# The Ordinary within the Extraordinary: The Ideology and Architectural Form of Boley, an "All-Black Town" in the Prairie

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In 1908, Booker T. Washington stepped off the Fort Smith and Western Railway train into the town of Boley, Oklahoma. Washington found a bustling main street home to over 2,500 African American citizens. He described this collective of individuals as unified around a common goal, "with the definite intention of getting a home and building up a community where they can, as they say, be 'free.'" The main street was the physical manifestation of this idea, the center of the community. It was comprised of ordinary banks, store front shops, theaters, and social clubs, all of which connected to form a dynamic cosmopolitan street—an architectural collective form. Each building aligned with its neighbor creating a single linear street, a space where the culture of the town thrived. This public space became a symbol of the extraordinary lives and ideology of its citizens, who produced an intentional utopia in the middle of the prairie.

Boley is one of more than fifty "All-Black Towns" that developed in "Indian Territory" before Oklahoma became a state. Despite their prominence, these towns' potential and influence was suppressed when the territory became a state in 1907. State development was driven by lawmaker's ambition to control the sovereign land of Native Americans and impose control over towns like Boley by enacting Jim Crow Laws legalizing segregation. This agenda manifests itself in the form and ideology of the state's colonial towns. However, the story of the state's history does not reflect the narrative of colonization. Instead, it is dominated by tales of sturdy "pioneers" realizing their role within the myth of manifest destiny. In contrast, Boley's history is an alternative to this myth, a symbol of a radical ideology of freedom, and a form that reinforces this idea. Boley's narrative begins to debunk the myth of manifest destiny and contrast with other colonial town forms.

This paper explores the relationship between the architectural form of Boley's main street and the town's cultural significance, linking the founding community's ideology to architectural spaces that transformed the ordinary street into a dynamic social space. The paper compares Boley's unified linear main street, which emphasized its citizens and their freedom, with another town typology built around the same time: Perry's centralized courthouse square that emphasized the seat of power that was colonizing Cherokee Nation land. Analysis of these slightly varied architectural forms and ideologies reorients the historical narrative of the state. As a result, these suppressed urban stories, in particular that of Boley's, are able to make new contributions to architectural discourse on the city and also change the dominant narratives of American Expansion.

## INTRODUCTION

In the early 1900s, travelers could board a train on the edge of what was called "Indian Territory," what would later become the state of Oklahoma, and be transported to thriving towns in the middle of the prairie. At first glance these towns all look the same, organized around main streets that were defined by flat storefronts and sidewalks. On closer inspection, each of these towns was a different world, centered around main streets that were organized, sequenced, and shaped into slightly different urban figures. These slightly varying street configurations constructed "social spaces" that—given their unique arrangements of architectural forms—represented ideologies that varied from town to town. The discipline of architecture, and tools of analysis found within its discourse on the city, has the ability to retell these stories and accompanying history through the main street typologies and ideologies that emerged during this momentous time in the development of the city. The town typologies that emerge include mining towns, oil boom towns, courthouse towns, and a phenomenon of over 50 All-Black Towns. This paper looks closer at the latter two, which demonstrate two different town typologies and ideologies. The first looks at the courthouse town of Perry that was the site of the infamous 1893 Land Run, showing how it was utilized as a space for imposing new power and laws on the territory that was barely cohering as a state—a colonizing urban machine. The second explores the All-Black Town of Boley, which demonstrates how the ordinary linear main street can be merged with radical ideology to create a

