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The radical (re)construction of memory in the American South

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ABSTRACT: Ruskin's "Lamp of Memory" situates power in permanence, eliminating the agency of dismantled projects within architectural history and overlooking embodied energy in consciously erased landscapes. Barton's *Sites of Memory* explains that the built environment provides collective history and cultural memory; yet the legacy of Black architectural heritage within the American South has been plagued with invisibility and trauma through the antebellum enslaved community's architecture of impermanence and postbellum acts of conscious erasure. A radical tectonics approach reaches beyond built permanence, revealing cognitive and embodied structures. Empathetic structures that acknowledge systematic oppression, exclusion, and exploitation in the built environment are nascent forms of radical tectonics but that they typically do not surface lost histories, memories, and values. As explored in a case study of the Equal Justice Initiative's National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, forensic architectural history can quantify a site's social changes, displacements, and environmental inequities.

1 INTRODUCTION

Today, the word 'radical' is associated with extreme or drastic deviation from the norm. An act or a person can be portrayed as radical if seen as moving away from what has been deemed expected or typical. This new and, frankly, uninformed meaning strays from the word's etymology. Radix means "root; of, relating to, or proceeding from a root" (Merriam Webster). Therefore, radical is "not about moving left, but 'down' to the roots" (India Walton 2021). 'Tectonic,' on the other hand, suggests a materially poetic construction that reaches beyond the pragmatic. It evokes poetic and cognitive constructs rooted in culture and context that reveals the normally hidden and expressive potentials of human bodies (Frampton, 1995; LeCuyer 2001). In this case study, we conceptualize radical tectonics as cognitive and material constructs that lay bare thidden, or erased, from a site. Radical tectonics reach beyond the immediately visible layers of a site through deep archival research and comparative mapping to expose the otherwise immaterial. In other words, radical tectonics can unearth buried, embodied energy. This can be expressed through quantifiable studies, such as the displacement of people, changes in economic valuation and political districting of land, systemic maladies (i.e., pollutants), and architectural vestiges, including materials and infrastructure.

In this paper, radical tectonics within architecture refers to the use of archival research based in historic maps, censuses, and written accounts to explore the roots of a site from its settlement, rather than a truncated view of history based on the immediately visible layers of a place. This position argues that a site, or structure, cannot truly be sustainable without an account of the life cycle and historical context of a place. At certain sites, brownfield and superfund redevelopment are well-recognized, regulated, and mandated investigations and remediations for sites, examining past uses, scars, and physical toxicity (Dixon 2007; Gans & Weisz 2004). Yet, few designers fully explore the historic layers of a site that can be just as toxic to a place, unearthing how the built environment is implicated in social, economic, environmental injustices. A radical and situated approach to tectonics in architecture asks that we hold a mirror up to a project's claims and existence by highlighting its limits, refusing to remain ignorant of socio-political structures that shape them, and by amplifying the stories of oppressed and erased people, histories, and environments (Noel 2021).

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This paper closely adheres to our conceptualization of radical tectonics by using the Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) built works in Montgomery, Alabama as a case study. Using the three main structures associated with EJI's initiatives – The Memorial, The Center, and The Museum - this paper explores the roots and groundings of these projects' interconnected sites through their historical contexts and demographic compositions. Rather than examining the EJI's built works as objects with twenty-first century construction dates, this paper takes an archaeological approach to the sites and examines the embodied energy of place: through the previously unexplored layers of the site, one can reveal much deeper meanings within the EJI's structures that are directly tied to systematic, racially motivated erasures within the landscape of Montgomery's built environment. Although the buried narratives and erasures of the physical environments at these sites had political motivations, this paper argues that the presentation of these shrouded and complex histories are not inherently political but, instead, form important corrections of fact based upon quantifiable evidence that can better enrich holistic understandings of the site and oppression in the American South.

This paper begins with a brief introduction of the EJI, their mission, and the three main sites in Montgomery. Methods describe our lenses for studying the site's historical, social, and political layers alongside the context of the American South. The following section, Decoding Site Layers presents findings and analyses on the radical tectonics, the erased roots of the sites, and their previously untold participation in physical, environmental, and economic injustices. In the Discussion, we consider implications for designing the built environment as well as some of the work's limitations. The Conclusion presents the implications of integrating historical layers into the design of commemorative landscapes and public history projects and possibilities for future research.

