

# Design is Political

## White Supremacy and Landscape Urbanism

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### ABSTRACT

*“Landscape architects, planners, and other land-use professionals can play an important role in disconnecting the nation’s racial regimes from their spatial grounding.”<sup>1</sup>*

Landscape Urbanism theory gained momentum for its potential to drive new urban forms and increase the agency of landscape architecture in the design and planning of the contemporary city. However, this approach still leaves significant gaps in our design discourse surrounding issues of equity that remain since Frederick Law Olmsted and the creation of Central Park. If Landscape Urbanism seeks transformational change, landscape architecture and planning professionals must recognize their role and responsibility in breaking down the physical and spatial manifestations of structural and systemic racism that continue to disproportionately affect people based on race and contribute to the increasing inequity in our cities. The momentum and influence of Landscape Urbanism today provides landscape architects and its allied professionals an important opportunity to critique what is missing from conversations in design that can move us toward progress in addressing issues of social and environmental equity. Environmental justice and environmental racism will be defined to frame the objectives of an environmental justice agenda for Landscape Urbanism. More specifically, Laura Pulido’s broadened definition of environmental racism that speaks to the spatial manifestations of environmental racism frames this critique. Through a review of Landscape Urbanism discourse and practice, examples of non-action, complacency, and erasure of structural and systemic racism embedded in the physical environment must be acknowledged in order to hold critical conversations on what it means to design better cities.

*'Black' is capitalized throughout this piece and consistent with Oxford and Webster's dictionaries convention. As articulated by Lori L. Tharps, associate professor of journalism at Temple University, in a 2014 New York Times Op-Ed piece, "The Case for Black with a Capital B," "Black should always be written with a capital B. We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe." Furthermore, 'white' is not capitalized in this piece as references to white with a capital 'W' have been associated with expressions of white supremacy.*

Landscape Urbanism has played a prominent role in contemporary landscape architecture discourse since its formal introduction at the first Landscape Urbanism conference in 1997 in Chicago.<sup>2</sup> Landscape Urbanism theory continues to gain traction in academic discourse and practice for its potential to drive new urban forms and increase the agency of landscape architecture in the design and planning of the contemporary city. Landscape Urbanism aspires to expand and scale up the traditional scope of landscape architecture beyond object-based design (e.g., individual plazas and parks) and speculates about the potential of landscape at the city-making level.<sup>3</sup> Charles Waldheim, James Corner (Field Operations, High Line), Chris Reed (Stoss), Michael Van Valkenburgh (Brooklyn Bridge Park, Detroit's West Riverfront Park), and Adriaan Gueze (West 8, Governors Island) are leading academics and practitioners whose built and speculative work employ the primary principles of Landscape Urbanism.<sup>4</sup>

Through the lens of Landscape Urbanism, landscape architects, urban designers, and architects speculate on the potential of landscape and landscape infrastructure to give new form to the urban environment. The increased impact of scale can address the ecological, social, and economic harm of post-industrialism facing our cities and offer an alternative mechanism to shape the urban environment (i.e., landscape leads and then buildings follow).<sup>5</sup> Landscape Urbanism leverages landscape as the medium to organize urban form and remedy past urban design grievances.<sup>6</sup> However, this approach leaves significant gaps in our design

discourse surrounding issues of equity that have remained since Frederick Law Olmsted and the creation of Central Park. If Landscape Urbanism seeks transformational change, landscape architecture and planning professionals must recognize their role and responsibility in breaking down the physical and spatial manifestations of structural and systemic racism and contribute to the increasing inequity in our cities.

Landscape architecture and its allied professions must engage in critical discourse recognizing design's role and responsibility in addressing issues of environmental racism and draw important connections between physical, spatial, and environmental maladies of our cities and structural racism and discrimination.<sup>7</sup> The momentum and influence of Landscape Urbanism today provide landscape architects, designers, and planners of the built environment a critical opportunity to critique what is missing from conversations in design practice and pedagogy that can move us toward progress in addressing issues of social and environmental equity.

