Charles L. Davis II

Inside the Museum, Outside the Discourse

The espousal of the doctrine of Negro inferiority by the South was primarily because of economic motives and the inter-connected political urge necessary to support slave industry; but to the watching world it sounded like the carefully thought out result of experience and reason; and because of this it was singularly disastrous for modern civilization in science and religion, in art and government, as well as in industry. The South could say that the Negro, even when brought into modern civilization, could not be civilized, and that, therefore, he and the other colored peoples of the world were so far inferior to the whites that the white world had a right to rule mankind for their own selfish interests.

– W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*

If the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art began as an institution in search of the formal limits of contemporary architecture, then it is now in the uncomfortable position of needing to move beyond its own mythical foundations in order to imagine its future in an increasingly diverse field. This is to say that the general definitions for modern architecture that its first curators established as a historical origin point of a progressive history of design have proven to be not only outdated but almost entirely based on a set of Eurocentric norms and assumptions for art and art appreciation that are made embarrassingly obvious by the exhibition "Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America." Despite the running time of this show (February 27–May 31, 2021) being criminally brief during the first relaxations of pandemic restrictions, this is a historic undertaking that is potentially transformative for the ways curators will discuss the national and global legacies of modern architecture. The work created by the 11 artists and architects of "Reconstructions" – Emanuel Admassu, Germane Barnes, Sekou Cooke, J. Yolande Daniels, Felecia Davis, Mario Gooden, Walter Hood, Olalekan Jeyifous, V. Mitch McEwen, Amanda Williams, and David Hartt – excels most when it employs the fragments of modern architectural formalism to reveal the countercultural projects of African American modernity that have been continuously at work in the United

States, from Reconstruction (1865–1877) to the present. This projective historiography reframes the aesthetic criteria that are necessary to round out the archives of the Department of Architecture and Design by exceeding the European and Enlightenment pedigree of its founding. In a similar fashion to Houston Baker's explanation of the unrecognized modernity of African American literature during the Harlem Renaissance, cocurators Sean Anderson and Mabel O. Wilson, with Arièle Dionne-Krosnick, have crafted an exhibit that reimagines the built environment by paying homage to historical modes of Black creativity.[1] If nothing else, this exhibit provides a curatorial model of intervention at institutions like MoMA that can be applied to recover the historical contributions of other communities of color when they have found themselves written out of the canon of modern architectural production.

The formal premise of "Reconstructions" is that it is an exhibit about the "centuries of disenfranchisement and race-based violence [that] have led to a built environment" in the United States that is constituted by its "segregated neighborhoods, compromised infrastructures, environmental toxins, and unequal access to financial and educational institutions."[2] However, this is surreptitious cover for the exhibition's deeper reckoning with the inequities that were precipitated by a racially biased conception of modern architecture culture in the United States. It is a vocalization of the need for a deeper historical accounting of the discipline's broad role, and the museum's specific role, in dismissing, erasing, and appropriating Black talent for the hegemonic cultural projects of a Pan-European avant-garde dressed up as a universal style of building. The cultural stakes of this exhibit are made clear by the racial politics surrounding its location in the museum, the Philip Johnson Galleries.[3] In a process that inverts the colonial politics of erasure that Ariella Azoulay attributes to the political function of "transcendental imperial art" and museological knowledge, the participants of the show formed the Black Reconstruction Collective and printed their Manifesting Statement on a tarp placed over the wall sign outside the gallery, effectively making it a gallery with no name.[4] In doing so, they made it possible for visitors to specifically place the crime of Black omission from MoMA squarely at the feet of a founding curator while acknowledging the placelessness that Black artists and architects have endured as a result of this very crime.