2 MEMORIALIZATION IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

2.1 *The EJI mission*

The EJI is a nonprofit, founded in 1989 by renowned public interest lawyer Bryan Stevenson. The nonprofit was initially founded to provide legal representation to the wrongfully convicted, unfairly sentenced, and abused. Their overall mission was committed to ending injustices of mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States which disproportionately impact Black and brown people. In 2016, elements of the EJI mission moved from the courtroom to the built environment.

2.2 *The sites of EJI's built works*

Currently, there are three sites that attempt to address racial injustices within the Montgomery landscape: The National Memorial for Peace and Justice (hereinafter referred to as The Memorial), The Peace and Justice Center (The Center) directly west, and one mile to the northeast is The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration (The Museum). These three sites offer places for remembrance and memorialization, meeting spaces for lectures and symposia, and educational sites that offer curricula directly aligned with Common Core Standards as well as provoking oral histories and primary source driven data, richly interpreted, and visualized for engaging lifelong learners.

The three sites are interconnected in their programming, exploring the nation's history of racial injustice, and providing venues for addressing the legacies of slavery, lynching, and racial segregation. They are, however, three very different constructions. The EJI announced The Memorial site in August 2016: the six-acres overlooking the city of Montgomery and MASS Design Group were selected to shape The Memorial. Grounded by the belief, "that architecture has a critical role to play in supporting communities to confront history, shape new narratives, collectively heal and project new possibilities for the future," the team crafted a site with several concrete and bronze sculptures, substantial earthwork and towering concrete retaining walls to navigate the varied terrain, and a processional memorial that features 800 six-foot monuments in Corten steel. Amid their research, the EJI documented more than 4,400 lynchings of Black people in the United States between 1877

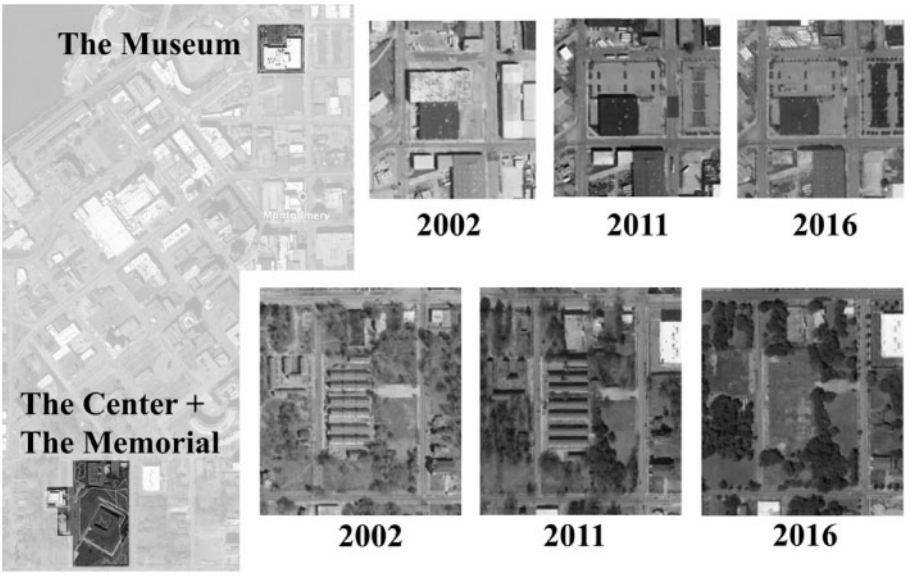

Figure 1. Authors' collage of Google Earth captures of The Memorial, The Center, and The Museum site, showing the erasure of housing on The Memorial site.

and 1950; this study accounted for 20% more lynchings than had been previously recognized. The steel forms are distinctly corporeal, especially as visitors initially engage with the forms at eye level. They then become suspended overhead, hanging, as visitors descend into the excavated site along a rectilinear, ramped path. The visual weight of the objects, frozen in place above the heads of visitors, is a clear representation of what Ware describes as the "extrajudicial violence" that was particularly prevalent in the Jim Crow south and a way for white supremacists to assert their power in a calculated, lawless, and public way (2016). Yet, these vertical, Corten coffins do not represent a one-to-one visualization of the victims of lynching violence. The steel forms bear plasma cut lettering with geographical information, citing either the county and state or state alone, and most of the markers also incise the names, when known, and dates of the lynching victims. Depending on the data available, one steel marker may have one name or may be representative of more than forty stolen lives.

