

## False Prophets

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**The demographic that she is referring to largely identify as people of color. One should not read a book that is recommended by the architectural zeitgeist as a critical text on urbanism that is devoid of contextualization. There are societal reasons that require individuals to reside within public housing projects, those reasons are routinely removed from architecture education. The responsibility is circumvented and in the end, we indoctrinate future designers to view black and brown bodies as feral animals. In retrospect, young students of color are faced with the harsh realities of how architecture perceives their contributions to urbanity.**

**This is not to say that architecture must silence the voices of its iconic contributors, again context matters. It does however have a responsibility to include diverse authors who provide alternative lens of architectural interrogation. Black, brown and queer bodies inhabit the built environment and they sculpt urbanism with their presence. The access and inclusion of those stories is crucial to a contemporary understanding of pedagogy. Architecture education must evolve beyond the lazy tropes of old white persons who do not understand the transgressions and exploitation of marginalized communities.**

### INTRODUCTION

Architecture education routinely manifests deity-like figures. They are placed on pedestals and their work, whether theoretical or actualized, acquires a holistic reverence. Rem Koolhaas, Michel Foucault, Jane Jacobs, etc. are architectural prophets that influence history, theory and practice. Explicitly or implicitly, their texts show clear bigotry and privilege. Jacobs states, “In some city areas-older public housing projects and

streets with very high population turnover are often conspicuous examples—the keeping of public sidewalk law and order is left almost entirely to the police and special guards. Such places are jungles”.<sup>1</sup>

The demographic that she is referring to largely identify as people of color. The nomenclature used for these racial groups are “strangers”, “extraneous” and “not nice”. One should not read a book recommended by the architectural zeitgeist, as a critical text on urbanism that is devoid of contextualization. There are societal reasons that require individuals to reside within public housing and, those reasons are routinely missing from architecture education. Far too often minority students are faced with issues of erasure and censorship. Responsibility is circumvented and in the end, we indoctrinate future designers to view black and brown bodies as feral animals. In retrospect, young students of color are faced with the harsh realities of how architecture perceives their contributions to urbanity. These revelations are rarely positive.

One could actually admire Jacobs’ consistent problematic lexicon. Rarely if ever does she discuss race in her seminal text, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Published in 1961, Jim Crow era statutes were prominent road blocks to black Americans. Especially with regards to adequate housing options and non-restrictive spatial articulations. Unfortunately, these very real issues are not included or willfully ignored. Which begs the question, for whom is the American city actually great? Who is the audience of the text and how might a person of color perceive the city?

When discussing the necessity of sidewalk usage for safety she mentions, “The second mode is to take refuge in vehicles. This is a technique practiced in the big wild-animal reservations of Africa where tourists are warned to leave their cars under no circumstances until they reach the lodge”.<sup>2</sup> In casual conversation if one were to refer to black and brown bodies, as sub-human in the presence of the aforementioned demographics, there would be violent retaliation at minimum, while a riot would be appropriate. However, this is consistent behavior for the disciples of architecture and it is disseminated as religion.

This is not to say that architecture must silence the voices of its iconic contributors, again context matters. It does however

UNDERGRAD	RANKING	TOTAL	WOMEN	POC	BLACK		GRAD	RANKING	TOTAL	WOMEN	POC	BLACK
CORNELL UNIVERSITY	1	89	26	8	4		HARVARD UNIVERSITY	1	103	37	27	3
RICE UNIVERSITY	2	37	9	2	0		COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY	2	453	119	53	9
CAL POLY, SAN LUIS OBISPO	3	46	15	6	1		M.I.T.	3	49	14	4	2
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY	4	57	18	8	1		CORNELL UNIVERSITY	4	89	26	8	4
COOPER UNION	5	59	26	7	1		YALE UNIVERSITY	5	104	35	10	2
RISD	6	43	14	5	3		PRINCETON UNIVERSITY	6	19	7	2	2
PRATT INSTITUTE	7	157	45	17	4		RICE UNIVERSITY	7	37	9	2	0
VIRGINIA TECH	8	75	20	1	0		UC-BERKLEY	8	98	27	12	3
SCI-Arc	9	41	13	5	0		SCI-Arc	9	41	13	5	0
UT-Austin	10	81	30	8	2		University of Michigan	10	112	41	13	6

Figure 1. DesignIntelligence 2019 top ten ranked undergraduate and graduate program faculty racial statistics.<sup>15</sup>

have a responsibility to include diverse authors who provide alternative lens of architectural interrogation. Black, brown and queer bodies inhabit the built environment and they sculpt urbanism with their presence. The access and inclusion of those stories is crucial to a contemporary understanding of pedagogy. Architecture education must evolve beyond the lazy tropes of old white people who do not understand or do not care to include the transgressions and exploitation of marginalized communities.

