



Dispatch

Is Architecture Accessible? Raising Awareness by Dissecting Diversity in Design

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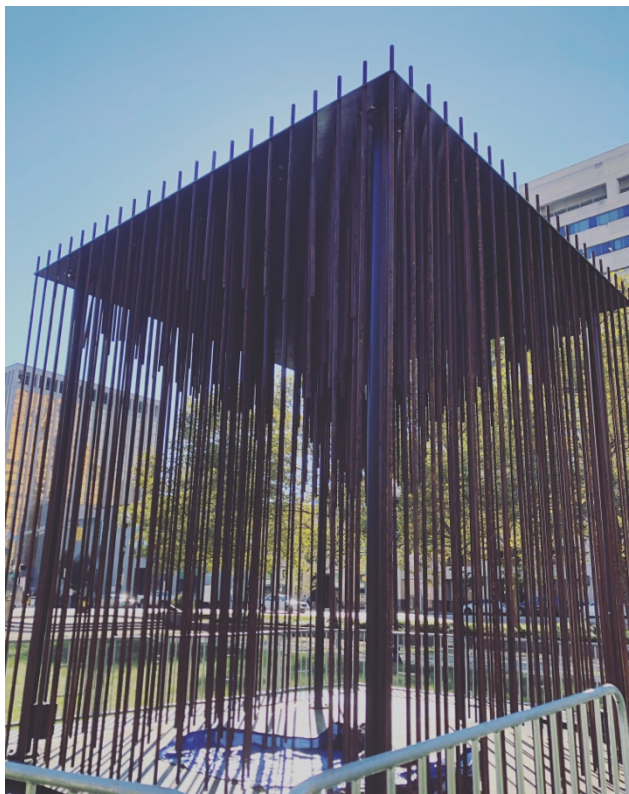


Figure 1. Society's Cage installation by the SmithGroup displayed by the City Hall. Baltimore Circuit Court, Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

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Introduction

Society's Cage, designed by the SmithGroup, an international architectural, engineering and planning firm, is an interpretive installation of systematic racism in the United States focused on the wave of the Black Lives Matter movement. The pavilion, created as a traveling exhibition, was displayed in the National Mall in Washington DC in August 2020 as a response to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. It serves as a powerful tool to educate about the nation's ugly history of state violence, and, as Dayton Schroeter, Principal, Design Director with SmithGroup, states, it is "a physical manifestation of the institutional structures that have undermined the progress of Black Americans over the history of this country" (SmithGroup, 2020). This installation, like other physical manifestations of human intolerance, provides an important reflection on racism and exclusion while calling designers to contribute creatively and intellectually.



Figure 2. #BLM demonstration, JH Homewood Campus, Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

This essay aims to examine social and spatial injustices through my students' work. Although we acknowledge the work of urbanist Mariela Fernández-Bermejo (2012) on Universal Design we argue that when applied to public spaces, they ought to be designed differently, to meet the needs of a wide range of users. We argue that every life demands equal respect and dignity, and that

every citizen ought to have the right to the city. This belief gives rise to “a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization” (Harvey, 2008, n.p.).



Figure 3. Design workshop, Morgan State University, Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

Background

The most interesting development in my career began after I left a hard-core commercial architecture office. From there, I co-founded an architecture studio, traveled to Cuba, moved to India, lived in El Salvador to work with distressed communities, and joined the design for disadvantaged communities movement in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. It is with this diverse, professional portfolio and experience that I migrated to academia. I embrace design work with students at various local and international universities where my priority is to implement research and design methods that call for globally inclusive interventions. Clearly inspired by the Global Studio Case (Rubbo, 2010) my work explores theories and practices of designing with(in) communities following a socially inclusive agenda.

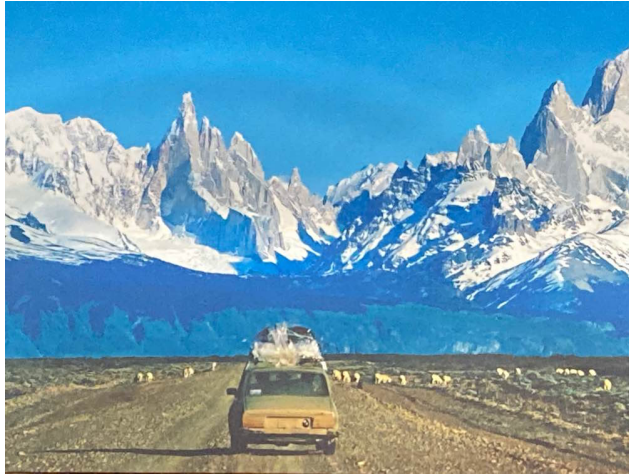


Figure 4. Symbolic image illustrating the importance of traveling, Alexandria, VA. (photo: Cristina Murphy)



Figure 5. Symposium on redlining with people’s dynamic participation, Morgan State University, Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

In Baltimore, I was drawn to neighborhoods on the west side of the city, given their social history, physical geography, and potential for rapid economic transformation. Learning about “urban apartheid” (Brown, 2021a) and “redlining,” the process by which the Homeowners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) rated urban neighborhoods to control the real estate market, has helped crystalize my understanding of west Baltimore.



