

# ¿Es su casa mi casa? Another Space in East L.A.

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## SU CASA...

In a recent issue, the architectural journal *Assemblage* documented an exhibit entitled *House Rules*. This exhibit paired theorists with architects around the project of re-thinking accepted notions of domestic space. The position taken was that society attempts to produce and reproduce itself both in symbolic and material form through the medium of architecture. Architecture is, in this sense, a narrative; the goal then was to find new ways of creating spatial stories that were more reflective of changing social bodies.

As contributors, Margaret Crawford and ADOBE LA submitted an article entitled *Mi casa es su casa* which investigates the cultural landscape of East Los Angeles. Their portrait differs from more common depictions of East LA that emphasize urban violence and social disorder. Crawford and ADOBE LA aim to clear the air, so to speak, in order to re-present East Los Angeles in a better light.

What one finds is "a landscape of heroic bricolage, a triumph of what Michel De Certeau calls 'making do'" (Crawford/ADOBE LA 12). By appropriating and re-making urban space, residents of the eastside have imbued the landscape with meaning. Suburban norms tied to proscriptive appearances and property values have been overthrown in favor of individual expression. The result has been the emergence of "community solidarity" based in a "distinctive domestic landscape" which provides East LA a means of political expression (Crawford/ADOBE LA 12-13).

## ¿ES ESTA MI CASA?

By examining the notion of the bricoleur, one finds an interesting gap. Crawford and ADOBE LA consider the "modest single-family housing stock" of East LA an inheritance "from a past era"—as an existing urban text which Latino communities actively re-write through "complex and creative cultural negotiations" (13). It is through this inheritance and its manipulation that the urban bricolage of East LA is produced. Working from a Derridian definition, however, one finds that the operative binary of engineer (architect)/bricoleur (lay-person) is inherently problematic;

"If one calls bricolage the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur...The engineer, whom Levi-Strauss opposes to the bricoleur, should be the one to construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon. In this sense, the engineer is a myth. A subject who would supposedly be the absolute origin of his own discourse and would construct it 'out of nothing,' 'out of whole cloth,' would be the creator of the verbe, the verbe itself. The notion of the engineer who had supposedly broken with all forms of bricolage is therefore a theoretical idea; and since Levi-Strauss tells us elsewhere that bricolage is mythopoetic, the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the bricoleur." (Demda 255-256)

In this sense, neither the engineer/architect nor the bricoleur can be seen as a unified entity. Each is a construct created in relation to the other; each is a myth produced both from the inside-out as well as from the outside-in. As mythology, they cannot be taken as definitive representations. Therefore, the story unfolded in the work of Crawford and ADOBE LA can only be seen as one representation of East LA operating within a larger system of cultural production.

## OTRA CASA...

In an effort to add to the continuing saga of East LA, I would like to pursue a spatial story not found in the Crawford/ADOBE LA article. By interviewing a few current and former residents, I was given a glimpse into the lives contained within another house—*otra casa*—in East LA.

The story begins some 15 to 20 years ago with Gustavo. Arriving from Mexico in search of work, Gustavo rented a house and began a new life in Los Angeles. After having found work as a janitor and eventually moving up the ranks to a managerial position, he began looking to buy a house. His family had, by this time, joined him in LA creating the need for permanent housing. His landlord had already decided to sell thereby providing Gustavo with the opportu-

nity to own the home he'd begun to establish.

Once under new ownership, the house began to change. The rented house was more of a staging ground, or temporary residence, while the family gained a foothold in California. Under these circumstances, the inhabitants did not exert much control over the space. By purchasing the house, Gustavo's family gained the control necessary to begin its transformation. The building itself had three levels; it was (is) a two-story house with a basement. Unlike families who "rarely alter the arrangements of rooms" (Crawford/ADOBE LA 16), Gustavo continually re-configured his family's home as new members arrived. Virtually every room within it became a house, or home, in-and-of itself. First, the basement was converted into an apartment with an entrance added from within the existing kitchen on the main level. Later, the basement was converted into two units; each accessed from the rear exterior of the house. Eventually, the main level of the house itself was subdivided into two units—a two room apartment on the main level and a two story, five room *house*—both of which shared a single kitchen.<sup>1</sup>

As the family began to take hold in LA, members moved on to other houses and other apartments around the city. Gustavo and his immediate family also have now moved on; he has bought a second home on the westside of Los Angeles while retaining the house in East LA for supplemental income. Currently, the house serves as a port of entry for twenty-three immigrants making up eight different households.\* Each occupies a separate room within the house—two on the first floor, three on the second floor, and three in the basement.

