



Matthew Jordan Miller, PhD

The Art of Black Urbanism

I visualize primarily to heal, build, connect to, and understand my place in the world. Black Urbanism is no different.

Visual production has, firstly, helped heal me from the traumas that three academic degrees and therapy have taught me to name and know. I visualize for experiencing the truth that I can produce beauty in a world that often feels designed to undermine people who exist at my intersections – first-generation college graduates, Blacks in predominantly white spaces, queer people who were raised religious. Art-making has forced me to create from a place of agency, however, not deficits and trauma. This self-preservation stance emanates outward to the other components of my practice.

Black Urbanism empowered me to build infrastructure – a mixed-methods dissertation, a faculty collaborative, short films, and now exhibits. However, the greatest building blocks are the relationships and the stories behind what it took to earn these images from the communities. It allowed me to connect with everyday people outside of the rarefied world of academia who need to be seen. Black Urbanism is unique in that photos were mostly created vox populi style for 30 days during 2018's Black History/Liberation Month, then sorted over the next 300 days. It was done in collaboration with a fellow artist, my youngest brother Gabriel Miller, who also helped curate the Instagram @BlackUrbanism. We covered Oakland, Los Angeles, Stockton, and Tracy, California as well as Philadelphia. Ironically, our shooting occurred right before my PhD defense, which requires extended periods of social distancing. Black Urbanism helped me survive that by connecting my worlds of episteme (knowledge) and doxa (popular opinion) with both sides of my brain, logos (rationality) and pathos (experience).

The most substantive intent of Black Urbanism was to visually understand Black belongingness as an emancipatory and restorative goal of the urban

humanities. To me, the term “Black urbanism” is an intellectual framework illustrating how Black spatial imaginations continually make cities cool and creative, yet intersectional and transgressive. It is an emergent approach to urban design, planning, development, and preservation. Like any good artist or scholar, I borrowed and expanded on the term from two Black artists, Professor Paul Goodwin and architect-urbanist Sara Zewde. I also incorporated theories from Black geographers, Clyde Woods and George Lipsitz (“blues epistemology”, “Black spatial imaginary”) and urban sociologists, Marcus Anthony Hunter and Zandria Robinson (“Black placemaking”, “chocolate cities”) to see how Black space acts as a site of urban innovation.

People should care about this project because cultural diversity is one of the raw ingredients for this experiment in democracy to truly stick. With today's cities and suburbs being neither as “chocolate” nor as “vanilla,” Black Urbanism challenges us to pay attention to the way in which Black space is fading in some places and strengthening in others. Black Urbanism represents me, as a trained city planner and as a Black American, taking responsibility for relating dynamic forms of blackness with urbanity. Black Urbanism represents the argument that, because planning has helped materialize racial difference, urbanists must engage our wicked problems. But it also represents the realization that something magical has happened: blackness is a global cultural resource separate from “race.” It represents the sincere question: will we help decouple blackness from the oppression that negatively determines life outcomes by zip code?

Ultimately, as a third-generation image-maker, I photograph to extend cultural legacies, both in method and in matter. I photograph with the radical optimism for a resurrection of dignity to stigmatized geographies. I photograph Black urbanism to hold academia accountable for intersectional equity as we deploy inventive cultural frameworks like “placemaking” and “urban humanities.” I photograph to world-build. Ultimately, I photograph to show love for people: especially my people.