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The 'counter-spaces' of New Bedford's 'Abolitionist Row'

Understanding black spaces as overlooked core canon

Black Spaces Matter

Dariel Cobb

The exhibition 'Black Spaces Matter', conceived by architectural historian Pamela Karimi and brought to life through extensive curatorial collaborations, presents a series of vignettes exploring the past, present, and future of New Bedford, Massachusetts, a hotbed of abolitionist activity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and a haven for freed and escaped slaves at the end of the so-called 'underground railroad'. Through a mix of media – objects, photographs, videos, and a virtual reality rig – the show presents a compelling picture of a vital, historic, and living African-American community that first thrived prior to the US Civil War, and its continued grassroots struggle to preserve its architectural heritage. The stories and images presented collate an important and overlooked chapter of New England architectural history, suggesting the utility of new media in historical documentation and highlighting the continued need to explore positive examples of communities of colour through the dimensions of space and place.

In its larger context, the show chips away at a mass of historiographic issues for architectural historians interested in the intersection of race and space in North America: lack of documentation, lack of popular recognition, and uncertainty about which methodologies to favour when discussing the conservation of buildings distinguished not by their formal or material qualities, but by the events that took place within them. The poor preservation of important African-Americans' homes is an architectural epidemic – the near demolition of Rosa Parks's house in Detroit before an artist paid for its transportation to Berlin provides



1 The opening tableau of the 'Black Spaces Matter' exhibition features an 1890s-era photograph of famed abolitionist and New Bedford resident Frederick Douglass, seated, and his grandson Joseph, playing the violin.

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ample evidence of collective neglect – and shows like 'Black Spaces Matter' are urgently needed to draw attention to history at risk. This show offers an instructive example of the power of micro-histories to illuminate larger historiographic problems, and presents case studies worthy of emulation by historians and preservationists alike. However, the show lacks the overall impact promised by its title, and seems muted in comparison with its political namesake, the Black Lives Matter movement.

New Bedford and Abolitionist Row

New Bedford, Massachusetts, was once a premier whaling hub, mentioned in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. It lies an hour south of Boston along a protected harbour at the mouth of the Acushnet River. New Bedford became a haven for free African-Americans as early as the mid-1700s, driven in part by enterprising abolitionists from the Quaker community whose maritime trade along the Atlantic seaboard allowed opportunities to shelter and transport escaped slaves. While Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1783, historian Manisha Sinha, interviewed in the exhibition, notes that an 'informal Jim Crow' system persisted. It was primarily the needs of New Bedford's lucrative and gruelling whaling industry, with its incessant churn of workers, that encouraged tolerance towards the newly-arrived and unemployed. A network of wealthy black entrepreneurs like Nathan and Polly Johnson, whose Georgian/Federalist home was recently renovated by the New Bedford Historical Society and designated a National Historic Landmark, helped settle new arrivals. The Johnson house anchored New Bedford's black activist community, which was substantial enough to resist attempted 'reclamations' of former slaves, a practice then permitted under federal law. It was here that Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), author, abolitionist, and escaped former slave, adopted his surname and first engaged in the anti-slavery oratory which would bring him to national prominence. Today, New Bedford is a diverse community with a large Cape Verdean population that, having suffered the decline of manufacturing and the ravages of 'urban renewal', is in the process of reinvention, with local efforts driven by preservation-enthusiasts and resident visual artists.

Staging the exhibition

The exhibition explores a neighbourhood known today as 'Abolitionist Row', the better preserved of nineteenth-century New Bedford's two affluent, mixed-race communities. The voices of University of Connecticut historian Manisha Sinha, and Lee Blake, president of the New Bedford Historical Society, echo across the polished concrete lobby of the exhibition space, situated on a busy corner of Newbury Street in the city of Boston. An architectural model of Abolitionist Row, with important residents' homes highlighted in pink, attracts visitors to the window even on a snowy day. In one of a trio of video interviews with academics, mounted on the gallery's central pillar, Sinha provides an historical overview of New Bedford, and Blake describes contemporary efforts to maintain its legacy, through architectural preservation, educational outreach, and memorial-building. Harvard professor John Stauffer discusses the importance of documentary photography as historical record, citing as examples both iconic images of Frederick Douglass and those produced by the Black Lives Matter movement – the show's singular reference to its namesake as it gestures towards the larger political *milieu*. Urbanist and MIT professor Caesar McDowell articulates the methods underlying equitable, participatory design. Each video corresponds to another part of the exhibition, divided thematically – if not spatially – into New Bedford's past, present, and future.



2 An interactive console provides a tour of New Bedford's Abolitionist Row combining historical information and beautifully photographed images.

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3 A view from above of the 'Black Spaces Matter' exhibition at the McCormick Gallery, Boston Architectural College.

Architectural portraits

Greeting the visitor with a juxtaposition of past and present, person and place, an enlarged photograph of Frederick Douglass and his grandson sits opposite a series of equi-rectangular photographs by Michael Swartz – 360-degree panoramas with multiple vanishing points – depicting homes highlighted by the architectural model across the room. Swartz makes visually compelling architectural portraits, images captured over a period of one year and digitally compiled into an ideal sunny day. Each historic home is named, but viewers must search elsewhere in the gallery for information about their former inhabitants: a mismatch between visual and textual presentation that persists throughout, strangely rendering the images mute and object-like. An interactive presentation of these homes, beautifully photographed and historically situated, provides an excellent example of the power of new media. The interactive console sits on a wall facing the street, initially hidden from view, and was a delight to discover. Following the Swartz images, one sees instead a second wall of New Bedford period photographs, paired with descriptions of prevalent architectural styles and a brief history of the whaling industry, which lacks the artistry and interest of the equi-rectangular portraits. Individuals' period portraits, the faces of abolitionists, inventors, and activists from nineteenth-century New Bedford's black and white communities, are accompanied by biographies printed on an enormous plastic card, shifting the burden of individual identification to a highly-engaged viewer. Glass cases of material ephemera – a whale bone, an oil lamp, a harpoon tip – and two caned chairs, with inevitable but frustrating 'do not sit' signs, suggest a museum-like atmosphere. This 'past' section is completed by a series of maps depicting the distribution of people of colour in New Bedford between the 1830s and 1890s based on information from Kathryn Grover's text, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 2001). The upheaval and disruption of urban renewal in the mid-twentieth century is mentioned but not directly mapped.

