

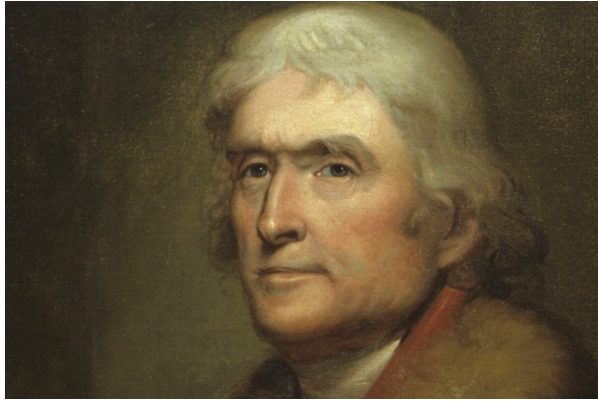
8 December 2021

Movin' On Up

Not Your Parents Colonial Home

A Postcolonial History of Race And Enlightenment Influence Afrofuturistic Home Design

George and Louise Jefferson shared their fictional lives on the television show, *The Jeffersons* (1978-1985). It is the second-longest-running American sitcom with an African American cast. It is famous for regularly featuring a mixed-race couple, groundbreaking in the 70s. The opening theme for *The Jeffersons* is by Ja'Net Du Bois, who happens to star on another predominantly Black show, *Good Times* (1974-1979). It is a memorable and catchy tune about achieving the American dream: "...movin' on up (t)o the east side (t)o a deluxe apartment in the sky..." (Songfacts). *The Jeffersons* embodied the Black American Dream and achieved that gold ring of success with hard work and grit. They landed their dream apartment high above the upper-east-side of Manhattan. It is fun to consider the raucous George Jefferson as a metaphor for another famous Jefferson, Thomas (1743-1826), a slave owner, who did not achieve success through grit, but through inheritance.