In April 2018, The Memorial, The Center, and The Museum opened and became Alabama's most visited tourist attraction for 2019. Outgrowing the original museum site, located in a warehouse linked to the domestic slave trade in Montgomery, The Museum opened a new purpose-built structure in September 2021, located on a former slave auction site and warehouse fueled by enslaved labor. The larger space affords expanded exhibitions as well as an area dedicated to an element of the EJI's Community Remembrance Project: The Community Soil Collection Project that gathers earth from known lynching sites and places it within glass jars labeled with the victim's names. Despite this focus on soil, the earth upon which The Memorial, The Center, and The Museum sits has not been fully excavated, raising questions about meaning, memory, and engrained interconnectivity between these sites. The Google Earth maps of the sites (Figure 1) illustrate the recent evolution of the sites, especially the erasure of the public housing at The Center and The Memorial sites that dated to 1910 and 1943.

2.3 *Commemorative landscapes*

Although evocative in its construction, The Memorial is not the first time that lynchings were represented in physical forms within the United States. Contemporary ephemera, for example,

were common: a postcard features a photograph of 65-year-old Allen Brooks hanging from Elk's Arch on 3 March 1910 in Dallas while a mob of 5,000 attended the downtown event after seizing Brooks directly from the courthouse and interrupting the legal proceedings (Scott 2016).

Within the established construction language of ceremonial and commemorative monuments, one can frequently find vertical forms: obelisks as well as inscribed and decorative columns. Located on Capitol Hill, Montgomery has one such monument to its role as first capital of the Confederacy and over 100,000 Alabama veterans who fought for the Confederate States of America in the Civil War. The Montgomery Southern History Society was founded in late 1860s, but funds were not secured until 1880s, with the assistance of the Ladies' Memorial Association of Montgomery, an organization that typified the Lost Cause narrative: patriotism, male chivalry, and female nostalgia (Upton 2015). The 88-foot-tall column, capped with a bronze figure personifying "Patriotism" was dedicated on December 7, 1898. Montgomery celebrated its secessionist history in commissioned maps, such as a 1945 delineation of the metro area highlighting the city as the "Cradle of the Confederacy." Facing little resistance, the monument stood largely unquestioned until it was vandalized with black paint in 2007, but efforts were made to protect it and other symbols of white supremacy when the state passed the Alabama Memorial Preservation Act in 2017, barring the removal of monuments through fiscal barrier of a $25,000 fine.

The terrestrially grounded totem of Montgomery's commemorative Confederate landscape serves as a symbol of supremacist patronage, but also a decisive representation of approved racial control and power through its proximity to the capital building. Converse to the existing memorial landscape, the monuments of The Memorial are suspended: they hang stoically next to visitors at The Memorials bounded entryway but then as visitors progress, they begin to hang from elongated steel tubes and eventually they precariously loom over visitors who can view them from below while standing in the commemorative-built landscape. Through the weight of the Corten coffins, they assert empathetic power over the visitors.

2.4 *Project reviews*

In descriptions and reviews, The (first) Museum's connections to Montgomery's domestic slave trade and The (new) Museum's ties to forced labor during the Jim Crow era are often repeated. However, the site of The Memorial, and adjacent Center, is largely treated as a tabula rasa. This, however, is an incomplete history.

The newspaper reports from 2016, exploring the chosen site for The Memorial presented the hillside site to the public as the "site of a former low-cost housing project" (Enterprise-Journal, 2016) or "formerly the site of an apartment complex" (The Montgomery Advertiser 2016). Yet, a review of newspapers and architecture websites revealed that within reports on the finished Memorial, there were no articles that discussed the domestic history of the site. It is, instead, presented as a blank slate – through omission - upon which a physical construction brings together soil, markers, and stories. The history, participation, and implication in racial oppression, exclusion, and exploitation of the Memorial sites are not revealed; and as a result, the palimpsest of the site is not brought to the fore.

