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## Critical Race Theory and the Landscapes of Higher Education

Frank Michael Muñoz

*As a locus of mass acculturation, the American college campus is uniquely suited to impact the lives of millions of students each year. Drawing on the framework of critical race theory (CRT) and the professional practice of campus planning, this analysis suggests that campus buildings and landscapes have a role in maintaining and perpetuating American racism. Guided by CRT's anti-racist and color-aware tenets, this analysis offers CRT as a lens through which campus planners and architects can (re)envision their work and roles on campus. Suggestions include strategies and tools for campus planners and educators.*

The landscape of the college campus is a site of both the imagined and lived realities of contemporary Americans. Each year millions of students traverse the grounds of a diverse range of institutions of higher education. In doing so they engage in a reciprocal relationship with these landscapes; their experiences are shaped, in part, by the terrain they traverse and the buildings they occupy and these physical elements are in turn shaped through continued use. This complementary relationship is one in which the ideas and actions of people shape and are shaped by the physical environments of the campus.

As sites of mass acculturation, lessons about what it means to be American and who matters are taught to college students alongside their daily academic endeavors (Dober, 1992). In more critical terms, American schools are seen as “principal sites for the production and naturalization of myths and ideologies that systematically disorganize and neutralize minority cultural identities” (McCarthy, 1988, p. 163). In this view, higher education is suited to impact millions of individuals. Furthermore, increasingly diverse campus communities reinforce the need to critically address issues of equity and inclusion within the academy. As a vital component of any college or university, the built forms and landscapes of a campus warrant such careful examination.

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Drawing upon the field of critical race theory (CRT) and the established theories and practices of campus design and planning, this work seeks to realign the gaze of campus communities. It examines the contemporary and historical landscapes of institutions of higher education and, guided by the tenets of CRT, suggests ways to improve understandings of campus dynamics while contributing to the design of more inclusive educational environments. This instructive theoretical framework merges CRT and architectural practice to offer a new lens through which one may view and understand college and university campuses while increasing their inclusivity.

To fully appreciate the rich analysis that CRT can provide, this work will first recount trends in current campus planning practices, including the ecological perspective advanced by Strange and Banning (2001). An account of the origins and components of CRT will follow. Finally, these two realms will be explored in tandem, highlighting the importance of CRT in the construction and maintenance of inclusive and educationally purposeful environments.

#### Campus Architecture, Planning, and the Ecological Perspective

Campus planning is an interdisciplinary process that often involves multiple constituencies. From the board of trustees and state legislators, to students and grassroots organizers, committees and individuals involved in campus planning must respond to the needs of varied constituents. Even after a project has been completed, planners and architects will be asked to explain their rationale, and their designs will be constantly reinterpreted. Considerable guidance for campus planners emerges from the fields of architecture, landscape design, and planning. These professional practice guides are often impersonal and emphasize elements of style, the role of infrastructure, and the importance of strategically placed green space to creating aesthetically pleasing and functional designs (Dober, 1992; Kenney, Dumont, & Kenney, 2005; Knell & Latta, 2006).

Understanding the importance of extending the analysis of campus environments beyond aesthetic and physical considerations, Strange and Banning (2001) elaborated upon the ecological perspective, a spatial-educational theoretical framework that orients spatial analysis toward the campus environment and its inhabitants. The perspective's analysis of educational environments identifies four essential elements of campus environments: (a) physical components, both natural and created; (b) human features, conveyed through aggregated characteristics; (c) organizational structures and designs; and (d) the constructed or perceived environments and meanings attributed to them (Strange, 2003). Together, these elements influence the behavior of campus community members. Therefore, architects must fully understand and carefully analyze each component in order to achieve an educationally purposeful environment.

Strange and Banning (2001) have identified safety and inclusion as components of the student experience impacted by the campus environment. From campus planning traditions emerge physical spaces and human aggregates capable of promoting or undermining the safety of environments. The structural diversity of a campus contributes to students' sense of safety and inclusion, yet students who do not fit the dominant characteristics of their campus community, such as racial or ethnic minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) individuals, and differently-abled individuals, often experience hostile campus environments. As the diversity of college and university environments increases, it is important to understand why certain groups of students interpret them as hostile, unwelcoming, and unsafe. Campus planners seeking to create safe, inclusive environments must use physical and psychological perspectives to achieve these ends (Kenney et al., 2005).

Unfortunately, both professional guides and educational theory have historically neglected research concerning race and the college landscape. Most work, especially Strange and Banning's (2001), has discussed some aspects of inclusion and diversity on the college campus. However, these cursory glances often speak in generalities about feelings of inclusion and safety rather than identifying forces, such as institutionalized racism, that affect students in collegiate environments. This lack of focus around issues of campus environments and landscapes can be partially remedied through an analysis guided by critical race theory.

### Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework and movement that is politically committed to examining contemporary social structures, thoughts, and principles with a focus on highlighting their role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In essence, it is a vantage point that privileges the subordinated by seeking to underscore the myriad ways in which modern systems support and perpetuate racist ideologies and practices in America. Developed by activists and scholars, this movement draws its origins from the field of critical legal studies. As early as the mid-1970s, lawyers, legal scholars, organizers, and others began to focus on the Civil Rights Movement's loss of momentum and decay in some instances (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Having identified that strategies were needed to help combat the strong racist undercurrents that dominated mainstream political and legal arenas, an interdisciplinary group began to fashion the early tenets of the still unnamed field.

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), CRT subsumes many of the issues more conventional racial and civil rights conversations include, but it resituates them in a context that includes "economics, history, context, group- and self-

interest, and even feelings and unconscious” (p. 3). Denying the legitimacy of colorblindness in the anti-racism movement, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) assert that ignoring race allows individuals to ignore all but the most overt racist acts, permitting more subtle and insidious acts to remain unnamed and unchallenged. Central to the color-awareness that CRT advocates are six basic tenets that Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) extract from early legal studies in the 1970s. These basic principles guide the antiracist work of the movement:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

As CRT grew among legal scholars and activists, it also branched away from its legal roots and asserted its relevance in other fields of study. In the mid-1990s, scholars of education first encountered CRT when Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) demonstrated that CRT could help educators understand some prevalent educational inequities (Dixson, 2006). Though scholars of education and critical race theory approach the topics in different ways, their work focuses intently on lending voice to the experiences of students and scholars of color (Teranishi, 2002; Yosso, 2006), conceptions of equality in education (Rousseau & Tate, 2003), and the pitfalls of colorblindness in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Work that fuses CRT with education seeks to liberate people of color and positively impact their educational experiences. As scholarship incorporating education and critical race theory enters its second decade, there remains great space for this work to develop.

### *Critical Race Theory, the Architect, and the College Campus*

Scholars of critical race theory have yet to turn their analysis toward the physical landscapes of America. Much contemporary architecture and planning work that focuses on issues of race and gender address professional duties to recruit qualified women and students of color and provide access to fair-workplace practices (Anthony, 2001; Coleman, Danze & Henderson, 1996). This research focuses on the identities of the architects while ignoring the substance of their work. Recently, however, an emerging scholarship that focuses on the relationship be-

tween built space and race has shifted the critical lens back toward the spaces and boundaries in which Americans live (Barton, 2001; Grandison, 1999; Wilkins, 2007). Drawing from these works, the following analysis will apply the aforementioned tenets of critical race theory to extend the lessons of these works to the landscape of the American campus.

### Critical Race Theory and the Landscapes of Higher Education

The six tenets that Matsuda et al. (1993) identified as central to the work of CRT serve as important foundations for examining the landscape of the college campus. Following is an analysis of campus planning and architecture guided by these tenets.

#### *CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to American life*

Recognizing that racism is an integral part of the organization of American society, CRT affirms that the question is not one of who or what serves to subordinate individuals based on race. Rather, it seeks to explain how everyday artifacts, values, interests, and ideas serve as mechanisms of racism. The built space and landscapes of higher education do not escape this scrupulous gaze. As manifestations of American values and educational priorities, the residence halls students sleep inside, the greens they laze upon, and the classrooms they learn within are each steeped in the machinations of American racism. Only from this fundamental assumption can the following constructs of CRT operate and provide guidance.

#### *CRT expresses skepticism toward claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy*

CRT rejects claims that the inanimate structures college students live within are racially neutral. As objects of intense planning and sites of focused architectural collaboration, residence halls, classrooms, and student centers are hardly neutral sites. Instead, they are locations that frequently perpetuate and reward White-normative behavior. Bolted-down seats that prevent collaboration and conversation and thin walls that prevent lively conversation are physical features of many classrooms that reinforce White-normative behavior. In these classrooms, behavior is policed not only by the gaze of the professor and students, but also by the limitations imposed by the physical spaces themselves (O'Brien, 2006). These oft-subtle features of the classroom can cumulatively contribute to a "chilly climate," the additive effect of persistent acts of subtle racism, for non-White students on campus (Strange & Banning, 2001). Recently, architects and critical theorists have begun to discuss the pervasive colorblindness that haunts their field, and assert that increased awareness and new approaches to design are

necessary to understand how race is embedded in architecture (Cripps, 2004; Wilkins, 2007). CRT demands that college planners and architects have a place in this conversation, as they too are involved in the creation and maintenance of spaces and places that perpetuate American racism.

*CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis*

The historical context of the college campus provides important information about where the institution has been and where it is going. Often, traditions and values are drawn from institutional histories but lack historical accuracy. CRT values revisionist histories that more accurately convey the stories of marginalized individuals on college campuses. As campuses revise collegiate histories, marginalized groups take an equal, if not primary, role in the accounts. Though painful tales of oppression and exclusion may surface, campus planners and architects can seize these opportunities to celebrate the oft-forgotten contributions of people of color uncovered in these efforts. These accounts also provide valuable insight into planning traditions that may, upon review, require revision. Furthermore, as colleges map the changing landscapes of their campuses, changes will reflect the evolving values and priorities of their institutions.

