Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America is an urgent call for architects to accept the challenge of reconceiving and reconstructing our built environment rather than continue giving shape to buildings, infrastructure, and urban plans that have, for generations, embodied and sustained anti-Black racism in the United States. The architects, designers, artists, and writers who were invited to contribute to this book—and to the exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art for which it serves as a "field guide"—reimagine the legacies of race-based dispossession in ten American cities (Atlanta; Brooklyn, New York; Kansas City, Missouri; Los Angeles; Miami; Nashville; New Orleans; Oakland; Pittsburgh; and Syracuse) and celebrate the ways individuals and communities across the country have mobilized Black cultural spaces, forms, and practices as sites of imagination, liberation, resistance, care, and refusal. A broad range of essays by the curators and prominent scholars from diverse fields, as well as a portfolio of new photographs by the artist David Hammons, complement this volume’s richly illustrated presentations of the architectural projects at the heart of MoMA’s groundbreaking exhibition.
THE GEORGIA NEGRO
A SOCIAL STUDY
BY
W.E.BURGHARDT DU BOIS.

RECONSTRUCTIONS:
ARCHITECTURE AND
BLACKNESS IN AMERICA

Edited by Sean Anderson and Mabel O. Wilson

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Allianz, MoMA’s partner for design and innovation, is proud to sponsor Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America at The Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition explores the important ways in which hidden histories can be made visible and equity can be built into architecture, urbanism, and the landscape. The Museum’s first sustained consideration of the relationship between architecture and African American and African Diaspora communities, Reconstructions features eleven newly commissioned works that examine the intersections of anti-Black racism and Blackness within cities, and how sites at multiple scales may be mobilized as spaces for resistance, renewal, and imagination.

At Allianz we strive every day to be an inclusive organization that embraces diversity to achieve a brighter, more innovative future. In that spirit we celebrate an exhibition that highlights the crucial work and innovation of architects, designers, and artists like Emanuel Admassu, Germane Barnes, Sekou Cooke, J. Yolande Daniels, Felicia Davis, Marto Gooden, Walter J. Hood, Olalekan Jeyifous, V. Mitch McEwen, Amanda Williams, and David Hartt, whom we are proud to support.

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FOREWORD

In recent months, if not years, escalating demands for a re-consideration of the social, economic, and political implications of architecture and urbanism have challenged the paradigms of modernism’s promise. Broader recognition of absences in the historiography of modern architecture and in the representation of geographies, communities, and architects of color has led to a reconsideration not only of how we, as a society and as individ-uals, understand the limits of architecture in all of its guises, but also of who determines and ultimately designs and builds the environments in which we live. Taking this as its impetus, Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America sets forth intertwining narratives and histories of anti-Black racism that simultaneously look back to the past and forward to the future. Referring the time period immediately following the abolition of slavery in the United States, the exhibition’s title also evokes metaphors and processes of building, amplifying how architecture defines conceptions of both ourselves and our world.

Blackness, framed in terms of racial identity but also encompassing all aspects of Black social life, is a concept essential to visualizing African American collectivity. The long shadow of slavery and anti-Black racism stretches across the United States in segregated cities and communities with inadequate access to housing, education, and infrastructure. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, efforts to “fix” these communities—exemplified by programs of “urban renewal”—exacerbated these inadequa-ties, further sundering cities and people. Rejecting ill-defined “solutions” to ever-present American injustices, Reconstructions rethinks the scales through which architecture is rendered—and the means by which repair can flourish.

In extrapolating the conditions of the American built envi-ronment, the exhibition also, in part, underscores the ways in which American government and industry were made by design to delimit and ultimately diminish the role and presence of African American and African Diasporic communities. Through commissioned works by Black architects, artists, and design-ers as well as in this Field Guide of critical texts by writers and scholars, Reconstructions argues that American racial injustice is fundamentally spatial. Those stakes are all the higher in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others throughout the United States. The exhibition and this book provide critical platforms from which speculative architecture can aid in forms of redress, sown as it is within the means by which repair can flourish.

To facilitate the significant research and revaluations embodied in Reconstructions, the curatorial team—deftly led by Mabel O. Wilson, Nancy and George E. Rupp Professor of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, and Professor in African American and African Diaspora Studies at Columbia University, and Sean Anderson, Associate Curator in the Department of Architecture and Design, with Arièle Dionne-Krosnick, Curatorial Assistant—assembled an extraordinary advisory committee of scholars, writers, planners, lawyers, educators, activists, and architects who were essential not only in formulating the contexts and questions of the exhibition but also in determining the show’s eleven commissioned architects, artists, and designers. We are extremely grateful to Kevin Young, Executive Director of New York’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, for his contributions to these discussions. The Practicing Refusal Collective ( Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt, and Christina Sharpe, among others) likewise provided an essential touchstone from which the curatorial and architectural teams elucidated narratives of agency in an increasingly diffuse world.

To extend the ambitions of the exhibition and its projects, public panel discussions and community workshops were planned in Atlanta and Los Angeles, and in New York at MoMA PS1 in Queens. Students and members of local design communities were invited to join the exhibition contributors in open discus-sions on the stakes of devising a people’s architecture through the lens of Blackness today. (Unfortunately, those programs had to be canceled due to the pandemic.) We are grateful to the administrations and students of Georgia Tech, the consortium of Clark Atlanta University and Spelman and Morehouse Colleges, the University of Southern California, Woodbury University, and City College of New York, as well as to MoMA PS1, for their hopeful collaborations.

