

Duality and Invisibility: The Space of Race and Memory in the Urbanism of the American South

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Ask your wife to take you around the gin mills and the barber shops and the juke joints and the churches, Brother. Yes, and the beauty parlors on Saturdays when they're frying hair. A whole unrecorded history is spoken then, Brother.

- Ralph Ellison,
The Invisible Man

In his essay, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," Cornell West argues that the late 20th century cultural worker (the architect, the writer, the artist) must face a critical challenge "To comprehend the historical representations of self within the evolving construction of history, politics, and culture."¹ It is in light of this challenge that this paper will explore the idea of the American city as a cultural artifact; examine the dominant and marginalized cultures which form the city, and investigate alternative readings of the fabric of the American city by examining the issues of site, form, culture, and memory as they pertain to the spatiality of culture and to the construction of "place" within the urban landscape.

Within this proposition lies the idea that place is codified by the relationship of form and space to a series of social, political, and cultural forces which historically have shaped the form of any given city. The fabric and form of the city function as a repository for the histories and the "memories" of various cultures, and these memories are recounted through narratives which help to define the cultural landscape of city. In examining the relationship between race and urban form this paper also proposes to examine the concept of spatial memory as a means to understanding the imprint which black culture has left upon the physical form of the city.

While issues of race and its effect upon the spatiality of history and memory are present throughout America, the American South is a particularly interesting field of inquiry because of the historical and contemporary relationship which exists between black and white cultures. It is significant that within this region lies sites (cities) seminal to understanding the evolution of the American Civil Rights Movement and the social, political, and cultural transforma-

tions which emerged from it. The legacy of the informal traditions and the formal statutory separation of black and white cultures promoted an urbanism of duality and of invisibility.

Using Selma, Alabama, as a model, the paper will examine the construction of social, political, and cultural space relative to the issue of race and memory. Central to this examination is the idea that the fabric of Selma and other similar urban environments in the South provided for an urbanism of duality, where one can perceive the existence of not one but two "cities." One, the white city, was the city of majority culture, was highly visible. Its political, social, and cultural spaces were derived from the analogous components of urban morphology. The other, the black city, which contained a set of political, social, and cultural spaces not derived from analogous elements of urban form, was largely invisible. In a comparative examination of each of these "cities" the paper will discuss the ideas of duality and invisibility as they may be discerned within the physical, social, and cultural structures of Selma.

It can be argued that the challenge of the late twentieth-century American architect/urbanist is to be able to discern the fragments which are "sites of memory" and from them "build" the "mnemonic city" by creating those interventions which increase their visibility. Legibly, these fragments constitute the basis for the mnemonic city, a city of memory. This paper assumes an interdisciplinary approach to the re-reading of public space in American cities, integrating the disciplines of urban design, architecture, landscape architecture, and preservation, and assumes that such a strategy is critical to developing a consideration of American urbanism.

NOTES

¹ West, Cornell, *Keeping Faith Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge Press, 1993), "Cultural Politics of Difference," p. 5.

Editor's note: The full text of this paper was not available at the time of publication.