Mapping the African American Urban Enclave: The Ghetto in Translation

It has neither name nor place. I shall repeat the reason why I was describing it to you: from the number of imaginary cities we must exclude those whose elements are assembled without connecting thread, an inner rule, a perspective, a discourse. With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else …

Cities also believe they are the work of the mind or of chance, but neither the one nor the other suffices to hold up their walls. You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours. Or the question it asks you, forcing you to answer, like Thebes through the mouth of the Sphinx.

—Marco Polo to Kublai Khan in Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*[1]

The intent of this paper is to develop an African American urban enclave (AAUE) morphology. It is an essential step in generating an architecturally formal discourse of African American spatial practices. Because of the African American urban enclave's central role in segregation-era America, conceptually and literally, it became a city within a city, a haven for a disenfranchised people, with a vital political and economic base. Over time, in this post-segregation and postindustrial age it has become a shadow of its former self. Because of urban flight (both white flight and black flight), no longer does an AAUE have a healthy cross section of economic classes, or a thriving market place, or strong schools. This abandonment of place has

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created a perpetual state of human poverty and infrastructural deterioration for those who will not or cannot leave.[2] The AAUE continues to be a locus of African American collective energy, because more than 80% of the African American population dwells within metropolitan areas.[3] This study looks at this American cultural enclave as a serious and vital space within the history and evolution of the American city. Most importantly, the study positions the African American urban enclave as something beyond its powerful—but clichéd—image, as an economically distressed area of urban infrastructure. The AAUE is a spatially rich site of African American and thus American collective consciousness.[4] What follows is a synopsis of the general history of African American urban enclaves with an emphasis on clarifying the common spatial, environmental, and physical elements that give form and definition to these places.

There are many aspects of history, geography, and culture that inform a discussion of African American urban enclaves. It is over simplified to categorize the large number of these places under one unarticulated term of '*the ghetto.*' In the context of this essay the ghetto is defined as a type of African American urban enclave, but the term is also nuanced in its use by spatial, scale, and compositional descriptors to develop a lexicon to use in an evolving typology of this provocative American cultural form. It is important to maintain a relationship to the term "ghetto" because it contextualizes these African American spaces with the much older and broader occidental urban practice of ghettoizing the "other," throughout history.[5] One of the earliest records of this practice, and the origin of the term, is the Venice ghetto of 1516. It was established to separate the Jewish population from the Venetian through the use of urban infrastructures; walls, motes, and bridges.[6]

The term '*ghetto*' refers to a section of city occupied by a cultural and or ethnic group. Places such as "Little Italy," the Barrio and China Town are ghettos in the general use of the word. Most cultural groups that have immigrated to the United States in any significant numbers have formed ghettos at some level. Then there is the African American ghetto "the ghetto of all ghettos." Whatever the denotation of the word might mean, in twenty-first century United States of America, '*the ghetto*' refers to the physical, spatial site of large concentrations of peoples of African descent in an urban environment. The colloquial definition can further be qualified to include people of African descent of poor to middle class economic status. [7] Throughout the term's history it has carried, across continents and oceans, a negative connotation—a place fashioned to isolate, confine, and restrict: to oppress. Its very existence, in present day America, is evidence of an unofficial capitalist and racialized "caste" system. It is not meant to be a place where people strive to be, like Park Avenue, the Hamptons or Beverly Hills, but rather a place where people start out, where people end up, where they are allowed to live. It is a conceptualized transitory locale from which most people struggle to get themselves and or their families out—to a 'better place.' The ghetto is difficult to invest one's life energies into, thus most people physically, materially,

and intellectually divest.[8] While the ghetto may be understood as a marginal space for mainstream United States culture, for African American culture—at large—it is at the very core of urban existence and thus urban spatial thinking. If all United States citizens have a conception of the American dream, a single family dwelling with a white picket fence—a suburban dwelling—then the ghetto is the African- American's constant antithesis to that reverie. It acts as a model to negatively re-act to and run away from. It is the hard reality that many learn to accept and passively choose to exist within and for evermore understand as the city. There are a number of people that embrace the ghetto, just because it is "theirs," or at least it reaches some reasonable facsimile of ownership/propriety.[9] These are the people who fight for quality living conditions, greater police presence but also fight against police violence and cultural displacement disguised as gentrification. Often times these are people born in the ghetto, who see the promise of its cultural collectivity.

