights in a cheap hotel room, or



those who lived out on the street.<sup>36</sup> This hypervisibility of trans women in public—mixed with a conservative attitude toward queer people and urban renewal's agenda to “clean up” the streets—made them the “wrong” people to be taking up space. Compton's Cafeteria, by being cleaner and safer than the streets of the Tenderloin and open 24 hours a day, effectively became queer people's hangout space, as long as they were paying customers. But as soon as the queens were no longer merely consumers, they became trans women who did not have a right to exist in space—inside the cafeteria or not. Compton's management called the police to make their indoor space exclusionary, to forcibly evict unworthy patrons from their establishment.

It was appropriate, then, that rioters broke Compton's plate glass windows and spilled out onto the street, pulling passersby into the chaos. The riot was as much a reaction to the situation at the cafeteria as it was to years of queerphobic policing throughout San Francisco. Breaking the barrier between interior and exterior—semi-public and public—and bringing the displays of solidarity and care to the street made clear that the issue was not a private matter between customers and management, but a public matter between queer people and the city. If the riot had remained inside Compton's, it would have been just another night of police harassment, but the public show of queer solidarity and care made it queer vigilantism. The riot called into question: are queer people ever safe in private or public? Who gets to take up space? Who gets to be part of the public?

These questions were also at the heart of the Queer Liberation March for Black Lives & Against Police Brutality, where tens of thousands of queer people and allies gathered and marched in the streets without a permit. The march started off at Foley Square, a triangle-shaped city square in Lower Manhattan bounded by Lafayette, Worth, and Centre Streets, roughly the size of half a small Manhattan block. Reclaim Pride Coalition organizers selected Foley Square for the start of the march not only because it is wheelchair accessible, but because of its history as a protest site: numerous public demonstrations have taken place there, including Occupy Wall Street in 2011; a rally to protest the decision in the death of Eric Garner in 2014; a protest of the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016; and the “NYC Stand Against Trump” rally in January 2017. Though bounded by car-dominated streets and surrounded by blocks of stony, tall, civic buildings, Foley Square's openness and visibility from many directions made it an ideal meeting place.

The procession was more protest than parade. The people's takeover of the public street disrupted usual vehicle traffic, slowing the movement down to the pace of the march and bringing the scale of activity to individual and collective human bodies. As thousands of people marched while holding signs that called for abolishing the

police as well as remembrance of Black and Brown people taken too soon at the hands of police violence, volunteers handed out free water and food. Just like at Compton's Cafeteria, these acts of community care in the streets transformed the public spaces, for the time that the march was happening, from sites of anti-queer and racist violence to safer, accessible spaces. This was especially true for marchers who were Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC), who were there in defiance of death.

The marchers' response to police brutality at the end of the march was a public display of solidarity and unity in the place where anti-queer and anti-Black violence often happens: the street. The marchers were largely white and able-bodied, but physical representation should not be the arbiter of success in a society whose structures and infrastructures are inaccessible to BIPOC and/or disabled people. That community care was practiced by white people and BIPOC alike resists and redefines the racialized conceptions of care work. The responsibility of care for people who had been shoved, punched, or pepper-sprayed did not apply only to oppressed members of BIPOC communities, as it has historically; white allies also kept vigil during the march and used their privilege to push back against police violence. The march did not look like a typical “protest,” but June 2020 was not a typical time. It was by collective queer vigilance, from the selection of the stepping off point to the acts of mutual aid and community care, that the over-policed streets were transformed into safer spaces for queer people.

## REFRAMING VIGILANTISM

Queer vigilantism is focused on accessibility, care, and justice for one's own community; a struggle for power rooted in *solidarity with*, in which care is the point. Traditional vigilantism, in contrast, embodies reactionary acts of revenge. While care may not usually take shape as a nighttime riot in the Tenderloin, and typical vigilantism may not look like ensuring an accessible and violence-free protest march through

the streets of Lower Manhattan, both Compton's riot and the Queer Liberation March for Black Lives & Against Police Brutality are examples of queer vigilantism. Because the state continues to refuse to examine its criminalization of oppressed BIPOC communities, queer-ness, and disability, this reframing vigilantism through a queer lens refuses the limits that are placed on our whole selves in a punitive framework. It shifts notions of accountability from crime-prevention to harm reduction, from violence and punishment to care.

Admittedly, this redefinition is far from systemic change. But in tumultuous times of great social upheaval and reactionary conservatism, reframing the context of words can provide the necessary linguistic agency to propel us into a more just future.<sup>37</sup> Expanding the scope of the vigilante to encompass its queer fluidity in multiple scales frees it from its violent connotations, providing the beginnings of a model to move toward building a more liberatory world. We'll know we are there when there is no need for any vigilante of any type, queer or not—because cultures of care will be the norm, and harm will be repaired through restorative justice. Until then, queer vigilantism, through conscious practices of solidarity between the most vulnerable and allies, transforms public space into queer safe spaces, moments and places where glimmers of a better future shine through.

From the complexity of the two examples of public queer space analyzed in this essay, it is no wonder that private spaces are the focus of most queer spatial studies and scholarship. Even gay and lesbian bars, which are technically open to the public, are considered private spaces once entered because they are among the safest places for queer people to be themselves. But this binary of public space as unsafe, and private space as safe, is a false one, like so many binaries are. Both the riot in 1966 and the march in 2020 called into question the safety of and access to public space for queer people, and then modeled the methods of fostering safety and access through cultures of care. The street became an in-between space where the binaries of public versus private, unsafe versus safe, and cis-gender norms versus transgender deviations were actively dismantled through collective acts of care. In this way, queer vigilantism transforms public spaces—considered neutral by default, but violent for many BIPOC and/or queer people—into actual safe spaces. The care practiced through relationships and collective solidarity breaks the binary, opening up the possibility for new ways to think about queer space.

As Saje and I headed our separate ways from the park, I mapped out my route home in my head. Night had fallen and the moon was a waning crescent, so I switched on the lights on my bike to counteract the darkness. I rode on well-trafficked arterial streets, reveling in the slightly cool breeze against my skin, skipping shortcuts and staying alert to my surroundings. The few pedestrians, delivery people on electric bikes, and rideshare drivers who were still out in the night seemed careful to acknowledge my presence, and I theirs, as we encountered each other and then continued on our separate journeys. It was as though we had each other's backs, even as we moved in different directions. The return trip felt faster than getting to the park; I messaged Saje first that I had arrived home with no incident. When I finally received Saje's message of safe passage several minutes later, I breathed a sigh of relief. My watch was over, for now. ★



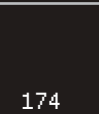


ENDNOTES

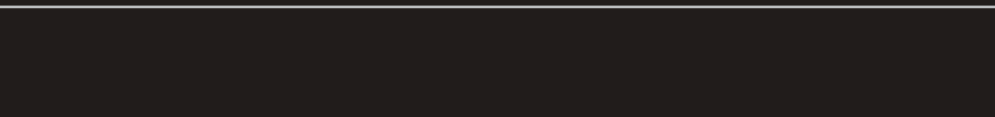
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A CHOICE OF



FROM



JENNIFER NEWSOM

WEAPONS:

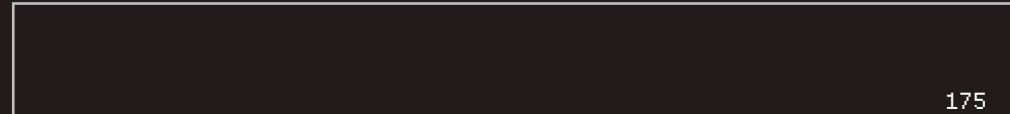
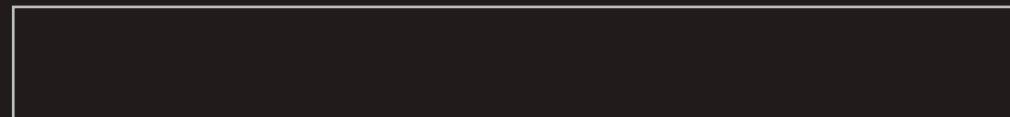


IMAGE NOTES



MINNEAPOLIS



What does it mean to be a witness?

We operate with the belief that images have power—they help us to recollect the past. Yet with each remembering, we contend with our moving version of the truth. Images help induce oscillations between events and the narratives we make, the thousand words they tell. In the context of the images that are a part of this photo essay in particular, it is this vibration that gives me pause. These images are not stable. They are operating on many levels of witness, invalidating some narratives and authenticating others. They refer to certain places and times and weather and sounds and emotional states, but they don't stay fixed in my mind, tied as they are by the tenuous cords of memory. They dredge things up from the bottom of the well each time I look at them.

On the one hand, they are telling the story of *what was* in the manner of photographic vérité. Put simply, they document people, places, and things, with light registers on a screen and date stamps in the metadata. They are instantiations, frozen moments where action is held in suspension.<sup>01</sup> Images can catch history as it happens. "We were just walking around our neighborhood," capturing the scene as it unfolded.

The images also participate in the *how* of photography and broader trajectories of image-making. There is a consideration of balance and weight and composition and form. We want to make images of some quality. We approach with an artistic eye, searching for the frames with the visual impact to draw us in.

Metaphorically, and perhaps most importantly, the images, too, are a visual reminder of the tension of that time—the fear, crisis, incapable rage, and deep mourning that many of us felt. A man lost his life for lack of twenty dollars. That is a tragedy. The images tell of how we processed and are still processing those events.

I worry that images can fall into the trap where "culture simply sublimates desires for political and social change into visible, but ultimately ineffectual, forms."<sup>02</sup> What, really, can a photograph do? Who is it for? In a simplistic view, taking a picture is a voyeuristic act then processed for later consumption. It transmits for the purpose of viewing later, removed from the visceral event, at a distance from the real.

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"I focus excessively and dramatically on that which was never really hidden, but rarely is noticed. My motivations are analogous in the sense that they are small—they only enlarge under the scrutiny of hindsight, which is usually a distortion."

—Philip Lorca diCorcia<sup>03</sup>

The images in this photo essay were taken by Dream The Combine in the days immediately following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN on May 25, 2020.

But perhaps that time gap is an important part of images' currency. As Stan Douglas notes, when there is a transformation of society, "there's a choice to be made as to what the future is going to look like. And by looking at those moments, we can see that the world we live in is not necessarily the only world we could have realized for ourselves."<sup>04</sup> They collapse the past with the present, pressing us to realize "that what we have now is not the only reality that is possible." Images help us project into a different future.

Each of the photographs that follow implicates the viewer. As a witness of these images, you have become a new interpreter and co-conspirator in this story. How might these pixels get newly read or miscast? I, as the director, may have lost control; the actors may have gone astray. You bring your own histories to this work, too. I am curious what these images provoke in new improvisations. The camera was my choice of weapon in the moment, but what will the afterimage cause you to do?

In the footnotes included with each photo is a short text that contextualizes the image from our fragmentary perspectives. I have tried to lend some insight into what is happening in the picture, where you are in the city, and what the image might catalyze for someone who was there. At the end of the day, though, these are just snapshots of the life of the street, taken with a cellular phone. The truth of the matter is that we couldn't look away. ★



A pawn shop on Lake Street burned down, about a 10-minute walk from our home. The building's alarm had been ringing the entire day. No one stopped anyone doing anything. Maybe most said, "good riddance."

On the right is the public library. In the next couple of days, its windows were covered with plywood and volunteers moved all the books within the front thirty feet of the building to the rear, hoping to save them from anticipated destruction. People wrote notes on the plywood. Some were prayers for how the building is a cherished part of the neighborhood.





Part of me is seduced by the aesthetics of this image, in no small part because it was caught on an iPhone in a split second of compositional awareness. It almost feels staged, the lighting mapped, the cropping just so. A woman and child, caught in a moment of effort, navigating the city as it fell in pieces around them.

They still need to get from A to B. Perhaps they waited for a bus that never came. Maybe they were there to take in the scene. My focus goes to the kid and the way he is tugging on his mother. She walks forward, pulling him along as she operates her phone. That insistent tug is so familiar to me as a parent. They are just walking, carrying on with the ordinary act of living.

It still seems odd to me that there are only two people captured in this photograph. What is somehow not shown are the roiling crowds just outside the frame: the cacophony of protest, the heat of that day, the tension in the air. Instead, the setting seems very calm.

The pair are crossing the expanse of parking in front of what was the AutoZone Auto Parts store on the corner of Minnehaha Avenue and Lake Street, catercorner to the 3rd Precinct police station. Later, video circulated online of a white man hitting the store windows behind these two figures with a hammer, while people around him pleaded for him to stop. He wrote the message “free shit for everyone zone,” encouraging the looting that would soon erupt in this part of the city. He is believed to be a white supremacist member of the Hells Angels and Aryan Cowboys.





A TCF Bank is adorned with pseudo-Doric columns and an entablature over brick veneer. A kind of Greek shrug fronted by a parking lot. The flag is hung at half-ish mast.

An extension of the property's nonchalance is the way it is precisely and efficiently boarded up to stave off trespassers breaching the halls of capitalism. Truly, they know they will be fine.

The police are given a polite middle finger.



Protesters are throwing tear gas canisters back to the National Guard assembled in front of the 3rd Precinct police station.





I don't really have much to add to this one, although it is a question with a lengthy back story. I could write about Inhabit.Global and the anarchist sentiments that were there, but I don't really want to clutter the clarity of the question.



Informal infrastructures of care sprang up all over Minneapolis during the protests. There were free supermarkets full of donated food. Mutual aid sites with clothing, baby formula, diapers, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer. There were tables set out with water to help with the summer heat.

Often, roving medics would walk through the crowds. I remember them as though they were dressed in army fatigues but of course the photo tells otherwise. The tent wasn't something official from the Red Cross, but some red duct tape plastered to a simple tent.

They were just ordinary people. People stepped up in the ways they felt they could, with the skillsets they had.



Memorial services for George Floyd happened in multiple cities, including Minneapolis, MN, Raeford, NC, and Houston, TX. During the Minneapolis service, a sound stage was set up at Floyd's memorial at 38th Street and Chicago Avenue and the ceremony was broadcast outward to the assembled crowd.

Our son brought flowers, lush peonies from our garden, to lay at the site where Floyd died. Our daughter made blueberry muffins to distribute to the workers standing vigil and protecting this space of mourning. We listened to Al Sharpton deliver his eulogy. There were prayers and tears and a simple message to carry forward:

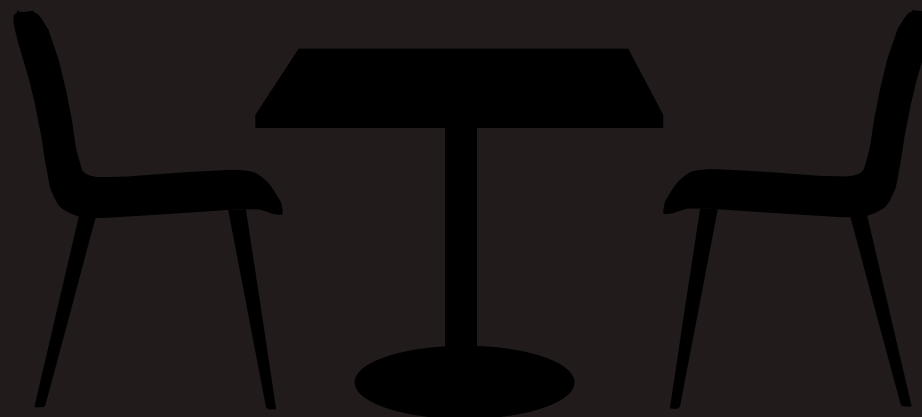
Love us.

From love all things can flow and find their right direction. There is much work to be done, but really it is that simple.





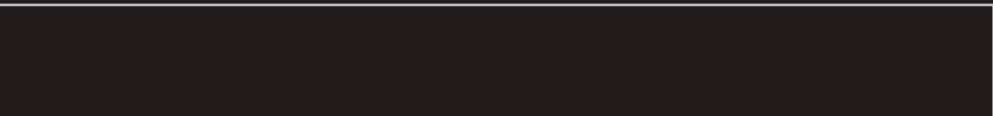
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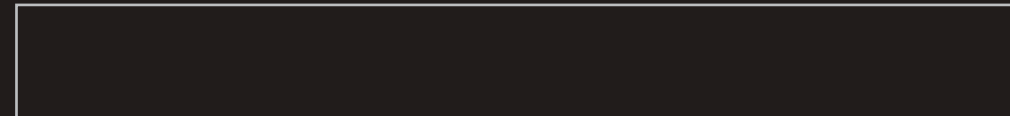
# SURVIVING



KRYSTINA FRANÇOIS



# RESPECTABILITY



SR: How did you get involved with Law for Black Lives and the Office for New Americans?

KF: In November of 2016, I was four years into my own consulting firm. I was working in a whole bunch of different spaces, from capacity building to immigration and the women's movement. Then Donald Trump won the presidential election and I was really angry, because I always had a critique of the anti-Blackness that was unleashed under the Obama years. I saw this coming and folks were not really doing anything to stop it.

At the same time, we have all these super viral police killings happening. You have Trayvon Martin, you have Tamir Rice, you have all these instances where the post-racial utopia is clearly a myth, and you see that, even when you have Black folks in leadership, the systemic issues of devaluing Black lives are still actualized.

A friend of mine passed along information about Law for Black Lives, which was really born out of Ferguson, MO. It started as an informal network of lawyers mobilizing across the country to address issues of racial injustice. It is not just police killings per se, but also policies regarding clean water in Flint and the codification of gentrification and community.

One of the first things we did was go on a listening tour for a year. We went to eighteen states. We developed a framework around identifying the key issues that people on the ground are fighting at the local level, state level, or nationally, then trying to find means to connect them. For example, if people in Louisiana and people in Michigan are both working on water rights, how do we link them so that we can develop some legal framework to do the lawsuits and to do the impact litigation?

Take the example of what happened to the Little Farm mobile home community in Little Haiti in Miami. A new development, Magic City, is being placed there. It basically displaced all these folks that are in mobile home units, knowing that it is one of the very few places that have affordable housing in the Miami-Dade County. There is only a handful of mobile home parks left in the Miami-Dade County, because they have all been sold to developers to build mixed-use high-rises, you know, "live, work, play" developments.

