A Conversation About Landscapes and Preservation as Justice

WALTER HOOD AND BRENT LEGGS

Brent Leggs: I’m Brent Leggs, the executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. I want to welcome you to the 2021 PastForward Conference. The Action Fund is this year’s sponsor of the Promoting Equity and Justice in Historic Preservation conference track, and we’re thrilled to launch the conference program with the renowned artist, landscape architect, and author Walter Hood.

Before I interview Walter, I want to share opening remarks to center this conversation in our conference theme. In solidarity with African Americans, a multi-racial coalition is marching in the footsteps of earlier generations whose vision for equality and human rights continues to inspire. Nevertheless, the preservation movement is flawed. In the not-too-distant past, historic sites were preserved to reinforce the white majority’s narrative and to communicate idealized, but unevenly realized, American values. We must face the fact that history and the character of our nation is carved out of chasms of racial brutality and economic exploitation, and out of a self-determination, character, and resilience that moves our nation to its best self. By preserving these places and telling their stories, preservationists inspire commitment to equity and justice. By preserving the beauty, uniqueness, complexity, and significance of historic African American sites, we can craft a more accurate American narrative and identity.

We stimulate revitalization and foster interest in places that today seem to exist without history or meaning, spanning space, time, and geography. African American and diverse cultural sites can anchor us and expand our sense of pride and agency. I feel it’s critically important to acknowledge that the nation may be rich in diverse history, but it has often been poor in representation of that history and in funding its protection, conservation, and recognition. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) sites, whether cultural
landscapes or historic buildings, deserve the same stewardship and admiration as Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello and George Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate. Regrettably, grassroots efforts to preserve places of diverse history are some of the most underfunded.

For instance, the Action Fund has received a remarkable 2,300 grant proposals since 2018, totaling nearly $253 million. A response on this scale speaks to the need for significant investment in preserving this impressive collection of places and stories. It also represents that African American landmarks are in critical need of financial support. With urgency and intention, the public must invest in and restore more assets that hold exceptional cultural value. The National Trust launched the Action Fund in 2017 to reconstruct a true national identity that reflects America’s diversity. I’m proud to lead this effort for the National Trust. Through historic preservation practice, we aim to expose the world and our nation to the culture, ideals, politics, art, and the hope of America. We tell overlooked stories embodied in these places, ones of African American resilience, activism, and achievement that are fundamental to the nation itself. Preserving this tapestry of our shared culture, pride, and heritage is an act of racial justice and should be viewed as a civil right.

Today, we’ve supported more than 200 preservation projects nationwide and raised more than $50 million, thanks to our partnerships and esteemed National Advisory Council. We can also expand the conversation to answer both questions: How should America preserve BIPOC monuments and landscapes so that we never forget their meaning and history? What’s the role of the BIPOC community, civic leaders, preservationists, artists, and funders to envision landscapes of understanding and reconciliation? The purpose of preservation practice is not to stop change, but to offer tools that help society manage change in ways that do not disconnect it from the legacies of its past. Done right, historic places can foster real healing, true equity, and a validation of all Americans and their history.

Join us in honoring and telling the full American story and in leading the change we all seek. Walter, it’s so good to see you and to be with you today.
Walter Hood: How are you doing, Brent? I’m glad to be here.

Brent Leggs: In your book, Black Landscapes Matter, you write in the introduction, “Black landscapes matter because they are prophetic. They tell the truth of the struggles and victories of African Americans in North America. Black landscapes matter because they can be born again.” Your writing is both poetic and intellectual. It challenges our nation and profession to build an ethic for the conservation of BIPOC landscapes imbued with important stories and sacred memories. In historic preservation, we’ve often prioritized protecting old buildings versus the natural landscape. Why should more Americans and preservationists elevate landscape preservation and create reverence for these historic spaces?