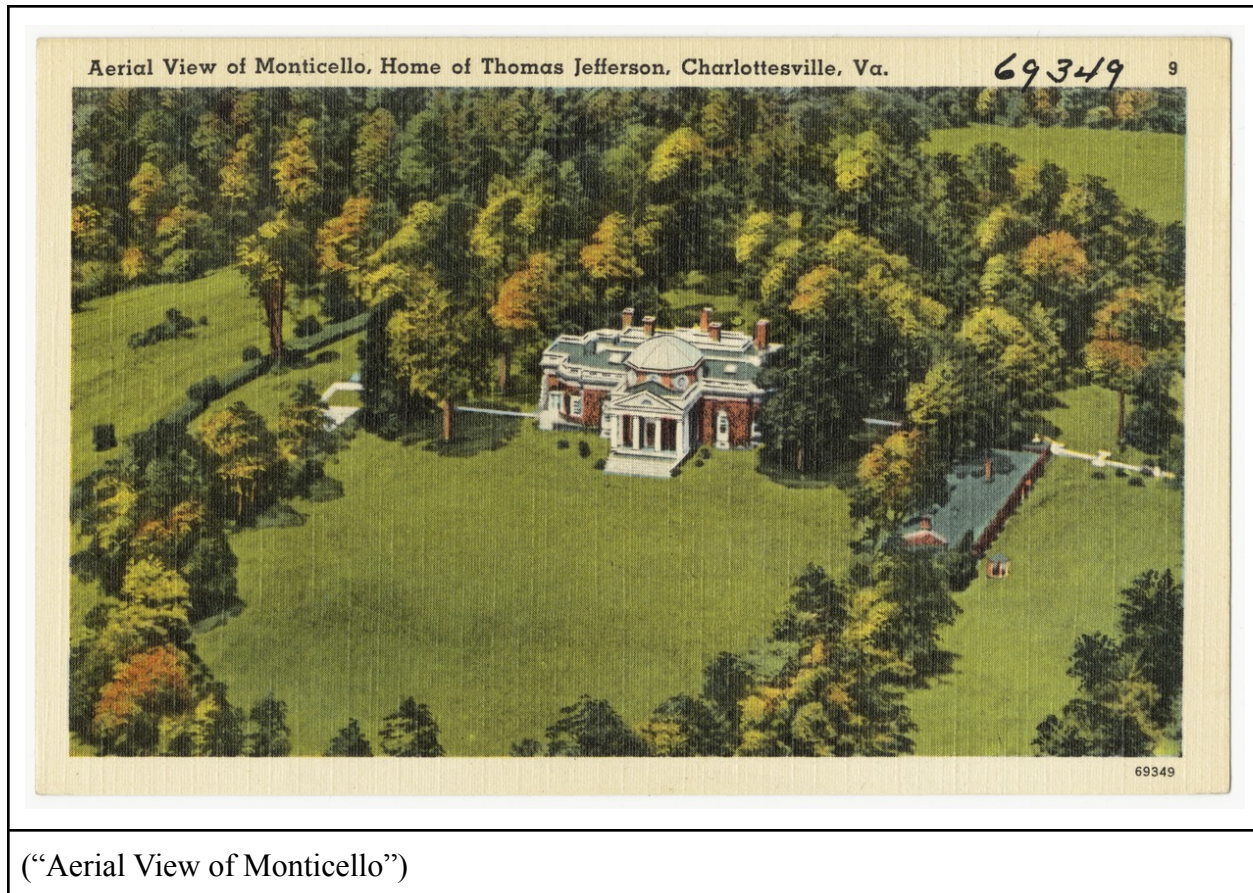


Thomas Jefferson (Dick)



George Jefferson (CBS/Landov)

Both gentlemen were hubristic, loquacious, fond of luxury, and achieved their dream home in the sky. In the book *Founding Gardeners* by Andrea Wulf, Thomas Jefferson says about his famous hilltop estate, Monticello: “With what majesty do we there ride there above the storms! How sublime to look down into the work-house of nature, to see her clouds, hail, snow, rain, thunder, all fabricated at our feet! And the glorious Sun, when rising as if out of a distant water, just gilding the tops of the mountains, and giving life to all nature...”. We can imagine a gesticulating and bombastic George Jefferson peering from his skyline windows and extoll the same.



Thomas Jefferson is an 18th-century white country squire; an aristocrat influenced by European thought and the Classics. In architecture, Classicism is adherence to architectural harmony, understatement, and craftsmanship. George Jefferson is a 20th-century Black self-made businessman living in an era of Afrocentrism and Black pride, concepts in which are developing its influence on architecture to come. This unlikely pair collide and hybridize in a discussion of dream homes in a postcolonial world, where white hegemony slowly recedes, and black culture progresses. Afrofuturism is a science-fiction and technology perspective; Négritude is pride in Black culture. As we enter the 21st century, the American Dream home is in a full-court press of Black identity and history.

At ground level, it appears these two Jeffersons share the allegory of the American

Dream of their times. However, looking over our shoulder at 200 years of postcolonial white supremacy is to look at the sun. It is impossible to stare at it without pain. In 21st century America, the positive evolution of the postcolonial American home evolves with the contribution of Afrofuturism, Négritude, and The Enlightenment.

A lens of postcolonialism gives us a variable aperture to examine the consequences and influences of American enslavement from the African diaspora. “Postcolonial theory looks at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial hegemony (Western colonizers controlling the colonized)” (Purdue). White people uprooted the Black, indigenous people from their homes. They forced them across the ocean from the Caribbean, Africa, and South America to live in a world built by white people for white people. American hegemony opened like a billowy white sheet and choked atop a powerless enslaved class. To be clear, these people *never* had agency or power in America. We imported them as sub-human chattel. “We the people” put aside “all men are created equal.” We justified lashing the spirit and humanity from people with loud cracks of a whip, all to support the white economy of the southern states and beyond. Entitled and superior-thinking white hegemony did not die out even after the Civil War. Long-term Black economic wealth eroded by real estate redlining in the 1900s. In an *Uneasy Peace* - a book about American crime and violence, Patrick Sharkey says: “...police departments nationwide have been bolstered by growing federal and state funding and emboldened by a policy of aggressive, zero-tolerance policing that targeted low-income communities of color”. A deep trench of race inequality still cuts through the communities and homes of Black America today.

