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Community Arts Network

Reading Room

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Resonant Spaces/Dynamic Flow

HIP-HOP + ARCHITECTURE

21st century designers in the global cosmopolis

by James Garrett Jr.

I see myself, simply, as a conduit for the interpol8ion of urban culture and expression — an interpreter, transl8ing both the potential and kinetic energy of the city from art in its myriad form, in2 architecture.

"I See Myself"
j a g a
2003

Today "Hip-Hop kids" are adults and enter the contemporary global cosmopolitan milieu as, among other things, architects and designers. A closer look at the parallels between the phenomena of "**globaliz8ion**" and Hip-Hop Culture may reveal opportunities to cre8 a design language that rel8s in a unique way to the emerging conditions that accompany our new geopolitical and socio-economic reality.

Hip-Hop is a byproduct of the **global cosmopolis** in the same way that heat and light are byproducts of intense chemical reaction. Its 4 elements are composed of the eternal energy of humanity — repostul8ed against a backdrop of struggle and chaos. Hip-Hop Architecture is an architecture of globaliz8ion. It seeks to reorder order and **rhyzomatically** redirect the trajectory of human imaginative possibility by reclaiming and artistically reconceiving the space of human dwelling.

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Hip-Hop as Social Movement

Hip-Hop culture was born as a reaction to the tension created by economic shifts in the already undervalued and underserved urban ghettos of New York City — almost instantaneously spreading its influence across America. Today, the influence of Hip-Hop culture perme8s many global cosmopolises in Africa, Asia, South America and Europe.

In the wake of liberating **social currents** flowing through late 1960s America, there was a subsequent and equally impassioned movement toward political and socio-economic regression

This [conservative] socio-economic

by the wealthy, white, conservative status quo. This ideology manifested itself as an assault on the social values and economic redistribution attempts of the 1970s. As the rhetoric behind Reaganomics in the 1980s, it was — as the current paranoid, right wing, panoptic, power structure continues to be — an entity that endeavors to vilify, criminalize and marginalize everything that our "inner-cities" tend to produce. This socio-economic assault necessitated an equally vigilant and ubiquitous urban artistic revolution to counteract its conspicuous destructivity. This cultural movement is now referred to as Hip-Hop and its constituents are the generation of children born and raised within the aforementioned urban economic violence and social repression.

**assault
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Heavenly father, may I holla at you briefly —
I want to meet the President but will he meet me?
Is he scared to look into the eyes of a "thug nigga"?
We're tired of being scapegoats for his capitalistic drug-dealin',
How hypocritical is liberty? That blind bitch ain't never did shit for
me,
My history is full of caskets and scars, my own black nation at
war —
My whole family "behind bars" — and they wonder why we're
scarred...

"Letter to the President"

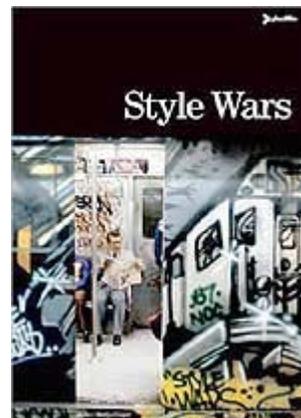
Tupac Amaru Shakur
1996

Hip-Hop oscillates between polarities (black and white, rich and poor, religious and spiritual, essential and whimsical, critical and superficial) at high frequency and it nourishes and sustains itself on the tension created by their juxtaposition. In this way Hip-Hop creates an energy field — perceptible though unintelligible to the uninitiated — but legible, addictive and inseparable from the lives of those who are open to its liberating essence.

Hip-Hop extracts insight from the living, breathing, residue of the global cosmopolitan H-bomb — the explosive device that neo-conservatism continues to drop on urban communities of color in true George (dub-yuh) Bush/post-traumatic 9-11 tragedy/Afghani-Iraqi/neo-scapegoat fashion — selectively overlooking the fact that American power brokers create and recycle both the rhetoric and conditions that agglomerate, escalate and proliferate these types of explosions and the subsequent devastation left in their aftermath.

Hip-Hop and Globalization

Globalization is, by nature, a contradictory



From "Style Wars,"
documentary film on subway
graffiti by Henry Chalfont
(1983)

puls8ion of opposing energies — at once centralizing and dispersing — yet always cognizant of many centers. It is inclusive and selectively exclusionary — always strategic in its position. It is focused upon "smart" technology but fueled by immigrants performing manual labor and providing the backbone for a secondary service-based economy that supports it.

Hip-Hop culture is similarly contradictory. It is simultaneously self-referential and continuously reflective of the conditions that spawned it. It is both "**everyday**" and "**other**" in its quest to express reality through the lens of art. It is at once safe and dangerous, primal and complex, simplistic and specifically coded. It is at once laudatory and derogatory, misogynistic and female-reverent, destructive and cre8ive, medit8ive and explosive. It is self-explanatory and inexplicable, reactionary and dialectic, underground (highly specialized) and mainstream (open to all), peripheral and centric, typological (classifying) and amalgam8ing (recombining), old (extant) and new (neoteric). Hip-Hop is phobic and fearless, traditional and radical, unapologetically tactless and unconditionally receptive. Yet as an expressive voice — it is always empowering and benevolent to the otherwise disenfranchised.

Hip-Hop is global, virtual (on the Web) and real — unifying youth worldwide through music and art — like neo-jazz. Furthermore, I reiterate my prior assertion that the Hip-Hop generation has come of age and stands on the horizon — poised and capable of deciphering, redirecting, redressing and artistically expressing the new spaces that are to define the 21st-century **global cosmopolis** and the info-tech culture that gave rise to it.

The Culture of Hip-Hop

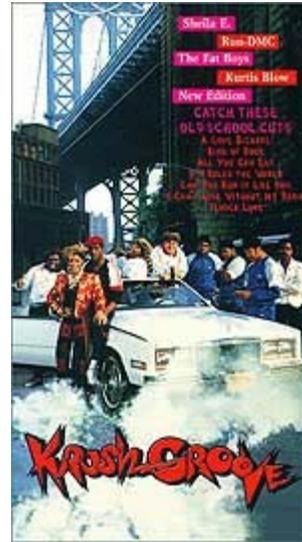
Hip-Hop culture is multi-ethnic, multiracial, multitalented, multifaceted — able to shift and recombine with fluidity to easily accommod8 rapidly changing atmospheric and climactic conditions. It is able to reconfigure and strategically position itself in order to facilit8 growth. Hip-Hop is ecologically "smart" — it adapts to various, often extreme environments and sustains itself on discarded elements of society like **the snail and the coffee grounds**, changing the fundamental nature of those elements, purifying and resynthesizing them, ultimately producing a product that is then resold to society for reconsumption. In this way, Hip-Hop allows society to eat twice from the same food.

Hip-Hop language is a transient semiotic excursion fusing Africa and Meso-America with pop culture, consumerism, urban America, current events, poetic verse, meta4, simile and sports jargon. Originally an African-American and Latino creation, Hip-Hop utilizes and influences the development of dialects like **Ebonics** and **Spanglish**. The culture is empowered through words that, taken out of context and reinserted into "standard English" or "official Spanish," would be taken as vulgar and derogatory. Hip-Hop culture recycles words and reclaims them, never losing their original meaning — but now, when utilized within a new paradigm,

they take on the possibility of expressing contradictory meanings. In this, and many other ways, these dialects transfigure the English and Spanish languages from semiotic symbols of colonial dominance, destruction and anguish into heterotopic 4rms of empowerment.

The **4 Elements** of Hip-Hop culture are art 4rms in flux — favoring innov8ion over repetition — eman8ing from the same source of dynamic, urban energy:

1. **DJing/Turntablism** is aural stimulation and expression using record players and audio mixing equipment to cre8 new beats and rhythms. Existing soul, disco, jazz and rhythm & blues records are remade, spun backwards, "scratched," "looped" and mixed 2 cre8 a completely new context or backdrop for the facilit8ion and reinforcement of other Hip-Hop elements (Rapping, Graffiti Writing, Break Dancing).
2. **MCing/Rapping** is poetic, verbal/vocal expression of both individual and collective social, spiritual and economic aspir8ions communic8ed in the 4rm of urban oration/storytelling. It documents and/or resists the imposition of contemporary social (and often economic) conditions.
3. **Graffiti Writing/Muralism** is a complex, socially coded, visual mode of social expression — marking territory, time and/or passing along vital inform8ion among the initi8ed. It is a temporal art 4rm — understanding that it will eventually be "reclaimed" by other 4ces and/or other artists — and subsumed in2 the "collage in progress" that is urban life.
4. **B-Boying/Break-Dancing** is a high-energy, competitive, cre8ive, stylistic 4rm of physical expression — incorpor8ing various spontaneous forms of bodily movement 2 cre8 complex sp8ial rel8ionships that give physical 4rm 2 music — subsuming and uniting sonic energy with the individual receiving it.



From "Krush Groove," 1985 film by Michael Schultz based on life of Hip-Hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons

Hip-Hop is, by nature, the final bastion of avant-garde potential. And although its peculiar products are quickly copied, mass-produced and assimilated in2 the mainstream, the time required 2 package, distribute and decipher their meaning allows their point-of-origin virtual space 2 evolve in substance and trajectory, regener8ing its archetypal quality while sequestered in an urban laboratory and flourishing in relative seclusion. Thus the tension between old and new, exuberant and mundane, renewable and solitary, ephemeral and immutable sustains and renews Hip-Hop's essence. And like Rem Koolhaas' **Generic**

City within the global cosmopolis, it simply continues to grow, mutate and reinvent itself, ad infinitum. In this sense it is both a heterotopia and a real place, both social wasteland and social refuge and like "**The Matrix**," both construct of imagination and construct of reality.

Hip-Hop is more than artistic expression "sin fronteras" (without boundaries), it is anti-boundary, 4 boundaries need maintenance, vigilance and policing to maintain their present form in real time. Hip-Hop says "**fuck the police**" (N.W.A., 1988) and **La Migra** tambien. Hip-Hop is antiforeigner and antisafe social distance — there is no concept of the so-called "illegal alien" here. Hip-Hop says, "**mi hermanito, ponga los headphones, turn up the beat, pick up the microphone/paintbrush/spray can and muestranos que tienes.**"

Within Hip-Hop there is room for diverse input and dialogue. It has learned to reevaluate itself in the face of diverse interaction. There are no certificates, no degrees in "Hip-Hop science" — only faith and training in the tradition of the Shaolin Monk. The only prerequisites for this training are a heartbeat that acknowledges the African drum as its rhythmic kindred, the courage to freely expose its innermost passions and ideas, and the desire to explore real life in real time. In this respect, Hip-Hop is both tangible and virtual.

Hip-Hop in Urban Space

Hip-Hop is an organic construct that emerged from the American condition — simultaneously resisting and welcoming the packaging and simplification that mainstream culture has placed upon it. It flourishes as both an urban counterpart and urban byproduct of globalization in much the same way that the **Generic City** does.

The Generic City breaks with this destructive cycle of dependency: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is equally exciting — or unexciting — everywhere. It is "superficial" — like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning.

The Generic City is what is left after large sections of urban life crossed over to cyberspace...The Generic City is fractal, an endless repetition of the same simple structural module: it is possible to reconstruct it from its smallest entity, a desktop computer, maybe even a diskette...

The Generic City is seriously multiracial, on average 8% black, 12% white, 27% Hispanic, 37% Chinese/Asian, 6% indeterminate, 10% other. Not only multiracial, also



Poster from "Beat Street,"
1984 Hip-Hop film by Stan
Lathan

multicultural...

The great originality of the Generic City is simply to abandon what doesn't work — what has outlived its use — to break up the blacktop of idealism with the jackhammers of realism and to accept whatever grows in its place.

"Generic City"

Rem Koolhaas

1998

Hip-Hop is about reclaiming and redefining space. It allows for spaces to be transformed by "adaptive reuse" in heterotopias (e.g., the alley becomes a basketball court when there is a ball and hoop [of any sort], a time interval between vehicular traffic [any length], a potential for competition [usually 3 or more people of similar ability] and usually music). The space transforms itself without eliminating the possibility of the former usage by constantly respecting the significance



From a submission by Rem Koolhaas to a design competition for redesign of New York's Museum of Modern Art

of its other functions, understanding its current and future occupation as temporal. Hip-Hop seeks not to despoil but to coexist (as evidenced by the frequent voluntary game stoppages to allow cars to pass in a variable current). In the same way, the front stoop or street corner becomes an informal agora — where information and ideas are exchanged, social substructures are reinforced, strategic surveillance and conversation comes in the form of storytelling, signifying, elder reverence, acknowledgement, verbal and visual love or hate. And so the street becomes a football field, the basement becomes a dancehall/meditation space/smoking lounge/music studio/video game arcade/theater. The deteriorating blank walls in the neighborhood become local billboards/art galleries/informal posting boards/memorials. Hip-Hop never negates the history of a place, a song, a word, a landscape, or an idea — nor does it prohibit the continued usage of that entity as it was initially intended — but always explores ways to reintroduce it as a new thing AND an existing one. It agglomerates and adds value when it borrows — never just a Venturian "duck" or "decorated shed" — but maybe a duck that endeavors to actually swim or a shed that is now an inhabitable, mixed-use storehouse for a multiplicity of human and non-human artifacts.

...the term landscape no longer refers to prospects of pastoral innocence but rather invokes the functioning matrix of connective tissue that organizes not only objects and places but also the dynamic processes and events that move through them. This is landscape as active surface, structuring the new conditions for new relationships and interactions among the things it supports.

In describing landscape as urban surface, I do not mean to refer to simply the space between buildings, as in parking lots, planted areas and residual spaces. Neither do I want to limit the use of the term landscape to wholly green, natural or recreational

spaces. Instead, I refer to the extensive and inclusive ground-plane of the city, to the "field" that accommodates buildings, roads, utilities, open spaces, neighborhoods and natural habitats. This is the ground structure that organizes and supports a broad range of fixed and changing activities in the city. As such, the urban surface is dynamic and responsive; like a catalytic emulsion, the surface literally unfolds events in time."

"Programming the Urban Landscape"

Alex Wall

1999

Hip-Hop Architecture

Hip-Hop architecture redresses the notion of landscape — bending, folding, juxtaposing, synthesizing, mediating, blurring and melding planes, surfaces and materials into a nebulous interpretation and exploration of necessity, desire and possibility.

Hip-Hop architecture is an architecture of **phenomenological transparencies** and complex contradictions — not postmodern, but beyond modern. Hip-Hop architecture is a response to contemporary apathy and hypocrisy. It is a heterotopic dietary supplement that makes digestive space for all forms of expression. As such, it reflects, refracts and receives input from all "flavas" that comprise the new global gumbo.

Hip-Hop architecture is not characterized by any definitive or predetermined aesthetic manifestation/expression (as an end result). It is however about processes — the process of conceiving (thought), the process of making (building/construction) and the process of inhabiting (experiential, phenomenological) — understood best both by the acts of walking and dwelling of human end-users. Its success is gauged by whether people feel the flow of energy, which is Hip-Hop, as they circulate, circumnavigate and ambulate through the spaces. This notion separates it from the so-called avant-garde, which is focused — almost solely — on the visual aesthetic of the final result.

The Hip-Hop Architect

Our challenge is to create an architecture that suggests rather than dictates and approaches an understanding rather than presupposing a position/pretension of superior knowledge (often articulated by our propensity to evoke complex, coded, lexiconic speech patterns that begin in the realm of structuralist philosophy and are corrupted into, well, "archispeak"). I find that creating an architecture that seeks to reorganize, redistribute and reinhabit space rather than simply objectify and occupy it — within the current architectural milieu — is a most challenging and difficult task, but one that I am committed to pursuing and exploring.

I hope that my attempts and struggles within this arena will crack open the door for others to reconsider our collective role as architects; and instead of the modern LeCorbusian notion of "architect as GOD" — maybe it could suffice to consider ourselves, rather, as "interpreters of GOD's will" (so to speak) in the sense that we have a certain training as problem solvers, an understanding (in varied ways) of the historical precedents that have

collectively led us to this precise moment in time and we each individually possess a certain artistic intuition. The combination of these factors and skill sets will allow us to best serve contemporary society in the role of interpreting both the needs AND aspirations of the client/society, negotiating the pragmatics of the building process and reappropriating the artistic license to trust our hands in creating spaces capable of inciting multiple readings over multiple moments in time. Indeed, I prefer the role of interpreter over that of hegemonic delineator of space/style/etc.

The writing of the city may be indecipherable, flawed, but that does not mean that there is no writing; it may simply be that we developed a new illiteracy, a new blindness...The best definition of the aesthetic of the Generic City is "free style..."

"Generic City"

Rem Koolhaas

1998

I see Hip-Hop architecture, ultimately, as a communication of movement and flow from the perspective of the artist/designer. I see the Hip-Hop architect as a mediator, translator and incubator of this energy flow — a go-between, oscillating back and forth between the art form and the building process. Our quest must be to create resonant spaces — places in which the human body can tune into the energy flow that initially necessitated the act of making, building at that specific place at that specific time.

I see the Hip-Hop architect as a mediator, translator and incubator of this energy flow — a go-between, oscillating back and forth between the art form and the building process.

I believe that only forays into uncertain mental territory in pursuit of such resonant harmony will prepare architects for the unseeable challenges that lie ahead — provoking, stimulating, creating adjacent conditions and implications that reveal new ways of interpreting, responding to and representing the complex spatial logistics that will ultimately define our "collective" success as 21st-century architects and designers within this **global cosmopolis**.

James Garrett Jr. is a writer, spoken-word poet and designer "interested in expressing the urban condition through the lens of architecture and art." Garrett is currently a third-year graduate student in architecture at Parsons School of Design in New York City, specializing in Hip-Hop architecture. He has a B.A. in architecture from U.C. Berkeley, has worked with architectural firms in Minnesota and in 1999 opened his own design studio. This story is excerpted from a graphics-intensive, book-length manuscript. Says Garrett: "I'm looking to get this text out into the schools (both high schools and universities) and larger ART/ARCHITECTURE community to hopefully stimulate the 'lost generation' of kids — to suggest that they indeed have an important contribution to make/role to play in society. That their experiences with the culture of Hip-Hop are not lost on us, but are valid and pregnant with possibility for the future. I indeed one high-school teacher (with a background in architecture) has already requested to use this text in his classroom to motivate students to think beyond the bounds of 'textbook logic.' I feel great about this."

Thanks to Tom Borrup for bringing this story to CAN.

Glossary

Global Cosmopolis: The notion of the interconnected 21st-century city — cosmopolitan in the sense that information, style and even culture flow across geopolitical borders, oceans, rivers and deserts instantaneously via cyberspace (WWW). Cities across the globe are now interconnected as never before and uniquely capable of celebrating and suffering from the same phenomena in real-time.

Globalization: A phenomenon that, in America, arose in part from technological infrastructure development financed with money divested from urban communities of color in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

social currents: These include the Civil Rights Movement and the inception of numerous government-subsidized programs and community-oriented initiatives aimed at relieving poverty, improving educational opportunities and advancing local political empowerment of urban communities of color.

rhizomatically: The term rhizomatically refers to the philosophical definition of rhizome:



James Garrett Jr.

"...the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added ($n+1$). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities with n dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which the One is always subtracted ($n-1$).

The rhizome is antigenealogy. It is a short-term memory, or antimemory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. Unlike the graphic arts, drawing, or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. It is tracings that must be put on the map, not the opposite. In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentered, organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states."

"A Thousand Plateaus"
Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari
1987

Ebonics: A hybrid dialect created by African slaves and their descendants that fused bits and pieces of various African languages and English into a quickly evolving, specifically coded semiotic system of communication.

Spanglish: A hybrid dialect created by African slaves, Native American Indians and their descendants that fuses bits and pieces of various African and Indian languages with Spanish into a quickly evolving, specifically coded semiotic system of communication.

La Migra: The I.N.S. (United States Department of Immigration and Naturalization), seen by many Spanglish speakers as "the enemy" — always seeking to deport them back to their Latin American countries of origin.

"mi hermanito, ponga los headphones, turn up the beat, pick up the microphone/paintbrush/spray can and muestranos que tienes.": This statement translates from Spanglish to Ebonics as "My brother, put on the headphones, turn up the beat, pick up the microphone/paintbrush/spray can and show us what you've got."

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