Walter Hood: That’s a wonderful question, Brent, and very complex, just like the quote that you just mentioned. For me, at the end of the day, when buildings disappear, the landscape is still there. I have been privy to wonderful experiences around the world, to go to places where there had been either civilization or people inhabiting a place, and the most wonderful memories and strategies that I’ve collected from that is: There’s always something there, if you choose to see it. I’m taken by how in history, we can go to the Roman Forum and find all kinds of things, but then if I go to Charleston, South Carolina, I find nothing. To me, it’s all there; it’s just that we have to be vigilant to exhume it and want it. It takes courage, because in doing so, we say something about ourselves. I think in our national memory, we only like to remember those things that make us heroic, that make us powerful. We don’t want to remember those things that make us vulnerable, that make us have this empathy, that make us want to reconcile, that make us want to forgive all of those things that human nature really wants us to, and collectively have this relationship to one another. I think in the landscape, there are so many different stories that create a collective, if we choose to do so.

Brent Leggs: I love that you just mentioned the word empathy, and it made me think about, what does an empathetic landscape look like? How would you describe empathy?

Walter Hood: Empathy for me in a landscape means that there is care in wanting to remember, but also wanting to re-present, and
really getting out of your way. I think a lot of us in design, and even in preservation, we're in the way, because we have this narrow view. If we get out of the way and let those other things lead us, they will take us to these different places where we're then able to have that joy and that pain, collectively together. It's not an either/or thing. I think we like our joy over here, and we like our pain over here. To me, that empathetic landscape mixes those two things together, and it allows you to have that reverence in space.

**Brent Leggs:** I love that, balancing public memory. I'm curious about how you got inspired to contribute to this work, and I wonder if you have a first memory, whether as a child or an adult, that's connected you to cultural landscape, heritage, and conservation that’s inspired your passion, career, and ideas.

**Walter Hood:** From a very early memory, my childhood growing up in rural America, in North Carolina in the ’70s, and also later, my first job at the National Park Service. And I never really connected those two things together. I spent summers in Tobacco Road with my uncles, who were sharecroppers. I spent time with my grandmother literally in agricultural fields. So that kind of memory of landscape in North Carolina. If you’ve never been there, it’s green. Everything is green. As a kid, we were in the landscape all the time. Then if I zoom ahead 15 years, when I was at an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), North Carolina A&T, one of my faculty members said, “You should take this job in the Blue Ridge Parkway.” I went and got a job with the National Park Service, and there were three things that they coveted as part of the job. It was preservation, reservation, and conservation of landscapes. I had a chance then to witness how the national memory is constructed through design. I then moved to Washington, D.C., and I worked for National Capital Planning for one year, and then I got really bored with it, and I wanted to really do work that impacted the everyday.

Years later, as I’m doing urban work, slowly, a lot of those memories start to come back. One of them, in particular: returning back to Charleston, South Carolina, or to the South, a decade or so ago. It reminded me of my Southern roots, and it also
gave me clarity to go deeper and remember that I was around storytellers when I was growing up, that people had ways of imbuing the landscape through a collective memory. Then I started thinking about the National Park Service work, and all of these things started to come together through art as I freed myself from the more professional aspects. I started digging deeper and saying, “Well, there’s got to be something here, a way of critique.” Why was I bored with these national landscapes? The reason I was bored was because they were only telling one story, and if you went back in there and started filtering out those other stories, it then gave me a better way to put all of these things together, and actually use that as a way to force creativity within my studio work, within my academic work, and then within my public life.

**Brent Leggs:** I love that you mentioned the role of preservationists to construct national memory. In the program that I run, the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, our mission is to reconstruct a national identity that reflects America’s true diversity. That work is so important—that all citizens can see themselves in the landscape, in historic buildings, and have their stories reflected in spaces around them.

I’m curious about your work on the Tidal Basin. As you know, this was sponsored by the National Trust and presented by American Express. I’m curious about your proposal. This iconic memorial

This design proposal of the Tidal Basin landscape in Washington D.C. reflects the participation of many voices, both heard and unheard focusing on design anthems of Tell the Truth, Let the Waters Be Free, and Invention: Making New Things.

PHOTO COURTESY HOOD DESIGN STUDIO RENDERING
landscape in the heart of D.C. is provocative and innovative in its format, really a graphic novella in four parts. One shows an African American family on a tour of Washington, D.C. At the Tidal Basin, they wander through restored wetlands and elevated walkways, discovering the lost Black history of Washington, D.C., in its landscapes, namely, a hush harbor. Can you tell us more about your vision for such monumental public spaces like the Tidal Basin?