**IT’S ALL ACADEMIC**

These issues clearly begin in the classroom where the racial and ethnic makeup of architecture education is littered with discrepancies. There are 138 accredited institutions that claim membership in the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA).<sup>3</sup> An accredited program is one that is legally able to provide a professional architecture degree to a student. While a largely North American association, member schools are also located in the Lebanon, United Arab Emirates and Australia. Of those institutions, there are approximately 3,297 registered full time faculty members. Of those faculty members, 1076 are women, 349 are people of color, as defined by ACSA racial guidelines and 64 are black.<sup>4</sup>

According to the latest figures from the National Architectural Accrediting Board, some 24,200 students—of whom 57 percent were bachelor’s students—were enrolled in 2015 at accredited architecture programs at 122 public and private colleges and universities.<sup>5</sup>

The NAAB data also reveals a stark and indisputable racial and ethnic disparity. The overwhelming bulk (44 percent) of all students are white, trailed by Latino students (16 percent); Asian students (9 percent); and black students (5 percent). The balance is made up of international students (18 percent) and ethnic categories in the single digits or so small that they round to zero. Additionally, trend data shows the total number of black architecture students has remained at or near 5 percent since 2008.<sup>6</sup> The racially skewed faculty reflects the student population.

An important question is can educators be penalized for limiting the architectural canon to familiar authors? To students

who identify as non-majority, yes, they should. Faculty that identify as minority are more likely to utilize texts written by minority authors. Students who are engaged in an accredited program rarely see a diverse faculty. DesignIntelligence, one of the leading influencers of architecture education, posts an annual list of the top architecture programs. Of the schools listed in the top 10 for undergraduate education 16 have black faculty and 67 faculty that identify as a person of color. Of the schools listed in the top 10 for graduate education 31 have black faculty and 136 faculty that identify as a person of color. Black and female leadership across the nation is also limited. Data taken from each ACSA-Architecture member schools faculty list show that only 31 professors/educators hold the rank of Dean, Chair, or Director.<sup>7</sup>

One particular advantage for acknowledging the perspective of minority authors is the benefit of each author speaking from a position of personal experience. A white author can explain black plight but not in the manner of an actual black person who experiences the disadvantages of their skin color. An example of this is Le Corbusier’s *When the Cathedrals Were White* juxtaposed with Rashad Shabazz’ *Spatializing Blackness* as a lens to explore an infamous articulation of black space, the kitchenette. Corbusier states “[T]hey live, crowded together, in Harlem... in slums near skyscrapers. They serve in Pullmans, in coaches, in all-night bars.”<sup>8</sup> highlighting the unfortunate area reductions within Black living conditions. He marvels at the ingenuity and complexity of Black art given the apparent lack of resources available to Black people.

This is one way to examine the built environment and its effects on a racial group. A country that prides itself on the pursuit of happiness and equality would certainly prioritize a positive narrative that displays innovation. As opposed to discussing the systemic issues that, facilitate inconsistencies and discrimination.

In Chicago, a city that shares similar urban principals to New York, Shabazz provides his own description of the crowded living environments, “Kitchenettes were apartments, sometimes attics, and even basements subdivided into smaller individual living quarters... cramped, yes, but they were also disease-ridden, rat infested forms of housing, and Black



Figure 2: Participants participating in the False Prophets Session at the ACSA Fall Conference Less Talk | More Action. <sup>16</sup>

migrants were forced to live in them".<sup>9</sup> Shabazz prefers to present an authentic representation of the vile living standards that facilitated the spread of bacteria and diseases within the Black community. The dissection and comparison of these two distinctly different texts show a clear difference in perspective that is only gained when multiple voices are championed.

