
DESIGNING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Architects are taught to think about architecture in terms of beauty and utility. But should architecture—and the profession itself—also be judged by how it supports or diminishes social justice?

The built environment is one of the most obvious expressions of social injustice in society. Injustices of the past were explicit in specific building features, including separate entrances for Black patrons of spaces such as restaurants, movie theaters, and train stations. Remnants of this legacy persist. In 2018 a Brooklyn high-rise developer planned for a separate “poor door” lobby for its low-income tenants until community residents objected.

In 1934, when Black architect Charles S. Duke submitted the first proposal to build low-cost housing on the South Side of Chicago, it was rejected by federal agencies. After extensive lobbying by local groups, the Chicago Housing Authority built the Ida B. Wells Homes—a project in which Duke and other Black architects, including Beverly Greene, the nation’s first Black female architect, were eventually allowed to participate. Initially offering affordable public housing for Black residents who were restricted from living in Chicago’s white housing developments, it suffered decades of disinvestment and neglect and was ultimately demolished in 2002.

But limited justice could be found in the projects led by Black architects, who have long pursued the goal of an inclusive and socially aware built environment conceived in accord with just principles. In 1938 Amaza Lee Meredith, founder of the art department at the Virginia State College for Negroes (now Virginia State University) and architect of Azurest South, a noteworthy International Style house in Petersburg, developed Azurest North, together with her sister Maude Terry. The Black housing enclave in New York’s Sag Harbor became a thriving community in an area previously off limits to African Americans. In 2019 the site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The struggle for social justice in architecture is painfully obvious in the history of these spaces, and in the history of Black architects who first had to fight an unjust society before they could ever practice. Even one hundred years after the end of the Civil War, most Black Americans who wanted to become architects could only enroll in schools of architecture established at Black colleges and universities. In 1963 Harvey Gantt became the first Black architecture graduate

from Clemson University in South Carolina—only after successfully suing the university to be admitted.

In the mid-1960s the aspiration for social justice formed the basis of community design centers such as ARCH (Architects’ Renewal Committee in Harlem), which advocated for more Black architects and worked to ensure that the city’s plans for local communities were vetted by allies in the profession. In 1971 a group of Black architects assembled at the American Institute of Architects convention in Detroit, and within the year they had formed the National Organization of Black Architects (NOBA), now the National Organization of Minority Architects, or NOMA, which continues to challenge racism in the profession to this day.

J. Max Bond Jr., a NOMA member who once led ARCH, designed cultural touchstones such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. Bond continually sought opportunities to inject social justice into architecture. Once asked why he had insisted on a masonry facade for a Harlem office tower instead of the expected glass and steel, he responded: “To provide work opportunities for black sub-contractors shut out of glass and metal trade unions.”¹

In 2009 the team that Bond assembled, led by Black architects Phil Freelon and David Adjaye, was selected to design the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. In the decade since, Black architects across the country have continued to create successful practices—like Moody Nolan, the largest African American–owned and managed design firm in the US—that confirm generations of perseverance in the face of racism and discrimination. Yet today less than 2 percent of the country’s 116,000 architects—approximately 2,300—are African American.²

Representation is meaningful, and a plurality of architects from historically marginalized groups could begin to reshape our social and built structures and reteach the terms by which architecture is assessed. While the concept of justice may be the hallmark of the socially conscious architect of today, more elusive evidence of injustice—whether in the built environment or in practice—is often overlooked. A continued push toward social justice in architecture must be encouraged, and architects must be part of the growing movement in society that seeks to eradicate injustice wherever it is found.

Robert Wilson speaking at a meeting of the National Organization of Black Architects (NOBA) in Houston, 1972

1. Bond offered this in response to a question from a community board member during a presentation of the design.

2. First published as a hard copy in 1991, the research project of two University

of Cincinnati faculty members has since morphed into an online database constantly updated with the names and locations of licensed African American architects. This percentage is extrapolated from that data. See <https://blackarchitect.us>.

FABRICATING NETWORKS: TRANSMISSIONS AND RECEPTIONS FROM PITTSBURGH'S HILL DISTRICT

Felecia Davis



Collaboration, reciprocity, and shared creation defines the practice of mutual aid. . . . The mutual aid society survived the Middle Passage and its origins might be traced to traditions of collectivity, which flourished in the stateless societies that preceded the breach of the Atlantic and perdured in its wake. . . . It made good the ideals of the commons, the collective, the ensemble, the always-more-than-one of existing in the world.

