

## Ef/Facing Racial Segregation--Understanding Culture: Transcending Boundaries in a Design Studio

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Incorporating the cultural aspects of architecture in an urban design studio creates the opportunity to investigate the politics of space—the interplay of power and place. It also challenges the supremacy of design as the sole evaluative arbiter of quality urban environments. It raises the question, “Why does design trump user-needs in the battle over built space?” In the world of design that has floated beneath the heady radar of Pritzker Prize winners, those who use and interact with the built environment have often been given no voice.<sup>1</sup> Even if the users have been considered in the design process of these award winners, the preponderance of evidence for awarding the prize has been heaped on the aesthetic qualities of the works and not on the extent to which they met user needs or were environmentally sound. The obverse of the Pritzker bronze medal reads “firmness, commodity, and delight” (a translation of the Vitruvian triad “*firmitas, utilitas* and *venustas*”) but it is “delight” or “grace,” sense of the original meaning that reigns supreme in architecture and fosters a blindness towards the people who use the spaces and places we create. Architects are visual thinkers, but people occupy real space. How to enable students to bridge that gap has become the goal of my studio.

The first time I taught an urban design studio in Kansas City in the spring of 2004, I was largely silenced by the formalistic focus of the students. During the previous (Fall 2003) semester, the students under the guidance of two practitioners took on the challenge of building over one of the many sunken highways that circle Kansas City’s south loop. They had no client and no intention beyond

creating visionary architecture—a tradition with deep roots in our field. They ultimately conceived the solution as a 3-dimensional moebius (möbius) strip meandering / wandering / projecting.



Figure 1. Urban intervention December 2003. The students created an enticing formal solution to connect the decimated, highway-riven landscape that characterized Kansas City in 2003, but they were unable to translate their vision into a viable proposal because they had no sense of the particularity of place or of the people involved.

itself/ through the city, parasitically attaching itself to existing and new buildings in a single *grande d rive*.

The moebius form transformed the freewheeling path created by an individual's random wanderings, as envisioned by Guy Debord and the members of the *Situationniste Internationale*, into a fixed conduit. The students appropriated the existing urban fabric and imposed their designs on it irrespective of user needs, the character of the particular site, or of any study of successful urban public spaces. Indeed their scheme did exactly what Mike Davis railed against in *City of Quartz*—it created privatized public space—the “publicly-financed private space” that simultaneously selects those with money and positions and excludes those lacking them.<sup>2</sup> The image of the project was the driving factor. The work was visionary. The images and the physical model of the white filigreed serpent against the dark gray painted base of the existing city and the burnished milky Plexiglas of the infill buildings were provocative and appealing—but narrowly so—as the video that accompanied them confirmed. The 3-D moebius strip was an endless array of extrusions lacking particularity (a cynical discursion on the globalized future of the public realm). The people on the street and their experience were irrelevant—and indeed they had no place in this paper architecture of the conceptual realm. Regardless, the images would publish well in design magazines and would not embarrass the budding designers in their careers—would even be a credit to them.

I was an invited guest at their mid-term and final reviews and amidst the unqualified praise for their plan I gently chided that their scheme negated rather than enhanced the social life of the city. But the students had no use for real users and contexts that were, anyway, too messy and indistinct to contemplate. Even the existing buildings were left unconsidered—they were simply the canvas on which to array their untested and un-testable design concepts. For the students it was much easier to design a futuristic scheme for the decimated urban environment that characterized Kansas City in 2003 than to question the politics that had created it or to question the residents, users and hangers-on of this blighted urban space for knowledge and inspiration.

The following semester in January 2004, I took over the studio and agreed to allow the students to participate in a 3-week design competition sponsored by the Young Architects' Forum to transform the Jones Store site in the heart of Kansas City's South Loop—the former commercial/retail hub—into a million square feet of mixed-use housing, commercial and retail—which given the limited site area, I soon realized, would translate into a high-rise solution. This site abutted the project that the students had worked on the previous semester and I thought it would afford them the opportunity to imbricate their visionary architecture onto reality. Plans of the existing buildings on the site were unavailable so it proved impossible to consider reusing them in any meaningful way. Students who had initially wanted to explore preserving the buildings thus abandoned the idea—a lesson in itself. The competition sponsors explained that the existing buildings were taken off the table because they were too contaminated (with asbestos), structurally inefficient, and occupied too much space (ironic in a city littered with underused parking lots and open space) to preserve. As anyone who has grappled with design parameters fully understands, design solutions are embedded in the framework of the program—in what those who set the program decide are within the realm of possibilities. Designers challenge the program through their proposals—competition winners have often demonstrated this—but usually on aesthetic rather than functional or political grounds.

