

(de)othering empathic design thinking for race + culture in urban landscapes

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Abstract

Designing for spatial justice, with goals of incorporating the diversity of underrepresented voices, requires new methodologies when creating for the *other* to integrate complex topics of race and culture. *(de)othering* is such a method - an architectural empathic thinking approach - incorporating untold socio-cultural historical narratives implementing archival research of public and community historians. This paper details the foundational principles of the method and influences from a field-defining precedent, with guidelines on urban-scaled axial/spatial practices to produce, as noted by Mabel O. Wilson, “black scenography” in classical, colonial, and ideologically held cultural landscapes.¹ This paper details an implementation of the approach in Charlottesville, Virginia to memorialize the life and legacy of John Henry James; an African American man lynched just west of town on July 12, 1898. Originating in multidisciplinary empathy-based research, *(de)othering* adds an African American narrative in the civic and political center, Court Square, marked on July 12, 2019, becoming a transferrable model for re-stitching urban fabric. *(de)othering* positions that inclusionary architectures must respond to the ever-growing public call for rethinking urban spaces demonstrated in the United States through the discussions on Confederate statues.² The approach produces the necessary rethinking of culturally dominant landscapes, introducing one to one human-scaled representations, resulting in much-

needed, empathic architectural spatial justice models.

Empathic Thinking: Principles + Precedent

(de)othering's integrative research of empathy spatially introduces the *other*. Karla McLaren, who coined the term empath, defines empathy as “a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others, such that we can offer sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate communication and support.”³ *(de)othering* suggests that an empathic perspective – or empathic design – can help overcome socio-cultural differences to introduce the *other*, as McLaren notes, “helping us re-engage with public spaces and read anew the nuances, subtexts, undercurrents, intentions, thoughts that structure social space.”⁴ The method operates in a pedagogy, initiative, and design practice titled *_mpathic design*.⁵ *_mpathic design* originates in design projects across North America in diverse socio-cultural arenas, fully realized in the energy connected to the design rethinking of the “founding fathers” plantations (Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, James Madison’s Montpelier, James Monroe’s Highland), where an African American narrative is now a constant.⁶

Foundational Principles

Principles 1 + 2

Principle 1, the first is about you – as an embodied participant in a space, as noted by architect and humanist Robert Lamb Hart - that

we “read relationships between buildings, landscapes, and streetscapes in social terms, too, imagining their dialogues and conflicts and sensing them rejecting or welcoming us, almost like a family member or a friend.”⁷ Principle 1 understands that the emotional connections we feel in constructed space, especially as the *other* within the urban landscapes, are valid, requiring empathic design.⁸

Principle 2, the second is *Einfühlung* – an aesthetic (*feeling into*), a dialogical act of projecting oneself into another body or environment.⁹ Science and medical historian Susan Lanzoni details *Einfühlung* in her work, relating the physiological and psychological responses to works of art. Lanzoni reveals a look at empathy, first appearing in the early years of the twentieth century as a translation of the German *Einfühlung* – or “in feeling.” *In – feeling* reads as a central concept in German aesthetics, capturing a viewer’s projection of feeling and movement into paintings, objects of art, and nature.¹⁰ *In –feeling* is required to connect dominant culture to the *other’s* narrative/life experience.

(*de*)othering oscillates between both principles to introduce empathic design in Court Square, fully informed by the representations of African American space masterfully demonstrated by the design team of Phillip Freelon / Adjaye / Bond / Smith Group at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Mabel O. Wilson notes that the NMAAHC’s “black scenography of architectural space can play a counter to the classical, traditional way of making space and offer really creative alternatives.”¹¹ For (*de*)othering, this “black scenography” aligns with empathic principles through empathic design research.¹²

For example:

Principle 1: as an embodied participant - creating emotional and inclusionary architecture through various scales:

- The open base of the museum arrives visitors into the transparent *Heritage Hall*, in contrast to the solid classical, Eurocentric, bases of buildings on nearby Constitution Avenue. Instantly, the architecture of the NMAAHC states to the public that the museum hosts an invitational history, not just a black account. The column less Hall invites

drawing visitors in from outside, inclusively immersing you into the “deep spatial memory of the forest,” as stated by architect David Adjaye, meeting the museum’s central mission to “help all Americans remember, and by remembering, to stimulate a dialogue about race and help foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing.”¹³

- *Heritage Hall* recalls the African American traditions of hush harbors (clearings deep in the forest), where the enslaved gathered, away from slave-owners.¹⁴
- The porch on the southern elevation recalls the covered outdoor space of the shotgun house, a one-room wide cottage with pitched roof of the American South.¹⁵ This iconic gathering and essential community space of African American culture provides one of the few locations for shade and respite on the National Mall.
- The landscape design of the museum, incorporating walls of polished granite, evokes the water of the historical Tiber Creek, which waters once flowed through the site, most likely excavated by slaves. Empathic design enters the north lawn of the NMAAHC featuring a vast blue carpet in springtime, referencing the beads and amulets used by African Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to symbolize hospitality – another example of all-inclusive natural aspects.¹⁶

Principle 2: aesthetic “feeling into” - sociocultural emotional connections at a human one – to one scale, through the design of the Corona.

- The Corona directly references human-scaled African representation. Inspiration begins with the West African caryatid, a column in human or animal form that supported verandas of major religious shrines. Adjaye abstractly references the carvings of a three-tiered inverted pyramidal form atop a human form in the design of the corona– relating a one to one relationship, from representation to support the structural crossbeam.¹⁷
- The filigree of the Corona directly abstracts the ironwork of the enslaved

from New Orleans and Charleston, shifting in density to respond to program, shifting in perception and tone throughout the day to speak to the Middle Passage from Africa to America.¹⁸

- The upward motion of the corona resembles hands raised in jubilation, found in African and African American worship culture, as well as the “crowns” of church hats worn by African American women.¹⁹
- The corona connects to the urban landscape, adopting the 17-degree angle of Robert Mills’ 1848 Washington Monument, evident in a view toward the Lincoln Memorial to match it’s the pyramidal capstone. The placement of the corona panels mimics the bond pattern of the Monument, again evoking connections of Africa on Greek and Roman architecture, raising visitor knowledge of the enslaved who built surrounding structures on the Mall.²⁰

Axial / Spatial Practices

In David Adjaye’s *Form, Heft, and Material*, Okuwi Enwezor details how axial relationships are strategically reframed. Enwezor describes the symbolism of the NMAAHC, as its shifting shades of darkness, African inspired corona, and African American historical filigree of African American slave craft rethink the social space of the National Mall.²¹ The NMAAHC creates new sightlines, allowing the visitor to view the Washington Monument through strategic apertures on upper levels of the corona, again mobilizing Egyptian influences to indicate Martha Washington’s slaves building Renwick Castle, the original Smithsonian.²² The building views southeast to the Renwick Castle, where Washington’s slaves labored, framing the Department of Agriculture to emphasize slavery’s connection.²³ New sightlines angle southwest and further west to reposition the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials, questioning the intents and effects of emancipation.²⁴

Principles 1 +2

(de)othering takes both principles, the influence of the NMAAHC precedent and axial/spatial

practices to place the Charlottesville Memorial for Peace and Justice (CMPJ) in the southeast corner of Court Square, the civic and political center of this Southern city. Charlottesville takes its namesake from the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, the source of its historical marker and Corten steel body column monument designed by Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) and MASS Design Group. The Memorial marks the “nation’s first memorial(s) dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence.”²⁵

Site Visit Notes, March 2019 - National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama.

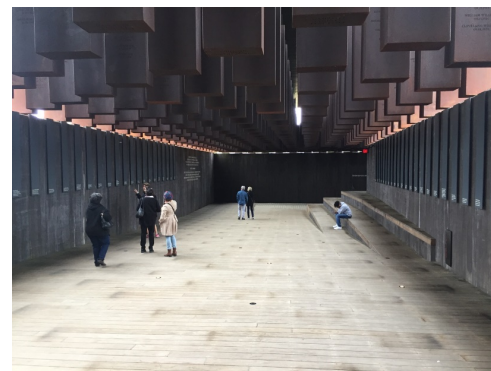


Figure 1. Interior View of the National Memorial with body columns above. Photo by Author.

