

## R: Reconstruction is Everything with V. Mitch McEwen

by Shih Ting Huang



***Reconstruct Everything, a lecture by V. Mitch McEwen***  
*Tuesday, March 2, 2021*

This event was part of the Spring 2021 Architecture Lecture Series, co-presented with [The Museum of the African Diaspora](#).

V. Mitch McEwen joined the faculty at Princeton in fall 2017 from the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture & Urban Planning, where she had been an assistant professor since 2014. She is the co-founder of [Atelier Office](#), a design practice in New York City. McEwen's design work has been awarded grants from the Graham Foundation, Knight Foundation, and New York State Council on the Arts. McEwen earned her M.Arch. at Columbia and B.A. at Harvard.

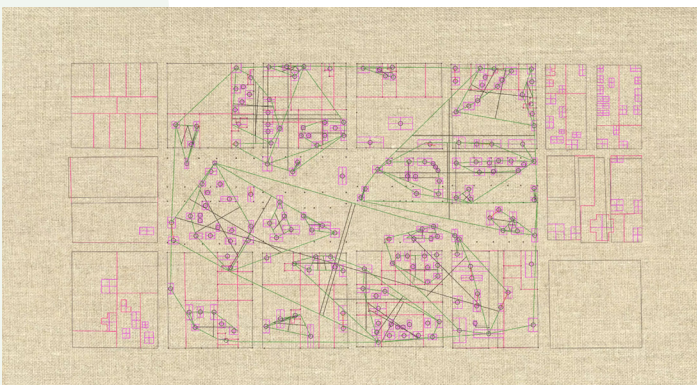
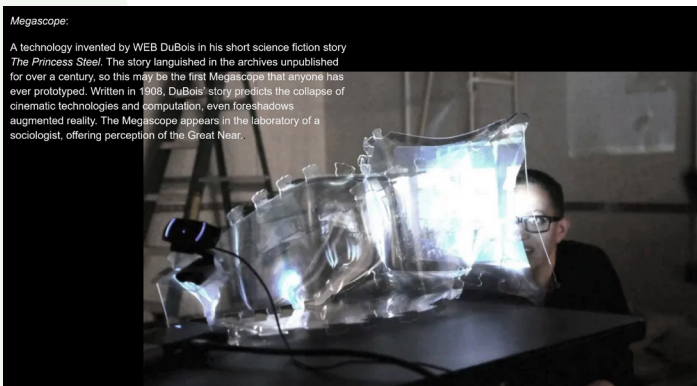
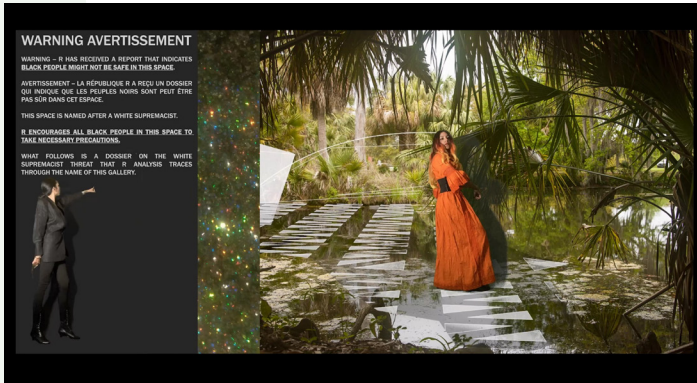
On March 2nd, Principal of Atelier Office in New York City, assistant professor at the Princeton University School of Architecture, and director of the Black Box Research group V. Mitch McEwen presented the lecture "Reconstruct Everything," which focused on McEwen's exhibition "Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America," on view now at the MoMA NYC. The exhibition seeks to bring architects, designers, and artists together to discuss how race structures America's cities. McEwen mentioned that they wanted to create a platform through this exhibition that articulated the reconstruction of monumentally different ideas through an interdisciplinary framework. The talk was co-hosted on Zoom by CCA's Architecture Division and the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco.

McEwen shared some pages from her notebook with the audience, so they could better understand the process of curating the exhibition—something crucial to understanding the show's themes. McEwen wrote the letter "R" on the notebook's front, meaning Reconstruction, Reparations, and Republica. Inside the notebook are various sketches about weaving: its relationship to the ground and how its process creates a memory for time. Memorializing implicates memories; memories involve our emotional lives.

Then, McEwen gave the audience some examples from her research on R. She discussed a photograph she took in Mexico City, speaking to themes of modernization as colonization—something McEwen has discussed [in more detail elsewhere](#). The picture showed the pavement being dug out, with exposed pipes, connecting this image of the ground as mere land to land that European colonization conquered. Mexico City's development is akin to colonization, as it erases traces of the original ground, replacing it with something foreign. Another example of development as colonization takes place in New Orleans' history, where there are still some signs of the French Quarter built by the original French colonies. The buildings' historical footprint became the inspiration



Photo taken in Mexico City, from McEwen's presentation.



Slides from McEwen's presentation.

for a project in which McEwen tried to use a metric system to measure the city's early pattern. New Orleans is built in 100m x 100m blocks. In the city, there are many holes or grouping points of patterns built by nefarious means of labor such as slavery and human trafficking. McEwen interpreted these patterns to be the staging of the Enlightenment that was a radical departure from early city patterns of other cities. McEwen also indicated this project is not specific only in New Orleans but to other southern states. The New Orleans investigation inspired McEwen to design a series of "space frames" and material weavings. These designs included remaking maps that told the story of "Republica," emphasizing the connection between the Enlightenment and the 100mx100m squares that occupy New Orleans. These investigations question colonial endurance through the disparate relationship between Orléans in France and New Orleans, asking "What are the stories of 200 years ago?"

McEwen then pivoted to discuss the Johnson Study Group and their work in the exhibition. Currently, the group is working to remove architect Philip Johnson's name from MoMA walls with a petition, as he was a Nazi sympathizer in his early years. Other signers of the letter include Kate Orff, a landscape architect and MacArthur Fellow; Amale Andraos, dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation; and Justin Garrett Moore, the executive director of New York City's Public Design Commission and a founding member of BlackSpace, a Black urbanist collective. The group's thinking forefronts Blackness as central in MoMA's reconstruction, unpacking how the MoMA Architecture department has mainly supported and innovated white voices since the department opened. In fact, works by Black architects were not even in the collection during the 80s and 90s. Now, the Johnson Study Group is sharing how other architects consider blackness as essential to reconstructing the field.

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**Shih Ting Huang** is a graduate architecture student who focuses on environmental issues and trying to design a sustainable future.



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