African-American Art and Architecture:
A Theology of Life, Death, and Transformation

SHERYL TUCKER DE VAZQUEZ
University of Houston

In West African culture, from which the vast majority of AfricanAmericans descended, death was viewed merely as a transition to a more powerful spiritual realm. The Kongo cosmogram - a cross, inscribed inside a circle or diamond, symbolized thecontinuous cycle of life and death. In contrast to Western philosophy, traditional African belief systems suggest that everything is interconnected and overlapped with everything else. A spiritual belief in the continuing cycle of life, death, transformation and rebirth continues to inform the whole of AfricanAmerican cultural life and is revealed to us in the art and architecture of African-American people. Houston artist and educator John Biggers has vividly portrayed aspects of this belief system in his powerful portraits of the shotgun house and its landscape. With its spiritually protected yard, the shotgun house, which has been traced by historian John Michael Vlach to West African origins, is portrayed by Biggers as a mythological archetype that gives form to the collective African-American ancestral experience. The modest shotgun house form is abstracted as a temple-like icon and domestic chores are treated as sacred rituals. Seemingly charged with the accumulations of long-gathering ancestral energy, Biggers' portraits of the shotgun house suggest a transcendent metaphysical relationship between people, house and place. Beginning with the iconography in the work of John Biggers this paper explores the of individual and collective memory in African-American culture and how the interconnectedness of things is revealed to us in the contemporary art, architecture and landscape of African-American people.

INTRODUCTION

> Scholars of African-American culture have emphasized that the underpinning of African-American creativity is marked by constant improvisation: "It is an integral part of the process of African-art to constantly reshape the old and familiar into something modern and unique to simultaneously express one's self and reinforce the image of the community."
>
> – John Michael Vlach in *Afro-American Tradition* in *Decorative Arts.*[1]

For many African-American artists, art objects are often dressed in the accouterments of the ordinary, the discarded and the abandoned. Houston self-taught artist Jessie Lott refers to his sculptures welded from salvaged found objects as an *"art of circumstances,"*[2] an art that emerged from the convergence of financial lack and the ability, with divine insight, to *"see* what God has put in front you." Art is the

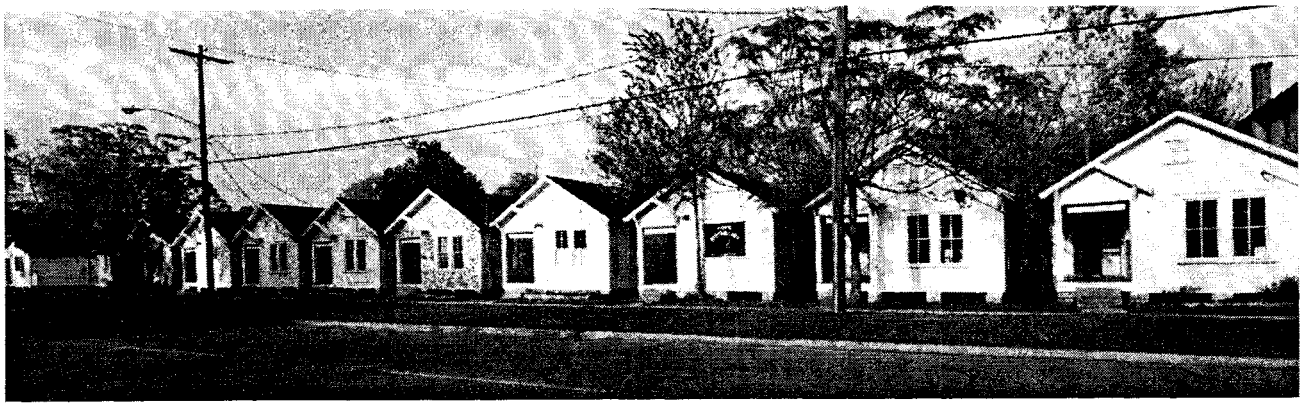


Fig. 1. Project Row Houses, Third Ward, Houston, Texas.

