White Space: the Architecture of Institutional Racism

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Racist ideologies are embedded in spaces we design. From courtrooms to classrooms, and from circulation to threshold, architects in the US design spaces that reflect an institutionalization of white supremacy. While the whiteness of such spaces may be invisible to some, it is oppressive and even violent for others. This paper contributes a framework for describing and analyzing institutional white space in architecture. We build on sociological theories of white institutions to demonstrate how architectural elements express and perpetuate institutional racism. We illustrate this framework through reviewing sociological interpretations of institutional spaces. Such elements as spatial hierarchy in courtrooms not only harbor a white institutional history, but they engender a racialized experience of space. We argue that reading architecture through the proposed lens of white institutional space is an important step toward confronting institutional racism inherent in design and space.

On February 1st, 1960, Ezell A. Blair, Jr., Franklin E. McCain, Joseph A. McNeil, and David L. Richmond staged their first sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. During the hour that they sat at the lunch counter, they received no service. At the end of the hour, the counter closed, and Blair, McCain, McNeil, and Richmond went home.[1] The racialized context of those otherwise mundane acts of sitting, service, and closing at that counter on that day catalyzed the nation. In the sit-in movement that was ignited, participants were given the following instructions: "Do show yourself friendly at the counter at all times. Do sit straight and always face the counter. Don't strike back, or curse back if attacked. Don't laugh loud. Don't hold conversations. Don't block entrances."[2] The racialized politics of the lunch counter stands out in the instructions given to sit in participants. Black activists occupied spaces at diners upright, facing the counter, and not blocking the entrances. Through their spatial disruptions, the activists confronted the white supremacist structure of the diner. "They altered patterns of interaction and the arrangement of people in physical space–the essence of segregation–and thereby challenged the distribution of power that had kept these arrangements in place as cornerstones

of white privilege."[3] The racial politics that the white space of the lunch counter necessitated is a reflection of the white supremacy of the culture of the space and its architecture. Circulation, visibility, threshold, symbolism, and hierarchy had a strong role in shaping behavior in the spaces of the lunch counters and in reifying their racial order.

The invisibility of racism in colorblind interpretations of the lunch counter reflect ways we continue to frame, understand, and talk about such spaces today. Before the sit-ins erupted as a profoundly disruptive civil rights action, lunch counters were just as racialized, even if the majority had the privilege of not seeing them as such (see Figure 1). Reflecting on our present attitudes toward architecture, we ask which of our everyday spaces do we fail to acknowledge as racist today?

In response to the racism that overwhelms the experience of social spaces that we use everyday (like the lunch counter) we extend our focus to the architecture of common institutional spaces. Building on sociological definitions of institutions, whiteness, and the notion of institutional white space, we argue for an architectural definition of white space. The definition we propose acknowledges how our institutions' building typologies, architectural elements, tectonic, and aesthetic aspects reflect, perpetuate, and institute a racist order. This builds on an understanding of racism not as an individual act of prejudice or animus, but as an entrenched logic of the institutional structure of society. By studying the anti-black racism of everyday institutional spaces we believe that we can start to uncover the pervasive and dominant white ideologies that drive so much of space making in the US.[4]

TOWARD AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

"Race is generated in the social texture of space, and so the analysis of space reveals its racial grammar as forms of social practice to which race gives rise."

—Caroline Knowles, *Race and Social Analysis*

Many architects would oppose the design of spaces of overt racism such as prisons, segregated water fountains, and slave quarters in plantations. We aim to show, however, that as a

Figure 1. The lunch counter of the Greensboro sit-in, on display at the Smithsonian. Source: RadioFan, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=29539823.

discipline, we routinely design our racialized ideologies into such institutional spaces as courtrooms, classrooms, and conference rooms.[5] How might we conceptualize architecture and our design of these spaces in a way that accounts for the racist institutions that they are manifestations of?

