

POP LOCKIN' ARCHITECTURE: Hip Hop Dance Tags Space

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*Architecture is the embodiment, the concretization of the structures of freedom, domination, capitalism, democracy, and other institutions that have an effect on people. The less we consider architecture as an embodiment of these structures, the more these structures begin to control our discourse.*¹

Introduction

How might architects use dance to connect with people and to express the culture of a community through design? Architecture should not solely provide function, but reflect culture as our bodies reflect our lives. This document discusses the possibility of Hip Hop dance as the connector to architecture and culture in the impoverished inner-city environment.² My interest in this topic comes from my experience as a dancer and growing up in an urban community. In 2005 I had the opportunity to use Hip Hop dance for a design project in Woodlawn Chicago, which I will discuss in the latter portion of this document.

First, I will review previous research considering the relationship of Hip Hop and Architecture before discussing Hip Hop culture and dance. Then I will discuss Hip Hop dance and the connection of dance and architecture to life and space. The connections to life and space frame how dance and architecture work together to empower and influence how people inhabit an environment. Lastly, I will define and outline Hip Hopchitecture³ preceding an example of a project in which I engaged Hip Hop dance with my design

process to create a structure that embraced the culture and environment where it would be constructed.

Several scholars have recognized the potential of Hip Hop to address the spatial and political concerns within underprivileged African American communities in the city, including Craig Wilkins, Melvin Mitchell, Cornel West, and Darell Wayne Fields as well as architecture graduates James Garrett, Jr. and Jabari Garland. After claiming rap music as the 'womb from which hip hop is born,' Wilkins outlined four primary principles necessary for the physical manifestations of hip hop space: Palimpsestic, Anthropomorphic, Performative, and Adaptive.⁴ Wilkins reasoned Palimpsestic is an erasure of both dominant and spatial understandings of 'proper' and its hegemonic physical manifestations. Anthropomorphic is the holistic understanding of the place the body inhabits. Performative is providing the stage (backdrop) and (inviting) the performance where space is produced through the conjunction of people within it. Adaptive is using and reusing materials transformatively and creatively, removing the hegemonic 'proper' not only from spatial communication but from symbol and material communication as well.⁵

In 2005 Garland added Flow-Tektoniks, as he defined is the connection between the artistic and technical aspects within design. His concerns were to create structures that allow a personal connection with the architecture that would engage and empower people with

the world around them.⁶ In addition, I am focusing more intricately on the possibilities of Hip Hop dance to take its methods of creating space and apply it to architecture for not only impoverished Hip Hop culture communities, but Hip Hop culture in general.

There have also been many scholars that have mentioned the need for Black architecture, stressing the absence of Blacks as architects and spaces that capture the essence of Blackness, which I agree. However, Hip Hoprchitecture⁷ is not Black architecture. The paradigm for Hip Hopchitecture consists of the architectural needs of Black culture, but does not speak for all members of the Black community—due to the complexity and variances of Blackness—as well as Hip Hop. For instance, some Blacks may not feel a connection at all to Hip Hop culture and are let's say more connected to Gospel, Jazz, Rock, or Pop culture, therefore their experience and perception will differ.

In opposition professor and scholar Dr. John McWhorter labels Hip Hop culture as a 'therapeutic alienation' from dominant White culture.⁸ McWhorter argues that Hip Hop is merely a method created by African Americans in response to reclaiming self-esteem that is assumed to have been stripped away by their oppressors. He states that Hip Hop is used to accuse Whites of their pre-1960's perception of African Americans and therefore to be the complete opposite Hip Hop denounces anything that is considered 'acting white,' as the beginnings of a revolution.⁹ McWhorter concludes that most current racial problems African American face are caused by their misinformed knowledge of social, economic, and political conditions where hip hop is the culprit to this ignorance.¹⁰

Hip Hop Culture

Hip Hop culture began developing by young, impoverished African Americans in the Bronx New York during the 1960's with music and dance influence coming from artists such as James Brown, the Nicholas Brothers, and even Bruce Lee Kung Fu films. In the late 1970's the first Hip Hop rap entitled, *Rapper's Delight*, was recorded and became a pop and R&B hit in 1979.¹¹ By the 1980s the four elements of Hip Hop were defined: music production (DJ'ing), rapping (MC'ing), break

dancing (b-boyin'), and graffiti. The four elements expressed experiences of street life in the Bronx that would eventually enlighten the world of the creativity and talent of the poor, inner-city residents. In a short period of time, Hip Hop became a social movement acting as the voice of young oppressed communities to address politics, economics, and the struggles of inner city poverty.