Two hundred fifty years ago, The individualism and analytical approaches of Enlightenment heavily influenced the college experiences of the American Revolution

generation. Classical architecture reflects such erudition. Classical themes and decorative elements are from scientific studies and display “ideal” geometric proportions and forms. For example, the Washington DC memorials of Jefferson and Lincoln reflect the order and reverence of ancient monument architecture from Greece and Rome. Thomas Jefferson educates himself about architecture from the works of the famous Roman architect Palladio, among others. Jefferson’s passion for classical architecture unfurls in the design of his estate, Monticello in Virginia. He became a leader and advocated for a Classical American architecture vernacular, which today dot our nation’s capital and beyond. "Jefferson believed that architecture was the heart of the American cause. In his mind, a building was not merely a walled structure, but a metaphor for American ideology" (Johns). Today, Thomas Jefferson's dream lives on in variations of the colonial-style that remain widespread in American residential and religious architecture. The curb appeal is design symmetry, cohesion, and conformity of neoclassical architecture. Architecturally speaking, a colonial-designed home has been a stalwart of white American residential real estate for two centuries. It symbolizes white financial success, family stability, and exclusive education.

We can look to Hollywood for romantic comedies' aspirational and idealistic interpretations of Colonial homes. George and Nina Banks from *Father of the Bride* (1991) is cast with this 1913 Colonial from Pasadena, California.



Banks' Colonial Home (Andrea)

Classical elements are displayed here. The white mimics marble. The facade is symmetrical, anchored in the center with a front door below an Ionic segmental broken pediment with inset (Calloway 75). *Father of the Bride* uses the architectural elements as a background character. Aspects of the house enhance George and Nina as idealized, albeit quirky, parents. The traditional home theme aligns with the tradition of a traditional white marriage event in the movie. Classical architecture is a language of design that reflects society as it wants to be, not the individual (Looking at you Unabomber cabin). Thomas Jefferson's Monticello is an idealized classical home reflecting his wealth (appearances thereof), political status, and adherence to the classical zeitgeist. Notably, he uses architecture for what he wants people to see and not see. The enslavement service areas are below ground and away from the main vista of the house (see "Aerial View," above). Alas, much postcolonial architecture delineates social class and race and conforms to white aspirational ideals.

The importance of conformity lives in today's real estate industry. As a crucial measurement of the financial value of one's home, an appraisal is a purchase contingency tool of 21st-century real estate finance. Essentially, if one is financing a home purchase, a successful purchase loan relies heavily on the home's appraised value. "An appraisal principle of value is based on the concept that the more property or its components are in harmony with the surrounding properties or components, the greater the contributory value" (Reilly 5). So, as much as the Georges (Jefferson and Banks) aspire to dream spaces with their families, they must also comply with the real estate marketplace. Hollywood does not.

In *Black Panther* (2018), we see an ultimate freedom void of real estate market conformity and white colonialism. The Afrofuturistic architecture in Wakanda, the hidden capital of an African nation, is untouched by colonialism of any sort. It is sophisticated, integrated with its environment, and supported solely by natural resources. Indeed, this is a Hollywood display of the aspirational Black-built world. Still, it is striking to consider a place in Africa untouched by the crash and plunder of white people, a race that historically exploits the people and confiscates the resources wherever they land. Wakanda is immune to white colonialism, and is elevated above its real colonized global counterparts. Admittedly this is a popular Afrofuturistic movie made by a white dominated entertainment conglomerate. Still, the film exudes an elegant and technologically sophisticated utopia. In fact, according to *Architectural Digest*, "(Wakanda is) also inspired by a real place: the African empire of Mutapa, which existed from the 1400s to late 1700s" ("Things You Didn't Know"). Coincidentally, this is about the time of The Enlightenment in Europe, where the rebirth of Classical ideals emerged.



Urban Wakanda (Malkin)

Wakanda is woke with Enlightenment references such as reason and individualism within a community. As such, this is Wakanda-ism: a legacy imbued with a respected identity, appreciation of ancestry, celebration of the Earth, and a holistic approach to wellness and sustenance. We must find ways to celebrate and incorporate its future in American dream homes. We have a way to go.

Architectural history starts in white America by repeatedly scraping over local cultures. For indigenous tribes in the New World, their settlements disappeared by entitled early white Europeans colonizing America. Journalist Thomas Ricks captures this alienation from a comment made by musicians about being “First Peoples... We do not call ourselves ‘Native American.’ Because our blood and people were here long before this land was called the Americas. We are older than America can ever be and do not know the borders” (Ricks xii).

