Architecture + Geography: Working Notes on "Place Matters"

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Introduction

In recent years, critical theory in the fields of architecture, cultural geography, ecology and cultural anthropology, among others, has expanded, creating large areas of overlap. Increasingly, social scientist use architecture as a lens to theorize on spatial knowledge and the construction of identity, and architects increasingly turn to social scientists for hints on how to think about architecture "before it happens." Henry Lefebvre's writings on the "production of space" have underlined the fluctuating character of spatial meaning; space is constructed and its meaning shifts.[1] Social historian Michel de Certeau describes the way that space is "practiced" by inhabitants once the architect has left the scene, by diverting intended uses, through spatial amendments and the appropriations that inevitably take place during the act of inhabiting. Philippe Boudon's critical work on Le Corbusier's housing project and his negative assessment of Pessac, is yet another work read as much by architects as by social scientists.[2]

Architects are fascinated with projects, or, buildings as future realizations of ideas. For the geographer, reader of the landscape, the built world stands as an irrefutable text that evidences a past; it is *fait accompli*. We posed the question: can the confluence of architecture and geography assist us in develop-

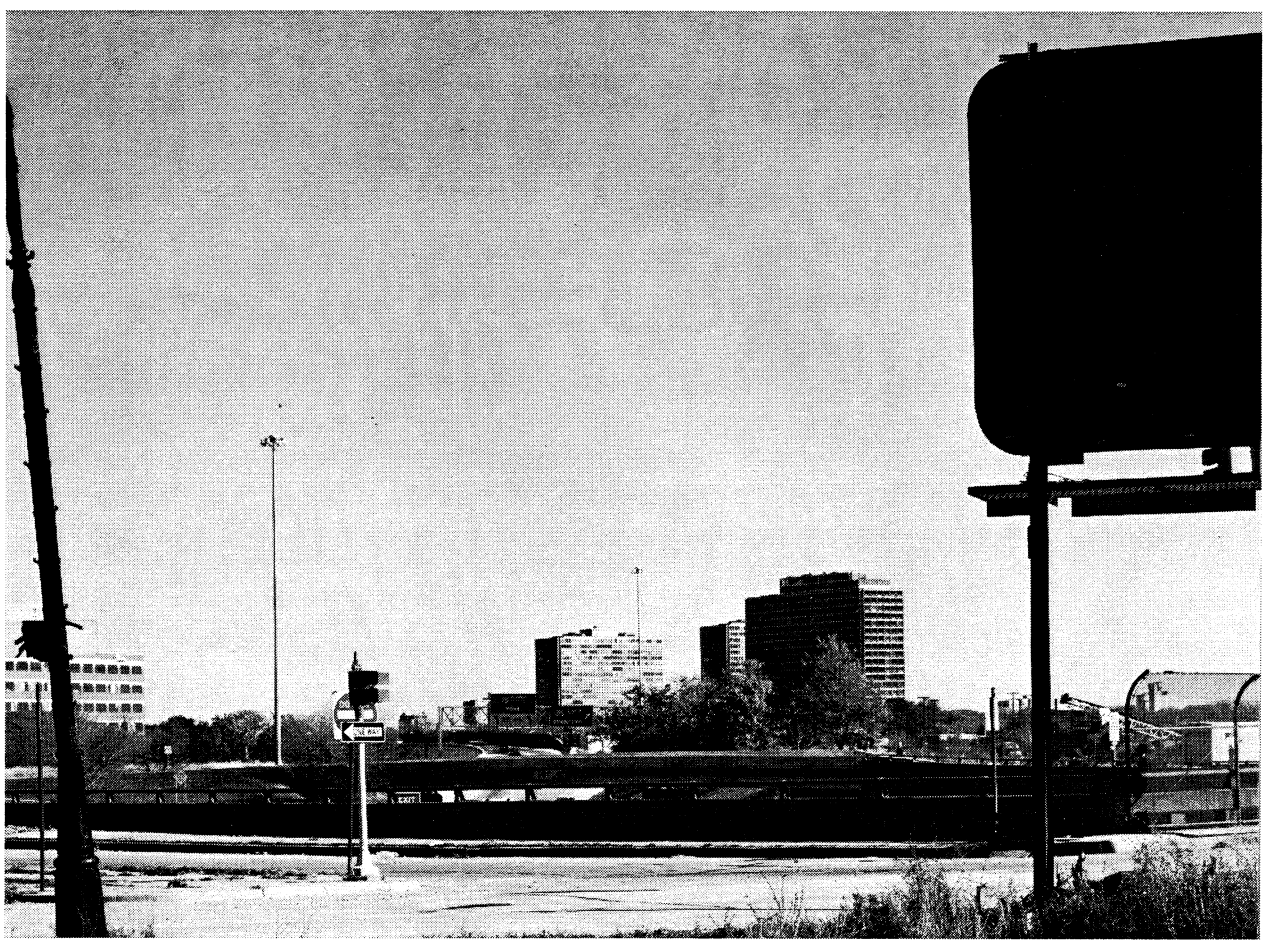


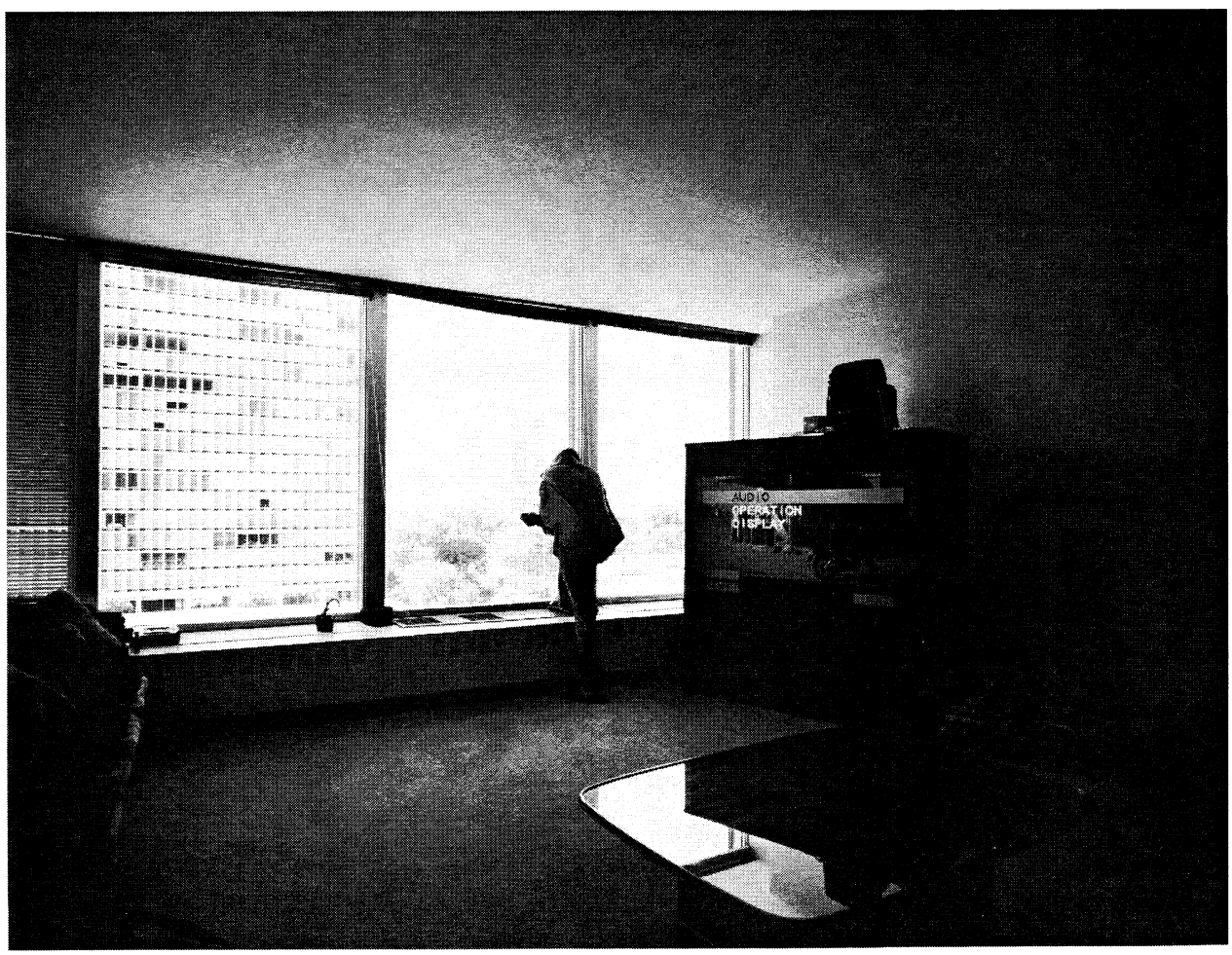
Fig. 1. Lafayette Park, Urban Context[3]

ing methods for a more comprehensive study place? I joined a cultural geographer to explore this approach in a course taught at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture in the winter term of 1999. Our common point of departure was the basic precept of phenomenology that body, building, and world are intertwined as expressions of human knowledge. The story of this class is a venue to discuss broader questions of the construction of spatial knowledge and identity. By standing at the intersection of architecture and geography, this course also illuminated the specificity of each field, and even, certain points of deep opposition.