Kiefer, Oklahoma
**Oil Town**

Osage Nation and
Pawhuska, Oklahoma
**Tribal Town**

Douthat, Oklahoma
**Monument Mining Street**

Boley, Oklahoma
**Linear Street**

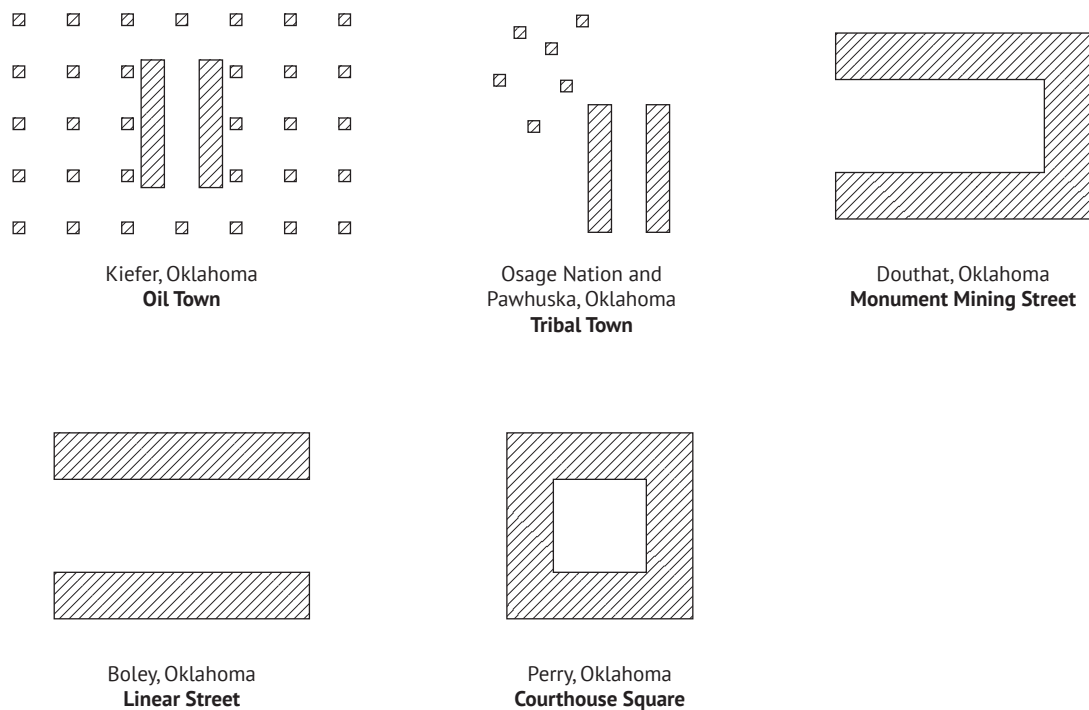Perry, Oklahoma
**Courthouse Square**

Figure 1. Morphological diagrams showing five town typologies that debunk the myth of manifest destiny. The paper looks at the last two: Boley's Linear Main Street, and Perry's Courthouse Square.

typology that becomes a utopian haven for Black Americans after emancipation. Boley's history and town form starts to debunk the myth of manifest destiny, the driving ideology used to justify the acquisition of lands in this territory at the expense of land treaties with Native American nations. The history of the All-Black Town provides an alternative to the narrative of white European "pioneers" and "settlers." An analysis of both Boley and Perry's form and ideology through the lens of architecture's discourse on the city has the opportunity to add new perspectives and architectural ideas to the historical narrative of the state. On the one hand it demonstrates that the state of Oklahoma has a history of radical social and political movements, but  that these movements have been overshadowed by other dominant historical narratives. This analysis also brings the history of these towns, Boley in particular, into conversation with other architectural and urban concepts.