Walter Hood: Working on the Tidal Basin was just really fantastic, so I have to thank you guys for supporting designers to think about these landscapes in a context where we’re able to be very liberal in how our thoughts can come to place.

I was taken by a couple things. One, I’ve always had this relationship with Washington, D.C., knowing that it’s a fiction, it’s basically a swampy landscape that has been given a fictitious origin story. That’s always intrigued me. But it’s also, as I become more learned about the American story, in particular the story of enslaved people and the aboriginal story here, the wetlands in America play a big, big role in constructing those cultures, whether you’re in the South, whether the Dismal Swamp, these landscapes actually gave people places of refuge, but they gave people also a place of diversity, biodiversity.

Water has always been this big, big theme for me, and particularly as it relates to spirituality. I remember my mother telling me very early as a kid that she was actually baptized in the Cape Fear River. But that image of my mother walking down to the river, I have this fictitious memory. The swamp and water is this very powerful thing to me. As we were doing the Tidal Basin, I was struck by the narrative that the Tidal Basin was a swimming area at one point in time, until it was conceived to be integrated. Once people wanted to integrate, it ceased becoming a swimming place, this idea of this shared resource. I started thinking, maybe if I could conjure up these other ideas about water, it becomes less precious. It becomes less of a fiction, and maybe it can actually return. And in a way, for me, seeing how histories are constructed and people are making decisions, this is where you can kind of push back through design. You don’t have to be direct to say, “Oh, the reason why I want to bring up hush harbors here is because of the racial
tension that existed 70 years ago.” It’s actually doing the opposite. It’s telling a different story, so that maybe people, in time, might begin to see the Tidal Basin differently and then want to advocate for making it something completely different, versus keeping it at this kind of rigid fiction. We didn’t want to repair it. We didn’t want to say, “Yeah, let’s go back to the origins.” We’re suggesting it’s a hybrid; it can keep evolving. But it should evolve maybe through cultural identities.

**Brent Leggs:** Where else might we conceive of similar work like that at the Tidal Basin? Do you think there are other opportunities for reimagining the ecology?

**Walter Hood:** Well, New Orleans. I think in places where communities have been most vulnerable in this country, particularly marginal communities, brown and Black communities, are in these environmentally degraded areas. I think history can teach us how to live with water, if we choose to do it. There are great stories of Natives and Africans in Louisiana living in the swamps, to not be part of plantation life. They figured out ways to live with the water. I think if we’re interested in the truth about these places, it might help us see the landscape and how we can live with it in a very different way. One of my favorite books is *Ark of Bones* by Henry Dumas. Toni Morrison found his work and reprinted it, I think in the late ‘80s. In the book, he talked about the ark of bones, that there is this mythical ship going up and down the Mississippi, collecting bones of our Black ancestors. That’s a very powerful idea, because it links you back in time to what that river really means. So those ideas, for me, can help us actually see places anew, and maybe give us different ways to begin to design the world around us.

**Brent Leggs:** I want to talk about some of your projects. Your work has transformed some of America’s most historic and significant landscapes, like the campus of the University of Virginia, Charleston’s Gadsden’s Wharf, and Pittsburgh’s Hill District. As you began working on projects like these that have and will transform space, history, and memory at different scales, share with us your design thinking and process to creating equitable yet thought-provoking public spaces and memorials.
Walter Hood: I would just start out saying, it is very difficult work to do. I’ll start with the Hill District. We’ve been working there probably over the last decade, and very little has come to fruition. It’s about a thousand acres. It has a historic legacy, but it’s very valuable land. And that value can either exist in its potential, as new development, or that value can exist as a cultural landscape. We’ve tried to get people to see it as a cultural landscape, and we just haven’t been successful. As an urban designer, an artist, I’m not a developer. I’m not a politician. I’m not involved in all the local politics of an area. You really need a team of people to come in and actually think in the same way. We try to get people to see the Hill District, which is an urban area, that its history is coal. Basically, immigrants came to the hill to mine the coal. Everyone else had access to other areas. We were left there, which is our cultural landscape story. We then lived in that landscape for 50 or so years as it’s being disinvested, and I think what we’ve been trying to do is get inhabitants who have lived in these places, we have to give them other means to imagine themselves. If you’re in a place for so long and you’ve been devalued, or your landscape has been devalued, it’s really hard for you to even accept another way, because you’re only familiar with one way. We try to really think about, how through disinvestment, you got a landscape back, and that people were living in this wild landscape. It’s a different aesthetic.

