Apparent Culture/ Invisible Nation: An Investigation in African and African-American Aesthetics

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INTRODUCTION

If asked the question, what is African-American architecture? Most, if not all people's minds would draw a blank. This is because the African-American culture has yet to fully enter into contemporary architectural discourse. As stated by Cornell West:

Architecture is the last discipline in the humanities to be affected by the crisis of the professional, cultural and managerial strata in American society. This crisis is three fold that of political legitimacy, intellectual orientation and social identity.[1]

What is put forth in this paper/project is an effort to begin a serious and critical dialogue as to the nature of an African-American architecture. Three questions will be addressed in this investigation: 1) where does one begin this investigation? 2) What principles of design surface as possible tools and guide lines? 3) What is the nature of the space that manifests from this study?

To investigate these questions one must probe deeply into the context of the people, the history that has forged an amalgamation of African cultures into a nation. A history which consists of over three hundred years of slavery and genocide. The varied psychological effects of the traumas of dislocation, alienation, and exile upon the minds and spirits of a people. Also, all forms of cultural expression must be synthesized and used in order to manifest an audible, articulate architecture which communes with the being of all people.

In this investigation Architecture of Western and North Western Africa are studied, pattern designs found in African textiles and African-American quilts are analyzed. And finally a discussion of theories and principles that connect these visual expressions of a people to the music produced and the spirituality lived.

The elements and principles that are articulated are then applied to the formation of a state capitol for the city of Washington, DC. Washington DC. is currently a territory of the U.S., not part of any state. Also the city has a 70 percent-plus African-American population.[2] These two factors create an open field in the political realm for the implementation of an African-American (State)ment of true cultural freedom. The freedom to develop as an independent people in relationship with other independent people of the United States and the world.

EXODUS: AFRICAN AESTHETICS

To begin a discussion on African- American architecture or the theory of an African- American approach to architecture, one must, as in all intellectual discussions establish a conceptual foundation. The foundation that must be set here is the understanding that West and Central Africa are cited as the original birthplace of the majority of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas. This claim has substantial support from not only trading documents but also from cultural retentions found throughout the African Diaspora. Robert Farris Thompson explains these retentions eloquently in his book Flash of the Spirit.

Africans from Kongo and Angola shared fundamental beliefs and languages. When they met on the plantations and in the cities of the western hemisphere, they fostered their heritage. Kongo cvilization and art were not obliterated in the New World: they resurfaced in the oming together, here and there, of numerous slaves from Kongo and Angola. Kongo presence unexpectedly emerges in the Americas in many ways and in many places... vernacular English, contemporary music, ...[3]

Although there has been great retentions of African principles and philosophies in the African- American. The fact still remains, that the vicissitudes of the Atlantic slave trade and American slavery stripped the African- American of a great deal of cultural tradition and philosophical base. In order to survive the enslaved African had to reconstruct themselves from fragments of things remembered, of new and alien concepts.[4] In this reconstruction it is very important to understand part of the situation: In regards to retained knowledge of the past, many times it had to be done in a clandestine manner.[5] And secondly, that the majority of new knowledge was circumspect, because the body of this knowledge came from the society that perpetuated vile inhuman acts.

This re-creation of self is a process that has continued into contemporary times and has become almost ritualized throughout the African- American culture. Within this constant recreation is found a continuous spirit that re-introduces new/old, reclaimed Africanisms. This can be seen most clearly in the evolution of music, dance and language usage, commonly refereed to as ebonics. Each style of music (Spirituals, Ragtime, Blues, Jazz, Rock-n-Roll, Rhythm and Blues, Gospel, House and Rap) utilizes similar aesthetic principals such as improvisation, extreme articulation and multilayered rhythmic patterns, "call n response." Also, each style varies in how these principles are used, and in the case of "Rap," the spoken word, the art of the African griot, is re- infused into the tradition as an aesthetic tool. Usually this re- infusion is not done on a conscious level, a word is used by some one and is heard by another and somehow it feels right. African Americans at the turn of the century call this process "Jes Grew", meaning that the idea just grew from the culture.

