

EQUITABLE RENEWAL: Reclamation + Repair

EDGAR ADAMS

Roger Williams University

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Reparations are one crucial means of acknowledging the irreparable harm done to BIPOC populations since the colonization of this country. Providence Rhode Island is one of several cities that have begun the difficult process of confronting the impacts of spatial injustice. By focusing on the Urban Renewal programs of the 50's and 60's, reparations programs offer an opportunity to examine the role of the planning and architecture professions in blindly perpetuating the racist policies that, coupled with discriminatory real estate and lending practices, are responsible for our current landscape of inequality. Without a clearer accounting for the lasting impacts of racism, stark disparities in outcomes will only persist. This realization, and the murder of George Floyd, prompted Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza to commit to a comprehensive Truth Telling and Reconciliation process in July of 2020 that led to the establishment of a Municipal Reparations Commission the following year.¹

Working alongside this process, our urban design studio investigated two sites of past trauma. Students were asked to confront one transgressive act with another by intervening in the work of an acclaimed architect culpable in the erasure of Providence's largest Black neighborhood. Our second site called for mending the embattled community that became home to those who were displaced. The students had access to a wide range of historical and contemporary narratives from the truth telling and reconciliation process and had regular engagement with leaders of this process.² Our two sites represent related, but starkly different, conditions that allowed us to examine a range of social and spatial injustices and expose students to the various ways that BIPOC communities continue to be prevented from participating in the wealth and community building opportunities that are available to white families. By using design as research, we were also able to document what was lost and explore place-based strategies of repair and community-centered renewal to help shape the form of the remedies sought by the Reparations Commission.

PROVIDENCE: INNOVATOR + TRANSGRESSOR

As early as 1652, Roger Williams and Thomas Olney passed a law to do away with lifelong servitude limiting it to 10 years. While not an outright prohibition, Williams also enacted laws to prevent Indigenous people from being held in perpetual servitude. Tragically the King Philip's war would put an end to this, and Indigenous people would eventually find themselves working alongside African slaves. While Providence was not the most active New England port to participate in the slave trade, Rhode Island clearly played an outsized role. The first slave ship arrived in Newport in 1696 and it was not long before slaves were a feature of everyday life in colonial Rhode Island.³ Roger Williams's principled stand was soon taken up by Moses Brown, whose brother John was a leading merchant and an ardent defender of the triangle trade. After many contentious debates, Moses successfully lobbied the General Assembly in 1787 to make Rhode Island the first state in the Union to prohibit its citizens from participating in the slave trade.⁴ Unfortunately, without a wider ban this law proved difficult to enforce and Moses and his fellow Quakers had to take their fight to the still nascent Federal authorities who were struggling to build a lasting union with the Southern states. Within Brown family itself, and within our young nation, we can clearly see the high moral consciousness and libertarian strains that would become opposing features of Rhode Island's Janus-like identity.⁵

REPARATIONS

Providence was not a prominent destination during the great migration. The African Heritage community in Providence is largely a mix of freed slaves, Indigenous people who often lived and worked alongside African slaves, and more recent arrivals from Cape Verde who fled privation in that former Portuguese colony off the coast of Africa. The Cape Verdean community was concentrated in Fox Point at the south end of Main Street and there was an early concentration of freed slaves on Mount Hope (Lippitt Hill) at the north end of Main Street. This was near the settlement of Snowtown on the eastern slopes of Smith Hill, north of the Great Salt Cove. This had been the site of 4 days of violence by White mobs in 1831 that ended in the destruction of 19 buildings within this mostly African Heritage community whose erasure by the railroads has been so complete that its exact location remained unclear for many years.⁶