We talked about the woods a lot when we were in Pittsburgh, and I could see the Black community getting it. It’s like, “Woods,
yeah, we get it.” But the institutions that make parks, that make landscapes, they don’t get it. It’s really hard for a city to let land go. In a way, that’s what has happened in a lot of places, which I try to get people to see. If you go out to the suburbs, to a 19th-century suburb, it looks just like these wild areas in urban areas. Why do we allow one to look this way, and we can’t imagine people like me to be in that area, because all of a sudden, you want to make it different. That’s the ongoing work in the Hill. It’s taught me a lot, and we continue to work there.

The work in Charleston and the work at UVA is a little different, in that those works commemorate. They’re attempting to commemorate individuals or actions in a period of time. We use commemoration not as a memorial, but as a way to remember. At UVA, I struggled with trying to find the means through the medium that I had learned. I had to turn back to the mythologies that I was taught through storytelling as a kid. One of the things that I remembered was the Flash of the Spirit, which, shadow and reflection, is something that my grandmother would always talk about. Like, if you go to a cemetery, you will see the poinsettias, and you will see the foil turned back, or you’ll see someone leaving a little airplane. It’s always about flight. It’s always about ascending and moving away from this place. So we built the shadow-catcher for Miss Foster, which is a mythical structure that talked about a more spiritual aspect of our life. For me, that was a way that I could talk about the Spirit, and people would get it. I have to
tell you, I’ve lectured around the world, and people get it. We don’t have spaces where people are talking about spirituality in a non-denominational way. I’m just talking about it as an experience of looking at the ground and looking back up at the sky.

That project, in a way, gave us the juice—I’m going to use that term—to try other projects, whether it’s a statue that reads “freed,” F-R-E-D, that will be in Arlington, Virginia, and will probably go up in January. That project talks about the Freedman’s Village that was in Arlington Cemetery, and how that diaspora of Blacks moved into Arlington, and no one really talks about that. Or in Charleston, where upwards of 40 percent of the slave diaspora landed at Gadsden’s Wharf. How do you tell that story? There’s no other landscape that I can go to and say that. I can maybe go to Toni Morrison’s Bench by the Road and talk about what happened in these places, what happened in these forts, but there’s no historic landscape that I could go to, other than a plantation, other than a building. This is a moment for us to really do something audacious in the landscape. We’re inspired by the Brookes map, which was that first lithograph that depicted slaves in the hulls of ships. Now we have a big fountain at Gadsden’s Wharf that will actually go wet and dry, wet and dry, as a reminder that bodies, bodies, were basically left here, and the body becomes an important image then at the museum when you experience it.

The landscape design concept for the International African American Museum in Charleston, SC takes cues from the tradition of ‘hush harbors’—landscapes where enslaved Africans would gather often in secret, outside the view of slave owners, to freely assemble, share stories and keep traditions from their homeland alive.

PHOTO COURTESY HOOD DESIGN STUDIO RENDERING
**Brent Leggs:** When you were speaking, I kept hearing your words from *Black Landscapes Matter* about resuscitating the landscape, and also I was thinking about the resurrection, literally connected to the spirituality that you talked about, and the power of historic preservation to reduce that gap between space and time, and it becomes spiritual in essence. What are some opportunities that our profession has to resuscitate and resurrect land and memory in the U.S.?

**Walter Hood:** I think we have the ability to layer stories that are already out there. And I guess I’m more a palimpsest of layers. I don’t like these binaries because nothing really exists that way. It’s much more complex. But I would rather, instead of marking a special site to say something happened here, go to the place where it happened. If Black folks built the White House, when I’m out in front of the White House looking at it, I should be reminded that Black folks built the White House. I don’t know how we do that, but that should be part of that reminder. When I go to an important building, there’s a stone that says when it was built, something that forces us to layer things. I can look at a building and say, “It’s a classical building,” or I can look at a site and say, “It’s a historic site,” but once I say who inhabited that site and how they inhabited it, it changes how I actually see it.