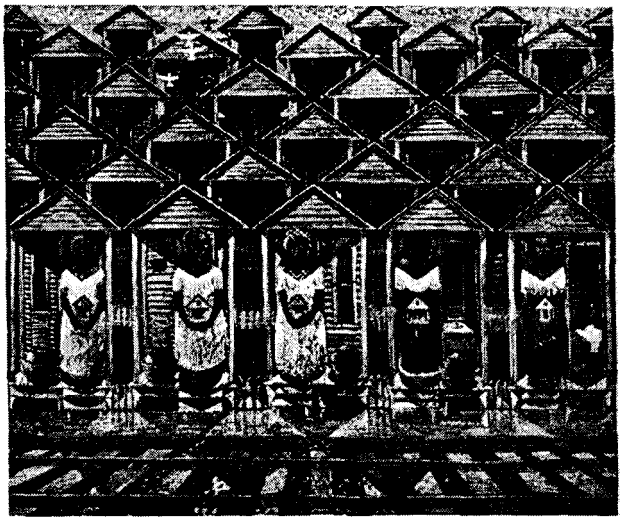


Fig. 2. John Biggers' painting *Shotguns*

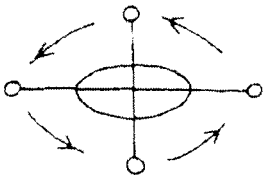
vehicle of revelation. Out of this tradition of improvisation and transformation has emerged an important prototypical public art project in Houston, Texas - Project Row Houses. This project has transformed an abandoned lot of twenty-two identical "shotgun" houses of the Third Ward community into revolving art installation sites for artists whose work deals with issues pertinent to the African-American community. Melding art and architecture, vernacular and academic, Project Row Houses acts not only as a historical retrieval of African-American material culture but also as a mirror of a distinctive African-American way of *being in the world.* Project Row Houses is a spatial unfolding of artist John Biggers' paintings in which the shotgun house is a powerful symbol of the AfricanAmerican cultural landscape. In Biggers' paintings, the narrow, gabled elevation of the shotgun house with its spiritually protected surrounding landscape is a mythological archetype that gives form to the collective African-American ancestral experience. The modest house form is abstracted as a temple-like symbol and domestic chores are treated as sacred rituals. Seemingly charged with the accumulations of longgathering ancestral energy, Biggers' portraits of shotgun houses suggest a transcendent metaphysical relationship between people, house and place. The shotgun house is one room wide, one story tall, several rooms deep, has its primary entrance in the gable end and has no hallways. The term "shotgun" was coined because one could shoot a bullet straight through the house without penetrating any walls. This linear plan also made the narrow houses well-suited for cross ventilation in the hot southern climate.

According to American folk culture historians, the shotgun house was introduced to the U.S. by free Haitians who settled in New Orleans after the Haitian slave rebellion against the French in the early nineteenth century. The Haitians, in essence, reconnected AfricanAmericans with the socially intimate housing space that many historians believe evolved from the narrow, one-room units of the Yoruba compound in West Africa - where most slaves brought to America were captured. The form of the shotgun house grew out of the value traditional African society placed on the continuity of the extended family and a reverence for one's ancestors. In contrast to the Western model of aggressive individuality, in African culture the lives of family and clan members were so interwoven with each other that the boundaries between self, family and community were ambiguous. A person is viewed as being born into a society that is the very source of his being. Like Buddhism, traditional African beliefs assume the continuity of generations, believing that "ancestors are reborn in the young." Although a person is an individual he or she is not an autonomous individual. African-American aesthetic values grew out of this complex belief system that interweaves the bonds of family, the continuing influence of the ancestor on the descendant and the connection of the human spirit to one's earthly dwelling place. The architecture of the Yoruba compound reflected the lack of importance the Africans gave to the individual within the dwelling unit. The emphasis was instead on the celebration of family life and the development of interpersonal relationships. Mostly used for sleeping, the one room units of the Yorubacompound surrounded a large communal space where the rituals of day-to-day existence were performed.[3] Even as transformed by Caribbean and European building techniques, the shotgun house expresses the enduring social values and cultural traditions of generations of African-Americans. For newly freed African-Americans emulating housing in the free Haitian community, the shotgun house type was not only a symbol of freedom, but also a means of defining themselves as a united community outside of the confines of slavery.

