

Jazzspace: A Provisional Report on the Production of Existential Place Identity

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This paper is not so much concerned with jazz music, per se, as it is with the extraordinary creative potencies in the processes of its production; processes that are at once individual and shared, palpable and ephemeral, critical and affirming.

The paper itself is an attempt to extract some useful implication from a modest illumination of what I call *Jazzspace*; that particular aspect of live, ensemble, jazz performance that comprises the collective emplacement of identity. This is what architect-theorist Norberg-Schulz and geographer Edward Relph characterize as *existential place identity*; the collective apprehension of an identity reinforcing connection to place that results when shared memories of significant actions and shared perceptions of spatial location conjoin.

The imagining of such a possibility is delayed by two critical appositions regarding the question of place identification itself. One position admonishes us to relinquish the support of unhealthy, nostalgic longings for stable place identity and to concern ourselves with how more therapeutic symbolic resists might be conceived.

The opposing argument sees the support of place identity as a disciplinary obligation deeply embedded in the ancient western triadic architectural imperative.

I intend an alternative position, one that momentarily extracts the question of place identity from issues of disciplinary obligation by positing the following: built form is really not the primary issue in identity emplacement. Rather, place identity is most profoundly considered with respect to Relph's conception of *place as process*; an accumulating consequence of human social dwelling wherein built form is a significant, but non-determinant participant. This is identity emplacement as vitally creative social actions, the examination of which holds the promise of disclosing powerful alternative models for creative collective action, including acts of architectural production.

I have selected Jazzspace as a locus of identity emplacement because it appears to be such a powerful generator of collective connection. It coalesces from ritualized transactions wherein individual intention are subsumed within acts

of common purpose that transcend temporal as well as geographical dislocation. And finally, through all of this, it aggregates collective agreements and understandings whereby identity reinforcing memories are spatially located and culturally preserved.

Make no mistake, I am not attempting the construction of some luminous metaphor. I am speaking of embodied, perceptual spatial experience. *Jazzspace* is "right-now-space," redolent of perfume, sweat and anticipation. This is the sound-space of sibilant frictions of nylon hose under small, close packed tables and the discreet, liquid tin-tinnabulations of cocktail shakers. It is body space; bent over, side-swaying, hand-clapping, finger-snapping, foot-stomping, hip-shaking space. It is talk space, signifying, dark and sensuous. And it is all of this densely social space before it is ever specifically music-space.

Indeed, jazz clubs locate complex intersections of historical, social, cultural, and economic streams that precede and exceed the objects of present performance and may be seen as the sources of the exceptional productivity in performance rituals. Jazz clubs operate on the basis of a predictable public patronage and while the musical form may be properly seen as an African-American cultural expression, historically neither jazz clubs nor jazz musicians have received their sole support from African American populations. They have, in fact, for many years, survived on the basis of cross-cultural patronage, a fact that is significant here because it reveals a persistent, overriding perception of benefit, not only in the musical play, but also in the participation in and identification with, what Paul Berliner characterizes as "jazz culture."

Improvisation constructs ambiguity and jazz play, being largely determined by its improvisational operations, is grounded in an ambiguity sustained by an insistent, critical deviance from the normative. In this regard, the social construction of Jazzspace has, of necessity, patterned the operation of its defining activity in locating reductions of social taboo that have facilitated the disclosure of attitudes and values that might otherwise have remained encased in the respective cultural memories of a diverse club patronage.

While none of these social operations can be exclusively

assigned to any venue, it appears that in live jazz performance the symbolic transfers in these operations acquire an enhanced potency, derived largely from three discreetly separable resistances that are deeply embedded in the call and response rituals and behavioral protocols of live jazz performance.

First, there is the resistance to compromising preoccupations with commercial success. Secondly, there is a resistance to conformity and predictability that comprises a central value in the production of the music, and locates a defining social imprimatur in jazz culture. The third resistance, which I will discuss more thoroughly further on, derives from the inherently ephemeral nature of live, improvised performance.

These resistances have deep historical and cultural grounds that have brought forward the exceptional tolerance of sustained ambiguity and the capacity for on-demand deviance that is the disciplinary and cultural inheritance of jazz musicians and patrons alike.

The form of Blues-based, improvisational jazz under consideration here, was invented in the 1930s and 40s, primarily, by young, Black, American males who launched their extraordinary project under the ambivalent gaze of a dominant Anglo culture that saw them as profoundly, threateningly "other".