Quite a sonic boom considering hundreds of thousands of Blacks chained and shipped to America felt the same way.

But for our enslaved class, their native culture and homes were left behind and ignored. They were actively submerged and folded over into a white culture, designed and built for white people, albeit most likely assembled by Black and poor whites. Looking at California's late 19th and early 20th centuries, Hispanic architecture revealed itself in a string of Missions up and down California. The Spanish Andalusia arts emerged for haciendas, churches, and eventually homes. Why the freedom of the Latin style? California did not participate with a slave economy in mind. The European cache appealed to rugged California's seeking to use architecture as status and identity (Keaton 9), just like Neoclassicism on the east coast. Other activities in Europe are afoot, culturally rebuking Black oppression in America. A positive artistic future for Black culture is emerging.

Négritude, a social movement in Paris, responds to the abuse it sees in France and abroad. It is an example of successful political power unheard of in enslaved America. In a 1965 edition of *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Abiola Irele writes about Négritude literature and ideology, and quotes a French writer from 1947: “The idealism of négritude from the beginning tended towards an earthly utopia:

We Africans need to know the meaning of an ideal, to be able to choose it and believe in it freely, but out of a sense of personal necessity, to relate it to the life of the world. We should occupy ourselves with present questions of world importance, and, in common with others, ponder upon them, in order that we might one day find ourselves among the creators of a new order (Diop).

In their search for identity, the adherents of negritude have had to accept and explore to the full their particular situation. But, although preoccupied with a sectional and limited interest, they were inspired by a universal human need for fulfilment. In this, they have never strayed from the

central, enduring problem of the human condition.”. Whatever color we are, we all have a need for personal fulfillment and a safe home.

But for all of the economic progress churning in Industrialized America, the African diaspora in America remains poor, isolated, and still serving white people. Even after the Civil War and the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments established equal rights to the enslaved class, an artistic and cultural movement would not evolve for decades. As such, we see George Jefferson “movin’ on up to an eastside apartment in the sky” in the 20th-century. From the creative freedom, flourishes, and validation from Négritude - and slow Reconstruction in America - we see a better future atop the ancestral shoulders that came before.

Ancestral futurism seems intuitive. It calls to mind family history and memories in an attic, scrapbook, or framed photos. There is cultural permission to call to action the behavior of those that came before, like the leadership qualities of a great-grandfather military general or the warm nurture of a grandmother. Often there is an ancestral home where the family tree starts and yields the ancestral rights of power or privilege to her descendants. However, ancestral futurism becomes murky if you don’t know your past. And this is especially true for much of the enslaved African diaspora, whose history is lost. They were plundered, pulled from their hand built homes, and put on ships to the “new world.” Their pasts were erased and they took on the white people’s names assigned to them. Today we banter about sustainability, green building, historic preservation, and restoration themes. "Ancestral futures" is an undiscovered country in home design.

In an interview with interior designer Kiyonda Powell, we talked about the pressure and freedom of a lack of heritage. On the one hand, her interior design clients will say, “Make it Black.” For Kiyonda, this is a nebulous term that subconsciously implies cultural references

from various tastes and styles of the African diaspora. Black people are from all over. Also, there is a common ground of responsibility in elevating design and culture in a home. “For the Culture” is a frequently audible term. It is woven through conversations with her colleagues and clients. There is a real need - *and urgency* - to make the highest and the best on-trend and cultural representation possible. We spoke of the irony of the African mask as a design element common in American interiors imbuing Africa and beyond. On the one hand, it is an artifact that reflects culture. On the other, a mask is a symbol of being someone else. It is a paradox to consider a mask as an inclusive design element. Nonetheless, it still projects a decorated face of a foreign place, even if it is a disguise or ceremonial. This mask lives in a variety of interpretations, possibly an elevated persona representing an aspirational future. Cultural application is flexible.

