Reconstruction and Redistribution: A Transatlantic Conversation on Architecture, Politics, and Pandemic
Anne Kockelkorn and Reinhold Martin

Between July and August 2020—several months after the global lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic—Anne Kockelkorn and Reinhold Martin engaged in a transatlantic email conversation, focusing on how the inequalities revealed by the pandemic have impacted American society and how this, in turn, impacts the conceptualization of architectural history. The conversation begins with the situation in New York in early July. It investigates

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fig. 1 Photograph Reinhold Martin July 2020

the modalities of biopolitical infrastructures of care and violence, traces histories of inequality in the United States back to the Reconstruction era, and, finally, reflects on the need for common histories of redistribution.

July 6, 2020
Anne Kockelkorn: New York, one of the most densely populated cities in the world, was an epicenter of the pandemic and an epicenter of the protests against racial killings in the United States. As an architectural historian living close to the Columbia University campus, what did you observe, and live, during the last months of imposed social isolation?

July 10, 2020
Reinhold Martin: Given the speed of change, I should begin by noting that I am writing in early July 2020. At Columbia, we

began moving online to remote instruction on March 9; New York City public schools closed on March 16, and New York State began "sheltering in place" on March 20. Confirmed COVID-19 case numbers in the city's five boroughs (Brooklyn, The Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, Staten Island) peaked on April 6; deaths peaked the following day. As elsewhere, data were and remain imprecise but plentiful, and the trends were clear. In the United States, most of the response has been guided at the state level rather than at the federal or municipal level. As is well known, the White House has combined barbaric bravado with calculated indifference. Consistent with neoliberal doctrine, the plan was not to have a plan.

State-level responses have varied widely. Daily press briefings from New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo became a counter-theater of technocratic "competence" that masked several disastrous early decisions, like the initial hesitation to close and the later decision to return thousands of elderly COVID patients to nursing homes, which by many accounts dramatically increased deaths in these facilities. To date, total confirmed and probable deaths from COVID-19 in New York City are over twenty-three thousand. Even so, the numbers could have been much higher.

Sometime in mid-March, the New York City soundscape changed. Ambulance sirens became nearly constant. Working from home, several blocks from the Columbia campus and near a hospital, has therefore entailed a mix of privilege — as so many others have lost their jobs or risked exposure to keep the city running — and dread. At some point individual ambulances seemed to blend into a single scream. Each announced a life in the balance, another statistic but also another story. In the immediate aftermath of the brutal police killing of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis, helicopters took over. Many Black Lives Matter protest marches and demonstrations passed near or through our neighborhood. Those in which we participated were peaceful, but the helicopters hovering loudly overhead registered the constant threat of state-sanctioned violence against which protesters assembled. These were not separate events. In New York, as in the rest of the United States, the most devastating effects of COVID-19 by far have been on Black and Latinx communities. Each event, however, has had its hardware. The pandemic: ambulances, personal protective equipment, ventilators, and a surreal heterotopia of hospital tents in Central Park set up by a homophobic religious group. The protests: helicopters, guns, batons, riot shields, masks, microphones, tear gas canisters, and statues. In the middle of it all, on June 23, New York State held a primary election in which an unusual number

of left-progressive local Democrat candidates—including sever-al democratic socialists—ran strong campaigns. The ballots are still being counted.

July 13, 2020
AK: You have often emphasized how biopolitics, modern eco-nomic rationality, and the interests of those who profit from it more than others are interrelated. The calculated indifference of the "plan to not have a plan," however, seems to entirely revoke the biopolitics of hygiene underlying the birth of the modern institution and modern infrastructure. How would you charac-terize the fragile infrastructures in New York (and the United States) today and their mode of functioning—and what could be strategies for their reappropriation given the increasing col-lective refusal to put so many lives at risk?

