

FEAR, VIOLENCE AND ARCHITECTURE IN KINGSTON, JAMAICA

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF A COLLISION¹

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We have allowed an essentially beautiful little city to develop into a squalid, violent horror. Kingston is our reflection and it is sick - are we going to let ourselves die in the mirror?

– Patrick Stanigar, 1996.²

Introduction

The city of Kingston is a patchy urban collage situated on the south coast of Jamaica in the parish of St. Andrew. The old city was born of violence in 1692 after an earthquake had made the city of Port Royal across the harbor fall into the sea. Old Kingston, located at the interface of a large natural harbor and the Liguanea plains, forms a neat rectangular grid covering one third of a square mile. A loosely radial sprawl has crept outward from this tightly regimented block to engulf an area of more than 200 square miles and over 1 million people. Kingston is currently one of the ten most violent cities in the Americas. 1996 has the dubious honor of setting a new record with regard to murders committed in the city. These murders sit upon a pyramid of threat, injury, robbery and the habit of rape.³

But for all the frightening statistics, Kingston is a city of people. Despite a persistent image, Kingston is not a city of monsters, it is a city in which even the most violent are people. Nor is it a particularly unique city. It is the product of forces which are global. For this reason we cannot dismiss Kingston as an *other* place and derive comfort from that distance. It is a mirror for all of us.

Largely a product of the complex dynamic of colonialism, Kingston presents a potent diagram of the social forces which have shaped Jamaica out of the collision of four continents: America, Europe, Africa and later Asia. Most western countries are at this moment having to deal with the problems of social friction arising from economic and ethnic tension. Jamaica has been dealing with such issues for a long time and has become a country where social and racial integration has perhaps been more successful than elsewhere. As such Kingston is an internationally relevant and urgent emblem of both cultural dislocation and social friction as well as dialogue and integration, each involving the issues of race, gender, economic and political division, to say nothing of an incisive environmental neglect.

This essay can offer no clear-cut solutions. Apart

from a few hints at a possible direction it must confine itself to presenting an image of the effects of violence as made visible in the architectural fabric of the city.

We are living in a time of increased social polarization. Polarized societies harden the edges of their internal divisions. The metabolism between divided and polarized areas - at any scale of observation, whether it is the house, apartment block, the neighborhood or the city district - is determined by mistrust and fear. The student of architecture needs to be aware of the architectural consequences of social polarization. Fear and mistrust are again becoming increasingly powerful generators of design. If their cause is cultural and ultimately political, their architectural effect is dramatic, their resolution a social imperative. To ignore the issues, or to give into the obvious response to threat, will result in the transformation of each *place* into a *prison*, each social, bureaucratic or commercial ritual of exchange into a convoluted dance through elaborate architectural systems of control and exclusion. As soon as architecture becomes merely a vehicle of security and introversion, we know we must be at war.

VIOLENCE

The issue of violence in Jamaican architecture plays a specific and tightly circumscribed role. There are three basic factors to be considered. The first is the violence which lies at the historical core of Jamaica. That violence is the consequence of colonialism and the slave-based economy. Its physical manifestation can be seen in the geometric configurations which such mechanisms force upon the landscape. The second factor describes how the more recent habit of violence, carrying the weight of Jamaica's past, affects the modulation of space and division in the buildings of modern Kingston. The third describes how the resulting architecture reciprocates and in turn does violence to society, becoming the place for violence.

In this way I have identified a largely self-referential and downward spiral of urban deterioration from which it is impossible to break free without the fatigue of the icons and fears which keeps a city responding to its own problems in a certain way.

I would first like to analyze the historical development of Kingston and, with a simplistic brevity, sketch the genesis of its violence and then return to the beginning with some questions.

