

## In Conversation with jackie sumell Page Comeaux

jackie sumell is an abolitionist, artist, educator, steward of Solitary Gardens, and Creative Director of the John Thompson Legacy Center. Page Comeaux is an abolitionist, architect, and organizer with NOLA to Angola.

The following interview was conducted on October 31, 2023. It has been condensed and

Page Comeaux: Let's begin by rooting this discussion in the earth. Our most generative conversations have taken place with our hands in the soil at Solitary Gardens, which you steward. What is it about tactile methods of engagement that make connections to our work and to our

communities potentially so fruitful? **jackie sumell:** Yeah, while garbling (destemming) this tulsi. I think it is incredible medicine to be in relationship to plants while having a

allows the part of your brain that falls into defensive habits to be absorbed by that action, and opens a whole new space for listening. **PC:** Having the gardens mediate my introduction to abolition was transformative. It feels communal too, when you're both doing it.

Having a place to put your hands that isn't confrontational or fearful

js: Well, right now, I'm the only one doing it.

PC: May I?

js: Yeah, grab some! This is dried tulsi, which some call holy basil.. It's for a ea blend with motherwort, lemon balm, and rose to support young people whose hearts are broken by what they're seeing happen to Gaza. There's something about the garden's relationship to possibility that I find to be spiritual. The first time I seeded Easter egg radishes—one of the easiest things to grow—I had this exalted feeling when the cotyledons pushed out of the soil. Being in relationship to miracles is part of what we need to engage with the human-built disappointments and crises of

**PC:** I remember planting sunflowers with our dear friend, Isaiah, and returning many weeks after his passing to see this striking transformation. It was startling to see stems five feet higher than we left them, but they also telegraphed just how much time had gone by since we had shared the space prior to that tragedy. It teaches us something about patience that the "constructed" world is not necessarily equipped to do. How then does the natural world endorse abolition and help us bring our thoughts from theory into practice?

js: The natural world does not rely on punishment to solve its conflicts. If we think of abolition as a recipe, some of the ingredients are patience, transformation, acceptance, accountability, possibility, curiosity, and wonder. There's a Viktor Frankl quote: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." I think the natural world creates more space between the stimulus and the response. That kind of patience that you mentioned is a practice. I often use "practice" as a framework for abolition. Sometimes we nail it and it's beautiful, and sometimes we fumble through it. But how can we become quicker with our responses to harm such that they are rooted in the goals of abolition?

PC: Is the goal as important as the process?

js: The goal is the process.

know how to use Rhino!

experience confinement

PC: You're not an architect in a professional sense.

PC: But you are making space for abolition and community. Do you

perceive yourself as an architect in that way? As a builder? js: I'm a movement builder. I'm an organizer. If the built environment is human relationships, then yes, you can call me an architect. But I don't

PC: Has your engagement with abolition shifted your perception of architecture? Where do you

is: I'd flip that and ask: Where do you experience freedom? Because 've spent more time in prisons than l havė in museums. There's a visua ocabulary of oppression. Hermar [Wallace] used to say, "You can't be steeped in shit and not come out

stinkin." We're so inured to it—living with window bars, and alarms, and fuckin' cameras—the experience of punishment and confinement is so normalized that we have to train ourselves to experience and see expansiveness and liberation.

PC: Yeah. Where don't you experience it?

natural world. But I've experienced vast amounts of liberation in carceral spaces, like Angola Prison. There are ways that the people I visit there love and care or each other through the ways that they express joy and play. part of the built environment, but t's energetic too—a relational architecture.

