

Session Introduction

DECOLONIZING ARCHITECTURAL PEDAGOGIES

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Note: You may view a selection of “Decolonizing Architectural Pedagogies” paper presentations online here: <https://youtu.be/9xPnNp23IWE>

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“Repositioning Center: Methods for Shifting the Diversity Discussion to Action” (Kiwana T. McClung, University of Louisiana at Lafayette)

“Intermediate Territories: Latin American Informal Urbanism as Provocation and Pedagogical Turn” (Gregory Marinic, University of Cincinnati, and Pablo Meninato, Temple University)

"In Post-Novis All the Students are the Teacher" (Cruz Garcia, Carnegie Mellon University, and Natalie Frankowski, Carnegie Mellon University)

"Entangled Architectures: Pedagogies of Displacement and Refuge" (Huda Tayob, University of Johannesburg)

FREEDOM AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE: CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR ANTIRACIST, FEMINIST PRACTICE IN US ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

Students and practitioners of architecture challenge the hegemonic Whiteness, maleness, cisheteronormativity, and capitalist control of these disciplines as a means of democratizing and decolonizing practice to create conditions for Black self-determination. This paper considers how architectural professionals have responded to contemporary movements for social justice in the United States and the ways in which some are more and some less successful at addressing the intersecting nature of identity-based oppressions.

Organizations and convenings, including the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), Black in Design, the Design Futures Public Interest Design Student Leadership Forum, Equity by Design, and the Architecture Lobby are considered from 2012 to the pre-pandemic spring of 2020, with a focus on the emergence of new spaces and shifts in how existing spaces engage with activist movements as a result of changing political conditions.

The paper provides historical background and constructive critique. It concludes with recommendations for creating institutions that respond proactively, rather than reactively, to racist violence, sexual harassment, assault, and exploitation, and for making lasting meaning of these injustices when they occur. The roles Black people and other people of color, particularly women, *have* played, and the roles White people, particularly men, and White institutions *must* play in creating an antiracist, feminist architecture are a focus of this paper.

Keywords: Activism, Antiracism, Equity, Feminism, Organizations, Protest

1. INTRODUCTION AND POSITIONALITY

Narratives of resistance struggle from slavery to the present share an obsession with the politics of space . . . indeed, Black folks equated freedom with the passage into a life where they would have the right to exercise control over space on their own behalf, where they would imagine, design, and create spaces that would respond to the needs of their lives, their communities, their families. (hooks 1995)

This is not activism, but a form of survival. Design practice must get closer to the unknown, to things that are uncomfortable and create friction. It's about creating spaces worth advocating for. Where memorials, museums, and enriching institutions outweigh prison yards by 100 to 1. Where those ideas about cities, neighborhoods,

and identities we live in are galvanized by the labor of design communities, not design silos. (Henry 2018)

This paper explores how contemporary students and practitioners have exercised control over the spaces of architectural academia and professional practice in response to antiracist, feminist, and anticapitalist movements. It concludes with recommendations for educators, administrators, students, and practitioners seeking to create institutions that respond proactively, rather than reactively, to racist violence, sexual harassment, assault, and exploitation, and to make lasting meaning of these injustices when they occur.

Such exploration requires definitions. “**Race**” is a social construct that artificially divides people into distinct groups based on physical appearance, ancestral heritage, or cultural affiliation. “**Racism**” is the systematic subordination of members of targeted racial groups placed within a hierarchy. In the United States, people of African descent racialized as Black are at the bottom of this hierarchy, along with Indigenous people, Asian Americans, and other non-White people of color occupying intermediary positions below White people. Racism is practiced through the actions of institutional structures, cultural norms, and individuals that reinforce this hierarchy (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love 1997). “**Antiracist practice**” in the United States context requires thoughtfulness and discipline; the application of cultural relativism; judging people as individuals rather than as representatives of an entire group; rejecting tokenism; and the embrace of feminism and the rejection of homophobia, femmephobia, and transphobia, because Black women, Black trans men and women, Black queer and nonbinary people are all Black people (Kendi 2019, 198–200).

I intend to provide historical background and constructive critique based on my own perceptions, research, and observations for the benefit of architectural educators, administrators, students, and practitioners. From my positionality as a queer gay able-bodied White man with access to generational wealth and American citizenship, raised in a predominantly White neighborhood in a predominantly White US city, one who attended predominantly White schools for most of my academic career, including architecture school, I am particularly interested in the obligations and responsibilities of predominantly White institutions (PWIs). I incorporate histories and analysis of organizations run by and for designers who are Black or other people of color, but my conclusions primarily suggest actions for people who hold wealth, power, and privilege, many—though not all—of whom are racialized as White.