July 17, 2020
RM: This is a complex question. Let me begin again with electoral politics, and then go to biopolitics and governmentality. In New York City, virtually all the left-progressive local campaigns empha-sized racial and class discrepancies that led to highly divergent risks associated with COVID-19, and expressed the intersectional nature of these risks with slogans like "Housing is Healthcare." The Black Lives Matter protests have further emphasized the role of the police in maintaining and propagating the social order of the carceral state on a magnitude well beyond that of the reformist, Benthamite "discipline" addressed by Foucault, even as prisons, including New York's notorious Riker's Island, became sites of major COVID outbreaks. Among the most consistent demands made by protesters was to "Abolish the Police," or more modestly, to "Defund the Police," both of which recognized the centrality of specific police techniques to the neoliberal urban order, such as "stop and frisk" practices or the "broken windows"-policing of petty crimes, which imposes harsh penalties for minor offens-es (like a broken window) based on the theory that offenders are entrepreneurs making cost-benefit calculations and can be deterred by raising the material costs of committing more serious crimes. This policy is among those that have led to outrageous-ly disproportionate incarceration rates, especially among Black and Hispanic populations.

   Unlike Minneapolis, which took more dramatic steps toward police reform, most of the discussion in New York centered on a proposal to cut one billion dollars from the New York Police Department's six-billion-dollar annual budget. After a long, ran-corous debate, the New York City Council voted to reallocate an

amount close to that (depending on what you count) but in a manner that did not match the goals of substantial defunding. All of this took place amid a budget crisis stemming from the huge economic losses related to the pandemic and the federal government's project of forcing much of the cost onto states and municipalities.

Institutions of biopolitical governmentality, most notably hospitals, bent under the stress. It is worth remembering that the principal object of Foucault's critique was the European welfare state—a form quite different from that in the United States. On one level, with mounting "caseloads" and insufficient "surveillance testing," New York healthcare workers have essentially demanded more (or more competent) governmentality, not less. Or rather, to adapt Foucault's language, they have demanded "not to be governed" in a manner that grants near-absolute sovereignty to market dynamics expressed, for example, as supply chains, procurement, and pricing of personal protective equipment. The plan not to plan is in itself a way of governing. Early on it became clear that, despite decades of prior warning, federal preparedness and stockpiles of necessary medical equipment like personal protective equipment or ventilators were woefully inadequate. This was not accidental; rather, it was the purposeful result of off-loading (over these same decades) what remained of planning onto the anti-planning "dynamism" of markets—most pathetically expressed by the spectacle of individual US states competing with each other for access to price-gouged equipment from third-party suppliers in a microcosmic replay of the neo-Darwinian competition among nation-states for the same supplies and treatments and eventually, perhaps, for a vaccine.

Importantly for the US context, most states, unlike the federal government, are unable to engage in significant deficit spending due to balanced budget requirements. For a state like New York and its hardest-hit municipality, New York City, this has meant that, even with low interest rates, debt has to be offset with income. Thus, with an estimated nine billion dollars in losses due to the pandemic, municipal institutions of biopolitical care like public education, housing, and transportation, and not institutions of state violence like police or prisons, have faced the most severe budget cuts. So in terms of strategies of reappropriation, one possible step for popular movements (like Black Lives Matter, the climate movement, the movement for universal healthcare, and others) is, through left-progressive allies in government, to gain control of budgets from the municipal to the national level and redirect funds from the military and the police toward what we can call "systems of care" like housing, education, and healthcare. Each

of these systems has a hardware: a technical infrastructure and an architecture. Reimagining and redesigning that hardware to save lives and improve them, rather than to shorten or end them, is the first task for professionals, educators, and activists working on the built environment.

