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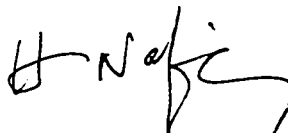
THE ART OF PLACE AND THE PLACE OF ART
AT PROJECT ROW HOUSES

by

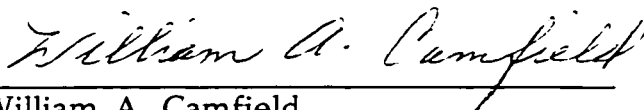
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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

The Art of Place and the Place of Art at Project Row Houses

Stephanie Paige Smith

Located within one of Houston's oldest African-American neighborhoods, Project Row Houses blends art and community revitalization under the repeated roof-peaks of once-decrepit shotgun row houses. Eight of the twenty-two houses shelter changing art installations that form the heart of the project; the rest provide settings for activities ranging from an after-school arts program to transitional housing for young single mothers.

This thesis traces the importance of place in the development of Project Row Houses, and in the nature of the art exhibited there. It also proposes characteristics of place-based art. "Place" here denotes physical location as well as the layers of history and culture that are created, sustained or recovered by those who have meaningful interaction with a location. In a contemporary world often described as fragmented and place-less, Project Row Houses' founders, by embedding their project in the specificity of a place, have activated a community and brought art into vibrant contact with the whole of life.

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Stephanie Smith
Houston, Texas

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine this site: two neat rows of narrow houses, the gleam of white-painted wood, the visual rhythm of gabled roof peaks and convivial porches. Add compact gardens in front of the houses, and a common strip of green between their rows. Picture the way the houses face a moderately busy street, and across the street, a broad bare asphalt lot. Make a note on your mental map reading “Project Row Houses, 2500 Holman Street.” Now add flux and flesh to that rather austere mental picture. Explore the layered history of these shotgun houses and the symbolism that has accrued around them, and note the character of the surrounding community. Enhance the visual with textures, smells, sounds, and the motion of people through time. Transform that site into a vibrant place.

This thesis centers on the place described above, and traces the importance of place in the development of Project Row Houses (PRH). (Fig. 1) Located within one of Houston’s oldest African-American neighborhoods and founded in 1992, PRH blends art and community revitalization under the repeated roof-peaks of once-decrepit shotgun row houses. Eight of the twenty-two houses shelter changing art installations that form the heart of the project; the rest provide settings for activities ranging from an after-school arts program to transitional housing for young single mothers.

Sensitivity to place has become increasingly visible within recent currents of artistic practice and critical discourse, and Project Row Houses resonates within this context. “Place” here denotes physical location as well as the layers of history and culture that are created, sustained or recovered by those who have meaningful interaction with a location. In a contemporary world often described as fragmented and place-less, Project Row Houses’ founders, by embedding their project in the specificity of a place, have activated a community and brought art into vibrant contact with the whole of life.

Place provided the filter through which I structured my discussion of the project's art historical context, its physical surroundings, its history, its art, and its future directions. Although this thesis addresses abstract notions, it is primarily a work of history, not a work of theory, and as such it is grounded in the tangible realities of a specific place. This concern inspired me to begin my thesis with an exercise in imagining the full texture of a moment at PRH. Although the photographs and other illustrations I have included provide visual information about this place, its sensual and temporal qualities can only be evoked by words and actualized through a leap of the reader's imagination.

This analysis offers the first critical study of Project Row Houses. Although the project has been described in numerous journalistic accounts, to my knowledge two short articles written by Sheryl Tucker, the University of Houston architecture professor who designed PRH's site plan, have been the only other scholarly essays on Project Row Houses.¹

Since Project Row Houses draws strength from its place, it seems logical to give the reader a chance to absorb some of the history and current texture of PRH's surroundings. The thesis begins with that need in mind, by establishing the project's setting in the Third Ward, a complex and historic African-American neighborhood. The focus narrows next onto the history and cultural resonance of the shotgun row houses that shelter PRH.

The second chapter moves into the theoretical realms surrounding the art of place. I begin with a discussion of place and its importance as an antidote to the increasing homogeneity, fragmentation and speeding change that shape our contemporary culture. Following this, I sketch out an art historical context for the current interest in art that addresses place. This context includes artistic critiques of the modernist "white cube" gallery spaces, the development

¹Sheryl Tucker, "Reinnovating the African-American Shotgun House," in *Places* 10 (Spring 1995): 64 - 71, and "Artists and the Shotgun: Houston's Project Row Houses," in *Art Papers* v. 19 (September-October 1995): 35 - 9.

of socially engaged and site-specific art, the use of recycled structures as display spaces, and recent interest in place-centered, activist public art projects.

The next chapter presents the history of PRH, addressing the processes used to embed the project in its place. The chapter begins with the founding vision behind PRH and the decision to shelter a public art and community revitalization project within a group of shotgun houses at 2500 Holman Street. PRH's choice to renovate those 22 shotgun houses rather than sheltering the project in a new structure has been particularly important to its success. I therefore devote considerable space to discussing the renovation process and its implications. (This phase of the project's development also holds special significance for me, for I first came to know PRH through a few sweaty afternoons of volunteer labor on one of the shotgun houses.) The creative processes of collaboration involved in building the organization, several of the programs through which it has embedded itself in its neighborhood, and the project's curatorial processes are also discussed.

The fourth section addresses the art inside those shotgun houses. The first part of this discussion is structured through a list of the characteristics that mark the art of place as manifested at Project Row Houses. These include: the integration of the work of art and its context; attention to the layers of history, culture, or popular memory in circulation around places; a tendency towards collaborative processes of art-making; the use of place to activate the full range of the visitor's senses and perception of time; an interest in processes of transformation; the creation of home places; the creation of new modes of the viewer's interaction with the art; and a tendency towards social activism. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, or prescriptive, but rather to offer a thinking model or theoretical filter through which to understand PRH and the art in its houses. The chapter closes with an examination of some of the issues involved in responding critically to the art of place.

The final chapter looks at PRH's plans to move forward in time and to expand into other places, as of fall 1997. It addresses PRH's efforts to create a sustainable organization, and describes two attempts to spread PRH's ideas and methods to other

places, noting some of the difficulties inherent in trying to transplant a place-centered practice to a new location.

Chapter I

PLACE HISTORY

Project Row Houses occupies two blocks of shotgun houses in the middle of Houston's Third Ward, an area now encrusted with layers of cultural significance — place history — for Houston's African-Americans. The neighborhood possesses a rich history and culture, including an interest in sustaining and recovering the memories that linger in locations and make them places. This interest in the power of place resonates at Project Row Houses. PRH has activated the shotgun house, a common type in the Third Ward and one redolent with African-American culture, as a powerful symbol of the community's heritage and potential.

