

# THE MNEMONIC CITY: DUALITY, INVISIBILITY AND MEMORY IN AMERICAN URBANISM

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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, *Invisible Man*

*The intellectual challenge...is how to think about representational practices in terms of history, culture and society. How does one understand, analyze and enact such practices today? An adequate answer to this question can be attempted only after one comes to terms with the insights and blindneses of earlier attempts to grapple with the question in light of the evolving crisis in different histories, cultures and societies. The existential challenge requires that the cultural worker acquire the requisite cultural capital necessary to produce and survive. The political challenge necessitates a view toward the coalescing of black and white peoples based upon a commonality of moral and political intent.<sup>1</sup>*

It is in light of West's existential challenge that I would like to examine issues of race, culture, and spatial representation and the relationship between architecture, urbanism and cultural identity. As architects and urbanists we are among the cultural workers to whom West refers, and the cultural capital which we need to acquire lies in the invisible history and memory of the city. Intellectually we bear the responsibility through our work to investigate, discern and ultimately to make legible the "invisible histories" to which Ellison refers.

The nature of this investigation is speculative and as such is incomplete. But I feel the discussion which these issues prompts is critical to our conception of the city of the future. I find that the questions and issues which I keep returning to are those which seek to understand the role of race in our conception of the historical city (by which I mean the city of collective memories), and in a vision for the city of the future. My interest lies not so much in using the lens of architectural design and history to acquire a synthetic understanding of the chronological development of architectural typology and in so doing to review the development of urban form in America, but rather to go beyond the orthodox methods of architectural history and design to comprehend within the city, the relationship between space, form, history and memory. In doing so I find that I am more compelled by that to which architecture does not yet speak directly: Issues of race, ethnicity and recognition of cultural identity. These have become the resonant concerns of my work.

I speak from the margins, as a witness to an architectural culture and history which has yet to adequately represent the diversity of the culture which it shelters. Left unquestioned, architecture and the architectural history of America would leave

us with the succinct impression that the world view reflected in its interpretation of built form, is one which contains little or no reference to any of us living and working at the margins. No women, blacks or any group understood to be "other." Is it simply question of historical oversight, corrected by tardy acknowledgment of the contributions of many of these groups? I suspect not.

Contemporary cultural criticism has attempted to re-focus the debate from object to subject; forcing us to ask who and what does history seek to interpret and represent. The history of the United States is largely mute about the presence and contribution of marginal cultures, and specifically black culture, to the development of American culture. The impact of black culture upon architecture and urbanism has been viewed largely in anthropological or sociological terms, and as such has not been introduced into the theoretical discourse about the conception and construction of urban space and form.

The discursive language of the city speaks to few of the components of cultural identity to which I feel a proprietary interest. As a discipline, architecture proposes that the city is the synthesis of the memory of its political, social and economic histories. Moreover, this synthetic collective urban history is understood to be legible and as such is subject to a variety of modes of formal analysis. The theoretical and pragmatic investigation of American urbanism has typically focused on issues such as technology and its impact upon typology and morphology, and on the significance of style in the evolution of urban fabric. Because cities have traditionally been understood as artifacts of the dominant cultures which built them, the impact of their marginalized cultures has not been thoroughly examined, and yet the form and image of American urbanism, particularly in the American South, is clearly linked to the presence of a black population and culture.

The problem of course is that history is subjective, constructing a narrative which with its gaps, omissions has rendered black culture historically "invisible." Writing in 1957, Richard Wright noted that, "The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms; it is the history of Western Man writ small."<sup>2</sup> For the black cultural worker, West's tenets of "production and survival" are inextricably tied to a responsibility to augment the narratives of dominant history through the "excavation" and construction of those objects and devices capable of evoking memory. In this context memory becomes a tool with which to construct a critical reading of the city by making that visible which is invisible.

Historically the construction of American black culture has been cast in terms of duality and of opposition. To be black is to be the "other," separate and subordinate to dominant

culture. Black culture has been defined not so much by what it is but by what is not. To be black is to be not white, and as such to be understood as being neither politically empowered nor culturally affluent. The oppositional nature and the terms of the definition of this cultural construction have resulted in a singular and monolithic representation of black culture, when in fact black culture is rich and diverse. The irony of course is that in America, black culture serves as a sort of avant garde testing ground for popular culture in general. Fashion, music, art and language draw heavily and directly from contemporary black culture. Black culture is nothing if not diverse, yet the myth of a singular black experience prevails, and when accepted as fact serves only to de-modulate the complexity of black culture, marginalize it, remove it from the discourse about the construction of culture and ultimately render it invisible.

