

## **Playing Crazy: Dressed Yards and the Performance of Community In an African-American Neighborhood<sup>1</sup>**



In towns and cities throughout the American south, African-American neighborhoods have grown up as distinct enclaves within larger urban areas. These neighborhoods, often indistinguishable from other residential areas on city maps, are remarkably different when seen first hand. A particular range of colors, architectural elements, elaborate front yards and symbolic displays are consistent within and between African American neighborhoods, but nonexistent in other areas. Neighborhood residents' common space-making strategies lead to a continual community-wide spatial conversation, which might be characterized as urban performance art. While many neighborhoods could illustrate this particular performance of community, I have found none that do so more successfully than the neighborhood nearest my home in Gainesville, Florida.<sup>2</sup>



### **The Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street Neighborhood**



The Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street Neighborhood has been central to Gainesville's African-American community since 1865, when the Civil War's end nearly coincided with the City's founding. During times of severe discrimination it became a city-within-a-city, providing a rich compliment of urban amenities including schools, churches, shops, theaters and



many homes. These 50-plus blocks have, over the last seven generations, developed a collaborative, evolving urbanism, different in kind from the types of urban design generally studied by architects. It might be better understood as a 140-year long work of performance art.



A number of aesthetic characteristics are found in the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood. Among these are: the layering of translucent patterns, in wooden lattices, lace curtains, strings of ornamental lights exterior lights; the use of contrasting or clashing colors; the use of spiritually identified colors such as deep blue, red, black and (appropriate only in Gainesville) orange and blue in combination; and the manipulation of graphic and sculptural forms found particularly in shutters and columns.



Such freshness and improvisation are found at every scale of architectural decision making, from urban planning to ornamentation. At the urban scale, 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 surprise might constitute the neighborhood's most important contribution to contemporary discussions of urban design.



### Defining Spatial Narrative Units

Beyond urban decisions made long ago, improvisation also occurs from house to house, week by week, across the entire neighborhood. To understand this performance of community it helps to import the concept of “narrative units”, described in poetry by African-American literary theorist Henry Louis Gates.<sup>3</sup> In literature, these are discrete phrases, much shorter than entire poems, that can be shifted around to achieve a particular rhyming sequence, or modified in strategic ways to create multiple meanings with the same arrangement of sounds. Walter Ong, in *Orality and Literacy*, argues that cultures with largely oral traditions typically prize creative achievement that successfully modifies known units of meaning rather than inventing new meaning from whole cloth.<sup>4</sup> This idea of small, independent elements of meaning is crucial to understanding jazz, rap, and, I believe, urban space-making.



Robert Farris Thompson, in *Flash of the Spirit*, addresses the particular scale of art created in the African diaspora,



specifically the Caribbean and the Americas. He describes a series of hand-held objects symbolizing important Yoruba deities, transmitted and transformed in Brazilian, Cuban and US culture. In almost all cases, the objects can be made by and controlled by an individual. This portability and individual control is a key aspect of the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood's most dynamic type of urban play or performance. The elements I will identify below share the scale described by Thompson. While not truly portable (except as materials from Home Depot) the elements are all scaled to individual builders/residents/artists. These elements include columns, walls, materials, windows, trim, color, yard art and signage.

In the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street neighborhood, such narrative units, to borrow Gates' term, are the common building blocks found in shared domestic realm; they are the pieces that make up yards, porches and the exterior facades of buildings. The focus for most individual urban performance artists' creative expression is what art historian Grey Gundaker describes as the "dressed yard."<sup>5</sup> Dressed yards-the portion of private residences visible to the public-often contain five or six discrete types of narrative units.

To underscore the preconceptions built into professional architectural education, I have listed elements according to



their commonly understood architectural hierarchy, beginning with structure and ending with ornament. This concept of architectural hierarchy is among the key concepts unraveled and rewoven by the neighborhood's artist-residents. Similarly, as these images show, the elements' typical architectural duties are precisely those challenged most inventively.



