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Two Black Utopias of The United States:
Self Determination and Survival

By
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Abstract

In line with Charles Davis III's assertion in regards to the formation of black space and its spectral qualities representing the "material conditions of black survival", two black utopic projects: Soul City, North Carolina and the unrealized work of Architects Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH) in New York City are analyzed to explicate to what extent that the United States built environment is compatible with "black survival". These two case studies are used to inform an understanding of the anti-black nature of Modernism and the cultural relationship between the construction of "whiteness" and "blackness" in the United States. This relationship based on capital and space influences the sabotage of black survival in the suburban hegemony and further exploitation via urban renewal in the United States. Exposing the undersides of American capitalism subsumed under global capitalism both ideations of black utopia will be historicized both in writing and creating visual graphics to distribute to empower ideation of new heterotopias of black survival.

Introduction

Visualizing and conceptualizing blackness in architecture, specifically the blackness of people whose culture and identity are dependent on the existence of the United States, is nascent not due to the lack of its existence, but due to apathy, if not direct erasure of black survival in the disciplinary canon. The construction of a black utopia does not fit within American capitalism and its suburban hegemony, which creates the foundation on which the practice of architecture relies in the United States today. The United States Government's use of soft power to co-opt black liberation and survival through American capitalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s failed to provide for black agency, but succeeded in slowing down black political radicalism—its true goal. The institutional mechanisms built did not create a level playing ground, ignoring the impacts of prior and current acts of veiled and overt racism leading to the failure of Soul City, North Carolina headed by Floyd B. McKissick. The incompatibilities found in these design approaches and institutions failed at all levels in creating celebratory spaces of black survival, and placing that failure not upon the institutions but the private citizens who attempted to work within them. This erasure and lack of fit within American capitalism renders the contributions of black people to the design of the built environment almost invisible, hoping to be forgotten to perpetuate the self-destructive mythos of the black community. Despite these acts of violence, there was a flourishing radical and aggressive movement of black urbanists and designers that through direct action created access not only to design professionals but the tools of design themselves. Empowering the community of Harlem through the ascension of black leadership of the Architect's Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH) expanded a visualization of self determination outside of and in opposition to the state, verifying that planning issues in Harlem

were always political issues. ARCH embodied contextualizing planning and architecture at all times; never ignoring the public popular culture and vernacular aesthetics of a truly democratized urban space. These forms of Harlem were created through the active preservation and fluidity of black survival and need; not stagnant or well defined, but existing to provide for material needs and allow spaces to define themselves in response to oppression. The generation of black utopias as reflections of black survival exist in our built environment, however, those who have succeeded and have failed don't have the proper visibility they deserve, or have had their radical underpinnings diluted and sanitized. Through an analysis of two architectural utopian projects, I will outline the incompatibilities of black utopianism, liberal and radical, to American capitalism, creating visual graphics to distribute to educate and empower ideation of new heterotopias of black survival.

Soul City and The Suburban Hegemony

Introduction

The United States codifying suburban development and home ownership barred access to blacks and reduced the overall engagement of black people in the disciplines related to designing the built environment. Global and "American" capitalism illustrated by the postwar period's movement towards Garden City utopianism highlights these failures through their inability to support black imagination and space making in this long standing ideology of suburban hegemony. Soul City's failure is due to its attempt to create a black heterotopia within the language of the suburban hegemony. In effect, creating an incompatible utopia for the hegemony and black citizens themselves. By attempting to mimic that language and institutional structure, Soul City followed an idea of self determination that relied on removing the spatial context and proximity to struggles and racial conflicts in urban environments. Floyd B. McKissick's attempt was not a misguided understanding of what black Americans desired in their communities, but could not remove itself from the existing relationship between black labor and white capital pervasive in all of the United States. Soul City's desire to create economic and social prosperity for blacks in the rural south failed to generate a form of architecture and urban design resisting the forms of American capitalism being sold to them as black capitalism, but working within that framework and without input from the citizens themselves.

I define and outline the elements of the United States' suburban hegemony and provide background for Soul City's development and creation before utilizing a close reading informed by a black Marxist lens. I identify Soul City's incompatibilities to Ebenezer Howard's proposals for a perfect Garden City and the suburban hegemony, concluding that this model lays bare the

ineffectiveness of black capitalism which at its core denies the reality of the “material conditions of black survival”¹ instead of celebrating it.

Suburban Hegemony

Ebenezer Howard’s impactful writing on the creation of new cities in the late nineteenth century followed a top down urban design approach attempting to solve the problems of the newly industrialized and bloated cities of Europe. Howard’s piece *The Town and Country Magnet*, illustrates through diagrams and a romantic conception of capitalist market forces, how a town may be developed to provide healthy outcomes for workers and fully eliminate squalor. Howard’s main preoccupation was his attempt to erase both the negatives that existed in “Town” and in “Country” living; uniting the positive lifestyle outcomes of both (fig. 1). This utopian method of space division nominally solves the problems of urban society.² The acceptance of this method of suburban building would not take hold clearly until the postwar period, at the time of Howard’s writing American’s dismissed this approach as too idealistic and impractical. In the New Deal period, a different form of suburban development seeking to decentralize residents through new town development around existing metropolises would be explored following Rex Tugwell’s model, however these “communist towns” labeled by major government support would receive congressional pushback and be sold to private interests.³ Easing the load of cities that were overcrowded, overpolluted, and without access to natural elements would not be without its problems. In the privatized and exclusionary practices developed to separate

¹ Davis, Charles L. “Blackness in Practice” *Disorienting Phenomenology*. New York: Anyone Corporation, 2018.

