

Architecture's whiteness by design can change. Mabel Wilson shows us how in MoMA show



Architectural scholar and cultural historian Mabel O. Wilson draws attention to the complex racial legacies of architecture. (Michael Nagle/For The Times)

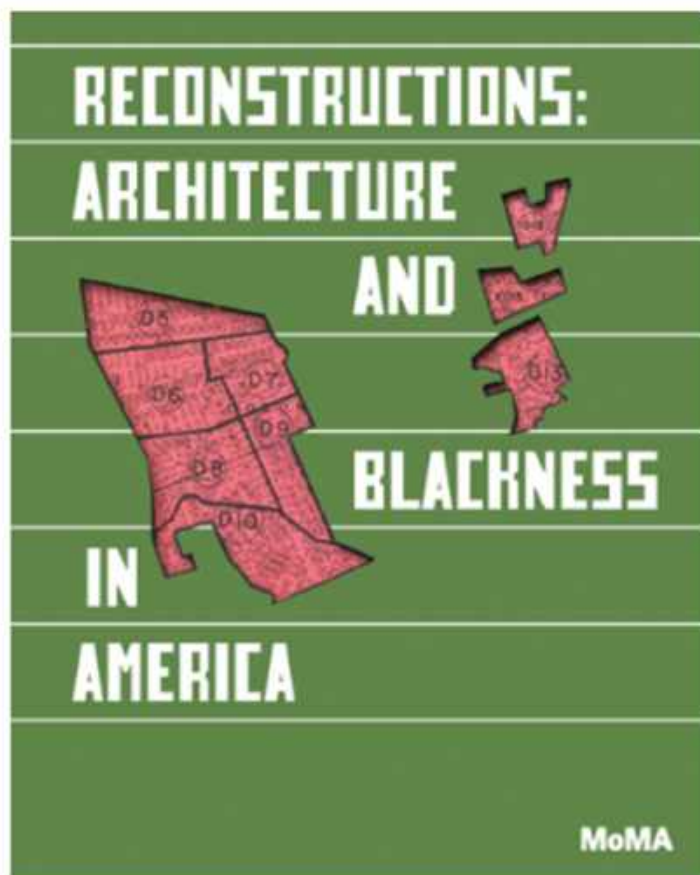
By CAROLINA A. MIRANDA | COLUMNIST
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2016. That was the first time New York's Museum of Modern Art acquired a work by a Black designer for its architecture and design collection. The object was a stereoscopic image viewer developed by Charles Harrison. And, yes, you read that correctly: MoMA, an institution whose [architecture and design department](#) goes back to 1932, didn't acquire a single work by a Black architect or designer until the tail end of the Obama administration.

That omission, along with the ways the museum has engaged — and not engaged — the ideas of Black architects during its history, was the subject of an illuminating essay by architectural scholar and cultural historian Mabel O. Wilson in the hefty tome "[Among Others: Blackness at MoMA.](#)" published in 2019.

“Modern architecture builds the world for the white subject, maintaining the logics of racism while also imagining a future world in which nonwhite subjects remain exploitable and marginal,” Wilson wrote in that essay. “The power of the architecture and its archive is to produce ‘whiteness’ by design.”

Now she has helped put together a MoMA exhibition that places Blackness at the heart of the show. [“Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America.”](#) organized by Wilson in collaboration with architecture and design associate curator [Sean Anderson](#), unearths the ways in which systemic racism has shaped architecture and how an unexamined whiteness has served as a default in the field.



The curators for “Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America” want viewers to deploy the catalog for the show as a field guide. (MoMA)

More important, the exhibition — and [its very worthwhile catalog](#) — presents myriad architectural possibilities framed by the Black experience. Among the contributors to the catalog is USC’s architecture dean, [Milton Curry](#), who provides a framework for architectural race theory.

“We wanted to pick people who were not only good architects, designers and artists,” Wilson says via telephone from New York, “but also had a critical perspective and could interrogate architecture, its modes of representations, its histories.”

To that end, she and Anderson commissioned 10 installations for the exhibition, which opened late last month and continues through May 31. These include a project by architect [J. Yolande Daniels](#) that surfaces Blackness in L.A.’s geography, a video work by L.A. artist [David Hartt](#) inspired by Charles Burnett’s film [“Killer of Sheep”](#) and an installation by Bay Area landscape architect [Walter Hood](#) that employs the Black Panthers’ 10-point program for proposed architectural interventions along San Pablo Avenue in Oakland.