Furthermore, in recent years Hip Hop has grown to be a globally known phenomenon—reaching more than just the poor African American, Latino, Asian, and White urbanites across the United States—but is very popular in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America.¹² One of the main reasons for Hip Hop's success, other than it being something new, different, or 'cool,' is how it enables teenagers and young adults to express themselves in a non-traditional fashion.

Hip Hop analysis

Today's Hip Hop music and culture is quite diverse, in that it has influences from several different societies. It has also become so commercialized that there is more than one genre, style, and ideology of the culture that has spread throughout the world. In places like Salvador, Brasil and South Korea Hip Hop is still celebrated and understood as a social movement, which is contradictory to the music that is imported from the U.S. to those areas.

One of the largest debates concerns the message and actions of commercial Hip Hop. Commercial Hip Hop is the culture that is arguably exploited by its participants and the media. Music videos by artists such as 50 cent, Nelly, Ying Yang Twins, Jay-Z, and Lil' John display half-naked women, alcohol, jewelry, and the need for a materialistic lifestyle. A lifestyle where partying, 'model-like' women, and the skill of intimidation portray Hip Hop as a boys club promoting debauchery.¹³ I have never viewed this music in this manner, but I do understand the difference in opinion because of all the negative images and associations with Hip Hop culture.

I do not perceive a problem with the challenges that Hip Hop brings for people to

understand a different way of life no matter if I agree with it or not. I do not agree with women being viewed as objects of mere entertainment nor do I agree with these women's desires to be viewed as sexual objects, but I do accept the fact that there are some people who are okay with this. There are some people who have different perceptions on what is right, what is wrong, and how this is determined.

This is where Hip Hop has its strongest foundation. It has not only allowed the world to see that there are innovative, creative, talented, adroit young men and women in low-income areas, projects, and ghettos, but also that these young people have derived a culture, which may not be completely understood until only remnants and memories remain. The most notable thing is that these young adults did it their way. They did not change the language or manner in which Hip Hop was to be understood; rather they are forcing those on the outside to understand its originality; something McWhorter should consider.

As in most cultures there is always more than one defining aspect. Hip Hop is a social movement. Hip Hop is an art, a culture, and has a political agenda to redefine, reconstruct, and question the traditional American way of life. Hip Hop welcomes everyone, but is not meant for everyone. The other side of Hip Hop that is rarely seen or being promoted in most media is what is called underground Hip Hop, where topics of partying, portrayal of women, and Black America are discussed in a more 'positive' manner. Positive by stating there is a problem with how Hip Hop is portrayed and generalized; positive by speaking for those who are not heard and don't have violence, drug dealing, or crime on their agendas; positive by being respectful to others' yet possibly controversial.

On the other hand, Hip Hop has been commercial since the release of *Rapper's Delight*. Along with appearances in the movie 'Flashdance' and the first Hip Hop movie 'Wild Style,' Hip Hop dance has accepted the influence of mainstream culture to add its own flavor.¹⁴ In my opinion, to state the inappropriateness of Hip Hop culture today is to point fingers at ourselves as a society for what we have embarked on this culture. As

most will remember Hip Hop began as a mode of expression for young people in the Bronx. Rap was not introduced until the late 70's. Before then Hip Hop was mainly b-boying (understood today as breakdancing).¹⁵ Once businesses and producers saw the response by the U.S. to the young breakers that were in the movies, they saw the opportunity for marketing this group. After break dancing had appeared to calm down and die-out, rap rose as a means of quick money and production. It is easier to market a compact disc or tape than it is to market a 20 people breakdancing crew. Breakdancing made its come back once it was placed in music videos again for the public. Actually, it never left it was just not available to everyone.