The students rallied and my studio of nine, working in three teams, won two of the three top prizes awarded out of the dozens of submissions from multiple studios. I take no credit for this feat. It proved Garry Stevens' point illustrated in *The Favored Circle*—those who spearheaded the competition were among its judges (and had taught these students in the Fall of 2003). No wonder they recognized their values among the students' solutions. It's the old Pritzker Prize legacy, as Stevens has so clearly demonstrated.<sup>3</sup>—The definition of “greatness” is evaluated and recognized by both the recipients and benefactors of the same directed design education and philosophy and not by those who finally use the space and are subjected to its benefits and limitations.

What did the results of the YAF competition mean for the existing context of Kansas City? Not much. The buildings were slated for demolition and Kansas City foresaw any development on that site as complementing the proposed H&R Block Headquarters (now under construction) and Baltimore-based Cordish's "Entertainment District" that would culminate at a downtown arena (now in its final design phase). The rest of the semester the students were supposed to develop their ideas further but proved unequal to the task of grappling with the function and context of their proposals. They were clueless on how to effectively translate the sexy computer generated images into buildings in an urban context and were resistant to design suggestions and strategies.

Out of this context, at the start of my teaching career I tried to find a way for the design studio to serve the students as well as the residents of greater Kansas City in a more meaningful way. Now, barely two years into this process, the studio is starting to find its feet.

Introducing the concept of "culture" to an architectural design studio highlights the importance of designing for "the other"—their points of view, needs and tastes. The very slipperiness of the concept of culture as an analytical term opens the opportunity to highlight for students of architecture the precariousness of any position that does not plumb the depth of the "culture of the client" in all its multifarious forms and incarnations. It can also ensnare them in the trap of generalizing too broadly from specific case studies. Architects design for someone else. Buildings are not for a single homogenous client—but for many diverse people and often for society at large. If the architect and client are culturally similar they are in danger of forgetting that the other users and inhabitants of the built environment will differ in age, mobility, gender, income, ethnicity and religion, among many other distinguishing features. Each of these characteristics can give rise to different needs and perceptions that are easily overlooked if not explicitly sought out. If the client and architect have few overlapping characteristics it can lead to a different kind of blindness and facile solutions to complex needs.

Inculcating design students to the idea of listening to, observing, and documenting the needs of clients and end users can be explored through many avenues—a design project with a particular cultural focus such as an interpretive center to explore the legacy of an ethnic or cultural group or event; the design of housing that requires students to find "clients" to design for who are different from themselves in age, race, ethnic group and/or class; another method is to locate the project in a context where the students' investigations will reveal the particular cultural aspects of the project. Other methods could easily be enumerated. Regardless of the design problem, the process is complicated because students rarely recognize their own social and cultural biases in the way they see, understand and use space. They need to be reminded often to question their prejudices and to acknowledge explicitly how different people—especially non-architects—might read the same situation.

In the fall of 2004, I introduced a project that allowed social and cultural issues to emerge through the design process without explicitly underscoring the underlying goal of enhancing students' cultural awareness. As a recent transplant to the Midwest, I also wanted to use the studio as a vehicle to start to research the history and culture of Kansas City and to build ties to local communities and neighborhood associations. I wanted the project to provoke a thoughtful response from the students based on their analysis and careful study. The main project I devised was to link the historic Jazz District of 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine Streets with the emerging arts community in the Crossroads along 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Streets. The outer boundaries of the sites were almost a mile and a half apart but the light industrial buildings, empty lots, and raised highways at their inner boundaries included a more manageable area ¼ mile in length.