Principle 1: I notice that the design of the Memorial sets collective emotional connection, taking visitors through an agora set parti (symbolizing the public town square). At first, I am at grade with the 800 Corten steel body column monuments representing the counties where lynchings occurred. Traveling through the design eventually puts me in the position of those viewing and participating in a lynching as the body columns move from ground level to above (Figure 1). I am entirely uncomfortable, being a black man. I later read on the website that, according to EJI, the memorial uses “sculpture, art, and design to contextualize racial terror. “It succeeds.

Principle 2: *In my black body, I am met at grade with one of the 800 six-foot human scale Corten steel body columns, finding my home county in South Carolina etched with the names of those lynched – and see my uncle's last name. The “feeling into” is direct – I am confronted with my existence, and fully engaged with the multi-sourced historical representation through aesthetics. Our diverse group has an intense conversation about this effect afterward.*

Axial / Spatial Practices: *As we enter the six-acre site, I notice the orientation around the square of the Memorial up on the hill, first meeting Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's at scale sculpture on slavery (Figures 2 and 3).²⁶ The scale of the bodies depicted matches ours. Next rising to the memorial square of 800 monuments, I move out into the simulated “city square” within. After our visit, we exit, meeting Dana King's human-scaled sculptures of women participating in the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. I notice that the city symbolically appears in sight just behind.*



Figure 2. View of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice from the entrance. Photo by Author.



Figure 3. Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's *Nkyinkyim* Installation. Photo by Author.

Implementation

Installed in the early 20th century, Court Square's statutes are design enforcements of Jim Crow (the period from 1877 to 1965 of state and local laws to enforce racial segregation in the Southern United States after Reconstruction). The efficacy of empathy could be put in question when recalling the violence that occurred in Charlottesville in August 2017 during the white nationalist Unite the Right rally, prompted by the city council's decision to remove these statues of Confederate generals Robert E. Lee in Lee Park, and Stonewall Jackson in Court Square, which resulted in 3 deaths, 33 injuries, and collective trauma. The Square holds the 1762 Courthouse, frequented by Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and James Madison (all slave-owners), alternating between a place of worship by local churches and a meeting place for the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1900s.²⁷

The original city jail occupied the space to the left of the Courthouse; its alley often filled with lynch mobs seeking to hang black men awaiting their fate. Slaves were lashed in on the gathering space in front of these justice temples, at the public whipping post, or placed in the stocks or pillory for public humiliation. Hangings occurred here. On its red clay brick, the State of Virginia declared that all freed blacks between 18 and 50 years old must register to fight for the Confederacy, resulting in 540 slaves brought here in 1862 from the County after an additional state mandate for slaves to help build defenses in Richmond. After the end of the Civil War, the Lost Cause constructed the 1909 Confederate Solider statute and Charles Keck's 1921 statue of General Thomas Jonathan Stonewall Jackson (site of a recent KKK rally in July 2017). The latter statue stands on the former site of McKee Row, a once mostly black neighborhood of rowhouses.²⁸

In the shadow of the statues, the lynching of John Henry James on July 12, 1898, becomes visible. James was an African American ice cream salesman accused of assaulting a white woman from an esteemed Charlottesville family in 1898. Instead of being held at County Jail at Court Square, James was taken by officials west to Staunton to avoid the lynch mobs, which often included University of Virginia students that gathered on the Square's brick landscape. When James was returned the next day, an

overpowering mob of whites intercepted the train transporting him just west of town. After thwarting a group of blacks who stood in their way, they attached a noose to his neck, strung him up in a tree, and shot him over 75 times.²⁹

Principle 1, the approach guides new connections to surrounding spatial features and your relationship to them, allowing one to maintain in touch your embodied self's experience through at-grade relationships of the marker and body column (Figure 4).