3 METHODS AND QUESTIONS

At the time of the initial abstract submission, the original research question for this paper focused on the erased communities abstractly represented in The Memorial. This would include, for example, a study of the physical damage imposed by the racially targeted 1906 Atlanta Riot and the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. However, subsequent archival discoveries turned our attention to the unpublished, and perhaps unknown historical layers of the EJI sites in Montgomery. An analysis of these layers reveals new meaning for the EJI's built works: for sites dedicated to showcasing individual acts of violence as well as radical erasures, there are specific examples buried within the historical layers of the sites themselves.

To accomplish this, the study employs the following methods. Sanborn Fire Insurance maps depict the evolution of these sites, as well as trends in Montgomery's population growth and development patterns related to the expansion of the urban grid as well as the use of building materials and construction methods. Late nineteenth and twentieth century perspectival maps reveal the shapes, volumes, and styles of landscapes, buildings, and infrastructures "of note" at different time periods. They also raise questions about what is represented in visual and textual forms. The Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) map and accompanying narratives underscore the social, economic, political, and environmental entanglements of sites and their inhabitants, and how they were categorized, valued, and devalued based purely on speculative development. Newspaper records were studied to understand how histories and the built environment were presented (or not) to the public. The archives were used alongside tax records and city directories to verify and correlate sites and events noted in the cognitive maps and oral histories. The cross-referencing of records of memory shed light on who and what were mentioned, left out, and erased in official documents. Historical maps and accounts of socio-political events helped uncover how planned and built environments participated in temporal and currently invisible events. Two historic cognitive maps disclosed a person's spatial experiences during a particular period and correlated or filled in data that may not have been presented in newspaper records. Oral histories gave first-person accounts of events and revealed how the site might be implicated in or be a part of a person's knowledge, memories, and experiences of a place and time. Comparative analysis and triangulation of these sources served as our methodology.

4 DECODING SITE LAYERS

With nearly 100,000 National Register properties, only 2% of the inventory is related to African American history and this staggering shortfall is representative of larger trends within the built environment in the United States, especially within the south, that African American contributions related to both labor and legacy are overlooked. Montgomery, too, shows a widespread failure to document and preserve African American sites and only recent efforts are underway within the historically Black areas but many of these project focus on twentieth century history, such as the Civil Rights Historic Survey, Planning, Research, Documentation, and Preservation Project for Montgomery, Alabama studying the neighborhoods behind the bus boycott of December 1955 to December 1956. The subjects of the study, however, are outside of the historic core of the city: Centennial Hill, King Hill, and West Montgomery. Focusing on the historic core of the city, it is possible to study layers of the city from the nineteenth century (Table 1). This is especially true of the two main EJI sites: The Memorial, bounded by Clayton Street to the north, Holcombe Street to the east, Mildred Street to the south, and Caroline Street to the west, and the Museum bounded by Randolph Street to the north, N. Perry Street to the east, Columbus Street to the south, and N. Court Street to the west.

4.1 *Mapping Montgomery*

Fletcher Hale's cognitive map, drawn around 1912, recalls sites from the cartographer's childhood "drawn from memory." Although The Memorial and Center sites are not distinctly presented, Hale notes that just south of the site "Wilson Raiders stopped here, Yankees cut down all the pecan trees for firewood." This refers to Brigadier General James H. Wilson's Union Army Calvary Corps mission to destroy manufacturing facilities in the south. Following a successful campaign to destroy the Shelby Iron Works near Birmingham, Alabama, Wilson's troops overtook the forces of Confederate Lt. General Nathan Bedford Forrest and razed the foundries in Selma, Alabama then moved into Montgomery on April 12, 1865. Therefore, the EJI site soil bears the footsteps of the liberating Union forces and this same area, later known as Peacock's Tract, represents the last few blocks that the endeavoring Selma to Montgomery marchers traveled before reaching the Capitol to demand equal voting rights that had been crippled by Jim Crow legislation following unfulfilled Constitutional amendments for African American citizens in the reconstruction era.

Table 1. The following primary source maps are available online through interactive platforms.

