

INTERPRETIVE LANDSCAPE DESIGN, RACE, AND PUBLIC HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic and racial conflict perennially surface in local and national news, yet solutions remain elusive. This may be due, in part, to discomfort in direct discussion of ethnicity, difference, and social change. How can a design studio integrate focused discussions on such social issues while also addressing design process and product? This paper presents a case study in which students in the St. Croix Praxis studio at Rutgers collaborated with the National Park Service (NPS), St. Croix, USVI, to develop alternative interpretive landscape plans for the Christiansted National Historic Site. The site is associated with the archeological remains and standing architecture of a slave market and its administrative function. The slave market site is the largest, most complete structural remains of the mercantilism associated with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Few traces of this important history remain, yet the overwhelming majority of the local population can trace its genesis to this site.

To more purposefully address issues of ethnicity and identity in design, the studio included fieldwork and interviews in St. Croix, followed by a series of structured conceptual exercises, guided self-reflection, and visits to mainland NPS sites upon return to New Jersey. As student feedback reveals, the studio process enabled students to explore their own stories relative to culture, history and ethnicity and, as a result, they more flexibly interpreted a public history site.

Keywords

community-based design; ethnicity and design; race and class; cultural place-making