Incubating Uncertainty: Anticipating Change in Vine City, Atlanta

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Vine City, Atlanta is an historic African-American neighborhood in Atlanta with a strong local identity. Among its many cultural assets are nearby Spelman and Morehouse Colleges, Clark Atlanta University and Washington Park, the first park in Atlanta open to African-Americans. This neighborhood of large trees and distinct houses is punctuated with landmarks but also with shuttered properties and vacant lots. 78% of housing units are renter-occupied, and house values are almost a third of the value in the rest of Atlanta.   This poverty is long-standing.[1]

The challenges and prospects of Vine City have been tied to larger social and economic changes. Over time, property has been pieced into larger and larger developments such as Eagan Homes and the Georgia World Congress Center. Similar to the large-scale residential projects Dana Cuff details in her history of L.A., *The Provisional City*, pockets of Vine City are now "convulsive."[2] In these areas, change is more volatile both in space and time. In fact, Vine City is fascinatingly unpredictable but resilient. The recent subprime mortgage crisis stifled investors betting on its immediate proximity to downtown and two rapid-transit stops. The neighborhood is poised for change, but the future is uncertain.

This paper will present a history of the changing urban fabric of Vine City, noting connections to larger social and economic changes. It will extend an understanding of how local change, tied to unpredictable forces outside of any single community, could be embraced as an architectural strategy of increasing uncertainty. Designing for an uncertain future, especially in underserved communities, challenges students to organize buildings as spatial and temporal frames of experience simultaneously ideological and circumstantial, enduring and resilient.

Recently, a "community incubator" at the Ashby MARTA stop was proposed for the 2011 National Organization of Minority Architects Student Design Competition. For such a project, change is built in; it's the goal. If successful, an incubator will inhabit a new context. If unsuccessful, an incubator should hopefully adapt to altered demands. As a larger-scale development, however, the challenge was to conceive of an architecture that is more resilient by increasing uncertainty. Rather than profess to the complete and durable, or surrender to the provisional and rapidly flexible, an uncertain architecture would be comfortable with and confident in an unpredictable future. Luckily, increasing uncertainty is an elaboration of techniques peculiar to architecture. In this case, iterative design procedures refine a scheme by approaching multiple possible scenarios. The goal is an architecture of

poise, a structure that allows the enjoyment of continuous change with options at moments of convulsive change. This poised response is demanded by the resilient and convulsive history of Vine City. Historically underserved, the neighborhood is remembered for significant developments in education, social reform, and entrepreneurship. At the same time, Vine City had been continually destabilized by ideological forces such as segregation and slum clearance.

A RESILIENT HISTORY

The Vine City neighborhood is west of downtown Atlanta. It is best known for the historic colleges immediately to the south including Atlanta University, Spelman College, Morehouse College and Morris Brown College. These iconic institutions were established on high ground starting in 1867.[3] In fact, the neighborhood was forged out of the advantages of high ground. During the Civil War, Sherman bombarded Atlanta from a ridge west of the city. "Diamond Hill" was the Confederate line, and Atlanta University was quite literally built on the ruins of a defeated Confederacy. The colleges were the center of a burgeoning African-American elite, and they occupied this high ground both physically and symbolically.[4] In contrast, the working class neighborhood of Vine City occupied flood-prone bottomlands: "Behind Atlanta University on the north was a similar section, known as 'Vine City' or 'Mechanicsville,' where slums, dumps, hovels, crime, and want prevailed."[5] The history, however, is more fascinating than this low-lying description suggests.

Following the crisis of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot, strict color lines were enforced through the threat of violence.[6] Established African-American neighborhoods such as Vine City and Auburn Avenue became tight housing markets. This encouraged substandard housing on poor land but also forged a diverse and active African-American community. In response to the riots, Lugenia Hope[7] created the Neighborhood Union and "brought women from Atlanta's west side together across class lines to provide many of the social services city officials denied to black neighborhoods."[8] Pioneering entrepreneurs such as Alonzo Herndon extended the work of benevolent societies by founding the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. By 1915, he was also the largest African-American property owner in Atlanta. Most of these properties, including his own home, were in Vine City.[9]