## LANDSCAPE URBANISM AMBITIONS

Landscape Urbanism theory marks a significant shift in the scale and authority of landscape architects in the design of cities. Reoccurring themes in landscape urbanism discourse can be summarized as 1) landscape as infrastructure, 2) landscape

as medium and driver of city formation, and 3) landscape as a social and political actor.<sup>8,9,10</sup> This third tenet has particularly transformative potential, yet issues of environmental justice are insufficiently addressed within the context of Landscape Urbanist discourse to effectively exert social and political change through design. Environmental racism is rarely addressed as a structural force shaping the social, economic, and ecological ills of the current urban condition and its disproportionate effect on people based on race.<sup>11</sup> The disproportionate impact on and exposure of Black communities to environmental hazards, urban poverty, housing segregation, and discrimination in the labor market are systemic issues that are seen and felt in the physical and spatial evolution of American cities.<sup>12</sup>

Defining environmental justice and environmental racism aids in framing the objectives of an environmental justice agenda for Landscape Urbanism. The noted qualitative social scientist and professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of Southern California, Laura Pulido, provides a broadened definition of environmental racism that speaks to the spatial manifestations of the phenomenon. Through a review of Landscape Urbanism discourse and practice, examples of non-action, complacency, and erasure of structural and systemic racism embedded in the physical environment must be acknowledged in order to begin critical conversations on designing equitable cities.

## DEFINING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, environmental justice is defined as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation,

and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”<sup>13</sup> The origins of the U.S. environmental justice movement can be traced back to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and linked to the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike and the 1982 protests in Warren County, North Carolina where hundreds of people protested the dumping of hazardous waste in the county’s already-marginalized communities.<sup>14,15</sup>

While environmental justice seeks fair and equitable distribution of environmental protections, deliberate and discriminatory acts of environmental racism that instigate events like the protests in Memphis and Warren County explain how these injustices are physically manifested in explicit and obvious ways. A city’s social ecology and its inequities cannot be considered separate from its physical and environmental ecology.<sup>16</sup> As our cities continue to rapidly urbanize, these inequities worsen and evolve into both explicit and implicit physical and spatial forms as they continue to be unrecognized and unchecked.

## DEFINING ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

In order to set forth an explicit environmental justice agenda, it is important that the concept of environmental racism be specifically acknowledged. By acknowledging environmental racism, we can make it part of the design discourse and offer important critiques about how the spatial and physical manifestations of racism have shaped past injustices in our cities and how they continue to influence the work we do as designers.

The term ‘environmental racism’ recognizes that marginalized communities based on race and socio-economic status are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards such as air and water pollution, proximity to industrial activities, waste

facilities, and exposure to toxins (e.g., lead, pesticides).<sup>17</sup> Scholars have traditionally defined environmental racism as individual and intentional acts inflicted upon marginalized groups via environmental measures. Within this definition, only conscious and intentional acts of racism or discrimination by bad actors can be categorized as environmental racism.<sup>18</sup>

Laura Pulido found that the existing definition amongst scholars did not sufficiently problematize the greater structural and systemic outcomes of environmental racism. Pulido argues that limiting environmental racism to only explicit and overt acts minimizes the socio-spatial relationship of structural racism, discrimination, and the urban form.<sup>19</sup> She further expands by noting that “focusing exclusively on discriminatory acts ignores the fact that all places are racialized, and that race informs all places.”<sup>20</sup> She has since contributed a broadened definition of the term to include not only intentional acts but also the more pervasive systemic and spatial manifestations of racism.<sup>21</sup> Pulido’s work pinpoints white privilege as the root of the problem and demonstrates how the environmental decisions benefitting white people are prioritized. These decisions continue to reinforce institutionalized racism and its spatial and physical repercussions in the urban environment. Pulido later amends her initial position to state that white supremacy is the more accurate definition to categorize the systemic and spatial manifestations of environmental racism.<sup>22</sup> Pulido’s evolved definition is supported in the context of Robin DiAngelo’s structural definition of racism in *White Fragility: Why It’s so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*.<sup>23</sup> Attributing racism to only discrete events or actions obscures the greater call to action to examine the implications of both actions and non-actions within the broader system.<sup>24</sup> More explicitly, “white supremacy in this context does not refer to individual white people and their individual intentions or actions but to an overarching political, economic, and

social system of domination.”<sup>25</sup> The following examples highlight political, economic, and social systems of domination in landscape architecture discourse and practices that obstruct the profession’s ability to enact a theory of change toward the design of equitable and inclusive cities.

