

POSITION PAPER: Research

My multivalent practice of design, art, and scholarship draws upon my background as both an architect and a cultural historian. As an educator I have taught courses in architectural design, architectural theory, visual cultural studies, and social theory. Over the years I've had the great pleasure of advising a range of student work in the fields of photography, sculpture, film/video, painting, visual criticism, museum anthropology, planning, and architecture. Forming the primary intellectual strand that can be traced through my practice is an ongoing exploration of how the built environment is lived and represented in American and African diasporic culture. Other significant topics of investigation have included the visual culture of race, along with research into how technologies influence the social production of space. Much of the work is collaborative and the projects served as platforms for fruitful creative and intellectual exchanges. It is perhaps because of this heteroclitic body of work, which upon retrospection I wonder if I've suffer from some sort of professional ADD, that prompted Lisa Grocott and the conference organizers to invite me to present today. I am delighted to be here and wish to thank everyone for the organizing what I think will be a lively public forum on the question of Research in Art and Design. My talk, the autobiography of a cultural *bricoleur*, someone who came of age in the early days of sampling and interdisciplinarity, will illustrate that my practice remains a work in progress.

1. Positioning

I'd like to start by saying something about fields, disciplines and knowledge. If we take into account the spaces through which we practice our respective disciplines, this institution for example, modern educational institutions have partitioned bodies of knowledge into fields (area of departments and schools) – history and literature within the humanities; anthropology and sociology within the social sciences; architecture and law within professional studies. Through their own particular disciplinary regimens, each group places value on the production, circulation and transference of knowledge. Disciplines also form into social spheres and spaces. We often refer to them “fields” because individuals stake out positions and are in turned positioned by others, reflected in part in the spatial divisions and allotments within universities. We can say that the production of knowledge within educational institutions is social in the way in which it creates cultural capital. These days we are attuned to how the production of knowledge is economically driven, with different levels of investment and compensation for those who learn, teach, manage, maintain, and administrate. Most significantly, the production of knowledge within disciplines emerges within a sphere of unequal power relations. When power *is* enacted within a field, groups determine what or who can appear within its sanctioned discursive, spatial, and visual territory. But these processes of territorialization can also be arrested and redirected through the production of new and even transgressive knowledge. After all positions and positioning can be tactical. **3** As Donna Haraway's cogent analysis reminds us “*positioning is the practice of grounding knowledge organized*

around the imagery of vision, as so much Western and scientific and philosophic discourse is organized. Positions implies responsibility for our enabling practices. It follows that politics and ethics ground struggles for the contests over what may count as rational knowledge. If educational agents understand more critically what is at stake in the creation of new ways of knowing, stalwart institutions can also be jostled, moved, and fundamentally transformed over time. My personal narrative will travel through these various disciplinary territories. My academic trajectory has traversed disciplinary limits to engage cross border relationships and encounter the antagonisms between disciplines-fields-professions.

2. Young architect seeks work

I was fortunate that my undergraduate education in architecture opened a window onto intellectual diversity within a single discipline. I matriculated through two diametrically opposed institutions: on one side of the Atlantic the University of Virginia – at the time steeped in neo-classical postmodernism, a product of its own institutional legacy as Mr. Jefferson’s University, and on the other side of the pond the Architectural Association in London, which offered an avante gardist approach to architecture, art, and culture. My professional training came for the former, but my intellectual curiosity would be ignited by brief stint at the AA’s incubator, amongst its global student body, taught by a faculty that included the likes of Nigel Coates, Robin Evans, and Zaha Hadid, and exposed to brilliant works like Chris Marker’s ethereal, enigmatic *Sans Soleil* (still an important influence upon my work.) Upon completion of my undergraduate studies, I worked in architectural offices in New York City and the Metropolitan region. Sparked by the various drawings for the high-end subdivisions, Tokyo apartment buildings, and vacation homes in the Hamptons spread about my drafting table at my work, I began to wonder about the role of wealth played in ability to build and hence control space. I realized a master’s degree might provide answers to these questions. And with a scholarships and loans in hand, Columbia’s GSAPP proved an ideal, albeit demanding refuge.

Upon graduating early 90s when the job market in architecture was bleak, I accepted a teaching position in the College of Architecture at the University of Kentucky. This first teaching appointment launched the two trajectories that I have been pursuing for the past twenty years— experimental design/art projects and scholarly writing. My first installation for the *House Rules* exhibition at the Wexner Center exemplifies these dual interests. For the show curator Mark Robbins paired each architect with a theorist to “deconstruct” the single-family house. I worked with a UK colleague, feminist geographer Heidi J. Nast, on both the essay and the installation (a model and drawing built out of glass.) Our project *This is the House that Jackie Built* dissected how race, sexuality, and gender roles shaped domestic space in suburban subdivisions and public housing developments in Lexington, Kentucky.

3. American What?

After five years of teaching architectural design I realized that the topic of race and architecture, a question that had been simmering throughout my educational and professional career, had not been sufficiently investigated. Therefore I decided to pursue doctoral studies. In light of my design background Architectural History programs seemed to be the obvious point of disciplinary crossover. Architectural history was originally a sub-field of art history, rooted in that discipline's 18th century Germanic philosophical traditions. But by 1970s, as architects became interested in articulating a body of knowledge about the discipline's origins, a postmodern turn to history away from modernism's utopian visions, architectural history programs sprouted in professional schools of architecture beginning in the 1970s.

