ROUTLEDGE CRITICAL COMPANION TO RACE AND ARCHITECTURE

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Who has agency over the shaping of the built environment and how do they acquire it? Historians of twentieth-century architecture have often focused on those for whom the paths ran through architecture schools, although clearly patronage also matters. Engineers are often respected collaborators; less attention has been paid to most builders, unless they worked on an imposing scale. Policymakers and bankers have also had a say, in both cases by determining who had access to financing and also through formal regulations, such as building codes, and informal ones, of which red-lining is a notorious example.[1] In the United States, for most of the twentieth century, those with access to these various types of agency have typically been middle-class or wealthy men of exclusively European ancestry. Until the middle decades of the century, women were denied access to many architecture schools, and until the passage of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act in 1974, they were openly discriminated against in obtaining the financing necessary to build.[2] The situation was even worse for African Americans. And yet a small number of exceptional African Americans persevered, often operating outside of the formal structures that supported the engagement of those upon whom architectural history has largely focused. Much more attention needs to be paid to how they were able to build in defiance of the discrimination they faced.

As important as identifying diverse agency is the development of appropriate yardsticks to measure the achievements of these shapers of the built environment. Such indices must acknowledge that the motivations of these African Americans may not have been the same as those of architects who have been celebrated for their "genius." Innovations in form and technology should not matter more than the empowerment of marginalized communities, especially those that have endured enslavement and segregation. Moreover, when individual African Americans and the communities to which they belonged expressed their economic and political aspirations as well as their religious faith through the buildings they constructed in the 1950s and early 1960s, they did not necessarily see the need to flout conventions popular with middle-class consumers of other ethnicities. Instead access to such conventions, regardless of whether or not they dovetailed with the signature achievements of the architectural culture of the day, could signal small victories in service of inclusion in the American dream.

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Earlier historians of African American architectural achievement, including Melanee Harvey, Ellen Weiss, and Amber Wiley, have charted the stylistically unadventurous but politically and socially significant structures erected by African American communities across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3] Their work provides the best template for understanding the extraordinary career of Ethel Madison Bailey Furman, whose houses and churches were mostly later in date and more modest in scale than the religious and educational structures upon which these scholars have focused. Furman did not allow either her gender or the color of her skin to deter her from supporting herself and her family, while working for the advancement of the African American community in Richmond to which she belonged from her birth in 1893 until her death in 1976.[4] Drawing upon the relative privilege she enjoyed as a member of the city's established middle class, she defied, as much as possible, the adversity she faced in a part of the country dominated for most of her life by Jim Crow. From 1923 through the early 1970s, she designed houses and churches in and around Richmond, as well as two churches in Liberia. Her architectural activities were part of a continuum that also included being a devout Baptist and a respected activist, whose causes included education, healthcare, and politics. Assessing Furman's career in terms of what she contributed to African American economic and political progress provides a better lens for understanding her motivations and achievements than does judging the degree to which she was a stylistic pioneer.

Furman's racial identity was defined for her by Virginia state laws. Until the passage of federal civil rights laws in the 1960s, race was a category used in Virginia to limit the political rights of those whose ancestry was partially, although not necessarily predominantly, African or Native American. Furman was considered to be, and considered herself, in the terminology that prevailed for much of her lifetime, "Negro" or "colored." From 1785 until 1910, Virginia defined anyone with at least one-quarter African ancestry this way; in 1910 this was revised to include anyone with one-sixteenth or more "negro blood." In 1924, when Furman was thirty, the legislature passed the notorious Racial Integrity Act establishing that anyone with a single African ancestor could not be considered "white."[5]

Furman's African American father, Madison Jones Bailey, was a successful building contractor, who erected the substantial Queen Anne house in Richmond's Church Hill neighborhood in which Furman lived and worked for most of her life.[6] Enslaved labor, including that of skilled artisans, constructed much of the antebellum city; already before the Civil War many freedmen also worked in the building trades.[7] Bailey, who died in 1945, sent his daughter north to an integrated high school in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia and arranged for her to learn drafting in the office of New York architect Edward R. Williams. Furman began to practice in conjunction with her father in 1923.[8] In 1944–1946 she earned an associate's degree in drafting from the Chicago Technical College.