The 'present' section is continued in three video interviews with preservation-minded resident activists, produced by filmmaker Don Burton. Their engagement and liveliness, as they relate the joy of discovering the historic legacy of their homes and neighbourhood, is a highlight of the show. Such documentary filmmaking and resident interviews promise a lasting future oral history of the present moment. The adjacent 'future' section presents design projects by Pamela Karimi's students at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, who proposed community-specific urban landscape interventions for Abolitionist Row. Proposals for a vacant lot, purchased by the Historical Society and slated for transformation into a park and potential neighbourhood anchor, audition for consideration. A virtual reality (VR) rig – which has to be dismantled and turned-on through a series of iPhone clicks – presents an aerial view of Abolitionist Row today with audio commentary by Grover. The VR footage, shot from an aerial drone, moves only up and down in space, not through the neighbourhood, and thus seems disconnected from the gallery's other images. While some might find the out-of-body VR experience slightly unnerving, I noticed two young visitors make a beeline right for the rig. Clearly, new technology is a winning partner in enticing such an audience to engage with history.

Black spaces and transformational places

The gallery's young visitors underscore the value of this show, and the urgent need to build up a familiar repertoire of architectural examples not just of black spaces, but transformational places like Abolitionist Row. As exhibition

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host, the Boston Architectural College continues its role as a centre of diversity in the Boston-Cambridge design community, graduating large numbers of students of colour. At the accompanying panel discussion, questions from students and from residents of Boston's historic black neighbourhoods underlined both the epistemic and emotional need for shows of this kind, ones that showcase what Manisha Sinha calls 'counter-spaces'. Yet, rather than christen an 'alternative' or 'other' architectural history, the goal is to recognise places like New Bedford as overlooked core canon. To this end, Karimi and her co-organisers should be encouraged to make the exhibition's VR and interactive console available online for use by a wider audience.

Panel speaker Jana Cephas, designer and architectural historian at the University of Michigan, emphasised the importance of stable databases and repositories for new media mapping projects that encourage broad participation. Cephas has developed a mapping platform, PARCi (Public Archive of Architecture and Cities), which requires no knowledge of GIS to operate. She has used it with her students to visually demonstrate the impact of the Great Migration, the movement of six million African-Americans from the southern states to the north and west, continuing in the tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Philadelphia Negro*, published by Du Bois in 1899, is an urban study of a mixed-race Philadelphia neighbourhood that , through maps, helped make black life visible as a spatial presence. For the Paris Exhibition of 1900, Du Bois drew a larger set of vibrant infographic diagrams describing the spatial distribution of African-Americans, images recently digitised by the Library of Congress. One hopes that access to Du Bois's material, and to the material in this show, will have a multiplying effect.

In this era of mass immigrant deportations from the United States, New Bedford serves as a potent reminder of the meaning of a 'sanctuary city'. Lee Blake encapsulates the larger ambitions of the 'Black Spaces Matter' exhibition using spatial rhetoric, asserting in her video interview that not only are African-Americans talking today about how black spaces matter, but also, 'how do we feel about trying to walk in the world?'. The content of this show gives this question more weight. While relaying historical, spatial data to the public in a compelling manner is a difficult challenge, a strength of the exhibition is the multifaceted articulation of its subject material through various narrative forms. For architects and planners, McDowell issues a challenge, referring to design professionals as, 'the mediators between democracy and capitalism'. Like many recent academic responses to the Black Lives Matter movement – from University of Michigan architectural historian Ana María León's social-media-sourced 'Space/Race' syllabus to the Aggregate Architectural History Collective's *Black Lives Matter* essay collection – the 'Black Spaces Matter' exhibition marks two important trends: the hunger among a younger generation of historians to re-examine the spatial impact of race, and the use of new media tools to facilitate their work. Finding ways to make history operative in the present moment opens up new planes of political engagement while simultaneously tilling fertile epistemic territory. It encourages both architectural conservation and creation. The converse – a progressive loss of architectural history in its physical manifestation – was a recent topic of another Aggregate publication, *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage: From Napoléon to ISIS*, edited by Pamela Karimi and Nasser Rabbat. Like lost buildings, we know that statues also die. While the New Bedford Historical Society works to build a monument to Frederick Douglass, white supremacists are elsewhere battling to prevent the removal of monuments to Confederate Civil War generals and segregationists. The 'Black Spaces Matter' exhibition could not have arrived at a more opportune time.

'Black Spaces Matter: Exploring the Aesthetics and Architectonics of an Abolitionist Neighborhood' was held at Boston Architectural College, McCormick Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts from 19 November 2017 to 29 January 2018.

Dariel Cobb is a PhD candidate at MIT. Her work examines modern art and architecture across the Black Atlantic, with a particular focus on plastic synthesis between art and architecture, the influence of Négritude on expressions of nationalism, and the entanglement of modern architecture and 'tropicality' in the postcolony.

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