

HIP HOP URBANIST RECONSTRUCTIONS

**Strategies & Tactics
for Urban Reparations**

By Isaac Howland

Syracuse University
School of Architecture

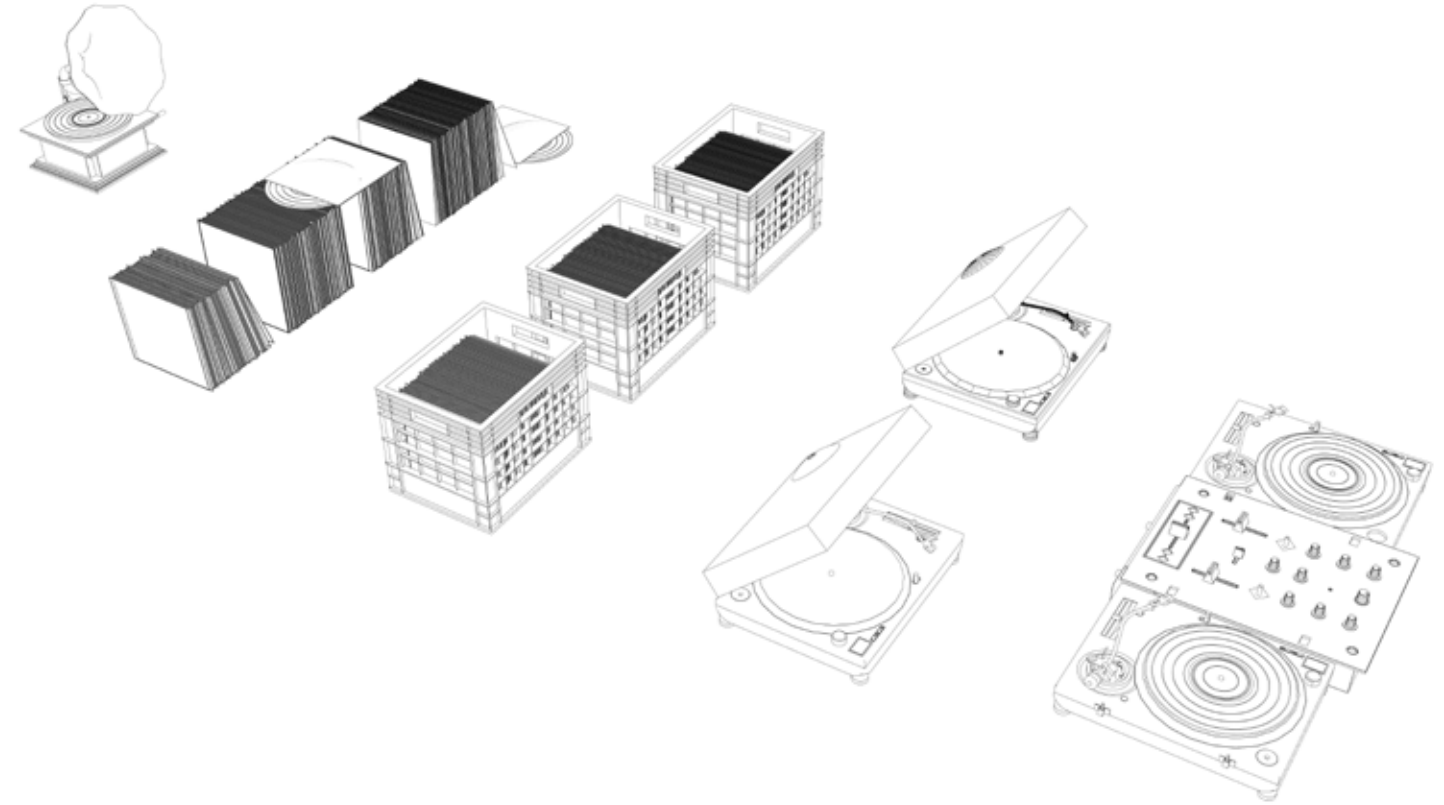
Spring 2021

Advisor: Brian Lonsway

TOPIC

HIP HOP URBANIST RECONSTRUCTION as per Merriam Webster

- Hip Hop -** a **cultural movement** associated especially with rap music. 2 : the stylized rhythmic music that commonly accompanies rap
- Urban -** in, relating to, or characteristic of a town or city. a context for popular dance music **associated with black performers.**
- Urbanism -** the way of life characteristic of cities and towns. **the development and planning of cities and towns.**
- Reconstruction -** the action or **process of reconstructing** or being reconstructed. a thing that has been rebuilt **after being damaged or destroyed.**



001. Hip Hop Cultural Products - Image by Author / Models see LOI

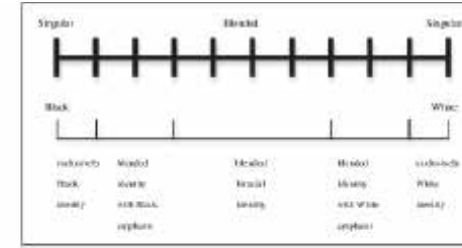
POSITION

As an architect and citizen, I advocate for strategies (proactive) and tactics (reactive) for generating community prosperity where it has been obscured by the intended and unintended consequences of racist urban policies and practices. My position is a consequence of my upbringing in Philadelphia and adulthood in New York City, in which I witnessed institutional disinvestment in non-white communities. This realization began during my adolescence in North Philadelphia and evolved during my years practicing architecture in Brooklyn, where I was exposed to the pitfalls of bureaucracy and timescale to affect positive change in vulnerable communities. On the NY subway, I read about the history of racial and socioeconomic inequality baked into the housing, real estate, and urban renewal policies that typified mid-late 20th century cities. This landscape of systemic racism became even more apparent when I moved from East New York to Bedford-Stuyvesant. The landscape of disinterest and disinvestment in East New York posed a stark contrast to the crescendo of desirability, gentrification and displacement present in Bed Stuy. I witnessed the building processes and neighborhood dynamics unfold in real time through elevated subway car windows and trips across Brooklyn. Socioeconomic disenfranchisement set the stage for the birth of hip hop. Being a designer of color, I believe that architects need to employ a novel approach to activate the physical and socio-economic potential latent in these sites of historical disinvestment. This is the value of Hip Hop as a spatial practice...

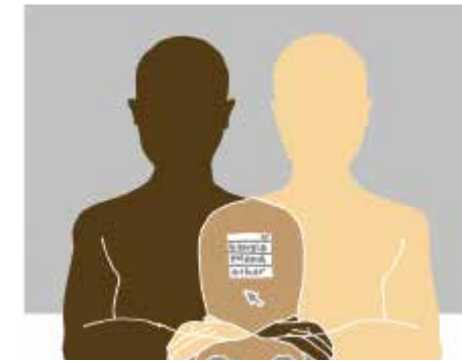
“To hem a people up in the prison walls of overcrowded ghettos and to confine them in rat-infested slums is to breed crime, whatever the racial group may be. It is a strange and twisted logic to use the tragic results of segregation as an argument for its continuation.”

INTRODUCTION

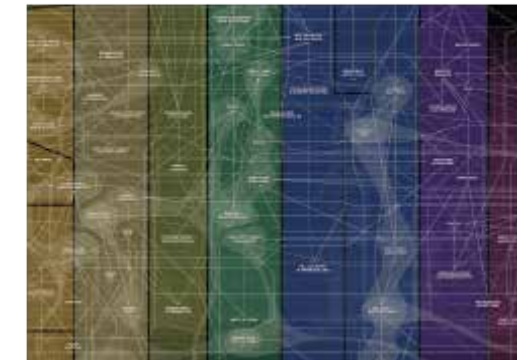
Biracial Duality & Cultural Fluidity



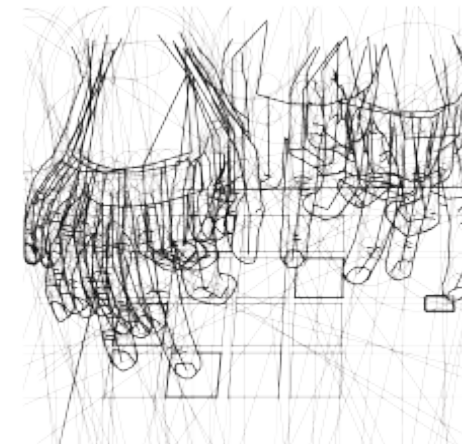
Assembling Cultural Heritage via Music



Pursuing Architecture in Gentrifying Urban Area



Identifying Various Stalemates Of Architectural Practice



“Hip Hop has appropriated the dispensable and made it indispensable and the concepts and information from/about the site of environmental conflict constructed by Hip Hop culture in today’s society are infinitely applicable for design, particularly architectural and spatial theory.”²

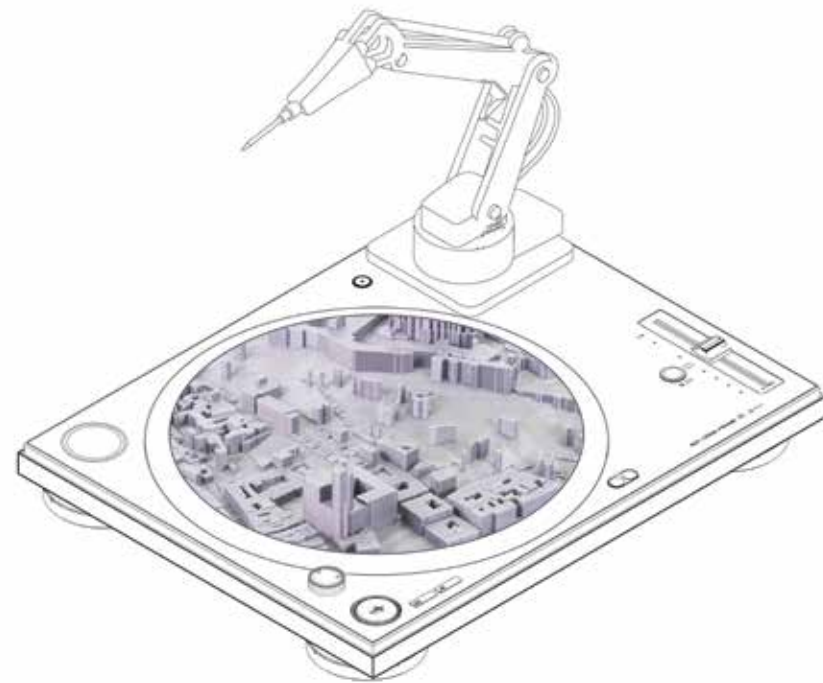
The perceptual relationship between white grids and black and brown bodies was rendered as oppressive, and each project affirmed Wilson’s assertions that “in the public arena ‘urban renewal’ was code for ‘Negro removal’.”³

“The architecture of reparations unbuilds the terrain that transformed bodies and land into property; a terrain built to maintain the vastness of the wealth gap, prison industrial complex, surveillance and policing.”⁴

2 Wilkins, Craig L. *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture, and Music* / Craig L. Wilkins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

3 Cooke, Sekou. “The Fifth Pillar: A Case for Hip-Hop Architecture.” *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy*, 2014, 15–18.

4 Admasu, Emanuel. *Black Reconstruction Collective. What Is the*



005. CNC DJ

SITUATION

The socioeconomic perils of inner-city, minority neighborhoods can be accurately measured by the failure, insensitivity, and coded racism of mid 20th century urban planning, urban renewal and modernist architecture imposed on communities unfairly painted as “slums”.⁵ The resultant lives and socioeconomic potential of these populations are largely dictated by preconceived environmental and systemic factors outside of their control. One of the only redeeming qualities of the adverse dwelling conditions emerging from this historical context of urban renewal are how they became the backdrop and catalyst for the birth of the cultural movement of hip hop.⁶

Through subversion of authority, spatio-sonic reappropriation, amplification of identity and communal synthesis, hip hop has gained worldwide recognition as a bonafide culture. Despite its maturation as a movement in almost every sense, it is lacking in Architecture of Reparations?, 2020.

5 Cooke, Sekou. “The Fifth Pillar”, 2014, 15–18.

6 Mike Ford. *Hip Hop Architecture: The Post Occupancy Report of Modernism* | TEDxMadison, 2017.

its spatial and architectural manifestation, in contrast to numerous Euro-centric cultural and artistic movements catalogued in architectural history and theory.

This spatial yearning of Hip Hop culture coupled with the increasingly dilapidated and disinvested built environments from which it emerged represents fertile grounds for deploying Hip Hop as a spatial paradigm or tool for re-engaging and reimagining those very same sites of disenfranchisement.

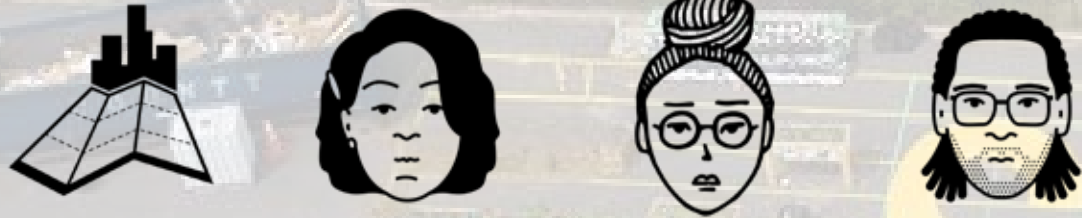
006. NYC Rap Map / Rap World Map



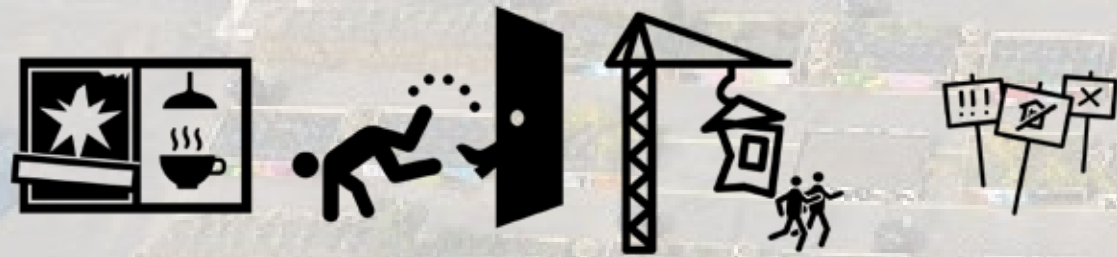
AUDIENCES

DESIRED OUTCOMES

MINORITY ARCHITECTS, PLANNERS, & DEVELOPERS



DISINVESTED & GENTRIFYING COMMUNITIES



HIP HOP'S PARTICIPANTS



AN ARCHITECTURE TO CURB THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF GENTRIFICATION.

RECLAIM, RETAIN OR REIMAGINE URBAN BLACK SPACES.

PROPOGATE FEASIBLE STRUCTURES OF ADVANTAGE. DECONSTRUCT STRUCTURES OF DISADVANTAGE.

BOOST THE CULTURAL RELEVANCE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT TO THE COMMUNITIES IT HAS HISTORICALLY HAD THE MOST PROFOUND EFFECT ON.

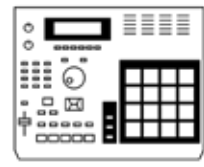
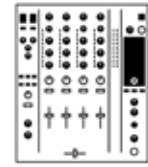
A CALL TO ACTION OF HIP HOP COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE.

SPACE

MATTERS

DRIVING QUESTION

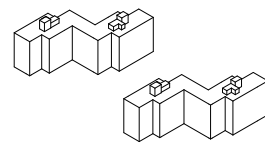
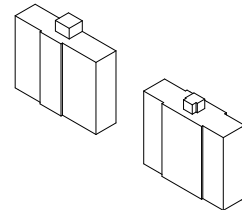
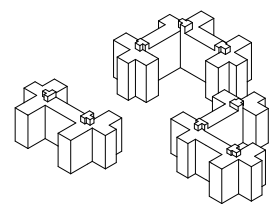
How might tools, techniques, and processes of hip hop...



provoke new engagements with and reformulate...



the spatial typologies and existing urban conditions central to black identity...



as evidenced in hip hop culture?



UNDERLYING QUESTIONS

What are Hip Hop's most prominent tools, techniques and processes?

What types of urban spaces are evidenced within hip hop's musical or visual cultural outputs?

How can external cultural relevance (hype/fandom/appropriation) be siphoned into spatial agency for the actors within the subject culture or environment?

How can blackness (and by extension hip hop) be a critical lens for the built environment?

How can spatial manifestations of hip hop culture realize socioeconomic potentials?



BACKGROUND RESEARCH

THE MODERNIST GHETTO



007. Le Corbusier's Hands, still from Pierre Chenal's film Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1930



009. Robert Moses Overlooks Model Bridge

“Not DJ Kool Herc. Not The Sugarhill Gang. Not Crazy Legs. Not even Cornbread. **The true father of hip-hop is Moses.** The tyrannical, mercilessly efficient head of several New York City public works organizations, **Robert Moses, did more in his fifty-year tenure to shape the physical and cultural conditions required for hip-hop's birth** than any other force of man or nature.¹

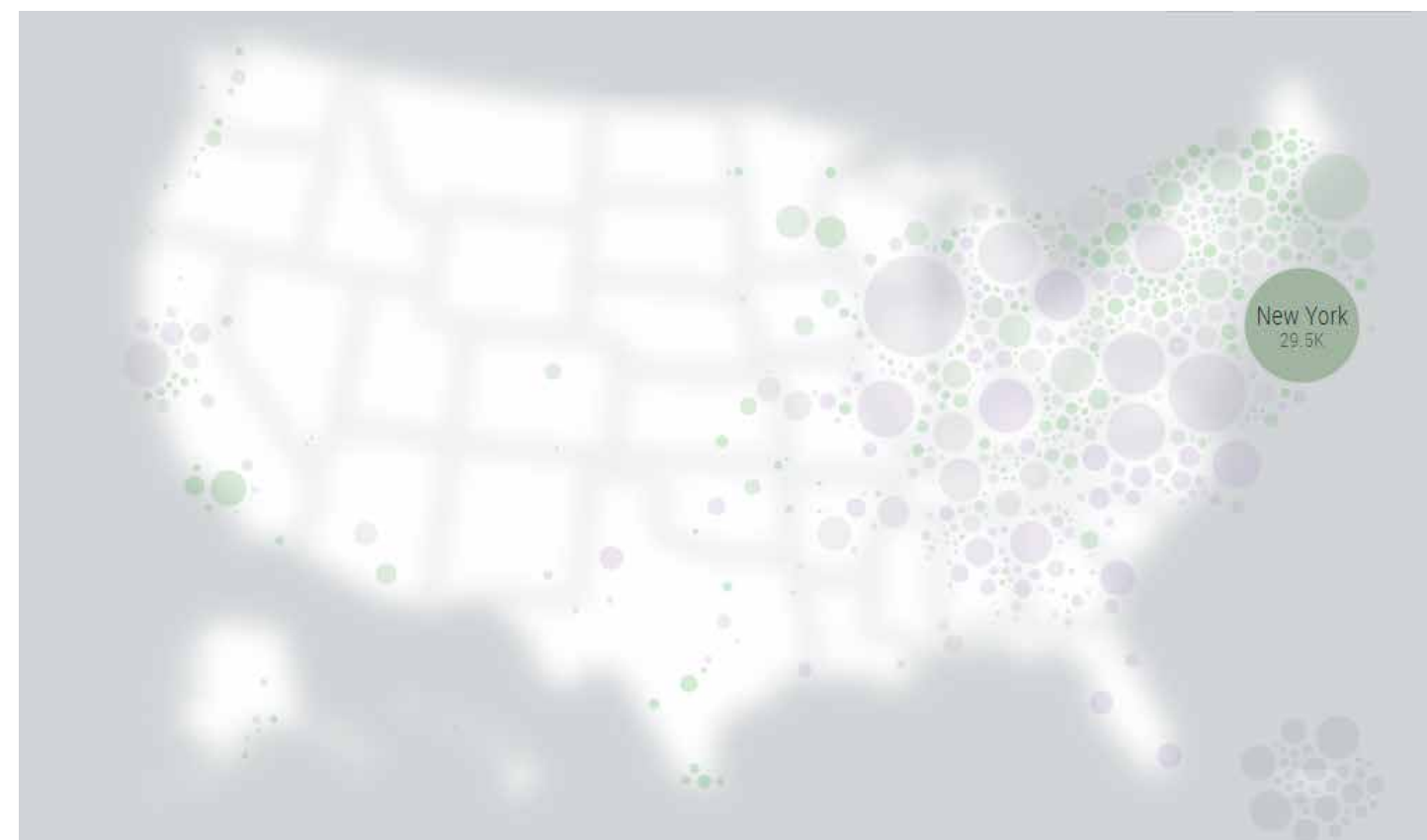
¹ Cooke, Sekou. 2014. “The Fifth Pillar: A Case for Hip-Hop Architecture.” Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy, 15–18.



008. Lilian Wald Houses by Zach K

NEW YORK CITY IS THE #1 HIGHEST DOLLAR VALUE RECIPIENT OF FEDERAL URBAN RENEWAL FUNDS WITH A COLLECTIVE DISPLACEMENT OF 29,500 FAMILIES.²

² Renewing Inequality, “Urban Renewal, 1950-1966.” Univ. of Richmond’s Digital Scholarship Lab



010. Renewing Inequality, “Urban Renewal, 1950-1966.” Univ. of Richmond’s Digital Scholarship Lab

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

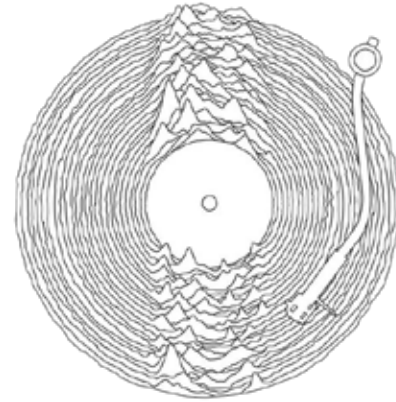
HIP HOP'S UTOPIAN GRIDLOCK

“A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential.³”

³ Lefebvre, Henri, and Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Production of Space*. Vol. 142. 1991.



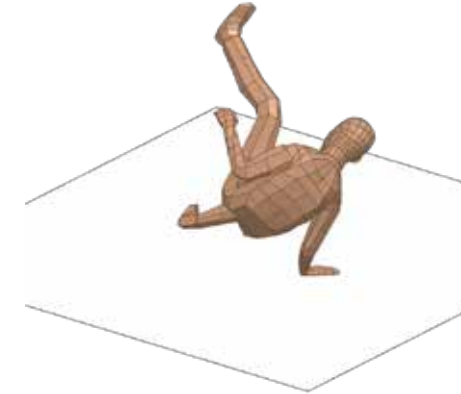
Cultural Production Mediums



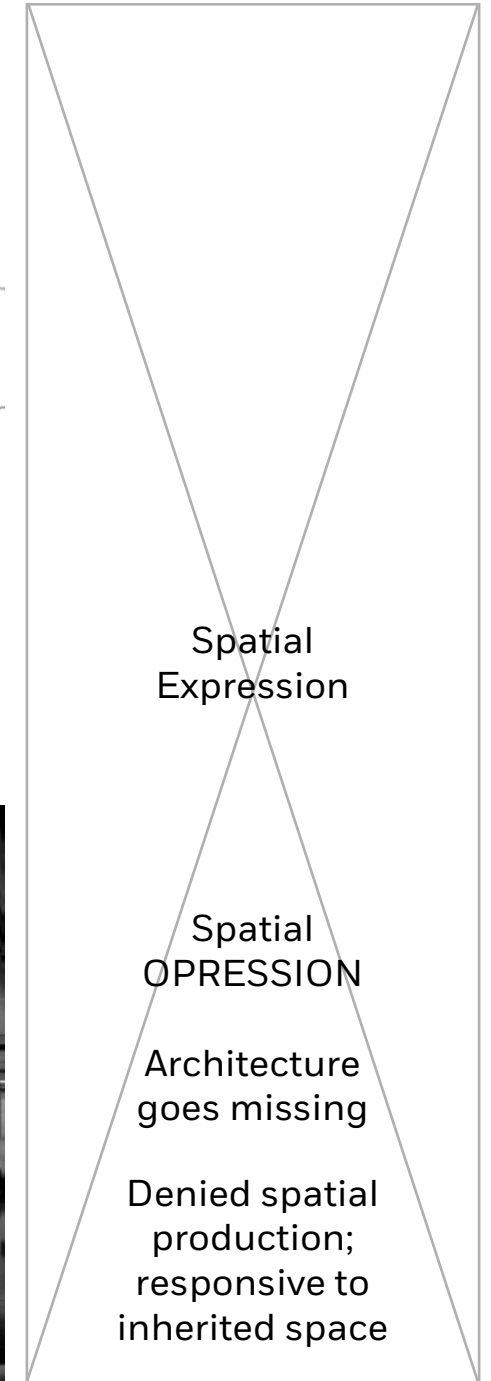
Sonic Production



Visual Production



Physical Production

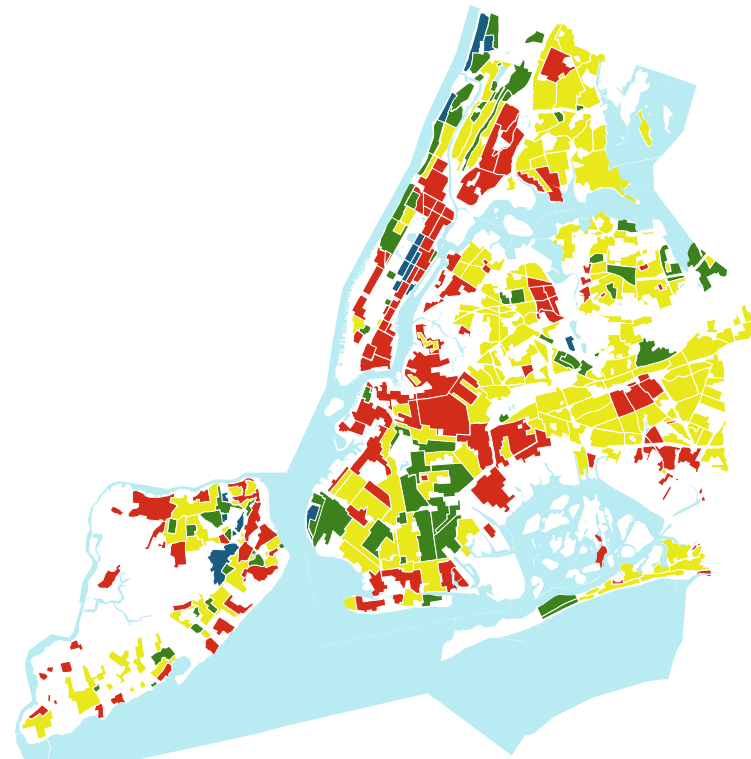


Hip Hop Cultural Pillars



011. Hip Hop's 4 Pillars;

POLICY MEETS PROJECTS



012. New York City Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC) Insurance Map
 ■ A- Best ■ B-Desirable ■ C-Declining ■ D-Hazardous



013. New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Building Stock

HIP HOP'S INCUBATOR



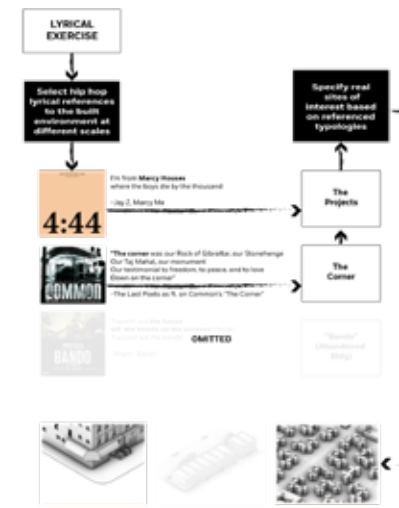
Frequently Credited Birthplace Of Hip-hop
 1520 Sedgwick Avenue
 Bronx, NY

014. Public Housing vs. Red-Lined HOLC Designation

To superimpose New York City's public housing stock within red-lined neighborhoods paints a clear picture of the racist political residue latent in the postwar housing environment. Segregation, political containment and white-flight coincided to cause systematic disinvestment and a decreased tax-base that has left communities of color in a downward spiral of lack of resources and needed infrastructures.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

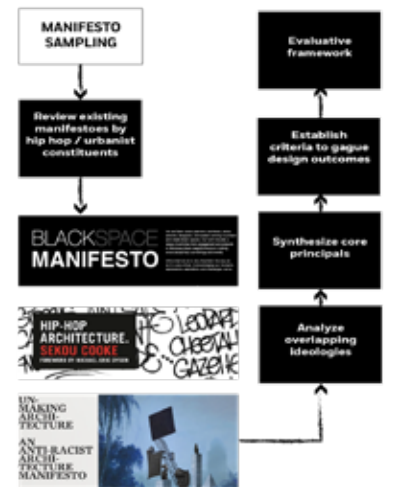
DESCRIPTION + GOALS



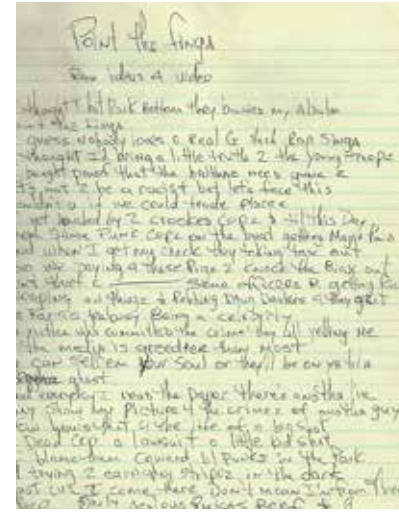
**METHOD 1
LYRICAL EXERCISE**



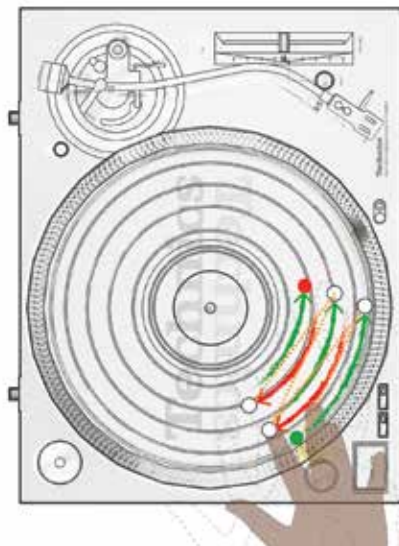
**METHOD 2
DON'T SWEAT
THE TECHNIQUE**



**METHOD 3
MANIFESTO SAMPLING**



Method 1 seeks to utilize hip hop music's lyrics as a primary source of post-occupancy reporting on the urban conditions experienced in many minority communities and henceforth, originators and subsequent practitioners of hip hop culture. Citing lyrics which reference specific places or spatial typologies allows for extracting scales and sites within which to intervene. This method has generated 1 specific condition and 2 typologies that represent relevant sites of inquiry.

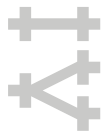


Method 2 aims to catalog and analyze the artifacts, tools and techniques of each the 4 pillars of hip hop culture. In order to generate an operational language for implementing architecture as the emergent fifth pillar, the tools and technologies adapted and reappropriated from the everyday and readymade objects begins to situate the importance of their relevance to spatial imagination and potentials in the built environment.



Method 3 seeks to generate an evaluative framework by looking at contemporary manifestos and literature regarding the subject matters of hip hop architecture and black identity in the built environment. This method aims to document the goals of these relevant organizers and organizations to connect with the audiences of this thesis and gauge their satisfaction on any outcomes of this project. These manifestos make clear an agenda to create a generative logic for architectural program in service to local organizations and communities.

RESEARCH MATRIX



VISUAL THOUGHT ESSAYS

LYRICAL EXERCISE

DON'T SWEAT THE TECHNIQUE

MANIFESTO SAMPLING

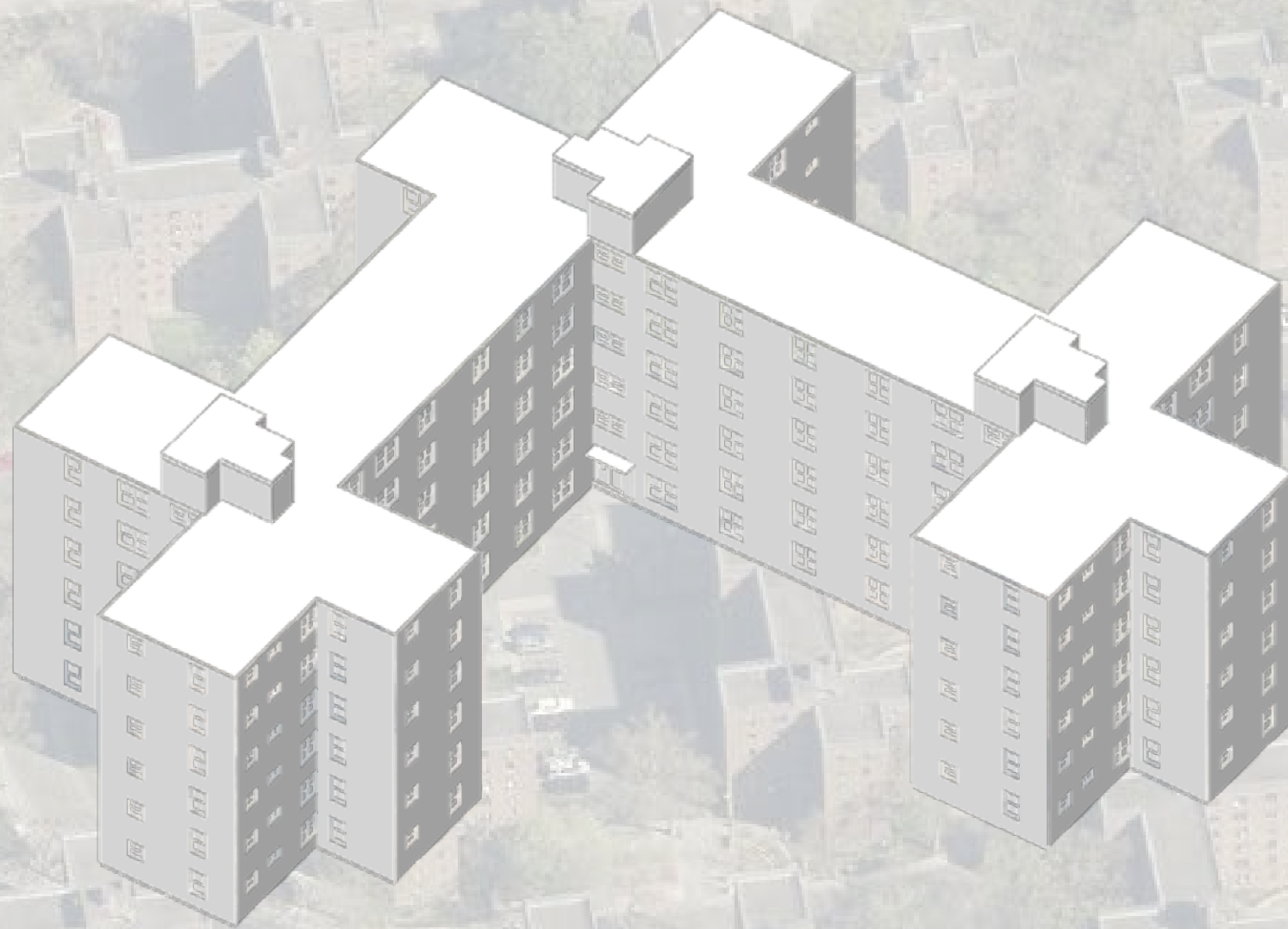
SITES / SCALES	SITUATION	SAMPLE/ REMIX
<p>01 THE PROJECTS</p>	<p>DILAPIDATED UNIT CONDITIONS</p> <p>REDEVELOPMENT PRESSURES</p> <p>UNDER-UTILIZED SITE</p> <p>NEGLECTED PUBLIC SPACES</p> <p>SOCIOECONOMIC ISOLATION</p>	<p>ADAPTIVE REMIXED USE</p>
<p>02 THE CORNER</p>	<p>HYPER SURVEILLANCE</p> <p>OVER-POLICING</p> <p>VAGRANCY LAWS</p> <p>NO SOLICITING</p>	<p>ANTI-CARCERAL CORNER</p>

LYRICS + TEXTS	MANIFESTATIONS	VISUAL THOUGHT ESSAYS
<p>Jay-Z</p> <p>Yasiin Bey</p> <p>Kendrick Lamar</p> <p>+</p> <p>Sekou Cooke</p> <p>Lawrence Chua</p> <p>Ifeoma Ebo</p> <p>Justin Tinsley</p> <p>Carla Shedd.</p>	<p>AMPLIFY BLACK JOY</p> <p>CENTER LIVED EXPERIENCE</p> <p>RECKON W/ PAST TO BUILD FUTURE</p> <p>PROTECT / STRENGTHEN CULTURE</p> <p>CULTIVATE WEALTH</p> <p>PERSONAL / COMMUNAL EVOLUTION</p>	
<p>Nas</p> <p>Common</p> <p>+</p> <p>WAI Think Tank.</p> <p>Sekou Cooke</p> <p>Carla Shedd.</p>	<p>REFUSAL</p> <p>LIBERATION</p> <p>CARE</p> <p>RECKON W/ PAST TO BUILD FUTURE</p> <p>CULTIVATE WEALTH</p>	

01 THE PROJECTS ADAPTIVE REMIXED USE



VISUAL THOUGHT ESSAYS



**WHAT MIGHT OCCUR IN
1,000,000 SF OF BLACK SPACE?**



VISUAL THOUGHT ESSAYS

UNBUILT POTENTIALS MARCY HOUSES

“The windows on the Ave look like sad eyes
They fix their sharp gaze on you when you pass by
And if you dare to stand, you can see 'em cry
You can watch 'em scowl, feel 'em prowl
**While they're steady sizing every inch about you
Fast math measuring what you amount to”¹**

¹ Yasiin Bey, Life in Marvelous Times, 2009

616,250 SF	X	LOT AREA
2.43		R6 FAR
	=	
1,497,487 S.F.		Max Zoned Floor Area
	-	
822,192 S.F.		Existing Built Space
	=	
675,295 S.F.		Unused Buildable Area

485,850 SF	X	LOT AREA
2.43		R6 FAR
	=	
1,180,615 S.F.		Max Zoned Floor Area
	-	
780,000 S.F.		Existing Built Space
	=	
400,615 S.F.		Unused Buildable Area

400,615 S.F.

675,295 S.F.

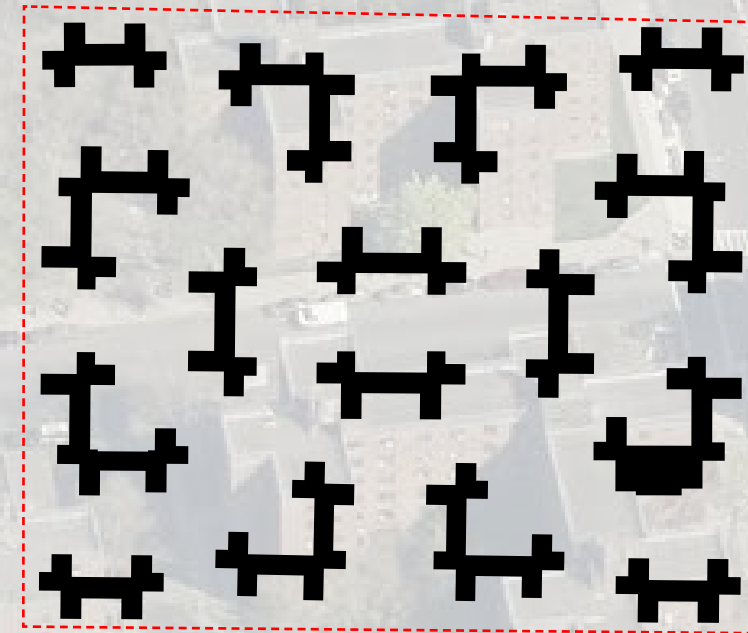
Unused Buildable Area
Marcy Plot 1

+

Unused Buildable Area
Marcy Plot 2

=

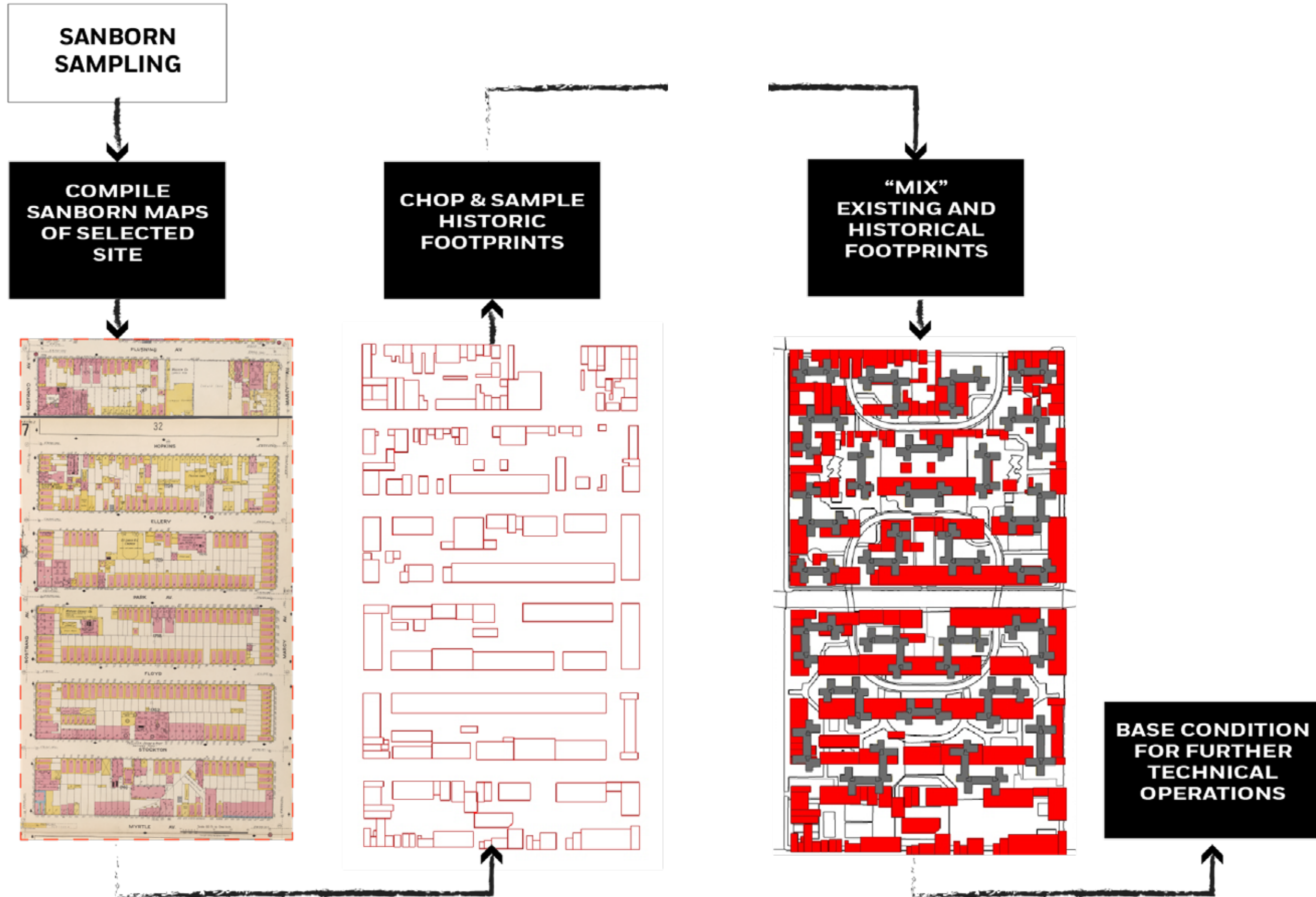
1,075,910 SF
of opportunity



PARK AVENUE



033. Marcy Houses Building Footprints & Lot Lines

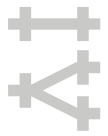


034. Sanborn Sampling Process Diagram

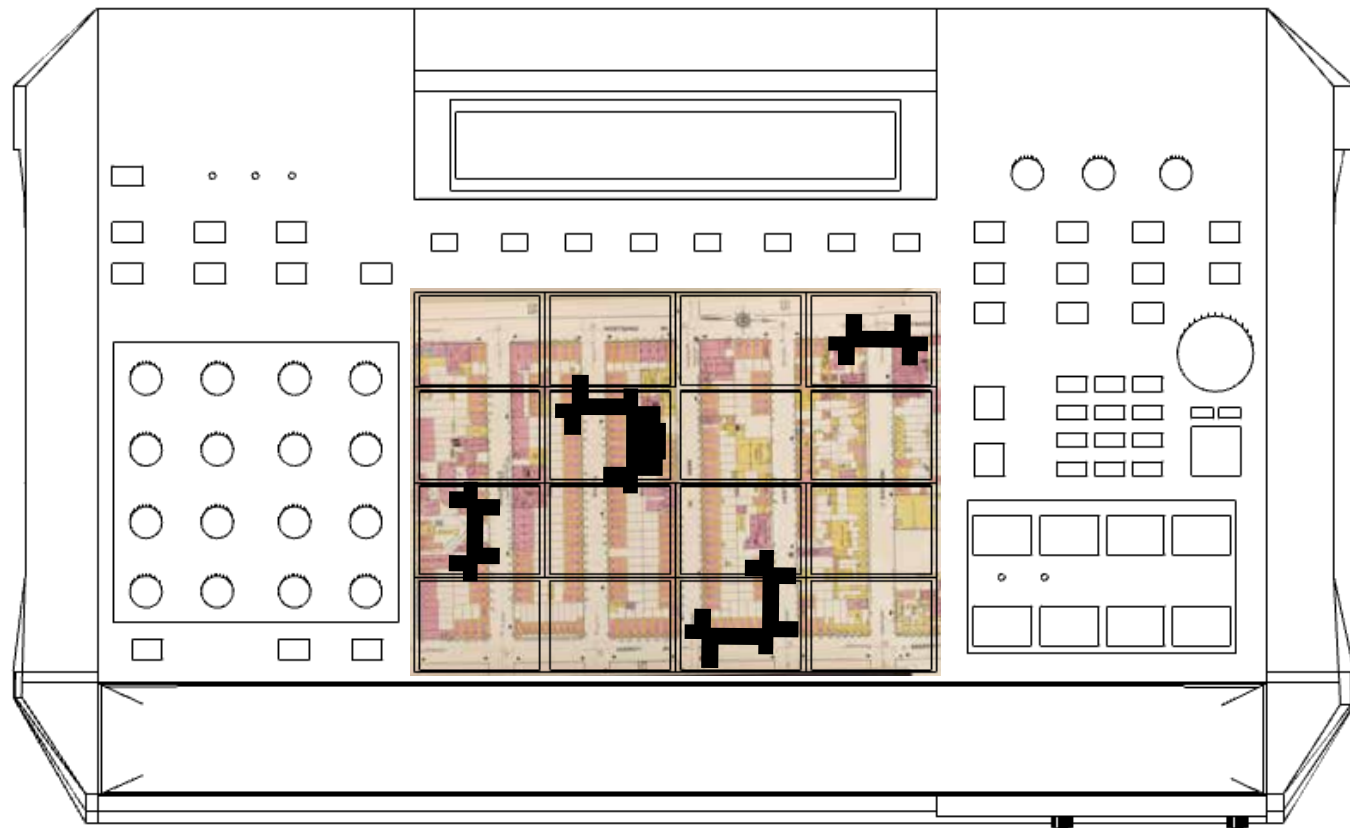
SANBORN SAMPLING PROCESS

Hip hop architecture is palimpsestic in the fact that it is engaged in reclaiming the subject from the object. Consistent with the foundations of hip hop's flow, layering, and rupture, the palimpsestic nature of hip hop architecture reorganizes and rewrites the "[v]isible boundaries [of architecture], such as walls or enclosures in general,"²

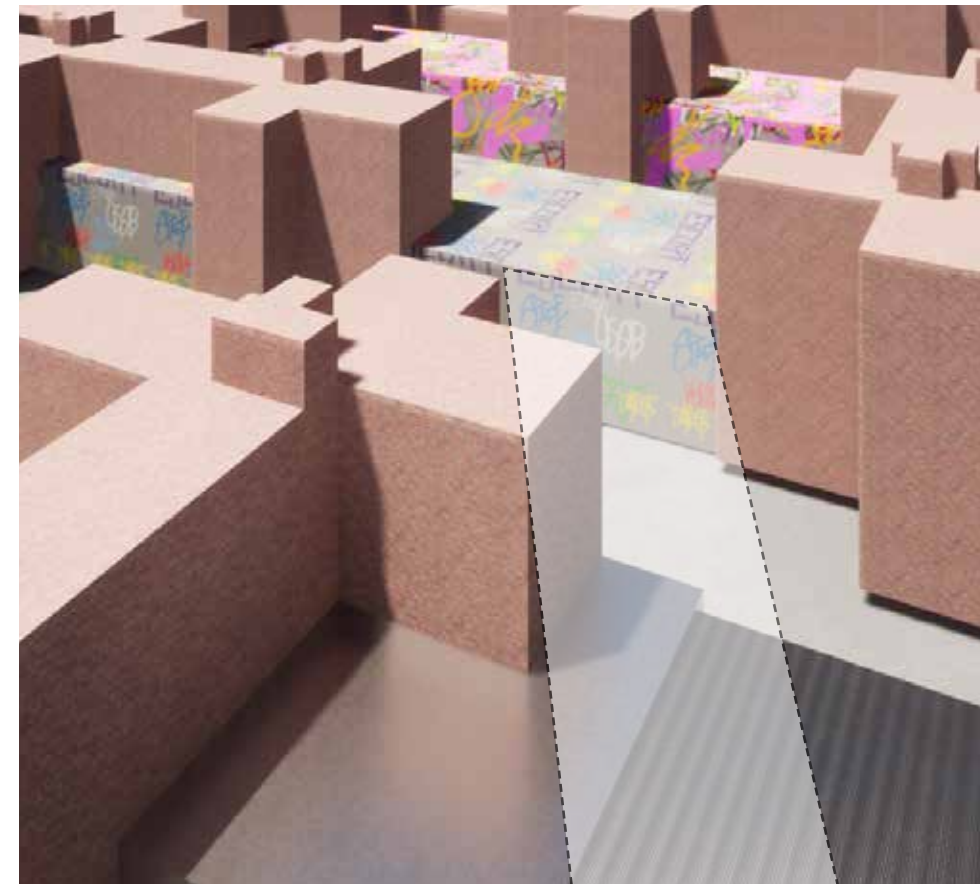
² Wilkins, Craig L. "(W)Rapped Space: The Architecture of Hip Hop."



VISUAL THOUGHT ESSAYS



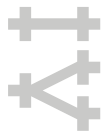
035. Sanborn Sampling Concept Diagram



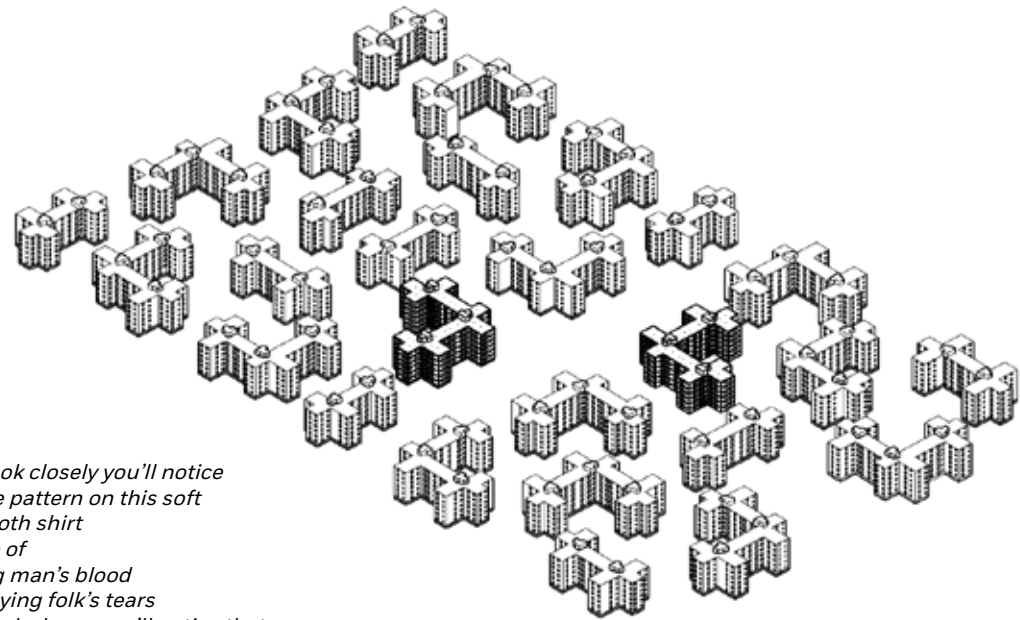
036. Brooklyn Historical Tax Photos & Marcy + Sanborn Massing photos c/o NYC DOF



MARCY HOUSES EXISTING CONDITIONS



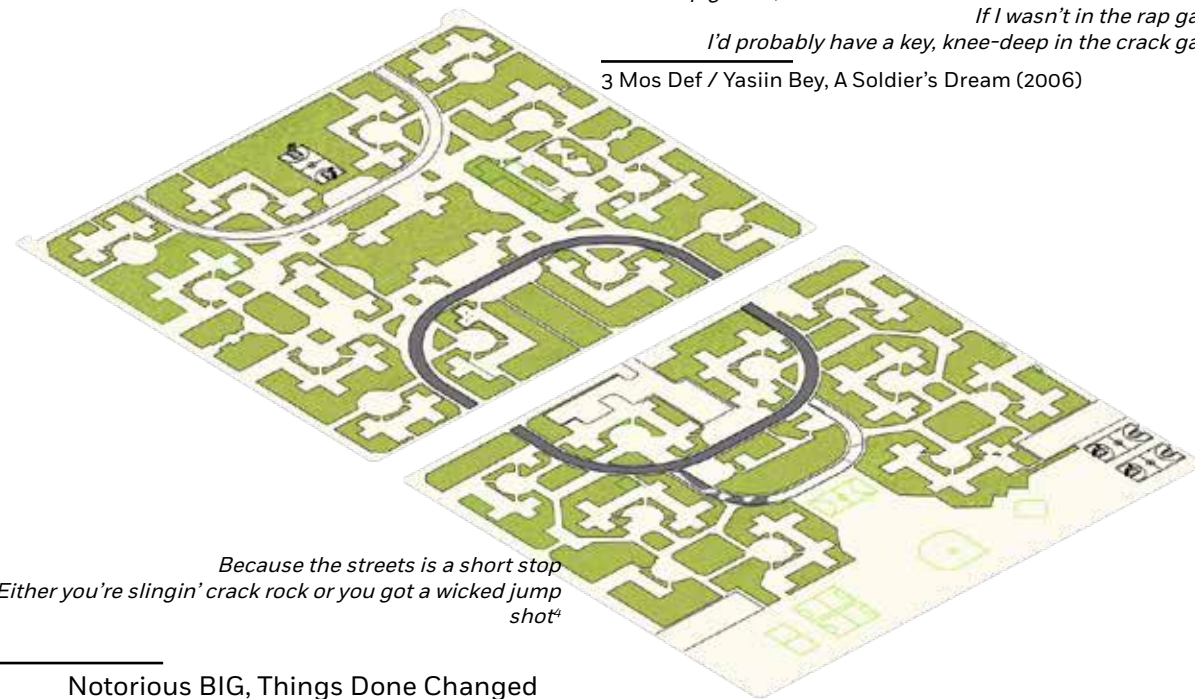
VISUAL THOUGHT ESSAYS



*If you look closely you'll notice
That the pattern on this soft
broadcloth shirt
Is made of
Working man's blood
And praying folk's tears
If you look closer, you'll notice that
This pattern resembles
Tenement row houses, project highrises
Cell block tiers*

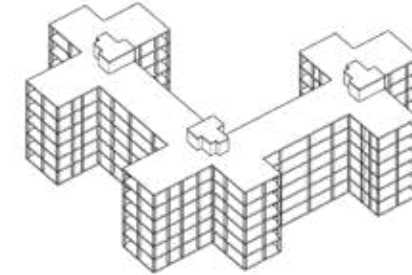
Journal of Architectural Education 54, no. 1
(September 2000): 7-19

*Discontinued stretches of elevated train tracks
Slave ship gullies, acres of tombstones³
If I wasn't in the rap game
I'd probably have a key, knee-deep in the crack game*
3 Mos Def / Yasiin Bey, A Soldier's Dream (2006)



*Because the streets is a short stop
Either you're slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump
shot⁴*

4 Notorious BIG, Things Done Changed
(1994)

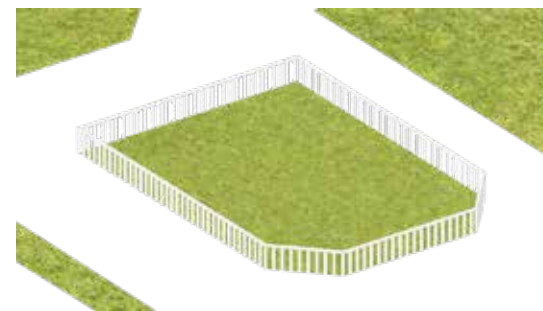
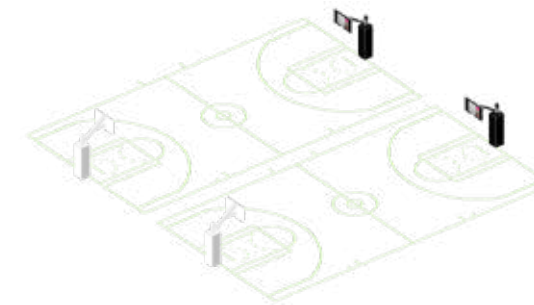


Garden Apartment Style Towers

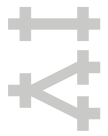
The depiction of minority communities as “blighted” and fit for removal became the justification for the wholesale destruction of many neighborhoods’ distinct urban fabric as well as the physical symbol of the family unit and notion of home. The super-blocks that replaced these neighborhoods was a monolithic gesture which has come to collectively identify black and lower income people and render the contained condition known as an ‘island of poverty.’

Existing Groundscape

Jay-Z refers to Marcy Projects as a talent incubator “where they ball and breed rhyme stars” (Where I’m From, 1997). In the past, the only avenues of escaping that environment have been: “SPORTS, DRUGS, ENTERTAINMENT” (Camron, 2000) - with each of these so-called ‘hustles’ coming to represent stereotypes and reinforce a negative feedback loop of downward socioeconomic trajectory when intersecting with one another in such close proximity to the others and a robust police presence.



The only public programs put on this site were basketball courts, fenced-off lawns, park benches and concrete paths. For the residents of NYCHA - a basketball court that was the only tool immediately at their disposal to develop skills to have a better career or life outlook.



VISUAL THOUGHT ESSAYS

MARCY HOUSES ADAPTIVE REMIXED USES

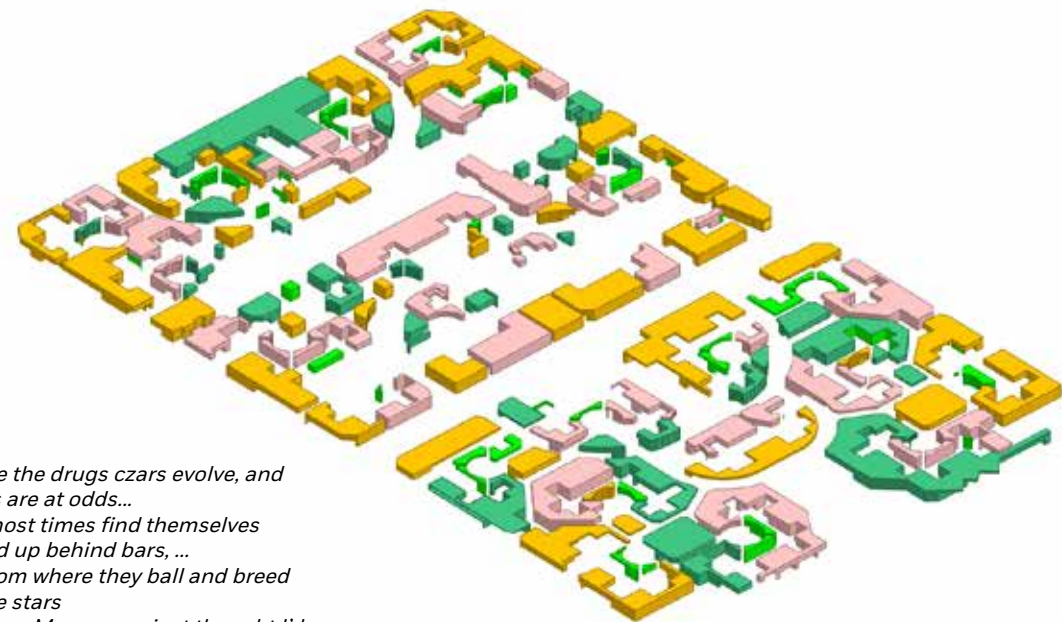
Brownstone Street Furniture

Utilizing the Brooklyn brownstone facade and porch as a language of street furniture and pop-up venues allows for intermittent public vendors, communal gathering and eventual reconstruction of neighborhood social fabric that begins to erode the 'island of poverty' condition that currently presides.



MANIFESTATIONS:

- CENTER LIVED EXPERIENCE
- NOSTALGIA
- KINSHIP



*Where the drugs czars evolve, and thugs are at odds...
But most times find themselves locked up behind bars, ...
I'm from where they ball and breed rhyme stars
I'm from Marcy, son, just thought I'd*

■ Skill-Ki- ■ Commer- ■ Residential / Public

038. Adaptive Remixed Groundscape
Bottom: Skill-Scape, Top: Brownstone Street Furniture

Skill-Scape

If playing NBA basketball doesn't pan out, the next closest team one can join is a gang. The only skill to develop is "hustling" (earning capital "by any means necessary") to change one's circumstances. Drugs - the next most profitable and socially networked activity behind sports - were only the medium by which to forge a path out of the environment where no other choice resides. If you didn't like basketball, and couldn't get a job "by any means necessary," the alternative routes to try to change your circumstance were very limited if not non-existent.

The invention of hip hop culture stands as an outgrowth from or refusal of those routes out, frequently referring to them as forerunners in the flight from inherited circumstance. How can these spatial moments become conducive to building new informal economies and learning new skills? Maybe it's a film editing kiosk or a public DJ booth where you just put on some headphones and can practice DJ-ing. A skill-building playscape in support of crafting skills to supplement the typical "rags to riches" escape routes have been in place in this site.

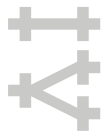


MANIFESTATIONS:

- PERSONAL & COMMUNAL EVOLUTION
- CULTIVATE WEALTH
- RECON W/ THE PAST TO BUILD THE FUTURE

LAW

KNOWLEDGE



VISUAL THOUGHT ESSAYS



039. Adaptive Remixed Towers

MARCY HOUSES ADAPTIVE REMIXED USES

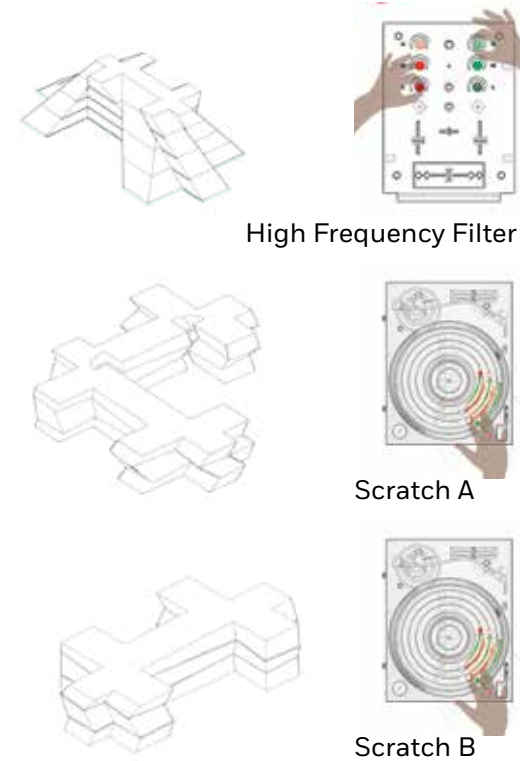
Technique Towers

Using the formal techniques of the DJ to literally inform building upwards aims to culturally reappropriate and resuscitate the ‘towers in a park’ concept as an inevitability of the contemporary capitalist techniques of banking air and as-of-right development. They stand as an actualization of the black notion of “Movin’ on Up to a deluxe apartment in the sky”¹ while simultaneously embodying Jay-Z’s “vision of the hood consistent with the utopianism of Marcus Garvey’s UNIA of 1920s Harlem.”²

¹ DuBois, Ja’net. The Jeffersons Theme Song, 1975.
² Lawrence Chua, “Life in Marvelous Times: Hip-hop, Housing, and Utopia,”

MANIFESTATIONS:

CULTIVATE WEALTH
 COMMODITY
 CONTRADICTION
 ENVIRONMENT



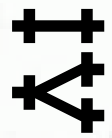
Identi-Facade

The original structures of the Marcy Houses will be procedurally gutted as residents proceed to “move-on-up” and be converted to a mix of market-rate and affordable apartment units. The reconstructed facade panels will be representative of the residents who occupy the unit, as a way to satisfy both the customization-inclined middle class and more importantly offer the long absent luxury of choice to NYCHA inbound residents while differentiating the family unit and individual from the monolithic identity of the super-block.

MANIFESTATIONS:

AMPLIFY BLACK JOY
 PROTECT & STRENGTHEN CULTURE
 PERSONAL /COMMUNAL EVOLUTION

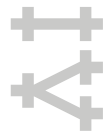
02 THE CORNER ANTI-CARCERAL CORNER



VISUAL THOUGHT ESSAYS

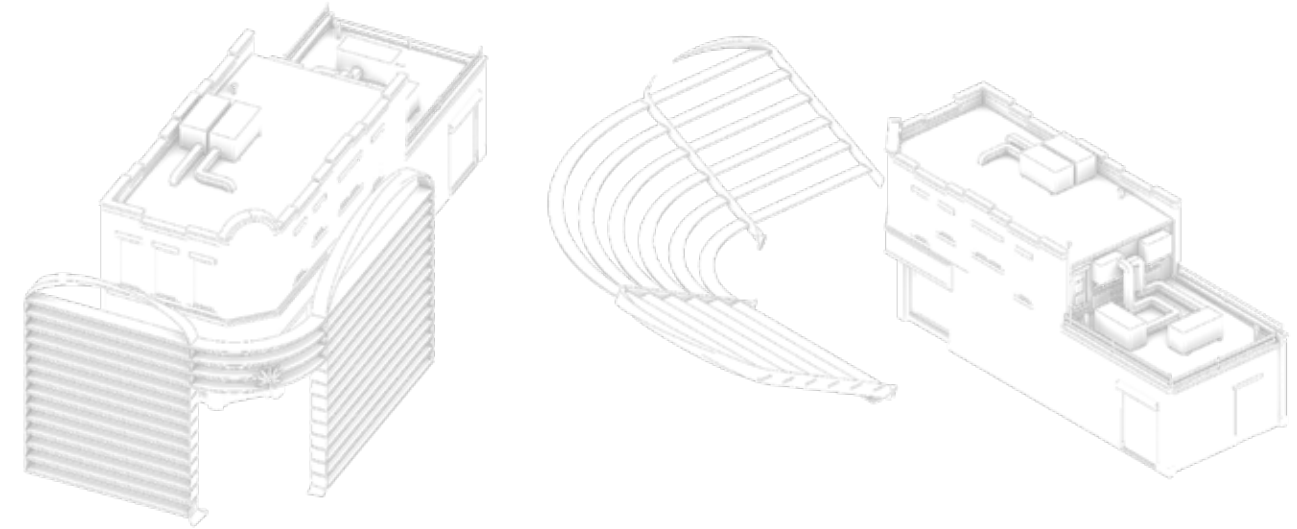


**WHERE DO POST-POLICED
URBAN SPACES,
COLLECTIVE ECONOMICS, AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE MEET?**



041. Anti-Carceral Corner
 Bottom-Up: Hip Hop Harvest Cyphe
 Top-Down: Vertical Cannabis Grow Operation & Dispensary

THE CORNER MANIFESTATIONS ANTI-CARCERAL CORNER



This design re-envision the corner as a site of justice for its wrongly-incarcerated occupants, encouraging the productive misuses of public space for loitering, marijuana growing and acts of pedestrian street performance.

REFUSAL...
 Of zoning
 Of anti-loitering rules.
 Of the disciplining gaze of governance.
 Of pseudo-scientific criminomics

The public right of way is fully reclaimed and reappropriated for the purpose of furthering other manifestations. Prohibitive ordinances are recognized as a planning tool that have limited the socioeconomic potentialities of spaces in minority neighborhoods.

LIBERATION...
 from the nexus of surveillance and over policing from collateral damage of gun violence from restrictions on “highest and best use” from the “carceral continuum”

AMPLIFY BLACK JOY
 with public performance
 with pedestrian speech acts
 by staying too long
 By embracing a fugitive aesthetic

RECKON WITH THE PAST TO BUILD FUTURE
 The stigma of illegal substances (drugs) in minority communities, as well as their

sale and use as portrayed by hip hop artists has a distinct relationship to the accelerated dilapidation and designed over-policing of minority neighborhoods. The 1980s crack-cocaine era and coinciding “war on drugs” devastated these communities by rupturing and disintegrating countless households by way of the carceral continuum (see: prison-industrial-complex).

The corner represents a site of capture where arrests and sentencing practices for minor possession charges are brought about in disproportionate numbers by pervasive policing, and racial profiling. This process discretely creeps into the future through contemporary practices of surveillance and crime statistics.

CULTIVATE WEALTH
 Whereby the possession and sale of drugs was previously grounds for arrest and incarceration, numerous startups and venture capitalists are flocking to industrialize and profit from the growth and sale of cannabis and it’s related products. Communities of color that bore the brunt of the sentencing for these former “crimes” fail to see this influx of investment nor a retroactive application of justice for being originators in the distribution and cultural relevance of this schedule 1 narcotic turned “medicine”. The anti-carceral corner simultaneously solidifies and re-envision the growth and sale of marijuana as an act of collective economics, urban agriculture and wealth cultivation, as it always has been in spheres of urban minorities and hip hop artists.