

William Smith
The Forum – the veranda
2022 Rotch Scholar

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My name is William Smith. Thank you all for having me here and thank you for this special project brief. I am very grateful to get a second chance at this scholarship. I will start by saying that I'm going to try this a little differently than I did last year.

In prior projects I have avoided admitting myself as the author, instead usually foregrounding an imaginary or theoretical narrative that drives the project.

Here, I want to admit that what drove the project was a collaboration I found in bell hooks' writing, that affected me somewhat more than I might have initially expected.

This brief was both compelling and daunting, because I could feel a certain risk within it that I couldn't explain at first. But I found hooks' explains it herself in her essay: "Choosing the Margin" saying that:

"It is no easy task to find ways to include our multiple voices within the various texts we create... Those ... sounds and images ... mainstream consumers find difficult to understand. Sounds and scenes which cannot be appropriated are often [those] that everyone questions, wants to erase, to "wipe out". I feel it even now, writing this piece.

In her essay "Stylish Nihilism" she adds further that:

[We are] "not represented as ourselves, but seen through the lens of the oppressor, or of the radicalized rebel who has broken ideologically from the oppressor group but still envisions the colonized through biases and stereotypes not yet understood or relinquished."

I could feel there was an inherent risk in my producing (or any white, or professionalized architect producing) this project, of moving too fast, identifying a single citation and simply spatializing it, inadvertently flattening and essentializing bell hooks, exactly in the ways she knew she could be by others.

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The way I worked to avoid that essentialism was to consider this project as a collaboration with multiple texts of hers, at multiple scales, in response to the stated needs of this community, while using the classical Forum as a disciplinary beginning point to subvert towards new ends.

The project's orientation and massing are based in a communal version of what Hooks describes as a Home Place: a space built to protect from outside domination, centering the humanizing act of gathering and resistance of black people as subjects rather than objects.

Outwardly, the project presents itself as a tall, blank edifice, lacking in any frontality or formal entry,

But inwardly, the project scales down to become more domestic, more human scale and while still publicly accessible, otherwise spatially separate from the greater city. If you know about it, you know, if you don't, you might never think to investigate.

The project's form then channels Hooks' attitudes about community, collecting a series of individual yards and porches into a continuous, unified veranda.

In her essay "Yearning": hooks' quotes Linell Cady, who says that:

"In a community, persons retain their identity and they also share a commitment to the ... relational life uniting them."

Hooks goes further herself to say that:

"Love is a mode of relating that seeks to establish bonds between the self and the other, creating a unity out of formerly detached individuals."

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For this project then: a neighborhood is simultaneously left as a series of individual identities and in the middle, collected as a new shared one

In its site, the project does not significantly address the street. No view connects through to the inner forum, no pathway delineates approach, and this is on purpose.

bell hooks explains that:

"Often when black subjects give expression to multiple aspects of our identity ... we may be seen by white others as "spectacle"

For an architect then there is a risk, for a community assembling a land trust and actively working to subvert gentrification, that their project could become exactly that spectacle.

Instead, here there can be no commercialized spectacle. Only direct experience within, by the direct community.

All that extends out towards public view, is what might appear to be an unfinished wall to the south. This space is then used as a garden, and public dining space for those in the extended community that need help with food.

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In plan, the origin of the roman forum can be found before it is unrolled, but it is immediately evident the the dimensions aren't right. In a forum, the colonnade is dimensioned for commerce with stalls large enough for merchants and their goods.

hooks repeatedly argues against consumerism and privatization, saying that:

“The most important agenda for ... liberation” is that we “must critically examine our obsession with material gain and consumer goods”

She goes on to then offer instead that:

“Sharing resources, sharing objects we find beautiful that enhance our lives, is one way to resist falling into privatized, hedonistic consumerism that is self serving”

So for this version of a forum, rather than following dimensions required for commerce the project scales spaces for people, porch swings and their conversations.