July 23, 2020
AK: The pandemic renders the need for what you call "institutions of biopolitical care"—schools, hospitals, housing—more visible and more urgent. You state two possible access strategies: first, redirect budgets to those institutions of care—and with it, the empowerment for local governments to resist neoliberal state rescaling and austerity; and, second, reimagine the institution, possibly via the power and skill of the architectural imaginary. Something similar appears in your recent essay "Abolish Oil," when you relate a drinking fountain of the public facility of the New Deal institution being reserved for "WHITES" to the way the New Deal legislation silently facilitated Jim Crow laws—the state and local laws that maintained racial segregation in the Southern states of the United States. I wish to pause a little on that relation between the drinking fountain and infrastructure politics, law, and architecture. Contemporary professional practice tends to neatly separate legal frameworks from their architectural materialization. How to relate the manifestations of biopolitical governing and "architecture"—as in "design of the built environment" for professional practice? Does your understanding of "architecture" as a technological medium of organization and distribution facilitate this rapprochement?

July 25, 2020
RM: In the United States, as in most capitalist countries, law and law enforcement are fundamentally tied to property. As I write, heavily equipped and armed anonymous federal police units—storm troopers by any other name—have deliberately initiated violent confrontations with unarmed protesters on a nightly basis in Portland, Oregon. The most widely reported clashes have taken place in and around Chapman Square, Terry Schrunk Plaza, and Lownsdale Square, a sequence of adjacent plazas in downtown Portland, opposite the Mark O. Hatfield United States Courthouse. Among the most common public excuses made for this provocation, after weeks of mostly peaceful civilian protests, has been the defense of federal property, in this case the Hatfield Courthouse. The backdrop is the toppling or attempted toppling of statues and other monuments to white supremacy in cities across the country, including in Washington, D.C., where

such cultural artifacts are counted among federal property, and their defacement, like that of federal courthouses, is considered a crime. The decision to provoke crimes against property and then enforce laws protecting that property is thus at the heart of this armed assault on legal, constitutionally protected civilian protest in Portland. Wherever it goes from here, this is clearly an electoral strategy on behalf of a beleaguered sovereign, and, should conditions deteriorate, a made-for-TV advertisement for governing by paramilitary force.

This law-and-order project is related to the Jim Crow laws in a manner that compares with New York's notorious "poor doors," some of which are still visible on the facades of new apartment buildings. Like the "separate but equal" drinking fountains, bathrooms, and library entrances of Jim Crow, these contemporary "poor doors" are separate entrances for the mostly Black and Hispanic working-class residents of the "affordable housing" that the city's laws require real estate developers to include as a supplement to market rate speculative units.

Beyond its occasional appearance on television and now, in citizen-journalist videos of the protests, how does architecture-as-medium figure here? Insofar as the police are instruments of an explicitly racist biopolitical order, their extensions into the built environment are equally so. Since the 1970s, architects and urbanists have incorporated police functions like "defensible space" and "eyes on the street" into instruments of biopolitical care like public housing; these functions have, in turn, been taken up by the very police discourse that was, directly or indirectly, responsible for the death of George Floyd. I am referring to the "broken windows" policing I mentioned earlier. Translated into the language we are speaking, the window, like the "poor door," is therefore an order-producing medium; its breaking signals the onset of disorder, which, according to the theory, can be deterred by one of two things: watchful "eyes on the street" or asymmetrical police violence.

July 30, 2020

AK: Aiming to understand the increased inequality caused by COVID-19, you bring three objects of scrutiny to the fore: property (understood as the political DNA of the United States), television shows and their infrastructure, and the racist policing of public institutions. Architecture, then, is what mediates a social order of what you have called dispossession along the axes of race and class, which can be traced back to the plantations of the North American colonies. If we, as architectural historians, are to construct a usable past relevant to confront future challenges,

how can we provide the grounds to conceive of measures that refund biopolitical institutions of care and to conceptualize their architectural articulations?

