

Emmett Till Memorial: A Community Engaged Studio Project

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In 1955, Emmett Till was 14-year-old when he was kidnaped and brutally murdered by two white men in the Mississippi Delta. This racist incident was one of the key events that galvanized the Civil Rights Movement's work. Through a community engagement project to design a memorial dedicated to Emmett Till, this essay explores a studio pedagogy that aimed to introduce social justice in architecture studios. The "Emmett Till Memorial" community engaged project took place in Spring 2020 in the first-year architecture studio of the School of Architecture at Mississippi State University. In this project, we partnered with the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (ETMC) to design a memorial at the Graball Landing site where it is believed Emmett's body was found. Since April 2008, the ETMC attempts to commemorate this site and it has become a nationally recognized memory site. Unfortunately, the site has been subjected to repeated vandalism. This paper describes the different stages of this community engaged project in a contested site that aimed to embrace transformative service-learning ideas and critical reflection. The service-learning design project integrated field experiences, including visits to historic sites related to Emmett Till's history and an immersive experience with activists and community organizers from the ETMC. Using critical reflection as a pedagogical approach, discussions among students and community members centered on how the design outcome of this community engaged project would contribute to community conversations about the future development of the Graball Landing site as well as design vision and values that could be included in the new memorial and its restorative narrative. Students' design proposals exhibited a wide range of design intentions and sources of inspiration. Employing symbolic and educational features, the diverse design proposals responded to specific environmental conditions of the place and explored how to engage visitors with Emmett Till's history, the civil rights movement, and the future of racial reconciliation. Finally, this paper discusses how African-American historical sites have intentionally been ignored and marginalized and how architecture educators, students, and community members can partner to preserve sites of memory and to dismantle systematic racism in urban design and architecture.

MEMORY AND PLACE: EMMETT TILL AND THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

As Dolores Hayden stated, "Place memory encapsulates the human ability to connect with both the built and the natural environments that are intertwined in the cultural landscape. It is the key to the power of historic places to help citizens define their public pasts: places trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past, and at the same time places can often represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present"^[1] Controversy and debate on preservation of historical places in the United States is not a new phenomenon. In 1997 Dolores Hayden argued that it was not enough to simply acknowledge diversity or add few projects from underrepresented groups to the list of historical preserved places or buildings. Hayden advocated for the importance "to reverse the neglect of resources" for the historic preservation of sites relevant to the history of BIPOC and women in the U.S.^[2]

While memorials and monuments have been designed and built through history to claim particular narratives, they have intentionally ignored and overlooked other narratives. Public monuments and memorials validate specific narratives reflecting and responding to political interests of the time when they are produced shaping history and collective identity, "the story told by a public monument becomes the official story..."^[3]. Erika Doss discusses the contemporary urgency of American culture to commemorate the past exposing issues of identity and representation.^[4] Memorials can be powerful instruments of influential power and identity. Contemporary memorials can act as counternarrative of dominant narratives challenging assumptions and "historical amnesia" of racist terrorism events in the U.S.^[5]

The Mississippi Delta has a history of racial injustices and oppression. This history still has its consequences in a region that struggles with poverty, food and housing insecurity, and lack of economic development. At the same time, communities the Delta attempt to capitalize on their civil rights history, identity, and cultural production to create jobs and economic development opportunities to survive and thrive. Dave Tells emphasizes on the interconnections of place, racism, and



Figure 1. Students at Graball Landing site, the place where Emmett Till's body was found. Photographs by Lopez Barrera.

commemoration on the story of Emmett Till. This region of long-term economic distress and poverty is affected by the economic development related to the Mississippi Freedom Trail and the remembrance of Till's history. Tells reflects on how different questions and places commemorating the Emmett Till affect the current economic well-being of the different small towns involved in Till's story, as Tell states "...the story of Till's commemoration is, quite simply, the story of race and the Mississippi Delta." [6]