Along the veranda, porches gather views through to neighboring yards. These porches then can remain open in summer, or close up in the winter and connect programmed spaces as one continuous interior enfilade.

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In section, the project’s external reading as a two story forum and its internal reading as a domestic veranda can be understood as the result of a simple lean-to, wrapped around the plan.

A wall is strung along the outside of the plan, with a roof that drops down to the human height veranda and series of internal porches.

But this approach does raise a slight structural problem: while the roof and second floor provide a continuous diaphragm, the long span of small members and partial walls doesn’t provide enough internal lateral support. To take care of this, long shoring posts must extend beyond the outer wall in support of the overall structure.

While the massing of the project stays within all required setbacks, its shoring structure extend over property lines into neighbors yards.

Neighbors are then physically tied to the communal structure, literally contributing to its staying upright.

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In her essay “Aesthetics of the Ordinary” bell hooks remembers back to her own childhood and say that:

“I saw black people who were land rich, but who did not have money, design and build dwellings for themselves out of a real spirit of creativity and a sense of space, and an excitement about that”

With this in mind, the project’s assembly and materiality is purposefully simple and alterable. A single stick-frame lean-to cross section is repeated down the linear path of the plan.

A series of simple sono-tube foundations support the exterior wall, with larger cast in place porch steps on the interior veranda.

And outside, in neighboring yards, large props are put in place to support the project’s shoring posts.

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These porches resting in each back yard are designed, built and then maintained by community members, collectively sharing one relational identity but individually remaining unique.

Connecting these back yards, the external wall then frames the porches that continue through to the interior.

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In her essay, "A Place Where the Soul Can Rest", hooks describes:

"The porch as a liminal space, standing between the house and the world...a threshold. Crossing it opened up the possibility of change."

That is what these porches aim to do, providing a space between the individual backyard, the communal yard of the forum, and the series of spaces that ring around it as an enfilade.

These are the spaces for dining, cooking and conversing, flexible to open wide for summer or close up tight in the winter.

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The edge these porches sit around is the inner yard of the project, the central communal forum

The continuous veranda connects the various porches and programs, casting views and conversations back and forth between them.

In reference to her childhood bell hooks explains that:

"When everyone sat on their porches...it was the way we all became acquainted with one another, the way we created community"

And she goes further to say that this ultimately scales in its importance, that the porch becomes, in her words:

"A democratic meeting place, capable of containing folks from various walks of life, with diverse perspectives, the porch was free floating space, anchored only by the porch swing"

If bell hooks puts forward the idea homeplace made by the individual, or family, as a (quote):

"Domestic space has been a crucial site for organizing, for forming political solidarity. Homeplace has been [as] a site of resistance."

Then maybe, a forum for bell hooks, built by a community, could become their collective homeplace.

This would be, in her words:

“[a] space where we return for renewal and self recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole”

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In the end what surprised me most about undertaking this project was that through her texts, bell hooks offered up an answer to a question that has been troubling me for some time: the balance between indifference and earnestness in a project.

bell hooks advocates for the ordinary, which I find compelling. Yet within the discipline of Architecture, the most contemporary approach to the ordinary that I have been exposed to is one that considers it with equal parts ambiguous irony and theoretical complexity. Where an audience can't quite tell where you stand, yet you demonstrate that you could back up a possible stance in the discipline should you ever need to. It's cool, it's smart and in a way, it's safe.

But Hooks' sees right though this, and labels this position as the failed modern radical.

She argues this is really a position of, in her words, of:

“Helplessness, powerlessness, that overwhelms many politically aware, cool people”

“They hide in desire, in that ... space of longing where difference - rather than becoming the new site for resistance ... becomes the setting for high spectacle, the alternative playground”

In her writing, bell hooks advocates for an embrace of the ordinary, that connects the theoretical and daily life, with complete earnestness. It has been my attempt, with this project, to do something like that.

Thank you again so much for the opportunity to be here, and, thank you again for this brief.