

Beyond Professional Practice: Pedagogies for Engaged Citizen Architects

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Keywords: Professional practice, ethics, multiculturalism, equity, pluralism.

What does it mean to be an architect today? What will it mean to be an architect in the near future? How will the emerging professionals we teach make decisions about how they want to practice? As educators, we develop new pedagogical approaches for teaching professional practice in response to landmark changes in architectural discourse and contemporary architectural practice. This paper shares lessons learned from an innovative course in professional practice that was radically reformed to identify and explore how one might practice architecture in the 21st century through a multicultural, feminist, and socially-just lens.¹ Even as those inflections may be new, the fundamental pedagogical emphasis of the course Professional Practice remains to help students recognize that all professional choices are ultimately ethical decisions. The new professional practice course's mission is to motivate students to actively design their future as architects with an awareness of their agency within shifting professional culture and standards.

TEACHING TO TRANSFORM

Architectural practice continually evolves in response to technology and culture. In the United States, the professional obligation of the architect is to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of the public through the design of buildings and the ramifications of each design decision. We recognize that architects do far more than that. Architects use their design aptitude to compose space in support of the programmatic needs of clients and occupants. They apply specialized knowledge of building science to produce socially relevant and ecologically beneficial architecture. And, we must reflect on how professional obligations shift as the intersectional care for societal sustainability and well-being continues to expand.

The current situation is more fraught because our students are entering the profession amid three pandemics: the COVID-19 pandemic which still threatens human health, the environmental crisis which threatens our collective welfare, and the call for social justice and racial reckoning that we understand as an ongoing challenge to personal safety and the ability for all to

prosper equitably in society.² Architecture is at the intersection of all three. Practicing in an era of instability requires a new set of considerations for adaptability in the confident yet nimble application of architectural expertise. Part of that is seeing change as a partner as emerging practitioners recognize their responsibility in designing the culture of practice they want to be a part of. The professional practice course considered here is informed by what bell hooks wrote in *Teaching to Transgress*, “When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve.”³ Architectural education can learn from feminist theory and other multicultural strategies as we expand what’s essential for the emerging professional to know.

COURSE AMBITION AND OVERVIEW

The new professional practice course’s mission is to motivate students to actively design their future as architects. We take to heart this insight from Samuel Mockbee of the Rural Studio, “If architecture is going to inspire a community, or stimulate the status quo into making responsible environmental and social structural changes now and in the future, it will take what I call ‘subversive leadership’ of academicians and practitioners to remind the student of architecture that theory and practice are not only interwoven with one’s culture but with the responsibility of shaping the environment, of breaking up social complacency, and of challenging the power of the status quo.”⁴ Mockbee’s call for subversive leadership manifested in his pedagogical embrace of community-engaged design-build, one form of alternative critical practice that is an instructive counterpoint to the conventional model of American architectural practice.⁵ In this spirit, the new course considered here not only delivers the NAAB-mandated content related to professional practice but also continually seeks to inspire students to act in service of the causes they believe architecture can support. Assessment measures used in the development of this course reveal that today’s students are highly aware of potentially negative impacts of contemporary architectural practice which they do not want to promote, including gentrification, loss of community through economic displacement, and increasing societal inequity stemming from financial burdens and from political efforts to suppress multiculturalism. Our rising graduates sincerely

desire to be agents of increasing plurality in how architecture is practiced and who it serves.

The course is designed like a quilt, stitching together many diverse ideas about professional practice. The underlying theme connecting these ideas invites students to consider how they want to practice architecture, recognizing the many forms of practice that constitute the contemporary expanded practice of architectural work today, including teaching, research, advocacy, fabrication, development, allied design fields, policy, and so on. This course introduces context and case studies to help students strategically bring their professional goals to fruition. Many of the ideas presented are based on an expanded consideration of the ethical demands discussed above. Some themes and topics are intended as provocations that might unsettle assumptions as these upper-level students pivot from the mindset of the architecture student to the mindset of the practitioner.

The new course Professional Practice maintains a commitment to teaching core principles of architectural practice and project management, including fundamentals of business success. The business of providing architectural services, this course assumes, can be approached as a design project, with expectations that management will frame a conceptual agenda and mission as well as conditions of success for the practice's impact on the world. Pragmatics—including consideration of a firm's structure and organization, financial strategy, client relations, marketing, project delivery, legal considerations, and other aspects of design service—are taught through the lens of the underlying objectives of the firm. Through this, we recognize that managing a transformative architectural practice is complex and nuanced.