Third Ward, Houston, Texas

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the term "Third Ward" has referred to a range of physical and social meanings. The city of Houston established the Third Ward in the late 1830s, when Houston was split into four political districts, or wards, centered at the intersection of Main and Congress Streets. Third Ward occupied the southeastern quadrant and spread south to an indeterminate end. The physical area designated by "Third Ward" has been rather elastic, but I use the term to refer to the roughly triangular area bounded by U.S. Highway 59 to the northwest, I- 45 to the northeast, and Alabama Street, Texas Southern University, and University of Houston to the south and east. (Fig. 2) "Greater Third Ward" refers to the neighborhoods that spread south from the "Third Ward."² This delineation retains the Third Ward's historical specificity while acknowledging its cultural influence on the surrounding area. Along with the shifting

²This description is taken from Third Ward Redevelopment Council's planning documents which acknowledge the encroachments of freeways and the spread of downtown. Their description of the "Greater Third Ward" includes parts of the Houston Medical Center in its purview, which may have been more optimistic than strictly accurate. *Greater Third Ward Community Plan* (Houston: Third Ward Redevelopment Council 1995): 5.

geographic area associated with the term “Third Ward,” other potential meanings have changed over time. Once a racially neutral term designating a political district, “Third Ward” has taken on racial connotations as the area’s African-American population has grown.

Newly freed blacks settled in this area after the Civil War, as well as in other pockets at the edges of the city nicknamed “Heavenly Houston.”³ Although African-Americans comprised the minority population in the Third Ward well into the twentieth century, they soon infused their cultural heritage into specific locations. In 1872, for instance, blacks commemorated the freeing of slaves in Texas (on June 19, 1865, or Juneteenth) by purchasing 10 acres of land to create Emancipation Park. The spark behind the park’s creation has been kept alive through the annual Juneteenth celebration still held there.⁴ The park, located a few blocks northwest of Project Row Houses, remains a “cultural landmark in Houston’s black community.”⁵ Donated to the city in 1916, it became “the first public park in Houston open to blacks.”⁶ The creation and continued use of Emancipation Park highlight an early, abiding interest in distilling communal history into specific locations, and to nurturing the memory of that history over time.

Third Ward’s black population grew with the city’s, and it has been a predominantly African-American neighborhood since the 1940s.⁷ Perhaps because of being cut off from many of the opportunities allowed by custom and law to white

³At the time of Emancipation, the city had a large population of black slaves, who along with already-free blacks and churches, helped the new arrivals to settle. The Fourth and, later, Fifth Wards also became centers of African-American population. See Cary D. Wintz, “Blacks,” in *The Ethnic Groups of Houston*, ed. Fred R. von der Mehden (Houston: Rice University Studies, 1984): 14-16. For more on “Heavenly Houston,” see Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station, 1987).

⁴“Blacks would travel to the park from throughout Houston to celebrate their emancipation each Juneteenth.” *Greater Third Ward Community Plan*, 109.

⁵Bullard, 18.

⁶Stephen Fox, *Houston Architectural Guide* (Houston: American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter: Herring Press, 1990): 149.

⁷Although residential segregation never became law in Houston, other segregation laws were enforced, and most blacks congregated in neighborhoods in Third, Fourth and Fifth Wards, many of which retained a small-town atmosphere into the 1940s. See Wintz, 20, 27.

Houstonians, the black community created its own vitality.⁸ In the Third Ward, this energy bloomed through thriving businesses (mostly located along Dowling Street) many churches, Texas Southern University (TSU, founded in 1947 as a state-funded, segregated black college) and a vibrant cultural scene that included blacks-only dance halls, theater, and visual arts. The neighborhood also possesses a tradition of social activism, such as the civil rights sit-ins led by TSU students. With the decline of other black neighborhoods such as the once-thriving Fourth and Fifth Wards (each of which had enjoyed the preeminent spot at earlier points), by mid-century, Third Ward became "the hub of black social, cultural and economic life in Houston."⁹

Today, African-Americans still dominate Third Ward's population, with 75% in the Greater Third Ward and 98% in the Third Ward proper.¹⁰ Architectural historian Stephen Fox has described the area's shift from "a culture formed under the impact of legal segregation to one that has won nominal equality but persists as a distinct subculture, not just as a matter of ethnic pride, but because of continuing social and economic disparities that sharply divide black from white."¹¹ The power of ethnic and community pride bound into this place should not, however, be underestimated. Unlike many urban areas where prosperous residents have fled to the suburbs, many African-Americans who could afford to leave the area have chosen instead to stay within the Greater Third Ward in elite neighborhoods along Brays Bayou, slightly south of the historic Third Ward.¹² Although unspoken segregation patterns and economics may have

⁸According to Wintz, most Houston "blacks responded to segregation by turning inward, relying on their own families and communities, creating their own institutions, and avoiding, as much as possible, contact with the outside (white) world." This included the celebration of Juneteenth, and "around the turn of the century they established their own fall festival, De-Ro-Loc, a black version of the historic No-Tsu-Oh Carnival (*No-Tsu-Oh* is *Houston* spelled backward.)." Wintz, 27.

⁹Bullard, 30. See also Wintz, 37.

¹⁰As of the 1990 Census, 664,227 blacks lived in the Houston/Galveston/Brazoria area, or approximately 18% of the total population of 3,711,043.

¹¹Fox, 144.

¹²These neighborhoods were Jewish enclaves until the 1960s. As Steven Fox notes this "marks almost the only occasion in Houston's history when insulated middle-class whites had to come to terms with the negative consequences of a system of racial privilege in which they were supposed to be beneficiaries. That Jewish families settled in Riverside Terrace in the 1930s because they were not welcomed in River Oaks has ensured that this episode is one of the few instances of real estate transition that has not merely been

played a part in the choice to stay in the area, the vital sense of place that persists here may have been important as well.

This mix of incomes and classes has helped sustain the Greater Third Ward area somewhat. Residents of all kinds seem willing to re-invest energy into the community, whether through business ventures, involvement at schools and churches or by volunteering at non-profit organizations like Project Row Houses. The area includes some thriving businesses, several black-owned banks, a large number of active, well-attended churches, the University of Houston, and Texas Southern University, the institution repeatedly cited as the focal point of black cultural life in Houston.