A SPIRITUALLY PROTECTED LANDSCAPE

> "I have seen things that neither Beckett, nor Ionesco nor any of the,
> others could have thought possible; and to see these things I did not need
> to do more than look out of my studio window above the Apollo theater on
> 125th Street. So you see, this experience allows me to represent in the
> means of today, another view of the world.[4]
>
> – Romare Bearden, quoted in *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden.*

The West Africans who were brought to the U. S. as slaves believed that death was merely a transition to a more powerful spiritual realm. The Kongo cosmogram - a cross, inscribed inside a circle or diamond, symbolizes the continuous cycle of life and death in traditional West African culture. Within this continuous cycle of life, the dead were believed to exist in a more powerful realm and to be able to manipulate good and evil in the world of the living. Remnants of this belief system, overlapping with Christian beliefs forged under slavery, persisted in African-American burial practices well into the twentieth century.



Yowa:
the Kongo sign of cosmos
and the continuity
of human life

Fig. 3. Drawing of the West African Kongo Cosmogram.

Fig. 4. An African-American grave site with broken and inverted pottery

Believed to contain fragments of the deceased's spiritual self, the last used possessions of the dead were inverted on the grave site to direct the spirit to the world of the dead that mirrored our own. Trees were thought to be a source of connection to the dead through their root systems which could travel deep through the earth surface. Spirits were not only to be feared, but could also called upon for healing and guidance in earthly matters. The nsiki, a portable charm or shrine made of roots, stones and grave dirt (believed to be one with the spirit)[5] could be activated by the spirit of one's ancestors for the healing and protection of its owner. Thompson refers to Biggers' *Shotguns* a "nski-painting," =created for spiritual healing and compares it to Grant Wood's American Gothic:

> On the front porch of each of the five closest shotgun houses appears a key feature of traditional African-American yard art: vessels by the door. They stand for African-American culture in practical, domestic acts: preparing soap, cooking pork, bathing infants. But they also signify covert spiritual protection, Grant Wood's pitchfork taken underground. The pot before the door cooks or contains more than meets the eye. It metaphysically caparisons the traditional African-American yard and houses, as do African-American bottle trees and bottle shelves and bottle-lined walks and garden beds.[6]

Fig. 5. The nkisi is a protective charm created for the healing and protection of its owner.

This landscape depicted by Biggers is based on the spiritually medicated dressed yards that emerged from the collective memory of African-Americans. Hung from trees, brightly colored bottles (bottletrees) are believed to bring rain, makes trees bloom, bring luck and entrap evil. Articles like broom straws and rice grains act as sieves filtering evil spirits. Paths through the yard are made to meander and many instances the doors in the linear shotgun were shifted because "evil travels in straight lines." The work of contemporary African-American yard-artists recall this mystical connection between man , his dwelling place and daily life. In the hands of African-American folk-artists, guided by divine insight, discarded household goods take on new meanings beyond mere make-do decoration. Houston Third Ward artist Robert Harper (who lived only blocks away from the Project Row House site until his house burned) continuously transformed the three-dimensional collage of wheels and hubcaps in his front yard. Consistent themes of Harper's art and the many spiritually medicated African-American gardens is movement and motion which are intertwined with cultural ideas of beauty. Objects that move in the wind, like Harper's wheels are decorated and treated as special objects that communicate the power of unseen spiritual forces. The role of the artist in African society and in African-American culture is that of intercessory between the divine spirit and man. The dressed yard acts a kind of visual prayer. The aesthetic experience lies with ability of the viewer to perceive an otherworldly presence. Created from salvaged, discarded objects, these gardens reveal the connection of our everyday lives to our existential essence. Art, life, land. philosophy, religion and politics are interconnected with the divine spark that art historian Robert Farris Thompson calls "the Flash of the Spirit" – an improvisational individuality informed by a transcendent spiritual presence that energizes all of African-

