

UO

THE DECENTERING OF ARCHITECTURE

Meet the Renegade Designers
Revolutionizing the Profession

Note: the collaged images, ads, and narratives created for this magazine are all fictional, and serve as a means to support my argument and speculative world-building.

The Decentering of Architecture

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2023 Thesis Book



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LETTER, *from the editor*

Housing insecurity is arguably the most pressing issue in our society. In the United States, home/land ownership has been the primary source to generate wealth. Yet, so many people are disproportionately affected and denied access due to this system. Historically, it has also been difficult for people of color to own their own property and receive adequate housing in viable neighborhoods. A person's ability to obtain quality housing affects other areas of their lives; it affects their ability to attend school in a certain district, and their proximity to work, healthcare, and entertainment. Interventions from both the public and private sectors over the past several decades have yielded (at best) mixed results. Continued privatization of land contributes to skyrocketing rent prices and is making it more onerous to find quality housing, let alone own property. What does the future of housing entail moving forward? What alternatives can be imagined and what role do architects play in imagining and creating a better, more sustainable outcome?

Architects are more than designers, so the profession bears a responsibility to transform the outdated and ineffective approach to housing. With the amount of capital, land, and underutilized built space that is available, no one should be unhoused. No one should have to struggle to search for an affordable place to live, and no one should feel underrepresented in the home they live in.

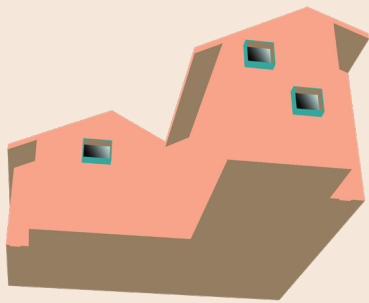
The subject of housing is a critical part of architectural discourse because it is one of the most common elements the general public associates with architecture. Before architecture became an institutionalized profession, humans built their homes using the environmental resources around them. Housing is one of the fundamental pillars of architecture that impacts everyone regardless of their relation to the profession. Given the current housing crisis in the U.S. and around the world, architects should be involved in the solution; it is not a time for architects to cower behind the rhetoric that "architecture is not political." Architects are responsible for the well-being of the public, and part of that well-being is having access to appropriate, affordable housing.

Therefore, my thesis explores the limitations of the architecture profession and pushes those limitations so the profession extends beyond the current capital driven designer-client.



UTHMAN OLOWA

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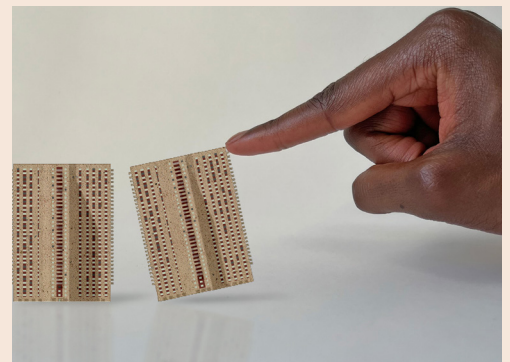
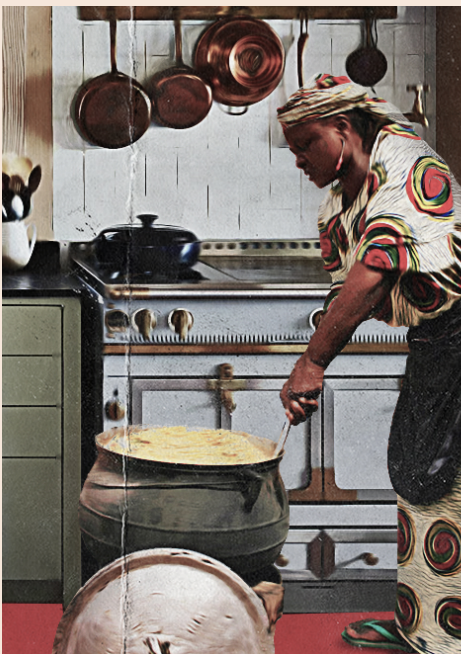


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Meet the Vigilante Architects

“Architecture is supposed to be a service industry. Yet, it seems like only the top 1% continues to truly be served.”