While the legal network members were not exclusively Black, they were predominantly people of color and all the organizations that they are working with on the ground are Black lead. It is rooted in queer Black feminism as a theory of change.

Does citizenship embolden vigilantism? What role does the naturalization of an individual play in the facilitation of aggression, resistance, and witnessing? In the following conversation, guest editors Germane Barnes (GB) and Shawhin Roudbari (SR) speak with social justice advocate and political strategist Krystina François (KF), Executive Director of the Office of New Americans of Miami-Dade, on the impact of immigration and vigilantism. The conversation addresses issues of the census as a spatial mechanism, the assimilation of identity, border patrol, and the ability to hold space in locations otherwise unwelcoming. Krystina explains the ramifications of a self-identified post-racial society and anti-Black incidents. How might ethnicities police each other to gain acceptance within the larger system of cultural respectability? How might individuals' police themselves and what are the results of these interactions?

I was there for about two years and then resigned to run the Office of New Americans, because for the past nine years I have also been working in the immigration space, really pushing for more awareness around redefining what citizenship is. Not just having your US passport and getting sworn in, but how folks are actively engaged as citizens. It starts by changing their immigration status and the civic engagement continuum as well as addressing the disproportionate blockages to accessing citizenship for Black immigrants, especially in a place like Miami. Florida has the largest population of Black immigrants in the country. I had consulted on the creation of the Office of New Americans because of my work in the immigrant rights movement. This office was born out of immigrant rights organizing around the role of municipal government/governance and local citizenship was a full circle moment for me to be able to do that.

SR: Can you tell us more about the ways that Black immigrants in the US encounter anti-Black violence here?

KF: It is definitely an underrepresented narrative. I am a first-generation American. Both of my parents are Haitian, although my mom came here when she was six and has a Queen's accent and is Americanized in a way. My dad came after medical school and married my mom. He had more of the traditional immigrant experience. I always grew up with a Black immigrant narrative and perspective, because that was my lived experience in terms of navigating spaces.

There are two things that I think of in this context of being super hyper aware of your body and moving through space: assimilation and surveillance. One is arriving from a predominantly Black country and then being the only Black person in spaces, having to self-police, determine how you interact and present yourself: "This is why I talk like this."

What are the different survival mechanisms? When I am in the space of immigrant integration, how can immigrants immerse themselves into their new home and society in a way that they can survive? There is a survival mechanism, and then thrive. What are the things they can adapt to and do for them to succeed and achieve the American dream—knowing that really the American Dream is assimilating into white supremacy?

You may still be in a Black or Brown body, but actually, the goals, how you move, and your perception of other people are from this very white supremacist lens because

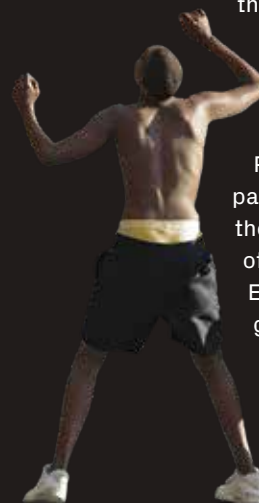
they are telling you, "This is what it means to be an American," which erases Black and Indigenous folks that are in the United States and their history.

But you also get reminded quickly that you are Black. You have to balance this. "They told me if I was a straight-A student and I was super polite and I dressed a certain way that I would be fine, because I'm not like those people." But then, you also have the random vigilante. And this frame that you are speaking about, who is surveilling you as you go through a store, as you try to buy things, as you try to get access to capital to buy a house or open a bank account, or all these things... They don't prepare you for that. You have lived your whole life being Black and it has never been a question. However, you experience Blackness in a whole new way when you get to the US. I can only speak from the Caribbean perspective, where there is a very clear class system that can have a correlation with skin color, but not always. Whereas here [in the US], at the end of the day, no matter how much money you have, you are still Black.

SR: Maybe we are hearing a distinction between self-policing, vigilante policing, and state policing. Can you speak to whether or not this is a difference?

KF: All three things are definitely happening. Depending on where you are geographically and depending on whether you are in a public space versus a private space versus an academic space, there is a difference. The self-policing—the moving through space—I think that is what I have expounded on the most. This is a mix of both vigilante and state. Florida, Michigan, Maine, and Hawaii are the only states where 100% of the state is a "border zone." That means that the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has the right to stop you and is actively patrolling the 100-mile "border zone." The border being the entire state. They can stop you. This is independent of local collaboration with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). They are constitution-less zones. You give up your constitutional right to free movement and the right to not be stopped and questioned.

You have this sense that you need to have your papers with you, you have to be prepared. A lot of organizers educate folks to have a contact number in your pocket, to make sure they have their green card. What



does that mean for their citizens and the residents if they get stopped? In a place like Florida, they don't know an immigrant versus a US-born person so anybody and everybody is allowed to be stopped, monitored, and reported on. It can happen if you see folks hanging out in a parking lot—particularly at a Home Depot, at a bus stop, or in certain neighborhoods—or you see someone not speaking English or, in the Florida context, not speaking Spanish. Then it's like, "Oh, my antenna is up, and I now get to surveil you and I get to interact with you in a whole different way." We see that in places like Florida, where we have high concentrations of wealth and a whole economy of domestic workers. It is not to say that folks don't have an immigration status. They may have work authorization, but that is a fear tactic. It is not like they are deportable; it is threatening you with deportability. The only protection against deportation is to become a US citizen, which is why it is my politic to get as many people to be citizens as possible so that is not a tool that can be used against them.

GB: You mentioned, "anybody and everybody can be monitored and reported." Who are the people that are doing the monitoring? Who are the people that are doing the reporting? And what does that do to the individuals who are being monitored and reported? How do they internalize those things? We wonder if there is more that we can dig into on the ways fear operates. We hadn't thought about it explicitly until the tail end of what you are saying. We are thinking about ways people legitimize police behaviors. People say, "Well, the police are afraid and, if we want to reduce the killings of Black people at the hands of police, let's do things so the police are less afraid." There are these perverse ways that fear gets used as an anti-racist strategy, but there are legitimate ways that fear operates. Are there other kinds of thoughts around fear and its role in immigrant integration?

KF: The reality is that there is fear of being poor, fear of being marginalized, fear of being monitored, fear of being controlled, and I think this year there is another layer of body autonomy in a whole different way. Who gets to say they are not going to wear a mask versus doesn't? Who gets to feel the consequences of that decision and who



doesn't? They are Black people and immigrants. Your grocery worker can't decide not to wear a mask.

There are a hundred Offices like mine across the country in different municipalities. I have a list of all the cities, big and small, across the country that are thinking about these things and how can immigrants, not just survive but thrive. We are thinking about what local governments can do to institute things in the public and private sector to make that happen.

This issue of being in a constant state of fear is also ironic. This is another thread. The constant state of fear that people are living in is ironic because that is why folks are leaving [their home countries before migrating to the US]. Immigrants are leaving because of that. They are risking and giving up everything. Whether or not you were coming here with money, you are giving up privileged access to things, your family, and friends. You are starting over whether you have some savings or not. You are basically starting from scratch. And society says it is okay for you to be monitored and it is okay for there to be consequences.

This sense that folks are constantly monitoring, *who the other is*, whether that is Black folks, whether they are immigrants, whether they are folks with different gender expression... we are always on the lookout for those that don't belong. You are leaving fear to be in fear, which is mind blowing to me. Being hyper vigilant and being super conscious of how you are moving is the personal impact.

GB: Continuing this thread—survival versus thriving—there was a line in there where you said, "I'm not that type of person."

KF: Mm-hmm. I knew you would write that one.

GB: What does that mean in regard to survival versus thriving?

KF: I talk a lot about respectability and I think both African American folks and Black immigrant folks think that, to a certain extent, class is my way out of racism. That, if only I wear the thing, sound like this, I am non-threatening to the whites, I achieve this degree, and I have all the bench markers for success that are laid out by white supremacy, then people will forget I am Black. If I am not those things, then it turns into the lazy Black narrative. It is either you are lazy, or you are violent. It's one of those things.

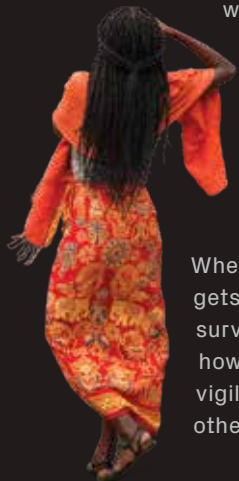
There is this really antiquated idea of what a successful Black person looks like. Folks are trying to get their kids to be that prototype successful Black person and not that other thing. I would actually argue that most Gen Z and millennial Black immigrants who are first generation assimilate into an African American identity, which is very interesting.

That survive versus thrive framework has been the media's depiction of Black people. Black Lives Matter has also changed this. The perception of the Watts riots and the perception of the uprisings of this summer are completely different now. In 2020, an interesting conversation that has been happening in intergenerational dialogue within the Black immigrant community is, "What I am seeing on the streets of every major city in June is what I left. What I left in my home country of mass protests, police violence against protesters. Not intractable change. Not seeing the demands being met. Shit being on fire."

One of the things that radicalized me was living in Haiti during our last coup. There was mass mobilization, burning things, and a new president. People left that instability for the stability and security of the United States to then see that it is the same. You don't get the change that you are asking for.

GB: There are a couple things that you said that are really interesting and that we want to tease out. One of them is this idea of assimilation, but not wanting to assimilate to the wrong culture. How is that framed as an immigrant who wants to be seen as the good immigrant versus a bad immigrant? We see that play out in Miami where Cuban Americans

who may identify or get as close to whiteness as possible don't align themselves with darker skin or even lower socioeconomically transient white, Latinos. That there is a hierarchy. Whether it is informal or formal, both might identify as white, but there is a clear separation between economic mobility and political mobility. When it comes to policing these things, who gets to police them as well as this idea of surviving, approachability, and respectability, how does that work when the policeman or the vigilante is an immigrant and they are policing other immigrants?



KF: That is Florida in a nutshell. And that hierarchy in and of itself is anti-Black but shows up in a place like Texas, Arizona, California, Florida, where you have multiple generations that have migrated here. White-passing or more established immigrants' relationship to other immigrants is very narrow. There is no solidarity across immigrants. And it is because there is a division around race and class. You can be Indigenous, Black, or white, or a mix of the above as a Latinx person. And there is a very rigid social system in Latin America, based on those lines of color, race, and economic status.

Immigrants are quick to assimilate into whiteness because when they were first met with xenophobia, they never want to feel this again. "I am going to do everything I can to make sure that me and my family never experience this again." That is particularly the narrative of Cubans in Florida. The first wave of Cubans were legitimate plantation owners, captains of industry who had been to the US, had multiple degrees, and were coming with hundreds of thousands of dollars. A plantation owner from Cuba and a plantation owner in Georgia have way more in common than a Cuban who owns the factory and a Cuban who was working in the factory. And that doesn't get erased.

The inequalities and over-policing you experience in Miami is different because we are all 'people of color.' It feels different. Look at banking. Look at the tech industry. All of these leaders are self-identified white Latinos. On one hand, people say, "Miami is so diverse." It is still white folks that are dominating things, maintaining a social hierarchy, and still perpetuating white supremacy.

GB: As a non-professional of the built environment, as someone who is an immigrant, as a woman, as someone who is Black, your spatial occupation is wrought with terror. How do you experience space?

KF: I have always been aware of how I occupy space. I am assessing safety. I ask myself, "Are there sufficient exits? Is this space built for me? Are people going to look at me like I don't belong here?" I also think about walkability [because] I am from New York.

I have been in predominantly white spaces basically my entire life. I also have curated a very diverse friend group across gender expression, class, and race. It is a balance.



I intentionally insert myself into spaces that are not meant for me. I am intentionally in that space, because I should be, and I think that is how I approach space: like I should be here. Over time, I have stopped making myself small in those spaces. The last two years have definitely changed me. I am unapologetical in this space and I am unapologetically taking up space and not in a combative way.

While I am conscious of my safety, I intentionally put myself in places where I can make people uncomfortable, make people question why I am the only person like me in this room, and still I insert my perspective.

And my perspective on the consequence or impact of vigilantism is not just being criminalized and having a negative interaction with the police, but it is also an issue of immigration enforcement, which can get you deported. Criminalization and immigration enforcement are one and the same.

Practitioners should be partnering with grassroots organizations who are doing the work. Do your research. Do something about the structural issue. There are people doing this work and they need you just as much as you need them. ★





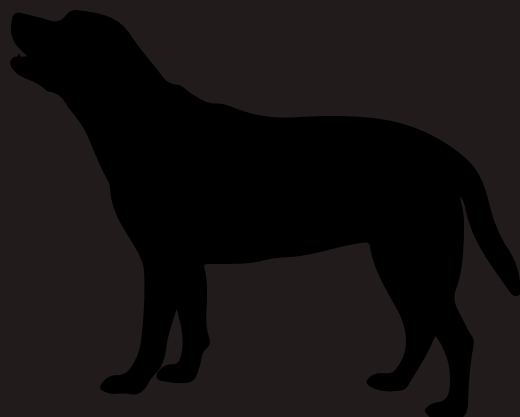
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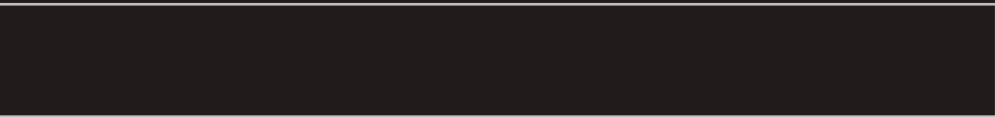
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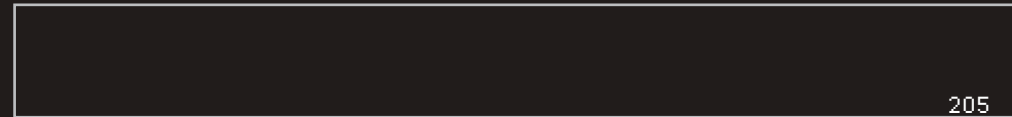


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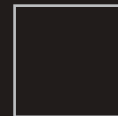
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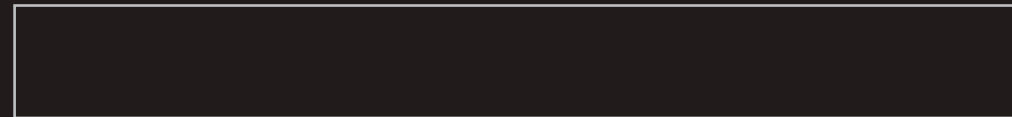
RECONSTRUCTION



OF



APPROACHABILITY



Are you supposed to be here? Appearance is one of the most contested issues of modern times. One's appearance can be the difference between life and death. A hoodie, dreadlocks, skin complexion, and clothing fit have all been reasons used by vigilantes to rationalize their overt acts of aggression. In the following conversation with Demar Matthews (DM), architect and director of Offtop Design, editors Shawhin Roudbari (SR) and Germane Barnes (GB) discuss approachability within the architected environment. Demar recounts stories from his architectural education and experiences of paranoia, isolation, and resilience. He explains his influential thesis proposal, "The Search for a Black Aesthetic," within the framework of the larger canon and the necessity of representation within the field. Based in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, Demar reveals the complexity of building community and how architecture can be an accelerant and deterrent to ethnicities.



SR: In the "A Black Architecture Education Experience" piece you wrote in *Architect*, you talked about your experience at architecture school, and you were using the idea of paranoia. We see paranoia and vigilance somehow connected. We were looking up the definition of vigilantism and vigilance comes from vigil, as in holding a vigil, being watchful. The definition that we found and have been working with is when people take the watching function of the government or the police into their own hands. With our idea of paranoia, there seems to be a modification to that idea. Is there something internal, something psychological that we are meant to feel about our vigilance because of the racism of the system? Does it cause us to be paranoid?

DM: I felt isolated. Of course, when you go to architecture school, if you are not at a HBCU (Historically Black College and University), most likely you are going to be the only Black person in the room. The percentages of seeing people like me get smaller as you go through education. I was fine with that. But to just have it thrown in your face in this sense, and to have to handle it and deal with a racial situation in school is something that has been going on for over a century. Germane and I were having a conversation on a panel a while ago and we were speaking about being approachable in school. Woodbury University was the first time that I was wondering if I was approachable. When I started school, I had hair like this [short dreads] but it was a little shorter. I remember I had this for maybe six months, perhaps a year, and people—students or professors—were not coming to my desk, and I was brand new in architecture. I just didn't know anything, so I needed the help, and I was busting my ass though. I was staying in studio later than anybody. I was working full time. But I just felt like, for some reason, I wasn't approachable at that point.

To have dreads, little dreads, not even supermassive long dreads, and depending on your skin complexion, people will take you a different way, and I started to look hyper focused. Perception really ended up informing my thesis, and all the work that I am interested in now can be traced back to that one moment of being singled out.

GB: What about these interactions made you feel unapproachable? Woodbury is a Hispanic serving institution, so they may argue that their student body isn't reflective of the profession. They would say that their student body is more

reflective of the diversity that people want in architecture. Even those who may check white on the census, may be ethnically Armenian or they might see themselves as people of color. With those nuances, how do you think your appearance also shaped that paranoia and, as a result, shaped the way you experience architectural space?



DM: Even though Woodbury is a minority serving institution, there are differences in terms of who you see excelling, who you see getting the big internships, or getting a good amount of attention. When I was there on Saturdays, and I saw professors going to studio on Saturdays to sit with certain students; I wasn't one of them. Typically, those students were not people of color, but even when they were, I wouldn't say that I felt better because there were people of color at Woodbury. You have some international students, majority of Woodbury students, and you. You go to Woodbury and see a Rolls Royce, and this is a student's car. You quickly see the difference in economics with a bunch of your peers. Money quickly became a big

Black elevation. © Demar Matthews.

differential or differentiator. The professors that you see at Woodbury aren't very reflective of the student body for the most part; there are still a lot of non-people of color. Even when you say people of color, a lot of us don't feel great. If they ain't black, I'm not feeling like they see my path. They are not going through the path that I am going to have to take to get there.