Segregation prevented Furman from attending Richmond's best public schools; as a woman and as an African American she was also barred from enrolling at the University of Virginia's publicly funded architecture school. Until she reached her sixties she was denied equal access to public transportation, equal treatment in such public settings as cinemas and theatres, and prohibited from eating in public in most Richmond restaurants. Yet Church Hill was with Jackson Ward home in the 1920s to many flourishing African American businesses, some of them supported by the entrepreneurial activities of Maggie Walker, the first African American woman in the United States to be president of her own bank.[9] Among the commissions Furman executed in these years was a house for Beulah and Robert Wilder.[10] Their son Douglas, who grew up calling Furman "Cousin Peachie," became Virginia's – and

the nation's – first elected African American governor.[11] Like many Church Hill homes of its era, the Wilder House was later demolished as part of urban renewal efforts.

Although they are not often dated, most of Furman's surviving drawings for domestic commissions are of house types that only became popular after World War II, making it difficult to reconstruct the first phase of her career.[12] But she was far from invisible. In 1928, she was the only woman included in a photograph of those attending the Negro Contractors Conference at Hampton Institute, now Hampton University (Figure 22.1). Hampton, which from its establishment in 1868 offered training in carpentry and other aspects of construction, became in the 1940s the first historically Black institution in Virginia to offer training in architecture; its degree program became fully accredited in 1972.[13] In 1940 and again in 1941, Furman served on the board of the Capital Trade Association, an association of Black builders.[14]

Furman stood out in a professional world dominated by men, but in the African American community career women were far from unusual. Marriage and children were not accompanied with the presumption that even a middle-class woman would necessarily leave the workplace. Even in the post-war period, the Black press frequently lauded the achievements of women who successfully balanced careers with families[15] Furman was a mother of three children. She married William H. Carter in 1912. After their divorce she took Joseph D. Furman, a Pullman porter, who died in 1944, as her second husband.[16] Their son Livingston Furman became Director of Housing Operations of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority.[17]

Furman's reputation reached far beyond Richmond. In 1937 the *Pittsburgh Courier* published a photograph of her; the caption described its subject as the only licensed female architect practicing in the state of Virginia.[18] It is not entirely clear what licensing requirements were in place in Virginia at the time and how Furman met them; by the 1950s, she instead described herself as a licensed draftsman.[19] Although it is difficult to piece together what she designed before the 1960s, references to her in both the white and Black press abound. In

Figure 22.1 Negro Contractors' Conference, Hampton, Virginia, 1928.

Source: Ethel Bailey Furman papers and architectural drawings, 1928–2003, Accession 41145, Personal Papers Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

1937, the same year her photograph appeared in the *Courier*, Furman was the subject of a longer profile in another Black newspaper, the Norfolk *Journal and Gazette*. Its author, Bill Jordon, described her as "the only licensed Negro woman architect in this section of the country."[20] He added "Mrs. Furman also finds time to enjoy the pleasures of her husband and children and in this dual capacity is rendering a definite service to the encouragement of women in all fields of study."[21] Upon her return from Chicago, Furman was pictured in the Richmond *Afro American*. The headline read "Virginia's Only Woman Architect," while the accompanying text noted that she "has been preparing blueprints for homes and churches for the past fifteen years. Now her work has been broadened to include steel and concrete structures and plans for hotels and department stores."[22] Furman was profiled in the same newspaper again in 1952, where she was described as having been "a businesswoman for more than twenty years."[23]

