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“Let’s Imagine Something Different”: Spiritual Principles in Contemporary African American Justice Movements and Their Implications for the Built Environment

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Received: 16 August 2017; Accepted: 13 November 2017; Published: 23 November 2017

Abstract: The Black Lives Matter movement has become one of the most visible, controversial, and impactful campaigns to address racialized violence and discrimination in the 21st century. Activists within the movement join traditional forms of social protest and policy development with rituals and spiritual practices, drawing upon spiritual resources as a source of transformation and empowerment. The transformative aims of Black Lives Matter and other contemporary African American justice movements address critical areas for reform, like criminal justice, education, and public health, but their vision for reform is broad and extensive, envisioning the creation of a more just world. As such, the physical context for African American life—the buildings and public spaces known as the built environment—is a crucial aspect of social transformation. This essay examines the spirituality of Black Lives Matter and other contemporary African American justice movements and considers how it inspires the ongoing transformation of buildings and public spaces. By analyzing the spiritual practices and themes in the Black Lives Matter movement as described by its founders, this paper identifies three principles and relates them to similar concepts in African American religious thought, womanist ethics, and ecowomanism. Applying these three spiritual principles—liberation, inspiration, and healing—to the design of architecture and public spaces can enrich and affirm African American life. Appealing to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture as an example, this paper articulates the possibilities of architectural projects to symbolically and practically support liberative goals in African American religious systems and political movements.

Keywords: African American religion; African American spirituality; Black Lives Matter; architecture; built environment; womanist ethics; ecowomanism; liberation theology; social justice; National Museum of African American History and Culture

1. Introduction

The Black Lives Matter movement has become one of the most visible, controversial, and impactful campaigns to address racialized violence and discrimination in the 21st century, emerging after the killing of Trayvon Martin. The movement began as a social media intervention using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, but subsequently grew beyond its online presence. Black Lives Matter is now a network of chapters around the United States. The organization has partnered with others in the Movement for Black Lives to develop a policy agenda that addresses political, economic, and educational issues that degrade black lives. Their agenda is holistic, and the movement embraces spiritual practices. These spiritual practices are a vital expression of the movement’s work for social transformation and can have a wider effect than what we typically credit to spirituality and religion. Spirituality cultivates an inner life that, as it grows, inspires visions of

a better world and empower individuals to bring these visions into being. The spiritual principles and aims of Black Lives Matter and other African-American justice movements have real-world implications beyond the obvious areas for reform, such as criminal justice, education, and public health. These are critical areas that merit immediate attention, but if a movement is about imagining a different kind of world to live in, it should also consider the physical landscape of that world.

The complex of constructed spaces that humanity inhabits, comprised of architecture, landscape design, and infrastructure is known as the built environment. Ordinary buildings and eminent works of architecture alike are the products of design intent and construction, and therefore reveal something about how designers envision the world they seek to create. At a house dedication in 1933, Paul Tillich, a Christian theologian, spoke about the ways space and time relate to dwelling. The word *dwelling* designates both a residence and a mode of living, a way of making a particular place in the world familiar. Tillich argues that “it makes sense” to reflect on our dwellings when “a community of people has transformed [them] into the space of its communal life” (Tillich [1933] 1987, p. 82). This essay takes up that reflective task by seeking design inspiration from African American social justice movements and considers how architecture and the built environment relate to the pursuit of justice in African American communal life. Specifically, this paper examines spiritual principles in contemporary African American social justice movements and considers the implications for those principles in creating spaces that promote the flourishing of black lives. Those who want to live in a world oriented to justice must participate in constructing it and interpreting it. How might African American spirituality guide us to create a built environment that affirms black life?

Theologians Philip Sheldrake, T. J. Gorringer, Eric Jacobsen, John de Gruchy, and others have explored the spiritual, ethical dimensions of built environments and urban spaces. *The Spiritual City*, Sheldrake’s (Sheldrake 2014) book, presents a moral and spiritual vision of cities that addresses contemporary social problems. He uses a historical and theological lens to describe how Christian thought can promote reconciliation and social cohesion in urban life, despite the Christian tradition’s anti-urban bias. Gorringer’s *The Common Good and the Global Emergency: God and the Built Environment* (2011) focuses on how Christians might address the built environment based on their commitments to the common good. This work extends his previous scholarship that proposes a Trinitarian theology of the built environment. His more recent book is a response to a global emergency predicated by increasing world population, climate change, and resource depletion. Gorringer addresses architecture and urban planning and relates these disciplines’ insights to ethical issues regarding place, transportation, agriculture, and food production (Gorringer 2011). Jacobsen’s most recent book (Jacobsen 2012) continues the Christian reflection on the built environment that began in his 2003 book *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Jacobsen and Peterson 2003). Like the earlier work, *The Space Between* offers a theologically-informed conceptual framework for questioning the experience of community in the places we live and the qualities of those places. The book presents a compelling analysis of Christianity’s relation to urbanism. De Gruchy’s contribution to this discourse is his discussion of art and architecture as they relate to social justice (De Gruchy 2001). He articulates the redemptive power of beauty and sacred images in both the life of the church and in the public square. As the title of his book suggests, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* provides a compelling vision of theological aesthetics that serves an ethical purpose. Writing from a South African context, de Gruchy addresses the historical struggles for equality and empowerment among racial groups in his country and uses theological reflection to explicate a role for the arts in societal transformation. As other scholars build from these theologians’ work, we have the opportunity to apply their insights to other cultural histories and community contexts.

These scholars understand the crises present within our historical moment. They seek to create a vision informed by Christian thought and concern for the common good that might guide the

formation and re-formation of our built environments to be just and inclusive.¹ However, the growing body of theological scholarship about the built environment is male-dominated and it has not yet substantially addressed the social justice concerns of black America, specifically the concerns of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Garza n.d.). This paper addresses that gap by centering liberative religious scholarship and political, ideological movements initiated by and for black people as its source for guiding principles to reconceive built environments. African American justice movements like Black Lives Matter call our attention to the ways black lives have participated in cultivating land and building public spaces of various forms, but have been denied equal benefit from them and are monitored and policed within them in detrimental ways. The Black Land and Liberation Initiative (BLLI) articulates a mission developed by black activists, organizers, healers, farmers, educators, and others that integrates the pursuit of black spaces and land into a platform for justice. Their manifesto states, “We call for a return of accumulated wealth to Black people in the US and Black people across the diaspora. We call for a release of stolen land. We vow to work with integrity and build partnership with those whose lands were stolen and with the land itself. We vow to continue the struggle, to build liberated black spaces, institutions, and power until we are returned what is rightfully ours” (Tutashinda 2017). Reclaiming black space and building places that serve the well-being of African American communities is a critical issue for our time. Spaces that support black life do exist, but religious theory and practices attending to them and their significance within the overall framework of well-being for African American communities could be developed further. As such, this paper centers African American spirituality in this area of emerging discourse. The academic and political movements examined within this paper also center women’s voices to construct a more fully inclusive and informed vision of justice.

