

# Don't Push Me: A Hip-Hop Urbanist Manifesto

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*"The following is a manifesto, in search of a movement... In it, I am proposing a theory of architecture based around a ruffneck, antisocial, hip-hop, rudeboy ethos."*

—Kara Walker<sup>1</sup>

**In her companion publication to the 2014 group exhibition "Ruffneck Constructivists," the show's curator, Kara Walker, lays down a radical manifesto for urban intervention. Just months before Ferguson<sup>2</sup> and a year before Baltimore<sup>3</sup>, Walker proposes her theory through which installation artists (along with architects and designers by extension) can become "defiant shapers of environments."<sup>4</sup> The invocation and juxtaposition of the terms hip-hop and architecture in the intro to her manifesto is particularly remarkable given the show's exclusive assembly of visual and installation artists.**

## INTRODUCTION

The theoretical groundwork promised by Hip-Hop Architecture traces the clearest roadmap for imagining the socially progressive (if not altogether just) cities. Hip-hop culture and each of its creative products, emergent from failed urban strategies—new urbanism, tower-in-the-park modernism, and the oppressive universal grid—presents a provocative alternative for urban design. In his introductory essay "Cuirass Architecture," architect Craig L. Wilkins describes this as a transition from "(the ideal) space," the assumed normative condition, through "(we'll just deal) space," a space of segregated experience, to "(it just got real) space," where truth is spoken to power, and finally to "(we'll just steal) space,"<sup>5</sup> the space of the ruffneck, where marginalized people exercise unlimited agency over their environments.

Much like hip-hop architects, the hip-hop urbanist must first ground herself in the two core concepts within hip-hop architectural theory—the architecturally restrictive conditions present at the birth of the hip-hop movement, and the exclusion of architecture from the various creative modes of hip-hop expression—before proposing practical applications. The genesis of hip-hop as a cultural movement is inextricably linked to the architectural conditions within which it emerged. When considering, for example, that residential playgrounds and school yards are as fenced in as prison yards, or that bars on residential balconies and classroom

windows recall the bars on prison cells, the expressive nature of hip-hop form can be better understood and predicted.

Additionally, hip-hop architectural theory seeks to reify a form of expression that is a natural component of any cultural movement but was largely inaccessible to teenaged Blacks and Latinos in 1970s South Bronx. As illustrated in my first essay on the subject, "each major cultural shift in Western society—Renaissance, Baroque, Modernism—has had its register in a plurality of creative outlets: theater, music, dance, fine art, and architecture. The first four art forms find their counterparts in the 'four pillars of hip-hop': deejaying, emceeing, b-boying, and graffiti writing. Architecture is lost."<sup>6</sup>

A third-year undergraduate design studio at Syracuse Architecture entitled "New Chocolate City: Hip-Hop Architecture in Washington, DC" asked students to reflect on these writings, ideas, and other provocations to ground their semester's work. Funded by a grant from the DC Office of Planning, the course employed Hip-Hop Architecture as a lens through which to frame new understandings of identity within various Washington, DC neighborhoods.

Phase one tasked students with documenting, diagramming, and mining five hip-hop elements (the four original elements plus hip-hop fashion—a subject fraught with architectural parallels) for resources with direct architectural application. Later phases consolidated the course's theoretical foundation, early diagrammatic explorations, and the practical requirement to create new identities for the DC neighborhoods identified as part of the city's creative placemaking initiative.

Seven neighborhoods were chosen for the testing and development of a hip-hop urbanist manifesto. Three are presented here in some detail. Each provokes some standard assumption about the way we shape our urban environments and challenges traditional urban development strategies. They are presented in parallel with excerpts from Walker's manifesto to more fully gauge the applicability of her theory.

## THIRD SPACE

The deejay, the first player in the hip-hop opera and the first subject of diagrammatic analysis, uses a freeform assembly logic that is immediately applicable to architectural production and suggestive of a new design methodology. Audio tracks, once only consumed through the phonograph, are now seen as a starting point for manipulation,