On behalf of the staff and trustees of the Museum, I would like to sincerely thank Allianz, MoMA’s lead partner for design and inno-vation, for making Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America possible. We would also like to express our gratitude to the Jon Stryker Endowment for its major support, and to the Leontine S. and Cornell G. Ebers Endowment for its generous support. Additional support is provided by The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. This publication is made possible by the Nancy Lee and Perry Bass Publications Endowment Fund.

Finally, we remain grateful to the commitment of every individ-ual listed here, as well as to MoMA’s staff and those individuals, past and present, whose voices and images continue to imagine building a world founded on integrity, equality, and respect.

Glen D. Lowery
The David Rockefeller Director
The Museum of Modern Art
Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America is a timely and ambitious meditation on why dismantling racism depends on transforming the built environment. It conjures iconic daguerreotypes of cities and towns reduced to rubble and refugees, reminders that the period of Reconstruction was very much about (re)building. Men and women once held as property were determined to reconstruct the nation under new democratic principles, new land tenure, a new racial order based on equality and access to power, and a built environment worthy of the new nation.

The “freedpeople” knew they weren’t truly free. Freedom was not handed down to them by the state or seized on their behalf by Radical Republicans. Freedom was aspirational. It had to be built slowly, deliberately, and defended at all costs. We know this from their dwellings. Black people built churches and schools, not just for worship and education but as gathering spaces for political organizing, as safe havens, and as barricades. And they defended these dwellings with their lives. Armed men and women took turns standing vigilant, always prepared to deal with the persistent threat of racial violence. Knowing that freedom without justice was impossible, Black men overwhelmingly sought elected or appointed office administering the criminal justice system. Black men whose bodies still carried the marks of slavery held positions as constables, judges, jury commissioners, justices of the peace, sheriffs, county magistrates, and even as jailers and prison wardens. They could have been the architects of a very different criminal justice system, but Jim Crow ensured their removal and installed a system of convict leasing, torture, fiffs, county magistrates, and even as jailers and prison wardens. They could have been the architects of a very different criminal justice system, but Jim Crow ensured their removal and installed a system of convict leasing, torture, lynchings, and ever more jails.

Reconstructions, in other words, reflects on what it means for a people determined to be free to build for freedom, to retrofit a hostile and deadly built environment for the protection and reproduction of Black life, and to create the conditions of possibility for genuine democracy for the whole nation, only to face the wrecking ball of racial capitalism. Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun is often misread as the story of a Black family in Chicago attaining the American dream, but it is actually about the struggle to democratize the United States by reconstructing the system governing entitlement to decent housing. The price of tearing down the walls of exclusion is equally dear, and throughout the play she celebrates Lena Younger, the family matriarch whose courage is unflappable. In response to one critic who dismissed the play’s conclusion as a conventional soap opera ending, Hansberry argued, “If he thinks that’s a happy ending, I invite him to live in one of the communities where the Youngers are going!” We know what comes next: a welcoming committee bearing bricks, bombs, and burning crosses, followed by white flight, home devaluation, and catastrophic loss of equity and tax revenue needed to pay for public schools and services—all incentivized by federal housing policies and real estate interests. The Youngers’ move marked not the end but the beginning of a new reconstruction—one that is still far from complete.

Of course, as Reconstructions makes clear, the work of “unbuilding” racism in the US was never about living next door to white folks. The most poignant experiments in a people’s architecture were conceived and built in the ghettos of America. The urban rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s sparked one of the greatest reconstruction movements in modern US history. Just two months after the Watts rebellion in Los Angeles in 1965, activists converted an abandoned furniture store on 103rd Street into the Watts Happening Coffee House, which later housed a Black cultural academy called the Mafundi Institute. On the same street, Black activists turned a burned-out Safeway supermarket into a 350-seat theater, which brought live, politically insurgent plays to the community until a Black FBI informant named Darhard Perry burned it to the ground in 1973. In Newark, following the 1967 rebellion, poet and activist Amiri Baraka and his organization, the Congress of African People, envisioned an ambitious urban redevelopment plan that included Kawaida Towers, a low- and middle-income apartment complex that would have not only provided safe, comfortable, and affordable housing to Black families but fostered a political culture committed to economic cooperation, education, and exposure to non-European art and culture. Kawaida Towers was to be equipped with a state-of-the-art 300-seat theater of survival. Life in a South Side tenement was dangerous and unhealthy, not just for the Youngers and other Black families trapped in the slums, but for the entire nation. Hansberry drives home the point that the nation pays a dear price for exclusion. Peace and prosperity cannot thrive in a country with second-class citizens. The price of tearing down the walls of exclusion is equally dear, and throughout the play she celebrates Lena Younger, the family matriarch whose courage is unflappable. In response to one critic who dismissed the play’s conclusion as...
theater, a lounge, a woodshop, exhibition spaces, a day care center, and a public kitchen. The architects tasked with realizing Itaraka’s (ultimately unrealized) vision were also responsible for transforming an abandoned Masonic temple in Newark into Hekalu Mwalimu (Swahili for “Temple of the Teacher”), which housed the Congress of African People’s various educational programs for children and adults, a community center, and a publishing house. Although CAP’s plan to reconstruct the city was backed by a multiracial coalition that included Puerto Ricans and whites, the organization’s plans were derailed by intense opposition from white residents, unions, the Housing Authority, and city officials.1