Numerous ethnic groups have contributed to the development of greater Kansas —Huron, French, Irish, German, English, African-American, Italian, Russian Jewish, Mexican, South Asian, to name only a few. Each of these groups has inscribed their communal and individual experiences onto the built environment and have been shaped by the housing and built environment that they inhabited whether they created them or not.

Those that followed further altered the built environment by adding to, destroying, effacing, and annotating it over time.

One of the most strongly imprinted landscapes in Kansas City marks the legacy of racial segregation—evident in both the physical condition of the neighborhoods and demographics of the area. Despite the lapse of more than thirty-five years since the passage of the Fair Housing Act, neighborhoods are still largely either European-American or African-American. As of the 2000 census, just over 12% of the population of Kansas City, Missouri proper is African-American—yet most of these live in areas that are over 98% African American. Similarly, Ward Parkway and Brookside neighborhoods to the south are over 95% white. These facts also translate into other inequities. For instance, in Kansas City Missouri 76% of White residents own their homes compared to only 50% of Blacks. But when you focus in on areas that are almost exclusively African-American (such as the area East of Troost Street and North of Brush Creek) only 21% of residents own their own home.<sup>4</sup> Income and educational levels yield similar results. The historic Jazz district was concentrated in the area from 12<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Streets and a few blocks east of Paseo Boulevards. African Americans originally selected the area around Vine as a better alternative than the more northern Belvedere neighborhood that appealed to Russian Jewish and Italian immigrants.<sup>5</sup> When housing preferences were reinforced through the imposition of Jim Crow policies that limited Black movement, the Vine area became the center of Black commerce, housing, and entertainment—and incredibly overcrowded, and lacking in public and private investment. Restrictive covenants on deeds prevented African Americans from settling in other areas of the city until the 1960s—and as the demographics underscore—and beyond. As wealthier Black families moved south and east, the area slowly crumbled through disinvestment and city policies. Highways cut the area off from downtown services and investment—Interstate 70 on the north along 14<sup>th</sup> Street and the Bruce R. Watkins Highway, Route 71 on the west. The latter highway was planned in the 1950s as a conduit to funnel residents from the south efficiently into downtown Kansas City and North Kansas City where the International Airport was built. The

abutting neighborhoods fought the highway for almost 15 years (from 1973-1987) before it was finally constructed. Advocates claimed that the “parkway” that was ultimately built was “more neighborhood friendly,”<sup>6</sup> but in truth it solidified the economic east-west dividing line south of 12<sup>th</sup> Street. Signs direct south-traveling commuters to the downtown sites, and to the airport but not to the Vine district.



Figure 2. Looking North over the Bruce R. Watkins highway from the 22<sup>nd</sup> street bridge. Completed in 2001, the highway has won an Excellence in Highway Design award in 2002, although it hardens the boundary between east and west.

The Crossroads sits directly west of the Jazz District but is separated from it by a wide strip of industrial buildings, Highway 71 (seen at the right edge of the map below), a power station, and empty lots. Two low underpasses at 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Streets are the only direct connections between the two sites. Since 1985, artists have slowly moved into the Crossroads—originally known as Leedy Town in honor of the first artist pioneers—occupying lofts and opening galleries and other small shops and businesses. On the first and third Fridays of the month galleries and arts events are opened to the public, which has brought new life to this area.

In 1997, the American Jazz and Negro League Museums were built along 18<sup>th</sup> Street in the Vine District and a number of other projects were planned although few have been realized. The few buildings in the Jazz district that are left from the earlier age are in danger of disappearing. The Jazz district is “invisible” to the city, rarely mentioned as an integral

part of downtown or as a tourist site. It is marginalized and "off the map" literally and figuratively. As Figure 3 illustrates although closer to the downtown core than Union Station or the Country Club Plaza it is portrayed an inset on tourist maps—its precise location seemingly unknown.

