

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: African American Porch Culture*

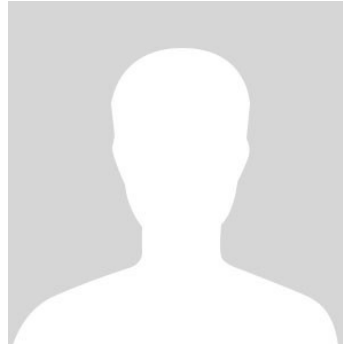
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Music Used in the Podcast

Jon Luc Hefferman - Upbeat

[https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Jon\\_Luc\\_Hefferman/20170730112628821/Upbeat](https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Jon_Luc_Hefferman/20170730112628821/Upbeat)

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### Transcript

Maeliosa: [00:00:02] Hi, my name's Maeliosa Barstow and I'm Helen Fialkowski, and this is going to be a podcast as a part of a larger project that's being done at the School of Architecture at Princeton with Professor Charles Davis as a way to reinterpret the American architecture and whiteness as a settler colonialist history. In this episode, we're going to talk about porches, their origin in the United States as a space constructed by the Black body and how through the nature of its construction, by and for Black people, it has become a key architectural space that's fundamental to Black culture as a space for exchange, storytelling and comfort, and therefore it's subverted settler colonialist strategies of exclusion of the Black body. So Helen and I are going to have a conversation today that talks through this with a bunch of different lenses. Hey, Helen. Hey, so why are we into porches?

Helen: [00:01:00] I mean, I think my interest in Porches started with my studio project last fall with Mira and Matthew with Current Interests was specifically in the Witherspoon-Jackson neighborhood in Princeton, which is a historically Black neighborhood. And a lot of our preliminary research to the studio was centered around the porches in that community. And I really realized how fundamental porches were to Black culture and even really started following the work of Germane Barnes and even his project titled Pop-Up Porch. and from his website, he explains in his words, what that project meant to him as "Historically, and today, the front porch plays a significant role in African-American culture. From the narrow shotgun homes of Atlanta and the dormer windowed bungalows of Chicago, the front porch has served as a refuge from Jim Crow restrictions, a stage straddling the home and the street and the structural backdrop for meaningful life moments."

Maeliosa: [00:02:02] Right. He came to Princeton, I think, before you got here as well, and gave a really great lecture about that, about his research on Porches and Detroit. And it was really great. I think he also has an exhibit at MoMA right now with the Black Reconstructions. We'll link all this below in the show notes for you guys to peruse.

Helen: [00:02:23] If you want to research this further he's definitely the expert on porches and its importance to Black culture. Yeah, definitely. We really wanted to trace porches back before colonialism itself, so we found out that indigenous cultures had a variety of kinds of porches and covered spaces before Europeans had even arrived to the United States, North America. And these are just some quotes written by Thomas Durant Visser where he says that evidence suggests that many indigenous peoples in North, Central and South America were building porch like structures long before contact with the Europeans. Noteworthy surviving examples include the stance down porticos, galleries and colonnades erected by the Mayan culture in Mexico and Belize from about five hundreds. And later, and there were archaeological finds of post holes and post mold's showing that wooden poles were used by Native American people in the American Southwest or building Ramada's the, simple open shelters supported by poles with grooves of brush or fabric.

Maeliosa: [00:03:34] Right. So basically porches have been here before the colonists were here is what essentially this is, saying.

Helen: [00:03:40] By the indigenous culture

Maeliosa: [00:03:44] Like maybe they weren't called porches and they came in a bunch of different forms, but it was really a passive cooling strategy that had been around long before European colonists were in North America.

Helen: [00:03:56] Right. And I really think that had it started solely out of utility for passive cooling and it wasn't yet a space of culture and exchange that it's become in cultures of minorities. Right.

Maeliosa: [00:04:13] And I mean, we can see how there's been similar like passive cooling strategies and other non colonized cultures around the world, like in the Middle East, for example, there's Mashaba, which are essentially a similar version of porches, I guess you could call it, where they kind of hang off of the side of a bunch of residential structures and they're these like, really beautiful or neat, decoratively screened rooms that kind of sit on the outside of those structures. And they're meant to be able to help passively ventilate homes in the Middle East, essentially so that you can sit comfortably in the really hot climate.