Within the twentieth century there has been a reoccurring call by intellectuals, political leaders, artists and spiritual leaders to re-infuse the African- American culture with more Africa. This can be seen in the movement started by Marcus Garvey, in the 1910's. It can be seen in the work of artists during the 1920's, known as the Harlem Renaissance. The Afro-Cobra Movement of the 1960's and 70's. In the Black Panther Movement of the 1970's. And it can also be seen

in the development of spirituality: In African based religions throughout the Americas Candomble, Santeria, Voodoo, and at various levels of the African-American Christian church and universal spiritual events such as *Kwanzaa*, developed by Dr. Maulana-Kerenga in 1969.

The afore mentioned history is but a synopsis of the background and culture that informs every move made in this investigation/study into African-American aesthetics in space articulation. Survival, Spiritual, Political, Resistance, Social, and Artistic aspects of life, all aspects of life, all set the context for the study and possible development of an African- American State.

PRINCIPLES

The Afro-American artist is... a conjuror who works Ju Ju uopn his oppressors; a witch doctor who frees his fellow victims from the psychic attack launched by demons of the outer and inner world.

— Ishmael Reed, 19

In this day and age, most of the world respects the rhythmic complexity and sophistication of African based music and dance, The raw, natural, simplicity and abstractness of African sculpture. The use of rhythm, time, multiplicity, extreme contrasts, all combined with a preference for improvisation, are primary components of the African aesthetic. These elements can be seen in almost every expression that is displayed by an African people; in music, textile design, dance, speech, sculpture, religion, architecture and life.

AFRICAN RHYTHM

A transformation of African music occurred in the African-American culture. In West Africa rhythm has a pre- eminence over melody and harmony, which dominated European music. However, the principles of melody and harmony in African music were close enough for a pluralistic joining to take place in song. Spoken languages who's complexities were dependent on pitch and intonation as much as vocabulary for meaning introduced subtleties of sound that had no part in the European musical traditions — singing in falsetto for instance, and bending and eliding notes rather than trying to hit them with pinpoint accuracy. And, the significance of drum choirs and percussion music in religious ceremonies had over the centuries, resulted in a sophistication of rhythm — often with sounds grouped in triplets, set slightly out of phase and overlaid on each other.[6]

Since music and its characteristics is one of the fundamental forms of expression to be highlighted in this discussion, it may be important to give a basic outline of qualities that have been retained and infused into the African- American manner of making. The main characteristics of music in West and Central Africa are; 1) an open, full throated singing voice, often with a raspy quality; (2) a general lack of embellishment of melody lines; (3) one note to one syllable, often delivered at a fast rate of speed; (4) polyphonic conception, harmony in two parts being perhaps the most common texture, with some ethnic groups singing by preference in parallel thirds, others in fourths and fifths and still others in a mixture of intervals; (5) sophisticated rhythm structures, consisting of several patterns (usually simple individually) overlaid to form a multilinear, poly rhythmic complex; and (6) the primary instrument is the drum and other percussion instruments made in various tones.[7]

AFRICAN DANCE

African Dance has a direct relationship to music. In West Africa, dance is to music as word is to music.[8] That is to say that dance becomes a communicative device where accent and articulation are supported by the music, and inversely, the dance (or the word) supports the music. Dance is an integral part of the African culture,

there are dances for various aspects of life; birth, death, marriage, birthdays, ancestral worship, praise to the most high, other forces that exist, story telling, etc.[9]

The fundamental principle behind African dance is to become one with the beat, for every beat a move is articulated. Becoming one with the beat is achieved through a system of movements that I call "Isolation within Composition," based upon simple isolations of every part of the body. These movements are then combined to become a complex system of movements that are simultaneously dynamic and subtle. A polyphony of gestures, executed in a seemingly improvisational and eclectic manner. As the person becomes more adept in this communion of body, sound and beat, they also become one with those around, the community, the ancestors and the universe. A dance is sometimes done in order to generate the proper mental and spiritual atmosphere for what might be called channeling of unseen forces.

RELIGION: AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY

Versions of some of the ritual authorities responsible for Kongo herbalistic healing and deviation appeared in the Americas and served as avatars of Kongo and Angola lore in the New World...

Those in the United States were known largely as "conjurors" and "root persons."