What would South Los Angeles or Newark look like if Black reconstruction had not been defeated? Or other cities where urban renewal, gentrification, and the subprime mortgage hustle have kept vulnerable Black communities in a constant state of precarity? What would post-Katrina New Orleans look like if Black reconstruction had prevailed? Would privatized charter schools still have replaced public education? Would we still have seen 4,500 units of public housing demolished, rents increased, and tens of thousands of displaced Black families unable to return home? Or the bulldozing of Faubourg Marigny, one of the oldest Black urban neighborhoods in the country, to create Interstate 10?2 Would earlier Black reconstruction efforts have permitted oil and chemical plants to operate alongside poor African American and Indigenous communities? Or the construction of the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet (MR-GO), an artificial channel created to shorten the navigation route for oil tankers that has destroyed New Orleans’s natural storm buffer?3 Or the construction of the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet (MR-GO), an artificial channel created to shorten the navigation route for oil tankers that has destroyed New Orleans’s natural storm buffer? Or the construction of the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet (MR-GO), an artificial channel created to shorten the navigation route for oil tankers that has destroyed New Orleans’s natural storm buffer? Or the construction of the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet (MR-GO), an artificial channel created to shorten the navigation route for oil tankers that has destroyed New Orleans’s natural storm buffer?

In the end, the defeat of Black reconstructions has imperiled not just Black communities but the entire planet. After all, Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities have been subject to environmental hazards created by racial capitalism since long before anyone declared a climate catastrophe. Racism explains why these communities have long lived near toxic waste dumps, freeways, bus barns, and oil and gas production facilities, with the attending injustices of industrial pollution, poverty, state-sanctioned and criminal violence, and lack of access to healthy food, clean drinking water, and safe affordable housing, among other things. This is why contemporary reconstruction movements—from Indigenous land protectors to the Movement for Black Lives, from Sankofa City to the Right to the City Alliance, from Detroit’s Freedom Freedom Farm to Mississippi’s Cooperation Jackson—are building for an ecologically sustainable future: planting community gardens, creating an empowered workforce, offering access to affordable childcare, running vacant lots and abandoned homes into energy-efficient low-income housing, and investing in community and conservation land trusts.

Black and Indigenous movements have tried for five centuries to make this a free and democratic land, to “unbuild” racism and restore balance to the planet. We’re running out of time. Our future depends on our ability to reconstruct this world. Fortunately, the architects and planners we’ve been waiting for are here. They’ve always been here. And this is their Field Guide.
Forged in the longue durée of the transatlantic slave trade, the architecture and planning of cities in the United States have been intimately linked to the dehumanizing commodification of African peoples as a labor force that cultivated the raw materials for industries to revolutionize and from which nations were born. Slavery promulgated concepts of “race” and racial difference that positioned white Europeans and Americans as far superior to other peoples and cultures around the world. Race as an aesthetic category shaped architectural design and history from its conceptualization in the Enlightenment to the present. But the continued presence and pervasiveness of anti-Black racisms in the American built environment signals that the promise of modernist codes for a “well-tempered society” and postmodernism’s appeal by means of “ordinary” pluralist forms have largely been rhetorical in nature. These spatial and social injustices—for example, historical failures in the design, construction, and management of housing and the violence prevalent in (revitalized) urban centers—also press upon questions of who constitutes the American “public” and who is afforded rights while others’ rights are diminished. Striking disparities in these rights—even basic access to water and shelter—have long existed, and the all-too-common sight of public housing and school buildings in disrepair exist as lasting reminders of racial determinants that were embedded in the early crafting of policies and the building of infrastructures that still determine where, how, why—and for whom—architecture is envisaged. The built environment, of which architecture is only a part, is a proving ground for how the lives of individuals and communities that for so long have been excluded can now be brought forth.

Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America awakens us to the many ways architecture, urbanism, and landscapes can promote collective justice for African Americans and African Diasporic communities throughout the US in the face of continual displacement and dispossession—from slavery through the period of Reconstruction to Jim Crow segregation, from the federally sanctioned “redlining” of neighborhoods beginning in the 1930s to the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007–9. Architecture cannot disavow its multiple grounds: of property, memory, and collective action. For Robin D. G. Kelley, “land is space, territory on which people can reconstruct their lives,” and may be understood as complementary to the quest for reparations, revitalizing movements for social justice. This Field Guide is both a companion to the exhibition and a bellwether for a movement in which the agency of architecture is used to amend the ways division has long been designed. Reconstructions asks, What does an architecture of redress and recovery look like for sites of racial disjunction—not only housing projects, partitioned schools, and prisons but America’s streets and playgrounds? Lateral to these sites of disinvestment and deprivation exist spaces of Black social life—kitchens, porches, street corners, gardens, and places of worship—

The door signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora. It accounts for the ways we observe and are observed as people, whether it’s through the lens of social injustice or the lens of human accomplishments. The door exists as an absence.
—Dionne Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return

