

‘Internal Empire : The Neoclassical Architecture of Racial Capitalism’.

In *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure: Race, Affect, Environment*, edited by Kelly M. Rich, Nicole M. Rizzuto, and Susan Zieger. Northwestern University Press, 2022.

The environments built by racial regimes are not only hostile they are liable, Cedric Robinson teaches us, to “collapse under the weight of their own artifices”. This chapter draws on Robinson’s insight to reconsider the recent interest in the unstable relationship between infrastructure and architecture in the early period of global capitalism. From the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, colonisation established plantation systems which appropriated land as property and enslaved African people as real estate. Overlaying this, an aesthetic taste for neoclassical architecture crystallised - enshrining the plantation in a humanist system that placed the metropolitan control of nature at its centre. Here we investigate the designs of Thomas Jefferson to consider how neoclassical architecture not only gave colonial infrastructure material support and political form, it established an underlying mode of psychic exploitation that formed the spatial terms of racist order.

Dr. Louis Moreno
Department of Visual Cultures
Goldsmiths, University of London
London, SE14 6NW

Internal Empire :The Neoclassical Architecture of Racial Capitalism

Racial regimes are unrelentingly hostile to their exhibition.
Cedric Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*

The Opaque Zone

Of all the competing efforts to define the term “infrastructure,” the entry for the eighth edition of *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (1932–35) is distinguished by its simplicity. Infrastructure is plainly described as the “lower part of a construction. Also known as Earthworks, the works of art of a railroad.”² Formulated in a time when infrastructural questions were largely the concern of engineers, if the presence of railroads, bridges, ports, sewers, electrical systems, and so on intruded on the space of everyday life, the role of architecture was to put infrastructure in its place. Infrastructure was something that supported life but was devoid of existence.

Since then, scholars have shown how the significance of infrastructure has expanded, forming a complex presence across every level and dimension of urban space. Keller Easterling argues that with infrastructure’s planetarization, urbanism has become overdetermined by its logistical protocols. “Like an operating system,” Easterling writes, “the medium of infrastructure space makes certain things possible and other things impossible. It is not the declared content but rather the content manager dictating the rules of the game in the urban milieu.”³ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten similarly describe a transmutation in the infrastructures of power. No longer content with supporting the world, logistical infrastructures want “to live in the concrete itself in space at once, time at once, form at once.”⁴ On this account, the earthworks of the twenty-first century, whether free ports, smart cities, or golf courses, while no longer described as “works of art,” nonetheless represent a powerful kind of landscape aesthetic.

Where did infrastructure learn to act this way? The answer lies in “the zone,” Easterling’s name for evolving spatial typologies that began with “ancient free ports, pirate enclaves . . . entrepôts of maritime trade”⁵ but in the twentieth century established a new degree of influence through the spread of logistics and standardization. In the postwar period, nation-states produced deregulated spaces, special economic zones, which blurred public right and commercial interest

in a competitive effort to access the global frontier of financial capital. By the early twenty-first century, so successful was the spatialization of free trade, it had become not only the medium of globalization but also its self-replicating form.

Easterling's account is sublime and unnerving, presenting an image of twenty-first-century life wholly dependent on spatial products that elude democratic control. But while the capitalist practices and policies that decide the culture of globalization are rigorously described, the motive forces animating this system are assumed rather than explained. More to the point, what is never clarified is the cultural process that enabled infrastructure to rise from the "urban substructure" to become architecture itself.⁶ Therefore, what remains opaque is any sense of the social conditions in which all of the "various and peculiarly shaped feelings, illusions, habits of thought and conceptions of life"⁷ become reducible to the logic of property and synthesized into one sprawling "real estate cocktail." Put differently, what the zone avoids is a historical analysis of the class system cultured by the power of infrastructure space.

The eschewal of historical materialism is no accident. According to Easterling the invocation of "Capital" "sends us to the same places to search for dangers while other concentrations of authoritarian power escape scrutiny."⁸ For the anthropologist Brian Larkin, the effort to unmask the subjection of social relationships to exchange relations "threatens to" obscure the agency of infrastructure by always "recenter[ing] the human subject as the sole locus of agency."⁹ However, both positions indicate a narrow grasp of the struggle, with and within Marxism, to develop a critique of culture that did not subject infrastructure to a reductively economic or humanist interpretation. In the field of cultural studies, Stuart Hall attempted to rethink the question of infrastructure and superstructure to show how in practice "the emergence of new structures of political power"¹⁰ circumvent a political economic analysis. From a different perspective, Fredric Jameson argued that nothing is ever explained when political, social, and cultural phenomena are thought to be determined by capital, but "everything changes"¹¹ when infrastructure is named as a cultural "problem." Or, as Raymond Williams said, the basis of determination occupies a space of struggle between emergent and residual social forces.¹² More recently, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, drawing on Williams, has described the enduring cultural work of those impoverished, surrounded, and trapped by racist systems of partition and exclusion, as "infrastructures of feeling."¹³