Does "Reconstructions" solve the problems raised by the historical erasure of Black artists at MoMA? Is it an effective form of repair to the international branding that has given

1. See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
2. "Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America," The Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5219.
3. See Sarah Bahr, "Artists Ask MoMA to Remove Philip Johnson's Name, Citing Racist Views," *New York Times*, December 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/arts/design/philip-johnson-moma.html.
4. See Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 58–63.
5. See James Johnson Sweeney, ed., *African Negro Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1935).
6. See Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom: Part I – Life as a Slave, Part II – Life as a Freeman* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 441–45.

The Black Reconstruction Collective, Manifesting Textile, 2020. Installation view of "Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America," The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, February 27–May 31, 2021. Photo: Robert Gerhardt. © The Museum of Modern Art, 2021.

the museum such pride of place in the past? I believe such questions are beside the point. Repairing MoMA's reputation is not the focus of this exhibit, nor should it be the job of any Black artist or architect operating at MoMA. More important, it is a powerful reclamation of the *intellectual* acumen that was required of the generations of African diasporic artists that found creative ways of existing in the modern world. These modalities are a rebuke of early exhibits on "African Negro Art" that categorized Black genius to be the result of a mere intuitive mindset that was common, if "pure," in the primitive cultures stuck at a premodern level of industrial development.[5] The presumed importance of industrialization and abstraction in the forward march of American modernism is greatly complicated by the inclusion of Black radical talent that is long overdue.

What to the "Primitive" is the Museum of Modern Art?

In 1852, Frederick Douglass asked a largely White audience of Independence Day revelers the rhetorical question, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"[6] He asked this question to give his listeners, and every listener thereafter, an opportunity to contemplate the aporias of American liberalism that went unresolved due to the very existence of slavery. I think this quote is often misunderstood because too many believe they

were finally resolved after the abolition of slavery. However, the barbs of his question persist, even to this day, because of the very *possibility* of categorizing a subject of the United States as a "slave" within a liberal democracy. The deeper lessons of Douglass's question provide us with an insightful parallel to the work undertaken by the "Reconstructions" show at MoMA.

When Douglass uses the word *slave* to describe members of the African diaspora living in the United States, he is not offering an empirical description of his community, as there were already Black people living outside of the institution of slavery, even if only provisionally. He himself was a runaway slave who touted his status as a freeman to demonstrate the human potential of Black Americans during his lifetime. Instead of being empirically descriptive, then, his use of *slave* is analytic as it lays bare the poverty of imagination haunting an American liberal consciousness that fails to identify and expunge its anti-Blackness to find a proper place for Black subjects on its shores. We must remember that American liberty was based on rhetorical claims on universal freedoms and suffrage for all, yet existed within a proslavery and settler-colonial state. A slave is a nonentity in the ontological sense; it has no legal recourse to being an individual but only operates for the purpose of counting one's property or things. In this vein, Douglass's question was no mere contemplation of the impracticalities of an enslaved person celebrating the principles of universal freedom, because a slave was not even considered to be a person under the law. Slaves were merely chattel. Instead, Douglass was asking his White audience to locate the racial biases of American liberalism by posing the more complicated question of what inherent limits are contained within a democratic system that was incapable of properly defining a Black person as anything more than a slave. He was asking his audience to imagine slaves, perhaps even their own slaves, as real people with their own modern projects. He was asking his audience to confront an internalized system of racism that was the result of an inherent hypocrisy embodied by a nation of freed White men standing on the necks of the Black laborers who brought them their current wealth and liberty.

