

Black Commune in Focus

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Source: *Perspecta*, 1969, Vol. 12 (1969), pp. 39-42

Published by: The MIT Press on behalf of Perspecta.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1566955>

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Black Commune in Focus

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According to the design sequence curriculum in the Department of Architecture at Howard University, the two semesters of the fourth year of design are devoted to site planning. In the fall semester the program from one of the three critics for the two semesters requires that the given site be studied for the designing of a maximum number of housing units and the amenities that such housing will generate, i.e., commercial, educational, social, etc. The site was the present 72 acre site of the National Bureau of Standards in the upper Connecticut Avenue section of Northwest Washington. The neighbourhood is white. To the North and West of the site is low density housing. To the South of it is medium density high rise. East of the site across Connecticut Avenue exists mainly high rise office buildings with a commercial center, the dominant and most recent one being Van Ness Center. The program asked that the students consider the fact that the new rapid transit system scheduled for completion by the mid-1970's is intended to have a major stop at Van Ness Center. Presently Van Ness Street is an east-west thoroughfare splitting the site in two almost equal parts. The topography arises in height by 75 feet east to west, such variations being drastically pronounced on the south side of the site.

The critic's students broke either into groups or individuals, whichever was preferable for the students, and the project was a semester long.

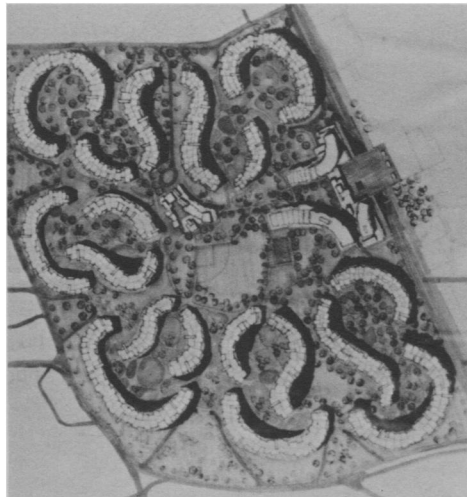
Being of colonial mentality, conceding that the white man knew all about planning, we proceeded to follow whitey's rules for planning. We read all the famous books on the topic. Something was wrong, but we couldn't figure it out. Finally we did. The books were written by whites for the designing of White America, and they conceded either all niggers belong in vertical concentration camps called Public Housing Projects, or whites can let them in a little at a time into their sterile sprawling suburbia. We threw away all those stupid racist books and looked out of the window of our studio, located in the Black inner city of Washington, and asked ourselves - what's wrong with our people's environment? The answer is simple - it was not designed for us and for our life style, and we are not in control of it.

The control of the environment is the most crucial need of any people. It is not enough to have a job, a school to attend, a place to shop, a welfare check or food stamps. A people with cultural integrity must be able to control their environment. What good is a job in which you are ill used, misused, abused or under-used? What good is a school in which you are taught nothing about your cultural heritage, taught that you have no valuable heritage, taught that another cultural heritage is the one to accept and lastly taught by persons who think of you as pitiful inferiors and leave the community in a hurry as soon as 3 p.m. comes? What good is it to shop where you are at the

economic mercy of persons who come to exploit you, take the money out of your community and who never invest in your community's economic development?

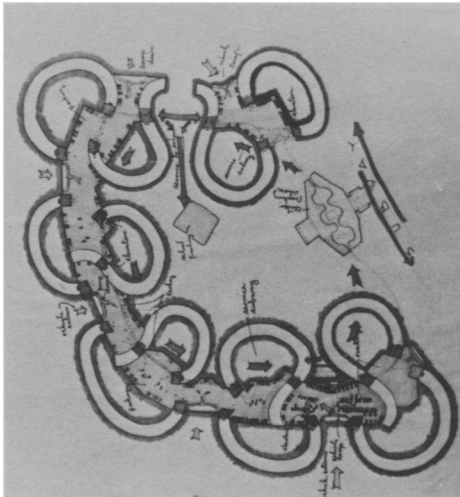
We don't care if an individual is a racist and we don't feel we have to go out of the way to rid him of racism. All that we want is that when a child gets called a nigger, spick, wetback, or redskin by a racist downtown, he doesn't have to come back to a community in which the institutions call him the same. Unfortunately in our

expand and contract according to the way a family expands and contracts. Black people don't send their elders to live in some "old people's home". First of all, it's not in their nature to do something as inhuman as that and, secondly, they don't have the money to do it like white people do. Families are so located that a family unit with the highest possibility of contraction can be situated adjacent to a family unit with equal possibility of expansion; since dwelling units mainly expand and contract according to the



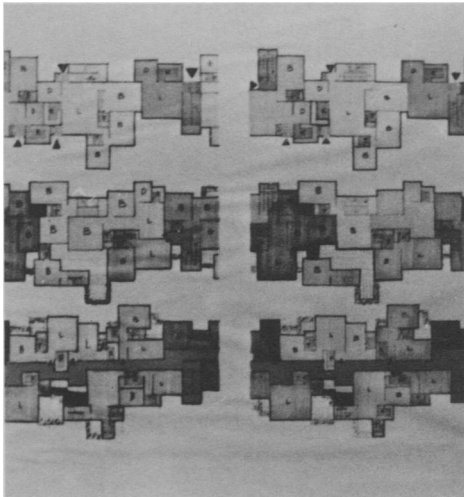
community presently the child gets called that by the school system, the church, the police, the merchants, the television, the everything, including the architecture.