² Howard, Ebenezer. “The Town and Country Magnet” *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. New Revised Ed. / with an Introduction by Ray Thomas ; New Towns Bibliography by Stephen Potter. ed. Eastbourne: Attic, 1985.

³ Biles, Roger. “The Rise and Fall of Soul City: Planning, Politics, and Race in Recent America.” *Journal of Planning History* 4, no. 1 (February 2005): 52–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513204269993>.

“whiteness” from “blackness” as whites were not the only group who desired these perceived positive life outcomes living in America’s suburban towns.

The understanding of suburbs within academic literature typically centers the existence of suburbs and suburban life as tied directly to “elite and middle-class whites” in the early to mid twentieth century.⁴ Despite this acknowledged history, suburban life as a product of efforts by the United States push of owner occupied residences was not only representative of the desires of whites, but an essential signifier of American middle class identity. In the 1940’s and 1950’s black citizens flocked to city outskirts desiring “better homes and better neighborhoods” than what was offered in the larger city centers. In the 1960’s this came to a head with infamous exclusionary practices and local code manipulation to bar access to blacks not through explicit racial covenants, but through laws targeting home building methods, materials, and other political mechanisms.⁵

This exclusion was not based only in opposition to having blacks as neighbors or living in close proximity to whites, but was a social distancing tactic to perpetuate the construction of white identity for European immigrants. The suburban hegemony of the United States aided in this ascension to whiteness by removing blackness. European immigrants were able to gain the same social and economic mobility privileges afforded to those who had immigrated before them, contemporaneously this would be defined as “white privilege” given through the sacrifice of cultural specificity and validating a racial hierarchy. Moreover, these separating to define “whiteness” in opposition to “blackness” took drastic and significantly more insidious routes, in

⁴ Wiese, Andrew. “Forbidden Neighbors: White Racism and the Black Suburbanites, 1940-1960” *Places of Their Own : African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*. Historical Studies of Urban America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

⁵ *ibid*

particular: the manipulation of local zoning.

The “market imperative” conclusion drawn by early city planning advocates in the 1910’s and 1920’s helped to legitimate zoning codes of residential exclusion to be understood as not one based out of ideology, but by well researched and supported “economics”. The ideation of incompatible land use — whether that be multifamily housing, commercial development, or who lived in a neighborhood — would be the cornerstone in which racialized segregation would be further validated through lawmaking and court decisions.⁶ Furthermore, the National Association of Real Estate Brokers (NAREB) would detail the economic benefits of restrictive covenants and zoning; developing a racially specific risk structure that codified property rights and a model of property ownership based entirely on the existence of a racial hierarchy. In addition to this, there are several examples of unincorporated suburbs changing municipal guidelines in response to owner-home builder blacks building their own homes, resulting in masses of half-built homes demolished or repossessed due to additional economic hardship. Alongside this, the aforementioned white citizenry of particular suburbs would take on gatekeeping efforts to remove blackness from their communities themselves. These typically took the form of domestic attacks of subtle and explicit violence on black residents unwelcome in suburban development. This reveals that “whiteness” is not solely dependent on the racial mythologization of “blackness”, but more precisely the success of “whiteness” is marked directly by perpetuating failure through sabotaging “blackness.”

Although this movement of development is characterized as relying exclusively on the private market, this is not the case. The Federal Housing Administration alongside the Veterans

⁶ Freund, David M. P.. *Colored Property : State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Accessed March 21, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Administration program reduced financial risk of private lenders by guaranteeing and insuring the payment of home loans allowed homeownership to expand from forty-four percent in 1940 to sixty-two percent in by 1960, however, by the late 1950's only two percent of homes that were backed by the FHA were occupied by black families. This was facilitated by the FHA's *Underwriting Manual* which created redlining; stating that racial diversity in development results in lower home values and unfavorable social outcomes, this barred black citizens access not only to new development in suburbs, but locked them in ignored and poorly funded neighborhoods in all towns.⁷

The first movement of publicly supported private developments would have legislation leading to the creation of the New Community Corporation underneath the Department of Housing and Urban Development from the New Community Acts of 1968 and 1970 during the Nixon and Ford administrations. Which all in all cultivated a total of thirteen different projects, all but two existing generally outside of existing urban centers. Cedar-Riverside, Minnesota would be developed within the city limits of Minneapolis, whereas Soul City, North Carolina would be 50 miles from the nearest large city.⁸

Soul City: Background

Soul City was a development headed by Floyd B. McKissick and funded partly by the New Community Corporation of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). As advertised Soul City was:

"The First City in The World That's Built Around Your Family, before we laid brick we

⁷ Wiese, Andrew. "Forbidden Neighbors: White Racism and the Black Suburbanites, 1940-1960" *Places of Their Own : African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*. Historical Studies of Urban America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

⁸ Fergus, Devin. "Black Power, Soft Power: Floyd McKissick, Soul City, and the Death of Moderate Black Republicanism." *Journal of Policy History* 22, no. 2 (2010): 148-92.

laid plans for a clean, uncongested city of 40,000. On 3,500 acres of beautiful land in Warren County, N.C. There will be 18,000 jobs at Soul City. But while people will work in a city, they'll live in a village. Within ten minutes of work. All types of homes are available at Soul City. Everything you need to live here is here now. Plus many recreational facilities. Here people of all, ages, races, and religions work together. Play together. Learn together. Soul City: A Fresh Start for your family or Industry.”⁹

Disillusioned with the progress made by the Civil Rights movement after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination, McKissick believed that the only way forward for black liberation would be to create towns and cities with black interests at their core:

“... coexistence between whites and blacks ... depends on the development of black economic power ... If we are to exist together, it will be as equals.”