The invisibility of black cultural narrative is largely due to the informal traditions and formal statutory practices of racism, which with its separation of black and white cultures formed a series of racially distinct social, physical, and spatial structures. Within the form and structure of American cities, particularly cities in the American South, the physical and spatial legacy of *Plessy v. Ferguson*<sup>3</sup> (in which the social and political doctrine of “separate but equal” was articulated) is an urbanism of separation, duality and invisibility, where the forms and spaces of black culture were separate from and subordinate to those of white culture. By separating one culture from the other and by establishing a hierarchy of space and form, black culture was effectively isolated and rendered invisible in the public realm of the dominant culture.

The concept of a “separate but equal” identities creates a hierarchy of value which elevates the products of the dominant culture and relegates to a subordinate status the products, forms and spaces controlled or conditioned by marginal culture. Because the urban artifacts of black culture were so de-valued within the fabric of the city they have become both phenomenally and literally invisible. As a result, the urban artifacts produced and or conditioned by black culture have largely been excluded from the theoretical discourse about the conception and re-invention American urbanism and so the impact of black culture upon it has been minor. Yet the critical reading required to evaluate and re-invent American urbanism is incomplete if it fails to include the forms and spaces influenced by black culture.

There are many ways in which invisibility can be defined. Literally we understand that which is invisible is that which is unseen. Contemporary culture ascribes a generally positive value to invisibility, nominally equating it with the freedom to move unseen. Within the context of architecture and urbanism invisibility is a cultural construction, achieved by consciously removing from the public gaze that which is neither intended nor desired to be seen. Within an understanding of the phenomenal forces of culture operative in the city, “invisibility” is as much a social and political phenomena as it is a literal and physical one.

Considered in this context Hannah Arendt’s concept of “spaces of appearance” provides a critical tool with which to understand the construction of invisibility. For Arendt “the space of public appearance”<sup>4</sup> is that ‘space,’ which comes into being whenever men are together in the manner of speech and action.”<sup>5</sup> Further it is the space,

*...where I appear to others as others appear to me... This space does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word,*



*most of them—like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity, like the laborer or craftsman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world do not live in it. No man, moreover, can live in it all the time. To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality which humanly and politically speaking is the same as appearance.*<sup>6</sup>

Yet to be visible in this space one must be able to “appear through speech and action” in the public realm. The duality of American urban structure particularly in the South made “visibility” for black culture virtually impossible. Perhaps the most important legacy of the American Civil Rights Movement was its challenge to enter and to be visible in the space of public appearance.

In the theory of landscape architecture, the result of an agent or (culture) acting upon a medium or (a natural area) is defined as a “cultural landscape.”<sup>7</sup> If by analogy a fragment of the city is the medium and culture the agent which acts upon it, the result can be defined as a “cultural fragment.” It is axiomatic then, that the memory of culture is inscribed onto these fragments, and that these fragments conditioned by social, political and cultural forces form the fabric of the city. Individually and collectively these cultural fragments are what Pierre Nora terms “lieux de memoire” or “sites of memory.” As mnemonic devices these fragments are the sites where,

*...memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with a sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.<sup>8</sup>*

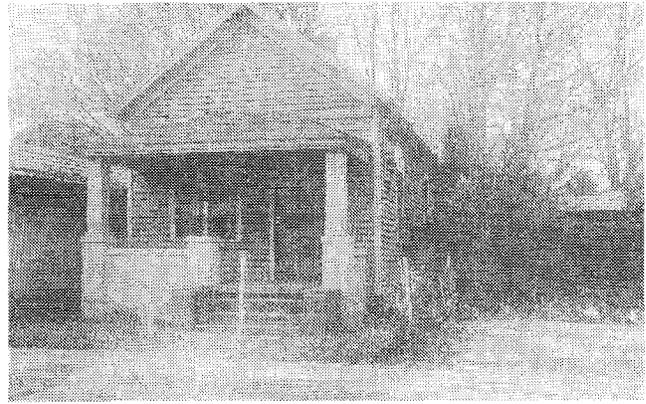
Linked through “excavation,” construction, or forms of intervention, the “collective memory” or mnemonic narrative of the city is made visible in these fragments. The narratives evoked by these sites of memory provide a means to further explore the idea of the American city as a cultural artifact; to examine the dominant and marginalized cultures which form the city. Further they offer the opportunity to investigate alternative readings of the fabric of the American city by examining the issues of site, form, and memory as they relate 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. When they are made “visible” in the urban fabric these forces provide a narrative structure with which to comprehend the cultural memory of a city.

