

# Materiality and Aesthetics in the Marginalized Community

**What is Architecture's role in bridging the divide between Design and Need?**

**Bill Bates**



Worlds apart but visible to each other, who decides the future of each? photo by: Bill Bates



Abandoned hope photo by Bill Bates

## QUESTIONS

How do we address the deeper needs of neighborhoods that have been historically marginalized by redlining, systemic segregation, gentrification and overly aggressive urban renewal projects? Architecture is the key element that anchors our sense of place. However it has often been used as a wedge to further divide the “haves” from the “have nots.”

## CONTEXT

The research work of the students will be built upon the ideas embodied in the following books:

- “The Color of Law: a Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America” by Richard Rothstein
- “How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequity and the Fight for the Neighborhood” by P. E. Moskowitz
- “A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction” by C. Alexander, S. Ishikawa, M. Silverstein
- “Root Shock: How Tearing up City Neighborhoods Hurt America, and What We Can Do About It” by Mindy Thompson Fullilove, MD

## PROMPT

Absentee ownership of property weakens a neighborhood’s cohesiveness, sense of power and self-respect in a society that disproportionately values wealth.

The Oxford Dictionary defines Materiality as “the quality of being material or composed of matter.” Obviously architecture has always been a key element of that definition.

More interesting is the second definition offered in the dictionary which is the word’s legal meaning: “the quality of being relevant or significant.” This studio will examine the limited privileges and rights of marginalized communities to occupy and own shelter and the impacts on their quality of life as well as the broader societal implications. It will pose challenges to understand how different communities define their relevance and empowerment to shape their own definitions of materiality and aesthetics in spite of the systemic covert and overt biases of outside bureaucracies and design trends. The class will examine how the social equity and justice movement challenges our preconceptions of the designer’s role in dictating materiality and aesthetics. Students will be engaged in seeking evidence of effective design solutions that are not only aesthetically pleasing but address the foundational needs of the disenfranchised. The course will include reading that will prompt discussion about what key architectural elements of a neighborhood are socially foundational and whether or not they should be considered essential human rights.

## PROGRAM

Exploration of different facets of design beyond its physical aspects will be encouraged. The reading material is intended to help the student recognize political and financial systems and policies that underlie all decisions around the built environment. Students will be challenged to contemplate potential attitudinal shifts to change community perceptions of powerlessness. The studio product will seek to design sustainable change strategies that might serve as a catalyst for social good and justice and enable previously disenfranchised citizens to thoughtfully address materiality and aesthetic deficits within their neighborhood without surrendering to tax driven gentrification.



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## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- The students will hone their listening skills to better understand clients’ needs.
- Emphasis will be placed on analysis of the political and social framework that dictates decision making in the built environment.
- The studio will encourage students to think about their design solutions in the context of fundamental community needs.
- Focus will be placed upon empathetic listening and problem solving.

**“Without an architecture of our own we have no soul of our own....”**

-Frank Lloyd Wright