**THE FALSE NARRATIVE OF WESTERN EXPANSION**
The construction of these towns occurred during a transitional time period during America's westward expansion. Land ownership in the territory that would later become Oklahoma was nebulous, with much of the land in the late 1800's legally recognized as the territory of Native American tribes, but manipulative changes in treaties was systematically taking land from sovereign nations. Occurring simultaneously was the large-scale urban development of lands newly acquired by the U.S. government, which, in Oklahoma, was accomplished through a two step process. First, land ownership was opened up to white European colonizers with "land runs," a race-like format that boosted interest in land ownership where tens of thousands of people literally ran into the prairie and staked their claim to parcels of land. The second step, which usually occurred simultaneously with land runs, was the insertion of pre-designed towns in key locations in the territory, used to bring resources to surrounding inhabitants but also to impose new authority to the areas where they were constructed. The result of this two-step process was that by 1907, when Oklahoma officially became a state, the land was already speckled with towns that were interconnected by railway. Through these colonizing land speculation events, the historical narrative of the state was solidified into American myth, specifically through the widely accepted ideas of manifest destiny, which claimed that white European "pioneers" were enacting their god-given right to own and cultivate the land.[1] Today, the histories of these towns is homogenized by these stories that valorize "settlers" and "pioneers," creating mascots out of land run participants, while masking the true intentions behind their occupation of Native American land and eventual urban development of the prairie. In the process, the stories of these mascots leaves out the eradication of Native American cultures.[2] Retelling this history through the lens of architecture, specifically how the town's formal characteristics are linked to its community's ideals, uncovers the true intentions of colonial towns during this era of America's urban development. These new historical narratives also show the contributions that underrepresented communities made to the development
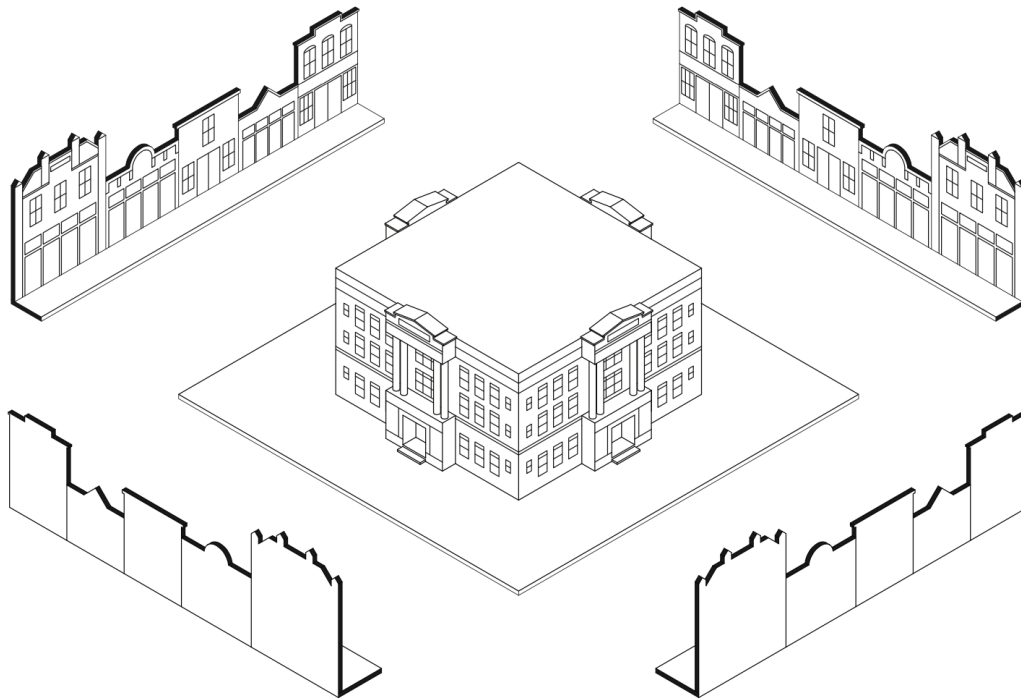
Figure 2. Main street store fronts are bent into the courthouse square, each buiness emphasizes the imposed law and order on the territory.

of the city during this time, specifically how their town building strategies counteracted the effects of colonization.

### LAND RUSH AS INSTANT COLONIZING URBANISM IN PERRY

In 1893, the town of Perry was established on the eastern edge of the Cherokee Outlet, a 60 mile-wide strip of land that ran between the borders of Oklahoma Territory and Kansas. As large parts of Cherokee Territory was annexed for resettlement, the town was founded as an outpost for a land office established by the United States government. The office was equipped to issue deeds for land ownership coinciding with what is known today as the Land Rush of 1893. By the night of September 15th, 1893, Perry had grown to over 90,000 people, mostly overnight, many taking the train from northern and eastern states serviced by the St. Louis and San Francisco railway, with many others traveling by horseback and wagon. They all converged on Perry and surrounded the land office in a make-shift tent-city. At noon on September 16th a shotgun was fired allowing all 90,000 men, women, and children to rush into the surrounding land in order to claim a parcel as their own. The coordinated and organized efforts of many years of planning, treaty dissolution, and deployment of citizen explorers was effective in rapidly colonizing the territory. Some towns like Perry thrived while others declined as fast as their near overnight construction, but this urbanizing act was effective. Fourteen years later, in 1907, the state of Oklahoma was established.