Right now, the way we do these things are, we put them over to the side. You have to actually remember to read the side note somewhere when you get to the thing to experience it fully. Places like Monticello, they’re struggling with this right now. They re-did Mulberry Row, where the slave houses are, and it’s kind of nice, so that people are like, “Oh, this is not that bad.” In a way, you’ve got to be very careful not to misrepresent. On the other hand, sites are thinking, “Well, we need to create a space so people can decompress.” I’m wondering why would you create a space? You’ve never thought of decompressing? I mean, when I went there and there was no mention of the slaves, no one thought, “Hey, Black folks need a place to decompress because we’re not talking about them.” That’s the other way, is flipping the script.
I think the more you layer it, the more the story becomes complex, and people then can find themselves in the story. Right now, I think people are left out of the story. For a lot of us, we’re trying to find ourselves in this world, and we don’t have that many touchstones. I think if we can give people more touchstones, the conversations will become even more complex, which I think is more sustainable.

**Brent Leggs:** I want to get your perspectives on the terms “equity” and “justice.” As you know, this plenary session is part of the PastForward Conference’s Equity and Justice track, and I’m curious how you define equity in historic preservation and justice in historic preservation. Do you see them as being individual strategies or one and the same?

**Walter Hood:** I think equity and justice need each other. On one hand, I can talk about equity as it relates to how two communities have the same thing, or that they’re given the same thing, but I would also like to think that people are viewed in the same way, and we know that’s not the case. That’s where justice comes in. To me, justice is really about finding that truth. In finding that truth, you’ve got to deal with it. You’ve got to deal with what happened yesterday. You’ve got to deal with all of these things. By the time you bring them together, you arrive at a different place.

We worked on a building here [in San Francisco] in Bayview Hunters Point. The building is 130 years old. It’s an old opera house. It was built in the suburbs, before the Blacks were...
pushed south of San Francisco. By the mid-60s, Bayview had become a Black neighborhood through redevelopment, and this historic building sat there. Over time, it became this unique element. It became a theater that taught drama and music and things like that. But slowly, it became paternalistic, because the bureaucracy looking at it didn't see it as a historic building, per se, but they saw that it was a place where a group of people needed to be taken care of. So instead of thinking that maybe culture will take care of them, things like community gardens, and all of that paternal, those tropes that come into our neighborhood. And in a way, the building was almost diminished in its reverie of being old. When we came in, the first place someone took us was under the building, and they talked about this rock that the building sat on, which related it back to the Ohlones, the natives. They were very proud of that. That inspired us to really talk about all these histories and return it back to a theater.

The reason why I’m telling you this is we used all these stories. When we had to go through the historic preservation process, we were then able to do something pretty radical to an old building, because I think we had a great layered story to talk about. We put in these modern, floating ramps around the building to make one elevation, so that you can move around the entire building. It’s new against old Victorian. To see these little beautiful Black kids come there every day, man, to dance, it’s just wonderful, because that’s where you have empathy and justice happening simultaneously.

They’re very proud of the building. I was just talking to one of my students who went over and was doing the evaluation the other day. The caretaker there is from Oakland. The whole time we were doing the project, and this goes back to my earlier statement, he kept saying, “Walter, why are you putting all this energy into this, man? They’re just not gonna take care of it.” That mentality of being in a place and seeing it that way. He’s like, “Oh, man, this is nice wood. You’re doing this nice wood? Oh, man, they’re not gonna take care of it. Oh, man, you’re putting in beautiful metal? Oh, man.” The thing opened up, he came over and shook my hand, and then when my student went over, she mentioned my
name, and he let her in. So again, they’re very proud. That’s my point, is that through that process, to see that kind of proudness of that history and taking care of something that’s really different, that’s valued, it just blows your mind.

**Brent Leggs:** Let’s talk about the future. What’s your vision, let’s say 10 years from now? What’s your vision for the U.S. historic preservation movement and profession?