Asking how infrastructure acquired an aesthetic form of life, therefore does not mean

abandoning the question of class struggle and spatial production. But the critique of political economy does require geographic reorientation, so we can excavate the “earthworks” that enabled capitalism to become a living system. Thus, far from taking infrastructure to be a fixed system of exploitation, a dialectical approach can draw on radical histories, throwing into relief the colonial designs of infrastructures “founded with the first great movement of commodities, the ones that could speak.”¹⁴ The Black radical tradition’s interpretations of infrastructure are therefore critical. Take two of the most famous examples; C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* and W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* both teach us about resistance to sociospatial systems—the plantation systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—and provide a concrete understanding of how the concept of race and the infrastructure of slavery formed capitalism’s conditions of existence. What James and Du Bois introduced, Cedric Robinson explained,¹⁵ was an analysis of the relationship between racism and capitalism that Marx was unable to comprehend. From this perspective, the infrastructures of enslavement that supported the growth of modern capitalism were not only composed of ports, ships, and plantations. Operating this fixed capital required “racial regimes,”¹⁶ Robinson’s term for systems of visual and spatial cognition whose perception of individual freedom and human sovereignty was underpinned by the total denial of Black social life, and this underpinning was justified in law by categorizing the enslaved as a peculiar asset class of infrastructure—as real estate.

Prompted by this insight, this essay considers the formative stage of global capitalism to consider why the infrastructure of colonization assumed a particular architectural form. Robinson’s fundamental observation is that racial regimes are unstable, always liable to “‘collapse’ under the weight of their own artifices, practices, and apparatuses.”¹⁷ Building on this we shall see how, from the eighteenth century, neoclassical architecture gave colonial infrastructure form and reinforcement, enshrining racial capitalism in a cultural system.

Homes, Gardens, and Plantations

To focus the inquiry, we shall consider one type of architecture—the Italian country villa. This was a design that, while originating in the terra firma of sixteenth-century Italy, moved around the world in a series of arcs: first gentrifying the development of eighteenth-century London and later cultivating the colonial growth of the British Empire with a corporate image.

As Rudolph Wittkower demonstrated in *Architectural Principles in the Age of*

Humanism, buildings like Villa Cornaro and Villa La Rotonda represented the culmination of an aesthetic pioneered by Alberti and perfected by Palladio. This project attempted to bring the proportions of the human being into geometric harmony with the building, the city, and the cosmos.¹⁸ More practically, this new architecture provided discrete spaces in which the enjoyment of the countryside could be blended with urbane functions—entertaining and deal making—that were needed by Venice’s merchant and political classes. By applying the classical Greek temple front of pediment and portico to the villa’s facade, Palladio realized an edifice that made these houses appear the earthly expression of some higher power.

The combination of scale, proportion, and grandeur captured the imagination of the English aristocracy of the eighteenth century. During the Restoration period, the touring classes saw Palladio’s architecture as a universal system that could be imported to London. Under the third Earl of Burlington, Palladio’s *Four Books of Architecture* provided a means to “fix a standard of architectural taste” for a society in a state of “improvement.”¹⁹ What was striking about this transplant was the practical way it ensconced itself in bourgeois and petit bourgeois society. “Palladianism,” John Summerson wrote, “conquered not only the high places of architecture—the great patrons, the government offices—but, through the medium of prints and books, most of the vernacular, finding its way ultimately into the workshop of the humble carpenter and bricklayer.”²⁰ So much so that by the mid-eighteenth century, through the proliferation of country houses and urban dwellings, it had established an aesthetic that enabled landowners, merchants, and aristocrats to construct a gentlemanly sense of class interest.

By the time Robert Morris’s pattern book *Rural Architecture* was published in 1750, Palladianism had been fully incorporated into the emerging system of “gentlemanly capitalism”: fabricating spatial products that could be fashioned and refashioned for town and country. This capacity to give the commercial force of capital a sense of human proportion manifested its growing cultural power. Or, as Raymond Williams put it, the country house refined the violence of dispossession. Although “fashionable to admire these extraordinarily numerous houses,”²¹ Williams wrote in *The Country and the City*, it was important to inspect the source of their value. When looking at these Italianate structures, with their elegant renewal of classical form and molding of landscape, one needed to ask, By what process was the dictatorship of both land and people *naturalized*? Williams’s answer was succinct.