When most people are looking at somebody they admire or looking to see which path we set ourselves up to follow, I think I can only look to follow someone who is like myself because I am going to think that they are going to go through a path that is similar to mine. I can't look at a white guy and say if they can do it, I can do it. We have a different path to get there. I tell Germane this all the time. Seeing his thesis, I was like, "Oh, I don't even have to live in this world that I'm in right now."

Reflection porch perspective.  
© Demar Matthews.



SR: I am looking at the collage behind you [figure on page 208]. I am thinking about what you said about approachability and appearance, and I am wondering if there is a connection. Do you see that connected to what you are doing in Watts right now?

DM: Definitely. These things are all from that idea of perception. When I got into thesis, I stopped looking at architecture that wasn't designed by a Black architect or African architecture. I would not look at it and I ain't looked at it ever since. The idea was to look at Black neighborhoods, mostly South LA, that will make me feel comfortable as a Black dude. If I am in Beverly Hills, I am walking like this [standing upright and rigid]; down in South Central, my shoulders can drop. But then, what is the built environment in South Central? I started analyzing the built environment. You would see a bunch of bars on the windows and on the doors. All these negative things that you see way more in Black neighborhoods. I started to think about things like old buildings, trash on the ground, graffiti, and you know all this stuff. Buildings that were meant to be temporary and should have been torn down fifty years ago. What is its effect on perception for Black people living in these Black neighborhoods?

How does this poor background lead to a negative perception? I didn't tell you but, at the end of that first year when I had my hair like this, I cut my hair. The next day I remember people coming up to me and they were like, "Oh dude, you look so much nicer like this." I am thinking, "Like what?"

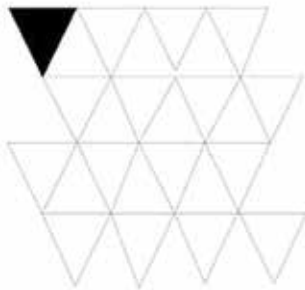
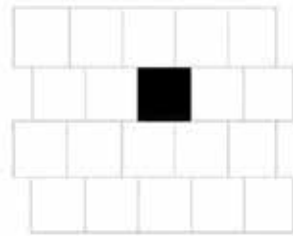
I was so mad at myself that day and the day after. I was like, "Alright, I do not care what nobody thinks of me being approachable." I was looking at building up Black perception based on our own values and our own aesthetics that we hold important. When you look at something like this one, yeah of course with the form, it ended up being a crown with all these things. We have had different inspirations behind them, but the ultimate goal of the building is to allow it to be associated as a positive perception. If someone sees you in front of the building it can speak to your culture as a Black person, it will raise your perception. However, if you are in front of a project building, with shitty walls, old paint, and bars everywhere, it ain't gonna raise your perception. Unless you want to be seen as a street dude or something, it is just not going to make people look at you and take you in the way that I am looking to have people take me.

SR: Is there tension here? I am looking at this crown and what you are doing in terms of connecting perception and appearance. Maybe what you are doing is deconstructing a racist association that we have between Black folks and the environments that we think they belong in. Is there an apology embedded in that?

DM: This was kind of a "fuck you" to architecture for doing this to the Black neighborhoods, for leaving Black neighborhoods. I don't know how South Central, Crenshaw, and Watts aren't developed neighborhoods for Black people. Ten minutes away from Watts you find Manhattan Beach and they developed the shit out of it and it is nice. Why did architecture leave the Black community? This was what I was critiquing.

GB: There is even more nuance to this Black aesthetic where it becomes, what type of Black are you speaking to? The first time Demar met me, he didn't know what kind of Black person I was. He had seen videos, articles, and whatnot. That is different than when you are unapologetically yourself. Then, we talked about the approachability politics, and I think approachability politics plays into the text. It actually breaks my heart to hear that you cut your hair. I think Shawhin perfectly put it when he said that your thesis was a reconstruction of that original appearance. How much of that approachability even lives as a 2D representation of architecture because the guy behind you [in the collage] looks more like me than he does like you.

DM: He is Black, and that is why I chose the photo. My decision was finding photos that were free, that weren't licensed, but I was always looking for skin like mine. I got like twenty tattoos. But I would say people at Woodbury mostly saw me with a sweater on because you just end up subconsciously hiding things to gain that approachability. Kehinde Wiley and Titus Kaphar both influenced this a lot. That will contrast completely with Lauren Halsey and Basquiat, whose styles are a little less violent. It is architectural because we want to frame things in a specific way. Gritty is what I am really interested in. With this house, I was interested in patterns that a lot of Black people may use or be familiar with.



SR: I am thinking about the audience of your work: who is seeing this work, what you want it to do for them, what you want it to do for yourself, and maybe, what you want to do for the future. It seems like your work has so much power to give people different ways of imagining new futures. Could you speak a little bit to what you see or speculate to be the power of this work, either for yourself, for your audience, or for the future?

DM: For Black neighborhoods, I would like to bring commerce into them. When I am at the site in Watts, I sit directly next to the Watts Towers. I watch people come in and out every day. They will go to 107th to look up at the towers. They might go and read some things, but they stay in the street. They don't even walk around the actual Watts Tower side where people are and where the cultural presence is. These people will do this in like six minutes, and then they are gone. You are coming to Watts, a neighborhood that is full of rich Black history and that is getting lost. Thirty years ago, it was almost 90% Black. Today, it is less than 30% Black, so the history is really

Post up perspective.  
© Demar Matthews.

Black aesthetic technique.  
© Demar Matthews.

dwindling. The people who come here have never seen Watts before. Never. They probably don't travel into Black neighborhoods often. They come, they get out of their car, they look, they leave, and they are out of that Black neighborhood. They are not going around other Black neighborhoods and they are not going to go to more places in Watts. They are not going to spend money. How do we get other people to come in and spend money in Black neighborhoods? It is also about allowing more Black landmarks to be able to see yourself in a building. I think it is powerful.

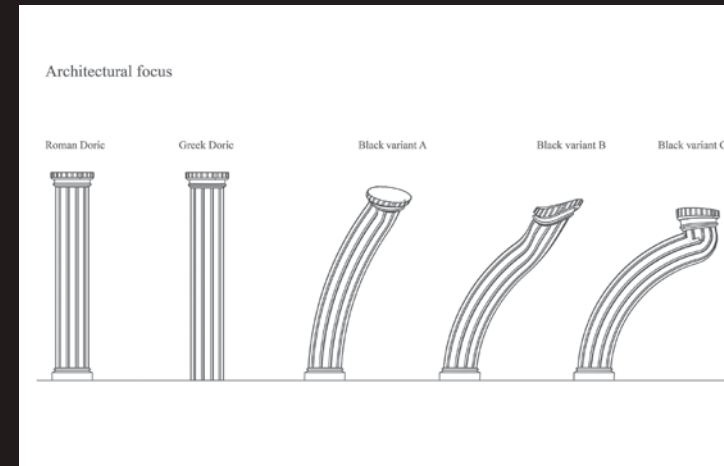
GB: What do you mean by resilience in your taxonomy diagram? I would like to understand the difference between the characteristics, the aesthetics, and the techniques. But then also, what would one of these look like if the word was vigilance or vigilante?

DM: For a Black person, you have to be resilient, and you have to get by with scraps constantly. You have to turn those scraps into gold and a lot of people have done that well. This picture reminds me of how hip-hop started, with people taking what they thought was a shitty disco record and grabbing one to four seconds of it and turning it into a beautiful song. That represents us better as a culture. The thought of the building and how it can come from sustainable materials, repurposed steel, the same steel that you would find on all the doors and windows. That is speaking to this image specifically. If we added vigilante on here, I could only imagine how many images I would want to put in the square.

SR: Looking at your columns, I am trying to understand a little bit more how you see perception operating and how you want to use perception as your tool to do the work that you are doing. How do you see it operating at very fundamental architectural elements like columns and walls or architectural spaces like circulation and threshold? Could you give very specific examples of elements like a column where you see whiteness and Blackness?

DM: I will start with this image [below]. We are always force-fed this image of the Greek or Roman man standing with his arms straight out and saying, "Do you know the columns are made off of these proportions?" You see a plaza full of columns, and I am just like, "Oh, it is a bunch of white dudes standing straight up here." How is my body language different? How do I speak to my body language? How do I speak to our posture? How do I speak to how we dance how we move, and how we walk? For a lot of us,

After researching Earnie Barnes's piece titled *Sugar Shack*, my interest was in the difference of body language of Black people. © Demar Matthews.



there is a little limp in the walk, or we just got a little style to it. How do I make a column do that? Black people have a certain whimsy about them—and we speak to this whimsy through paths. When you start to think about being whimsical, I think about when I was a kid and I was so happy and bubbly—you know, just giggly and thinking everything is cool. But then, by the time you are fifteen, depending on where you grow up, that stuff is sucked out of you. The whimsy is sucked out of you where you don't even feel like you can smile and you get beat down by society. Allowing Black people to function whimsically again and free is really the most powerful thing to me. ★



DISCIPLINED

218

TOMORROW

ANDREW

IN THE HOUSE

219

OF

SANTA LUCIA



## DISCLAIMER:

As Germane, Shawhin, and I have been discussing this essay, I have to say that it has been a very difficult one to write. First, I will begin by suggesting that who we are matters more than the ideologies we take on as architects. However, after writing six or seven-thousand words in another draft, trying to touch upon the relationship between architecture, white supremacy, personal identity, and the anecdotes that tie those things together, I realized that that is a bit bigger than what this particular issue or my essay can do. So, with their blessings, I decided to focus on one invisible facet of my life to tease out an autobiographical genre of architectural writing, where it is not the recitation of ideas, the canonical links between them, or name-dropping nepotism, but a manifestation of who I am verifying that architecture shapes us and in turn we shape it back, as painful as that may be.

Architectural theory is pretty dead if you ask me. I find it irrelevant in that the same issues get reprinted in *Log* and *Perspecta* all the time with the same people, some who are included in this issue of *MAS Context*. I hope we are not desperate enough to buy into the canon building we are being sold by them. Them = a white-supremacist loose canon. However, I have hope about making architectural writing relevant to a world and people that it hasn't fully represented. Frankly, it is through the anecdote, through the manifestation of our identities—not the white ones that would have been represented anyways—as the driver of ideas in design and the built environment. In addition, by writing this piece I am forced to live a truth that can never be reified by any op-ed or well-argued theory in architecture, however supported by our institutions they may be. I haven't done this publicly, only in small close-knit communities that I have found myself safe in. That is to say, the way I think about architecture is fundamentally shaped by who I am and by the myriad of ways I was introduced to it—through joy and trauma.



“Prison is a second-by-second assault on the soul, a day-to-day degradation of the self, an oppressive steel and brick umbrella that transforms seconds into hours and hours into days.”

“Children do not only have an innate hope; they are hope. And more than that: they are our future. As Kahlil Gibran writes, they are like ‘living arrows sent forth’ into infinity, and their souls ‘dwell in the house of tomorrow...’ They carry their hope with them to a future we can’t see.”

—Mumia Abu Jamal,

Activist, Black Panther, Father, and current  
US political prisoner serving a life sentence.

Who you are, before becoming an architect, can be more important than who you are now, not in the sense that it is the only thing that defines you, but certainly in that your story matters to the development of who you are as a person, who happens to be an architect. Recently, I was asked how I got into architecture. I have been giving the same answer for close to twenty years, which is that my mother worked at an art store in Coral Gables, Florida and I was lucky enough to be exposed every day after school to artists, designers, musicians, and architects, but also encouraged to test out different disciplines having a myriad of tools I could “borrow.” This time was incredibly influential in that it was a privilege that shaped my early aesthetic and disciplinary interests, but also because I probably shouldn’t have had that opportunity based on the socioeconomic reality for my family. I grew up in a Cuban single-parent impoverished working class household with an extended family under one roof. For reasons that perhaps you will understand at the end of this essay, I have not been fully honest with my origin story, particularly with what caused my family to be in that situation.

You see, this story is ubiquitous depending on where you grew up, and in Miami there are no shortages of it. I was born in 1985. If we know anything about Miami in the 80s it’s *Miami Vice*, Cuban immigration, and cocaine. These happen to be the material facts to my story because in 1989 my father was arrested for cocaine distribution and money laundering by the United States Federal Government and would be convicted, spending the next seventeen years of his and my life in prison. Aside from my origin story being one filled with creative design or exposure to art culture, perhaps my pathway to architecture was more profoundly shaped by my relationship to incarceration—emotionally, physically, and later, intellectually.

The sections of this essay are centered on concepts that obviously intertwine with my personal narrative. The first is the concept of discipline that connects most directly to the history of my father’s incarceration and its effect on my life, as well as my loose indoctrination into the discipline of architecture. The second concept is the notion of house, an incredibly loaded term in architecture. I want to connect house more directly to the practice of creating a house from a chosen family and a particular situation, but fundamentally not viewed as favorably as a home. Finally, I want to take on the concept of tomorrow, particularly the concept of futurity or modeling the world currently in ways you hope a future might be. Ideally the narrative that you will read will weave in the personal anecdote with architectural ideas with radical forms of politics and compassion, so as to fundamentally do a few things: (1) critique incarceration and prison in all its facets; (2) blast the gatekeepers of

the discipline of architecture and its inherent white supremacy; (3) and call on architects, students, and educators to develop an abolitionist framework moving forward.

## DISCIPLINE

There are two essential points in this origin story that define my interest in architecture. The first is obvious. From a very early age, I understood the physical and emotional limits of freedom, as well as the impossibility of humaneness in the design of prisons. The second point might sound a bit trivial. I have read many admissions essays and heard lots of you say things like, “the first time my parents took me to Rome, it changed how I saw space...” or “ever since I was a child, I remember my father working away at his drafting table.” Ironically, that last cliché is close to my truth.

The first time that I was introduced to the idea of becoming a professional architect was when, one random day on one of the thousands of phone calls I had with my father in the 1990s while in prison, he mentioned to us that he was about to take a class in something called AutoCAD offered in the minimum security prison in which he would spend the end of his sentence. It was truly a special moment for a few reasons: first, it made me think that one day when my father would be released and he would go straight; and second, AutoCAD was exploding in media advertisements of that era, specifically on ITT Tech commercials where they would present computer-aided drafting as the cutting edge. The camera angles, music, lighting, and focus on the computer mouse’s ability to make points and lines on an infinite grid of space on a computer screen, all enamored me. My dad wasn’t an architect; he only went to one class, but I am really glad he mentioned something about AutoCAD to me that day.

I was a curious and creative kid with an incarcerated father that took one drafting class in prison. And now I’m sitting here writing about how all this has more power over the way I see architecture than all the canons, the supposedly important figures turned mentors, and/

or the colleagues who continue to perpetuate the institutional propaganda of American architecture. You might want to question that premise because I certainly feel like an imposter suggesting it. However, I have hindsight and I'm mature enough to know what a gut feeling is. Intuition and authenticity are essential for any discourse in architecture, so let me manifest some of these truths and let's see what you think afterwards.

What is discipline if not an action one does to something else? I think this idea that there is a discipline of architecture can be both problematic and liberating. It is problematic because of people telling us that it is a place that they identify or own, for lack of a better word. It can be liberating in the sense that if we are able to discipline something, perhaps we have a little more control over the world than we thought. The problem occurs when choosing a form for discipline to take. My goal with this identity-first genre of criticism is to complicate discipline by explaining a couple of different ways I have experienced it in my life, before and after I studied architecture.

First, I have experienced discipline within the carceral state, as it relates to my father's incarceration. This form of discipline took the shape of growing up without a parent, of asymmetrical access to a parent. This means that every milestone, important conversation, and/or potential learning experience that a parent can share with a child would be mediated by a form of discipline: punishment. In many cases, discipline also took the form of a phone call every single day for seventeen years. Discipline also took the form of me losing bodily autonomy when visiting my father, since certain things are restricted for everyone in a visitation center, in effect extending the carceral state to you even though you have done nothing wrong. Discipline also looked like being very worried about sharing this information with people around you. In effect, this fear completes the panopticon because you police your own lived truths and who has access to it around you. In essence, this form of discipline is Foucauldian, occupying both soft and hard manners of application.

Punishment is certainly the hardest discipline possible. However, there are other less punitive versions of discipline that pertain to the formation of architectural pedagogy, how it is taught, and the expectations that are set in regards to how one should receive it. Eleven years ago, I moved to Chicago to finish a post-professional Masters in Design Criticism at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and had the chance to study under the tutelage of a couple of different critics and theorists, most notably Robert Somol. From the onset, the term discipline permeated every conversation, assignment, and expectation set upon not only the students but also the faculty

around us. This might seem like an exaggeration, but I challenge anyone reading to remember a time in your architectural career when the debate was not solely on the design project in front of you—perhaps even its process—but on the conceptual foundation of the term architecture. We were challenged to constantly reinvent the term discipline to make it relevant, however we were usually met with criticism that those definitions did not account for the hegemonic weight of those before us or perhaps were too focused on how architecture interfaced with the deadly realities of capitalism and settler colonialism, or perhaps we were too “social” in focus and not “architectural” enough. The term discipline was used as a way to *discipline* the school—to keep it in line.

An anecdote that spells out this version of soft discipline more clearly is when Bob speaks on how he clinched the directorship at UIC. Anecdotally, when he was interviewing, he basically said that he was the “discipline” candidate. What that meant was that every other candidate was effectively talking about architecture without caring about architecture, without centering the discipline in everything that they were doing. What that did was give folks like myself a license to proselytize this version of architecture on his and the school's behalf. The most poignant realization to arise from this moment in my life was that I got to effectively claim an entire area of knowledge by simply using the term discipline and impregnating it with very few definitions of it from the middle and end of the twentieth century. The power that comes with showing up anywhere and throwing the term discipline around freely is one that I cannot replicate using any other term.

When one starts referring directly to the “discipline” of architecture, it becomes the focus and in some ways places everything outside of it—another crack at autonomy. The hardest part for me was knowing that this world was broken; that white supremacy and settler colonialism and neoliberalism were the laws of the land; that things mattered so much outside of the practice of architecture; that I had given up my interests as a student for a while to take on a project of a very important critic, an educator in architecture. I had to do this to survive in this arena, but what I got from this experience was a false sense of security, a sense that I was a disciple who had its root in discipline, which I was not.