I seemed to see a line, and on the other side of that line were green fields, and lovely flowers, and beautiful white ladies, who stretched out their arms to me over the line, but I couldn’t reach them no-how. I always fell before I got to the line.
—Harriet Tubman

Sean Anderson and Mabel O. Wilson

Toward Higher Standards of Living

There’s no way like the
American Way

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—Harriet Tubman
that are often unseen (or at least unquestioned) by designers and architects, yet they are resonant within literary works and popular culture. The house, the kitchen, the porch—while all emblematic of individual freedoms, of identities hard-won, of the intermingling of cultures and genders—can also quickly become suppressed in light of improvements. These spaces, too, were ultimately beset by acts of racial violence that unsettled the everyday lives of Black communities—the East Saint Louis Riots (May 28 and July 1–3, 1917), Tulsa’s Greenwood Massacre (May 31–June 1, 1921), the Rosewood Massacre in Levy County, Florida (January 1923), and contemporary equivalents like the Ferguson unrest (August 9–25, 2014) and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, which sparked Black Lives Matter protests across the nation. In these towns, Black families built “homeplaces”—for safety, affirmation, refuge, and resistance. These places, too, were ultimately beset by acts of racial violence that unsettled the everyday lives of Black communities—the East Saint Louis Riots (May 28 and July 1–3, 1917), Tulsa’s Greenwood Massacre (May 31–June 1, 1921), the Rosewood Massacre in Levy County, Florida (January 1923), and contemporary equivalents like the Ferguson unrest (August 9–25, 2014) and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, which sparked Black Lives Matter protests across the globe during May 26, 2020. For some, place-names suggest only distant signs that exist beyond memory and language, a fragile physical presence to remind one of what may have come before. They point to a nascent reckoning: for in their naming is the redress yet to come.

In the lineaments of African American architecture, forms and images are mobile, carried in the knapsacks of those traveling through the safe houses and way stations of the Underground Railroad or perhaps even earlier, in the Underground Railroad. Along these routes of the Great Migration—along the Underground Railroad, perhaps even earlier, in the Underground Railroad or perhaps even earlier, in the Underground Railroad or perhaps even earlier, in the Underground Railroad or perhaps even earlier, in the Underground Railroad.
of urban renewal tore through Black neighborhoods, dispersing residents far and wide. Meanwhile, the unprec- dented design and construction of a vast network of prisons for the profligate incarceration of Black men and women became the extension of yesterday’s ghettos and the legacy of antebellum plantations. Place-names unfold temporalities—foreclosing the ways in which entire communities are redrawn or erased as a means to remake national cartographies. The import of Reconstructions exceeds the exhibition and this guide. Yet both examine how architecture accounts for the perpetuation of multi- ple absences. What are the protocols of repair?

Practices of redlining and other government-mandated discriminatory practices, degraded transportation and infrastructural services, limited access to financial and educational institutions, and proximity to the dangers of environmental poisons are but some of the spatial symptoms of more than a century of segregation, disen- franchisement, and violence based on race. New mandates ignore the “disparate impact” of federal housing regula- tions that obdurately affect low-income communities. The inevitability of cycles of exclusion and poverty rooted in discriminatory architectures contributes to the contin- ued erosion of individual and collective rights. That each of these violations is conceived through the design of built and unbuilt worlds suggests that alternative tools and problematics that fundamentally root segregation- ist policies and thought within the making of the built environment. Race, the construct that underwrites white supremacy and propagates the subordination of the other, was spatialized from the beginnings of the US, and, as a consequence, its forms are continually renewed and strengthened by, and often complementary to, inescapable cycles of false assimilation and impoverishment. Through eminent domain, redlining, and urban renewal, divisions by race and class were created with intent and by design. The so-called “inner city” was but a refraction of wider spread social ills and the condensation of racial tensions found outside of cities. Ghettoization was not a place but a deliberative process. The two-ness of Black life is embedded within an architecture positioned as an articulation of shared values and identities.

Blackness, in all of its complexity, captured the imagi- nation of modern artists, as well as architects like the Swiss-born Le Corbusier, who held a sublime reverence for Harlem Lindy Hoppers as a primal machine-like “energy” akin to the vertiginous modern skyscraper. Yet, while Blackness proved foundational to modernism’s imaginary, in MoMA’s ninety-two-year history, Black architects and designers—like the exceptional talents of Vertner Tandy, Paul R. Williams, Amaza Lee Meredith, and J. Max Bond Jr.—have had little to no purchase in its exhibitions or presence within its unparalleled collection of modernism. Among broader architectural histories, the scope of discussion on race as a component of the design and representation of the built environment has remained limited. The history of Black architects and designers was superseded in the academic imagination by a dominant formalist and stylistic concern for an “International Style” of modernism that favored those who design and pay to build, with little interest taken in those for whom building was an extension of their own labor.

This absence is not uncommon when surveying the historiographic contours of architectural or museologi- cal discourses writ broadly. Indeed, in discussions about reparations as a response to the afterlives of slavery—the effects of which are still reverberating in the expansion of American cities and towns—the concept of redress is fundamental to a questioning of the nation. As journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates has written, “To celebrate freedom and democracy while forgetting America’s origins in a slavery economy is patriotism à la carte.”