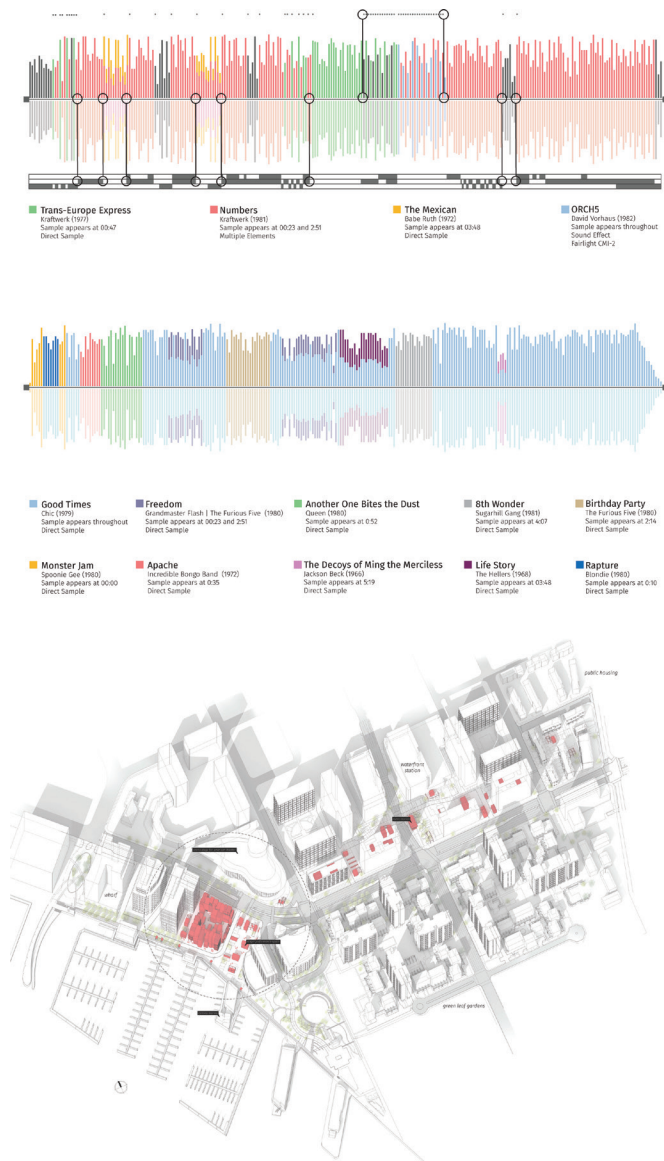


Figure 1: Scott Krabath, (top) diagram of “Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force, (middle) diagram of “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel” by Grandmaster Flash, (bottom) axonometric view of proposed Southwest DC Waterfront promenade and development.

fragmentation and distortion. Each composition produced is a collage of diverse references from a multitude of musical genres and miscellaneous recordings. Through simple color-coding of waveforms representing each individual sound sample, a clear diagram of these multi-layered compositions is created for complex tracks such as “Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force (Figure 1a), or “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel” by Grandmaster Flash (Figure 1b). Additional annotations indicating primary transitions, loops and breaks are layered on as part of the rich indexical language of the diagram—a Rosetta Stone of sorts for translating the language of hip-hop to that of schematic design.

The techniques and attitudes of the deejay are brought to the Southwest DC Waterfront neighborhood, an area that has long occupied a privileged

position just a few blocks south of the National Mall with its iconic memorials and monuments. What existed for over a century as slum settlements for poor Blacks was indiscriminately razed to make way for gridded modernist superblocs—a classic example of mid-century new urbanist hubris. Aerial photographs from the 1950s (informal era) through the 1960s (new urbanism era) to the 2010s (gentrification era) tell the story of the neighborhood’s drastic transformation. Backyards, side yards and courtyards once used for informal collective street life make way for rational grids and I.M. Pei-designed residential monoliths. These, in turn, catalyze a series of high-end developments claiming waterfront territory once occupied by the fishing trade. The projected future of the area looks much like a continuation of the last few decades of high-density, low-risk, market-rate developments.

Hip-hop—always the contrarian—rejects the inevitability of market-driven decision making. It flips the script and carves its own path through this hyper-rational concrete jungle. Referencing organizational techniques learned from the deejay, the new proposal samples 1950s era conditions of Southwest DC and imprints itself between the high-rises, forming the blueprint for a new pedestrian promenade. Traces of former tenements, lean-tos, and outhouses mark the rise of permanently and temporarily programmed insertions paralleling the busy M Street thoroughway. A barbershop or a meeting hall creates a permanent anchor while transformable frames and planes allow for seasonal occupation of the thoroughway. The new path connects low-income housing to the east (slated for imminent demolition) with the waterfront to the west. Other traces simply mark the ground with grassy plots, variable pavement, or informal seating. A new mixed-use development, at the end of the promenade (Figure 1c), grows out of the inscribed urban pattern and stands in contrast to the self-similar waterfront housing.