As a result of segregation and a severe housing shortage following World War I, Vine City became a predominately African-American working class neighborhood by 1925.[10] The Great Atlanta Fire of 1917 destroyed large sections of the Auburn Avenue district, further increasing demand for housing on the west side. In response, African-American business leader Heman Perry developed the area immediately west of Ashby Street into the suburb of Washington Park. A peer of Alonzo Herndon, Perry launched a financial empire in 1913 starting with the Standard Life Insurance Company of Atlanta. His collection of companies provided insurance, banking and modern housing to the African-American community, all without support from white investors. Perry handled real estate and construction for Washington Park, offering bungalows with indoor plumbing and electricity to a growing African-American professional and middle-class.[11]

Perry also secured services not available in other African-American neighborhoods. In 1919, he deeded two parcels of his investment property to the city to create Washington Park, the only public park in Atlanta open to African-Americans, and Booker T. Washington High School, the city's first public African-American high school. This was tacit agreement from white officials to cede areas west of Vine

City.[12] By 1922, a racial zoning ordinance further enforced these colors lines. By 1930, Ward 1 including Vine City and Washington Park housed the largest African-American population in Atlanta; only 3.8% were white.[13]
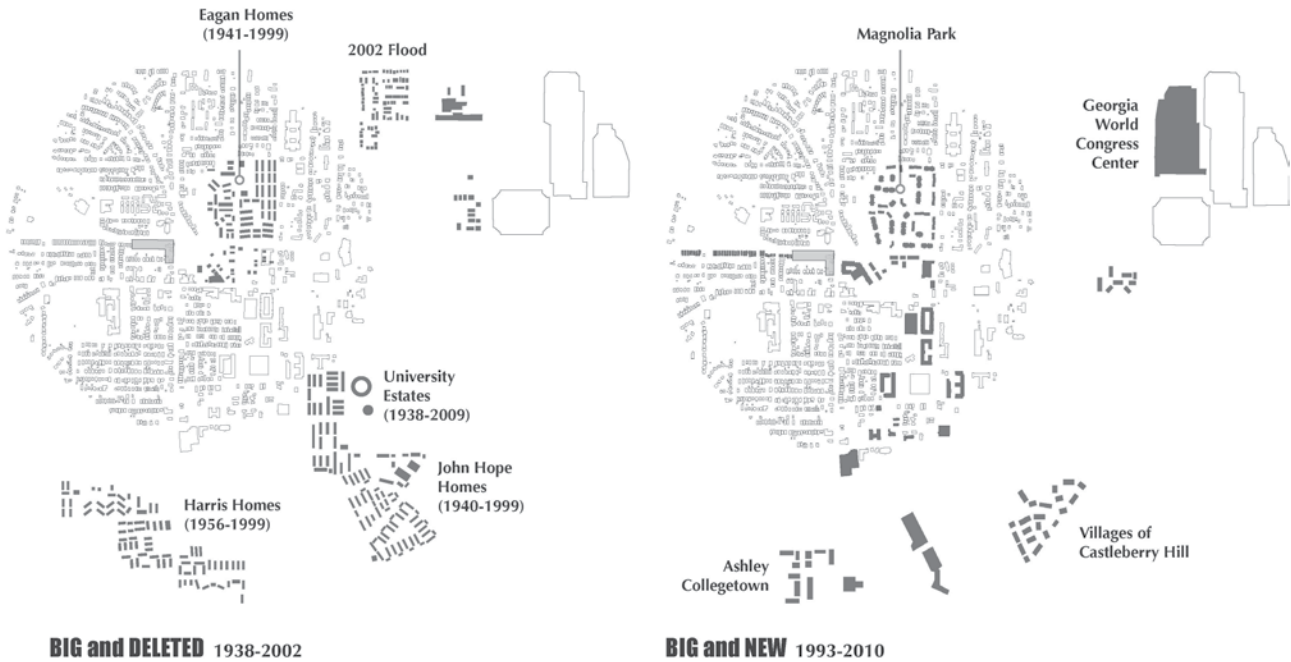
Although racially stratified, the west side was socially diverse. The prestigious Atlanta University Center, the middle-class suburb of Washington Park and Vine City are all within blocks. The area also helped launch an unprecedented expansion of African-American suburbs to the west between 1945 and 1960.[14] Unfortunately, as middle and upper class African-Americans moved to these suburbs, property in Vine City shifted from homeowners to absentee landlords.[15] This helps explain the poverty that alarmed Martin Luther King, Jr. when he moved to Vine City in 1965.[16]