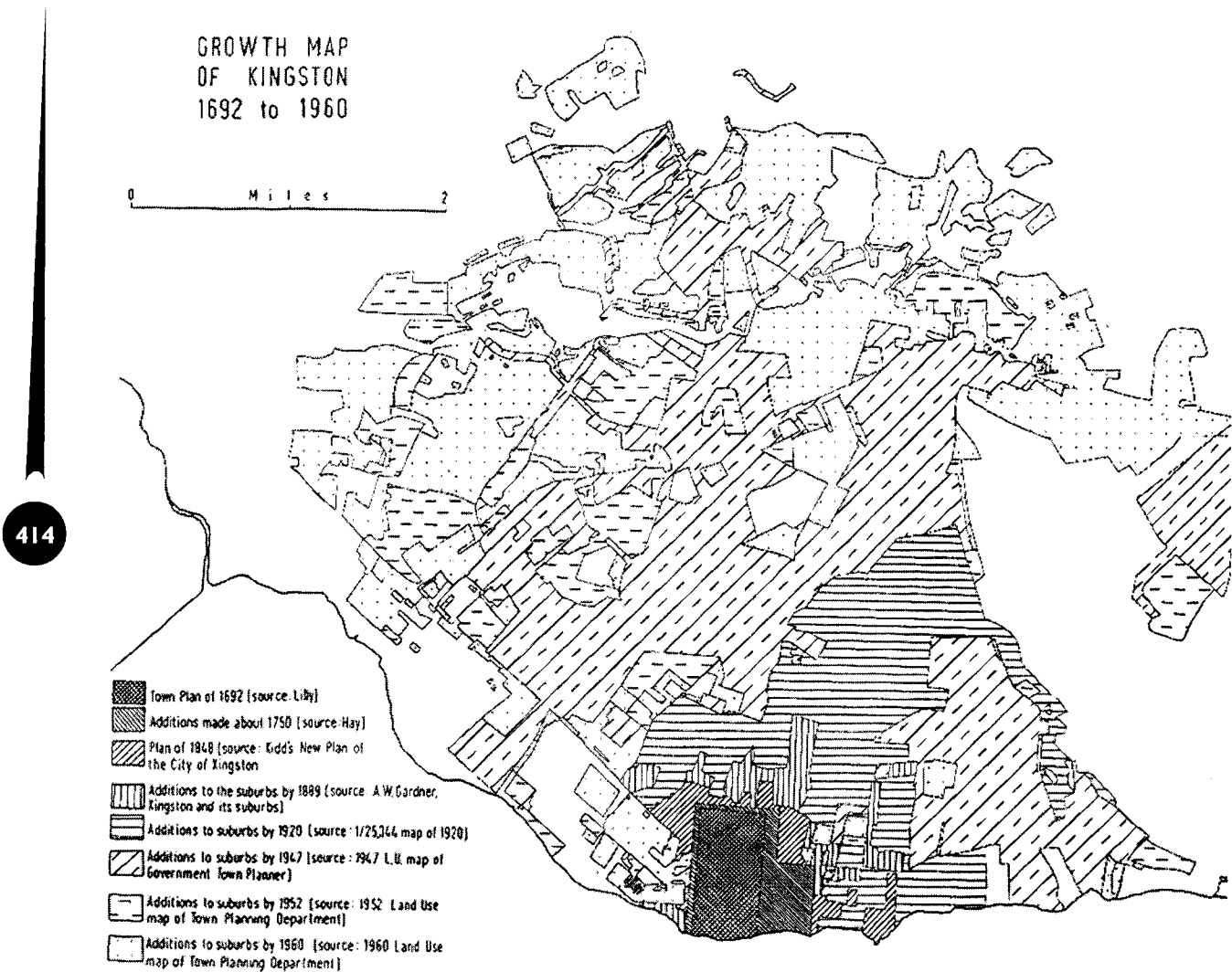


Fig. 1. Map of Kingston (1975) Showing the growth of Kingston. Trenchtown is situated just to the west of the grid. Southside is just to the east. Grants Pen Community is an enclave near "Four Roads." Beverly Hills is situated on Long Mountain to the north east of Kingston.

POLITICS AS AN ARCHITECTURAL ACT: The Development of Kingston

The historical development of Jamaica has, right from the start of British colonial rule, *created* the architectural and urban climate of the city of Kingston. The resulting architecture and the urban pattern now reciprocate the horrors of that period by to some extent reinforcing the habit of that history, creating an impossible circular labyrinth, *a sick mirror*.

Within the mechanisms of colonialism and slavery lies one cause of violence. The participants in colonialism allowed a social stratification to become possible along, among other things, such simplistic visual categories as skin color. This caused a taxonomic violence of aggressive segregation which manifested itself in the systematic coercion and control of which the architecture servicing the slave trade and the plantation economy is a potent image.⁴ It is precisely the visual simplicity of this system:

white master and black slave which made polarization so potent.

It is important to note, as Orlando Patterson pointed out, that the slave cannot be defined as *mere* property.⁵ The slave was first made into an object, a proto-industrial machine, which was then owned. It is in that dehumanizing objectification that the banality of being an owned consumer object became cruel. The cruelty manifested itself in the reconfiguration of priorities for such everyday concerns as housing. Housing, during slavery was not about *dwelling*, its geometry reflected a concern with efficient *product storage*.⁶ Enslaved people were categorized and stored according to their use and usefulness and not according to their own systems of personal relationships. They were consumer goods. But of course that metamorphosis into object was never complete. It was the complicated dialectic of the partial and humiliating success and the partial and hopeless failure of human objectification that defined the strange