Nor was Furman entirely ignored by the white community. In 1945 and again in 1949, journalists writing in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* recorded her defence of the city's Gothic Revival city hall, originally completed in 1894, at a time when many local architects viewed it as outmoded.[24] In 1945 it quoted her view that it was "one of the prettiest structures in the city," which should "never even be remodeled." When the reporter asserted that "its gray antique look" was "mostly from dirt collected for 51 years," "Mrs Furman thought about it and said that if that's the case, it should not even be cleaned."[25] It is not clear whether the slightly condescending tone was because she was African American, which he did not mention. More likely, it was because she was a woman. Meanwhile, in 1947, the *Richmond News Leader* published a correction after describing a Miss Forsberg as the city's only woman architect, noting that "Mrs. Ethel Furman, a registered architect, has been working for several years in Richmond."[26] Her race was not noted, only that, like Miss Forsberg, she also designed small houses. In 1963 the *Times Dispatch* noted that she had spoken at a housing symposium organized by the local chapter of the NAACP.[27]

The degree to which Furman drew attention to herself as a female professional can be contrasted with the activities of Amaza Lee Meredith. Two years younger, Meredith, too, had a father in the building trade, but according to census records he was "white," making it impossible for the family to live together legally in the house he built for his wife, with whom he travelled to Washington, D.C., to marry. Amaza Meredith trained as an artist at Columbia's teachers' college, and founded the art department at Virginia State College for Negroes, now Virginia State University. In New York, she familiarized herself with the latest developments in architecture, although Azurest South, the 1938 house she designed in Petersburg for herself and her partner Edna Mae Colson also displays the influence upon her of articles she read in home decorating magazines.[28] Meredith was the more adventurous designer, but her discreetly lesbian personal life may have led her to shy away from the publicity that Furman clearly sought.

If Meredith was more willing to experiment with architectural forms that departed from Virginia norms, Furman's surviving drawings demonstrate a high level of command of the building process. She meticulously set out how each structure was to be constructed through detailed technical as well as written notations. She clearly presumed that the African American workforce erecting her designs was literate, familiar with such documentation, and could work to her high standards.[29] She was also clearly accustomed to facing an extra level of scrutiny from inspectors, who must have understood, if not always been comfortable with, the level of proud self-assertation embodied in these structures.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, Richmond's African American leadership worked to convert the economic gains they had made in the 1920s into political ones.[30] In 1952 Furman was elected assistant secretary of the city's leading civil rights organization, the Civic Council. Oliver Hill, the lawyer who from 1949 to 1951 served as Richmond's first post-Reconstruction African American city councillor and who worked closely with Thurgood Marshall on Brown v. the Board of Education, served beside her as vice president.[31] The following year, at a time when the poll tax severely restricted the franchise for all Virginians, she ran unsuccessfully for a post on the city's Democratic party committee.[32] In 1959 she qualified all the members of her church's improvement league as voters.[33] Furman was also interested in education and health care. In 1936 she argued in a letter to the *Times Dispatch* that a proposed new building housing Richmond's second high school for African Americans be located in Church Hill.[34] During the 1950s she also engaged in raising money for the fight against polio.[35] In 1954 the East End Civic League, which focused on voting rights and for which she later served as treasurer, awarded her their Walter J. Manning citizenship award.[36] Five years later she was honored by the *Richmond Afro American*.[37]

That Furman's post-war house designs closely resemble what many whites were building was not an indication of her limits as an architect but of her commitment to providing middle class African Americans with the types of homes to which they aspired. That the suburban ideal was presented to white consumers entirely on their own terms does not mean that many African Americans did not want the same thing. [38] During the 1950s *Ebony* largely focused on displays of exceptional social and economic status that made almost no reference to modern architecture and design. The African Americans it profiled largely adhered to the combination of modern comfort and understated historicism that Paul Williams had established for Hollywood stars already in the 1930s.[39] These had the publicity value of fulfilling rather than challenging the dreams of their middle- and working-class fans.

