

## Playing Crazy: Serendipity and Settlement in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street Neighborhood

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“(T)hat it exists at all is what is important about Afro-American art.”<sup>1</sup>

Current expectations of sustainable urbanism focus on the modest use of resources to achieve maximum effective habitat. Historic African-American settlements, especially in southern cities, reflect this goal, albeit inadvertently. Inner city neighborhoods with small lot sizes; walking, biking and public transportation networks; heat-deflecting residential construction; gardens for nutritional self-sufficiency using regional foods; and strong community and familial structures are among the frequently cited benchmarks of sustainable communities, and they are found as a matter of course in most southern African-American neighborhoods. While many of these practices evolved in response to bitter poverty and lack of public services—cruel ironies that cannot be overlooked—the habits forged are instructive nonetheless.<sup>2</sup>



But the purpose of this essay is not to discuss these obvious and laudable examples of sustainable living. Rather, the mechanisms that allowed African culture to sustain itself *at all* will be sought. Given the calculated efforts made over hundreds of years to eradicate many signifiers of African culture in America—including languages, art, religion, kinship and spatial structures—it is remarkable that they live on today. As folklorist John Michael Vlach notes, “The continuity that we find in black folk art and craft is proof of strength, it is testimony of cultural stamina and endurance in the face of sometimes brutal oppression.”<sup>3</sup> The same can be said of the African-American urban practices that remain productive almost 400 years after the first Africans moved to the American hemisphere. But the physical evidence of this cultural stamina often seems elusive or enigmatic to urban professionals, for several reasons.



These are the very reasons it merits attention. First, African-American urban space can be understood as a result of the ongoing collective performance of negotiation and consensus. No master designer orchestrates the outcome. Since many people (developers, neighbors, families) participate, many are invested—financially and emotionally. Second, formal proposals are not invented from whole cloth. Rather, existing or “found” forms are strategically and continually modified. This results in a practice of

re-use, not destruction. Finally the act of modification signals resistance to, or play against, what often has been a narrative of oppression.

It might be argued that the real threat to a sustainable future is not our unwillingness to plan, build and buy green, per se, but rather the pervasive and growing pressures of global capitalism to consume everything. Edward Luttwak confirms this assessment stating, "(Turbo-charged capitalism) offers but a single model and a single set of rules for every country in the world, ignoring all differences of society, culture and temperament."<sup>4</sup> Cultural theorists such as Craig Owens describe such hegemonic projects as master narratives, or narratives of mastery.<sup>5</sup> The contemporary cultures most experienced with negotiating the dialectic of mastery are those of the African diaspora. And, as Thompson, Gates, Vlach and others have demonstrated, the ability to deflect totalizing logics is built into some West African cultures. It arrived in the New World with Africans and here it has flourished.

There are several reasons African-American spatial practices, including the practice of resistance, have not been widely communicated to the professional design community. The most obvious reason is the historic necessity of secrecy. It was, and perhaps remains, vital that the Master not realize resistance was/is being practiced. Therefore, many African American performances—social and spatial—leave the Master with the impression that the performer is simply dumb or ignorant when in fact s/he is subversive. Confirmation of this practice, described by Gates as "signifyin(g)," still rarely breaks the color barrier.<sup>6</sup>

A second reason African American spatial practices remain enigmatic is the historic under-appreciation of this nuanced spatial language. Most architects, overwhelmingly white, have had little direct experience of African-American urbanism. African-American architects, on the other hand, have often preferred to participate in the majority culture.<sup>7</sup> The phrase "the white man's bread is whiter and the white man's sugar is sweeter" may help explain the historic lack of focus on African-American urbanism.<sup>8</sup>