The Shabazz text clearly outlines the intersectionality of architecture. Architecture, urbanism and planning policy have a clear effect on race and health care. Expanding the architectural canon to include inter-disciplinary critics can

also improve the understanding of the built environment. Architecture is inherently multi-disciplinary due to the complex nature of the building industry and the influence buildings have on its inhabitants. Engineering, anthropology, sociology, and medical research are a sampling of disciplines that have architectural adjacencies.

#### **MULTI-DISCIPLINARY**

In Miami, FL, a coastal city that is currently experiencing climate changes and wrestling with future resiliency concerns, Dr. Donette Francis provides an alternative lens to the natural landscape.<sup>10</sup>

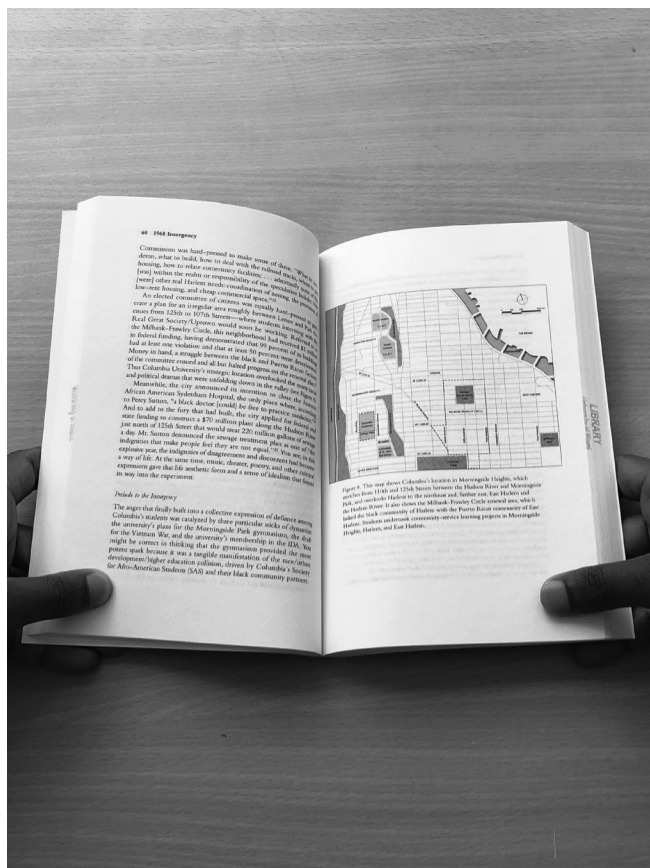


Figure 3: Typical depiction of black individual reading false prophet texts in academia<sup>17</sup>.

“In particular, I analyze how a “Miami sensibility” affects the dramaturgy of Head of Passes, which unfolds near the mouth of the Mississippi River, and I examine The Brother/Sister Plays, set in Louisiana’s public housing, alongside Moonlight’s setting in Miami’s Liberty Square projects and its surrounding environs. Incorporated in 1896 as a sinking city built on swampland for agricultural and tourist economies, Miami’s fragile habitat is compounded by the precariousness of Black life in the city, where racial segregation has historically meant the inland isolation of Blacks in inner-city neighborhoods, while the more desirable properties were reserved for whites on, or in close proximity to, the beaches. With recent attention to rising sea levels, these once-isolated Black neighborhoods—ten feet above the current sea level—are now highly sought after by developers, with the ensuing mass displacement of low-income Black and brown peoples. In addition to the city’s relative youth, its geopolitical multi-directionality simultaneously references urban cities in the northern United States, the politics of Jim Crow segregation in the southern United States, and the multiple and shifting imperial histories of the broader global “Souths,” which include the Caribbean and Central and South America. McCraney brings such a consciousness of place to his plays set in Louisiana, where he interrogates the ways the elements, ecological vulnerability, Black precariousness, and plurality are a part of everyday sensibilities.<sup>11,12,13</sup>