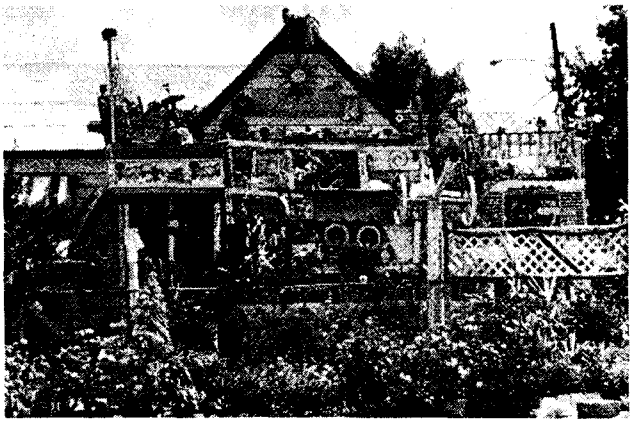


Fig. 6. Robert Harper's yard art in the Third Ward, Houston, Texas.

American culture and creates a powerful resistance to total Western encapsulation.

PROJECT ROW HOUSES

> I see them as I walk the Third Ward of Houston, the rhythm of their shadow, the square of the porch, three over four like the beat of a visual gospel.'
>
> – John Biggers quoted in *"The Song that named the Land,"* Black Art Ancestral Legacy: the African Impulse in African-American Art

As with Biggers' *Shotguns,* the striking presence of the Project Row House site comes from the repetition of the houses spare, identical elements - factory made double-hung windows, standard-sized wooden attic grills, prefabricated concrete steps and a single square post on the front porch that link the houses to the directness and minimalism of modern architectural expression. Devoid of ornamentation, the houses reveal the rhythm, interval, scale and proportion of the houses that, without affectation, restore the connection between the experience of art and architecture. While the stark, rough appearance of the shotgun house is usually associated with "financial lack," the minimalist expression of the shotgun house, as depicted by Biggers, is not one of real need, but rather a renunciation of luxury and display and has taken on an aura of spiritual discipline not unlike that of the Japanese tea house. In Biggers' *Shotguns* the female figures clasp *tiny versions of the houses - held like lanterns to guard the purity of the people." The flying birds in the upper left corner and the vertical washboards on the porches represent ascension to the heavens.*[8] (Figure *2)*

The tiny (six-hundred square feet) one-story houses are elevated on stone footings and are separated by side yards only three feet wide. The shotgun unit in and of itself, lacks significance and gathers meaning from its relationships to the whole: the identical elevations of a row of shotgun houses create a sense of collective identity and the front porches transform the street edge into a public gathering space. One row of houses faces a major thoroughfare, the other faces a narrow alley. The two rows of houses frame an outdoor courtyard. Much of life on the Project Row House site, not unlike the Yoruba compound, took place outside the tiny houses in the collective outdoor room framed by the two rows of houses. Punctuated by large trees, rusted clothesline posts and the porches that Biggers called the "talking places" where men" can discuss the meaning of the Bible," this common green space gives the site a distinctive rural character although it is located in what has become an inner city neighborhood. While the houses are in fact more of a hybrid form of the shotgun house and the compressed bungalow, with gabled tin roof tops,long narrow plans and shallow rear porches, the project's clapboard houses are typical of the shotgun house in their general appearance. The houses represent one of the many variations on the shotgun house found in African-American communities across the country. By the time the project's houses were built in the late 1930's, the shotgun house had been nationally adopted as an affordable housing type. The Third Ward was a flourishing business district and the neighborhood's population was evenly split between African-Americans and immigrant Whites. Frank and Katie Trombatore, an immigrant Italian family, built the site's houses as rental property adjacent to the corner two-story storefront where they lived and operated a grocery store.

When Lowe stumbled upon the site of identical shotgun houses in the Third Ward, he felt its resonance with Biggers paintings and the housing of the community – "The physical houses have relevance to the people in the area, those who grew up in the houses or lived near them." Since Lowe conceived of the housing site as a potential public art project, each of the houses have been opened to the public with revolving art installations. Artists spend six-month residences at the site and in the surrounding community developing concepts to transform one house. One house serves as the project's business office and another as an artist's residence. The vitality of domestic life still exists on the Project Row House site: seven of the abandoned houses have been adapted as living spaces for single mothers who are in the process of completing either high school or college degrees. The remaining houses have been converted into spaces for community service programs.