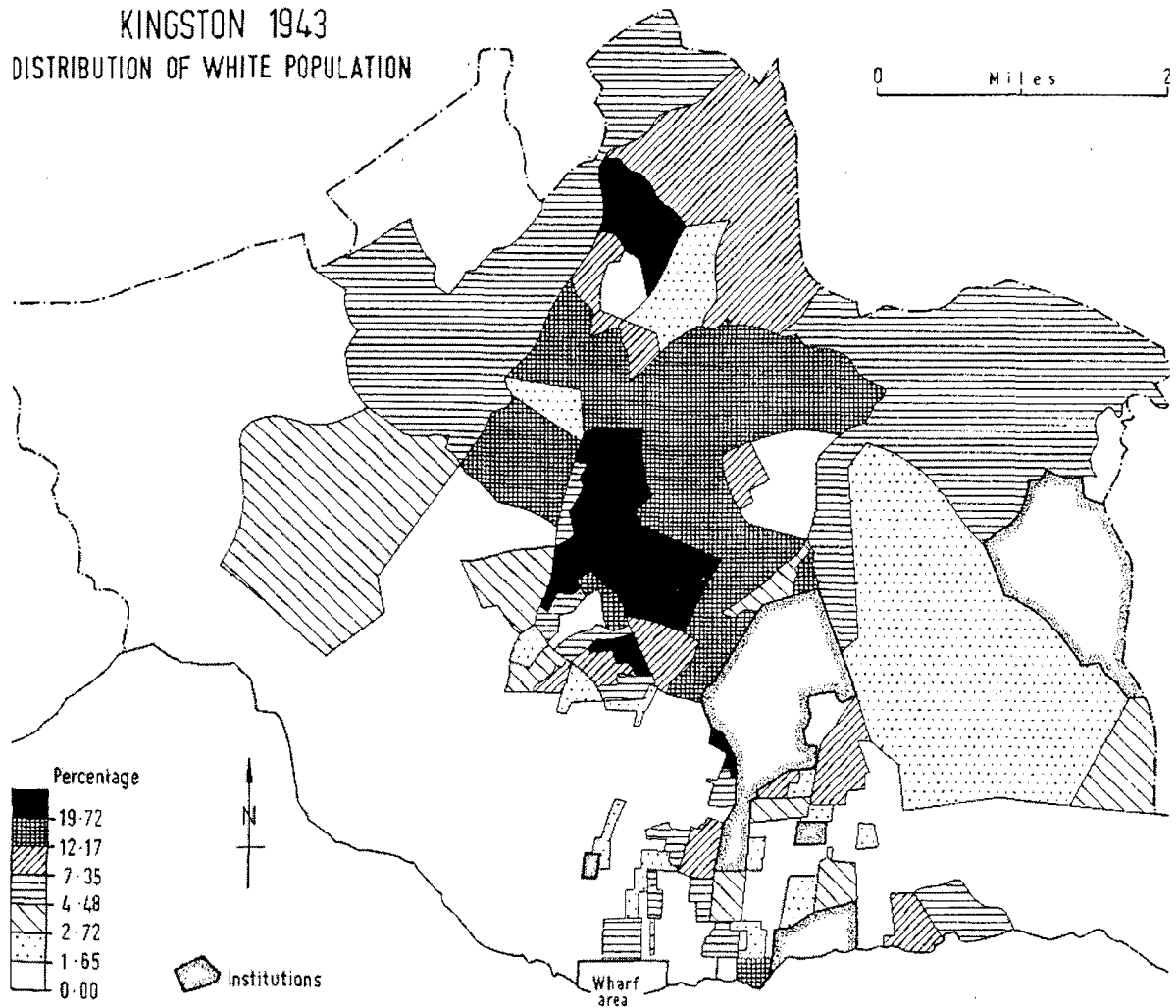


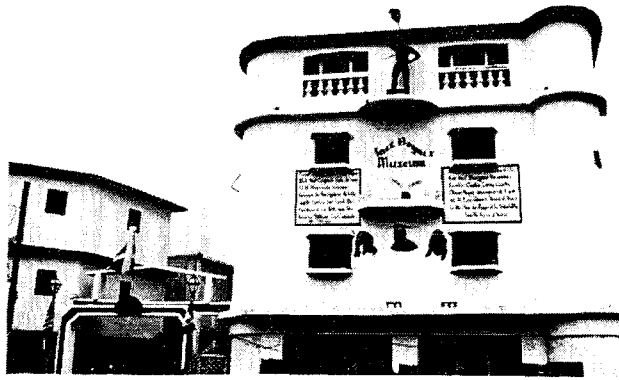
Fig. 2. Distribution of White Population in 1943, from Clark (1975) p. 181. Since then the pattern has moved outwards although no new data has been made available.

and disproportionate environment which a slave-based economy created. That is the past which Jamaica carries. The mechanisms with which the colonizers enforced their colony and the largely passive, internal resilience with which the enslaved bore their enslavement, produced a setting and a set of social rituals from which a divided and antithetical culture emerged.

When slave society in Jamaica became unstable through protest and economical decline in the early nineteenth century, the dissolution of the mechanisms of coercion and control gave way to a period of social readjustment. That period is characterized by a re-stratification of society into a new order. This new order was more complex than white master vs. black slave, partly because of the introduction of new peoples from Asia and partly because of the formation of a substantial black middle class. Nevertheless the old *scholastic* oppositions remained powerful, even though they became less and less relevant. The extraordinary distortion

whereby all white men were visibly wealthy, reinforced a simplified image of the world. Racial segregation continued; the architecture, the language and the cultural institutions as well as the urban pattern were its material signs. The socio-geographic enclaves defining the neighborhoods of Kingston speak clearly of this segregation. But the most interesting urban events are naturally those where such an established order and its justifying mythology was tested. Devon House is one such event.

Devon House was built during the 1880s by George Stiebel on *millionaire's corner* on the outer periphery of late nineteenth century Kingston along the main artery leading into Kingston proper. George Stiebel, who had made his fortune digging for gold in Venezuela, was Jamaica's first Black millionaire. Devon House is a manifesto of his equivalence *with the best*. In building the Palladian Mansion with its elegant concern for tropical comfort, George Stiebel did not set up his own icons of



other as a centrifugal force of acquired wealth which settled in ever widening concentric circles around the urban core. Land settlement patterns followed the contingencies of a market driven by the atrophy of the sugar trade which caused plantation owners to off-load their land in convenient parcels for urbanization. This process, no uncommon in English urbanization processes, determined the apparent haphazardness of Kingston's urban sprawl.