Furman's designs from the 1960s are much less ambitious than the houses published in *Ebony* and adhere to a later set of conventions than those advocated by Williams. Although mainstream (i.e. "white") discussions of housing for African Americans largely focused on the production of publicly funded housing for the urban working class, Furman's work reminds us that among the opportunities of which middle class African Americans availed themselves in the 1960s was, when they had access to land and financing, that of building suburban dwellings.[40]

Civil rights efforts focused above all on school desegregation and voting rights, but equal access to good housing was another important goal. When the Supreme Court issued its historic school desegregation ruling in 1954, the banner headline in the *Richmond Afro American* read "Housing Next."[41] While many middle-class African Americans achieved home ownership after World War II by buying existing dwellings in redlined areas witnessing white flight, some attempted, with mixed success, to integrate new suburbs.[42] The Supreme Court outlawed restrictive covenants in 1948, but illegal discrimination continued. Throughout the South, those African Americans who could afford it often chose to create new communities, typically with reduced access to municipal services.[43] Furman's clients owned land in suburban Henrico and Goochland Counties, where they built houses that were apparently not part of new African American developments, but, like those that were, communicated economic success and community standing in ways that were easily understandable to all middle-class Americans.

Several of houses Furman built for members of the Snead family resembled designs rival builders advertised in the *Richmond Afro American* in the early 1960s.[44] These were single story, often L-shaped dwellings with three bedrooms. Furman's dwellings were clearly a cut above, however. For instance, the four-bedroom residence she designed in 1965 for Mr. and

Mrs. Junius A. Snead in Glen Allen, featured brick rather than wooden siding (Figure 22.2). Details such as the transom and sidelights framing the front door and the pediment over the picture window distinguish it from more modest options marketed in the *Afro*. The largest of the group was a 1968 split-level for the Mack Sneads of Blair Road in Goochland County, that included embellishments such as the porch's iron grill columns (Figures 22.3 and 22.4). That the house sat 150 feet from the road on a generous acre and a half was another marker of the Sneads' economic success and social status.

Of the 27 buildings for which drawings by her are held by the Library of Virginia, 16 are for churches or church additions. Furman excelled at the kind of upgrades that were common to Virginia country churches in years that, despite rampant discrimination often reinforced through the threat of terror, nonetheless witnessed a degree of economic improvement in the lives of many African Americans. In 1953 the *Richmond Afro American* wrote of a church in whose expansion Furman was not involved that $16,000 bought "brick veneering the entire church, the addition of three extra classrooms, a pastor's study, choir room and church vestibule." It also boasted that the church in question "is modernly equipped with indoor flush lavatories . . . [and] is not only warm in winter, but cool in summer, made so by the installation of Air-conditioning fans."[45] These were exactly the facilities which Furman most commonly provided.

Furman made one important break, however, with the understated vocabulary she employed in these projects. This was, almost certainly not coincidentally, for her own church, Fourth Baptist, one of the defining landmarks of Richmond's African American community. The church had been established by enslaved worshippers who originally gathered in the basement of a white congregation on Leigh Street. In 1884 the congregation moved into its present Greek Revival building, erected at a cost of $15,000. Over time, steady