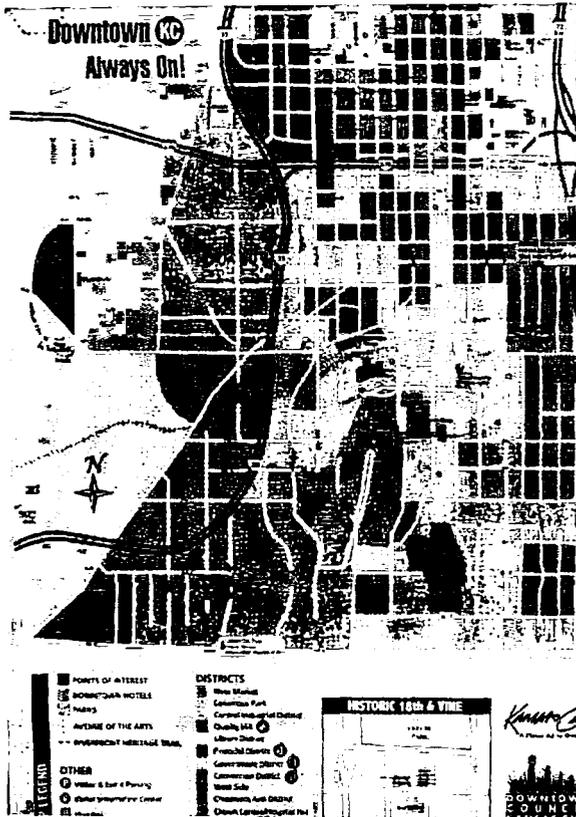


Figure 3. Map of Kansas City showing points of interest. Although directly to the east of the downtown loop, city maps showed the 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine district as an inset (seen at the south of the map) as if were remote from the rest of the city.

At the time I did not have sufficient community connections to facilitate input from local residents, as I would have preferred. Therefore student research was limited to observation, archival research, and mapping. However blindly, they found some measure of enlightenment.

Students found the concept of linking music and art appealing. Most of them were from the Greater Kansas City area, but none had ever visited the Vine Jazz district and only one had been to the Crossroads. They recognized their own biases about the area east of

Troost—the historic Black/White dividing line. They were all white suburban students who considered the area as "dangerous" from news reports and popular lore.<sup>7</sup> One of the students even wondered aloud when he noticed a sign for the Black Chamber of Commerce during our first walk between the two sites why "they would need their own Chamber." I suggested that he research that question and in his data gathering he stopped in at the Chamber and found out about its history and goals. Students also noticed the housing that extended north and east from the corner of Woodland and 18<sup>th</sup> Street and dismissed it as uninteresting because of its conventional design. But one of the students discovered that Parade Park Homes, as this development is called is a very successful cooperative low-income housing project with strict rules and a strong sense of identity.

In studying the history, demographics, and urban condition of the two sites, the rich and complex histories became palpable to the students. The Jazz district had been part of the Urban Renewal and Model Cities Program in the 1950s through the late 1960s and early 1970s. These programs worked against each other, promoting development while demolishing so much of the neighborhood fabric that businesses were reluctant to invest in the event that the site would change use or be demolished. This on top of the civil unrest that physically and psychologically injured the neighborhood in the 1960s and reinforced White fear of the site. Middle class and wealthy African Americans moved out as soon as they could leaving mostly the poorest and elderly residents behind.

Until artists had made inroads into it, the Crossroads did not have a distinct identity. It was the area between downtown to the North and, across the railroad tracks, Union Station to the south, composed of mostly low brick buildings sheltering small businesses and light manufacturing with much underused real estate. In mapping the neighborhoods students found few practical retail amenities in either although the Crossroads had more buildings in every category (commercial, retail, public and housing) than the jazz district.

In the design process students found that the problem of linking the two sites was not only an urban design problem, but a social one. In

achieving connections between the two sites, students considered the Bruce R. Watkins highway as the greatest physical challenge—too low to go under comfortably and too high to cross over easily. The greatest social problem from their view was the legacy of racial segregation. They acknowledged that most Whites were reluctant to venture east of Troost and tried to think of strategic ways to break down these long held mental barriers. Through their own experience they realized that the neighborhood was walk able and non-threatening. It needed more foot traffic and retail infrastructure to be viable. They queried their friends and community and explored the types of projects that might function as social mixers to bring a diverse group of people into closer proximity such as an art and music magnet school, a grocery store (there were none anywhere near either site) and a public transportation hub. The nearby community and recreational center on 16<sup>th</sup> Street was almost exclusively used by residents of the Vine Neighborhood but students thought that if they promoted the facility in the Crossroads neighborhood, they might lure these residents to take advantage of the convenient location and facilities—not for the sake of the facility but as a way of promoting community interaction. Crossroads residents are urban pioneers and open to breaking down barriers. Start with the easily converted and then let the process take its course.