*RUFFNECK CONSTRUCTIVISTS ARE DEFIANT SHAPERS OF ENVIRONMENTS. RUFFNECKS POSITION THEMSELVES AT ODDS WITH DOMINANT CULTURE. THEY RELY HEAVILY ON OFFENSIVE GESTURES. IF THE WORLD SAYS PANTS UP, THEY PULL THEIR DAWERS DOWN.<sup>7</sup>*

#### ADAMS MORGAN RE-CODED

Whether using simple line work, bubble letters, or wild style, graffiti writers communicate in code. Decoding these various styles—understanding their varied patterns, geometry, and structure—was the first step in understanding its applicability within the architectural design process. The resultant process provides architects with a graphic means of understanding, and thus decoding, complex urban systems.

In the example above (Figure 2), density mappings based on programmatic connections help decode the nightlife along 18th Street in the Adams Morgan neighborhood—bars and nightclubs, restaurants, and retail locations. The three graphics intersect and interlock to generate a new coded identity for the popular strip, legible around the clock only to those with the master key.

Adams Morgan Re-Coded marks place with colored surfaces weaving through and overlapping across the existing pavement. Proposed pedestrian amenities fold off the ground in the form of benches, tables and tiered amphitheater seating. Each ground manipulation realizes graffiti’s



Figure 2: Evelyn Brooks, graphic coding of uses along 18th Street.

long-held aspiration of breaking away from the two-dimensional canvas. The outdoor life along 18th Street is now a programmatic extension of its indoor function, all connected through color.

The final phase of the proposal tests graffiti's ability to, not only suggest space, but to inscribe space. Streetscape graphics, first imagined to re-code desire paths for commercial activity, fold and thicken to define places for human occupation and activity. The architectural object seamlessly integrates with its color-coordinated context. The final presentation (Figure 3) is not immune for this reconceptualization of graffiti's process and image. Drawings, renderings and models recode themselves to seamlessly integrate the graphic backdrop that, in turn, is grafted onto an uneven surface. Hip-Hop Architecture thus forces a reassessment of both product and process.

*THE SHAPE OF THE SYSTEMS THAT BIND US IS HINTED AT, DARKLY, LIKE SHADOWS VIEWED FROM THE FAR END OF A DARK ALLEY. WE ARE NOT WITHOUT CONTEXT, BUT THE PLACES WE BUILD, THE FORTRESSES OF SELF, ARE ERECTED TO SHUT OUT THE TYRANNY OF A LOSS OF SELF-CONTROL.<sup>8</sup>*

#### IVY CITY REDEAUX

In addition to its coded organizational logic graffiti culture maintains an unwritten code of conduct. Etiquette and respect are essential aspects of this society guided by territorialism and competition. Hierarchical structure within graffiti production (tag, throw up, burn, piece, mural) is determined by graphic complexity, color variety, and time commitment. Each level supersedes the level below. (You don't piece a mural; you don't burn a piece; you don't tag anything you're not prepared to fight over.)

A similar hierarchical structure is overlain onto one of DC's fastest transitioning neighborhoods as a tool for envisioning its imminent growth. The denizens of Ivy City are first organized into four stereotype-dependent crews representing four distinct ways of life. Each is a metaphoric "graff crew" jacking territory and jockeying for supremacy (Figure 4). Entrepreneurs, the primary gentrifiers, provide the most revenue and



Figure 3: Evelyn Brooks, excerpt of final presentation (photo: Olivia Flores-Siller).

contribute the most to rising property values. Homo Ludens, or hipsters, provide the necessary reference points for contemporary culture, lifestyle, and image. Pupils, the most transient and diverse group, operate in a world between the first two, bringing equal parts financial and cultural influence to the neighborhood while committing only year to year investment in its identity. Proletariats, the blue-collar residents, boast the longest tenure in the area and are the only ones who can remember