Afrofuturism takes ancestral futures to a new level and place. Around the time George Jefferson and his wife "Weezy" were entertaining us from his Manhattan apartment, Dana Franklin, the author-surrogate character of Octavia Butler in *Kindred*, was experiencing ancestral futurism from her Los Angeles bungalow. In 1976 Butler published a science fiction story of time travel, where the mechanism of a temporal switch was violence. Dana was on a trek to save her ancestors in antebellum Maryland. It is a scarring journey that changes Dana's future at the journey's end. She simultaneously saved herself and brought forth a 19th-century perspective of enslavement to 1976. Afrofuturism is the embodiment of this:

“Afrofuturism can be described as an emergent literary and cultural aesthetic that combines elements of science fiction, mysticism, magical realism, and Afrocentricity to critique not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color but also to revise the future and re-examine the historical events of the past” (Daniels 12).

In this lens, in a postcolonial world, we have permission, *an expectation*, to revisit gaps or missteps in our past and reframe them in new and productive ways, especially in our homes.

A successful example of Afrofuturistic American home design is a dream home virtual project in Oakland, California, coincidentally, where the film *Black Panther* opens. The Black Artists Design Guild (BADG) virtually designed a futuristic home for black families. The name of the house is a metaphor, a reflection of home solidarity built from a 250 year-old crucible of history. Named “Obsidian” - a weatherproof glassy lava-spewed metamorphic rock. It is designed with a cadre of Black designers working together from around the country. It is a laboratory, examining elements “...for physical, social, emotional, and creative well-being” (About - Obsidian):

“The Obsidian Virtual Concept House embraces possibility. Here we showcase an enlightened way of being and dwelling, designed on our own terms, as a virtual experience for Black families. In this future, home is our sanctuary where family and work life are intertwined and rest, safety, nourishment, spiritually and joy are central to our vision. Some areas will remain recognizable, while others will have been completely reimaged” (“Obsidian House”).

Notably, the marketing for the Obsidian project is for and about "Black Families." Indeed this is social validation beyond Thomas Jefferson’s wildest dreams, but a race disparity still exists. For example, today, if a design firm advertises homes for "White Families," it would be publicly eviscerated as racist, exclusionist, political, and a tantalizing tidbit for a media-hungry America. Reconstruction marches on. Nonetheless, the concepts designed in this home release the shackles of postcolonialism. It drops the facade of Colonial adherence to conformity and erudition. Obsidian values are ideal in the American dream home.

Beyond the prototype design of Obsidian House, Black families are building or renovating their dream homes in real life. Anyeley Hallová and her husband Ed Halla purchased a home in Portland, Oregon, in 2016. "We fell in love with it,'...Not only was the architecture unusual, but the home also presented the opportunity to live in a traditionally Black