Moving on, though, soft discipline is an idea that I want you to walk away with in this section as an instrument of change, of revolutionary power shifting. There are forms of discipline that mean to have dedication, a routine, a calling to a specific system and, to a certain extent, I think we could update it. A soft discipline is one that doesn't look to figures to give you authority. A soft discipline is one that emerges out of a scene of people or a closely aligned political collec-



tive of like-minded comrades. I think the idea of comradeship is dangerous to the disciplinary proselytizers of the world because it might challenge the cycles of power and abuse through collective action, collective identity. One key thing I can say is that I have a lot of colleagues, but not a lot of comrades. If you are a comrade, you know you are one because I told you so. Defining our relationships based on accountability and care between each other; basing them within the political ideologies and realities that we agree we would like to see that challenge the neoliberal academic and professional projects in architecture; using whatever platforms each of us has to collectively amplify stories of abusive discipline and disciplinary coercion; empowering our communities, students, and family around us to fundamentally manifest their identities without a worry that they do not fit the sociopathic molds we are being told to fit in to are the ultimate form of soft discipline in that, like gravity, they are easy to break away from, even for a second. That breathing room is liberation. I think that is a more authentic version of discipline and softer in that it is not about the location or a moving target or a doppler effect, but how you interact with the world at large based on ethics, politics, and practice.

## HOUSE

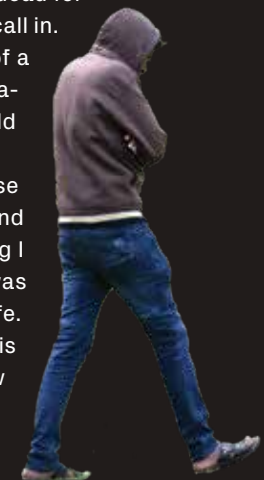
You do the time, too, as a family member of an incarcerated person. I can personally tell you that this builds on Foucault's conception of the institution and, of course, the panopticon in one of the most insidious ways possible. In essence, the panopticon works because you bet against yourself, even though there is no way for the jailer to always see what you are doing, you essentially police yourself out of fear. When your parent is locked up, you are guaranteed to have trauma around loss for the rest of your life that emerges in the most unexpected moments. This loss is incredibly dull but poignant in that it is categorically less difficult than a parent's death. It is more poignant in that there is an entire industry, architecture and social system dedicated to making sure that your loved one is not only deprived of fundamental

human rights, but you are, too. The penal system in the United States is one of the most brutal and regressive racist machines that exists on this planet. Its sole function is dehumanizing prisoners within models of cohousing and its tentacles have fully shaped my understanding of architecture, more specifically my lifetime fight for prison abolition.

Imagine waking up at age four to 20-30 US Marshals with their automatic weapons drawn in your house, knocking down the bedroom door where your mother, father, brother, and you sleep. Imagine what it looks like for both of your parents to be arrested, my mother only for a few months, but then your father for seventeen years, where he is only present in a visit, phone call, or a letter. Imagine not understanding how someone ages since you are so young that when you do finally visit him after seven years of not seeing him, you are so overwhelmed that he looks more like a stranger than the dad you saw in pictures growing up. Imagine that every time you go and visit him, your mother is patted down aggressively by a corrections officer (CO) and you, as a young child, have to sign a waiver stating you are not bringing in any contraband substances or weapons. I will save you the suspense and let you know that the COs in this instance unfairly targeted Latinx and BIPOC families who came to visit for these "random" searches over white ones. Imagine that when we entered this prisoner visiting room, we were lucky that it wasn't behind glass and we had our own family areas and platforms specifically designed for surveillance, with a plethora of microwaves and vending machine options, as well as a TV room for families (but not for inmates). Imagine having fond memories of this, as I do, because it is literally all I had in terms of my physical childhood relationships with my father. Imagine your father is a federal prisoner in the 1990s, who has to have a life-saving triple bypass surgery and you do not hear word of him being alive or dead for weeks, regardless of how many times your mom would call in. Imagine that because of this systematic degradation of a human life in both physical and emotional ways, your relationship with your father would wither away and he would never talk to you before he died some years later.

The scenes that stick with me through all of these moments have to do with both an architectural reality and an emotional trauma. I carry both of these in everything I do, so when I was introduced to prison abolition it was basically the name of the feeling I've had my entire life. No one deserves to be dehumanized in this way and this system serves one purpose as an industry, to churn new inmates out of us all.

What is more misunderstood in the history of architecture than the house?



I can't think of anything else, but I must say that the driving force around the development of a home or a house underlines a potent debate in the discipline of architecture and how it extends to our bodies and lives. To start, the idea that the avowed Nazi intellectual Martin Heidegger, who still finds his way into many of our architecture lexicons today through the hegemony of phenomenology, the house (or in Heidegger's case, the cabin in the woods) is the most primordial of architectural realities. That is fucking bullshit because no one is guaranteed it within capitalism as a human right, let alone the millions of Jews that were murdered, intellectually and materially supported by Heidegger. In another sense, housing was the saving grace of modernism in that there was a problem to solve post World War II and architects foamed at the mouth to interject their relevance back into the world that left them behind after the war.

I have lived in a few houses throughout my life. These have been everything from large palatial mansions to multi-generational cramped homes to apartments to my own modest starter home that I currently live in with my family. I have had a difficult relationship with my first long-term house for a lot of reasons, most notably because of the disrepair it fell into due to the fact that my family was working class. As an architect, I was always left puzzled by the lack of care that was put into this house, when I saw people around me always renovating the smallest things in their homes. As an architect, you are taught this horrible optimism about the power of design as a projective possibility, possible if only for the current reality not allowing it to manifest. We learn that reality itself is negotiable in education, but not in practice. The irony is that depending on your socioeconomic background as an architect or student, reality is much more negotiable with wealth. Growing up working class means you cannot add value to a home through expensive renovations, or perhaps it means borrowing against the equity in your home to help pay bills when a parent's sole income is lost due to layoff. More than any disciplinary idea or history, houses are about survival, health, and safety. But what is the house in architecture in the US other than a wealth generator, a market ploy, a site for formal investigations, a manifesto?

The other form of house that was painfully obvious to me was the reality that my father could not live in my house. I had to negotiate that throughout the years, particularly when I was younger, not fully understanding the reality of living in the US prison system. To be frank, I don't think I thought about it all the time because it was something I did not have access to outside of the media. It wasn't until I went to visit him that I started to understand what the architecture of the federal prison system in the United States was like. My father spent many years of his sentence at Terre Haute Correctional Prison in

Indiana, which is a maximum-security prison. I received several phone calls from him that started with the familiar robotic greeting, "This is a collect call from a federal inmate at Terre Haute Prison." The phone call reminded you where your loved one lived, where and how they were housed. I do not remember contemplating the realities of his living situation in prison when I was young, probably because it was too traumatic. The saving grace was when he was moved in the mid-1990s to a low security prison/work camp at Jesup, Georgia, which was only eleven hours away from my house in Miami. At that point, I started to visit my father in prison, due to the fact we were a little older and the proximity of our living situations, our houses.

In this case, the house was inhumane regardless of security level and there was nothing anyone could do to make it humane without totally abolishing the prison industrial complex. This goes out to all the bootlickers and pieces of shit in architecture that try to make prisons "better" through piecemeal design charrettes and competitions or ameliorating the realities of prison through design. No architect should design a prison again and if they do, they are only serving the capitalist class in a failing fascist state, further dehumanizing people in the United States.

Every educational institution in the United States that teaches architects should cease to make projects about prisons. We should out all institutions of higher learning who allow projects like these, as well as all designers of prisons in the United States. Believe me, they do not want people to know this. I will start with Harvard GSD a few years back when they touted Glen Santayana's project on youth prisons as a success, with a lot of media coverage on it through national outlets and Facebook shares. They praised its "humaneness" without critiquing the prison industrial complex that makes that impossible, effectively focusing on the individual as the problem and an architecture that can straighten you out. In practice there is Roula Associates Architects in Chicago, which designed the renovation to the largest carceral complex in the United States, Cook County Jail, which is 96 acres large. You can start with them because they love the design of prisons, and we need to put them on blast because it is the only way that people listen. They do not like bad publicity, but they are also very proud of what they do, so I suspect we just need to make some more names public, put more pressure on architects by any means necessary.

Prison abolition at its core is about the house. There is no way to house someone humanely in a prison, so if you do not deal with the core of the problem with the carceral state—housing, capitalism, resources, and discipline—in the United States, then you further lose the ability to rehabilitate and only punish. This current system does



not seek a reparative or restorative accountability, in the words of Derecka Purnell and Sonya Renee Taylor. To do so, to hold someone accountable, you must have a relationship with them. Without a relationship, punishment is the only thing that is possible in a prison industrial complex. Accountability exists within relationships and communities where one can be held within, nurtured, rehabilitated, and cared for. The cycle of punishment in the carceral state dehumanizes and limits any possibility of rehabilitation because of neoliberal profiteering necessitating the participation of the under-resourced in the cruelty *ad infinitum*. It is built from the chattel slavery system, the original king of dehumanization through forced labor and creating objects out of enslaved black and brown bodies. Punishment is literally an extension of everything you hate so to engage it with any seriousness—design, support for the police, worrying about what happens to dangerous criminals—only perpetuates this cycle.

Finally, I want to deal with the concept of a house as a chosen family, a safe space that is not always material, but is definitely physical. The house is something you can build with others; they can be communities that create homes for people without them. In Trans BIPOC communities centered around the hallowed ground of NYC Ballroom competitions, a house is a refuge from abuse and trauma; a chosen family; and a powerful platform for individual expression bolstered by a community. As I am not a part of those communities, I can only appreciate the beauty in finding a chosen family and being part of a house. As an ally, I want to not only voice support but also preach the good word of communities of care that are absent in many walks of one's life, let alone in a community as cannibalistic and traumatic as architects.

I found chosen families many times in my life or perhaps they found me. I have found survival in Latinx Punk communities and activist circles around Miami, Chicago, and Portland. However, not as much in the practice or education of architecture. Little by little, I have seen more and more architects change and start to reflect the possibility of a radical new world around them. Chosen family is ultimately the healthiest of ways to oppose the status quo abusive realities found in all dimensions of architecture. It is architecture sans Ivy League meritocracy, nepotism, and hopefully whitecishet patriarchy. Within a chosen family, a community of care, accountability is possible because our relationships matter more than using them for personal gains, jobs, academic appointments, or clients. They become the bedrock or foundation of a house that architects can live in, grow in, and ultimately move out of, allowing for the next generation to cultivate their own relationships in. It is the most important life project one can do and it has nothing to do with designing your way out of it. The

critical and cruel optimism of architecture should be supplanted by the beautiful and strange identities we manifest. Architecture is not more important than a revolutionary change in our world and we need to do everything we can to ensure a new radical, socialist, and egalitarian future if we want it to grow holistically with us.

## DISCIPLINED IN THE HOUSE OF TOMORROW

To reconnect with Mumia Abu Jamal's quote at the introduction of this essay, being disciplined in the house of tomorrow necessitates the abolition of the "second-by-second assault on the soul, (the) day-to-day degradation of the self, (the) oppressive steel and brick umbrella," that architects in our current world design. It asks for multiple humanisms that center our identities and do not seek to homogenize them into ideal forms, stereotypes, tokens, or data points. Tomorrow is not guaranteed, but it will become today and modeling the fight for a more radical future needs our involvement in those systems now. If we are not actively pushing and challenging capitalism in our work, from naming it to developing and exalting new practices outside of it, then we are partaking in the performative reformism of projective architecture. If we, like children, are to carry hope into the future we can't see, as Khalil Gibran suggests, we need to abolish the current forms of optimism in architecture that reward the most irrelevant changes to the biggest problems our communities face.

Being disciplined in the House of Tomorrow means engaging in the development of a community, of a chosen family and armature for them to travel into the future.

Being disciplined in the House of Tomorrow necessitates a process of futurity.

To be disciplined in the House of Tomorrow means you are dedicated to the cause of liberating as many people as possible after you are liberated.

To be disciplined in the House of Tomorrow means you are giving reparations without being mandated to white people.

To be disciplined in the House of Tomorrow means to exist at one point in the carceral state and then not; to achieve escape velocity from a system you think is unshakeable.

To discipline in the House of Tomorrow means to abolish the carceral state.

The House of Tomorrow is a place of hope, a place where the realities of today do not have to be the realities forever. To discipline that house means that we have more power tomorrow than we know today. It might also mean that we need to believe in that power to fight today. Without that, we are just redesigning the versions of prison and discipline we each inhabit today.

The arguments that many grassroots and national organizations have made for abolition should be enough in that they present it in architectural terms, in design discourse. This testament presents it to you from a first-person perspective validating that everything they are supporting is right and everything you are thinking of regarding the “worst criminals” argument is wrong or at least isn’t robust as a concept.

We have to connect the economic system of capitalism to the prison industrial complex. For some of you that view this world through a Marxist lens, this is probably enough. For the rest of the neoliberal and neoconservative designers around me, I am trying to create a vehicle for you to empathize with my story. This story is the norm, and it could literally be much worse; it is, especially if you are Black and Brown in the United States. ★

## CLOSING DISCLAIMER

I have been involved in prison abolition in one way or another for the last sixteen years. I became an activist in Miami in 2005 working closely with other Latin American socialist and anarchist organizations fighting for workers’ rights, housing for all, abortion rights, against war, against capitalism, as well as the release of political prisoners in Guantanamo Bay during the Anti-War movement of the 2000s. This intellectual introduction to revolutionary ideas occurred simultaneously to my introduction to architectural and critical theory. These events would provide the bedrock of my own personal discipline of architecture and its theories.

I have had the pleasure to teach at many institutions and I have made it a point to object to any prison project that was being proposed by faculty or students. I have also had to see architects around me fetishize prisons every single school year and I feel like this is a good medium to make a case for all architects to basically join in on this lifetime fight to abolish prisons by literally not designing them. Instead, educate yourself politically.





CONCRETE TERROR:

RACE BARRIERS

AND

VIGILANTISM

IN THE

UNITED STATES

CHAT TRAVIESO



📌 A sign objecting to Black tenants moving into a new federal housing project in Detroit, Michigan in 1942. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

📌 Newspaper clipping from November 1951 showing the damage from the second bombing at Carver Village in Miami, FL. *The Miami Daily News*, Friday, November 30, 1951.

As the federal government and local municipalities across the nation deployed discriminatory housing policies and allowed racist real estate practices to produce and uphold racial apartheid in the US, white communities, often assisted by the police and excused by the courts, have turned to harassment, vandalism, arson, bombings, riots, murders, and other forms of violence to keep Black people out of what they have perceived to be their territory. The boundaries delineating these hostile lands have often been invisible yet tacitly understood—established through decades of segregationist laws and anti-Black aggression. Even so, in many instances from the 1930s to today, these edges have literally been rendered solid through physical barriers like walls, fences, barricades, road closures, and buffer strips that, in addition to denying easy access into white districts, have served as the first line of intimidation to the Black residents on the other side.

Remnants of these race barriers are scattered throughout the nation; nevertheless, over time many of them have receded into the backdrop of our everyday built environment. For those who have not had to suffer under their oppressive shadow, these obstructions might appear as idiosyncratic elements of the street grid and nothing more. But for many who must confront these literal roadblocks day in and day out, they continue to be tangible reminders of the brutal sites of contestation that are US cities and suburbs. In their ubiquity and apparent banality, race barriers are a form of “terror of the mundane and quotidian.”<sup>21</sup> The indifference politicians and judges have shown towards the violence these exclusionary structures have imposed on innumerable Black communities across the country has allowed them to proliferate under the euphemistic guise of crime prevention and traffic control. In their capacity to bluntly demarcate and divide space, these built forms have also enabled vigilante terror by further entrenching the belief among white property owners that the neighborhood in which they live is their dominion.

Consider Miami’s Carver Village terror attacks. In 1951, city commissioners set aside several vacant units in Knight Manor, an all-white apartment complex in an all-white neighborhood, to be converted into Black housing and renamed Carver Village. This residential subdivision was located on the other side of a race wall built in 1939 to isolate what was then a new public housing development for African Americans (called Liberty Square) west of the wall from the existing white community.<sup>22</sup> The prospect of integrating the area east of the wall led to bitter objections from neighboring whites who formed the Dade County Property Owners’ Association to lobby government officials to keep the neighborhood racially homogeneous. Parallel to these negotiations, the Ku Klux Klan (in collusion with the Property Owners’ Association) used intimidation tactics at Carver Village. The terrorist





Map from 1951 showing the Carver Village explosion in relation to the Liberty Square Wall. Courtesy of Chat Travieso. Base map source: Florida Department of Transportation, Office of Surveying and Mapping.

group “distributed hate literature and burned giant letter Ks in four locations around Carver Village.”<sup>93</sup> In addition, Knight Manor residents participated in a motorcade circling Carver Village, ending in the shooting and wounding of a Black man.<sup>94</sup>

Tensions reached a critical point in September 1951 when, approximately a month after the first Black tenants moved into Carver Village, the apartment complex was bombed. According to contemporaneous reports, “The bombs, each composed of sticks of dynamite, tore holes in the [building’s] concrete block wall, ripped doors from their hinges, shattered every window in the bombed house and scores more in nearby White and Negro units, ripped out gas stoves, damaged electric refrigerators in the kitchen of the bombed building, ripped the roof of the building and caused widespread havoc.”<sup>95</sup> Sixty-nine days later, in November, another blast rocked Carver Village,<sup>96</sup> this time flinging rubble a radius of 150 feet. A third bomb was detonated in December. With so many explosions, Carver Village earned the nickname “Little Korea” in reference to the ongoing Korean War. Four suspects were eventually arrested, including three Klansmen, but none were ever indicted.

This was by no means the only act of domestic white-supremacist terror in Miami or beyond. The homes of “Black pioneers,” the first African Americans to move into all-white areas following the landmark 1948 supreme court case of *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which outlawed racially restrictive covenants, were frequently firebombed. By destroying homes, the perpetrators destroyed livelihoods, traumatized families,

stunted wealth accumulation, and sent an unwelcoming message to any other Black resident aspiring to relocate into the neighborhood.