—Saidiya Hartman¹

This project holds the possibility of reconstructing architectural practice through collaboration and co-construction with Pittsburgh artists to allow a new, multilayered reality to emerge within a new architecture built by means of mutual aid. We seek to fabricate networks of people through face-to-face encounters and on electromagnetic waves, using digital information technologies. The networking transpires via a metaphorical two-part antenna that uses computational textiles—textiles that can sense and respond to bodies or to the environment by means of embedded electronics and sensors or using the natural properties of the textile itself—to communicate information.

There are two computational textiles at work in this project. The first, a transmitter, is a touch-activated quilt with attached speakers (see, e.g., p. 58). The quilt panels display photographs from the 1950s and '60s, the era of “urban renewal” in the Lower Hill District in Pittsburgh. Touch the quilt panel’s copper fabric to hear a story related to the image. Members of the community are invited to add their own panels and recorded stories to the quilt over the course of this exhibition and after.

The second, a receiver (seen in the exhibition), is a knitted cone that acts as a low-tech antenna. Composed of yarn and wire and a microcontroller, the cone is a textile palimpsest bearing layers of stories about the Hill District. The project’s second network, this receiver links to an invisible urbanism floating above and through the city on electromagnetic waves. These waves are a new global ocean, and traversing it in our everyday practices is as perilous as the Atlantic crossings of the Middle Passage. Will *all* bodies be slaves in these global waters? Who will be seen and who will not? What new but invisible boundaries are being constructed in this electromagnetic city?

All bodies lie in its wake. So there is wake work to be done on this new ocean that is fast shaping our lives. By “wake work” I mean (following Christina Sharpe) analysis and reimagining of new ways to live, to thrive, after an unimaginable life of slavery.² The antenna is a symbol, when used for good, that makes visible the electromagnetic waves that connect us across time and space. It is a sculptural marker for the invisible city that reaches outward, that allows us to transcend the boundaries that are meant to keep us contained.

Pittsburgh’s Hill District, like many Black neighborhoods, has numerous empty lots—some large, some small—that one can occupy. They are vestiges of massive urban renewal (or, as James Baldwin sardonically put it, “negro removal”) projects from the late 1950s and '60s. The Hill District rises eastward from the flat of Downtown Pittsburgh and its Cultural District, where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers meet. It sits on a steep cord of land between the two rivers, flanked on either side by flatlands along their banks. These flats are home to the Strip District to the north along the Allegheny and Uptown to the south along the Monongahela. The Hill District, most easily traversed lengthwise by its east-west arteries (e.g., Bedford, Wylie, Webster, and Centre Avenues), is cut off from Pittsburgh’s downtown by a steep rise and by Interstate 579. A long, sharply falling greenbelt separates the District on the Northside. Thus, the landscape of the Hill District defines a geographic space that is less connected to the rest of the city than one would expect.

In addition to these natural barriers, Home Owner’s Lending Corporation maps—instruments of redlining dating back to the 1930s—further delineated spaces designed for the containment of Black bodies in Pittsburgh. Redlining maps were a tool for upholding the property values of white neighborhoods by restricting African Americans and other ethnic groups to areas deemed less valuable—and therefore vulnerable to further degradation and upheaval as the preferred sites for transportation and urban development projects. One sign of these processes at work is the ubiquitous highway overpass that segregates Black neighborhoods from the rest of the urban fabric in cities across the country, including Pittsburgh. Beginning in the late 1950s, the Lower Hill, adjacent to the Downtown Cultural District—once one of the most vibrant African American

Aerial view of Pittsburgh’s Civic Arena and adjacent Hill District, Uptown, and Oakland neighborhoods, c. 1961–71



neighborhoods in America—was deemed “blighted,” and the city invoked eminent domain to raze vast swaths of homes and businesses to make way first for a Civic Center at the base of the Hill and later for I-579. The local political establishment made promises to the residents who remained in other Hill District neighborhoods as a kind of exchange for the land. Concurrent with the construction of the Civic Center in the early 1960s, a housing complex designed by I. M. Pei, Washington Plaza (now City View Apartments), was built at Crawford Street and Centre Avenue. However, no other amenities were provided for displaced (primarily Black) residents, who were driven to the upper reaches of the Hill District or to the Northside, across the Allegheny. In 1969, those who remained in the area rioted, marched, raised their voices in protest against further development in their community and to demand affordable housing. Their meeting place at Crawford and Centre has now been designated Freedom Corner. During the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s scattered vacant sites were purchased in the District for affordable housing. The great domed—and doomed—Civic Center that went up in the early 1960s came down in 2012, leaving twenty-eight acres of emptiness in the heart of the city.

