

# Placemaking through Storytelling: Remembering Sacred Spaces

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In an Alabama town there is a bottom-up movement to communicate under-represented, African-American history through a series of “sacred sites” in the landscape. This under-represented history includes: former slaves engaged in early city development, Black land owners, redlining practices, and racial injustice. History education presently does not have the capacity to fully discuss these truths, and there is a movement to make them apparent in our cities. Rosenwald Schools, lynching sites, cemeteries, and formerly segregated schools are considered sacred due to their significance in the African-American and simply, *American* experience. In *The Power of Place* Dolores Hayden argues that we are fascinated with the past when touring historic sites but miss opportunities to translate this to our neighborhoods imbued with place-making potential. She states, “If Americans were to find their own social history preserved in the public landscapes of their own neighborhoods and cities, then connection to the past might be different” (Hayden, 46). This connection to place and history exists for local African-American families and has potential to engage a collective city. While some histories are painful, all should be evident for united progress. As stated by a Community Remembrance Project member, “There can be no reconciliation and healing without remembering the past” (2021).

These ideas are explored through a local, historic African-American cemetery dating back to Emancipation, and those buried were key figures in early city development. While a prominent landmark sited at the terminus of a historic road, its past is scarcely known. In fact, the cemetery has been poorly maintained over the past century compared to other cemeteries in the city, despite being one of the oldest. Additionally, due to erasure and lack of equitable agency, this African-American landmark is one of a few remaining in the town, and there is a movement to protect these assets and communicate their stories.

For this project students and I are working with stakeholders to envision public space that provides storytelling and placemaking opportunities. Stakeholders include: cemetery descendants, researchers, city representatives, and more. By elongating the schematic design schedule, we can gather

stories from community members, host participatory design sessions, and increase bottom-up advocacy. We are exploring placemaking and storytelling through a number of design considerations including: physical markers in the landscape, vernacular building typologies, and local materials. Presently, the project has land for development adjacent to the cemetery, has the interest of city officials, and has gone through initial participatory designs. Looking forward, we aim to continue participatory design sessions, and research grant opportunities to match city funding.

As with many U.S. cities, African-American assets have largely been erased. This erasure is more than the loss of building infrastructure. It represents who has a voice and who is excluded in urban development. It furthermore provides opportunity for neighborhoods to communicate history representative of all past, present, and future residents.

—Hayden, Dolores. *The Power of Place*. The MIT Press, 1995, 46

*Eji’s Community Remembrance Project*. Equal Justice Initiative. (2021, October 22). Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://eji.org/projects/community-remembrance-project/>.

## INTRODUCTION

Walter Hood and Melissa Erickson describe what many of us have long witnessed yet struggle to change. In *Sites of Memory* they state, “What we cannot articulate or see in the environment is the simple fact that past histories have been subtracted out of our everyday landscape.”<sup>1</sup> Cities across the American landscape are a testament to this statement, confirming its reality. All sites are imbued with placemaking potential as each terrain has a history. Some histories are forgotten while others are highlighted. Often, histories are paved over ubiquitously. The following paper is a call for designers, city officials, historians, planners, developers, and residents to ponder their neighborhood social history inquiring how it is legible, how it has strategically been erased, and how connection to place through the landscape might become a reality for all.

This inquiry started in Auburn, Alabama where there is a bottom-up movement to communicate under-represented, African-American history through a series of “sacred sites” in the landscape. This under-represented history includes: former