"Southern Section of Montgomery, Ala. 1899–1912" cognitive map by Fletcher Hale	https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/maps/id/1172/rec/82
Sanborn map of Montgomery, October 1884	https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00074_001/
Bird's eye view of Montgomery, Alabama, 1887	https://www.loc.gov/item/75693077/
Bird's eye view of Montgomery, 1912	https://bit.ly/3D9E1NJ
Sanborn map of Montgomery, May 1888	https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00074_002/
Sanborn map of Montgomery, September 1894	https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00074_003/
Sanborn map of Montgomery, 1900	https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00074_004/
Sanborn map of Montgomery, 1910	https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00074_005/
HOLC map of Montgomery, March 15, 1937	https://bit.ly/3o9UE7R
Sanborn map of Montgomery, 1910 + 1943-1950	https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00074_007/

In the antebellum era, the Memorial and Center sites would be known as Clayton. Following the Civil War, Montgomery would rebuild its industrial operations, but the economy was still built upon cotton. The perspectival map of 1887 (Figure 2) shows The Museum site occupied by a double courtyard "Alabama Cotton Ware House," one of six identified in the city and Memorial and Center sites were occupied by one-story and a few two-story residences, easily accessible by the streetcar line along Clayton Street. The warehouse appears on the May 1888 and September 1894 Sanborn maps, but the Memorial and Center sites are just outside of the map's boundary. Denoting forms and materials, the 1900 Sanborn map reinforces the 1887 perspective view and indicates wooden constructions; the warehouse site, however, was brick and now home to a spur line of the Alabama Midland Freight. By 1910, the warehouse shifted from cotton to storing and shipping hay, feed, seeds, auto parts, and more toxic chemicals and insecticides.

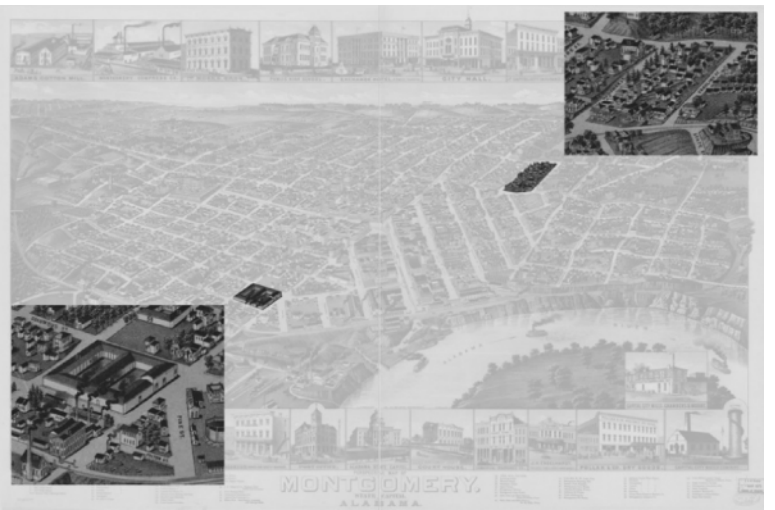

Figure 2. Authors' colorization of Henry Wellge & Co.'s "Perspective Map of Montgomery" (1887) to show the locations of the present-day locations of the EJI's Legacy Museum (bottom left) and National Memorial for Peace and Justice (top right). From the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

The HOLC maps and accompanying narratives are the documents that fully tie the EJI sites together through a historic lens. The Memorial and Center as well as The Museum site received the damaging security grade assessment of hazardous. The Memorial and Center were no longer wooded and although there were utilities, except for gas, and water, the surrounding area was unpaved and selected homes were still serviced by surface toilets that required scavenger service.

The area was home to "the largest negro area in the City" and these mechanics and laborers worked in the city's fertilizer factories and railroad shops: the residents of The Memorial and Center worked at The Museum site. Trapped in a system of limited, underpaid labor, these workers toiled in unhealthy environments and then returned home to a poorly serviced area of the city where many of the wooden residences needed repair and had "portions subject to vandalism." The HOLC map called it an area "stable for negro desirability, declining steadily for whites" and this was exasperated by the fact that the nearby Genetta Ditch overflowed and there were no supported investments in the area, only rentals. The EJI sites were home to another form of lynching: economic and environmental.

