Flow-Tektoniks: Re-mixing Architecture to a Hip Hop Beat

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INTRODUCTION

During the early 70's into the mid-80's a group of young people developed new forms of music, dance, art and fashion. These new styles started within the Bronx borough of New York then migrated out to the surrounding boroughs and other cities developing into the global phenomenon of hip hop culture. The conditions of these inner cities where hip hop first developed were deplorable. These poor Black, Latino, Asian and White teenagers inherited a polluted and crumbling environment previously abandoned by more affluent White Americans for the isolation of the suburbs. Sub par public school systems, a dramatic spike in violence surrounding the drug trade as well as a host of other factors made living in these cities a daily struggle. Despite being the first generation born into a legally desegregated America young black women and men suffered unmitigated racial profiling, police brutality, and anti-youth legislation. These factors and others paved the way for the highest number of black people incarcerated in American history.[1] Yet hip hop; the music, dance and graffiti brought order to the chaos. It gave a voice to a generation politically silenced and disenfranchised. It created a platform to expose the realties of street life in America to the world. Today hip hop culture and rap music in particular are one of the most visible and powerful exports of American culture. The young black men and women who helped create the rap music industry hold a position of economic and creative power heretofore unseen in the history of Black music.

In contrast, in the discipline of architecture black people are underrepresented and virtually invisible. This disenfranchised position has been acknowledged since the early '70s. Despite small advances architecture has not kept pace with other disciplines such as medicine, law, and the arts in providing an opportunity for black people to flourish within its ranks. Furthermore, architecture does very little to address the conditions of inner cities that many black people live within. As an aspiring architect, I see nothing to indicate a change for the better. What can be done to proactively change this situation? The answer may lie in hip hop. What is the philosophy of this culture that provides such power for black youth? Can this philosophy be adapted to architecture?

My thesis seeks to develop a hip hop architecture called "flow-tektoniks". This document analyzes and expands on the work of previous scholars who have explored the confluence of hip hop and architecture. These scholars Sharon Pat West and Craig Wilkins recognized the possibilities of hip hop in order render black architects visible and address the issues pertinent to many under-privileged communities populated by black people within the city.

THE "INVISIBLE ARCHITECT"

There is something wrong with architecture. Black people are extremely underrepresented within the profession, as opposed to other disciplines such as law and medicine. Recent studies list the number of black registered architects at barely above 1% of the entire profession, despite being 13% of the American population. In contrast black lawyers are 10% of the profession and doctors are 11%. 6.3% of architecture students are black but barely 50% of them earn degrees. Only 3% university professors are Black but the vast majority of them are teaching at historically black colleges and universities. There are zero editorial positions and only 3 books about black architects even though there have been black architects since the 17th century.[2] Recognizing this reality immediately changes the landscape or "playing-field" for black people within the profession.

Bradford C. Grant writes "Architecture, building, and planning are inherently racially constituted activities." Grant goes on to define how architectural theory and practice are intimately involved with the legacy of racism in American society. He then goes on to explain how the racial dynamics within the discipline help to give rise to "constricting full participation"[3] of African-American architects as the above statistics show. Therefore those who recognize the situation and actively try to changes things in their favor are "critical practitioners". These practitioners have the opportunity to "to lead, both within our various local political institutions and the dominant institutions of the governing culture."[4] The question remains what is the best course of action for a critical practitioner? Grant uses Cornel West's taxonomy of resistance to evaluate the work of current black architects, architectural educators and institutions resisting white supremacy.[5]

Mainstream Identity or the "Booker T. Temptation":A preoccupation with the mainstream and its legitimizing power.

These practitioners recognize the potential strength of assimilation within the mainstream of the architectural profession. Grant cites the necessary ingredients to integrating in the mainstream are becoming a registered architect-schooling, apprenticeship, passing the registration examination, and participating in professional practice.

Group Insularity or the "Talented Tenth Seduction": To preserve one's sanity and sense of self as one copes with the mainstream.

People who take this route find solace in groups of people like themselves. Organizations such as NOMA (National Organization of Minority Architects) are examples of this path.

The Independent African-American Architect or "Go-It-Alone": Extreme rejectionist perspective that shuns the mainstream and group insularity.

