



Protesters at City Hall during the George Floyd protest on June 2, 2020. Photo by Mark Felix.

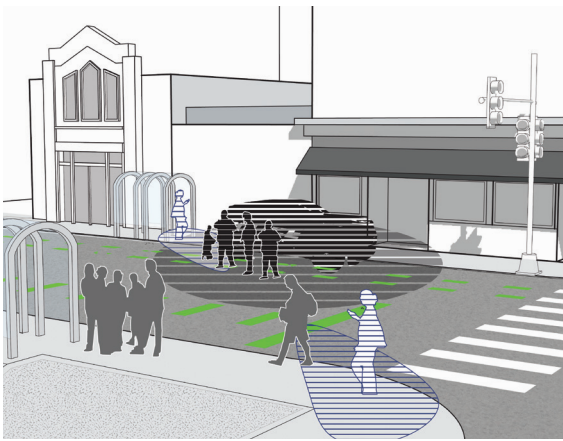
Protest

Inclusion Exclusion

Return

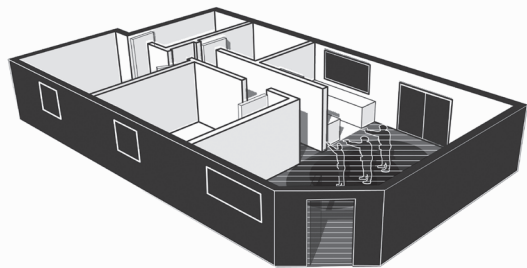
Zoe Middleton and
Libby Viera-Bland

After the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, the City of Houston, like the rest of the nation, was yet again confronted with a discussion of Black humanity and public space. Floyd, who grew up in the Third Ward, was murdered in the public right-of-way, on the asphalt of the bicycle lane at East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis. He was removed from the privacy of his vehicle and forced into the public realm, where officer Derek Chauvin of the Minneapolis Police Department kneeled on his neck for eight minutes, forty-six seconds. As the murder occurred, three other officers surrounded the two men, attempting to block the violence from view. The act occurred in public space. It quickly became yet another example of how a neutral space can be transformed to a place of violence and exclusion based on the will of those in power. An everyday place can terrifyingly become a place where one is stripped of power, agency, breath, and life in less than ten minutes.



The public right-of-way in Minneapolis where George Floyd was murdered.

While Floyd was executed in public, Breonna Taylor was murdered by police in the assumed privacy of her home. In both cases, Black bodies were stripped of their humanity with blatant disregard for the value of their lives. Videos of Floyd's murder entered the incident into public imagination. While video footage made its voyeurism easier by acting as a digital lynching postcard, Taylor's murder did not receive the same level of attention. There are several possible reasons why mourners and protesters had to work hard to bring attention to her killing. First among them is the pervasive *misogynoir*¹ of American society, and the second is the privacy of the space in which she was killed. She was murdered in her bedroom when a group of Louisville police officers forced their way into her home in the middle of the night, despite having no evidence to suggest that she would be a threat. The privacy in which Taylor was killed—from bullets that passed through a wall—meant her murder lacked the imagery that would enable the nation to respond to direct pictures of this violence. Instead, the movement that seeks justice for her murder has relied on photos and drawings of her as a living and vibrant person with a life worth living—a story about a Black woman that is impossible for many Americans to sympathize with, even without the facts of her murder.



Breonna Taylor's apartment in Louisville where she was murdered.

Understanding how a space is designed to function is too static a frame of analysis for the current moment. The agency of Black humanity in both public and private space must be understood as a relationship that is in constant contention with those who claim power over Black bodies.

In Houston, the transformation of neutral spaces and places of inclusion into spaces of exclusion

and oppression has been particularly pronounced during times of protest. The sixty-thousand person protest last summer in response to George Floyd's murder and the subsequent mass arrests of protesters are examples of how public space is transformed into an exclusionary zone of control. This and earlier protests and spatial disputes throughout the city further demonstrate the fraught relationship between Black bodies and civic space in Houston.