This "doubling up" of households is one way in which immigrants and the poor often combine their "scant resources" in order to make ends meet (Conquergood 120).<sup>3</sup> Without the means to rent individual homes, these households are forced to depend upon one another for help. Most urban and suburban contexts would discourage these kinds of compounded living arrangements; for these residents, doubling up is simply an economic fact of life (Conquergood 120).

### LA CASA Y LOS ANGELES...

The current residents have all, by one way or another, come to Los Angeles from a small town, Magdalena, in the state of Puebla, Mexico. The first of the current occupants to arrive was Don Joel with his three sons Dax, Beto, and Ernesto. Don Joel has since returned to Mexico after having become disenchanted with life in LA. His presence there serves to keep open ties between Magdalena and Los Angeles. This, in turn, helps to create a loop similar to what Roger Rouse has called a "transnational circuit" (7).

By displacing notions of unidirectional movement, Rouse points out that migration is a circular phenomenon creating single communities across several sites. Immigrants, then, do not leave one place for another; they move—they migrate—between two inter-connected places. This allows

immigrants to remain within a single network despite changes in physical location.

The wives and children of Dax and Ernesto have since joined them. They have, in a sense, become the anchors of the community in LA: Dax and Ernesto have now lived in the house a little over three years. Their tenure has provided a solid foothold in the house, allowing others to move through the space and onto other locations.

The Los Angeles of these households is, however, not that of many in East LA. The city for these residents is much reduced; it consists of only a handful of places and events generally occurring at different times of the week. The most traversed paths into the city are those leading to places of employment. The men all work in one of two garment related industries located in downtown LA. Each of them found employment through a connection made within the house.

The women work within a traditional model of domestic life; they prepare food, maintain the house, and watch over the children. Rarely do they venture out. When they do get out, it is usually in the company of their respective husbands. Occasionally, when the need arises, they may venture out, on foot, a few blocks to *la liquor* for some small item. Having recently arrived (after their husbands had earned enough money to send for them) and being tied to their husband's work schedules, these women have had their movements constricted.

Beyond work, very few other sites are frequented by the Magdalenan households. Trips to *El Rancho*, a grocery market catering to Mexican American and immigrant communities, near Mariachi Plaza (named after the Mariachis who line up in search of work much like the day laborers in other parts of LA) have become like excursions *al centro*. *El Parque de la Quatro* and *El Parque de Los Patos* serve as their recreational spaces. The parks have acquired names derived from their respective attributes; *La Quatro* is near Fourth Street and *Los Patos* has ducks. *La Quatro* acts as an informal outdoor space, while *Los Patos* provides more structured activities such as semi-formal *partidos de futbol* and family picnics.

These families rarely utilize the public space of the city for socializing other than the park-spaces. This is due in part to economic constraints—eating out or going to clubs is out of the question. But it is also due in many ways to a lack of connection to the public life of East LA. Since this group constitutes the arrival of a new "family" of immigrants, their social ties are contained, for the most part, within the walls of the house. Social connections leading beyond the house are generally tied in some way back to Mexico. Therefore, this re-located population remains within a network rarely centered on LA.

With so many people to accommodate, the house has become spatially re-oriented. It no longer seems to face the street. Entry is through the rear of the house and the driveway/parking area. The front entry has been blocked both from the inside as well as from the outside. The former living room, which opened onto the porch and the front yard,