One important area for revisionist history to explore is the naming of campus buildings. Campus community members may be disheartened to learn that they live or attend classes in buildings named for individuals whose recognized contributions and values are in direct conflict to their own. In one such example, the University of Virginia's Barringer Wing of the school's medical center is named after Paul B. Barringer, a proponent of scientific racism and the eugenics movement (Cristol, 2005). The largely uncontested presence of this name and others on campus could be interpreted as a lack of institutional commitment to creating an inclusive campus environment.

At Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), a campus housing initiative sparked the construction of many new student residences. Recognizing that building names impact university communities, the school sought to "reclaim the history and culture of the space and place that [it] currently occupies" (Whitney & Mullins, 2003, p. 5). Consideration of the campus' history and the significance of building names led to the Board of Trustees of Indiana University approving the purposeful naming of 22 buildings; 17 of which recognize the lasting contributions of African-American individuals and women. As current and future community members traverse the landscape of this institution, the names they encounter and histories they learn belong to individuals whose gender or race often exclude them from or malign them through institutional memory. CRT on the college campus seeks to illuminate these untold stories about marginalization and oppression in an effort to liberate the oppressed and

dismantle the racist status quo.

*CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin*

Vital to CRT is the power and importance of historically-silenced voices of color. Seeking to give voice to the experiences and knowledge of people and communities of color, campus planners embracing CRT as a guide for practice would seek the unique and valuable voices of color on campus. Seeking the knowledge and experiences of community members of color, planners, and architects can elicit information about feelings of safety, inclusion, and comfort on campus. This act of storytelling cannot be limited by White conventions and should be performed face-to-face. For people of color, the act of sharing these experiences, known as counterstorytelling, with those that adversely impact them can contribute positively to their psychological well-being (Dixson, 2006). Furthermore, seeking the experiences of marginalized individuals on grounds elicits information that is often lost in broad, campus-wide surveys.

In these stories, the intersections of multiple identities (intersectionality) may become clear in a way that only face-to-face exchange will allow. These narratives often challenge commonly held beliefs about campus realities and may expose White planners and architects to informal spaces that remain unnamed or unmapped. These counterspaces, formal and informal, social and academic spaces, created and inhabited by marginalized individuals e.g. “the Black bus stop” or “Black eating time,” are theorized by Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) to be critical sites of resistance to insidious racism on college campuses. Through counterstorytelling, the existence of counterspaces on campus points to the spatial needs of students of color. Only through these counterstories can campus planners and architects accurately gauge the dynamics of an institution and work effectively toward eliminating landscape and architecture-based racism.

*CRT is interdisciplinary*

Both CRT and campus planning draw on multiple veins of discourse to form their ideologies. As the field of education has begun to delve into the realm of CRT, so too can campus planners and architects. Drawing from the work of Strange and Banning (2001) for educational, psychological, and sociological discourses, campus planners can begin to craft more educationally purposeful spaces. Infusing their planning and design with the values and structure offered by CRT, planners and architects can create college landscapes that are more inclusive, representative of the realities of American life, and stewards of more socially just college environments. Diversifying planning committees involves including students and faculty from a variety of academic and personal backgrounds while

eliciting counterstories from a multitude of campus constituencies. Mentioned earlier, The Building Names Project at IUPUI was a collaboration of student affairs administrators, faculty from several departments, students, staff, alumni, and community members. The diverse composition of this planning group allowed them to draw upon the expertise and perspectives of their community. CRT encourages campus planners to routinely traverse disciplinary and organizational boundaries. As a practice, this approach is an important part of the elimination of oppression on campus, the final tenet.

*CRT works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of ending all forms of oppression*

The tenets of CRT collaboratively seek the elimination of racial oppression. In addition, CRT aims to affect other forms of oppression through its own efforts to address racism. Within the realm of campus planning there is room to devote attention to actively designing and constructing college landscapes that are inclusive and promote equality of process and outcome for students from marginalized social groups. Wilkins (2007) speculates that, void of critical examination, architects, as “space-[shapers]” and “place-[makers]” will “remain complicit in the racialization of the built environment” (p. 25). Identifying “theoretical analysis” and “activist practice” as essential components to overcoming the perpetuation of racism through architecture and planning, Wilkins (2007) asserts that an “activist architecture [is] one that not only redefines architecture and architect, but that is worthy of the discipline’s enormous gifts/abilities to make lives better” (p. 207).

As campus planners and architects seek to align themselves with institutional values of inclusion and justice, they should seek guidance from the tenets of critical race theory. Other critical social theories, such as queer theory, feminism, Latino and Asian critical thought, and critical White studies, will assert their role in these efforts as campus planners respond to multiple identities and marginalities of students on their campuses. As campus planners and architects become aware that they are complicit in the systematic marginalization of people of color, critical race theory offers guidance as they seek to undermine the oppression in which they previously participated. From exclusive college campuses to inclusive structures and landscapes, critical race theory offers higher education a pathway for (re)envisioning its future.

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