Narrow the focus to the Third Ward proper and the shifts between vibrant past and current decline become dramatic. The combination of economic activity and cultural vitality that once sparkled along Dowling Street, for instance, has dissipated (perhaps, as Fox notes, the bittersweet result of desegregation, but he overstates the case when he describes the street as “in ruins.”¹³) The center of gravity has shifted. A combination of official neglect, periods of economic decline in Houston, and the movement of middle and upper-class blacks to the Greater Third Ward and other neighborhoods, have left the poorest parts of the historic Third Ward impoverished indeed. The area lacks many basic services, from grocery stores to laundromats, and is riddled with vacant lots, crumbling houses and high crime rates. The Third Ward currently suffers from negative superlatives: the highest poverty rates, most houses in need of serious repair, the lowest property values, and largest amounts of population and employment loss in the Greater Third Ward area.¹⁴

Still, as Project Row Houses has proven, the power of place remains a powerful source of potential renewal. A few blocks away from PRH, Cleveland Turner, a.k.a. The

absorbed into the collective amnesia" of Houston.. Fox, 144.

¹³Fox, 144. Business corridors have shifted to Scott Street, Almeda Road, and Old Spanish Trail in Greater Third Ward, along with the shift of disposable income, but most residents travel out of the area to shop. *Greater Third Ward Community Plan*, 47.

¹⁴*Greater Third Ward Community Plan*, 12-13, 32-33, 38.

Flower Man, has covered his rented shotgun with bright plants and all manner of detritus, encrusting the house with color and form. (Fig. 3) Turner tells the story behind the house with obvious pleasure, using the cadences of a well-polished parable: while on his way from his home in Mississippi to California, he stopped in Houston and started drinking. After recovering from severe alcohol poisoning in the early 1980s, Turner decided to thank God by transforming his shotgun home into a place of beauty. Along with flowers, paint, and colorful cast-offs, Turner included several cotton plants that recall his journey (familiar to many African-Americans) from a rural past to the big city.¹⁵ Most elements of the house change, however, as Turner adds new plants and objects, repaints places, and removes older bits. The house stands as an organic (in both senses of the word) work of art, as an example of the beauty that can be created from humble materials, and as a memory-place where pieces of African-American culture can be sustained over time. With limited means and an exuberant creativity, Harper transformed his life and house into a public declaration of spiritual renewal.¹⁶

The Holman Street Baptist church offers another example of such creative attention to place. In the early 1990s, Reverend Leslie Smith, associate pastor, led his congregation's efforts to clean up several decrepit buildings near their Third Ward church. The church raised money to buy several neighboring properties, including twenty crackhouses and an hourly-rate motel that was converted into a Sunday school. Several of the crackhouses were renovated to hold Smith's drug treatment program, a conversion that cost more than it would have to raze the buildings and build new facilities. Smith seemed to share sensitivity to the meanings that can linger within buildings, for he found

¹⁵Turner shared this story with me in November, 1996; I saw him sitting outside as I drove by, and stopped to ask about the house. He pointed out a cotton plant, and marveled that so many of the neighborhood kids had never seen live cotton.

¹⁶John Biggers has noted the transformative aspect of another nearby house, that of Robert Harper, the Fan Man. He described it as "an art of transformation; this brother slipped through the mirror." Quoted in Robert Farris Thompson, "John Biggers' *Shotguns* of 1987: An American Classic," in *The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1995): 110.

the symbolic punch of turning a drug palace into a rehab center worth the extra expense.¹⁷

As made evident by such transformations, community pride and communal memory persist in the Third Ward. Many historic places in or near the neighborhood retain their potency as symbols of the continued vibrancy of Houston's African-American culture. Although located in one of the more decrepit areas of the Third Ward, Project Row Houses draws strength from many aspects of the neighborhood. The Third Ward's historical significance, its residents' interest and willingness to work for revitalization, a neighborhood ethos of making inventive and place-sensitive use of available materials, and the comparative stability of the Greater Third Ward area have all fed the project's success.

Site: The Shotgun House and 2500 Holman Street

Start with a wooden box, one room wide and a few rooms deep. Attach porches to the front and back, and place a chimney in the middle to fight winter chills. Raise the whole thing a few feet above the steamy swamp ground and align the doors to entice breezes through the length of the house. Top it off with a steeply pitched roof. Step back, and you will be looking at a shotgun house. Step up, and you can know the source of its name. Standing on the front porch, raise a shotgun to your shoulder and fire a bullet through the door. No walls will slow the bullet's rush toward the back door; it will exit cleanly along with the breeze.¹⁸ Twenty-two such shotgun houses, close-set in neat double rows on the north side of Holman Street, form the distinctive site of Project Row

¹⁷See Steve Brunsman, "Third Ward Church gets honors for amazing raze" *Houston Post* (June 23, 1994): 13, 15.

¹⁸For this definition of "shotgun" I have drawn on art historian Alvia Wardlaw and architectural historian John Michael Vlach. Wardlaw, *The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1995): 30. Vlach, "The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy," in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, eds. Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986). Vlach also provides information on some of the other variations on the form.

Houses, which sits in the historic Third Ward with downtown Houston looming Oz-like nearby.¹⁹ (Fig. 4)

Today, variations on this shotgun form exist throughout the United States. Such houses can be found in urban areas as well as rural spaces, in both white and black communities, and as individual homes as well as clusters of rental property or regimented company housing. All of these houses, however, probably derive from African forms, and Project Row Houses has performed a celebratory and selective act of place-archeology by reviving the African and African-American aspects of the shotgun's history.

Like many of the people who live in the Third Ward, these shotgun houses have roots in Africa, although their exact source is debated. According to architectural historian John Vlach, the shotgun house probably derived from a two-room dwelling type common in Yoruba compounds,²⁰ while art historian Robert Farris Thompson finds the gabled Beembe houses and Yema shrine houses of the Kongo, and the Chokwe houses of Angola, more likely sources.²¹ (Figs. 5 and 6) Both, however, believe that enslaved Africans infused their housing styles into the Caribbean, and eventually into the United States. Vlach, for instance, thinks the Yoruban proto-shotgun form transmuted into slave housing on Haitian plantations²² with some modifications such as the use of European construction methods. Free blacks adopted the style, which appeared in New Orleans in the early 19th century along with a wave of immigrant, free blacks from Haiti. (Figs. 7 and 8) From New Orleans, it diffused through United States.²³

¹⁹The shotguns at Project Row Houses actually vary slightly from this form, combining some elements of a compressed bungalow into "one of the many variations on the shotgun found in African-American communities across the country." Tucker, 65. See also Vlach, cited above.

²⁰ See Vlach, 71-77.

²¹ See Robert Farris Thompson, "The Visionary Presence of African-American Art," in *The Song That Named the Land* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989): 119-122.