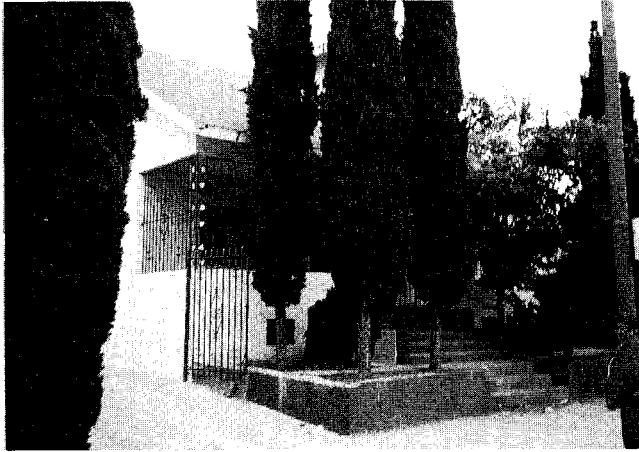


Figure 1. La otra casa (Photograph by Jose Luis Gamez).

has become a private dwelling. The porch itself now stands empty. It has been gated and locked rendering the front facade more like that of a non-house—of a building lacking even the slightest signs of life. A row of un-kept trees creates a barrier between the house and the street leaving the yard unclaimed and ambiguous. Partially hidden from view, it seems more like an abandoned site than the overcrowded space it has become.

The rear of the house is, however, another story. It now acts as the primary social space of the house. In addition to its original program, this area has become an extension of the interior space of the kitchen, much like a porch might, in which children can play under the watchful eye of someone inside. This is also the space in which friends may be greeted and adults often socialize. These activities mirror those described by Crawford and ADOBE LA with the exception that, here, the social life of the house remains dis-connected from that of the street.

In the evenings and on weekends, the parking area is primarily a masculine space where the men of the house trade stories or drink beer. The presence of cars helps to support this gendered spatial practice; it also doubles as an informal auto repair shop. Car related activities are seen by these households as part of a man's domain. The women are relegated to activities located primarily within the house. From the lutchen window they overlook the outside activities while monitoring the children and attending to household chores. The children, however, are allowed to bridge between these worlds, between inside and outside, using the open space of the parking area as a playground complete with the shells of immobile cars acting as mountains and caves.

By removing the cars and occasionally adding a tent or several tables, special events such as birthdays, weddings, receptions, and pueblo parties transform the space into a festival site. One recent week-end, fellow immigrants from Magdalena, who now live in various parts of Los Angeles, descended on the house for a town celebration complete with roasted meats, music, and dancing. Here, it seems, the zocalo has also migrated to LA, obscured political borders,

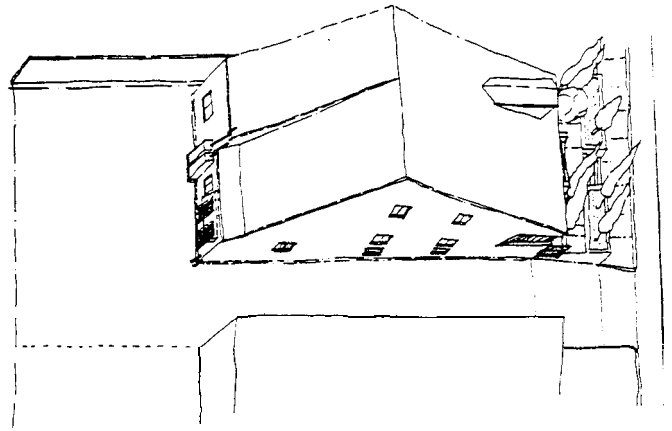


Fig. 2. The re-oriented house



Fig. 3. A landscape of cars (Drawing and photo by Jose Luis Gamez)

and provided a public realm for an extended community who might otherwise not have one.

While these spatial practices may point to alternative uses contained within a particular residential lot, they do not break completely with the typical suburban model. The exterior spaces of East LA remain a buffer zone between the house and the city at large. This is not unlike those found in much of middle class America. In the case of the Magdalenan households, much of the activity of the house has been relocated from the front to the rear. In the work of Crawford and ADOBE LA, friends and strangers are greeted at the sidewalk as opposed to the front door, but "casual guests rarely enter the house" (16). Each situation mirrors the suburban prohibition of non-family members within the private space of the house which is in keeping with the "suburbanization" of contemporary social life (Halle 23).

It is interesting to note that the family who owns the house, Gustavo's family, will on occasion return to use the parking area for their own celebrations. A recent wedding reception turned the parking space into a crowded dance hall. Two large canopies covered the space—joined in the center—reating a kind of wedding/big top atmosphere. Even the concrete paving was altered to support the newly proscribed activities.