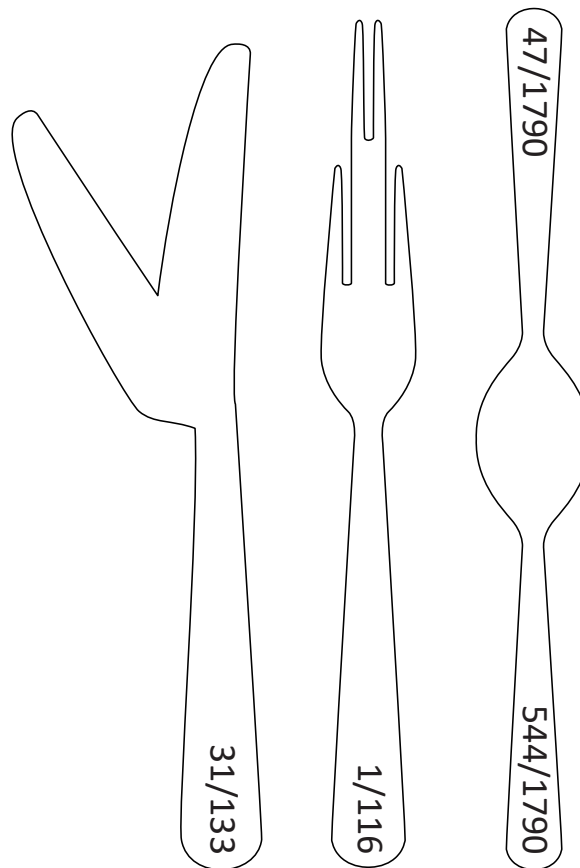


Figure 4: Augmented cutlery that highlight discrepancies in architecture education<sup>18</sup>

If viewed properly, one can see that there is a shared language between multiple fields that can contribute to architecture education. Sedimentation, resiliency, sustainability, durability, displacement, liberation, prosperity, ritual, performance, criminal, restrictive and façade are all terms that find themselves in American Studies, Geology, Anthropology, Clinical Psychology and Genealogy. A curriculum that incorporates the many facets that align with architecture is a comprehensive one. How does one design social housing without the requisite social information that contributes such as employment and incarceration rates, spatial mobility and fresh food sources? Is urban theory holistic if it does not credit the role of restrictive zoning and planning as a mitigating factor for cultural identity and gentrification? These critical perspectives are outside the purview of traditional architecture critics. But required nonetheless.

**CONCLUSION**

If architecture education is ready to acknowledge the fundamental deficiencies in its pedagogy, it must expand its racial and gender membership. Many strides have been made to increase the female population within the profession and academia. Substantial work needs to be done to achieve similar accolades in racial statistics. In 1968, Whitney M. Young,