²² Although Vlach does not fully explain how the slaves would have controlled structural design, he does suggest that this retention of an African style, with its links back to a distant home, may have been facilitated by similarities to a house type that the French had already borrowed from the Arawak Indians.

²³ See Tucker's previously cited article "Reinnovating the African-American Shotgun House," and also Robert Farris Thompson's essay cited above.

Although individual shotgun houses pepper the American landscape, they often appear in close-knit rows as in Project Row Houses. University of Houston architecture professor Sheryl Tucker, who designed the master plan for the PRH renovation, accepts Vlach's theory of the shotgun's Yoruban origin and believes that the communal nature of these spaces, with porches front and back and an "open room" of green space between the houses, echoed the communal nature of the Yoruban compound. She notes the way that Yoruban society emphasized "the continuity of the extended family and a reverence for one's ancestors. The lives of family and clan members were so interwoven with each other that the boundaries between self, family and community were ambiguous."²⁴ Shared outdoor spaces, porches, and the close-set, repeated forms of the shotgun houses thus could reinforce a sense of collective identity and cultural heritage. Tucker sees it this way, finding that the cultural roots and current form of the shotgun/row house express "the enduring social values and cultural traditions of generations of African-Americans."²⁵ Shotgun compounds, then, might facilitate communal activities and symbolize the values that support those activities, which could in turn allow black people to preserve culture and community in the face of white onslaught and deracination.

Cultural critic bell hooks sounds similar notes, but moves into the realm of aesthetics in a short essay on black vernacular architecture. hooks describes the wood-frame shacks (surely kin to shotgun houses) inhabited by African-Americans throughout the south, and notes the combination of personal freedom and communal spirit often expressed within those structures. She describes the ways their exterior spaces might be decorated or enhanced as public areas, noting that "often, exploited or oppressed groups of people who are compelled by economic circumstance to share small living quarters with many others view the world right outside their housing structure as liminal space where they can stretch the limits of desire and imagination."²⁶ She felt it essential to

²⁴Tucker, 66.

²⁵Tucker, 66. See also Wardlaw, 58.

²⁶bell hooks, "Black Vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*

remember such interventions, for often “we are led to believe that lack of material privilege means that one can have no meaningful constructive engagement with one’s living space and certainly no relationship to aesthetics.”²⁷ This sort of resistant, celebratory cultural memory seems very much a part of the shotgun house’s history, and is certainly current at PRH.

Other aspects of the shotgun house’s transmission through the United States, however, complicate its status as a positive cultural symbol. Although some shotguns were built by free African-Americans,²⁸ industry also co-opted the form, building shotgun compounds as company housing. The Sloss Furnaces in Birmingham, Alabama, for example, built shotgun compounds for both black and white workers.²⁹ Money and power surely played a larger role here than cultural sensitivity. The owners of Sloss Furnaces probably cared more about the economic efficacy of placing small, simple houses in tight rows, and about the labor control possible with many of its workers living nearby, than about maintaining African-American culture and values. Black laborers might have influenced or modified the design of the structures, and once built, black workers and their families may have invigorated the company-built compounds with a richly communal way of life. Still, the hardships of life in a company village, and the shotgun’s appropriation by an industry with little interest in sustaining cultural continuity or communal memory, should be noted.

The current resonance of this place — 2500 Holman Street, the site of Project Row Houses — includes this general history of the shotgun house along with more

(New York: The New Press, 1995): 149.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Vlach convincingly documented cases of shotguns built by free blacks in New Orleans, and Thompson notes the potential influence of free African laborers on shotguns and other American vernacular architecture (especially the spread of the porch). Vlach, 61-67, Thompson, 121. A shotgun built by its African-American owner on a lot opposite the Watts Towers in Los Angeles also provides an example of this; see Epilogue.

²⁹Now a National Historic Landmark, Sloss has moved some historic shotguns onto its property to present the living conditions of past employees. See Walter Bryant, “Sloss to re-create workers’ houses,” *The Birmingham News* (June 18, 1995): 20A. In addition to the shotguns, Sloss built other types of houses, and not all of its workers lived in company housing. The author in conversation with Bode Morin, Curator at the Sloss Furnaces, December 1997.

specific pieces of history, myth, and memory. In Houston, for instance, the shotgun has taken on special significance because of its celebrated importance to the paintings of John Biggers.³⁰ Biggers, one of the leaders of the post-World War II generation of black Houston artists, came to the city in 1949 to found Texas Southern University's art department. Born in a shotgun house in North Carolina, he remembers these houses as safe-zones (with floors "so carefully scrubbed with homemade lye soap that when you slept on them they smelt sweet"³¹) and the porches as "talking places." Once in Houston, Biggers would walk the streets of the Third and Fourth Wards, noting "the rhythm of their light and shadow, the triangle of their gables, the square of the porch, three over four, like the beat of a visual gospel."³²

Biggers eventually combined repeated images of these houses into rhythmic patterns in paintings such as *Shotguns*, 1987.³³ (Fig. 9) He linked his artistic use of shotgun houses to this particular place and its continuing values: "I told myself hey, I've got to show this whole community as it is . . . As I passed the churches and the jukejoints it come to me: you ain't painting perspective, you're painting *shotgun blocks*, their own spatial concept, all the houses of the past, all the houses of the future, just let it roll."³⁴ The shotgun houses in Biggers' abstracted representations of African-American life have been described as portraying ascension and transcendence,³⁵ as "symbols of endurance and order in the African-American community"³⁶ and as expressing "the idea of community characterized by closeness, interdependence and continuity."³⁷ Such

³⁰For more on Biggers, see the book he co-wrote with Carroll Sims, *Black Art in Houston* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, c. 1978.), the catalogue of the exhibition curated by Alvia Wardlaw, *The Art of John Biggers: the View from the Upper Room*, (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1995), and 117 - 123 of Thompson, 1989.

³¹Thompson, 1989, 122.

³²*Ibid.*

³³Biggers first used the shotgun house form in *Mother and Child*, 1944. Although it reappeared in other paintings, the repeated form only became prevalent in his work in the late 1980s.

³⁴As quoted in Thompson, 1995, 110.

³⁵Wardlaw, 30.

³⁶Wardlaw, 63.