### PERRY AS COLONIZING MACHINE: THE COURTHOUSE SQUARE TYPOLOGY

As the territory around Perry developed, the town was designated a county seat, or the governing center for the surrounding Noble County, a strategically appointed role for the town meant to establish law and order both literally and symbolically in this newly established territory of the United States. Just like other towns established in the state, Perry was planned around a main street with flat storefront buildings that aligned along the street. This urban form, while ubiquitous, was effective in each community, unifying what was a tenuously held together social fabric in these isolated towns. In addition to the cohering qualities of the main street, it was malleable and able to be shaped into different configurations depending on the type of town being constructed. The main street functioned as a unifying architectural form by allowing each inhabitant of these barely existing towns to differentiate their store fronts with business signage and slightly varied parapet walls while still being unified in a single street wall, a condition needed in such a weak urban setting. In the late 1900's, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, Hoke Smith, required that every county seat built in Cherokee Territory—within which Perry was located—be organized around a courthouse square. This meant that the main street would not be an open linear shape, as was the case in the town of Boley, but would be bent and shaped into a square with each aligned store front facing the courthouse that was built on this central square. The effect was a powerfully different condition than the straight open-ended linear main street. While the street's storefronts emphasized

Figure 3. Archival photograph of Boley shortly after it was founded between 1903 and 1910.

the unity of the community whose ideals of freedom were being constantly challenged in other towns and states, Perry's emphasized the newly inserted law and order meant to shift the power of the territory away from the culture and customs of Indigenous Nations and back to the system of colonization existing through the establishment of towns across the state. Perry's main street form related directly to the idea that unified its community, emphasizing the role courthouse towns played in restructuring power in this territory, a link between the town form and its ideology.

## OKLAHOMA TOWNS AS LAND SPECULATION

Towns like Perry were used to implement large-scale land speculation that were then used as leverage to change land ownership treaties with Native American tribes. While there were land acquisitions paid for by corporate interests, in particular those of rail road companies, most of these towns were formed with pre-conceived plans that were implemented by a diverse set of individuals.[3] While there was not necessarily a single entity that was planning all of the towns in these territories, they were conceived as planned communities. Initially, this idea about how towns colonized the land in a concerted effort was not a part of historicism's account of urban development in western expansion. In the 1890's, for instance, Frederick