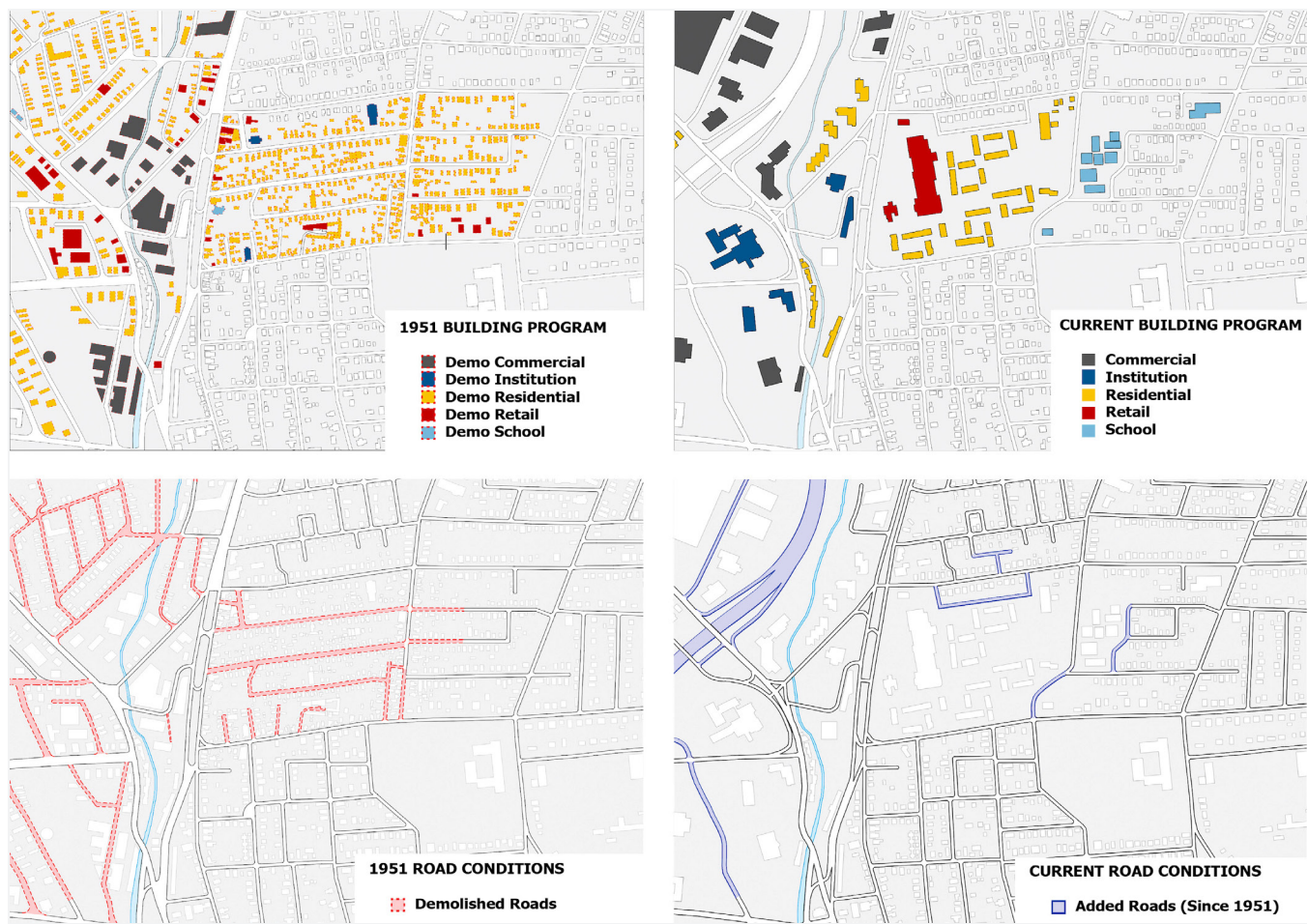


Figure 1. Lippitt Hill Before and After. Image credit: Naomi Cruz, Alessandro Pinto, Jason Plascencia, Nick Plasse.