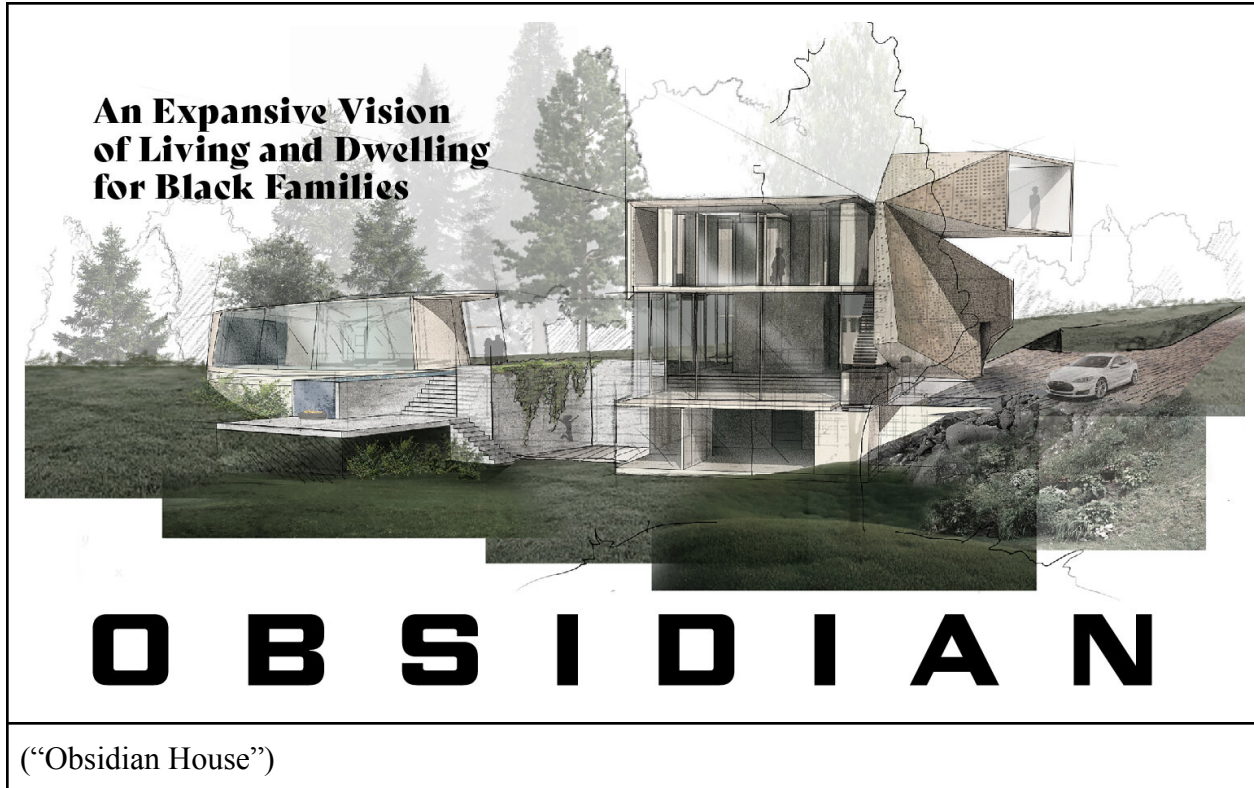
community—one of very few in Portland, a city with a legacy of redlining—and especially in one without a historic designation that puts limits on renovations" (Ladgarneo). Redlining was a discriminatory real estate and insurance practice of refusing service based on race. "... the vast majority of neighborhoods marked "hazardous" in red ink on maps drawn by the federal Home Owners' Loan Corp. from 1935 to 1939..." (Jan). The appraisal and value of homes in redlined districts were significantly less than comparable to white neighborhoods. The Fair Housing Act in 1968 made redlining illegal. However, the Black generational accumulation of wealth through American real estate is a drip compared to the gusher of white financial progress in the decades since.

The aforementioned "historic designation" is an architectural preservation overlay zone outlined on municipal plans in many cities. A type of policing regulation, these zones ensure a community conforms to area homes' historical legacy and characteristics. Such restrictions unencumbered the Hallová-Hall family, and they now live in the house of their dreams.



It is an easy leap to think Afrofuturism is too groovy and far out for an America founded on Classical ideals. ~~Notably, Surprisingly,~~ *Gleefully* these values align with 18th Century Enlightenment ideals. Whether we are black, white, purple, or green; all of us stand shoulder to shoulder with a kinship to the “best of” values our country was thinking in the 18th-century.

Obsidian Values (“Obsidian by BADG”)	Enlightenment Values (“American Enlightenment”)
Legacy: where we come from.	Deism: God guides us to move forward.
Identity: who we are in society.	Liberalism: we are an organized society valuing individual rights.
Ancestral Futures: we look back to move forward.	Republicanism: we exercise freedom within our communities and political ties.
Terra: physical connection and conservation of the Earth.	Conservatism: we value tradition and practice.
Wellness: taking care of ourselves and each other; safety.	Toleration: we are better off when we interact, not avoid each other.
Sustenance: nourishment and health.	Scientific Progress: is built on skepticism but buoys our curiosity about our health and planet.



George and Thomas Jefferson created their dream homes. Whether a fictional New Yorker or founding father, they are icons of achievement and socially reflective of their times. Even as their stories are remarkably divergent in race, class, and centuries, there is burgeoning optimism for anyone aspiring to a home that gives them well-being, personal power and joy. American home preservationist and actor Diane Keaton captures what George and Thomas Jefferson were feeling in the foreword of *California Romantica*: “The promise of heaven in a

home lies somewhere out there, almost within reach”. In postcolonial America, the contribution of Négritude, Afrofuturism, and The Enlightenment deserve a prominent place in our American design culture. In a pandemic world with polarizing political gravitas, our empathy and humanity must hold hands. Let’s move forward and design our most intimate spaces for ourselves and our families: our homes. Our mandate is to move on up and create dream homes on enlightened foundations for people of every color and tribe.

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