³⁷Edmund Barry Gaither, "John Biggers: A Perspective," in *The Art of John Biggers: The View from the Upper Room*, 90.

place-centered associations with communal activity, with the ways that art and life can intertwine, and with the continuation of African-American cultural traditions, dovetail with many of the aims of Project Row Houses. Sheryl Tucker, in fact, describes PRH as “a spatial unfolding of Biggers’ paintings.”³⁸

Before PRH restored these shotgun houses, however, it seems doubtful that those positive Afrocentric qualities were visible to anyone other than an artist with sun gilding his sight. As with the workers’ housing at Sloss Furnaces, these houses were built by people who probably had little interest in, or knowledge of, the shotguns’ African-American history. Frank and Katie Trombatore, an Italian couple who owned and lived in the now-closed corner store, built this group of shotgun houses in the late 1930s as rental property.³⁹ As with the Sloss Furnaces, this use of the shotgun form by white builders complicates the form’s legacy as a symbol of African-American self-determination, and adds a layer of commercial self-interest. Did the Trombatores choose the form because they knew it was common in black neighborhoods in Houston (particularly Freedman’s Town in the Fourth Ward) and would therefore attract renters?⁴⁰ Were they drawn to its efficient use of land and materials, which would keep building costs down? Were the original occupants African-American? Although it is difficult to know for certain, African-Americans probably occupied the houses from the time of their construction, for blacks sometimes lived near immigrant white storeowners and the area surrounding PRH was 98% black by 1940.⁴¹

³⁸Tucker, 70.

³⁹Tucker, 64-65.

⁴⁰I have been told of shotgun houses built and occupied by whites in other parts of the country, from St. Louis to East Texas. A thorough examination of the spread of this form from African-American roots through white industrial housing and vernacular architecture would be welcome.

⁴¹According to James SoRelle’s 1980 dissertation, *The Darker Side of “Heaven”: The Black Community in Houston, Texas, 1917-1945*, although racial segregation remained incomplete, the white presence within African-American areas was often restricted to “white storeowners, in many cases immigrants, [who] lived next door to the stores they operated in black neighborhoods.” Data gathered by the Urban League and reprinted by SoRelle lists the 1940 population of Census Tract 38 (the area immediately around PRH) as 6,533, of which 98% were black. See SoRelle, 225 - 6.

With the decline in Houston's economy in the early 1980s, conditions at the site deteriorated. By the early 1990s, the owner had stopped making any effort to collect rent or to maintain the property, although the hypodermic needles and trash littering the area bore witness to its continued use.⁴² As with other decrepit shotguns in the area, these houses became tarnished by associations with shame, poverty, and oppression that displaced more positive connotations. Before Project Row Houses began, the sense of place associated with 2500 Holman Street surely involved a complex brew of aversion and pride.

⁴²The author in conversation with Deborah Grotfeldt, November 5, 1996 and artist Fred Wilson, March 19, 1996.

Chapter II

CONTEXTUALIZING THE ART OF PLACE

Using the creative energy of artists, an activist spirit and a collaborative manner of working, Project Row Houses has tapped into the history, cultural memory and symbolic resonance of the shotgun houses and their surroundings. In doing so, PRH has activated place. Its attention to these social, cultural and historical associations, along with its socially engaged sensibility and many of its aesthetic and pragmatic strategies, aligns PRH with a genre of artistic production that might be termed “the art of place.” Such place-centered artistic practices are in turn aligned with several strands of recent artistic and museum practices (and in opposition to others). This art-historical context will be addressed briefly in this chapter. First, however, it seems necessary to clarify what I mean by place.

Space And Place

The concept of place has been probed by urban historians and cultural geographers, by thinkers and artists of all stripes. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard, for instance, has explored place as manifested in one of its most familiar manifestations: the house.⁴³ Layered with history and memory, homes can trigger emotions that shade from nostalgia to anger to longing to comfort, sometimes calling forth all at once. They suggest activities of homecoming and storytelling, of secrets and neurosis, shelter and renewal. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard explored the phenomenological and psychoanalytical implications of the house, a discussion which adds another, more interior, layer of place-meaning to the shotgun houses at 2500 Holman Street. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

⁴³Bachelard also discusses other types of shelters, such as shells and nests, which are less immediately relevant to this thesis. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), especially chapters one and three.

took another approach to understanding place.⁴⁴ In the “Treatise on Nomadology” they describe place through the nomad who exists at the edge of society and moves along a variety of familiar paths that lead from point to point. These points (for example, watering holes) might normally be the focus for a discussion of place, but for the nomad as described by Deleuze and Guattari, the path is more important: “the in-between . . . enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own.”⁴⁵ The nomad thus experiences place through connection with an entire region (a connection which is continually made manifest through contact with changing pieces of that region) rather than as manifested in a permanent home or experienced through intimate association with a physical structure.

Such disparate understandings of place show the difficulty in coming to any shared understanding of the meaning of the word. As architectural historian Dolores Hayden notes, “‘place’ is one of the trickiest words . . . a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid.”⁴⁶ Perhaps the term is so slippery because it seems at first to be such a basic component of existence. As philosopher Edward S. Casey, who has written one book on the modern experience of place and another on the concept’s philosophical history, wrote, “can you imagine what it would be like if there were no places in the world? . . . I suspect that you will not succeed in this thought-experiment, which is not just difficult to perform (can you really eliminate any trace of place from your experience of *things*?) but also disturbing (can you really picture yourself in *a world* without places?).”⁴⁷ The term slips when one tries to understand its complexity; paradoxically, place can be a difficult concept to ground.

⁴⁴See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), especially chapter twelve and, 380-387. I found Edward Casey’s commentary on this work extremely helpful; see Casey, 1997, 301-308.

⁴⁵Deleuze and Guattari, 380.

⁴⁶Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995): 15.

⁴⁷Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993): ix.

My own conception of place owes much to cultural geographer David's Harvey's thinking on the postmodern experience of space and time.⁴⁸ A basic definition of space might describe it as that-which-surrounds: the expanse in which we and all things exist, and that extends to the expanding borders of the universe. Place could then be defined as a specific area within space. Harvey, however, describes a postmodern condition in which we experience space as increasingly compressed and time as perpetually accelerating, a situation which shapes any experience of place.

One of these qualities — the compression of space — has become a pervasive aspect of contemporary experience, and seems especially pertinent for this discussion of place. Although the physical amount of space between, say, the United States and India has not changed since the turn of the twentieth century, the perceptual distance between them has decreased. Both nations have been brought closer, bound together by a web of global changes in infrastructure and technology. These changes include proliferation of transnational corporations and globalized capital, the growth of pervasive networks of media and transportation, and the increasing mobility and hybridity of people and cultures. I can fly to Delhi, for instance, in a matter of hours. I can send electronic mail to an artist there, and keep up with the intricacies of city politics through newspapers or the internet. I can find at least three brands of Indian curry paste at my local grocery store, or buy a sari or a Hindu comic book in an Indian-American strip mall ten minutes down the highway. Delhi, then, does not feel so far away. These linkages do not add up to being there, however. Pieces of there and here have intermingled but the actual experience of being-in-Delhi remains distinct, and distant.

