
ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Why Justice in Design Is Critical to Repairing America
Racial inequity is historically and literally built into the country's
landscape—here's how we can begin to fix that

Meaghan O'Neill



An impoverished section of Albany, New York. Photo: Denis Tangney, Jr. / Getty Images

In 2016, when Michelle Obama addressed the nation during a live broadcast from the Democratic National Convention, she said, “I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves.” Some listeners applauded her bold remarks, others were shocked; still others held out in their disbelief. There’s no question, however, that one of the very emblems of our nation, the White House—the seat of the highest office in the land, and arguably the world—was built using enslaved labor. Even if most history books don’t address it.

In so many ways, the built environment expresses who we are culturally and signals who holds power—those who have the money to make decisions can transform their ideas into their material surroundings. Since before the United States of America was even a nation, it was being constructed around a European worldview that was built on a hierarchy of racial inequity, explains [Mabel O. Wilson](#), a professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. As it grew, the U.S. constructed an image of its history through a particular lens, while disregarding its conquest of Indigenous people and its use of enslaved labor.

Building that identity of whiteness, says Wilson, “gives meaning to the culture—and all of that had to be invented,” which has informed our society, our systems, and even our democracy. “It’s not just about a feeling; it’s what builds the modern world,” adds the architect and author, who recently co-

edited *Race and Modern Architecture*, which traces the discipline back to the Enlightenment. Today, racism and inequity are quite literally built into our culture.

For some of us, recognizing that revered emblems of our country actually represent the exploitation of one race for the benefit of another is difficult to hear and hard to admit; this inequity will be even tougher to repair. Yet acknowledging past injustice is a crucial step in rethinking, reframing, and restoring justice. “What would it mean to have an open conversation about people who are willing to talk about it that way?” asks Wilson.

A complex network of discriminatory policy and planning.



Public housing in Chicago.
Photo: Via Getty Images

From Colonial-era and post–Civil War land grabs to 20th-century legal loopholes, a complex and purposeful network of American policy and planning has wittingly increased inequity among Black and Indigenous people as well as other people of color. Following World War II, when the suburban housing market began to boom, Black people—even those with nearly adequate wealth—were subjected to unfair housing policies and discriminatory lending. Consigned to particular neighborhoods, they were largely unable to purchase property in the suburbs, and thereby denied access to the middle class at a time when it was blossoming. The result today is a disproportionate burden where it comes to poverty, unemployment, homelessness, public safety, public health crises, food insecurity, environmental injustice, and much more.

Such spatial inequalities continued into the 1970s, when urban “renewal” programs across the U.S. approved new highways that cruelly slashed cities into neighborhoods of haves and have-nots, their boundaries clearly defined by siting public housing developments at their edges. Segregation had been deemed unconstitutional, but in the built environment, its physical imprints remain unmistakable.

Innumerable other waypoints along this timeline highlight the inequities intricately woven into our systems and our spaces, which persist today. And untangling these complexities and coming to grips with the true nature of America’s history is going to be rough. But it is also necessary.

Unbuilding and reframing to move toward design justice.



People gather to show support for the “White Coats for Black Lives” movement, which has worked to raise awareness of police brutality, inequality, and racism, at the University of Virginia’s Memorial to Enslaved Laborers.

Photo: Sanjay Suchak/UVA Communications via Höweler + Yoon Architecture

Design professionals alone, of course, are not to blame. But as a group of people who generally view themselves as progressive problem solvers, they have some power—and responsibility—to help unbuild inequity. No one yet knows exactly how to build a just city. But with throngs of people pouring into the streets in support of Black Lives Matter—that is, into the very spaces where black Americans like George Floyd, Eric Garner, Ahmaud Arbery, and too many others, are being unlawfully killed by police—right now is the time to have some hard conversations and to reframe how we build and unbuild communities and spaces. “Architecture is really good at being the vanguard,” says Wilson. “But without material changes in people’s lives, it’s just hot air.”

There can be no moving forward until we acknowledge and reckon with our past. And while there’s no single prescription for moving toward design justice, we must seek to end the systemic power structures that enable oppressive architecture as well as radically rethink how we build neighborhoods that liberate and celebrate our disenfranchised communities and protect and strengthen their culture, stories, and sacred places.

Removing overtly racist emblems and monuments from towns and cities across the country is a logical early step. “Racist commemoration of false histories should be eliminated,” says Bryan C. Lee Jr., design principal of firm Colloqate, which fought for three years to remove Confederate and racist monuments in New Orleans. “It’s a false narrative and a false history that was set in place to set fear in black people.” Preservationists, too, are only beginning to address black history; too much has already been brushed aside.

Monuments to African American history are also crucial. Spaces such as the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, in Charlottesville, Virginia, designed by Höweler + Yoon Architecture in collaboration with Wilson, honor the lives of enslaved people who worked for and built the University of Virginia. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, located on six acres of land in Montgomery, Alabama, is a sobering monument to the thousands of Americans who were lynched.