The students' familiarization with these topics is accomplished through lectures, targeted readings, and dialogue with guest professionals. As these topics are quilted together their links are discussed even as each discrete element receives its due attention. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, an effort is made to demonstrate how practice can be elevated to its highest level, where it is carried out to have a powerful impact on society and to elevate the human spirit.

Professional Practice helps students recognize that they have profound agency. While much of the content presupposes "how business works" in conventional practice today, practice continually evolves through the leadership of the most passionate practitioners. We examine emerging modes of practice while asking students to imagine how they might use their passions to steer the coming changes. Sometimes that evolution is sparked by a vanguard, a group of people with radically influential ideas. Emerging practitioners will determine what the future of architecture holds.

PROVOCATIONS AND INSIGHTS DERIVED

Professional Practice has been offered under this new direction three times in as many years, with iterative improvements and

refinements based on specific insights and provocations for architecture raised through the course content, its reception by the students, and the conversations this pedagogical process generates.

AESTHETIC ETHICS

Architectural aesthetics have been relevant to contemporary discourse, ranging from an embrace of formal exuberance enabled by technology, to a denial of aesthetics in favor of pragmatism, to the development of Object Oriented Ontology in architecture's relevance and meaning to others. The field of aesthetic ethics is deeply relevant to architectural practice as well. In her essay "Beyond Design Ethics," Victoria Beach argues for an aesthetic basis to architectural professional ethics in that we have a duty to provide design guidance influencing the production of beautiful buildings, not only ones that are technically proficient, or ones that might not harm the occupants near or far.⁶ She reminds us of the etymology of the word aesthetic as the capacity to perceive with one's senses: "Under its timeless definition, aesthetics is a most capacious term—encompassing the perception of all material things by all living senses: the earthy warmth of fresh milk and the repulsive acridness when it spoils. An aesthetic experience, then, is simply a perceptible one, just as a medical anesthetic renders us unable to perceive."⁷ Though we commonly frame aesthetics as concerning purely the visual, and thus somehow extravagant or beyond what is necessary, when we design for the full sensory experience of space in the pursuit of design excellence, we might make buildings that will be loved and cared for by many people over generations. Architects can design for the greater good of society, not only for the initial concerns of the clients who commissioned the work. Mark Foster Gauge also investigates the intersection of architecture, aesthetics, and justice in his book *Designing Social Equality: Architecture, Aesthetics, and the Perception of Democracy*. He argues that "an architecture that continues the ethos of function as a primary generator of form, or that only directly responds to client needs to solve particular problems, is inherently complicit in supporting the status quo of the existing wealth and power structures in which those clients are nearly always embedded, and subsequently is implicated in the inequalities on which those structures rely."⁸ Through the professional practice course, we explore how to hold a project to high standards even when they exceed those of the client's request. We consider how and why the architect may choose to go beyond service.

CRITICAL PRACTICE

In their influential 2010 book *Provisional: Emerging Modes of Architectural Practice USA*, editors Elite Kedan, Jon Dreyfous, and Craig Mutter grapple with the sense that the profession is service-oriented and risk-averse to the detriment of innovation and true leadership.⁹ Through this book, they profile ten firms that serve as extraordinary models for engaged practice, both meeting clients' expectations and also furthering the firm's objectives for the practice, whether through research, advocacy, design excellence, sustainable performance, or other goals The