PC: We're in the John Thompson Legacy Center, which is the subject of the studio vou're teaching at Tulane. This space seems to defy carceral and capitalist logics—it would never be on the cover of a magazine. yet it embodies the ambitions of what architects claim they want to achieve vis-à-vis spaces for community. Why do you think

js: There's legacy—the ethos of John Thompson (JT) being one of caring for each other at all

costs—and there's geography; we are in an active part of the city for violence and poverty. My nine-year-old was killed four blocks from here, and I chose to stay. I think that those closest to the problems are closest o the solutions. When Butta, who used to drop his kid at the garden, was killed, people that were in proximity to the shooting ran in, and we ran out. Those inside were offered calming tinctures from the Abolitionist's Apothecary. We sat and processed. That wouldn't happen if we were on St. Charles Avenue—you know what I mean? Everyone just locks their doors, and gets further and further away from the problem. That doesn't solve anything. This is the Seventh Ward—historically the murder capital. In the spirit of abolition, everything changes, but it's a slow fuckin' change I think it's one of the reasons JT chose this building

PC: As for abolition, your friend Angela [Davis] has spoken to the fallacy of reform, in that it can often strengthen repression. With Angola, is advocating for a resource like air conditioning antithetical to abolition? If retrofitting the prison extends the lives of the people inside, but also extends the life of the institution, how do we balance our short-term goals of investing in their care with our long-term goals of abolishing their confines?

is: For me, making basic improvements to the building does not assume hat we are extending the life of the institution. Having your basic needs met is a principle value system for how we can dismantle prisons from the inside and the outside. On the days where my basic needs are met, I am way less prone to cause harm. So this idea that we would create spaces that fester, and encourage harm and pain is absurd if the goal is to cause less. This is where I think imagination is critical. How are we thinking about these spaces in a transitional period? Herman would even say, "Not everyone in [Angola] should be on the street. Not as they are." While we're thinking about bringing people home, we're also thinking about how to do so safely

## PC: Let's close with Herman's House. How can the dream home of a political prisoner who spent 40 years in a cell inspire us to create life-affirming spaces of care and compassion for our communities?

js: Herman designed that home with himself last, thinking about the needs of others in each and every room. The first thing that he asked for were gardens for guests to smile and walk through year round. He wanted four guestrooms and a giant wrap-around porch for folks to gather. He talked about the house being made of wood so it breathes life. Concrete and steel stifle it. Not to mention that it could also be set on fire, should there be a raid by the government, allowing him to escape through an underground tunnel! The common thread between my understanding of authentic spiritual traditions and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense is that liberation is only made possible through service to others. That's what I know to be the embodiment of Herman's