What makes the Carver Village incident notable is that when the initial Black tenants moved into the apartment complex, they not only crossed an imaginary racial boundary, they breached a literal concrete wall meant to separate the races both “psychologically and physically” (as a white public housing official once declared when describing his intentions to construct a race wall in Houston in the 1950s).<sup>97</sup> What’s more, this wall was planned by the municipal government, supported by the US Housing Authority, and designed by an architect. Such barriers were often pretexts for developers to access FHA-insured mortgages and procure the necessary permits and approvals from local planning and zoning boards, not to mention ways for county and city officials to mollify irate white residents—the products of real estate interests and white supremacy comingling. Walls were not necessary, of course, for such racist backlash to transpire, but in their visibility and physicality, they put into sharp relief architecture’s active role in America’s vicious history of white supremacy and vigilantism.

Countless white communities throughout much of the twentieth century not only prevented Black families from moving in next door, they also (formally and informally) banned African Americans from even entering after dark under the threat of arrest or worse.<sup>98</sup> Some of these white communities employed barriers to mark the boundaries of their so-called “sundown towns.” Take, for instance, North Brentwood, an African American suburb in Maryland near Washington D.C., where into the 1960s Black residents knew not to cross a road barricade that divided their community from the white neighborhood of Brentwood, or risk violence from the KKK.<sup>99</sup> The barricade still stands today.

In Lake Worth, Florida, a wall the length of four football fields continues to enclose the historic African American neighborhood of Osborne from the rest of the city. As told by former City Commissioner Retha Lowe in a 2019 interview, into the 1950s, “if a Black person worked downtown, at five o’clock in the afternoon, they had to be off the street and had to be back down here in Osborne.”<sup>10</sup> And Ferguson, Missouri, too, was a sundown town. Up until 1968, white residents from Ferguson blocked the primary road from the adjoining African American enclave of Kinloch with chains and debris.<sup>11</sup> While Ferguson is now majority Black due to decades of white flight, the murder of 18-year-old Michael Brown in 2014 at the hands of the police illustrates that it is still not safe. As historian Beryl Satter notes, “This is what happens when you have massive racial change in a community and the power structure remains in the hands of whites and the police force acts as this sort of mediating force between the white power structure and what is now a black community and has very little empathy or knowledge about that community.”<sup>12</sup>

There is a clear relationship between the architectural ghosts of segregation that persistently haunt us and the actions of white vigilantes both past and present. It is in this legacy of sundown towns, exclusionary architecture, and the endangerment of Black people that the killings of Trayvon Martin and Ahmaud Arbery can be situated.

The racist fortress mentality that has spurred so many communities to wall themselves off from supposed intruders, is what, in part, emboldened George Zimmerman to murder Trayvon Martin in 2012. The Retreat at Twin Lakes, the gated community in central Florida where Martin was walking that fateful day, is encircled by fences and regulated access points. As urban policy scholar Edward J. Blakely wrote in 2012 about the connection between gated communities and Martin's death, "Gates and security guards also convey to residents that their preserve is outside the wider community's laws. It is their kingdom; anyone who enters it is subject to new rules that transfer public authority to private individuals."<sup>13</sup>

Similar in spirit, access into Satilla Shores, the subdivision in Georgia where Ahmaud Arbery was murdered in 2020, is limited to only two streets. Tucked behind a wall of tall trees lining Jekyll Island Causeway, this small majority-white coastal community is intentionally hidden and secluded. Like Zimmerman, Arbery's vigilante murderers acted with perceived impunity under the presumption that their exclusive neighborhood was their private domain to police as they saw fit.

Race barriers, though, go beyond enabling vigilante terror. They physically restrict movement, denying easy access into white areas and forcing Black people to take lengthy and burdensome routes to reach important amenities. In their ability to inhibit people's full freedom and enforce a racial caste system, these exclusionary structures are a form of physical, social, and psychological abuse in themselves.

From Arlington, Virginia to Melbourne, Florida to Fort Worth, Texas to New Haven, Connecticut and beyond, walls, fences, and barricades have been deployed by white communities throughout the nation to block direct paths to schools, doctors, jobs, and grocery stores for countless Black residents.<sup>14</sup> Emphasizing the harmful emotional consequences of these obstructions (and expressing a feeling that undoubtedly is shared by others who have experienced the effects of these barriers), Black Memphian N. T. Greene, in a 1981 supreme court testimony against a barricade installed by the city of Memphis along racial lines, put it this way: "Because we are Black, we cannot drive through a piece



of property that is owned collectively by us. This would cause psychological damage to me personally," adding that the Memphis street closure is "simply an extension of the insult and humiliation that we have tolerated and experienced too long already."<sup>15</sup>

While they have the power to physically dictate how people traverse the urban landscape, to those who do not grasp their significance, these segregation walls often remain an unremarkable feature of our built environment. As the legal scholar Sarah Schindler points out, "courts and lawmakers often fail to recognize architecture as a form of regulation at all, viewing it instead as functional, innocuous, and pre-political."<sup>16</sup> As in so many cases of white-supremacist vigilantism wherein the courts have sided with the accused defendant (like Zimmerman), when Black residents have challenged the construction of a physical race barrier on grounds of racial discrimination, judges have routinely dismissed their complaints (see *City of Memphis v. Greene* and *Thompson v. HUD*). Outrageously, in the case of *Thompson v. HUD*, the court ruled that a fence constructed in Baltimore in 1998 to divide a majority Black public housing project from an adjacent white suburb did not amount to discrimination, even if its construction was partly motivated by racist sentiments.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, numerous majority-white municipalities across the nation continue to erect physical barriers along Black-white borders under the pretext of crime prevention. Their effects are not dissimilar from their Jim Crow counterparts: to divide and control.

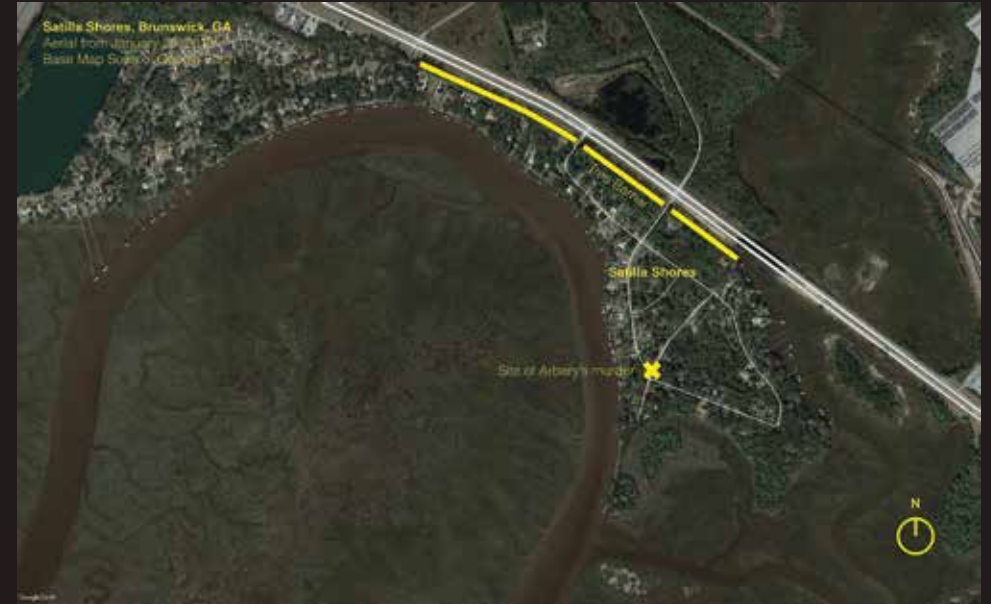
For example, in 1994, after a string of violent crimes that peaked with the murder of an elderly white couple in the wealthy white area of Guilford in Baltimore, residents of Guilford lobbied the city's Public Works Department to barricade certain streets connecting to York Road, as well as transform several roads into one-way streets leading out from Guilford. York Road is the main thoroughfare dividing Guilford from the adjacent working-class Black neighborhood. The murder of the couple was initially thought to be the doing of a non-resident burglar; however, the culprit turned out to be the couple's grandson. The street revisions, nevertheless, remained.<sup>18</sup> As anthropologist Teresa P.R. Caldeira writes about the proliferation of gated communities in her book *City of Wall: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*, "The talk of crime works its symbolic reordering of the world by elaborating prejudices and creating categories that naturalize some groups as dangerous."<sup>19</sup> She continues, "[The universe of crime and fear] stimulates the development of two novel modes of discrimination: the privatization of security and the seclusion of some social groups in fortified and private enclaves."<sup>20</sup>

Like Guildford, residents of Miami's affluent Morningside neighborhood, a majority white area located immediately east of the



244

Map showing where Trayvon Martin was murdered within the gated community of Retreat of Twin Lakes in Central Florida. Courtesy of Chat Travieso. Base map source: Google Earth.



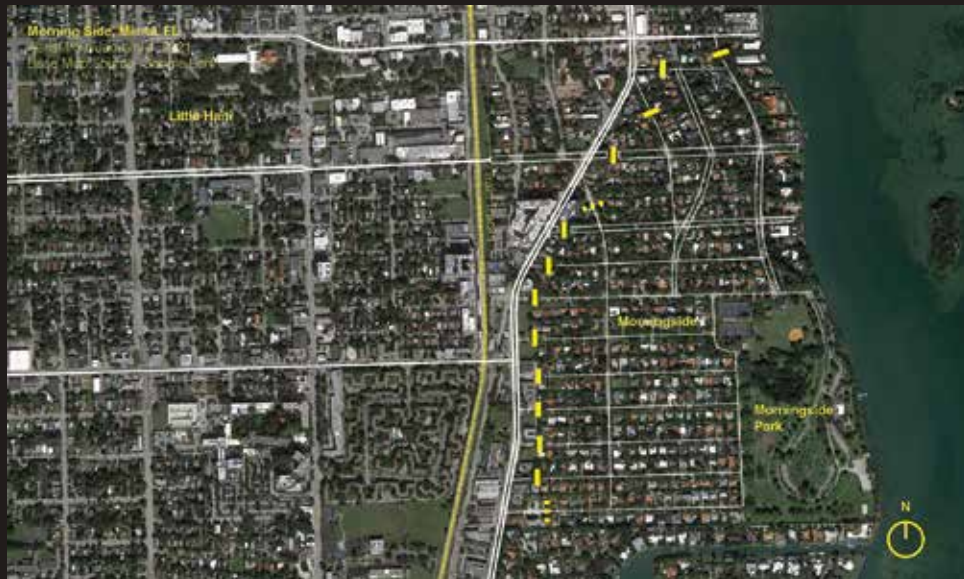
245

Map showing where Ahmaud Arbery was murdered within the exclusive coastal community of Satilla Shores in Brunswick, Georgia. Courtesy of Chat Travieso. Base map source: Google Earth.



majority Black community of Little Haiti, chose to block every road leading into Morningside with landscaped barricades (mostly installed in the early 1990s) and security gates (installed in the early 2000s), despite the fact that there is a public park within the borders of the neighborhood. In a community meeting in 2000, a Black community member “complained the guard gates made her feel as if she were subject to apartheid.”<sup>21</sup>

In their essay titled “Itemizing Atrocity,” sociologist Tamara K. Nopper and community organizer Mariame Kaba comment on non-Blacks’ inability to see, hear, or empathize with Black Americans’ everyday suffering unless it comes in the form of shock spectacle, such as images of graphic violence or comparisons to war. In so doing, “the terror of the mundane and quotidian,” (a term they bring up from Saidiya Hartman’s book *Scenes of Subjection*) is overlooked. As Nopper and Kaba point out, “the problem is that the formulation suggests it is the excess against which we must rally. We must accept that the ordinary is fair, for an extreme to be the problem.”<sup>22</sup>



Map showing road closures and security gates blocking access to the affluent majority-white Morningside neighborhood from the majority Black community of Little Haiti in Miami, Florida. Courtesy of Chat Travieso. Base map source: Google Earth.

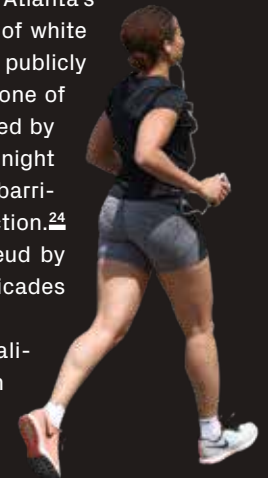
In their commonplaceness, race barriers represent an architectural manifestation of the “terror of the mundane and quotidian.” But it is through framing these structures as spectacles (often referring to them as a city’s Berlin Wall), as well as sustained activism that, in certain cases,



Black residents have successfully pressured local authorities and the courts to remove some barriers. Such was the case in Atlanta in 1962–1963 when the city’s board of aldermen ordered the construction of steel and wood road barricades to discourage any more African Americans from moving into a white neighborhood known as Cascade Heights after a Black surgeon named Dr. Clinton Warner purchased a home in the area. The story made national news and the backlash was swift. “Petitions were filed in Atlanta’s courts, protesters picketed City Hall with signs referring to Atlanta’s ‘Berlin Wall,’ civil rights organizations called for boycotts of white businesses around Cascade Heights, and black leaders publicly lambasted the mayor.”<sup>23</sup> At one point, activists damaged one of the barricades. The next morning, white residents retaliated by closing off the street with debris. Protesters returned that night to set fire to the ad-hoc barrier. The city then rebuilt the barricade, with Klansmen standing guard after its construction.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the Superior Court of Fulton County ended the feud by issuing an injunction to remove the obstructions. The barricades were taken down less than a year after they were erected.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, in 2017–2018 in Palm Springs, California, residents from the historically African American neighborhood of Crossley Tract successfully pushed the city to remove a row of tall tamarisk trees that stood between their neighborhood and a golf course. Residents

Newspaper clipping from 1987 showing people protesting a barricade dividing the majority white Jefferson Parish from neighboring Black sections in New Orleans. Like in Atlanta in the early 1960s, protesters here dubbed the barricade New Orleans’ “Berlin Wall.” *Post-Crescent* (Appleton, Wisconsin), February 23, 1987.



believed the trees were planted decades ago to segregate the neighborhood from the rest of Palm Springs, keeping their property values low.<sup>26</sup> In the act of exposing the racist intentions and effects of what would appear to be a “mundane” element of the urban fabric, these activists were able to transform the public’s perception of the trees in their backyard into physical embodiment of oppression. Now that the trees are gone, Crossley Tract residents have an unobstructed view of the mountains in the distance.

Unfortunately, such triumphs are the exception. Most of these pieces of racist infrastructure continue to hide in plain sight while in many cases still reproducing the injustices they were built to inflict. Furthermore, they represent “just one set of forms by which to segregate built space, along with highways, train tracks, low bridges, one-way streets, misaligned city grids, and a lack of sidewalks or crosswalks.”<sup>27</sup> These structures solidify in built form the hostile tactics inherent in white supremacist vigilantism and reveal design’s active role in inflicting violence. In their concreteness, these structures should be a call to action to redress the lasting impact such planned systems of dispossession and terrorism have wrought. ★



## ENDNOTES

01. The term “terror of the mundane and quotidian” appears in Saidiya V. Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). It is also quoted in Tamara K. Nopper and Mariame Kaba’s “Itemizing Atrocity,” *Jacobin*, September 2014.
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04. Ibid.
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09. Ibid (Kindle Location 4995-4996).
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19. Teresa P.R. Caldeira, *City of Wall: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 2.
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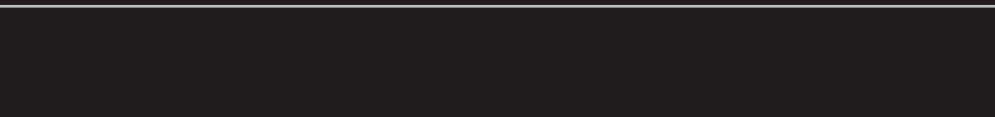


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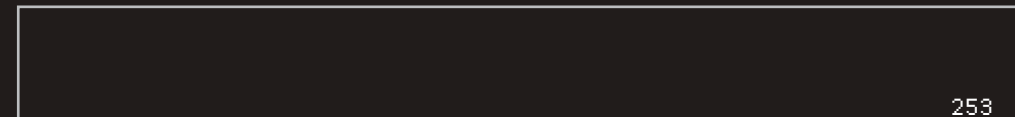


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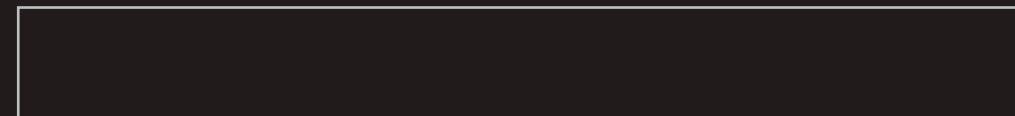


ATELIER MEY

TACTICS OF



CONTROL:



MISSISSIPPI DELTA



✎ Spatial Vernacular: The Mississippi Delta. Transportation infrastructure riding on top of, adjacent to, and bridging over the continuous levee systems of the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Delta. © Atelier Mey.



## INTRODUCTION

Ritual, praxis, behavior, boundary, limit, constraints, resistance, threshold, culture—all of these define a spatial vernacular, a local expression of built forms that collectively define the physical conditions of an environment. When applying this spatial vernacular to the architecture and territory of the Atchafalaya and Mississippi River delta, what is uncovered is a complex system of balance and imbalance, control and resistance, wealth and poverty, and nurture and neglect. Individual voices, curiosities, and reflections expose the arrogance and racial injustices embedded in one of America's greatest acts of territorial control. Within the Mississippi River and Atchafalaya River delta, the spatial implications linked to territorial control stratify social classes, divide rich from poor, and ultimately segregate Whites from Blacks. Associated with the physical and social conventions of the delta is a set of actors: the river, the levee, the cotton pickers, the cotton owners. The intersecting dialogue of these actors frames the role of the delta vigilante: the levee.

The levee. A construct of humans, it is continuous and pervasive in nature. Its design and build harnesses, directs, and controls water's meander across the delta. The levee is the primary component of this domain's spatial vernacular—designed to control. This complex system takes the form of earthen mounds, hardened edges, and expansive concrete walls that tower over people and habitats; the levee is the delimiting element, but its role is to connect with a complex infrastructural control system. The vast infrastructure of levees, outlets, inlets, channels, dams, and dredging hybridize the formal configuration of the river with the natural flows of billions of cubic feet of water along thousands of miles of established edge. ("Established" in this context defines built by humans to mediate between the natural setting and the constructed habitat of human artifice.)

