

Intersectional Landscapes

1.

Everything should mimic the horizon, follow the lines parallel to the earth, Frank Lloyd Wright thought. These horizontal lines “do the most to make the buildings belong to the ground,” he says in *The Natural House*. These lines would evoke nature, would evoke beauty, would be pleasing to the eye.

Everything then, in his Usonian homes--affordable homes designed for the everyday man-- would be horizontal. Or designed to make the eye see only the horizontal. The cypress-board siding: horizontal. The roof: flat and cantilevered. Windows and doors: placed together so they created a horizontal block. The windows just below the ceiling: long, creating a strip of light. Even the bricks could be manipulated to look like one strip of burnt red. He wanted the horizontal mortar between the bricks deeply dug out, while the vertical mortar would remain flush with the brick and be colored red. The eyes see only the horizontal line, although the vertical remains.

2.

Erasure (a noun) and erase (a verb) come from the Latin *erasus*, the past participle of *eradere*, from *e-* + *radere*, or to scratch, scrape. To arrive at the brick pattern as Wright wanted it, a mason scraped away the sand, lime, and water mixture from between the bricks.

With a building, an act of erasure doesn't have to be so intentional. Simply stop taking care of a structure and the world will erase it. Wind will rip off siding. Rodents will gnaw on wood and insulation and wires. Rain will wash away the mortar between bricks. Nature leaves only a trace of the building's past life.

More dramatically, humans can scrape a building from a landscape. We can tear it down and make room for something new. The Virginia Department of Highways wanted to insert a highway through one Usonian home Frank Lloyd Wright designed. In the early 1960s, the house was only twenty years old, not historic, not worth saving.

3.

The owner of this Usonian home, Marjorie Leighey, felt differently. She saw a house that would become historic, that should remain. She negotiated with the National Trust for Historic Preservation to have the house dismantled from the Fairfax landscape and reconstructed in a small patch of woods on a former plantation near Mt. Vernon.

Nearby stands the 1805 Woodlawn mansion. The architect of this home was also famous: William Thornton, who designed the United States Capitol. But just as Wright didn't build the Usonian home, Thornton didn't build Woodlawn.

With history, an act of erasure can happen by removing people. Language provides an easy way to erase people. Today, a tour guide at Woodlawn can say, "When the crops were harvested," and in 1817, a visitor to the estate could write, "The table was spread with double table cloths.... The first cloth was removed.... Clean glasses were brought on.... Coffee and tea were sent around at eight ..." The passive voice denies the existence of the actors making the actions happen.

Active denial can also eliminate these lives. After a tour of a plantation in South Carolina, one woman left a bad review, stating, "We didn't come to hear a lecture on how the white people treated slaves, we came to get this history of a southern plantation and get a tour of

the house and grounds.” She wants to scratch out the stories of the enslaved on these forced labor camps, leaving only what she thinks is a pleasant story.

4.

And yet, even if we obscure and deny, the lives of the enslaved inhabit all parts of the Woodlawn property even if the places they lived do not remain. Outside, enslaved men and women once cleared the land for the house and the farm. They harvested the crops, and grew them and nurtured them. In the smokehouse, they built sweltering fires on humid Virginia days to cure meat. Inside the house, they spread the table with table cloths, removed dishes between courses and brought new glass, and brewed the coffee and tea and served it and cleaned up when everyone was done. What the reviewer of the South Carolina tour failed to realize is that the history of a southern plantation is a history of enslavement, a tour of the house and grounds cannot exist without a tour of forced labor.

Woodlawn functioned because of the enslaved men, women, and children who had to work, who could not leave this place. Even the physical structure of the house itself reveals the enslaved, if we look closely enough.

The bricks on this house are mortared in Flemish Bond, a decorative brick pattern popular in early America. Enslaved men, and maybe boys, made these bricks by hand at Woodlawn. Sometimes, you can see a trace of the maker in the form of a fingerprint on the surface. They laid two bricks long ways, then one brick across, two bricks long ways, then one brick across until they completed the entire structure. They wiped away the mortar between rows and between bricks, creating a pattern where vertical lines and horizontal lines intersect.

Frank Lloyd Wright's elimination of vertical lines was part of his philosophy on simplicity. But he didn't believe in simplicity for simplicity's sake. He looks to language as a reference point: "to eliminate expressive words in speaking or writing-- words that intensify or vivify meaning-- is not simplicity. Nor is similar elimination in architecture simplicity." Instead, that elimination "may be, and usually is, stupidity."

The root of erase, *eradere*, comes from Latin *rōdere* "to gnaw, nibble, eat away." To scrape away the physical landscape of enslavement is to gnaw and eat away the truth of American history. The bricks, the lines, the fingerprints on pre-1865 buildings from Williamsburg to Baltimore to Albany to Virginia to Charleston to New Orleans can show how enslavement and forced labor were the economic system of the United States.

Rōdere may go back to Sanskrit *rādati* "(s/he) bites, gnaws, cuts, opens." What if we cut open the landscapes instead of nibbling away at them? What if we rip apart buildings to see what they really hold? What will we find? Will we be able to ignore it? What if in each building we enter, in each landscape we walk, we fully examine, accept, and reconcile the history behind it?

In a Flemish Bond, we have horizontal and vertical lines and lives. We have the lives of the white enslavers and all the white people who benefited socially and economically from enslavement and white supremacy. We have the lives of the enslaved and free people of color, Black and Native, whose land and hands built the United States. In Flemish Bond, we have intersections where mortar meets and a fuller understanding of American history. When we erase the intersections, a dangerous optical illusion appears.