The ghetto is a constructed place often sited in residual, peripheral, and marginalized spaces of the city. It is the result of cultural, social, economic, and environmental forces. We are most familiar with the economic and social forces that shape the ghetto; scholars and government agency have covered both in great depth in their respective fields. We are less familiar with the physical and spatial components that are the resultant residue of mainstream America's cultural mores: racism. Because of how the ghetto has come into being it is a morphologically unstable entity, which is constantly in a state of crisis. As a place it is at risk of being destroyed; by its inhabitants, through crime, civil unrest, and material and intellectual divestment; by real estate owners and speculators, the process of gentrification and property neglect; and by government agency, through urban renewal programs, infrastructural neglect and real estate policy; and by scholars to be dismissed as unfortunate and insignificant in relationship to the greater public realm. Due, in part to federally sanctioned state segregation laws in the first half of the twentieth century and the cultural residue of racism, the ghetto became and still is the de facto space of the African diaspora in the United States.[10] To the African American community "the ghetto" is more than its negative image. It is an informal residual space appropriated by people of African descent and their spatial response to cultural mores and real-estate market conditions. Despite the negative connotations of ghetto, many African Americans find the space has been culturally empowering. There is cultural memory, if not physical evidence, of when the ghetto did not always contain dilapidated houses, decaying sub-government housing, and empty retail districts abandoned long ago.

FORMATION OF THE AMERICAN GHETTO

The contemporary American ghetto is a manifestation of social forces, which were developed over two centuries. There are at least two cultural/spatial origins to the ghetto, one develops in the south and the other develops in the north. Within some areas of the nineteenth-century south, African populations surpassed the European populations. While most of these Africans were enslaved on plantations—in cities such as New Orleans,

Louisiana and Charleston, South Carolina—hundreds of Africans were free people of African heritage mixed with urban slaves, living in racially segregated districts. Common urban housing typologies that signify many African American districts in these cities are the shotgun house and the Creole cottage. Nineteenth-century northern cities did not develop such large districts, because of the relatively small population of Africans living within the northern United States. In the north, people of African origin lived in a much less concentrated manner. The Five Points area of New York City is an example of nineteenth-century northern urban dwelling by African Americans. This changed in the early twentieth century as large numbers of southern Blacks migrated from the south to the north in search of industrial jobs. Large African American urban enclaves such as Harlem in New York and Brownsville in Chicago were appropriated in this era. The nature of civil occupation of these districts/cities is dynamic. This is to say that the patterns of spatial formation change over a relatively short period of time, thus terms such as expansive, contracted, dispersed, and fragmented are used as prefixes to specify the dynamic spatial form of African American urban enclaves. I have categorized the African American Urban Enclave into six broad classifications: the primordial ghetto; the polycentric ghetto; the multicultural mosaic; the city-within-a-city; the nomadic ghetto, and the "Mecca" ghetto. Although these typologies are presented individually, many ghettos are a varied combination of these typologies, especially when studied across a 100- to 200-year time frame. Each city has a primal spatial form in its genesis, which morphs and transforms overtime.

The primordial ghetto is usually an area where the history of African American occupation can be traced back to the early twentieth century and in some cases such as New Orleans and Charleston as far back as the late seventeenth century. The time when the city was developed is not the only factor that classifies an area as primordial, but it is an important component. The primordial ghetto is equivalent to the old city, it has become iconic and mythic in stature. It often began as a suburb outside of the city limits, beyond the wall or on the other side of the tracks, or beyond the park, the place adjacent to the city. By this definition Harlem New York is also primordial. Depending on the cultural mores, geographic, political, and economic forces of an area, different configurations manifest from this primal core, they are: the city-within-a-city expanded to the polycentric ghetto, the multicultural mosaic or a nomadic ghetto. The polycentric ghetto is a pattern of urban growth where, over time, multiple African American centers develop that are not necessarily spatially contiguous with one another. The "nomadic" ghetto is a pattern where the spatial location of the African American urban enclave moves from one area of the city to another over a period of time. It is similar to polycentric accept that the past area is all but voided of people of African descent. The "multicultural mosaic" is a pattern where there is an intermix of cultural groups in an area, but for the purposes of this study that mix might still be slanted to a demographic percentage of 50% African American. The sixth classification is "Mecca." This is an expansive ghetto with a vital economic structure, thus attracting many African Americans to the site. These AAUEs are growing, as opposed to

many of the other classifications where the AAUE is stagnant, nomadic, or contracting. Cities such as Atlanta, Georgia and Washington, DC, are part of this classification.