Spaces of Protest

2014: Mike Brown protests at the Galleria

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown Jr., an 18-year-old Black man, was killed by Darren Wilson, an armed police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, just outside of St. Louis. Brown's murder, like Floyd's six years later, resulted in days of protests around the nation. Members of the group now known as Black Lives Matter Houston (BLM HOU) traveled to Ferguson to participate in direct actions there.

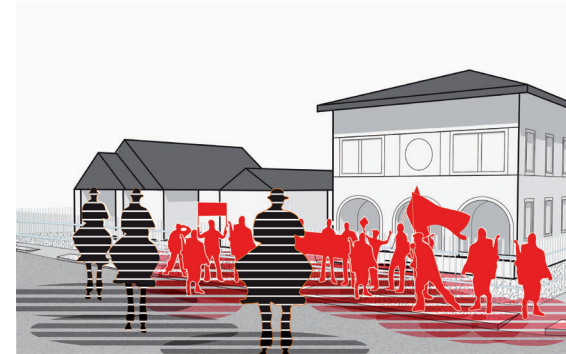
At that time, organizers in Houston didn't target local symbols of state power. Instead they turned their attention to the hyper-capitalist, hyper-visible space of the Galleria, which was the site of two marches. Unlike many parts of Houston, Uptown has well-maintained wide sidewalks for protestors to move along and the mall itself is located just off I-610. Secunda Joseph, a local organizer, traces the beginning of her organizing work to a march here. She notes that one difference between this march and other actions that have taken place around the Galleria was that protesters activated the sidewalks usually reserved for ferrying shoppers, nearby office workers, and Galleria employees to and from their cars. The group then marched inside the mall during the winter holiday rush to perform chants and stage a die-in.

Reflecting on this action, Cassandra Jones with BLMHTX, a mutual aid coalition, shared: "I think about that time and then this last protest in the city, with cops intentionally kettling folks in that downtown area and an escalation of aggression on the side of police officers in the city in response to protest. I feel like now since that last protest there are physical and real reasons why I don't feel safe going to a protest in the city of Houston." Despite the lack of arrests, the tactics used have discouraged her from attending direct actions.

2016: White Lives Matter at the Third Ward NAACP

Less than two years later, as the 2016 presidential election was in full swing, in late summer a white supremacist group calling itself "White Lives Matter" protested outside the Houston branch of the NAACP in the Third Ward, a neighborhood that has been majority Black for two generations. The protesters specifically mentioned urban space in speaking to the press, folding the preservation of cities into their cause. One of the attendees told the *Houston Chronicle* that they "came out here specifically today to protest against the NAACP and their failure in speaking out against the atrocities that organizations like Black Lives Matter and other pro-Black organizations have caused the attack and killing of white police officers, the burning down of cities and things of that nature."² Over the course of

an afternoon the action attracted counter-protesters as well as police on horseback and the use of barricades.³ By the close of the action, national attention had been garnered on media and counter-protesters outnumbered the white supremacists. Joseph, who attended both the Mike Brown protest and the NAACP counter-protests, stated that she felt police were not there to protect counter-protesters or the property so much as to observe counter-protesters for signs of agitation, a role evidenced by the fact that officers at the scene frequently stood towards counter-protesters, whose movements were also restricted by barricades.



The NAACP headquarters in the Third Ward where protests and counter-protests took place in 2016.

2020: George Floyd protests, including Discovery Green

There were many actions including marches and vigils across Houston, George Floyd's hometown, to protest police brutality and to honor his memory. Many protesters we interviewed attended multiple marches over the days leading up to and after his funeral. Notably, in interviews, they indicated which protests they were discussing not by date, but by the public space from which the protest began (e.g. "the one at Emancipation Park").