The drastic crisis of the Great Depression resulted in an equally drastic national housing policy. Beginning in 1933, the Public Works Administration began funding slum clearance as a way to create jobs and provide modern public housing. In Atlanta, federal policy financed a wholesale disruption of established communities. African-American "slums" adjacent to city institutions such as the State Capitol and the Georgia Institute of Technology were demolished and replaced with public housing for whites.[17] This uprooted entire neighborhoods, further isolating African-American communities and exacerbating a severe housing shortage during the height of the Depression. Additional "slums" were cleared for African-American public housing, but again, entire neighborhoods were disrupted and replaced with fewer units of new housing. Atlanta adopted New Deal housing policy early and aggressively. By the end of World War II, Atlanta had completed more public housing per capita than any other American city. A full 20% of Atlanta's African-American population had been displaced.[18] It was a radical reconfiguration of Atlanta's racial geography.

In Vine City, the John J. Eagan Homes were built over Connally Park, abandoned land that was used as an unofficial garbage dump. Within a mile of Eagan Homes, four slum clearance projects erased existing communities. University Homes, for example, replaced the infamous African-American neighborhood of Beaver Slide south of Spelman. As Karen Ferguson explains, elite African-Americans supported slum clearance. Reformers were anxious to create a new neighborhood to match the prestige of the Atlanta University Center while uplifting neighbors to full citizenship.[19] Ferguson notes, "...by becoming active participants in the low-income housing program, black reformers could finally put their ideological convictions into action, with material consequences for the entire black community."[20]

Based on ideological concerns, Vine City's unique diversity gave way to large-scale projects. These projects remain large discontinuities in the urban fabric today. In response to the crisis of public housing in the 1990's, the Hope VI program has erased public housing projects and replaced them with mixed-income developments, once again with fewer total units. Eagan Homes is now Magnolia Park, but its gated street pattern is still wholly foreign to Vine City. In the next couple of years, every housing project in the immediate area will have been remade.

Additional large-scale projects to the east of Vine City have also proven antagonistic. The Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC) opened to the east of Vine City in 1976. It expanded in 1985, 1992 and 2002. The adjacent Georgia Dome opened in 1992. These large-scale civic projects serve Metro Atlanta, but they have consistently eroded the eastern edge of Vine City, leaving mostly event parking and vacant lots.

Eagan Homes
(1941-1999)

2002 Flood

University
Estates
(1938-2009)

John Hope
Homes
(1940-1999)

Harris Homes
(1956-1999)

BIG and DELETED 1938-2002

Magnolia Park

Georgia
World
Congress
Center

Ashley
Collegetown

Villages of
Castleberry Hill

BIG and NEW 1993-2010

1

A CONVULSIVE HISTORY

In *The Provisional City*, Dana Cuff provides a framework to understand the spatial and temporal implications of these "large-scale operations." Spatially, they are internally logical and consistent. As a result, they are radically discontinuous with the surrounding city. Temporally, they are convulsive, creating civic upheaval as they "lurch into existence" to erase the past life on the site.[21] In this way, large-scale operations are insistently global and ideological rather than local and circumstantial. There is a clear experiential difference, too. As Cuff explains:

> When an area is composed of independent, small bits of land, the buildings, use, and ownership make a certain sense that can be discerned by a situated observer. When it is taken over, pieced together, and reworked, it no longer makes phenomenal sense. Instead, it destabilized, disorients, and perplexes. Its authorship had unclear roots, except that something big was behind it.[22]

This explains the comfort of the remaining small-scale urban fabric of Vine City and Washington Park. But it also explains the allure of a large project. It is impressively optimistic. It proposes a new world, an alternate future. Consequently, large-scale operations make sense at a time of crisis. But large projects are also provisional. They deteriorate uniformly, suggesting their replacement, also at a large scale.[23] This has consistently been the case in Vine City. Global ideological forces such as segregation and slum clearance have consistently reshaped Vine City. As its history suggests, however, messy local circumstances are potentially more resilient over time. A neighborhood that responds to uncertain events such as riots, fire, war and flooding also encourages entrepreneurship, innovation and community. This, too, has consistently been the case in Vine City.