Sociological understandings of institutions, whiteness, and white institutions serve as the foundation of our definition of white space. First, an institution can be defined as "an established law, practice, or custom"[6] or "a large-scale social arrangement that is stable and predictable, created and maintained to serve the needs of society."[7] In our analysis, we summarize institutions as social structures that govern our thoughts and actions. Institutions express and reproduce racism, simultaneously. For example, the institutions of law in the US, historically express the desires of colonizers and slaveholders to establish their dominance while, simultaneously, reproducing a white supremacist social order.[8] Laws were constructed and leveraged to accumulate wealth, dominion over land, and the right to own and exploit slaves. Much of this was done by legally defining racial groups and allocating resources and rights based on thoses racial categories.

Second, whiteness is an "an analytic category that refers to the structured advantages that accrue to whites because of past and present discrimination.[9] Sociologist of racism, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that whiteness is "embodied racial power," wherein those considered white receive systemic benefits.[10] White supremacism, in turn, is the racialized social system that confers benefits to whites and the "totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege."[11]

At the intersection of institutions and whiteness, the idea of white institutions reflects the "deep racial structures, racialized everyday practices, and racial ideologies" that work in combination to organize social life.[12] In this paper, when we consider institutions as structures that govern our thoughts and actions, we bring attention to the power of white institutions to further the advantages of whites.

Acknowledging a courtroom as white space, for example, means understanding that the architectural design and experience of that space cannot be separated from the white supremacist ideologies that court procedures in the US are built upon, and which it perpetuates, as an insitution. White space is not merely a space occupied by a majority of white persons. The designation of white space does not change with occupancy. It is, historically, correlated to occupancy, but its fundamental nature is based in the white systems and structures that govern the institution that white space is an

architectural manifestation of. Thus, our working definition of *white space is the architecture of institutions that have a track record of perpetuating white supremacy.*

Framing architecture as complicit in producing white space requires suspending the notion that architecture is neutral—that architecture's inhabitants and the activities encased within it, and not the architecture itself, are what make a space racist or not. This requires asking how architectural products and processes are political and connected to histories of white supremacy. This also necessitates an understanding of racism not as an individual act of prejudice or animus, but as a deeply embedded, implicit and explicit organizational logic of the institutional and ideological structure of society.

In this paper, we advocate for bridging interdisciplinary perspectives on race and space. Sociological research in race and ethnicity treats the spatial logics and spatial experiences of racism extensively. As well, architectural histories and theories grapple with race and racial inequality. There remains an important gap, however, in conceptualizing spaces of racism: sociologically, there is a lack of research dealing with race at the scale of architectural spaces; and architecturally, there is a lack of research accounting for institutional analysis of racism. By emphasizing the institutional context of architecture, we aim to bridge this gap.

SPACES OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

"Racialized space is one mechanism of institutional racism through which white power and privilege are reproduced in often tacit and relatively invisible ways."

—Wendy Leo Moore, *Reproducing Racism*

Racial hierarchy and inequality are foundational to the development of major institutions in U.S. society, including education, employment, health, wealth, and property. Yet, oftentimes in popular understandings of racism it is reduced to individual animus or acts of hate, obscuring structural forms of racism, and allowing most (white) Americans to absolve themselves of responsibility for racial inequalities: "By placing the emphasis on prejudice rather than on power, we lose the ability to see how race does its work in our society; how it systematically skews opportunities and life chances along racial lines, how it literally as well as figuratively 'takes place.'"[13] The white and racist history and logic of U.S. institutions allow individuals to uphold white supremacy without feeling racist. Sociologist of whiteness and racism, Joe Feagin writes that, "white-generated and white-maintained oppression is far more than a matter of individual bigotry, for it has been from the beginning a material, social, and ideological reality… white oppression of Americans of color has been systemic—that is, it has been manifested in all major societal institutions."[14] Sociologist Wendy Leo Moore drives this connection between institutional and individual racism deeper. According to Moore, "the

concept of institutional racism captures how racist relations can be reproduced without individuals' intentional racist acts, because racism is deeply entrenched within our institutions."[15] The work that institutions do that is germane to this analysis of architectural space lies in their reproduction of racism through entrenched and tacit means.