Added to this was the fact that even within African-American society support for the music was not universal. There were many members of Black communities who viewed jazz culture as a profane, embarrassing, deviant, resistance to social strictures and moral imperatives that many Blacks, under the prosecutions of Anglo domination, had incorporated as their own cultural norms. And, of course, they were right.

None of this, however, changed the reality that the material and expressive advancement of the form required these musicians to place themselves under obligation to both Blacks and Whites. Thus, were the unique disciplinary resistances of jazz culture constructed out of the residual resources of two societies that both, although for sometimes differing reasons, directed repressive, but powerfully tempering pressures at their own brilliantly deviant progeny. From this complex, conflicted condition a sub-culture of musicians and fellow travelers emerge, rigorously selected by the demands of their shared creative project and the social realities of the times, that was as determinedly non-conformist as it was convinced of the worth of its innovations.

This resistance gave birth to the archetypal image of the jazz musician as purest musician-artist. Servicing this defining archetype demands the resistance to any intention, including the accumulation of personal wealth and the approval of jazz patrons themselves that might subvert the creative advancement of the form. To relinquish these resistive obligations is often seen within jazz culture, not only as a corruption of the form, but an ethical failure as well in that the jazz musician is expected to internalize these resistances as defining characteristics of personal being and as crucial aspects of improvisational intention.

An understanding of how these resistances inform performance rituals begins with an examination of what is known in jazz culture as "playing in the moment," that is, the spontaneous, continuous re-invention that features three essential characteristics, pre-figuration, duration, and improvisation.

Pre-figuration names the human propensity to anticipate what is beyond the current perceptual moment through the imaginative extrapolation of current perceptual experience.

Duration is the tendency for an acoustic event to persist in the imagination beyond the measured time of its sounding. These two phenomena act together to activate otherwise symbolically "empty" acoustic space "in-filling" such spaces with prefigured anticipations that are constructed on the basis of preceding acoustic events.

Improvisation, on the other hand, comprises the intended reduction in probability that the content of the present moment will have, in fact, conformed to prefigured expectations. The complex interactions between processes of pre-figuration, duration, and improvisation induce subjectively centered disjunction between what is expected and what is actually revealed. These disjunctive operations, which by themselves, demand uncommon levels of attention and interpretation also carry a persistent presence of ironic "surprise." All of this acts to engender the peculiarly seductive tensions in the apprehension of the performance and consequently, in the spatial ambiance of the performance place.

However, the means by which all of these symbolic referrals are accomplished persist only so long as the performance activity itself persists and no existing means of preservation can completely transfer the live performance experience across the spatial-temporal boundaries of the performance. Hence, the deeply poignant, "never, ever again" quality of the performance experience and the concomitant preciousness of the "moment of play."

The thematic objects in performance, though entirely ephemeral, are none the less, highly ritualized. Typically play begins with the ensemble presentation of melodic, rhythmic, and/or chordal structures, against which, ensuing improvisational iterations can be contrasted and compared. The improvised expansion the initial musical idea discloses the unlimited possibilities of development that were hidden within the apparently stable initial statement.

The constraining thematic structures of the music, thus weakened, are opened to pre-figurative speculation and the distinctive anticipative tensions of Jazzspace are brought into presence. Typically, the progressive dismantling of the initial theme varies directly with the response of the audience. The call of musicians and approbations of patrons spiral through crucial confirmations of agreement regarding the expressive authenticities in the performance. The emerging discursive form comprises a collectively constructed symbolic edifice that is stabilized by the extent to which it transfers illuminating referrals to the initial thematic offering.

The regression of this spiraling development towards the termination of play may reflect the musician's sense of artistically appropriate limits or a sensed diminution in audi-

ence response. In any event, this sensing of appropriate limits appears to almost never represent a purely autonomous decision. Thus, the cycles of call and response continuously test and re-affirm the tacit agreements that structure the full range of Jazzspace experience. Because the call and response cycles of a given performance can occur only one time, patrons and players are bound up in the joint production of a singular place experience, with respect to which, all others are made "forever outsiders." Participants are thus differentiated as a discreet collective so long as individual spatial memory last.

Jazzspace is slippery. The performance, with its deviant, incipient ambiguities, subject to the constant revising pressures of the improvisational tradition, cannot be held hostage to any enduring purpose beyond the advancement of its own expressive capacities; an aleatory object enduring on the strength its ability to continuously surprise. If pressed to far beyond this operation, it vanishes; the near perfect resistance to "repressive incursions" of any kind.