Jackson Turner described the development of this land as simply the product of a surplus of space and an inevitable process of populating it, with what were described as hardy citizens who had the tenacity to take on this great feat.[4] He termed the protagonists described as populating this land as "men of capital and enterprise," who used "exploration, trapping and trading, and farming" as a way of incrementally and informally developing land into towns and cities.[5] This interpretation of how western expansion occurred argued that this was a "slow and steady" process of development that was informal in nature, or not orchestrated by a governmental structural system. Later historical theories described a "standardized zonal pattern," or what the historian Ray Allen Billington identified as "Six Zones of Western Development," which included the domain of fur traders, cattlemen, miners, pioneers, farmers, equipped farmers, and urbanization. While this way of retelling the story of history started to look at the typological aspects of this development, it did not explain the link these forms had to the different ideals leading their creation. By the 1950's, the idea that these towns were inserted into these territories as devices of land speculation driven by the commodification of land initiated by the Jeffersonian Grid was taking root.[6] However, the story of Boley, and its comparison with Perry, demonstrates how this narrative has been distorted.
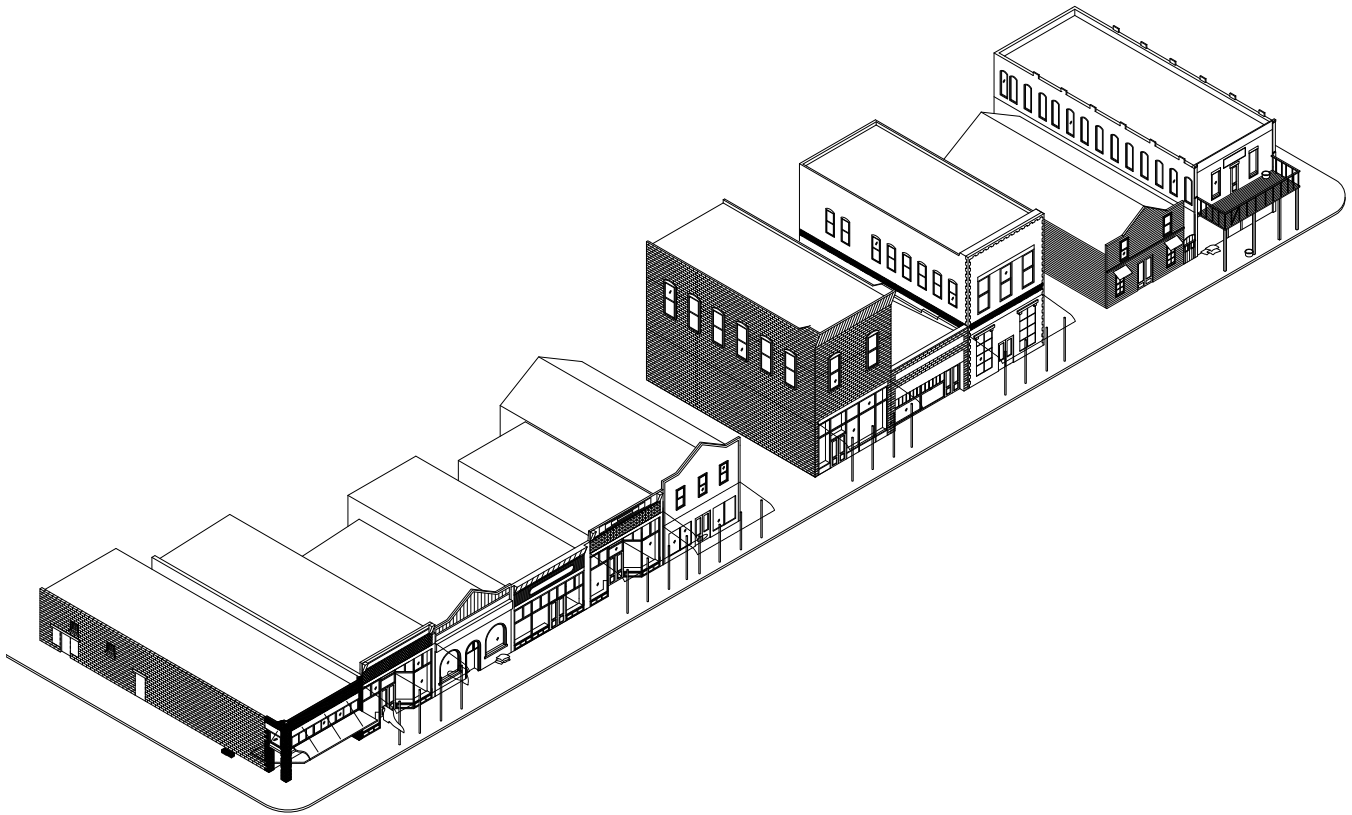
Figure 4. Reconstructed axonometric drawing showing what one side of the street of Boley may have looked like when Booker T. Washington visited in 1907. Drawing shows how the ordinary elements of the main street—awnings, niches, balconies, marquees—create social space.

