



## [Irene Cheng's \*Race and Modern Architecture\* Book Launch](#): How Can Race Transform Architecture History?

*Shih Ting Huang*

The Race and Architecture event that took place on Friday, September 18th celebrated the launch of the anthology *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present*, edited by Mabel O. Wilson, Charles L. Davis II, and CCA Faculty member Irene C. Cheng. When I heard about the event, I was immediately attracted by its content and the fact that it was hosted by three institutions with global reach. I had several personal connections to the event—I am an alumna of the University at Buffalo, where I studied Environmental Design, and Irene was my architecture theory professor—so, it was an excellent opportunity to see the book launch with different perspectives from global educators who I knew on a personal level.

The event consisted of three parts. The first part was an explanation of the book's content, followed by different educators giving brief speeches about their teaching experiences, and the closing part was a question and answer period. The book presents an idea of how to reformulate architectural history concepts in the right way, so students can understand architecture without being racist. Those who are teaching modern architecture theory classes in higher education have to adjust their course material by adding an anti-racist point of view. Racism has been in the field of architectural history for a long time, and the way it is taught has been shaped by the intertwined histories of slavery and capitalism in the U.S, as much of our modern culture is. In the late 20th century, and even now, architectural history and theory contain some information that is racist towards various people or cultures.

There are two examples that I remember clearly from the event. Addison Godel spoke about a Chinese garden built in 1760 in Europe during the Enlightenment. He pointed out that the Europeans who built the garden had an imagined, non-historical version of Chinese culture in their minds (from inaccurate garden styles to concubine stereotypes)—far from reality. The history of the garden reflects the racial theory of the white architects' culture at that period. When we study Chinoiserie in architecture, it is essential to understand that background

stories, as we pass them on, influence students' thinking, often dangerously. Eventually, the garden was burned down, though for unclear reasons.

Reinhold Martin spoke about the dumbwaiter built into the dining room fireplace in Monticello. In the speech, he mentioned that race and nation are related because government and law regulate most of the people's thinking. Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's primary plantation, is an excellent example to present the history of slaves and their rooms. Incredibly, lots of the places slaves were housed are relatively small, or in a dark basement, with hardly enough room for the enslaved people to stretch their bodies—completely unethical. Martin shared a picture of a dumbwaiter in a Monticello fireplace, which demonstrated the relationship between servants and Thomas Jefferson's guests and families. The function of a dumbwaiter is to transport wine from the basement wine cellar; the enslaved individuals pulled it up using rope during Thomas Jefferson's dinners. Martin also discussed the relationship between voice and race. How can we amplify those who are silenced without tokenizing those voices, turning individuals into spokespersons for the race? Perhaps, there is a need for counter-propaganda to course-correct architectural history's path away from racism.

In the end, lots of writers think *Race and Modern Architecture* is the right book appearing at the perfect time. Personally, I think the book is interesting because it consists of essays by global educators that try to pursue an anti-racism architecture theory. The book diagnoses architecture with a race problem, making us rethink race and architecture entirely. In past textbooks, there is a lot of racist information which directs students to have incorrect ideas about the history of architecture, and why buildings are the way they are now. This book is a step towards a discussion about something much more extensive than architecture. The educators even talked about the need for an anti-racist syllabus in architecture pedagogy, and how institutions should have more open communication via seminars or syllabus sharing to promote anti-racist architecture. Therefore, this book, which redefines architectural history and theory is needed, and can begin to remake architecture pedagogy.

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*Race and Modern Architecture: Book Launch* was organized by CCA Architecture Division, moderated by Mabel O. Wilson, Irene Cheng, and Charles L. Davis II with presentations by Esra Akcan, Adrienne Brown, Luis Carranza, Jiat-Hwee Chang, Mark Crinson, Kenny Cupers, Addison Godel, Dianne Harris, Andrew Herscher, Reinhold Martin, Brian McLaren, Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, Peter Minosh, Adedoyin Teriba, and Lisa Uddin.

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