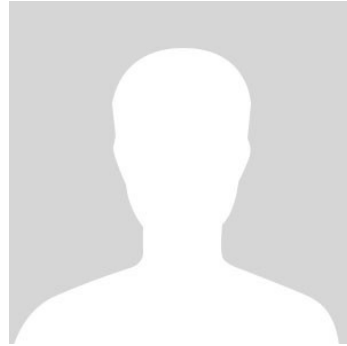


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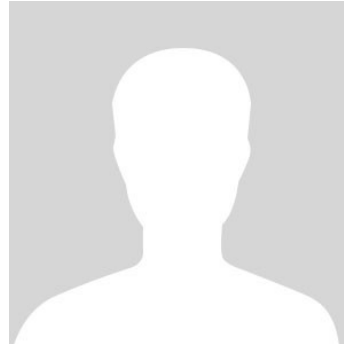
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American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Detroit's Urban Frontier

TRANSCRIPT

GL: Hello! I'm Grace Lee, a graduate student at the Princeton School of Architecture.

EC: And I'm Evan Crawford, a graduate student at Princeton as well.

GL: And from the last podcast we discussed the transformation and erasure of Black urban spaces and settlements, and today we wanted to mine narratives close to us – ways in which settler colonialism, as discussed last time continues today, its morphed forms, etc. And today we're shifting the focus to Detroit, and I will be talking with Evan specifically about his experience in Detroit.

EC: Yeah, so I have lived in Detroit all my life. I grew up on Detroit's Westside, which is basically defined by its extreme border condition with the suburbs, just a mile north and going to school in the suburbs, I had that extreme interaction with the border every single day. Recently my family relocated to the Eastside of Detroit right down by the river and so I've been able to kind of see these different changes that are happening throughout Detroit, with people coming in – people that I once knew from being out in the suburbs, and kind of re-entering Detroit, you know, as their city, into these spaces that were once familiar to me.

GL: To get us started, I want to position our conversation within the context of settler colonialism. On our previous podcast, our investigation on Seneca Village let us to consider the lasting effects of these historical spatial transformations. With Seneca Village, we saw the displacement of Black residents to make way for Central Park in a complete clearing of the houses that were there. How do you see this narrative overlapping with the current transformation in Detroit?

EC: Yeah, in Detroit. I mean, I feel like the Seneca Village story is so familiar and it mounts on pretty well. The overlaps become pretty extreme when you start to consider they're both these contemporary situations where a displaced population of minority communities are really not the first to occupy their zones. In Seneca Village, I mean, we had the Native Americans, or I guess all across the Americas. A Native American population that was first plagued by these issues so long ago – almost the original settler colonies, were now with those populations no longer in place, and a new population in place – the minority is shifted. The population may have changed, but now they've become more known and more nameable, more familiar to us.

GL: Yeah, this idea that Detroit is vacant and open for the taking already places us in a later entry point of settler colonialism in the US, since it erases the original indigenous peoples claims to the land.

EC: Yeah, exactly kind of like back in the 1600s, around that time. The land that was already there, the land that we're talking about today that we talked about in the last podcast, it was excluded and a path was made for these European interest in conquest that came in. Whether it was religious or as these positions of power economically, you know, Detroit and New York served as these important port identities for European powers. You know, with New York being on the Atlantic and Detroit being on that route that connected the Great Lakes together. And so we had these different tribes, from the Huron, the Chippewa, to the Ottawa, who were displaced or replaced. Their first kind of pushed out their traditional existing homes and their property to the periphery. But then later those peripheral conditions became extremely delineated, pushing them out into reservations or into zones that were nameable, and this type of same behavior would then become mirrored into the patterns of the city. In segregatory patterns where this same white imperial power would delineate zones for black occupation from white occupation, and then we saw that kind of clarified into laws and policies of the era. We look at the aftermath of that period, where again the native populations' own struggles with exclusion and displacement are kind of mirrored in those more established government structures between Black and white citizens at the time.

GL: Exactly, and I think for this conversation that we're having within the framework of settler colonialism, here we're going to be talking about the Black population of Detroit as a native population rather than the original indigenous people. Mostly because within this framework, racialization in the US has rendered black people hypervisible and yet we also see that there's a simultaneous erasure going on where white flight occurred in the post-war era, where white people evaded to the suburbs and were actually given loans to get houses. And the majority Black populations stayed within the inner city. So here we also see that currently the media has positioned Detroit as a Black city which needs to be saved, and I guess within this narrative, in what ways do you see the current gentrification of Detroit as a symptom of settler colonialism?

EC: Yeah, you brought up some really interesting points. I mean one of the ways that Detroit is kind of sick with settler colonialism at this point has to do with the way that it again is perceived as you said, as a Black city, as this place that has been, you know, it's been prepared and readied for action and interaction or insertion of new programs in this visibility or identity of Detroit as an urban frontier. We see this uptick in projects that have to do with urban gardening and urban greening, and this all of these different types of activities taking place with different types of organizations. Whether it's from Detroit the surrounding area or even international players that all contribute to a type of environmental gentrification. Work and there's this narrative that the population needs to be dependent on this return of white people for economic survival and the idea that these farms or these installations are the type of reinvestment that really no one's asking for that need to come in to support and create a healthy economy or a healthy neighborhood life for the city. Where there's this idea of pushing out of the Black people where there is a fleeing. In even previously this re-coding of the city as unsafe, where it's been demonized, but then we see at a later date, this re-takeover of the city of Detroit by these outside forces. And again, the idea of Detroit as ripe for the taking, and the ability that's been given by these large areas of green and kind of de-housed zones, de-densified zones to give rise to the taking of Detroit again, and the framing of the arrival of white entrepreneurs as a savior or as an urban pioneer that can shepherd these projects and lead to kind of their own, propping their own interest up. Supported by the idea that trade is shrinking and needs to be saved.