Helen: [00:04:55] Right, but what's really fascinating is that - and what we really wanted to highlight is when the colonists arrived to the United States, the houses that they were building as settler colonialists were houses like that children sketch of a box with a pitched roof. And there was not this outdoor interstitial space between indoor and outdoor that we know now as the front porch.

Maeliosa: [00:05:24] Basically porches weren't a part of that.

Helen: [00:05:26] Right. And what we're trying to say is that they were present in cultures before colonialists. But in the United States, when the colonialists arrived, there wasn't present in their first architectural settlements of like Williamsburg.

Maeliosa: [00:05:43] Wait, so who then built the first porches in the United States and why?

Helen: [00:05:51] Yeah, I think that's what's really fascinating is it wasn't in the European architectural traditions. It was actually brought to the United States in the early eighteen hundreds by African immigrants, Haitian refugees coming from Africa to the United States to New Orleans and Louisiana when the city had just been kind of destroyed by a fire and a majority of the population was now these African immigrants. And they made up, it says, ten

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thousand to four thousand Black people to white people. So the majority of the laborers and residents were Black people and they used the traditions of African culture, of what now is known in the United States as shotgun houses, constructed them in Louisiana as well - as places of residence. And that's where the first porches showed up in the United States from the Black cultures of Africa.

Maeliosa: [00:06:57] So it was really like the shotgun house that the porch got tied to right early on in the US. So one of the things that we see still today with porches is that people often paint their porches, especially the ceiling and the floor of porches. And one of the most typical shades is a blue green shade that's been manufactured and renamed from the original haint blue to what's called veranda blue. And what's interesting is that sort of the origin of this sort of painting of the porch and the color haint blue really comes from a very old tradition of how African slaves would paint the sort of earliest porches that were outside of their shacks where essentially, they were preserving a form of their African heritage or a portion of their African heritage where ancestors of theirs came from Angola. And there was sort of a tradition of storytelling around a fear of what are called haints, which are also known as haunts, which are basically spirits that are supposedly trapped between the world of the living and the dead, and they can't cross over water. And so they're like the solution to those who were enslaved at the time to sort of protecting themselves from these spirits was to basically paint their porches, this bluish color, so that it looked like water and the spirits wouldn't pass over, essentially protecting their homes. And so it became a tradition to paint your porch this haint blue color. And so what's really interesting is that this tradition of painting your porch, a bluish color that came from this time is something that's still there today, that American culture today still does this. And even though it's been kind of rendered invisible by whiteness and white culture, it has been sort of manufactured and renamed as veranda blue, that the essence of where this came from remains a piece of sort of African heritage.

Helen: [00:09:11] Right. And even building off of this idea of even spirituality, Europeans tried to even reframe the porch from Blackness and reconstruct it as a religious idea around cathedrals and this kind of idea of cleansing between the outside world and the pure space of the cathedrals and Catholicism that you need of this interstitial space of cleansing before entering.

Maeliosa: [00:09:48] So not only were porches historically a space that was constructed by Black communities in North America. But they were really they became a space for Black women to really claim as a space for themselves, Bell hooks specifically as a Black feminist writer who's written a really powerful essay about how porches have become sort of areas of resistance and places to be reclaimed for Black femininity.

Helen: [00:10:23] Right, exactly. In her essay, *A Place Where a Soul Can Rest*, and we'll link this below, There's a really incredible account where she stated, "The street corners have always been places that have belonged to men, patriarchal territory, and that the feminist movement really couldn't change that ... and they couldn't take back the night because women in public spaces and street corners ... were seen as a lurking lingering in places for observation by the male gaze." And then she further explains that verandas and porches were made for females to have ... to have outdoor space to occupy, and that they are a common feature of Southern living really showing that the porch was their way of taking back an outdoor space that they could occupy while the men were away and to come out on the porch was to see and be seen to have nothing to hide, and it signaled a willingness to be known.

Maeliosa: [00:11:29] So I think what's really important about all of this that we should talk about is how porches are really like a physical manifestation of Black identity and Black culture. Right, like the actual architecture itself isn't just a space where the Black body can feel comfortable and can feel like it has agency, but also that the image of this porch has produced an image of Black identity.

