

Valuing Black Lives Means Changing Curricula

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It was a week of dual emotions: We felt it was predictable while at the same time unbelievable. It reaffirmed our sense that we did not live in a post-racial America, even after President Obama had been elected twice. It also reaffirmed our ongoing discussion—as architects, landscape architects, planners, urban designers, urban policymakers, and real estate developers—contending that the education system training us needs serious rethinking. #BlackLivesMatter. But so does Black culture. Even as the movement to value black lives has spurred us to challenge what Michelle Alexander calls the New Jim Crow, it has also helped us crystallize our approach toward how, as minds in black bodies, we theorize, inhabit, and build our world.

When the decision not to indict police officer Darren Wilson was released in early November 2014, our organization, the [Harvard Graduate School of Design - African American Student Union \(GSDAASU\)](#) was already in the midst of trying to formulate an agenda for our group and present it to the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) administration and the school's general membership. Two years after our organization started discussing race in design education, the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and others like them emboldened us to pursue more emphatically the pressing racial and urban issues that we felt our school should address. Discussion in the GSDAASU revolved around two themes: how to address the challenges posed by the growing murder epidemic of unarmed black men and boys by armed police officers and vigilantes; and how to broaden that discussion so that it reveals black contributions to design that are not framed solely in terms of social justice and inequality.

While we would prefer to discuss both themes in this publication, we limit ourselves to the latter in order to better describe our distinctive contribution to the #BlackLivesMatter movement: to deepen discussion of contributions to the field of design by black talent through curriculum reform. As design students, we believe

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PROJECT

Black Lives Matter

TAGS

aesthetics

black lives matter

pedagogy

theories

that the Harvard GSD can learn from the ways in which other fields beyond architecture, landscape architecture, and planning approach buildings, landscapes, and cities from the perspective of Black culture rather than from canonical narratives. Working with Dean Mohsen Mostafavi and the Dean's Diversity Initiative, our group is making this a reality by coordinating key GSD courses with those at Harvard Law School and in the Department of African and African American Studies at the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences. We are asking ourselves and our professors: Could urban planning be enriched by understanding race through a class that uses the HBO series *The Wire* as its main text? What can the historical analysis of plantations reveal about both past land use and current labor practices in prisons? We formed those questions after we found Prof. Charles Ogletree's law class on *The Wire* and Prof. Kaia Stern's sociology class on plantations and prisons.

Placing black history and experience at the center of our courses, as these examples do, is a good start, but it is only one part of the approach we are pursuing. The real task for us and for other student-led black design groups is to value black creativity, intellect, and talent independent of their contributions to social justice. Too often, African-Americans see themselves in our courses solely through questions of social justice or in short-term reactions to a crisis. We believe it's past time to rethink this approach.

We say this not to diminish the current need to respond to the challenge posed by the #BlackLivesMatter movement, but precisely in order to capitalize on and institutionalize whatever positive contribution the movement might make. We believe black student design groups should contest the binary intellectual frameworks that address Black culture in design solely as a question of social justice. We and our precursors have contributed more to society and design than merely constituting a social problem. Consider some of the other possibilities. Black poets from the Harlem renaissance as text on urban planning. Syncopated rhythms as a basis for façade design. Miles Davis's jazz improvisation as a design methodology. Fully built out, the list of such opportunities would be long, culturally rich, and intellectually liberating. This richness should not be narrowed down to the theme of "social justice." Black people have contributed significantly to creativity in modern and contemporary culture, and the same could be true of our design fields.

When I was obtaining a bachelor's degree in architecture at Cornell University, my professor and advisor Jerry Wells told me, "Go take a class on jazz in the Music department. You will probably learn more about architecture there than in this brick-and-mortar building." I think he was right to point me toward black accomplishments in music as a basis for architectural creativity. What if Black culture were as pervasive in design education as modernism? What if we taught students about modernism by giving them two Louis Armstrong records and a

copy of Le Corbusier's *When the Cathedrals Were White?* Perhaps if Black culture—or any other racially based identity culture—were pervasive, academic institutions would stop approaching diversity primarily through the lens of social problems and would further enrich our view of design traditions. This would help young black men and women identify with a design culture in tune with their own. Perhaps this approach would address the lack of racial diversity in the fields of design in a more nuanced and dynamic matter.

This is why it is important to focus on black lives not only in moments of crisis, or when they end too early in the street. Black culture can spur us to find new approaches to design creativity, relevant not just to Harvard GSD and the GSDAASU, but to all design schools and their student groups, not to mention the design professions. We look forward to the day when we are asked, “What has design research revealed about #BlackLivesMatter and Black culture?,” rather than “How can design relate to the #BlackLivesMatter movement?”

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