The area west of Kingston was the obvious, first and eternally-temporary resting place for the rural poor coming into the city. At the end of the road into the center still lies the largest market for rural produce in Kingston: Coronation Market. The road leading to it, the Spanish Town Road, is in fact a linear sub-city, a ribbon development of shantytowns and low income housing projects home to Kingston's most troubled areas.

There are three further events which help to determine the image of the city today. The first is the economic emigration out of Jamaica starting during the economic depression of the thirties and culminating in the rush before Jamaica's independence in 1962. This process severely ruptured the ties of much family life creating a sizeable subculture of displaced and dislocated children growing up in the looser affiliation of secondary family ties.

The second is the development of New Kingston which started during the late 1960s when a plan was launched to move the financial hub of the old city a mile northward, closer to the residential web of people it was meant to serve. These people consequently moved yet further away again, into Beverly Hills, Jack's Hill, Red Hills, etc.

A third element is the radical socialism introduced during the seventies under Michael Manley. He attempted to reverse the growth of the underprivileged groups in Jamaica. Apart from instituting educational reforms and trying to widen the economic base, he rather oversimplified the problem by openly declaring the people living in wealthy areas such as Beverly Hills to be the enemy of the common man. In a famous speech by Michael Manley, he told the people who were not happy with the impending new order that there were five planes a day to Miami. Many of the affluent middle class took his advice, especially as they felt threatened by the increasingly open resentment vented by those who were set to gain by this *politics of change*.

These three factors quite literally caused Kingston to explode, leaving a huge crater in the old center. The vacuum was quickly filled by yet more rural immigrants, still looking for opportunity, but finding it had moved on. With many of the wealthier middle classes gone, so had the economic and managerial base for production. The economy declined rapidly. Pockets of desperation began to spill over the traditional poverty boundaries into the inner city and expanding the western edges. Land tenure in the downtown areas of Kingston became uncertain and as a consequence settlement of the land became subject to uncontrollable mechanisms, as many of the landowners ceased to collect rent altogether, either because of they were afraid to or because they were no longer in the country. Existing buildings thus neglected by their owners, deteriorated, gashing the city open. Some were

Figs. 3 and 4. Concord Plaza and the Inez Bogue's Museum in Fort Henderson (Photograph by author)

social success but instead competed on the established European norms of social display, significantly inverting some of them. He travelled Europe with a retinue of *white* servants. The act of encroachment was so brazen, so threatening to the establishment, that the Governor General's wife, Lady Musgrave reputedly took matters in her own hand. She had a road built on axis with the approach to King's House, the Governor General's residence further up the road, thereby creating a link to an alternative approach to the city whereby she could avoid the odious confrontation with this bumptious upstart of the wrong color who was so violently invading her social territory. The road, to emphasize the complexity of historical development, is still called Lady Musgrave Road.

KINGSTON EXPLODES

With economic contraction in the nineteenth century and the financial crisis in the 1930s came increasing urban immigration, people looking for economic opportunity. With racial segregation a cultural inevitability, people grouped according to *a gravity of the familiar* and according to what they could afford. Often these two gravitational forces overlapped in the color of one's skin. The growth of Kingston consequently presents a sequence of migration, regrouping and settlement determined by that cultural bias. The initial grid, stretched and surrounded by urban accretion, functioned on the one hand as a centripetal force for economic opportunity and on the

inhabited by squatters, while other residential properties were slowly transformed into hollow yards of unfathomable human density, infinite subdivision and squalor.

The radical socialism adopted by what, ironically, was the former right wing of Jamaican Politics, widened the gulf inherent in any two-party system, especially during election time. The economic slide induced by this process of radicalism, made winning elections a matter of extreme urgency for both parties. As a result of this urgency, the political agenda of each party became less well defined in terms of policy and goals. The need to secure the popular vote gained an all-exclusive focus. A system of political patronage was set up within the constituencies of both parties to ensure that the popular vote went the right way. Extant divisions among groups of people, the culture of fierce loyalty and existing criminal gangs were mobilized to the cause and exploited. Guns were imported and the political parties became no more than their symbols, slogans and party-colors. They demanded an unquestioning, tribal loyalty rather than a full belief in the political program. Any good intentions were quickly hollowed out by expediency and the self-defeating dynamic of violent means to good ends. As such the electoral history of Jamaica created a surreal urban patchwork of antithetical areas in what should have been the heart of the city of Kingston. The city cellularized.

HOUSING AND VOTING: The Garrison Community

The increasing numbers of urban poor and the need to secure their vote made housing an area both of genuine social concern and political potential. The *Garrison community* is the architectural and urban type created by that process. In terms of urban geography, the geometries of movement, settlement, social friction and so forth all were redrawn according the political poles within a neighborhood. Low income housing schemes, sometimes given cynical nicknames like Angola, or Pegasus, the paths of which will be explained below, were populated through covert systems of political patronage by people willing to declare their loyalty to a particular party. It is important to note that this system was part of the grass root level of politics where small doses of administrative power were effective personal weapons within the war for *scarce benefits and spoils perpetuated by political tribes*. The resulting political "simplification" of an area duly resulted in the geographical polarization of communities into garrisons, areas overtly defined by their political allegiance.

