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testify that one can bring in very little income with this type of work and that indeed it helps to have a good supplementary job. Perhaps the day will soon come when grant-giving agencies will establish constructive liaisons between critics and artists, materially rewarding both groups of individuals so that the work of marginalized artists may be given the sort of critical attention that ensures that its value will be sustained through time; that the knowledge and appreciation of the significance of such work will not wane with passing trends.

Like artists, public funders also need education that encourages critical consciousness. More forums and small conferences are needed that create a context for dialogue, for the working through of differences, for the airing of ideas that are not yet fully understood. This requires the will and imagination to break with the ways in which information has traditionally been shared. How many of us have attended conferences where there were small group sessions and one-on-one encounters with significant visionaries and thinkers? All too often we structure conferences in such a way that conflicting viewpoints cannot be worked through or even explored. We are desperately in need of new models. Ultimately, new agendas can be set and successfully implemented by funding agencies only if the individuals working within these spheres of power embrace the spirit of change that calls us all to deepen our awareness, to intensify our commitment to art as the practice of freedom.

Black Vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice

DESIGNING THE house of my dreams in a high school art class, I did not think that any decisions I made were political. Indeed, every thought I had about the aesthetics of this project was rooted in imaginative fantasy. Beginning with the idea of a world of unlimited freedom where space, and in particular living space, could be designed solely in relation to "desire," I greatly wanted most to move away from concrete "political" realities, such as class, and just dream. When we were given the assignment—to build a dream house—our art teacher encouraged us to forget about dwellings as we knew them and to think imaginatively about space, about the link between what we desire, dream about, and what is practical.

We were to design, as I understood it, a dwelling place of dreams. I began this assignment by making a list of all the aspects of a house I found most compelling: stairways, window seats, hidden nooks and crannies. On paper, my house exposed and revealed my obsessions. I was a constant reader, living with a huge family, in small space. To me, reading was a deliciously private experience, one that allowed me to be secluded, walled in by silence and thought. In my dream house there were many places designed to enhance the pleasure of reading, places for sitting and lying down, places for reading and reverie. Every bit of space was shaped to be subordinate to these desires. Thus, there were endless stairways, window seats and small rooms everywhere. On paper, in structure and design the house I imagined was a place for the fulfillment of desire, a place with no sense of necessity.

Although I have no clear memory of where this design ended up, I know this assignment affected me deeply. More than twenty years later, I can close my eyes and see the image of this house as I drew it. Loving flowers, I had designed the different floors to be like petals. It fascinates me now to think about why a white male Italian immigrant high school art

teacher in the segregated South would encourage students to think of artistic practice solely in relation to fantasy and desire. In retrospect it is clear that this was precisely the kind of assignment that was meant to deflect attention from political realities, from the class, race, and gender differences that separated and divided us from one another. Through this sort of a project, we could work harmoniously, focusing on dreams; we could see ourselves as connected—as the same.

This would have been a radically different assignment had we been encouraged to think critically about the actual spaces we inhabited, the neighborhoods and houses that were our world. Had we been given such an assignment, we would have learned to think about space politically, about who controls and shapes environments. This assignment might have compelled recognition of class differences, the way racial apartheid and white supremacy altered individuals' space, overdetermined locations and the nature of structures, created a sense of entitlement for some and deprivation for others. Doing this assignment, we might have come face to face with the politics of property, not only who owns and controls space but the relationship between power and cultural production.

We were not given such an assignment because it would not only have disrupted and subverted the idea of artistic endeavor and creative expression as politically neutral acts, it would have at the same time fundamentally challenged the idea of art as a site for transcendence, of art as emerging from an unfettered free zone of the imagination. Even though I did not see myself as thinking politically then, the very fact that I designed my dream house to counter the experience of growing up in small overcrowded space, a circumstance that reflected my families' economic standing, meant that undergirding my dreams, my fantasies and desires, were class-based longings. This dream house, then, was not solely the outcome of abstract musings about dwellings; it was equally rooted in a concrete acknowledgment of my reality. Despite its limitations, this assignment did teach us that, irrespective of our location, irrespective of class, race, and gender, we were all capable of inventing, transforming, making space. It would have been exciting to have designed this dream house, then to have done another assignment in which we worked on designing space to meet concrete needs within the limitations of our lived experiences.