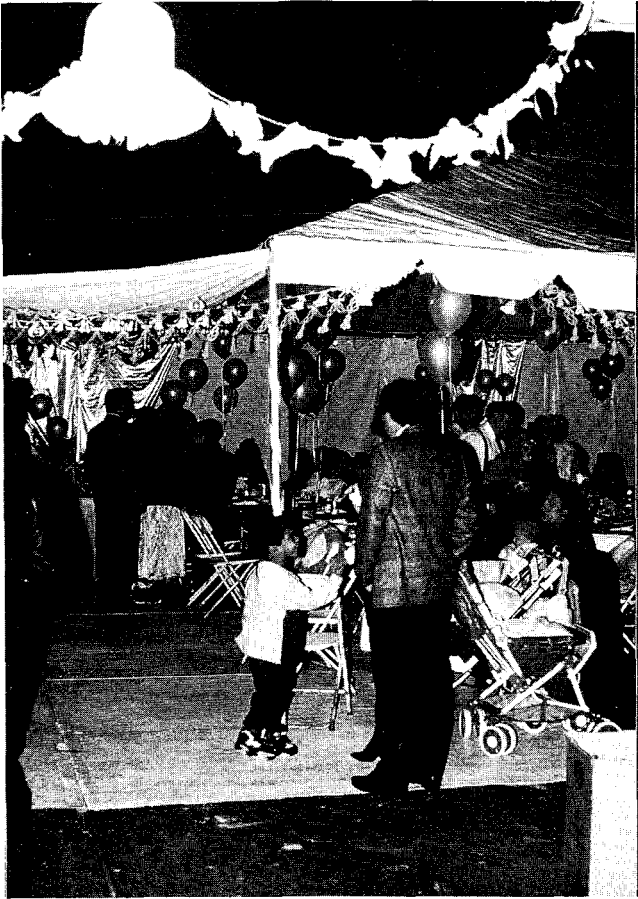


Figure 4. The parking area transformed (Photo by Jose Luis Gamez)

Painted a pale blue with two large four-pointed stars marking each end of a rectangle, a space for dancing was set apart from an eating area. Once underway, the reception created a space full of activity to rival any local club.

While the current residents were invited to attend the celebration, most kept to themselves and remained inside the house. A few of the men joined in briefly but this seemed more like a strategy for acquiring a free beer than an actual attempt at participating in the festivities. It was as if divisions between social classes had divided social spaces of the house; the middle class (landlord) occupied the exterior and public space, while the lower class (tenants) were relegated to the interior and more private spaces.

### MI FAMILIA...

Moving through the back door into the house itself, one enters a storage area which is essentially the entry to two different houses—the two room apartment and the two story unit. Here, one finds a door leading into the private spaces of two families and an open doorway leading into the shared kitchen of both units. The kitchen acts as the main interior living space for the households located in the main body of the house.

Although the kitchen is the most public area of the house,

it is generally populated by more equipment than people. Two refrigerators, one small stove, two tables pushed together surrounded by numerous mis-matched chair—all clues pointing to what one would think is the kitchen of an extended family. But these clues are misleading; the chairs are rarely occupied all at once. The kitchen is a shared and public space, but it is generally not shared by any two separate households at any give time. Each nuclear family eats as an individual family, each woman prepares her own family's meals, on so on. The kitchen, therefore, remains tied primarily to a domestic economy rather than to some more open-ended spatial activity.

The remaining areas of the house have become private dwellings tied to individual households. Most of the rooms in the house now function as both living and sleeping areas. Coupled with the kitchen, they contain most of the activities of domestic life.

Although these households are all in one way or another related, each operates independently of the others. During the week, each household socializes privately in their own spaces leaving the inter-household interaction to take place while at work. This means that the men generally socialize while away from the house and the women interact at home in the kitchen. As mentioned earlier, each household takes it dinner as an individual unit at different times of the day.



Figure 5. The kitchen (Photo by Jose Luis Gamez)

By re-privatizing the kitchen at differing times of the day, each family regains some measure of control in an otherwise hectic and overlapping space. Their weekend activities do not differ greatly. When they do interact as households, they do not do so in large numbers. In general, each household seems to keep to themselves.