The perception of shrinking space has been accompanied by rapid shifts of people, products and information, and by a growing sense of pressure for many people. An example from high-school physics rings true here: when the diameter of a pipe becomes smaller, water flows faster and the pressure can become immense. Thus most of

⁴⁸See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1990).

us experience an increasingly interconnected global society undergoing rapid change, with fragments of various cultures floating within an increasingly pressurized and compressed space.

How, then, to define place in relation to this new conception of space? Places exist within space: they occupy areas carved from within its expanse.⁴⁹ These areas may be marked by boundaries — a tree, a wall, a street, a line on a map — that separate one place from another and from the rest of space. Places, however, consist of more than just area or volume. Human content — layers of history, memory, and daily activity — activates them, giving life and meaning to physical locations.

Created by people with subjective and mutable needs, the character and boundaries of places shimmy over time and according to individual and collective needs. Take, for example, the term “Third Ward.” As noted earlier, the meanings signified by the term have shifted over time, and are loaded with subjective associations as well as geographical connotations. The media and many white Houstonians, for instance, often equate “Third Ward” with “Poor/Dangerous/Black Area.” For others, “Third Ward” evokes a troubled but still viable community, a home place. As one artist associated with PRH observed, “To me, the Third Ward is the only area in town that really is a neighborhood.”⁵⁰ As in the perceived shrinking of space, place involves perception as much as any empirical reality.

By place, then, I mean both a physical location and the layers of history, memory, and human activity that have accrued there over time. Place — whether a home such as Bachelard describes or another type of location — can provide a node of stability, something to grasp amidst the blurring rush, the drift, the fragmentation of homogenized

⁴⁹My ideas about place, and the art of place, have been profoundly influenced by David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Dolores Hayden's *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), Edward Casey's previously cited *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: The University of California Press, 1997), and Jeff Kelley's essay “Common Work,” in *New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995): 139-151.

⁵⁰Tierney Malone in conversation with the author, December 2, 1996.

and shrinking space. The grounded specificity of place provides one way for individuals to gain a sense of self and community in a time of flux and homogenization. As Harvey has noted, the concrete nature of places provide a means to find “secure moorings in a shifting world. Place-identity, in this collage of superimposed spatial images that implode in upon us, becomes an important issue.”⁵¹ This way of thinking about place grounds my understanding of Project Row Houses and its importance within a broader sweep of contemporary experience.

Contextualizing the Art of Place

Attention to place appears in artistic practice as well as in everyday experience. Although place itself has only recently become a major part of the discourse about contemporary art, the art of place has historical precedents. These include several generations of artists and others who attempted to take art beyond place-less modes of creating, presenting and experiencing art and to create socially engaged art that addresses people and place. Over time, sensitivity to the richness of places as “reservoirs of human content” has fed art that may, in some small way, counter the sense of rootlessness and isolation so often experienced in an era of compressed, fragmented space and ever-speeding change.

Place v. the White Cube

As described by Brian O’Doherty in a now-classic series of essays, the white cube, or modernist gallery, provided an airless, timeless setting for viewing art. This white cube privileged a certain kind of art (abstract painting) and a certain type of viewer (elite, white, educated, probably male).⁵² Denuded of anything that might contaminate

⁵¹Harvey, 302. For a quick review of recent ideas about place, see Hayden, 15 - 43, and for a more comprehensive treatment of philosophical approaches to place, see Casey, 1997.

⁵²See Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica and San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986). See also Carol Duncan’s *Civilizing Rituals* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 102-32.

the viewer's aesthetic one-on-one with each object, it created an almost sanctified space that raised art above the world. As O'Doherty wrote, "the ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art.'" As a type, the white cube encapsulates the chilly, elite pallor, mausoleum air, and auratic celebration of individual genius that have been condemned in a chorus of recent museum critiques.⁵³

These criticisms of the white cube expose its utter lack of place. A white cube could be extracted from one location and inserted in another without losing its integrity. Traditionally, it offers no engagement with locality, and sets art apart as something that exists over yonder, in the temple, rather than something that can be part of the flux of life. As O'Doherty noted, time, and therefore life, have no business there. Given such qualities, the temptation to champion the shotgun house as the antithesis of that white cube is hard to resist. Still, as will be discussed later, the peaked roofs, front porches and rough-hewn gallery spaces of Project Row Houses undo the pristine geometry of the white cube without completely subverting its ethos.

Although its creators may not have specifically intended to challenge the white cube, PRH relates to a broad current of art that has sought to present and experience art in new ways. This search by artists for alternatives — often a reaction against the art institutions in power at any given moment, sometimes by artists denied access to those institutions through systemic problems such as racism, sexism, or poverty — can be traced through several centuries of art-making.⁵⁴ More recently, over the past three decades a growing number of artists, institutions, and curators have challenged the separation of art from society. Instead of abandoning art to the white cube or high temple, they dragged it into the flux and mess and vigor of everyday life.

⁵³In the decades since O'Doherty's article, his astute criticisms have become so accepted a part of the discourse that "White Cube" can be a term of endearment, the sort of mild tweaking one might give to a dissolute uncle whose flaws, while obvious, don't preclude affection.

⁵⁴For instance, these might include 18th- and 19th-century single picture exhibitions, the Salon de Refuses, or Dada and Surrealist exhibitions and performances.

This history resists condensation, but I will point to several moments of particular relevance to Project Row Houses and the art of place. Expanding out from the late 1950s, many forms of artistic practice developed (for instance, Happenings, performance, Conceptual art, earthworks, installation) that took art into unusual venues, from city streets to magazine pages to remote spots in the landscape. Many of these practices followed the modernist trend of expanding possible roles for art and artists. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, for instance, continue to mobilize vast numbers of people to plan and present their temporary, large-scale projects. They bring art and life together both through poetic interventions in various landscapes and by considering all parts of the process as art, from contract negotiation to sewing. Joseph Beuys also expanded these definitions, albeit with more activist intentions than the Christos. Beuys' well-known motto, "Everyone's an artist," indicated not that everyone should paint or sculpt, but rather "that everyone possessed creative faculties that must be identified and developed"⁵⁵ and that these energies could contribute to his utopian ideals of social sculpture.