What these ‘great’ houses do is to break the scale, by an act of will corresponding to their real and systematic exploitation of others. For look at the sites, the facades, the defining avenues and walls, the great iron gates and the guardian lodges. They were chosen for more than the effect from the inside out; where so many admirers, too many of them writers, they stood and shared the view, finding its prospect delightful. They were chosen, also, you now see, for the other effect, from the outside looking in: a visible stamping of power, of displayed wealth and command: a social disproportion which was meant to impress and overawe.²²

Yet, as Edward Said remarked in *Culture and Imperialism*, Williams was so absorbed in drawing the English architecture of class, the critique fell short in mapping the wider foundations of colonial power. Pushing Williams further, Said demonstrated how a domestic social consciousness was altered by changes in the geographical reach of property. For example, when comparing her expansive Northampton residence to her childhood home in Portsmouth, the heroine of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* conveys a sense of disorientation. Fanny is “stunned” by “the smallness of the house” and the “thinness of the walls” in the place where she was raised. Another dimension of compression lies in the way domestic life is ordered at Mansfield Park. While an absent figure, Fanny’s benefactor and uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, maintains a regime of oversight that seems natural in an estate the size of Mansfield Park. In “her uncle’s house,” Austen writes, there is a peculiarly constant “consideration of times and seasons, a regulation of subject, a propriety, an attention towards every body which there was not here.”²³

This represents a different “stamping of power” to the one Williams had in mind. Bertram’s need to personally police the “trouble in Antigua” expresses a fault in the colonial estate felt in the metropolitan interior. Thus, in demonstrating how property forms a complex field of material and cultural forces, Said opened a hidden floor supporting Williams’s “structure of feeling.” The environment of Mansfield Park is “troubled” by a crisis in the infrastructure connecting colony to metropole, and while Austen never makes the reason explicit, the specter of decline haunts the domestic interior. Belying the balance of neoclassical architecture is a “ghastly . . . infrastructure underlying a chain of people, ideas, places and practices”²⁴ disclosing the conflict and corruption at the heart of the colonial process.

Even in decline, however, this system has a trick up its sleeve. As Eric Williams wrote in

Capitalism and Slavery, the ideologies that inhabit the plantation can outlive the immediate form of this system. “An outworn interest, whose bankruptcy smells to heaven in historical perspective, can exercise an obstructionist and disruptive effect which can only be explained by the powerful services it had previously rendered and the entrenchment previously gained.”²⁵ The immediate personifications of capital, such as Bertram’s “planter class,” may be liquidated, but their ideas survive to “work their old mischief.”²⁶

To consider how this unfolded, we must shift the critique of property—surveying a venerated monument to landed power *and* a variegated set of infrastructures in perpetual transformation—to launch a thesis, namely, that neoclassical architecture enabled the plantation to exercise an enduring influence over the organization of metropolitan life. To explore this, we must ask how architecture concretized the political authority of the eighteenth-century planter class. Retaining the focus on the country house, we will now pivot from England to eighteenth-century America, to consider the attraction this architecture had for one particular planter, Thomas Jefferson. The third president of the United States is celebrated as a philosopher, politician, and architect. Of interest here, however, is the manner in which this slaveowner used culture to sink the plantation into the foundations of American consciousness.

Expressions of the American Mind

Transplanted to England, the Italian villa indexed a point of translation between the movement of capital and the stasis of land. Which is to say, this aesthetic expressed a general transformation in the structure and culture of the eighteenth century. The colonial “infrastructure of commercial capitalism”²⁷ expanded the wealth of merchants, bankers, shipowners, insurance agents, and stockbrokers in London, and the stockbrokers in turn provided the gentry and aristocracy with a means for their influence to survive.²⁸ The import of Palladianism to eighteenth-century England followed, then, a logic: the new architecture sealed an exchange that used commercial capital to restore the financial interests, political influence, and cultural dominance of landed property. But how did this process of translation work in the United States, a republic?

Architectural historians argue that Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence identified with the moral as well as mathematical clarity of Palladio’s architectural system. According to at least one study, the “relationship established by the Italian architect between architecture and natural law appealed to the American, and the codification of proportion was accepted as most

authoritative; and if the first made its appeal to sentiment, the second was based upon intellectual and archaeological grounds.”²⁹ And against the charge that Jefferson was merely a “copyist,” it has been claimed that the free use of classical sources manifested a synthesis—of revolution and tradition—similar in manner to the way elements of Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, and Sidney were borrowed in the drafting of the Philadelphia Manifesto.³⁰