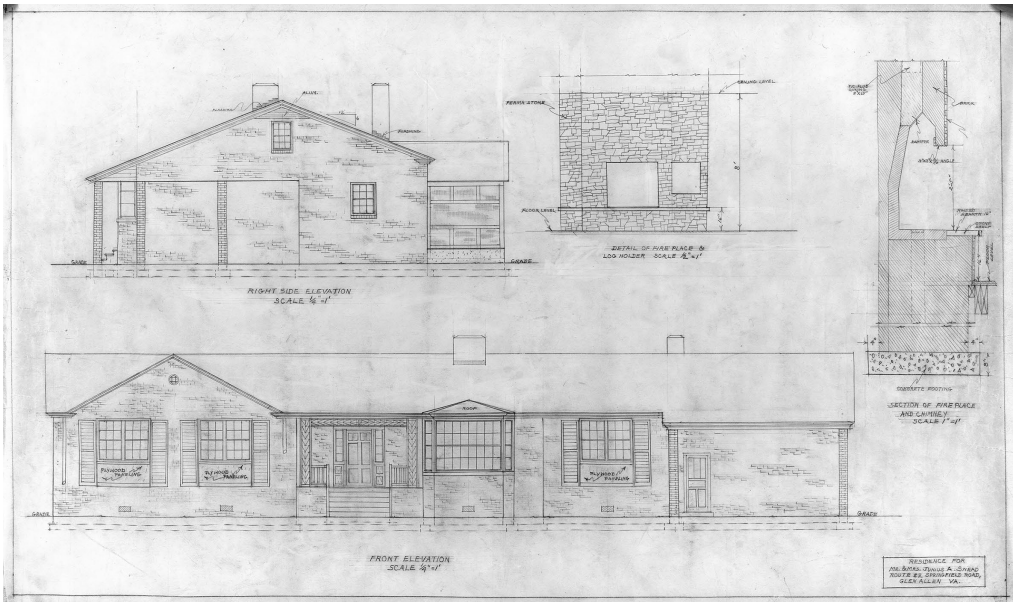

Figure 22.2 Mr. and Mrs. Junius A. Snead House, Ethel Furman, Glen Allen, Virginia, 1965.
Source: Ethel Bailey Furman papers.

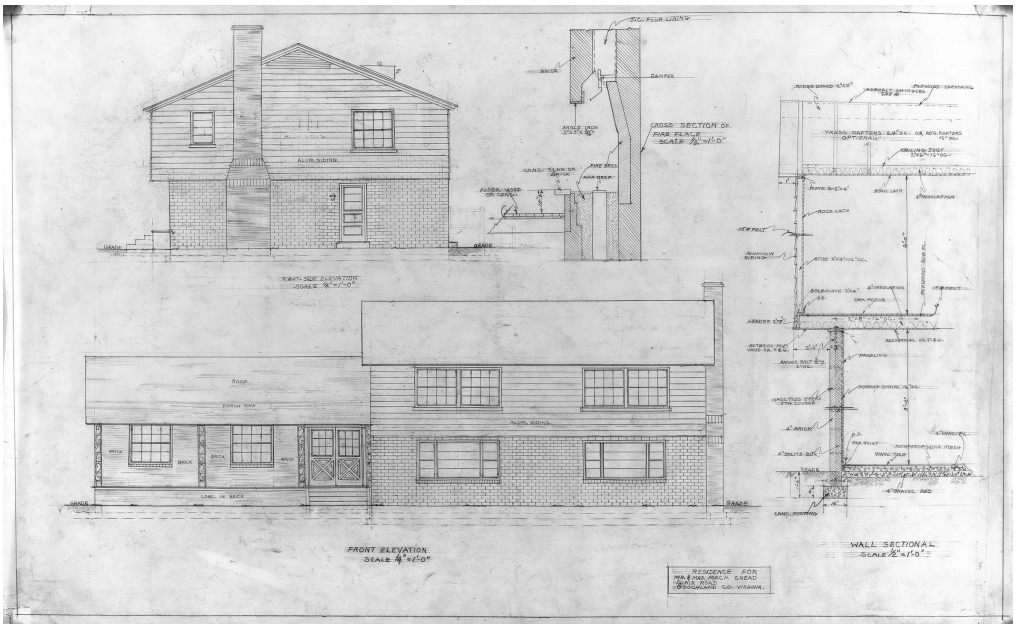

Figure 22.3 Mr. and Mrs. Mack Snead House, Ethel Furman, Goochland County, Virginia, 1968.
Source: Ethel Bailey Furman papers.