Trenchtown, a particularly potent example, is a desolate place, true to its name even though the area was named after a Lady Trench. Here the geometry of confrontation takes on a dramatic simplicity. A broad no-man's land circumscribes the entrenched communities. Precariously situated on the edge of one of them is a lonely police station. Before it was built bullets used to fly freely across the divide, from one *garrison* to the other, especially during the more frolicsome evenings. Aimed only vaguely in the right direction, the kill was an arbitrary piece of luck; the victim's identity not important. It was enough that the victim be *one of them*.

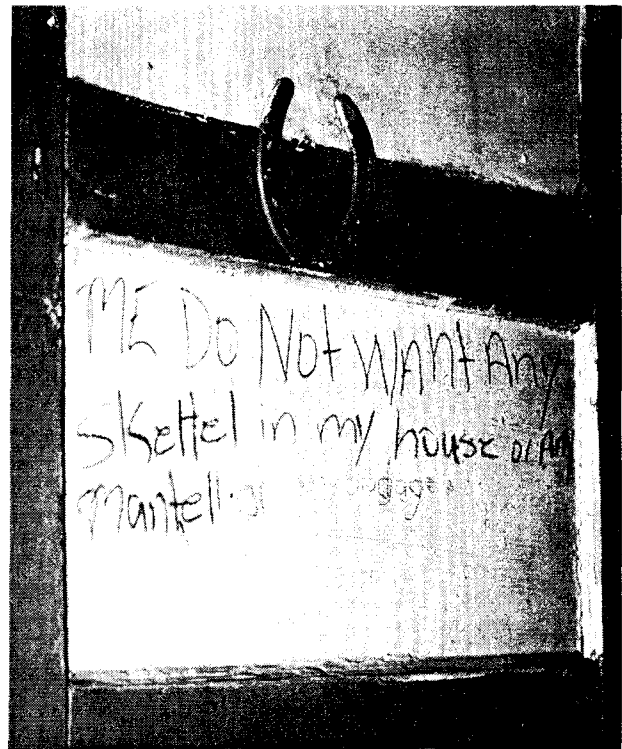


Fig. 5. A Door within the zinc labyrinth of Grant's Pen a shanty town enclave within Kingston, Skettel and Mantell are names for undesirable people.

To prevent the main road being used by opposing posse's, a roundabout was blocked by a house built over the road. The urban hemorrhage was treated by the creation of an urban thrombosis.

The no-man's land is still punctuated here and there by the ruins of past acts of futile goodwill and helpless foreign aid. A cinema lies in ruins. Community centers are places to plunder for building materials. Health clinics disintegrate under the immense and insupportable weight of the problem. The result is a desolation which achieves a brutal poetry echoed by the harsh words and provocative movements of Dance Hall Culture. Further development is discouraged by the people who live in these areas. *They just want out*. To them Trenchtown is a *bad place*; the thing they crave above all: Jobs and respect, which lie beyond its boundaries.⁷

Many people now realize that the social housing schemes of the seventies and eighties merely concentrated on alleviating the symptoms. High rise "Government Yards" were built at minimal cost in the naive but understandable belief that they were better than the self-build shanty towns they were meant to replace. The one called Pegasus, mentioned earlier, was given that nickname because it lies on axis with a luxury Hotel of that name visible above the scarred landscape in the fantastically distant north of New Kingston. I think that contrast explains the problem. The popular opinion is that "Jamaicans don't like living in high rise apartments." Looking at a government yard one can hardly be surprised! Surely it is not the high-rise as a generic solution which is meant here, but *this specific kind* of high-rise: A dire

concrete shell designed to alienate by the inadvertent evil of good intentions.

Social housing policies globally have continually given in to the prevailing wisdom that ever lower costs, built by people with ever fewer skills at ever minimal standards would solve a problem *for the moment*: *At least they have something* was the argument, *it is better than nothing*. Research has borne out that is not quite so. In fact these schemes created their own problems. Short-term cheapness has an awful long-term cost. The need for unskilled labor prerequisite to this cheapness becomes the social depository of a paradox. Social Housing needs cheap people to build cheap houses for people with little money. In the process, the building industry has created, or at least failed to discourage the formation of a class of people without the means to their own dignity.