What seems disturbingly convulsive, then, is the periodic disruption of the social fabric of Vine City precisely at moments of crisis. At such moments, huge sums of federal money are invested in the community only to destabilize it. It is no
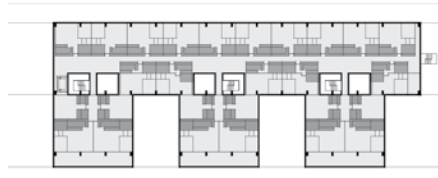
Figure 1: A convulsive history.

BULL MARKET
retail + office + parking
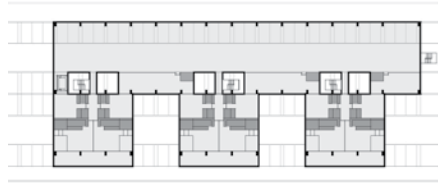
COLLEGE BOOM!
apartments + parking

POST-OIL ATLANTA
apartments + public transport

2

Figure 2: Poised for multiple future scenarios.

surprise a working class African-American community is vulnerable to these ideological refashionings. However, the value of circumstantial change over ideological change is ambiguous. Extending the productive diversity of Vine City into an unpredictable future would promote an enduring social order. But infrastructural projects complete a list of enviable nearby amenities including the Atlanta University Center, Washington Park, two MARTA stops and immediate access to the Beltline, a new 22-mile multi-use trail and transit corridor. The neighborhood is poised for change, and the design of a "community incubator" is a case study in aligning large-scale opportunities with an enduring local community.

INCUBATOR

A community incubator at the Ashby MARTA stop takes advantage of Vine City's poised position as an historic neighborhood adjacent to downtown. The neighborhood still has many older homes, including the bungalows built by Heman Perry in the 1920s. Although too small for many Atlantans, they could appeal to singles, young couples, retirees and lower income families. This same constituency is increasingly likely to use rapid transit. Here, then, is the start of a productive diversity.

The project site is large. Large projects are less nimble, but an expansive building provides opportunities not possible with a distributed arrangement. For example, creating a new identity for the Ashby MARTA station as an event in the city has the potential to attract visitors and incubate local business. As projects in the surrounding urban fabric increase in size, however, fewer options emerge for circumstantial change and local diversity. As the history of Vine City suggests, large-scale projects with clear ideological narratives remove future options. Adding options, on the other hand increases uncertainty.

Architects arrange forms in space to structure desired and predictable activities. It is also possible to arrange forms to accommodate unpredictable changes over time. Stuart Brand describes this process as "scenario planning."[24] In this process, a diverse multi-disciplinary team imagines ideal and unlikely scenarios. Then, solutions are generated that anticipate multiple scenarios. Organized as an independent study course, a team of Auburn students began the competition with a scenario plan. Students researched the history of Vine City and rehearsed possible futures to anticipate local assets to global changes. "Bull Market," "College Boom!" or "Post-Oil Atlanta" were options for Vine City. A great team building exercise, the scenario plan also directly complicated the future consequences of the given program.

The competition brief required parking for 500 cars. After thoroughly researching the history of the community, a parking garage seemed disruptive. At this point, the team realized the design was not for an incubator with parking but a parking garage that could act as an incubator. Initial skepticism lifted as the students conceived of a structure that could be renovated in stages or at once into various combinations of parking, office and housing. Rather than an optimized parking garage with an elegant surface, the team imagined a cleverly redundant hybrid form.

Through an iterative design process, proliferating alternate futures actually narrowed design decisions. Indentations and courtyards provided ample light and ventilation to future housing, and stairs and structure carefully anticipated corridors. In fact, the team developed apartment plans to coordinate overlapping demands. By collapsing several typologies into a single form, students embraced unexpected opportunities to propose future balconies and roof gardens. Anticipating renovation, ceiling heights were generous and floors were

level. Connecting these floors with driving ramps proved a geometrical trick, but the result was a uniquely spacious and light-filled garage. Fun to drive and walk through, the students also imagined staging community events to support the initial program mix of museum, grocery and retail.

This method temporarily removed the burden of symbolic and functional clarity by multiplying possibilities. Initial arguments over image were subsumed into the challenge to superimpose typologies. The final image of the building loomed, however, and traditional composition remained instrumental. Reducing the scale on the residential street; holding a mass on the commercial boulevard; saving a pair of substantial trees on the corner; and extending the adjacent schoolyard with a monumental porch all informed the ongoing refinement of the scheme.

