Conflicting Spaces: Exploring Consciousness and Reaction Through Architecture

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Conflicting Spaces is the title of the final, two-week design project given to beginning studio students at the School of Architecture and Engineering Technology at Florida A&M University during the summer of 2020. All students involved in the project were Black. It is important to make this distinction, as they were asked to choose a current social topic, and seven out of eight participants selected the Black Lives Matters movement. This project intends to open up the conversation and allow students to question the roles architecture has played in the realities of our BIPOC and underrepresented communities.

This assignment was divided into two main phases. The first phase was titled SPACE(s) & SELF. Its focus is on introspection. They are to ask: can architecture be conscious? Students were given the task of designing two 15' x 15' spaces, each one meant to be inhabited by an individual. The spaces were required to be opposite, conflicting, and/or contradictory in nature from one another. The second phase of the project was titled SPACE(s) & SITE. They were to answer the question: How can architecture react? They would place their designed spaces in a blank site and create a composition that would reflect on the possible dynamics between the spaces with one another, with the site, and with users.

Conflicting Spaces was more than a final studio project, it became a cathartic conversation on the conflictive realities our Black student population face in their everyday. It demonstrates the importance of architecture as a political act and how in academia, we have failed multiple times in listening and giving voice to our BIPOC students. It sets conflict in the forefront, challenging everyone to question, reflect and act in changing the biases and exclusionary discourses that Architecture has been complicit of for far too long.

"Anti-racism is not taught. Anti-racism is practiced."

—WAI ARCHITECTURE THINK TANK, *A Manual of Anti-Racist Architecture Education*

PREFACE

The summer of 2020 was characterized by the numerous Black Lives Matter protests across the country following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and many other Black lives. These protests continue to spark social debate questioning the role of every human being and their complicity to these injustices. As a result, many forums have been opened for conversations on Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) issues, but is it enough? This paper is written in the spirit of extending the dialogue and inviting the voices of a demographic affected directly by these issues: specifically black undergraduate architecture students enrolled at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

HBCUs are integral in the recruitment and preparation of Black students in architecture. As Kendall A. Nicholson explains, the seven National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) accredited schools at HBCUs are responsible for enrolling 32% of the total Black student population in accredited and pre-professional programs.[1] If this is the case, and we are to talk about black issues, it is paramount that HBCUs are rightfully acknowledged and at the forefront of the conversation. I who writes this preface am not black, but a white, Hispanic, Puerto Rican male, former alumni and current visiting professor at the School of Architecture and Engineering Technology at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. It is important that I begin making this distinction, as we recognize that we run the risk of being politically incorrect in the process of writing this paper. However, we are willing to do so following Whitney M. Young Jr.'s call back in 1968 to the AIA when he said: "...for a society that has permitted itself in the luxury of an excess of callousness and indifference, we can now afford to permit ourselves the luxury of an excess of caring and of concern."[2]

The project Conflicting Spaces was the final, two-week design project assigned to eight beginning design students enrolled in my summer Design 1.1 studio. All students participating (Clemence Crawford, Taylor Donelson, Dene Garret, Jacob Olodude, Corlus Pope, Dominic Samson, Jalena Washington, and Akil Webster) are black. The format of this paper will be similar to the format of their final project. I will first offer context to the creation and development of this project followed

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by the description of the two parts of this exercise: SPACE(s) & SELF, and SPACE(s) & SITE. In this paper, these two parts will include the instructions, premises, and questions presented to students. Afterwards, Akil and Jalena will explain their architectural response through the sharing of spatial narratives and personal reflections. We will conclude by offering more premises and questions so that this conversation does not die, inviting all readers to reflect, react and engage in the conflicting spaces of their everyday lives.

CONFLICTING SPACES PROJECT

Conflicting Spaces was not conceived originally as part of the list of projects for my summer design students. In fact, two weeks into the term we were still on track to conclude with a spatial exploration exercise completed by my other students during the Fall of 2020. However, no amount of planning would have prepared me as an instructor, or our students to the reality and stressors brought by 2020. If the conditions were not the same, why would we repeat the same exercise?