Collaborative Course in Architecture and Geography: Description

Traditionally taught as a field-based architectural analysis class aiming to sharpen architecture students' critical observational skills, this course was reoriented to examine the meeting point of architecture and geography. Previously, the course had focussed on local architectural artifacts as autonomous constructions. Here, the to•1c was expanded to the larger urban and social fabric. The goal of this course was to learn to involve both the micro-scale of the architectural artifact (building and architectonics) and the macro-scale of the city (urban configurations and patterns) in the hermeneutic process. A central theme to both fields was relational thinking.

The course was made possible by a series of guest lectures by a professor of cultural geography, Dr. Jean-François Staszak.[4] We decided to shift the class's object of study from individual buildings to building *ensembles*. Eero Saarinen's G.M. Tech Center and other local urban complexes were examined during the course. The focus was on Mies van der Rohe's residential district of Lafayette Park. The modernist housing landscape seemed a fortuitously rich topic for both an architect and a ge-



ographer. Set in close proximity to the central business district and severed from it by an expressway that connects the downtown to the distant suburbs, Lafayette Park possesses a complex site plan and a powerful location in the city. It is the only work by Mies, a pivotal figure of the modern movement. It is his largest realized residential district anywhere.

The course, entitled *Place Matters: Experiences and Studies of Our Built World,* exposed students to methods of analysis at the urban scale, while unfolding tools of architectural analysis, observation and description. Students were assigned a case study of one household in Lafayette Park. Their mandate was to document the physical place (apartment, townhouse or courtyard house) as well as the life of the person dwelling there. Students measured, photographed, and filmed dwellings, in addition to interviewing inhabitants. During the interview process, inhabitants were asked to draw a mental map of their dwellings and one of the "city they live in."[5] Ultimately, through various kinds of notations, we hoped to construct a deeper understanding of Lafayette Park, as both urban and human landscape, and to understand it in its relationship to Detroit and the metropolitan region. Students were exposed to "the other side of architecture," architecture as received by the resident.

Relational Thinking

The interdisciplinary approach seemed to lend itself to the consideration of the architectural site plan: as sketch, as drawing, as diagram, as notation, and as idea. There were challenges. The idiosyncrasies of architectonic language, which are of no interest to the geographer and which endlessly fascinate the architect, needed here to be considered in a new way. Was it possible to hope that a specific miesian detail inflect the experience of space and the relationship of the dwelling to the city/ world, or was such faith in architecture only wishful thinking? A by-product of this class, one perhaps more appreciable by the instructors than the students, was a reflection on the respective natures of architecture and geography. Contrasts between the two fields, in terms of their relationship to time, in terms of degrees of willfulness, and in terms of how they wish to affect humans, emerged with increasing clarity at the end of the course. Finally, reflections on Modernism as a language for human habitat were put forth, from the contrasting vantage points of architecture and geography.

Architects are taught to consider the site relationally. Design teachers attempt to instill the belief that a building does not "stop at the lot lines." This discussion is often a formal one dealing with surface aspects of contextualism. A smaller but important architectural voice considers the relational aspect of architecture through questions of sustainability, and scales of local economies. However meritous their architecture, the cultural geographer systematically wishes to look at buildings as elements of a landscape of influences; culture, collective dreams, economic and physical forces, mental constructs.