This method was a particularly useful pedagogical tool. Students learned to design several typologies by nudging them into alignment. After suspending preoccupations with imagery, they rediscovered the power of composition. Most importantly, the social history of a neighborhood had a direct bearing on organizing potential futures, not simply composing a lasting image. Acknowledging the resilient and convulsive history of Vine City by anticipating change may seem obvious, even simplistic. But the winning team from Auburn was uncomfortable enough with the large parking garage to structure potentially unfolding futures. This is a significant lesson. A similar method has even garnered Auburn first place entries for the NOMA competitions in Detroit (2012) and Indianapolis (2013). Invention is still required. Future mechanical, electrical and pluming was only acknowledged as unresolved.[25] A significant shift in values is also required to dislodge standard arguments for optimization and efficiency. Building for adaptability and redundancy, especially for underserved communities, requires at least an equally innovative financial and management model.

For the proposed incubator, all roofs collected water or generated energy. Limited areas of water collecting roofs were arranged as future roof gardens and terraces. The extensive photovoltaic roof was more efficient at this large scale, and it was intended to provide subsidies to incubate local businesses. As these businesses expand, the team suggested they move into the neighborhood to revitalize the

Figure 3: Poised for civic and community events.

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Figure 4: Poised for driving and walking.

existing commercial boulevard. Although the economic details remained unresolved, this is a productively imaginative balance of large-scale opportunities that support a local community with a long history of social and economic entrepreneurship.

AN ARCHITECTURE OF POISE

This delicate balance between large and small scales, city and local events, transcends a choice between ideological and circumstantial operations in the city. At its best, the extraordinary entrepreneurship and social reform created in Vine City is both. Heman Perry, for example, insisted Washington Park and Booker T. Washington High School become public amenities in spite of strict racial segregation and economic isolation. In fact, a tension between top-down and bottom-up practices is productive. This could be considered a working definition of the public realm. In Vine City, local conditions rub against city-wide events and infrastructure. This is its poised position. But it has also been its historic disadvantage. Tensions with clear ideological trajectories have increasingly destabilized Vine City. At such a critical point of contact, the proposed incubator attempts to generate a productive tension. More importantly, it anticipates an uncertain future by balancing continuous and disruptive change.

Buildings change in layers. Referred to by Stuart Brand as "shearing layers of change," the most immediate layers change continuously.[26] Small experiential discontinuities in rapid succession are the patterns of everyday life, weekly events, seasonal cycles and weathering. In general, the larger a discontinuity, the slower its pace. Tenant improvements, for example, are more frequent and less disruptive than major renovations. This shearing is productive. Cities create diversity precisely because change is close at hand. But slower structural and infrastructural layers can shear convulsively. Large disruptions such as natural disasters, recessions or radical shifts in demographics can catch a community or building unprepared. What is proposed here is an architecture of poise, and it is distinguished from a traditional architecture of composition in the following ways:

1. SOCIAL HISTORY: If a composed architecture reacts to an existing physical and cultural context, a poised architecture also attempts to extend the social history of the context into an unpredictable future. The history of a community is instrumental in organizing potential futures, not simply composing a lasting image.

2. SUPERIMPOSITION: If a composed architecture arranges typical forms into imaginative spatial combinations, a poised architecture also superimposes typical forms to imagine multiple future scenarios. Resolving competing spatial desires allows alternate arrangements to unfold over time.

ENDNOTES

1. City of Atlanta Department of Planning & Community Development Bureau of Planning, *Vine City/Washington Park Livable Centers Initiative Study* (Atlanta: Atlanta Regional Commission, 2009), 30. http://www.atlantaregional.com/File%20Library/Land%20Use/LCI/LCI%20Recipients/Atlanta/Vine%20City/Vine%20City%20LCI%20Study.pdf.

2. Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000) 5.

3. Carole Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 48.

4. Merritt, *The Herndons*, 48.

5. Louie D. Shivery, *The History of Organized Social Work among Negroes in Atlanta, 1890-1935* (M.A. thesis, Atlanta University, 1936). Quoted in Ridgely Torrence, The Story of John Hope (1948; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 139. Also see 127 for a vivid description of Beaver Slide.

6. Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 21.

Figure 5: "Spelman students and faculty are lined up on the nine acres of drill ground used for the campus, 1880's. The army barracks in the background, which had housed federal troops during the Civil War, served as classrooms and dormitory buildings."[30]

3. UNFOLDING: If a composed architecture endures as an appropriately useful building with a meaningful image, a poised architecture endures as an appropriately imageable building with meaningful options at times of disruptive change. Patterns of immediate and future use—continuously unfolding events in the city—are as important to individual and collective identity as architectural imagery.

This method makes no great claim on what the future should look like, only that buildings that afford change are absorbed into their community over time. For this reason, a poised architecture is particularly welcome in underserved communities, areas historically susceptible to gradual neglect and catastrophic displacement. These communities can benefit from a design methodology that extends lessons from their history to increase uncertainty in productive ways. An architecture of poise is "specifically generic,"[27] and it anticipates continuous and disruptive change. The method of superimposing types forges this unity. It is similar to "transduction," a method Henri Lefebvre outlines in "The Right to the City." He explains: "Transduction elaborates and constructs a theoretical object, a *possible* object from information related to reality and a problematic posed by this reality...It introduces rigour in invention and knowledge in utopia."[28] In this case, the rigor is the process of limiting options by increasing uncertainty, a problematic posed by the reality of Vine City's convulsive yet enduring history. What is abandoned is any knowledge in utopia. The danger is a deep ambivalence about the future. With many futures open, an architecture of poise may simply defer to succeeding ideological goals. The promise, however, is a productive diversity of immediate experience and alternate futures.

Lefebvre also offers a telling definition of the city: "the 'urban', place of encounter, priority of use value, inscription in space of a time promoted to the rank of a supreme resource among all resources."[29] In this case, patterns of immediate and future use—unfolding encounters in the city—are crucial to individual and collective identity. The time urban space allows us is profound.

While researching Vine City, the team uncovered a striking image of Spelman College. The photograph is of faculty and students in front of a large building with a broad porch. The caption tells us the building was the barracks of the Union Army. The image is poignant. It encapsulates the promise and tragedy of Reconstruction and the collision of powerful ideologies and individual hope. The students hoped to create a similar effect: a poised but obdurate building waiting patiently for events of individual and collective identity to unfold in time.

7. Merritt, *The Herndons*, 62. Lugenia Hope was the wife of John Hope, first African-American faculty member at Morehouse College (1906) and first African-American president of Atlanta University (1929). .

8. Ferguson, *Black Politics*, 26.

9. Merritt, T*he Herndons*, 65..

10. "Sunset Avenue Historic District in Vine City: Draft," 4. http://74.228.95.7/historicdistrict/Research%20 Data/2010_11_03_14_24_36.pdf.

11. Ferguson, *Black Politcs*, 30.

12. Ferguson, *Black Politcs*, 29.

13. "Sunset Avenue Historic District," 8.

14. Andrew Wiese, "African American Suburban Development in Atlanta," *Southern Spaces*, September 29, 2006. http://www.southernspaces.org/2006/ african-american-suburban-development-atlanta.

15. Harry G. Lefever, *Undaunted by the Fight: Spelman College and the Civil Rights Movement 1957-1967* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 238.

16. "Atlanta History Center," http://album.atlantahistory-center.com/store/Products/89218-vine-city-civil-rights-demonstration.aspx.

17. Ferguson, *Black Politcs*, 166.

18. Ferguson, *Black Politcs*, 168.

19. Ferguson, *Black Politcs*, 193.

20. Ferguson, *Black Politcs*, 187.

21. Cuff, The Provisional City, 5.

22. Cuff, The Provisional City, 13-14.

23. Cuff, The Provisional City, 332.

24. Steward Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 178-189.

25. Kiel Moe, *Convergence: An Architectural Agenda for Energy* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 250. Moe suggests a concrete thermally active surface can provide a more permanent mechanical system.

26. Brand, *How Buildings Learn*, 13.

27. Moe, *Convergence*, 246.

28. Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," in *Writings on Cities*, Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, trans., ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 151.

29. Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," 158.

30. Herman "Skip" Mason, Jr., ed., *Going Against the Wind: A Pictorial History of African-Americans in Atlanta* (Marietta, GA : Longstreet Press, 1992), 29.