1.1 METHODOLOGY

This paper examines architectural education and practice through the lens of architecture race theory, descended from legal scholarship’s critical race theory, and critical Whiteness studies as applied to architectural education and practice (Lokko 2000, 14–20; Curry 2017; Davis 2019). Activism in education and practice is considered through social movement theory, with media and content analysis methods utilized to compile documentation of recent historical events (Macnamara 2005; Della Porta and Diani 2006).

1.2 AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE AS WHITE SUPREMACIST CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY

The appropriation and use of space are political acts (hooks 1989, 209). As long as people have shaped the environment through built interventions, the designers and builders of

those interventions have sought to create desired political, economic, social, and cultural conditions through the process and product of their work.

If an architectural product, the “use” of space, is an expression of the cultures that produced it, so too is the “appropriation,” the professional processes through which spaces are created for use. Architectural practice in the United States is normatively conceptualized within a “Western tradition” focusing on European powers and their colonial dominions (Wiley 2015). This artificially proscribed past is reinforced in a Euro-American present in which 92 percent of living registered architects are White and 2 percent are Black, 82 percent are men and fewer than 500 are Black women, out of about 110,000 (National Council of Architectural Registration Boards 2018). Enrollment of African American and Latino architecture students hasn’t appreciably increased since 2009 (National Architectural Accrediting Board 2016, 10). Eighty-two percent of architectural educators are White; 3 percent are Black, 6 percent are Asian, 6 percent are Latinx, and less than 1 percent are Native American (Chikako Chang 2014).

I was taught that architects evolved from the “master builders” of medieval European cathedrals, whose work was professionalized by men working in the service of absolutist monarchs, religious leaders, and capitalist imperialists. American architects are taught a pantheon of White supremacist patriarchs (Finley 2019; Lamster 2019, 329–30; López-Durán 2019, 7–10).

These histories are the foundations of White US settler colonialist city making. In a country built on the genocide of Indigenous people with wealth created by the unpaid labor of Black people, traditional architectural practice is a tool for the erasure and reproduction of these traumas. Designers seeking to deconstruct domination through their work will find no precedent in dominant practice.

1.3 “ARCHITECTS AND URBAN DESIGNERS: HOODIES UP!”

Like the direct-action campaigns that challenged anti-Black policies during Reconstruction in the 1860s and Jim Crow in the 1950s, the movement known as “Black Lives Matter” arose after a specific act of anti-Black physical violence and an insufficient state response. On the night of February 26, 2012, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin walked to a convenience store in Sanford, Florida. George Zimmerman’s decisions to profile, follow, and murder Martin initially did not raise enough concern for police to detain Zimmerman. In the days and weeks that followed, outrage, disgust, and sadness about the incident spread nationally.

In an article concluding with the words of this section’s title, the urban designer Mitch McEwen (2012) implored architects to see Martin’s murder as “a lever in American history, like the death of Emmitt Till—a pivotal moment when irreconcilable narratives of this country collide.” Zimmerman was acquitted in July 2013. The activist Alicia Garza’s “A Love Letter to Black People,” posted on Facebook and shared by Opal Tometi and Patrisse Khan Cullors, originated the phrase “#BlackLivesMatter” on July 13. Within days, it appeared on signs at protests around the nation (Chase 2018, 1091).

On August 9, 2014, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was murdered by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Protests drew significant attention on social and traditional media, particularly after a militarized police response. Local and national organizers converged on the city, building a national network by the time of Wilson’s nonindictment in November (Lowery 2016, 65).

1.4 #SAYHERNAME, #BLACKTRANSLIVESMATTER

Protests after the death of Sandra Bland in Waller County, Texas, on July 13, 2015, led to increased visibility of organizing under the hashtag #SayHerName, highlighting the toll of police brutality and murder on Black women and girls whose deaths receive minimal attention (Khaleeli 2016). Activists seeking justice for Black trans women raise awareness of their unique vulnerabilities with the hashtag #BlackTransLivesMatter:

Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and **trans** and **disabled** folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, **Black undocumented folks**, folks with **records**, **women** and **all Black lives** along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement. (St. Clair 2016)

How did architectural students and practitioners respond to this movement and others in the 2010s? Where do designers succeed in applying its intersectional analysis to address the needs of the most marginalized (Hill Collins 1990, 221–38)? Where do we fail to comprehend overlapping positionalities?