## DESIGN INSPIRATION AND ERASURE FROM PLACE

Olmsted’s Central Park is a celebrated icon in landscape architecture. However, the Landscape Urbanist perspective differs slightly in that Central Park is not only an urban respite from the chaos and pollution of the city but, more significantly, a model of landscape infrastructure foundational to Manhattan’s urban form and development.<sup>26</sup> Corner has espoused the virtues of the “green complex” model by figures such as Olmsted, Jens Jensen, and Le Corbusier, and the capacity of such environments to provide “civility, health, social equity, and economic development to the city.”<sup>27</sup> However, Central Park was designed on a foundation of environmental racism. The discipline has historically failed to include the site’s contextual history in its critical discourse and how narratives of the oppressed are not considered in design of place. Landscape Urbanism is no exception to this gap in the discourse.

Central Park embodies the physical and spatial manifestations of white supremacy that Pulido articulates in her research. Recent archeological findings have revealed that the land for Central Park was seized by eminent domain in 1857, which displaced over 250 residents in a community known as Seneca Village.<sup>28</sup> Seneca Village was settled in the 1820s and located between what is now 82<sup>nd</sup> to 89<sup>th</sup> Street and 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenues in Manhattan. Two-thirds of the residents were Black middle- and working-class property owners and another third consisted

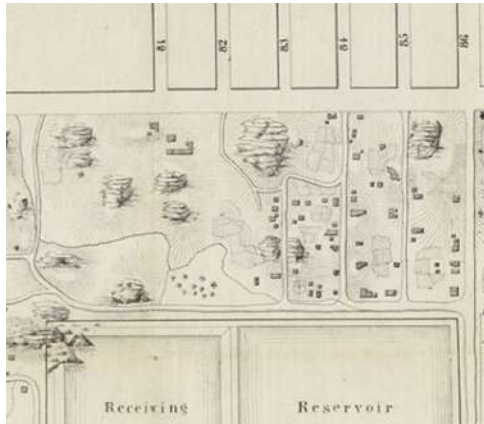


Figure 1: An map of Seneca Village from the Central Park Plan.



Figure 2: An aerial of the site today.

of European immigrants, mostly of Irish descent. The well-established community of Seneca Village included its own school, churches, and cemeteries far removed from the Dutch residents in lower Manhattan. Even today, there is little evidence of where these residents relocated after their displacement to make room for the park.<sup>30,31</sup> Pulido's elements of environmental racism – "taking" and "racial superiority" – are clearly evident in the inception of Central Park.<sup>32</sup> Racial superiority and taking were operationalized through the physical removal of property from Black Americans, an action that suggests that the interests of nonwhites

are either expendable or less valuable, and thereby undermines the welfare of people that have been historically marginalized based on race.<sup>33</sup> The only physical recognition of this past is captured by a plaque in the park.<sup>34</sup> Olmsted's design erased Seneca Village's history entirely: "Central Park's landscape near the West 85<sup>th</sup> Street entrance looks much like the rest of the Park, featuring rolling hills, rock outcrops, and towering trees."<sup>35</sup> The seizure of property and the subsequent erasure of Seneca Village from landscape architecture discourse is alarming and problematic. We fail to have critical conversations about place beyond the dominant historical narratives and perspectives of white supremacy and power. As a result, we continue to perpetuate and reinforce structural inequity by non-action and complacency through the narratives we choose to uphold and the erasure of marginalized communities from our history of place.

The erasure of discriminatory actions in planning history substantially influences the cultural history, context, and stories about places from which we seek inspiration which we embed in the designs we generate. If Landscape Urbanism claims to be the antidote to the past missteps of architecture and urban planning and social change in the urban environment, recognition of past physical and spatial inequities must be acknowledged. We must engage in a conversation about the responsibility of design to address the deeply rooted structural inequalities in the built environment.

Landscape Urbanism also takes design inspiration from a team of modernist designers and planners responsible for the planning and design of Detroit's Lafayette Park; these designers' complacency within mid-century urban renewal projects still leaves scars of racism, discrimination, and segregation in contemporary urban neighborhoods across the country. In his book, *Landscape As Urbanism*, Waldheim



Figure 3: Black Bottom before urban renewal.