During the same period, socially engaged feminist, ethnic, and politically activist artists also explored territory outside the white cube. Until fairly recently, such artists (women, minorities, activists) have usually been overlooked or excluded by the curatorial keepers of traditional display spaces. Such exclusion, coupled with a widespread use of art to explore identity, power, and community, fostered work in locations and with audiences outside the artistic mainstream.⁵⁶ Mural projects, for instance, often use images of a shared but marginalized history, as a vehicle for remembrance and cultural connection. At Texas Southern University, John Biggers and fellow teacher Carroll Simms led several generations of students in such efforts; they turned many bare walls around

⁵⁵Heiner Stachelhaus, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987).

⁵⁶Although I had been thinking in these terms already, Suzanne Lacy's introduction to *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995) gave me new insight into the histories of public and alternative artistic practices.

campus into evocations of African-American culture.⁵⁷ In another sort of public project, in the late 1970s Jenny Holzer created xeroxed lists of disquieting statements centered around power and gender (“Abuse of power comes as no surprise.” “Money creates taste.” “Men can’t protect you anymore.”) She called these sometimes oblique, often contradictory statements *Truisms*, couched each in a neutral tone of authority, and posted them around New York, the better to insinuate its way into the consciousness of unsuspecting passers-by.⁵⁸ Such practices and many others reached audiences outside the white cube.

Site-Specificity and Art in Recycled Structures

Activity outside the white cube has taken many forms. One strand, site-specific art, has been of particular importance to the art of place since both activate the connection between a work of art and its physical environment. In both cases, art might be integrated into its surroundings, or might involve an activity, discrete object, or group of objects created for a particular setting (a museum space, a “real-world” structure or public area, a spot in the landscapes). Site-specific and place-specific art both engage the specific qualities of an architectural space or physical location, but site-specific art often ellides the layered human content so important to place. The art of place is always site-specific, but not all site-specific art addresses those qualities of place.

The motif of the recycled structure has recurred throughout this movement beyond the white cube and into site- and place-specific art. By recycled structures, I mean buildings that were made for one use (as a factory, a store, a warehouse, a home) and then recycled into places to create, display and experience art. Artists and curators could then call attention to the relationship between a work of art and a no-longer neutral

⁵⁷Over time, some of these murals have been destroyed, but many remain accessible to any visitor. For more on this history, see Biggers and Simms, 1978.

⁵⁸Holzer's work has become more expensive (with phrases carved into tomb-like marble or emblazoned on artful streams of LED boards) and less subversively public. It usually appears in museums, either in white-cube gallery spaces or as gift-shop merchandise.

architectural setting, and might even transform the entire structure into a work of art. The use of artistically recycled structures has spread internationally as well as in PRH's home city, Houston, and holds particular relevance for Project Row Houses' reuse of the shotgun houses.

The recycled house or domestic space has attracted many artists. Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* (1923-1930's), in which he transformed several consecutive apartments in Hanover, Germany into fantastic constructions, might be considered the grandfather of this practice (and would surely have been interesting to Bachelard). More recently, Gordon Matta-Clark sculpturally transformed houses and other structures, as in his famous work *Splitting* (1974). (Fig. 10) For this piece, Matta-Clark altered an abandoned urban house by carving out some exterior spaces and by creating a split that widened as it cracked the height of the house. Through this process, he exploited the building's non-art status by using it as a found object in "real" space. He created a work of art that had to be experienced by moving through the entire thing and encountering its shifting perspectives through passing time.⁵⁹ Matta-Clark inserted something unexpected into the daily routine of urbanites, and offered a "countercultural critique of dehumanized urban renewal and international style architecture" by creating awareness of the uses of urban space and exploitations of real-estate industry.⁶⁰ No mere formalist project, *Splitting* attempted to bridge art and life and to reach audiences outside the white cube.

Artistically recycled structures in Houston provide another point of context for PRH and the art of place. In the early 1990s, artist Dan Havel transformed two abandoned bungalows in the West End neighborhood into sculptural projects. (Both projects — *Alchemy House*, 1994 and *O House*, 1996, in collaboration with Kate Petley and Dean Ruck — have since been demolished). The Houston context might also be extended to the many visionary environments in the city, which include John

⁵⁹Sandler, 67.

⁶⁰Sandler, 68.

Milkovisch's *Beer Can House*, (Fig 11) and the homes of Robert Harper, the Fan Man and Cleveland Turner, the Flower Man. (Fig. 3) In each of these folk environments, self-taught artists have used humble materials to transform their houses into vibrant, public expressions of creative vision.⁶¹

This practice of infusing art into preexisting structures has also been taken up by arts organizations and curators. Since the early 1970s, many houses, schools, factories, train stations and other vernacular buildings have been recycled into exhibition spaces. In some cases, the transformation has resulted in fairly traditional museums⁶² but many of these new ventures focused their energies on site-specific projects by contemporary artists.⁶³ Sometimes site-specificity extends to institutional activism as well; the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh (founded 1977, with art installations beginning in 1982) and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Massachusetts (another factory-turned-arts-space, scheduled for full opening in 1998) both try to stimulate the economic and cultural revitalization of their communities.

Curators have also organized temporary exhibitions in recycled structures, sometimes scattering exhibition sites around a city. The domestic spaces of houses or apartment buildings have proven particularly attractive sites, and several influential exhibitions in such spaces could be seen as precursors of Project Row Houses art-houses. These include Jan Hoet's *Chambres d'amis* exhibition, in which 51 homes in Ghent, Belgium became exhibition spaces in 1986, and *Pour vivre heureux, vivons cachés*,

⁶¹I have excluded Jeff McKissack's *Orange Show*, one of the most famous folk art environments in Houston, since McKissack built it rather than transforming an existing structure.

⁶²For instance, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

⁶³The movement to create site-specific art, and the creation of institutional spaces appropriate for that art (as opposed to the white cube) may have been mutually reinforcing trends. The number of such spaces is too great to list here, but a few others of note include the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's Geffen Contemporary building and PS1 in Long Island City. For an overview of these developments, see Mary Jane Jacob's introductory essay for the exhibition *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival*. Exh. cat. (New York: Rizzoli, 1991): 12 - 19; see also Harry Schwalb's "The Mattress Factory: 'Flexibility, Innovation, and Risk,'" *ArtNews* (September 1997): 43-44; Mary Certuti's introduction to *Capp Street Project 1991 - 1993* (San Francisco: Capp Street Project, 1994) and Ken Johnson's "Report from North Adams: Back to the Future Again," *Art in America* v. 84 (October 1996): 51-55.

organized by the Association pour l'art contemporain, Nevers, France, in which fourteen artists worked in situ at houses and apartments. Echoes of these exhibitions include recent projects such as a series of *Home Shows*, in San Diego in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which artists created installations in private residences which were then opened to the public.