On the afternoon of Tuesday, June 2, 2020, approximately sixty-thousand Texans gathered to march from Discovery Green to City Hall along Walker Street. One protester, Neil Goldberg-Aquino, noted that while the urban realm felt greatly expanded as thousands of people gathered together in the street with no vehicular traffic, what he felt most acutely was "restriction," as the protest route was tightly confined and controlled by the police. He also noted that while he felt very connected to the other protesters there was also an awareness of the dangers of the COVID-19 virus that forced protesters to keep their distance from one another as much as the crowd permitted.

As the protest carried on at Discovery Green, another protester, Felix Kapoor, sensing the changing mood of the police as the event continued, noted that "it was really strange to [him] that they allowed all of that [protester] traffic to happen, because there was no curfew." Meaning: An end time for the action wasn't set by local officials before the protest began. At that point Houston was the country's largest city without a curfew in place. As the event continued, Kapoor noted that protesters were not given instructions to clear the streets or vacate the park until 6:30 p.m., when there was suddenly an announcement made that the protest was officially considered a "riot" from that point forward.

As the night continued, the controlled nature of the "expanded" space of the vehicle-free streets became more evident. Behind the George R. Brown Convention Center, Chris González noted that dozens of police officers who had been waiting in parking lots along Gray Street when he arrived began funneling protesters away from the convention center by walking in formation and creating blockades with police vehicles. At this point, González recorded videos of tear gas canisters being shot at protesters at least twice. At the corner of Chartres and Dallas Streets, he noticed that the police were using their batons to hit and push protesters in an attempt to box people into private parking lots to make it easier to detain and arrest them—a Houston variation on the practice called "kettling."

Yasmeen Dávila was one of the protesters who was who arrested through this method of crowd control. They described the rapidly changing directives from a nearby officer who initially directed them to not stand on the streets, and then to not stand on the side-walks, and then to not stand on the grass next to the sidewalks—until eventually they and other protesters were pressed into a fenced-in parking lot where they either had to jump the fence or be detained by police. As the sun set, the expansive public realm where a community formed to protest police brutality was quickly deflated to a slim margin against a chain-link fence. As those who were arrested were corralled on buses to be taken to jail, it also became clear that several people had just been walking or biking past the downtown area without involvement in the protest—but had been detained all the same.

Spaces of Inclusion and Exclusion

Inclusive spaces

In discussing Black spaces, the tenuousness of the concept itself must be acknowledged. Black communities across the diaspora have been displaced and separated for many reasons: the slave trade, the Great Migration, urban renewal, mass incarceration, and gentrification. The policing of Black bodies results in the erasure of Black humanity and memories; it dissolves the knowledge that is otherwise built and supported through community.

Jaison Oliver, a digital activist and social griot, creates Black spaces that combine the digital and the physical. He makes space—or, more aptly, "belonging"—for Black Houstonians. Oliver is interested in curating and building spaces for people who would not normally meet or have access to Black futurist thinking. "We've got so many people in this city who are thinking about or are interested in speculative ideas around Blackness but who don't have a place to come together because Houston is so siloed," he says. "How do we create a space for this?"

Across his various events, Oliver looks to create spaces to which participants long to return and can revisit without using their physical bodies. When those events are in person and organized by Oliver or other members of the BLMHTX collective, they usually take place at venues that, public or private, are previously vetted and known to be Black-owned



Images and messages from protesters, assembled by the authors.

or Black-friendly. Collective members were quick to point out though that when they are invited to speak, the spaces and institutions they are invited into are not always welcoming by design, regardless of if an ally or comrade extends the invitation.

When discussing the inner loop spaces of Rice University, Fourth Ward (now Midtown), and Third Ward, Joseph , the organizer, notes that

there are so many spaces that are unwelcoming, but you get used to moving through it when you have to. For example, we've spoken in classrooms at Rice a lot. Black and brown scholars and students have brought us in and are active, but it's not a place that's welcoming to Black folks. You need a credit card and your credit card needs money on it just to park. It's hard when you get lost on that campus.