ELEMENTS OF THE AMERICAN GHETTO

The city of New Orleans Louisiana is classified as an expansive primordial ghetto. It is the site of the first district—Treme—to allow people of African heritage to own property in an urban environment.[11] While there are many factors that separate nineteenth-century New Orleans from a sixteenth-century Italian city, there are several physical elements that are found in an AAUE that are derivative of the original Venice ghetto of 1516: the use of manmade and environmental infrastructure to isolate the area from the main city. In the early European models of Jewish ghettos, an urban wall was the main piece of infrastructure, occasionally coupled with water, to separate the district. The ghettos were also situated in undesirable locations such as industrial districts, where noise, odor, and pollution created unpleasant experiences; or nuisance areas, environmentally distressed areas such as swamps; and high-density housing. According to urban geographer, Richard Campanella, there are six geographic political conditions that identify and organize the pattern of African American urban settlement in New Orleans: (1) back-of-town clusters, (2) front of town enclaves (3) nuisance areas, (4) super block pockets, (5) nascent middle- class suburbs, and (6) urban outskirts. Treme New Orleans has fit all of these criteria at some point in its 200-year history. Treme was originally established in a swamp area just beyond the ramparts of the city walls and fortress. This area was known as back of town. Soon after the district's establishment, an industrial canal was built connecting Lake Pontchartrain with the core of city commerce. Also part of the area that became Treme was an industrial brick-making yard.[12] While the infrastructural lexicon of most contemporary American cities does not include urban walls, they do have large infrastructural systems, like highways and municipal service sites that consistently have a contentious spatial relationship with ghettos. The relationship is different in each city, occasionally the infrastructure bifurcates the original AAUE. In other places it isolates the district from the rest of the city. The "Projects" as they are known (public housing) is a common sub-district found in many African American urban enclaves. These, often high-rise, structures have become notorious in our contemporary American society for the amount of crime generated within and around these sub-districts. The ghetto becomes a strange "memory theater," a place that has contained historic sites.

Systemic socioeconomic factors have limited access of much of the African American community to upward class mobility. The lack of material wealth affects the physical environment and the behavior of people in that environment. Without the economic base for community redevelopment and few people in the private sector interested in development of the area, ghettos quickly fall into a state of urban decay. The primary signs of urban decay are discontinuous urban fabric/pattern and empty plots of land. In both commercial and residential areas scores of buildings are in a state of disrepair

or a state of ruin, but they are still very much physically present. These contemporary ruins and urban voids become places people must move around, sometimes move through or look at from the outside and recollect what the site used to be. The lack of money in the community increases the amount of all levels of crime, especially violent crimes. The social environment becomes dangerous and hostile to both those inside the community and particularly those outside the community. This hostile social atmosphere is as powerful a boundary/barrier as any physical wall, waterway, highway, or railroad track might create. A strange positive of these factors is that the ghetto becomes a strange "memory theater," a place that has contained historic sites, but more importantly historic urban fabric—housing stock. Each of the defining elements of ghetto (AAUEs) operates as both positive and negative factors for the community. Even the socio-atmospheric boundary of high crime serves to impede the consumptive machine of cultural assimilation and erasure. As some criminal enterprises of drugs, gambling, and the sex trade morally erode the community, they, along with un-licensed street vendors and crafts people who operate without paying taxes, also fill the huge economic void necessary to squeak out the merest pittance of existence. The final element of the community has many subcomponents, but can generally be classified as the institutions of the ghetto. These institutions are constants within their communities, although, like the ghetto they occupy, service, support and are supported by, they too are often unstable. Economic challenges, infrastructural decay, and the aggressive environment they exist within threaten them. These institutions include: community centers/cultural centers, churches (including storefront churches), schools, social aid clubs, museums, and businesses.

DWELLING IN THE AMERICAN GHETTO

From food to textiles to landscapes, African American culture has had to make do with the scraps, residual, and refuse of the empowered European Americans and the constant recycling of their own materials. This occurred on the plantation during slavery, it occurred on the share-cropping farms during Reconstruction, and during the segregation era. This is to say that if one cultural factor has been consistent in African American culture, it is the act of *surviving* by "making do" with what one has. This is the well-spring from which African American music modes were cultivated.