Individuals practicing in this mode are concerned with being identified as idealized artistic masterbuilders.

Organic Catalysts or "Cultural Politics of Difference": Stays attuned to what the mainstream has to offer"–its paradigms, viewpoints and methods-yet maintains grounding in affirming and enabling subcultures of criticism.

Black architects within this category participate in the good parts of the mainstream, draw from their own identity and cultural history and connect with other African American architects.

Grant cites the final path of Organic Catalyst as the most successful way to approach architecture for the critical practitioner. The other three methods have their advantages also but their disadvantages are too strong to change the position of African Americans in architecture. He lists Julian Max Bond Jr. as good example of on who integrates the notion of cultural politics of difference within his work. By understanding "the boundaries of the dynamic influences that are apart of the social conditions and incorporates these issues as a catalyst to broaden the role of his architecture. Bond does this achieve his agenda of "social uplift" with architecture.

West developed this taxonomy of resistance for all people of color, regardless of disciplines, who consider themselves critical practitioners. West acknowledge other practitioners who have taken the path of critical organic catalysts such as Louis Armstrong, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ella Baker, and Martin Luther King. Now there is a new generation of black social theorist, journalist, and activist who are fluent with the practices mainstream and at the same time draw from the transformative power of hip hop culture in the spirit of cultural politics of difference. For example, Tricia Rose, Bakari Kitwana and Murray Forman have critically looked at the impact of hip hop culture on a generation of young people, the nation and the world at large using a myriad of tools such as social and political theory. They've also explored what can be gleaned from this cultural force in order to improve the conditions of black people and impoverished communities. The power of hip hop has also begun to influence the new generation of critical architects. Sharon Pat West and Craig Wilkins have both developed strong principles for how hip hop culture can influence the practice of architecture. Although these scholars differ in approach and focus, both come up with relatively similar principles. Each architect addresses social issues in the vein necessary for true politics of difference.

SHARON PAT WEST: EXPRESSING CULTURE THROUGH THE ARCHITECTURE OF HIP HOP

West's address the "structural discrimination" of

black people within Nova Scotia. She defines this as""a personal injustice that occurs though the physical structure of the built environment."[6] West documents the racist history of Nova Scotia towards its black population. She then illustrates how this practice of discrimination is continued through the built environment. For example, the building of the Cogswell Interchange resulted in the destruction of many traditionally black neighborhoods and buildings of historical importance within the city of Halifax. This and other examples listed by West make the argument that these "improvements" would not happen in wealthier White communities. She illustrates the power of structural discrimination by drawing the relationship between people and the buildings. "Buildings are in some ways a person's material extension, so by destroying, defacing or devaluing a building it often has the same effect as destroying the human being."[7] West identifies the public power of architecture to communicate a particular message. Destroying a historically black community while leaving other white communities untouched sends a message. West looks to hip hop as a vehicle for an "architecture of voice" out of this dilemma of structural discrimination. Outlining several inherent cultural characteristics of the black community, such as oral tradition and the centrality of music, West hits upon hip hop as a vital vehicle for delivering a voice to represent black community in the built environment as it does in music, dance and art. West identifies four principles of hip hop culture. The following list each principles and examples of her methods for translating these principles into built forms.

Community: All participants in hip hop culture posses a strong affiliation with a certain area and/or group of people to help establish identity.

Public Expression: The connection between artist and audience is an integral component within hip hop culture.

Adaptation: Due to lack of access to traditional forms of music/art production and dance training, hip hop artist adapted other means.

Technology: West emphasizes the "humanizing" quality of hip hop technology by enhancing the experience between user and technology as opposed to simply replacing the user.

West's program demonstrates a sincere affinity and connection to the black communities of Nova Scotia. At no point does her response to the neglected and endangered communities call for improvements. West's response demands a built environment that more accurately represents and engages the black people in Halifax. This is a subtle yet significant departure from the Modernist Movement's approach to socially conscious design. The Modernist tried to give people an ideal way to live completely divorced from their own patterns of life. Recognizing the flaws of modernism's "participatory design" seeks to include the user a pivotal part of the design process. Yet there is still this separation of the professional from the client. Often resulting in the architect "educating" the client to the best product to fit their needs. In the architecture of hip hop there is no separation. The architect must understand and think as the client thinks. This approach works from within the identity of user outward to the product. Even before the ground is broken on a hip hop building we can see the revolutionary potential for this methodology, to more accurately address the needs of the user.