Above, left: Temple of Beauty, National Architecture Exhibition, New York, 1913, Published in The Crisis, November 1913
Above, right: Hilyard Robinson. Langston Toothman Dwellings, Washington, DC, 1942–46
Opposite, left: Living room in an apartment in Riverton Houses, Harlem, New York, c. 1947
Opposite, right: Riverton Houses, Harlem, New York, c. 1947

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.... He simply wishes to make it possi- ble for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.7

Given such apposite constructions of a United States, a sense of disjuncture and loss—of thwarted attempts to locate oneself in an America not necessarily made for you but nonetheless built by you and your ancestors— pervades, from the first words of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, “We the people,” to the last words of a 1926 poem by Langston Hughes, “I, too, am America,” and beyond. Slavery barbarically rendered Blackness, Saidiya Hartman has written, “as the mark of object status and whiteness licensing the proprietorship of self.” For in between these histories are a succession of events and problems that fundamentally root segregation- ist policies and thought within the making of the built environment. The ambition of the exhibition is not to provide mono- lithic “solutions.” Rather, the participants were encour- aged to envision strategies concerning language, struc- tures, and visuality through proposed interventions sited in public, semi-public, and private contexts and expressed through valences of Blackness.

Articulating Blackness in Architecture

If the US government failed in the wake of slavery to successfully account for and address the historical injustices to Black communities—communities that it actively sought to push to the margins—then Reconstructions seeks to recenteer discourses of architect- ure in America around histories of Blackness. In its framing, the exhibition attempts a spatial articulation of what W. E. B. Du Bois decried as Black America’s “two- ness.” In The Souls of Black Folk, he writes,8

Reconstructions exposes these understudied narratives to foster critical questions on how notions of Blackness per- vade the contemporary American built environment. Writ- ing about how social relationality diverges from identity, cultural historian Saidiya Hartman argues that “Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation; it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle.” The ambition of the exhibition is not to provide mono- lithic “solutions.” Rather, the participants were encour- aged to envision strategies concerning language, struc- tures, and visuality through proposed interventions sited in public, semi-public, and private contexts and expressed through valences of Blackness.

18

19
Building a Field Guide

Contemporary anti-Black racism has as much to do with the writing of laws that disenfranchise millions as it does with the production of spaces that actively seek to further the premises of a shared history of racial difference and the material excesses of racism. Observed together, the proposed interventions transcend the limits of architecture to assert one’s contribution toward a shared history of belonging and a recuperation of humanity. In 2020, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic further reified the boundaries inscribed on redlining maps between those who live and those who die, underscoring the precarity of America’s social contract. Returning to Du Bois, who writes that the most significant problem of the twentieth century was the “color line,” what might be said of those traces of the self-governing Black communities of Mound Bayou in Mississippi, Nicodemus in Kansas, Eatonville in Florida, Allensworth in California, and Seneca Village in New York City? We read these name-places and conjure the lives that inhabited the porches and kitchens, the jail joints and schoolrooms, law offices and churches beyond the lines, not because of it. And through these names we are able to retrace histories that speak to human cruelty, unspeakable depredation, and imperial misadventure, while also securing—with unlimited promise—the prospect to think about, design, and build spaces of resistance and refusal, imagination and liberation.

Blackness materializes spatial narratives insasmuch as it catalyzes an assertion of identities. This Field Guide is conceived as a collection of essays—that when enmeshed with David Harrit’s suite of photographs On Excruciate in Science (Watts), which is extended in the exhibition by the artist’s 2020 filmic portrait of Watts—reinforces the historical, discursive, and descriptive contexts of the architectural projects. The American city, for the exhibition and this guide, has been apprehended as both an archive and a lexicon for living in the American city is established. Locating one’s future (and failure) in and among the remnants of a not-so-distant past is possible through the stratified immersive environments of Olalekan Jeyifous and Emanuel Admassu. Blackness emerges as both an origin for and embodied within spatial languages that haunt the architectural forms of the present.

A conjuring of scales, historical research, and projective interventions transcends the limits of architecture to assert one’s contribution toward a shared history of belonging and a recuperation of humanity. In 2020, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic further reified the boundaries inscribed on redlining maps between those who live and those who die, underscoring the precarity of America’s social contract. Returning to Du Bois, who writes that the most significant problem of the twentieth century was the “color line,” what might be said of those traces of the self-governing Black communities of Mound Bayou in Mississippi, Nicodemus in Kansas, Eatonville in Florida, Allensworth in California, and Seneca Village in New York City? We read these name-places and conjure the lives that inhabited the porches and kitchens, the jail joints and schoolrooms, law offices and churches beyond the lines, not because of it. And through these names we are able to retrace histories that speak to human cruelty, unspeakable depredation, and imperial misadventure, while also securing—with unlimited promise—the prospect to think about, design, and build spaces of resistance and refusal, imagination and liberation.

7. 2010 marked fifty years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1960, otherwise known as the Fair Housing Act. While the bill initially prohibited long-standing unconstitutional practices prohibiting against individuals based on race in the pursuit of housing, landlords, local jurisdictions, and the federal government circumvented the ruling through various measures to ensure that discriminatory practices continued in every area.
8.(slavery and the federal government circumvented the ruling through various measures to ensure that discriminatory practices continued in every area.
REFUSAL

Christina Sharpe

Part I: The Shape Makes...