— Robert Farris Thompson

African religion is a highly structured and ordered cosmological system that is a composite of divine, spirit, human, animate and inanimate elements, hierarchically perceived, but all interrelated. At the top of this system is the "Divine Force" (God), which is the ultimate and primary life giving power.[10] All that exists is filled with the power of God. This entity does not interact directly with humanity, the force which Yorubans call *ashe* is transmitted through spirits and ancestors. Most religions in this African tradition are extremely pluralistic, they have the ability to accept and or absorb new ideas and knowledge of other religions easily, thus making the religions adaptable to changing times and conditions. This is most clearly seen in the adaptation of African religions in the Americas.

AFRICAN CITY - STATES

The notion of pluralism takes form in African cities and villages. In looking at contemporary African cities one finds developments that have manifested from a triple heritage. Space has been shared amongst three cultures. In NNamdi Elleh's text *African Architecture*, the three cultures that are cited are; Indigenous African, Moslem, and European. Although this is true, we must dig deeper to understand how this tripartite sharing of space is continuos of an African way of life. African cities have always had the charge of having multiple cultures somehow co-exist. In many regions of Africa there may be up to 10 different language groups, either living in or in close proximity to the city. These various cultures are drawn to the city mostly for market reasons but many of the cities were originally conceived, for spiritual reasons. According to J.C. Moughton, many African cities and towns originated as spiritual centers as opposed to market centers. The Hausa city - state of Kano in Northern Nigeria sprang from a high rock outcropping, Dalla rock, which had served as the habitation of an important local spirit. The city of Ife in Nigeria is one that developed in this manner.[11]

In *African Cities and Towns before the European Conquest*, Richard W. Hull discusses the importance of urban walls.

Walling was a vitally important consideration in the development of African urban life. Walls gave definition to settlements and prevented urban sprawl. Walls also provided psychic and physical security. Urban walls had many layers

of purpose; politically, walls were a sign of prestige, their size was a measure of a ruler's ability to command the labor of his or her subjects. Walls were also built to overawe foreign visitors.

Inner walls in African cities protected and defined the royal compound. They maintained the integrity of divine kingship by shielding the monarch from the rude gaze of public scrutiny and preventing the dispersion of state secrets. Inner walls, then, reinforced the mystique of divine kingship.

In contrast the outer walls of African cities were the people's walls. Walls shielded the people from foreign attack and allowed merchants to conduct business with confidence. Outer walls also provided the masses with a necessary sense of corporate identity.[12]

Between the inner and outer walls existed scores of secondary ones which defined the perimeters of kinship activity and fulfilled the extended families need for privacy and protection. One could almost view a West African city as a series of containers.[13]

Dwellings were constructed extremely close to one another, but narrow alleyways separated blocks of buildings. Many larger towns and cities were intersected by avenues, alleyways not only opened onto these broad thoroughfares but also were broken by pleasant community plazas. The scale of these urban areas rarely exceeded two stories and often times only one story, giving the city a very human scale.[14] Cities were extremely self sufficient in regards to the trading and cultivation of marketable goods. Animals were allowed into the city and fruit and vegetables were grown on roadsides and the perimeter of the cities.[15]

A number of common elements have been found in West African house/ village plans. These common features appear to independent of location, social organization, or religious affiliation. All compounds are surrounded by high walls or fence, which provides privacy and security. The compound so formed is entered through one main gateway, which usually takes the form of a gatehouse, a feature that gives both visual and physical control of movement in and out of the private spaces in the settlements. Within the compound, accommodation is arranged formally or informally around one or more outdoor spaces or courtyards. The construction used for the individual buildings use thick walls made from the surrounding earth, and articulation of the lighter structural elements against this heavy surface is very common.

AFRICAN TEXTILES

According to Maude Wahlman many examples of patchwork, asymmetry, bold colors, large shapes, improvisation, breakline patterning and multiple patterning occur in the history of African textiles.[16]

Notable examples include cotton Jibbeh, Fante Asafo Flags, Egungun costumes of the Yoruba people, Camaroon costumes, and patched together barkcloth made primarily by the Kuba and Pygmies in central Africa. Mbuti artists also paint barkcloth with designs that resemble strips and patchwork.[17]

It is my observation that there exists a strong relationship in the aesthetic choice to use small units in the making of a cloth pattern and the choice of using small building modules found in the development of African dwellings and cities. These small building units are rigidly combined, like in the Ashanti courtyard compounds or loosely put together much like in the Hausa dwelling compound.