Students also explored enlarging the connection across route 71—one pair grafted a light rail station to the side of the highway. Several groups suggested removing the highway and creating a European-style boulevard system at grade as advocated by Allan Jacobs.<sup>8</sup> One pair, who considered Troost Street an entrenched barrier, eliminated it and created a park flanked by housing in its place provoking a lively response from visiting jurors—could the symbolic removal of the divide enable the healing of the torn fabric or would it remain an unspoken void—enduring despite its absence?

In discussing the project with me later the urban planning professor Sheri Smith, who grew up in Parade Park Homes, said she felt she was hearing “my history through your eyes.” In her community, the jazz and Negro League history of the jazz district had a negative obverse side of racism, discrimination, and humiliation. It represented

a socio-economic divide, so why preserve it? Those who escaped the neighborhood in their teens never looked back and wanted to forget the problematic history of this place. She asked rhetorically, “Why not focus on another part of the history?” Who lived there before it became a restricted enclave? She was not advocating that the area be cleared but that its history needed to be understood from multiple points of view. In truth both sides have their blind spots and easy assumptions.

Kansas City recently celebrated the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great alto-sax musician, Charlie Parker (August 29, 1920 –March 5, 1955). Professor Smith in describing the event, mentioned the burial of Parker in a remote cemetery dedicated to “coloreds” outside of Kansas City because they were refused burial in local cemeteries, the poor state of his grave in a derelict part of town, and the frustrated attempt to relocate the grave—she described the cemetery as “hidden away” and unkempt, those who desired to move the grave as “outsiders” and those who refused as “family members” who were adhering to Parker’s wishes never to set foot in Kansas City again because of his poor treatment there.<sup>9</sup> But when I located the grave and visited it, I found the cemetery remote but not untended. The cemetery did lack an appropriate portal and funerary chapel. All the stones were flush to the ground to facilitate maintenance—except for Charlie Parker’s, which extended about 8” above grade. (Figure 4) Legends and myths nurture and bind communities. The desire to claim Charlie Parker as a favored Kansas City son by one group and an angered spurner of Kansas City’s history of racism on the other, underscores the conflict over representation in the public realm.

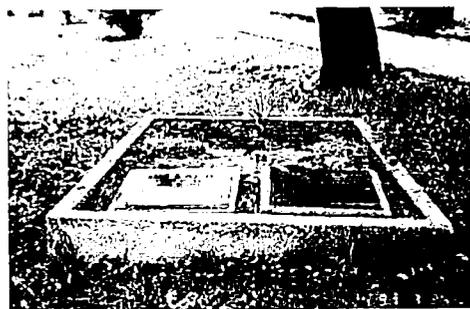


Figure 4a. Photo Take prior to the 1994 stone completion.



Figure 4b. The grave as it is in October 2005.

The great jazz alto-sax player, Charlie Parker's grave in Lincoln Cemetery in Blue Springs, Missouri outside of Kansas City. In 4a a photo taken prior to the 1994 stone completion, although it is dated 2001 and in 4b, the grave in October 2005. Charlie Parker was denied burial in Jim-Crow era Kansas City despite his status. Although the grave has been tended and upgraded, Charlie Parker's progeny refused to allow his exhumation to Kansas City quoting his wishes to forever remove himself from that place. Since Charlie Parker is the most important resident of this site, exhuming him would diminish the importance of the cemetery. The myth of the unkept burial ground cannot be substantiated.



Figure 5. The Mutual Musicians Association Building was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1981—it is the only NHL in Kansas City.