In looking back in History it seems as if every culture started by African Americans has been frowned upon and looked at negatively until its acceptance by mainstream White culture.¹⁶ This holds true for early dances and music such as Ragtime, Rock n' Roll, Jazz, Soul, Bebop and even Black Gospel. So is it truly the message and style of the culture that we are against or is it the masterminds behind the creation?

Dance

Stealing from the night
A few
Desperate Hours
Of Pleasure

Stealing from death
A few
Desperate days
Of Life¹⁷

-Langston Hughes, *Dancers*

You may be asking yourself: why dance? The Random house Unabridged dictionary states that dance is to move one's feet or body, or both, rhythmically in a pattern of steps, especially to the accompaniment of music.¹⁸ I agree with this definition, but does the rhythm determine if the body movement is dance or not? Like the ideology of renowned Modern dancer, choreographer, and innovator Alvin Ailey I believe the dance is for everybody and that it comes from the people and should always be given back to the people. No matter which of these ideologies you agree

with dance is subjective and consists of movement and non-movement.

Connection of dance and architecture to life and space

As natural movers, humans define, shape, experience, and create space. In the book, *Body, Space, and Image*, authors Tufnell and Crickmay reported, 'Our bodies are the reflections of our lives.'¹⁹ Dance expresses the Self and our lives by utilizing the body to create, move within, around, and through space. Dance does not have to be a scored performance; rather every natural movement produced by humans is dance. Dance also, takes a conscious approach to experiencing the identity and performance of space within a culture. Architecture, like dance, should value experiencing identity in a culture just as it is concerned about matters of space. Understanding the culture of a community surrounding the site of a building is the architect's first task and I argue good architecture serves passions, aiming to satisfy emotions and address functional needs. More architecture should address needs greater than function, and focus on the cultural identity of people in the community.

In architecture, our ability to understand the essence of a space—space defined as where all matter exists—depends on our understanding of the process of change. Miami Graduate, Nuosi Chen, quoted Robert Irwin in stating 'change is the key physical and physiological factor in our being able to perceive at all.'²⁰ We live in changing environments of movement, people, objects, space, light, sound, words, and stories. Chen herself claimed that, 'If we are present in space, we are inevitably changed and influenced by the circumstances around us.'²¹ In our bodily experience we are not only perceiving, but also being perceived and provoking change. As our bodies become involved with the space we assimilate it and begin to alter the environment spontaneously, like Hip Hop dance, due to our interactions. The connections to life and space frame how dance and architecture work together to empower and influence how people inhabit an environment.

I chose dance not only because it is an art form that I can relate to personally, but

because of its phenomenal ability to transpire the physical environment with emotion and force. Also, dance is different from architecture in that its created space is a one time occurrence. When you watch someone dance—unless you are videotaping and can pause and rewind the video—you can only recall the created space through memory. In architecture, once the space is set in stone it is literally set in stone. You can only alter the space by either adding or taking away objects. This is one way the two forms are different and has sparked my interest the most. If dance does not hold form then what is it? What can architecture do to pause dance and what can dance do to move architecture?

Hip Hop dance

In order to have a firm grasp on Hip Hop dance it is important to understand some of its African American dance predecessors like ragtime, funk, doo-wop, jazz, and modern. It is argued that Jazz has had an influential impact on architecture among other professions, which is thoroughly discussed in David P. Brown's book *Noise Orders* where he alludes to the spontaneity and improvisation of jazz creating ordered inhabitable spaces. Ailey sought to create dance pieces that exemplified and glorified the African American body in space. He was a trained modern and classical ballet dancer who aimed to capture the African American experience through the natural curves and defined African American body. This type of body does not coalesce with the ideologies of the geometric configured classical ballet frame so Ailey sought to create a style that was more expressive of African American culture.²² Of course, he accepted and respected the ballet style and form; he simply wanted to define a separate entity. Along the same lines Hip Hop dance is influenced by and respects modern movement, yet it has created a practice for the dancer whose approach is different from how the modern body is used and glorified. Both Hip Hop dance and modern dance in their rawest form tell a story, responds to something, and expresses emotion. The main differences are how Hip Hop dance has been commercialized including the monetary success of its production, the importance of music accompaniment, and the embracing of youth culture worldwide.²³