These environmental control infrastructures, as old as the delta's settlements, are responsible for the organization of contemporary living environments and the complex social structures of their inhabitants.<sup>21</sup> The survival of the levee depends on the growth of the network, requiring physical reinforcements, adaptations in height, and the continual subdividing of already leveed territories. The ceaseless definition of the undefined terrain through the construction

01. *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring, 1984): 44–62.

256



of expanding levee networks fosters value frameworks of constructed and static edges and devalues natural fluctuations and evolutions within the physical space. We explore the relationship of the rigid spatial vernacular; one consistently constraining the evolution of social space through the lens of the levee as a spatial provocateur—incessant, unbiased, and unpredictable the levee asserts its role as a delusional king over a disenchanting kingdom.

✚ Spatial Vernacular: Isle de Jean Charles. A single road connecting Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana in the Terrebonne Parish is under constant pressure from the encroaching Gulf waters. Aggressive erosion, encroachment of salt water, and increased storm events have compromised this life line for the community. © Atelier Mey + D. Hemmendinger.

✚ Spatial Vernacular: The Delta. The delta was found on and remains a landscape of resource extraction. The extracted resources are in service of the few while at the cost of the many. © Atelier Mey.

✚ Spatial Vernacular: Morgan City Levee Wall. Towering concrete walls stand between the Atchafalaya River and Morgan City, a shrimp and petroleum capital. © Atelier Mey.

#### TACTICS OF CONTROL: CONSTRUCTING THE LEVEE'S TENURE

The first theme of the writing aims to provide context to the early environmental control infrastructures and the risk associated with these strategies. We question the fundamental behavior of constructing levees and the extreme delineation of space. The act of building is conditioned by the scale and abilities of the human body—both through the cognitive areas of the brain and the physical ability within the hands to manipulate tools. This unique ability to strategically and sophisticatedly manipulate one's environment is recognized by Richard Sennett in *The Craftsman*. Sennett posits the ability to conquer three means of holding [to pinch, to cup, and to cradle] as the moment culture is derived.

02. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin, 2009), 151.

"Once an animal like ourselves can grip well in these three ways, (referencing pinch, cup and cradle) cultural evolution takes over...Thinking then ensues about the nature of what one holds."<sup>02</sup>

257

When the mind translates individual personal expression, such as making, into physical artifact, should the next cognitive process not be to reflect on the artifact? It is within this reflection and one's response to reflection that culture [defined as a collective's set of beliefs, customs, or social institutions tied to place] develops. Consciously or subconsciously, as humans refine the expression of one's being physically, the nurturing of culture binds itself within the construct of our environments.

America entered the twentieth century as an emancipated territory—the ideals of the Radical Reconstruction, however, were left in the wake of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> In the delta, the liberties

of the social revolution would remain anchored to the river and the levees as southern Black slaves that worked by hand to shape the rivers' edges evolved to obliging sharecroppers; legislatively free but bound to the southern white owner and their crop. Mounded earthen levees, shaped by shackled hands throughout the eighteenth century, eventually became the shadows of the

sharecroppers working the same cotton fields in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The shadows of the levees constructed by their forefathers, levees at the service of cotton fields were owned solely by white southerners.

At first, earthen mounds constructed by slaves for individual property owners speckled the landscape to ease the river's natural ebbs and flows. As farming industrialized and the US depended on a

consistent supply of delta cotton, the stippling of levees transformed into continuous lines, hard and rigid barriers that cut across the delta terrain. Yet these constructs were by hand and simply molded from the delta soil that easily gave way to the dynamic river currents. The call to action for a more permanent control barrier by the landowners and then the national government was spawned by the Great Flood of 1927. Notions of authority and control would become synonymous with the country's success and were implemented through

a manmade framework of control infrastructures and mechanisms. With the Flood Control Act of 1928 and its appointed leader, the "Secretary of War," mankind's efforts to tame the Mississippi River were written into law.

Exploring the idea of the spatial vernacular through time—the levee serves as an ever-present delimiter of space. Vigilante by definition, the levees were constructed to control or override mother

03. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007). Print. Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. Works. Selections. 2007.

23. The Great Flood of 1927. The constructed edge of the river is projected through the flood waters by trees and the remaining buildings that served the breach. Source: Library of Congress.

24. The Great Flood of 1927. A breach in the levee systems between a homestead and barn allowed the river to spill into the once protected farmlands. Source: Library of Congress.





nature's biological ebb and flow. The Mississippi River, a natural path centuries in existence, is abruptly altered and redirected by the levee. Imposed by man, the delimiting of the delta landscape establishes a new actor, the levee, and with it spatial vernacular. This new role and form position the levee as a non-bias vigilante, one that uniformly regulates landscape, water, and people—regardless of the color of skin. Levees reinforce the segregation of place and people, yet act as a common dimension throughout the delta territory, engaging every actor within the territory.

The levee's relationship to the river is authoritarian; it forms a boundary through a variety of physical means. At first conceived as hand-formed earthen mounds, decades of labor and control unveil a reinforced industrialized generative machine. The levee's identity dissolves at the water's edge as the river leans into the taught concrete walls. The constant spatial vernacular of taught edges rise to dominate the horizon and a familiarity or even comfort is perceived by us. What are the spatial ramifications of the levee constraints? How does the dominating and endless presence of the levee bind our ability to perceive change?


The levee's relationship to the cotton owners is constant. The prosperity brought to the cotton owners through the implementation of control mechanisms reinforces success through methods of control. The economic and social vernacular of place is a cycle of control. What is the effect when this cycle is broken?


The levee's relationship to the cotton workers is equally constant yet more complex. The cotton workers themselves or their parents and grandparents were the physical makers of the levee, through the early 1900s. Through the making and forming of the levee

by hand, an intimate bond is formed between builder and levee. Yet, the levee acts as a bondage in the landscape, a constant marker of the boundaries of space for the cotton workers. The cotton workers depend on the authority of the levee for their livelihood; the levees guide, tame, and direct the water to nurture the cotton fields but govern the flow and redirect unwanted water barrages downstream. The water's obedience

provides economic stability for the cotton workers as well as life safety. What are the social ramifications when the levee fails? Who will the levee save, or who will save the levee?



 The Cotton Worker. The Southern workers searching for respite use the very earthen levees they were forced to construct as their last stand. In search of refuge, they brought any and all belongings to higher ground. Source: Library of Congress.

 The Cotton Farm. The construction of earthen levees allowed the swamp-lands to be converted into some of the most fertile agricultural grounds on the planet. Source: Library of Congress.





## VIGILANTE IN THE DELTA: PAST NARRATIVES AND PROJECTIVE PORTRAYALS

Ingrained in the relationship between the river, levee, landowners, and land workers, is the delta culture, coupled with the spatial vernacular of place. The first theme of the writing lends time to depict the physical conditions of the delta, the endless levee walls delimiting the river and its landscape. We pose the notion that humans' unique ability to construct, reshape, and order is what enables culture. But what is culture's relationship to space and the spatial vernacular? James Corner states, "Environment is irrevocably bound to culture-nature and ecologies are not culture-less, instead, dependent with societal context."<sup>04</sup> Exploring these ideas of nature and ecology, evoking or even provoking the social constructs within the delta, we can more clearly indulge the idea of the levee's vigilantism. The levee's self-appointing authority over the river, the landscape, and the black cotton workers introduce a disruption to the natural order. The disruption is incremental, yet with each change and expansion, the disorder of nature is transformed to the order of the levee. Slowly, through the decades, the persistent physical presence of the levee becomes the constant, even unifying element throughout the delta. The idea of a vigilant levee is replaced with dependency, confidence, and assurance; the levee can and will perform. The societal context[s] or social structures defined through their relationship with the levees infuse this arrogance in notions of control. As the white crop owners demand to build walls to enclose and confine the landscape, confident in their ability to control, these environmental contexts are applied to the Black crop workers. Ideas of social change or social evolution fade.

Physical change in the delta region is constant. By definition, the territory is formed by the water flowing through, continuously altering the landscape and pouring into the Gulf of Mexico. The dynamic landscape ebbs and flows in continuous cycles, but the levees were mounded, moved, and formed to anticipate these ebbings and flowings. The levees regulate change. They regulate social progression.

04. James Corner, *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).

01 The Delta Family. On their porch, before the flood. Source: Library of Congress.

02 The Delta Family. The levees aimed at controlling the Mississippi River, once compromised, became the only stretches of land above the muddy water for miles. The people inhabiting the lowlands of the river delta found refuge along the levees, now islands, with the Mississippi River on one side while the flood waters occupied the other. Source: Library of Congress.



When the levees gave way during the Great Flood in 1927, the incident was unprecedented in scale. In an entire population of Black workers, hundreds of thousands were abruptly displaced from their homes and left isolated without resources to turn to. According to one

05. *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring, 1984): 44–62.

estimate, of the 608,000 who lost their homes in the Great Flood, 555,000 were Black.<sup>05</sup> Months of displacement and encampment frayed bonds between the cotton worker tenant farmers and the levees. This isolation and feeling of abandonment are a paradigm in the culture of those tied to the delta. As early as March 1927, Bessie Smith wrote and sang “Back Water Blues:”

“When it thunders and lightnin’  
And the wind begins to blow  
There’s thousands of people  
Ain’t got no place to go”<sup>06</sup>

Additionally, the *Crisis Journal*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, produced a three-

06. Bessie Smith, “Back Water Blues,” March 1927.

07. “The Flood, the Red Cross and the National Guard,” *Crisis* 35 (January, February, and March 1928): 5–7, 41–43, 80–81.

part series in 1928 reporting the race culture of Blacks tied to place and bringing national attention to the agricultural revolution in the south and the dependency of the cotton workers on peonage, an illegal sharecropping economic structure.<sup>07</sup> The imagery documenting the cotton workers in 1927 foreshadows the context of the delta in

2005, reinforcing the notion of societal contexts irrevocably bound to our physical constructs.

➔ **Foreshadowing.** An image of the encampment at Birdsong Camp on the Greenville Levee in 1927. The encampment, not set up to rescue or save refugees, but to gather fleeing workers to stay and repair the levees. Source: Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture; Illinois Central Railroad.

➔ **A Retrospective.** The failing and antiquated spatial constructs of the Mississippi River Delta—boundaries, constraints, walls, levees—failed. The result is a retrospective of the 1927 Birdsong Camp. Source: FEMA.



## THE SPONTANEOUS ACTOR: VIGILANTE AS LIBERATOR

The levee is formally derived from the idea of control; a thick, opaque, heavy structure, exploiting mass, designed to hold in place. Solid, persistent, and relentless for miles—the normalcy of its presence provides a mundane comfort to all races of the delta. An exemplar vigilante, the levee endlessly limited and restricted the delta water's behavior—what happens when the vigilante fails? The complex levee system of the early twentieth century that was constructed to control [the Mississippi River], once compromised, became the only stretches of land above the muddy water for miles. The people inhabiting the lowlands of the river delta found refuge along the levees, now islands, with the Mississippi River on one side while the flood waters occupied the other. Instantaneously, the failure of the levee dynamically altered the delta landscape. This physical distortion repositioned the spatial behavior of the levee from one of power to one of refuge. This reborn role of the vigilante served to expose a vulnerable community and provide temporary safety. As the days passed and the water did not recede, the levees' natural behavior patterns of containment, isolation, and captivity mutated. The common and familiar restrictive themes of the landscape shifted to confine Black workers to levee encampments. The objective of the levee—to contain and control—fashions familiarity with themes control. At the moment all social, economic, and cultural order is at risk, the response is to transfer the familiar physical construct of control and captivity of the landscape to the social constructs of place and people.

As the encampment conditions worsened, time passed, and the imprisoned levee mounds exemplified the culture of place and the unjust treatment based on race was brought to the national spotlight.

"It is clear that, while the natural disaster altered the Mississippi landscape, the Mississippi social system remained intact."  
—Richard Wright, *The Man Who Saw the Flood*, 114-116.

The Great Flood of 1927 is marked in time, the levees chronicled as failures by the very race that perpetuated their existence. It is at this moment that we expose a liberator. In Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology*, she proposes the idea of a failure or "glitch" not as a

problem within a system, but the exposure of a large systemic disruptor. Benjamin infers that the codifying of our spatial vernaculars "reflect particular perspectives and forms of social organization that allow some people to assert themselves—their assumptions, interests, and desires—over others."<sup>08</sup> The cultural norms or practices of a particular group of actors simultaneously racially restrict and confine the other group of actors. This "glitch," acting again in 2005, exposed the same antiquated constructs of the spatial vernacular of the river delta as when the levees failed in the Great Flood of 1927.

08. Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology* (Polity, 2019), 77-79.



✚ The First Glitch: Mounds Landing Breach. The first breach—the first glitch. In an moment ahead of its time, the release, the emancipation, and the liberation of the river water reveals a new perspective within the spatial vernacular. Source: Library of Congress.

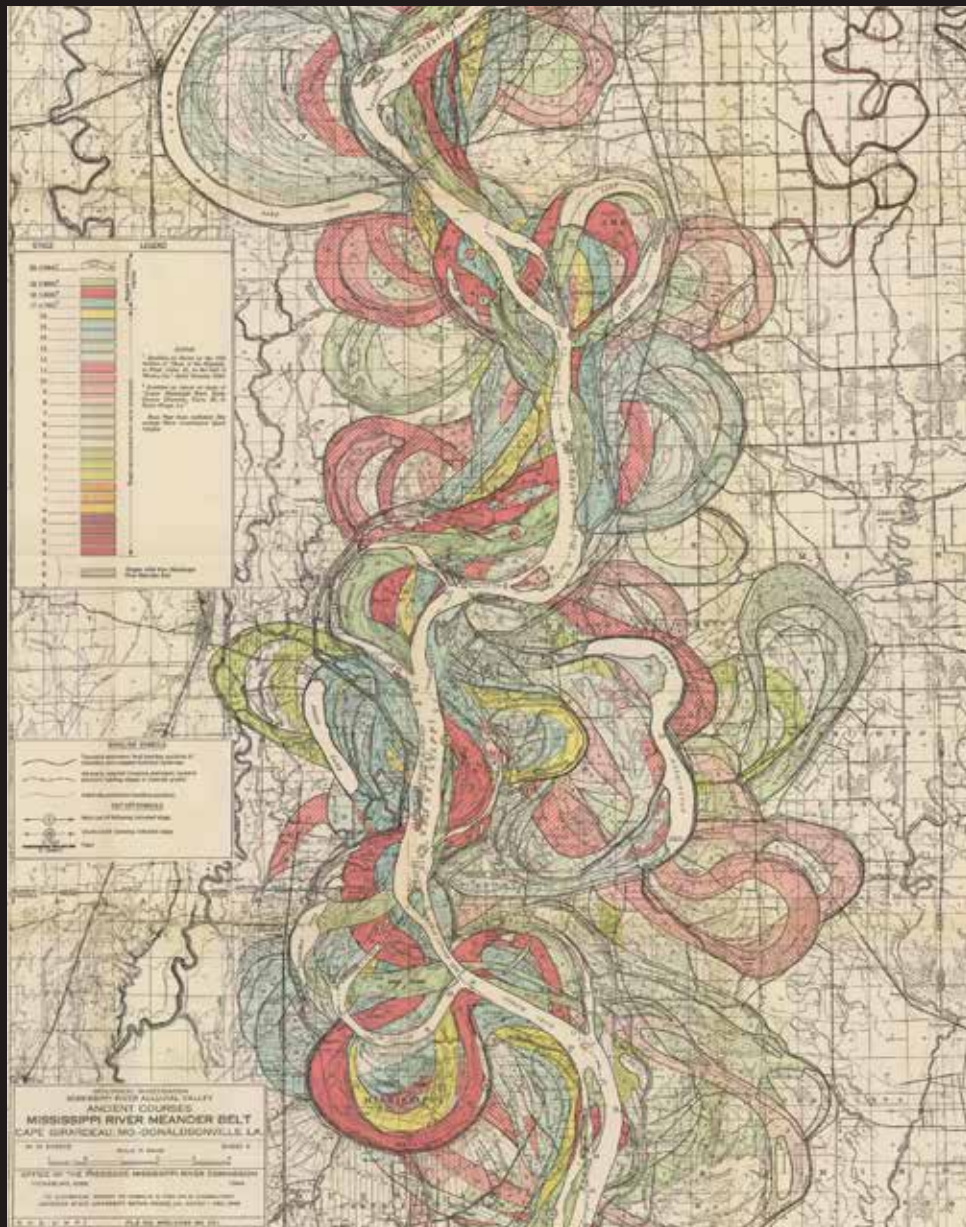






↑ Antiquated Spatial Constructs. A glitch in the system. Imagery from 2005 callback imagery from 1927. As we begin to interrogate the idea of the “glitch,” what new lessons can we learn from old spatial constructs? Source: FEMA.





↑ Dynamic Existence. Free of any constraints, control, or bondage: the Fisk Map represents the domain of the Mississippi Delta across time and space—beseeching to be noticed, acknowledged and represented. Source: Library of Congress.

## THE LESSONS OF THE DELTA

A culture grounded in notions of control, practices of static limits, and endless systems of physical boundaries inherently segregates. An environment operating with so many constraints catalyzes the controlling behaviors of the actors within; in this highly controlled environment, one is either controlled or the controller. The James Corner reference to the intrinsic relationships between environment, culture and social constructs provides a tangible explanation to the highly regimented delta culture. Yet, if we overlay the theory offered by Ruha Benjamin to search for a systemic revelation of the “glitch,” we interrogate the behaviors of the static boundary, the levee, as the aggressor—or the vigilante. The dynamic fluctuations of the water become encouraged and respected as a figure of change.

The agency of design to develop a sophisticated culture—a flexible adaptable spatial vernacular—is diluted through a continual commitment to authority over nature in the delta territory. This commitment to control over the landscape is shifted to authority over space. Within this space, the authority spreads over people and defines authoritarian social constructs. Through this process, the construct of the levee, the spatial vernacular of place is defined: bounding, limiting, controlling, and unable to evolve. The static environment feels secluded, hopeless, and isolated from change—until the levee glitches, breaks, and reveals a larger systemic culture. Is the static environment a glitch within the temporal time scale of the fluid territory?