The African-American mayor, Emanuel Cleaver II promoted the construction of the twin museums (Jazz and baseball) on 18<sup>th</sup> street, although the heart of the Jazz clubs had been on 12<sup>th</sup> Street—now separated from the

district by Interstate 70. But it changed from being a "Jazz Museum" honoring the Kansas City style, to the "American Jazz Museum, one that ignored the local residents as it tried to entice white Johnson County residents. Much of the urban fabric that existed during the Jazz heyday had been removed or is on the verge of decay. The Attack School, the Armory, and Water District buildings stand empty. The last row of small wood-frame houses that date from the jazz era are exposed to the weather and have stood half renovated for over a year, the victim of bankruptcy and law suits. A couple of hopeful items—in October 2005, the EPA gave the John "Buck" O'Neil Education and Research Center a grant of \$165,047 to clean up hazardous materials from the Historic Black YMCA that has stood empty for years on the Paseo around the corner from Vine.<sup>10</sup> I have been working with the Mutual Musician's Foundation on Highland, the oldest extant African-American Union Hall and social club in the US still in use to prepare a plan to enhance its viability through an American Institute of Architects Grant. Figure 5. This research has increased my contacts with local community groups and facilitated interaction for my students with them.

This semester my studio is working with the New Bethel AME church to develop 16 acres of land into a model housing development with efficient use of land, a community building and senior citizen housing on 55<sup>th</sup> Street in Kansas City, Kansas. Through neighborhood connections the community is much more involved and students are exploring their own housing biases while working to create housing that satisfies the head of the committee who wants contemporary designs and to use light-weight concrete for the basic construction. In his introduction, the developer Thomas Mozeé explained that "his people" had always moved into existing housing abandoned by earlier groups, and he wanted this housing to be theirs in every sense of the word. In the next few months, students will work with future residents to help them achieve this.

The Crossroad and Jazz district project's main impact was on the students themselves. Through their research they recognized that they held biased ideas that needed to be reconsidered. They understood that discriminatory practices were still at work and

became much more sensitive to the language they used and thought more inclusively when querying potential users for their projects the following semester. The studio this semester is engaging with future residents that have a different background from their own and after initial uncertainty they are becoming more comfortable in engaging the future home owners and residents. They are learning to listen and slowly forgetting about the surface differences between themselves and their clients.

One studio at a time is admittedly a slow way to break down racial barriers, but it is a start. In crisscrossing the middle of the country by car in the summer of 2005, I found similar discriminatory legacies in most cities in the Midwest with a diverse population. It is a topic that could constructively be on the table in more design studios.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to the Pritzkerprize.com website, "the purpose of the Pritzker Architecture Prize is to honor annually a living architect whose built work demonstrates a combination of those qualities of talent, vision and commitment, which has produced consistent and significant contributions to humanity and the built environment through the art of architecture."

<sup>2</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* [New York, Vintage Books: 1992] 223-250.

<sup>3</sup> Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1998)

<sup>4</sup> 2000 US Census <http://www.census.gov/>

<sup>5</sup> Sherry Lamb Schirmer, *City Divided : the Racial Landscape of Kansas City, 1900-1960*, (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2002) 49-57.

<sup>6</sup> *Fifth Council District Handbook*, Preservation, Planning and Urban Design Division of the City Planning and Development Department, Kansas City, Missouri Planning Department, n.d. p. 35

<sup>7</sup> Christine Vendel, "KC's Deadly Year Baffles Authorities: Average is 10 Killings Monthly," *Kansas City Star* 30 September 2005 : A1, A16, and A17. Although race was not mentioned in the article either about the victims or the perpetrators, Vendel noted that "many of the deaths are clustered in the inner city, east of Troost Avenue." (A1) Only 47 of the 91 murders had a person charged with the crime.

<sup>8</sup> Allan Jacobs, Eliza, Jacobs, and Rofe, Yodan, *The Boulevard Book: History, Evolution, Design of Multiway Boulevards* MIT Press 2003

<sup>9</sup> "Exhuming Bird : Two Views on Moving Charlie Parker's Grace, *Jam* Dec/Jan 1999 <http://www.jazzkc.org/issues/1998-12/parkersgrave.html>

<sup>10</sup> Karen Dillon, A Boost for Buck, *Kansas City Star* 4 October 2005: B1.