Figure 4: Lafayette Park after redevelopment.

lauds Lafayette Park as a successful example of “landscape as medium for urbanism for the modern metropolis.”<sup>36</sup> Lafayette Park was a private housing redevelopment project and one of many urban renewal projects of the New Deal, which author and activist James Baldwin referred to as “Negro Removal.”<sup>37</sup> Lafayette Park displaced 6,000 Blacks from what used to be the Black Bottom neighborhood.<sup>38</sup> Waldheim’s intentional dismissal of the neighborhood’s history to advocate for an open, space-driven design is an example of his privilege to uphold the concept of landscape as medium while marginalizing the site’s complex socio-spatial history of racism. In *Metropolis* magazine’s

2016 interview, Waldheim continues to support this stance:

I think Hilb [with Mies van der Rohe and Alfred Caldwell, the project’s landscape designer] produced a place that was not just socially and environmentally redemptive but had an explicitly progressive mixed-race, mixed-class program.<sup>39</sup> A part of what I like about that story is that it imbricates a kind of environmental position – he removed the old street grid and turned the property into a lush tabula verde – but also a set of social and political conditions that I find absent today.<sup>40</sup>

Here, Waldheim advocates for erasure by advancing narratives that uphold white supremacy to justify what is valuable to preserve versus what is deemed worthy of sacrifice and destruction to create a greener and racially preferable urban vision.<sup>41</sup> Waldheim could leverage his power and privilege to reflect on past urban planning failings to discuss the designer’s role in spatial and physical shaping of inclusion, exclusion and the right to place: concepts that are fundamental in order to address issues of environmental and social equity in our cities.

Waldheim is not alone. Other Landscape Urbanism scholars reference vacant lots, neglected open spaces, and industrial “waste landscapes” as spaces ripe with opportunity. More specifically, Alan Berger introduces the term “drosscapes” or “waste landscapes” as a product of two processes: rapid urban sprawl and the abandonment of land after its industrial use has ended.<sup>42</sup> These concepts further reinforce Landscape Urbanism’s opportunism and failure to recognize the embedded history and complexity of abandonment within the urban context, particularly from urban sprawl. Many of these neglected and abandoned spaces are the result of racially motivated actions of suburban white flight and racial segregation in the evolution of our industrial to post-

industrial cities.<sup>43</sup> Landscape Urbanism has received criticism for its whitewashing of history to advance its vision: "Landscape Urbanist discourse is readily interpreted as elitist and authoritarian because it turns a blind eye to the root problem: a class-based, racist social structure."<sup>44</sup> "Waste landscape" implies the power and privilege to dictate what is deemed waste and ready for the taking to advance a landscape-centered agenda.

## LANDSCAPE URBANISM AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE

Landscape Urbanism sees the potential of landscape as an active political and social mediator that "eschews formal object-making for the tactical work of choreography, a choreography of elements and materials in time that extends new networks, new linkages, and new opportunities."<sup>45</sup> However, Landscape Urbanism's portfolio of built work provides contrary evidence. As Michael Rios articulates in *Landscape Urbanism and Its Discontents: Dissimulating the Sustainable City*: "The political is about making choices about what is seen and unseen in the city, a reflection of power in urbanist discourse and practice."<sup>46</sup> Instead, the contributions of Landscape Urbanism in urban public space have contributed to what Greg Hise refers to as "social distance:" "Often this form of association [social distance], a linking of people with space, facilitated a transition from a use of land deemed lower (and associated with lower people) to a higher use, deemed a 'higher and best use' for putatively better people (often called 'the people')." <sup>47, 48</sup> Social distancing and its boundaries further reinforce the racial and class divides of cities that already face significant inequality.<sup>49</sup>

The High Line in New York City is a famous early achievement in Landscape Urbanism that has generated substantial attention for landscape architecture and urban

design. Since the completion of its phase one construction in 2009, the High Line has inspired replications around the country: the Lowline in the Lower East Side of New York City, the Underline in Miami, the Bloomingdale Line in Chicago, and the Atlanta Beltline are a few prominent projects inspired by its success and popularity.<sup>50</sup>