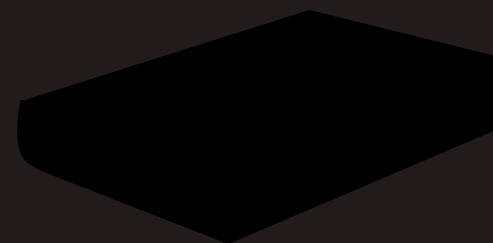
Analyzing Fisk’s the Mississippi River and we find a spatial and social present to future. Through offer a model to explore vernacular and social construct that encourages the levee through control and change. The dictable and dynamic spawns a cultural shift in



mapping of the history of subsequent delta terrain, construct that ties past to this temporal lens, we a more dynamic spatial construct. A physical ages spontaneity under an oscillating role of acceptance of an unpre-physical environment social constructs. ★



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THE OPEN LETTER

274

DIGITAL

VIGILANTE

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SPREADSHEET:

PRACTICES

IN ARCHITECTURE

GARY RICHIRŌ FOX  
CYRUS PEÑARROYO

A Conversation on Spreadsheets and Open Letters brings four architectural historians and designers together in conversation about accountability practices within digital spaces. Exploring the formats of open letters, spreadsheets, and list-making as sites of intervention to address individual and institutional failures, the group considers how digital vigilantism is unfolding in the contemporary field of architecture, while simultaneously documenting digital ephemera vis-à-vis the conversational record.



How is digital vigilantism practiced and what form does it take in architecture? In 2017, after the release and wide circulation of the Shitty Architecture Men's List, it took the form of spreadsheets, transforming systems of accounting into systems of accountability. In 2020, as the ethos of Black Lives Matter tore through architectural institutions, accountability took the form of open letters and signatories circulating between institutions and individuals. In the following conversation between Laida Aguirre (LA), Gary Riichirō Fox (GRF), Jia Yi Gu (JYG), and Cyrus Peñarroyo (CP), two architectural historians and two architectural designers come together to address media-based practices of accountability and how the recent digital "scriptural economy" (i.e. the everyday practices of writing, signing, naming, recording) have become critical components to the architectural movement addressing anti-Blackness in architecture. The conversation touched on two digital vigilante practices in architecture through their formats: the open letter and the spreadsheet. Can attention to the details of this practice via formatting, signing, and naming also address larger questions tied to politics, agency, and authorship? Can we understand spreadsheets and letter formats to be determining structures that carry efficacy and (re)distribute power?

To surface small-scale interactions, habits, and invisible formats means paying attention to the details and the small units that constitute our accountability practices, insisting that formats (and their effects) do in fact add up to something more.

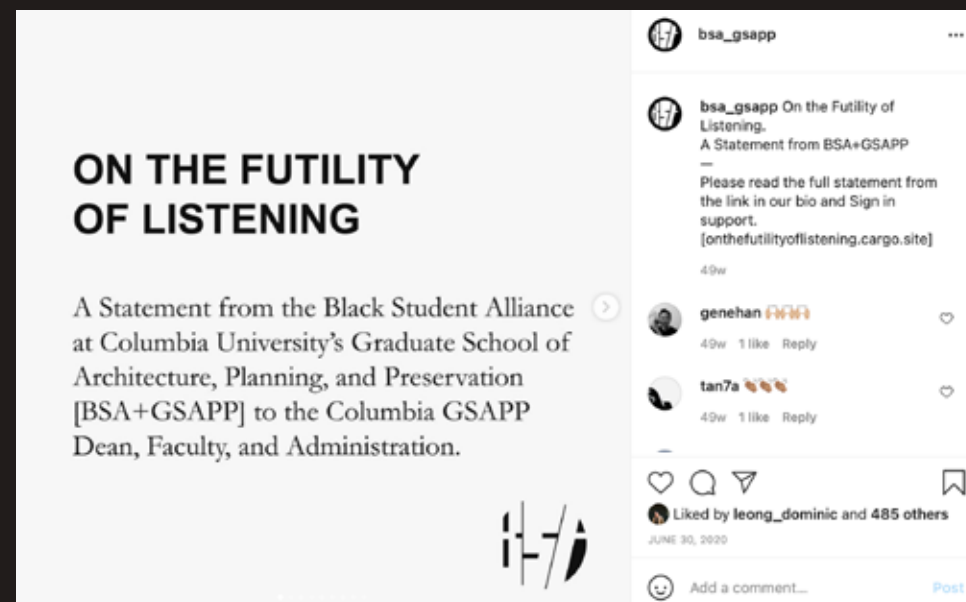
JYG: Open letters and spreadsheets share the same motivations—they are systems of accountability that have emerged on the Internet in the past few years that attempt to hold architecture accountable for invisible or unspoken transgressions. I am interested in discussing the narratives produced by these types of digital documents, how they became the literary sites of advocacy, activism, and student organizing, and why. In particular, I am interested in the kinds of agency and narrativity that are produced through the making of documents, through formatting. In 2020, open letters became the format of exchange in calls for accountability within architectural institutions. Two years ago, spreadsheets were the sites of accountability.<sup>01</sup> So maybe we can start there, a comparison between spreadsheets and open letters. Part of this conversation is to enter these practices into a record because their ephemerality as digital letters also make them susceptible to disappearing. To witness these letters was to witness an institutional conversation, a conversation that felt very much like people talking to one another, but they were also carefully adopted speech acts.



LA: I am going to draw a parallel between letters and zines. Zines were accessible. They were made with tools that were readily available; you just needed a printer and a typewriter, not even a computer. They were the underbelly of a conversation that was hovering in more official avenues. Zines presented a subversion of more mainstream conversations, and because they weren't published in official channels, zines were allowed to be more specific, contrarian, and self-reflective. Because there was no larger oversight, they were able to become a direct reflection on the conversation going on rather than something scripted. The letters similarly felt like a subset of more official conversations, and if you add hierarchy in our time of precarity, those official conversations can become scary. The first thing one thinks about is the kind of damage that those conversations can do to you or your friends' careers. So instead, you create back channels that then have a very public moment, but they are produced through sub-tools, or more accessible lines of communication.

GRF: It is useful to draw out these official and alternate channels of communication as political acts. If we think about the longer history of open letters—let's say before the advent

A statement from the Black Faculty of Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation.



Published on digital platforms, such statements and letters began to circulate virally outside the official channels and collected new readers outside the reciprocity between letter, writer, and institution.

of the Internet—they would have to be understood as tools to surface those conversations in and through “official” channels. The publication of an open letter in *The New York Times* in the 1960s, for example, would at least purport to do exactly that: bring sub-conversations to light. But it is important to push back on this idea: only some are given the privilege of publishing open letters in *The New York Times* in 1960. This is evidence of the persistence of a closed conversation that is signaling the ethos of a more open conversation. The current situation of online sharing and circulation operates in very different terms. Tied to this longer history is this weird inversion where the term, the idea of the open letter, persists, and yet it perhaps operates very differently in the current context to how it operated in a previous historical moment.

JYG: The fluidity of the circulation system itself is political. That the letters, because they can be proliferated, shared, and distributed with a tap, begin to open to systems of accountability outside of the institutions that they are speaking to. The letters always seemed to address two readers—the institutional and the public.



LA: Yeah, they are cooked in as they circulate through the less official channels, bursting in to directly address the official currents. They have this quality of bursting. They just show up one day.

CP: I am not sure which letter I saw first—I think I saw fragments that were initially circulated or posted through Instagram. It felt like the actual artifactual letter appeared later. Stories or demands emerged first through individual accounts that were eventually organized into a single document. I found that really interesting because it felt like the network of statements and emotions expressed on social media helped give each letter its form, its power.

JYG: You also felt like you were following conversations in real time, and I constantly felt psychologically fragmented. I would be doing one thing and then suddenly I find myself reading a letter from within its own conversational space.

GRF: That feeling was especially true for me in the context of the spreadsheets rather than the letters. When you click a link and see seventeen anonymous Google Anteaters, you know exactly where in the document they are, you know where their cursor is, you see them typing in real time, and you sense collective action unfolding. This kind of unfolding, or accounting, in real time felt powerful and yet also immediately lost somehow. Jia, you have alluded to the longer ephemerality of these documents; one can no longer access the Shitty Architecture Men list, for example. I think that is not an accident but precisely the result of this process of bursting through and then fading away.

JYG: Let's talk about the function of names vs the act of naming people and how they work as systems of accountability. The Shitty Architecture Men list was circulated several years ago then removed after what I understand to be a threat of legal action. It was anonymous yet focused on naming people—bad actors. The open letter was not anonymous but was also a system of accruing names, this time in support of Eva Franch i Gilabert for example. Could we talk a little bit about that? Who gets named? How do names function here?

LA: I think it is huge. The spreadsheets and the open letter were so opposite of one another. If we see the spreadsheet as an actual datafying of people—essentially just creating lists and numbers—it reduces the subjectivities of experience or humanity. That is the realm of the spreadsheet in its conception. Rather than datafying, what if we consider the data on the spreadsheet as something post-identity, meaning it is inconsiderate of the nuance and complexity of being human? But the open letters actually became the opposite. They became a commodification of the list, attaching value to identities.

JYG: Because the spreadsheet turns people into units for classification, and you are saying that quantifying identities flattens them. And the list does a similar thing.

LA: The list quantified hype as they visualized one's network or clout. And every name on that list quantified identity. It seemed like the letter's impact was its attempt to add value to itself through its heavyweight roster. That seemed like a dare in a way. But it was a document that, to me, visualized somebody's abstract network.

JYG: Let's discuss the format of the open letter and the idea of a reader—specifically how the spreadsheet and the open letter produce different kinds of readers.

GRF: My immediate thought is that the spreadsheet can only be engaged at the level of ctrl+F: I am searching for a specific name, an institution; I am not reading each of the five hundred entries in sequence. You are engaging the spreadsheet to confirm or somehow complicate your own experience or the experience you assume others to have had. Whereas the letter takes a narrative form that, ostensibly, you would read from beginning to end. You would be engaged very, very differently. The letters also enter the world as almost fixed documents and there is something completely different at stake in that closed process.

CP: Exactly. The spreadsheet is designed to be updated by cell as information comes through and not in a way that seems linear. The spreadsheet anticipates change.



GRF: This might suggest the demand for some form of closure where the data and the spreadsheet become visualized or narrativized in some way that makes them actionable. So instead of five hundred unrelated data points, shitty dudes in this case, how can we get to a point where data becomes narrative, becomes information, where we can say “these are the centers from which these shitty dudes have disproportionately emerged?” I don’t know what that would look like or what that would do. But if we have long known that there are shitty dudes in architecture, beyond listing them, where and how can we be effective in a systemic way? “Accountability” holds together a number of disparate ideas, to my mind, namely accounting and accountability. In terms of the former, the thinking goes: if we could just enumerate all the shitty things that happened, if we could enumerate the salaries and wages that adjuncts are getting paid at different institutions, if we could enumerate the BIPOC studios, if we could produce a collective reading list. There is a clear sense that enumeration is itself a value. But I think the other aspect of accountability gets us back to this notion of narrativity: to give account for, to offer explanation. I think the challenge remains that enumeration has thus far been the focus, but the accounting for has yet to fully happen. In the GSAPP Black Student Alliance statement on the futility of listening, for example, they clearly point out that the proliferation of bureaucracy via countless listening sessions and endless subcommittees on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are merely ruses for the institution to say, “Oh look, we are doing this work” without actually having to do it.

LA: Within the neoliberal institution, data essentially played two roles. It proves that the institution has passed identity, creating this performance around numbers that ultimately takes shape as DEI programs. It’s like data washing through campaigns which say, “we are doing things and here is the data to show for it,” but really there is nothing substantial.

JYG: Harvesting data from communities can be an alienating mechanism that only major organizations or institutions can implement and claim to utilize. It turns people and relationships into data.

LA: It’s like an institutional shadow game in order to avoid the thing itself. If you can name the data, you don’t need to name racism in itself. You don’t need to name the identity-based hot topic or the thing that evokes emotions and personal positions.

CP: Letters and spreadsheets compel different actions. Do these formats produce their own readers and responders? I am also thinking about how the word “demand” was rhetorically deployed. In the letter written by Michigan students, the word “action” was used instead of “demand.” This change of language might itself initiate different forms of action.

GRF: Some of the open letters compelled institutions to at least produce written responses. It is clear that this isn’t enough, but it is at least some form of response. I don’t know that the spreadsheets produced any immediate consequence or action. I wonder if the anonymity of the spreadsheet neutralized the capacity for accountability. Thinking of the Shitty Architecture Men list, can you be accountable to someone who isn’t identified?

LA: That particular spreadsheet surprised me in that it actually centered the conversation around anonymity. It initiated a lot of methodological questions. An open letter removes some concern for the format. It is legible, it is sentences, it is things that you can emotionally invest in instead of questioning the journalistic practices of its production, which is what the Shitty Architecture Men list produced. Every time it was mentioned, we would actually end up in a conversation about veracity and provability. It created lots of loopholes in the system, which I think unfortunately discredited the process itself. It is very surprising the little impact it had; the act of being listed in things usually always has this very damning condition because it is sort of on or off. It is like a switch.

JYG: Let’s close the conversation on this question of digital readership, which is tied to the question of architecture’s public sphere. Cyrus, this is something you are thinking about a lot, but I’ll say my thinking about what constitutes the public and architecture has shifted since doing work at Materials & Applications (M&A).<sup>92</sup> For a long time, public architecture and public art was interested in bringing people out to physical spaces and sharing that space through the installation model. A sense of something being public came from a physical site, physically accessible to anyone who wanted to walk by—a 1990s state-run and developer-funded public art project kind of thing. But when the Internet happened to M&A, our understanding of the public expanded outside of its physical sited-ness. We now have different kinds of

publics accessing our programs, and sited-ness fades to the background a bit. We start to have the community spaces of architecture, new spaces of participation, and mutual aid networks across the country that really seem only possible in the era of the internet.<sup>93</sup>

LA: Food Not Bombs would be a zine version of mutual aid.

CP: There are examples of mutual aid that existed prior to the Internet. But more recently (maybe because of our pandemic-induced intimacy with devices), the Internet has helped these networks grow and become more visible, especially with the support of Google Sheets and Docs. In some networks, I have seen features of the organizational space—the shared document, the public profile or email address—allow for connections to be formed solely through one's Gmail account, as opposed to in-person interactions. Mutual aid networks might also be increasingly visible because we are living through multiple crises that require aid in different ways.

GRF: I think both Laida and Cyrus's responses are important. Your comments remind me of the long endeavor to unhinge architecture from its site specificity.

LA: To produce audiences now is to produce buy-in for earnest projects. Before, the creation of an audience required an installation in a public space. But that kept the audience and the discipline of architecture separate from one another. I think with something like mutual aid, the digital tools are helping expand our audience. Audience comes with one's involvement because of the very subject matter. You can't visit mutual aid, but it creates membership and collectivity. Despite the fact of "issues tourism," to create an audience and membership into architectural collectivity are one and the same. I don't know if that's what you were trying to say, Gary, but there is strong evidence of a growing collectivity in architecture. Rather than maintaining the separation of architect from the audience, now it's like you are in the collective that is thinking, doing, and looking at these things.

JYG: At M&A, we were doing a lot of interviews with collaborative spaces. In the interview with the Director of the Women's Center for Creative Work, Sarah Williams offered a really nice distinction in their organization around the difference

between community and audience.<sup>94</sup> In major institutions, often there is a conflation of community and audience. But for WCCW, audience means those who might come to a public-facing event and then leave. But the community of Women's Center are people who are actively involved in participating in the construction of the organization and institution. I am much more invested in the question of porosity and participation in organizations and institutions. How does one build direct contact to intervene in architectural systems?

LA: The cultural realm of Women's Center for Creative Work initially wouldn't do cultural output which made the audience a third person exhibition producer. That is instead the architectural exhibition format. We do something and an audience looks at it; those don't really fuse into one. Originally, the Women's Center program meant putting a printer in their main space for use. I'm likening them with Gary's point, about the audience creating collectivity.

GRF: This feels analogous to the open letter. There we have, it seems, three actors. The person who is writing and the person who is being addressed, both on the inside of the same institution, are actually in the action together somehow and possibly only in opposition. Then there is the audience outside the institution, maybe us, who receive it in very different terms. Maybe the analogy isn't quite so neat. But I think it is interesting, perhaps productive, to consider a different ecology of conversation in opposition to the speech act, where one speaks and one receives. The question would then become how to make community or collectivity out of audience.

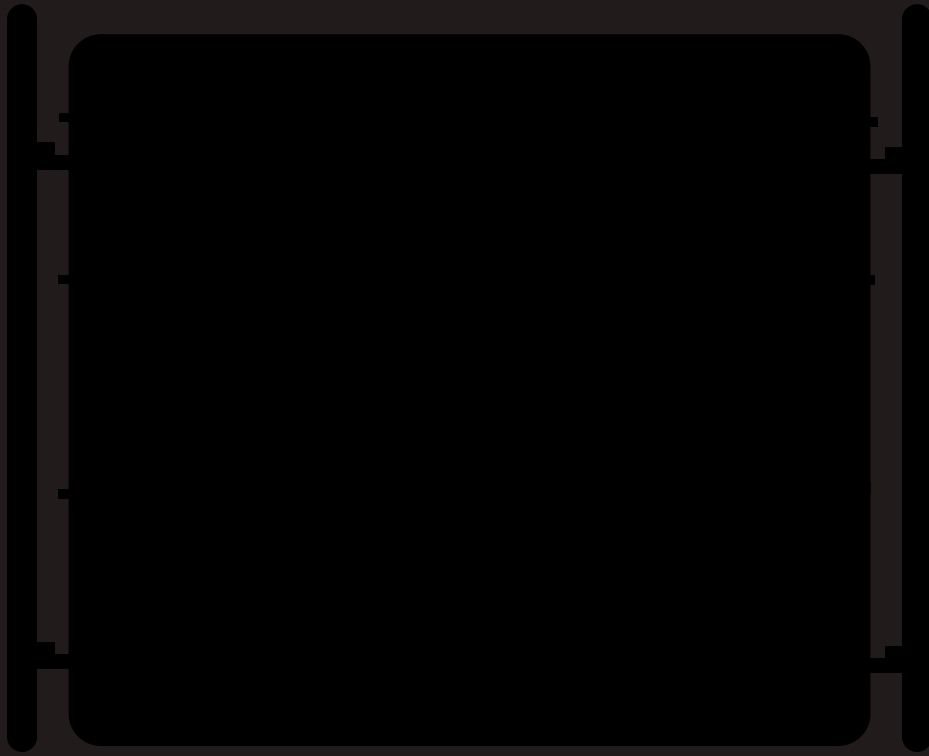


Speaking of formats, this back-and-forth dialogue between friends took place on September 11, 2020, and will be published close to a year after the discussions took place. Several rounds of editing and transcription took place. There is no foreseeable end to this conversation, but for the purposes of this publication, the transcription ends here.