## BOLEY'S HISTORY - DECONSTRUCTING THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF THE STATE

In 1907, a few months before Oklahoma became a state, the Black Author and educator Booker T. Washington took the Fort Smith and Western train to Boley. Washington chronicled his visit in an article published one year later, where he describes stepping into a bustling town of over 2,500 inhabitants. The article marveled at the success of the town, calling it a cosmopolitan refuge with amenities that included a school, two colleges, grocers, doctors' offices, banks, two cotton gins, and community meeting spaces. Boley was a few years old at the time of Washington's visit, having been established in 1903 as former slaves of Native American nations were freed by emancipation and acquired land from those tribes. The town that Washington visited was formed within a specific moment in the development of the American empire as western expansion deconstructed the last land treaties with Native American tribes. This condition, the land not yet governed by state law makers, left these lands in a legal limbo. On the hand it was illegal for individuals or groups of people to occupy these lands without acquiring them from tribal nations, but it also meant that the territory was not ruled by the same segregation laws that states, particularly those in the south, were using to control the lives of Black Americans. In the case of Boley,

the town founders had received land from the Muskogee and Creek Nations who had once enslaved them. This condition of land ownership coupled with the fact that this land was not governed by segregation laws, created the perfect situation to form a town that could provide protection for Black Americans to live free from the psychological and physical trauma of daily life in white cities.

## BOLEY'S RADICAL IDEOLOGY IN THE PRAIRIE

Boley was an important destination for Booker T. Washington because it was not only a significant haven for its town's founders but also other Black Americans fleeing segregation laws in adjacent states. The town as an urban form provided an environment of social equity that eased the daily psychological and physical trauma that came from living in white cities. Inhabitants described All-Black Towns as strongholds of freedom that provided 'community, comfort, easier living, and strength' for their citizens.[7] In comparison, outside these towns they found 'danger, disorientation, and unease'.[8] As a result, All-Black Towns became a 'utopian movement' that created 'idealized places where Blacks could be free,' an idea that unified their citizens around this simple yet radical ideology of freedom. What is compelling in the case of Boley is that, in contrast to its radical ideology, the town's physical manifestation
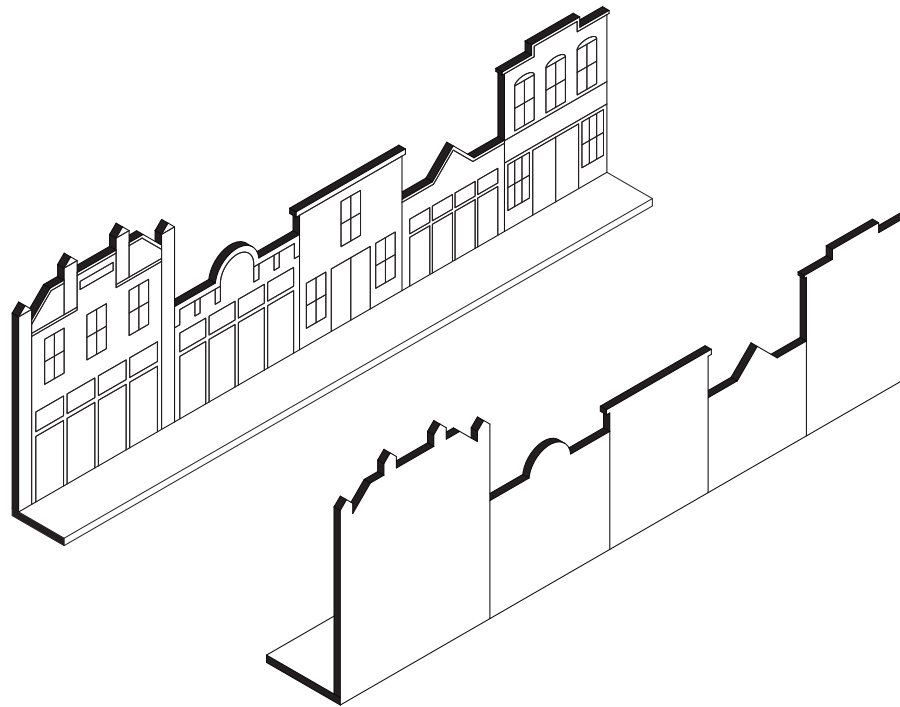
Figure 5. Diagram showing the flat aligned storefronts emphasizing each other from each side of the street.

