

“Reconceptualizing the History of the Built Environment in North America”

Comment on the panel, “Reconsidering Race in the Built Environment”

Eric Avila (U.C.L.A. / Warren Center)

Teaching ethnic studies at UCLA is a lot like preaching to the choir.

An audience mostly of color, though there are always, happily, a few brave ‘white’ souls who venture into that corner of the university.

This is a crowd that ‘believes’ in race: post 1960s generation, many students mindful of their immigrant background, well aware of racial difference, racial identity and racial inequality.

And so for me, there is no need to convince these students of the salience of race in our society. They do not assume that there is equality among the so-called races, nor are they convinced that we live or ought to live in a color blind society.

Knowing, therefore, that this is the ideological predisposition of my students in ethnic studies, I seek ways of disrupting, provoking, or challenging their assumptions.

One of the ways that I do that is by introducing a hypothetical scenario, usually on the first day of class, which draws heavily upon themes and imagery present within science fiction genres of writing and film.

“What if” I ask rhetorically, “our planet was suddenly colonized by an alien species?” and that these aliens – phenotypically very different than humans – integrated themselves into our society?

Settling in our neighborhoods, shopping in our markets, teaching and taking classes in our schools, etc., etc.....

And then I get to the point:

in the course of living alongside this extraterrestrial species, what would happen to the historical ways that we have differentiated ourselves as human beings?

In particular, for the purposes of my class, what would happen to our most deep-seated notions of race and racial difference? Would we continue to speak and think and live and work in terms of Black and White? Would the color line continue to exist? Or is it possible that we might really move towards an ideal of a truly color-blind society as we adopt new modes of social differentiation among a society integrated within intergalactic proportions?

I don't mean to bore you by showing off my pedagogical strategies, but you can imagine how this scenario might catch many of my students off guard.

I have yet to encounter that gum-chewing freshman with the cap on backwards who replies: "But professor, your science fiction fantasy simply confirms existing ideas about the epiphenomenality of race and denies the essentialist paradigms of the 1960s any theoretical legitimacy!"

But that's precisely where I go with this little 'story' – for it underscores the fictional basis of the racial identities that we have taken for granted historically.

So many, so often, stop here: "yes, race is a construct. Therefore, it is not real. Therefore, let's stay focused upon the 'real' bases of social conflict..."

And while race is ultimately ideological, cultural, epiphenomenal, fictitious, even theatrical, according to certain academic circles, it is built into the socio-historical environment.

It is – as these papers demonstrate quite effectively -- an indelible part of the physical landscape.

Fences and Borders; freeways and housing projects; reservations and internment camps; basketball courts and country clubs; trolley cars and school buses; drinking fountains, lunch counters and swimming pools; gated communities, ghettos and barrios.

It doesn't get more 'real' than that.

If there is anything essential about race, it is – at the very least – the spaces that have been created to separate, isolate and marginalize those groups who have been thought to 'have race' in American history.

The papers in this panel focus upon the very spaces that create and perpetuate racial differences.

And yet, taken together, they provide a profile of the different ways in which race 'works' historically:

There is domination -- but there is also accommodation and resistance -- and I like the way that the combination of these papers present different models of what we once described as 'race relations' in 20th century America.

A common thread running through all three papers is the spatial articulation of racial identity.

Dianne Harris brings the critical study of whiteness to the history of the postwar suburb.

Suburban residential landscapes -- underpinned by federal housing policies that prescribed homogeneity, uniformity, and predictability – cultivated a broader white identity that encompassed families of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Her work brings a much-needed awareness of space, design and architecture to the critical study of whiteness, while at the same time, underscores the ways in which the postwar suburb created a basis for racial power, which surfaced through a broader, more inclusive ‘white’ identity.

She closely examines the spaces themselves: the way that suburban houses and gardens, front and back yards constituted a spatial extension of racial privilege that occluded racial and ethnic difference.

Her work suggests that suburbanization was deeply invested with racial meaning and that it was predicated upon not so much the exclusion of “blacks” but rather upon the inclusion of ‘whites’ and those who qualified themselves as such.

But at the same time people were building racial barriers in the postwar suburbs, they were also working to dismantle those barriers, as Wendell Pritchett observes.

He considers theories about race and property values, but instead of giving us the standard history of how white concerns about property values precluded racial integration in the postwar suburb, Pritchett focuses upon the surprising and relatively unknown efforts – among both Blacks and Whites – to contest the conventional wisdom about the detriment of Black people to white property.