Accompanying this conversation is an Open Letters Archive, an online repository of fifteen open letters circulated by architecture students and faculty nationally. Most open letters are housed on independent websites. Considering that the typical lifespan of websites lasts less than ten years and are highly dependent on the maintenance practices of the domain registrant, Jia Yi Gu began working with Delaney McCraney to screenshot and collect a selection of open letters for future posterity. The Open Letters Archive and index can be accessed via [tiny.cc/2021openletters](https://tiny.cc/2021openletters). ★

## ENDNOTES

01. The Shitty Architecture Men list is no longer visible to the general public, but for insight into its founder's thinking, one can read an interview with the anonymous list generator. See: Anonymous as told to Suzanne Labarre, "Why I Started the Shitty Architecture Men List," *Fast Company*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90164300/exclusive-why-i-started-a-shitty-architecture-men-list>.
02. From 2015 to 2020, Jia Yi Gu served as Director of Materials & Applications, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit project space dedicated to critical and experimental architecture. With a focus on architectural ideas and processes, M&A curates critical exhibitions and commissions new work by underrecognized architects, designers, and artists. See: [www.materialsan-dapplications.org](http://www.materialsan-dapplications.org).
03. Bart Cammaerts discusses the participatory effects of the intent in relation to mutual aid and mutual survival work in "Internet-Mediated Mutual Cooperation Practices: The Sharing of Material and Immaterial Resources" in *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*, eds. Barney Darin, Coleman Gabriella, Ross Christine, Sterne Jonathan, and Tembeck Tamar (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 145–66. Mutual aid has also served as an organizing model for the internet itself, where principles of decentralized power and condition-less sharing. See Jonathan Zittrain, "A Mutual Aid Treaty for the Internet" in *Constitution 3.0: Freedom and Technological Change*, ed. Rosen Jeffrey and Wittes Benjamin (Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 100–10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt6wpdhr.10>.
04. In early 2021, the Women's Center for Creative Work changed their name to the Feminist Center for Creative Work, moving away from a gendered name association to one that is more reflective of the organization now. The Feminist Center for Creative Work centers a feminism prioritizing Black and Indigenous people of color, queer, trans and nonbinary people, and other historically marginalized communities. In their words, "Not all women are feminists and not all feminists are women."



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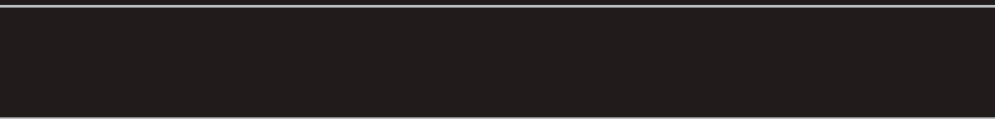
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THE



ELEMENTS



KATHERINE McKITTRICK



ARCHITECTURAL

OF

VIGILANTISM

What are some of the earliest instances of US vigilantism? What are the foundational systems that propagate homogeneity and exclusion? Katherine McKittrick's (KM) book *Demonic Grounds* serves as an entry point to conversation with guest editors Shawhin Roudbari (SR) and Germane Barnes (GB). Excerpts from *Demonic Grounds* are utilized as points of departure to dissect slavery, the transatlantic slave trade, geography, scale, and colonialism. McKittrick informs us that colonial pedagogies and colonial geographies are confluent, that the classroom is a location of layered racial-sexual discipline, and the Black student is the figure through which that discipline takes place. In this interview they reference elements of architecture often seen as innocuous or supplementary to the role in which race and structural racism frame the collective understanding of vigilance.



GB/SR: In writing about Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent's escape from slavery to the garret under the roof of her grandmother's house, you argued that "the attic serves as a workable paradoxical space, one that positions her across the regime of slavery and begins her emancipation," and that "the garret is a painful geographic expression of black emancipation."<sup>01</sup> As we struggle to analyze the architectural context/manifestation/logic of vigilantism, your reconciliation of the painful and the emancipatory, in the context of the garret for example, suggests new ways of thinking for us. Can you share thoughts on ways that as architects and designers we can think about mundane, unremarkable (even invisible) spaces like corridors, entrances, and thresholds as "painful geographic expressions of black emancipation"?

KM: I begin most of my work with thinking about how plantation and post-plantation infrastructures and ecologies—the buildings, fields, roads, waterways, and trees—are entangled with a Black sense of place. It is useful, I think, to begin with the idea that Black people do not passively inhabit space and place, but instead are *of* geography, are living with and impart geographic knowledge, and are geographic actors. If we begin from this premise—that the production of space and multi-scalar geographies are, in themselves, a kind of blackness—we can avoid conversations that rely on linearity and conceptualize Black people as an afterthought (first there is oppressive space, second is the oppression of black people in that space, third is resistance). This is not to avoid or dismiss locations or architectures or ecologies that are (ideologically and materially) constructed to harm, but instead to draw attention to the dynamism of Black geographies. In her account of slavery, Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs exemplified, in this remarkable way, an intimate understanding of space, place, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Not only did she have a clear sense of place—her entire narrative, within and beyond the garret, is an agentive *mapping and remapping* of her surroundings—she also recognized that these geographies hold in them possibilities. I mean, this is a radical overturning of prevailing geographic knowledges because she is actually sharing that carceral disabling patriarchal logics provide the conditions for alternative worlds. This story, this geographic story, is both disconcerting and breathtaking. I would wager that if

01. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 144.

we read across the very different narratives and accounts of the enslaved, we would notice a geographic thread that illuminates how the terrifying infrastructures of racial violence are sites of contemplation, resistance, invention, and reinvention. So, for me, geographies are not mundane per se, but rather enlivened precisely because they are of and with Blackness. I must imagine Black geographies, and thus all geographies from the three-dimensional to the imaginative, through and as Black livingness—if I don't, I have failed to appreciate the complexity and density (the heartbreak, the promises, the innovations, the histories and stories, the songs) of Black life. Just as we should not situate Black people as passive (or always victims), we should not read their (our) geographies (including architectures and doorways and grass and bees) as unliving inaudible backdrops.

GB/SR: We are reminded of a passage from Claudia Rankine's *Citizen:*

"The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?

It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry."

Rankine's account of the space, down to the detail of the doorbell, suggests a complicity of architecture in this encounter. The elements Rankine describes feel like actors (or actants) in this story of vigilance. What do you see as the agency of architectural elements in racialized encounters?

KM: I agree that architecture, as a moment of encounter, provides a way for us to read a range of spatial processes that center Black life and livingness. I mean, this is what Édouard Glissant so brilliantly outlines in his work—how the encounter not only produces something new and terrible and explosive and revealing, but also how encounter holds in it the possibility to ethically reorient our relationship with our surroundings and each other. This is interesting to think about alongside the excerpt you have offered here, because the encounter does not produce anything new and instead delineates the twin problems of white property and Black presence (or what Cheryl Harris describes as "whiteness as property"). The dynamism I note above is obscured by the back entrance, the front entrance, the path, the locked gate, the phantom dogs, the deer grass and rosemary, the spit, the yard, the yelling, and the surveillance. We all know this house! This is a moment where architecture and design refuse the difficult potential of encounter, even in apology. The punishing part of the story is, of course, the question of therapy and reading harm reduction in concert with white supremacy. It seems to me that Rankine is commenting on how architecture galvanizes segregation even though, in this excerpt, race and racial identification are not mentioned. I wonder if she knows we know the story before reading it. If we know the story in advance, if it is a narrative of familiarity (normativity, routine, habit, what we already know, what we expected), can we capture dynamism, Black livingness? Is there something else happening outside the vicious apologies of hate leveled at a patient? For me this is an invitation to read the poem with Cheryl Harris and Stephanie Jones-Rogers, keeping in mind Glissant, and also looking to work that focuses on landscape design (specifically gardens, grass, shrubs, as well as the labor of their upkeep) as racializing ecologies. I guess what I am saying is that in order to untangle the very heavy and anxious spatial logics of the therapist's home, and think about the potentiality of Blackness, we must read Rankine's poem or excerpt as an invitation to defamiliarize ourselves with commonsense, seemingly natural (because they are spatialized and encoded in the doorbell, at the top of her lungs, in the questionable black presence), stories of racial violence and therapeutic harm.



GB/SR: Where does geography end and architecture begin? Is this a question of scale, of experience, of expression, or otherwise?

KM: For me, geography is a set of multi-scalar relational processes. The processes are entangled, and they are also punctuated by physical geographies (including the design and construction of buildings), ecologies, and other infrastructures and materials such as roads, railways, concrete foundations, steel, stones, cliffs, waves, and water. The processes are produced through human interactions—this is to say, we make geography what it is by engaging with it, mapping it, dismissing it, touching it, and organizing it. Architecture is an expression of geography—it dreams or materializes space, place, time; architecture is an expression of entangled human processes that imagines and concretizes ideas and experiences. Geography and architecture are overlapping processes, produced through human interactions, including difficult encounters and unrealized liberations.

I like to think as capaciously and as widely as possible about geography, space, and place because this leaves room for alternative voices, narratives, spaces, places, songs, experiences, and stories. If we demarcate geography and architecture temporally or spatially—endings and beginnings, discreet scales, discreet-disconnected disciplines, and designs—we will inevitably replicate prevailing knowledge systems and how things already are. Again, this is not a call to erase colonial and plantocratic geographies (enclosures, violences); it is a plea to enter into them by recognizing a Black sense of place. I do not think there is a divide between geography and architecture—and this is what Black scholars have spent considerable time telling us across a range of texts and conversations. We must take those seemingly discreet disciplinary knowledges, those categorized colonial expressions of geography, and notice that they are fictive and alterable and relational, too.

GB/SR: You have stated that “the classroom is, as I see it, a colonial site that was, and always has been, engendered by and through violent exclusion!”<sup>02</sup> Would you extend this argument to the physical space of the classroom? What about its architecture, arrangement of elements, material, and aesthetic?

KM: My work on safe space emerged from witnessing, experiencing, and sharing stories of racial violence that occur in the classroom. Black students, teachers, and staff know the walls of the classroom enclose us, while the materials presented are often, not always, outside Black ways of knowing. Colonial pedagogies and colonial geographies are confluent; the classroom is a location of layered racial-sexual discipline, and the Black student is the figure through which that discipline takes place. Black students are perceived to be unteachable, intractable, and out of place within educational settings and the classroom is the container where specialized instructions are imparted to teach, manage, and hold blackness (through the organization of the classroom, through expressions of power and racial privilege, through seating arrangements, through implementing linguistic and cultural norms, through grades and grading, through praise and anger, through readings and tests and thrown desks). Of course, police in schools are the penultimate and violent expression of coloniality. Again, this kind of architecture cannot be adequately theorized without recognizing how the infrastructure of the classroom is subverted and undone. My statement above, from the interview with Peter James Hudson, does not begin and end with violent exclusion—and should not be read as such. It draws attention to how learning and teaching is difficult and awful precisely because colonial settings that exclude Black students do not and cannot totally and absolutely foreclose Black life; many of us make space for the Black student (inside and outside the classroom), many of us work across these sites of violence in order to teach our students and each other how to live this world differently; we teach each other that the walls of the classroom are porous and complicated and breakable. There is a wonderful book by Carmen Kynard that centers the classroom as a location of possibility that is tied to the Black radical tradition. Her classroom is engendered by and through Black radical pedagogy, thought, and action. What happens if we begin there—what happens to educational architecture that is laced with the years and years of the radical pedagogy, thought, and action Black teachers have provided?

GB/SR: Your discussion of the auction block in *Demonic Grounds* has infected our thinking about the most basic architectural tectonics—e.g., a platform built from an arrangement of stones. “The auction block exudes white supremacy,” you write.<sup>03</sup> Just as the auction block is “a site where the

ongoing production and reproduction of difference (race, gender, sexuality, class, and so forth) takes place and moves beyond the body,"<sup>94</sup> could you help us make the case that such everyday spaces as the sidewalk, the condo building entrance, the public park, and the cafe counter exude white supremacy? In other words, what about the architecture of these spaces condition the white supremacy of, respectively, Permit Patty, Keyfob Kelly, Barbeque Betty, and Barista Ben?

KM: I don't want to make this case (I think that is clear from my answers above). I mean the auction block you describe here only tells half of the story I told in *Demonic Grounds*. In that chapter I also outline multitudinous resistances that break apart and redefine the white supremacist underpinnings of the auction block. This does not mean it is not a site of violence; it means it is a place of Black subversion, reinvention. Terror is here, it is in my heart, but it is not all we have. It is difficult for me to imagine different worlds, and different infrastructures, by only focusing on violence and harm. I think I would ask: Why do you want to prove these things, these places, are white supremacist? Do we need proof? Scholars like Sarah Constanza-Chock, for example, have detailed the ways in which design is intentionally and impactfully oppressive. She also asks how we think outside of these kinds of designs and redesign, too. So how do we think outside of oppression vis-à-vis design? How does the auction block simultaneously critique and capture white supremacy? What else does a sidewalk hold? Again, this is not meant to posit some kind of absolutist optimistic alternative but rather to ask a different kind of question that notices how Black livingness and Black life evidence something other than violent exclusion.

GB/SR: We wonder if our framing of architecture's aggression, resistance, and witnessing (as we present in this issue) encourages us to separate ideas that should, instead, be brought together. What if, thinking out loud, we take direction from Harriet Jacobs's "mapping and remapping" of our surroundings and "defamiliarize ourselves with commonsense, seemingly natural, stories of racial violence and therapeutic harm?" We wonder how that would change our theorizing architecture's radical potentials. On that note, what closing thoughts would you share with architects as we explore our agency in designing spaces that.

KM: Yes! We should collaborate and knit all sorts of ideas, theories, stories together. Architecture—the field and the practice—holds in it the capacity to make radical change. And this change is not only conceptual; it is tied to walls and concrete and streets and windows and more. If we pair architecture with Black studies, or Black geographies, we can perhaps think more generously about what is possible and, at the same time, draw attention to how existing infrastructures are, or can be, infused with struggles against racism. The beauty of architecture, the gift of Black architects, might lie in the simultaneity of envisioning *and* making worlds that are open to kindness and rebellion. These are not perfect or utopian buildings or roads or city plans; they are sites of struggle that continually upend the idea that colonial architectures are sites of static oppressive veracity. And what the architect can bring to Black studies is exciting—what photos, collages, designs, prints, linocuts, and technologies can help us theorize liberation? What architectures and architectural techniques already exist that will help with this theorization? How might architectural expertise—the writing up of surveys, the thinking through of floor plans, the drafting, the decisions about where load bearing beams are placed—be implicit to social change that honors Black worlds and Black livingness? ★





## OBJECTS OF VIGILANTISM

The following cataloguing system is used to archive the objects and spaces of vigilantism, extracted from the events cited below.

**DATE:**  
year-month-date (YYYYMMDD)

**FORM OF VIGILANTISM:**  
aggression, resistance, witness (A, R, W)

**TYPE OF OBJECT:**  
product, fixture, furniture, vehicle, architecture, landscape, animal (Pr, Fi, Fu, Ve, Ar, La, An)

**NATURE/MEASURE OF IMPACT:**  
aggression, assault, damage, harm, death, pursuit, surveillance, sanctuary, liberation, care, occupying space, incrimination (Ag, As, Da, Ha, De, Pu, Su, Sa, Li, Ca, Oc, In)

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**Black Figures**  
The figures included in the pages of this issue have been compiled and shared by visual artist Olalekan Jeyifous. They are a reflection of black occupation of space.



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ISSN 2332-5046

**Support**

MAS Context is partially supported by private donations. Special thanks to Chuck Thurow, Geoffrey Goldberg, and Maria Mercedes Gomis Bertrand.

MAS Context has printing support from Graphic Arts Studio.

We are extremely grateful to the support provided by these institutions that helps us continue to do the work we do.

**Acknowledgements**

Our Vigilantism issue, guest edited by Germane Barnes and Shawhin Roudbari, has had invaluable help from Emanuel Admassu, Laida Aguirre, Joseph Altshuler, Isabella Adelsohn, Atelier Mey, Ashley Bigham, Jennifer Bonner, Galo Canizares, Sean Canty, Esther Choi, Ana Colon Quiñones, Sekou Cooke, Ann Marie Dang, Gary Riichirō Fox, Krystina François, Iker Gil, Jia Yi Gu, A.L. Hu, Olalekan Jeyifous, Andrea Martinez, Demar Matthews, Delaney McCraney, Katherine McKittrick, Julie Michiels, Zack Morrison, Paul Mougey, Jennifer Newsom, Skye Niles, Cyrus Peñarroyo, Anjolie Rao, Karen Reichenbach, Quilian Riano, Andrew Santa Lucia, David Schalliol, Chat Travieso, and Mimi Zeiger.

The research of Shawhin Roudbari was partially supported by the National Science Foundation (Award 1664260). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

Our gratitude to the Community, Housing & Identity Lab (CHIL) at the University of Miami, School of Architecture, a testing ground for the physical and theoretical investigations of architecture's social and political resiliency. CHIL posits that the built environment is manipulated by factors that extend beyond conventional construction procedures and attempts to highlight the narratives of marginalized communities.

We are extremely thankful to Bobby Joe Smith III for the design of this issue. It was a pleasure to work with him and discuss for months what vigilantism means and how it could be manifested in a publication.

And a special thank you goes to our guest editors Germane Barnes and Shawhin Roudbari, whose remarkable research and design work is the foundation to this issue. Their rigorous exploration of the topic and their generosity to engage with their colleagues made this a special issue.





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