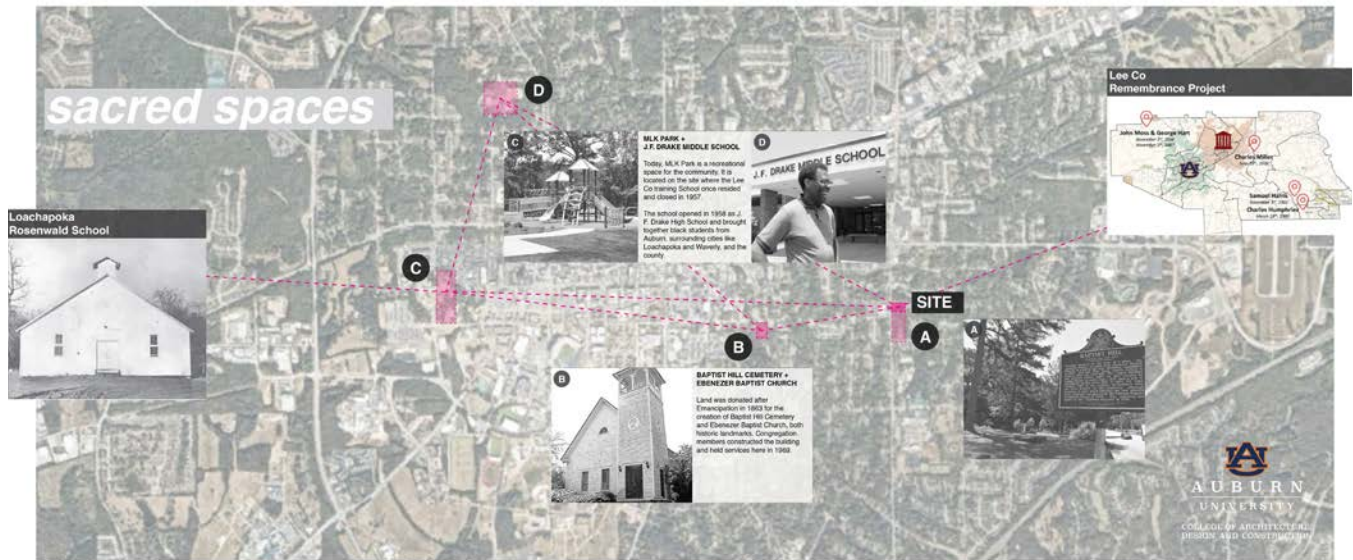


Figure 1. Black and African-American sacred sites in Auburn, Alabama. Created by Author.

slaves engaged in early city development, redlining practices, and racial injustice. History education presently does not have the capacity to fully discuss these truths, and there is a movement to make them apparent in our cities. Rosenwald Schools, lynching sites, cemeteries, and formerly segregated schools are considered sacred due to their significance in the African-American and simply, *American* experience. In *The Power of Place* Dolores Hayden argues that we are fascinated with the past when touring historic sites but miss opportunities to translate this to our neighborhoods imbued with placemaking potential. She states, “If Americans were to find their own social history preserved in the public landscapes of their own neighborhoods and cities, then connection to the past might be different.”<sup>2</sup> This connection to place and history exists for local African-American families and has potential to engage a collective city. While some histories are painful, all should be evident for united progress. As stated by a Community Remembrance Project member, “There can be no reconciliation and healing without remembering the past.”<sup>3</sup>

### LOCAL PROJECT

These ideas are explored through Baptist Hill Cemetery, a historic, African-American cemetery dating back to Emancipation. The cemetery is a prominent landmark sited at the terminus of a historic road in Auburn, Alabama. Nevertheless, its past is scarcely known. In fact, the cemetery has been poorly maintained over the past century compared to others in the city, despite being one of the oldest. Additionally, due to erasure and lack of equitable agency, this African-American landmark is one of a few remaining in the town, and there is a movement to protect these assets and communicate their stories.

Baptist Hill Cemetery is a prominent project as it is 1) historically significant; 2) sacred to African-Americans as those buried tell a history about slavery in the South, Jim Crow, Black land-ownership, Black-owned businesses, faith, and resilience; 3) challenged by a unique relationship between descendants and city officials; and 4) a beautiful site located atop Baptist Hill, at the terminus of a historic road, amid multiple community assets, and within a tranquil wooded site in the heart of Auburn.

The site is historically significant as it was the first Black cemetery following The Civil War. The 3.68-acre site was donated by Glenn Rudd, a large landowner during early city development. The name, Baptist Hill Cemetery, came from Ebenezer Baptist Church, which was founded in 1865. It was one of the first Black churches following The Civil War and was built by former slaves atop Baptist Hill. Today, the church remains in use and is notable for its craft and vernacular typology. Unfortunately, much of the history at Baptist Hill is unknown, as there is neither a systematic record of those buried, nor a plot map of the area. According to the Auburn Heritage Association, there are approximately 400 marked graves in Baptist Hill, with at least 100 of those unidentified.<sup>4</sup> Graves marked and unmarked communicate a rich and dark history of slavery, racism, and resilience. It is valuable for our cities to communicate their holistic histories for students and residents, alike.

The project of highlighting the sacred space of Baptist Hill Cemetery was initiated by a Baptist Hill descendant and liaison with the Auburn Parks and Recreation Department. The city of Auburn is open to the concept, and owns property directly north of the cemetery. They have agreed to dedicate this space for storytelling and remembering a holistic history of Auburn’s early development. The hope is this would be evident through



Figure 2. Baptist Hill Cemetery and surrounding sites in Auburn, Alabama. Created by Author.

physical artifacts on the site, oral stories told by descendants and researchers, as well as high school history classes occurring on the redesigned property. Currently, the project is gaining advocacy and funding sources.

### SACRED SPACES

The idea of honoring sacred spaces is central to this project. Baptist Hill Cemetery is one of many sites that is considered sacred due to its significance for African-Americans. It is a well-known reality that historically Black spaces are often erased and gentrified. Preservation of these sacred spaces should occur throughout our cities. This idea, presented in Auburn by Baptist Hill descendants, would include honoring the sites of: Baptist Hill Cemetery, Drake Middle School (the formerly segregated, all-Black high school), Ebenezer Baptist Church, former Rosenwald Schools, and lynching sites in the neighboring city of Opelika.