However, while Jefferson may have seen himself as the spiritual “descendent and willing follower of Palladio,”³¹ the designs exhibit deviations. For example, the geometry of Monticello, Jefferson’s hilltop villa in Charlottesville, Virginia, betrays the Palladian system with a “preoccupation with polygonal architectural forms.” Such idiosyncrasies reflected his desire for the fashionable trappings of the English gentry. This can be seen in the considerable influence Robert Morris’s pattern book had on Jefferson. Such was his debt to Morris that the arrangement of his own private utopia was in fact a copy of plate 37 of *Rural Architecture*—“A Little Building intended for Retirement.” Once again, architectural historians are quick to defend Jefferson’s reputation as a Renaissance man, presenting the use of templates as merely an *aide memoire*. Even so we might ask, Why was Jefferson devoted to such a peculiarly English “memory model”?³²

One answer is that, in Jefferson’s adaptation of classical form, the architecture was symptomatic of an American “longing for *something other than itself*.”³³ In this respect, it conformed to Antonio Gramsci’s famous assessment that “Americanism” regenerated rather than broke with European classicism. “What we are dealing with,” Gramsci said, “is an organic extension and an intensification of European civilisation, which has simply acquired a new coat in the American climate.”³⁴ The design of the landscape presented an aesthetic means to “understand and absorb” the forces of accumulation. Moreover, and here was the mischievous trick, through the deployment of architecture, these forces could be coded to the grammar of classicism, enabling the founding fathers to obtain an entirely new sense of “natural” history.

Manfredo Tafuri complicated Gramsci’s critique by drawing attention to the design of this new coat. Although the stability, clarity, and above all mobility of classical design helped Jefferson conceptualize America as an agrarian utopia, his plans (for universities, observatories, houses, and cities) manifested a feeling of ambivalence about the urbanizing nature of American society. “Agricultural economy, local and regional autonomy as pivots of the democratic system, and the restraining of industrial development . . . were symbols of his fear in face of the

processes set in motion by the Revolution. Essentially this was fear of . . . the birth and growth of an urban proletariat.”³⁵

This fearful ambivalence can be seen in Jefferson’s experiments in town planning. As a visiting minister to Paris, Jefferson was impressed by the city’s scale, but as a solution to urban form he was convinced more by the American gridiron system than the French capital’s baroque convolutions. First deployed in 1638 by English colonists, the nine square plan for the town of New Haven, Connecticut, provided a flexible system that had guided the urban development of America. From what Jefferson saw in Philadelphia, the pattern of radial streets and open squares inhibited the European experience of “density and congestion . . . which he hoped to see avoided in his own country.”³⁶ But the repetitious uniformity of the grid also unsettled Jefferson, recognizing an infrastructure that could generate conditions for disorder and disease. So as with Monticello, which broke with Palladio’s geometry through the use of multisided rooms, his design for Jeffersonville attempted to break the grid’s monotony. The checkerboard punctuation of buildings with parks was intended to ventilate the streets, prevent epidemics, and evoke a feeling for nature. “The atmosphere of such a town,” Jefferson wrote, “would be like that of the country, insusceptible of the miasmata which produce yellow fever.”³⁷

Jefferson’s translation of English neoclassical form was no doubt born of taste, but animating it was the search for what Tafuri called aesthetic “terms of reference for a society continually terrified by the process it has itself set in motion and considered irreversible.”³⁸ Seen in this light, Monticello’s architecture manifested an insurance policy disguised as national propaganda. Even if economic and social interests were to be dictated by the urbanization of capital, this American form of power would be cultured by an order “other than itself”: namely, the apparent timelessness, effortless superiority, and unquestioned rationality of European humanism. As a theorist whose form was space as well as politics, Jefferson was a policy maker who saw architecture as a medium to regulate the passage of time and motion of society. Faced with the social tumult of urban transformation, the colonial architecture of power—the plantation house—would become the timeless registry preserving the terms of American order.

Real Estate as a Racial Regime

Architecture cracks open a window onto a struggle taking place in the metropolitan and colonial infrastructures of the eighteenth century. Just as the imagined interiors of Mansfield Park are

stalked by “trouble in Antigua,” Monticello forms the facade to a political unconscious “terrified” by a force that makes freedom uncontrollable. What, though, was the source of this ambivalence and how did it structure the environment? According to Tafuri’s spatial dialectic, neoclassical architecture produced a space of inertia, a bulwark protecting the planters from the industrial force of urbanization. However, this analysis observes a clash of forces—plantation slavery of the South versus the industrial complex of the North—without excavating the protocols that preserved, before and after the Civil War, capitalism’s racial terms of order. Thus while historical materialism could explain the intersection of infrastructure and culture by making the working class the center of gravity, the emphasis on proletarian urbanization repeated the oversight Du Bois found in Charles and Mary Beard’s “Rise of American Civilization”:

Manufacturing and industry develop in the North; agrarian feudalism develops in the South. They clash, as winds and waters strive, and the stronger forces develop the tremendous industrial machines that governs us so magnificently and selfishly today. Yet in this sweeping mechanistic interpretation, there is no room for the real plot of the story, for the clear mistake and guilt of rebuilding a new slavery of the working class in the midst of a fateful experiment in democracy; for the triumph of sheer moral courage and sacrifice in the abolition crusade; and for the hurt and struggle of degraded black millions in their fight for freedom and their attempt to enter democracy.³⁹

Following Du Bois, we must dig deeper to investigate the racial regime that underpinned the topography of eighteenth-century capitalism. What underlying instability produced the spatial desire for architectural form? How did the coding of race permeate a neoclassical structure of feeling? Here I want to draw on Hortense Spillers and Nahum Chandler as well as Du Bois to take a second look at Jefferson’s architecture. This path clarifies much of what is otherwise cryptic in the spatial dialectic. For example, to grasp the “ambiguous conscience” of neoclassical architecture, the ambiguity does not lie in any notion that the ideology of civil society was troubled by the existence of slavery. It lies rather in the underlying volatility of the category of property that forms liberalism’s condition of existence—real estate—a form of value that treated the enslaved not as people but as infrastructure equivalent to a tract of land or a building.

As Spillers explains, the “various civil codes of the slave holding United States” are read in retrospect as if they were “monolithically informed, unified, and executed in their application.” But if one reads between the lines, although the slave “is perceived as the essence of stillness (an early version of ethnicity), or of an undynamic human state, fixed in time and space,” when one approaches the material facts of slavery we encounter a business “riddled in

practice, with contradictions, accidents and surprise.” The source of these contradictions comes from the increasing pressure of resistance to the system of plantation slavery. “It is, perhaps, not by chance,” Spillers writes, “that the laws regarding slavery appear to crystallize in the precise moment when agitation against the arrangement becomes articulate in certain European and New World communities.”⁴⁰ How then did this moment agitate the crystalizing form, function, and feeling of the racial regime?

Form

We must first clarify how the practice of slavery grounded the concept of race in the idea of architectural form. Perhaps the best illustration lies in chapter 3 of *Black Reconstruction* where Du Bois indicates a fissure in the master class’s racist ideology of freedom. Recounting a speech given at the Southern Congress in February 1861, Du Bois notes that the planters said that the cause of the Civil War was rooted in the American mind’s flawed expression. According to Alexander H. Stevens, vice president of the Confederacy, “The assumption of the equality of races” contained in the Declaration of Independence “was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the idea of a government built upon it; when the ‘storm came and the winds blew, it fell.”⁴¹ Thus according to Du Bois, the Civil War was fought by the planters to eliminate any doubt that the equivalence of African people to real estate was antithetical to American existence, an evil that “somehow or other, in the order of Providence . . . would be evanescent and pass away.”⁴² Further, such testimony clarified the Confederacy’s objective: to geographically extend the right of colonization through a God-granted power to enslave. The racial coding of slavery would form the law that universalized the cosmic “truth” of the Southern empire.

The proof, Du Bois wrote, lay in the slave codes: “Slaves were not considered men. . . . The whole legal status of slavery was enunciated in the extraordinary statement of a chief justice of the United States that Negroes had always been regarded in America ‘as having no rights which a white man was bound to respect.”⁴³ For the Confederacy, the war was a moment in which this confusion of theory and practice over slavery could be resolved once and for all. Secession would realize a dictatorship of property that no longer had to conceal its base of power, because architecture manifested proof of the sovereign truth of white supremacy. “The architect in the construction of buildings” Stevens said in 1861, “lays the foundations with the proper materials, the granite; then comes the brick or the marble. The substratum of our society

is made of the material fitted by nature for it, and by experience we know that it is best, not only for the superior, but for the inferior race that it should be so. It is, indeed in conformity with the ordinance of the Creator.”⁴⁴ What this indicates is that, beyond the external threat of Northern industrialization, what constituted the American mind was the sense of a threat internal to the design of American democracy. As evidence, Nahum Chandler directs our attention to the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which Jefferson records his “trembling” conscience over the “so-called Negro Question.”⁴⁵ The question at hand, Chandler makes clear, is not any sense of shame over the institution of slavery. Jefferson saw no inconsistency when a slaveholder declared the principle of equality for all self-owning people, precisely because of “his propositional declaration of belief in Negro inferiority in relation to ‘Whites’ or Europeans.”⁴⁶ Rather, working in the tracks of Du Bois’s method, Chandler argues that Jefferson’s trembling turned on the question of possible emancipation.⁴⁷ It was caused by the difficulty of establishing, through empirical observation, the grounds for the natural law of racial subordination. Nature did not furnish the white man with the grounds of judgment. “Thus,” Chandler writes, “the hesitation and ambivalence recorded” by Jefferson in the following passage:

To justify a general conclusion requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the Anatomical knife, to Optical glasses, or by solvents. How much more then where it is a faculty, not a substance, we are examining; where it eludes the research of all the senses; where the conditions of its existence are various and variously combined; where the effects of those which are present or absent bid defiance to calculation; let me add too as a circumstance of tenderness, where our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from the rank in the scale of beings which their Creator may perhaps have given them. . . . I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distant race or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites in the endowments of both body and mind.⁴⁸

Chandler provides us with a Du Boisian interpretation of the “ambiguous conscience” of architectural naturalism. Jefferson’s racism was “organized by the *telos* of preventing, justifying the preclusion of, the mixture and intermixture of any kind among the races.” But given that the concept of race awaited some forthcoming proof, the racial segregation of American society was to be constantly enforced and reinforced in view of a threat to the “putative white identity that Jefferson [was] most concerned to affirm,”⁴⁹ which meant that, while the slave codes were made, and could only be made, on the basis of pure speculation, the spatial coding of the social environment turned “a suspicion” into a term of order. Thus, just as God revealed himself to Man

“only through signs,” the founding fathers sought an aesthetic whose symbolic form naturalized the authority of the European order of things. And this belief in architecture would, in naturalizing the racism of the plantation system, constitute the private ground on which civil society would be built.

Function

How did architectural form enshrine the “metaphysical infrastructure”⁵⁰ of property? Earlier we acknowledged that the inertia of the eighteenth-century country house was the dialectical expression of the motion of capital. For both Williams and Said, the inert grandeur of such estates articulated a deep sense of trouble permeating the foundations of private property. However, explaining this structure of feeling tests the limits of architectural analysis, as it is extremely difficult to recover the grammar of real estate from the language of form, although another route can be explored by treating the policy regime of real estate as the “generator” of form. On this reading, neoclassical humanism sublimates what Spillers calls the “uneasy oxymoronic character that the ‘peculiar institution’ attempts to sustain in transforming *personality* into *property*.”⁵¹ The advantage of this move is that it helps us track the correspondence between the division and subdivision of the space of public and private life.

As we have seen, Jefferson’s experiments in town planning used geometry to influence the motion of a city, although the most realized experiment in organization is found at Monticello. Here the third president intended his “rich spot of earth” to produce an experience of total space. Unlike the fashion for buildings designed to “communicate the planter’s exalted, wealth, status and power,”⁵² Monticello was intended to instill a more measured, even cerebral, feeling of control over the environment. Why else “would Jefferson build his house on an isolated hilltop, far from the rivers and roads that linked Virginians to the world? Why would visitors have to struggle over rough terrain, in round-about fashion, in order to see”⁵³ the so-called Sage of Monticello? The architecture of this particular estate was, scholars conclude, intended to give the plantation a form of self-expression.⁵⁴

However, this leaves us with the “conventional story of the old slave plantation owner and its owner’s fine, aristocratic life of cultured leisure.”⁵⁵ But when the plantation system is looked at not from the perspective of the owner *of* but from the perspective of those owned *as* real estate, then the spatial question is transformed. In a short passage in “The Coming of the

Lord” chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois proposes that the slave codes formed an environmental policy precipitated by the planters’ fear of Black sociality and fugitivity. “Before the war,” Du Bois writes, “the slave was curiously isolated; this was the policy, and the effective policy of the slave system,” the function of which was a spatial configuration that “made the plantation the center of a black group with a network of white folk around and about, who kept the slaves from contact with each other.”⁵⁶ Plantation power lay, Du Bois suggested, not only in the direct violence of capitalist extraction but in a *network* preventing social *contact*. If the uncontrolled desire for liberty terrified revolutionary America, then that terror was to be applied to those held captive in a free society. Such terrorism could take diffuse environmental forms, requiring creative modes of sociality to subvert the authority of the slave codes. “Of course, clandestine contact there always was” Du Bois writes, “the passing of Negroes to and fro on errands; particularly the semi-freedom and mingling in cities; and yet, the mass of slaves was curiously provincial and kept out of the currents of information.”⁵⁷