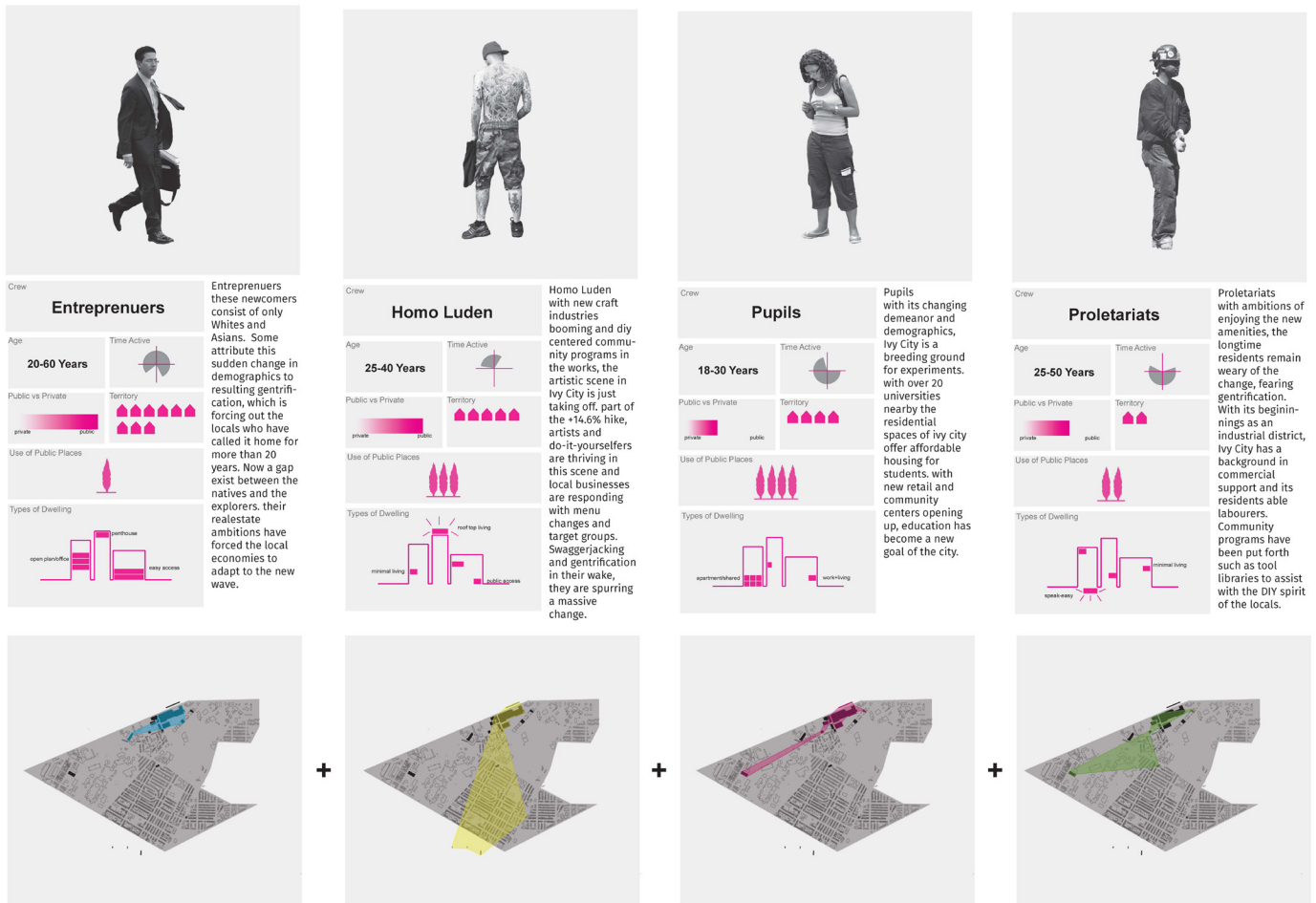


Figure 4: Kyle Simmons, Ivy City crew profiles.

“the good old days.” Each crew is assigned a territory based on Yelp-rated locations typically frequented by its members. These territories consolidate themselves along a dense commercial strip requiring new rules of engagement and reconciliation. Diagrams developed in the study of graffiti culture help in this negotiation.

The proposed new construction typology of Ivy City is one born out of claiming and reclaiming space. It begins with a semi-demolished structure as its foundation and builds itself gradually, as any marginal neighborhood might, on its way to becoming an artistic icon. Each crew has access to disparate resources ranging from custom fabricated curtain wall systems (entrepreneurs) to crowd-funded materials (homo luden) or from stolen shipping containers (students) to discarded delivery pallets (proletariat). Each has its own set of programmatic requirements and design agendas. All will have to collaborate to identify common circulation and support systems (stairs, elevators, lighting, plumbing, etc.) and to negotiate emergent spatial complexities. The final proposal is an ever-growing organism adherent only to rules set by its occupants. It has no identifiable genre or style, as it is never finished. Time is its only limitation.