In the pursuit of changing the project, some objectives remained unchanged: Students are to develop an understanding of space. Students are to be challenged to think conceptually, capable of translating their ideas formally through the creation of space. However, new objectives were identified (less for the students and more for me as their instructor): The project deliverables should adapt to the circumstances of both online teaching and socio-economic realities of the students. The project needs to be a critique of space as it relates to the BIPOC experience, in an effort to engage and address the disconnect between abstract concepts explored in first year from the very concrete concerns of the students.

The creation of this exercise owes itself, in large part, to the conversations with my students on our daily virtual calls. Teaching architecture to freshmen students in a remote environment already presents its complications, but when the social commentary occurring daily across the country involves the politization of their identity and experiences it is our social responsibility to prioritize the social, physical and mental well-being of our black students. This confronted me into recognizing that even though I am an educator at an HBCU, I have also been ignorant to the many issues that my black students face daily for just presenting as they are; and that is unacceptable. I took the opportunity to look into my limited experience teaching as a way to, through this exercise, begin to question what really matters when educating the current generation of marginalized architecture students.

We believe that if architecture is to serve, it needs to listen. When looking into how architecture has disserved and ignored BIPOC communities in a pursuit of formalisms and theories that have blatantly been historically racist and exclusionary, this exercise was to confront and question why it has been

this way and how can we do better. To do better is to realize that architecture has previous theoretical frameworks are not mutable with the current socio-political realities that desperately need to be addressed. Craig L. Wilkins argues that many of our theoretical foundations are of "dead space, a space that fossilizes identity and thus renders space less than pliable for political engagement and identity construction for African-Americans."[3]

The Conflicting Spaces project intends to allow students to critique space from their direct experiences and prioritizing their concerns. It recognizes that "architecture spatializes political, social, and historical relationships as well as instrumentalizes subjectivities. It brackets place, time, and materiality to events in order to produce meanings and discourse."[4] During the SPACE(s)/SELF phase of the project, the design of spaces parallels the concretization of conflicting experiences they perceive as black people living in the United States of America. During the SPACE(s)/SITE phase, they explore how space reacts and responds to its surroundings, questioning the nature of conflict when two contradictory spaces are somewhat close in proximity to each other, and exert their influence on a previously "bare" site. Below you will see the premises and questions for both phases of the project's framework.

PHASE 1: SPACE(S)/SELF

For the first part of the exercise, titled SPACE(s)/SELF, students were given the following set of premises, questions, and instructions.

Architecture has been described in many ways. It can be political, social, cultural, spiritual... Can Architecture be conscious?

The first part of this project is about introspection. As architects we should not only be aware of the impact our decisions can have in others, but we must question our notions of space and how we inhabit it. Can this consciousness of self begin to inform the exploration of a conscious architecture?

2020 has been a year of much uncertainty, tension, and change. For this project you are to reflect on current events where conflict has been at the forefront of the social conversation and debate. Choose a topic that speaks to your own reality, experiences, and/or you are passionate about. Because of the very nature of conflict, two opposing stances will be present. Brainstorm words and phrases that come to mind when thinking of the selected topic (seven out of eight students chose Black Lives Matter as their explored topic).