CRAIG WILKINS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF (W)RAPPED SPACE

Craig Wilkins, architect/educator, established strong connections between rap music, space and the built environment. In his manuscript "A Nig(g)er Runs Through It", Wilkins critically analyzes the architectural establishment. He questions many held assumptions and practices that lead to the exclusion of diversity within practice and education. Initially Wilkins identifies the importance of space as a fundamental way we see, shape and interact with/in the world and within this space our economic, political, social and aesthetic values are revealed. He goes on to explain how the commonly held understanding of space only favors white males. Consequently as architectural professors disseminate and practitioners practice from this dogma spaces continue to be "colonial in their hegemony; racist in their origin and manifestation, if not necessarily in their intent." In order to combat this phenomenon Wilkins calls for an activist architecture, which allows other paradigms to emerge making architecture more relevant to those it, serves and effects. Hip hop culture in general and rap music in particular is the vehicle Wilkins uses to develop this new practice. Architecture

can learn from the way hip hop deals with places in contention within inner cities. By rejecting standard definitions of economic or political issues other than its own hip hop and rap music, the most visible product of hip hop culture, has become a global force influencing music, fashion, and culture. Rap music does this by creating its own space or "free-space." According the Ray Pratt author of Rhythm and Resistance: Explorations in the Political Uses of Popular Music popular music not only produces "empowering experiences" for listeners but this phenomenon can also be called a "kind of temporal-spatial creation." yielding dimensions of "free-space". Since this free-space is hard to limit Wilkins raises the need for""…new architectural design perspective to practice in this community and design for the object of this free-space""[8]

Wilkins uses rap music as a model for resistance for a new practice in architecture because of its obvious ability to reject traditionally held beliefs yet flourish becoming accessible to a wide audience. (W)rapped space, the space that rap music creates, is ideal for developing an environment that speaks to the "Africentric Diasporian" project of identity embedded in rap music in response to spaces that represent the power of oppression. Wilkins uses architectural and social theorist such as, Foucault, Locke, and bell hooks to construct identify and analyze the space produced by hip hop. From this analysis Wilkins teases out four primary spatial principles evident in the physical manifestations of hip hop architecture .

ANTHROPOMORPHIC:

Concerned with holistic understanding of the place the body inhabits.

Performative: Providing the stage (backdrop) and privileging (inviting) the performance where space is produced through the conjunction of people within it.

Adaptive: Using and Reusing materials transformatively and creatively, removing the hegemonic "proper" not only from spatial communication but from symbol and material communication also

Palimpsestic: It is an erasure of both dominant spatial understandings of "proper" and its hegemonic physical manifestations

FLOW-TEKTONIKS:EXPANSION

Sharon Pat West and Craig Wilkins laid strong foundations for the development of hip hop architecture. The important aspect of West's analysis is her methodology of practicing hip hop architecture. Opposed to Wilkins, each of her principle includes several examples of how to design. However Wilkins' new paradigm of architectural spatial theory based upon rap music pulls the discourse into a new realm rife with possibilities. He establishes a new understanding of space where'"… rap music [is] the womb from which hip hop space and architecture are born."[9]

This approach answers the paradox of post-modernity, creating difference within the same system. Cultural theorist Fredric Jameson states, "From within the system you cannot hope to generate anything that negates the system as a whole or portends to experience of something other than the system, or outside of the system."[10] Fortunately, Jameson offers a possibility "Perhaps we can see whether any of the new forms we have imagined might secretly correspond to new modes of life emerging even partially. Perhaps indeed we might start to do this at the existential level, at the level of daily life, asking ourselves whether we can think of spaces that demand new kinds or types of living that demand new kinds of space." An example of this new space is the spatial production of rap music. Wilkins' (w)rapped space can be synthesized with West's methods can further clarify the practice of hip hop architecture

PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

The first step is to christen hip hop architecture to flow-tektoniks. The act of renaming is a vital part of hip hop culture essential to the act of claiming one's own identity. The name flow-tektoniks seeks to capture the dichotomy between two components of hip hop and architecture. Flow is defined as the combination of style, skill and emotion expressed in a clearly delineated fashion. Flow can be as smooth as a light eddy or as rough as a torrential downpour. However, a discernable pattern lies at the core of flow. A rapper's flow, or lack of, can make and/or break a style. Tektoniks refers to the technical/engineering aspects inherent in architecture. Where flow refers the artistic side of architecture Tektoniks denotes scientific process of

building, i.e. materials, methods of construction, structural physics, etc. The name synergizes these two disparate elements together. Not only does this process of renaming denote a metaphoric departure from traditional architecture but also creating a new vocabulary can help to define new conditions that arise from this new praxis.