The work as presented for review (Figure 5) rejects the flat pinup surface and instead creates its own backdrop collaged from found and recycled materials—a prototype of the proposal itself.

*WE HAVE NO POLITICAL AFFILIATION, ONLY DEEP LOYALTIES TO SPECIFIC ENTITIES—FAMILY, MOTHER, GOD, UNIT, CELL BLOCK, RACE, TEAM, NEIGHBORHOOD, GANG, OURS IS A LIMITED TERRITORY. WE ROAM IT WITH IMPUNITY. WE GIVE LITTLE VOICE TO THE FRAGILE, AND YET THEY HUNT US AND HOUND US.*<sup>9</sup>

#### OTHER PROPOSALS

Four additional proposals (not presented here) were developed for other DC neighborhoods, each embracing similarly radical approaches to urban design. In Benning, east of the river, the deejay’s ability to mix and scratch was studied to sample elements of a sprawling neighborhood and to condense them in a single consolidated strip. This strategy allowed for development to be gradual, adaptable, and cost-effective, transforming the neighborhood over a 25-year period. A proposal for the U Street corridor borrowed from hip-hop fashion’s affinity for amplified graphics. It referenced historical imagery to graphically brand tensile structures dramatically draped across the entire width of 14th Street NW, transforming the strip into a multi-colored public marketplace. In the

