“Black matters are spatial matters,” scholar Katherine McKittrick has noted. Yet Black spaces have for too long been compromised, if not erased, by laws, maps, and histories. For each of the projects in this exhibition, the potential for repair, for reconciling past with present, confronts the magnitude of anti-Black narratives and practices. Sited in ten cities across the United States, the commissioned works by architects, designers, and artists navigate the ways in which Blackness, as both a conceptual orientation and a way of being, is embedded in the built environment.

The systematic disenfranchisement of Black American and African Diasporic communities was designed. Starting in the sixteenth century, fortresses along the coasts of colonized nations in West Africa facilitated the collection and transport of African peoples as human cargo to the Americas. European colonists soon established plantations to extract labor and profit from these enslaved individuals. Even after the abolition of slavery, the formation of cities and landscapes continued to be shaped by these horrific legacies. Throughout the United States, discriminatory housing laws and predatory lending segregated urban areas and denied Black Americans access to homeownership. State-sponsored “urban renewal” schemes systematically dismantled communities of color. The impact of these racist strategies can still be seen today in neighborhoods, infrastructures, the environment, and institutions large and small.

This exhibition takes up the unfinished project of Reconstruction (1863–77)—the brief period following the American Civil War when attempts were made to redress the injustices of slavery—and extends its ambitions to the twenty-first century and beyond. Transcending the inequitable conditions that have historically bounded African American and Diasporic communities, the assembled projects envision transformative spaces that galvanize Black life, from the kitchen and the front porch to the street and the spaceship. Reconstructions centers Black cultural forms and amplifies Black life and joy while imagining community, care, knowledge, refusal, and, ultimately, liberation.