The result of all this is a certain sanctification of the activity that engenders Jazzspace with an extraordinary spatial intimacy that can move the attitudes of club patrons toward near reverence. In this sense, it is votive space where dispersive populations confirm shared values, understandings, and sensibilities that may be barely distinguishable within their otherwise normative experiences. Here, through ritualized practices, individual intentions may be at least momentarily displaced in favor of a transcendent collective creative motivation. Powerful, identity reinforcing memories are thus shared, existential intensities of collective place identification established, and a common world of dwelling is revealed.

Though the above description may not always mirror the conscious intentions of performance participants, the behavioral protocols that order club activity have remained relatively stable even within their wide geographic and temporal dispersions. The knowledge of and compliance with these "invisible" cultural sub-structures, confirmed and propagated through the call and response rituals have, over those same spatial and temporal dispersions, constituted the first order of Jazzspace insideness.

I began this paper with the speculation that the examinations of particularly creative social activity might offer the possibility of disclosing alternative models for various forms of collective action. I would like to conclude by offering some brief comments regarding what seems to me to be the more provocative implications that the production of Jazzspace has with respect to the dominant patterns in current architectural production.

Let me suggest that these implications come into their most meaningful focus when Jazzspace is seen, not just as possible metaphor for alternative visions of design education and practice, but as a critique of those practices.

Regarding design practice; it has been my experience that in most offices design activity is ordered by distributions of power that have virtually nothing to do with the salient issues in the design opportunity in question. Moreover, these pat-

terns of power tend to be fixed, not by practical necessity, but by attitudes about turf, social prestige, ego reinforcement, etc. By contrast, while improvisational jazz play is not immune to arbitrary intrusions of power, it is resistant to their reductive influences in two crucial ways.

Membership in jazz culture prescribes the acceptance of the artistic and ethical, principle that the creative potential in the present work is the preeminent issue with respect to which all other issues must be subordinated. This attitude is carried, not only within disciplinary structures, but is propagated through realms of practice as an article of faith that respects no person regardless of individual power of public approbation. The concrete procedures in the creative activity are structured to enforce this imperative. The system may not be infallible, but it, none-the-less, extremely effective because each individual who is allowed to significantly affect the creative process must be able to demonstrate three crucial capacities. The first is an ability to perceive and effectively act on significant creative potentials in the present moment of work. The second capacity is the willingness to support the advancement of the work toward the most effective eventual outcome. The third capacity is the willingness to sublimate individual ego and personal benefit to the first two potentials, even as they spontaneously present within the dynamics of evolving intention and chance.

All this, of course, requires the availability of an intellectual framework and disciplinary tradition about which each member is thoroughly informed and to which each member holds a disciplined, critical allegiance. Because, the choreographic potentials of ensemble jazz play can only be as effective as the least prepared player, each player must, then, come to the task already possessing a level of talent, virtuosity, and commitment that facilitates the elevation of play beyond what is simply adequate to levels of poetic expressive intensities.

The creative disclosures of Jazzspace involve the audience/client as an essential co-participant. The creative activity is understood as a player/patron transaction wherein a world of value and agreement is most effectively authenticated by the active, present participation of the client/patron, not in post-play approvals regardless of their form.

Jazz, even when aggressively pressing the boundaries of accepted precedent has always understood itself to a phenomena that is not only "against" but "of" present culture. Improvisational jazz extrapolates the blues and the blues has always been concerned with common, everyday experience. The cultural critiques of jazz, therefore, "push" from its grounding inside common experience even while it "pulls" from its position of critical resistance at the margins of social convention.

In my experience, this is in marked contrast to architectural culture which remains, for the most part, poised outside of common social reality perpetually waiting for a culturally challenged majority to "catch up" and "catch on" to the value in our disciplinary offerings.

Finally, the powerful resistances to external reduction in

the production of Jazzspace comprise deep cultural structures that are crucial to the very maintenance of the form and integral to the creation of the work. Spanish architect/critic Ignasi de Sola-Morales delineates a position for us that seeks to move architectural practice toward an effective, productive engagement with the Jazzspace creative imperative. He states the following:

only by means of a critical attitude toward reality is it possible for contemporary architecture to maintain a rigorous and nonconformist position. It is an attitude capable of distinguishing itself from trivial culture, from the perverse operations of market forces, toward which the only valid response is resistance.

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