Architecture *Before:* Visit of a Building Before Occupancy

In order to consider the question of architectural intention and inhabitation/ appropriation, the class first visited a building at the point of completion, two weeks before occupancy. It was a small office building in the suburb of Dearborn designed by an accomplished architect.[6] The site plan was intriguing: the building was u-shaped, its rear facade tightly wrapping around an existing house, with a narrow footpath between them. Decidedly modernist in language, its internal spaces were highly determined: six foot high partition walls were built-in-place rather than moveable. At the entry of each station, partition walls folded at a right angles, creating an enclave for filing cabinets. The long narrow stations each featured a small punched window. All was painted white. It was quiet, elegant, ordered. After visiting the building, students offered interpretations and suggestions on the building's program and client. As the conversation evolved and ideas circulated, it was concluded that it was an office building intended to be rented out in four suites; that the owner would occupy the one containing the narrow stations ("since it was the most complete, it must be the owner's"), and that this was an accountants' office, because the long narrow stations seemed to imply a type of work that was done in isolation. All of the students' conclusions were in fact correct. As for the strange courtyard in the rear that was almost entirely filled by an old house, the students correctly surmised that the owner had formerly conducted his business from his house, and that he had needed the house until the new building was ready, and that this was why the architect had designed around it. One student advanced that the house would soon be torn down. This was also true.

Thus, a group of astute students was able to "read" a building before it was inhabited. It was perhaps not surprising that upper level architecture students, informed with common sense and an ability to read spaces and arrangements, were able to do so. I was nonetheless impressed. What remained unknowable to all of us was how the space would be appropriated. Would it be "practiced" as the architect and client imagined? Would the distance between partition walls prove a happy one? Would the suggestive platformed enclave (intended for filing cabinets) be recognized and accepted without resistance? Returning now to Lafayette Park, might it be possible to access a deeper understanding of Mies's architectural language, of spatial arrangements, of modernism in general, by carefully examining the dwellings after they have been moved into?

A Building *After:* Lafayette Park, Detroit.

Lafayette Park is now forty years old. The modernist residential district located immediately to the East of Detroit's Central Business District has had in interesting relationship to the city and to the suburbs. It was intended to deter suburban expansion when it was built, and to offer the conveniences and healthful

conditions promised in the suburbs. Lafayette Park occupies 193 acres and consists of three high-rise towers, twenty-one low-rise townhouse buildings, and parkland. Its size and the variety of housing types offer a rich terrain of study. The austere architectural language of the glass-clad buildings is an added element of interest here: human habitation and gestures of appropriation are all the more clearly legible against such a backdrop. Lafayette Park is also one of the city's most vibrant neighborhoods, as well as one of the most socially and economically integrated ones. It is nested between a railway and an expressway trench, and is the innermost residential district with relation to the downtown. Is its exterior geography — its siting and its site plan — related to the interior geographies of the dwellings? What is the nature of the relationship between these two geographies?

Personal Knowledge, Spatial Knowledge

> *To approach inhabitation in this way means to be able no longer to make such a radical distinction between flesh and matter, between bodies and mere things. Bodily existence floods over into things, appropriates them, infuses them with the breath of life, draws them into the sphere of daily projects and concerns. A fully inhabited world is at the same time also a fully embodied world.7*

The course was built on the premise that personal knowledge is fundamentally spatial, and that individuals construct identity through a negotiation with dwelling and territory. Phenomenology has long related body, house, and world, elevating embodied knowledge above mathematical thinking as privileged tool for knowing the world. It was there that a common ground was initially formulated between the two fields. A dwelling in an urban context contains knowledge about both the person and the manner they look at the world around them: its internal geography is always in some way mapped upon the larger geography of the city. Beyond attesting to recurring frictions between architectural vision and inhabitational preference, what can be called "breaches" — furniture placed *against* the walls in a modernist house for example — have the potential to reveal personal habits, spatial knowledge learned in previous dwellings, even values. This course proposed that these also had the potential to reflect deeper attitudes toward broader urban and social contexts. In the case of a miesian residential building, it could be argued that breaches uncovered deeper truths about humans' relationship to order.

Miesian order is understood more clearly when it is confronted by the necessities of dwelling, personal possessions, storage, clutter. From the architect's standpoint, the relationship between the severity of the architecture and the non-modernist furniture that tends to fill the homes at Lafayette Park is often curious. In contrast, the geographer tends to feel vindicated: "the inhabitant managed to warm up the architecture: you see how wrong Mies was." In some dwellings, the rarefied spaces of Mies's architecture and the grid's unrelenting presence were challenged by too many belongings, clutter, and over-stuffed furniture. We are familiar with this conflict and with the critique of miesian architecture as language for a larger project for mass housing. Inside the grid, the disarray of our own lives is likely to be made more obvious; for is not the space inside a grid "as perfect, meticulous, and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived, and in a sketchy state"?[8] These questions could only be broached through field research and interviews of people who live inside Mies's gridded dwellings at Lafayette Park.