What might their spirituality contribute to a vision for architecture focused on the design and construction of places in which African Americans live and move and have our being? The answer to this question is developed in three sections. The first section below describes the interrelated nature of social, spiritual, and material transformation within African American justice movements. If we do not understand their interconnection, we may overlook the relevance of physical spaces for justice work. The next section explains why enhancing the built environment is consistent with the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement and suggests expanding its agenda to more explicitly include the built environment. The next section addresses the heart of the matter by describing the spiritual principles in this social justice movement and their relevance to the built environment. Through analysis of the spiritual practices and themes in the Black Lives Matter movement as described by its founders, this paper identifies three principles and relates them to similar concepts in African American religious thought, womanist ethics, and ecowomanism. Ongoing research about the spirituality of the Black Lives Matter movement is merited. The aim of this paper is to connect this emerging form of spirituality to the built environment, so analysis of these principles is discussed in religious and architectural terms. These three spiritual principles—liberation, inspiration, and healing—suggest approaches to and characteristics of public spaces and buildings that would enrich and affirm African American life. Appealing to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture as an example, this paper articulates the possibilities of architecture to contribute to shared liberative goals in the Black Lives Matter movement and African American religion. The museum demonstrates that the spirituality-architecture connection is not merely theoretical or limited to religious buildings. The articulation of these spiritual principles and their architectural implications along with the descriptions of the National Museum of African American History and Culture not only

¹ These thinkers are not trying to impose a Christian theocratic vision on urban life and built environments. In different ways, these theologians develop frameworks informed by Christian doctrines and virtues that include robust conceptions of the common good or cosmopolitan life that embrace the autonomy and wellbeing of non-Christians.

indicate what is already possible with our built environment but also help us to imagine a different way of approaching design in the future.

Sensitive to the ways racism and heteropatriarchy marginalize the work of queer black women, even when people use the hashtag #blacklivesmatter and appeal to its agenda, the analysis of each of the three principles in contemporary African American spirituality begins with descriptions from interviews with two of its founders, Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza. Because academic scholarship about the spirituality within the Black Lives Matter movement is limited, the analysis of its spiritual practices and applications to the built environment in this paper is supplemented with scholarship from allied movements that also seek social transformation for African American life. Black liberation theology and ethics have always been concerned with the real-world, practical implications of religious doctrines and cosmologies. In academic settings and the worlds outside them, liberative theology and ethics have confronted issues about African Americans' opportunities and quality of life. They have sought the transformation of lived realities and religious systems. The transformative goals of womanist ethics and ecowomanism, especially, align with the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement, hence my inclusion of them here.

2. Spiritual Transformation and the Material World

The Black Lives Matter movement has clear guiding principles about the transformative work it is doing. The movement is "unapologetically Black" in affirming the value of black lives, while its activists also remain committed to diversity and globalism within their movement. Black Lives Matter is a queer-affirming organization "guided by the fact all Black lives [matter], regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability, disability, religious beliefs or disbeliefs, immigration status or location" (Black Lives Matter n.d.). Their guiding principles include empathy, loving engagement, intergenerational participation, and support for black families and black "villages" of collective care. Black Lives Matter is committed to affirming and making visible the efforts of transgender persons and black women so that they may participate in and lead the movement freely, without harassment or harm. They are committed to the principles of restorative justice, which means they seek to renew their communities through invigorating approaches (Black Lives Matter n.d.). To this end, participants in the movement incorporate spiritual practices into traditional forms of protest and civic engagement. Black Lives Matter activists have been known to burn sage at sites of conflict, which is a ritualized cleansing practice that invites balance, love, and light (Farrag 2015). They have also constructed altars to honor the dead at protest sites and activists read the names of the dead as a sacred act of remembrance (Tippett et al. 2016). In addition to these practices, organizations within the Movement for Black Lives host events focused on emotional health and spiritual well-being (Farrag 2015).

Participants engaged in these spiritual practices know that social transformation involves politics and policy, but they believe that transformative work is ultimately a spiritual effort that requires a shift in consciousness. Although Black Lives Matter is predominantly a political and ideological movement, its co-founder Patrisse Cullors explains that political engagement alone will not accomplish the transformative work that needs to occur. Cullors insists: "I believe that this work of Black Lives Matter is actually healing work. It's not just about policy. It's why, I think, some people get so confused by us. They're like, where's the policy? I'm like, you can't policy your racism away. We no longer have Jim Crow laws, but we still have Jim Crow hate" (Tippett et al. 2016). Human transformation is dependent on inner change, the type of reorientation that religionists call conversion. Although spiritual transformation does not necessarily require the aid of formalized religious communities, African American communities have consistently drawn on black religion to propel and sustain transformative justice movements and cultivate resistance to racism and other death-dealing forces. Rev. Traci Blackmon, an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and United Church of Christ (UCC), has been a visible spiritual leader in Black Lives Matter since the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. She serves as the acting executive

of UCC Justice and Witness Ministries, representing an institutional Christian church that welcomes those outside its denominational bounds into its community work. Justice work in black communities was often grounded in Christian churches but has also notably occurred in other religious communities such as the Nation of Islam and those rooted in other African and Caribbean religious traditions like Rastafarianism. Cullors, herself, is inspired by indigenous spiritualities and Ifà (Farrag 2015). She explains that the spirituality of many Black Lives Matter activists is not based in traditional or formalized religious communities. Many of the activists felt rejected or even “pushed out” of churches because of their queer identities or challenges to patriarchy. Nevertheless, they continue to practice their spirituality through “healing justice work,” working to exorcise their communities of racism, sexism, and homophobia (Tippett et al. 2016).

The activists’ healing practice confronts the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual wounds that they and their opponents carry. Yet, there is a physical component to their work, too. Western religious and philosophical traditions sometimes lead us to believe that spiritual work is transcendent or immaterial. However, African-American spirituality has been profoundly engaged with the material world, whether found in 19th century enslaved communities, the black church, liberation theology, womanist ethics, or Black Lives Matter activism. These contexts resist dualisms that uplift only body or spirit. The spiritual is exercised in everyday lived experience; this African American form of spirituality addresses the practical aspects of what it takes to stay alive and flourish. This, of course, is explicit in the assertion that black *lives* do matter. The spiritual work of healing is a practice of promoting the wellbeing of black bodies and furthering justice for black people as we move inside constrained economic systems, criminal justice systems, educational systems, and neighborhoods.

Cullors asserts that the spiritual work of Black Lives Matter is integral to reimagining humanity; we have to use our collective imagination to center on black life, not black death. “Let’s imagine something different,” she says. Why not image a physical environment that promotes black life? After all, communities are not mere social networks. Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes writes, “In black theology, community is an exploration of a ‘we’ relationship through seeking to understand the dynamics of belonging, group identification, and social solidarity” (Townes 1999, p. 110). Communities have a material presence; they are the places where people meet, the physical spaces they share in common life together, and the territory they recognize as their own. What type of environment—what type of *built* environment—would promote a healthy, communal existence? In light of systemic failures to remediate toxic environments like Flint, Michigan, envisioning a physical environment where African Americans will be nourished and restored to health and wholeness is an urgent need. This work is already taking place, but can be enhanced by spiritual resources. Spiritual power helps people claim more than a minimal existence, it orients them to a life of fulfillment. An architecture influenced by the spirituality of African-American communities is not about trying to give buildings “a soul” it is about stirring the soul in its people, building their own power, and cultivating “the audacity to imagine something different for [themselves]” (Tippett et al. 2016).

3. An Architectural Agenda: Black Lives in the Built Environment

Black Lives Matter began in 2014, so critical scholarship about the movement is still emerging. However, its goals are widely disseminated. Given the movement’s origins online, it is unsurprising that its guiding principles and agenda are communicated through the websites BlackLivesMatter.com and m4bl.org, which is the official site for the Movement for Black Lives (The Movement for Black Lives n.d.). Black Lives Matter activism is breaking new ground with its savvy use of media and technology. Its message is shared through multiple social media platforms aided by the ubiquitous hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Additionally, articles and interviews with leaders in the movement have not only stated their aims for political and economic life, but also described the spirituality within the movement. As the Movement for Black Lives emerges and expands, the timing is right for supporters to assess its agenda and offer issues for consideration that may not already be included. The arts, broadly speaking, are vital to the movement. However, its consideration of the arts does not include a

comprehensive analysis of architecture and its significant role in shaping communities. This movement is hardly the first to overlook the built environment as its own area of concern. But because the agenda does include concerns about community control, housing, environmental health, and the vitality of black neighborhoods, it could also explicitly address architecture and urban planning, recognizing that buildings are literal building blocks that form the material conditions in which humanity lives. Architecture has both practical and symbolic implications for how communities dwell within the spaces they occupy.