According to Tell, the 1st commemoration of Emmett Till in the Delta was place in 2005 where two roadside markers were erected outside Greenville and Tutwiler. Since then, over five million dollars have been invested in buildings and signage in the Delta to commemorate Emmett Till including roadside markers, two restored buildings, the Emmett Till Interpretative Center, among others. Tell argues "*This newfound commemorative infrastructure is uncoordinated, unevenly distributed, ideologically inconsistent, and frequently vandalized. For all these limitations, however, the infrastructure ensures that the memory of Emmett Till has something it never had before: a material presence on the landscape on the Delta.*" [7]

This paper explores a community engagement project to design a memorial dedicated to honor Emmett Till in a historical site in the Mississippi Delta that has been historically ignored, marginalized and vandalized.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ARCHITECTURE STUDIO: EMMETT TILL MEMORIAL

Community engaged pedagogy in architecture studios help students to develop their civic identity and develop life-long human values that are at the core of the architectural education while applying their knowledge and design skills in real-life contexts. This pedagogical approach highlights the importance

of the role of the designer in society as an agent for social change at community level. [8] Transformative community engagement in the form of service-learning has the potential to transform student's understanding of power dynamics and privilege and their place within the world. [9]

The introduction of social justice and community engagement in the 1st year architecture studio was inspired by Paulo Freire's ideas of dialogue and cooperation to respond to and challenge unjust and oppressive realities. [10] Freire emphasizes the idea of dialogue as a "*process of learning and knowing.*" [11] The community-engaged studio project described in this paper embraced the ideas of transformative community engagement and critical pedagogy using students' critical reflection and dialogue.

In the Spring of 2020, the 1st year architecture studio at Mississippi State university partnered with the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (EMTC) whose mission is to tell the story of the tragedy of Emmett Till and explore ways to facilitate racial healing. The goal of this partnership and project was to develop design proposals for a memorial to honor Emmett Till at the Graball Landing, the site sits at the confluence of the Tallahatchie River and the Black Bayou, where, it is believed Emmett's body was found in 1955. Emmett Till was 14-year-old when he was kidnaped and brutally murdered by two white men in the Mississippi Delta. This racist incident was one of the key events that galvanized the Civil Rights Movement's work.

Since April 2008, the ETMC has attempted to commemorate Graball Landing and the site has been subjected to repeated vandalism. Signs erected on the site have been stolen, thrown in the river, and shot multiple times. This site embraces a history of vandalism and activism, representing "*both a beacon*



Figure 2. Students meeting with activists from the ETMC at the Emmett Till Interpretive Center in Sumner, MS. Photo by Lopez Barrera.

of racial progress and a trenchant reminder of the progress yet to be made” as it is stated on the current site marker.

In February 2020, the freshman architecture class traveled to the Mississippi Delta near Glendora to meet with members of the ETMC and activists to discuss the community’s vision for the future development of Graball Landing and needs regarding the Memorial project. During this field trip, students learned about Till’s history and visited the Emmett Till Interpretive Center and the historic restored Courthouse in Sumner where Till’s accused killers were acquitted (see Figures 2 and 3). As part of this field experience, the students participated in an immersive reading of the Emmett Till apology letter and reflected about the past and the future of racial reconciliation.

Additionally, at the end of the student design phase, the ETMC members participated in an online review of the student’s designs and offered positive feedback about the memorial pavilion designs’ quality and variety. The collaboration with the community was extended when the Mississippi State University faculty worked with ETMC to setup and stage an exhibit of the work at the Emmett Till Interpretive Center in Sumner, Mississippi. The goal of this exhibition was to contribute to community conversations about the future development of the Graball Landing site as well as to explore design visions and values that could be included in the new memorial and its restorative narrative.

Throughout the project, the faculty endeavored to create a climate of engagement that connected the learning process with community needs, evaluating the student learning needs with community outcomes. Using symbolic and educative features, the students’ design proposals responded to specific

environmental conditions of the place, trying to engage future visitors with Emmett Till’s history, the civil rights movement, and the future of racial reconciliation (see Figure 4).

EMBRACING SERVICE-LEARNING AND CRITICAL REFLECTION: STAGES OF THE PROJECT

Critical reflection is at the core of service-learning and transformative education.^[12,13] The different stages of this community engaged project in a contested site aimed to embrace transformative service-learning ideas and critical reflection.