Making do, in an African manner, with the instruments that were available. Spirituals and Gospel music were born, Ragtime, Jazz, the Blues, Rock and Roll and Soul, Funk and Hip-Hop. Making do with food scraps produced "soul food" and the reuse of cloths produced African American quilts. The city is no different. Once again the culture has been allowed to squat in the refuse of the majority culture and African American people *make do* with the unwanted space of society. Once again, Treme presents powerful examples of how residual space is culturally appropriated and used like an orchestral instrument in the hands of a jazz musician. As a primordial ghetto, Treme is a prototype in understanding morphological elements of most other AAUEs but it is also a place where the community maintains a high level of African diasporic aesthetic in the modes of dwelling/use of

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the urban environment—from the African-inspired social-aid and pleasure clubs; Mardi Gras Indians who continue traditions of African secret societies; to the tradition of funeral rites being carried out in a jubilant celebration of song and dance in the public realm. Each of these cultural institutions engages in the periodic event of "second line" parades of which Treme, New Orleans is famous. For these festive events the spaces of residential side streets instantaneously become a party, a dance hall, a bar, a market, and parade ground. The space known as "Under the Bridge" (a stretch of the I-10 highway, which destroyed Treme's economic corridor) becomes activated. It is transformed into a concert/ dance hall of the highest order.

"The Ghetto" is comprised of the old mundane urban fabric of cities, pitted with voids and physical decay; ruptured by infrastructure and residual space left by unresolved urban planning. It has been a space of containment, oppression, poverty, and crime. As the collective cultural loci of the African American culture "the ghetto" has also been a place of cultivation, enrichment, refuge, resistance, revolution, and memory. Urban flight and crime, state and federal infrastructure programs, and gentrification lay siege upon these districts, causing them to be in a perpetual state of both physical and existential crisis, yet, the people continue to dwell. They live what Henri Lefebvre has termed the "everyday life." Life in the ghetto is such that one negotiates and navigates the complex set of circumstances. It is an improvisational and reactionary way of life. This is not to say that those who live in the ghetto do not develop life plans, but it is to acknowledge that spatial situations and circumstance sometimes affect those long-term plans. This paper is the precursor to the development of tactics, strategies, and projects for the evolution of the African American urban enclave. To understand the past and the conditions of that formed these areas can inform future development that embraces the community as opposed to breaking the community. ◆

ENDNOTES

1. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* translated by William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), pp43-44
2. Zukin, S. (1998), How 'Bad' Is It?: Institutions and Intentions in the Study of the American Ghetto. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 22: pp.513. Although Zurkin's essay focuses on the distinction between a racial ghetto and an ethnic ghetto many of the references in this text can be inferred from her clear and thorough discourse on the topic of the American-Ghetto.
3. U.S. Census Bureau(2010 Metropolitan Demographics).
4. This essay operates within the binary opposition of "The Ghetto or "not the Ghetto," choosing a position deeply entrenched in a conception of pro "the ghetto" that exposes and exploits its' potential as a place of cultural memory and transformation.
5. Zukin, S. (1998), How 'Bad' Is It?: Institutions and Intentions in the Study of the American Ghetto. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 22: pp.511-521.
6. *The Ghetto of the Lagoon: A guide to the history and art of the Venetian Ghetto*. Translated by Roberto Matteoda. 1987-2000.
7. Zukin, S. (1998), How 'Bad' Is It?: Institutions and Intentions in the Study of the American Ghetto. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 22: pp.511-521.
8. The Ghetto is a cultural spatial construct that is created to separate the haves from the have-nots, the desirable from the undesirable "other". The Willie "Lynch - ion" systemic program operates at peak efficiency within the ghetto, making those who live outside, fear the place and most of those who live within to fear and despise it.
9. The type of ownership that is referred to as "being theirs" is not the type granted by government or market ownership, but the type that exists because it is part of that which informs the socio-cultural make-up of a person. It is an ownership that can only be removed through the complete loss of environmental memory. Thus the space of the ghetto, the environment belongs to those who live there. "You can take the person out of the ghetto, but you can't take the ghetto out of the person".
10. Zukin, S. (1998), How 'Bad' Is It?: Institutions and Intentions in the Study of the American Ghetto. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 22: pp.513.
11. Crutcher Jr., Michael. *Treme: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood* (Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation). Athens GA. University of Georgia Press. 2010.
12. Ibid.