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Reflections of Rondo

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Reflections of Rondo

Alexander Mathew Thomas

Professor Megan Vossler, Studio Art

April 13, 2022

Reflections of Rondo is a temporal, visual exploration of the I-94 freeway's relationship with and implications on the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota.

As a prominent center of Black community and culture since the 1900s, Rondo had a thriving, working-class population that built families, businesses, and markers of place and identity in a socially segregated city. They had built "a city within a city" that welcomed people of all backgrounds and classes.

However, with the passing of the Federal Interstate Highway Act in 1956, the state was able to move forward with their plan of building a highway that would tear through the Rondo community, demolishing over 700 family homes and closing over 300 businesses. The Rondo neighborhood was fragmented—disrupting and destroying the social and economic culture that the community spent years and decades fostering.

The story of I-94 and Rondo are one of many across the U.S. where less affluent neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color were subject to "urban revitalization" efforts at their expense. Cities like Milwaukee, Detroit, Boston, and New Orleans are among many that continue to wrestle with the deeply-ridden inequities caused by racist policies and systems.

Drawing on historical records, oral histories, and conversations with community members from Rondo, *Reflections of Rondo* considers the past, present, and potential futures of the neighborhood. Each artwork is inspired by conversations with community members who spoke of their fondest memories, their vividest experiences, and their most hopeful dreams of what they see Rondo to be.

In highlighting the histories of neighborhoods of color like Rondo, I hope that these artworks create spaces for reflection and conversation about conscious and equitable urban design.

Past

Ink on Paper
2022

"There was something on every street corner that was alive. I would ride the streetcar up and down Rondo Avenue, stopping at every store on my way even if I didn't need anything."

"I remember all the trees around us; large oak canopies that breathed life into our community."

"I felt like I mattered at Rondo."

Present

Glazed Earthenware, Soil from Rondo
2022

"The highway amputated the soul and vibrancy of Rondo. Its impact was beyond physical, it was a change in the state of mind."

"The community right now is so fragmented and we are hurt to an incredible degree."

"We are experiencing 'root shock,' where the actions of governments and peoples decades ago continue to affect us as a community today. It is transgenerational trauma."

Futures

Glazed Earthenware, Soil from Rondo
2022

"I see Rondo as a place where people can dream again."

"The future of Rondo is about acceptance, about giving people a chance regardless of where they came from."

"I want a Rondo that is curious about other cultures, languages, and differences."

"Wherever I go, Rondo goes with me."







