Unlike the extended family found in which "privacy is rare, but not particularly valued (Crawford/ADOBE LA 16), for the Magdalenan households, privacy remains an important part of domestic life. Here one does not find several generations of a single family whose lives might overlap; there are no grandparents helping out with the kids while a younger couple attempts to build a life for them-

selves. What one finds instead are several siblings and their families. Rather than operating like a structured generational family, these households function more along parallel tracks. It seems that these households are attempting to act out individual suburban lives in spite of their crowded circumstances.

**MI CASA ES SU CIUDAD...**

The living situations of the Magdalenan households are also telling of the re-structured low wage industries located in and around downtown LA. Of these, few are as exploitative as the garment industry; this labor intensive sector of the

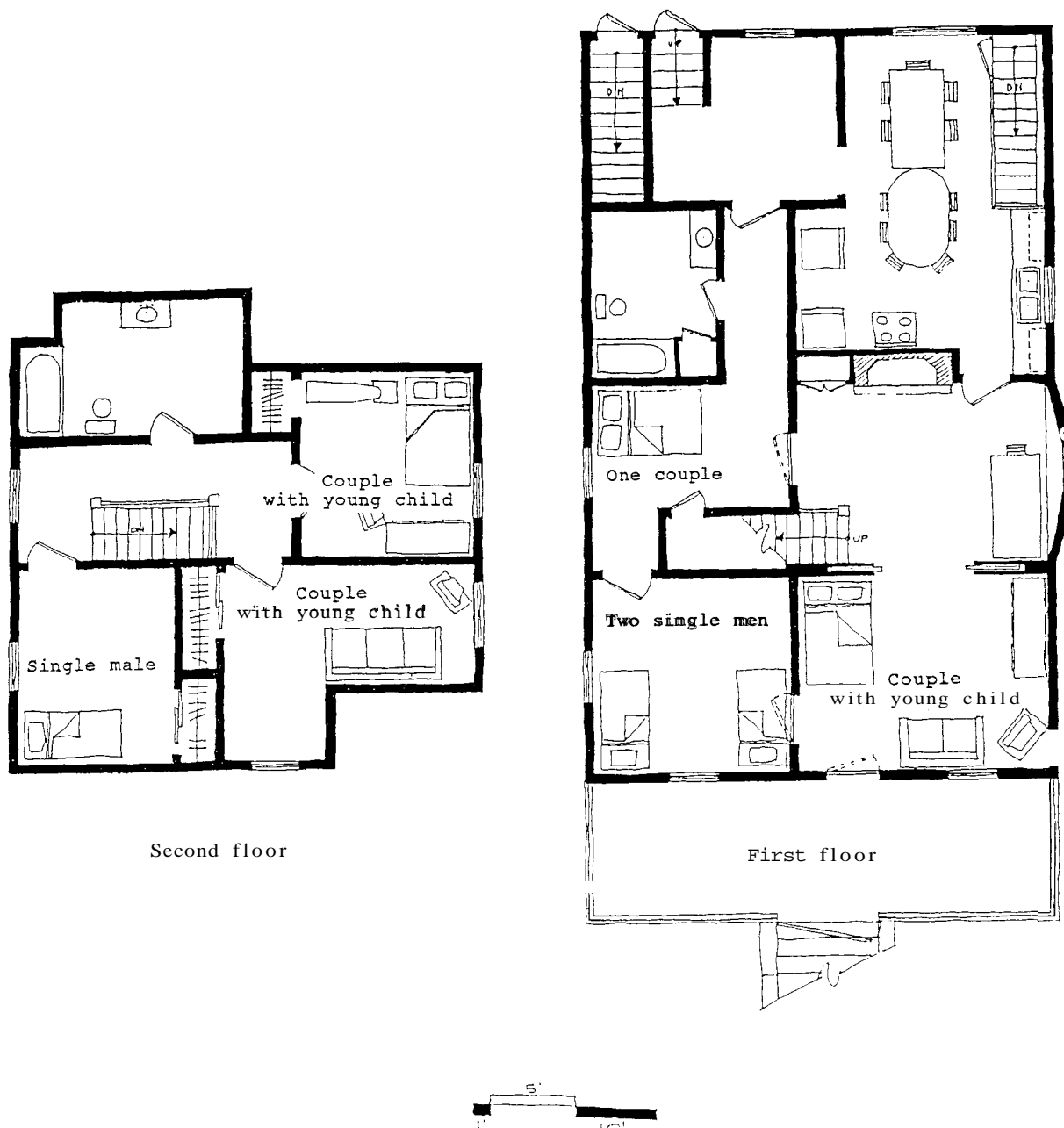


Figure 6. The "houses" of each individual household (Drawings by Jose Luis Gamez).