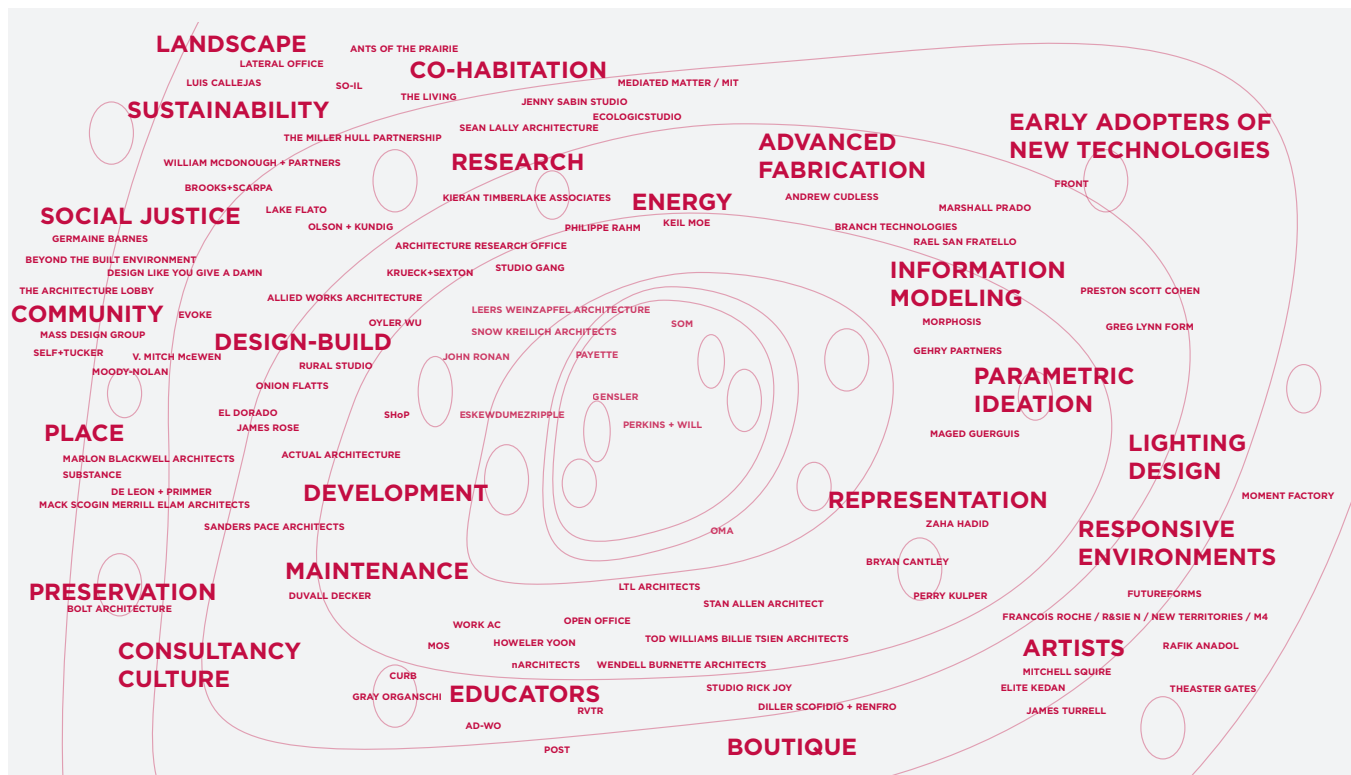


Figure 1. "Forms of Practice," diagram mapping the contemporary field of critical practice. Jennifer Akerman, 2023.

authors' interviews with many of their subjects brings to light a common theme: these are practices actively engaged in architectural discourse seeking to integrate their care for history and theory into practice. This advocacy for critical practice is particularly instructive for today's students of professional practice.

This new course works collaboratively with students, encouraging them to articulate issues they think architecture has the capacity to address and whose absence from normative practice has frustrated them. Following a deep reading of *Provisional*, the course instructor developed a diagram provisionally mapping the territory of engaged critical practices serving as exemplars today (Figure 1). This diagram has been iteratively developed over the three cycles the course has been taught incorporating student insights. This is meant as a provocation for the students to imagine and construct their own versions of a map of contemporary practice. Here it's significant that this professional practice course is taken by students in their final semester and it coincides with their thesis project or an advanced research studio. Each student is invested in that process of articulating their personal agenda and mission through the lens of architecture, be that addressing issues of ecology, technology, social justice, culture, philosophy, representation, or other topics of critical concern. Architectural education over-qualifies students for the profession they are entering, in the best way possible, preparing them to assume agency in what their future practice could become.