As structures that govern our thoughts and actions, institutions frequently have spatial manifestations. These are reflected in the buildings of institutional spaces such as courts (legal institutions), museums (cultural institutions), and schools (academic institutions) as well as the spaces that institutions produce, such as segregated neighborhoods (the institution of red-lining), segregated schools (the institution of Jim Crow segregation), and slave quarters (the institution of slavery). Because of their systemic (vs. individual) nature, institutions "[reify] whiteness within the space without need for intentional action to do so." Moore argues that, "the material and ideological privileges that whites receive as a result of racial segregation get rendered invisible because they require no individual racial animus."[16] Again, it bears emphasizing the need to exercise our sociological imagination to see institutional forms of racism as not being manifest solely through individual's racist acts.[17] (Racist spaces can, and often do, house non-racist interactions between individuals while simultaneously perpetuating institutional forms of racism.)

White institutions are regulatory, cultural, but also spatial things. Wendy Moore's study of law schools is powerful because it connects the institution of *law* with the institutions of *legal education* with, in turn, the *spaces of law schools* in which those institutions are reproduced. She shows how whiteness versus non-whiteness are reflected in these institutions through "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, and meaning and identity."[18] The curriculum, pedagogy, admissions, and even the symbolic placement of images of white leaders in the halls of law schools all play roles in shaping them as white institutional space. In the context of law schools, Moore points out that "the implicit message of this whitewashed space was that whites were the legal and political insiders, while, if present at all, Americans of color were outsiders trying to get treated fairly by the legal or political system."[19] (See Figure 2.) Moore's insight is a powerful one that is central in our conceptualization of white space as one that foregrounds the institutional context of architecture.

Whether explicitly stated or implied through analyses of racism, architects have productively explored racism expressed through or inherent in spaces at the scale of buildings. Craig Wilkins's discussion on philosophical conceptions of space is a starting point. He examines John Locke's conceptions of space as private property in comparison to his writings on slaves as property.[20] Juxtaposing these attitudes toward ownership and dominance, Wilkins makes a persuasive case for the white supremacist logic of even our most foundational conceptions

Figure 2. White institutional space. Secretary Pompeo delivers remarks at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Source: U.S. Department of State from United States, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=87422565.

of space. His subsequent illustration of everyday racism that occurs in, for example, a line at an ATM machine, is a reflection of an entrenched assumption about the white supremacy of space and who holds priority in space. The same underlying notions give Mario Gooden's reflections on Dark Space so much of their potency. Attending to racialization of not only experiences of space, but also the production of aesthetics in architecture, Gooden encourages us to account for affective aspects of white supremacy.[21]

Adding to these works, the canonical Foucauldian perspectives on spatial manifestations of biopolitics offer a further approach to acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in architectural elements. Foucault's analysis of the panopticon exemplifies the agency and complicity of architectural elements in experiences of racism. Foucault does not, however, address the significant racialized logics of institutional racism. The "glaring ommission" in Foucault's prison history reflects a "disregard for the centrality of slavery and colonialism in the production of Western carcereal formations and in the unfolding of occidental modernity as a whole."[22] While we draw inspiration from the spatial significance of the panoptic gaze, we are simultaneously mindful of how a Foucauldian analysis of white space could fall short in analyzing the white institutional context of architecture. For example, courtrooms and classrooms are seen as places of justice and social mobility, respectively, but sociologists have shown that these spaces

often also serve to exacerbate social stratification. Today's courtrooms continue to discriminate by penalizing black subjects and today's classrooms are an oversized pipeline into that (in)justice system.[23]

How can we frame the architecture of these institutions as spaces that maintain racist social order? Consider the following analyses as first steps.