Lippitt Hill and Fox Point were areas that, because of the age and the condition of the housing, had long served as refuge for the waves of immigrants seeking a foothold in the New World. Located adjacent to North and South Main Street parts of Lippitt Hill and Fox Point had been inhabited since the 17th century. Some of the older homes lacked indoor plumbing and modern heating. This made them prime targets for housing inspectors tasked with identifying blighted neighborhoods for demolition. These inspectors refined the clinical techniques used by the HOLC (Home Owner's Loan Corporation) to produce red lining maps responsible for the inability to get loans for these homes in the first place. While Providence's Urban Renewal projects were often seen as pioneering for their time, their focus on 'blight' and blindness regarding the eradication and displacement of whole communities made their impact on the African Heritage and Indigenous populations little different than that of other cities across the nation. Our work with the organizers of the Providence reconciliation and reparations framework, not only gave us access to the most comprehensive scholarship to date on the history of African Heritage and Indigenous people in Rhode Island, it also allowed us to inform the scope of the proposed remedy. The truth telling process

made the justification for reparations clear. The removal of the African Heritage population from the historic East Side (College Hill) had been deliberate and methodical. However, the long history of injustices made it difficult to fix of a time or place that would establish eligibility for reparations. Urban Renewal became the most practical choice, but many moved or were forced out of their homes before formal notices were issued. Those that were impacted by federal highway programs would also need to be included. Both Urban Renewal and highway construction were important in that they did not distinguish between those who were descended from slaves, Indigenous people or Cape Verdeans who came here voluntarily. All had suffered the same discriminatory treatment while trying to build a better life. The more pressing question for many was what form the reparations themselves might take? It is this last question that inspired me to think that the exploration of more place-based research and strategies could be influential in not only identifying more precisely what was lost, but also envisioning how these sites of trauma could be redeemed or transformed when seen through an anti-racist lens.

LIPPITT HILL: RECLAMATION

“We as a people are tired of moving and we expect a certain degree of stability one day. We are tired of running and we have got to stop one day.”⁷

Anonymous, Providence Journal 1959

Lippitt Hill was an early target of Providence’s Urban Renewal program that led to the complete erasure of a vibrant and integrated African Heritage community. It was replaced by University Heights, an insular housing complex and shopping mall designed by famed mall architect Victor Gruen. This project called for the displacement of 650 families, 499 of whom were Black, and 42 Black owned businesses.⁸ At a time when public housing was segregated, Lippitt Hill was promoted as a pioneering mixed race and mixed income development; however, the re-integration of a token number of the original inhabitants and black owned businesses was ultimately short lived given the sale of the property following the sunset of the 20 year provision for the subsidized housing and businesses. The planning and naming of University Heights represented a decisive break from the area’s rich and diverse history and the imposition of a form of spatial apartheid. The apartments are arranged in inward facing quadrangles that are detached from the surrounding streets and the adjacent auto-dependent mall that now includes a Whole Foods to serve wealthy East Side residents (Figure 1). The enclave enjoys ample green space, but any connection between members of this community or engagement with the adjacent urban neighborhood was

severed. During colonial times North Main and Olney Street had been the site of Olney’s Tavern not far from Gov. Jabez Brown’s house. The Brown family had deeded land in this area to some of their freed slaves (the black Browns) who were early inhabitants.⁹ Olney Street soon became the site of numerous black owned businesses and the majestic Olney Street Baptist Church. Camp Street to the east also held Black owned businesses and merchants would wheel carts up and down the narrow streets hawking vegetables, fish and crabs. The local playground had a pool. There was a Synagogue, and several churches, including one that was central to the life of the local Polish community.¹⁰ Many of the Black residents were displaced to the crowded quarters bordering this verdant super-block; however, they were advised to move, with other refugees from the East Side, to our second site in Upper South Providence.¹¹ The other option was Public Housing that White residents fled to take advantage of the GI Bill and federally guaranteed loans not available in areas that were accepting of Black residents.