There is also a work that contends with the site of MoMA itself: The [Black Reconstruction Collective](#), which counts Hood and Daniels as well as architects Mario Gooden, Germane Barnes and Sekou Cooke among its members, created a large-scale, fabric-printed manifesto, which [obscures the name of Philip Johnson](#) on the museum galleries that bear his name. Johnson was the founding director of the museum's architecture and design department. He was also, in his youth, an assiduous supporter of the Nazis — or as biographer Mark Lamster [describes him](#), “an unpaid agent of the Nazi state.”



An installation view of a wall piece by the Black Reconstruction Collective obscures the name of MoMA's Philip Johnson Galleries. (Robert Gerhardt / MoMA)

The polymath Wilson — who teaches at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation — was also part of the team that designed the [Memorial to Enslaved Laborers](#) at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville (her undergraduate alma mater). Plus, with fellow scholars Charles L. Davis II and Irene Cheng, she edited the essay collection “[Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History From the Enlightenment to the Present](#)”, published last year by University of Pittsburgh Press.

Though she was raised in New Jersey and is now based in New York City, Wilson is no stranger to Los Angeles, where she has made regular pilgrimages as a scholar and to see family: The late Los Angeles assemblage artist [John Outterbridge](#) was an uncle (and an inspiration).



"I have a love-hate relationship with architecture": Mabel Wilson, curator, scholar and architect. (Michael Nagle / For The Times)

In this interview, edited for length and clarity, Wilson talks about how “Reconstructions” came together, why putting up a few monuments to Black people doesn’t begin to make up for centuries of injustice, and how novelist Toni Morrison can serve as a role model in the world of design.

Your essay in “Among Others” examined the appalling lack of Black designers in MoMA’s collection. How did that work shape “Reconstructions”?

I wasn’t the person who uncovered the fact that there weren’t Black designers in the collection. That was the department at the behest of [curator] [Darby English](#). They were scouring their archives. And when they got to architecture, they were like, “Oh, wait.”

I had already started a conversation with Sean Anderson about anti-Black racism and the built environment in 2017. The essay, I think, just made the absence more imperative — to address anti-Black racism at MoMA and to try to understand it institutionally. The museum was essential to defining the Modern canon through its collection. No museum had ever done that. And that was done by Philip Johnson, who had this very problematic role in American Nazism.



Sculptural pieces by Oakland-based landscape architect Walter Hood were inspired by the Black Panthers’ Ten-Point Program. (Robert Gerhardt / MoMA)

“Reconstructions” looks forward, not just back. What was your aim in having an exhibition that was pointed squarely at the future?

I always have a love-hate relationship with architecture. Architects are well-meaning, often. It's a *hard* profession. A very hard profession. And it requires a sense of dedication and sacrifice. But that makes it hard for people of color to get in the field, and it has therefore remained an overwhelmingly white and male profession. Unlike art, it's very prescriptive. It's always about the future. It's about what we will make in the world.

But architecture doesn't always do well in reckoning with its own reality. My arrival as an architecture student at the University of Virginia was one of being steeped into this Eurocentric vision, and I never saw my own culture and history. So, it's like, if we do think about futures, what other futures could there be?

You describe the catalog as a “field guide” that can be used to “amend the ways division has long been designed.” How would you like to see some of its ideas deployed?

We don't know yet! Maybe it's supporting the kinds of inventions that Black people came up with and were then cheated out of. Black people have invented so many things that they have then been denied. I think it offers a set of ideas of methods, of practices, different ways of communicating. It's a book about the built environment taken from many perspectives — from scholars, poets, artists. And it's dense and capacious to be used by whomever.



"No Beach Access," 2020, a digital collage by architectural designer Germane Barnes. (Germane Barnes / MoMA)

In the catalog, you touch on monuments and representation, writing: “In the face of Black people’s continued eviction from the category of human, we should not mistake the erection of the monument or memorial for repair.”

What these monuments do — we were very insistent when working on the [Memorial to Enslaved Laborers](#) — it’s not an end. It’s part of a continuum. It just means you recognized that a wrong has been committed. It can do useful work, but it’s not an end in and of itself. Otherwise it fosters forgetting.

In 2016, you said architecture hadn’t examined its own racial legacies in the way that fields such as anthropology have done. Has that changed in the wake of the uprisings?