PATHS AND POLITICS

The political climate is changing, becoming more pragmatic and economically opportunistic. The system of political patronage is being dismantled or at least fragmented. Dons, the bulwarks of the system of political patronage, are giving way to Sub-Dons. The recent past is still a prime determinant of the geometric description in zinc and concrete of the urban rituals of Jamaica today. The landscape of Kingston remains divided into a complex pattern of antithetical areas connected by an absurdly convoluted network of paths. To each city dweller the city presents itself as a customized patchwork of familiar fragments linked by corridors intersecting large blank areas, usually lined with zinc and inhabited only by hearsay and its mythological creatures. The boundaries of these patches in the politically more sensitive areas are marked clearly by the color and signs of that community's forcefully homogenized political affiliation. The violence occurs at or near the boundaries. Countless deaths are still caused by a Romeo persisting in his love for a Juliet and crossing the line that has come to divide them.⁸

The area of Southside is infamous for its complex partitioning into areas of a tribal loyalty for which the overt justification is political affiliation. That loyalty is becoming less and less voluntary and increasingly imposed upon a tired people by increasingly younger tigers, whose only motive is personal control. Whatever the cause, the place remains a labyrinth of imperative routes. People on their daily trek to the shops or to work are living proof that the shortest efficient distance between two points is seldom a straight line.

Paradoxically this urban complexity obtains for both sides of the divide, the poorer areas of Downtown and the wealthy areas of Uptown Kingston. Uptown and Downtown Kingston are, in fact, mirror images of each other. For instance, landowners from both areas have capitalised on their land, creating yards (for the poor) or compounds (for the wealthy). These mercenary subdivisions have created a patchwork of domestic fortresses and an extraordinary network of non-connecting, narrow canyon-like paths. Those of the poorer areas are lined by high corrugated iron fences, those of the wealthier areas are lined by concrete. Cars take up nearly all the available space in the resulting trench or even canyon; drivers pay little or no heed to the army of



Fig. 6. The zinc Barricades of the Grants Pen Community. (Photograph André King).

commuting pedestrians at the wrong side of the puddle: school children, helpers, gardeners, farmers, beggars, churchgoers and nurses all negotiating the rough edges left to them. Such treatment rankles and caresses the easier prejudices.

INTERNALIZING THE HOUSE: The Yard and the Compound

That same mirror image obtains for the home which on both sides of the social divide are being internalized to a degree which is absurd when considering the climate. Houses built before the fear of violence became endemic have attempted to reverse their generous centrifugal geometry with grillwork and boundary walls. Verandas and windows have been rendered lifeless by endless security bars and so-called "rape gates." Uptown Kingston has become a zoo for the benefit of the *have-nots*, or worse, a monument to a Pyrrhic victory: Their wealth obtained at the expense of its riches. Houses built more recently have crept together into the angst-ridden compounds, facing inward and relying on tall walls and a huge and largely anonymous workforce of guards who sleepily regulate access through a single barred entry. *Don't worry*, my neighbor said to me when I first arrived, *everybody on the compound owns a gun*.

The poorer areas on the other hand, where the endless supply of *helpers* come from, have also become labyrinths of endless zinc fences. Boundaries to permanently temporary structures, the fences are there to ensure at least a modicum of privacy and to ward off the criminal and the outcast. The thin ramshackle walls have often failed to stop stray bullets. Recently a young girl died in her sleep unaware of the fight outside her bedroom which was the cause of her death. Streets have become mere channels, life happens in hidden corners for the fearful and in the wider streets for the fearless.⁹ In the stifling heat, single mothers sleep with their windows closed.

Where the Jamaican small house was, until recently, never defined by the modest building itself but by the paths and trees and resting places around it, the outside has now come to hide the inside. The exterior of any house has either become heroically defiant or prudently invisible, the interiors of even the poorest houses scream



Fig. 8. The Francis Castle at Newhaven, a castle built by a family as an act of faith. (Photograph by author).

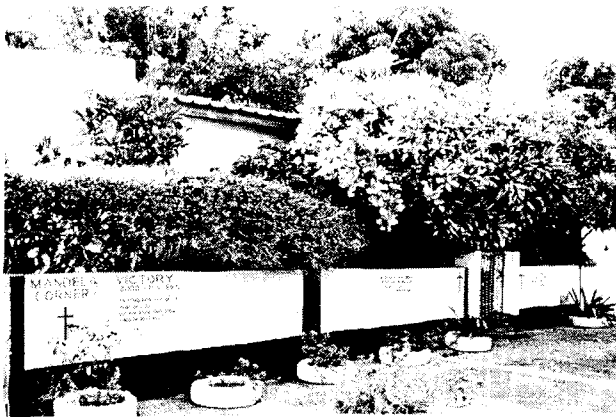


Fig. 7. A door to a yard in Kingston, a manifesto of faith hiding a pleasant little garden. (Photograph by author).

of a desire for normality. Photographs of pretty babies plaster the walls in Trenchtown. What-nots and shiny ornaments make John Soane's Museum look like an empty railway station. Outside young, empty men sit with nothing to do, on fences, fencing empty gaps which used to be called gardens. They are smoking *the weed* and bearing their extraordinary typology of scars as marks of a negative respect and identification.

URBAN MYTHOLOGIES

From this effort at self-insulation an insidious and ultimately absurd pattern of expectations and fears is created whereby people from each segregated area reinvent the worlds of those other areas where they dare not venture themselves. This cultural insulation has a curious effect on the image of the city. The city is mapped by myth. Urban patches which function very well for one group of Kingstonians are labelled as no-go areas for the other. One such example is St. William Grants Park, designed in the 1980s by the architect and dean of the Caribbean School of Architecture Patrick Stanigar. The park is always bustling with activity. It is a marvelous place, full of lovers and delight serviced by the harsh reality of over-friendly photographers desperate to earn an income. But the park is invisible to the young of Uptown Kingston and, in their eyes, a simple failure.