EQUITABLE PRACTICE

This course considers how architectural education, licensure, and practice have actively failed to support women, people of color, people with disabilities, and all who have been traditionally marginalized and excluded from societal power structures. The very real limitations of parenthood, the crushing effects of student debt, or the alienation of being "the only one like me" in a room of decision-makers are all explored through lectures, readings, and alumni panels. Our current student population in architecture is majority female and 25% identify as minorities. We know from research of the architectural profession that those numbers don't hold in the workplace currently, and that significant wage gaps exist across all identity markers.¹⁰ Though identity-based demographics are complex and difficult to summarize accurately, in 2022 NCARB reported that 24.9% of NCARB Certificate holders were women architects and 1.9% were Black or African-American architects.¹¹

Educating students of an implicit expectation that they would take on the added work of educating their colleagues and superiors in diversity, equity, and inclusion, especially labor expected from people of color and women, is now central to the new pedagogy of professional practice. Students read and discuss themes published in the *AIA Guides to Equitable Practice* (2019), which has become essential to this course's reformed approach to teaching professional practice. The Guides affirm the AIA's established role in the United States anchoring the profession with resources on ethics and practices broadly. Specifically, now

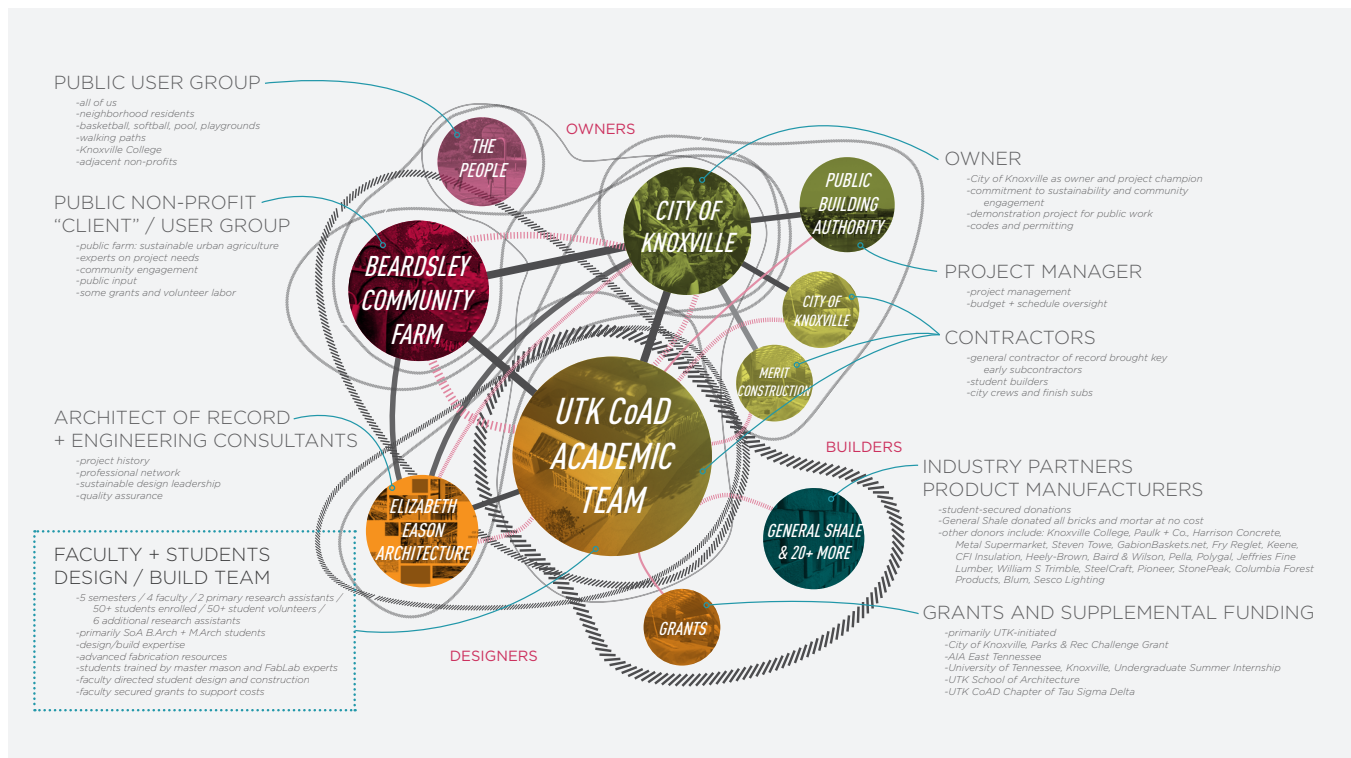


Figure 2. "Alternative Practice: Network of Collaborations," diagram mapping the atypical shared power workflow that enabled the Beardsley Community Farm academic design-build project to thrive. Jennifer Akerman, 2023.