Du Bois would later call the urbanization of racial division the construction of a “total environment.”⁵⁸ Again, Monticello’s organization of space prefigured techniques that would become associated with the modern city. For example, Jefferson’s tinkering with Palladian templates was not only animated by English fashion but also by a need to accommodate “a whole series of . . . functional inventions.” As Tafuri notes, “At Monticello, with its clear distinction of spaces for service and served, Jefferson anticipated something that was to be typical” of the experiments in architecture and urbanism of Frank Lloyd-Wright and Louis Khan.⁵⁹ What led Jefferson to anticipate this system of division making? Jefferson scholars inform us that the use of “dumb waiters and revolving service doors” were all intended to ensure the “conspicuous absence of slaves.”⁶⁰ Thus, the function of served and service space was intended to protect the modesty of guests, providing them the “comfort” of avoiding what Jefferson called in his *Notes* “the whole commerce between master and slave.”⁶¹

Feeling

How do we recover the experience of those trapped inside such a monstrous structure of feeling? Spillers’s critique of the bonds of sentiment that underwrite the legal coding of African women and their children as “chattels personal” is fundamental. Addressing a process whose cruelty “manhandled” the body as alienable flesh, Spillers requires us to consider the psychic, social,

and sensuous conditions of ownership that made this violence endemic. Specifically, Spillers argues that the vestige of sentiment claimed on behalf of the sexual oppression of captive women indicates the deep level of chaos permeating the infrastructure of civil society—private property.

Faced with Jefferson's concern for concealed space and his desire to protect his precious *sanctum sanctorum*, we need to retrieve the place of Sally Hemings, the enslaved mother of Thomas Jefferson's children. While we know where Jefferson's official family were situated at Monticello, in recent work Spillers has asked about the place of Jefferson's "shadow family."⁶² In 2017, archaeologists working on Monticello's restoration uncovered the site. While taking down the fabric of the men's bathroom adjoining Jefferson's bedroom in Monticello's South Wing, Sally Hemings's living quarters were located.⁶³ The recovery of this living space that measured fourteen feet and eight inches wide by thirteen feet long is said to be architectural evidence of Jefferson's "closeness" to Hemings. Looking at this situation, however, Spillers asks, what does domestic intimacy mean when close proximity and familial ties represent the very opposite of freedom?

Within this thick network of relations, what Spillers throws into relief is another infrastructure subtending the plantation, a system of logistics that polices the expression of intimacy and contact. Spillers's critique is thus indispensable for investigating infrastructure, because when the space of privacy is looked at from the perspective of the owned and not the owner, then the fugitive becomes our guide. For example, based on Valerie Smith's architectonic reading of Linda Brent's (Harriet Jacobs) memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Spillers argues that Brent reveals an interstitial space "between the lines and in the not-quite spaces of an American domesticity."⁶⁴ Recounting Brent's testimony concerning one Dr. Flint's "sexual designs on the young Linda," Spillers asks, What does the scene of married intimacy look like when property ownership enables a man to instrumentalize his subject position as husband, father, and master in pursuit of self-gratification?

Linda Brent's account presents the chaotic situation. When Dr. Flint's jealous wife visits Brent's garret room, she bends over her, "whispering in my ear, as though it were her husband

speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer.” Here is the horror of possessive individuation, wherein the free woman embodies the abusive power of the self-made man. The uneven distribution of freedom enjoyed by women of the eighteenth century is balanced on the ungendered flesh of the enslaved body. “Since the gendered female *exists* for the male,” Spillers writes, “we might say that the ungendered female—in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential—might be invaded/raided by another woman or man.”⁶⁵ In other words, the system of dispossession Marx called “primitive accumulation”—which removed people from land, processed them as property, and formed the ground of possessive individualism—was, from the very first, ordered by a sensuous mode of exploitation that abstracted flesh from body.⁶⁶

The ramifications of the sexual violence and “founding fatherhood” that nurtured American democracy are critical to measure the depths and dimensions of the infrastructural connection of real estate to architecture. They demonstrate how the unstable coding of another human’s *being* as private property produced a “common psychic landscape . . . of dread and humiliation,”⁶⁷ one that was rendered in the interior design of the plantation house, an “internal empire”⁶⁸ whose service corridors, cramped attics, and crawl spaces subtracted those who were spatialized into service from those who were served by architecture. In the last analysis, what this tells us is that coursing through the architectonics of real estate is an underlying system of degradation, a “pornotropic” mode of exploitation forming the sensuous basis and debased sensuousness of infrastructural power.

Minus

If infrastructure refers, in its most basic sense, to the “lower part of any construction,” this essay has argued that to understand its politics, we must understand how the racial terms of social superiority and inferiority have been historically concealed. Over centuries, this art of human appraisal has supported the accumulation process by putting people under and away, out of sight, out of mind. The means of deciding who enjoys a quality of life and who is enjoyed as service has been developed through systems of spatial production forming racial regimes—“constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power.”⁶⁹

Architecture therefore provides a history of the spatial dialectic whereby real estate—the combination of land, labor, and finance—gave infrastructure the logistical means to possess a life of its own. However, to confront this regime’s history, we need to uncover the “makeshift

patchwork” of prejudicial conceptions of race, sex, and gender “masquerading as memory and the immutable.”⁷⁰ All of which gives the architecture of racial capitalism its sense of permanence and purpose. By examining the relationship between the humanism of neoclassical architecture and the categorical volatility of real estate, we can uproot a system of judgment which, when laid into the earth and built into the environment, persists to the present day.