- Columns
- Walls
- Windows and Shutters
- Painted trim
- Yard art
- Signage

### **The Performance of Community: Method**

Contemporary urban theories often lack the conceptual framework necessary to understand the way this rich and communicative urbanism unfolds, nor to grapple with its multiplicity of meanings. Such theories presume that urban vitality is the result of excellent designs executed by sole authors. In practice, such proposals often lack the ability to foster a flexible and diverse street life; to promote the creation of citizen-generated meaning and, most important, to embed transformative qualities into a singular urban prescription.



It is therefore necessary to find a framework beyond those provided by traditional urbanism to understand the urban



performance described here. Drawing from other disciplines rooted in West African culture-- music, dance, poetry and rap—a trans-disciplinary grammar of creativity can be articulated.<sup>6</sup> Authors working in various fields have demonstrated that certain principles migrate from spoken language to music and to visual art and folk arts such as textiles. This paper proposes that the same method of transmission and transformation operates spatially through architectural expression.

While many factors have contributed to the incredible wealth of creativity emerging from West Africa, a reliance on oral, rather than written, communication provides a foundation for many features that span several modes of creative expression. Ong, theorizing relationships between orality and literacy, identifies a set of characteristics describing what he terms the psychodynamics of orality. Looking across cultures and through time, he suggests that oral cultures rely on the repetition of units of meaning (not single integers but “clusters of integers”), which are memorable because of exaggerated, “heroic” qualities, and on specific rhyming structures. He describes spoken texts as typically additive rather than subordinative from general principle to specific case. He characterizes oral cognition as situational rather than categorical. Speaking of contemporary south Slavic narrative poets Ong says, “The fixed materials in the bard’s memory are



a float of themes and formulas out of which all stories are variously built.”<sup>7</sup> In these ways and others, forms of expression extended from the African diaspora are consistent with Ong’s general principles.

Ong also says, though, that most oral traditions are fundamentally conservative, changing stories to suit audiences as necessary, but lacking the goal of originality. He argues that orally constructed cultures tend to be aggregative rather than analytic, because an aggregate holds a more complex meaning in a single thought-form. “Once a formulary expression has crystallized, it had best be kept intact. Without a writing system, breaking up thought—that is, analysis—is a high-risk procedure.”<sup>8</sup> Here, the cultures of the African diaspora offer an important new strategy: a method of strategic transformation.

A number of theorists have identified characteristics found in subsets of African-American art forms. Thompson argues that a series of principles organizing the interrelated arts (visual, aural, performance) of some West African cultures such as the Yoruba have been carried around the world through the African diaspora. He focuses on the role of rhythm, repetition and the collaborative construction of layered “pulses” in coordinating multiple voices (metaphorically or literally).<sup>9</sup> Paul Berliner emphasizes the multiple contexts of the jazz musician,



describing them as a series of conversations—with the history of jazz, with communities of players and listeners, and with the musician’s own history, to name a few.<sup>10</sup> Dance theorist Joan Frosch describes the stylization of everyday movements and their importation into polycentric and polyrhythmic dance sequences in contemporary West African dance.<sup>11</sup>

Smitherman, in *Talkin’ and Testifyin’*, underscores the importance of rhythm in stimulating substitute meanings. He particularly emphasizes punning, irony and the substitution of semantically or logically unexpected words and phrases, often with the goal of delivering humorous and gentle social lessons.<sup>12</sup>

Each of these art forms relies on a predictable, shared formula—aural, visual or kinetic—which is sufficiently flexible to instigate endless variation without losing its “shape”. And each is driven by a shared impulse toward open-ended yet goal-oriented transformation. Gates credits this structured change to cultural traces of the Yoruba god Esu-Elegbara, the trickster god. Esu, Gates says, carries ase (power) in his calabash and “(a)se...is the force of coherence of process itself, that which makes a system a system.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, though “Esu is the free play or element of undecidability within the Ifa textual universe; Esu endlessly displaces meaning, deferring it by the play of signification.”<sup>14</sup> The combination of predictability—built and reinforced by a



community of participants—and undecidability—allowing individual expression and endless of variety—are the ingredients of urban performance shared by residents of the Fifth Avenue/Pleasant Street community, and by many other African-American residents throughout the south.



