

In Conversation with Mabel O. Wilson

Zainab Yaqub and Shadman Chowdhury are Teen Thinkers at the Bard Graduate Center. They spoke with Mabel O. Wilson, a professor at the Columbia Graduate School for Architecture, Planning, and Preservation on July 24, 2019. Below is an excerpt from their interview.

Location: Columbia University, New York City

Audio Excerpt #1:

Zainab Yaqub: What is it like approaching architecture from the lens of a cultural historian? Like is there anything that you think you can see that maybe a normal architect wouldn't be able to see.

Dr. Wilson: That's a really great question. I mean, part of what, I think, you know, disciplines, that's why they are called disciplines, they discipline you to do certain things or to work a certain way. Art history and architectural history are really engaged in interrogating an object. What is the building? Or what is the painting? What is that body of work a particular artist might do? But historically, they never sort of ask, 'well, how do we understand that piece of art in a broader context of the artist who made it, where that person might have lived, the politics and everything that are going on around in which that work is situated or the people that are even seeing the work are situated'. And being a cultural historian, having studied American studies, we work across disciplines to kind of think about how all of these things are interlaced. So, I see myself as a scholar of the built environment because I look at, sometimes, things that are big, like cities, and sometimes there are just very tiny things, like objects, that I'm interested in that are smaller than buildings.

Audio Excerpt #2:

Zainab: I know that the memorial is meant for not just mourning but also to promote conversation in the form of an outdoor classroom or space for performances, but can architects trust the public to use the design as intended? So, do you think it would be misused if students were having a picnic or something on the lawn.

Dr. Wilson: That is the nature of buildings, you know, they are going to be misused. I mean, unless you have security regulating what is going on, that's always difficult. I

mean, our hope is that people will recognize that this is a memorial, not just a monument, but a memorial to honor the lives of the dead and that they will be respectful but that's never guaranteed. There's a really interesting monument in Berlin—it's a memorial, it's a memorial to the murdered Jews in the Europe. It sits kind of in the central part of Berlin, and it's a series of a Stella, which are these big boxes, they're huge, and they're all of different heights. There may be, I don't know, a thousand of them in a field.

Zainab: Oh, I know what this is!

Dr. Wilson: Yeah! You go into them, and... people start tanning, sunbathing, parkour, and it's a selfie machine, and... you know, it's so abstract that people don't quite know how to engage it because they're not sure what their use are. I think that can be a part of the problem and I just hope its clear from the way that we designed it that this is a memorial and that people will be respectful.

Audio Excerpt #3:

Zainab: Do you feel that this memorial is kind of like filling a void and making up for the past?

Dr. Wilson: I think what the memorials job to do is to stimulate a conversation. Sometimes you can memorialize it and that serves as a medium to forget and so its easy, you know... And you see it and you're like 'who is that dude on a horse?' or 'blah, blah, blah who this plaza is named after' and usually they're guys in New York City. And so, our hope is that – and that's why we've put the gathering space in the middle – is that it's an educational site and a gathering space. One of the things that the students who were part of the committee... we met with about 4 students and they said we want... one of the things that we want for this memorial is that it can be a site for us to convene if we're having a protest or if we want to gather and that was something that we felt was very important and we wanted to make sure that there was that space with it. So I would say that our team really have thought about this as sort of starting the conversation. I think the university recognizes that they can't *just* do a memorial. The thing I like about our team and the conversations that we had with the community of Charlottesville is that we constantly said that there is an aftermath to slavery. And that's clear with low wages and non-access to healthcare. The New York times did an amazing profile on the segregation in Charlottesville and how unequal it was. That is the legacy of slavery, so it is not over. So, can this site be a catalyst to link the past to present issues?