Joyce Bell, a sociologist of civil rights, considers the architectural signification to the courtroom. In her discussion of the "hegemonic white space" of the courtroom, Bell studies the tactics that Assata Shakur and members of the Black Liberation Army used to disrupt the spatial and social hierarchies of the courtroom.[24] They used their bodies, gestures, speech as ways to disrupt circulation, threshold, and hierarchy. The physical situation of the judge, examiners, jurors, defendants, and witnesses are all architectural expressions of a system of (in)justice defined by its racist history and racist present. This dynamic is explicitly depicted in Bobby Seale's strategic interruption of courtroom decorum in the 2020 film, The Trial of the Chicago Seven. Following several interruptions of rules that were systematically denying him his rights, Seale was gagged and bound to his chair in the courtroom. (Figure 3.)

The well-documented racial dynamics of courtrooms are not the only spaces in which the hegemony of white space

Figure 3. "Bobby Seale attempting to write notes on a legal pad while bound and gagged in the courtroom during the Chicago Eight conspiracy trial in Chicago, Illinois" (Source: Howard Brodie. Between October 29 and November 5, 1969. Color crayon and on white paper. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, 039.00.00.)

shapes racialized interactions. Mundane and everyday institutional spaces exercise white hegemonic power through similar spatial dynamics. Cary Costello distinguishes between the panoptic gaze of white faculty over students in a standard auditorium seating arrangement in contrast to the omni-optic gaze of mutual control by students in circular seating arrangements.[25] Building on his analysis, an auditorium tells us that a large group of people, seated in the aisles, are focused on one or a small number of people, who occupy the stage. The aisles located closer to the stage confer some benefit compared to the aisles at the back of the room. Further yet, those seats in the middle of the aisles have a privileged vantage over seats at the edges. In a colorblind interpretation of these layers of hierarchy, an architect might say that there is nothing racialized about these forms of proximity and adjacency in a standard sloped classroom. The more attentive students might occupy the front-most rows. Those who arrive early might take the seats close to the center. Colorblind analyses often end there. Now, if we consider the white hegemonic context of the institution, our analysis goes further. The presence of white bodies will affect where non-white bodies are welcomed to sit. The aisles thus become racialized.

If we consider the white hegemonic context of higher education and Western pedagogies, a further interpretation of racialization presents itself. Hierarchical and patriarchal forms of learning where a historically white, male figure occupies a platform of power and preaches coveted knowledge to his subjects, are consistently racialized (and gendered). Thus, the hierarchical configuration of seats oriented toward a stage also reveals a deep seated racialized logic, reifying what Katherine McKittrick notes in her description of the classroom to be "a

colonial site that was, and always has been, engendered by and through violent exclusion!"[26] The arrangement of seats in mock court room classes, spatial hierarchy and the positioning of the typically white professor in the classroom, as well as symbolic elements that referred to the white history of academic institutions work in concert (see Figure 4). A review of alternative architectures of learning and restorative justice, as examples, would illustrate flattened hierarchies, collectivist, and more just institutional practices of other cultures.

CONFRONTING ARCHITECTURAL WHITENESS

"Space is in fact a composite, active, archive of politics and individual agency, and is, in this capacity, part of race making."

—Joe Feagin, *Systemic Racism*

White space is not just a container where social relations take place–its materiality has agency, its program conditions relationships, and its aesthetic does work. Costello argues that "the influence of [a] schools' built environment [is] a paradigmatic example of how certain curricula remain hidden, even though they are in plain sight." Like Bell, Moore, McKittrick, and Costello, we argue that architecture must be interpreted in its institutional context. And, further, we argue that this institutional interpretation of architecture is critical for confronting architecture's racism.

Analyzing architecture as white space has potential for recognizing and addressing racism. Colorblind attitudes do much to sustain and perpetuate racism in the US. The same is true in the context of architectural practice and theory. Not recognizing the ways race operates ideologically, insitutionaly, and hegemonically serves as an excuse for inaction. If we acknowledge the work that race does and the work that architecture does, we might see how these two serve to advance one another.