Lafayette Park: Case Studies of Households

The question for the students was whether glass boxes had the capacity to extend embodied life harmoniously, to be "enabling matrices" for life, as Rem Koolhass would say, or whether they interfered with comfort. The critique of miesian architecture as alienating, inhuman, overly corporate, is pervasive. This class aimed to set up a questioning, although not necessarily a refutation, of the overly schematic construction of that critique using a complex process of observation and analysis. Students were asked to interview members of their assigned household over the course of several interviews spaced throughout the term. They learned techniques used in the social sciences to ask questions in a way that encouraged free-flowing conversation avoiding fear of judgement. Part of the interview process included the drawing of mental maps in order to indicate how the residents experience and remember the architecture. Mental maps' content, the unmeasurable part of architecture, was compared to measured drawings of the spaces in order to understand personal perceptions, spatial understanding, and preferences. Students interpreted both what was present on the map and what was left out. Omissions, errors and corrections often contain more valuable insights than do visible markings. In the high-rise towers, did the mental map include the corridor? How was the curtain wall conveyed? In the townhouses, were adjacent units depicted or did the drawing end at the party wall? How were dwellings represented in relation to the exterior, to the streets, to the city? Mental maps of the city were also drawn. There, it was possible to begin to see how much knowledge of the city residents of Lafayette Park possessed: was Detroit understood as a series of freeways leading to specific destinations (a workplace, an institution), or did it contain a wealth of landmarks and places? How did Lafayette Park appear on these depictions? These maps were then compared to mental maps of the dwellings drawn by the same person. This allowed students interpret a resident's relationship to their dwelling and to the city.

In the background of the course, conversations illuminated the fundamental premise. A common point of departure for architects is that architecture can contribute to the cultural elevation and development of its inhabitants. For geographers by contrast, the more common approach is that other forces will inevitably overpower architecture's influence and people's habits and preferences reassert themselves in spite of the architecture, and therefore the architect's vision is necessarily tainted with

arrogance. Dr. Staszak confessed: "There is always the odd student who says to me: the apartment is arranged this way: and so? This has nothing to do with the city or with culture. It doesn't *mean* anything." The resolution of this discussion was beyond the scope of the course. Suffice it to say that the students were compelled to recognize that analysis implies judgements and therefore they must carefully consider their premises.

Some Conclusions

During the case studies of Lafayette Park households, students confessed to having had the sense that a kind of psychoanalysis of the person was taking place during the mental map and interview sessions. Undoubtedly, to a degree, it was, and the potential for discomfort was real. Generally though, Lafayette Park has enjoyed a positive reputation as "alternative" neighborhood in Detroit, or even, a place "for thinking minds" as one resident put it, since its early days. Residents tended to take pleasure in disclosing their values and preferences, because they were self-consciously proud of them. Students in turn overwhelmingly enjoyed their research experience. Some stated feeling drawn closer to their field as a result of it.

The experience of looking at a building after it has been inhabited, practiced, diverted or even subverted, expands traditional architectural education in several valuable ways. The act of measuring the difference between a mental map and a dimensionned plan or city map unavoidably instills a sense of architecture's lived dimension. The geographer's standpoint implies a kind of deficiency of architecture: because the dream of the architect can never hope to be that of all inhabitants — and this is especially true in a housing development — one could conclude the failure of architecture at the outset. This sense of implied failure led the students of this class to reconsider design approaches and the "hero architect" construct.

The students' research overwhelmingly revealed a positive assessment of the miesian home, especially the low-rise townhouses. As for the tenants of the rental high-rise towers who were interviewed during this class, their complaints were not so much with Mies's dream as with aging mechanical systems, the management, and the rental rates. We were not able to determine, for example, why one tenant believed the residents of the East Tower die sooner than those in the West. While some described a greater sense of friction with the grid and glass curtain walls, as many described their apartment and view with jubilation. We were left to wonder if it was still possible for the architect to speculate about a building that no one would feel the need to divert from.

The optimistic plans of the architect and the "disinterested"[9] eye of the geographer addressed the built world from opposing angles. The built world's double relationship with time was evident in many of the observations made by tenants interviewed at Lafayette Park. Residents often knew of its architect, and spoke of Mies's ideas and intentions as they understood them. Sometimes this was done critically with remarks such as "if he had it his way, we wouldn't have kitchens or washrooms at all, they're so small." Other times comments affirmed the architecture: "you see, he gave us all this light; he didn't want us to put furniture against the walls, and the paintings look so beautiful here," or "he was enlightened," "he was spiritual."[10] As architects, the experience of studying Lafayette Park as both promise and as evidence was surprisingly affirming. The project stands for the promise of modernism which many claim was broken, and yet as given, it more than survives the criticisms brought against it.