Throughout this community-engaged design project, different methods for critical reflection were used along with assessment of the project outcomes and its impacts in the community and student learning. Student outcomes and impacts of community-engaged learning were assessed using critical reflection and the student’s final design project. Critical reflections were incorporated throughout the semester.

We had in-class discussions before and after the field trip to visit the Graball Landing (the site where Emmett Till’s body was found and the site for our design project), the Sumner historical Courthouse (where the trial of Till’s murder took place), and the Emmett Till Interpretive Center in Sumner. Before and after the field trip, instructors facilitated in-class discussions to integrate critical reflections in the curricula. The following are some example of questions that were addressed in the discussions: 1) Before the field trip: What additional questions need to be answered and/or evidence gathered in order for you to make a more informed decisions regarding the adequacy/accuracy/appropriateness of the design?^[14] 2) After the field trip: What complexities (subtleties, nuances, new dimensions) do you now see that were not addressed or that you had not been aware of before?^[15] Additionally, after the field trip students developed a written assignment addressing the following questions: 1) Why is Emmett Till’s history important? Why does it matter? 2) Why is it important to preserve and remember the Graball Landing site? 3) How was your experience on the site? What will you do in light of it? Reflect on your social, cultural, and environmental experience.^[16]

Presentations and lectures were given by the ETMC about the five-day trial, it’s significance to both the regional and national community and its importance as *“the first great media event of the civil rights movement.”*^[17] Being present in the courthouse, students and faculty gained an acute awareness of the significance of the renovated space as both an *“operating courthouse and a living memorial to the Till murder.”*^[18] A place about race, memory, and justice.

While visiting the Sumner Courthouse, students engaged in a shared reading of the formal apology to the Till family from the county in 2007. Various students voluntarily read passages from the apology letter out loud creating a sense of solidarity within the group. Afterwards, students and faculty had



Figure 3. Students in an immersive experience with activists from the ETMC at the Courthouse in Sumner, MS. Photo by Lopez Barrera.

the opportunity to converse with another community group visiting from Seattle, WA, gaining insight into the national awareness and impact of Emmet Till's story throughout various generations.

Another type of critical reflection was facilitated through small group in-class design review discussions, in groups of around 4 or 5 students discussed the progress of their design project. They were asked to compare and contrast their design ideas and the community's vision for the Emmett Till Memorial, and in what specific ways their design would embrace or avoid certain experiences on the Graball Landing site. These questions evolved throughout the semester.

This project's significant pedagogical focus was the reciprocity, partnership, and shared information between MSU and the ETMC through site visits, lectures, and design reviews. It fostered community engagement to gain acute awareness of social injustice, civil rights, and the progress that has yet to be made in creating social solidarity. Before this project, many students were unaware of the story of Emmet Till and/or the existence of the Emmet Till Memorial Commission and its impact on both the local and national community. Having the opportunity for shared field visits to Graball Landing, the Emmet Till Interpretive Center and the Sumner courthouse

as "living memorials" to the Till murder created immersive experiences that offered awareness of the significance of Till's murder to social injustice and the civil rights movement.

Although sometimes challenging, embracing reciprocity to pursue sustainable and long-term partnerships that could lead to social change is one of the fundamental goals of community engagement.^[19] This project's emphasis on community engagement, reciprocity and social awareness through a mutually beneficial partnership offered the opportunity for open conversations between faculty, students, and the ETMC that fostered meaningful discussions about civic conditions, both locally and nationally, regarding community practices on racism and social injustice. Discussions emphasized historical awareness of racism and advancement of social unity and racial reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

The project discussed in this paper offers an example of how architectures studios and communities can partner to preserve and provide design solutions for marginalized historical sites and at the same time offering opportunities to start challenging and dismantling the systemic racism in architecture, urban design, and architectural education.