Anthropomorphism: the space around the building is just as important as the building itself.

Hip hop is for the people by the people. Therefore anthropomorphism is a necessary component to Flow-tektoniks. Any construction must be a derivative of the human scale and inspired by the body. Yet "The anthropomorphism in hip hop space is not concerned with typical Western understandings of the concept that focuses centrally on the physical attributes or appendages of the body."11 This new type of anthropomorphism takes the space around the body as equally important as the body itself. Although unusual to Westerners the concept that empty space is important can be seen in Eastern thought. For example, Japanese don't say space is empty but'"full of nothingness". In his book Zen and the Art of Management, Richard Tanner Pascale documents how this spatial understanding permeates the business life of eastern cultures. Pascale notes the tendency "of the culture to acknowledge the ambivalence experienced when our mastery of situations is imperfect. Faced with difficult trade-offs, Japanese 'choose' one over the other; Westerners like to think they 'decide.'"12 This illustrates how the concept of both is held within the mind as opposed to privileging one over the other. Pascale goes on to note that Eastern cultures value leaders who stand "in", as result individuals who promote the implicit wholeness of the organization are valued. This is analogous to hip hop culture in that artist who acknowledge their city or neighborhood are valued and appreciated for""representing" or embodying the place from which they originated.

Anthropomorphism is analogous to West's principle of Community.

- Physically wrapping, touching, or penetrating neighboring buildings.
- Allowing views deep into a building to demystify its functions and thus help prevent community alienation.

An example of this anthropomorphism comes from the Batammaliba people of Western Africa. "In Batammaliba architecture, anthropomorphism is one of the most important concerns of building design, decoration, symbolism, and use. 'The house is like a human,'..."13 There is no separation between the house itself and the people who use it, it is like a member of the family. As opposed to they way we see a building as object in space the Batammaliba see their buildings as made from space and the people who use it.

Performative: Providing the stage (backdrop) and privileging (inviting) the performance where space is produced through the conjunction of people within it.

Performance is a major component in the production of (w)rapped space and hip hop culture. It can't be a passive performance where an audience quietly watches the performer. A building cannot simply display itself for the public to behold but it must engage in the manner of call and response practiced in hip hop. This call and response is derived from the African tradition of inclusion of spectators within performances. It has manifested itself with in the African-American Diaspora with preachers who speak to their congregation and in turn receive verbal responses of affirmation and/or dancing. In hip hop rappers often have certain phrases or lines that they call out to the crowd in order to illicit a response to get the crowd "hyped" or excited. So a Flow-tektoniks must develop a way to include the user within the performance or spectacle of the built environment.

Performative is analogous to West's principle of Public Expression.

- Be physically open or at least able to be visually penetrated to help develop a relationship between the user and passer-by, much like the tradition of call and response, which invites participation in the event.
- Contain elements for public announcement such as videos monitors, message screens or other places to broadcast information.

A school in Romerstadt designed by Behnisch & Partners incorporates this notion of call and response in the built environment. Noticing the prolific graf artist around the area of the school the architects incorporated a wall within the program that called for local artist to perform their work on

the wall as apart of the program, in order to engage a sector of the community. The wall its self openly calls to the artist to make their mark in the play of building and its relationship to the community.

Adaptive: Using and Reusing materials transformatively and creatively, removing the hegemonic "proper" not only from spatial communication but from symbol and material communication also.

The environment of the South Bronx required the young developers of hip hop to be creative. Without formal training, in art, music and dance they were forced to adapt other means of production to express themselves. Many of these tools were discarded junk such as turntables and records from the 70's disco era. Others were iconic such as the popular cartoon The Smurfs. During the late '80s urban youth not only enjoyed the show but its popularity inspired a dance called'"the smurf" as well as many songs and T-shirts with the images of smurfs dressed in clothes popular among young city dwellers of the time (baggy pants, beepers and gold chains).