During research and initial design investigations several themes emerged. First was the need to undo the systemic barriers between people and uses by connecting the housing quadrangles to one another and to the shopping mall. Second was the reintegration with the surrounding neighborhood. This included the reactivation and reconnection of Camp Street at the eastern edge of the site to the Moshassuck River to the west. In reviewing our plans with a member of the Municipal Reparations Commission from the area, he revealed that, since Camp Street had been reduced to only serving an elementary school, it had



Figure 2. Transit Plaza with stair to housing above. Image credit: Naomi Cruz, Jason Plasencia

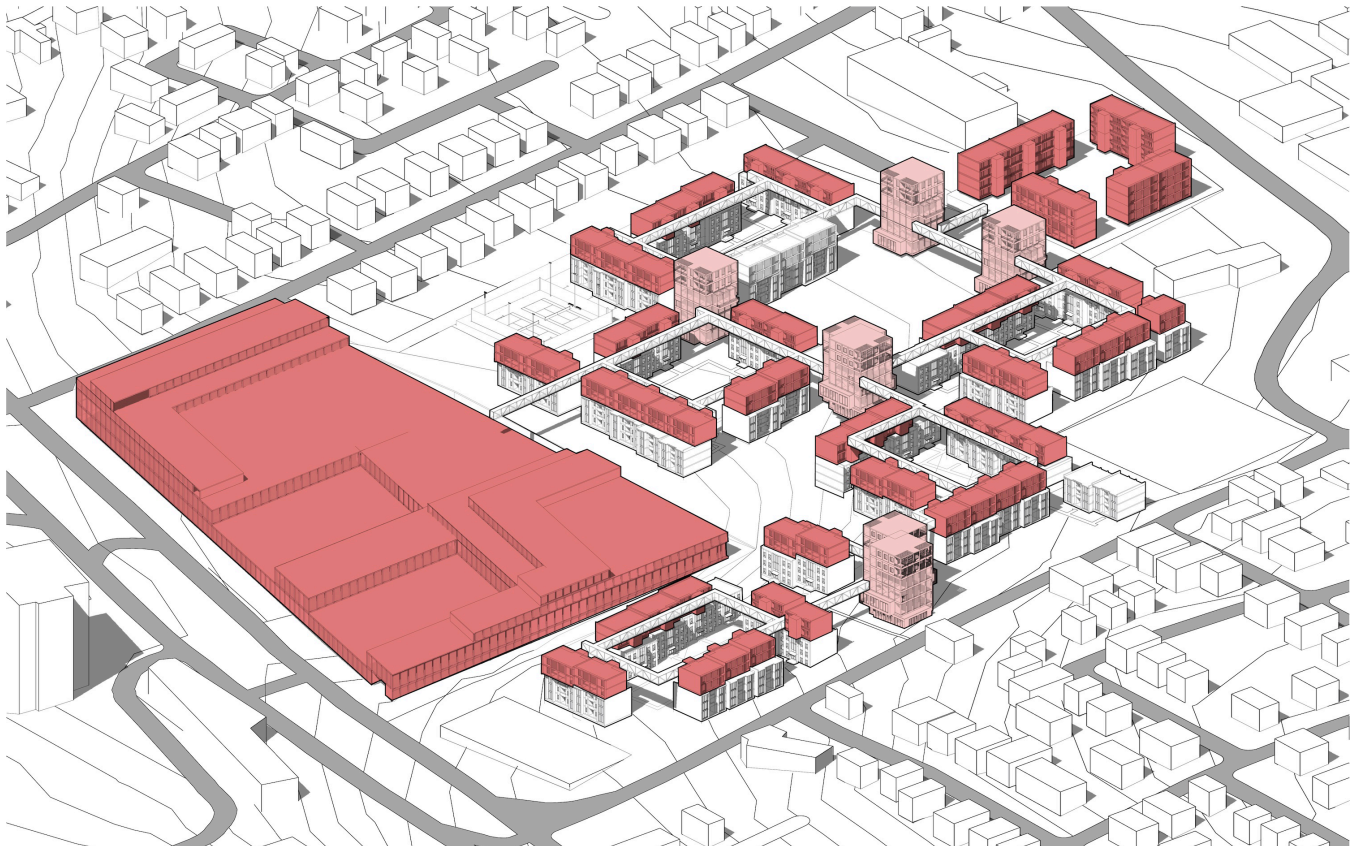


Figure 3. Overlay strategy with 'Social Condensers'. Image credit: Mason Lantz, Nathan Fehrs.