You are to design two 15' x 15' spaces. These spaces are meant to be inhabited by an individual. Both spaces have to be opposite, conflicting, and/or contradictory in nature. Begin to relate elements from the brainstorming exercise with both spaces. What does it mean to dwell in them? Is it possible? How do you access this space? Can you enter? What is the nature of light
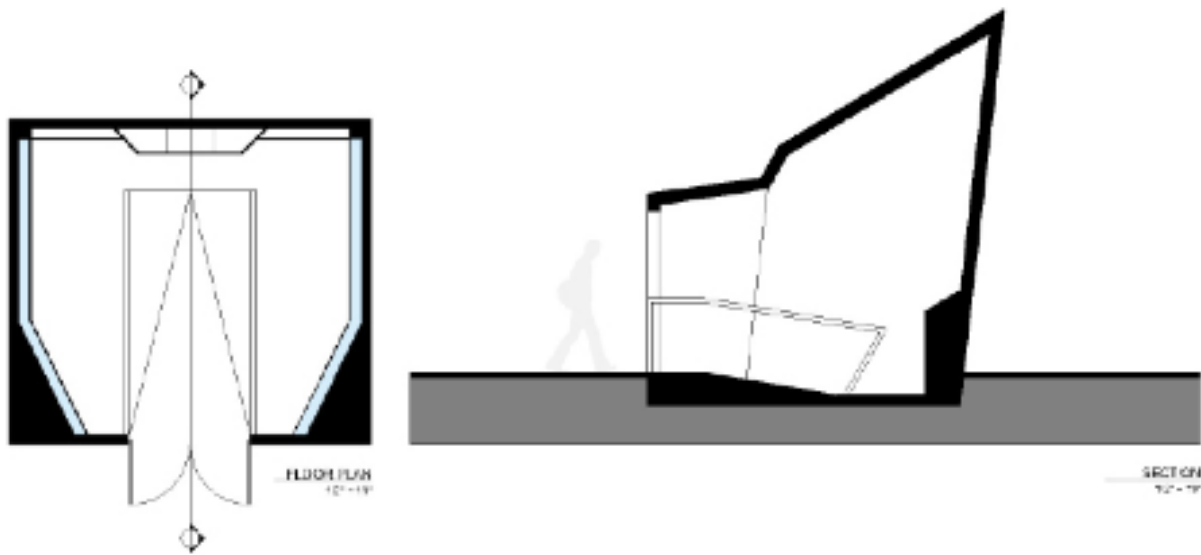
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Figure 1. Space for Mourning. Akil Webster.

within this space? How does the space make you feel? What is the scale of the space in comparison to you? If you could describe this space, would it be introverted or extroverted? Is this a space you would want to stay in?

PHASE 2: SPACE(S)/SITE

For the second part of the exercise, titled SPACE(s)/SITE students were given the following set of premises, questions, and instructions.

Up to this moment you have focused on designing two distinct spaces that encapsulate the notions of two opposing and/or conflicting spaces. For this second part, you are to ask what interactions and dynamics do these spaces not only have with each other, but with a given, imaginary site. What influences do these spaces exert on their surroundings?

Can Architecture react? As of now you have worked and designed your space individually and separate from one another. However, for this second part you are to examine a different scenario. What if they are in relative proximity to each other? How does their introduction to an otherwise bare site, begin to exert changes? How do the spaces react to one another? How do the spaces react to the site? How does the site react to these spaces? How would you react to the spatial experiences present in your design?

EXAMPLE 1: BLACK LIVES MATTER: MOURNING AND CELEBRATION

Akil Webster explains his architectural response through a spatial narrative.

The first space [Figure 1] is a memorial mourning the black lives lost to police brutality. You are guided into the space with railing that serves the purpose of safety but also creating a sense of restriction. This is to represent the unescapable and oppressive feeling that black people feel daily; the feeling that no matter what you do you cannot succeed because the system was created for you to fail. As you walk further into the space it begins to open, creating a sense of clarity. The space is intended to be dark and gloomy, for that reason, there are no windows. The only light available in the space comes from a few light fixtures. On the wall facing the entrance are engraved names of lives that have been lost to police brutality. Below, is a piece of stone engraved with the names of black people whose killers were convicted for their wrongful death. Along the walls to the sides, water cascades, representing the sound of blood shed from the hands from police brutality.

The second space [Figure 2] is a gallery that showcases black artists. This is a place for the celebration of black lives. Protruding from the ground are two wedges made mostly of glass to introduce more light and to bring the environment into the space, unlike the other. This structure was created underground in order to utilize more space within the plot of land that was allocated to us. It was pertinent that the space not feel as restricted and tight to create a major distinction between the two spaces. The purpose of this structure is also aimed towards socializing so the space needed to be expanded. It was important to add foliage to the space, not purely for aesthetic purposes, but also to represent growth and the gift of life.