BACK TO VIOLENCE

We need to think again. One way forward might be to realize that in the process of disurbanization, actual violence plays largely an iconic role, it is a principle of authority which most people receive only through harrowing images of the media.

The cause of violence in Jamaica is manifold. It has been well researched in documents such as the *World Bank report on Urban Violence and Poverty in Jamaica*, a document I have relied on extensively. They describe the places of that violence, places which have been emptied of normal life, by fear. The place of violence is in the urban gap.

One of the many causes they identify is the necessarily narrow focus on survival as a consequence of economic conditions in the country. That is important. Another is historical, the result of *a way of seeing* that has grown over time. I am referring to the consequences of racial and social segregation. Racism and classism are the direct result of the habit of objectification; of man into a thing, of an individual into a generality. The violence in Jamaica is partly the result of the simplification of a rigid existential taxonomy persistently valid in any racially complex society. Man in these societies has become a victim of his own metaphysics, of his need to impose hardened categories of being on to his surroundings. He has stratified himself into a situation whereby he can all too easily be categorized as a racial, socioeconomic symbol, allowing himself to be generalized upon and judged without reference to his humanity. Social stratas and racial identities appear too hardened in such an environment, too self-evident, too impenetrable and yet they are merely the result of cultural and aesthetic habit.¹⁰

The project of modern society has been to undermine the justification of these stratas. The habit of racism is receding intellectually: as a result the categories have become increasingly unstable and arbitrary. This itself is a cause of crisis. Crisis is a word which describes a precarious moment of ambivalent instability. The city of Kingston is in such a state of crisis; it may mobilize its forces to rebuild a city in love with itself. Alternatively it may consume itself completely in a paroxysm of violent self-destruction.

FEAR

The real executive agent for architectural form within a violent society is not violence, it is the imagination working on the possibility of violence: the fear of violence. Fear is a legitimate emotion, to which architecture offers an immediate, compelling but permanent solution.

Fear cannot be adequately rationalized. There is a *natural assumption* that fear is the consequence of a *persistent reality*. The *immediate reaction* to that assumption is the prudence which builds hermetically sealed vessels against this thing called violence. Fear therefore affects the city by creating cells of a full life invisible to the outside. In the gaps between these cells wanders the continual possibility of violence. Being a legitimate state of being, fear is not subject to the same social and institutional pressures as the violence itself. Fear is forgiven, institutionalized even. Architecture not only reflects but, by reason of its permanence, helps to

enforce the habit of fear through the channels and obstacles -physical or psychological- which architecture imposes upon movement and exchange. Those habits made into stone are the shrines of our persistent social icons.

The proportional relationship between the fear of violence and actual violence is incremental. For every reported murder in Jamaica, there is a disproportionate further entrenchment, further polarization, further introversion of communities and a further growth of an increasingly insidious mythology. Fear looks for the signs of possible violence and finds them all too easily in the zinc fences, paradoxically hiding scared people. It finds them in the emptiness of neglected streets and buildings, in aggressive slogans and provocative dress. Fear creates more fear. The visible signs of potential violence become subject to the dynamics of hyperbole and generalization: whole blocks of humanity are dismissed as potentially dangerous. Fear must overstate its case, just to be sure. Do the violent themselves conform to the signs with which the potentially violent are identified by the fearful? Does it matter? The inadequate reading of the inadequate signs of violence: zinc fences, emptiness and graffiti create an urban leprosy: Places are avoided, emptied of understanding, ignored and even denied.

The vituperative spiral of urban deterioration identified at the beginning of this essay has become binding through such intangibles as the mosaic self-image which the Jamaican has come to see as a homogenous identity. The architecture of Kingston is an important irritant in that self-image, both as a symbol of political and even national inadequacy and as an unquestioned habit of prudent segregation. The architects (with exceptions: one architect has made his office on the boundary of Southside and lives its problems daily) planners and builders give in to that prudence. What can they do? There is no adequate and enforced program determining how the city is supposed to be. The city is allowed cellularize itself.

The question for architects becomes: How can we respond adequately to fear without taking on the rituals and forms of hedgehogs, turtles and rabbits? How can we stop fear segregating society further and thereby allowing fear to create the gaps and spaces for violence to occur? We have no adequate architectural program for fear. It can have no manifesto because fear does not want to be manifest. Then we must look at fearlessness.

ARCHITECTURE AS A POLITICAL ACT

The most heroic moments in the process of fragmentation and dialectical opposition described above are also provided by buildings. I have mentioned Patrick Stanigar's office on the edge of Southside. That is a truly heroic building. Architecture in Kingston is often used as a vehicle of ideological expression: each home becomes a contract of allegiance, an icon of political, utopian or religious desire ranging from the hedonistic to the anti-materialist. This architecture is not about the creation of space, its purpose is more immediate. It is iconic. The bible, the writings of Marcus Garvey and other texts are instruments of political alignment: quotations are painted over entrances; wall-paintings and graffiti regulate the metabolism of people going in and out. The urban poet

Mr. Wesley, until recently lived in a tree between a shantytown and the Ministry of Finance around Hero's Circle. The tree is a safe place. It was hung, like a Christmas tree celebrating the birth of protest, with long cardboard strips on which Mr. Wesley had written his poetry, full of the pathos of racial division, of violence and incomprehensible justification. Similarly a food stand at the side of the road will advertise its politics, its religion and, as an after thought, its wares. One particularly favorite example did not survive long enough for me to find an opportunity to photograph it. It was a very modest blue painted structure selling individual cigarettes and warm beer. On the front was written in an evocative and economical patois: *Me vex dem kill Malcolm X*. Another hut has painted on its door a simple *Don't Mess with Me*. The house *is* the owner.