Another aesthetic that arises from the analysis of African textiles is the multiple formal hierarchies, which are established due to the slightly shifted patterns (multiple fields) established in one composition. This establishment of multiple hierarchies blurs the sense of one specific hierarchy. Thus it simulates a breakdown of dominance and establishes a new order based upon equivalence or multivalence. I felt this particular aesthetic has strong ties to music, dance and religion.

AFRICAN - AMERICAN QUILTS

Strip patterns are not the exclusive property of African peoples in the United States. As stated in John Vlachs text African- American Decorative Arts;

...that Euro-Americans also made strip quilts - for example the Pennsylvania Germans, Amish and Menonite, in the 19th century. However these quilts would never be mistaken for quilts made by the Africans in America. Euro- Americans tend to draw their designs into a tight and ordered symmetry. Moreover, geometric motifs set in blocks constitute the core of the Euro-American...

By contrast, Afro-American strip quilts are random and wild, seemingly out of control.[18]

Although controlled geometric motifs are standard in the designs, accidentals are anticipated if not calculated as a part of the composition. In both African textiles and African-American quilt work there is a commitment to a deeply imbedded sense of improvisation.[18] Also as we analyze these quilt compositions we find an aesthetic expression that is inclusive of many different and varied possibilities and ideas, the essence of pluralist thought.

KENTE CLOTH SPATIAL STUDY

In the United States African textiles are commonly referred to as Kente cloth, why this particular name has caught on is not known.

This study was done by taking the image of a swatch of Kente cloth and using the basic principles of western color theory to abstract and transform the cloth into a construct that is more architectonic in its nature.

In Kente Study I, the lines and blocks of color were abstracted into solid forms to establish the type of massing the kente strip suggests. The masses are expanded to various heights and depths, each according to its related color. (fig. 1)

In Kente Study II, the lines and blocks of color were abstracted into thin planes of the same thickness. The planes are then placed at different heights and depths, each according to its related color. (fig. 2)
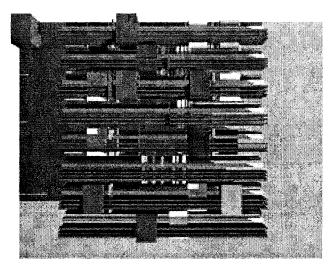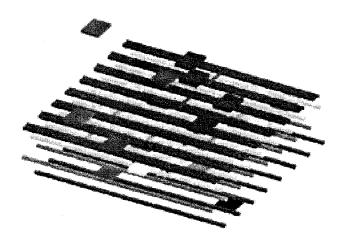

Fig. 1.

Fig 2.

PROVIDENCE

I could not conjure my God in this place, and it seemed His failure. Surprise ... Overwhelmed me.
— Lorene Carey

New Ife is a project that was first conceived when I was a graduate student in architecture at Cornell University. As an undergraduate I struggled with architecture and after a time I achieved a certain amount of academic success, but by the end of my undergraduate career, I felt much like the above quote, empty. I was still searching for myself in the lessons, and to my dismay couldn't find myself. I had a great deal of exposure to contemporary European thought in architecture. I was even exposed to a great deal of Asian philosophy and design theory, but there were no courses on African-American thought and philosophy in architecture. That became my focus in graduate school African and African-American aesthetics. Early in my graduate studies I came across an article in Ebony magazine, that was focused upon Jesse Jackson and the attempt at designating Washington, DC as a state, the 51st state of the United States of America. As I continued to read the all too short article, too short because of my intense interest, the article began to articulate some very interesting statistics, of the demographics of Washington, DC and the City - States contribution to this nation.

The District of Columbia has more residents than four states. The residents of the district pay more taxes than the residents of nine states, and they pay more taxes per capita than the residents of 49 states. More residents from DC died in Vietnam per capita than the residents from 47 states.[20]

The demographic and historical background of Washington, DC, makes it an ideal location to implement theories and principles of African and African- American aesthetics. Not only is it the nation's capital but it is also an are that has been black (Mecca)nized in the past one hundred to one hundred and fifty years. It is an area that appears to take a complete snapshot of the African-American population. The city's African -American economic and social strata are covered from low extreme to high extreme. It articulates the multiple faces of the African- American people.