become a site of illicit activity and gang violence. This prompted one team to introduce a series of pedestrian-oriented east-west streets (or woonerfs) to connect a revitalized Camp Street to North Main Street to the west. The auto-dependent mall is transformed into a mixed-use pedestrian transit hub with additional housing and live/work opportunities above (Figure 2). A generous landscaped stair also links the housing to Randall Square and the Moshassuck River beyond. A second team superimposed housing (equal to the number of families displaced) on top of the shopping center and the existing 350-unit development.¹² The existing courtyards are intensified and interconnected by bridges leading to 'social condensers' that facilitate vertical circulation to knit these separate realms together and provide a range of support services that serve multiple courtyards. This deliberate layering of circulation and functions seeks to restore the opportunity for local businesses and services to confront the anonymity of the big box retail that now dominates the adjacent mall. The east - west connection is facilitated by additional housing linking to Camp Street (Figure 3). The re-integration and mixing of uses and populations cannot restore the community that was lost; but by densifying this important gateway to North Main Street, we could allow new forms of community to emerge and offer increased opportunity and choice for those who were previously forced into isolated pockets of poverty in forgotten corners of the city. This act of reclamation calls attention to the systematic

displacement of Black families and businesses from Main Street and their erasure from Providence's historic Main Street.

SOUTH PROVIDENCE: REPAIR

Our second site was subject to a series of equally violent, but more gradual intrusions, that further marginalized and eroded the fabric of this community of last resort. South Providence was annexed from Cranston in 1868 as port activities shifted south on freshly filled land along Allen's Ave.¹³ Easier access to sea and rail networks attracted a range of industries. This industry attracted Irish and Jewish immigrants who had previously crowded into neighborhoods like Lippitt Hill and Fox Point, but were excluded from the more fashionable West End (Italians were concentrated in the North End). This process of the sorting of ethnic groups into discreet neighborhoods was not uncommon; however, in South Providence previously distinct African Heritage populations were forced together by Urban Renewal. The predominant housing type was the familiar triple-decker. Major streetcar lines on Broad St., Prairie Avenue and Eddy St. provided important commercial and institutional corridors leading to Downcity. Upper South Providence also became host to modern institutions such as Rhode Island Hospital following the Civil War. The city continued to grow southward, and White flight accelerated when the construction of I-195 gave access to the East Bay suburbs. Black families, who were displaced from Lippitt Hill and Fox Point to South

Providence, now had to contend with the construction of I-95 which paralleled Eddy St. and Allen's Ave. The cleared east side of Eddy St. was designated Light Industrial effectively crippling this once vital corridor. Not only did I-95 cut the community off from the waterfront, this embattled community also required buttressing from the ongoing encroachments from the Rhode Island Hospital (Figure 4). The Civil Rights and Fair Housing protests that led to Martin Luther King's assassination also set off a series of violent protests that damaged many businesses along Prairie Avenue.¹⁴ This ultimately ended investment in this increasingly isolated Black community. More recently, the Rhode Island Credit Union and 2008 sub-prime mortgage disasters led to South Providence having the highest number of vacant and abandoned properties in the City.

Urban design strategies for South Providence focused on selective infill and the reestablishment of the pre-existing commercial corridors. Eddy Street was rezoned to restore more compatible uses and buffer against I-95. Broad Street, which is the western border of this neighborhood, has become an important corridor for the burgeoning Latinx community, further limiting opportunities for Black owned businesses. We focused on transforming Prairie Avenue and the underutilized Urban League property from a DMZ between the neighborhood and the ever-expanding hospital, to once again allow it to become the heart of the Black community. Another team explored various strategies to restore the neighborhoods defined by these corridors and the east – west streets that connect to the waterfront (Figure 5). Numerous civic organizations have invested in South Providence creating a patchwork