- Designer X

Forty years ago, Bernheimer Architects in Brooklyn became the first private architectural firm to unionize since the 1930s. It was a groundbreaking move that was expected to shift the way other architecture practitioners conducted their office, but not much has changed in the decades since. Less than 5% of architecture firms in the United States are unionized. Although the four day work week was a welcomed addition to the profession, long hours are still being worked and the wages for architects have been almost stagnant. To further exacerbate issues, the satisfaction of architectural workers has been in decline for decades. Even the public has soured on the projects that have entered their communities.

The only demand from the strike of 2055 that came to fruition was the four day work week. However, many architects and designers have stated that the quality of their professional life hasn't changed much since. During the peak of the labor strike, a group of urbanists gathered to discuss an alternative to the current ways of practice. At first nameless, they became known as the "vigilante architects." Architects frustrated with the lack of impactful work they were completing decided to make a change. A shift was needed. This group of architects, artists, designers, and working professionals came together to address needs within their communities outside of the typical practice of architecture. The members of the collective practice within anonymity, stating they are the antithesis of the old standard: the starchitect and their eponymous design firm. "We don't believe that a single name should be out in front of the work that takes an entire group of people to accomplish," Designer X remarked.

The projects created by the collective started out as small interventions - impermanent installations in parks and other publicly owned spaces. "We just decided if the field of architecture can't get it done, we will find a way to do it ourselves." Designer X continues, "The purpose of our collective is to bring attention to the actual needs of the people we serve. Architecture is supposed to be a service industry. Yet, it seems like only the top 1% continues to truly be served." Designer X declined to reveal the firm they were formerly employed at, but there was a united sentiment that the architecture profession was unfulfilling. Eight years into their career, Designer X lost much of the wonder and idealism that attracted them to architecture.

With so many projects geared toward private luxury, the profession has not been a reflection of the way architecture is taught in institutions across the world. Rent prices have rapidly increased for decades. Although the amount of affordable housing projects has also risen, it has not come close to meeting the demands of the public. "We keep getting Starbucks and no one is asking for it," Designer X decries. "People need housing. Quality housing." The question becomes, what are the Vigilante Architects doing about it?

When someone in their neighborhood reveals there is an issue in their community - be it a vacant lot, or an old abandoned building - vigilante architects come together to make a decision on what to do. The city tracks the amount of vacant lots in the neighborhood and it is accessible to the public on their public domain. One of the first successful projects that the revolutionary collective completed was a grocery store in the Flatlands neighborhood of Brooklyn. Residents continued to complain about the lack of transit to grocery stores that had a more robust offering of produce. Elderly residents in particular had difficulty since they relied the most on the city's public transit system. New York State's ban on gasoline-operated vehicles has proved to be a difficult transition for local residents. Instead of waiting for the city or private developer to act, residents organized with the vigilante architects to raise money and convert a storefront church into a grocery store. The project proved to be a huge success within the neighborhood since it was an all hands on deck project. Members of the collective who were architects, contractors, and builders all contributed to the project. "I believe this collective is an example of what it looks like when people come together to leverage our strengths and knowledge," one Flatlands resident remarked. "This is only the beginning."

Tenets of the Vigilante Architect

design what we believe.

The origins of our built environment is someone's imagination. If we believe in a fair and healthy world for everyone, we must design and practice as such.

prioritize ecological growth.

Do not change for "change's sake." Grow human contact, grow human connection to nature, grow the human potential through your practice.

futurism is not enough.

Change today for tomorrow. Dreaming, or projecting what the future may be is not enough. We must transform the way we engage with our present if we want a better future.

designer and builder are not exclusive.

The tangible material world cannot be separate from the design process. Users, designers, and builders should be in sync throughout the process of creating space.

design for the 99%.

The dismantling of “Capital A” architecture, a term used to describe the formal, canonical, and capitalistic nature of the profession. With the growing unrest over the past few decades, vigilante architects and others have organized around shifting the profession to serve in more informal and less harmful ways.