1.5 RISE: NOMA 2015 AND THE FIRST BLACK IN DESIGN

Scholars of social movements trace their life cycles through four stages: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline (Christiansen 2009). This section considers these events as the context against which two groups planned gatherings held in October 2015 around which emergent activism in architecture coalesced.

NOMA's Louisiana chapter hosted its 2015 national conference in New Orleans, where awareness of design's political nature had spread in the decade since the Katrina disaster. "RISE: Social Justice by Design" hosted sessions such as "Design as Protest"; "The People as Genus Loci: Counter-Gentrification Tactics after the Storm"; and "The Political Is Personal: The Role of the Designer at the Intersection of Social Justice and Design" (NOMA Louisiana 2015). One attendee reflected:

If our claims of high performance and accountability are to continue to have relevance and adaptive value, the collective experience and perspective of our workforce must reflect the users of our designs. When we, the collective design workplace, include social justice as a business practice, we not only enhance opportunities for minority talent, we engage a wider potential for pioneering socially just environments. (Dickinson 2015)

The African American Student Union (AASU) at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in Boston began planning what became Black in Design (BID) in the fall of 2014 (Mock 2017). The AASU had invited the rapper Kanye West to visit and speak informally at

the school, an invitation West accepted in November 2013, five months after Zimmerman's acquittal. Students used the subsequent media attention to shine a light on the underrepresentation of Black designers at their school and in the field. AASU's Tessa Kaneene said:

We're both African-Americans who have had a lot of successes that we hope others can have; we can be ambassadors for those that might not be able to be sitting at the table right now. We'd love to start a conversation about the fact that we have a school of several hundred people and we have an African-American student union of 20. Why are there fewer than 30 African-Americans in a school of 700? What does that say? (Vozick-Levinson 2013)

During the 2014 and 2015 academic years, protests responding to the murders of Brown, Bland, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and others coincided with harassment, threats, and graffiti targeting Black students on college campuses (Trachtenberg 2018). Students' responses echoed 1960s activism, highlighting a chronic lack of racial transformation in American higher education (Smith and Thrasher 2015).

AASU's April 2015 conference on race and urban design was organized as protesters sought justice for Freddie Gray in Baltimore. AASU president Dana McKinney said, "We don't have courses on justice and race . . . It's the first time these issues have really been put forth" (El-Nasser 2015). Observations from this event informed the planning of Black in Design, a two-day gathering held October 9–10, 2015 (Mock 2017).

Speakers included students, professors, and practitioners; researchers, activists, and artists representing a wide range of fields, ages, and depths of experience. Thirteen percent were White—inverting the demographics of the 13 percent Black US population (Black in Design 2015; US Census Bureau 2019). Student organizers Cara Michell and Courtney Sharpe spoke on the conference's origins:

Michell: "Because of the events in Ferguson and Baltimore that made national news last year . . . [which] are unfortunately not uncommon, we felt that it was imperative to make a new contribution to this conversation, and to use our training as designers to convene a conversation about how to intervene in these cycles of injustice. We are particularly grateful to everyone who organized, protested, and acted to raise consciousness to bring the conversation about social injustice today to the forefront of the national discourse."

Sharpe: "Here at the GSD the [AASU] participated in marches, we went to vigils, and we participated in [the] Map the Gap mapping project . . . we created an installation to honor the lives that were lost to police brutality, and we thought it was really important that we make a memorial to that." (Michell and Sharpe 2015)

1.6 BID SATELLITE AND DESIGN FUTURES

The White architectural theorist K. Michael Hays spoke at Black in Design 2015 about the White spatial imaginary, which "produces the kind of defensive localism that dominates decisions about public interventions and how services are distributed, and . . . privatism which sometimes turns hostile" and the "radicalized place Black Americans live in, which

has compelled them to develop . . . a spatial imaginary of congregation” (Hays 2015). Hays could be describing the 2016 Republican presidential primary campaign during which students organized a satellite Black in Design in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, affirming Black presence at a public PWI without the resources or spotlight of the GSD (Louisiana State University College of Art and Design 2016; Dasjon Jordan, personal communication with the author, 2020).

Another conference, in the predominantly White field of public interest design (PID), joined Black activist design practices with allies in the community design movement. The initial Design Futures PID Student Leadership Forum aimed “to capture the growing movement of people interested in how design might better address the wicked problems facing our globe” (Design Futures 2013).