Here it is important to distinguish between the two concepts of memory which Maurice Halbwachs defines as the “individual or personal memory” and the “group or collective memory.”<sup>9</sup> For Halbwachs, personal memory allows an individual to “place his own remembrance within the framework of his personality; his own personal life...,”<sup>10</sup> and is a means to of constructing an “autobiographical narrative.” Collective memory differs in that it allows an individual to “act merely as a member of group helping to evoke and maintain impersonal remembrances of the group,”<sup>11</sup> and as such collective memory can be understood as a historical narrative.

Within any given urban fabric, some of these cultural fragments are more legible (opaque) and others are invisible (transparent). The relative transparency and opacity of the cultural fragments reflects the explicit hierarchy of social values and status. The most opaque fragments are historically connected to the dominant culture, and are literally the most solid and visible, while the fragments of marginalized cultures tend to be transparent, invisible and ephemeral. For these marginalized cultures, the power of the fragment as a mnemonic device lies in its ability to supplement the gaps of dominant history. With greater legibility these fragments hold the potential to alter the context in which urban history is read, and through this altered context to develop an architecture derived from the reading and analysis of these fragments and thus expressive of that culture.

The cities of the American South provide an opportunity to examine the construction of invisibility, the legibility of various “sites of memory” and the articulation of narratives of collective memory. As an example, in a city like Selma, Alabama one finds an urbanism of duality, where there are in fact two separate “cities,” one black and one white with areas of overlap or superimposition. These cities are constructed or formed by a series of fragments codified by responses to the specific narratives of black and white culture.

However, these dual cultural narratives are distinct and separate and in their distinction are not equally legible, so that the narratives and fragments of black Selma recede and become “invisible.”



*Shotgun houses, Selma, Alabama*

The dual structure of the city in fact provided for the construction of separate sites of memory, and spaces of appearance. The sites of memory for Selma’s white culture are the spaces of the public realm. The political, social and culture spaces formed by the morphological structure of the city are coincident with the conveyed meanings of the courthouse (the Dallas County Courthouse), the public square and the main street (Broad Street) and the entry into the city (the Edmund Pettus Bridge). This is the “city” which is legible in maps, images and texts. The equivalent spaces of the black city contain narrative structures which are more disparate, not supported by a morphological structure, and in fact are superimposed upon an urban form that never intended to support them. For example, the major political and social space in the black city is found in the street (Sylvan Street) which connects two of the cities major black churches (First Baptist and Brown’s AME Chapel). This street does not read as a space of public assembly, yet within the dual nature of southern urbanism, where entrance is denied to the more formal public realm this is precisely its role. The dual structure of the urban fabric creates spaces where this is a discontinuity between site, form and meaning. This phenomenon forces certain spaces to derive meaning from a use superimposed onto them, while allowing other spaces to derive meaning directly from the form of the city.

The segregated school house, the separate “colored” entrance to a movie theater, the unpaved street, the shotgun house, the separate cemetery and the inaccessible public building are but a few of the examples of the types of mnemonic fragments still extant in the fabric of American cities. Within them lie the formal devices of hierarchy of scale, material and implied permanence useful for the conception of architectural



Figure 4: Caption: Dallas County Courthouse, Selma, Alabama

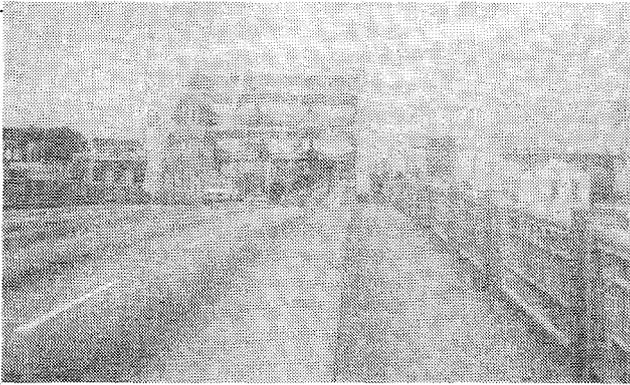


Figure 5: Caption: Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, Alabama

intervention. In contemporary society many of these devices of which “invisibility” was built lie obscured and unseen, bearing a muted witness to era recalled by only a few. Left obscured, these fragments, their memories and the narratives derived from them are once again marginalized. These elements form a critical part of our cultural history which needs to be preserved.