Ruha Benjamin writes that "if we consider race as itself a technology, as a means to sort, organize, and design a social structure as well as to understand the durability of race, its consistency and adaptability, we can understand more clearly the literal architecture of power."[27] Architecture's role in perpetuating and entrenching racism in the U.S. must be acknowledged in order for architects to address institutional racism. It has been, and remains, an intellectual challenge to connect architecture to racism. And we believe that that challenge has prevented our field from making significant progress and from demonstrating its relevance in efforts to challenge racism.

As a profession concerned with the dignity, safety, and welfare of users of space, the need for us to develop theoretical frameworks that help us recognize oppression is urgent. Moore reminds us that "black accounts of everyday, micro-level experiences with white oppressors reveal a macroworld of

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Figure 4. The white space of a law school classroom. Source: Philip Larson, CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

institutionalized oppression that, in its numerous and bloody manifestations, constantly crashes in on and warps the every-day microworlds of African Americans, to the present day."[28] In this paper, we have argued that it is this institutional context of architecture that must be foregrounded in order to decipher the spaces of our institutions as white space. It is not enough to relegate discussions of racism in architecture to individual acts of discrimination.

We recognize the challenge that the proposition in this paper poses. In arguing that fundamental architectural elements must be analyzed in their institutional context, we are suppos-ing that those elements can be seen, in themselves, as racist. It is not just the users of space that make the experience of space racist. Architecture is not solely a physical thing that is racially neutral. Architecture comprises space and its mean-ing. In this ontological position, a neutral view of architecture's material agency parallels the colorblindness that enables rac-ism to persist. We invite readers to explore white institutions as the ideologies, practices, and policies that bring racialized meaning to space, thereby shaping what we argue to be white space. The foundational premise that we advance here is that architecture cannot be divorced from its institutional context, and therefore it must be understood as always reproducing or resisting the racial structures of society.

ENDNOTES

1.   Howard Zinn, *On Race* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011), 42.

2.   Zinn, *On Race,* 45.

3.   Allan G. Johnson, *The Forest and the Trees: Sociology as Life, Practice, and Promise* (Third ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

4.   The focus of the forms of institutional racism investigated in this paper are anti-black. We anticipate that future research on other forms of racism—particularly against indigenous persons and other persons of color—will reveal different institutional and architectural logics of racism.

5.   The definition of "institutional buildings" in architectural practice refers to such typologies as hospitals and schools. This term may originate in its refer-ence to the buildings that house organizations that serve as institutions, in the sociological sense. This is not, however, the definition of institution that we are working with in this paper.

6.   New Oxford American Dictionary, "Institution"

7.   Sociology Dictionary, https://sociologydictionary.org/institution/

8.   Wendy Leo Moore, *Reproducing Racism: White Space, Elite Law Schools, and Racial Inequality* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

9.   George Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: theorizing the hidden architecture of landscape," *Landscape Journal* 26, 1-07 (2007), 13.

10. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Fourth ed. Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2014), 156.

11. Ibid, 8-9.

12. Moore, *Reproducing Racism*, 4-5.

13. George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 41.

14. Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xii.

15. Moore, *Reproducing Racism,* 25

16. Ibid, 25.

17. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

18. Ibid, 26.

19.   Ibid, page xi.

20.   Craig L. Wilkins, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture, and Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

21.   Mario Gooden, *Dark Space: Architecture, Representation, Black Identity* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2016).

22.   David Childs, "You ain't seen nothing yet: 'Beloved', the American chain gang, and the Middle Passage remix," *American Quarterly* 61, 2 (2009): 288.

23.   Victor M. Rios, *Human Targets: Schools, Police, and the Criminalization of Latino Youth* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

24.   Joyce Bell, forthcoming

25.   Carrie Yang Costello (now Cary Gabriel Costello), "Schooled by the Classroom: The (re)production of social stratification in professional school settings," in Eric Margolis, *The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

26.   Peter James Hudson, "Canada and the Question of Black Geographies: An Interview with Katherine McKittrick," in *The CLR James Journal* 20, 1 (fall 2014).

27.   Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), 91.

28.   Feagin, *Systemic Racism,* 9.

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