August 7, 2020
RM: There are indeed histories that may prove "usable" not only in opposing an authoritarian project but also in replacing it with a genuine left-progressive vision. The New Deal, and in particular, those New Deal policies and programs that recognized the strength of an organized working class and the necessity of large-scale economic and ecological planning, have provided historical support to ambitious proposals like the Green New Deal. In the article on oil abolition, I argue that the historical imagination should reach further back, toward the abortive, incomplete project of post-Civil War Reconstruction — the massive effort among Southern Black workers, a Black intelligentsia, and Northern white abolitionists to build what W. E. B. Du Bois called an "abolition democracy."

Thinking this way that every negation must also be an affirmation — that abolition must not only negate oppression but affirm democracy — means in a sense that for every "de-" word (decolonize, decarceral, defund, etc.) we need a "re-" word that does not restore but reconstruct. In the neoliberal US context, systems of care have been built upon inequalities, instabilities, and precarities that have been revealed and exacerbated by the current crisis and by the longer, slower crisis of planetary warming, the effects of which are no less racialized. Reconstruction, then, means redistribution. In solidarity with activists, architects and urbanists might therefore ask: What principles, practices, and histories of redistribution can assist in reimagining new systems of education, healthcare, and housing, particularly as the climate crisis looms?

August 16, 2020
AK: As neoliberal ideologies are in full operation within the discursive framework of architecture, redistribution has become increasingly unthinkable. I wonder how it may become intelligible to architects that the impact (or absence) of these histories is intertwined with the impact and aftermath of the pandemic; how it may become intelligible that architecture — discourse and materialization — mediates dispossession to the one or access to resources to the other, depending on which body or subjectivity they cater to.

During the short twentieth century, modern architecture and urban planning played a crucial role in implementing a

governmental attempt towards redistribution. At the same time, their histories are tainted with their uncanny other, be it colonial exploitation, racism, state terror, or capitalist complicity. Revisiting those stories to construct a usable past could mean expanding the picture within which they are set and acknowledging their modes of exclusion and amnesia; or reconstructing role models by setting them within the purview of their adversaries, such as the urban policies of Red Vienna during the 1920s that provided the backdrop against which early Austrian neoliberal theorists, Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, established their doctrines to protect an immaculate world market. Yet I have no answer to the need for both nuanced histories that acknowledge this contradictory heritage and the (re-)construction of operational programs that feed into discourse and build on the economic disposition that sustains them. I return the question: If we accept that a singular story, no matter how relevant, cannot change the power of discourse, what could be today the economic and technological grounds on which architectural histories of redistribution can take hold?

August 23, 2020
RM: One place to begin if not to end is familiar, since architecture does have a radical historiographical tradition, albeit a minor one. Take an example from the history of liberal capitalism that is strangely close to what we have been discussing yet also astonishingly far: the collaborative work by the group of historians known as the Venice School, the book *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal*, edited by Giorgio Ciucci, Francesco Dal Co, Mario Manieri-Elia, and Manfredo Tafuri. You could say that the whole book attempts to answer the question famously posed in 1906 by another economist of relevance to us, Werner Sombart: *Why is there no socialism in the United States?* Given that book's publication date (1973, neoliberalism's *annus mirabilis*), a lack of engagement with the contradictions of post-Civil War Reconstruction in the South—perhaps the greatest doomed experiment in material redistribution in US history—is understandable. However, a failure to recognize the role played by race as well as capital in shaping the American cities, and indeed in shaping imperial capitals like London, Paris, or Berlin, is less understandable.

Reconstruction entailed, among other things, a monumental program of land reform that was thwarted by racial capitalism. To understand its importance, and perhaps to recover the project of reparations for slavery to which those reforms were dedicated, historians of architecture must look at the land underneath their buildings. Looking skyward in the immediately following Gilded

Age (considered in detail in *The American City*), wealth was massively redistributed in the other direction: upwards. This redistribution is literalized in the Chicago School skyscrapers with which Tafuri begins his contribution to the volume: the skyscraper as an instrument of upward redistribution. Reading these buildings as reified testaments to architecture's alleged helplessness, Tafuri is unable to see in them the primitive accumulation of slavery and its aftermath — and of course, the expropriation of Indigenous lands — on which they were built.