### **Performing Community**

Coalescing characteristics from other art forms, I have identified four common themes which I argue can also be found in this performed urbanism, components leading to a community-wide, continual creative “churning”. I developed these themes by comparing characteristics identified above and collapsing them into what might be considered meta-characteristics shared by all. I present them here as a series of simple instructions, though in their actual performance, as Mitchell-Kernan advises, “the hearer [neighbor] is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech [spatial] events—the total universe of discourse.”<sup>15</sup>



First, each urban artist articulates, then stretches and stylizes standard types. In Gates’ terms, s/he emphasizes the signifier, the unit that carries meaning, rather than the meaning itself. These narrative units carry typological meaning to everyone who builds, maintains or inhabits a single-family home in the south. Because each type, element or narrative



unit is separated, it can be understood independent of the rest of the composition. Artists isolate narrative units rather than creating a thematic whole. Each is a center within a polycentric presentation. This allows a special chair to compete for visual hierarchy with the front door, or decorative elements to overtake a house's massing. And because narrative units are not fully subordinate to an overarching effect, each artist can modify them easily, or neighbors can borrow their signature features.

Once identified, narrative units can be stylized, exaggerated or stretched. The term stretch suggests formal exaggeration, similar to the West African concept of "bent" notes that deform sounds without changing their roles within a melodic sequence. Such is the case with architectural elements—they may nearly lose their identity, but not quite.

Second, each artist layers these stylized, stretched typologies to build a dense network of communication within an individual dressed yard. This overlap—multiple visual rhythms, suspended or unexpected visual accents—allows the narrative units to remain partially discrete. For example, some trim might be painted to match the walls, while other trim is painted to match furniture or the house next door. Each narrative unit operates with relative autonomy, and they are not intended to reinforce an overall formal composition by using devices like



symmetry and visual hierarchy. Rather than blending into a homogenous whole, these narrative units retain their ability to transform independent of their local (dressed yard) contexts. Apparent cacophony, at the scale of an individual site, can be understood as a series of partially coordinated, layered communications in the context of the neighborhood.



Third, other urban artists see and repeat narrative units to build a community-wide conversation. Multiple aesthetic conversations occur simultaneously, leading to an interlock of communications that extend across the neighborhood. The urban scale—the street grid, block, and lot—provides a matrix allowing layered repetitions to maintain a sense of coherence.



Because each new artist naturally stretches the received form, repetitions are not exact but rather emerge with built-in variation. Gates describes this as “repetition with a signal difference”. The repetition of narrative units often occurs between artists, resulting in a call-response form of communication that builds throughout the neighborhood, similar to a jam among jazz musicians. The repetition of elements across the neighborhood creates an urban rhythm, understandable to walkers familiar with the neighborhood.



The neighborhood’s organization, the block and lot structure, forms a silent inner pulse control, creating a common



denominator to receive series of repetitive narrative units. It also allows the creator to recognize receipt of her/his “signal”, sometimes blocks away. As in music, this rhythmic repetition collects and affirms isolated elements. It builds a larger whole. It reaffirms the elements’ aesthetic or cultural value.



Fourth, each artist can, at any moment, shift the visual/spatial discourse, allowing for new avenues of communication and creativity to open. Here artists introduce new signifiers that are semantically or logically unexpected.<sup>16</sup> Whereas musicians might shift the level of communication by finding an idiosyncratic feature of an instrument’s responsiveness such as drumming on a guitar, or a dancer might turn her/his body into a musical instrument, these urban artists shift meaning in other ways.<sup>17</sup> They change the direction of the “argument” by changing materials or using them satirically. For instance, as described above, a pair of rectangles, flanking a picture window, that look like shutters might in fact be two more windows. Thus glass acts like, yet not like, “shutters.” In another case, obviously artificial flowers are “planted” in place of real flowers. Through this method both the previous meaning and new meanings are linked in one surprising gesture. Visual punning and humor lead to sudden urban transformations.





## Conclusion

Authors studying the affiliated aesthetics forms of poetry, rap, jazz and dance suggest two important principles, which might also motivate and underlie this urban performance.



First, it is context-dependent. Only knowledgeable community members recognize the meanings of these narrative units. The constructs contain and affirm shared memories and history while they simultaneously offer possibilities for future urban art. As a jazz player converses with all previous iterations of a song, and all previous performers, so an urban artist extends an understood historic lineage of space-making. Such narrative units might refer to African practices, to symbols of the antebellum south, or to a project completed a month ago and a block away. Each artist also works within the traditional vocabulary of single-family or modest commercial construction and ornamental techniques. S/he creatively modifies construction features fusing a moment in her/his personal creative history with a centuries-old craft tradition. At the same time, artists in the neighborhood revise their own history through each addition and renovation to their projects, entering what Berliner describes as “a personal historical conversation where the player’s unfolding ideas grow, moment by moment, out of a cumulative lifetime performance.”<sup>18</sup>





Second, it is communicative. The universe of meanings generated among layers of narrative units are directed at community members, who, it is anticipated, will understand their various levels of meaning. They communicate simultaneously to several audiences. Other artists in the neighborhood recognize and respond to emerging themes. Members of the neighborhood who do not actively participate, an audience of sorts, receive the collective dressed yards' aesthetic impact. In some cases narrative units might send forth social lessons to those "in the know." And, as community members are included in the communication by recognizing and sharing known signifiers, narrative elements also exclude non-community members. In this way, through socially difficult periods of Gainesville's history, urban art practices have had the ability to communicate one meaning internally and another to the larger city of Gainesville.

What is the goal of this elaborate ongoing performance of community? This urbanism stands in stark contrast to the strategy of the master plan, in which all elements are foreseen before construction begins. This is not to suggest the diminution of the creative power or importance of individual urban artists. Quite the opposite, it is the energetic commitment of a number of artists that leads to this dazzling community project.



Ms. Pam Thomas, September 2004

Why have hundreds of neighbors over many generations participated in a common urban performance? Most have worked very, very hard to make enough money to live, and have overcome extraordinary personal and cultural obstacles to achieve success. How and why have they found the time and energy to turn their homes into works of art? Perhaps, as Thompson suggests, it provides a channel for pure creativity, shared broadly across the community. The result of this urban performance is, in any case, a hopeful urbanism constructed equally by all the community's residents.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Ms. Savannah Williams, who used the term "playing crazy" in an interview that is part of the University of Florida's Oral History collection.

<sup>2</sup> The author has studied neighborhoods in Gainesville, Jacksonville and Orlando Florida; Raleigh and Durham North Carolina, Montgomery Alabama; Jackson, Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee.

<sup>3</sup> Gates, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Walter J. Ong, in *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1988)

<sup>5</sup> Grey Gundaker, "Tradition and Innovation in African-American Yards" *African Arts* (Los Angeles: UCLA) Volume XXVI, Number 2, April 1993, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Authors whose work have influenced the evolution of my argument in include Gates and Thompson, cited above; Araya Asgedom's essay "The Unsounded Space" in Lesley Naa Norle's edited volume *White Papers Black Marks. Architecture, Race, Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); P.F. Berliner in *Thinking in Jazz; the Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Brenda Dixon Gottschild in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance. Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CN: Praeger 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Ong, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> Ong, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, p. xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Asgedom, p. 256.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Frosch, in an interview, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Gates, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> Gates, p. 8

<sup>14</sup> Gates, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Gates, 82, quoting Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art" in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in*

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*the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes  
(Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 314.

<sup>16</sup> This is the act Gates describes as “signifyin”. See particularly  
Chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> Asegdom, p. 256.

<sup>18</sup> Asegdom, citing Berliner, p. 256.