ART FOR THE SOUL

> a world through art in which, the validity of my Negro experience would live and make its own logic.'
>
> – Romare Bearden, quoted in *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden.*

For Project Row Houses, the shotgun house acts as a transparent, accessible material link to the African-American past that connects not only art and life, but also the particulars of the African-American experience to universal truths. The shotgun house gathers connects. The site and houses provide an infrastructure of content to which the artist must respond.

With the space of the houses as a backdrop, the artist has the particular opportunity to transcend the personal, by providing a window onto a set of collective cultural values expressed by the shotgun house.

Before the restoration of the houses was completed artist Jessie Lott transformed the boarded over windows of the houses into a collective canvas for the work of individual artists, the first art show on the site, *A Drive-by Exhibit.* This first exhibition set the stage for the project's challenge to individual artists: to interweave personal visions with those of the community and the unique form and space of the shotgun house – echoing the traditional African artisan's creative process of melding collective values and personal visions. Biggers' Shotguns capture this philosophy in the imagery of the collective identity of the shotgun house that contrasts sharply with the individuality of the women on the porches and improvisational quality of the dressed yards in the foreground. The dual nature of African-American culture is expressed in Cornell West's description of the jazz ensemble: *"As with a soloist in a jazz quartet, quintet, or band, individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the creative tension with the group - a tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project."*[10]

Drawing upon the direct experience of the house, in her installation, *Recollections,* Annette Lawrence, created one of the project's most holistic yet personal expression of art, place and culture. Preferring the purity of a single vaulted space, Lawrence removed the house's interior partitions and ceiling, exposing its wooden rafters. She finished the roof and walls with sheet rock, creating a light, pristine space interrupted only by a the remains of a brick chimney. The space was layered with vertical planes of strings strung from the rafters to the floor. Woven between the harp-like strings are tiny paper bag notebooks made by neighborhood children, who tell the story of the community through their eyes. Lawrence, whose work often has musical overtones, compares her stringed installation to the "inside of a piano" and "bars of music." I wanted my piece to be as light as possible and quiet. The strings in my piece refer to the lines of clapboard siding on the houses." Lawrence's delicate installation seemed like a melody played against the heavier cadence established by the rhythm of the identical houses along the street. Many of the artists installations transform the houses with narratives and metaphysical metaphors echoing reoccurring themes of spiritual healing in the African-American yard-art. Artist Tierney Malone transformed the shotgun house into a mythical drugstore, Hope Apothecary, a rich installation of rooms filled with bottles and cans containing various potions for curing the ills of the community. Stacked on shelves, Malone's containers are collaged with images of AfricanAmerican heros like Langston Hughes and Jackie Robinson and juxtaposed with scenes of poverty and violence. The installation was created as a reflection upon the "societal, spiritual, and psychological problems we face as a country and as individuals." Malone left the walls as they