It can be argued that the challenge of the late twentieth century American architect/urbanist is to be able to discern the “sites of memory and from them “build” the mnemonic city by creating those interventions which increase the opacity of specific cultural fragments. With increased their “visibility” these fragments can provide the narratives which alter the perception of the history of the city. This task is significant because within the urban fabric of cities in the American South lie sites seminal to understanding the evolution of the American Civil Rights Movement and the social, political and cultural transformations which emerged from it. As such these cities provide a unique opportunity to examine the strategies and methodologies for discerning, analyzing and interpreting the fragments and narratives of black and white culture. Unfortunately for a variety of reasons many of these sites are now so difficult to discern that we may say that they are “invisible.” Their “invisibility” contributes to an incomplete reading of the history and culture of these cities. Legible these fragments constitute the basis for the mnemonic city, a city of memory.

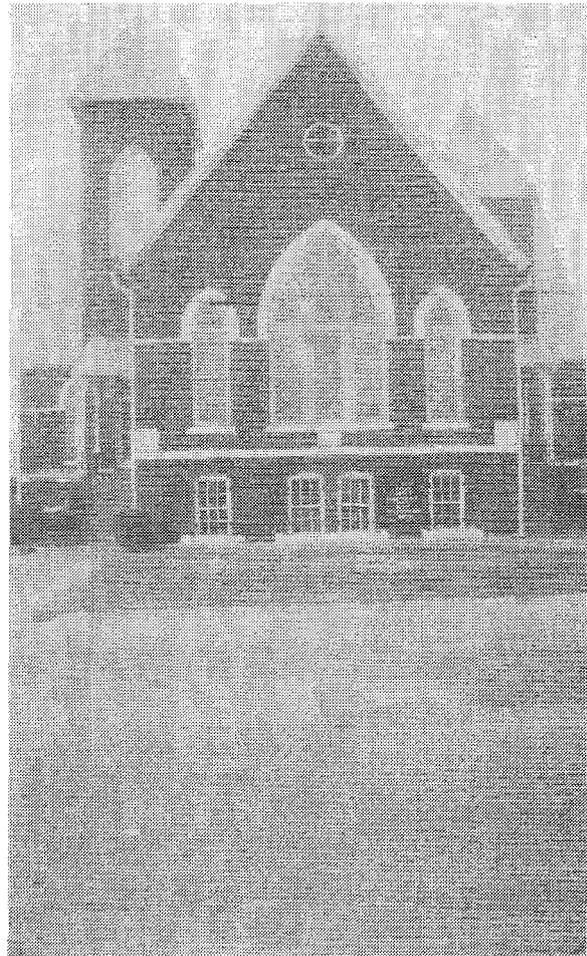


Figure 6: Caption: First Baptist Church, Selma, Alabama

#### NOTES

1. West, Cornell., *Keeping Faith Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge Press, 1993), “Cultural Politics of Difference”, p.5
2. Wright, Richard., *White Man Listen!* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p.109
3. Plessy v. Ferguson was argued before the United States Supreme court in April of 1896 and decided in favor of the plaintiff later that year. In this case the court affirmed a lower court ruling supporting the constitutionality of a statute enacted by the State of Louisiana which provided for separate railway cars for white and black travelers. The ruling by U.S. Supreme Court provided for a revised reading of the obligations of the Thirteenth amendment (which made illegal the practice of slavery) and modified the scope of the language of the Fourteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, (which provided for equal protection under the law for all citizens.) In the case of the Fourteenth amendment the interpretive revisions of the scope of the amendment’s language allowed the doctrine of “separate but equal” to be articulated.
4. Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.199
5. Ibid. pp.199
6. Ibid. pp.198-199
7. Lark, Robert P. and Gary L. Peters, eds., *Dictionary of Concepts in Human Geography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), Sauer, “Landscape” pp.139-144
8. Fabre, Genevieve and O’Mealley, Robert (ed.). *History and Memory in African American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.284
9. Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Collective Memory*. (New York: Harper & Row 1980), p.50
10. Ibid
11. Ibid