The later developments in neoliberal thought in reaction to social democratic reforms in Europe that you mention (Red Vienna was another preoccupation for Tafuri and his colleagues) are related to this earlier history. Important revisionist architectural history has been written on both subjects since then (think, for example, of Joanna Merwood Salisbury's work on the Chicago School and Eve Blau's on Red Vienna); but much remains to be done. Tafuri's negativity was realistic, but it was also that of a bourgeois, white intelligentsia: architects and their theorists. The legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois, whose *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) radically transformed the historiography, was to recognize anti-racist, anti-capitalist struggle everywhere and to expose more about the oppressors than the oppressors knew about themselves.

A related crisis looms behind all that we are discussing. As I write, fires burn again in California's forests, and the Sahara's edges grow drier daily. Tafuri was skeptical of the ecological turn of the 1970s and, in particular, of the technocratic pretensions of environmental design, very little of which could be construed as truly anti-capitalist. But when we put climate change and capitalism together, and when we learn to see race and gender as well as class as both the preconditions and the products of the latter — racial capitalist patriarchy — then the battle lines for historians are redrawn. Because if, as Walter Benjamin said so well, history is a backward-facing angel, that angel's rear-view mirror looks toward the future.

To return then to where we began: A submicroscopic virus continues to rewrite human history as the fragile interdependence of society and nature. Masked, we now fear inhaling one another's breath. Social distancing is not spatial; it is pulmonary. The upcoming US election will likely be a referendum on the viral threat. Meanwhile, uncounted molecules of carbon dioxide emitted by our buildings and by our machines across the modern era have trapped heat in our atmosphere, differentially warming the air we breathe. It may seem unrelated that, pinned to the Minneapolis pavement by the police, George Floyd's last words were "I can't

breathe." But what modernity called space we must now call air. And there will be no redistribution, no justice, no peace, and indeed no change until we learn to see the complex of forces at work in that air, which, like the land underneath a building, can be life-sustaining and deadly at once.

November 26, 2020
AK: It is difficult to fathom that if not for the pandemic, Democrats would not have won the US presidential race. In the meantime, Europe and the United States seem to be separated by more than just another lockdown: by different calculation modes of "affordable" deaths. Not that this is news, but it has become more visible. How would you describe architecture's implication in the amalgam of racial and environmental justice, the art of governing, biopolitical care, and a viral threat during these last weeks? Are these all simply mediatic events that will be quickly forgotten, or do they represent an epistemic shift that allows for different formations of truth?

December 6, 2020
RM: It has now been about a month since the US election. The fact that a majority of Republican voters do not yet appear to accept the results is striking less as evidence of misinformation or denialism than of an underlying power struggle among classes, races, and other social groupings. No less striking is the assault on left-progressive movements now being waged in the Democratic Party on behalf of neoliberal suburban "moderates" who, rather than being held responsible for the electoral setbacks incurred by the Democrats in the congressional races, are openly celebrated as a substitute for the party's former working-class base. Radical posturing aside, architecture as a cultural form and as a profession, and architects as exemplary members of the professional-managerial class, stand firmly on the side of the neoliberals. With some notable exceptions, there have been few calls from the professional-managerial class for material redistribution, few concrete proposals that respond to those voices coming from the streets asserting that "Housing is Healthcare" and demanding to "Defund the Police."

Now too, after months of deliberate failure to manage the pandemic, economic crisis looms. As I write, a path to recovery that does not intensify existing inequalities is all but blocked. Most ominously, the neoliberal hegemony has responded to the widely popular Green New Deal with the open admission that the plan for climate change is the same as for COVID-19: distribute casualties and collateral damage according to a sliding scale of

power rather than redistribute resources to prevent those casualties in the first place. Still, we appear to have avoided — or at least delayed — the worst. Now, as the sense of relief slowly passes, begins the hard work of reconstruction.