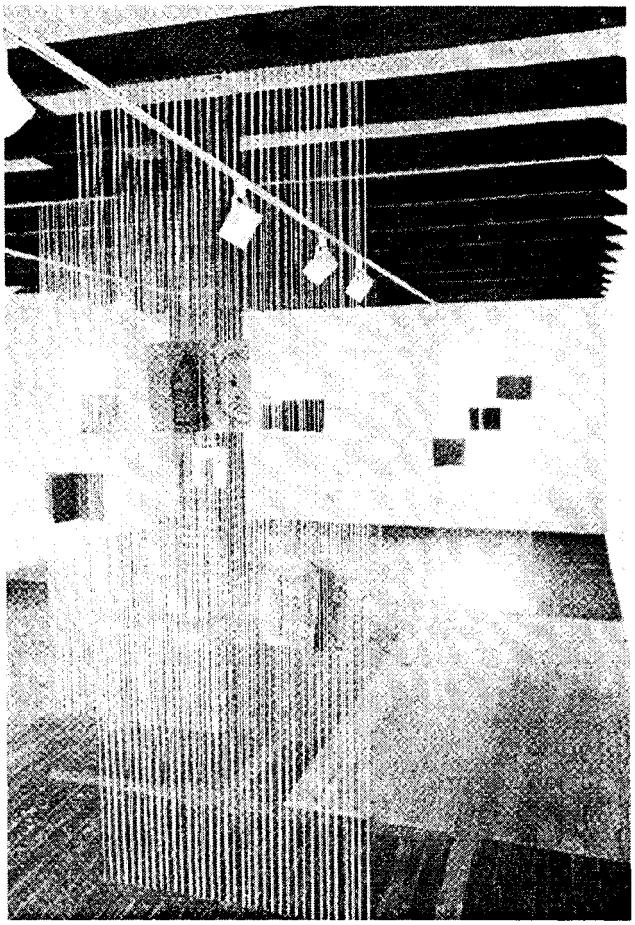


Fig. 7. Recollections, an installation by Annette Lawrence.

were rough and textured with bent nails, staples and remnants of wall and newspaper recalling the African-American tradition of "dressing" the house to ward off evil spirits. The rooms, filled with beautifully detailed and well craftedcollaged containers, transcend the sentiment and nostalgia of the artist's message.

In another house, the "spirits" of the community members are captured on film with disposable cameras disbursed throughout the neighborhood. The photographs framed inside mason in jars echoed themes of the nsiki, the spirit-evokingcontainers for the healingand protection of its owner. The "spiritual guidance the community members seek is found within themselves. The mason jars are stacked on free-standing shelves filtering the hear and light from the windows the house takes on an other-worldly presence. George Smith, an artist in residence at Rice University, has often alluded to African and African-American burial rites and traditions in his sculpture. Like Biggers, Smith has interpreted the narrow form of the house as an ancestral shrine: *This shrine represent(s) an African-American interpretation of the Mbari shrines that are built by the Ibo people of Nigeria. These public shrines were usedfor celebration whenever it was felt that a community needed spiritual renewal or strengthening after a crisis caused by drought, war, famine or similar adversity."* Smith, in an early study for his house-shrine,

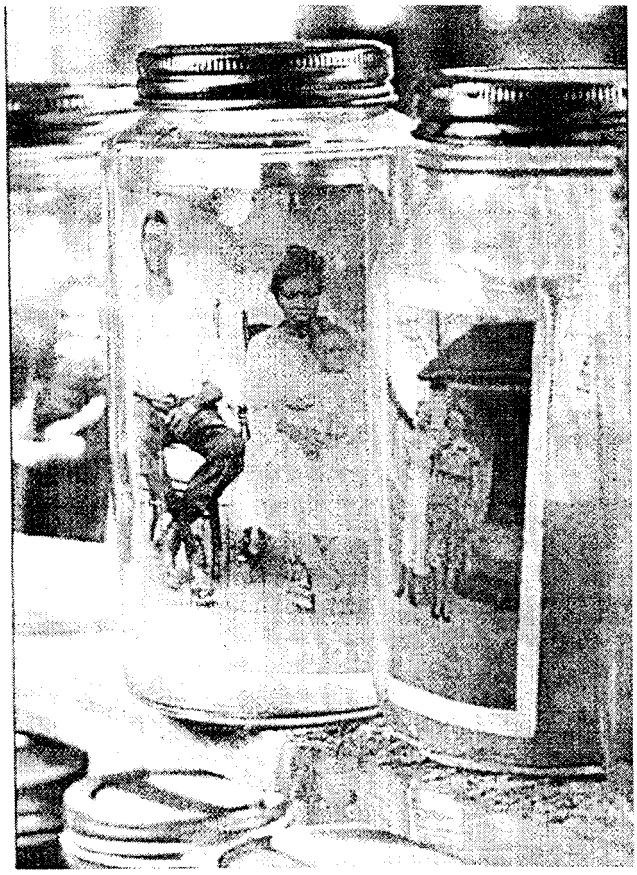


Fig. 8. *Third Ward Archives,* an installation by Tracy Hicks.

explored the domestic link between African-American house and grave. In keeping with the African-American tradition of placing broken, inverted cups, saucers, dishes and other possessions of the deceased over the grave site to keep the spirit content, smith created a sacred ring of broken white dishes in the middle of the house. "Gathering together to eat is life-affirming and china was always the family's most revered possession," he notes.'? Smith's idea of creating a shrine to African-American ancestors evolved into the construction of a wood-frame altar around a brick chimney that was once connected to a wood stove. Providing warmth in the winter and a means for cooking.