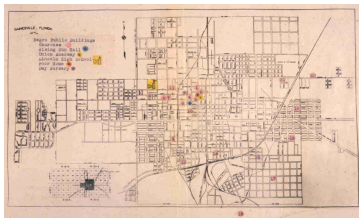
The third, and most provocative, reason African-American spatial practices remain hidden is their method of transmission. Whereas European treatises, notably Palladio's *Four Books*, found their way to America and became patterns for builders, African practices have been transmitted through interdisciplinary, often oral, means. Instruction jumps boundaries: from music to dance to religion to art to craft to narrative to street making. The influence of West African textiles, including color, pattern, visual rhythm along with technical parameters, is felt in American quilting and in sign systems such as those used in Masonic lodges and the Underground Railroad.<sup>9</sup> Mythic narratives, such as the Yoruba story of the trickster god Eshu, make their way into street

performances like rapping, and perhaps into the organization of street patterns. But the crisp clear evidence of architectural theory, distinct from lived practice, either does not exist or has not yet been recovered.

This paper relies, then, on a combination of indirect and completely literal texts to develop a theory of resistant and therefore sustaining urbanism based in African-American culture. The indirect sources employed will include myth, oral history, and textile design and fabrication found in Africa and African-American culture. Direct evidence will be drawn from the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood in Gainesville Florida, and secondarily from other historic African-American neighborhoods in southern American cities.

### **The Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street Neighborhood in Gainesville, Florida**

Gainesville was founded in 1854 at the approximate mid-point of the newly laid Fernandina-Cedar Key Railroad, in the middle of what is known as the Arredondo Grant in north central Florida. This Spanish land grant, one of the earliest and largest in Florida, encompassed a system of lakes, streams, rolling hills and fertile ground in what is now Alachua County. A large population of slaves worked the land, while others escaped and lived among the Seminole Indians, especially on the rim of nearby Paynes Prairie.



After the Civil War, African-Americans immediately settled in Gainesville. The Union Academy, founded by the Freedman's Bureau in 1865, was established to educate children and adults. From its inception Gainesville developed a reputation as a city hospitable to people of color, and oral histories demonstrate that African-Americans chose to settle in the region as a result.<sup>10</sup> Though many people moved to the city from surrounding farming communities, a large number of African-Americans also migrated from Camden, South Carolina. As late as 1930 Alachua County's population was around 45% African American.<sup>11</sup>

Today the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood is a 60 square block area that has grown westward away from the historic center of Gainesville over the past 150 years. Its first major public street, Pleasant Street, runs north-south along what is now the district's eastern edge. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century it contained a variety of shops, churches and a Masonic lodge. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, largely in response to Jim Crow laws, the commercial center migrated to the east-west Fifth Avenue (then called Seminary Lane), while several prominent churches remained on Pleasant Street. Many other churches were also founded over the course of the century, and about a dozen still hold services within the neighborhood.

In addition to its numerous churches, educational institutions provided stability and permanence to the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood for a century. Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of private schools were found scattered throughout the neighborhood. The Union Academy, on the neighborhood's northeastern edge, was torn down in 1925; the year Lincoln High School was built in the northwestern portion of the neighborhood. Like Union Academy before it, Lincoln High School educated African-American students from Gainesville and the surrounding community and was a source of educational aspiration, community pride and social focus.

Along with educational institutions, churches and home-based businesses such as day care and hair care have historically been located throughout the neighborhood, not just along major public streets. This decentralized public space is a key urban condition within the neighborhood.<sup>12</sup> While the neighborhood's settlement pattern will be described in detail below, it is important to note here that the matrix of streets, a complex mix of order and serendipity, is a perfect compliment to the neighborhood's rhizomatic public space.

The integration of Gainesville's public schools in the 1960s included the closing of Lincoln High School. This decision, along with other efforts to desegregate Gainesville, led to the neighborhood's gradual decline during the 1970s and 1980s.

Today, thanks to the combined efforts of residents, business owners and City and University partners, the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood is undergoing a renaissance. The inspiration for and foundation of these efforts is due, in large part, to the powerful historic presence still tangible in the neighborhood. It is this historical presence that provides the cultural stamina Vlach describes, one aspect of which I will characterize as "playing crazy."

### **Playing Crazy**

"I had a lady tell me one time, 'You think because you got education and can walk down the street and write people up to register and vote, that you somebody.' I say, 'Well that's all right. Let's play crazy together. Let's go down and get registered where you can vote.'"

Ms. Savannah Williams of Gainesville Florida<sup>13</sup>

The phrase "playing crazy" captures a sophisticated double logic. In order to play—a game or an instrument, for example—one must understand the rules of the engagement. If one is crazy, on the other hand, one simply doesn't comprehend these rules. Therefore, to play crazy, one must understand then strategically subvert rules while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge these rules, to play without acknowledging that one is playing.

In *Back of the Big House The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, Vlach describes this phenomenon of responding to order with apparent randomness. He hypothesizes that slaves, given the opportunity to design their own dwelling areas within plantation landscapes, sometimes chose to site their simple homes in non-geometric organizations to resist the overt controlling order built into their masters' domains. In some cases, he argues, slaves cabins were located in response to subtle but irregular environmental factors such as streams or hollows. Other examples have no obvious contextual antecedent. In these cases, slave quarters appear to be simple examples of studied chaos.<sup>14</sup>

Gainesville Florida's Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood is a direct spatial descendant of the antebellum period and presumably carries cultural meaning from southern slave culture and its heritage of African principles. Playing crazy, here defined as simultaneously acknowledging and subverting formal order, is one of a series of linked urban strategies that characterizes this neighborhood. Others include repetition and improvisation around a formal theme; the use of otherworldly symbolism particularly as found among the Yoruba; and appropriation, here defined as the recontextualization of expressive themes and objects.

### **Grids**

The grid, as a spatial device to order and control large tracts of land, has been used in many cultures across the globe. Richard Sennett, in *The Conscience of the Eye*, describes a key instrumental aspect of this form:

"If the Romans saw the grid as an emotionally charged sign, the Americans were the first to use it for a different purpose: to deny that complexity and difference existed in the environment....But just as Americans saw the natural world around them as limitless, they saw their own powers of conquest and habitation as subject to no natural or inherent limitation. The conviction that people can infinitely expand the spaces of human settlement is the first way, geographically, of neutralizing the value of any particular space."<sup>15</sup>

Sennett says the grid is the perfect spatial tool of efficient control. By indiscriminately subordinating local topographies and physical challenges to the abstraction of geometry, land can be expediently subdivided, sold and developed. The grid renders all landforms economically equivalent and apparently master-able.

Gainesville, Florida, like many American towns, grew from a grid. The town grew principally south to meet the original train depot and east toward the Sweetwater Branch Creek. The neighborhood that has come to be known as the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood grew westward, in the opposite direction, over the course of a century.

This neighborhood today bears traces of its historic participation in Gainesville's larger spatial structure, but with key differences. At many levels the master order—regular and uninterrupted—is subverted through strategic serendipity. Although I do not argue that the planning of this neighborhood was carried out with a prior intent to create a certain designed effect—just the opposite—the sophisticated modulation of order and surprise achieved in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood demonstrates an urban practice carried out over the course of a century. This practice, I argue, is the spatial equivalent of “playing crazy.”

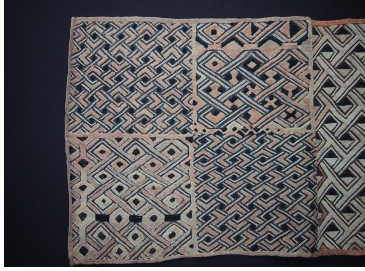
Looking first at the larger order of settlement, the Gainesville's square grid is obvious.<sup>16</sup> Upon closer inspection, this primary structure can be seen as a quiet backdrop against another set of streets, developed within the larger blocks. These streets, running north/south or east/west seemingly at random, provide access to lots in a series of small, independently planned subdivisions.

Within each subdivision, lot sizes vary one from another. Some subdivisions cross from one large block to another, some are contained within a portion of a block. Relatively few lot sizes or orientation repeat—that is occur more than two in a row. Lot sizes that do repeat seldom repeat more than five or six lots in a row. More than 30 different types of repeating lots are found within the neighborhood.



The independent construction of roads to provide access to these smaller, irregular development units allows substantial variety within a very constrained physical area. Each of these smaller roads meets the city's grid at a different point, leading to a great variety of intersection types and vistas. The orientation of lots relative to their street frontages creates numerous entries possibilities, leading to varied street promenades. Some lots have no street frontage, requiring the generosity of neighbors for access to the urban grid. The upshot of this subtle variety, when combined with multiple street orientations and intersection types, is a magically labyrinthine urban experience.

This dense and intricate spatiality continues in the construction of the neighborhood's houses as well. In the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood, many of the houses are similar but none are the same. Most are made of wood with pitched, often tin roofs, double hung windows and front porches. Many are long and narrow, in keeping with the configuration of the lots, and they are set close to the street. Yet within this set of unspoken rules, inventive variety emerges. Because the houses were developed in sets of one, two or three rather than 50 or 100, a strange and fascinating architectural texture unfolds. The neighborhood seems almost completely predictable, yet it is in fact never predictable. This balance of comfort and strangeness is perhaps



the neighborhood's most important contribution to contemporary discussions of urban design.

For the sake of interdisciplinary comparison, the visual equivalent of playing crazy can be demonstrated in the cloth of the Kuba people of West Africa.<sup>17</sup> Here, too, an obvious and repetitive pattern dissolves into pure difference upon close inspection.



What is the origin of the anti-grid impulse that counters the regular order of Gainesville's development pattern? Hovering between the random and the predictable, such patterning has been compared to the structure of jazz. While this is an apt comparison as far as it goes, it does not speak of a deep common cultural structure. As does jazz, the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood's order borrows a standard theme around which many individuals can improvise according to tight formal constraints. But why improvise? Why syncopate rather than reinforcing the beat, so to speak? Certainly recent trends such as New Urbanism reinforce repetitive continuity, not individual authorship. How are formal rules established only to be slightly broken? And how did this collective project emerge over the course of 150 years among hundreds of individual builders, property owners and other inhabitants?

Nicholas Creswell, writing between 1774 and 1777, observed "In (the blacks') song they generally relate the usages they have received from their masters or mistresses in a very satirical stile (sic) and manner."<sup>18</sup>

The play of variation against structure, evident in planning orders as well as individual architectural and landscape expressions is more than a free play of signifiers. It is, as Gates articulates, repetition with signal difference, a difference that tends toward the dialectic.

Gates hypothesizes an antecedent for such signifyin(g) (his term, here applied to a linguistics of form). He says, "let me attempt to account for the complexities of this (re) naming ritual, which apparently took place anonymously and unrecorded in antebellum America. Some black genius or community of witty and sensitive speakers (here: builders) emptied the signifier...of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts." And, pre-empting charges of haphazard, confused or chaotic production, he continues, "How accidental, unconscious, or unintentional (or any other code-word substitution for the absence of reason) could such a brilliant challenge at the semantic level be?"<sup>19</sup>

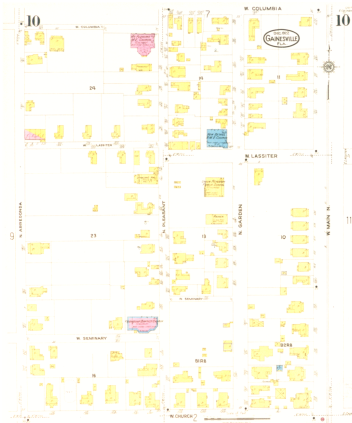
Paralleling Gates argument, I hypothesize that the strategic evacuation and playful replenishment of the quintessential sign of

spatial order and control—the grid—along with those icons of small town harmony—frame houses with pitched roofs, front porches, cheerfully painted window trim and tended front yards—is a collaborative engagement in troping, or signifyin(g).

### Boundaries

“Evil travels in straight lines.”<sup>20</sup>

What defines an African-American neighborhood as distinct from any other? Certainly cultural distinctions such as the use of bright colors, a preference for certain types of food establishments, a large number of churches of varying denominations and sizes, a preponderance of smaller houses, along with the syncopated grid development pattern described above, collectively suggest an African-American neighborhood. Underdeveloped infrastructure and a conspicuous lack of public services (garbage collection or code enforcement), remain regrettable indicators in some areas. And, due to the tragic process of red-lining, whereby banks refused to loan money to be spent in African-American neighborhoods, some neighborhoods demonstrate the resulting long-term decline in the maintenance of housing stock.



There is, however, another type of boundary making employed to define African-American neighborhoods. A series of urban decisions helped to create boundaries to distinguish African-American neighborhoods from adjacent white neighborhoods. Unlike today’s gated communities, these do not announce or deny the crossing of a threshold. Rather, they subliminally make travel between neighborhoods difficult but not impossible. Three methods can be confirmed in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood, and they are also found in other southern towns.



The first method of boundary definition stops passage by literally “plugging” a street—interrupting it with a new building.<sup>21</sup> In the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood around 1928 a new Buick dealership was built between Seminary Lane (now Fifth Avenue) and Main Street. This made it impossible to consider traveling into or out of the neighborhood along the major thoroughfare. Instead only circuitous access to the growing segregated business district was allowed. In later years, moving into the neighborhood from the University of Florida to the south was made more difficult by several developments with access only to University Avenue, that turned their backs on the neighborhood. In one case a street into the neighborhood was closed, and a house built in its place. Thus, access to and from the larger community was limited to relatively few routes.

One-way traffic flow also helps to create invisible borders. In the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood, many streets allow only one-way traffic, in part due to their narrowness. However, as





a consequence, it is difficult to move randomly into or out of the neighborhood. In Jackson, Mississippi, Farish Street is the only major street connecting the Farish Street Historic District with downtown Jackson. It is also designated one-way, away from the downtown area, for its entire length. In Montgomery, Alabama, the Selma-Mobile Highway becomes the major thoroughfare of an historic African neighborhood, then runs directly to the State Capitol building. It too is designated one way, away from the downtown area, but only for one block, where the neighborhood meets the downtown business district. In both cases, traffic engineering makes it possible to move into African-American neighborhoods from the downtown, but prevents travel directly from the neighborhoods into the business center. This simple traffic designation also acts as an effective boundary.

A third method of interrupting the flow of traffic is through shifts in road alignment. Moving west from Gainesville's Main Street, five roads connect to the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood. Of these one is blocked and three are shifted. Only one road travels directly into the neighborhood. Here, too, the boundary is not overt or visually marked but is palpable to those attempting to travel between the larger city and the neighborhood.

In at least the first two cases—the creation of blockages at the neighborhood's edges through new development or by traffic designation—it is reasonable to assume that majority cultures interrupted access to the neighborhood purposefully or subconsciously. African-American developers working within the community, again either purposefully or subconsciously, might have carried out the third method, shifting street alignments. In all three cases however, the segregation of street traffic has the effect of reinforcing the practice of exclusion/inclusion without obvious or visible symbols.

These subtle methods by which pockets of difference were created arguably benefits the neighborhoods' inhabitants. During periods of random violence, selective access to the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood might have afforded some protection to the residents. Today, selective access helps neighbors defend their community against unwanted activities such as drug sales and prostitution. The grid's interruption, signaling the neighborhood's edge, alerts one to a cultural shift, and may even amplify this shift. Perhaps as a result, qualities such as those described earlier (colors, foods, commerce, religiosity) seem to intensify rather than dissipate within the neighborhood.

The folk saying "evil travels in straight lines" can be confirmed in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood by the number of drive-by drug buyers on the neighborhood's through streets. Recently, to reverse this trend, the City has installed small

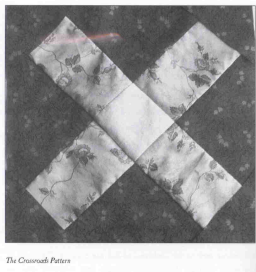
roundabouts to create shifts in the traffic pattern where none were planned. In a classic act of signify(g), a neighborhood resident has contributed a potted plant to the center of the round-about—the only one so marked within the City.

### **Crossroads. An Intervention**

In another act of appropriation, or signifyin(g), during the 1960s the commonly used term “urban renewal” was renamed “urban removal.” This gave a satiric twist to the practice of revitalizing inner cities by clearing “slums” and replacing them with major infrastructure elements, typically interstate highways. Apparently, what looked like derelict buildings to city planners often functioned as major social spaces within African-American communities. Street life, a common feature of African-American and other cohesive ethnic cultures, appeared disorderly and perhaps threatening. As a result, the places where people congregated were often removed, only to be replaced with solid concrete pillars stretching to highways above.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Miami, Durham, Montgomery or many other southern cities, Gainesville did not have an interstate highway to drive through its African-American neighborhood. In fact, Gainesville was ahead of the curve, having placed its second railroad station and line along Sixth Street decades earlier thus nearly cutting the neighborhood in two.<sup>23</sup> Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and following the newly installed railroad line, Sixth Street became a major citywide thoroughfare. This might be the reason the City’s new police station, built during the 1970s, was located just two blocks north of the train station on Sixth Street, almost completing the neighborhood’s bisection.

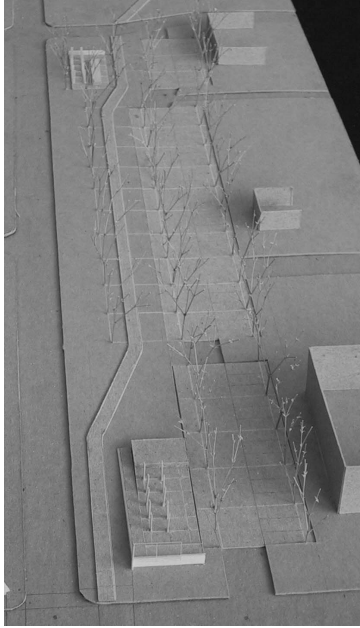
Today two continuous blocks of City and railroad owned land offer the only potential point to reattach the neighborhood’s eastern and western halves, containing its 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century histories, respectively. This land runs along Northwest Sixth Street from Fifth Avenue, the neighborhood’s commercial street, to Seventh Street, the location of several doctors’ office and the community’s two most important school sites. This two-block site was chosen to create a community-gathering place, which we have identified as a symbolic and literal crossroads.



The Crossroads Pattern

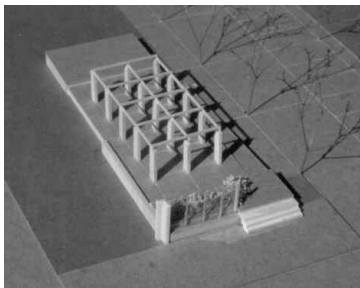
“Lord, that I’m standin’ at the crossroad, babe  
I believe I’m sinkin’ down”<sup>24</sup>

The term crossroads has longstanding meaning within the African and African-American communities. Legendary blues singer Robert Johnson, who wrote and performed “Cross Road Blues,” is also said to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for talent at the crossroads of Highways 61 and 49 in rural Mississippi.<sup>25</sup> His symbolic use of this term follows its traditional meaning as a place

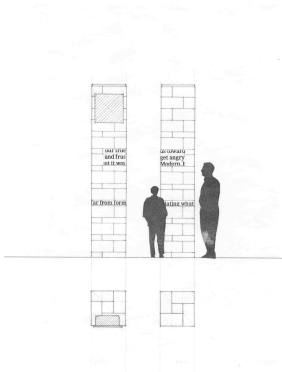


of choice and decision-making, familiar to those who knew the visual language of the Underground Railway. A quilt pattern entitled the crossroads is thought to be a part of the system of signs used to guide slaves toward freedom.<sup>26</sup>

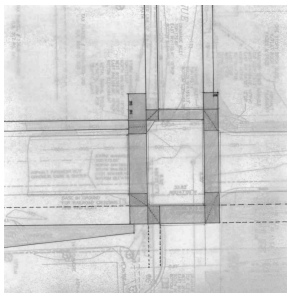
The concept of the crossroads can be traced to West Africa, where the trickster god Eshu was also the god of the crossroads. According to Thompson, “Eshu consequently came to be regarded as the very embodiment of the crossroads. Eshu-Elegbara is also the messenger of the gods, not only carrying sacrifices, deposited at crucial points of intersection...but sometimes bearing the crossroads to us in verbal form, in messages that test our wisdom and compassion.... He sometimes even “wears” the crossroads as a cap, colored black on one side, red on the other, provoking in his wake foolish arguments about whether his cap is black or red, wittily insisting by implication that we view a person or a thing from all sides before we form a general judgment.”<sup>27</sup>



The Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street Crossroads project—consisting of pillars bearing historic quotations, articulated crosswalks to make crossing the busy Sixth Street easier, a market to be used weekly for farmers’ markets and annually for the Fifth Avenue Festival, and a memorial honoring the people who integrated Gainesville—marks numerous crossroads. Literally, it occupies the place where the larger Gainesville community travels directly through the neighborhood and intersects with the neighborhood’s principal street. It will ease physical and psychological passage between the neighborhood’s two halves, severed not only by Sixth Street but also by the unfortunate political boundary of the Pleasant Street Historic District. The project’s historic references, gleaned through oral histories and newspaper records, will be available to today’s children, linking past and future. And the market will allow all of Gainesville’s citizens to participate in a crossroads experience in the sense envisioned by Bakhtin and others, whereby people’s fear of otherness dissolves temporarily at sites of liminality.



Three sets of crosswalks will borrow further from African-American tradition. Each intersection is irregular, owing to shifted roads, missing or misaligned sidewalks, and the location of the rail-bed (soon to be a rail-trail). Therefore, rather than attempting to fabricate uniformity, we borrowed the tradition of strip quilting. In this common technique, rectangles of fabric of different sizes are arranged pragmatically, no two pieces the same. This strategy, borrowed from African-American strip quilting techniques and their African antecedents, proposes a revision of the Semperian textile aesthetic.<sup>28</sup> The appropriation of this strategy of “making do” further serves celebrate a culture hidden and quickly evaporating.<sup>29</sup>





## Conclusions

Modest ethnic neighborhoods such as the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood are generally overlooked or rendered invisible within academic architectural discourse, in part because of the preconceptions and academic training of most researchers. Making research more difficult, it is necessary to recognize that primary texts come in different and unexpected forms. Traditional sources of information are sparse. Given the predilections of their authors, few local histories focus on African American neighborhoods. Local papers emphasize the sensational, if not the terrible. Sanborn maps provide some guidance, but significant gaps occur even here.<sup>30</sup> To supplement these scanty sources other disciplines must be invoked. Textile design, art, music, narratives such as poems, songs and stories and myths, and the things left unsaid, all form part of the tapestry of urban practices that construct neighborhoods such as this.

Seen through this very rich, but atypical set of parameters, the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood can be understood as a 150 year long collective performance of what is currently termed critical deconstruction. Put simply, the community subverts the dominant discourse from within. It does not negate (i.e. repress) signature elements of American small town development in order to replace them with new forms. Rather it has occupied the knife's edge of liminality for 150 years.

The process of troping, of taking a known quality with an understood meaning, and modifying the quality in a witty yet strategic way, has proved socially useful throughout African-American history. The application of this strategy to the construction of urban form, for fun and for protection, is at once obvious and invisible, as would be intended. By playing crazy—creating mismatched streets filled with vibrant clashing colors, scattering important buildings such as churches and schools hither and yon, mixing houses with workplaces, juke joints with churches—the culture in power has been lulled into believing no other culture existed. In fact, the opposite has been true. Precisely this dialectic, and its restless evolution, have strengthened and sustained threatened African-American cultures for centuries.



Ironically, in a landscape both ordered and chaotic, filled with homes both typical and unique, surrounded by gardens both prosaic and sacred only today is this inscrutable, undecidable urbanism finally endangered. As African-Americans freely join the so-called majority culture, these performance and formal strategies of urban resistance may become illegible and ultimately obsolete. Perhaps, though, the collective wisdom of America's West African cultures, which have proved so resilient through centuries of profound adversity will somehow endure, providing a legacy of strategic resistance for all the world's Others.

All illustrations provided by author except the following:

“Negro Public Buildings” from Edward Loring Miller’s unpublished University of Florida Master Thesis, “Negro Life in Gainesville,” 1938.

“The Crossroads Pattern” quilt detail from Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, PhD. *Hidden in Plain View. A Secret Story of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), p. 98.

“Strip quilt detail” from Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols. African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books, 1993).

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropologist Sidney Mintz, quoted in John Michael Vlach, *Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Author bell hooks argues that such poverty can be reinterpreted according to Buddhist precepts in *Art on My Mind. Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995). Her argument is not consistently appreciated within the African-American community.

<sup>3</sup>Op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Luttwak, *Turbo Capitalism. Winners and Losers in the Global Economy* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2000), p. 27-28.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” Hal Foster, Ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 57-82.

<sup>6</sup> For a pivotal exception see Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifyin(g) Monkey. A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> A notable exception is the recent conference organized by and book edited by Craig Barton, *Sites of Memory. Perspectives on Architecture and Race* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Revealed to the author by Mr. Andrew Mickel in an interview, Spring 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, Ph.D. *Hidden in Plain View. A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The Samuel Proctor Oral History Collection at the University of Florida contains approximately 50 oral histories of members of the African-American community, most of whom were affiliated with the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood.

<sup>11</sup> Map by Raper provided in Westmacott, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Churches have long been viewed as alternative public spaces within the African-American community.

<sup>13</sup> Ms. Savannah Williams, quoted from oral history taken as part of the University of Florida Oral History Program. Joel Buchanan, Interviewer, January 24, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House. The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Rob Bryant and Chris Wahome, who developed the spatial analysis of the neighborhood’s grid structure.

<sup>17</sup> Raffia Kuba cloth, made by the Kuba of the central Kongo, is thought to reiterate the cosmogram representing birth, life, death and rebirth through a Greek cross-shaped symbol. See Tobin and Dobard, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Gates, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Gates, 46-47.

<sup>20</sup> The implications of this common folk saying are described by Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1983) p. 222.

<sup>21</sup> Julie Charvatt, who conceived of the term “plug”, identified this strategy in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood.

<sup>22</sup> See Nathaniel Q. Belcher, “Miami’s Colored-Over Segregation” in Craig E. Barton, *Sites of Memory. Perspectives on Architecture and Race* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), pp. 37-54.

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<sup>23</sup> Sanborn maps indicate that the rail line was installed around 1909. The train depot was not built until the late 1940s.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Johnson in "Cross Road Blues (take 2)" in Robert Johnson, *The Complete Recordings*, Columbia CBS Records, Inc. 1990.

<sup>25</sup> A thorough articulation of the crossroads argument, based on the Blues Highway, is made by Matthew Potteiger and Jamie Purinton, *Landscape Narratives. Design Practices for Telling Stories* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1998), pp. 295-322.

<sup>26</sup> Tobin and Dobard, pp. 97-110.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols. African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Brown, in an unpublished M Arch. Thesis, University of Florida 1999, describes and codifies the concept of "making do" in an urban setting.

<sup>30</sup> Gainesville's Sanborn maps overlook some African-American dwellings which appear in the 1938 University of Florida Masters Thesis of Edward Loring Miller entitled "Negro Life in Gainesville".