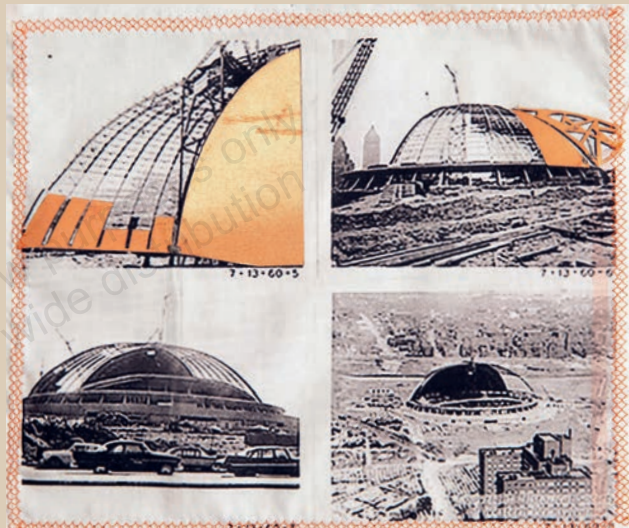
This is Pittsburgh’s ugly scar.

Today, Hill District leadership and residents are negotiating with developers to shape what will eventually replace the twenty-eight acres of parking currently occupying the site of the old Civic Center. Still, the question remains: Will old habits and behaviors—now subtler, more hidden—yield results similar to those of the urban renewal projects of the 1960s? Can this place be co-constructed? What networks are being established for healing? Building in that empty space is an opportunity to reimagine, to dream a new world order. A new fabric could emerge.

1. Saidiya Hartman, “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (July 2018): 471.

2. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 18.

Above: Felecia Davis, *Fabricating Networks Quilt* (detail: reverse side showing circuits). 2020. Digital prints on cotton broadcloth, copper ripstop nylon, stainless steel thread, cotton thread, 40 × 30" (101.6 × 76.2 cm) overall



Top left: Felecia Davis. *Fabricating Networks Quilt* (detail: woman and children sewing). 2020. Digital prints on cotton broadcloth, copper ripstop nylon, stainless steel thread, cotton thread, 40 x 30" (101.6 x 76.2 cm) overall. Photograph: Charles "Teenie" Harris. *Woman sewing at Singer machine with two girls and a boy in domestic interior*. c. 1958

Top right: Felecia Davis. *Fabricating Networks Quilt* (detail: women in sewing class). 2020. Digital prints on cotton broadcloth, copper ripstop nylon, stainless steel thread, cotton thread, 40 x 30" (101.6 x 76.2 cm) overall. Photograph: Charles "Teenie" Harris. *Group of young women, including two women hand sewing on right, gathered at long desks in classroom interior with sewing machine and chalkboard with sewing terms*. c. 1961

Bottom left: Felecia Davis. *Fabricating Networks Quilt* (detail: empty lot, Wylie Avenue Hill District). 2020. Digital prints on cotton broadcloth, copper ripstop nylon, stainless steel thread, cotton thread, 40 x 30" (101.6 x 76.2 cm) overall. Photograph: Charles "Teenie" Harris. *Two women, one holding hat box, standing in front of empty lot between two brick buildings with trash and rubble, 2100 block of Wylie Avenue, Hill District*. 1960

Bottom right: Felecia Davis. *Fabricating Networks Quilt* (detail: four views of Civic Arena under construction). 2020. Digital prints on cotton broadcloth, copper ripstop nylon, stainless steel thread, cotton thread, 40 x 30" (101.6 x 76.2 cm) overall





Opposite: Felecia Davis. *Fabricating Networks Quilt* (detail: scenes from Pittsburgh). 2020. Digital print on cotton broadcloth, copper ripstop nylon, copper tape, cotton thread, stainless steel conductive thread, LilyPad microcontroller mp3 chip, speakers, battery, 40 × 30" (101.6 × 76.2 cm) overall

Above: Felecia Davis. *Fabricating Networks Quilt* (detail: antenna and electronic shadow). 2020. Digital prints on cotton broadcloth, copper ripstop nylon, stainless steel thread, cotton thread, 40 × 30" (101.6 × 76.2 cm) overall