Had we done an assignment that required us to think critically and imaginatively about our homes and neighborhoods, those of us from non-

privileged backgrounds would have had an opportunity to think about architecture and design in relation to our lives both in the present and in the future. Growing up working-class and black in the South, I do not remember any direct discussion of our architectural realities. If our earliest understanding of architecture was that it exists only in the location of dream and fantasy, of "impossibility," it is no wonder then that many children of the working class and poor tend not to grow to maturity understanding architecture as a professional and cultural practice central to our imaginative and concrete relationship to space.

Although the dream house I designed had no direct connection to the dwellings in my community—which were separate, distinct, segregated spaces inhabited by the black working and non-working poor—the link between that fantasy place and the actual world I lived in was grounded in generations of concern with space, with the shaping and construction of environments. Poor Southern black folks were often land rich. Owning land, they were concerned with the use of space, the building of dwellings. Many narratives of resistance struggle from slavery to the present share an obsession with the politics of space, particularly the need to construct and build houses. Indeed, black folks equated freedom with the passage into a life where they would have the right to exercise control over space on their own behalf, where they would imagine, design, and create spaces that would respond to the needs of their lives, their communities, their families.

Growing up in a world where black working-class and "po' folk," as well as the black well-to-do, were deeply concerned with the aesthetics of space, I learned to see freedom as always and intimately linked to the issue of transforming space. I have chosen to write about this concern with space in order both to acknowledge the oppositional modes of psychic decolonization that marginalized, exploited, and oppressed black folks envisioned and to document a cultural genealogy of resistance. This project is distinct from those forms of nostalgic remembering of the past that simply appropriate colorful touristic images of "the darkies way back then." Framing this cultural genealogy of resistance in relation to space is necessary for the "cognitive mapping" Fredric Jameson speaks about when he insists that "it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than categories of time." It is my con-

viction that African-Americans can respond to contemporary crises we face by learning from and building on strategies of opposition and resistance that were effective in the past and are empowering in the present.

It is empowering for me to construct, in writing, the continuum that exists between the exploration of space and architecture that was a fundamental aspect of poor black rural Southern life even though it was not articulated in those terms. When my father's father, Daddy Jerry, a sharecropper and farmer, talked in concrete terms about his relationship to land, his longing to own and build, he spoke poetically about working with space so that it would reveal and mirror the texture of his longings. I never understood how Daddy Jerry "came by" a piece of land; that was the way folks talked about it then. The phrase could define a number of transactions. It could mean that he bought, traded, inherited, or exchanged work for land. On this land Daddy Jerry built a house. I can still remember the way he and my father would sit on the porch and have deep discussions about that house; their talk evoked a poetics of space, the joy of thinking imaginatively about one's dwelling. And I can recall my disappointment when I finally saw the small square brick house that he built. In my childhood imagination this space seemed so utterly closed and tight. Had I understood the interconnected politics of race, gender, and class in the white-supremacist South, I would have looked upon this house with the same awe as I did my favorite house.

My awe was reserved for the house of my mother's father, Daddy Gus, and her mother, Baba. An artist/quiltmaker, Baba shaped this house to meet her needs, those of her husband of more than seventy years and the extended family that stayed or visited there. Like Toni Morrison's fictional character Eva Peace in *Song of Solomon*, Baba's wood-frame dwelling was a place where rooms were continuously added in odd places, tacked on, usually to accommodate the desires of the individual who was destined to inhabit that space. At Baba's house there was always an excitement about space—a sense of possibility. There dwellings were seen as in a constant state of change. Significantly, the absence of material privilege did not mean that poor and working-class black folks (such as my grandparents) did not think creatively about space. While lack of material privilege limited what could be done with one's surroundings, it was nevertheless always possible to make changes.

