

America's Cities Were Designed to Oppress

Architects and planners have an obligation to protect health, safety and welfare through the spaces we design. As the George Floyd protests reveal, we've failed.

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June 3, 2020, 12:56 PM PDT



Police line up outside the White House in Washington, D.C. as protests against the killing of George Floyd continue. *Oliver Douliery/AFP via Getty Images*

This moment is heartbreaking. Again. It is emotionally exhausting. Again. It is enraging to watch yet another black body plead not to be executed in public. Again.

There is nothing more representative of the state of and abuse of power in America than the scene that transpired in Washington, D.C. on Monday night: After watching U.S. cities erupt for days with pain and grief in response to the police murder of George Floyd, President Donald Trump emerged from his White House bunker to forcibly remove clergy and tear-gas Black Lives Matter protesters – all in order to pose with a Bible in front of D.C.'s St. John's Church. The Episcopal diocese oversees the 1815 structure and has expressed outrage at the action. It's

important to understand his intentions, as the president did all of this to marshal the physical architectural symbolism of the church to buttress his claims of moral, political, and racial authority. It was an escalation on the highest level, from the highest office.

For nearly every injustice in the world, there is an architecture that has been planned and designed to perpetuate it. That's a key principle of the Design Justice movement, upon which I base my practice. Design Justice seeks to dismantle the privilege and power structures that use architecture as a tool of oppression and sees it as an opportunity to envision radically just spaces centered on the liberation of disinherited communities.

That built-in oppression takes many forms. It's in the planning decisions that target non-white communities for highway projects and "urban renewal" schemes conceived to steer economic benefits away from existing residents. It's in a design philosophy that turned neighborhoods into mazes of "defensible space" that often criminalize blackness under the guise of safety. And it's in the proliferation of public spaces that often fail to let certain cultural communities congregate without fear of harassment.

This moment, like so many others, rose out of the state-sanctioned murder of black people. It emerged from the killing of George Floyd, and Tony McDade, before that, Breonna Taylor, before that Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others. It grew out of the specter of impending violence that follows black and brown people daily. And it grew out of the apathy of this nation toward a black community so profoundly sickened by our built environment that a global pandemic disproportionately impacts us.

Rebellion is a response to a prolonged dehumanization of a people unwilling to be participants in their own demise; it is often the soft power of the built environment that provides the preconditions for that dehumanization and the atrocities that follow.

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Right now, our obligation to each other, to the built environment, and in solidarity with black lives is to hold all complicit actors in these systems accountable. The profession of architecture is as complicit as any. This is a profession swarming with “white moderates more devoted to order than to justice,” to quote everyone’s favorite civil rights leader, Dr. King. Now the field is faced with another critical moment to act in accordance with justice over order. It is not clear if we will make the right choice.

When it comes to violence against black people in America, history repeats itself so precisely that it can be hard to place any given moment into context. The script has shown us that the violence inherent in the economic and cultural deconstruction of black neighborhoods, usually under the pretense of economic development, precipitates the displacement of living communities, accelerates inequities, amplifies the fears of white society, and makes acceptable the use of force by police to protect even the slightest inconvenience of land and property.

White America has found it all too easy to transpose its capital and beliefs into physical space.

The design professions should know that our colleagues are hurting. Back in June 1968, when America’s cities were again the site of protest, civil rights leader Whitney M. Young Jr. spoke before the annual convention of the American Institute of Architects, a gathering of nearly all white men. “You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights,” he told them. “You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence.”

We failed to respond, and now we are here, again. Alas, the response now, as it was then, is likely to be woefully short of a material change demanded from those most impacted by our work.

It is essential to name the manner in which our profession's silence is assent. In its purest form, we have an obligation to protect the people's health, safety, and welfare in and through the spaces we design. This commitment extends beyond the boundary of our buildings and landscapes and into the public realm. We narrow and neglect these commitments often on the backs of the perpetually marginalized and to the detriment of the field. Architecture has been the backdrop and often the instigator for violence on black bodies throughout this nation's history. This is the case, in large part, because white America has found it all too easy to transpose its capital and beliefs into physical space, allowing the architecture to covertly project power in the name of white supremacy without the burden of having to sustain the unpleasant acts of overt racism themselves.