Soul City as intended was to be a free standing development attracting northern black migrants back to the south and creating economic opportunity for the black rural poor in the area. Given this, a segregated development for a particular race would not receive federal funding from HUD, McKissick stated “We do not intend on adopting the white man’s racism” encoding equity and access to all regardless of McKissick’s original intentions.¹⁰

The city’s planning committee developed a typical garden plan with the division of residence and labor away from one another along a major transit corridor in an attempt to attract economic sustainability through contracts of industry and private sector development in those industrialized areas. McKissick was directly participating in Nixon’s proposals of a black capitalism subsumed underneath American capitalism. The development of a freestanding black

⁹ Graves. Black enterprise. 2000. New York

¹⁰ Fergus, Devin. "Black Power, Soft Power: Floyd McKissick, Soul City, and the Death of Moderate Black Republicanism." Journal of Policy History 22, no. 2 (2010): 148-92.

town had subtle political ramifications, with its initial governmental support and Nixon's understanding of the Black Power Movement as a "threat to internal security of the United States".¹¹ The Nixon Administration believed that Soul City could potentially ease inter race conflict in other cities as black citizens relocated.

The bureaucratic nature of the black capitalist initiatives underneath Nixon were derided by multiple black scholars and critics as a "dream and delusion".¹² Despite this, the black populace were originally persuaded by Nixon's rhetoric; a covert attempt for state control over the spatial autonomy of blacks. The support for development of black entrepreneurial pursuits in the name of "economic equality" and other conservative values were perpetuated to attract black voters to the GOP. Eventually, the New Community Corporation would shutter due to subpar funding, citing lack of results to garner traction by the towns developed despite real estate projects in the United States' in that time period typically operated at a loss for the first five to ten years.¹³ Soul City's fate would result in its dissolution that concluded in 1981. The land held by Soul City would be sold off at a loss to private interests and McKissick would buy back seventy-one acres of his failed development.¹⁴

Black Incompatibilities to Suburban Form

Soul City's idiosyncrasies from suburban hegemony are ostensibly subtle but the few moves made in particular define how black autonomy and agency is incompatible not only with the historic reality of suburban development in the United States, but also how the urban design

¹¹ Weems, Robert E., and Lewis A. Randolph. "The National Response to Richard M. Nixon's Black Capitalism Initiative: The Success of Domestic Detente." *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 1 (September 2001): 66–83. doi:10.1177/002193470103200104.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Fergus, Devin. "Black Power, Soft Power: Floyd McKissick, Soul City, and the Death of Moderate Black Republicanism." *Journal of Policy History* 22, no. 2 (2010): 148-92.

¹⁴ *ibid*

of a suburban black utopia denies the very fact of black survival. Utilizing the language and direction from James Boggs, Charles Davis and bell hooks to read the incompatibilities of what *was* and *was not* viable to the creation of Soul City as a black utopian project.

The heaviest strike against the feasibility of centering black identity within the suburban hegemony of the United States is the essence of top down development. Although this is directly in line with the values of black capitalism, this methodology centered McKissick's individual desires or ideas directly over the community he was attempting to help. Additionally, this meant that McKissick's individual determination and ability was the gauge for the potential success of Soul City. James Boggs' criticisms of top down development and black entrepreneurship are directly applicable to McKissick's vision of Soul City:

*"In no uncertain terms, he made it clear that the system and capitalism were synonymous. Moreover, he asserted that "Black underdevelopment is a product of capitalist development..." he noted that the Black working class was "in no mood to change from one exploiter to another just because he is of the same color"'*¹⁵

American capitalism, even in the hands of black citizens of the United States is in direct opposition to the health of black people. Boggs asserts, justly, that the nature of "free-market" capitalism in the American mode relies on placing "blackness" underneath "whiteness" regardless of who is engaging in the activity as illustrated by the perpetuation of suburban hegemony. McKissick utilized the political mechanisms offered by and subsidized by the government, and still his development failed. Aside from this, Boggs in direct opposition to black capitalism proposed land reform in an anti-capitalist framework, giving the community

¹⁵ Weems, Robert E., and Lewis A. Randolph. "The National Response to Richard M. Nixon's Black Capitalism Initiative: The Success of Domestic Detente." *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 1 (September 2001): 66–83. doi:10.1177/002193470103200104.

direct access to provide the means and resources for black survival:

*“...undertake a massive land reform movement with the aim of forcing the federal government to turn these plowed-under lands over to the millions of Blacks still in the South, to be developed by Black community organizations”*¹⁶

Boggs never developed or explained a greater strategy for achieving these goals. However, it is decidedly a bottom up development perspective — connecting the needs of the group to develop the land as the collective best saw fit through acknowledging the individual. Albeit a bit anachronistic, this understanding of community development is in line with this Charles Davis’ vision of black identity within *Blackness in Practice*:

*“Recent studies of the spatial complexity of informal spaces, including black neighborhoods in America, reveal an incredible diversity of programming within these seemingly mundane and outdated districts of the city.”*¹⁷

These studies reveal that a community based approach to development and connection is still one that happens within the context of black neighborhoods now. The means of black survival as stated by Davis also relies on ingenuity and personal connection, as the lifestyles of blacks in the United States is one of “making do” with what is accessible. This is seen in the self-built homes of blacks in unincorporated suburban areas in the United States postwar, and the lengths in which white residents and manipulation of local zoning codes went to disrupt and remove them from those areas. The comfort of informal gathering and spatial programming is intrinsic to black survival and providing space for those areas is dictated by the use of the community — the antithesis to top down development and spatial organization.

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Davis, Charles L. “Blackness in Practice” *Disorienting Phenomenology*. New York: Anyone Corporation, 2018.

It would be unfair to characterize the failure of McKissick's Soul City as one solely due to working within the bounds of American capitalism and the Soft Power of the United States. Despite attempting to generate positive outcomes for black people, which was ostensibly in line with the Nixon and Ford administrations, playing within the bounds still resulted in failure. The US Government, despite its political narrative, never fulfilled funding or development goals for the benefit of black people regardless of the density or location of the project. McKissick's development was propped up by a federal framework that the suburban hegemony did not have to work within as it was developed and, by placing economic and racial diversity in its vision, also disrupted the suburban hegemony.

The division and development of the Soul City is typical to the garden city typology¹⁸ (fig. 2), but placement of Soul City fifty miles away from the closest largest city directly opposes the rationale of Howard's Garden City plan (fig. 3). This distance would give room for the creation of a city centering black identity. The lack of other residents or development would also erase the potential pressure of racialized violence predicated on the relationship of "whiteness" and "blackness" reminiscent of Howard's rationale of not retrofitting old cities through creating new towns. This problem seemingly resolved in McKissick's eyes this would give room for free expression and agency, for a new black development. Furthermore, Soul City's development was essentially a new central city for a region that was not "unnecessary", but made it much more difficult to attract residents. This would begin a vicious cycle without residents residing in Soul City, the new development had increased difficulty in attracting commerce and economic viability, and with no guarantee of economic or social mobility, not even those of a close by

¹⁸ Biles, Roger. "The Rise and Fall of Soul City: Planning, Politics, and Race in Recent America." *Journal of Planning History* 4, no. 1 (February 2005): 52–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513204269993>.

municipality, meant that the historical character of attracting residents became strenuous as well.

Proposed expansion of the housing plan didn't only call for single family detached homes, but also townhomes and apartments in an attempt to provide housing options to everyone regardless of income and lifestyle. Although this does not seem like a radical approach to housing development, creating room for density in these communities is in direct opposition to the aspirations of suburban development connected to the early housing boom. The tract homes and apartments of early suburbs were quickly erased to bar access to minoritized groups and low income whites. The "market imperative" stated that multi-family housing and commercial developments near residential enclaves could only lower property values and interrupt the amenities and neighborhood qualities of suburban development. As Soul City was developed after the introduction of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, the false narrative of single family detached homes providing the highest quality life outcomes would be dismantled, however, Soul City's inclusive nature as a federal development also interrupted the racial hierarchy and segregation inherent to suburban hegemony, in so fighting against the cultural standards and understanding of wealth building in the United States for white residents and the economic viability of an integrated development.

This need for economic viability is only due to the mechanisms in which Soul City was developed and sustained by American capitalism. Given this and understanding that black people do not fit within the suburban hegemony of the United States, it would also follow that black people do not fit within American capitalism. Despite blacks being omitted from this form of homeownership, which is still the primary tool of wealth building in the United States, bell hooks' centering of the working poor and their relationship to spacemaking asserts the access to

autonomy that poor in the rural south had in their self built residences:

*“No matter how poor you were in the shack, no matter if you owned the shack or not, there you could allow your needs and desires to articulate interior design and exterior surroundings. Poverty could not be viewed as a circumstance that suppresses creativity and possibility, for all around you were expressions of unique sensibility. Standardized housing brought with it a sense that to be poor meant that one was powerless.”*¹⁹

McKissick’s Soul City sought to uplift the economic status of the black rural poor through a garden city plan with a history of racism and oppressive techniques as opposed to one celebrating black survival. This fact continues to reinforce a narrative that the impoverished have no cultural practices worthy of retaining, or even recognizing. The myriad of housing types within Soul City, if it had succeeded, would not disrupt that outlook due to the trust in capitalism’s ability to level the playing field. With black citizens already at a disadvantage in an economic system set against them, it would be nigh impossible to create a separate but equal economic base.

Soul City: Analysis

Soul City’s failure was not due to McKissick’s missteps or the utopian ideals of creating a free-standing city centering the health and wealth of blacks, but due to the inherent incompatibilities of American capitalism and black autonomy — even when working within the framework of the suburban hegemony. Although the construction of “whiteness” is in direct opposition to “blackness”, “whiteness” is not dependent on just the existence of “blackness”. The racial hierarchy in place within the United States is based on the subjugation and sabotage of

¹⁹ hooks, bell. “Black Vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice” *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995

blackness in the United States. This has been directly illuminated at the local level and at the federal level. Even after attempts to reduce racial prejudice, the institutionalization and cultural perpetuation of the racial hierarchy continues to develop inequities. Soul City's attempt instead worked in favor of a cultural hegemony that historically sought to destroy black life. Codifying the reality of "black survival" in the urban environment is of the utmost importance. Only a design and process that "imagine[s] in such a way that we can witness ourselves dreaming, moving forward and beyond the limits and confines of fixed locations"²⁰ can achieve a utopian ideal for black citizens in the United States.