Methodologically, this essay interweaves architectural criticism with varied strands in theological-ethical discourse: the spirituality of Black Lives Matter, black theology, womanist and ecowomanist ethics. The synthesis is intentional. A connective thread between these contemporary movements is their hope and effort for making our world more just, humane, and livable. Creating this new world requires forming the real places African Americans inhabit into places that promote survival and actively challenge a death-dealing racialized hierarchy. The black community is not monolithic; African Americans live and work and occupy varied spaces and have diverse experiences within them. Consequently, there can be no singular expression of African American space. A vision for the built environment must include multiple types of spaces. Predominantly black neighborhoods can be poor or affluent, African American homes meager or lavish, and black places of business can be delapidated or well-maintained. But because of pervasive characterizations of African American people as criminal threats or dangers to others, even when African Americans dwell in “safe,” economically sound neighborhoods, their spaces might not be secure. After all, it was in Sanford, Florida that Trayvon Martin was killed as he walked home from a convenience store. Trayvon Martin rightfully belonged on those streets, but his killer had a dangerously racialized perception of the neighborhood as the teenager walked through it. The killer’s insidious conception of blackness (particularly youthful, male, blackness) was applied to the built environment in such a way that threatened the young man’s very existence. The physical space of the built environment was overlaid with immaterial conceptions of who and what belonged there. This kind of spatial mapping and interpretation likely occurs in every built environment, and it suggests that concerns about justice should address the physical settings in which justice is subverted. Obviously, it is highly unlikely that good architecture would have prevented Trayvon Martin’s murder. But architecture, like other art forms, can be utilized to communicate positive messages about blackness that contradict the insidious stereotypes that link blackness and danger. Designers can create just, inclusive architecture that incorporates and celebrates a blackness that is too often demonized. The Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC is one example of a notable architectural work that accomplishes this. It demonstrates the potential of architecture to express life-affirming principles. The section below will explore the ways architecture can be employed in the work of social transformation.

4. Spiritual Principles and Their Implications for the Built Environment

The remainder of this essay will identify and discuss three spiritual principles for an architecture that affirms black life: liberation, inspiration, and healing. The principles are grounded in the spirituality of the Black Lives Matter movement, but they are also present in other forms of black liberation movements, like womanist ethics and ecowomanism. While ideas that inspire architectural design can be found anywhere, these three principles offer a vision grounded in something profound and more life-affirming than political consciousness, racial struggle, or aesthetic preferences could provide alone. They emerge from a black spirituality that ties everyday living to the spirit of a people and seeks to infuse a sacred dimension into the most common, ordinary of things: our buildings. The expression of these principles can be found in architecture that already exists, like the NMAAHC, but these principles also provide guidance about what to consider for buildings that have not yet been envisioned and built.

Liberation, the first principle, aims to promote freedom from oppression and death. Applied to the built environment, liberation promotes claiming or reclaiming spaces for African Americans to flourish.

It centers their needs in design processes like creative placemaking and aims to create architecture for the people—buildings that meet the needs of African Americans. The second principle, inspiration, is a reliance on spirit to inform and invigorate the process of social transformation. For architecture informed by African American spirituality, inspiration means basing design decisions on what will uplift the full humanity of the who dwell in the community. Spirit, in African American religion, is an active force that guides people to truth, beauty, and justice. Responding to spirit as inspiration means incorporating beauty and cultural referents into architecture. The final principle, healing, is central to the Black Lives Matter movement and also ecowomanism. In these movements, contemporary social justice advocates see their work as having not only political or educational aims but also emotional and spiritual intentions. Social transformation requires healing what is broken. Applied to architecture, healing becomes about repairing and rebuilding the physical structures of a community to restore them to wholeness. The three principles identified here are not the only ones that can be drawn from contemporary justice movements and applied to architecture. However, these three principles offer a compelling vision of a different way to shape community life. They are also, to a large degree, interconnected and inseparable. Inspiration promotes acts of liberation and liberative thinking, which aim to heal the effects of racial hierarchies.

4.1. Liberation: Reclaiming Black Space

The theological principle of liberation is a fitting start. Alicia Garza declares that Black Lives Matter “centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement” (Garza n.d.). Garza asserts that liberation efforts need to be rebuilt because they are too often exclusive; this subverts the principle of liberation itself. The movement is unapologetically focused on black lives in all their diversity but stands in solidarity with others who seek liberation. As one of the co-founders of Black Lives Matter, Garza is committed to preserving its central tenet. She defends the unapologetic focus on black life by citing numerous ways in which black people’s dignity and rights are subverted by violence, often at the hands of the state. She continues:

#BlackLivesMatter doesn’t mean your [non-black] life isn’t important—it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within White supremacy, are important to your liberation. Given the disproportionate impact state violence has on Black lives, we understand that when Black people in this country get free, the benefits will be wide-reaching and transformative for society as a whole. When we are able to end hyper-criminalization and sexualization of Black people and end the poverty, control, and surveillance of Black people, every single person in this world has a better shot at getting and staying free. When Black people get free, everybody gets free. This is why we call on Black people and our allies to take up the call that Black lives matter. We’re not saying Black lives are more important than other lives, or that other lives are not criminalized and oppressed in various ways. We remain in active solidarity with all oppressed people who are fighting for their liberation and we know that our destinies are intertwined. (Garza n.d.)

Garza’s expression of liberation is centered on black life, but it is not exclusive. The movement’s centering on black life, however, is the specified route to inclusive liberation.

Liberation, in a religious context, is the freedom that God wants for the world, a freedom that its most marginalized people seek. Emilie Townes explains, “The aim of liberation is to restore a sense of self as a free person and as a spiritual being” (Townes 2011, p. 39). It seeks the freedom to live abundantly, to escape from oppressive structures and institutions, and to triumph over death-dealing

powers. Liberation theologians and ethicists focus on the practical considerations of living.² Their argument is that God is concerned with humanity's well-being, and does not divide us into discrete parts: spirit, soul, body, mind. God's concern is for our whole selves, and therefore what constrains and denigrates any part of human being is subject to theological consideration and challenge by liberationists. Liberation theologians argue that there are patterns to marginalization and exclusion; that status and access to opportunity are often demarcated along lines that preference or disadvantage people according to their race, gender, class, physical condition, and sexual orientation or identity. There are often intersecting systems of oppression that work together and reinforce each other. If a force or system is oppressive, then according to Christian liberation theologies, it is sinful, subverting God's purposes or design. This is why Christian liberation theologies invert traditional hierarchies, advocating for God's preferential option for the poor. In the Kingdom of God, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. God suffers with the oppressed, and works for their salvation. To be marginalized, oppressed, poor, or in some other way on the underside is to have an epistemological privilege that enables one to more clearly know the things of God. Whereas dominant systems have said to be in a same-sex relationship is sinful, liberationists argue that oppressing or excluding someone on the basis of sexual orientation is sinful. Where theologians like Thomas Aquinas have infamously stated that a woman is a misbegotten male (quoting Aristotle) and not fit for clerical leadership (Aquinas 1914, 1.99.2), feminists have used the principle of liberation to declare the full humanity of women. As Rosemary Radford Ruether writes in a clear demonstration of the liberation principle, "Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption" (Ruether 1983, pp. 18–19).