Principle 2, strategic placement of the marker and body column at grade asks visitors to disassociate with their living/perceiving body to conceive of themselves as inhabiting another body or environment.

Axial / Spatial Practices: *Einfühlung* begins with the selection of Buckingham County, Virginia slate as the base for the Corten steel body column axially positioned from the front door of the Courthouse, gazing the viewer directly toward Monticello in the distance. Buckingham slate, originating from nearby Buckingham County (prized for its blue-black materiality) originates from the home county of the historian, author, leader, and creator of black history month, Dr. Carter G. Woodson. This same slate – ubiquitous at Washington D.C.'s National Mall, quarried by the enslaved and brought up the Rivanna River in Jefferson's quintessential nearby Academical Village, built by the enslaved.³⁰ Visitors to this corner of the Square step onto a base of this slate, directly faced at grade with an upright body column of the duplicate currently stored at the exterior of the Montgomery Memorial. The axis of the column positions James, and the viewer directly between two large pin oak trees, evoking the act of lynching. Monticello peers directly in the background, as noted by a historical marker on the left.³¹ On the left of the body column, visitors peer toward the location of the Number Nothing building, where slaves were sold, and on the right, the former Eagle Tavern, where Jefferson's slaves were sold after his death to settle his accounts.³² Again to the left, now on the grass, visitors get an up-close look at the historical marker from EJI, able to read details of the account. Turning around from both pieces, a direct line to the Courthouse, the Stonewall Jackson statue, and Johnny Reb

Confederate Soldier, all become clear- yet the noticeable difference is scale (Figure 5).

The Charlottesville Memorial refuses to aggrandize, the response here is to place your body face to face with an imaginary, developing an empathic and emotional connection to the life of James'. The at grade response humanizes the account – suddenly one thinks of the location of the lynch mobs – here and to the west, and the realities of the act of lynching that begins at grade, before the base of James' feet become an elevation line at the bottom of the oxidized bronze statues. As a result, visitors to the square experience *(de)othering* – a *Heritage Hall* hybridized to urban square, an inclusionary model for spatial justice design.



Figure 4. Plan of Court Square with Charlottesville Memorial for Peace and Justice. Drawing by My – Anh Nguyen.



Figure 5. Charlottesville Memorial for Peace and Justice, view looking West , with body column (installed in 2020) and historical marker, installed July 12, 2019. Drawing by Gabriel Andrade.