²⁰ *ibid*

Harlem, ARCH, and Fighting Negro Removal

Introduction

Urban renewal within the United States (additionally in Canada and Western Europe) sought to use technocratic mechanisms in which to control the development of the urban environments in cities, and in addition the redevelopment of cities cited as blighted or with undesirable development or uses. This in turn generated the movement of capital into these areas; influencing gentrification and removal of the communities built in these formerly undesirable locations.²¹ This conflict between real estate development for private interests and the community good also finds itself in the racial split between the construction of “whiteness” and “blackness” erasing black identity in processes of urban renewal; making room for whiteness in the communities black citizens were relegated to through the aforementioned processes of redlining and forced displacement. Urban renewal at its core did not care for the imagination or survival of black people similar to the construction of the suburban hegemony, further supporting that there is no place for black people within American capitalism. Architects’ Renewal Committee in Harlem’s (ARCH) interventions are based in supporting and celebrating “black survival”, acknowledging the existing relationship between black labor and white capital in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City’s Manhattan borough. ARCH through activating the political nature of the planning process allowed black self determination through working both in the context of grassroots conflict and navigating the bureaucratic systems of planning and design.

I outline the movement of urban renewal as one of capital and not necessarily bodies and the relationship that Modernism’s tenets lead to the gentrification of urban space that has been

²¹Smith, Neil. "Toward a Theory of Gentrification A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. 4 (1979): 538-48.

shaped by the “material conditions of black survival”. Additionally, I will give a brief history of ARCH’s formation and efforts focusing on its initial formation and the following decade of advocacy planning and architecture work they engaged in. ARCH gave an alternative approach to black self determination and survival which included participatory engagement, community organizing, and resistance to the formation of “whiteness” relying on the active sabotage of “blackness”. Finally, concluding that active resistance is analogous to survival, however, that the mechanisms of the state innately favor the destruction of blackness through the same Soft Power that allowed and shifted blame for the failures of Soul City, North Carolina.

ARCH: Background

Architects Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH), began as an advocacy planning nonprofit situated and centered in the New Left Urbanist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Founded by C. Richard Hatch in 1964²²; the planning firm would quickly employ and be led by black urbanists. J. Max Bond, Nathan Smith, and Arthur Symes.²³ After leadership of the board was conferred to the three, the vision of the US government sponsored “urban renewal” was indicted (in the tradition of James Baldwin) by ARCH’s J. Max Bond. as “negro removal”²⁴, another mechanism in which “blackness” would be destroyed in favor of the success and livelihood of “whiteness”. ARCH rejecting this movement of capital and technocracy used multiple tactics to combat the gentrification of Harlem. The leadership of ARCH sought out citizens in Harlem to provide them direct access to the planning and design professions, while also giving much needed support to the political organizing in direct opposition to the

²² Klemek, Christopher. "The Rise & Fall of New Left Urbanism." *Daedalus* 138, no. 2 (2009): 73-82,144.

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Goldstein, Brian D. *The Roots of Urban Renaissance : Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017.

bureaucratic decisions being made for the neighborhood; once again from a top down framework. ARCH's connection to the Black Power movement, confronting and protesting proposed uses at the grassroots level, and additionally drafting community influenced and planned contributions through the tools of design and planning. ARCH didn't only provide their services to the community, but created a program so the community could become their own experts in the field.

ARCH's connection to black liberation was innate, but not without its detractors, mostly black moderates and liberals that believed the outcry and radicality of the visible Harlem community was not reflective of the neighborhood's actual ideological makeup. Despite this, the actions of ARCH provided support against the construction of Columbia University's expansion into West Harlem, and combatted the apathy of not only the university itself, but additionally, the Manhattan white and elite, to the material conditions of the black community of Harlem. Symes stated "Architecture and planning are just too important to be omitted from the lives of people who happen to be poor".²⁵ This couldn't be more true of the black and Puerto Rican residents of Harlem of the 1970s who historically lacked access to the disciplines at all levels.

ARCH's direct action and intervention would start with the founding of a pre-architecture program with an initial group of twenty five students who were provided experience in the design and planning discipline of architecture. The program's overall intention was that these skills would return to the communities the students came from:

"Specific emphasis will be given to developing skills which can be used not only in traditional planning or architecture studios," they reported, "but also by advocacy

²⁵ ibid

planning groups (such as ARCH), by community groups, or in the implementation of governmental programs in urban areas."²⁶

Tapping into Harlem youth ages 18-25 (giving primary preference to those who hadn't completed a high school education) support was given to attain their GEDs paired with an intensive studio learning environment producing architectural products and learning the terminology of the discipline. The intensive program also came with full time positions at prestigious firms such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), and financially backed support to pursue planning and architecture in universities.

