

The Museum of Modern Art

MoMA AUDIO PLAYLIST

Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America

<https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/312>

351: Introduction

Audio from Amanda Williams's video: *Black space is not down there, Black space is over here.*

Walter Hood: It has been really hard for Brown and Black people to imagine a future in this country.

Germane Barnes: Through policy, through redlining, through segregation, through gentrification, through lynchings, through massacres, we are at risk.

Audio from Amanda Williams's video: *Black Space is vexed about racism, segregation, reconstruction, apartheid, redlining, gray towns.*

Sean Anderson: My name is Sean Anderson.

Mabel Wilson: I'm Mabel Wilson. And together we curated this exhibition, *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*.

Sean Anderson: The title comes from the period of Reconstruction in the United States in which the federal government would begin to redress the violence of slavery.

Mabel Wilson: In addressing the legacies of segregation and all of the ways in which the built environment serves as a medium of hostility and social repression, it seemed appropriate to think about what does it mean to repair and rebuild that environment?

Emanuel Admassu: We wanted to practice refusal against the ways in which architecture is typically defined and to imagine radically different worlds.

Yolande Daniels: The narratives that I found had to do with how they built community.

Germane Barnes: For many people that identify as black in the US, really, all you have is your imagination.

Olakekan Jeyiifous: Speculative fiction allows me the flexibility to create new parameters.

Felecia Davis: Liberation could happen in architecture for many people by imagining, dreaming.

Amanda Williams: What it might mean to have to fashion your own path to a space of freedom or to a space of self-determination.

Sekou Cooke: In freedom is joy and in joy is ultimate self-preservation and self-care.

Mario Gooden: To be really free is to be spatially free.

Audio from Amanda Williams's video: *Black space gets out of line, Black space free plans, cross-sections, two-point perspectives, hidden lines, line breaks, and draws for freedom.*

352: Yolande Daniels, *Black City: The Los Angeles Edition*, Los Angeles, California

Yolande Daniels: My name is Yolande Daniels. My project explores Black settlement in Los Angeles, from its founding by the Spanish through to American occupation. As I started to do research, the narratives that I found had to do with the agency of the inhabitants and how they built community focusing on their power to shape the spaces around them.

And one of the narratives that really stood out had to do with Bidy Mason because she was an enslaved woman who sued for her freedom and won. She saves her money and she buys property throughout downtown Los Angeles. But what was really interesting to me was piecing together how she was able to do this through her relationship with other African-Americans. So, it wasn't just her as an actor by herself, but it was really about this community.

My project is basically an Atlas. It contains maps that have historic layers projected onto the contemporary map of the city, a timeline, dictionary plates.

African Americans are often made to feel that we have no history or that our history is only sorrow, but the people who were making the history, they were fighting all the time to realize good things for themselves and for their family and for others. That's what I see in these stories and I want others to see them too.

353: Felecia Davis, *Fabricating Networks*, Hill District, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Felecia Davis: My name is Felecia Davis. Pittsburgh's Hill District was a predominantly Black neighborhood that in the 1930s, 1940s was really vibrant. But towards the end of the '50s, Pittsburgh decided this was really valuable land and that it should be torn down to make space for a civic center. People had been hopeful of having the government build back into the community. When that didn't happen, you had protests in 1969. After the protest, people are saying: "Okay, we're gonna make some architecture here and it's going to be a benefit to the community."

Walking into the gallery, you'll see a gigantic suspended black textile flower, made up of 34 different knitted cones. And some of the cones have embedded into them a copper yarn, which makes the textile active. So as a visitor walks around the piece, they hear sounds of different electromagnetic waves captured in MoMA's galleries. And then we've amplified it in a speaker so that you can hear things that are invisible.

So really the work is about bringing people together in conversation. I believe that one of the important aspects of being a black architect is to construct the social around artifacts and around places and around people. That is just as much a part of making architecture as making a building with bricks and mortar.

I've been inspired to work with textiles because this was a skill that I really enjoyed as a child, learning how to sew, working with my mother, working with my aunt. Bringing that

into architecture, I can make buildings with textiles that I can lift with my own body, that I can make with my own body. So, the textile was a source of liberation.

354: Mario Gooden, *The Refusal of Space*, Nashville, Tennessee

Mario Gooden: My name is Mario Gooden. My project is a protest machine that visualizes the experiences of protesters during the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and the recent Black Lives Matter movement.

The protest machine is a full-scale structure that bears a resemblance to a trolley, which recalls the first Black owned independent streetcar line in Nashville, in response to newly enacted segregation laws. The three animations are based upon the routes that Civil Rights marchers took in 1960, 1961, and 1964 through the streets of downtown Nashville, Tennessee to the courthouse, to the sites of sit-ins, and other protests.

To overcome the exclusionary practices of segregation, African-Americans have often had to negotiate boundaries, think about how to be in places in which they were prohibited from being. This is very much a spatial idea.