**Walter Hood:** Well, one, I don’t know what’s going on right now. I think there’s a lot of reactionary planning happening right now, and I don’t know where we’re going to land. And what I mean by that, from last year, a record number of memories were taken down in the landscape, and I’m going to be vague about that. Every narrative that people could chip at in the last year has been chipped. I think for me, in a decade, I would like to see us figure out the multiplicity of memory, the multiplicity of history. I know it’s very generational, because I know younger millennials, they want everything out of the way. But for me, I want to live in a world where there’s palimpsest, there are old things around me that tell multiple stories, that talk about multiple lives, so that if I go to a building that’s 200 years old, I’m able to understand the traumas of Black life, but also the progress of Black life. I’m also understanding the trauma of white life and the progress of white life. All of these things are tied together. I think if we focus on the stuff in the middle versus the stuff at the extremes, that might allow us to actually have a very interesting set of ruins in our lives. These ruins are sometimes just there for us to reflect, but sometimes they’re there for us to inhabit in a very different way. Because in a way, the ruins are the projections for tomorrow. They set the tone of how we can imagine the world. That’s what I would say in a decade. I just want there to be more cross-cultivation of what’s important in our collective memory.

**Brent Leggs:** I’m mindful that you are a busy man with many jobs. You’ve got your own firm, and you are leading in practice, but you also have one foot inside of academia. You and I both share that duality in our careers, and I would even say, at least personally, it feels like a responsibility, a social responsibility, to train the
next generation of leaders. Why are you devoting some of your time at UC Berkeley as a professor in the landscape architecture department?

Walter Hood: You know, teaching was something I never set out to do. I always thought I was going to be in practice. But when I came to Berkeley to get my master’s degree in architecture and landscape architecture, I just had this renaissance. I got to a place where I had gone through my undergraduate. I had worked in the profession and the institutional world, the National Park Service, private practice. I felt I had done all of that. Then when I came out West, being an East Coaster, it was almost this amazing freedom to learn unfettered, whereas on the East Coast, it’s a little different, how you learn. I was privy to a lot of things when I came out here in the late ‘80s. Those things opened my eyes, and they made me want to learn more. As I started to learn more, I actually figured out that I had something to say. Teaching then gave me a framework in which to try to develop what I wanted to say. I knew I wanted to say something; I just didn’t know what I wanted to say. My first decade of teaching gave me this context—going through tenure, doing research—to figure out how I wanted to practice and how I wanted to teach. It was really tough, because the ‘90s was multiculturalism, riots.

The ‘90s was almost like 2020, if you think about it, spread out over a decade. It was a very interesting time to be in California, but also to be in academia. Twenty years later, it feels like being around youth and seeing generational change has also been very valuable to my growth, because I could imagine if you weren’t around that generational change all the time, you get set in your ways. Every year that I’m confronted with a different group of students who are from a different time, that forces me to change. I’ve really seen that transformation in my work, in my teachings, and also in how I think about the world. I think teaching allows me to be oral, to think orally, basically, so I’m not at home talking in a mirror. You can get your thoughts out there in the world unencumbered, and you can have that critique and dialog, which is different than the professional world. You have to take more care in the professional world.
**Brent Leggs:** What about your experience with the LOEB Fellowship at Harvard? When I think of the number of LOEB fellows who are historic preservation practitioners, it's just a handful of us. And I would love to see more colleagues have sabbaticals in the space to contemplate their own careers, but everything that you just described. What was your experience like?

**Walter Hood:** Well, it's interesting. I just did a LOEB fellowship in the spring, but that's a senior fellowship. I've never been a LOEB fellow, but I've just been on juries to select LOEB fellows. I was teaching at Harvard, and they indoctrinated me, and I know a lot of LOEB fellows. It's an interesting relationship, in that I've never been part of their club, yet I'm part of their club.

I think you're right. I think it's a wonderful gift for people. This is what I was getting at with teaching, where you're just given this period of time and resources where you can take the things that you have and just take a step back and re-imagine a different way to move. Being around really smart people, and being at Harvard, a great place of resources, it only empowers. I just saw a LOEB fellow yesterday on a Zoom call who's doing wonderful work here on transforming incarceration and those kinds of things. And so, it's a wonderful program. If people don’t know about it, they should look into it.

**Brent Leggs:** I've got two more questions for you. One is, what's your dream project, a dream project that connects the multiplicity of narratives in one shared landscape?