they write of the profession's urgent obligation to both expand diversity, equity, and inclusion in practice and in who has access to architecture as a part of our leadership role in society. They write "Increasingly, architects will be called to lead efforts in finding solutions to many of our society's most pressing issues. To meet these challenges, as well as the unknown ones ahead, we must have the talent, passion, and creativity of a diverse cohort of students, professionals, and leaders."¹² This professional practice course adopts a range of methodologies from the *Guides* for rendering equitable practice relevant to architectural professionals at all steps of their careers. They present topics such as intercultural competency, workplace culture, compensation, recruitment and retention, negotiation, mentorship, and community engagement, through a range of motivations, recognizing that different people in the profession and in our client base will harbor different reasons for wanting to enact change. These include educating future architects on the nuanced differences between the moral case, the business case, the ethical case, the professional case, and the societal case driving equity and justice in professional practice.

RETHINKING LABOR

The course explores rethinking labor practices, including as framed by Peggy Deamer and The Architecture Lobby, who provide advocacy and activism in favor of rectifying the extreme hardships and unpaid labor often expected of architectural interns or students in support of professional practice.¹³

Consideration of knowing one's worth when negotiating contracts is also part of this module. When students learn how to "pay themselves first" through financial planning and equitable negotiation, they can better care for all employees of their firm. We also consider construction labor. Mabel O. Wilsons' *Who Builds Your Architecture: A Field Guide* highlighting unjust labor conditions for builders is instrumental here.¹⁴

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The course presents architectural practices that actively seek to benefit communities and the environment at large. Guest lectures by architects leading excellent practices exemplify work that positively impacts communities and the environment at large. We consider firms who conduct some amount of *pro bono* services, informed through the writings of John Cary and others.¹⁵ We consider firms that are sustainability leaders, including William McDonough + Partners.¹⁶ We consider firms that strategically choose to work with clients in communities where their design excellence will have a more pronounced effect, including Self+Tucker Architects of Memphis.¹⁷ We consider projects that emerged from academic design-build efforts to serve an immediate community, including several efforts from the University of Tennessee's Design-Build-Evaluate Institute, including the Beardsley Community Farm Education Center in Knoxville,¹⁸ and the Red Bird Water Kiosk in Clay County, Kentucky.¹⁹

RESTRUCTURING ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE

The status quo of architectural practice in America disincentivizes innovation at all levels, making it critical to teach students in tactics for restructuring architectural practice. Architect Sekou Cooke delivered a lecture about his practice to the College of Architecture and Design in Spring 2023.²⁰ Sekou Cooke Studio, explores the intersection of architecture and identity, specifically through the emergent field of hip-hop architecture, “which addresses the broad impacts of the racist history of architecture and urban planning, opening a pathway for practice, education, and scholarship that embraces architecture as a tool for shaping, reflecting, and understanding culture.”²¹ A key insight he shared was the recognition that approximately 90% of the effort required to fully develop the work of his firm happens outside of the scope of work dictated by the AIA Standard Owner-Architect Agreement. The AIA B101 Standard Form of Agreement between Owner and Architect assumes architects should be paid for only five phases of work: Schematic Design, Design Development, Construction Documents, Bidding and Negotiation, and Contract Administration. Cooke outlined his attention to research, representational methods, iterative design, marketing, developing exhibitions (including his speculative design work exhibited in *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*, at the Museum of Modern Art in 2021²²), teaching, writing (including his book *Hip-Hop Architecture*²³), and lecturing to academic audiences. Though Cooke did not overtly follow that provocation through, the business implications are that critical architects are continually hustling—whether seeking revenue from supplemental employment, managing commission fees such that more-lucrative projects can subsidize extra efforts across the practice, or simply not being adequately paid for architectural labor.