Garza does not rely on a Christian theological framework to support her view of liberation. As Cullors has explained in her description of healing justice work, many activists in the movement were rejected in Christian churches. Black Lives Matter is queer-affirming in its participation and leadership, and although there are queer liberation Christian theologies, the dominant Christian tradition has supported heterosexual, male leadership. Even civil rights movements committed to liberation have marginalized some of the people they purport to fight for. For this reason, Black Lives Matter is committed to fostering a more inclusive vision of liberation. "It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all," Garza explains (Garza n.d.). Any religious system that knowingly perpetuates systems of exclusion as it works toward liberation is incompatible with the principles undergirding Black Lives Matter.

The principle of liberation advances a social, political, and economic agenda of inclusive equality.³ Ethicist Peter Paris describes the "structure of inclusive equality" as one "wherein the well-being of all the community's members is assured" (Paris 2004, p. 62). This fight for inclusive equality is the goal of justice movements in African American communities. When activists say "Black Lives Matter" or shout "Say Her Name," they assert the radical equality of *all* black people to

² Miguel De La Torre writes about the distinction between liberationist and liberative ethics: "While liberationist ethics is a type of liberative ethics, liberative ethics is not necessarily liberationist. Liberation ethics is based on liberation theology (usually rooted in 1960s Latin America), which is characteristically Christian. Liberative ethics, like liberation theology, still emphasizes the preferential option for the oppressed, but in doing so, might—but not necessarily—center its reasoning on Christian concepts. The focus of liberative ethics moves away from orthodoxy, correct doctrine, towards orthopraxis, the correct actions required to bring about liberation. So while liberationism is Christian, liberative ethics can be Muslim, Hindu, humanist, or Buddhist" (De La Torre 2013, p. 3). That distinction is helpful. In this section, the term *liberationist* is used to convey an association with Christian theological systems. Liberative will be used to refer to the broader, non-Christian context of ethical thought. In the remainder of the essay, I simply use *liberation ethics* or *liberation* as descriptors that include both approaches.

³ Equality does not (necessarily) mean integration or equal distribution of wealth; the ideal social organization varies in different liberation theologies. The principle of full inclusion in societal systems and structures and equal valuing and equal opportunity is consistent, though, and certainly evident in the spirituality of Black Lives Matter activism.

their white counterparts and underscore the right to black life. These justice movements work to disrupt a racialized hierarchy of white supremacy that allows blackness to be devalued by asserting the inferiority and danger that black bodies possess (Vesely-Flad 2017). One implication of this hierarchy is that black spaces—neighborhoods, homes, parks, vehicles, and bodies—are allowed to neglected, monitored, invaded, and usurped for the benefit of other races. We see these patterns in deteriorating and neglected infrastructure, surveillance, racially disproportionate policing, and gentrification. The challenge that black communities can consciously practice in response to the racist construction and redefinition of boundaries is preserving and reclaiming their space.

Preserving and reclaiming black space as a liberation practice can be approached in two different ways: creative placemaking and designing architecture for the people. Placemaking is an approach to urban planning and design that focuses on public spaces for the community. It “capitalizes on a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential, and it results in the creation of quality public spaces that contribute to people’s health, happiness, and well being” (Project for Public Spaces 2015). Creative placemaking highlights the role of local arts and culture to activate the social dimension of space. The process and concept of creative placemaking are very close to practices of community-based design, although community-based design may be practiced in various types of architectural or urban planning projects and not just those related to placemaking. Community-based design is an approach to decision-making that empowers the local community, including its members who do not have expertise in architecture, urban planning, or community development. Community-based design recognizes that despite an individual’s lack of specialized education or training, that person can and should have a legitimate say in the conditions in which they live. It recognizes that people in a local community know things about the community—good and bad—that outsiders (even professionals) do not. The inversion of authority and the inclusive vision of creative placemaking and community-based design are consistent with the principle of liberation.

Architecture for the people is an approach through which notable works of architecture are commissioned for poor or marginalized communities. In typical design processes, the most specialized buildings and the most prestigious architecture of a region are commissioned for those who can pay for them. Great works of architecture are most often placed in desirable neighborhoods because signature buildings designate areas of importance. Architecture for the people inverts this principle to help the marginalized. Commissioning significant works of architecture for marginalized people and/or placing them in areas that are considered unremarkable or undesirable elevates their image in practical and symbolic ways.

It is entirely possible for creative placemaking and architecture for the underserved to be done without appealing to religious or spiritual frameworks. However, applying the spiritual principle of liberation to guide the work enables us to see these activities’ meaning and significance in terms of the sacred, divine, and life-affirming energy of the universe. It allows us to connect these activities to the deepest motivations a community holds.

4.1.1. Creative Placemaking

Creative placemaking is a collaborative process “public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities . . . [It] rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired” (Markusen and Gadwa 2010, p. 3). When we speak about creative placemaking, even from a religious perspective, we are discussing the possibilities for public spaces, not just religious buildings. At first, that may seem confusing, or even presumptuous: What could religion possibly have to say about public spaces and why should it say anything? However, we might concede (without much controversy) that throughout history, a sense of religious mission has inspired significant works of architecture in the form of churches, monasteries, places of worship, monuments, and hospitals. Is it such a stretch, then, to agree that a contemporary form of religious belief might inspire other types of

buildings that contribute to a community's well-being? Good design can support a religious mission not only when it is used for worship, but also when it is used for service to the community. Serving one's sisters and brothers is at the heart of the Black Lives Matter agenda and it is also what the black church and religious communities have been doing with their buildings. Churches are not used for worship alone. Ecclesial buildings often house community meals, food pantries, clothes closets, homeless shelters, emergency shelters, immigrant sanctuaries, community meetings, addiction recovery groups, scouting troops, polling places, and numerous other occasions for civic engagement and community gathering (Hopkins 1999, pp. 1–2).⁴ Churches provide a type of semi-public space that differs from the semi-public space of shopping malls named "town centers" whose primary aim is commercial. Commercial spaces do often host community celebrations, but they are constructed specifically for drive consumer activity, whereas ecclesial spaces are built to promote activity that serves God and others; even when financial transactions occur in ecclesial spaces (e.g., tithes and offerings, fundraisers, bazaars), their primary aim is service oriented.

Although church buildings and even the buildings of para-church ministries provide so much, they are not sufficient to meet the needs of an entire community. Also, they may not be hospitable to people outside their religious group. Therefore, a commitment to the principle of liberation requires expanding our scope beyond churches to examine public architecture. Public architecture includes government buildings, libraries, schools, community centers, and park structures. They are buildings for the public good, in which the community is shaped and formed. Examining how these buildings might be designed and constructed to further the aims of justice enables us to confront the religious-ethical questions of how what we believe about the divine influences how we should live outside of houses of worship.

This is a similar assertion to that of countless ecowomanists, ecofeminists, and environmental ethicists who argue that caring for our communities must address unhealthy environments we live in, both for our own sakes and out of obligation to the interrelated living world we occupy. Ecowomanist analysis is particularly applicable to this essay, because its approach to environmental justice incorporates race, gender, and class analysis, "but also helps to show how religious moral codes and values support an ethic that honors the earth and honors voices from communities of color and women as they speak up for the earth" (Harris 2016, p. 31). Ecowomanism is an emphasis within womanist discourse that centers black women's spirituality and connections to the earth. Its contribution to the discourse of environmental justice is that it addresses intersecting oppressions of racism, sexism, classism and environmental injustice that can become separated in other movements (Harris 2016, p. 27). Not only does ecowomanist analysis confront issues like water, air, and land toxicity, it highlights the effects of toxins on already marginalized communities who may not have adequate access to health care and enforcement of environmental regulations. By broadening environmental justice sensibilities to include the built environment, we address spaces that we construct from the earth's raw materials and work to make our environs livable and enjoyable.⁵ As we construct environments that nurture African American life for the present, considering its environmental impact on future generations is important. This means selecting materials with low energy footprints and levels of toxins, seeking building technologies (like heating and cooling systems) that use passive or renewable forms of energy and implementing construction procedures that minimize disruption of local ecosystems and reduce waste.

