

THE ARCHITECTURE OF INFILL: DOES RACE MATTER?

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Bio: Ellen Dunham-Jones is Associate Professor of architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge.

This session is intended to foster a conversation on issues of race, architecture, urban design and new urbanism. We're not expecting to arrive at specific policy recommendations at this point so much as get the issue of race on the table and talk about it. This morning's contentious debates and heated remarks on gentrification reveal just how much we need this conversation. Each of the panelists will make a ten minute presentation after which audience members are invited to come up to the microphones and share their comments and questions. The panelists are Craig Barton, Jim Constantine, and David Lee.

Craig Barton is on the architecture faculty at the University of Virginia. He is a principal of RBGC Associates in Charlottesville, VA. The firm works in urban design, affordable housing, and historic preservation. They are currently working on a masterplan for the National Voting Rights Museum in Selma, Alabama, as well as the Philip Simmons Foundation in Charleston, South Carolina. Craig is the editor of the upcoming anthology, *Sites of Memory; Landscapes of Race and Ideology*.

Jim Constantine is a planner and researcher with the Princeton, New Jersey office of Looney, Ricks Kiss. He has conducted community visioning and consumer preference research on several dozen new urbanist projects in North America. Using focus groups, surveys, and one-on-one interviews, the firm's research is used to gauge the community and market acceptance of various design alternatives.

David Lee is a partner in Stull and Lee Architects of Boston, Massachusetts. His work is well known for its engagement with public infrastructure, especially mass transit, including Boston's award-winning Southwest Corridor Transit Project. He is currently working on urban design studies for Houston, Charlotte, and San Francisco as well as some Hope VI housing projects. He is also an adjunct professor at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. At the recent conference on new urbanism at Harvard, David asked for a more forthright discussion of race and class in the assessment of new urbanism and, in many respects, precipitated today's session.

I'm Ellen Dunham-Jones, Chair of the Education Task Force at CNU. I teach architectural design at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I am also actively researching and writing on contemporary theory and development. I do not have any particular expertise in issues of race and that is precisely why I wanted to organize this session. I have questions, not answers.

I have also been somewhat haunted by a recent conversation I had with two black urban design students at MIT. Both told me that while they sympathized with much of the thinking behind new urbanism, they were turned off by the designs, which one of them referred to as “white world.” I tried to persuade them that in terms of the designs, race really didn’t matter. New urbanism’s planning strategies are for revitalizing neighborhoods anywhere for anyone. The particular imagery responds to the design preferences and regional climate of the particular locations, and that race really didn’t play a part in it. That’s when I realized that perhaps that was precisely the problem. Race hasn’t played a part in new urbanist designs.

Perhaps this is because, unlike music or fashion, where there are immediate associations between particular forms and different races, there isn’t as clear a connection between race and architecture. Is there an African-American or Asian-American style of architecture? Or is the identification of race with architecture or with a neighborhood more a question of inhabitation - a subtle overlay of behaviors or transformation of elements that identify who now occupies a place? We all know of many examples of hand-me-down houses and neighborhoods that were designed for one group but then occupied by various other groups over time. This might well lead us to conclude that, regarding the architecture of infill, race doesn’t matter.

But, it’s difficult to accept such an idea in our far from color-blind society. I think we all know from our everyday lives that race certainly does matter. Do I need to quote statistics on home ownership or wealth accumulation or the policy obstacles that continue to thwart minority equity in these areas? To deny that race matters is to perpetuate the status quo. To determine precisely how race matters in architecture and urban design requires asking questions and getting a conversation started.

Race can be a difficult subject to talk about. It is almost impossible not to fall into overly general - and often negative - stereotypes. Questions of race easily get confused with those of class, failing to distinguish between the two, or failing to recognize how intertwined they really are. A combination of guilt and fear of giving offense tends to silence those in power, those in the majority, from openly acknowledging the impact of race on decisions, and the impact of decisions on race.

My colleagues in academia have found it rather fashionable lately to talk of race and gender in advanced architectural theory. These discussions, sometimes referred to as the discourse of otherness or the new politics of identity, have explored how the economic and cultural dominance of white European males can be explained in part through the West’s tendency to culturally define women and people of color as “other.” Rather than defining “us” in terms of “our” various particular and positive attributes, Western Civilization (and I use the term deliberately) has tended instead to construct and define our identities in negative terms as non-male, non-white, non-European. As such, women and people of color have long been characterized as either lesser or exotic, but clearly marginal.

New urbanism is committed to diverse communities and an urban vision that tries to bring together different incomes, different uses, different building types, different transportation choices, and different races. But, all of this mixing of differences comes together in designs that are visually unified, that emphasize sameness rather than difference. This is deliberate and strategic. Much of design’s role in new urbanism is to appease those afraid of difference; to make the proximity of the apartment building, the single-family house, offices and retail, appear enriching rather than detrimental. A unified style for the various uses helps confront NIMBYism and promote the acceptability of mixed-use to suburbanites, developers, and bankers used to conforming uses. But - does this also work to preclude, and even code against, the otherness of other people?

In resurrecting architectural and planning models from the past and the culturally-specific behaviors associated with them, there is a risk that new urbanism perpetuates a white, European, bourgeois notion of civility that demeans “other” forms and behaviors as improper or kitsch. Community murals on side walls, Madonna shrines in the front yard, playing dominoes in lawn chairs on the sidewalk, sleeping lots of kids in the bedroom are all positive norms in some

cultures, but seemingly outside the largely white, middle-class traditions of new urbanism. Does new urbanism only welcome other races if they assimilate to more dominant norms? In the new Hope VI projects, is the transposition of new urbanism from greenfields to brownfields, from a white, suburban clientele to a black inner-city clientele, also sending a message of assimilation? I think so, and in many ways it is a perfectly justifiable one that hopes the next generation of children will not repeat the patterns of poverty, but will assimilate into the middle class. But is it possible here to retain a positive ethnic identity while assimilating to another class? How might otherness be more celebrated?

For starters, I would like to suggest that new urbanist renderings - how we publically represent our vision of the communities we're promoting - incorporate more diverse faces and behaviors. Reacting against the rather narrow representation of people in new urbanist renderings, my students and I took a rendering each from Duany, Plater-Zyberk, Calthorpe, and Urban Design Associates, and collaged in a few "other" faces, activities, and identifying elements. Is it enough to simply change the faces and throw in a few symbols of who is inhabiting these places? It's a start. If we are truly interested in promoting ethnically diverse communities, perhaps we need to anticipate different means of using public space, different housing type preferences, different comfort levels with different densities, i.e. - differences in design. Are Olmsteadian boulevards, such as that shown in UDA's rendering of a Hope VI project in Louisville, only appropriate for "civilized" sedate strolling? Or might they also be designed to accommodate "other" activities such as double-dutch jump-rope, tai chi, or stickball? Personally, I would like to see the "civility" of new urbanism's public spaces recognize how demographics are changing (most of the population growth anticipated in the U.S. will come from immigration.) I would like to see them become more urban and more funky. New urbanism needs more jazz.

As I said, this is for starters. I now want to turn things over to the panelists to further expand on the question, the architecture of infill: does race matter?