

Decolonizing Design

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In Fall of 2017, New York City witnessed simultaneous protests over space, identity, and knowledge. One concerned the preservation of a Manhattan skyscraper, the other a museum campus and its controversial centerpiece. Together, the protests underscored a link between preservation and expropriation — a connection vital to the legitimacy of design discourse but suppressed in the critical literature.

1.

In November, the Norwegian architecture group Snøhetta released an ambitious plan to renovate the façade and atrium of Philip Johnson’s iconic Manhattan office tower, 550 Madison Avenue.

The next week, a group of architects and preservationists assembled in front of the building—husked in a scaffold and ready for construction—to protest.

Most of the protesters were white men. As a friend wryly observed to me, the protesters looked gratified to have found a controversy to call their own. They held signs reading “Hands off my Johnson” and “PoMo Power,” reflecting the jocular corporate culture long associated with the building. Since its construction in the

early 1980s and through its iterations as the AT&T and SONY headquarters, Johnson’s tower has embodied the dream of postmodern globality. It stands as a monument to free trade, telecommunications, and over-scaled real estate speculation. Its form — a vaulted fascist atrium at its base, a massive Chippendale finial on top — demonstrates what Rem Koolhaas called the “delirium” of neo-liberal urban aesthetics.

Such a display of proprietary chauvinism is highly resonant with contemporary cultural politics. The protests occurred against the backdrop of nationwide debates over US Civil War monuments. Many of those who called for the preservation of Confederate statues had cloaked their nativism in talk of continuity, legacy, and tradition. They, too, were happy to court controversy. Some appealed to the notion of an objective historical record, a wish for authenticity amidst the constant reconstruction of historical and political imaginaries. Such arguments were made by even liberal faculty at Yale with regard to the status of the slave owner John Calhoun—and not without some wincing. In every case, hesitation was allayed by fidelity to dominant traditions and territorial identities.

A statement on the Johnson protest from British architect Norman Foster modeled this compromised logic. “I was never sympathetic to the short lived post-modern movement — and this building in particular,” Foster wrote on an Instagram post promoting the demonstration. “However it is an important part of our heritage and should be respected as such.”

What matters is heritage — tradition borne of genealogy. In the context of architecture, talk of heritage licenses a few to design the lives many, often in a mode of discreet cultural supremacism. Johnson’s work is an exemplary case, his curatorial practices since the 1930s animated by a puerile fascination with modernist power. Its links to race science and fascism were never an issue for the architect, and seldom for his public. A disdain for moral purpose is indeed a part of 550 Madison, at once a glittering showpiece and a banal artifact of its time — a “graceless disguise,” in the words of Michael Sorkin, “for the same old building.”

The building’s importance never had to do with its form, but all the things it nevertheless signified: corporate zeal and a cherished place (preordained by Johnson’s own status) in a narrow taxonomy of belonging. The protests affirmed this last point. Organizers filed a petition to have the façade of 550 Madison designated a landmark. They wished for the building to stand in perpetuity, even as the rest of the city churns with displacement, disintegration, and renewal. The petition proved unsuccessful, however, as endless urban development — the very force that drove the construction of the building in the first place — continues apace.

Renovations have begun.

2.

The furor over 550 Madison followed shortly after demonstrations at the American Museum of Natural His-

tory. There protestors voiced a longstanding complaint: while the museum purports a mission to “discover, interpret, and disseminate” objects and ideas, its principal ideology is a mode of white masculinity. Upon inspection, as Donna Haraway remarked succinctly in 1984, the museum’s collection discloses the “commerce of power and knowledge in white and male supremacist monopoly capitalism.”

The field of Natural History itself derives from colonial expeditions and expropriation programs. Naturalists like the famed taxidermist Carl Akeley — who designed the museum’s African Hall — were ruthless game hunters, collectors, and exploiters of local custom and labor. Many also subscribed to colonial racial taxonomies; the museum hosted a global eugenics conference in 1921.

In its architecture (largely designed by Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould) and visual displays, the museum has showcased modernist attitudes about nature, many of which draw explicitly on the contrived opposition between savagery and enlightened subjectivity. Every New York City elementary school student is well acquainted the museum, which holds out the world’s treasures as the province of American inheritance.

As the chief benefactor of the museum, the populist US President Teddy Roosevelt sought to preserve objects and territories against what he saw as the onslaught of modern society. The messianic complex that resulted appears everywhere in the museum, and particularly in the imposing statue of Roosevelt outside the museum’s Western arch, overlooking Central Park. On the morning of October 26, 2017, protestors doused the base of the statue in red paint. In a statement, they said that the action symbolized the museum’s bloody origins.

Expropriation and enslavement are exalted dramatically by the statue. Roosevelt sits astride a stallion, flanked on his right by an indigenous man in a headdress, a gown knotted above his shoulder, and on his left by an enslaved man, his leg in shackles, naked but for a cloth. The statue represents the myth of Manifest Destiny and thus stands as a tribute to white supremacy in the world. It implies that whiteness is at the heart not only of American nationalism, but of the claims to nature that give dimension to American expansion.

Conservationism can be a way of maintaining these claims. Roosevelt after all issued several orders to protect vast federal lands, seeking not only to maintain what he called, in words inscribed on the walls of the AMNH's Great Hall, the "hidden spirit of wilderness," but to ensure that "assets" of the natural world be "increased and not impaired in value." Sustained expropriation of resources for the security of national interest was the cornerstone of Roosevelt's imperial adventures. He sought to extend American statecraft and harness the world's resources for its use.

This attitude still prevails at the museum. Earlier in 2018, the AMNH encountered additional protests due to its 23-year relationship with David Koch, the fossil fuel oligarch; before Koch resigned from the museum's board of trustees, protestors made note of how little attention was paid to the topics of carbon emissions and climate change—signs of still more negative propaganda masquerading as empiricism.

Many protestors have called to "Decolonize" the AMNH, objecting to the museum's racist legacy through a resonant short-hand metaphor. They demanded that the statue of Roosevelt be dismantled and that indigenous curators be appointed to the museum's staff. While the protests had occurred each year to coincide with related Columbus Day actions, 2017's were (like the John-

son protests) charged with feelings that were aroused during the previous Summer by calls to preserve Civil War monuments. The intensity of protests prompted Mayor Bill De Blasio to assemble a committee to review the Roosevelt statue, along with several others, treating the city to a rare excavation of imperial history in the urban present.

Ultimately, the commission ruled to let the statue stand.

3.

The Johnson building and the AMNH were built on lands that until relatively recently were inhabited by indigenous peoples. In such spaces, talk of cultural preservation signals naïve white narcissism and disciplinary myopia. Yet it does afford critical attention.

Discourse, such talk shows us, is not benign. Authoritative language and related signifiers give objects weight, protect them from the maelstrom of development that constitutes modernity. But denial is also important. For it conceals the processes by which culture comes into being. The groundwork of extraction and privation must be naturalized, suppressed, or ignored so that sanctioned forms of culture may take shape.

Modernity is rife with this form of denialism, whether it licenses the idea of a corporate architectural heritage worth saving or produces democratic knowledge through junk science and boys' adventurism. Architecture, the museum—these are sites of consolidated knowledge/power, motors of signification, which shape the world in real ways. Their guardians have a choice—to pursue real justice or founder in a shelter of tradition.

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