**Walter Hood:** Wow. I just did this installation at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). It was called *Black Towers/Black Power*. That's my dream landscape. It's 10 buildings, tall buildings, imagined through the genesis of Black inventors who patented what I call mundane objects paired with the Ten Points of the Black Panther movement. That's my project. Oh, it's a futuristic project. It's a crazy project, so you have to look it up. It's something that I wanted to do. It's a fiction, and I wanted to do it because it's a critique on a landscape that I live in, and I use these Black inventions as a way to talk about bringing these memories that most of us don't know, that the shucker, the pencil eraser, a bicycle, a
dirigible, I mean, you go on and on, a dustpan. All of these kind of mundane elements of labor are attributed to people of color, but we don’t know that. For me, marrying that with a larger set of ideas about how to construct a set of cultural landscapes was a critique against a lot of the social service nonprofits that are much more paternal. I use this term “paternalism” because it’s people getting in the way, of saying, “I know what’s best for you,” versus trying to understand me and then working with me to create a different future. It pushes back at this notion that Black folk can’t live in high-rises, that we can’t have high-end development in our communities because it just gets rid of us. It’s all of these fictions that we’re told. It challenges those things.

Those are the projects that I want to do in the future, those that challenge the assumption that we can’t live in beautiful spaces because they’ll get gentrified. We’ve actually started drinking that Kool-Aid, and that’s not sustainable. That’s only going to allow us to basically perish. I have this notion that I want beauty in my landscape. I want commerce. I want diversity. One of the things that we were talking about with Black Tower/Black Power is just give me one millionaire per tower. I just need 10 Black millionaires, right? But we don’t think in that way. Other developers are coming
into our places. But it doesn’t take much. Just give me $120 million, and hey, we could create this amazing thing. That’s nothing these days, when you think about it.

**Brent Leggs:** The last question for you, Walter, is, what advice do you want to leave with the historic preservation profession?

**Walter Hood:** The advice I would leave with the historic preservation profession is: History is messy, and I do think the better way to leave a legacy and have an understanding of cultural sites, cultural landscapes, is to allow them to be messy, to allow them to be complex, and to have faith that people are intelligent. I know we can be critical about that at times, but just have faith in the intelligence of people, that by giving them that information in wonderful ways, for them to see something, it can be really powerful. And don’t do it in a reactionary way. You’ve seen, “We can’t have weddings on plantations anymore. We’ve got to do this thing on a plantation where we have to talk about slaves, but we’ll do it at the end of the tour.” Or, “Something bad happened here. Well, let’s just put a sign up over there.” That’s reaction, versus trying to say, “Okay, how do we come together with this history and tell this complex story? Maybe we just need more voices to help us, and maybe we have to get out of the way of keeping something stuck in time.” Because that’s my view of historic preservation in this country. It chooses a time, and it just stops it, versus saying, “It’s of this time, and look at all of these other things that came out of its time,” and choose ways in which to tell it in powerful ways. I was taken by the Tenement Museum. I don’t know if you saw this piece where they “discovered” that there were African Americans who lived in tenements, so they just recently restored a tenement to tell that story. They’ve had the Tenement Museum all along and never told that story. It makes it more powerful, because for years, you go through those images of the tenement and all those social studies, they never talk about Black folk. They always talk about the Italians, but we were there too! We were all down there together. I just think it makes it richer.

**Brent Leggs:** I think that was a beautiful conclusion. Walter, I want to thank you for a stimulating discussion and provocative
interview. I just want to close with words from Black Landscapes Matter, which you wrote in the afterword: “People should see that they themselves, and landscapes, have multiplicities. We should be moving through space that constantly reminds us that women are equal, that we owe responsibility to Natives who were here beforehand, that Black hands built our landscape. Having landscapes with multiplicities forces us not to reconcile; to see that maybe all these forces are irreconcilable, and that’s okay.”

I want to thank you for leading the change, sharing your voice with us today, and helping our nation value the link between landscapes, cultural heritage, and equality. Thank you, Walter.

Walter Hood: Thank you so much, Brent. I look forward to seeing you in person and having longer discussions about what I think is a place that we need collective voices to keep pushing this work along. FJ

WALTER HOOD is the Creative Director and Founder of Hood Design Studio. BRENT LEGGS is senior vice president and executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund.