

Race, Rhetoric and Revision: June Jordan as Utopian Architect

“At the Donnell I lost myself among rooms and doorways and Japanese gardens and Bauhaus chairs and spoons. The picture of a spoon, of an elegant, spare utensil as common in its purpose as a spoon, and as lovely and singular in its form as sculpture, utterly transformed my ideas about the possibilities of design in relation to human existence.”

— June Jordan (1981)

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INTRODUCTION

“June Jordan was an architect,” or so declares the black feminist writer and blogger Alexis Pauline Gumbs.¹ This declaration involves some political risk on Gumbs’ part, as Jordan is more popularly known as a writer, playwright and poet. Several rhetorical questions immediately come to mind when one considers the veracity of such a claim. Questions such as, ‘Where did Jordan receive her architectural training?’ ‘What are her most influential buildings?’ ‘Who was directly influenced by her built (or unbuilt) projects?’ Of course, fielding all of these questions is a routine part of architectural historiography. Yet, too rigid a categorization of architectural talent leads to patent absurdities. The Architectural Registration Board of the UK recently warned the local press not to refer to foreign designers (such as Renzo Piano or Daniel Libeskind) as ‘architect’ in print because they had no license to practice in the UK.² While this nationalist defense of the professional label is laudable, the criterion of simple licensure for professional inclusion is too narrowly legalistic to bracket the architect’s social influence. Etienne Boullée, Friedrich Gilly, Giovanni Piranesi and Lebbeus Woods might also be excluded on the grounds that they rarely (if ever) produced physical buildings, choosing instead to focus on ideal projects. Of course, these architects have made some of the most influential changes to the discipline, especially in the postwar period when architectural commissions were down and designers needed to manifest their ideas in ever more convenient ways. All of this reveals the fact that tacitly accepted categories of professional expertise have always buckled under the weight of close scrutiny.

But what is to be done when one identifies a body of work that clearly makes use of architectural principles, but is not manifested in the typical mediums of the professional architect (e.g. through drawing, modeling, or physical construction)? Is this work any less architectural, or should this person be considered any less of an architect? These questions are the implicit stakes of Gumbs’ historiographical

inclusion of June Jordan into the architectural canon. Despite having no physical structures credited to her name, June Jordan – a female artist and a woman of color, a college dropout with no architectural license – was indelibly drawn to and incorporated the principles of modern architecture throughout her career. This journey began with her entry into the Environmental Design major at Barnard College.³ After dropping out of Barnard, Jordan began seriously reading architectural journals and writings in the art reading room of the Donnell library in New York. She fondly recalls her “fantastic visual inundation” in Greek architecture when courting a series of biographical writings published in the 1980s:

At the Donnell I lost myself among rooms and doorways and Japanese gardens and Bauhaus chairs and spoons. The picture of a spoon, of an elegant, spare utensil as common in its purpose as a spoon, and as lovely and singular in its form as sculpture, utterly transformed my ideas about the possibilities of design in relation to human existence.⁴

During this time, Jordan developed the roots of what one historian has called her “ecosocial” interpretation of the built environment, which considered architecture and the built environment to be an extension and manifestation of human ecology.⁵ This preference for the social led her to elevate Buckminster Fuller’s ecological utopian speculations over Le Corbusier’s technocratic solution for distinctly zoned postwar cities. Fuller’s solutions for domed cities seemed to include all of the mess and layering of the urban condition in its organic and emergent condition. This textual love for Fuller blossomed into a real correspondence with the architect and subsequent collaboration on the “Skyrise for Harlem” project – an alternative urban design solution for the “New York” approach to urban renewal.⁶ Jordan was later awarded a Rome Prize Fellowship in Environmental Design, where she began to do research on communal agrarian reform. This research synthesized the themes of race and place by bringing together the communal ideals of Fanny Lou Hamer (the black feminist activist) and the utopian ideals of Fuller’s architectural speculations. (The fact that Fuller had also dropped out of school made him an approachable figure in Jordan’s eyes.) However, the greatest testament to Jordan’s architectural expertise is likely to be found in the manner in which she employed architectural description and metaphor in her written work.

I tend to agree with Pauline Gumbs that “June Jordan was an architect” in the most expansive sense, that is to say in the sense that counts most for the progression of the architectural discipline (instead of its ‘professional’ boundaries). Despite the apparent lack of legal and professional credentials, Jordan’s literature is filled with the techniques, strategies and suppositions of the progressive postwar architect. In light of this situation, it would be more fruitful to consider her literary output a synthetic hybridization of her poetic and architectural talents. Such a reading builds upon Cheryl Fish’s identification of the “architextural” character of Jordan’s career; the architectural implications of her genius remain pregnant in the prose and poetry she produced in the postwar period. My own interest in the Jordan’s architextural output extends an abiding interest I have maintained with postwar depictions of black spaces in novels and movies. For me, Jordan’s textual utopian speculations seemed no less real or influential for not being visualized in the traditional mediums of the architect. The textual form of her output was shaped by her need to reach the aspiring young black readers who wanted to dream but did not think of architecture as an obvious career choice or mode of experimentation. Jordan served as



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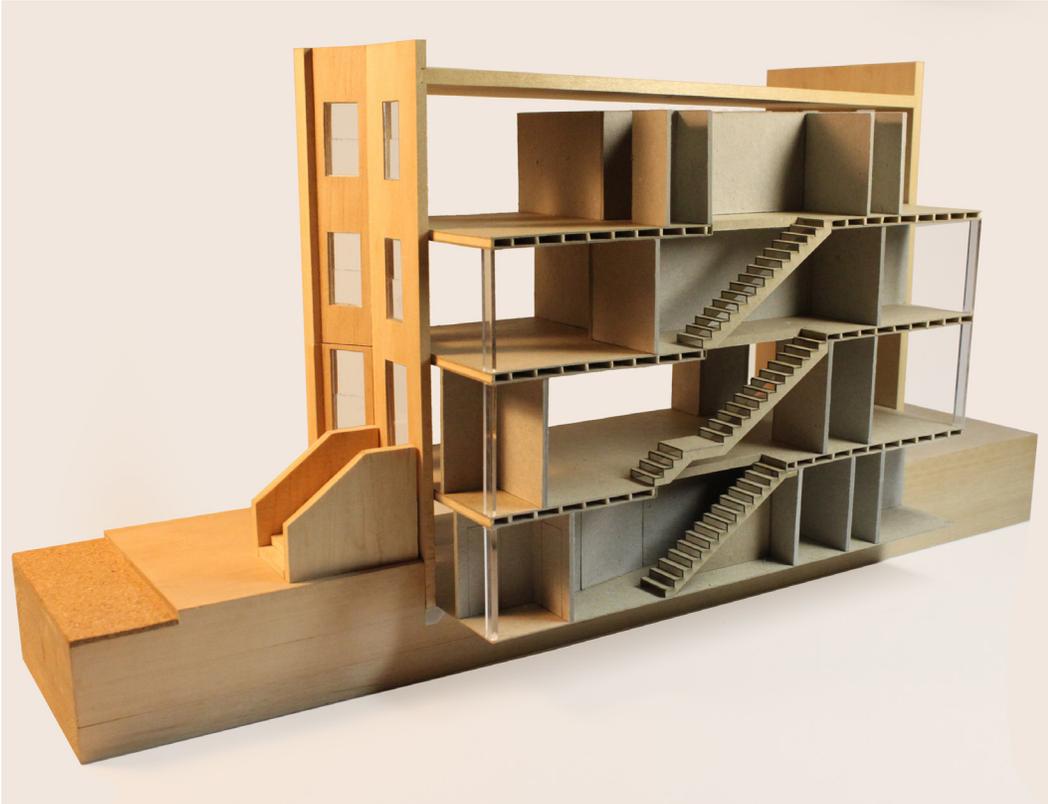
Figure 1: Historic fabric of row houses found in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant. This development has appeared in photos that date back to the 1940s.

an intermediary for the many who had limited physical agency to reform their environment, but were discovering a new sense of self worth as a result of the radical messages communicated by various black social movements.

OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

I began a research project in the summer of 2013 that analyzed the architectural and urban design principles implicit in June Jordan's 1971 novella *His Own Where*.⁷ Jordan's book described the experiences of a young black boy named Buddy who is forced to live on his own after his father is hospitalized by an errant car on the side of the road. Buddy's life experiences teach him that the space of the city is overtly aggressive and unforgiving toward black life and therefore not to be trusted. In addition to the vulnerabilities that street corners and other spatial elements of the urban grid presents to its poor black occupants, the massive restructuring of urban policy, urban poverty, and institutional neglect indirectly affected one's future. This can be seen in the fate of Buddy's girlfriend who is shunted from one girl's home to another in a desperate attempt to escape her abusive father and jealous mother. The one comfort that Buddy finds in life is the art of carpentry, which his father taught him before being hospitalized. In the years after his divorce, Buddy's father takes to radically restructuring the interior spaces of their 1960s brownstone along modernist principles. The closed off partitioned fabric of the interior that was so typical of turn of the century building stock was reconfigured to construct a three-storey loft space that rose to include all three floors of its height. This space was capped with a stained glass skylight that rested squarely above the new loft space. Although Jordan never uses the term 'architect' or 'architectural' to describe the spatial transformation of this brownstone, it is clear that her description of the spare and minimalist aesthetic of the interior is influenced by her readings in architectural modernism. It is at moments like this that we can clearly see the influence of her early exposure to architecture in the Donnell library.

The newly unfinished walls of the bourgeois interior of Buddy's home are a manifestation of what I like to call the alternative modernism that is revealed by Jordan's text. This sort of modernism is not officially sanctioned by any authoritative body, but represents the strategic appropriation that the social project of modernism requires in order to influence the city from the bottom-up. In contrast to Le Corbusier and CIAM's efforts to position the professional architect as the regulator of physical space, Jordan has placed these tools within the hands of a fifteen year-old boy. He has no teacher besides his father and his own mind, and yet these are enough for him to gain control over his own space. In fact, he is doing more for the black community than the official planning bodies that are supported by local tax dollars. This informal architectural education causes Buddy to constantly think about the city in spatial and architectural terms. His leisurely rides through the city make him imagine a timeshare arrangement for the skyscrapers and business towers that lay dormant after hours, or to elevate interior space as a physical element to be celebrated and shaped instead of filled with possessions and clutter. This textual depiction of Buddy's ethos gives him a glint of the handicraft roots of Adolf Loos or Mies van der Rohe, although far more tempered by the neglect and want of the 1960s. It is a radical black version of architectural culture that pluralizes the restrictive canons that reinforce the social exclusions of the postwar period. In a biographical sense, Jordan's attempts to synthesize race and place in her works constituted her efforts come to grips with the race riots and abject poverty that marked Harlem



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in the mid to late-1960s. She wanted to move beyond the hate she felt for her oppressors by providing the urban residents of these segregated enclaves with a glimpse of hope, even if this hope was largely textual in form.

I began to materialize the architectural implications of Buddy's world by adjusting the interior space of a historical brownstone house found in 1960s Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. [Figure 1] This simulated renovation followed Jordan's textual depiction of Buddy's architecture, including gutting the front rooms of the first three floors to form a loft space and cutting out the ground floor bay window to accommodate a floor-to-floor modern window. There were several other innovations described in *His Own Where*, including the non-conventional door openings and shelves that were flush with wall finishes and lit by bright primary colors (mostly blues, reds, and oranges) to segregate the internal functions of the home. Historically speaking, Jordan's version of architectural utopianism touches on at least two historical traditions in the United States. On the one hand is the emphasis on developing an iconic image to inaugurate the realization of the modern project, and on the other hand there is the communal reformist movements that took place at the turn of the century that employed architecture as an institutional tool for managing the physical and social reality of an experimental society.⁸ In this latter context, the spatial arrangement and ease of construction trumped the iconic images that dominated the heroic projects of Cedric Price, Yona Freedman and Constant in the 1960s and 70s. Buddy's approach synthesizes these two attitudes, but in a manner that is appropriate for his status as a minority in postwar New York. The redesign of his house realigns the minimalist aesthetic of normative architectural modernism with a do-it-yourself ethos, much like the spirit that underwrote the rise of postwar magazines that were produced for a bourgeois white readership that finally had the money to invest in a good home.⁹ However, in contrast to the exterior application of modernist aesthetics, Buddy's renovations are mostly reserved for the interior of the renovated home and a few key locations on the surrounding exterior grounds. I have tried to depict this restrained ethos via an

Figure 5: Historic photograph of Harlem announcing famous march on Washington D.C. (c.1963).



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architectural model that preserves the exterior modeling of the brownstone, but radically reconfigured the interior space. [Figure 3] Just as Kendrick Ian Grandison notes in his landscape study of Tuskegee Institute, black entrepreneurs were often forced to hide the visible evidence of their steady progress from hostile onlookers, be they black or white.¹⁰ Buddy's experiments with his alternative modernism were both done in response to the fact that he was not a 'man' or an 'architect' in the legal sense, and that his poor neighbors looked upon his architectural innovations with suspicion.

In a speculative turn, I have also tried to depict what the broader implications of Buddy's DIY attitude might have been had they been communally appropriated by the black community in the form of a colored map of Harlem. [Figure 4] In contrast to contemporary histories of postwar architectural utopianism that omit Harlemites from participating in design culture, this map reveals the predominance of an alternative utopian thinking that was manifest in Jordan's depiction of Harlem. For her, Harlem was a space of bright minds locked into a context of dramatically limited agency. Yet, this agency must be acknowledged and fostered if one is ever to actually use this agency when given the opportunity. The final collage gives us a glimpse into a typical 1960s black as reconstructed by people like Buddy in *His Own Where*. [Figures 5, 6] The playful attitude of young boys and girls is redirected to reforming the interiors of inherited spaces. As the block recedes into the distance we can see superficial manifestations of others daring to experiment, and the avenue turns upward to reveal the larger context of Harlem silently participating in the reclamation and reformation of domestic space. The purpose of these illustrations is not to authoritatively represent June Jordan's architextural speculations, but to provide them with a visual and material reality that the architect and architectural historian can recognize. Through her word-images, Jordan reveals the complexity of black urban space in the postwar period with an alternative vision of architectural modernism.

Figure 6: Collage illustrating the implications and roots of Jordan's 'Architextural' principles: (a) digital model of Buddy's house, (b) 'Architextural' map of Harlem, (c) frontispiece of June Jordan's *His Own Where* (1971), (d) "Skyrise for Harlem" collaboration by June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller (1969).

CONCLUSIONS

More important than arguing over whether June Jordan can officially be called an architect for the purposes of architectural historiography is her insistence on not identifying herself in exclusively careerist terms. Whatever we decide to call her does not matter if we can resolutely reclaim her hybridized and ecological approach to interpreting the built environment. In this sense, June Jordan is only one of many black artists and writers who found value in the principles of architectural modernism and urban design.¹¹ All it requires of us is to read through these speculations and continue to remake them in the present. Doing so would afford such work an even greater influence on architectural culture as it requires an active interpretation of the word-images that were recorded in the postwar period.

ENDNOTES

1. See Pauline Gumb's essay "June Jordan and a Black Feminist Poetics of Architecture," March 21, 2012 (<http://pluraletantum.com/2012/03/21/June-Jordan-and-a-Black-Feminist-Poetics-of-Architecture-site-1/>)
2. See the ArchDaily column of October 9, 2012 covering this controversy at <http://www.archdaily.com/28037/Renzo-Piano-is-not-an-Architect/>
3. Environmental Design was an umbrella curriculum introduced in the 1950s and 60s to teach designers of all kinds the importance of shaping the built environment. Many of these programs were not accredited because they exceeded the boundaries of professional education.
4. June Jordan, "One Way of Starting this Book," *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), xvi-xvii.
5. Cheryl J. Fish, "Place, Emotion, and Environmental Justice in Harlem: June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller's 1965 'Architextural' Collaboration," *Disclosure*, vol.29, no.2-3 (spring-fall 2007): 332.
6. June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller, "Instant Urban Renewal," *Esquire* magazine, April 1965.
7. The models for this research was completed with the help of my research assistant Adam Caruthers, as well as funding from the School of Architecture and the Digital Arts Center. I want to thank Chris Jarrett, Peter Wong, and Eric Sauda for their assistance in obtaining these funds.
8. For information on this communitarian tradition, see Dorores Hayden's *Seven Architectural Utopias: the Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1976)
9. For the racial politics of postwar magazine culture see Monica Penick's "Framing Modern: Maynard L. Parker, Elizabeth Gordon, and House Beautiful's Pace Setter Program," in *Maynard Parker: Modern Photography and the American Dream* (Yale University Press, 2012), 161-189. For the racial politics of postwar housing in general, see Dianne Harris' *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
10. Kendrick Ian Grandison, "Negotiated Space: the Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America," in *American Quarterly*, vol.51, no.3 (1999): 529-579.
11. I offered a research seminar in the spring of 2014 that afforded students this opportunity. This course was entitled, "The Modernist Spaces of African American Literature and Film" and was offered at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.