5 DISCUSSION

In this paper, we define radical tectonics as cognitive and material constructs that reveal embodied energy hidden or erased from a site. We also present a radical tectonics framework (Figure 3) which employs deep archival research based on historic maps, censuses, and written accounts to explore the roots of a site from its settlement, rather than the immediately visible layers of a place. The work suggests that by digging into the socio-political, environmental, and economical histories of our sites, we can better enrich and present our built environments by taking into consideration these invisible and often erased tectonics.

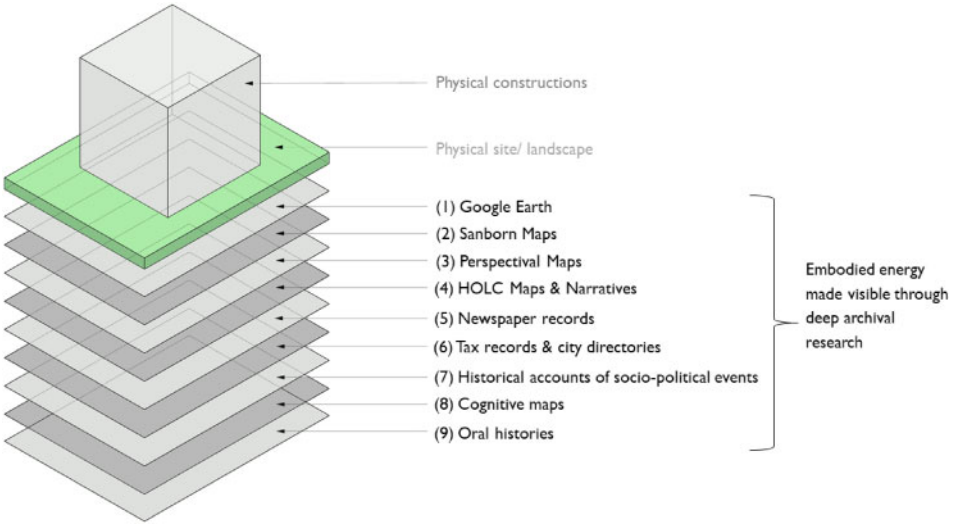

Figure 3. A Radical Tectonics Framework for revealing and getting to the root of sites in the built environment.

One implication of employing a radical tectonics approach to architecture is that it resurrects that which has been lost, erased, or buried. A second implication is the development of stronger connections and reflections between sites and the architecture built upon them in terms of categories such as community connections, invisible histories, transposed materials, and physical tectonics. Third, the framework facilitates the didactic pairing of physical constructions with digital constructions, and reconstructions, of a site's material and immaterial histories. Resulting documentation and analysis can be publicly disseminated through venues such as websites and interactive displays for enhancing education, understanding, and building empathy. A fourth implication is an ethical obligation within architecture. It asks that we investigate, acknowledge, and advocate for the histories of overlooked, marginalized, and erased voices within the built environment. As demonstrated in the analysis of President's Park, the layers of a site must be studied to not only understand the past but to also advocate for a truly collective and democratic future (Way 2020).

6 CONCLUSIONS

This research presents neither a nostalgic nor a sanitized view of the sites but instead uses a 'radical tectonics framework' to evaluate the EJI's built works, drawing upon architectural history methods and historical contexts to better understand how "individuals and communities operate within their material worlds" (Ellis 2017). Although not at the forefront of this study, it is critical to mention a historic site located immediately to the east of The Memorial: The Old Ship African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church. Home to the oldest African American congregation in the city, the current brick, classical revival building dates to c.1918–1920. There are, however, elements that date to the original building: in 1852, when investing in a new stone structure, a white congregation on Court Street donated the wooden frame of its 1835 church. Newspapers and oral histories reveal the components were rolled, like lumber along a shipyard, to the new AME church site under the supervision of a free Black contractor, Thomas Wilson (Savage 1994). This construction transportation method gave the building part of its name and the structure's pulpit would later welcome Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Built during an era when enslaved labor fueled Montgomery's economy and a safe harbor to free men and women, the church is a Montgomery witness from the antebellum era to the Union invasion, Jim Crow legislation, segregation, and the legacies of systematic oppression. The EJI's built works focus on new constructions, on sites with deep histories, yet there is an inherent responsibility within their driving mission of justice to ensure the preservation of this church and disseminate the story of the EJI site archaeology, still awaiting further excavation and exploration.

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