The fourth annual Forum was the first to dedicate an entire day of its program to discussions of race and identity (Haynes 2016). Sessions covered community organizing, community engagement, and other forms of democratized design and planning, and speakers led participatory workshops. Student “open mics,” panels of community experts, and other participatory methods put the conference planners’ pedagogy into practice (Design Futures 2016b). The shift from “[better addressing] wicked problems” in 2013 to “helping students better understand challenges of racial inequality that inform their work” in 2016 can be read as a reflection of a maturing endeavor and a barometer of the political climate (Design Futures 2016a).

1.7 EQUITY BY DESIGN

Equity by Design (EQxD)’s advocacy illustrates continuing disparities between representation of White men, Black women and other women of color, and White women in architecture (Pitts et al. 2015). The evolution of the Missing 32% Project into EQxD represents the success of organizers who used the AIA as a platform to spread their message (Equity by Design 2020). Resolution 15-1, adopted at the June 2015 conference in Atlanta while protesters sought justice for Freddie Gray in Baltimore, asked the AIA to develop an ongoing program to “assess data, track progress, set a plan of action, and report on results.” Co-author Rosa Sheng said:

Until the architecture profession reflects the demographics which it serves, we will not have reached our fullest potential for impact, meaning and influence . . . It’s not just for women’s sake, but also for talent retention to sustain the profession and connect with the diverse population that we serve. (Testado 2015)

EQxD’s annual symposium in San Francisco brings together practitioners and leaders across architecture, planning, and landscape architecture. The 2018 symposium was structured around panels on “Voices,” “Values,” and “Vision,” and featured members of Architexx, NOMA, and the Architecture Lobby (Equity by Design 2018). Eighty-four percent of the speakers identified as female or nonbinary, inverting representation in an 81% male profession (National Council of Architectural Registration Boards 2018).

1.8 #METOO AND SHITTY ARCHITECTURE MEN

#MeToo was originated in 2006 by Tarana Burke, a Black woman activist and survivor of sexual assault who encouraged women to share their experiences in solidarity with one another through social media (Harris 2018). The movement went viral during the early Trump presidency (*Chicago Tribune* 2020). The writer Moira Donegan anonymously created an online “Shitty Media Men” list to which sexual harassment and assault could be anonymously reported (Friedersdorf 2018). Women and men in architecture who had experienced sexual harassment and assault began to discuss their experiences on a “Shitty Architecture Men” (SAM) list made public in March 2018, the week after five women accused Richard Meier of sexual harassment (Pogrebin 2018). SAM’s anonymous creator said,

There’s this idea that architecture is a magical, important contribution to the world that is undervalued. We’re trained to view suffering as deeply related to the work . . . Harassment is easy to dismiss as part of the sacrifice. And even when it’s absolutely wrenching and not easy to dismiss, the culture of genius in architecture remains. Many firms are structured around a “Great Man” with a singular vision, which lowly employees are tasked with carrying out. It’s very top-down. This can create power imbalances that make junior employees vulnerable to exploitation, whether it’s harassment, pay inequality, or something else. (Labarre 2018)

At the 2018 AIA conference Voices of Plurality, a one-hundred-member flash mob protest, organized by a racially and age-diverse group, gathered to read a collaborative manifesto declaring “This is what a feminist looks like.” Pascale Sablan, NOMA’s official historian, said:

In 1968, when Whitney M. Young . . . gave that speech it really resonated. And what’s scary to us is that we haven’t seen much progress, if at all. We really need to be vocal and understand that we don’t have to wait for these prolific heroes and leaders to come in and make changes. Each of us have a voice and those voices are valid. (Keane 2018)

At a Think-In organized by the Architecture Lobby (TAL), the feminist architectural historian Andrea Merrett said,

The big lesson from [the 1960s and ’70s] is the change that happened then was in parallel with the larger women’s movement. Women in architecture really capitalized on that moment to make progress in the profession. We’re in another [similar] moment. We’re not going to fix this all on this run, but while we have the momentum, now is the time to do as much as we can.

As the AIA Code of Ethics was updated to explicitly prohibit sexual abuse and harassment, many remained frustrated with the AIA’s strategy of affirming and incentivizing good behavior rather than investigating, penalizing, or facilitating the reporting of bad behavior. The AIA’s ability to force action or change was questioned by the Architecture Lobby (Budds 2019).

1.9 THE ARCHITECTURE LOBBY

Founded in 2013 at Yale University, the Architecture Lobby (TAL) brought the anticapitalist critique of the Occupy movement into the architectural profession. Focused on labor issues and active in feminist organizing, the group has more than a dozen chapters in the United States, Australia, and the UK (Medina 2017; Petrunia 2021). Organizers challenge the AIA from the left on its response to the election of President Trump, to #MeToo, and to architects' roles in the construction of prisons and immigrant concentration camps (Franklin 2019).