With this simple deed, we've restricted the freedom of movement to those deemed unworthy by the declaration of the built environment – and thus authorized countless acts of violence in the name of protecting land, property and the public realm.

For example: In 2019, Minneapolis approved the extension of CPTED (crime prevention through environmental design) practices for all new developments. While CPTED principles are said to help discourage crime by orienting building windows and entrances to aid in providing “eyes on the street” that monitor activity, in practice this strategy can end up serving the same suppressive purpose as stop-and-frisk policing – to assure that anyone considered suspicious is made to feel uncomfortable. The problem is when you are black in this country, you live daily with the heavy weight of the world's distrust on your shoulders. In a city like Minneapolis, whose police officers used force against black people at a rate at least seven times that of white residents, such design practices could help create the very conditions that led to Mr. Floyd's murder.

America has never fully recognized racism as a complex cooperative system dependent upon its institutions – academic, political, commercial, and otherwise – to resign themselves to complicity. As a result, the design profession, like many others, has been unable to find a reason to acknowledge the compounding effects of each act of violence on the psyche of Black America. The rebellion you see across our country is fundamentally rooted in this conflict, rooted in the notion that black lives are deemed disposable in white society, justified solely for the act of being – in place.

For some, there will be an impulse to equate property loss to the loss of life. Don't.

For others, there will be an instinct that swells from the pits of whiteness to declare the fury and rage of the protesters as invalid because the disorder on the streets looks like “chaos,” not dissent.

To those challenging the credibility of this mass movement, I urge you to remember that nearly every riot you’ve ever heard of, starting with the American Revolution, was preceded by the murder of black people and escalated by an oppressive militarized force. We have seen throughout our history that to label an uprising as a riot is in itself a declaration of authorization that serves to assuage the white moderate, to justify the expansion of state-sanctioned violence on its people, and to mask the manifest rage of black and brown people pleading for justice in the face of a dispassionate system.

The first step towards dismantling unjust systems is to clearly articulate a direction out of our malaise and into action. Here is the start to a path forward through the efforts of Design Justice and in alignment with the demands of the Movement for Black Lives.

Cities and towns should reallocate funds supporting police departments and reinvest in the critical needs of disinherited neighborhoods and communities. Anyone who has worked with marginalized communities knows of multiple projects unable to find footing due to the lack of investment and resources. The design profession must be an actor in the visioning of these spaces.

Cease all efforts to implement defensible space and CPTED crime prevention through environmental design tactics that often promote unwarranted interaction with the police.

Architects should stop supporting the carceral state through the design of prisons, jails, and police stations. All of these spaces inflict harm and extraction on black bodies far beyond that of other communities.

Stop using area mean income, or AMI, to determine “affordability” in our communities. Instead root the distribution of state and federal resources in a measure that reflects the extraction of generational wealth from black communities.

Advocate for policies and procedures that support a genuinely accessible public realm, free from embedded oppression.

Ensure communities’ self-determination through an established procedure that incorporates community voice in process and community benefits agreements in action for all publicly accountable projects.

Detangle our contractual relationships with power and capital to better serve neighborhoods and communities from a position of service and not from a place of

extraction, freeing ourselves from the fee-for-service model and building power through black and brown development of the built environment.

Invest in and secure the place-keeping of black cultural spaces.

Redesign our design training and licensing efforts to reflect the history of spatial injustice and build new measures to ground our work in service of liberating spaces.

The design profession has a role to play in the short- and long-term outcomes of justice, and we would be wise to revisit our past to find direction. We must act swiftly and sustain our efforts to reconstitute our profession as a co-conspirator to justice. Justice requires us to repair a past of inequity, to make whole those subjected to oppression in the present, and to remove barriers to progress in the future.

One day it will inevitably be one of us – the ones you deem palatable for your committees, boardrooms, and Ivy League schools – who becomes a victim of police violence. You will never know the prevailing grief of a people destined to mourn our loved ones before they are gone because we refuse to seek justice before trauma. Where will you stand when it's one of your “diversity hires” left bloodied and breathless in the street?

This is as much a call to action as it is an act of healing. Join the Design Justice movement. Don't let this become another moment of inaction when our nation so clearly needs us to stand for, fight for, and build a just future.

In this article

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