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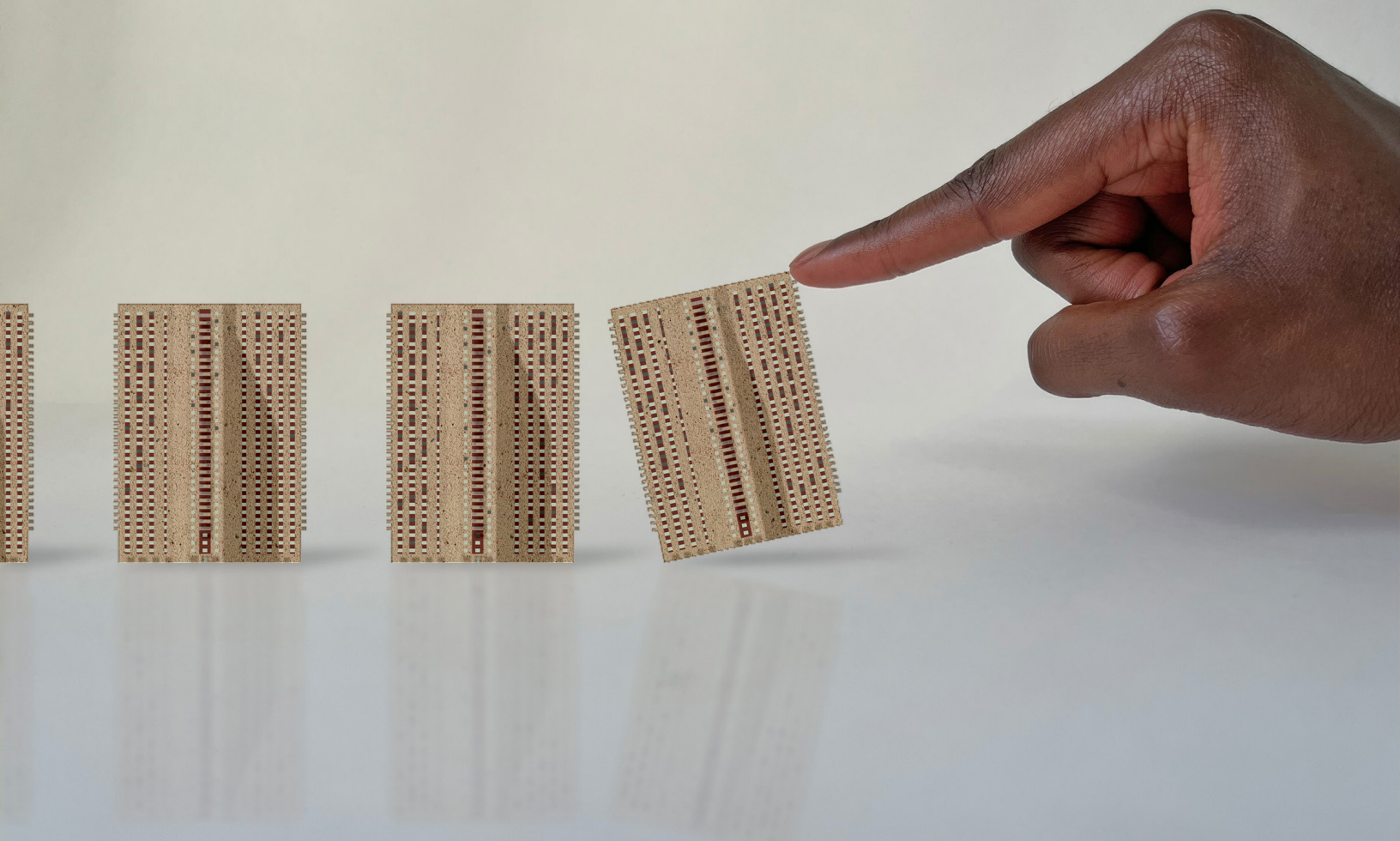


2063

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Towards A New Housing Model



New York's groundbreaking Housing Rights Act is positioned to have a domino effect on the way housing is approached throughout the country.

