

WATER JUSTICE | PRE-ENACTMENT | PUERTO RICO
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Redesigning How We Live Together

Artists and designers invite
us to focus on justice, inclusion,
and human dignity

Seesaws Across the U.S.-Mexico Border:

*A 40-minute-long temporary
playground has global impact*



\$30.00 USD

DEANNA VAN BUREN

For six years, Deanna Van Buren worked in the mainstream of architecture designing large retail structures in Europe. On her return home to the U.S. she was keen to reconnect with African-American culture. So on Martin Luther King's birthday in 2006, she went to a Black church in East Oakland, California, to hear the veteran activist Angela Davis and her sister, Fania. The topic: restorative justice—in which victims, perpetrators, and community members meet to decide how to repair the harm done by crime.

Van Buren had an epiphany. Restorative justice, with its emphasis on human connection and solution-finding rather than abstract statutes, struck her as "a much more logical, more realistic approach than our current judicial system. It's more aligned with human nature. 'Blind justice,' absolutely objective justice, is impossible," she says. "We're subjective, emotional beings, and a system that allows for that is the one we need to embrace, because it works."

She found her life's work that night: designing spaces for restorative justice to flourish. For her, current "justice architecture"—courtrooms, jails—is too rigid and forbidding for the restorative paradigm. "Architecture amplifies our social interactions," she says. "The current spaces, and the activities that go on in them, are traumatizing."

With developer Kyle Rawlins, she founded Designing Justice + Designing Spaces (DJDS), a nonprofit architectural and real estate development firm in Oakland. Generally partnering with community organizations, DJDS has developed restorative justice and peacemaking spaces and structures. The design challenges include balancing an open, light-filled, domestic-scaled atmosphere open to the natural world and including objects of beauty—all of which help participants "regulate their nervous systems," Van Buren says—with giving participants a sense of safety.

But DJDS also addresses the needs that foster the "school-to-prison pipeline" in communities of color: with, for example, a refurbished city bus that serves as a mobile schoolhouse bringing learning and other resources to struggling neighborhoods; and the Women's Mobile Refuge Center, a mobile unit that allows women who have been released from incarceration in the middle of the night (a standard practice) to spend a safe night and prepare themselves for the next phase of their lives. (Van Buren, who begins every project with listening sessions, was surprised to hear that the women didn't want beds in the trailer. "They didn't want to take a nap," she says. "They wanted to get their hair ready, get a change of clothes, contact their caseworker. They *did* want comfortable furniture they didn't have in jail—a Barcalounger!")

For Van Buren, these new structures and spaces are not just adaptations to new attitudes about justice; they're ways of concretizing them. "When you *build* for a new set of beliefs about justice," she says, "I believe it anchors the beliefs."



ABOVE: Deanna Van Buren, co-founder and design director of Designing Justice + Designing Spaces (DJDS). OPPOSITE ABOVE: DJDS designed the Women's Mobile Refuge Center in Oakland, California, to provide a safe space for women recently released from incarceration to prepare for transition back into their communities. OPPOSITE BELOW: Entrance to DJDS-designed Restore Oakland, a space for resolving conflicts, obtaining legal counseling for housing issues, training for higher-paid jobs in the restaurant industry, hosting community organizing meetings, and enjoying meals at COLORS, a living wage restaurant.



Design for Equity

There's a new kind of practitioner in town, one that bridges the gap between good design and social justice—and dismantles systems of exclusion.

ESSAY BY JEN KRAVA /
PROFILES BY JON SPAYDE

38 **THE FIELDS OF DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE** are shifting.

Art and design professionals have long collaborated to ask questions about our shared public spaces, the land we are on, our relationships to one another, and our built environment, and recently we've seen a rise in social practice, community-centered design, and co-design emerging as new ways to practice.

Historically, architecture and public design practices have been largely dominated by White designers, and traditional art and design education have mostly eliminated community members and social issues from this process of investigation. Over the past few years we have seen an emergence of artists and designers of color, bringing lived experience to the places they design, leading the charge in changing what questions are asked, and engaging their skills as facilitators and listeners rather than only as outside experts. Essentially, they're addressing issues of social justice.

Here's why this shift is so important: Inequitable distribution of access to food, healthcare, parks, safe and stable housing, and welcoming spaces are all results of the many years of unbalanced, discriminatory policies and decisions made by a privileged few on local and national levels.

When architects, landscape architects, and urban planners address these inequities through more inclusive and equitable community-centered processes, these dominant systems can be dismantled—through design. Engaging community members, young people, elders, new immigrants, indigenous people, residents and others as partners is an essential part of the process and necessary to ensuring equity. Designers working

in this way are setting a new standard for what “good” design should look like in our country and who gets to decide.

The design process itself—when designers ask questions, analyze current conditions, find gaps, and work to resolve these gaps—is where significant change can begin. When the community is involved, the act of evaluating systems, processes, and programs is itself a form of social justice. Designers who prioritize inclusion are:

- sharing power with community members, creating access to processes not every community has had the privilege of being involved in;
- understanding the mechanisms that perpetuate oppression, and dismantling systems and tenets of White supremacy that have dominated the creation of





Restore Oakland was designed by architect Deanna Van Buren and associates at Designing Justice + Designing Spaces to support the restorative justice process outside the courtroom. It includes paint colors to support peace and calm, multiple large windows, and chairs arranged in circles.

our built environment, distribution of resources, and access to power;

- putting empathy at the forefront of their process, using deep listening skills to truly understand the needs of people affected by these oppressive systems, amplifying human dignity, connecting people to each other, and remembering that people are human beings with emotions and opinions;
- creating spaces and places that are designed for the person who currently has the least amount of access, and working cues into the design that all are actually welcome in the space; and
- generating actions, operations, and locations that

establish social and physical conditions which encourage and allow people to reach their full human potential—and to do this work themselves.

"People don't think they deserve good design," Quardean Lewis-Allen, founder of Made in Brownsville, once said to me. That means design is seen as being reserved for only certain people. But because design creatively addresses challenges and prompts examination of how we use our shared resources, we can *all* benefit from it. And because a more inclusive approach essentially creates new systems and methods of movement, sharing, and use of space, good design changes the course of our existence.

Read on about the work of Quardean and others who are breaking processes open and addressing issues of social justice through their design work.