Practices such as Sekou Cooke Studio, and dozens of others explored in this professional practice course, engage architecture through restructured relationships beyond the scope of what is assumed by the status quo. This includes rethinking the role of the architect by coupling architectural effort with other forms of work—teaching, for one; design-build, for another. It includes challenging the convention of the architect-contractor dichotomy,

Another path for restructuring practice may be learned from those whose innovative methods challenge the status quo for project delivery. It includes practices like Gramazio Kohler Research of Switzerland that engage robots as builders, fundamentally reshaping the relationship of design, fabrication, and risk in architectural production.²⁴ This challenges the architect-contractor dichotomy. We can read this innovation as one step away from Integrated Project Delivery in the United States where clients and architects, consulting professionals, and the contractor enter into a novel legal and working structure predicated on collaboration.²⁵ Academic design-build is another example where the typical set of collaborative relationships is continually in flux allowing architects to opportunistically leverage their

insights within the system, maybe beyond the system, to bring about more than the client is expecting. This is explored through an analytical diagram exploring the set of collaborative relationships at play in the previously-mentioned Beardsley Community Farm Education Center (Figure 2).

This reformed Professional Practice course has been taught three times, evolving each time, and is currently undergoing further revision and refinement based on lessons learned through continual assessment and reflection. It is far too common for a professional practice course’s agenda to be solely driven by NAAB criteria, or to be hastily outsourced when faculty fail to critically engage this vital subject. The decision to reform a professional practice course from within the core tenured faculty of a design-oriented and research-savvy program may serve as an actionable example of how professional education can be expanded broadly and diversely across the many schools of architecture. By reframing Professional Practice through the lens of inclusivity, each student’s decisions as an ethical practitioner of architecture hold profound promise.

ENDNOTES

1. The ideas and pedagogy presented in this paper stem from a required course, ARCH 462/562: Professional Practice, taught by the author at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for students enrolled in the School of Architecture's B.Arch and M.Arch professional-degree programs. The author extends her deep appreciation to Prof. Jason Young, Dean of the College of Architecture and Design, Prof. Carl Lostritto, Director of the School of Architecture, and Prof. Scott Wall, past Interim Director of the School of Architecture. Energetic dialogue with each of these educators and architectural thinkers has made the course better. I am also indebted to the graduate students who have served as graduate teaching assistants supporting the course, Will Nix, Aubrey Bader, and Paige Peterson.
2. This insight was inspired by comments shared by Antoine Bryant of Moody Nolan Architects as part of the AIA 2020 Continuing Education panel discussion "Design Excellence in Practice, Leading in Uncertain Times", moderated by Michael Strogoff, FAIA, <https://aia.org/courses/live-course-design-excellence-and-practice>.
3. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 44.
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5. For more considerations of pedagogy of design-build as a counter to the professional status quo, see Jennifer Akerman, "Crafting Production: Design-Build as Alternative Practice," *Journal of Architectural Education* 71, no. 1 (2017): 73–81.
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16. With thanks to Jose Atienza, Design Director, for his lectures to the Professional Practice class. <https://mcdonoughpartners.com/>.
17. With thanks to Jimmie Tucker, FAIA, Principal and cofounder, for his lecture to the Professional Practice class. <https://www.selftucker.com/>.
18. University of Tennessee, College of Architecture and Design, Profs Jennifer Akerman and Robert C. French with Elizabeth Eason Architects, the City of Knoxville, the Public Building Authority, Merit Construction, and others, substantially completed in 2016. <https://archdesign.utk.edu/projects/beardsley-farm-education-center/>.
19. University of Tennessee, College of Architecture and Design, Professor John McRae with Merit Construction and others, completed in 2015. <https://archdesign.utk.edu/projects/the-appalachia-project-red-bird-water-kiosk/>.
20. Sekou Cooke, "Mr. Morale: A Hip-Hop Architectural Journey," The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, College of Architecture and Design Lecture Series, March 27, 2023.
21. <http://www.sekoucooke.com/>.
22. *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*, New York: MoMA (Museum of Modern Art), February 27–May 31, 2021.
23. Sekou Cooke, *Hip-Hop Architecture*, (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021).
24. Fabio Gramazio and Matthias Kohler, *Digital Materiality in Architecture*, (Baden: Lars Muller Publishers, 2008). See also <https://gramaziokohler.arch.ethz.ch/>.
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