



DURON CHAVIS

By The Editors, Duron Chavis and Quilian Riano

***F*ood justice activist Duron Chavis believes that fresh, healthy food should be available to all: a form of common wealth. He conceived his “resiliency garden” at the Institute for Contemporary Art, one of the commissioned projects for *Commonwealth*, as a space both to grow fresh produce and to teach about the links between food insecurity, access to green space, and systemic racism. For example, the modular design, developed in partnership with architect Quilian Riano, includes not only raised beds in which to grow vegetables, but also trees and other elements that shade what is usually a bare blacktop lot. This demonstrates how to reduce the “urban heat island” effect that makes some neighborhoods hotter than others. Initiated in response to COVID-19 in the spirit of mutual aid, the project also came to reflect the ICA’s location near an epicenter of the first wave of racial justice protests in summer 2020, traces of which remain on the facade. Black empowerment drives Chavis’s practice, and he and Riano chose to echo the “Black Lives Matter” street murals painted around the country in summer 2020 by integrating the phrase “Black Space Matters” into the design. The harvest will be distributed to VCU students facing food insecurity, and the plants, soil, and other**

materials will be redistributed to urban garden sites around Richmond.

– The Editors

Why Does Black Space Matter?

Two years ago I had the pleasure of taking a garden tour with several amazing colleagues. The tour was unique in that we went to Reveille Church in the West End of Richmond, Virginia.

Reveille Church is one of the oldest churches in the city, and it is also one of the wealthiest. The tour guide narrated the history of the church, walked us through its gardens, and told us the story of the oldest house on the church's campus, which is also one of the oldest houses in the city.

The house is as old as the enslavement of my ancestors in the country. The other tour participants were predominantly white, older women, all of whom I am sure weren't experiencing the tour in the same way I experienced it. As the tour guide told the history of this space, all I could think of was how my African ancestors experienced this place. What stories they would tell. What terrors they faced. What their lives were like as they were forced to work the landscape, the kitchens, and the farms of one of Richmond's oldest religious institutions. I distinctly remember the separate door for the help.

Alongside my own ancestral evocations, one of the most poignant

aspects of the tour was the story of how the land came to be held by these early Virginia colonists. As we walked up the steps of the house, the tour guide explained that King George had granted an astounding 50,000 acres to them. I thought, 50,000 acres? The guide said this from the top of the steps, explaining that the land stretched from these steps, only blocks from Willow Lawn, to the James River; the entirety of that expanse was given to these white people in complete disregard of the indigenous people who lived there.

I tell this story to help you understand the root of why Black Spaces Matters. The story of people of European ancestry and western imperialism, specifically the story of the Americas, is the story of space: white people having it and the power of it to do what they want and create the life they desire upon it.

The genocide, forced removal, and marginalization on reservations of indigenous people; the enslavement, discrimination, and marginalization of African people; the marginalization of Asian communities; the exploitation of so-called Latino people (because before a Spanish person colonized this hemisphere, the people we say are Latino or Hispanic didn't call themselves that) are all wrapped up in the people of European ancestry doing wrong to every other ethnicity on the planet using the false construct of race as a justification and a hierarchy of human value that places themselves at the top and everyone else beneath them.

Food, Climate, and Racial Justice require Land Justice. As an urban farmer, one of the most tenacious issues I have faced has been that of land tenure. Finding places to grow has been hard work, often harder than the growth itself. After years of growing

on land, I have seen landowners decide to change terms, sell their property, or develop urban farms we have grown on into something else. In order to fully practice self-determination, people of African ancestry have to have land that they control, without worry that it will be taken away.

The phenomenon we experience today is that predominately white-led urban agriculture profiteers colonize our rapidly gentrifying Black and brown communities in Richmond and across the country. Instead of investing in the preexisting community, these organizations access their circles of wealth and resources to fund salaries, programs, and organizations that hardly ever put our communities in leadership positions. We aren't ever given the title to the land nor the title of leadership. These organizations rarely if ever use their power and privilege to disrupt patterns of systemic racism.

When we do work explaining why communities do not have access to healthy food, we tell the story of how communities of color were redlined—denied mortgages and financing based on race—in the 1950s by the Federal Housing Administration. We tell the tale of how African American neighborhoods were destroyed by the creation of the interstate highway system. We tell the story of how Black farmers were discriminated against and denied loans and other services by the USDA, plus how their land was stolen by members of the white community operating on local and state levels across the country. We tell the story of how black farmers have had twelve million acres of land stolen in the last century. That 98% of agricultural land is owned by white people. We always explain that lack of food access is always about power and how systems were established to deny people of color of theirs.

Black Space Matters because it is the one thing we have lacked. Agency over space has been denied to people of color by people of European ancestry since the first piece of land was granted to a colonist, whether it be in the Americas, Africa, the so-called Middle East, Australia, or Asia. The navigation of space, or land; its equitable redistribution; its potential for use and what happens on it are the final frontier for all those who aspire to social justice.

The Resiliency Garden is a reimagining of space and an example of what can happen when Black people take control of space and regenerate it as a catalyst for freedom, healing, and liberation. The space lives at the intersection of food, climate, and racial justice and is an homage to a future that serves us all, not just a select few.

– DURON CHAVIS

A FLEXIBLE SPACE THAT GROWS: ON THE DESIGN OF 'RESILIENCY GARDENS'

The design of 'Resiliency Gardens' takes as its inspiration the very process of farming and community organizing as an ongoing process, one that shifts slightly each season and over time. Thus, the design is a framework, or organizational logic, for growth that evolves as the programming and other needs change and shift.

It begins with the dimension of the width of a growing bed, 4 feet, which begins to take over the ground as a grid that demarcates the area of the garden. On top of the linear 4 foot grid, a secondary grid is superimposed in the more public areas to demarcate a 6 foot distance to comply with Covid19 protocols. On top of that the team on the ground will create a tertiary grid that breaks down some of the areas most used by them over the course of farming, classes, and producing other programs. Together, all the grids create a tapestry made by the farmers in which they both claim land and create a new set of relationships and communities for growth.

Within the grid, items grow towards the center, with larger items, trees, on the edges, followed by grow beds, followed by either table top or hay bale growing showcases. The center is not one dedicated zone but rather a negotiated zone of growth, circulation and programming.

Framing the entire active area are three murals that together say BLACK SPACE MATTERS, placed in different places and surfaces to encompass the entire project -- both to be seen as a whole from outside and to be experienced in different ways inside the active area of the project. on boards placed throughout the space, the artist Duron Chavis and his team will lead programming to explore just how Black Space Matters in the Black communities of Richmond and beyond.

– QUILIAN RIANO, DSGN AGNC

Commonwealth is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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