Helen: [00:12:04] Right, right, and I think that this even goes along with Sarah Ahmed's argument on the phenomenology of whiteness, where she talks about how "colonialism makes the world white, which is, of course, a world ready for certain kinds of bodies as a world that puts certain objects within their reach. Bodies remember such histories even when we forget them." And what's important about that is it's not by coincidence that these spaces were originally constructed and built with Black communities and that this is where they feel the most comfortable and where this has become a space of freedom and Bell Hook talking about like Black feminism. And I think Sarah Akhmad really makes a strong point.

Maeliosa: [00:12:56] Right, and this even ties into our last podcast, which we will link in the show notes as well, it's one of our previous ones which was about New Urbanism. And in that podcast, we were really talking about how harmful it is to be building off of settler colonial structures, that because settler colonial structures are really spaces that have been constructed for the white body and for the white body to feel comfortable and where the Black body becomes this sort of other within a white space.

Helen: [00:13:28] And it's really embedded within the architectural forms themselves without knowing the origin, you can feel it in and the way that these architectures have created cultures and social institutions around them.

Maeliosa: [00:13:46] And so this kind of image making that has been produced through the porch and through the construction of the porch is like this architectural object. And as this image of Black identity, you can see it play out in a bunch of different ways in popular culture and sort of in the public image. For example, the African-American Museum in D.C. that was designed by David Adjaye literally has a porch embedded into the design where they say that this museum has a quote unquote "porch", "a large covered area for visitors to pass through to reach the museums facing entrance. In many cultures, porches are spaces for relaxation and socializing. The architects designed one for this museum to reference the historical and cultural use of porches throughout the African diaspora." And so I think it's just really interesting that the image of the porch as this sort of symbol of Black culture can be embedded not only in sort of the single family home or in the residence, but also in these larger civic institutions such as museums and public spaces.

Helen: [00:14:58] And even in Beyonce's album, like visual album *Lemonade*, the strongest image from that was a group of women sitting on the steps of

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a porch, nobody smiling. They're incredibly serious because the porch as a place of Black culture was also then kind of contested and contested ground where even in New Orleans, there's a history of struggle, of people being kind of limited to the amount of people that they can have on those porches. So it's kind of the way of reclaiming the space of Black identity because a group of Black bodies gathering in almost this private space that's public facing is threatening to whiteness. And people have really been trying to tear down that image as a possibility.

Maeliosa: [00:15:55] Yeah, I think what's interesting too is maybe one other example we could pull into this would be how design studios like the one that you did last semester with Mira and Matthew for studio is that there's a similar studio we found online done in Portland, where a group of students at the Portland State University School of Architecture worked with the Center for Public Interest Design to design what was a Pop-Up porch or a temporary porch in sort of a middle of the community, in a public space, as a way to kind of reclaim Black art and storytelling in public spaces. Because Portland has been undergoing so much kind of gentrification right now. And I think it should be done more so that sort of design studios take on these issues.

Helen: [00:16:52] I agree that they really need to take on this issue. And since it's such an image of Black identity, there's also serious discussions of reclaiming the space because there have now been fights to take it away.

Maeliosa: [00:17:12] I think it's also typologies. Right? Like it's about the porch itself as a typology. And I think in studios and in the design world, we talk about typology and precedent all the time. And so often this is coming from a Eurocentric model and from that other colonial models. And we don't sort of come at that. We don't question that enough. And I think design studios like this that start to question that and start to provoke well, what are sort of spaces that construct Black identity and how can we think about sort of typologies that might break from the kind of white identity that is so pervasive in the United States right now?

Maeliosa: This has been the podcast Porches produced by Helen Fialkowski and Maeliosa Barstow as a part of a larger project in the School of Architecture at Princeton University with professor Charles Davis. A special thanks to writers and critics referenced in this podcast Germane Barnes, Bell Hooks, Sarah Ahmed, David Adjaye, and Thomas Durant Visser. Music used in this podcast was from Jon Luc Hefferman, and links to all works referenced in this podcast as well as videos for future research can be found in the shownotes below. Thanks.