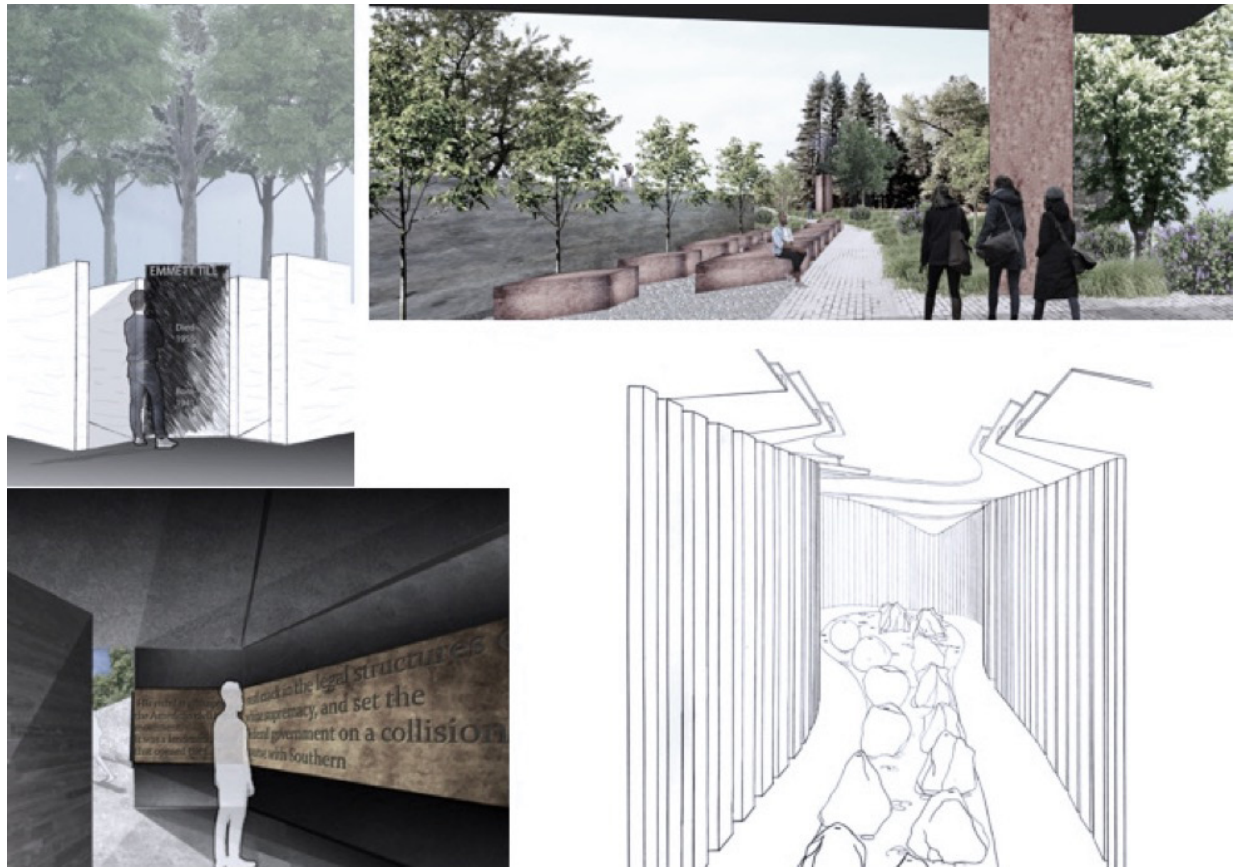


Figure 4. Examples of students' work. Drawings by B. Baugus, J. Woullard, S. Sloan, and A. Sernich.

This community engaged project contributed to the education and empowerment of both the community and students through aligned outcome and learning. The primary method for assessing the partnership's success is measured by the positive feedback received from the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (ETMC) at the final event of students' designs presentation. This event was a celebration of students' community-engaged designs and the partnership with the ETMC.

After the student's design phase, the ETMC members participated in an online review and feedback session with each student presenting their design for the Emmett Till Memorial pavilion. The commission members were impressed enough with the student's work to invite all the class members to exhibit their projects at the Emmett Till Interpretive Center in Sumner, Mississippi. A third gauge for the partnership's success has been through the students' projects' demonstrative value, which brought about the ETMC decision to pursue a grant to develop the project further.

Finally, this project establishes a lasting impact through mutually beneficial practices and an ongoing exchange and collaboration between MSU and the ETMC focused on community partnership and pedagogical objectives regarding the civil rights movement, social justice awareness, racial

reconciliation and solidarity, which offer a deep and lasting change within both local and national communities.

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