The political nature of cultural expression in Jamaica is reflected in the fact that it is the birthplace of a religion whose inspiration is to some extent political. Its messiah is an Ethiopian king in military costume whose divinity is derived from the miraculous act of maintaining his country's age-old independence from European domination. Rastafarianism has a powerful if anti-monumental architectural language devoted to the issue of respect. Frequently built with cheap materials, this architecture is an *arte povere*; awkward in plan, utopian in its communality and strange in form it has a visual and poetic strength which renders its target speechless. These informal manifestos, not confined to the Rastafarians of course, contrast sharply with the institutionalized monuments to heroes and independence, most of which speak a bland third world modernism and suffer a cynical neglect. An informal architecture has arisen which attempts to rehearse the unifying philosophy of Bob Marley, an architecture of fearless independence.

One example of this architecture is a Rastafarian "museum." Along one wall is a declaration of independence, over the entrance is implied a solution to the whole problem of Kingston which finds wide support: Divide the land fairly and let people get on with it. It is true that people who feel their land securely under their own feet become visible proof of the creative energy in Jamaica. Portmore, for instance, a dormitory suburb of Kingston, was intended as a low-cost housing development of dreary starter units regimented into the pattern of maximum returns. The minute people started settling there, these concrete and cheerless boxes underwent a wonderful metamorphosis — the boxes became castles of an extraordinary vitality. But fearlessness and heroic architecture must by its superlative nature be the exception. It is a rare phenomenon and we cannot demand people to be used as moral cannon fodder.

What happens when architecture becomes the only vehicle for physical security? When the fear of violence has changed domestic habit and subsequently changed the architecture enclosing that domesticity, how does the resulting architecture then begin to affect society? Surely it will provide security at the expense of the very life it tries to secure? I cannot here go into solutions too deeply. Two present themselves. If the solution has to be architectural then one way forward would be to learn from the traditional city. Not out of a misplaced nostalgia

for a golden period that never was, but precisely the opposite. The pre-industrial city was a sophisticated organism with highly developed systems of defense and control. If we decide that this is too insidious we should perhaps enforce, through politics, those architectural and urban patterns which do not allow the gaps to develop, which do not allow the segregation, the subsequent friction and the mythology to ripen. We need an architecture of private dignity and public ease but strongly supported by the social institutions whose primary purpose is to deal with fear and violence so that it does not need to contaminate the architecture. That is easy to say and thankfully removes the argument away from architecture. And so, instead of elaborating on this, I would like to end with an apocryphal but widely circulated conversation reported between a prisoner and an Uptown visitor: Prisoner: *I am better off than you. Visitor: How so? Prisoner: I shall be out of my cage in just three years.*¹¹

NOTES

- ¹ I would like to thank Prof. Ivor Smith, Alicia Taylor, Raoul Snelder and David Harrison of the Caribbean School of Architecture for their help and kind suggestions for improving the argument. I would also like to thank the University of Technology for their generous sponsorship which allowed me to attend the conference. If it seems strange that a Dutchman, a foreigner, should talk about Kingston, I have this to say: Coming to Kingston, from the relative insularity of a wealthy society filled with its own myths and images, I arrived in Kingston and found my mind torn open by realities from which I had hitherto been comfortably separated by the glass of the television screen. The tortuous history of the Caribbean and the kindness with which the colonizing powers have popularly treated their own involvement in it seems a furious contradiction. My fragmentary and distorted perspective on what is, after all, also part of my own history had to be thoroughly revised. I had to think things out for myself. This essay presents a first attempt at understanding. I hope that I do not appear arrogant if I try to understand this extraordinary city in my own way.
- ² Stanigar, (1996) p. 2.
- ³ Levy, (1996) p. vii.
- ⁴ c.f. Higman, (1988)
- ⁴ Patterson, (1973) pp. 52 ff.
- ⁵ Higman, (1988) pp. 5 ff. & 243 ff & Patterson, (1973) pp. 52 ff.
- ⁶ On the dynamic of violence see, Paul Richards, *Fighting for the rainforest; war, youth & resources in Sierra Leone* (London, 1997).
- ⁷ Thanks to Father MacDonald of Habitat for Humanity for an enlightening visit in 1996.
- ⁸ Levy, (1996) p. 11.
- ⁹ King (1997) p. 5 ff.
- ¹⁰ Levy (1996), The literature on racism within the Caribbean is extensive. The impossible labyrinths of perception and its social obstacles is, however, well illustrated in the diagrams of the World Bank report.
- ¹¹ The anecdote was reported to me by David Harrison.

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