So, the trolley as a protest machine recalls the ways in which the civil rights protesters and Black Lives Matter protesters have occupied the city, have taken over the streets and the sidewalks in order to express themselves, as well as to say that liberation is an action and that liberation demands action and that liberation is spatial. While freedom is an idea, to be really free is to be spatially free.

355: Amanda Williams, *We're Not Down There, We're Over Here*, in Kinloch, Missouri

Amanda Williams: Often Black people in America are not given the space at all to even just be. A lot of time is spent just concerning ourselves with staying alive. But we just need to stop and imagine what it might mean to have to fashion your own path, to a space of freedom, or to a space of self-determination.

My name is Amanda Williams. When you see my project, you'll see a series of emergency blankets, with tools and fragments that Black people might use to navigate their way to free Black space. There's a vessel, which I have named the space-boat-ship-vessel-capsule, that is an imagined device to help you get to this mental and physical place of freedom. You'll see a series of inventions created by African-American scientists, scholars, everyday folks that were inventing things as simple as water sprinkler nozzles, scaffolding devices, ice cream scoopers. I keyed in on an idea about inventions and how significant patenting was for acknowledging that everyone had a right to participate in making America the place that they wanted it to be.

For me, it's important that you know, there's already been free Black space in the United States. There are a number of towns that were called Free towns, of which Kinloch, Missouri was the first for the state of Missouri. Kinloch and outer space in many ways are both frontiers. I think it's important to connect them and imagine how we relaunch back or forward into this kind of space.

Even from its beginning, Kinloch was a contested space, being an all-Black town, and there was a systemic effort to make sure that Kinloch becomes isolated from resources and from inclusion in everyday society.

There are dozens of cities across the United States that have very similar histories. What would it mean if those places existed today and had thrived? What would it mean for the beauty and the benefit of the entire United States if there hadn't continued to be this concerted effort to eliminate Black space?

356: Sekou Cooke, *We Outchea*, Syracuse, New York

Sekou Cooke: The story of Syracuse is really an American story of displacing Black residents when there is a public infrastructural project happening. When you're going to build a public highway, you don't go through the white neighborhoods. Instead, you designate the black neighborhoods as slums and you clear them out and you build a highway right through it.

I am Sekou Cooke.

There are several layers of history of the site that I've chosen in what used to be the old 15th ward of Syracuse. In the 1920s, it was a really dense neighborhood of single-family housing. All of that was developed into one of the first public housing projects in the country. Then the highway came through, and then they tore down some of that development. And what's being proposed for the site now is that all of that low-income housing is going to be cleared away to build new mixed-income housing.

One of the things that I've done for a long time in my practice is think about how hip hop as a culture can influence architecture. So, my proposal is taking all of those layers of history and sampling them, remixing them into something new.

The stoop has a long legacy of being really important to Black people in urban environments. It's been a place for sitting and watching the world, for interacting with neighbors, it's been a playground for children, it's been the location for storytelling. So, the model is actually a large section of concrete stoop. And it is attached to a base of plywood layers. The wood areas are the new proposal for mixed income housing and the orange areas are spaces for commerce, for public interaction.

In claiming public space, that's a space where black joy can really exist. We are able to form community despite hardship, despite oppression, despite being placed in public housing and then displaced. The way that we use public space is really the way that we express freedom and in freedom is joy and in joy is ultimate self-preservation and self-care.

357: Germane Barnes, *A Spectrum of Blackness*, Miami, Florida

Germane Barnes: My name is Germane David Barnes. *A Spectrum of Blackness* started from this exploration of what does it constitute to be Black in Miami? When you're in Miami, you'll meet Panamanians, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Bahamians, African-Americans, and they're all Black.

There's 12 collages in total: of the porch and the kitchen and the rituals that happen within those spaces. All of the things that are shown within those collages are directly sourced from individuals from each of those ethnicities.

Another part of the project is a spice rack and these custom-made labels. Instead of giving them their normal name, we put the times that we actually use them in black families. So instead of saying paprika, it'll say we use this on Thanksgiving on deviled eggs. So, you really get to understand the ways in which we cook, in which we hang out, in which we care for each other.

There's also a map, which talks about water, because water shapes the locations of where individuals were allowed to live in Miami. When Miami was first founded, it was built off the backs of Bahamian immigrants and Black people from neighboring Georgia, Arkansas, Louisiana. Black people were not allowed to live by water. But Miami is currently dealing with sea level rise. Ironically, the locations that Black people were forced to live in, because of discriminatory planning policies, are now the areas that are the least vulnerable to sea level rise. So now you're taking those from them as well.

358: Emanuel Admassu, *Immeasurability*, Atlanta, Georgia

Emanuel Admassu: My name is Emanuel Admassu.

Our installation is primarily made up of two pieces: a vertical disc, a large tapestry, which depicts a drawing of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, a massive rift on the ocean floor of the Atlantic and a site for an incalculable loss of Black life during the middle passage, as enslaved Africans were moving across that line to the Americas. The horizontal disc is projecting ambient sounds of Atlanta: sounds of the highway, the forest, and fragments of trap music. On top of that disc will be a series of bricks to represent fragments of the city and two collages showing the overlaps between the forest and these everyday spaces.