I begin with Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* and the sermon given by Baby Suggs (holy) in the Black gathering space known as the Clearing. In that “wide-open space cut deep in the woods,” Baby Suggs gathers together the community of Black women, men, and children—the formerly enslaved and the nominally free—and tells them they must love their flesh and love it hard because yonder they do not love it. “She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory-bound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. . . . That if they could not see it, they would not have it,” and with that, a liberatory imagination and its bodily architecture are summoned in the Clearing. Morrison lands her readers squarely in the power of the imagination. How else did the abducted Africans and their enslaved and then nominally free generations make freedom out of absolute unfreedom? How else did they—how else do we—navigate the spaces of “the long emancipation”?1 How else do we usher something other than the current deathly order into being? In her sculptural work and abstract paintings, contemporary artist Torkwase Dyson, like Baby Suggs before her, activates that Black liberatory imagination, summoning its bodily architectures using a series of forms—models, drawings, maquettes—as she theorizes and visualizes ways of moving through geographies of unfreedom. Dyson calls this movement Black Compositional Thought, “a working term that considers how paths, throughways, waterways, architecture, objects, and geographies are composed by black bodies, and then how additional properties of energy, space, scale, and sound all work together in networks of liberation.”2 Thinking through geographies of capture, segregation, and resistance, Dyson says that “if we are to understand the Middle Passage, we are to also understand the ocean as geography. If we are to understand water as a geographic site, then we can also understand the ships that were built to enslave and transport people as a kind of architecture . . . [that] evolved over the years specifically to house black bodies.”3 When Dyson says “the shape makes the Black,” she means that “Blackness” is made and remade in location, in the line of the coffle, in the circle of the shackle, in the curve of the hull, in the plane of the rough board, in the porthole of the ship. If a shape makes, it can also unmake—if a shape can confine, it can also liberate. Dyson’s work pushes us to think how and what architectures make, to think through how forms and shapes function, how we construct and are constructed by them. Her work pushes us further to engage abstraction as, say, the violences of the ledger and its brutal calculations and also as a set of ifs, of possibility, as breath and breadth, as dimension and room.

Part II: If

If—supposition, hypothesis, possibility, requirement, stipulation
— a location, to live in if, to live as if
— to live (as if) in a future time
— as if . . . Black living was not interdicted, as if the streets were not militarized and organized against Black life, Black gathering, Black being, Black breath, Black habitation.

To live as if there is enough.

Black Compositional Thought is one means by which to understand and unmake the violently anti-Black world in which Black people encounter, transform, shape, and are shaped by a series of ifs—noun and conjunction. We move in the wake and the weather—of the ship, the plantation, the coffle, the penitentiary, the kitchenette, the tenement, the slum, the ghetto, the refugee camp, the skyscraper.6 Shaped by the spaces and places arrayed, constructed, and organized against Black life, we seek out and make new geographies (temporary and provisional) that are able to hold (as in cradle, as in catch) but not enclose that life. If we are persistent, if we are cunning, if we are organized, if we are idle, if we are recalcitrant, undisciplined, and joyous, and even if we do not survive, we encounter and perhaps move through spaces of enclosure using the navigational tools fashioned out of duress, stricture, memory, beauty, cooperation, and the desire for and knowledge of freedom. What spaces might be available to meet Black life with care, to join Black life with the habitable, to facilitate all our wide and beautiful ambitions? Where might the building be other or more than just the place where [I] stay? What shape might it take? Where might the coordinates be?

1 View of Torkwase Dyson and the Wyter-Wells School. Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago, 2018
Kaba’s if we look right at the thing that is happening in front of our nose directs us to a particular line of vision, to an alignment of site and sight, to the ways that we might and should understand the if—and stay with that if as we think out our way through and to what “repair” or “unbuilding” or “reconstructing” the racist, anti-Black, white settler colonial city would look and sound like if one was attuned to sustaining, really sustaining, Black life. It is not a reme- diating if or a disciplining if. It is an if that insists that the answers are right before us and that everything needed to live abolition is already being lived. To live as it is, in a city without policing, a city without prisons, a city without zones of despair, a city with free and good public transpor-tation for all, with free and good public education, or plenty of green spaces, with drinkable water, a city in which everyone has health care and access to fresh food and air, a city in which housing is a right. Kaba reminds us that our imagining otherwise of these spaces and ways of being together must not submit to the brutal and ecocidal imaginaries of the parcelled-out present.

A vital refusal to submit to these cruel logics emerged in 2019, when several Black women, “homeless and marginally housed” formed a collective they called Moms4Housing and began organizing against the eviction of two Moms 4 Housing activists, some of whom gathered in the yard and attempted to provide round-the-clock protection.

Through their acts of resistance and reclaiming, the women activated an alternative present, insisting that: “We won’t stop until everyone is housed.” And also that: “We’re not going anywhere. We deserve to be here.” But at great cost. The city responded with force and might, sending in militarized police to evict them brutally, disposing of their possessions on the street in the rain—and made them unhoused again. But the women also summoned a possible future. Wedgewood has since agreed that a community land trust will have right of first refusal to purchase the company’s properties in Oakland—now and into the future. In this holy Clearing, the flesh is loved, and justice is humane.

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Part III: Monument, Memorial.