Student Reports: Some Excerpts

1. Single Man Residing in a Townhouse:

On my first interview with Mr. M, I was surprised by how knowledgeable he was about art and architecture. R. knew quite a bit about the famous architect Mies van der Rohe... My interview with R.M. was truly one of the most interesting things I have done in school because it opened my eyes to how interesting architecture can be to someone who is not an architect... When I asked him to draw a mental map of his apartment he drew the view out the window. This confused me because he was so knowledgeable about architecture (and yet he drew a view rather than a plan). The only conclusion I could come up with was that he somehow felt that the outdoors were a part of his townhouse. I found it interesting how well he knew the city of Detroit. I gathered from his map that he knew the city by streets and roads, not by landmarks.[11]

2. Couple Residing in a Pavilion Apartment:

She is from Detroit and most of her family lives on the East Side of Detroit. She has two children who live with their father but come to visit. She takes her son to Lafayette Park. Her mental map of the park gave a clear knowledge of the Pavilion swimming pool, which she frequents, but no knowledge of the pool that divides the Towers...The three mental maps she drew of the apartment show her perceptions of a small kitchen, small bath and closets and a long chunky entry way leading into the huge open living space...He chose the apartment for the view, the downtown, and he continues to like the apartment. She could do without it and has tried everything to make it feel like home. The other apartment she would like to move into is "modern, yet it has enough little details already in it to make it feel like home."... She pulls the couch back and turns it into a bed. He sleeps there, on the floor. (one on one contact with Mies.)[12]

3. Couple Residing in a Townhouse:

In 1978 the F's decided that it was time to move to the city. Their son is a landscape architect in Cape Cod and he told them that they had to move to Lafayette Park. Their apartment has a larger living room and a smaller dining room than the rest.[13] For that reason, they had to have a special dining room table made...The sun also faded the whole dwelling and destroyed the drapes. By the time the F.'s replaced them, they were brittle to the touch...The F.'s really love living in their Lafayette Park townhouse. They thought that they would feel like they were

being watched, but they do not feel that way. Mr. F. feels like he's living in a tent, and he likes that idea. Mrs. F. does not think about being in the windows, she just enjoys being able to watch the world through them, from their living room...They want to stay in their townhouse in Lafayette Park until they die. They consider their home, the complex, and all of Lafayette Park to be the perfect living environment.[14]

NOTES:

1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991)

2 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1984) and Philippe Boudon, *Lived-In Architecture: Le Corbusier's Pessac Revisited*. Trans. Onn, (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1972).

3 Photographs by author.

4 Dr. Jean-François Staszak, *Institut Universitaire de France*, is the author of several books on the construction of geographical knowledge. After visiting Detroit in 1997, Dr. Staszak became fascinated with the city of Detroit. A series of collaborations have taken place since then.

5 The term to use was a topic of debate: by asking the person to draw the "city they live in" we hoped to keep the question sufficiently open so that more revealing information about urban perceptions could emerge. Would the person, for example, draw the suburbs or the downtown? We referred here to R. M. Downs and D. Stea, *Maps and minds. Reflections on cognitive mapping*. (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1977). See also Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), and finally A. Kornhauser, *Detroit as the People See it. A Survey of Attitudes in an Industrial City*. (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1952).

6 The architect of this building was Detroit architect James Cardoza. A visit of the building at the end of the term was conducted by students individually, to observe how it was occupied.

7 Bernd Jager, "Body, House and City," in Seamon and Mugerauer, *Dwelling, Place, and Environment. Toward a Phenomenology of Person and World*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

8 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." This essay is reprinted in Ockman, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*. (New York: Columbia Press, 1993).

9 Although one could claim that urban geography simply reads the landscape without ever judging it, its readings are able to impact urban planning.

10 Interviews with tenants by author, 1998-9.

11 Antonio Derricks, Term Paper for course *Place Matters*, University of Detroit Mercy (U.D.M) School of Architecture, 1999.

12 Maria Messina, Term Paper for course *Place Matters*, U.D.M. School of Architecture, 1999.

13 A change was made to Mies's plans on the last units built at Lafayette Park. The developer shifted the core to give the units larger living rooms. Dining rooms are smaller as a consequence.

14 Bronwyn Reid, Term Paper for course *Place Matters*, U.D.M. School of Architecture, 1999.