Break dancing is the first Hip Hop style of dance deriving in the late 60's from the song and dance the *Good Foot*, recorded by Soul and Funk artist James Brown.²⁴ Dances such as breakin', b-boyin', and pop lockin' (from L.A.) were the original forms. The name b-boyin' or break boyin' was created by DJ Kool Herc who held parties in the Bronx.²⁵ When he mixed old disco records he would extend a section known as the break, and would call out all the b-boys to the dance floor. It is argued that break dancing is a commercialized term derived from mainstream culture and instead the original terminology is just b-boyin'. Current Hip Hop dance originated from b-boyin' and has become internationally influenced.²⁶

Hip hop dance is not meant for audiences to just watch; they should act as participants as well. Just as in the Afro-Brasilian dance and martial art, Capoeira (Angola or Regional) the audience controls the tempo and acts as a distributor of adrenaline-like buckeye fans at an Ohio State football game.²⁷ To think that hip hop dance is meant to be viewed like a classical ballet causes the spectator to lose the concept and essence of the dance.

Hip Hopchitecture

How does Hip Hop become architecture? Hip Hopchitecture aims to reinvent the way people perceive, design, and interact with architecture. The architecture is similar to Frank Gehry's concept of deconstructivism in that it is remixing as Garland would say or is palimpsestic as Wilkins would argue modern architecture, but different in that functional needs are to be addressed.²⁸

First Hip Hopchitecture has to encompass the essence of Hip Hop culture. You can choose any of the four elements as design tools for your process as I have focused on Hip Hop dance. Since Hip Hop is a spontaneous, constantly changing art form, the connection to the present Hip Hop culture is extremely important. Hip hop space has to be spontaneous, static, strong, creative, open for interpretation, confident, adroit, adaptable, and in-tune with Hip hop culture.²⁹ Hip hop space should have call and response relationships as part of the structure just as Hip Hop dance does with music, an audience, or a person's internal rhythm.³⁰ Also, music

is quite necessary for hip hop dance to be in full effect, therefore this should be addressed in the design. Whether the music is made by b-boxing, sounds from different parts of the body like clapping, or Kanye West's newest sinle, it compliments and completes the dance.³¹ How can the architecture do this and what does it look like?

In the fall of 2005, I had the opportunity to use Hip Hop dance as a design tool for a studio project conducted in Woodlawn Chicago, where my professor supported my vision and believed like Mitchell:

*The pencil and T-square, and the computer mouse still currently occupy center stage in architectural education. But it simply may not be possible to express Hip Hop music and culture through those inherently one, or at best two dimensionally static and soundless methodologies and tools. The Hip Hop culture that is being created through music and video by non-architecturally trained black people may well contain brilliant serious elements, all on their own, of a Black Architecture!*³²

In the Woodlawn built environment you will discover graffiti art and tagging, broken bottles, trash, gang insignia, vacant lots, stoops, and a 'ghetto' lifestyle that rappers often describe in their lyrics as a reaction to not only undesirable living conditions, but to the insufficient building infrastructure as well.³³ The culture that is most present and visible in Woodlawn is Hip Hop. The style of dress, music, language, as well as the influx of a Hip Hop guided youth reflect the strong presence of Hip Hop culture. Does the architecture reflect this same Hip Hop existence? I argue it does not. Instead the architecture neglects the community and its way of life. Scholar and designer Bradford C. Grant observed that race has remained invisible in environmental design and he agrees with Cornel West that social conditions are linked to race:

Race does matter in environmental design, just as race matters in the arts, business, humanities, science, and the rest of our society. Architecture, building, and planning are inherently