A New Housing Model to Believe In

The first building has been erected since New York State's landmark Housing Rights Act passed eight years ago in 2055. The State's decision to take control of large scale housing developments have shifted the way affordable housing projects will be developed moving forward. The new residential development is located in the South Bronx and will house over 600 residents. The community itself has been dubbed the "Great New Housing Deal." With rent prices having reached astronomical levels, and near extinction of non-renewable resources, New York became the epicenter of America's overall housing crisis. "Something had to be done - private development was only exacerbating the issue," said one New York State legislator. Politicians, community leaders, architects, and urbanists had to converge on a common outlook for housing within the State of New York. "We wanted our state to be the first domino to fall, and hopefully other states would follow suit." The goal of the Housing Rights Act was to ensure that every New Yorker has an affordable and adequate place to live. Similar to the way young people throughout the state have access to free public education through state funding, this new act utilizes public funding to build housing for low to middle income New Yorkers.

The Act was proposed after the growing momentum of the vigilante architecture movement. The strike of 2055 that brought a halt to construction projects in New York proved to be a dramatic setback. The state government realized a change was needed as housing became one of the most contentious issues within the state. However, there was plenty of skepticism towards another Housing regulation law being passed. Federally, several housing acts have been enacted over the past century, and many believe that is an indictment on the poor efficacy of the housing system in the U.S. The Housing Act of 1949 presented "the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family." Subsequent Housing Acts either supplemented the Housing Act of 1949, or worsened the equitable damage to communities of color. The Housing Act of 1954 is recognized as having the most detrimental effect as it permitted the government and commercial developers to demolish and displace low-income neighborhoods deemed "slums." The effects of this law was felt for decades. Urbanists and activists are still working to reverse the harmful effects of those housing acts decades after its enactment.





Skeptics of the new legislation want to know how it differs from the previous ones. The answer is in the accountability and implementation of these Acts. “The previous housing regulation laws didn’t work because they weren’t carried out well enough,” remarked one historian. “No one was held accountable, and there wasn’t enough care or maintenance of the buildings that were built.” The 2063 Act includes programs and incentives geared towards maintaining the properties precluding the event from happening again. Under the new statute, building property managers are eligible for tax credits upon receiving an exceptional grade from state inspection. Renters that maintain their space will recoup the full amount of their deposit in addition to the accrued inflated value throughout the term of their lease. While it remains to be seen how effective these initiatives will be, there is a renewed optimism that this could be the final Housing Act needed.



Lessons from *Towers In the Park*

In addition to the radical shift in policy changes from previous housing acts, the architects designing the buildings bringing this legislation to life are shifting the look of public housing. Nearly a century ago, similar housing developments were constructed in major cities throughout the country. Le Corbusier's "Towers in the Park" strategy for designing high-rise buildings became synonymous with public housing communities. The design strategy was centered around a rational organization of residential towers oriented in clusters that distinctly separate the communal space at ground level. Over time, the towers in the park motif was recognized as an ineffective design strategy. Poor maintenance of these housing communities became a breeding ground for increased crime and the negative stigma associated with affordable housing communities. Advocates for the new housing law - most notably the vigilante architects - were adamant that the same issues would not be repeated. "We've been down this road before, trying to provide quality housing for our citizens and it's largely been a failure," expressed a New York State community organizer. "I'm hopeful this time around we'll design with more intent and care for the people who will inhabit these spaces."

Architects commissioned to design the project were well aware of the harmful effects of the Corbusier's Tower in the Park theory, and instead decided to mediate between the ground and building. "It was important that residents and pedestrians did not feel alienated while at the ground level," one vigilante architect commented. The housing units designed with these guiding principles in mind: connectivity, sustainability, and transparency. The buildings are built with materials that are meant to last over 100 years. Current affordable housing structures are either at, or approaching, one hundred years of age. Those buildings are in need of being replaced.