When considering the insertion of the conflicting spaces on site [Figure 3], I took a more abstract approach, utilizing
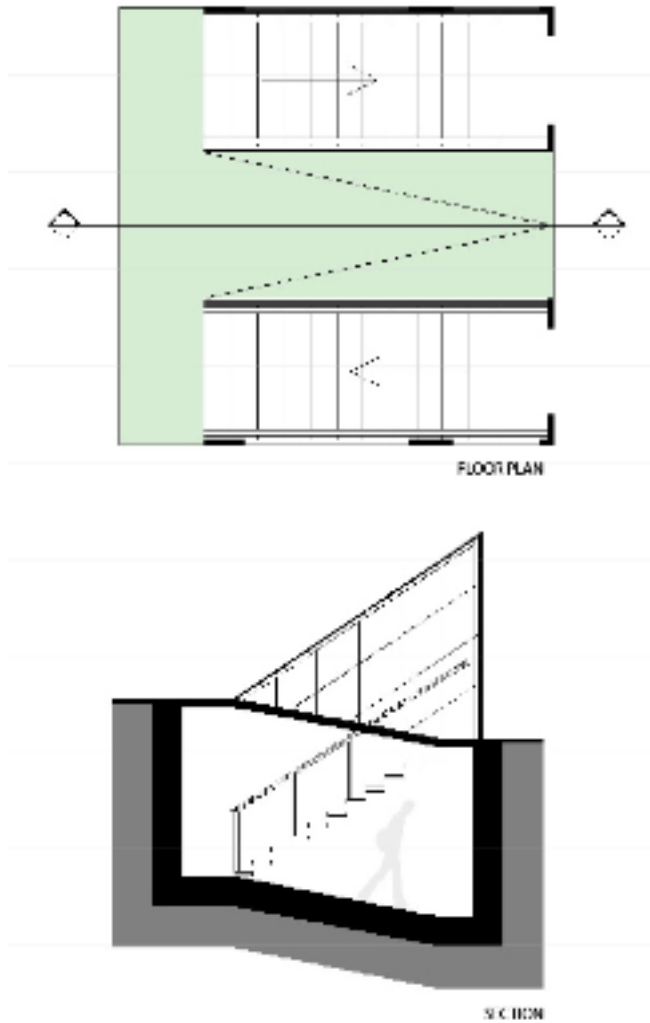
Figure 2. Space for Celebration. Akil Webster.

techniques learned in the semester. I chose a brown mono-chromatic scheme to represent the different skin tones. On the right side is the mourning space and on the left side is the celebrating space. On the right, you see lines that intersect each other, which are representative of the turmoil caused by the killing of innocent black men and women. And on the left, the lines are all parallel, representing unity. If you look towards the middle, you see that the rectangles are similar, representing the fact that we are all the same inside, even though at first glance it may not seem like it.

EXAMPLE 2: A DIFFERENCE OF REALITY
Jalena Washington explains her architectural response through a spatial narrative.

For my first space [Figure 4], I wanted to represent the reality of black people living in America. The space is in an odd shape, the floor is very rugged, it is very tight and compact on the inside, making it difficult to get around. Although the space is difficult to maneuver, it is not entirely impossible. I did this for this space because I wanted to show how as a black person living in America, life is made more difficult. Doing something as simple as walking in this space is made increasingly difficult. This challenge of walking serves as a metaphor to the very real challenges black people face every day simply because of the color of their skin. Yet, even with these challenges, we make sure that we do what we need to ensure our success. I decided not to add a roof to this space to represent how even with all these challenges going on, not every moment lived as a black person has to be defined by the struggles you face. Looking up at the sky serves as a representation of how we can get a breath of relief from the daily struggles as a black person and remember why we are proud to live in our skin. These breaths of relief can include things like being inmersed in black culture and seeing all of our accomplishments, which is what motivates us to keep going.
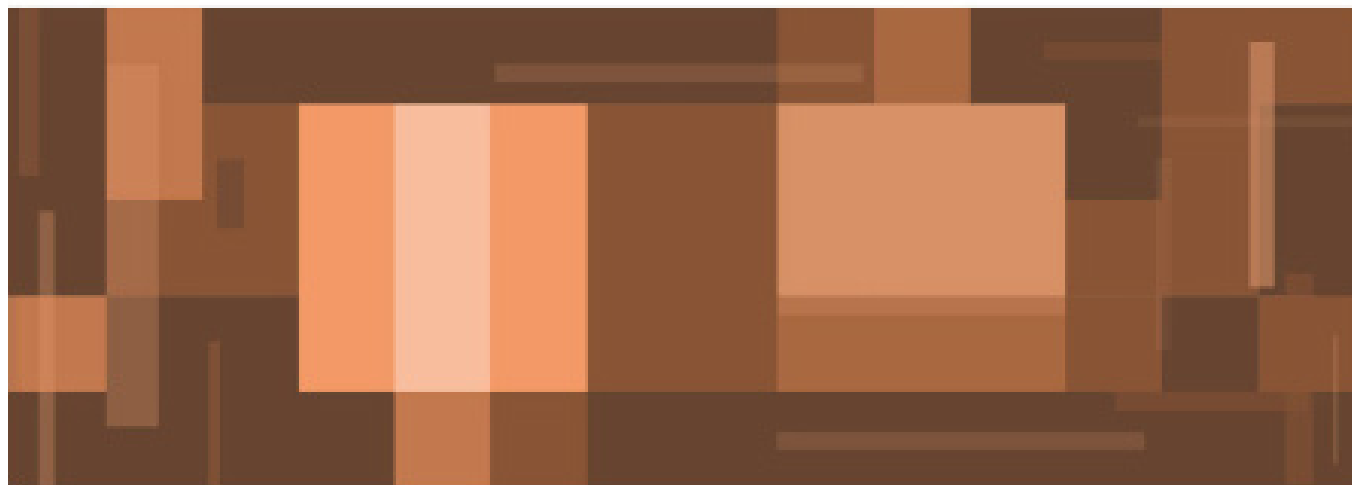