Bond and Smith would leave in 1968 to found their own architecture firms leaving the direction of ARCH to Symes, but not without creating a framework for the groups' advocacy and processes established during their tenure. Their departure and creation of their firm would have unforeseen consequences on the future success of ARCH's mission against the gentrification of Harlem and the political ideology that they supported. Unfortunately, similarly to the retraction of funding that affected Soul City the support from the Office of Economic Opportunity would be retracted by 1973, and the government powers moving towards black capitalism and private development would leave the Harlem Commonwealth Council (HCC) and Harlem Urban Development Committee (HUDC). These two entities would go on to utilize the design services of Bond to accomplish a reformist dream, for the economic development of Harlem.²⁷

Urban Renewal? Negro Removal

The other side of the ideologies of suburban development as an exclusionary zone only desirable to the white and middle class, the most common understanding of gentrification comes

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ *ibid*

from a jointly held understanding of both culture and economics being the main drivers of gentrification, focusing on effect but not cause. It was plainly accepted that the changing of cities is at the hands of the United States consumer culture prioritizing consumer preference. Those returning to the cities post-”white flight” were said to desire a different lifestyle more in line with consumerism, pushing past the previous generation’s preoccupation with the suburban American dream; single family home ownership as a symbol of the previous production based economy. This previous American dream constructing “whiteness” and the suburban hegemony with post-War ideology alongside industrial or blue collar labor would be manipulated to influence a younger population’s “desires” as a means to profit financially.²⁸

Neil Smith argues instead that the gentrification of cities is based on the movement of capital:

*“the preference for profit, or, more accurately, a sound financial investment. Whether or not gentrifiers articulate this preference, it is fundamental, for few would even consider rehabilitation if a financial loss were to be expected.”*²⁹

Property ownership that seeks to rehabilitate changes the character of a neighborhood; not based on immigration patterns due to unbiased market forces or cultural shifts, but is more attributed to the fabrication of desirability by private interests and the state mechanisms that enable them. Removing “blackness” from spaces so as “whiteness” may profit and an alternative narrative be perpetuated to distract from the reality of capitalist intentions.

The egoism and anti-blackness present in Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (better known as Le Corbusier) would influence the United States “urban renewal” in formal and aesthetic choices

²⁸ Smith, Neil. "Toward a Theory of Gentrification A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. 4 (1979): 538-48.

²⁹ *ibid*

exemplified in CIAM's framework of urban planning for the 20th century outlined in The Athens Charter.³⁰ In line with the long standing history and ideas to control a population via urban planning, Le Corbusier's individual philosophy on architecture establishes a clear bias:

*"Architecture . . . is the art above all others which achieves a state of platonic grandeur, mathematical order, speculation, the perception of harmony that lies in emotional relationships."*³¹

Le Corbusier's contributions to architecture and personal analysis has proven to be a gross simplification of the complexity of urban environments and centered urbanist discourse on an eurocentric understanding of utopia. This is supported directly through Le Corbusier's influence on the design of cities such as Chandigarh in India, and localized the coloniality of the design of Tema in Ghana, both high Modernist cities. Michele Lamprakos indicts the nature of the coloniality of Le Corbusier's designs of the Plan Obus for Algiers:

*"While the plan allegedly advocated the integration of the French and Algerian communities, it was an integration on French terms only: the French were to be the masters, the Algerians the servants. Like his contemporaries, Le Corbusier made no attempt to challenge the basic assumptions of the French colonial presence."*³²

Given this, Corbusier's contributions to architecture also contributed to increased efficacy to the colonization and extraction of capital from a black bodied nation by France. Corbusier in fact

³⁰ Lamprakos, Michele. "Le Corbusier and Algiers: The Plan Obus As Colonial Urbansim" in *Forms of Dominance on the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial* edited by Nezar AlSayyad Enterprise. Ethnoscapes ; v. 5. Aldershot ; Brookfield, U.S.A.: Avebury, 1992.

³¹ Scott, James C. "The High-Modernist City: An Experiment and A Critique" in *Seeing like a State : How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale Agrarian Studies. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

³² Lamprakos, Michele. "Le Corbusier and Algiers: The Plan Obus As Colonial Urbansim" in *Forms of Dominance on the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial* edited by Nezar AlSayyad Enterprise. Ethnoscapes ; v. 5. Aldershot ; Brookfield, U.S.A.: Avebury, 1992.

influenced the push of urban renewal as having logical irreducible qualities which were little more than an “inconsistent mix of socialist utopianism and functionalism that was all too co-opted by the process of capitalist domination”³³ creating a pathway for planners like Robert Moses in American cities.

One of the most prominent figures in retrofitting existing American cities with massive highways and large planned communities, Moses’ vision for New York City created racial and community tension in the non-white enclaves many citizens were relegated to, due to the housing developments of NYCHA and the roadways that encroached existing communities of color. Moses’ private decisions regarding public infrastructure through manipulating local and Federal government’s would destroy and raze communities for the perceived betterment of the people. The worst offender in this tradition in New York City would be the Cross Bronx Expressway completed in 1963 just one year prior to the founding of ARCH.³⁴ The Expressway Allowed easier access to Manhattan, New Jersey, and Upstate New York through eliminating miles of low-income housing stock, bifurcating and eliminating the heart of the Bronx, indefinitely lowering the property values in the surrounding neighborhoods and would be blamed as the impetus for the urban decay that soon took it over throughout the the 1970s, just north of Harlem.