Ultimately however, the project is less concerned with the individual work of art than it is with its ability to transform a economically and socially depressed community. Project Row Houses founder Rick Lowe, like artist John Biggers, has always believed that art was capable of the healing and transformation of the human spirit. Now considered one of Houston's pockets of poverty, the Third Ward's economic and social depression is evidenced by the large numbers of boarded up and abandoned houses and empty lots scattered throughout the neighborhood. Despite thriving African-Americanchurchesandpublic institutions, the neighborhood's lack of a viable private enterprise has fostered a high unemployment rate and its associated ills – poverty crime, deteriorating housing and poor health care for the community's

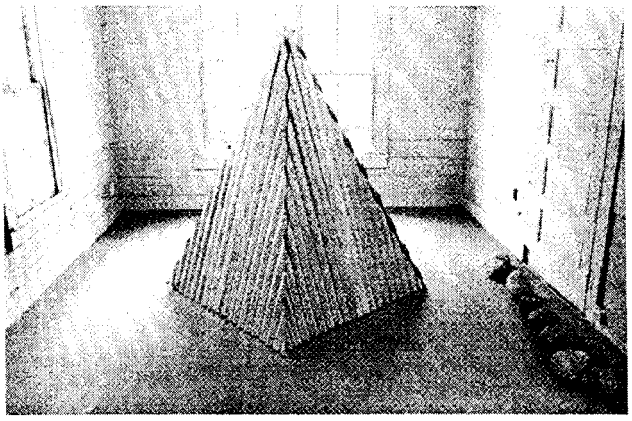


Fig. 9. Ancestral Shrine by George Smith.

citizens. Lowe says "One cannot be avictim (of situations and circumstances) while participating in the creative act." Jessie Lott explains: "when one transforms a discarded article into a work of art, one transforms and gives new life to himself. Art and imagination are the means of revealing the beauty in an object once its function is gone. Inherent in this act of restoration is the African-American theology of birth, death and redemption.

The soulfulness of the African-American landscape comes from the commonplace convergence of matter and spirit in everyday life providing a subtle but potent resistance to a Western technocratic way of life. The art and architecture of Project Row Houses is a powerful visual and spatial expression of the spirit-filled way of being that informs the whole of African-American life and reveals to us the interconnectedness of things: of culture and circumstance, of past and future, of the individual and the collective, of the everyday and the existential.

NOTES

[1] John Michael Vlach, *Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), p. 3.
[2] Jessie Lott, Interview, May 17, 1997.
[3] John Michael Vlach, "Sources of the Shotgun House: African and Caribbean Antecedents for Afro-American Architecture," Vols. I and II, Doctoral Dissertation (Indiana University, March, 1975).
[4] Campbell and Patton, *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1991), p. 44.
[5] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit, African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 1984), pp. 117-119.
[6] Robert Farris Thompson, "John Biggers' Shotguns of 1987: An American Classic," *The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1995). p. 108.
[7] Robert Farris Thompson, "The Song that named the Land," *Black art Ancestral Legacy: the African Impulse in African-American Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989).
[8] Robert Farris Thompson, "John Bigers' Shotguns of 1987: An American Classic," *The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1995), p. 108.
[9] Campbell and Patton, *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1991), p. 44.

[10] Cornell West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 105.
[11] George Smith, "Project Row Houses Artists Notes," (Houston, Texas, 1995).
[12] Ibid.
[13] Rick, Lowe, Interview, July 13, 1995.
[14] Jessie Lott, Interview, May, 17, 1997.