While incredibly popular, projects like the High Line have been designed to express social difference and worth spatially, physically, and aesthetically: "Aesthetics is at the core of politics, not as the art of politics, but in terms of what can be seen and what can be said about it... the point is that urbanism, like art, can either repress modes of being as invisible or reveal new sensory possibilities that instigate novel forms of political subjectivity."<sup>51</sup> The design and imagery created by the High Line demonstrate the endless potential and imagination of a \$152 million public space, elevated within a rapidly growing canopy of luxury commercial and residential buildings that serve the needs and desires of the white and wealthy. Conversely, long-standing, marginalized residents in Chelsea remain invisible and underserved. New York City Housing Authority's Fulton Houses, Chelsea Houses, and Elliot Houses have been in the neighborhood since the 1960s and occupied by low-income Black and Hispanic families.<sup>52</sup> Robert Hammond, co-founder and executive director of the High Line, admits



Figure 5: Photo of the beginning of the High Line in NYC.

that local residents have definitive reasons for not using the space: “They didn’t feel it was built for them; they didn’t see people who looked like them using it.”<sup>53</sup> Projects like the High Line do not serve Landscape Urbanism’s ambitions to heal and forge new connections in the city but instead strengthen the city’s growing class and race divide while reinforcing existing inequity in the distribution of and access to public space in New York City.

Large-scale urban parks and multi-modal corridors, which build upon Landscape Urbanism precedents and philosophies such as the High Line, are rapidly accumulating as symbols of power and taking in cities already plagued by a history of structural inequality. Similar in form to the High Line but significantly larger in scale and is the Atlanta Beltline in Georgia. An adapted reuse of an abandoned freight corridor, the Beltline was first conceived as a thesis project by Ryan Gravel in 1999, a then graduate student at Georgia Tech. Today, the Atlanta Beltline includes five multi-use trails and seven parks. According to the Atlanta Beltline website, a total of 22 miles of Atlanta Streetcar expansion, 33 miles of trail, and 2,000 acres of new parks will be built through 2030.<sup>54</sup>

Early design renderings for the Beltline were dominated by primarily white pedestrians and bicyclists enjoying their new multi-modal corridor – an interesting design decision even though Atlanta’s population is majority Black. Today, photos of the newly built portions of the Beltline are very green and also remain very white. These photos are telling of the reality of the project today. In a CityLab interview, Mark Pendergast, author of *City on the Verge*, shared his impression “that the Eastside Trail section of the BeltLine – part of which has already been completed – does indeed appeal primarily to middle- and upper-class folks. About half the city population is white and half black, but that isn’t reflected by who you see on the Eastside Trail. It’s majority white.”<sup>55</sup> The

Atlanta Beltline aspires to “a more socially and economically resilient Atlanta,” yet there is significant controversy surrounding the on going project and whom this new landscape infrastructure is built for.<sup>56</sup> Cities such as Atlanta make clear that landscape is not neutral. It is a dynamic political actor that shapes a city’s social and environmental ecosystem. Landscape infrastructure as a new urban form cannot ignore that our cities visually and spatially reinforce a long history of conscious discrimination and segregation. For landscape infrastructure to act as a remediator to these structural inequalities, there must be a more explicit conversation about design’s role and responsibility in confronting these systems. Conversations must include design’s power to foster exclusion as much as it aspires to design for inclusion.

The history of inequity in American cities continues to create severe race and class divisions in this country. The designer plays an integral role in dismantling these strong visual and spatial associations with structural and systemic racism in the urban environment. If Landscape Urbanism truly sees landscape as a social and political actor that can be leveraged to create more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous cities, it is critical that an explicit environmental justice agenda be firmly embedded into the design discourse. We must also engage in open and self-reflective discourse that includes the history of white supremacy, and how white power and privilege have intentionally shaped the design of the built environment and its continued impact on marginalized communities in place. Through both action and non-action, designers of the physical environment have the power and privilege to drive change or be complicit in the continuation of discrimination and inequity. ■



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Jennifer is a graduate candidate in the Master of Design in Integrative Design program in the Stamps School of Art and Design and a landscape architect with over 11 years of experience in the design and construction of urban public space in South California, New York City, San Francisco, and Seattle. Most recently, she was the Program Manager of the leadership and scholarship programs at the Landscape Architecture Foundation and guest lecturer at the University of Maryland's Department of Landscape Architecture. She seeks to explore how a more integrated approach to design research and practice can be leveraged to better address the social and environmental inequities of cities.*

## ENDNOTES

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