



## Mabel Wilson Honored with the Vincent Scully Award

### Description

Architect, author, and historian Mabel O. Wilson was presented with the much-coveted Vincent Scully Award by the [National Building Museum](#) on Tuesday evening, Oct. 19.

Wilson, whose work focuses on the intersection of design and Black history and culture, is the annual prize's 23rd awardee. Established in 1999, the Scully Prize recognizes excellence in practice, scholarship, or criticism in architecture, historic preservation, and urban design. Earlier recipients include Scully himself, Laurie Olin, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown.

Wilson is the Nancy and George E. Rupp Professor of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University. After the presentation, she gave an eight-minute talk, then engaged in conversation with Steven Nelson, Dean of the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art.

Among the topics Wilson covered in her talk were:

- How the invention of racial difference was influenced by and influences the aesthetic and technical dimensions of architecture in the early modern era of the nineteenth century.
- How and why historically marginalized groups were excluded from the commemorative landscape of memorial structures in American cities.
- How to articulate criteria and practices that can be used when public memorials or monuments are contested.

Wilson is a 1985 graduate of the University of Virginia School of Architecture, and was instrumental in developing U.Va.'s Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, with Boston-based architecture firm Höweler + Yoon. That memorial's process began with a student-led initiative 2010, and was formalized in 2013 when University President Teresa Sullivan established the President's Commission on Slavery and the University.

RFPs for the memorial design were issued in 2016, with a number of national firms invited to participate. "For me, it began with Meejin Yoon reaching out to me to join the design team at the RFP phase, and lo and behold – the other teams were landscape architects and we were architects," Wilson

says. “We came in and said: ‘You need to ask questions, not ask what to do.’”

The Höweler + Yoon/ Mabel Wilson team won the contract. And the research began – by listening to staff, students, and the descendent community in and around Charlottesville. What was revealed was that the local black community believed the University essentially functioned as a plantation.

Clearly, that was a perception that had to change – and not with just a memorial, but over an extended period of time. “We still live in the wake of slavery, in terms of cost of housing and labor,” she says. “This is a memorial, but only a moment along the way in terms of thinking of forms of redress and repair.”

The descendent community now has stepped up and formed a non-profit to serve as stakeholders and caretakers of the memorial. After it opened in June of 2020, Black Lives Matter marchers stopped at the site to gather. “It’s important to understand that the racial violence hasn’t stopped but has taken a different form,” she says. “If the memorial brings people together to address these issues, then the memorial is doing its work.”

Wilson’s own work has been exhibited around the world, including the Venice Architecture Biennale, the Architekturmuseum der TU München, the Istanbul Design Biennale, and in galleries throughout the U.S. Her books include *Begin with the Past: Building the National Museum of African American History and Culture* (2017), *Negro Building: African Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (2012), and *Race and Modern Architecture: From the Enlightenment to Today* (2020), co-edited with Irene Cheng and Charles Davis. She was also co-curator of the 2021 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*.

In its statement naming Wilson as the 2021 recipient, the jury wrote: “Mabel O. Wilson has built up a reputation over many years as the leading researcher, historian, and designer on space, politics, and cultural memory in Black America. And her recent contributions have culminated in both co-editing *Race and Modern Architecture* and co-organizing *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*. Both her lifelong work and these two recent, high-profile contributions more than justify her selection as someone in the vein of Vincent Scully, opening the eyes of both professionals and the broader public to deeper understandings of the built environment.”

For more, go [here](#).

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