Figure 6. Urban segregation, West Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

Discrimination has perpetuated social inequities, impeded the attainment of secure futures, and cut off certain urban communities from their “natural” evolutionary growth and economic prosperity. The American dream does not provide equal chances to people; the evolution of many cities is driven by financial interests, and the structural organization of cities continues to be influenced by racial biases and disparities that are challenging to resolve.

As Lawrence T. Brown (2021b) eloquently puts it in his “Mapping Baltimore Apartheid” lecture, “slavery was not just about the domination of people, but also the domination of spaces.” We are responsible for designing the environment of the city consciously, thinking about concepts like liberation, tolerance, collaboration, and reflection as opposed to domination, suppression, and segregation.



Figure 7. Urban segregation, West Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)



Figure 8. Urban decay, West Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

Inspired by Eric Klinenberg (2018, p. 277), I teach my students how infrastructure can become “social,” truly serving the city by creating the possibility for public space where citizens connect and interact while dispelling false perceptions and distorted views that often lead to crime, isolation, food insecurity, and contribute to climate change. Klinenberg argues that investing in the quantity and quality of social infrastructure, the commons and public spaces, can create social cohesion and support liberatory ideals.



Figure 9. Multiple cultures coming together through playing games, Treviso, Italy. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

Method

I currently teach at a historically Black college, and I challenge my students and myself to design after the theoretical principles they learn during the research phase of their course. Just like Ant Farm and Buckminster Fuller, my goal is to articulate a design process based on the radical participation of end users, which is encouraged through “soft architecture... enabling individualism, responsiveness, nomadism, and anarchy” (Holmes, 2020, n.p.)

According to Esther Charlesworth (2018), a humanitarian approach to design is critical. By researching precedents, analyzing sites, studying community contexts, and collaborating with diverse professionals, I establish principles that foster the building of community-based experimental studios: positive environments that teach the importance of interdisciplinary working within and with communities. Community-based design enhances cities and creates stronger visions of the public built environment, which can help make a city less vulnerable and more powerful. The work generated in these experimental

studios is crucial for both communities and students who gain valuable experiences through it (Charlesworth, 2018).



Figure 10. Working and designing with and for the unhoused, The Red Shed Village, Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)



Figure 11. Symposium on bridging the social and spatial gap with people's dynamic participation, Wicomico Building, Pigtown, Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)



Figure 12. Students and residents' interaction through meaningful design, Pigtown, Baltimore. Park(ING) Day. (photo: Cristina Murphy)



Figure 13. Design workshop, Morgan State University, Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

Over the past five years, I have organized and delivered two symposia and a series of virtual webinars on redlining, segregation and inclusion, which collectively instigated dialogues on how design can make spaces more accessible to all and how the new generation of students can advocate for places that permit every life to be accepted. Further, under my mentorship, graduate architecture students explore the potential of design – at all scales –

to improve and sustain healthy environments for diverse communities, and to engage the public in ways that elevate broader community values, aspirations, and collective identity. Spring 2019 and 2020 studios took place in project sites, opening conversations and design opportunities among city planners, residents, and students.

Projects

In Summer 2019, I offered “Global Design in Local Italy,” an elective course based in Treviso, that gave students the opportunity to experience global citizenship and explore how design could contribute to creating more just spaces and communities. In collaboration with a local non-profit organization, the students designed and built a small-scale pop-up installation addressing global integration. Sports became the binding agent for diversity. “*Tutti Giocano*” (Everyone Plays) became a series of five play areas stretching along a two-mile route. The design team aimed for a short moment of awareness where people across different backgrounds were unified in new social urban spaces (Murphy, 2019).



Figure 14. Multi-cultures coming together through playing games, Loggia dei Cavalieri, Treviso. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

In the same year, I initiated an academic exchange between my students in the US and a European Institution around the concept of “just cities.” While the European students concentrated on “urban acupuncture” interventions in west Baltimore, a strategy aimed at motivating communities to initiate their own self-regeneration for further development, the American students focused on the analysis of a disadvantaged neighborhood in Rotterdam, the Netherlands,

populated by first- and second-generation immigrants from Turkey and Morocco, and the design of (infra)structure aiming at empowering the community of the “superdiverse” area. Superdiversity is the “interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants” (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024). The two groups informed each other about the main sites’ characteristics and provided expertise during project exchanges and reviews.



Figure 15. Design workshop, Morgan State University, Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

Part of conducting this international exchange were two symposia launched in 2019 in Baltimore: “Redlining in Baltimore” in April and “Bridging the Gap” in October. The symposia helped the students understand the context in which systemic racism has dictated the way cities were designed. Conclusions drawn from both events were that American cities’ genesis is driven by a strong yet inequitable cultural narrative that we should challenge by providing a different perspective on how to design cities for people.