Atlanta is a sprawling horizontal environment that is defined by its highway infrastructure, single-family homes, and strip malls. These are spaces where Blackness as an identity is consistently being negotiated. So, something like Waffle House is typically associated with nightlife in Atlanta. You party until 4:00 AM and you would go to Waffle House. And we were really interested in the negotiation between this kind of lush, endless forest and the minimal nature of a Waffle House sign and how the moment you put a Waffle House sign within the forest it becomes a space of Blackness. They're also spaces that would never qualify as architecture with a capital "A." They're spaces that have been undervalued, just like the people who have occupied them.

We wanted to practice refusal against the ways in which architecture is typically defined, this urge to make the world measurable. That allows us to engage with the city differently and to imagine radically different worlds.

359: Walter Hood, *Black Towers / Black Power*, Oakland, California

Walter Hood: My name is Walter Hood. Within a one-mile stretch of San Pablo Avenue, there's the highest concentration of low-income housing in Oakland, California, and my project suggests that, maybe, we can rethink this through the insertion of 10 high rise

buildings. And those high-rise buildings are based on the Ten-Point Program that was developed by the Black Panthers.

The Black Panther Party grew out of the West Oakland neighborhood in the late '60s and it came about because of the incarceration of African-Americans within a ghettoized system. The Ten-Point Program suggests that we should be self-sufficient, let's have housing, let's take care of our community, let's stop capitalist theft, let's think about education, food, the economy, and who's in control of those things.

My project is a hybrid collage of models, of drawings and a video. The street is central to the idea. It's planted with lush plantings. The paving is based on the prints of black panthers. The public spaces are imbued with our radical heroes: Huey Newton, Angela Davis. The architecture begins to create community space. You can go to a place that teaches you about civic lessons, about jurisprudence.

It has been really hard for Brown and Black people to imagine a future in this country. And so, in *Black Towers/Black Power*, there's a fiction that narrates the entire story of these towers. And by using fiction, maybe it's possible to re-imagine ourselves in new places and then find ways to get there.

360: Olalekan Jeyifous, *The Frozen Neighborhoods*, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York

Olalekan Jeyifous: My name is Olalekan Jeyifous, I go by LEk for short.

For me, speculative fiction allows me the necessary flexibility that I need to examine contemporary issues but create new parameters for exploring them.

My project "The Frozen Neighborhoods" examines a speculative world. Climate change has exacerbated to the point where the government has granted the individual a certain amount of mobility credits but in this world, the rich have purchased much of the mobility credits and poor and marginalized communities are left without them and so cut off from the larger world. So, these communities develop sustainable practices and new technologies. They've overtaken the MTA and trains, instead of shuttling you from one place to the other, are now virtual kiosks where you can go and engage in virtual travel, you can take educational lessons, job training—so really imagining this new self-contained world in Brooklyn.

I have an intersection that's completely flooded with water. And it's this freshwater marsh that has a floating barge that has some bodegas on it, people are playing in the water. Another rendering has a vertical row of storefront churches, but it's also a seed vault. And at the base of the building is a farmer's market.

Thinking of highly self-organized communities is a way of opening up the idea of public versus private, of power versus authority. The powers that be will always say you need to have an authority to monitor and to control people and the reality is, you don't need that when you provide the basic needs of a community.

361: Mitch McEwen on the legacy of white supremacy in architecture and design

Mitch McEwen: I'm Mitch McEwen.

The Johnson Study Group came together in 2020 after the uprising and the movement for Black lives. There was a concern, that architecture had not grappled with its white supremacist legacy. The Johnson Study Group formed as a small group of architects who were concerned that Philip Johnson, the founder of the Architecture and Design Department at MoMA, was a known white supremacist, having collaborated with the Nazi party, founded a fascist party within the US, and also financially supported a range of hate mongers and white supremacists.

Johnson's name is on the wall of the architecture gallery at MoMA. Naming communicates values and naming spaces after a person demands a connection between that person's legacy and the future that that institution is committed to.

Effectively the Architecture and Design Department at MoMA maintained a whites-only policy. So, there's not a single work in the design and architecture collection by any Black designers throughout Johnson's decades of leading that department. And that continued to be the Museum of Modern Art's policy around Black architecture.

Addressing a figure like Philip Johnson is asking us to be critical about the language that architecture uses, the assumption that architecture makes, and to be aware of the extent to which the erasure of Black and Brown people, Indigenous people, from architecture and design, it has nothing to do with us, right? It's not because we weren't there.

SPONSORSHIP:



The exhibition is made possible by Allianz, MoMA's partner for design and innovation.

Major support is provided by the Jon Stryker Endowment.

Generous funding is provided by the Leontine S. and Cornell G. Ebers Endowment Fund.

Additional support is provided by The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts.

MoMA Audio is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.

PRESS CONTACTS:

Olivia Oramas, olivia_oramas@moma.org
Press Office, pressoffice@moma.org

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