

# Black color and "Negro villages" : why skin color still matters in architecture and planning

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# Black Color and «Negro Villages» Why Skin Color Still Matters in Architecture and Planning

*Samia Henni*



fig. a French Postcard, «Le Village Nègre», Oran, Algeria, 19th century

The red color in the Red Square in Moscow, the white color in the White House in Washington D.C., and the black color in the so-called «Negro village» suggest both power and ideology. Unlike in the first and second case, the color in the «Negro village» derives not from a visual perceptual property of a building, but rather from that of a human skin and race. Why and where does this wording come from? When and how was it employed? And why does human skin color still matter in architecture and planning?

Invented by European colonial empires, the appellations «Negro village», «village nègre», «villaggi negri», «Negerdorf», «Negerdörfli», and so on, were commonly used by white colonizers to name the settlements that existed in the unfamiliar colonized African territories that were inhabited by colonized colored populations. It was the Portuguese who introduced the term «Negro»—literally meaning black—in the fifteenth century to designate Bantu peoples (African ethnic groups) that the Portuguese had encountered when they arrived in Southern Africa. Since then, the term was used in various languages and forms, and it epitomizes a great number of historical connotations. One of the most infamous subtexts of the term was highlighted in James Baldwin's 1953 essay, *Stranger in the Village*,<sup>1</sup> an account of his personal experience in the Swiss Alpine village of Leukerbad. Baldwin wove the European history of slavery, colonialism, racism, and Christianity together with the North American ones. He wondered why even in a remote Swiss all-white-village, children, who might never have seen a black man, yet shouted «Neger! Neger!» («Negro! Negro!») while he walked along the streets of Leukerbad. Baldwin also questioned why some of the adults living in Leukerbad called him «le sal nègre» («dirty Negro»), accusing him of stealing wood. Whilst Baldwin deemed the attitude of the Swiss villagers *naïve racism*, he firmly condemned the European and American white supremacy and longstanding, willful, systematic racism. However, both attitudes are rooted in colonial mindsets<sup>2</sup> and the use of the term «Negro» is not naïve.

When combined with the word village, the term «Negro» enters the sphere of colonial architecture and urban planning. In African towns under colonial rule, the European colonial regimes designed and built neighborhoods exclusively for colonizing white settlers, military officers and civil servants. Often called «European quarters», these settlements were distanced from existing settlements that the white man had designated as «Negro villages». To this end, the two communities were physically segregated. In his 1961 book, *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*), Frantz Fanon described the colonial



fig. b Poster, 'Negerdorf aus dem Senegal', Zoologischen Garten Basel, Switzerland, 1926



fig. c One of the 'human zoos' in France, 19th century

context as a Manichean world segregated into two compartments and characterized by a flagrant colonized/colonizer dichotomy. Fanon portrayed the ways with which the white colonizer viewed the settlements of the colonized population, arguing that for the white man «the town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the Medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute.»<sup>3</sup> Among the manifold reasons of the not-naïve association of the black skin color with perpetual criminality, devious violence, and further ramifications of a constructed devil is the invention of the 'Other'. A colonized 'Other' that the colonizer 'Self' considered to be 'savage' and 'uncivilized'—today 'underdeveloped'—and destined to be dominated by the colonizer in order to be 'civilized'. The colonizer 'Self', or the white man, believed—and in a number of places still believes—to be superior to the colonized 'Other'. This colonial attitude was commonly extended into the settlements inhabited by African populations (fig. a).

To propagate this colonial construct and disseminate it among European populations, the colonial authorities reproduced what they had named 'Negro villages' in World's Fairs and Colonial Exhibitions throughout Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These included World's Fairs in Paris in 1878 and 1880; in St Louis (United States of America) in 1904; Colonial Exhibitions in Marseille in 1906 and 1922, in Paris in 1907 and 1931; and in a number of other European countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Great Britain. Likewise, Switzerland exhibited African people in the 'village nègre' in Geneva in 1896, in 'Negerdörfli' in Altstetten in Zurich in 1925, and in 'Negerdorf aus Senegal' in Basel Zoo in 1926. Whereas the white man transformed what he called 'Negro villages' into lucrative attractions, African children, women, and men—locked up in cages—were expected to act as 'savages'. Not only did these human exhibitions turn human lives into consumable spectacles, but also into exotic subjects and objects pregnant with colonial discourses and imaginations of somewhat universally fabricated assumptions. To this end, the display of these 'living exhibits' and the establishment of Human Zoos, also called Ethnological Expositions, further propagated racist prejudice and discriminatory constructs. While the exhibitions varied in design, size and duration, they typically shared common biased misinterpretations and not-naïve misrepresentations of the displayed African races, customs, religions, genders, and architecture (fig. b, c).