The story is not a simple one of defensive suburban whites undertaking desperate measures to preserve the whiteness of their neighborhoods.

There were also, we discover, efforts to create racially integrated suburbs, predicated upon legal and academic challenges to the racial guidelines of public agencies like the FHA and private associations like NAREB (National Association of Real Estate Boards).

The work of Robert Weaver and the activism of Charles Abrams, as well as the creation of integrated communities like Concord Park by Morris Milgram...challenge the stereotype of the racially homogenous suburb and although “race was intrinsic to the process of postwar suburbanization,” there is a history of people, Black and White, seeking to defy the received wisdom about the necessity of racially homogenous suburban neighborhoods.

And yet, I wonder, where would we be without the kind of racial segregation that ensued during the postwar period?

What if Morris Milgram had succeeded and what if places like Concord Park – integrated suburban communities – were the rule and not the exception?

What if the ‘second ghetto’ – i.e. public housing -- didn’t exist in cities like Detroit, Chicago and New York?

How different would American culture look – or sound? Which brings us to the topic of Jeff Melnick’s argument about the vitality of ‘project culture’

This strikes me as a fundamental yet unsettling question underlying his presentation: what would American culture (American national identity) be without the historic isolation of Black people?

The ghetto – particularly the modernist, high-rise version of the ghetto that debuted through public housing programs – has been the site of explosive creative energy, and the culture nurtured specifically by public housing has become a defining characteristic of American culture.

And yet this very culture has been either ignored or dismissed by a culturally deaf generation of scholars, critics, journalists and architects who disparage public housing as a bitter failure of mid-twentieth century planning.

From Doo wop to hip hop, the housing project can take credit for creating conditions favorable to the production of Black popular culture, which, more often than not, becomes simply American popular culture.

Think simply of the irony of White suburban kids who defy the geography of racial differentiation by listening to music that powerfully expresses the culture and identity of those lacking access to the comforts of suburban life.

Public housing has become, according to Melnick, a “performance sanctuary,” demonstrating the agency by which Black youth personalize and transform institutional environments like public housing.

And while there is a certain kind of warranted idealism in finding “cultural creativity in the ruins,” it seems that we’ve all forgotten the tremendous idealism underlying the creation of public housing during the New Deal programs of the 1930s. I would encourage Mr. Melnick to think historically about public housing itself, it’s creators, their intentions and the result of their efforts.

I think he would find a clear discrepancy between the intentions and the result, but his emphasis upon the projects as a well of Black cultural energy adds another dimension to a disparity so taken for granted in urban history.

I’d like to conclude by offering suggestions for a few avenues of discussion:

Also linking these papers is an exclusive emphasis upon the spaces of home and neighborhood, but what other kinds of landscapes betray meaning about the relationship between race and the built environment?

Is there a racial geography of work? How have notions of race and racial difference shaped the historic organization of labor production? It's not difficult to identify racial and ethnic hierarchies embedded within an evolving division of labor: service provision, office work, agriculture, manufacturing have maintained a distinct racial order and continue to do so.

And what about the landscapes of leisure and consumption? Museums, amusement parks and world's fairs have played important roles in creating and reifying popular ideas about race and racial hierarchy.

I think we need to look beyond the sites of home and neighborhood to fully understand how race shapes the built environment, and vice versa.

Also, we need to remember that considering race in the built environment demands thinking beyond the stale Black/White paradigms. Now, more than ever, immigrants from Asia and Latin America are transforming the landscapes of cities and towns across the nation, and we need to understand how they bring and impart their distinct spatial sensibilities upon the American landscape.

It also means thinking historically about the spaces that were neither homogeneous white neighborhoods, nor Black 'Mudtowns': German towns, Jewish ghettos, Little Italies, Chinatowns, Little Tokyos, reservations and internment camps – all of these sites have attained a certain prominence in the landscape of American history, and they also contain important clues about the connections between race and the built environment.

Ultimately, I think this panel underscores the need to take race and ethnicity seriously as its own category of analyzing the built environment and that it operates both independently of and in conjunction with other social dynamics like class and gender.

We've often heard about the whites who threw rocks and rotten vegetables at the home of the only Black family on the block and while it's tempting to look behind the blatant expressions of racism to say 'it's really about class,' I'm not sure the people inside the home would agree.