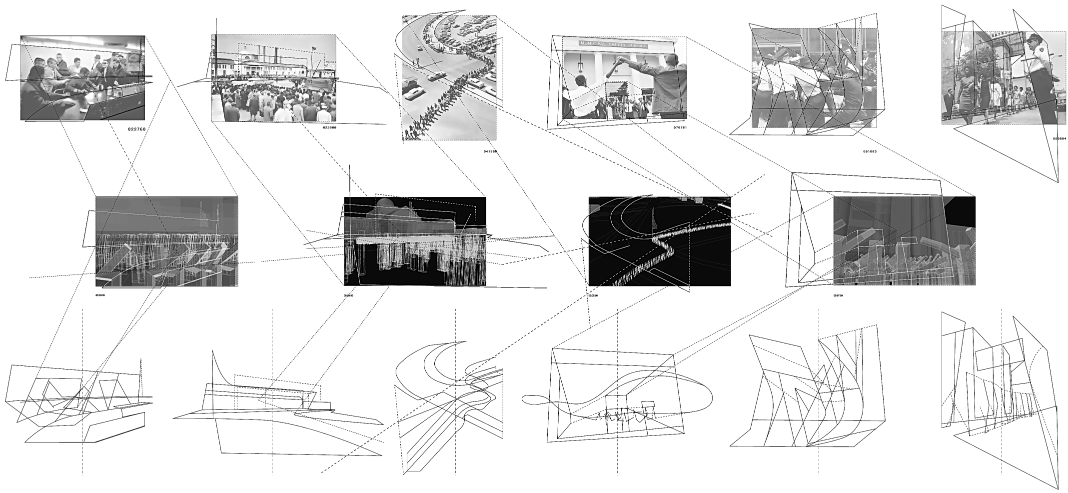
Pairing the labels of "Architecture" and "Blackness," the "Reconstructions" exhibit poses a similar question to the founding myths of modern architecture. Of what value are the historical definitions, labels, and principles of a modern architecture that are still too commonly understood to be the universal exponents of the European avant-garde culture that have now become globalized? Like the slave of the antebellum

world, the discipline of architecture has been unable to properly define the African and African-diasporic modernities that were created by the Black communities that have lived in the United States. Instead of acknowledging the Whiteness that was essential to the Pan-European conception of modern architecture birthed at MoMA – a Whiteness that seemed capable of switching its support from American democracy to Nazism or fascism if this better enabled the creation of beautiful architectural forms – its founders invented the category of the "primitive" to contain the seemingly aberrant modern subjectivities that endangered the cultural and political hegemony of a sublimated European conception of architectural form that promised to colonize the world anew. The cocurators of "Reconstructions" invite MoMA to make itself anew.

"Reconstructions" asks MoMA's curators, past and present, and any architect who employs its avant-garde legacies to support their own creative activities, the simple question, "What to the 'Primitive' is the Museum of Modern Art?"

The problem with viewing Black artists and architects as something more than the "primitive" subject of modern architecture theory is not one that emerged from within the Black community. It is a problem of the colonial and imperial museum apparatus that fails to identify and authentically express the creativity of these cultural agents.

Of what true value is an artistic worldview that tacitly suspects all forms of Black modernity to be an act of mere intuition, or a chance operation of premodern thinking? What else would describe the historical omission of Black architects in MoMA's archive? We currently lack the conceptual language to even describe the broad range of modern cultural projects that emerged to sustain the diverse forms of life that have existed in the United States. So many of our inherited frameworks only operate at the level of a presumed universality that must be achieved by all subjects, regardless of their actual needs or desires. Within this restricted intellectual context, Blackness has only operated as a symbol of lack, absence, and want. It is the permanent underbelly of a rationalist system of design that requires modernist cultures to renew themselves with the premodern sentiments of so-called primitive subjects. The very act of staging "Reconstructions" is still critically necessary because it begins to provide us with the appropriate lenses to properly see the racial aporias of architectural modernity that we have inherited. However, we are left with the difficult task of critiquing, deconstructing, and reconstructing these founding values so that they



Mario Gooden, The Refusal of Space: BNA Transcripts, 2020. 70 by 29 inches. BNA Transcripts is a mapping of the spatial choreographies, body movements, positions, and postures demonstrating the agility, transformability, and fluidity of the ways in which Black people moved through space, negotiating the barriers of social, political, and economic landscapes during the civil rights era in Nashville, Tennessee. Drawing courtesy the architect.

operate more inclusively. As pioneering as this exhibit is, it does not delineate a prescriptive list of new vocabulary words and design principles for its main audience. The value of "Reconstructions," for better or worse, is not spent formulating a didactic revision of MoMA's institutional culture, but is to be found in a powerful display of the mastery of its practitioners. I, for one, welcome this new list of master architects as I eagerly await the internal reconstruction of the museum's holdings that is inevitable in the wake of this effort.