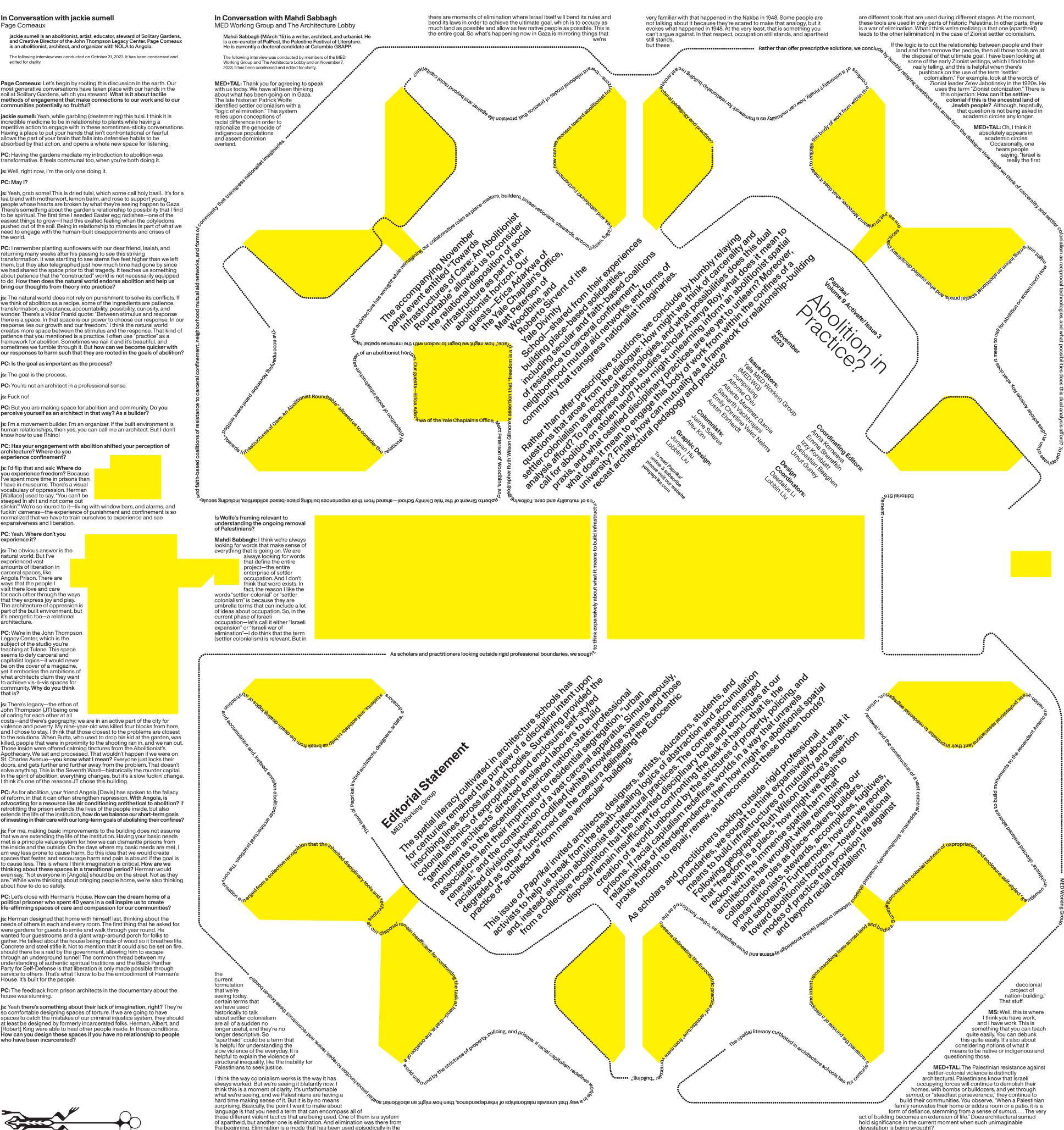
**PC:** The feedback from prison architects in the documentary about the house was stunning

js: Yeah there's something about their lack of imagination, right? They're so comfortable designing spaces of torture. If we are going to have spaces to catch the mistakes of our criminal injustice system, they should at least be designed by formerly incarcerated folks. Herman, Albert, and [Robert] King were able to heal other people inside. In those conditions. How can you design these spaces if you have no relationship to people

history of settler colonialism in Palestine, or what Rashid Khalidi calls the

Hundred-Years' War on Palestine. I think that is a good formulation—that





stands for what's happening in Gaza today. The fact that there are about 400,000 people who remain in Gaza City and are not leaving even though they've been asked to leave, and even though they might all get killed—that is sumud. The idea that your life will be threatened, but you're choosing to stay put—that's exactly the tactic of resistance that we are seeing from the people in Gaza, among other tactics and forms of resistance, which I don't need to get into here. But that's what sumud specifically looks like. Sumud is choosing to stay alive. So it could also mean picking up and going to the south to what is essentially a concentration camp that Israel is designing

I think it is a really useful term. And I might be criticized for saying it that way because there's also the pushback that we've used sumud as a tactic of life for the last 75 years. It is important to ask what it has led to. People are still being removed from their homes, and villages are still being destroyed. But I don't think that's necessarily fair. Sumud means that you choose to position yourself against the grain of the settler colonial project So, instead of making it easier, you make it harder for them.