economy relies a large, concentrated, and largely unseen labor force as its means of production. Immigrants, often willing to take the jobs many US citizens scoff at, are at the heart of this pool. The combination of questionable immigration status, little education, and a lack of social and economic resources creates a situation in which immigrants are rendered virtually invisible. For the Magdalenan men, this translates into long hours at work leaving little time or energy for social activities of any kind. In fact, "this round of restructuring" has dramatically increased the immigrant labor pool creating the kind of bottom-of-the-barrel competition for jobs that almost guarantees declining wages and a dim future (Soja 197-217). By doubling up their households, the Magdalenans have managed to secure for themselves a dwelling space but this has not been without a price. Their living conditions are more closely related to the realm of "hotbeds," illegal garage conversions, and "six-pack stucco tenements" than to their neighbors in East LA (Davis 63).

### MUCHAS CASAS...

The stories contained within *la otra casa* provide insights for understanding the complexity located within what is often seen as a fairly homogeneous community. Much of the population of East LA is now second and third generation Mexican-American. Their presence has altered the landscape in ways that reflect certain aspects of cultural production. As immigrants, however, the Magdalenan households have yet to make a similar impact upon the community. Lacking a strong connection to the social life of the city, they are often overlooked—even by those with similar social histories. This is further compounded by the fact that the Magdalenan households are renters; they do not own the home in which they live and, therefore, lack the ability to physically transform their spaces in ways that might reflect the character of other parts of East Los Angeles. As a part of a low wage economy, it is unlikely the Magdalenan households will become home owners any time soon. Their economic status works to keep them in an overcrowded and often sub-standard housing market. Add to this the periodic use of portions of site by the landlord and one finds a situation in which these immigrants are often displaced both within their own homes as well as the city in general.

It is also not clear to what extent the community of East LA has departed from the middle class norms of suburbia. While certain aspects of domestic social life have enlivened the urban landscape, the fact that non-family members rarely enter the house is in keeping with more mainstream notions of privacy. This can be seen in both the *yarda* of Crawford and ADOBE LA (15) as well as the parking area of *la otra casa*. Each has become a primary social space simultaneously maintaining a distance between the home and the outside world while extending the life of the family(ies) beyond the walls of the house. This complicated relationship with suburbia is also reflected in the model of the traditional family and its accompanying social roles. In the work of

Crawford and ADOBE LA, the kitchen is "the territory of the mother and the female members of the family" (16). The same is true of the households contained within *la otra casa*; in each case, traditional social roles remain embedded within the built environment. Even the fence, "the initial gesture that defines East LA's domestic landscape" (Crawford and ADOBE LA 14), has its counterpart in the white picket fence of the American Dream.

The relationship between East LA and the suburban model—between the ideal and the everyday—points to the complex ways in which identity and place intersect. Culture, community, and identity are often presented as cohesive entities free of inconsistencies. While they may, in some ways, be generalizable, they are by no means unified. Each is embedded in spatial texts located in particular places and times. Each influences, and is influenced by, a myriad of contextual force—from the macro-level structures of international economies to the micro-level settings of daily life. If architects and planners are to reclaim a social agenda, they must develop a heterogeneous understanding of community—one that recognizes the complexities located within any given group.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on the households located within the original living spaces of the house. Therefore, the spaces located in the basement do not figure prominently in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> I am using the term households loosely here to mean a grouping of people sharing one dwelling space. Within the context of this house, a household may be a couple, a couple with a young child, or a grouping of single men.
- <sup>3</sup> While the living arrangements of this house seem more than just doubled up, Dwight Conquergood uses this term to illustrate the practice of multiple households working together to attain affordable housing. For more information see pages 120-131 in Conquergood, "Life in Big Red."

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