The Reconstruction of Architectural Formalism at MoMA

The curatorial strategy for "Reconstructions" is purposefully site based, both in terms of the viewer's experience and in terms of the geographic forms of Blackness that are investigated throughout the exhibit. One walks into the gallery space viewing three main orientation elements within: the aforementioned manifesto by the Black Reconstruction Collective; a large wall of text providing a summary of the exhibit's intention to "take up the unfinished project of Reconstruction"; and a wall-sized map of the United States orienting viewers to the 10 cities that the participants reimagine in their work. This spine then splits into a series of perpendicular axes that take the viewer on a virtual tour of what could have been if America had dedicated itself fully to the historical mission of Reconstruction.

At least two pieces reconceptualize the potential meaning of architecture as a discipline from an object-based practice that is primarily concerned with the generation and aesthetic contemplation of static form to a discipline focused on interpreting the building's role in delineating the broader spatial experiences of the built environment. As Gooden notes in his

Mario Gooden, The Refusal of Space, 2020. Photo courtesy the architect.

explanation of the piece The Refusal of Space, "Architecture is about making space."[7] Moving beyond the presumed universalism of both postmodern architectural autonomy and phenomenology, Gooden introduces the possibility of understanding architectural form through the physical and intellectual emulation of Black spatial practices. Hood's contribution, Black Towers/Black Power, equally reimagines the formal qualities of the freestanding object by infusing the meaning of minimalist form with a complex and layered spatial program. The architectural section drawings of each tower enable us to concentrate on the structural power that subtends these forms but is all too often ignored for a superficial and apolitical formalist discussion of a building's exterior form.

Gooden's contribution is a self-described "protest machine" that encapsulates the Black struggle for spatial inclusion in Nashville, Tennessee, during the 1960s and '70s. He specifically chose Nashville for his work because it was the location of several important moments in American history: its trolley-car protests predated the Montgomery bus boycott by nearly 50 years and gave birth to the Union Transportation Company, a privately owned Black trolley line that better enabled minorities to navigate the city on equal terms. Nashville was also the location of an early lunch-counter protest that emulated the Greensboro sit-ins of early 1960 to end racial segregation in private commercial spaces in the South. The theme of spatial liberation is timely not only in light of recent Black Lives Matter protests around the nation, but also in relation to the political strategy of refusal that Gooden references in the title of his piece, as Black Americans have had to reject the dehumanizing labels that are a structural part

7. "To be really free is to be spatially free | Ep 9 | REIMAGINING BLACKNESS & ARCHITECTURE," YouTube video, 6:02, posted by "The Museum of Modern Art," April 29, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3qkcuNXRwM.

of White supremacy. In disciplinary terms, Gooden stages his protest machine as a stationary trolley that makes clever use of the notational systems of architecture, both literal and representational, to index the spatial dramas of 1960s Nashville. As a stationary piece, it recalls the permanence expected of architecture, but as a formal registration of the Union Transportation trolley line, it subverts our expectation of such fixity with a tableau of projective orientations. It remains in place only so we can rethink space through circumambulatory practices. In framing multiple views of the Black body in the urban landscape, The Refusal of Space demonstrates the ways that architecture as an object in the landscape is completely dependent upon the social meanings it accumulates. Yet Gooden's findings are framed by a careful historical study of Black space, which refuses to make generalist claims toward what these spaces might have meant to the White segregationists or new generations of refugees, Latinx, or Asian migrants living in the area. Even the blackened Confederate flag denotes the Blackness of this historical struggle. The only transferable property of Gooden's work is its stripped-down aesthetic, which employs the assemblage of standardized pieces of architectural structure to suggest a series of open lines of action and projection. While these elements help us to understand the potentialities of space, the piece does not resolve into a static object as might be expected of a permanent work of architecture.