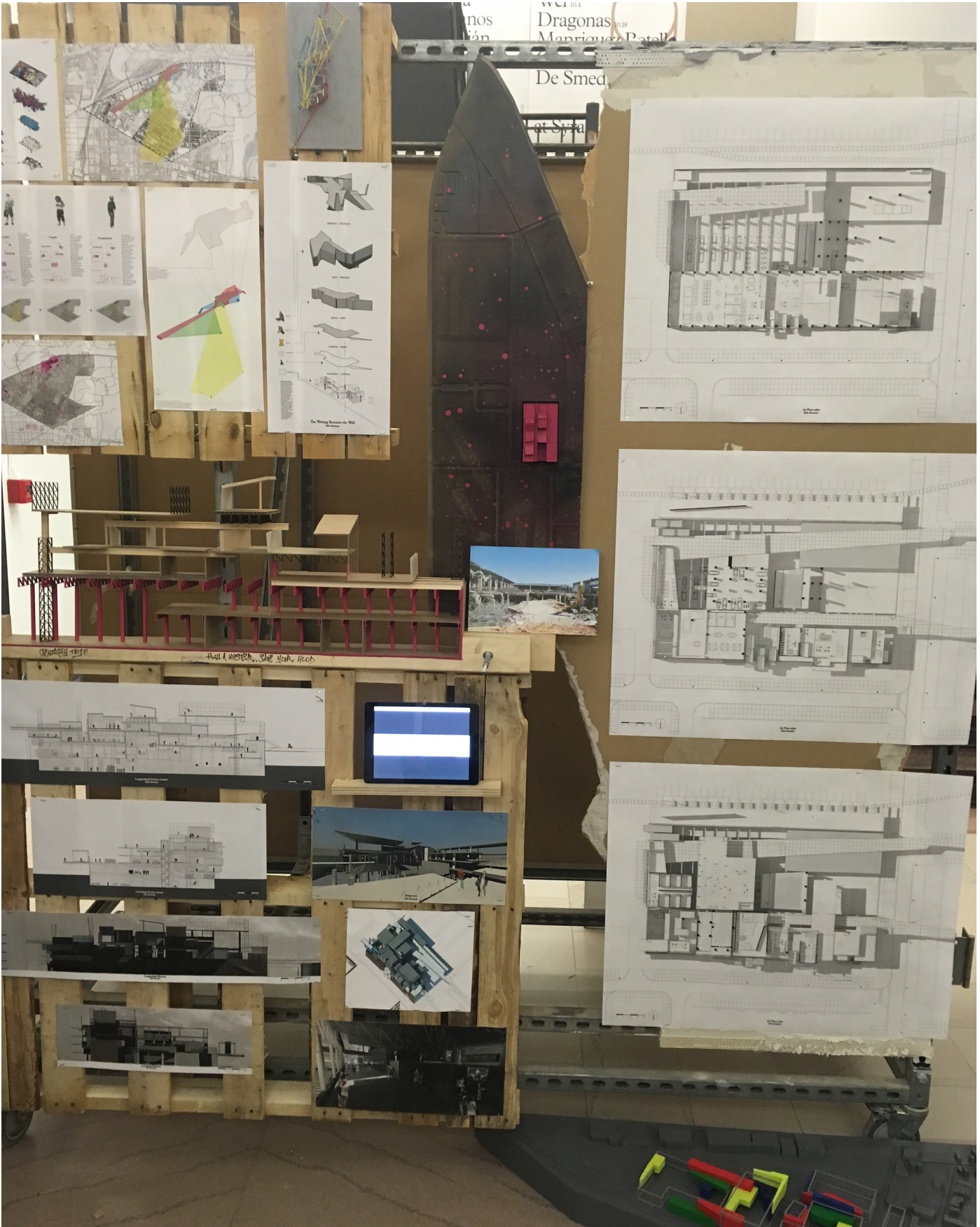


Figure 5: Kyle Simmons, final presentation.

Mid-City East region the emcee's mode of storytelling, with all its external references and variable rhyming patterns, informed a new pedestrian pathway that transforms shared mid-block voids into publicly access courtyards and pathways.

One final proposal, though not presented in detail, warrants some additional examination. In a city park at the intersection of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X in the Congress Heights neighborhood a peculiarly informal claiming of public space can be observed. Cars strategically parked near a bench under the shade of a tree extend the amount of outdoor space to which one can stake claim. Users of public sidewalks who decide to walk between the open vehicles and the bench dwellers have now violated the personal space of the original claimant. Similarly, stoops attached to houses adjacent to the park have an additional extension taking over much of the extra wide sidewalks.

The proposal adopts the attitude of the b-boy. It covers the entire park area with spaces and surfaces for extended loitering. Benches, tables, and other places of repose organize themselves in response to the newly carved parking inlets along the parks edge, amplifying the observed condition as if through 9" speakers. Public space is further assimilated, and pedestrian traffic further disrupted, by additional amplification of the residential stoops and insertion of more parking inlets along the edge of the MLK Boulevard curb.

*"BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY" IS A MOTTO WE HOLD CLOSE TO HEART. WE WEAR IT ON OUR ARMS AND FLEX FUCK-YOUS IN THE DIRECTION OF ADVERSARIES. WE ARE PREPARED TO FIGHT AND PEPPER OUR SPEECH WITH EPITHETS AND SLURS. LIKE CALIBAN, WE CURSE.<sup>10</sup>*

## OUTRO

Though some of these proposals (the last one in particular) seem anti-utilitarian in their composition, utilitarianism is only a secondary convenience. Hip-Hop Urbanism is interested in answering a larger question than "how do we fix our neighborhoods?" The more pressing inquiries for those interested in social justice are "how do we envision neighborhoods developed from the bottom up?" "What kind of city can be realized outside of traditional urban design strategies?" "What does and experiment informed by the spirit of Walker's manifesto reveal about our role as design professionals?"

In his seminal work on the topic of race, space, architecture and music, Wilkins states, "the study of hip-hop culture in general and rap music in particular is essential to the new generation of urbanists."<sup>11</sup> "New Chocolate City" is the first true test of this prophetic cantation.

## ENDNOTES

1. Kara Walker, "Ruffneck Constructivism" in *Ruffneck Constructivists*, ed. Kara Walker (Brooklyn: Dancing Foxes Press, 2014), 9.
2. Protests began in Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting of Michael Brown in August, 2014.
3. Protests began in Baltimore, Maryland after the shooting of Freddie Gray in April, 2015.

4. Walker, 9.
5. Craig L. Wilkins, "Cuirass Architecture" in *Ruffneck Constructivists*, ed. Kara Walker (Brooklyn: Dancing Foxes Press, 2014), 20-21.
6. Sekou Cooke, "The Fifth Pillar: A Case for Hip-Hop Architecture," in *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy* (2014), 15.
7. Walker, 9.
8. *ibid*
9. *ibid*
10. *ibid*
11. Craig L. Wilkins, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture and Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)