This further illustrates the difficulties for the existence of a black utopia within the United States. Culturally, America continues to center the distinctions between “whiteness” as dependent on the failure of “blackness” manipulating through policy and privatized economics. The centering of “whiteness” constructing the suburban hegemony propped up by racialized

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air : The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.

policy influenced where black people were allowed to build communities, or exist in communities. Additionally, the removal of self-determination in these marginalized spaces was then erased by the urban renewal movement; continuing to shape and dictate the form of black community by American capitalism in a patriarchal framework for the vague benefit of the “public”. Modernism’s early explorations and codified tenets via CIAM’s Athens Charter influenced the unspoken relationships of “whiteness” abusing black space as a testing ground for technocratic processes to no benefit of the actual community. The construction of American capitalism leaves no place for black people, utilizing them and displacing them for exploitation so “whiteness” can prosper, the invisible but telling strings of environmental racism. With this in mind, one of the only options left for “blackness” is to make room for itself, fighting in direct opposition to “whiteness” through forcibly reclaiming and making space through self preservation, all of these spaces becoming the tectonic and architecture of “black survival”.

ARCH: Analysis

Max Bond rejected the ideology of modernism identifying new cities in line with the current planning discourse looking away from their centers and instead at their edges. Cities such as Brasilia and Tema engaged their own Modernist projects post-War, despite the coloniality of the design language and history, these colossal projects outside of Europe were believed to be the most “logical” and appropriate in designing new clean cities.³⁵ In the United States these planning notes revealed themselves in private development resulting in suburban sprawl’s penchant for splitting uses and now urban renewal’s preoccupation to make existing city infrastructures look more like the suburbs and exurbs that sprung up around them.

³⁵ Scott, James C. “The High-Modernist City: An Experiment and A Critique” in *Seeing like a State : How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale Agrarian Studies. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Bond celebrated the distinctness and vibrancy of street life and popular culture that those who lived around those segmented and uniformly designed settlements. In effect, Bond centered the margins of other developments to help influence his plans for engaging and creating an aesthetic language of black survival in Harlem:

*“They are shantytowns only because they do not have the public services and facilities that Brasilia or Tema have, but they do possess the spirit and life of an urban place that Brasilia and Tema lack. They are in fact the people’s creation, full of the vibrancy and color that go with life.”*³⁶

Bond’s reaction was not based out of his appreciation for the ingenuity of the impoverished Ghanese and Brazillians, seeking to mimic them, but celebrating the existing context of a black Harlem with structures and community informally built for collective survival and the distinct difference from the “whiteness” that existed southernly in Manhattan. Bond’s discernment of the qualities of urban life that needed to be preserved were in line with rejecting the innate Eurocentricity of the Modern project whose coloniality revealed itself even in non-European contexts. Bond’s criticisms of the technocratic top down development in 1968 of Brasilia specifically would be completely founded as the “candangos”³⁷ (originally a derogatory term used for the pioneers and builders of the city) developed the outskirts into densely populated urban pockets which would fight for access to services that were built next to them which they would succeed in securing.

One of ARCH’s earliest proposals for Harlem amplified this movement of planning for survival devised a sweeping organization of space, organizing programmatic elements that

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *ibid*

sought to serve the existing community, preserve the housing that it could, and create high quality living conditions through the redevelopment of deteriorating housing stock by landlord neglect. There are stark differences between this plan and the plan of McKissick's Soul City in North Carolina and the tenets of the Modernist project. Modernist ideology reflected the desires of new rules for division of urban spaces and engaged in the "heroic" nature of the movement; rebuilding Europe and supporting the technological advances that would alleviate stress or provide individual freedom were already being critiqued. The desire to centralize the community around its resources and create boundaries for the community as opposed to splitting the community into different uses over its entire area (fig. 4). The community would not be bifurcated by the major arterials, like the Cross Bronx Expressway did north of Harlem, relegating all vehicle traffic to the outskirts of the mixed residential and administrative center of the neighborhood.³⁸ The industrial area would not be placed miles away from the residential area, but using the existing arterials to influence the program; reducing the commute and increasing access to the types of jobs held by most Harlemites letting them get to and from work by foot. These moves seemed obvious to retain the character of the neighborhood and the crowning achievement of siting social and welfare services in the center of the community removed any shame that comes with being impoverished in the United States. Through combining like programming (education, cultural, and recreation) in the same place, the community surrounded an area where all types of needs could be met on a local scale.

Black survival based in the everyday use of space is innately fluid and presupposes a spectral quality. Bond engaged in heightening and maintaining the eclectic nature of urban life.

³⁸ Goldstein, Brian D. *The Roots of Urban Renaissance : Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017.

The sterilization of urban life through the modern project was, if not antithetical to urbanity itself, it was a construction that ignored the realities of black life. This is not to say that rehabilitation is the only quality available in maintaining the qualities that Harlemites built with their hands. This aesthetic of ingenuity and black survival was core to the influence of radical thought that influenced the agenda of Harlemites and their motivations to decentralize the planning of their communities.