⁴ In this essay, Hopkins lists dozens of ways that the black church "has functioned as the practical organizing center" of community life.

⁵ This, of course, is not to say that environmental concerns do not significantly overlap with concerns about the built environment. We make a mistake when we assume a sharp separation between nature and human culture. We are animals, natural beings, and are dependent on nature and culture. Emilie Townes writes, "Black womanist thought must work to broaden the black community's understanding of what is at stake in the atmosphere we breathe, beyond the pristine and irrelevant images of Sierra Club calendars that rarely, if ever, put people in nature" (Townes 199, p. 113).

Creative placemaking allows a community to identify the values that are important to them and incorporate them into design through imaginative approaches. Sustainability, the principle of creating buildings that use resources wisely out of concern for our environment, is one value that we have seen emerge in the public sphere over the past few decades. Yet there are others that may be incorporated into placemaking and design. Recognizing a place's specific cultural history is a tenet of placemaking (Fleming 2007). In African-American communities, it may be crucial to use buildings to engage in constructive memory. Christian theologian M. Shawn Copeland articulates the importance of reviving the stories of the oppressed in her account of anamnesis, which she defines as "the intentional remembering of the dead, exploited, despised victims of history" (Copeland 2010, p. 100). In Copeland's work, anamnesis is crucial to the praxis of solidarity, the sharing of sufferings that forges connections among people and also between humanity and the crucified Jesus. Solidarity affirms the interconnectedness of humanity across identity groups and time periods. Intentionally invoking the memory of the past sufferings is more than remembrance, it is an act that obliges those who inherit the stories to do what they can to end oppression in the present (Copeland 2010, pp. 100–1).

Anamnesis can be incorporated in architecture through naming and signage, textual tools that explicitly tell the stories of those who have been oppressed and forgotten. Creative placemaking offers other ways for these stories to be incorporated as well. The arts can be used as a civic engagement toolkit that can be promoted through architecture. Murals and public art can be visual representations of cultural memory. Too often, these are only added to projects after they are built. Advocating for their inclusion at the early stages of design enables the space and viewing angles to be incorporated into the building's plan. The visual arts do not have to do the work of storytelling alone. Performing arts are vital to African-American communities, who have a long tradition of innovation in music, dance, and acting. Creating facilities for the safe creation, rehearsal, and performance of these arts should be part of the justice agenda, too.

Creative placemaking is about cultivating an authentic feel to a built environment, one that resonates with the community's sense of itself and its aspirations. It is a process of laying out intentions for the present and future. Ronald Fleming describes the potential of creative placemaking to bring together political figures, artists, and community members to clarify the meaning of a particular place: "Interpretation of place can now become an interactive process, inviting the community to evaluate future civic planning and design options. Strengthened by new technologies and the experience of confronting controversy, both interpreters and artists are initiating dialogues with the public and occasionally collaborating" (Fleming 2007, p. 211).

When informed by spiritual principles, the quest for a true "spirit of place" is not just about the realities that exist in plain sight. A religious or spiritual outlook seeks to infuse the ordinary with the sacred, and the imminent with the transcendent. This means that ultimately, we are looking to create a built environment that nurtures the soul as it meets the bodily need for shelter. It means we look beyond a building's function and its aesthetic properties to assess its potential for forming (or deforming) the souls of African American communities. The topic of spirit will be addressed more thoroughly later in this essay. For now, it will suffice to affirm its role in creative placemaking. It enables deep examination of what is being built and the motivations behind it. When spiritually grounded, creative placemaking is a process of discernment.

4.1.2. Architecture for the People

Reclaiming black space can also be accomplished by designing and constructing buildings that are intended for black communities. This does not mean enforcing racial segregation, as in facilities with "blacks only" signs to exclude occupants from other races, and does not mean excluding others from participating in design processes. The National Museum of African American History and Culture illustrates that creating spaces for or about specific communities (in this case, African American communities), is about centering the experience of the intended groups, not regulating others' participation. This is consistent with the liberation aims and methodologies of the Movement for Black

Lives, black theology, womanism, and ecowomanism, which center on the lives and experiences of African American groups. The vision for the built environment inspired by the principle of liberation proposed here is an intentional investment in facilities that meet the needs of underserved and marginalized populations. This strategy is about devoting resources to building architecture and infrastructure in black communities to provide what they need and restore them to health.

The Black Land and Liberation Initiative (BLLI) is promoting Juneteenth (June 19) as an annual day for black people to reclaim their space and land. This observance and other BLLI activity center on reclaiming land and repairing relations. They describe their work as such: “We are taking back land that should be used for the good of the people; land that has historically been denied access to Black people. Through these actions we will confront the institutions that have been built off the extracted wealth of Black bodies and Black land and the individuals who have profited from them” (Tutashinda 2017). Their call for reparations is a call for those who continue to benefit from the harm to accept their moral responsibility, which cannot be discharged by apologies alone. Patrisse Cullors, too, is an advocate for reparations, especially for communities like Flint, Michigan, where, for years, residents ingested water that contained unacceptable levels of lead (Tippett et al. 2016). Reparations could remediate infrastructure needs in Flint, as well as provide for health care and compensate for other damages. An alternative approach to resource allocation might make sense in another context. As indicated previously, there is no uniformity in the kinds of spaces that African Americans inhabit. Therefore, the strategies implemented to reclaim and preserve their spaces will vary. In an area facing gentrification and racialized displacement, architecture for African Americans may focus on providing housing or places for local business to thrive. In an affluent area that does not need investment in housing or infrastructure, the agenda for the built environment might be cultural, as in the creation of community centers or places of worship that serves constituencies that do not have places to gather. These kinds of needs can be uncovered during a creative placemaking process.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) is an example of architecture for the people focused on African Americans. It is a public building that is part of a network of cultural institutions sited on “America’s front lawn,” the National Mall in Washington, DC. Government buildings, like the United States Capitol, sit adjacent to the National Mall with museums, monuments, and memorials that chronicle American history and culture. As of 2017, The NMAAHC is the most recent addition to the Mall’s landscape. The building’s design was selected through a competition, which is common for high-profile museums. The winning entry was submitted by a team led by David Adjaye, a London-based, Ghanaian-British architect; Phillip Freelon, head of the largest minority-owned architecture firm in the United States, and J. Max Bond Jr., known as the “dean of African American architects” (Rybczynski 2013, p. 37). Designs submitted to the competition were expected to express the building’s cultural aims. The description in the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for the competition included this requirement for design teams: “Detail in writing how you will infuse your participation and vision for this project with an appreciation of African American History and Culture” (Rybczynski 2013, p. 32). Adjaye, the lead designer, envisioned a bronze-paneled building that draws on the shape of a Yoruban caryatid, which is a traditional column topped by a corona (Kimmelman 2016). Yet Adjaye was clear that the building needed to express an African American, not just African form. He explains:

I wanted to see if we could make the silhouette of the building the beginning of the narrative I was completely moved by the corona motif. It seemed like a way to start to tell a story that moves from one continent, where people were taken, along with their cultures, and used as labor, then contributed towards making another country and new cultures. That history then continues in the decorative patterning of those [bronzed, exterior] panels . . . People keep thinking that the slave trade was about cotton picking. It was also about bridge building, canals, house making. Labor in all its forms. So, I suddenly went, ‘Oh my God, well, let’s really talk about architecture and African-American history, let’s go back and look at Georgia and Charleston, you know,

all these places, through a different lens. There, the history is right in front of you—this incredible tradition of metalsmithing by freed slaves. (Kimmelman 2016)