Second question we asked: Who has a housing problem in this country? – the poor. The middle class doesn't have a real housing problem – they just have prejudices. Since this site is in an urban setting – who are the urban poor? – the Black people, most of whom are recent arrivals from rural areas. What is their social structure like? The basic unit is the extended family unit. The essence of our design lies in the fact that we consider communal living as the basic ingredient in our concept. Communities in Africa, have always been communal in essence. Communal communities cannot be analysed according to present planning procedures and standards. Their density is dynamic, not static. Their spatial needs have four dimensions: depth, breadth, height, and time. Our basic living units are able to



bedroom units required and possibly toilets.

One D.U. may no longer have a need for a bedroom. The adjacent D.U. may have a need for another bedroom. Thus the bedroom is sealed off from the former unit and a new opening makes it accessible to the latter unit. Internally you can begin to visualize the variations of space. For a time the normal access to your apartment was up four floors, turn left and walk for a number of yards until you got there. Now things would change – you go up two flights, turn left, walk to another elevator, go up two floors, turn left and there you are. Your space changes as your need changes. Who knows – you might run into a very interesting person by being on the second floor, or a sweet thing in need of friendship. The interaction of the sharing of spaces, experience and experiencing different spatial sequences lead to the kind of communal sharing that our original ancestors experienced in their tribal setting.



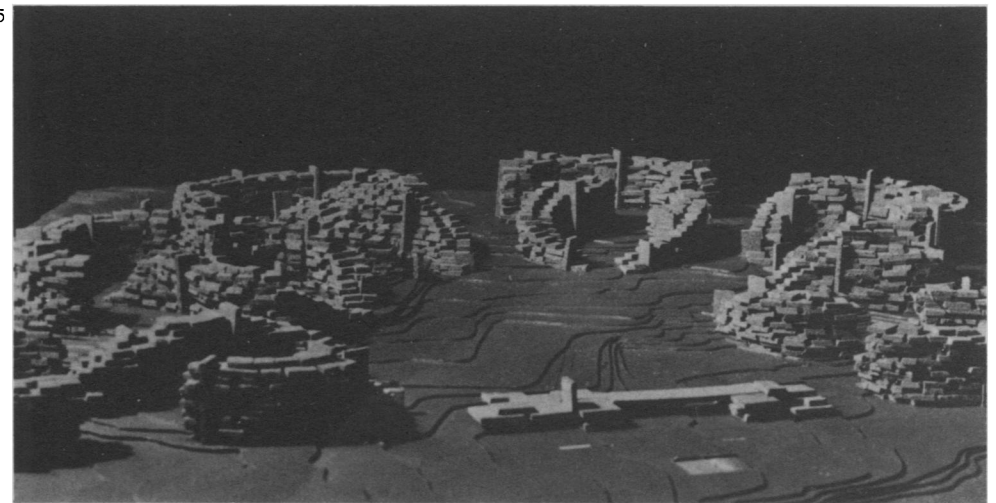
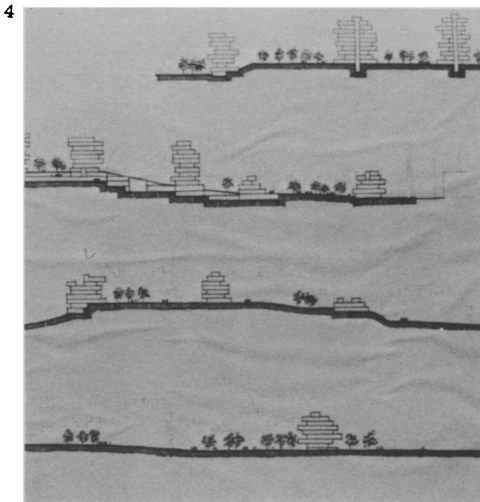
- 1. Site plan.
- 2. Service diagram.
- 3. Multi-use units.
- 4. Section through site.
- 5. Model of project.

Four kitchens facing an internal commons is what mothers need in order to function in the kitchen and allow their brood to play with neighbour's brood, specifically for those children who bear watching. At the same time, she may leave them out of sight with ease of mind if she knows that three other women are watching the children.

The buildings themselves form enclosure patterns which tend to give large spatial logic to the argument of communalism embracing all

message he could deliver it anywhere he could set up shop. In an urban setting, it was a store front.