This is not a new concept for cities. New York, for example, has *The Walking Tours of Manhattan*, which connects Blacks and African-Americans with the past of New Amsterdam through a series of maps marking historically significant or “sacred” spaces, even while physical artifacts are absent.<sup>5</sup> The maps build upon *A Negro History Tour of Manhattan* from 1968, which is a historical narrative winding through discrete neighborhoods of the borough. The narrative documents the “mostly lost and uncommemorated grounds upon which the history of African-Americans has unfolded.”<sup>6</sup>

Walter Hood and Melissa Erickson further describe this concept in their essay, *Storing Memories in the Yard*. They describe the yard (or site) as the “archive [of] a tangible landscape that holds specific cultural memories.”<sup>7</sup> They illuminate this notion by examining Broadway Street in Macon, Georgia as the former nexus for black cultural life. It is described as a place where people could “strut their stuff” without worry of a segregationist culture, go to the Douglass Theatre, get haircuts, go shopping, or hear blues and R&B.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, it is where life and culture happened for Blacks and African-Americans. Unfortunately, today there is limited trace of such a profound cultural identity.

It is no surprise, then, that residents of Auburn, Alabama would advocate for their own memories stored in the yard to become legible. Stories at Baptist Hill Cemetery and other sacred sites across Lee County, Alabama are painful, rich, and worth celebrating. Oral storytelling and physical artifacts communicating history begins at Baptist Hill Cemetery.

### ONE METHOD: PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

It is especially crucial for this project to engage multiple stakeholders in participatory design. Foremost, Baptist Hill descendants have a long, challenging relationship with the city of Auburn. The cemetery has not been maintained by the City Parks and Recreation Department in the same manner as surrounding cemeteries. Some of this is due to missing land deeds and confusion over property ownership. Nevertheless, there is significant differences in maintenance, visibility of headstones,

**Placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community. Strengthening the connection between people and the places they share, placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value. More than just promoting better urban design, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution.**  
***Project for Public Spaces***

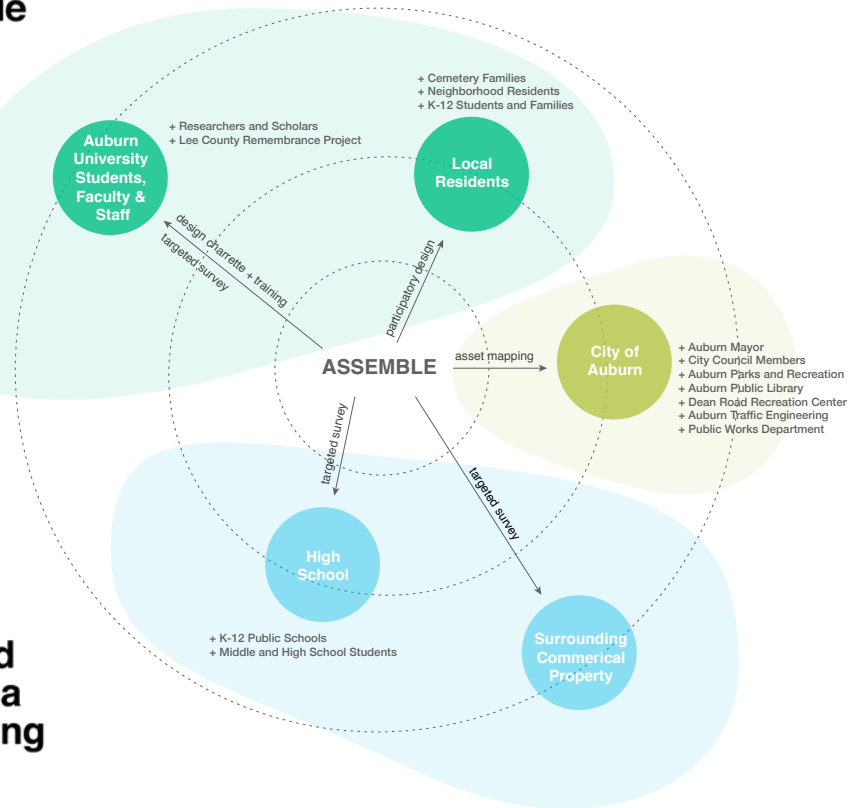


Figure 3. Identified stakeholders for participatory design sessions. Created by Author.<sup>9</sup>

and safe access to and through the site. Furthermore, burial plots were relocated for road expansion prior to notifying families. The cemetery size has been reduced, and a retaining wall inserted to accommodate growing vehicular traffic. These are two examples that indicate how tension has developed between cemetery descendants and the city. Having both parties at the table to honor this sacred space is crucial, even though challenging. Participatory design with multiple stakeholders is one way to start discussion and forward movement.