In service of Harlemites occupying the construction site of a government building at what was colloquially designated as *Harlem Square*,³⁹ ARCH developed multiple plans in line with their desire for a mixed use and celebratory space absent from the private commercial aspirations and influence of the government. The government sought to move middle income workers to the prominent location on 125th Street (now Martin Luther King Jr) between Lenox (now Malcolm X) and Seventh Avenue. New York State asserted that the introduction of filling this block with a government high rise would provide jobs to the surrounding area and benefit Harlemites; however this building did not represent the actual needs of the community. Harlemites knew that this development would facilitate the movement of capital into their community at a rate that the residents could not compete with. Additionally, the community foresaw that as private developers were eyeing the margins of Harlem as a source of profit, the lever of urban renewal's destruction of the heart of Harlem, would enable this motive.

In opposition, ARCH generated three separate proposals aiding the occupiers of Reclamation Site #1 to their vision for the redevelopment of the Harlem Square. Illustration A focused on high density affordable housing, and brought in cultural and commercial needs (fig.

³⁹ *ibid*

5), Illustration B on education, creating a high school that the area desperately lacked. Finally Illustration C (fig.7) the only scheme without housing instead created a mixture of uses including social services, child care, a museum of art, commercial and education services, an urban center for an urban community. Every proposal generated for Harlem is a significantly better utilization of the site. These proposals fulfilled the needs of a larger swathe of the community. Additionally, the designs celebrated the diverse scale of buildings throughout Harlem, a quality of the pertinent quality of the urban fabric, high rises and lower scaled public buildings allowing a variability between public, private, educational, and cultural space. This approach integrated a cohesive variety replicating the nature of Harlem, where land use was dictated on where it needed or could be instead of a distinct delineation of uses, a true mark of black survival. These proposals would create a central hub for the urban life of Harlem, creating intersections of community and concentrating resources to a singular accessible space for the neighborhood. This vision of Harlem centered itself, not ancillary to Manhattan or solely the needs or desires of the government.

These elements challenged urban renewal plans to create economic opportunity through the importation of private influences; instead celebrated the reality of black life at the time. High modernism's preoccupation with masking an aesthetic attraction to the reality of urban cohesion and prosperity would be erased and replaced with actual socialist ideals in the organization of space and human interaction. The work done by ARCH in line with black liberation and self-determination would eventually be undermined by Bond, after the 10 year tenure of a black run ARCH came to close in 1974. Bond Ryder Associates in a reformist lens would also design a mall at the proposed site commissioned by the HCC that would inevitably become another

unfunded project leaving the site's fate as the originally proposed Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Office building completed in 1974. Contemporaneously, the building shares the full lot split up by a low rise parking structure between a commercial strip that includes only two non-corporate businesses.

Conclusion

The utopian vision of ARCH and McKissick presented itself in two different modes with varying degrees of success and visibility. McKissick attempted to fall in line with the utopian ideals of the suburban hegemony in the United States, an ideal not unpalatable to black citizens at the time. The difficulties faced by Soul City lied directly with the needs of “whiteness” to be preferred to “blackness” or any other forms of “other”. The tools afforded to the hegemony were not suitable or available to Soul City, leading to it’s inevitable failure and unfortunate dissolution; becoming a failed development by a nascent and experimental government program obscuring its existence. ARCH directly opposed the same soft-power forces that McKissick attempted to placate, favoring radicality in preventing displacement through community occupation and design processes. ARCH sought to protect existing community fabrics and strengthen the already successful qualities and expand services as well, this resistance would eventually be co-opted and abused to further private gains instead of the true voice of the people. The government willfully quash utopian visions forcing movements doing it the “right way” and the “wrong way” to have the same results. The foundations of capitalism and the coloniality of the United States are insufficient in providing or realizing or supporting black survival in the United States.

The struggle for black survival in architecture, planning, and our urban environment is very obviously something still being fought for today. In recent years, Harlem's fight to retain its character was once again faced with the passive rebranding of South Harlem to "SoHa".⁴⁰ An attempt to undermine the existing community and attract "new" residents to the area. These residents are attracted to the area not for the existing rich cultural history, but the new identity formed through the removal of blackness. Although a seemingly less significant fight, these battles of identity and visibility are just as important to cultural continuity as the designed or spatial considerations of the community.

The canonization of architectural and planning histories has further diluted and created an unbalanced understanding and continues to other those holding identities outside of the current norms. Architecture in its practice is often reduced to a tool of hegemonic control over marginalized people for profit and labor exploitation. There is no place in American capitalism for "blackness" therefore, discourse revolves around the achievements and direction of "whiteness", removing responsibility of the discipline for its complicitness in environmental racism. Resistance, active participation, and distribution and supporting communities who need it most are assuredly the only way forward.

Visual Graphics

⁴⁰ Davidson, Nestor M., and Fagundes, David. "Law and Neighborhood Names." *Vanderbilt Law Review*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2019, pp. 757–824.

Documentation of research to be distributed freely through digital and physical means.

Additionally, the beginnings of a black architectural archive on Instagram,

@blackarchitecturearchivesf

Figure 1: Three Magnets from *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*

Figure 2: Housing Plan of Soul City from *The Rise and Fall of Soul City*

THEORETICAL DESIGN FOR THE PHYSICAL COMMUNITY

Figure 4: Theoretical Design for E. Harlem. Triangle from *The Roots of Urban Renaissance*. . .

Figure 5: Reclamation Site #1, Illustration A from *The Roots of Urban Renaissance*. . .

Figure 6: Reclamation Site #1, Illustration B from *The Roots of Urban Renaissance*. . .

Figure 7: Reclamation Site #1, Illustration C from *The Roots of Urban Renaissance*. . .

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