I mean, sumud is resistance—a way to say, "We haven't forgotten that our lands are on both sides of the border. These are our lands." Most people in Gaza are refugees, and that is a very important fact. I don't think you can look at sumud as simply to stay put in one's house. I think it also implies a kind of perseverance that directs you towards life, towards living, and towards surviving. It is not just a passive thing, it's also an active thing. Sumud sometimes means taking the political solution into your own hands and saying, "No, I'm going back to my land." There's something in this act that I think is important to understand and talk about.

MED + TAL: Your discussion of sumud suggests a radical way of viewing architectural practice. So much of what we teach and practice is about designing for prosperity. But, especially in a site of active colonization, it is urgent to think about how design can advance freedom and liberation. How can we reimagine the design studio as a space of resistance? Given the complicity of our discipline in settler colonialism, both presently and historically, is this even a fair question to ask?

MS: From a design perspective, what if you were to approach the Gaza Strip without starting at the border at all? You look at it instead from the position of this city that has existed for 4,000 years. It has an immense nistory. It's one of those cities that has so much archeology beneath it that you could tell the story of the entire region through Gaza. This region, this entire area of historic Palestine, was completely destroyed. All those villages were destroyed. These Israeli towns, which in the Palestinian narrative we call "settlements," were built on top of our villages.

There is a way to look at the past and the future simultaneously. One could take a position, for example, to not center the border and not center the colonial apparatus. You might come across other relations to land; you might come across other ways to do this, and you would very quickly realize that there is no place for the border Palestinians reject this border and categorically all borders, but this border in particular. And that is the violence that should be centered if you're talking about violence.

But again, if you're talking about a place like Gaza, I would love to see a studio that centers the kind of worldview of the refugees themselves. You would also quickly realize that this narrative of the refugees in camps who can be moved around doesn't hold because that's not how they see themselves. They don't believe that. They know that is not true. And they know exactly where they want to be. They know exactly what that looks like. And there's knowledge in that connection. I think you can completely implode the entire narrative that this is a place full of refugees that has a border around it that needs to be solved from the outside. There are already solutions there. And I think that is where I get a lot of inspiration. Even with all the bombs and starvation, people's connection to the

## In Conversation with Charles L. Davis II

Charles L. Davis II is an associate professor of architectural history and criticism at UT Austin's School of Architecture. He is the author of *Building* Character: The Racial Politics of Modern Architectural Style (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019) and co-editor of Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).

The following interview was conducted by members of Yale NOMAS on October 26, 2023. It has been condensed and edited for clarity. An unabridged version can be read at yalepaprika.com.

## NOMAS: How might an abolitionist architecture reconsider the knowledge systems that were denied for centuries by the white architectural profession?

Charles L. Davis II: There are several aspects to it that I want to isolate before providing an answer. One is the fact that Black architectural talent—Black design— has existed in the United States for a long time, but only in certain forms is it formally acknowledged by the discipline of architecture. Only when someone is licensed or trained— at least at the time, in a Beaux-Arts style or a particular kind of methodology that yields monumental projects that are akin to the types of projects that were celebrated within the United States. From my perspective, this is sort of a simulative model of the settler-colonial project. If you can build just as good as white Americans, then you can be included in the professional space that was originally preserved for white male practitioners.

It was a gentleman's profession that allowed for the colonial function of Beaux-Arts pedagogy. Start within a French state institutional context to formalize and standardize the aesthetic standards of elite state projects both at home and in colonies, then have Americans coming over, learning these values, going home, and doing the same thing. Daniel Burnham can design Washington, D.C., at the same time that he designs the center of the Philippines. It is interesting that we expect Black practitioners to enter and emulate the settler-colonial ideology, mindset, and practices that would literally render them invisible in that space, and there is no critical vocabulary or formal language to express their own unique cultural standards. Black architects labor under this disciplinary definition and professional practice that tends to render them invisible, and they have to use those tools in a countercultural way to both show outsiders that they've assimilated this

That's a pretty demanding set of requirements for anybody just to enter a profession to be called an architect, let alone try to win awards. In my mind the definition of architect as a specialist, as a technician, as a professional is a racially exclusive term. It writes out the Black master craftsman and artist operating on an architectural scale. It writes out the Black entrepreneur or the Black activist operating at an urban scale. It only gives credit to people who can formalize those dynamics in a particular aesthetic language that perpetuates the supremacy of Western architectural forms, ideologies, and aesthetics.

language, but to still satisfy the cultural and programmatic needs of their people.