Figure 3. SPACE(S)/SITE. Akil Webster

For my second space [Figure 5], I wanted to represent the ideal version of America that too many people believe they live in. For this space, there is no point of entry or exit. The idea is that either we're lucky enough to be born into it or we aren't. It also doesn't give opportunity for those on the outside to gain entry. No one on the inside can see those who aren't a part of their reality. Even if they were willing to let someone else in, they wouldn't be able to. The spherical shapes between the two walls represent the very real issues that we as black people face in America, along with other issues that exist in society. There is a window in the space that allows whoever is inside to see these issues, but their view is limited to what is in front of them through the framing of the window. This represents how the people on the inside have the privilege of only dealing with what they see, even though there are many other issues that are out of their view. This leads people into believing that because they don't see it, it must not exist especially since it doesn't affect them personally. There is also a room in this space where you don't see anything, and it is completely closed off. This room represents how those who have the privilege to live in this space can completely close themselves off to issues in the black community without even trying to understand what we face every day. Life is made easier for those in this space because even though they may have their own issues, they can't relate to ours. Some don't even recognize that there are any issues for us at all.

For my site plan, I put both spaces on opposite sides of the site but made the first space closer to the second one to represent how we are making moves to make our issues seen and our voices heard. The second space has a barrier that is blocking itself off from the first space to show how there is division between these two spaces. The triangular shapes represent the efforts we have made and continue to make in order for the privileged individuals to hear us and see us and our issues.
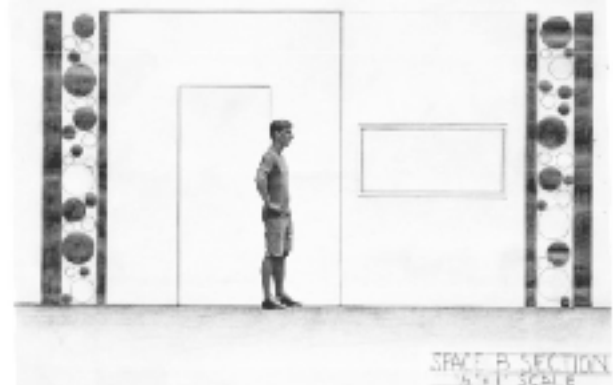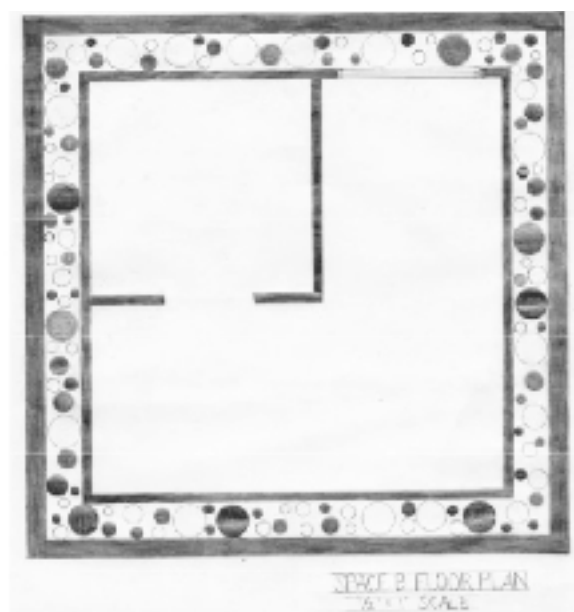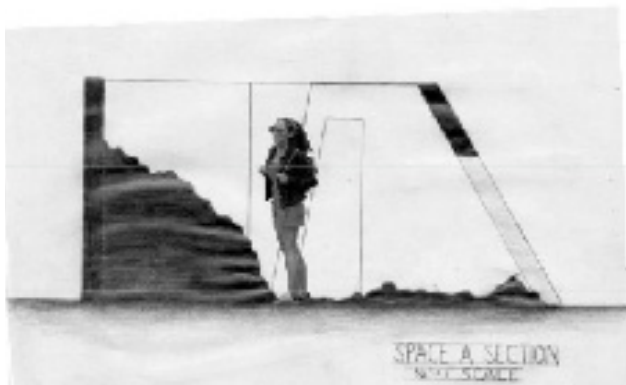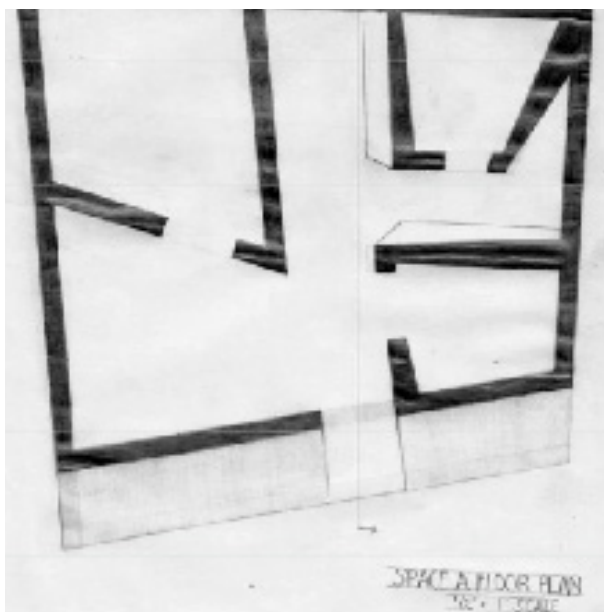