... before any of us even break into the work of our absence in the memorial,
we have been conquered,
fingers still jagged
from battle,
and age go on
and we age
into nocturne.
—Canius Libritin, “Final Prayer in the Cathedral of the Immundate Conception II”

Dedicated to more than 4,400 victims of spectacle lynch-ing in twelve states, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, was born of a prolifer-ation of building within twenty-first-century America of monuments and memorials imagined as key to a kind of national repair—as pathways to reparation (if x, then y) or national repair—as pathways to reparation (if x, then y) or national repair—as pathways to reparation (if x, then y) or national repair—as pathways to reparation (if x, then y). Dedicated to more than 4,400 victims of spectacle lynch-ing in twelve states, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, was born of a proliferation of building within twenty-first-century America of monuments and memorials imagined as key to a kind of national repair—as pathways to reparation (if x, then y). Dedicated to more than 4,400 victims of spectacle lynch-ing in twelve states, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, was born of a proliferation of building within twenty-first-century America of monuments and memorials imagined as key to a kind of national repair—as pathways to reparation (if x, then y). Dedicated to more than 4,400 victims of spectacle lynch-ing in twelve states, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, was born of a proliferation of building within twenty-first-century America of monuments and memorials imagined as key to a kind of national repair—as pathways to reparation (if x, then y). Dedicated to more than 4,400 victims of spectacle lynch-ing in twelve states, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, was born of a proliferation of building within twenty-first-century America of monuments and memorials imagined as key to a kind of national repair—as pathways to reparation (if x, then y).

That equation—monument/memorial = repair or its hori-zon—is particularly significant in the face of unrelenting anti-Blackness and the planned disrepair and infrastruc-tural failure evidenced by deteriorating living condi-tions, environmental degradation, resource extraction, the dislocation and decimation of Black communities through Black land and property theft, the absolute and criminal failure to ensure clean water, the refusal of safe shelter despite abundant housing, the marginalization of Black political demand on its own and against ongoing and resurgent white supremacy, and so on. These dire conditions risk being made illegible by the celebratory narrativization of monuments and memorials to a terrible past that is not yet past—a past that we know continues to materially and psychically structure our present. In the face of Black people’s continued eviction from the cate-gory of the human, we should not mistake the erection of the monument or memorial for repair, or for the end horizon of something like justice or the fulfillment of something like liberation.

No matter the intention, every monument or memorial to atrocities against Black people already contains its failure. Because they are projects of reform and not radical proj-ects, they do not imagine new worlds. They stage encoun-ter. But for whom? Who is the subject seen to be coming to terms with an ongoing brutality imagined as past and then reimagined as an aesthetic project? Who are the sub-jects imagined as witness and participant in the encoun-ter, and who is imagined as being moved by the encounter and to what end? How is such movement facilitated or inhibited by its architectures? The monument or memorial is a staged encounter in which the terrible grammars of the past, though disrupted, still remain.

The I, the we, the us, the our that monuments and memo-rials employ as narrative devices often require a certain innocence about the violence of nation—or a belief in nation, a commitment to reforming nation. One is asked to assume a particular position upon entering the space; asked to embrace memorial narratives that offer Black suffering as a pathway to knowledge, national and “racial” healing, reparation, and reconciliation; asked to embrace narratives that acknowledge violence but present that vio-lence as anomalous and intermittent and not foundational and ever-present.

The architecture of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, with its weathering steel monoliths seeming to bleed, hanging above the heads of those who enter the pavilion, refuses to materially account for the contempo-rary experiences of subjugation in the lives of many Black people. While it is aesthetically beautiful and in many ways profoundly moving, to enter the pavilion is to submit...
to an exercise in terror—to participate in an exercise in bodily vulnerability.

In contradistinction, Torkwase Dyson’s works resist this terror toward a critical fabulation and close narration in which the languages of architecture (line, space, shape, grid) abstract the forms of what can be measured, what cannot be measured, and an imagining from within a circle (as figure, as community). For Dyson, abstraction is a rubric and not a destination—she is rearticulating a history and a past not yet past. She is “unkeeping history” by moving into the if—if we work from the memorialization that is not monumental; if we take as subject that which we know to be true; if . . .

Two paintings from Dyson’s Strange Fruit series, Hé She and She Hé (2015), have been built up over time, layer upon layer—a painterly process that points to how lives are built up and that also works to both see and make Blackness in space and in relation. Dyson’s paintings offer us different points of view of their time together in geographic space.

Dyson, Kaha, Moms 4 Housing, and each of the architects, artists, and designers of Reconstructions open us to the multiple urgencies facing Black people and then invite us to inhabit it’s possible and expansive and otherworldly architectures. Even as the cities and towns in which we live are increasingly financialized—and aligned more with capital and its reductive logics—Black architect, Black building, and their radical companions just might carve out disjunctive, asynchronous spaces in which an architecture of Black living unfolds and gathers.

In contrast to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Dyson’s paintings are representational and nonfigurative. But unlike the National Memorial, they imagine an if of space and no-space. Using a representational mode borrowed from the language of landscape architecture in plan, Dyson paints circles to indicate the trees from which a man and a woman—invoking thousands of Black people—were hung. But the circles also map a more psychological landscape: the trees they stood under for relief from the heat, to rest and talk, to think or have a moment of solitude or togetherness. The paintings are, I think, a kind of geographical heat map in which the circle is also an exchange of energy, a space of intramural regard, a space of the couple’s co-imagining.