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GL: Yeah, I mean, this idea of the white entrepreneur, you know, the new chefs, the new creatives, the new artists who are moving to Detroit. It's not just in the words that are being described, but it's also manifesting in the literal architecture where we also see that there are developments, such as building of Quonset huts. This temporary shed that is made for the arrival of temporary workers of this new creative class is something really reminiscent of like Alaskan frontier architecture of Cold War infrastructure. And I think this is also, we're talking about very contemporary events in the last 20-30 years, but this is not just an isolated incident, right? We're still talking about the ideas of settler colonialism and this is just the latest manifestation where we have an entire structure that sets up for the continuous invasion and subsequent elimination of the native population. Here, the local Black population in Detroit. And we see this manifest again: legacies of redlining, of racial segregation, of unfair zoning, and these are all things that led to the post-war population leaving in the first place in this white flight, of this population that is now coming back to take over Detroit. So I guess within this framework, what are some specific examples and case studies of this occurring in Detroit?

EC: Yes, it's been happening, I mean, you know you talk about the population loss in this chain of events that led to you know we see today. I mean we can start to look at this idea of population loss in the loss of this economic investment in neighborhoods. We can look at these really large municipal projects, even looking at, in relation to our previous podcast about Olmstead and Central Park. One of Olmstead's other parks, Belle Isle Park, it's a very large island. It was previously, before its takeover, the largest city-owned park in the country. Even these properties that are, that were kind of poses these resources of the commons, you know, for the city and now for Detroit as a now eighty-percent African-American city in population, for that population, suddenly as Detroit assumes its new identity from the outside self, or externally defined identity as a black city, as a city that needs to be protected and saved, spaces like these common spaces are being taken. I mean, Belle Isle was recently taken over by the state and its ownership was transferred and now this access to this island that used to mean so much in terms of for barbecues and summer get-togethers between family members that have been disparate for some time. There's now this idea, paying to access the island in this insistence on the car and less you know, or this insistence on, yeah, it's on the cars as kind of the vehicle to get you there, where that's the only way you can really charge, where in opposition, walking onto the island charge you nothing. But the people who are being now allowed to live in the periphery of Belle Isle and have access to walk there, that population is changing and it's not the population it used to be. It is, you know, these new people who are predominantly white and don't really reflect the contemporary population of Detroit. So there's just a very large change happening in the proximity, of park spaces, and what that means for the city organizationally.

GL: Yeah that's really interesting because you know oftentimes Olmstead parks are being referred to as the people's parks but here you're really making us question who are these parks really for given this changing demographic and also the changing organization and ownership of the park. I want to return to a point you brought up about environmental gentrification, since we're talking about green spaces and parks in general. And environmental justification is where vacated and what is often referred to as "blighted" land is cleaned up and then transformed for real estate speculation and development. This is something that you're talking about as happening in Detroit, and it's happening in a lot of American cities. So what do you think differentiates the specific case of this, of environmental gentrification in Detroit?

EC: Yeah, well I think, what you talked about earlier about this idea of the post-war emptying out of the city and population loss and these same ideas of segregation, that kind of push through. We have, especially on the eastside of Detroit, where you know Belle Isle is in the same neighborhood. This idea where there's a lot of open land and open space, and in reference to the environmental gentrification, we have a lot of companies that are coming in from all over Michigan actually, who are coming in to establish a presence that is environmentally-focused and environmentally-based and is receiving a lot of support from the government but not necessarily a lot of support from the local community. I mean, these are projects that have come in that are not asked for, there's no input from the local community. We have projects like the Oakland Avenue Farm where they are trying to establish what they call a neo-rural condition, where they've been able to come in and take over acres of land that was once prime real estate for a community, and make it a goal of theirs to not commit to densification of land, but instead a continued de-densification of the land, and in this way establishing for themselves this perpetual condition of rotating saviors, as you brought up earlier, who can come in and continue these conditions.

GL: That's really interesting, and I think one issue with all this is we continuously talk about, like what is the solution there? And thinking once again that there needs to be something that needs to be solved in Detroit. So do you think there needs to be something that's changed around the entire conversation or concept about the future of Detroit?

EC: Yeah I think so, I mean as I was saying earlier, the idea when these environmental organizations come in, they're able to take advantage of a lot of favorable tax codes and opportunity zones for businesses. There definitely to be more oversight to make sure that these businesses cannot just come in, you know, plant trees that they're not being asked to plant as a way to hold out land for future development. And there need to be definitely more oversight to watch out for these developers who are coming in under the guise of environmental concern. And kind of the greening of neighborhoods, but for who? There's definitely a lack of discussions with local communities, and there's always someone it seems in Detroit, not just for environmental things, could always someone coming in and asking you know, how can I solve X? And maybe the solution is that we need to stop trying to solve problems by inventing the problem in the first place.

GL: That's a really good point to end on. I want to thank Evan for speaking with me today on our podcast and for more information discussed in today's episode, such as concepts like settler colonialism, environmental gentrification, the current developments in Detroit, please visit our corresponding show notes.