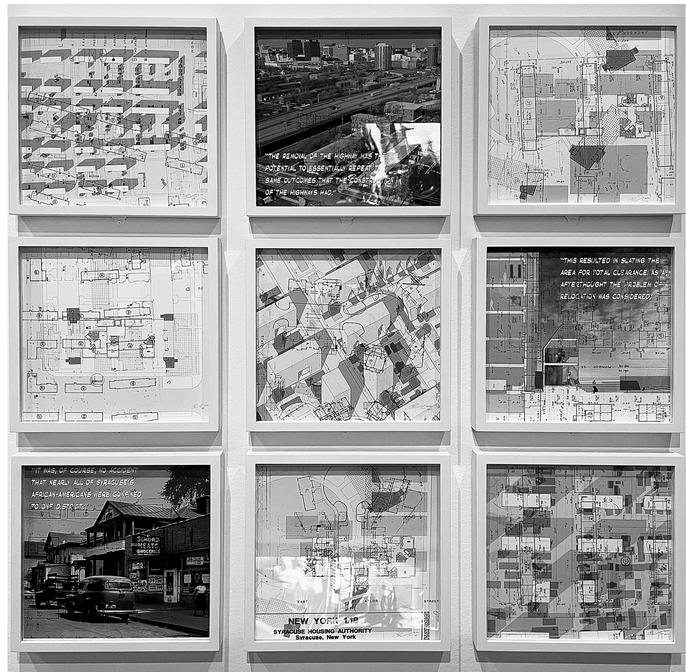
Black Towers/Black Power consists of 10 scaled totems that represent a series of new skyscrapers designed for Oakland, California, a city that provided an opportunity to reimagine the contemporary materialization of the revolutionary principles of self-governance and Black ownership outlined in the Black Panther Party's 1966 Ten-Point Program. Hood's experience growing up in the area led him to realize the physical importance of San Pablo Avenue as a material document of the race-based policies of containment that were used to control Black space, as well as a living record of the remnants of the Black Panther Party's program in the social institutions of the area. On an aesthetic level, the eye is drawn to Hood's 10 black towers, which stand on axis as discrete monoliths in the gallery. At first glance, they seem to exist as pure formal objects of contemplation. Yet Hood's statuary transforms the apolitical reading of these abstract elements into an activist tool. This is only made apparent when one spends some time with the section drawings of each tower, which imagine Black control of everything, from a community-managed

Walter J. Hood, Black Towers/Black Power, 2020. Installation view of "Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America," The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Photo: Robert Gerhardt. © The Museum of Modern Art, 2021.

police force to communal housing and a "Hall of Justice." Black Towers/Black Power establishes a material analogue to the revolutionary outline that is often provided by the leaders of Black social movements. On an aesthetic level that extends the Black traditions found within MoMA itself, Hood's pairing of evocative architectural section drawings with the visual traditions of minimalist modern sculpture recodes the potential social meaning of these objects in the museum, enriching pure form in a way that parallels what was achieved by Louise Nevelson's social imbrication of the pictorial practices of the abstract expressionists of the 1940s and '50s. I find it to be a clever way of smuggling the social content of architecture into museum contexts that may be too conservative to entertain the practical realities of "Reconstructions." It is not hard to imagine the display of Hood's sculptures without any social contextualization, much like the recontextualization of literal ethnographical objects as works of art within the formalist interiors of Ateliers Jean Nouvel's Musée du Quai Branly, which was enclosed by a primitive forest that rehearses the sad tropes of the aesthetic principles of Oceanic art so well trod in early modernist circles.[8]