What needs to be abolished is the monopoly by which the architect is thought to shape the built environment. The discipline routinely critiques the world that they live in because it is not either aesthetically harmonious in the ways that they might imagine in utopian sense, or aesthetically rigorous in the ways that they reward in the profession. But it's never been that way and when we look at the built environment, much of it is not designed by architects. They've painted themselves into a small corner, but then want the whole world to give them all this power. It prevents public engagement, it prevents dealing with people on equal terms. Black entrepreneurs and Black activists had to stand in for the white state structure that neglected their space. Within that space architects worked collaboratively with others. I think that it's a really good civic model to understand what the social role of the architect could be

The definition of the architect—the person who leverages the knowledge of techne, who turns that into formalist practices in the current moment, who creates the monumental building—there's so much investment in that. Not just as an idea, but literally at the institutional basis. There's an investment in this idea that the architect is a genius who thinks differently from the general public. They produce iconic forms, and that gives them the cultural prestige that they need to make these projects. Without that mythology, we have a broader sense of who has expertise. We invented measured drawings as a single aesthetic medium by which the architect could separate their intellectual labor from manual labor and forever created a separation between the contractors, the subcontractors, and the architect who speaks with the client in the smoking rooms. I think that's the system that needs to be abolished. I don't know that architecture as a profession and discipline can do that. I think that radical experiments will have to nappen in allied fields outside, and architecture will have to appropriate those things and by degree things might change for the general practitioner.

The cynical part of me believes that architecture as it is currently defined within the discipline is inherently racialized to privilege certain types of practices, and that we are very far behind because of our reliance on money, neoliberal practices, and monumentalism—the kinds of things that literally only thrive when you reproduce privilege. If you're expecting someone to still be able to make a monumental project and to do so without creating peonage at the level of manual labor and creating a symbol that does not reproduce any element of white supremacy, I think you're fooling yourself. Your expectations are out of whack with what is possible. I think that our field quite radically needs to abolish itself. It has to abolish this idea that the architect is the prime mover of these things, that the designer is something that is necessary.

The short answer to your question is we need to abolish the label of architects and replace it with something that is more inclusive. The only way to do that is to experiment radically outside the profession but compel the profession to reclaim and reintegrate these beacons of experimentation. That is the only way that I think architecture will sufficiently change. I say this because we've put people of color at the top of institutions, we have tenured people of color in the profession, and whenever there's a kind of social turbulence around race relations, we give them a call, they come and give a lecture, they teach a guest studio, they come to a guest exhibition, and then people feel like they've done the best that they can. But the center of the discipline doesn't shift, the values of the discipline don't shift, and how we give awards doesn't shift. I think what we need to do is even more radical.

People of color who are no longer deemed architects by our discipline and profession because they've gone to art school spaces, they teach postcolonial theory in different art history programs, or they are doing nonprofit work that seems to deal more with program or social sustainability than form-making—I would argue that they never stopped being architects. They're actually reforming the label of the architect, and it's when we finally acknowledge them that we recuperate the benefits of their work. In terms of Black creatives, people like Theaster Gates, Rick Lowe, Tyree Guyton, Olalekan Jeyifous, and Amanda Williams are out here doing God's work for our profession. Black people have been making architecture, art, and spaces for a long time. We need to abolish the exclusive definitions. We have to include them in our historiography.

MS: There's a way in which sumud, I think, is relevant now. I think it still