In considering likely topics of investigation I proposed to study to parallels between the discourse of racial science and architecture. And while I was willing to commit to rigorous academic studies, I still intended bring these insights back into practice—craft a bridge between history/theory and architecture. Fundamentally what I was proposing was to study was how race might be historicized within architectural discourse. This critical question, it would seem, was not something that the field at that time would support and make visible within its disciplinary territory. Therefore I would have to stake out my position elsewhere, in another discipline. How space was racialized in the writings of people like Toni Morrison, for example, showed me that there were other mediums through which I could work. At the end of the day, the field that seemed the most amenable and open to this project turned about be American Studies and thus I entered NYU's program in 1995.

For many who may not know its rather curious origins and shadowy evolution (with rumors of it being a conduit to glean CIA recruits,) the interdisciplinary field of American Studies is a relatively recent field. American Studies was first conceived of as a social science in the 1930s as a way to study the progress of the American civilization, hence validating American cultural superiority. Literature and History were the primary disciplines combined into this new area study, which also included law, economics, and so forth. During the cold war era of the 1950s, for example, Yale's American Studies program put foreign students in "close contact with American life, the institution and principles of American democracy, a subject of worldwide interest." In the 1990's American Studies' rather heavy ideological baggage in service of the State was being unpacked by an importation of British Cultural Studies, thereby challenging the field's underlying presumptions of American cultural hegemony. The revamped NYU program brought together the core disciplines of history and literature with performance studies, sociology, anthropology, Africana studies, film studies, women studies and other sub fields. For someone like me interested in the study of race, space and politics – American Studies and a extraordinary cohort of peers provided a fertile intellectual space that nurtured diverse trajectories of exploration.

The choice to pursue my doctoral studies American Studies was nonetheless a daunting decision. What would it mean for me, given my two degrees and professional training in architecture and previous career experiences, to enter a humanities/social science program? I was not alone in my apprehension. At my defense my advisor Andrew Ross in complementing the quality of my scholarship admitted that “quite frankly coming into this program with a degree in design, there was no expectation whatsoever that you would produce a work this caliber for a dissertation”. I was determined to research, write, and eventually publish a body scholarship on race that I hoped would in turn impact the field of architecture.

4. et al.

The same year I began my doctoral studies, I started KW:a with Paul Kariouk as a means of developing speculative and built architectural projects that paralleled my doctoral research. KW:a, (originally called Architecture et al.) was an important twelve year collaboration. Many of our projects explored the spatial politics of cultural memory. *(a)way station – the Architectural Spaces of Urban Migration* was emblematic of these interests at that time. This large installation project out of plywood, plexiglass, resin and found objects, which took us several months of intensive work to fabricate, reconstructed the interim improvised, domestic sphere of peoples in the midst of urban migration. Another project in collaboration with Dean Wolfe Architects and artist John Outterbridge, was selected as a finalists for competition to design a memorial for lower Manhattan’s African Burial Ground. Our proposal *Sacred Ground* envisioned the site as a public garden. The would re-territorialize the burial ground’s abject space by proposing that a new group of caretakers would tend the grounds of the cemetery, therein cultivating and continuing the memory of those interred there.

5. Becoming History

In the past five years I’ve continued to foster exchanges between my scholarly and design work. My forthcoming cultural history *Progress and Prospects: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* is the culmination of ten years of research, as well as an important catalyst for my next body of work. The book’s title is taken from W.E.B. Du Bois’ article that appeared in the *Atlantic* about his contribution to the “American Negro Exhibit” at Paris’ *Exposition Universalle* in 1900. Through an in-depth analysis of expositions and museums, many that have been forgotten or whose histories remain untold, *Progress and Prospects* illustrates how from the post Reconstruction to post Civil Rights eras black Americans created buildings and spaces of display. In what were christened “Negro Buildings” at the turn of the century world’s fairs in the South and eventually at black organized events commemorating Emancipation in the North, held between 1910 and 1940, as well as in Detroit and Chicago’s grassroots museums of the 1960s, black Americans put their aspirations on display. They developed, I argue, a unique way of envisioning their future as citizens whose rights had yet to be fully realized, while also fostering a collective memory of their American and African legacies.

The research on *Progress and Prospects* has also led to new design projects. Because I assert that the early black museums in the U.S. were enterprises led by grassroots activists, as well as know the contentious history of the various proposals for a national black museum beginning shortly after WWI, I teamed with the New York architecture firm Diller Scofidio+Renfro (DS+R) to submit a proposal for last year's competition to design the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture to be built on the National Mall adjacent to the Washington Monument. Our proposal *Stone Cloud* began with a consideration of Du Bois' paradoxical theory of double consciousness, one that we interpreted as "how to represent on a prominent, highly visible site on the National Mall a culture and history that has over centuries been unrepresented and even rendered invisible."

Lastly my research into museums and archives, time and memory has fostered a new avenue of experimentation in video and interactive databases. "Becoming History" will be an interactive installation that displays images of rarely seen nineteenth and twentieth century black expositions and museums. *Becoming History* develops the cache of images I discovered while researching and writing *Progress and Prospects* into a navigable database. The installation will offer viewers the prospect of navigating new constellations of meanings through rapidly changing imagery and sounds that reflect the temporary nature of the original expositions, buildings, and displays. Within this ephemeral space in which time expands and contracts, viewers will engage black cultural memory in ways unimagined by those who created the original events and spaces.

I want to end by noting that I find the malleability of knowledge streams fascinating. For me, research from within and from outside of the discipline opens the field of architecture to reveal the situated-ness of the discipline and profession, how it operates, how it is regulated. I've always appreciated philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's characterization of technology as a thing as well as a way of thinking. In this way she wed object with concept, positing that intuiting as valuable as knowing. Grosz, ever the provocateur, asks the following "what might it be like to invent machines, things, objects,[I want to insert here architecture/design/art] not for what we can do with them, but for ways in which they transform us, beyond even our own control?"

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