It is more than the exterior part of the building's form (shown in Figures 1 and 2) that expresses the history and culture of African American people. The experience of moving through the museum, a visitor's educational journey, is a progression through three parts of the museum. Historical galleries are underground, in a crypt-like space. The second part of the museum represents a migration. Visitors move closer to the light above ground as they view exhibits addressing black migration from the South and the emergence of a visible black professional class (Kimmelman 2016). While the lower levels focus on history, the highest levels of the museum are about community, arts, and culture. The third section on the building's two highest floors is a celebration of what African Americans have and continue to offer to the development of the world's culture. Exhibits address visual and performing arts, but also television, politics, sports, and religion. Whereas the lower levels are self-contained in dark rooms, the lobby level and upper floors provide views to the surrounding buildings, allowing visitors to perceive history as it continues (Kimmelman 2016). Adjaye intended for the experience of the museum to differ from other Smithsonian buildings, in which the exhibit spaces are typically are closed off to the outside world. He explains that the other museums "function a bit like cinema: You go into a different world and then you come back out. I didn't want that. The experience of being black is not a fiction. There's something important about always coming back to the light of day" (Kimmelman 2016). The NMAAHC's architecture expresses a message about African American experience in the present, not only the past.



Figure 1. An exterior view of the National Museum of African American History and Culture with the Washington Monument in the background, June 2017.



Figure 2. An interior view of the exterior panels at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, June 2017.

4.2. Inspiration: Responding to Spirit

Architecture is a physical object, but it is never just that. It is material, but it always points to another dimension, the world of ideas and abstractions, where design originates. Architecture begins as an idea or intent developed by a person or group, and this is especially true of public architecture. Paul Tillich writes, “If a strong architectonic will has created these spaces, has formed them throughout on the basis of an idea, in great and in small, that will deserves to be grasped in thought and placed into overarching contexts” (Tillich [1933] 1987, p. 82). People unfamiliar with architectural theory or criticism may not consciously be aware that architecture expresses a range of ideas and values, but they are likely familiar with this assertion in the way it is expressed in ordinary situations. When we complain that a house does not feel like a home or when we celebrate the destruction of public housing that confines people like laboratory rats, we appeal to aesthetic, function-based, or moral ideals and sensibilities. We want to dwell in buildings that have a certain look. We expect certain buildings to meet particular needs. And when it comes to public architecture that serves a representative function, we want it to look good, function well, and say something about what we value. Following the spirit, the second spiritual principle extracted from spirituality in the Black Lives Matter movement, equips African American communities to have courage, clarity, and truth to ask questions about the meaning and function of architecture and answer them.⁶

In religious and mystical traditions, spirit is the power that guides us to truth and action.⁷ The spirituality of African American social justice movements has appealed to an active force of spirit, evident throughout history spanning from the abolitionist movement, to the US Civil Rights Movement, to contemporary Black Lives Matter and ecowomanist activism. For Patrisse Cullors, spirit has a role in moving humanity to its fullness. She explains, “I come at all my work from a deep philosophical place that [asks], what does it take for humans to live in our full humanity and allow for others to live in their full dignity? . . . I don’t believe spirit is this thing that lives outside of us dictating our lives, but rather our ability to be deeply connected to something that is bigger than us. I think that is what makes our work powerful” (Farrag 2015). The principle of inspiration is that relying on spirit to guide actions and movements will lead justice seekers to pursue our full humanity. Howard Thurman, a contemplative Christian minister who was influential during the Civil Rights movement, asked people engaged in the struggles for justice of his time to become aware of their inner authority, who decides what is placed on the altar of their “inward sea.” This altar and what we place on it are connected to the divine (Thurman 2010). Our inner authority has the power of consent over our innermost being; it is what determines what we are for and what we seek. Accordingly, Thurman advocates taking an inventory of the fundamental purpose of our lives. Self-examination, guided by spirit, will help us understand what our lives are truly set upon. The question “What is my life set upon?” has the power to provoke African Americans to dig through falsehoods and internalized oppressions to find a source, an altar in the inward sea, that will provide a truth that sustains them. This mystical dimension of African American spirituality is crucial for locating and maintaining what is good, true, beautiful, and worthy of pursuit in a culture that denigrates blackness.

We must be willing to ask what a building is about, what it is generating for our community, and whether it is intended for the community’s benefit or harm. The architectural implication of inspiration

⁶ Inspiration, in the context of this paper, refers to a practice of following one’s spirit. It may be conceived as a deity (see note below) or not, depending on one’s religious or spiritual orientation. Inspiration is an active experience of seeking out guidance from what is sacred, divine, holy, good, true, or beautiful.

⁷ Within African American writings, the capitalization of *spirit* is inconsistent. I have chosen not to capitalize it, following the style of articles that quote Patrisse Cullors. Capitalizing Spirit as a proper noun signifies both its personal and deified character. In the Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit is one person of the Trinity, and even when referring to the Spirit’s indwelling presence in a human person, it is capitalized as the title God would be. Womanist Layli Maparyan (Maparyan 2016) capitalizes Luminosity, the principle that “all living things are filled with light and spirit,” but does not capitalize spirit itself. In Christian usage, it is common to refer to *the* spirit. I have excluded the definite article to be consistent with Cullors’ usage.

this: the buildings we inhabit and the processes of creating them should affirm the full humanity of African American communities. Being guided by spirit means refusing to let market forces alone dictate design. Instead, we should respond to what fulfills a fuller conception of humanity. African American spirituality informs us that what people need and desire in our built environment cannot be determined at the material or economic levels alone. People need buildings that nourish our souls. They need environments that remind them what is good and sacred within themselves, especially in the cultural context of perception that blackness is a lack or something or deformation of something.

Turning to the right sources for inspiration sustains movements. Spirit has the power to revive people who have faced oppression and those who work for justice. Cullors explains: “When you are working with people who have been directly impacted by state violence and heavy policing in our communities, it is really important that there is a connection to the spirit world . . . For me, seeking spirituality had a lot to do with trying to seek understanding about my conditions—how these conditions shape me in my everyday life and how do I understand them as part of a larger fight, a fight for my life. People’s resilience, I think, is tied to their will to live, our will to survive, which is deeply spiritual” (Farrag 2015).

Inspiration does not always need to be thought to be derived from a deity for it to be spiritually renewing. For African Americans, a renewing spirit can be found in community life, black history, and cultural pride. Promoting and sustaining these can inspire a renewed vigor to work for justice. The NMAAHC celebrates African American history and engenders cultural pride, but also highlights the importance of beauty and rest for a healthy spirit. The building is beautiful and manages to express its beauty through its simple, yet expressive, modernist form. The museum’s director, Lonnie Bunch, was pleased that the competition’s jurors selected a building that was able to convey “spirituality and uplift” (Rybczynski 2013, p. 40). Consistent with Adjaye’s design aesthetic, a modernist aesthetic that avoids figural ornamentation, the building’s exterior derives its beauty from its materiality. The bronze-colored skin of the building gleams in the sunlight. This skin stands out; it is distinctive on the National Mall even though the buildings of the Smithsonian are by no means monolithic. The East Wing of the National Gallery of Art designed by I.M. Pei and the Hirshhorn Museum designed by Gordon Bunshaft are geometric in form, like the NMAAHC. The Museum of the American Indian, designed by Douglas Cardinal, has a curvy form meant to express the spirit of the land’s indigenous peoples and the “spirit of the Great Plains” (Rybczynski 2013, p. 33). Most of the other buildings on the National Mall, though, have classical Greco-Roman forms. But with notable exceptions (like the Smithsonian Castle), the buildings are typically white, pale gray, or a light sand color. The overall impression of the complex of buildings is one of whiteness. So the very color of the NMAAHC’s building is distinctive and part of its appeal.