was the ordinary main street. Through this ordinary form and the individual architectural parts that comprise it, the citizens of Boley were able to both 'Change Life!' and 'Change Society!' and in the process create a meaningful and intentional social space.[9] Boley subverted the laws of segregation at the time by forming a metaphorical Black 'bastion'—a space that bypassed the ways social segregation limited the success of the citizens it affected—but by realizing its physical form as a typical main street. [10]

**BOLEY'S ORDINARY FORM**
Washington witnessed how the freedom Boley provided affected Black citizens as he strolled through the main street in the center of the town. He described a robust social space that acted as a physical representation of its citizens' ideals, a literal and metaphoric symbol of the community's unity. Boley's guiding ideology of 'moral, industrial, and political freedom' for Black citizens was radical and defied racial politics.[11] These two characteristics of the town—its social space and ideology—were manifested in the architectural form of the main street. Boley's radical ideals were manifested through the simplest instantiation of the main street typology: a single linear street open at the ends and lined by flat store fronts. The aligned fronts created a long collective wall that unified business owners into a canyon-like space that spanned the

length of the street. The repeated fronts created a pact of formal unity between neighboring stores that allowed for small moments of differentiation through signage and parapet wall shapes creating a street that was a monument comprised of individuals. Each side of the street faced the other, creating an urban form that emphasized its inhabitants and therefore the ideals that unified them. In addition, the banal and unassuming architectural features of the typical main street, such as awnings, entrance niches, marquees, and sidewalks connected the storefronts. These connections generated the town's social spaces, or locations where its radical ideals took place through bustling street interactions.

**TYPOLOGIES OF COMMUNITY VERSUS POWER**
When the main street form's simple yet effective organization of architectural parts is aligned in different configurations along the street, it both creates and represents their respective but different community ideologies. In the case of Perry, the buildings aligned with each other to emphasize something other than themselves: the courthouse, a literal and symbolic power center for the county. In the case of Boley, which was creating a pocket of urbanism isolated by the prairie that was free of racial segregation laws, it became crucial that the inhabitants of the town, which were represented in the different buildings along the street, aligned but then faced each other. This coordinated

arrangement of buildings in the town emphasized each side and therefore each other and created a monumental space for the interactions of the town to take place. The inhabitants of the town were equally emphasized, placing the power in them not an institution that was meant to impose an outside concept of control like the courthouse in Perry.

## HISTORICAL NARRATIVES DERIVED FROM THE FORM AND IDEOLOGY OF TOWNS

By looking at the history of towns like Perry and Boley, and comparing their form and ideologies, the archaic historical narrative of the state can start to be shifted. This is important given its exclusion of the true intentions imbedded in the ideals of these towns, which on the one hand acted as colonizing systems that transgressed treaties with Native American tribes regarding land rights, but also left out the stories of historically underrepresented communities. These histories are even more important today as their histories are challenged by cultural movements centered around ideals of White Supremacy, and laws such as House Bill 1775 in Oklahoma that, although its wording is ambiguous, bans critical race theory despite it not being prevalent throughout academic pedagogies in the state. On the one hand, we can start to understand how towns like Perry were intentionally inserted colonization machines meant to initiate a land grab, but this history was washed clean with heroic stories of hard-working pioneers. The organization of its main street was used to reinforce the imposed power structure of the land: the courthouse. On the other, the town of Boley was formed as a refuge from these other towns, and was counteracting the effects segregation had on their citizens by creating a town that allowed its inhabitants to truly be free. Boley's main street, in contrast to Perry, was not installing a power structure into "Indian Territory" as a way to shift the ideological center towards the unification of American lands in the west, it was a utopian escape for citizens who were seeking to contribute to ideals of freedom. The ordinary architectural parts found in its main street emphasized the individual citizens who were a part of this collective endeavor. As these new aspects of American narratives are told through the lens of architectural discourse, the forms and ideologies of these communities can make new contributions to the history of architecture and the city alike.

## ENDNOTES

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