

bike trail project and no one mentions it.

But then this woman, Shaughnessy Daniels—the community engagement manager with Great Rivers Greenway—sends me articles. Then I find out two of the brothers had patents for bicycles. So now we're trying to weave this into this sectional trail.

There was nothing there, because there'd been disinvestment. But designing elements that can inspire people might allow them to see a future that's very different. I'm doing lenticular fences so when you're on the trail you're actually riding with the soldiers. I think that's the work: digging and trying to find ways to express history, but also a validation that African Americans didn't just arrive here. We've been part of making this public from the beginning.

SARA

I'd love to hear more about the role of narrative for you. In my work, sometimes people say, "Well, even if that narrative inspired your design, it's not legible." My response is that that's okay. It's not about public spaces being didactic or literal, but that there is an entry point. Actually, there are multiple entry points because it has to serve so many. It has to be open-ended by virtue of it being public.

WALTER

I think of telling stories instead, because when people think of "narratives" they assume that it must come from something historic. But the landscape is a place where stories unfold, whether you like it or not. The story of racial segregation is in the landscape. The story of colonialism is in the landscape.

I use story to find difference, because I don't want to keep doing the same thing. I don't think you can go into a community, and ask people what they

want, and get something different. Because we're all part of the same cultural landscape. So when I ask people what they want, they always want a park, grass, and trees. It's a normative way of thinking. There's nothing negative about that, but I'm trying to find something that can validate a history that people might not know that they're a part of.

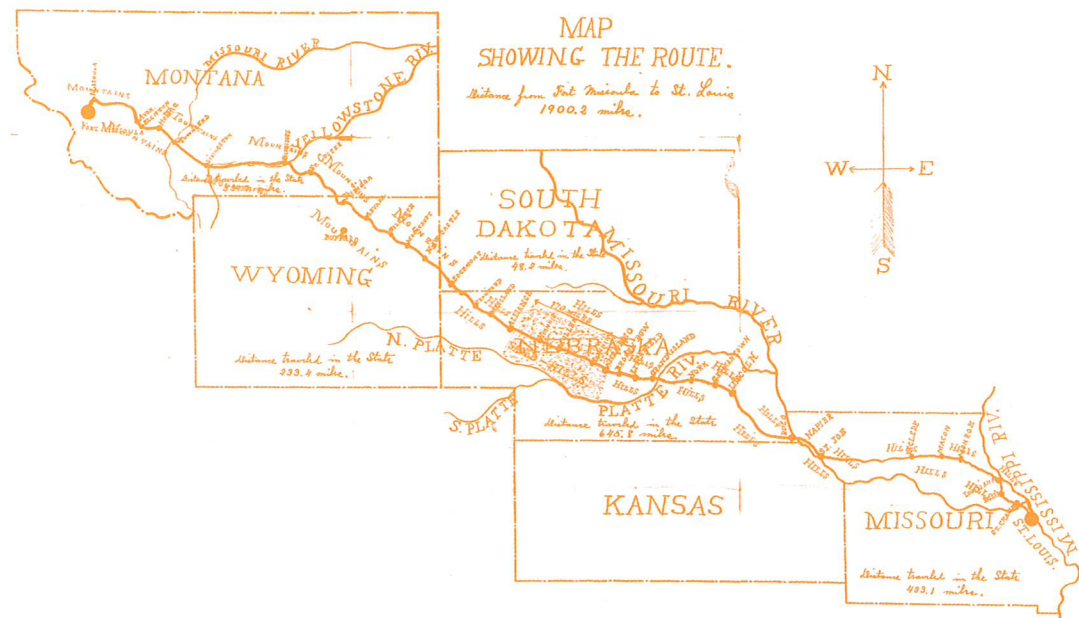
I feel that African Americans are never in the conversation. We're never contributing to what something looks like. This is my best way to contribute. I don't care so much about knowing "Oh, that's based on this." I care more about someone saying, "Wow, you made that for us? How'd you come up with that?" People appreciate that you're going out of your way to find something to give to them that's really different. I think there is a reciprocal relationship: it's not just that people will take care of this space, but they will look at it in a completely different way.

SARA

Many American public spaces are either privately owned or just the leftover space from private development. I'm sure many of your clients are private entities—but your thinking is always about the public. How do you wrestle with that?

WALTER

As a society, we don't want to live together. Someone was just telling me that during segregation, there was more investment into public works because white communities wanted swimming pools and they would have them to themselves. They had to give us the same thing. When we started to integrate these places, they were like, "We can do without these," which is kind of mind-blowing.



Map drawn by 2nd Lieutenant James A. Moss of the journey of the 25th

When we're doing public spaces for cities today, it's really hard because there's no money, and then they're always talking about low maintenance, and we know what that means. So the private is the only thing we have left. We try to leverage that, to give something back to the collective. Nonprofits are now working with developers, and the nonprofits have these great missions, but then they're somehow subverted through the development.

For example, a faith-based nonprofit is doing a housing project at a little triangle park where people used to hang out at the end of our block. It's been fenced off so no one can go in. Since the city deemed that what they had been doing was non-normative, all the brothers now are across the street sitting against a fence. The city gave the community \$50,000. They said to me, "Walter, we have \$50,000. Can you design the space?" I said, "Let's think about this entire block as a district. Do you know there's almost 50 artists in this little district? We need to make a beautiful public realm. Let's plant some trees, widen the sidewalks so those people have a place." But a nun said something to me that blew my mind: "If you plant the trees and everything, the space will get gentrified." This is coming from a nun—someone with compassion—but that's how people think of public space. It is left to private individuals because no one wants to pay taxes to create those spaces.

If we really want to think about public, we have to think about the collective. Olmsted was writing about how to bring people together. Whether his spaces do that or not, at least he was thinking about it. It really is about putting something out there and hoping that the world will come to you. In a way, that's the philosophy embedded in America, that I think we've forgotten—that we're an experiment. We're still experimenting. We should be more

speculative and remember that there is no one solution. Pragmatism suggests that you keep trying, and things are going to work themselves out. Olmsted was a pragmatist, and that's a powerful way to think about design. Sometimes the world might not meet you, so you keep trying. Too many of us are searching for the right answer.

SARA

Public space is about democracy. The small touch points that bring people together are necessary to cultivating the calculation of democracy. . . the calculation that there is a common good, that there is moral advancement, intellectual advancement inherent to the idea of democracy, and that public space has a critical role. These everyday moments of spending time together in the same space, no matter who you are, is central to the project of democracy.

WALTER

That's beautifully said. Catastrophic events are probably the places where we see democracy at its best. You see people collectively working together, and I wish we didn't have to always be at the extreme before we come together. During COVID, I noticed how people used public space in my neighborhood... At noontime, everyone was out walking. It's too bad it takes these kinds of events for us to see, "Wow, we can close streets, and people will come out and be together." Then all of a sudden it's like, "Oh, we need the streets back." But we had that moment, right? We had that moment.



During their 1896 excursion from Fort Missoula, Montana to Yellowstone National Park, riders of the