Adaptive is analogous to West's principle of Adaptation.

• Reusing existing buildings wherever possible.
• Using pre-fabricated material not normally used for construction.

Wilkins cites the appropriation of abandoned lots and buildings scattered throughout our cities as critical practice of adaptation. This goal can have a major impact on communities struggling with a need for housing and safe viable public spaces to enjoy. The use of recycled trash in wall materials is a growing method of construction amongst advocates of sustainable architecture. This method of construction can be a major component of all construction within flow-tektoniks. In the vein of post-modernist practitioners Flow-tektoniks includes the use of iconic elements of in architectural history "remixed" into contemporary structures.

Palimpsestic: An erasure of dominant spatial understandings of "proper" and its hegemonic physical manifestations

The work of Primitivo Saurez illustrates the nature of Palimpsestic. The way he distorts the image of the house into completely different forms is analogous to graf (graffiti) artist do to letters. This removal of the proper rendering of the house is a strong example of palimpsestic practice.

CONCLUSION

The nature of this practice is actively involved with the people of blighted communities in inner cities. Their attitudes and connection with the built environment must be addressed. However it is unrealistic to expect someone to think of a home as a member of the family if they have not been brought up in the Batammaliba culture. In fact many people who live in cities feel very little connection to the buildings that surround them. Therefore a major component of flow-tektoniks is to create structures that allow a personal connection with the architecture that surrounds them. Flow-tektoniks isn't overly concerned with creating a building or object for admiration but is a vehicle for engagement and empowerment for people with the world around them.

These principles require a new approach to architecture. Any practitioner of flow-tektoniks must consciously re-evaluate certain held beliefs. For example one must question their notions of proper to begin to design palimpsestically. An important way to achieve this is cross-disciplinary interaction. Some of the important aspects in the development of hip hop are its strong roots in African traditions but graffiti, rap music, and break dancing drew from a myriad of cultural practices and aesthetics, i.e. South American, European, and American to create this multidimensional social practice. OpenOffice, an architectural firm, is not preoccupied with pure architecture they are more interested in the social implications of their work, which may or may not call of for a building but rather an intervention. The path they designed for a office building that seeks to connect disparate spaces within the structure as well as link the movement through space closer to the human scale is a good example of their philosophy.14

This thought pattern will be natural for practitioners and students within the hip hop generation. In fact people imbedded within the culture will gravitate toward this methodology. Consequently it can become an important path for young black designers interested in becoming critical practitioners. Not only can these designers use tools de-

veloped from the way they see the world but forms a pattern to actively engage black urban communities heretofore unseen. This has the potential of attracting and retaining black students and architects in unprecedented ways

ENDNOTES

[1] Kitwana, Bakari. The Hip hop Generation. New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2002. Kitwana list a number of factors contributing to the worldview of "hip hop generationers". One of those being public policy regarding criminal justice with racial impacts. For example, the Omnibus Crime Bill and Anti-Drug Abuse Act passed in the name of being tough on crime but disproportionately imprisoned poor black teenagers of the inner city with longer jail sentencing then their white counterparts.

[2] Wilkins, Craig L. A Nig(g)er... Runs Through It. Manuscript, 2002. pg 181

[3] Grant, Bradford C. Reconstruction Architecture. "Accommodation and Resistance: The Built Environment and African-Americans" pg 202

[4] Ibid. pg 215

[5] Ibid. pg 217

[6] West, Pat. Voice: Expressing Culture Through the Architecture of Hip hop. pg 3

[7] Ibid pg 3

[8] Wilkins. Pg 250

[9] Ibid. pg 270

[10] Jameson, "Is Space Political?"Rethinking Architecture. pg 260

[11] Wilkins, pg 265

[12] Richard Tanner Pascale. "Zen and the Art of Management"

[13] Blier, Suzanne Preston. The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987. pg 181

[14] Russell, James S. OpenOffice redefines practice by blurring borders between design and art. Architectural Record; Dec2003, Vol. 191 Issue 12, p56, 4p, 10c