My grandmother's house was not unlike the small shacks that were the homes of many Southern black folks. Her place was just a bigger, more elegant shack. Wood-frame dwellings that were fragile or sturdy shaped my sense of meaningful vernacular architecture. Many of these structures, though fragile and therefore altered by time and the elements, remain and offer a wealth of information about the relationship of poor and working-class rural black folks to space. African-American professor of architecture LaVerne Wells-Bowie highlights in her writings the significance of architecture created by folks who were not schooled in the profession or even in the arts of building. She offers the insight that "vernacular architecture is a language of cultural expression" that "exemplifies how the physical environment reflects the uniqueness of a culture." Little railroad shacks in the South were often peopled by large families. When I was a child, I entered the home of an elderly black woman who lived in a lovely shack and was most impressed and delighted by the small cot-size beds placed here and there. I carry in my memory the serenity this woman's utterly neat and sparse place evoked. This experience helped shape my relationship to interior design and dwellings.

Often the rural black folks who lived in shacks on the edges and margins of town conceptualized the yard as a continuation of living space. Careful attention might be given to the planting of flowers, the positioning of a porch or a rope-hung swing. In the recent autobiography of the more-than-a-hundred-year-old Delaney sisters, they describe their migration north, their purchase of a small house, and the amazement of white folks that they wanted to add on a porch. Reading this, I recalled overhearing the conversations between my father and his dad as they sat on the porch and shared thoughts, ideas, dreams. Often, exploited or oppressed groups of people who are compelled by economic circumstance to share small living quarters with many others view the world right outside their housing structure as liminal space where they can stretch the limits of desire and the imagination.

Recording these memories seems absolutely essential, because in today's world we are led to believe that lack of material privilege means that one can have no meaningful constructive engagement with one's living space and certainly no relationship to aesthetics. I am often disturbed when folks equate a concern with beauty, the design and arrangement of space, with class privilege. Unfortunately, so many poor people have been

socialized by the mass media and the politics of consumerism to see themselves as lacking “taste and style” when it comes to issues of architecture and aesthetics that they have surrendered their capacity to imagine and create. They explain this surrender as the unavoidable consequence of poverty. Yet lack of material privilege need not be synonymous with poverty of spirit or imagination. Significantly, in the past, even during the most dire circumstances of oppression and exploitation, African-Americans could find ways to express their creativity—to display artistry. They dared to use their imagination in ways that were liberatory.

Few critics have attempted to look at poor and working-class black folks’ relationship to space. We need studies of housing that talk about the way in which the construction of “projects”—state-owned and -designed dwellings for the economically disadvantaged—brought an end to the dwelling in shacks that allowed for individual creativity and an assertion of aesthetic engagement with space and one’s environment. The state-built dwellings erase all chances for unique perspectives to shape living space and replace these with a blueprint of sameness—everyone’s place structured similarly. Clearly, these structures inform the ways poor folk are allowed to see themselves in relationship to space. 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, unable to intervene in or transform, in any way, one’s relationship to space. In many areas of the rural South the shack still remains as a dwelling that counters and subverts the messages of this dehumanization of the spatial imagination of folks who are not materially privileged.

Mapping a cultural genealogy of resistance, we can see ways poor African-Americans used their imaginations to transcend limits. This history increasingly becomes subjugated knowledge as black folks embrace notions of victimhood that suggest our reality can be defined only by the circumstances of our oppression. In the essay “Race and Architecture,” the philosopher and cultural critic Cornel West suggests that “the major challenge of a new architectural historiography is that its conception of the ‘past’ and ‘present’ be attuned to the complex role of difference—

nature, primitive, ruled, Dionysian, female, black and so on.” To rise to this challenge, spaces must exist for us to think and talk about, and theorize architecture as it reflects and informs culture.

In this expansive and more inclusive understanding of architecture, the vernacular is as relevant as any other form of architectural practice. This perspective allows critics to theorize black experience in ways that promote documentation of our historical and contemporary relationship to space and aesthetics. Few scholars theorize black experience from a standpoint that centralizes the perspectives of poor and working-class folks. Yet to ignore this standpoint is to reproduce a body of work that is neocolonial insofar as it violently erases and destroys those subjugated knowledges that can only erupt, disrupt, and serve as acts of resistance if they are visible, remembered. Documentation of a cultural genealogy of resistance invites the making of theory that highlights the cultural practices which transform ways of looking and being in a manner that resists reinscription by prevailing structures of domination. Subversive historiography connects oppositional practices from the past with forms of resistance in the present, thus creating spaces of possibility where the future can be imagined differently—imagined in such a way that we can witness ourselves dreaming, moving forward and beyond the limits and confines of fixed locations.