Symbolically, the building’s shimmering brownness and its intentional use of bronze-clad aluminum for visual effect (shown in Figure 3) cannot be overstated. The building’s skin appears to be different shades as the sun and clouds shift during the day, recalling the shades of African American skin, a primary identifying mark of blackness. In the NMAAHC’s exterior, brown skin/blackness is displayed as beautiful. It is notable that when we take the museum’s design as a whole, blackness is neither reduced to an experience of oppression nor resistance. The design conveys joy and delight, as well.

One remaining element of the NMAAHC that expresses spirit is its contemplative court. Museum guides recommend visiting the contemplative space to “renew your spirit” after touring the lower galleries of the museum that has exhibits about slavery, Jim Crow, and the legacy of white supremacy. While the exhibits do speak to the resilience and innovation of African Americans, the tragedies in American history are not glossed over. They are made present so that we can remember them. This anamnesis is crucial, but it can be emotionally draining. The contemplation court, then, provides a transition point between the lower galleries and the upper galleries for visitors to reflect and re-center themselves. In the building, it is placed on a level between the lower history galleries and the upper culture and community galleries. The large room is situated below street level, but skylights to the

plaza above bring in daylight. As shown in Figure 4, visitors to the contemplation garden sit together on benches or stand side by side around the perimeter of the room, which features dramatic waterfalls and inspirational quotes. The renewal of the spirit that takes place in this area is a communal one.

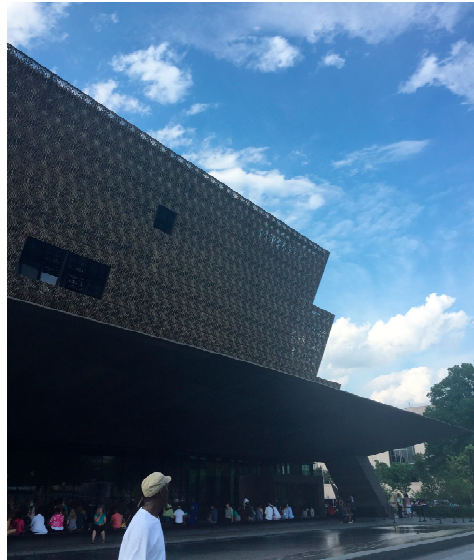


Figure 3. The bronze colored exterior panels appear to change color as the sunlight changes, June 2017.



Figure 4. The interior contemplative court of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, June 2017.

Barbara Holmes, who has examined contemplative practices of the black church, notes that for African and African American people, contemplation can take individual or communal forms. Communal practices of contemplation, she explains, are about orienting the gathered community and unifying them with a shared vision of the work of the Divine. She writes, “Contemplation in Africana contexts is an act of communal reflection and reflexive engagement with both knowable and unknowable occurrences. In communal settings, it is the confluence of atomistic experiences and reflection grounded in a shared interpretive process” (Holmes 2004, p. 46). This element of spirit in contemplation and in the NMAAHC contemplation court’s design is ultimately oriented to the shared

work of interpreting their realities. The communal spirit is a key element of the third principle, healing, to be discussed below.

4.3. Healing: Facilitating Well-Being for Self and Others

Healing is a predominant theme that emerges repeatedly in Black Lives Matter activists' description of their spiritual practice. Hebah Farrag, the assistant director of research at the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture, writes about the role that spirit and healing play in Black Lives Matter activism, "Black Lives Matter chapters and affiliated groups are expressing a type of spiritual practice that makes use of the language of health and wellness to impart meaning, heal grief and trauma, combat burn-out and encourage organizational efficiency" (Farrag 2015). Initiatives for self-care and recovery are part of today's social justice movements and their spiritual practices. Cullors explains that these are the next steps to the civil rights work of 50 years ago:

I think when there are laws on the books that are so hateful, of course our first instinct is to get rid of those laws, transform those laws, reform those laws. But there's something much deeper inside of us that causes our behavior to be biased or discriminatory. And to me, racism is a sickness. If we're approaching racism and sexism and homophobia as sicknesses, you're not just gonna think, "Well, if someone writes standards over and over again, I will no longer be racist, I will no longer be racist," that it's going to change them. No, it takes something else. It takes a sort of exorcism. I deeply believe that. And you see it in people's transformation in this work.

In the last year and a half, from the black community in and of itself, as we say "black lives matter," you see the light that comes inside of people to other communities that are like, I'm going to stand on the side of black lives. You see people literally transforming. And that's a different type of work. And for me, that is a spiritual work. It's a healing work and we don't have it codified. There's no science to it. Really, it's—we are social creatures. Human to human, if you take a moment to be with somebody, to understand the pains they're going through, you get to transform yourself. (Tippett et al. 2016)

Empathy, one of the guiding principles of Black Lives Matter, feeds the spiritual process of healing. The sicknesses that lead to social stratification require intentional processes that build connections across social divides. But overcoming racism, sexism, and homophobia's divides between people is not the only healing task to be accomplished. Internal divides within the self can cause harm, too.

Contemporary African American justice movements seek to affirm a holistic conception of black life, which for many, means they address and heal the negative impacts of mind/body dualisms. Black Lives Matter activists are committed to challenging negative perceptions of black bodies. Kelly Brown Douglas' *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Douglas 2015) deftly traces a history of the America's socio-cultural narratives and the religious canopies that legitimate a culture that has allowed and promoted racialized violence. She examines the cultural associations that have been implemented to designate black bodies with associations of chattel, guilt, hypersexuality, danger, and criminality. Trying to heal the psychic and spiritual harm that bearing these labels produces might lead some African Americans to dissociate their bodies from themselves—referring to an inward sense of self as the true self. At times, religion has been complicit in this disassociation, lifting up the ways of the "spirit" over the "flesh". But rejecting the negative perceptions of the body and not the body itself is a healthier strategy. Cullors recognizes the value in affirming the body's ability to sustain life and its centrality to the movement: "My being alive is actually a part of the work . . . Even rudimentary things like eating healthy and exercising "are essentially taken from us, black folks in particular. To reclaim our bodies and our health is a form of resistance, a form of resilience" (Farrag 2015).

Overcoming human/nature dualisms can promote healing. The separation of the human self from nature or "the environment" is a common criticism of Western theology and cosmology emerging from

ecowomanist and ecofeminist. In one sense, the human/nature divide is an epistemological separation that needs to be healed; it is based on faulty knowledge. We have come to believe that as humans, we are separate from other forms of nature, distinctive by our reason for existing. In some Christian cosmologies, this is taught through the belief that humans are to rule, subject, or dominate nature. In a second sense, humanity is literally separated from nature. A large number of Westernized people spend most of their days in buildings and automobiles. For many urban dwellers, spending time in natural surroundings requires intentional acts of visiting a park or cultivating a garden. Even cities that have tree-lined streets and sidewalks often do not provide enough expansive vegetation for meaningful interaction, much less immersion. How does this distort our perceptions of the self in relation to nature? Black feminist cultural critic bell hooks posits that the great migration of black people from the agricultural south to the industrial north altered communal practices and black people's relation to their bodies (Hooks 2015, p. 138). She argues that recovering a connection to nature is integral to African Americans' healing: "Estrangement from nature and engagement in mind/body splits made it all the more possible for black people to internalize white-supremacist assumptions about black identity If we think of urban life as a location where black folks learned to accept a mind/body split that made it possible to abuse the body, we can better understand the growth of nihilism and despair in the black psyche. And we can know that when we talk about healing that psyche we must also speak about restoring our connection to the natural world" (Hooks 2015, pp. 138–39). Ecowomanist Melanie Harris uses this quote to describe the ecowomanist perspective that promotes relationality between the earth, human and non-human communities, and the human self. She notes that healing the connections between self, community, and nature is important because of their interrelated nature. As we experience climate change and environmental degradation, marginalized black and brown communities will likely face the most disastrous results (Harris 2016, pp. 28–29).