TAL's statements have explicitly called out and declared its opposition to White supremacy (Franklin 2020). Activist designers outside the organization, however, note the organization's position within a White and privileged profession, demanding that its actions align with its words (Lena [@lenapalestina] 2020).

A 2017 pamphlet considers that "there is a fine line between normalizing diversity and promoting tokenization . . . tokenization is not a substitute for genuine diversity and inclusion . . . direct action must be taken," and questions emphasizing the value proposition of diversity and inclusion, noting that such rhetoric dehumanizes marginalized groups by associating their validity with their economic productivity (Deamer, Dunn, and Shvartzberg Carrió 2017).

2. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This paper is directed primarily at educators, leaders, and administrators of institutions and organizations. It catalogues students' and professionals' demands for change in the face of violence and trauma. In periods of protest, such demands have occasionally been met with action from institutions and organizations. More often these institutions wait until the next time protesters demand action. This cycle must be disrupted, and here I propose interventions to do so.

The status quo benefits people who run architectural institutions of White male privilege and power. Only when protest movements outside the profession become too difficult to ignore do they take action, and when students and professionals organize, they may not know the histories of those who have organized before them. Knowing these histories could help them avoid past mistakes and build power with activists of older generations. **Educators must teach histories of protest and social movements as factors shaping the built environment and the city-making professions.**

Antiracist movements led by Black people and other people of color outside the professions spread into the professions first through Black people and other people of color who fight for their positions as students, faculty, interns, and associates. Though they may begin with questions of representation, these activists recognize that diversity is no substitute for justice. They know the difference between descriptive and substantive representation: do they look like me, or are they actually creating policy, shaping power, or creating cities in my interest? (Guinier 1994, 41–71). **Students and practitioners must demand substantive representation of Black, feminist, queer interests.**

White people must not act as saviors, especially when we represent institutions of White wealth, power, and privilege interested in change. We must collaborate and cooperate with people who substantively and descriptively represent marginalized identities. We must practice stepping back, stepping out, listening, and the simple but powerful act of not talking. We must seek out and use resources, like antiracism workshops run by professional

educators. Antiracism and feminism are practices, like running or weightlifting; we get better at them when we make an effort to do so. **Students, educators, and practitioners must actively seek out and use resources for antiracist, feminist education. We must change norms of professional practice to create antiracist, feminist schools and workplaces.**

When we recognize the intersecting nature of oppressions, we also see that identities are plural, and that just and equitable design requires considering the most marginalized first. Black lives matter; Black women's lives matter; poor Black women's lives matter; poor Black queer and trans women's lives matter. We are not "designing cities for everyone" until we are actively designing with—not "for"—the most vulnerable members of our society (Brown-Wilson 2018, 169–75) **Students and practitioners must design with the margins.**

What do Black, feminist, queer cities look like? What does an antiracist Green New Deal look like? Ivy League students are not the only ones asking, but they are able to leverage media visibility, institutional wealth, and connections. Faculty advisors and strong alumni networks are especially important to student organizers because of their temporary and transient presence on campuses (Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture 2019). PWIs must recognize such support as a responsibility to their students and faculty and the world in which they are preparing their students to work. **Educational leaders, particularly at PWIs, must hire and retain Black faculty and other faculty of color, particularly women and queer people, and Black students and other students of color, particularly women and queer people, and provide financial and staff support for student organizations, and funding and encouragement of student and faculty-directed projects like the conferences and symposia described in this essay.**

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have always excelled at training Black architects (Dozier 1976, 162–68). Rather than encouraging investment in these programs, however, White architectural institutions with the privilege and power to object have allowed them to be defunded or destroyed (Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College 2013). **The AIA, NCARB, and PWIs must support HBCU architectural institutions and other minority-serving institutions on these institutions' terms.**

All architectural workers must have more control over their labor conditions, including the projects on which they work, and the ability to withhold their labor from projects and clients who advance White supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, and imperialism. **White, male, straight architectural labor activists must affirmatively further antiracist, feminist, and queer city making in coalition with architectural workers already organizing in spaces that are predominantly Black or of other people of color.**

Racial capitalist violence and trauma will continue to precipitate cycles of activist energy (Kelley 2017). Leaders must use their own and their institutions' power, privilege, and wealth to meet activist demands between, not just during, periods of protest. If this is not activism, but a form of survival, we cannot discourage demands for justice when the people in power deem such demands inconvenient or ill-timed. We must take addressing the harm caused by White supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, and capitalism as seriously as we take energy consumption, detailing, and style.

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