*racially constituted activities. Environmental design is much an expression by people responding to cultural and social criteria, among many other forces. Architecture, in this context, cannot be 'color-blind' or culturally neutral. Architecture, in theory as well as in practice, is inextricably tied to race as it is to class, economics, politics, and gender.*³⁴

As part of my process I filmed my improvisational movement created from interpreting the site and culture of the environment. From this process I began to understand how important the way humans walk, talk, and maneuver through space defines who we are and how we live. I also discovered that though a community may appear to be predominantly one culture, the architecture that exists in that community is not a representation of everyone who resides there. The intent of Hip Hopchitecture is to respect these same principles.

There is no perfect location per se for Hip Hopchitecture. Hip Hop is a global cosmopolis that has stretched as far as some of the smallest farm villages in Itubera, Brasil. To say that a predominantly African American, inner-city ghetto is the only place to erect Hip Hopchitecture is to ignore the growth and development of Hip Hop as an art, culture, and global phenomenon.

Conclusion

Architectural design needs to express the culture of the community it is designing for. Even within low-income communities architects should conceptualize their designs to include meaningfulness that relates with the present environment. The connection of the individual to dance and architecture should be used as the guiding force in thinking about spatial relations.

The spatial language, forms, dynamic moves, spontaneity, creativity, and power

incorporated in Hip Hop dance is influential and impacts all art forms including architecture. The possibilities that Hip Hop dance explores in choreographing design focuses on more than just aesthetics. It delves critically in how to address the ever-changing and adapting environment of Hip Hop culture. The arrangement and shifting of space within Hip Hop dance is quite relevant for the creation of form and space within architectural design. How can one anticipate the next layer and concept of Hip Hop so their design and ideologies do not become obsolete? Cornel West (1997) eloquently suggested:

*The future of architectural criticism rests on the development of a refined and a revisionist architectural historiography that creatively fuses social histories of architectural practices and social histories of technology, in light of sophisticated interpretations of the present cultural crisis. This historiography must be informed by the current theoretical debates in the larger discourse of cultural criticism. Yet the benefits of these debates are in the enabling insights that facilitate actual history writing and cultural analysis of specific past and present architectural practices, not ontological, nor any epistemic conclusions that promote mere avant-gardist posturing and posing. You can't just tune the fiddle, you've got to play the darn thing! You've got to tell the stories. You have to do the detailed historical investigation and the social analytical investigation. The present obsession with theory must now yield to theory-laden historiography if architectural criticism is to have any chance of breaking through the impasse that now engulfs us. There are no guarantees for any resolutions, but there are certain routes that weaken our efforts to move beyond this fascinating and possibly fickle moment in architectural criticism.*³⁵