I think that like in a lot of areas, people are now more vocal. People aren’t holding their cards to their chest anymore. People are asking for accountability, and they are also asking for change. And that’s transformative.

Your book “Race and Modern Architecture” is a step toward that reckoning.

It is important to understand how architectural historical discourse is racialized. People say, “No, it’s a social issue. It has nothing to do with architecture.”



David Hartt's film "On Exactitude in Science (Watts)," 2020, which was inspired by the work of L.A. filmmaker Charles Burnett. (Robert Gerhardt / MoMA)

One of my early papers was about race and Le Corbusier [[“Black Bodies, White Cities: Le Corbusier in Harlem,”](#) 1996] — how he used tap dancers in Harlem as a way of imagining labor in America. I got s— for that paper. People were like, “Oh, that’s a metaphor and you can’t judge them by our standard today.” The field wasn’t open to these ideas at the time. It’s been a journey.

[The book] was another collaboration. Irene Cheng and Charles Davis, along with Diane Harris — she’s been writing about whiteness and American architecture — the four of us kind of recognized that now was the time to work on this project. We were like: Who is out there studying these issues that we don’t know about? We found others who have engaged this question. That’s how the book came together.

Speaking of collaboration, the design of the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers was a very open process. How is that a model for how we can think about monument design?

There is this tendency in the architectural press to look for the white male genius. It doesn’t do very well in accommodating collaborative projects. In this case, [Boston-based] [Höweler + Yoon](#) are the architects of record. But initially it was [landscape architect] [Greg Bleam](#) and [UVA architectural scholar] [Frank Dukes](#) who helped [start the commission](#) to move the statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson [in Charlottesville]. They put together a team to interview for the project — so we interviewed. We were the only team that wasn’t a single firm. We didn’t have a design. But we got the project because I think they realized we were going to ask questions.

RACE AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE

A Critical History
from the
Enlightenment
to the Present

Edited by **IRENE CHENG**
CHARLES L. DAVIS II
MABEL O. WILSON

"Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present" was published last year. (University of Pittsburgh Press)

That was 2016 and we had until June of 2017 to come up with a schematic design. We didn't design anything until January of that year. And that wasn't until after extensive conversations with the community, with students, with the Charlottesville Black community, with churches. We asked, "What does this mean to you?"

We had to tell a story of their survival, their joy, their community, but we couldn't hide the violence of bondage. We had to figure out a way of working that into the form of architecture.



A view of the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at UVA, by Höweler + Yoon, Greg Beam, Frank Dukes, artist Eto Otitigbe and Mabel O. Wilson. (Sanjay Suchak / UVA)

Architecture writer Mimi Zeiger recently wrote that it's time to abolish the architecture critic, noting that "the same structural conditions that produce inequity in the field ... also limit who is legitimized as a critic." How do you think criticism needs to evolve to meet the moment?

I think it was the same as with art critics. You look at my uncle [John Outterbridge's] work and his group of peers — Betye Saar, David Hammons, etc. — it's about having people who can write about the work. It's about having curators who understand the work. It's not just about the art.

"Reconstructions" is not the first show on this topic. [Thelma Golden](#) [at the Studio Museum in Harlem] curated a show called "[Harlemworld: Metropolis as Metaphor.](#)" And [Mpho Matsipa](#) curated a show called "African Mobilities" [for the [Architekturmuseum Der Tum](#) in Munich]. [William Williams](#) did "[ROW: Trajectories Through the Shotgun House](#)" and he did a show called "[The Dresser Trunk Project.](#)" But a lot of that stuff doesn't appear on the radar of architects because it wasn't really written about in the architecture press.

What is the design project you haven't done that you would like to do?

I would like to work more on my art practice. I've done installation. The "(a)way station," a project I did for KW:a [with architect Paul Kariouk] is now in the collection at [SFMOMA](#). I worked on a project about suburbia, the single-family home — that was at the Wexner Center [for the Arts in Ohio]. With photographer Peter Tolkin [a principal of the L.A.-architecture studio [Tolo](#)], we looked at [Modernism in Ghana](#) and decided that if we listened instead of just looked, we would find other frequencies.

If you are going to explore Blackness, you have to be undisciplined. Your discipline isn't going to do it. It has silenced Blackness. I look to art and literature. I had to find Toni Morrison, the ways in which she describes space and place. She describes carving away at the English language. Can I carve away at design?

Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America

Where: Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53rd
St., New York, NY
When: Through May 31
Info: moma.org