Figure 16. One of many lectures during the symposium on Bridging the Social and Spatial Gap, Wicomico Building in Pigtown, Baltimore. (photo: Cristina Murphy)

A year later, during Fall 2020, my third-year graduate students were offered the opportunity to continue the analysis of equitable design through a project in west Baltimore. This project was an eye-opener on issues such as the inequality of space, community, and healthy food provision. The goal of this project was to provide a sustainable food alternative to the community. Despite the pandemic, students built one-to-one scale installations for a community garden and designed a food system, which generated valuable ideas on food empowerment for the area.

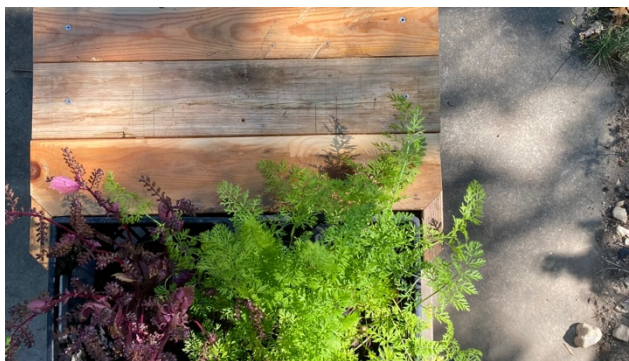


Figure 17. The design of a planter, bench and seeds organizer, Park(ING) Day, Harlem Square, Baltimore. (photo: © Andrew Bui)

Finally, in Fall 2021, my studio students worked with a local village for unhoused people. The initial aim was to generate an inclusive and comprehensive masterplan concept with a set of policies enabling the village to become a recognized “emergency/welcome” site in Mid-town Baltimore for unhoused individuals. Parallel to this vision, students were tasked with producing a schematic design based on the selection of one student project by the community. In Spring 2022, these students worked out a joined design and proposed it to the village. After obtaining a grant, the design is now ready to deploy. The final project will include a food garden, formal and informal gathering areas, and new residents’ sheds



Figure 18. Working and designing with and for the unhoused, Red Shed Village, Baltimore. This is Pam! (photo: © Ryan Eubanks)

I believe that architecture students ought to experience a design-and-build studio. According to Tammy Gaber (2010, p. 24), design-build programs “empowered students with an experience of learning that involved physical

construction as well as cooperation in some form with a local community.” Design-build is collaborative and circular, a learning experience for students, communities, and professors alike, leading to the ultimate goal of community empowerment through decision making and direct transformation of the immediate surroundings (Gaber, 2010). At Virginia Tech, a Fall 2021 studio was similarly characterized by learning to design with respect. The Right to the City Studio looked at what the #BLM movement meant for this country and how it has been manifested in space.

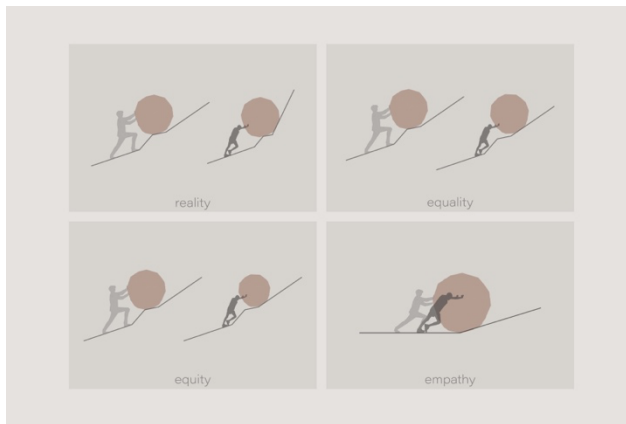


Figure 19. The Right to the City Design Studio at Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center, Virginia Tech. (photo: © Justin Penn)

Conclusion

Anna Rubbo’s Global Studio (Rubbo, 2010, pp. 61-87) aims at developing processes, knowledge, and skills that enable future professionals to contribute to well-designed and well-planned equitable, sustainable and socially inclusive cities that support human development. Likewise, my design studio classes aim to increase access to quality and living-spatial conditions, end discrimination in the public space, redefine human urbanization and provide the right to the city to all its citizens.

While involving the community at each stage of the design processes I undertake with my students, I look at Debra Webb’s placemaking that advocates the understanding of a community character by articulating its historic, cultural, economic, and cultural context (Webb, 2014, pp. 35-48). Design needs to include creative placemaking that “develop[s] a strong sense of place” and “animate[s] public and private spaces, rejuvenate[s] structures and streetscapes, improve[s] local business viability and public safety, and bring[s] diverse, people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired” (Webb, 2014, p. 36)

I inject responsibility and empowerment into the work of my students by following the principles articulated in *The End of Charity* by Nic Frances (2008) on social entrepreneurship. In short, we should move past notions of charity and welfare, and focus on creating a value-centered market economy. This can be done through academic acupuncture, allowing those with advantage to use their privilege to help create change. My students are among the advantaged, so they are charged with this responsibility of designing a better built world for everyone.

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