Dyson is interested in what can be known and what cannot be known, in breath and lips. The places in the paintings where the paint runs and the circles overlap are moments where multiple Lynchings occurred at the same time and over time, but they are also where that man and that woman touched, embraced, and kissed; spaces where they worked the land and rested and moved. The two paintings offer us different points of view of their time together in geographic space.

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Opposite: Left: Torkwase Dyson, Strange Fruit (Hé She), 2015. Acrylic on board, 60 × 60” (152.4 × 152.4 cm). Right: Torkwase Dyson, Strange Fruit (She Hé), 2015. Acrylic on board, 60 × 60” (152.4 × 152.4 cm).

Above: Charles Gaines, Number and Trace IV, Minimal 1985. Acrylic sheet, acrylic paint, watercolor silkscreen, photograph, 65% in. x 38 1/2 in. (165.4 x 98.1 cm).
If architecture is a discipline that encloses space, making it measurable and exploitable, the spatial practices that work in the Black radical tradition exist outside of architecture, as refusals of measurability. Such refusals manifest themselves in the carving out of temporal zones of liberation within various realms of suppression. AD–WO’s installation addresses the pervasive systems of displacement and containment that impinge upon the sanctity of Black life, from the floor of the Atlantic to the ordinary environments of Atlanta.

My interest in the inseparability of the Atlantic from Atlanta is partially autobiographical, informed by my displacement from Addis Ababa to a northern suburb of Atlanta as a teenager. Both cities have rich histories of radical resistance to white supremacy, yet they maintain paradoxical attachments to both Blackness and capitalism, preserving wealth disparities while propagating examples of exceptionalism.

AD–WO’s installation is made up of two disks, each six feet in diameter, one horizontal and one vertical. The vertical disk evokes our racialized planetary entanglements through a drawing of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, which is a natural canyon, a planetary scar on the ocean floor, a metaphor for the violence that undergirds the extractive logic binding Africa to America. The Mid-Atlantic Ridge is a space of disappearance that has witnessed an incalculable loss of Black life, from the Door of No Return to the port of Savannah, where Eli Whitney patented the cotton gin.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, prior to the gin’s arrival, the state of Georgia was divided—like the vast and heterodox continent of Africa—into nations but, rather, counties with varying densities of enslaved Africans. The maps measuring these concentrations illustrate the intimacies between bodies, cotton, and land, quantifying the ever-expanding definitions of property. After settlers cleared the forest, Savannah was divided into twenty-four squares, marking the brutal transition from the open communality of Indigenous caregivers to the violent enclosures of Europeans. Scars in the form of train tracks extended the port of Savannah to the hinterlands, establishing the city of Atlanta.

The Mid-Atlantic Ridge is also a site of movement and formation, a space that prefigures a global Black aesthetic. Disrupting the ocean floor, it presents a non-static zone of immersion, a space that “holds bodies and populations together by tearing them apart.” It is a topography that was an escape from the hold and manifests as a sectional inversion of it, signifying the slow erosion of confinement systems that attempt to fix and solidify Blackness. It is a vector, a non-site. Much like the vibrant spaces of Atlanta, its significance can never be fully captured by colonial metrics that apply mathematics to the material and digital realms of Blackness.

In an episode in the second season of Donald Glover’s TV show Atlanta, Alfred Miles (played by Brian Tyree Henry), gets lost in the woods after fleeing from a violent confrontation. The camera cuts to a bird’s-eye view and continues to soar upward, revealing the ubiquitous green canopy that covers much of Metro Atlanta. A further expansion of this view would have revealed the spaces of Black quotidian life that emerge as clearings within the horizontal patchwork of trees: strip malls, gas stations, ravines, embankments, parking lots, and cul-de-sacs. The diffusion of the woods and the built environment provides temporal spaces for meditation and concealment beyond state surveillance and other enclosures implemented by racial capital.

The installation’s horizontal disk explores these sites of diffusion by zooming into the scale of the city, floating above an inverted cone, projecting ambient sounds of Atlanta (one minute for every hour of the day): sounds of the forest and the highway layered with fragments of trap music. Black sand flows across the top of the disk, through and around a dense forest, vehicles, people, and buildings cast out of black sand. These are the blurred movements that frame the fugitivity of Black spatial practices while emphasizing the mythological nature of the Atlantan woods. A constellation of images on the walls of the gallery present a landscape that is both mythical and ordinary. The spaces depicted do not qualify as Architecture because they are not strictly tethered to power and capital. They anticipate the contextual reframing that is emblematic of a city where
Digital collage

Digital drawing
This project could not have been done without the impeccable skill, dedication, and brilliance of Arielle Dionne-Kronick. We have been through it all together these past years. Your incisive humility has made your every contribution—to all of our projects—that much more grounded, eloquent, and powerful.

Finally, Reconstructions would not have been possible without the “good trouble” of the eleven practitioners, as individuals and as a collective, who, alongside our families, colleagues, and friends, share in this book as much as those who came before them and likewise dedicated their energies and visionary thinking to ensuring the freedoms inherent in substantive change.

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