Architects prioritized the mantra of working with the natural environment to design. With the expiration of fuel and natural gas over the past year, it was important to be mindful of the scarcity of non-renewable resources, and build responsibly. “I think a lot of people didn’t really think they’d live to see it, but we’re actually running out of energy sources and we’re all scrambling to find alternatives,” said a NYS official. To encourage people to be mindful of the environmental impact of their choices, the designs were made with more transparency. “Our industry is responsible for 40% of the carbon emissions that have put us in this predicament,” said vigilante architect, Designer X. “The disconnect between the built environment and the natural world contributed to the collective neglect that escalated over time.” Design interventions implemented by architects include ensuring that running water systems become more visible to the public, outdoor spaces at various levels throughout the building, and outdoor spaces for communal learning about the environment. Ground has broken at the first building to be erected under the Housing Rights Act. The building is expected to be open for residents in 2066, and it will be the beginning of a new era for housing moving forward.



TOP: Photo rendering critiquing the ecological impact of the architecture and construction industries. Architects have taken on a greater responsibility to care for the Earth as they continue to construct buildings. BOTTOM: The construction site of the first housing building to be erected under New York’s Housing Act. Construction is expected to be completed by 2066





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Since 2023, Urbanist Outlook magazine has sponsored an annual design challenge. This yearly design exercise offers an opportunity for designers, urbanists, artists, educators, and creatives to submit imaginative proposals that push our world forward.

The theme for this year's submission is

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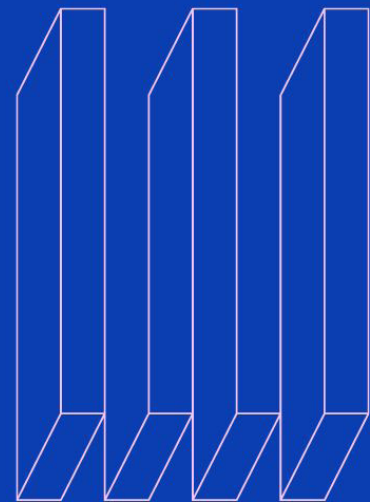
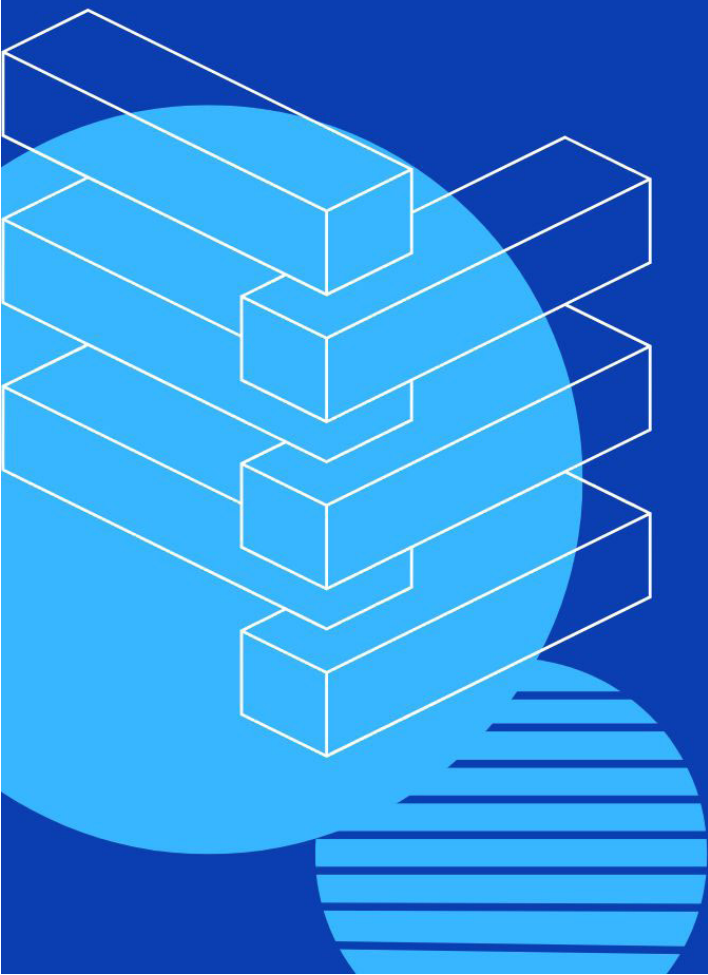
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Key Terms

Adequate housing (adj. + noun) - housing that has enough space for people to move around in without feeling constricted; a dwelling that has the amenities necessary for a person's well-being (plumbing, electricity, heating/cooling, etc.); "adequate housing" also refers to being within close proximity to grocery stores, school, work opportunities, healthcare, schools, and cultural hubs.

