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American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Los Angeles's Metro

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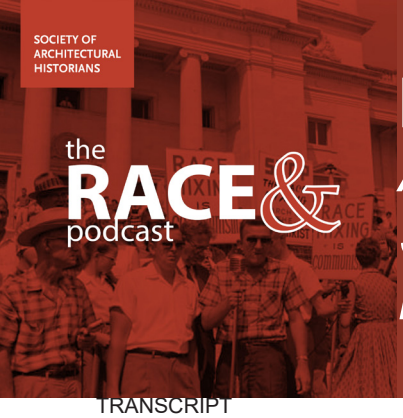
Music Credit

Song: "A Road Less Travelled"
Album: Melanchonique
Artist: Ketsa

located on the Free Music Archive:
https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Ketsa/Melanchonique/A_Road_Less_Traveled_



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TRANSCRIPT

[intro music]

[Ellen]
Hi, I'm Ellen Harris.

[Dillon]
And I'm Dillon Horwitz. We're graduate students at the Princeton University School of Architecture, and this podcast is part of a series that uses an analysis of architecture – and of the physical environment more broadly – to critique settler colonial policies and practices in the United States.

[Ellen]
In this episode, we'll use contemporary accounts of what it's like for people of color to commute in and around Los Angeles to highlight the ways in which America's spatial logic is highly segregated. The observation that a major population center in the United States is in its physical constitution, divided along racialized lines, is a widely acknowledged element of the current American landscape. Likewise, we argue that the public transportation systems operating within American cities are highly racialized as well. In this podcast, we hope to expound upon these premises by tying together first-hand accounts, news stories, and a range of data from studies in different disciplines to show how the country's systems of capital and infrastructure are deeply entwined and organized to make people of color feel invisible and unwelcome as they navigate through space.

[Dillon]
The main argument we want to make is less of a novel assertion, and perhaps more of a summary of extant histories and lived contemporary experiences, in order to show how the settler colonial dictates set forth in America's founding still play a deeply harmful role in affecting the organization of public transportation networks, and the spatial practices of the people of color who use them. Transportation systems may not necessarily seem to fit into the traditional definition of architecture, but they are indisputably a part of the physical environment. As such, they play an important role in providing – or limiting – access to other architectures of society, whether those places be for work, domesticity, or leisure. Again, though, this infrastructure is in and of itself a site of racialized power dynamics, a direct mode for industries and the government to filter, control, and corral people of color.

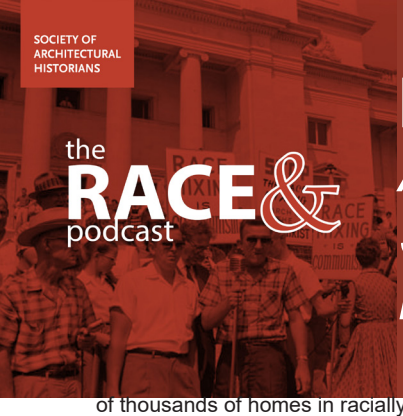
We also want to note that this podcast will, of course, be unable to fully address the nuances inherent in such a broad survey. Nationally-representative data compiled in a 2017 report for the American Public Transportation Association indicate that white or Caucasian individuals make up 40% of all transit users, while "communities of color make up a majority of riders (60%), with Black/African-American riders comprising the largest single group (24%) within communities of color," and Hispanic riders making up 19% of transit users (20). We are focusing on Los Angeles as a case study because the racial divide in the city's transportation network is particularly salient. LA Metro ridership data summarized by Steve Hymon in 2020 show that 66% of bus riders and 44% of rail users are Latino, far ahead of any other demographic group. Combined with 15% of bus riders and 18% of rail users who are African American, the majority of people who use public transit in Los Angeles are Latino and Black. As we'll see over the course of this podcast, it is not an accident that the ridership of a major metropolitan transit network is composed principally of people who have been – and continue to be – disenfranchised and hurt in the United States.

[Ellen]
Before we go any further, let's quickly explain what settler colonialism is, in order to establish the framework through which we'll be constructing our argument. Settler colonialism is a racial, social, and economic system of dominance in which white individuals and institutions, which have genealogical origins in Europe, forcefully assert their culture, ways of governance, and means of economic exploitation over indigenous and non-white populations. Settler colonizers ultimately aim to transplant native and non-white peoples and ways of life, in order to establish full control over land, resources, and other entities deemed valuable. Settler colonialism has been practiced for millennia, and while its geographical and technological manifestations have not always been the same, the fundamental premise of imposing new governing frameworks on existing lands and populations – and subsequently denying people of color their basic rights within those systems – has remained consistent.