Cooke's We Outchea: Hip-Hop Fabrications and Public Space formalizes the memory of Black public spaces erased by multiple phases of neoliberal development in Syracuse, New York. His methodology recalls Felecia Davis's Walking Tours of Manhattan, which recovers the lost Black sites of the

8. See James Clifford's "Quai Branly in Process," *October* 120 (Spring 2007): 3–23.



Sekou Cooke, We Outchea: Hip-Hop Fabrications and Public Space, 2020. Installation view of digital prints and screen prints on paper. © the architect.

island, but Cooke primarily uses the language of hip-hop – sampling, break, freestyle, and remix, to name just a few – to think through architectural form that simultaneously indexes these historical fragments in the present.[9] Despite the formal similarities to other layered architectural schemes, we know that we are working with a palimpsest of memory because of the superimposition of historical images of residents on the facades of the site's original low-rise buildings. In my mind, this work operates as a visual form of oral history that animates the site through the layered presentation of local stories of everyday life. If Cooke's piece is firmly rooted in a visual archaeology of ground, then Williams launches us into a utopian version of Black space that looks a lot like Sun Ra's outer space or a cognitive frontier that is placeless yet ubiquitous in the minority subject's imagination. At the level of notation, her piece, We're Not Down There, We're Over Here, revises illustrations of patents of intellectual labor to index Black creative genius. It physically consists of a video and a series of representations of patented materials. It begins with a cataloguing of the free towns that Black Americans founded from Reconstruction onward to develop their potential in the United States. The constant interruption of White terror and racial suppression, however, necessitated a search for physical territory that lay further and further removed from such negative forces. The beautiful supergraphic of a multicolored

9. See Felecia Davis, "Uncovering Places of Memory: Walking Tours of Manhattan," in *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race*, ed. Craig E. Barton (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 27–36; Sekou Cooke, *Hip-Hop Architecture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).
10. See Cheryl J. Fish, "Place, Emotion, and Environmental Justice in Harlem: June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller's 1965 'Architextual' Collaboration," *Discourse* 29, no. 2/3: Race, Environment, and Representation (Spring & Fall 2007): 330–45.
11. See Charles L. Davis II, "Toward a Theory of Pan-African Architecture" in *Sub-Saharan Africa: Architectural Guide*, ed. Philipp Meuser and Adil Dalbai, vol. 1, *Introduction to the History and Theory of Sub-Saharan African Architecture* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2021), 136–37; "Improvised Shanty-Megastructures," *ASAP/J*, July 30, 2018, https://asapjournal.com/b-o-s-5-1-improvised-shanty-megastructures-charles-davis/.

Amanda Williams, We're Not Down There, We're Over Here, 2020. Installation view of "Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America," The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Photo: Robert Gerhardt. © The Museum of Modern Art, 2021.

Jacob's ladder stretching up into a metal superstructure that hovers above the vernacular housing below should remind us of the visual aesthetic of postwar utopian projects such as June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller's Skyrise for Harlem. Like its predecessor, We're Not Down There, We're Over Here is also deeply infused by the specific memories and cultural projects of the midrise community of Kinloch, Missouri.[10]

Of course, these are only some of the ways that "Reconstructions" challenges the norms of architectural formalism. The connections that are drawn between the fine arts and architecture expand the content of architectural formalism to include the content of new conversations on the visualization and oral performance of Blackness in these fields. I have written on another occasion of the deep reformation of Blackness that Olalekan Jeyifous introduces to the architectural canon as a member of the African diaspora, and the inclusion of visual artists and architects such as Germane Barnes and David Hartt connects the innovations of the fine arts to those of architecture.[11] One can only hope that "Reconstructions" is an opening salvo that inspires others to contribute to the reformulation of contemporary architectural discourse. That would be an effective form of reparations if ever there was one.

Charles L. Davis II is associate professor of architectural history and criticism at the University at Buffalo. He is the author of *Building Character: The Racial Politics of Modern Architectural Style.*