The above graphic indicates groups identified and invited to initial participatory design sessions held at the Auburn Public Library. Groups include cemetery descendants, researchers and historians of Auburn Black history, design professionals, and Environmental Design students. Thus far, community engagement has included participatory design through maps, drawings, case studies, and discussions, guest speakers and panel discussions at the public library, design reviews with students and city officials, gallery exhibits, and access to online resources regarding the project.

It is worth noting that including participatory design in a typical architecture practice is challenging. Normative fee structures and schematic design schedules do not accommodate the time

and resources required to gather research and host multiple participatory design sessions. Due to the time required and the interdisciplinary nature of the work (i.e. design work, collecting historical information, conducting interviews with descendants, etc.), partnering with an academic institution such as Auburn University seemed reasonable. Having this process become normative and integrated into design business models is desirable.

### MOVING FORWARD

As mentioned previously, this work was integrated into Environmental Design coursework. It is a challenging and rewarding task to discuss difficult social issues with early design students (or anyone, for that matter). Remarkably, it has been successful as students learn and work locally with city officials and community partners. Thanks to the efforts of cemetery descendants, city officials, the Auburn Mayor, history teachers, researchers, and advocates, our students were introduced to how history can drive design decisions, how participatory design is crucial for quality, useable, and lasting public space, and how designers can be local change-makers.

Presently, the city is not running full-speed ahead to highlight sacred spaces communicating Black and African-American



## New Amsterdam 1623–1664

### SITE TYPOLOGIES 1) FORT AMSTERDAM AT U.S. CUSTOM HOUSE

1 Bowling Green  
 Built by first slaves on Manhattan.  
 First Dutch Reformed Church Inside Fort.  
 1626

### 2) HOSPITAL FOR SICK SOLDIERS AND BLACKS

Bridge Street  
 Castello Plan Section E, Lot 23 & 24

### 3) "BLACK JACOB'S HOUSE"

Home built by Jacob Hellekers  
 The Black Carpenter of Gravesend.  
 Castello Plan Section A, Lot 18

### 4) JACOB STOFFELSEN OF ZIERICKZEE

Home of the Overseer of the Dutch  
 West India Company's Slaves.  
 Castello Plan Section J, Lot 15, 1639

### 5) HOUSE OF THE DUTCH WEST INDIA COMPANY'S SLAVES

32–34 South William Street  
 Castello Plan Section J, Lot 15, 1640

### 6) SUSANNA ANTHONY ROBERT'S HOUSE

Free Black Woman's Home  
 52–54 Beaver Street  
 Planted with 8 Small Trees

### 7) THE HARLEM ROAD

Later the Boston Post Road  
 Built by the Slaves of the Dutch West India Co.  
 Currently Includes portions of 5th Ave.,  
 Park Ave., Madison Ave., and the Bowery, 1658

### 8) FREE AFRICANS LOTS

Chinatown, Little Italy, Soho, Greenwich  
 Village, Washington Square Park. Land Granted  
 to Africans freed from slavery after years of  
 dedicated service. Prince St. to Astor Place and  
 from the Bowery to Broadway. Includes the land  
 of Lucas Santomee, a black physician,  
 1645–1716

### 9) BIG MANUEL'S FARM

Greenwich Village, Washington Square Park

### 10) DOMINGO ANTHONY'S FARM

Greenwich Village, 1643

### 11) THE AFRICAN'S CAUSEWAY

Minetta Lane and Minetta Brook  
 The "Negroes" Causeway on historic maps

### 12) PAUL D'ANGOLA'S FARM

MacDougal & West 4th Street, 1644

Figure 4. Walking Tours of Manhattan, New Amersterdam 1623-1664. Davis.



Figure 5. Participatory design session at the public library. Auburn University School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture.



Figure 6. Design seminar, student proposal. Jennifer Diaz-Ponce.



Figure 7. Initial design proposal. Created by Author.



Figure 8. Baptist Hill Cemetery Historical Marker. Image Credit: Author.

histories. There is not the explosion of bottom-up advocacy regarding these concerns as I had hoped. There is, however, growing discussion on past and present racism. There is an understanding that erasing our landscapes imbued with placemaking potential benefits the few and only for the short-term. There is growing excitement for making palimpsest evident throughout our urban landscapes so that a holistic understanding of history is available.

Referring back to Hood and Erickson's initial quote, it is possibly unreasonable and undesirable to artificially add back to our cities what was previously erased during urban evolution. The ghosted sacred space can be made legible through non-physical means. Those spaces still present can be nodes where holistic histories are shared through oral storytelling and the physical landscape. May Baptist Hill be the impetus for lower Alabama.

#### ENDNOTES

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