The buildings don't have the beautiful architectural aesthetics of the modern architecture we are forced to accept in school. Aesthetics is not something that could only be manifested by some esoteric architect. Aesthetics comes out of the life style of a culture created by everyone. Before the white man came to Africa, there was no art. They did everything as best they



members of the community. We attempted to maintain a pattern of density which would change from low at the lowest levels to very high at the extreme top. This will not necessarily be the pattern of density all the time. This is why the land use map we had to make is one of the worst aspects of the graphics hangup of planners. Some of them can't see beyond their drawings. Our problem is in depicting a dynamic land use graphically which we solved verbally, not graphically.

This leads us to examine the state of planning graphics. Today, the typical gradients of yellow for residential, blue for institutional, red for commercial and so forth, is something we feel is irrelevant. For instance, we were asked - where were the churches? Churches are everywhere and anywhere the people wish to have them. Blacks have had store-front churches all through their history. This doesn't mean that they couldn't necessarily have a common type building for their churches. It simply meant that when a minister had a

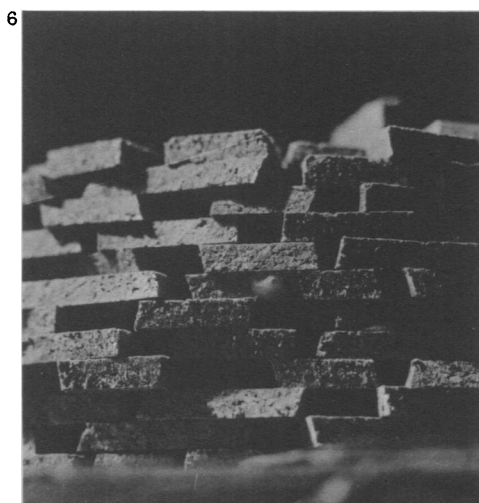
could. With the white man came art, artists, art museums, art critics and all those terrible examples of a culture which tries to analyse or control life instead of just simply living life. Which, I think, is the fundamental difference between the white race and the dark races. We Blacks simply live life and don't try to master it or explain it.

The building can be built of reinforced concrete. One thing that Black People have is a labor force. The Community would build the buildings themselves. Thus the land and the structures would be owned by the community. In Africa no one man in the village owned the land, everyone owned the land. The land could be acquired under the present Urban Renewal legislation even at a minus written down so that Black People could have money to develop it.

All parking is underground since urban land is too precious to be turned over to the automobile. That means that all the land is available for sole human use.

Emergency vehicles are the only ones allowed on the land. Not even police cruisers would patrol the land since Black People are capable of policing their own neighbourhood. The school has no parking for any teachers. They would live there, if they intend to teach there.

The common educational problem in our community is the average student has to react to a set of educational stimulants completely in contrast to each other. From 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. he is under a middle-class philosophy;



from 3 p.m. to 12 midnight he is under the influence of the BLOCK, and from midnight till morning he has to be party to family conflicts; a family who is kept constantly oppressed by the system.

The project begins by assuming 10,000 inhabitants which may decrease or increase from time to time. There are no designated play areas. You play or recreate in the area where you feel it and when you feel it. There are water holes in every compound. Water holes replace community centers as the central spot where everyone gathers to meet and socialize and outwardly emanate with their social life. In America the sculptured fountain or the bourgeoisie community center has replaced the water hole. In this water hole people will swim, lounge around the shore, stroll or do anything which one feels around water. Water is the basis of all life. Black people like to dance to express themselves. They are a warm, humanistic, sensuous race, filled with the natural joy of life.

It is common practice for the faculty at Howard University to invite guest critics (mostly whites) to come in and help judge the fourth year problems since the problems deal mainly with urban development. These guest critics really come to see how these little monkeys perform. Since the faculty felt fit to invite all these irrelevant people to watch us perform, we decided to invite a person who we felt would be more relevant to the judging of whether or not we had designed a true urban community in light of the realities of present urban America. All the Uncle Toms in the faculty and the racist whites were shaken when Stokeley Carmichael sat among them. Before appearing on the jury, Stokeley had expressed apprehension at being asked to give critical comment at an architectural jury. The point that we told Stokeley is that in order to discuss or be able to judge urban planning efforts all you have to know how to do, is to be relevant to the communities' needs. We explained that urban planning is nothing but urban politics. Stokeley was able to fit right into our general trend of thought once we had made our presentation. The point that we made to the whole jury is that first of all Black People have been fooled to think that only people with high-falutin degrees from Ivy League Schools can do planning. As far as Blacks are concerned those are the people that are the cause of their present planning dilemma.

Secondly, if we really examined planners and architects for what they are, which is essentially environmentalists, then we can say what has always been our contention, i.e., that anyone is an environmentalist and can be critical of the environment.

Just briefly we wish to mention a few authors and their books that have influenced our thinking: Malcolm X, Marshall McLuhan, Robert Venturi and his book "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture"; and Robert Ardrey's books "African Genesis" and "The Territorial Imperative".



6. Detail of disposition of dwelling units.

7. Stokeley Carmichael, left, at the jury.