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April 19, 2021 • Jay Cephas on “Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America”



Installation view of “Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America,” at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Robert Gerhardt.

IN 1935, W. E. B. Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. Coming in at just under eight hundred pages, Du Bois’s “essay” served to carefully delineate the role of African Americans in the social, political, and economic restructuring of the United States following the devastation of the Civil War. In many ways, the artists, architects, and designers included in “Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America,” at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, have set for themselves a task no less ambitious than Du Bois’s. The exhibition surveys the complex and often contested relationships between race and space, drawing an analogy to Reconstruction to shape their investigations of Black spatial practices. Organized by associate curator Sean Anderson and Mabel O. Wilson, an architect and Columbia University professor, the exhibition features commissioned works by Emanuel Admassu, Germane Barnes, Sekou Cooke, J. Yolande Daniels, Felecia Davis, Mario Gooden, Walter Hood, Olalekan Jeyifous, V. Mitch McEwen, and Amanda Williams, as well as new photographs and a film by artist David Hartt.

The historical Black Reconstruction is the framing device that unifies the work of “Reconstructions.” But the theme of the show departs from the postbellum metaphor in at least one important way: The survey doesn’t pose “a” reconstruction but rather argues for reconstructions—multiple visions, both overlapping and divergent, not just of possible futures but of varying interpretations of the present and past. That these artistic and architectural visions are necessarily varied in their approach challenges the monolithic rendering of Black American life that has far too often structured cultural conversations about race. While the premise of the exhibition relies on pairing an artist with an American city as a means of uncovering Black spatialities, the works themselves do not necessarily offer insights into these specific urban areas—nor do they need to. Rather, a “Manifesting Statement” by the Black Reconstruction Collective, as the commissioned artists and architects have organized themselves, frames the entry to the gallery and asserts that such reconstructions of the nation’s history, governance, and infrastructure must precede the construction of any possible egalitarian society. The work of “Reconstructions,” then, offers a prelude to the re-construction of American cities. If architecture can be a “vehicle of liberation and joy,” as the statement claims, then the work in the exhibition soars especially when it sets aside the instrumental potential of architecture in favor of speculative investigations of Black presents, pasts, and futures.



Olalekan Jeyifous, *Plant Seeds Grow Blessings*, 2020, photomontage, framed renderings printed on Luster 260 GSM, 40 × 30". Photo: Olalekan Jeyifous and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Olalekan Jeyifous's fantastical collages uniquely capture the speculative spirit running throughout "Reconstructions." His compositions, in both print and video, depict dense urban landscapes of concrete structures covered with greenery, topped with colorful billboards, and interspersed with weary but stable infrastructure. Picturing a kind of heterotopia in which Blackness is normalized, these visualizations seem both foreign and familiar, though perhaps no more so than the highly racialized conditions of the here and now. I visited "Reconstructions" with my seven-year-old son, a Black boy, who stood transfixed before Jeyifous's otherworldly renderings, asking me, "Where is this? Is it real? Is it a video game? Can we go there?" Indeed, the strange and captivating spaces tread a thin and delicate line between reality and Otherness, though what stands out is the presence of Black bodies in the ethereal worlds that the artist and designer conjures. These lush cityscapes, which seem both highly technical and rough and worn, reflect, through a kind of inverted social lens, the grave contradictions we live with today—cities of immense wealth wracked with devastating poverty; a scientifically advanced society on the brink of environmental collapse. Jeyifous is not alone in illustrating these narratives, but he frames them via a new kind of "speculative fiction," one in which Black bodies not only exist within an imaginative ecological urbanism but can also shape its developing narrative.

In a series of framed panels that caption an intricate Mylar map, Amanda Williams asks what it means to be a free Black body in conditions under which being Black is a liability. The efforts toward freedom, underscored by a collective and world-weary desire to be freed from the bounds of racialized conventions (what Du Bois in another essay referred to as "our spiritual strivings"), envelop Williams's tender yet rigorous treatment of free Black towns in Missouri. The Mylar map collects and traces the intellectual contributions of antebellum free Blacks while also spatializing these collections. An associated video articulates these free Black towns as sites of both longing and belonging, and a cradlelike vessel hanging above suggests a vehicle for escape. While this coupling of longing and belonging is echoed elsewhere in the exhibition, the work of "Reconstructions" is distinctly void of the kind of overbearing nostalgia that could easily weigh down such a venture. There is no idealized past being presented here, nor do the works champion or strive toward some unknown utopian future, an approach that is too often a hallmark of architectural speculation.



Sekou Cooke, *We Outchea: Hip-Hop Fabrications and Public Space*, 2020, digital print and screenprint, 12 × 12".
Photo: Sekou Cooke and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Instead, the narratives of Black life told in “Reconstructions” rely on the techniques of architectural representation to convey their thick and rich descriptions of the places that ordinary Black people create and occupy. Germane Barnes’s catalogue of Black spatial rituals pays homage to the Black kitchen as an inherently social space, one that amplifies the “flavor that is Black” while also offering literal sustenance to the community. Derived from interviews with Black families in Miami, Barnes’s design introduces new architectural elements that revel in the intimacies of Black domesticity—a spice wall, rendered as both a drawing and a full-scale construct, becomes a dominant feature of the kitchen, while a salon bowl replaces the sink in affirmation of the kitchen as a domestic center for Black hair care. At the other end of the architectural scale, Sekou Cooke and Walter Hood each address the Black subjective erasure that often comes with new urban developments. Cooke’s larger-than-life photographs of Black workers form a backdrop for a series of panels wherein he “remixes” the history of public housing in Syracuse by recentering Black culture in both the design and the representation of the apartment blocks. Hood’s array of Black towers of Black power, human-scaled sculptural objects that seem at once architectural and figurative, offers a new architectural form for high-rise housing—one based on the social agenda of the Black Panther Party’s ten-point program.

It’s tempting to think of the exhibition as prefiguring a possible future for American urbanism. But the power of “Reconstructions” lies in its contemporaneity. Though in the works long before the current racial reckoning prompted by the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, “Reconstructions” stands to play a pivotal role in the critical discussions of race that have arisen since in the world of architecture and design. Those conversations have already begun, although too much of the discourse sparked by “Reconstructions” has focused on MoMA’s founding architecture curator, Philip Johnson (the Nazi sympathizer whose iconic role in the establishment of modernist architecture emerged from an exhibition he curated at the museum in 1932), rather than on the poignant insights into race the exhibition offers. Extending that discussion beyond the show and its catalogue, “Reconstructions” includes a fourteen-hour online course on how race and racism have shaped the built environment, bearing witness to not just the work of ten artists, architects, and designers, but also to the ordinary spatial practices of Black folk. As much as the exhibition is about space, it’s even more about time—about the present moment, and about the urgent need for change.

—*Jay Cephas*