Another collective member noted that many of the spaces that they travel between (often by car) are walking distance from one another, if not walkable. But once spaces that have experienced or are experiencing gentrification are entered, "you barely see the remnants of Black and brown folks. The more they build, the more other people shrink."

Exclusionary Spaces

BLMHTX members note that the more formal the space is, the greater the likelihood that it will be unwelcoming. While formal in its campus plan and high in social capital, Rice University's exclusion of Black folks is notable when compared to other seemingly public spaces in Houston. While Houston's population was estimated to be nearly 23% Black in 2019, in the fall of that same year, 9% of Rice's population identified as Black.⁴

Houston's strong-mayor style of government along with a cultural bias towards closed-door, pro-market policymaking has a long history. Formal, public-facing proceedings including marches sanctioned by local government and, more mundanely, public comment sessions are controlled for tone as much as they are for substance. As such, spaces that are intended to be inclusionary frequently silence Black voices through displays of masculine defensiveness, jargon, and logistical hurdles.

Even places that are informally understood as Black can be litigated into exclusionary spaces. In 2015, city officials initiated an injunction in civil court to ban ninety-two people from entering the Southlawn region of Third Ward with no input from the community.⁵ This action, which largely targeted Black men, would have removed these community members from their neighborhood while also marking them as undesirable for any community to which they might be forced to move. Many of the men who were served in the course of this civil proceeding had no known criminal activity and were being selected purely because of their proximity to an under-resourced community suffering from a high crime rate. Oliver recalls that, "[these men] were being labeled as gang members explicitly because of place—where they came from—and nothing else." When the decision was made public and shown to have little merit, the community successfully pressured the District Attorney to dismiss the suit.

Spaces of Return

In conversation, Jones, an activist with BLMHTX, addressed the future of her Black neighborhood in southeast Houston. She described the gap in knowledge and trust that white teachers whom she has worked with often have for Black students and their parents. The fantasy that poverty and Blackness are indelibly linked with abuse and violence isn't grounded in reality, but still the projected fear of white people is strong enough to have Black children removed from their homes or given permanent records. The white imagination of what Black bodies do in Black spaces doesn't leave room for the lived reality of Black people, so these actual Black bodies are under constant surveillance and attack. Black people who are trying to move about through the city are then forced to contend with whatever fantasy has superseded them in a particular space.

Conversely, Black people are forced to contend with the specter of displacement. In any Black community where new construction is occurring, people are constantly looking over their shoulder to figure out for whom these new resources are actually intended. Communities that have been redlined, starved for resources, or cut off from efficient transportation know that they are being actively erased from the city. Black people know that whe ever they venture outside of where the city's narrative comfortably has them situated, they are entering a space of psycho-spatial confrontation.

Notes

- 1 Queer Black feminist Moya Bailey coined the term *misogynoir* in 2010 to describe the intersectional misogyny and anti-Black racism that Black women experience.
- 2 Jessica Hamilton Young, Darla Guillen, "White Lives Matter group protests outside NAACP in Houston's Third Ward," *Chron.com*, August 21, 2016, updated January 30, 2018, <https://www.chron.com/houston/article/White-Lives-Matter-group-protests-outside-NAACP-9176142.php>.
- 3 John Nova Lomax, "Let's Talk About The White Lives Matter Protest Outside The Houston NAACP Office," *Texas Monthly*, August 23, 2016, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/the-daily-post/lets-talk-about-the-white-lives-matter-protest-outside-of-the-houston-naacp-office/>.
- 4 "QuickFacts, Houston city, Texas" United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/houstoncitytexas>. "Enrollment Demographics," Office Institutional Research, Rice University, <https://oir.rice.edu/students-scholars/enrollment/enrollment-demographics>.
- 5 Cindy George, "Suspected gang members unfairly targeted in Southlawn lawsuit, lawyers charge," *Chron.com*, February 18, 2016, updated February 18, 2016, <https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Suspected-gang-members-unfairly-targeted-in-6841086.php>.