Alumni Spotlight: Zarith Pineda (A '15, SLA '15)

January 12, 2022
|
Mary-Elizabeth Lough mlough@tulane.edu

[View PDF](#)

The central pillar in Zarith Pineda's (A '15, SLA '15) life is one of a commitment to helping others. Pineda, who is Colombian and grew up in Boston, began her time at Tulane with a pre-med major. But she quickly shifted to a double major in architecture and French, excited about the possibilities that design techniques and

the built environment offered for making a difference, and — just as importantly — for involving members of marginalized communities in creating avenues toward justice.

Today, Pineda is the founder and director of [Territorial Empathy](#), a nonprofit design collective, and an adjunct associate professor at Columbia University. Recent Territorial Empathy projects include Segregation is Killing Us, which is working to combat public school segregation in New York City, and The People's Bus a former Department of Corrections bus that was transformed into a mobile community center.

You graduated from the School of Architecture and the School of Liberal Arts in 2015 with degrees in architecture and French. What first brought you to Tulane?

It was a couple of years after [Hurricane] Katrina, and it was this unique time and place where I could explore all of the things, particularly in the architecture school. In New Orleans after Katrina, it really seemed like a unique opportunity to have not necessarily impact, but to really deal with real-world issues, resilience, and thinking about not just coastal resiliency but the resilience of the human spirit.

And then going into [the architecture program], it was so challenging, but, at the same time, I just felt (and do to this day) that when I'm in that studio time passes in a completely different way. There is something about being presented with a challenge that seems insurmountable that really makes me want to do it. My thesis advisor, Graham Owen, was really encouraging to me in a way that made me use my imagination to define the constraints of what architecture meant to me.

You founded Territorial Empathy to advance urban equity and pursue justice through research and design. And your work has brought you all over the world. The term territorial empathy seems chosen with incredible precision and care. Can you unpack the term for our readers?

I was interested in what leads people to dehumanize each other, dehumanization is the precursor to conflict. Historically, designers have been manipulated to carry out the political agendas of different actors, whether it is drafting arbitrary borders, to detailing an architecture of surveillance (walls, checkpoints, prisons). I began

analyzing armed conflict zones and seeing patterns in the series of events that allowed the violence to occur. I thought, "If design has played such an integral role in urban conflict, it also needs to be deliberately considered in its prevention and the mediation of its trauma." I truly believe that the antidote to dehumanization is empathy. All of our projects aim to spur feelings of connectivity to another, through research, spaces, or experiences. I want my work to emulate the experience of walking a mile in someone else's shoes.

How has your Tulane experience contributed to your present career?

It's actually beautiful. So many of my close friends today I met at Tulane. In 2018 we had our first fundraiser, and it was a crew of Tulanians who truly made it a truly special and successful evening. They played photographer, checked people in, collected donations, held the auction…they did every little odd job to support me in the early days. These Tulane friends continue to play an important part in my personal and professional life.

Territorial Empathy specializes in mitigating urban conflict through architectural interventions. Can you tell me about some of your projects?

Our latest project was called [The People's Bus](#) for the Civic Engagement Commission of New York in partnership with their artist in residence. We took on a decommissioned prison bus that used to take incarcerated people up to Riker's, and we transformed it into a community center to bring joy into communities most affected by COVID. It's a really miraculous space and I think what makes it so miraculous is that it was co-created with historically overlooked communities. The city had just come out of the pandemic, it was a tough time in New York. However, we went through this beautiful community engagement process all over the city. We had these postcards where kids could color in what they wanted, and those postcards were turned into this beautiful mosaic that we called 'The People's Sistine Chapel' beaded by Mujeres en Movimiento, an organization made up of incredibly talented undocumented women.

This past summer we took the bus to each one of the neighborhoods we'd identified [as having been particularly impacted by COVID-19], and we held the People's Festival. We invited local musicians and performers to essentially throw a block party and the bus was the stage. Not only did it provide entertainment, it provided resources — vaccine registration, voter registration. It was really bringing communities together and putting marginalized communities at the forefront.

Territorial Empathy has been working to advocate for public school integration in New York City. Can you tell me about your work in this important area?

New York City has the most segregated public school system in the country, and that's not something people really know. When we think about New York City, we think of diversity and resources — it just doesn't jive with the idea that people have of New York that this reality could exist. I became really fascinated with the history of redlining and how these practices still have an impact today. I started studying how kids get to school and seeing that Black kids have to travel three times farther to get to school, that there is school policing in schools that will discipline Black and brown children in different ways…

So, I started working with an organization called IntegrateNYC that trains youth throughout New York City to become integration activists. They had done such important work but were having a hard time visualizing the problem and that's where my tools of practice became helpful. I started mapping and visualizing these complex education systems and their consequences.

This advocacy is how I knew 70 percent of New York City public school students rely on their school communities for free and reduced lunch. So many kids come from low-income backgrounds, come from one-parent households with parents that might not have the ability to work from home, and may not have access to a reliable Internet connection for remote learning. I thought, these families are going to be devastated by the pandemic, and their children need special consideration during future admission processes. This led to the creation of Segregation is Killing Us a research project and policy proposal that shows the impact of the pandemic on these vulnerable families and proposes a "Priority Score" based on these needs to favor the children in these communities in the school admissions process.

Territorial Empathy has been working to advocate for public school integration in New York City. And you also make time to teach. In your mind, what is the importance or potential of education for reshaping our future?

I think it really comes down to empowerment. There were so many people that haven't valued the way that I thought but educators like [late Tulane architecture professor] Elizabeth Gamard or Graham Owen did, and that made all the difference. It just takes this one person [like them] who can make you feel like you can really do anything. These pivotal figures in my life didn't look like me and at the time it was hard to find an educator that did. I know that there is power in representation, and I would like to help other people feel seen through their formative journeys. However, the ultimate hope is to arrive at a place where such intersectionality is par for the course.