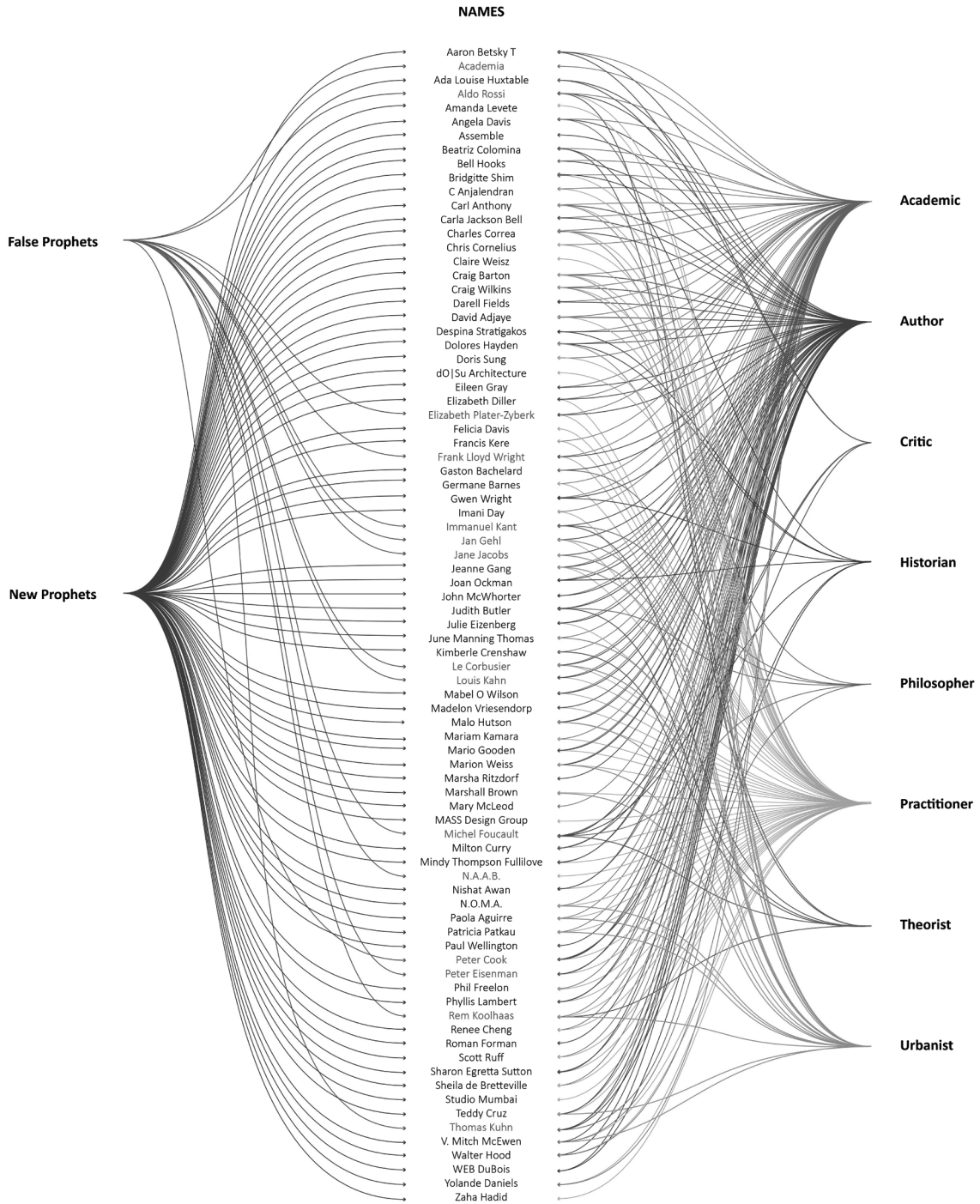


Figure 5: False and new prophets to expand the architectural literary cannon<sup>19</sup>

Jr., renowned civil rights leader and executive director of the National Urban League, delivered a now-famous rebuke at the annual convention of the American Institute of Architects, denouncing the group's "thunderous silence" on diversity within the industry even as segregation in housing became a flashpoint in American politics.<sup>14</sup> His speech centered the work of architects and planners in a national conversation about race, that even 51 years later, the profession and academia is still deficient at addressing. False prophets is one step toward reparations.

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#### ENDNOTES

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8. Corbusier, Le. *When the Cathedrals Were White: a Journey to the Country of Timid People*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, 159.
9. Shabazz, Rashad. *Spatializing Blackness Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015, 34.
10. Francis, Donette. "Juxtaposing Creoles," n.d.
11. *Moonlight*, directed by Barry Jenkins (2016; Santa Monica, Calif.: A24/Lionsgate, 2017). All subsequent references are to this version.
12. See John Stuart, "Liberty Square: Florida's First Public Housing Project," in *The New Deal in South Florida: Design, Policy, and Community Building, 1933–1940*, edited by John F. Stack and John A. Stuart (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008); Nathan Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Chanelle Rose, *The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami: Civil Rights and America's Tourist Paradise, 1896–1968* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2015). Liberty Square housing projects were built to both "clean up" the substandard tropical housing many Blacks were subjected to as well as to "isolate Blacks from the white community." Segregated housing, nonetheless, led to the flourishing of the Black professional and entrepreneurial classes. In the 1960s, the construction of I-95, which cut through the Overtown neighborhood, was the death knell of such a visible, successful Black middle class in Miami.
13. Jessica Moulite, "Color of Climate: Is Climate Change Gentrifying Miami's Black Neighborhoods?" *The Root*, August 4, 2017. See also the short documentary film *Right to Wynwood*, which follows the displacement of the city's longstanding Puerto Rican community. *Right to Wynwood*, directed by Camila Alvarez and Natalie Edgar (Meraki Media, 2014).
14. Anderson, Melinda D. "How Can Architecture Schools Increase Diversity?" *Curbed*. *Curbed*, February 22, 2017. <https://www.curbed.com/2017/2/22/14653054/architecture-schools-diversity>.
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