Affordable (adj.) - this is one of the most subjective terms within my lexicon, and one of the most relevant to the housing crisis that my thesis is exploring. The term affordable means something different for everyone, mostly due to their income levels. With regards to housing, a widely accepted metric is housing which only costs 30% of a person's income. Unfortunately, in 2020, 46% of American renters spend more than 30% of their income on their rent, causing a strain on their overall financial well-being.

Institutional (adj.) - institutional refers to the formal/"official" nature of architecture. In order to be recognized as an architect, one has to attend an accredited program, and in most cases, be licensed in order to approve architectural drawings. The institutional progression of architecture has shifted the way we engage with our built environment. A few centuries ago, it was far more widespread for people to build their homes and important community structures without the formal education/title of being an architect. Empirical knowledge and apprenticeship were the skills that were needed to design and build structures.

Limitations (noun) - this term is essential to my speculation. It is clear that architecture cannot solely resolve all the issues that our current housing system faces. Clients and developers are typically owners of the land who approach architects with the idea they have of what building to put on their lot. The word limitation refers to what more can architects do beyond applying their design skills to meet the desires of their clients.

Public (adj. + noun) - refers to the part of business, or the economy, that comprises government-run agencies and organizations, or non-profit organizations. The public sector is a "service" industry that (technically) prioritizes the needs of the general public as opposed to prioritizing profit margins.

Private (adj. + noun) - refers to the part of the business and economy sector that prioritizes capital gains and profits. It is not primarily run by the government; as businesses are not primarily funded by tax revenue, grants, or public donations.

Privatization (noun) - the commodification of land as property (property that belongs to a single owner, or a shared ownership group/business). The land is used to generate income and the owners dictate who has access to the land, and

what activities they can engage in when they're on it. Housing continues to be increasingly privatized, and the competition drives up costs to secure housing.

Sustainable (adj.) - Lasting. The term sustainable is integral to my thesis argument because sustainability is typically discussed within the context of environmentalism. While it is important we use materials that have a low to zero carbon footprint, I believe the design field's use of the term sustainable. There have been solutions that will provide temporary relief from homelessness, but where are the lasting sustainable solutions? How can these solutions be completed given the scarcity of our materials?

Fundamental pillar (noun) - Housing is synonymous with architecture; folks who are not in (or adjacent to) the architecture profession associate housing with the discipline. In 2018, 55% of the revenue generated by architecture was from residential projects.

Housing crisis (noun) - The current housing model is not working for people who do not have substantial wealth. The average asking rent in the United States is \$1900. The average U.S. salary is \$54,132 (\$4,511 per month). Using those figures, the average American is spending 42% of their income on housing - well over the recommended limit of 30% of a renter's income. People continue to stretch their finances thin just to be able to afford housing and it is restricting their ability to use their income to contribute to other areas of their lives.

Underrepresented (noun) - The ethos of my thesis stems from an assertion my mother made while cooking in our single-family home a few years ago. She lamented, "American homes aren't made for Nigerian cooking." The smells from the Nigerian dishes she was preparing always filled our house, and accompanied our clothes - much to the dismay of my father. The assertion my mother made sparked my questioning of what an American home that was designed for Nigerian cooking looks like. The conflict of trying to conform to U.S. customs, but also continuing to uphold native cultural practices, is a shared experience by many foreigners in America. I questioned in what ways architecture contributes to this feeling of being underrepresented in one's own home - perhaps the last space anyone could imagine feeling underrepresented in.

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