At the World's Fair of 1930 in Antwerp, the specifically designed 'Negro village' imitated a pseudo Sudanese village made of adobe.



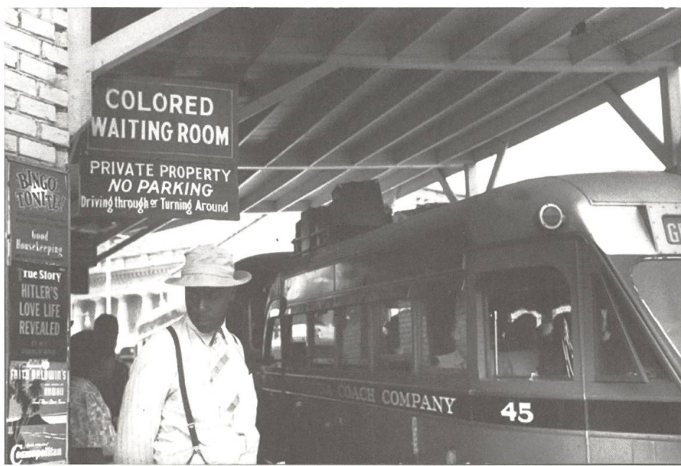


fig. d Racial segregation, bus station in Durham, North Carolina, United States of America, 1940s  
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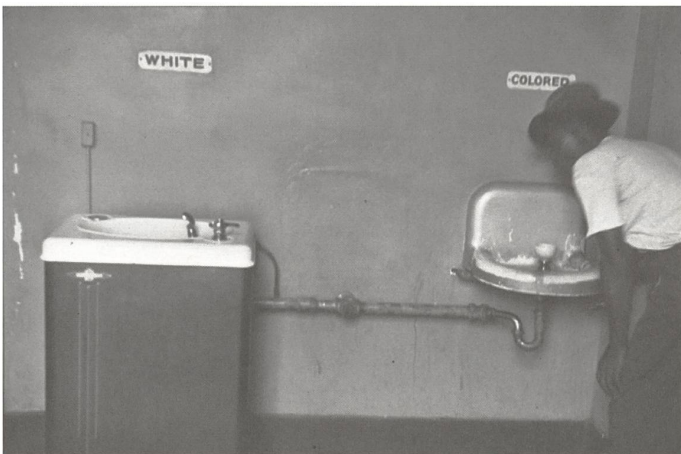


fig. e Racial segregation, drinking fountain, United States of America, 1950s © Elliot Erwitz



fig. f Demolition of the tower 106, Les Minguettes, Lyon, France, 1983  
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Paradoxically, such architectural language did not exist in Congo, which was the colonial possession of King Leopold II of Belgium.<sup>5</sup> This simulacrum provided an invented Congolese village. This meant that at European colonial human shows, the colonial regimes did not necessarily reconstruct the pre-colonial village of the colony under their authority, but rather a random African village, an arbitrary architectural style from any country of the African continent, which might over-emphasize the dissimilarities and oppositions between European spectators and African «living exhibits», orchestrate racial segregation, and betray the original characteristics of architecture.

Although African people and the replica of their habitat ceased to be exhibited in the late 1950s, human skin color continues to nurture discrimination, as well as condition built and living environments. In the majority of European and American cities, residential racial segregation is widely visible and measurable. In certain areas it became an institutional mechanism of racism designed to impede social interaction among various communities, primarily among black and white people in the United States of America, and among Europeans and formerly colonized populations in European countries.