[transition]

[Ellen]
Robert García and Thomas Rubin state that "Los Angeles may be regarded by many as the car capital of the world, but for the working poor and other people with limited or no access to a car who depend on public transit, it can be almost impossible to get to work, to school, to the market, to the park, to the doctor, to the church, to friends and loved ones, or to many of the other basic needs of life that many of us take for granted" (221). This condition is, in part, a result of calculated efforts by government officials in the first half of the 20th century to create spatial distinctions between those who took public transit and those who could afford to navigate the city by car, distinctions which often carried implicitly racial biases.

In 1910, the percentage of African Americans who owned homes in Los Angeles was higher than the percentage of any other city in the country. At the time, LA's Red Car transit system was an inexpensive and unsegregated means of connection between racially-diverse neighborhoods and economic opportunities within the rapidly growing city. However, the migration of almost 1 million people into the city throughout the following decades brought with it the possibility of people of color attaining a higher level of social and economic stability. This possibility was met with reactionary policies that would ultimately prevent this prosperity from taking place. For example, the 1944 Federal-Aid Highway Act funded the construction of almost 2,000 miles of freeways in the state of California. In the hands of local city planning officials with a proclivity for slum clearance, it also effectively funded the destruction



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of thousands of homes in racially diverse areas of Los Angeles. Several African American and Latino neighborhoods, such as Boyle Heights and Sugar Hill, were torn down in order to build highways connecting the city to its predominantly white suburbs. Jim Crow federal lending policies often legally prevented developers in these suburbs from building racially integrated neighborhoods, so the people of color who were displaced by the new highways were also prevented from moving to the very neighborhoods for which they were built. Instead, they often moved to existing, densely populated, and segregated neighborhoods in South and East Los Angeles, whose borders were now defined by the uncompromising network of highways which surround them. The initial 1939 plan for Los Angeles's freeways essentially called for public transit to fill in the gaps, in order to ease congestion and widen access. Over the next several decades, however, this transit infrastructure was never funded.

[transition]

[Dillon]
In the time that's passed since the establishment of Los Angeles's transit system, there have been nominal changes in how and where the network operates, but by and large, the infrastructure is still designed to make life harder for people of color. We can, therefore, say that contemporary transportation infrastructure in Los Angeles remains deeply committed to upholding America's settler colonial project. Let's take a look at some of the current issues and consequences of this architecture of disenfranchisement.

Time and time again, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority has had the chance to change and correct itself, and time and time again, it has played the same old game. García and Rubin provide an in-depth overview of the Metro's harmful decision-making over the years, and we would highly recommend reading their summary. Essentially, as they explain, "During the period [from] 1980-96, the public transit decision-making process in Los Angeles County resulted in poor decisions on the type of transportation projects, … incredible missed opportunities, and massive damage to the most important components of the transit network and its users. In particular, the decision to devote over 60% of total transit subsidy funds to rail construction and operations for over a decade produced very expensive, relatively little used transit system components with paltry evident transportation purposes, while the extremely productive and cost-effective bus system – and its riders – suffered major harm to both quality and quantity of service" (224). In 1994, as a way to raise money for new projects, instead of diverting existing funds, the MTA attempted to enact a fare hike that would have significantly affected a substantial portion of the system's riders, many of whom were poor, and many of whom were people of color.

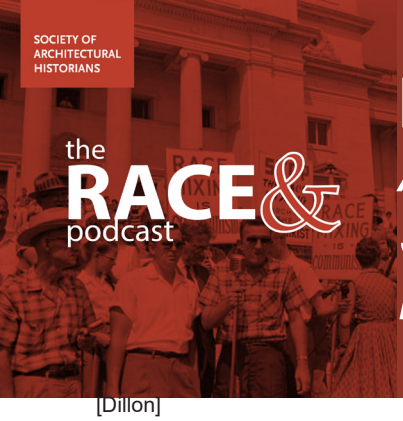
[transition]

[Ellen]
Now let's take a quick step back. When we think about the transit network in Los Angeles, we can break it down into three primary components: the bus service, the rail lines, and the freeways. All three consistently result in conditions which make life more difficult for people of color, while simultaneously maintaining spaces for white people to feel more comfortable. The location of transit stops reinforces the segregation of neighborhoods established through zoning and housing laws. Multiple sociological surveys and analyses indicate how widespread and harmful this issue is. Keeping people of color in concentrated areas that then receive little financial investment makes it harder for members of these communities to access economic opportunity. Comparisons with other demographic groups clearly show that these imposed barriers get in the way of generational change among people of color, and chronically underfunded and limited public transportation only exacerbates this discrimination.

Freeways that bypass or cut through non-white neighborhoods expose people of color to harmful pollution, which plays a role in their significantly higher rates of asthma and asthma-related deaths than in those of white populations (Sánchez et al. 24). Many rail lines do not service neighborhoods with large African American and Latino populations, so buses are the primary mode of transportation for these communities. In Los Angeles, García and Rubin report that more than 90% of Metro users ride buses (223). As we previously heard, the bus system tends to be the transit sector that receives the least investment. So, spending funds on the little-used suburban rail lines that primarily cater to white residents, and not investing in the bus system, maintains physical distance between certain groups and discriminates unfairly against people of color.