of isolated and disconnected efforts. Urban gardens have given life to vacant lots but are not strategically located. By seeking to establish more identifiable neighborhoods we also discovered further evidence of the long history of disenfranchisement. A proposed green space was created to draw attention to the otherwise isolated Pond Street Baptist Church; however, we were curious to find that the contemporary 'A-frame' sanctuary was located on Chester Avenue. The Church's roots date back to 1821 and the founding of the African Meeting Union and School House Society (an organization championed by Moses Brown). The African Meeting Union was founded to allow Black members of the First Baptist Church in America (who were relegated to the balcony) a place to worship independently and educate their children. In 1841 a splinter group built The Second Freewill Baptist Church on Pond Street on the west side of the city. After 74 years it became known as the Pond Street Baptist Church. From 1945-1965 it occupied an impressive structure on nearby Stewart Street with imposing twin towers.¹⁵ Only a barely discernible fragment of Pond Street survived the construction of I-95 and the adjacent West End Urban Renewal project. Through this early effort to empower the African community by the First Baptist Church in America (founded by Roger Williams and Chad Brown, Moses Brown's ancestor) we see an all too familiar pattern of displacement and disenfranchisement that subverts the best intentions of this progressive community which remains a refuge for those seeking 'liberty of conscience'.¹⁶



Figure 4. Upper South Providence Before and After (demolitions in red) Image credit: M. Cruz, G. Noonan, D. Perez, M. Smith, C. Uriona-Gamboa,



Figure 5. Reconnecting Corridors and Neighborhoods Image credit: Maria Cruz, David Perez, Camila Uriona-Gamboa

STUDIO METHODOLOGY

Research intensive design studios are a common feature of architectural education. The structuring of these studios and selection of topics is carefully considered to achieve clear learning outcomes. Community engaged studios often struggle to balance these learning objectives with the more concrete outcomes desired by the community. In addition, the desire for a single outcome or product for implementation can inhibit individual exploration and skill development. Travel limits imposed during COVID-19 had serious implications for community engaged studios and called for a different form of engagement. The murder of George Floyd had provoked a resounding call for racial justice. Before we can engage meaningfully with communities of color, we have to confront the entire apparatus of racist planning and its complicated history. In their introduction to *Spatializing Justice*, Teddy Cruz and Fiona Forman concluded that it is only by “exposing the drivers of inequality and challenging exclusionary urban policies that undermine spatial justice” that we can find a new way forward.¹⁷ The Truth Telling and Reconciliation process initiated by the City and moderated by the University served as a crucial resource. We also benefited from direct access to members of this process and a member of the Reparations Commission. As this process was unfolding, our students engaged in exhaustive mapping, historic and demographic research to graphically reveal the conditions prior to Urban Renewal and the concrete impacts of the extensive demolitions occasioned by the renewal and highway construction projects that occurred during this time frame. At the same time, more contemporary GIS mapping of voucher recipients (by Rhode Island Housing) revealed that the access to the opportunity that the Section 8 program was designed to deliver

remains elusive without the removal of more entrenched local and regional barriers to spatial justice.

By looking at Lippitt Hill, the site of a major displacement, and South Providence, the destination for those displaced, we could see for ourselves the ongoing destabilization and fragmentation of the African Heritage Community. By critically intervening in the work of a prominent architect, students had to confront the racist, anti-urban and auto-centric paradigms promoted during that time. The loss of community was made explicit in different ways on each site. In both cases, the lack of connectivity and disruptions to the urban and social fabric were tangible. In one case this had been by design, but in South Providence it was by neglect and well-meaning but disjointed half measures. Here we engaged in strategic proposals that transgressed boundaries to reclaim Prairie Avenue. While not dealing with the economic and political realities of the moment, these proposals were intended to reclaim what was lost. These transgressive acts, while not coming from the community, were directly inspired by the painful history the reparations were attempting to address. The aggressive nature of the proposals was a direct challenge to the power dynamics at play on each site. Design was viewed as a critical act of engagement with the built environment and these stark reminders of its political, economic and social dimensions. As a capstone undergraduate studio, and the only to focus on urban design, this studio also benefitted from the University’s close relationship with HousingWorks RI a housing research and advocacy organization.