New Orleans in Louisiana, which we recently visited during a seminar week,<sup>6</sup> illustrates this disparity and power. Founded by French colonists in the eighteenth century, *La Nouvelle Orléans* (New Orleans) was planned according to the colonial aforementioned Manichean principle. The French, and later the British, the Spanish and the Americans, imported thousands of slaves, or «living properties», from Africa, who were forced to perform all kinds of duties, including planting cotton and sugar canes, and building levees to protect dwellings and crops. Much earlier than other American cities, New Orleans legally consolidated its racial segregation by means of the Jim Crow laws (1877–1954), a codified system of apartheid that affected every aspect of daily life of African Americans. Signs bearing «White only» and «Colored» were omnipresent reminders of the enforced racial order in the city (fig. d, e). With the New Deal's (1933–1938) housing program and the expansion of the streetcar system in New Orleans, the distance between «Black neighborhoods» and «White neighborhoods»—similar to colonized cities—was further accentuated. In post-Katarina New Orleans, in spite of countless African Americans' protests and uprisings, residential racial segregation continues to exist.

Another example for this urban ghettoization based on race and human skin color is discernibly the French *banlieues* (suburbs)—and other peripheries of European cities—where the majority of the residential neighborhoods that were built after the damages of the Second World War are today inhabited by French families of African origin; that is by formerly colonized populations. The everyday struggles in one of these vast apartment blocks, called in French HLM (*Habitat à loyer modéré*, or Moderated Rent Flats), are portrayed in the 1995 movie *La haine* (Hate). Directed by Mathieu Kassovitz, *La haine* depicts not only the youth's rage and police violence and racial profiling, but also the spatial organization of these mass housing projects, or *grand ensembles*, and the limits of architecture and planning, which had played an essential role in reinforcing this divide. Since the 1980s, the young dwellers of these large neighborhoods, or *cités*, have repeatedly denounced this civil unrest in a series of riots throughout French suburbs, which culminated in the 2005 infamous nationwide intense riots against socio-economic exclusion and racial discrimination.

In an attempt to spatially address this enduring turmoil, the French public authorities developed a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, they authorized planned demolitions of specific slabs and towers, the first of which took place at Les Minguettes in Vénissieux in the suburb of Lyon in 1983 (fig. f). On the other hand, they commissioned regional plans for urban renewal called «*renovation urbaine*». To this end, a number of architectural competitions were launched, and debates on French welfare state and on possible demolitions/reconstructions of the *grand ensembles*—now called «*quartiers sensibles*» (at-risk neighborhoods) or «*quartiers difficiles*» (difficult



fig. g Transformation of buildings G, H, I, Grand Parc, Bordeaux, France by Lacaton & Vassal, Druot, Hutin, 2016 © Philippe Ruault

neighborhoods)—were conducted among various professionals, including civil servants, architects, sociologists, journalists, and social workers. Responses were diverse and controversial.

The French architecture office Anne Lacaton & Jean Philippe Vassal has favored the extension and transformation of existing constructions in French suburbs. In lieu of a demolition/reconstruction approach, they promoted the enlargement of standing housing units and a radical transformation of the building. For example, in the *Cité du Grand Parc* with 4'000 existing dwellings in Bordeaux, where they intervened on three buildings (G, H and I) of 10 to 15 floors that accommodate 530 apartments, Lacaton & Vassal office attached large winter gardens, renovated the entrance hall, the staircases and the elevators (fig. g). These outdoor spaces, completed in 2016, have undoubtedly increased the living area of the apartments, offered more light, a better view, and a superior comfort to the apartments. Yet, can architecture counter with racial discrimination? Can architecture unsettle political unresponsiveness? Can architecture bring social justice? Considering current extreme right-wing rises, we will witness both a strengthening of the division between skin colors, genders, religions, and classes, and a proliferation of not-naïve racism. Some architects will subscribe to this belief, but others will have to find strategic ways to subvert it.

- 1 Baldwin's essay was originally published in Harper's Magazine, 1953 and then in his collection of essays *Notes on a Native Son*, 1955.
- 2 On the Swiss involvement in colonialism, see, for example, Purtschert, Patricia and Harald Fischer-Tiné. *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*. Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- 3 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 4.
- 4 Other colonized populations were also exhibited, including people from Asia.
- 5 Filip de Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Ghent: Ludion, 2004), 21.
- 6 *Down in Mississippi*, Seminar Week organized by the Chairs of Profs. Philip Ursprung and Alex Lehnerer, ETH Zurich, 22–29 October 2016.

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