[Dillon]
As we mentioned at the beginning of this podcast, these systems are obviously more nuanced than we have time to explore, and it can be easy to fall into the trap of assuming that transit networks are generally comprised of a bus system for people of color, and a rail system for white people. Even if this binary in ridership is not fully accurate, it is actually how transit organizations themselves tend to think of their service groupings. Christof Spieler writes that this "dual mandate never really got reconciled in the world of transit, and it still shapes the transit we operate today. It's often expressed in terms of 'dependent' and 'choice' riders — terms that sound neutral (even thoughtful) but can lead to policy with racist impacts. It's a pejorative, dated and inaccurate way of thinking about transit ridership — but it has profoundly shaped our transit networks. For the 'dependent riders,' transit agencies preserved and somewhat expanded urban bus (and sometimes rail) systems. But 'dependent' meant they weren't going to be picky — the primary emphasis here was on providing service, not providing a good experience. For the 'choice riders,' however, agencies needed to provide great service — shiny new rail lines, and limited-stop express commuter buses — that had to be fast, reliable, comfortable and safe to get people out of their cars. As a result of this dual mandate, many agencies essentially built and operated two systems with different standards for amenities, service levels and levels of subsidy. … It's a transit planning and operations strategy built around the idea that there are two types of riders, one (assumed to be white) who needs (and deserves) great service because they have a choice, and another (largely Black) who doesn't need anything beyond the bare minimum. This is obvious in how transit is funded and built."

[transition]



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[Dillon]
So far, we've spoken about the location of transit infrastructure at a more macro scale. At the level of urban transit network planning, it should be clear how the Metro is a tool for furthering the settler colonial act of demarcating land along racial lines, and corralling people of color into concentrated areas that can be more easily targeted and bypassed, in terms of transit options, availability, and investment. The settler colonial nature of these systems is, naturally, something that plays out on more micro levels, too. Specifically, we'll highlight one of the ways that individual bodies are policed. Lallen Johnson and Evelyn Patterson write that "shifting social structural dynamics influence the policing of fare evasion across the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority subway system. In accordance with the postindustrial perspective, results indicate that order maintenance policing is most intense at stations located in gentrifying neighborhoods; and, at the average station this form of policing is overwhelmingly directed towards Black and Latinx riders. Collectively, study findings suggest that mass transit in gentrifying areas represents a disputed resource that is policed in the interests of urban revitalization. Moreover, this treatment of fare evasion joins a growing body of penal remedies that expands the sphere of public social control, and further marginalizes disenfranchised groups" (1).

[Ellen]
Feelings of marginalization and disenfranchisement are common among people of color who use the LA Metro. In Domestic Economies: Women, Work, and the American Dream in Los Angeles, Susanna Rosenbaum chronicles the daily experiences of immigrant women who use the Los Angeles bus system to travel to and from their jobs as domestic employees in the city's wealthy neighborhoods. Their stories paint a picture of an exhausting and dehumanizing system, which in physically relegating certain bodies to spaces of invisibility, reifies settler colonial power structures and expectations about how people of color operate within a city. This system requires people of color to wait at a bus stop for thirty minutes only to be met with a bus that is already too full to accept new passengers. It creates an environment where people are afraid to speak Spanish in front of transit guards for fear of attracting too much unwanted attention. It requires disenfranchised people to surrender several hours of their lives each day to hectic and ineffective environments, instead of the transit authority taking steps to improve efficiency. It reinforces spatial segregation in an already segregated city by making sure that the overlapping experiences of those who own cars and those who take public transit never quite converge. In Rosenbaum's words, "these physical separations lend a particular shape to the city, a built environment that creates and maintains disaffection, exclusion, and class, racial, and gender inequalities" (32).

[transition]

[Dillon]
Talking about a transit network may not seem like a direct way to address architectural issues, but we believe that it is extremely important for people interested in the built environment to have a broader awareness of how and where people move through space. Studying transportation networks is another way to explore the spatial practices of people, to understand how settler colonialism and other socioeconomic dynamics condition life for disenfranchised populations, and to see how space and material can be used to keep people apart and assert who belongs where. One way to think about transit networks is to see them as being a kind of linchpin that connects – or segregates – different social, economic, and environmental nodes. Another way to think about these systems is that they are, in and of themselves, places where people move and operate, spaces that have the power to make people feel hidden, invisible, and unwanted, but also empowered and able to act with agency.

[transition]

[Ellen]
The music that plays between clips is an excerpt from the song "A Road Less Travelled," by the artist Ketsa. This can be found on the Free Music Archive, and Creative Commons information for the song can be found in our show notes.

[Dillon]
A full list of sources can be found in our show notes as well. Material touches on a range of subjects, including transportation analyses, economic studies, sociological reports, and ethnographic accounts.

[Ellen]
Thank you for listening.

[outro music]