CONCLUSION

“Reinterpreting architecture as a social medium capable of changing hearts and minds, and reorienting urbanization, begins by critically engaging the conditions that have produced our urban crises.”¹⁸

Teddy Cruz and Fiona Forman, *Spatializing Justice*

Providence’s ‘pioneering’ Urban Renewal projects reflect our earlier struggles to reconcile the founding ideals of our nation with the horrors of slavery. Lippitt Hill was the first racially integrated, mixed income urban renewal project in the country. Providence was also responsible for the College Hill Study in Historic Area Renewal that was the first study to pair historic preservation with ‘targeted’ clearance. Both studies boasted of unprecedented community participation. The College Hill study received a planning citation at the 1960 AIA convention and was widely lauded in the architectural press.¹⁹ However, the East Side Renewal Plan that it sponsored uprooted most of the remaining Black residents of the East Side and struck at the heart of the Cape Verdean community on South Main Street. While a watershed moment for the preservation community and Providence’s long and painful rebirth, it has also been responsible for widespread gentrification.

Our students have limited preparation for their Urban Design studio making it a crash course in the hard learned lessons of the last 100 years. For a community engaged studio during the COVID-19 pandemic, the historic research and contemporary interviews available from the Truth Telling and Reconciliation process were indispensable. However, the lack of genuine engagement with members of the South Providence community put us at risk of repeating some of the elitist top-down processes that were responsible for the inequitable policies we were attempting to remedy. With Lippitt Hill we were engaging in a deliberate critique by resurrecting the ghost of a community whose memory was rapidly fading. However, in South Providence there is a very proud and active community that we were not able to directly engage in our process. This questions the scale and ambitions of engaged studios that strive to empower minority communities with one-off initiatives, without accounting for our own culpability in creating the conditions that they are struggling with. To do so risks condescension; however, by seeking to provoke a larger discussion without attention to the very real needs of the communities involved risks another form of conceit. To be effective we must engage at both scales, to confront spatial injustice and to empower members of the impacted communities. All are in agreement that the status quo is not working. The distrust of outside experts and institutions that these communities see as responsible for the displacement and gentrification that continues to marginalize them is real. The reparations discussions have been a powerful opportunity for the African Heritage community to speak with one voice; however, the history of displacement and disenfranchisement have led to a loss of

cohesion that sometimes makes this difficult. Once most of the Black community resided in heart of the historic East Side, along the rivers that fed commerce and industry. Now they are scattered in neglected neighborhoods and public housing projects on the urban fringe.

By confronting the stark discrepancy between conditions before an after Urban Renewal, we were able to expose our students and the people of Providence to the wide array of social and spatial injustices that have impacted the African Heritage community. We were able to see for ourselves the various ways that African Heritage communities continue to be destabilized and prevented from participating in the wealth and community building opportunities that are available to White communities. We were also able to make a clear argument for significant ongoing place-based investment in those communities impacted by Urban Renewal. The loss of community is hard to quantify; however, the summer following this studio, the Providence Municipal Reparations Commission issued their final report. This report proposed a comprehensive plan that moves from the “Recognition of Harm” to the “Expansion of Cultural Engagement and Educational Opportunities for African Heritage and Indigenous Communities”.²⁰ The “Creation of an African Heritage and Indigenous Survivors & Descendants of Providence Urban Renewal Displacement Fund” is just one of eleven restorative justice recommendations that include healthcare, economic development, educational, cultural, and political reforms to support African Heritage institutions and communities and to remove barriers for its members to participate more fully in the life of the City.²¹ By exploring physical responses to the tangible loss of community that the Commission’s proposals are seeking to restore, we were seeking more explicit responses to demonstrate what was lost. By pursuing a research intensive design process that drew on historical mapping and the powerful narratives captured by Truth Telling and Reconciliation process we provided an engaged and hopeful space for students seeking to understand the roots of the racial reckoning they were experiencing in real time. By struggling to find meaningful responses, students had to confront the hubris and racism that fueled the destruction of so many impoverished urban communities during this period. Through design they were able to build empathy and empower both students and residents to envision a more just, equitable and anti-racist Providence.

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