Notes

-
- 2 “Partie inférieure d’une construction. Il se dit aussi des Terrassements, des travaux d’art d’une voie ferrée.”
<http://atilf.atilf.fr/academie.htm>.
 - 3 Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014), 14.
 - 4 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (London: Minor Compositions, 2013), 88.
 - 5 Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 27.
 - 6 Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 12.
 - 7 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 76.
 - 8 Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 22.
 - 9 Brian Larkin, “Promising Forms: The Political Aesthetics of Infrastructure,” in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, ed. Hannah Appel, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 197.
 - 10 Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 96.
 - 11 Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1996), 46.
 - 12 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 121-127
 - 13 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017), 237.
 - 14 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 92.
 - 15 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
 - 16 Robinson, *Forgeries*.
 - 17 Robinson. *Forgeries*, xii.
 - 18 Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (Chichester, England: Academy, 1988), 104.
 - 19 John Summerson, *Georgian London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 20.
 - 20 Summerson, *Georgian London*, 20.
 - 21 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 105.
 - 22 Williams, *The Country and the City*, 106.
 - 23 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1816; reprt. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1966), 375-376 Quoted in Edward Said,

-
- Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 88
- 24 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Preface," in *Prison/Culture*, ed. Sharon E. Bliss, Kevin B. Chen, Steve Dickison, Mark Dean Johnson, and Rebeka Rodriguez (San Francisco: City Lights Foundation Books, 2009).
- 25 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), 211 Quoted in Said, *Culture*, 95.
- 26 Said, *Culture*, 95.
- 27 Jairus Banaji, *A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 17.
- 28 Geoffrey Ingham, *Capitalism Divided? The City and Industry* (London: Macmillan, 1984).
- 29 Clay Lancaster, "Jefferson's Architectural Indebtedness to Robert Morris," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 10, no. 1 (1951): 3.
- 30 Buford Pickens, "Mr. Jefferson as Revolutionary Architect," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 34, no. 4 (1975): 257.
- 31 Lancaster, "Jefferson's Architectural Indebtedness," 3.
- 32 Lancaster, "Jefferson's Architectural Indebtedness," 10.
- 33 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979), 36.
- 34 Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Dagenham, England: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), 318
- 35 Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 26.
- 36 John W. Reps, "Thomas Jefferson's Checkerboard Towns," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 20, no. 3 (1961): 109.
- 37 Reps, "Checkerboard Towns," 109.
- 38 Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 36.
- 39 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 714–15.
- 40 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 224–25.
- 41 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 49–50.
- 42 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 50
- 43 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 10.
- 44 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 50.
- 45 Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 29.
- 46 Chandler, *X*, 24.
- 47 Chandler, *X*, 25.
- 48 Chandler, *X*, 27.

-
- 49 Chandler, *X*, 29.
- 50 Chandler, *X*, 21.
- 51 Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 225.
- 52 P. S. Onuf and A. Gordon-Reed. "Jefferson's Spaces," *Early American Literature* 48, no. 3 (2013): 761.
- 53 Onuf and Gordon-Reed, "Jefferson's Spaces," 761.
- 54 Onuf and Gordon-Reed, "Jefferson's Spaces," 757.
- 55 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 715.
- 56 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 122.
- 57 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 122.
- 58 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68.
- 59 Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 27.
- 60 Onuf and Gordon-Reed, "Jefferson's Spaces," 764.
- 61 Onuf and Gordon-Reed, "Jefferson's Spaces," 763.
- 62 This essay is indebted to a lecture Spillers gave at Barnard in 2017, "Shades of Intimacy: Women in the Time of Revolution," February 21, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPa7KhbuEJo>.
- 63 Michael Cottman, "Historians Uncover Slave Quarters of Sally Hemings at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello," July 3, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/thomas-jefferson-sally-hemings-living-quarters-found-n771261>.
- 64 Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 223.
- 65 Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 222.
- 66 Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 206.
- 67 Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 223.
- 68 The essay's title is inspired by Robert Hood's 1994 album *Internal Empire*, whose music underpins Arthur Jafa's 2013 film *APEX*, a cinematic inquiry into the aesthetics of racial regimes.
- 69 Robinson, *Forgeries*, xii.
- 70 Robinson, *Forgeries*, xii.