The project begins looking at the area formerly known as Washington, DC, this includes part of the current city of Alexandria Virginia. To many African-Americans, the design of DC was done by not Charles L'Enfant but by Benjamin Bannaker, an African - American mathematician, inventor, astronomer and surveyor of the 18th century. He is recorded as the surveyor of the DC area. This misunderstanding of his role in the development of the nation's capital is used as a starting point for the design of a new state and state capital. In general the role of a surveyor is to mark the boundaries of
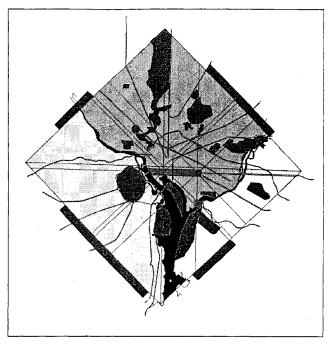

Fig.3.

a tract of land, to determine shape, extent, contour, position, elevation etc. The area is analyzed from the perspective of its original boundaries, which included the area known as Alexandria, VA., its natural boundaries and its man made boundaries. In (fig. 3) a composite of smaller analysis studies is shown. Articulated in this composition are the axis of the diamond shape and the axis that divide the city into quadrants. The water ways, which divide the city with natural boundaries. Florida Ave., once called Boundary street, separates the federal portion of the city from the general domestic areas. The many open areas of land, such as; airports, parks, etc. The strong line that divides the city racially. Suppressed systems such as the public transportation system. These boundaries, many of which are invisible, are physically articulated/ marked throughout the city, as the implementation of the new State structure. In doing so the work of Benjamin Bannaker is forever visible as an integral part of the development of New Ife, and the nation's capital.

The strategy used to place the state capitol is done with the desire to make a commentary on the centralized and imperialistic organization of the Federal Mall and its relation to the entire city. It is envisioned that the state would be based upon a decentralized scheme, one that would absorb the centralized Federal Mall into its system, but not destroying its strength or power. This idea comes from the incorporation of concepts of pluralism and multiple hierarchy within the city (ideas derived from the investigation of African aesthetics). In Herman Hertzberger's book *Lessons for students in Architecture* he calls this the concept of "Equivalence":

When something that was a secondary feature in one situation can become the main feature in another, in other words that both features can adapt to specific conditions, then we have a system of values in which there is no hierarchy of importance among component parts. And when, for instance, something in any architectonic ordering, an element or an organization of elements, can perform different functions depending on its placement in different situations, then its value is no longer constant.[21]

Depending on how an element is placed, it can perform a pivotal function, it can become the center of a system in its own right. According to Hertzberger, a system in which primary and secondary elements are recognizable as such cannot but refer to a hierarchy of
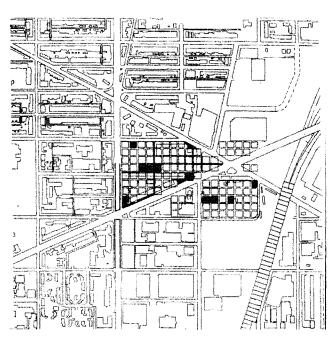
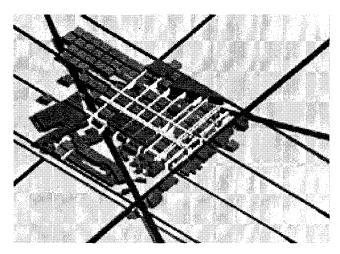Fig. 4. Site plan of a state capital district

Fig. 5. Birds Eye perspective of a state capital district

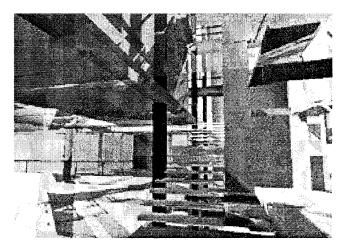Fig. 6. This is an image of the interior of one of the multi-use buildings in the state capital districts.

constant and unalterable values: a system of values which is unequivocal and which consequently precludes interpretation on more than one level.[22]

The design of Washington, DC is based upon a French Baroque plan designed by Charles L'Enfant, termed a Grand Manner plan in Spiro Kostof's book *The City Shaped*, he states:

> The Grand Manner is not the currency of little towns. It is neither practical nor modest. Perceived as an expansive pattern of sweeping vistas, its relation to topography and prior urban arrangements is arbitrary, its effects often grandiloquent. Typically, behind designs in the Grand Manner stands a powerful, centrist State whose resources and undiluted authority make possible the extravagant urban vision of ramrod-straight avenues, vast uniformly bordered squares, and a suitable accompaniment of monumental public buildings.[23]

Underneath the Grand Manner design lies the orthogonal grid, which has a strong foundation in the design of American cities and in the Greek formation of democratic society. Its homogeneity lends itself well to the idea that all people are created equal. No street is more important than another in its schematic make up and no one point receives preferential positions on diagonal axis or intersecting squares and circles, as is the case in Washington and other cities like Paris. The grid operates upon extremely simple principles, while it clearly sets the overall rules, it is all the more flexible, when it comes to the detailing of each site. Its economy of means is very much like a chess board, which has an unimaginable number of possibilities.

The design of New Ife attaches on to the highly structured strategy of the grid and decreases its scale, creating a finely meshed fabric that is interwoven into the Grand Manner Plan and the existing city grid. It introduces into the city fabric an extremely tight grid, which is scaled more for pedestrian use than for automotive. Within a state capital district would exist an ambiguity between a multiblocked mega structure on one level, a grouping of individual mid- sized buildings and very small scaled units, all interconnecting in varied ways and levels (improvisational method: variation on a theme). The idea being, that a city is a house, a place made for comfortable formal and informal dwelling.

The program of the state is developed from an understanding of African philosophy, African aesthetic principles (characteristics) and the concept of a social democracy. African philosophy, has three major emphasis; that of spirituality, communalism, and pluralism. This leads us to what I call the storefront state, the creation of mixed use areas. The state becomes self sufficient, setting up manufacturing facilities and agricultural space, within the city/ states perimeters. Each part of the State network of buildings would essentially be a microcosm of a larger urban scheme. The state areas become the formal manifestation of a government that is for the people, by the people and of the people, in other words it becomes democracy. In placing the domestic, market and civic areas in close proximity, it is hoped that the areas would remain vital during all times of the day and that the tendency of the current government, to neglect lower income areas would be deterred. The state would have to provide proper security and maintenance for its facilities and its surrounding areas, thus providing the same high quality maintenance and security for its neighbors. The program of New Ife will consist of but is not limited to: state capital, city halls, state farm(s), police (security stations), housing, and various market types such as; shops and cafes.

After establishing possible location(s) of the state capital areas, one area is used as a prototype. Its location lies on North Capital St. between Florida Ave. and New York Ave. Conceptually the idea is to place a kente cloth on the site. The following images are a result of this intervention on the site.

NOTES

1. Cornell West, "A Note on Race and Architecture," *Keeping Faith* (New York/London: Routledge, 1993), p. 45.
2. *1990 Census of Population: General Population Characteristics, District of Columbia* (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration Bureau of the Census, 1992), Table 3.
3. Robert Ferris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 104.
4. Robert Ferris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit.*
5. Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols; African Images in African American Quilts* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1993), p. vii.
6. *Encylclopedia Britanica.*
7. Ibid.
8. Kariamu Weish Asanti, *African Dance,* p. 63.
9. Ibid., p. 6.
10. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion,* p. 39.
11. J.C. Moughton, *Hausa Architecture* (London: Ethnographica Ltd., 1985), p. 133.
12. Richard Hull, *African Cities and Towns before the European Conquest,* pp. 33-34.
13. Ibid., pp. 33-34.
14. Ibid., p. 42.
15. Ibid., p. 42.
16. Wahlman, Maude, Southwell. *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African America Quilts,* p. 75.
17. Ibid. p. 25.
18. John Vlach, *The Afro- American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland Museum of Art), p. 67.
19. Ibid. p. 67.
20. Laura B. Randolph, "What D.C. Statehood Would Mean To Black America," *Ebony Magazine* (October 1990) (Chicago: Johnson Publications), p. 124.
21. Herman Hertzberger, "Equivilance," *Lessons for Students in Architecture* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010 Publishers, 1991), p. 246.
22. Ibid.
23. Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped, Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History* (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown & Company, 1991), p. 240.