Figure 4. First Reality. Jalena Washington.

Figure 5. Second Reality. Jalena Washington.

I surrounded the second space with blocks to further emphasize the barrier between these two spaces.

CONCLUSION

This Conflicting Spaces project was not born out of necessity, but as a result of the exhaustion of a marginalized community carrying the burden of a shapeshifting oppression many times embodied in our own educational spaces. We no longer have the luxury of just thinking about space through the many times exclusionary and racist formalisms of the past. Our BIPOC and underrepresented minorities have never had the luxury to engage in these theoretical processes, when their very lives are affected by the engagement of violent spatial practices. How do we breach this disconnect and go past the resiliency and into practical action? It is time for us to redefine how to view space and how to engage with it. It can no longer be disconnected from identity and community. Ideas of space need to be voiced, and it is in the inclusion of our most silenced voices. Listen and give power to your marginalized communities.

Architecture education needs to change. Architecture education should have less room for lecturing, and more room for conversing. Architecture cannot be stagnant and absolute, it needs to be flexible, transformative, and constantly dissatisfied. Architecture should be for everyone, and it is a shame that it has not been for way too long.

We invite you to look into these premises beyond contemplation. What are we practicing as educators? What is our reaction to conflict in all spaces? Where is the evidence of our consciousness reflected?

ENDNOTES

1. Kendall Nicholson, "Where Are My People? Black in Architecture," October 29, 2020, https://www.acsa-arch.org/resources/data-resources/where-are-my-people-black-in-architecture/.

2. Kiisk, Linda, and Theodore C. Landsmark. 2003. *20 on 20/20 vision: perspectives on diversity and design.* [Washington, DC]: AIA Diversity Committee.

3. Craig L. Wilkins, "Space-Place," in *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture, and Music* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 18.

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

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