Endnotes

- ¹ West, Cornel. (1997). *The pragmatism cybrary*. Appendix, Inc. Retrieved February 12, 2006, from <http://projects.gsd.harvard.edu/appendx/dev/issue2/west/index7.htm>
- ³ Mitchell, Melvin. *The crisis of the African-American architect: conflicting cultures of architecture and (black) power*. (New York: Writers Club Press. pg 185). This term is mentioned by scholar Melvin Mitchell in his discussion of African American Hip Hop music being expressed in architecture.
- ⁴ Wilkins, Craig. *(W)rapped Space: The architecture of hip hop*. (*Journal of Architectural Education*, 54, 2000) pg 7-19.
- ⁵ Ibid. pg 7-19
- ⁶ Garland, Jabari. *Flow-Tektoniks: Re-mixing architecture to a hip hop beat*. (Master's Thesis, Miami University 2005).
- ⁷ Mitchell, M. (2001). *The crisis of the African-American architect: conflicting cultures of architecture and (black) power*. New York: Writers Club Press. (p.185) This term is mentioned by scholar Melvin Mitchell in his discussion of African American Hip Hop music being expressed in architecture.
- ⁸ McWhorter, John. *Winning the Race: Beyond the crisis in Black America*. (New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2005).
- ⁹ Ibid. pg 45
- ¹⁰ McWhorter, John. *Winning the Race: Beyond the crisis in Black America*. 2005. Penguin Group Inc. New York
- ¹¹ Hoffmann, Frank. *Rhythm and Blues, Rap, and Hip-Hop*. (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2006), p.121-122.
- ¹² Mitchell, Tony. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop outside the U.S.* 2001. Middletown, CT. Wesleyan University Press.
- ¹³ Hip Hop as boys' club and debauchery.....
- ¹⁴ Flava is adding your mark, influence, input—something that represents your Being and essence.
- ¹⁵ B-boyin' is short for Break boyin' now an aspect of Breakdancing. Most people just call all Hip Hop moves breakdancing or Hip Hop dance.
- ¹⁶ Kitwana, Bakari. *Why White kids love Hip-Hop*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005).
- ¹⁷ Rampersad, Arnold. *The Collection Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994) pg 334. Langston Hughes poem: 'Dancers' (Section: Poems 1941-1950)
- ¹⁸ dance. *Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.0.1), Based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary*(© Random House, Inc., 2006). <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=dance> (accessed: September 20, 2006).
- ¹⁹ Tufnell, M., & Crickmay, C. *Body, space, image*. (Alton Hampshire: Dance Books, 1993).
- ²⁰ Chen, Nuosi. *An approach to space-making: Re-examining the body in space*. (Master's Thesis, Miami University 2005). pg 34
- ²¹ Ibid. pg 3
- ²² Defrantz, Thomas. *Dancing Revelations*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- ²³ George, Nelson. *Hip Hop America*. (New York: the Penguin Group).
- ²⁴ Ibid. pg 23
- ²⁵ DJ Kool Herc and his beginnings....
- ²⁶ Mitchell, Tony. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop outside the U.S.* (Middletown, CT. Wesleyan University Press, 2001).
- ²⁷ Capoliera.....
- ²⁸ Garrett Jr., James. (2003). *Hip-Hop + Architecture, 21st century designers in the global cosmopolis*. http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/files/2004/03/resonant_spaces.php
- ²⁹ *Key Terms*
Spontaneous: Can happen randomly in different combinations and styles; unique and improvised
Static: Allowed to maintain a present state for a certain period of time, like how one "freezes" during

break dancing or how one style of music or dance can be popular for months and years at a time.

Strong: very powerful and bold with a strong foundation.

Creative: constantly re-defines new modes of 'making'.

Open for interpretation: Allows cross-cultural rationale and appreciation as well as from people with different tastes, perceptions, and personalities

Confident: Sure of performance and style. If something is 'wrong' or 'out of place' then confidence allows that wrongness to become something new and better to build upon.

Adroit: Though strong and bold, the space is delicate like the skill and swing of a tennis player, yet powerful like the serve.

Adaptable: changes with the environment, culture and people, yet still maintains its Hip Hop essence.

In-tune with Hip Hop culture: Can be creative, yet still needs to follow the guidelines of the culture.

³⁰ Internal rhythm is what every person possesses and is defined by the beat of individual experiences.

³¹ Kanye West is an Hip Hop artist, producer, and musician who is known for his clever and controversial lyrics as well as innovative beats.

³² Melvin Mitchell, (2001). The crisis of the African-American architect: conflicting cultures of architecture and (black) power. New York: Writers Club Press. (p. 185)

³³ Graffiti is the artwork or design created using aerosol spray paint. The act of creating this graffiti is called tagging. The term ghetto is highly used and is defined differently by those who are from a ghetto and those who have learned the terminology from pop culture influence.

³⁴ Grant, Bradford. (1996). Accommodation and resistance: The built environment and the African American experience. In T. Dutton & L. Mann (Eds.). *Reconstructing architecture: Critical discourses and social practices* (pp. 202-233). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. p.202

³⁵ West, Cornel. (1997). *The pragmatism cybrary.* Appendix, Inc. Retrieved February 12, 2006, from <http://projects.qsd.harvard.edu/appendx/dev/issue2/west/index7.htm>

Koestler, Arthur. The Act of Creation. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964) pg 45.