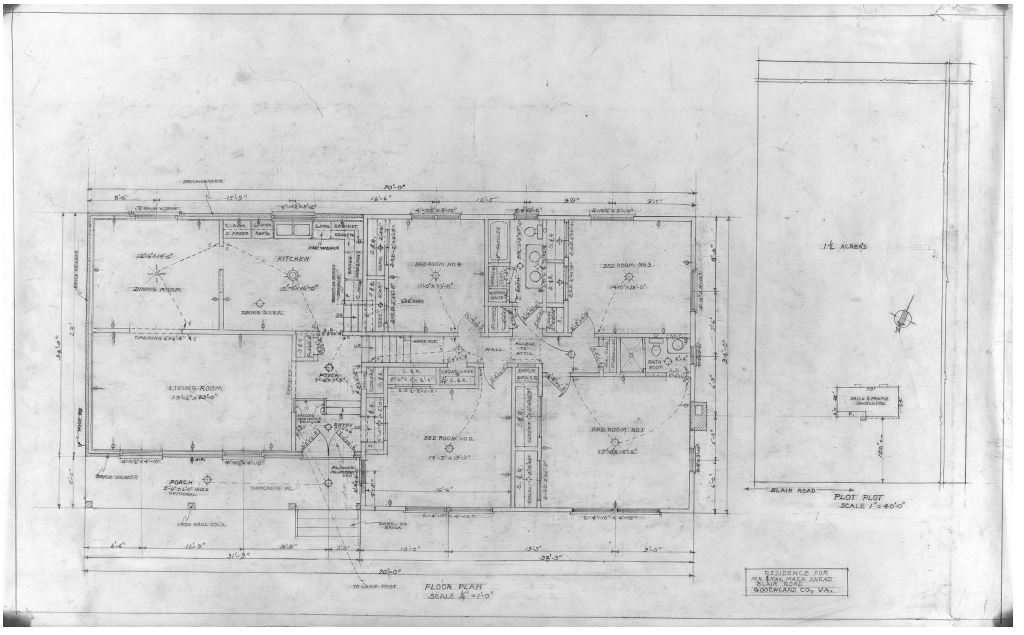

Figure 22.4 Mr. and Mrs. Mack Snead House.
Source: Ethel Bailey Furman papers.

Figure 22.5 Addition to Fourth Baptist Church, Ethel Furman, Richmond, Virginia, 1962.
Source: Bryan Clark Green.

improvements were made to both the interior and the exterior of the building, ensuring that it remained a community showpiece.[46]

In 1952 the church hired Rev. Robert Taylor as its pastor. The new level of professionalism he brought to its finances enabled two phases of renovation and expansion. In 1954 the interior was overhauled and "castle stone," a decorative veneer popular in the post-war decades, was added to the lower level of the façade.[47] Seven years later the congregation broke ground on an office and classroom addition for which it budgeted nearly $200,000.[48] The building was completed by July of the next year.[49] The *Richmond News Leader* named Ernest Cook as its architect, but Furman's autograph drawings survive for an only slight variant, and it has been repeatedly credited to her.[50] The curtain walls of the church extension are evidence of a frank modernity missing in her other commissions. Here is it is more likely that she was building in relation to civic and commercial structures of the period. Most tantalizing is the use of a similar skin on the recently completed John Marshall high school, which in 1961, the year it opened, accepted a handful of African American pupils.[51] By this time, modern architecture was also being understood in the African American press as a symbol of the strides being made by newly independent African countries.[52]

Furman did not change the course of architecture in the United States through the style of her designs, the standard by which architects are too often judged. Instead, she changed how African American women could shape their surroundings by courageously challenging the social conventions of her day, clearing the path for licensed, university-trained architects such as Beverly Lorraine Greene and Norma Merrick Sklarek. She insisted that her African American clients be able to dwell and worship in dignity. Against enormous odds, she forged a career in architecture, while tirelessly fighting for the education, health, civil rights, and spiritual welfare of her community. She has never been forgotten in Richmond. On 31 March 1985, less than a decade after her death, the city of Richmond dedicated a public park to her memory.[53] In 2010 the Library of Virginia named her one of Virginia's Women in History.[54]

Notes

1 This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 101019419).
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15 "Women Leaders." *Ebony* (July 1949) pp. 19–22; and Lerone Bennett, Jr., "The Negro Woman." *Ebony* (August 1960) pp. 38–46.
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20 Bill Jorden, "Richmond Merry-Go-Round." *Norfolk New Journal and Guide*, 11 September 1937.
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22 "Virginia's Only Woman Architect." *Richmond Afro American*, 6 July 1946.
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29 Drawings for Nathan Pleasant Residence, Ethel Bailey Furman papers. Similar notations can be found on other drawings, including those for Mt. Nebo Baptist Church.
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