Building community gardens and public green spaces like the grounds surrounding the NMAAHC is one strategy to dissipate both mind/body and human/nature dualisms. Considering the immense scope of environmental problems like climate change, gardening to promote healing may seem like a trivial intervention in the built environment, but its impact should not be easily dismissed. Community gardens address one's spiritual and physical health. They provide healthy food that is especially important in food deserts and also provide productive work for those who cultivate them. Gardens and other community green spaces provide a place for members of the community to gather and interact. Figures 1 and 3 show the groups of people gathered in the landscaped park areas around the NMAAHC. This is space to share experiences with one another. Ecowomanists have noted that in literature and in actual communities, gardens provide space for reflection and expression of self in relation to others (Morrison 2012). These gardens have the additional benefit of providing the gardeners the agency to work with their physical surroundings to transform them, instead of merely receiving what someone else has provided. Any green space that is tended by the community has this potential. Lastly, community gardens and public green spaces add vitality to built environments. When they are sited on previously unused plots of land, green spaces insert living elements in neglected space, and, in urban environments, break up the harshness of concrete, brick, and stone surfaces.

Healing, like the other principles in the context of African American spirituality, is applicable to both the individual and the community. Caring for others in the community is an expression of the virtue of beneficence. Peter Paris identifies this virtue as the most highly praised moral virtue among Africans and African Americans (Paris 2004, p. 20). The beneficent person respects all members of the community (Paris 2004, p. 25). This virtue is closely connected with liberation, discussed earlier. Healing and liberation together are about improving the conditions in which a community lives. Applied to the built environment, these principles would be manifested by maintaining, rebuilding, and rehabilitation what already exists. Where buildings have been neglected and allowed to deteriorate, healing a built environment entails finding the means to fix them for the common good. Healing also includes creating new structures when previous elements are so damaged that they cannot be repaired.

Healing, in the context of architecture, is ultimately a practice of creating spaces that improve the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Public architecture and design projects that meet the needs of particular black communities express the core commitment of Black Lives Matter—they affirm the value of black lives and promote their flourishing.

5. Concluding Reflections: Anamnesis and Present Crises

For communities that care about justice—African American religious communities are among these—architecture and the built environment needs be on the agenda for society’s transformation. We need built environments that support liberation, spirit-filled living, and healing, especially in this historical moment. Although buildings like the NMHAAC and numerous others demonstrate that life-affirming principles can successfully be built into architectural forms, contemporary scholarship lacks sustained religious reflection about justice that includes the built environment and recognizes its importance for the well-being of African American communities. This essay begins this work, pointing us toward a new approach to African American religious thought. There is more that can be researched, described, and examined concerning spirituality in the Black Lives Matter movement, and womanist ethics seems a particularly fitting methodological lens for this work.

One of the significant methodological contributions that womanist ethics has made to the broader fields of religion and Christian ethics, is its use of narratives, both historical and contemporaneous, as a source for ethical reflection (Floyd-Thomas 2006). This essay has foregrounded the accounts of women in the Black Lives Matter movement to define the principles of their spirituality and then apply them to the built environment. Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors are but two activists who are invigorating their political work with a sense of spirit. As scholarship in this area expands, we will likely unearth the narratives of others who enable us to reconceive the work of justice. To conclude this essay, I will share the experiences of people I know and love.

As I write this essay in August 2017, justice-seeking communities around the United States are horrified about events that have unfolded in Charlottesville, Virginia. White nationalists, Nazis, and other white supremacists held a rally there to protest the removal of Confederate memorials. The rally degenerated from angry protest to violent attacks throughout the city. One white supremacist drove his car into a crowd of people who were protesting the rally, killing one woman and injuring others.

While tragedy does not require an explanation for us to perceive its harm, explaining the latent forces at work in violent, racist acts can help us confront them. We know these rallies and protests are about white supremacy and a rage against socially transformative movements that seek to make our society more inclusive and just. But also, at the heart of the issues concerning these protests and counter-protests is a debate about anamnesis and privilege of claiming space. Who has the right to move safely through public space and who determines the meaning we attribute to those spaces? The opposing groups have competing visions of what should be commemorated in public space, who belongs there, and what they both signify about their national or regional identity. In 2015, the massacre in Charleston at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church renewed debates about the display of the Confederate battle flag at statehouses and other public grounds and turned attention to Confederate monuments and memorials, too. Some localities, like New Orleans, Louisiana decided to remove these monuments from public places. Most Confederate monuments placed around the South are emblems of the Lost Cause, a movement after the Confederacy’s defeat that sought to narrate Confederate secession, not as treason and their loss not as a defeat, but as heroic attempts to preserve the truest ideals of the nation.⁸ Christian ministers promoted and provided theological rationalizations

⁸ I am indebted to church historian Bill J. Leonard at Wake Forest University School of Divinity for our conversations about Lost Cause narratives and American exceptionalism following his lecture titled “Redeemer Nation or Lost Cause Religion?: Making America Great Again (For the First Time)” at Baylor University on 20 March 2017.

of the Lost Cause memorials and rituals (Wilson 1980). They were hoping to use the memory of their fallen soldiers to propel them into a new world in which their values would be celebrated. Their aims are not very different from my own, and those of Black Lives matter activists. The crucial difference, though, is that those of us who reject public memorials that commemorate our nation's slaveocracy and the continuing effects are staking our claim for a diverse, inclusive community. We want to, as Cullors would say, imagine something different.

The deadly car attack in Charlottesville took place on a downtown street that is home to several shops and offices. Even in the wake of this attack, one of my college friends, an African American architect, must travel there to go to her workplace. She does not want to be there and the reason is obvious. I wonder if there exists *any* space in this moment that is both literally and symbolically safe for her. This event and the historical precedents for it confirms, for me, two central claims of this essay: (1) For the liberation and healing of their communities to occur, African Americans need to be able to claim space for themselves. (2) Spirituality, religious systems, and ritual practices will either promote or hinder these efforts to make places for African Americans to thrive. The spirit in African American social justice movements needs to be utilized as a voice of discernment that challenges all other narratives that seek to (re)build places of exclusion based on race, gender expression, class, or sexuality.

The practice of African American religion, in all its diverse manifestations, continues to be relevant as long as it helps promote survival and flourishing for African American communities. The moral significance of built environments is that they give physical form to our deepest commitments about how we wish to live. The religious dimension of these commitments should not be underestimated. The spirituality evoked through Black Lives Matter activism shares specific moral orientations with other forms of African American spirituality and religion. In black theology, womanist ethics, and ecowomanism, we find similar themes: liberation, participation, inspiration, and healing. We may call liberation *emancipation*. We may identify participation as *mobilization*. Inspiration may be *living in the Spirit*, and healing may be *recovery*. Despite what we call these impulses, they move us toward justice and wholeness, and as such, are critical to securing the fullness of black life. Incorporating these into an agenda for the built environment with further the aims of justice.

Acknowledgments: I thank the College of Arts & Sciences and the Department of Religion at Baylor University for their support in publishing this essay.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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