Endnotes

1. Mabel Wilson and Lonnie G. Bunch, *Begin with the Past: Building the National Museum of African American History & Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2016):74..
2. Charlottesville's Blue Ribbon Commission on Race, Memorials, and Public Spaces developed a full report to the City Council of Charlottesville, full report: <http://blairhawkins.net/RH/2016BRCReport.pdf>.
3. Karla McLaren, *The Art of Empathy: a Complete Guide to Life's Most Essential Skill* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2013):4.
4. McLaren, *The Art of Empathy*, 5.
5. The initiative, pedagogy, and professional practice formally developed in response to the Unite the Right rally that took place in Charlottesville in the summer of 2017.
6. All of the "founding fathers" plantations now include new strategies for interpretation of African Americans (examples: The Mere Distinction of Colour at Highland, Sally Hemings at Monticello, and in the case of Highland, Augmented Reality).
7. Robert Lamb Hart, "Architectural Empathy: Why Our Brains Experience Places Like People." *Metropolis* accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.metropolismag.com/architecture/architectural-empathy-why-our-brains-experience-places-like-people/>.
8. For further details the links between race, space, and architecture, *(de)othering* references the work of Craig L. Wilkins, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture, and Music* (Minneapolis (USA): University of Minnesota Press, 2007) :3-29.
9. Lanzoni details *Einführung* - an aesthetic reading of Empathy - as "the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation." Susan Lanzoni. *Empathy: A History* (Yale University Press, 2019):21.
10. Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History*: 21.
11. Wilson and Bunch, *Begin with the Past*: 74.
12. Mario Gooden's *Dark Space* provides an essential empathic investigation on African American Museums: Mario Gooden, *Dark Space: Architecture, Representation, Black Identity* (New York, New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2016): 99 -118.
13. Wilson and Bunch, *Begin with the Past*: 113, 17.
14. *Ibid.*,74.
15. National Museum of African American History and Culture, "The Building | National Museum of African American History and Culture," *Smithsonian Institution*, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/building>.
16. Wilson and Bunch, *Begin with the Past*: 94.
17. *Ibid.*,81.
18. *Ibid.*,82-83, and National Museum of African American History and Culture, "Corona Panel Designed for NMAAHC (Type E: 85% Opacity) | National Museum of African American History and Culture," *Smithsonian Institution*, accessed December 1, 2019, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2016.41.3.
19. *Ibid.*,76-77.
20. Lance Hosey, "The Hidden History of Cities." *HuffPost*, July 19, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-hidden-history-of-cities_b_58647e58e4b04d7df167d2ea?guccounter=1.
21. Okwui Enwezor, Zoë Ryan, Peter Allison, and Douglas W. Druick, *David Adjaye: Form, Heft, Material*. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2015):172-174.
22. Mark Auslander, Scott Nesbit, Kwesi DeGraft-Hanson, Anthony E. Kaye, Central Washington University. "Enslaved Labor and Building the Smithsonian: Reading the Stones." *Southern Spaces*, December 12, 2012, <https://southernspaces.org/2012/enslaved-labor-and-building-smithsonian-reading-stones/>.
23. Enwezor, *David Adjaye: Form, Heft, Material*: 174.
24. Visitors experience *Einführung* in the underground circular water ring NMAAHC's Contemplation Court, evoking the location of the former shoreline where slave markets existed, with empathic design symbolic connotations of the ring (implying shackles and the African traditions of the ring shout).
25. Equal Justice Initiative, "Memorial," *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, accessed November 21, 2019, <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>.
26. Bryan Stevenson, "EJI Releases Video on Sculpture About Enslavement," *Equal Justice Initiative*, accessed November 28, 2019, <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/news/2019-01-28/eji-releases-video-sculpture-about-enslavement>.
27. The actions of the local Charlottesville KKK are well documented: Citizen Justice Initiative, "Illusions of Progress: Charlottesville's Roots in White Supremacy," *Carter G. Woodson Institute*, summer 2017, accessed December 2, 2019, <http://illusion.woodson.as.virginia.edu/index.html>.
28. Albermarle County | City of Charlottesville, "Historic Court Square", accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www.charlottesville.org/departments-and-services/departments-h-z/neighborhood-development-services/historic-preservation-and-design-review/historic-resources-committee/local-markers/historic-court-square>. The Stonewall Jackson statue in Court Square is one of three (including the Robert E. Lee statue a few blocks west) donated by local philanthropist Paul Goodloe McIntire as part of Charlottesville's City beautiful movement. A review of Daniel Bluestone's research of Court Square is a precedent for historical and spatial understanding of Court Square for *(de)othering*. Daniel Bluestone, *Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2011):222-230.
29. Brendan Wolfe, "The Lynching of John Henry James (1898)." *Encyclopedia Virginia Humanities*, July 10, 2018, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/James_The_Lynching_of_John_Henry_1898.
30. Through the development of a personal exhibition project, the author discovered the history of Buckingham Slate with the Buckingham County African American Historical Society, Dr. Carter G. Woodson's "the father of black history's originating birth county.
31. Craig Evan Barton, *Sites of Memory: Landscapes of Race and Ideology* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000):4. Craig Barton details in *Sites of Memory* the efforts Jefferson undertook to hide the black body at his Monticello plantation through the manipulation of landscape section and dependency wing.
32. Maurie D. McNinnis, curator, with contributions by Barbara C. Batson, Gregory Crawford, and Gregg D. Kimball, "Will Be Sold, Before the Door of the Eagle Tavern. At 12 O'clock, on Monday the 24th Instant, A Number of Valuable Slaves." *To Be Sold, Virginia and the American Slave Trade*, accessed December 1, 2019, <http://www.virginiamemory.com/online-exhibitions/exhibits/show/to-be-sold/item/378>.