As with the art projects and institutions discussed above, however, these exhibitions seemed to have more to do with site than with place. Vernacular architectural spaces (school, factory, house) and non-elite surroundings (working class neighborhoods) suggest possibilities for bringing art and life closer together, and for creating art that responds to the richness of a location. Sometimes, however, the installations created and presented at these spaces and in these exhibitions could be re-presented in a white cube with little loss of meaning. Even when location has been incorporated into installations, it has often responded more to the surface qualities of a physical location than to place as I think of it, with its awareness of popular memory, of layered, sometimes contested, histories, and of the potency of cultural symbolism.

Site, Place and Public Art

In the United States, interest in taking art beyond the white cube was mirrored and eventually nurtured by the National Endowment for the Arts' Art in Public Places program, started in 1967. Many early public art efforts featured "plop art" sculptures set within corporate plazas, and although these works were taken outside the white cube, they lacked engagement with their surroundings. (Examples of this kind of art pepper downtown Houston.) Although over time, mainstream public art began to pay attention to the physical qualities and sometimes the history or current uses of a site, place did not figure into the discourse until recently. As Jeff Kelley has noted, "what too many artists did was to parachute into a place and displace it with art. Site specificity was really more

like the imposition of a kind of disembodied museum zone onto what already had been very meaningful and present before that, which was the place.”⁶⁴

Recently, however, a number of artists, curators, and writers have acknowledged the importance of place and place-centered practices in creating vibrant, meaningful public art. This may relate to the expanding definition of “public art,” which now extends well beyond the sculpture-on-the-pedestal/plaza, or even the site-specific project, to include work based in the Conceptual, performance, process, and socially activist practices created by artists seeking to move into that famous gap between art and life. Artist Suzanne Lacy has been a key proponent of this kind of practice, which she dubbed “new genre public art,” and which relates directly to PRH’s ideals. As editor of *Mapping the Terrain*, a recent book of essays on the topic, she described the new genre public artist’s interest in leftist politics, social activism, redefined audiences, relevance for communities (particularly marginalized ones) and collaborative methodology.”⁶⁵ All of these qualities relate directly to the art of place as manifested at Project Row Houses.

Curator Mary Jane Jacob has been another key proponents of this strand of site-specific public art, with its attention to place, to alternative histories, and to engaging diverse audiences beyond the museum and the public-art pedestal. In one of her best-known exhibitions, *Places with a Past* at the Spoleto Festival in 1991, artists spent time getting to know the city and then created site-specific, and sometimes place-sensitive, projects around Charleston, North Carolina.⁶⁶ For *Culture in Action*, the 1996 manifestation of Sculpture Chicago, Jacob pushed further into the realm of place by inviting artists work intensely with (not just within) eight neighborhoods scattered around the city. Jacob’s statement about the benefits of creating and experiencing art in places, rather than museums or studios, bears quoting at length:

⁶⁴Kelley, as quoted in Lacy’s introduction, 25.

⁶⁵Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995): 25.

⁶⁶As Jacob described it, the “result was art that addressed a location, not just from a design and physical point of view, but also in relation to a social and cultural past. The installations became like chapters in a book that together told a larger, more complete, and alternative story of Charleston.” Jacob, 17.

“Contextualizing the work captures a premuseum state of art as much as it may take an oppositional stance to institutions. In order to become part of the ‘natural’ surroundings and daily experience, contextual art integrates objects with site, promoting the concept of art as environmental and experiential . . . It reinvestigates the place of art in society; it presents the artist as a catalyst or activist for change while it reintroduces the artist as shaman or healer in the community; it seeks to broaden the public for art that has taken on privatizing aspects in a world of museum parties, memberships, and admissions, and in cities where social boundaries corresponding to geographic divides inhibit audiences from reaching the doors of the museum.”⁶⁷

Although Jacobs tends to use the term “site” rather than “place,” her ideals seem very much in keeping with the art of place.

Dolores Hayden provides another example of the resonance of the notion of place in current discourse about and production of art. In her recent book *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History* Hayden, an architectural historian, invokes the potential for artists, architects, social historians and community members to collaborate on projects that recover and mark the often-forgotten urban history of ethnic groups, workers, and women. Before joining the faculty at Yale, Hayden founded a group called The Power of Place that initiated several such projects in Los Angeles. These projects, including the marking of the homestead of former slave Biddy Mason (Fig. 12) and a timeline weaving through the sidewalks of Little Tokyo, have been particularly sensitive to the history that can be reactivated by the art of place.

As a final point of context, I wonder how this recent attention to the importance of place in contextualizing art, activating communal memory, and sustaining oppositional histories might be related to the current interest in other kinds of memorials, such as Holocaust museums and museums devoted to ethnic history. Both the Civil Rights

⁶⁷Mary Jane Jacob, “Outside the Loop,” *Culture in Action* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995): 51.

Institute in Birmingham and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., for instance, seem to use some elements of the art of place to animate the past in meaningful way, without sliding into pathos or kitsch. Although not rooted in place to the same degree as the other examples discussed here, the proliferation of such memorializing institutions reiterates our enduring need for connection to the past and to other people in an increasingly fragmented world.

Project Row Houses, then, relates to several interconnected art-historical contexts. Aligned with critiques of the modernist white cube, PRH reflects widespread interest in creating and presenting art outside traditional museum and gallery spaces. Such art often reaches non-traditional audiences, sometimes through placement in recycled structures. PRH is also linked to a tradition of socially engaged art, and most specifically to the recent spread of place-centered, activist public art projects: the art of place.

Chapter III

WORKING PROCESS / WORK IN PROGRESS

The working process of building Project Row Houses at 2500 Holman Street has combined a socially activist spirit, attention to collective memory and communal history, the use of collaborative working processes, the transformation of humble materials, the pragmatic application of creativity and resourcefulness, and an interest in bringing art into the everyday activities of a particular place. This process has combined physical labor with less concrete tasks of research, inventive problem-solving, network-building, and fund-raising: all necessary skills in the creation of the art of place.⁶⁸

Founding Visions

The rich potential of the site at 2500 Holman was first perceived by Rick Lowe, an African-American artist and activist with a long-standing interest in bringing art to audiences outside the traditional confines of the white cube. (Fig. 13) Before getting into details of biography, it seems important to note one of the difficulties in discussing projects like PRH within the standard critical confines of art history. Such projects involve the committed labor and communal spirit of a large number of people, so it seems especially important to avoid reinscribing modernist notions of the individual artist as an isolated genius. As will become clear, Lowe's background, as well as his vision, intelligence, personal support within the community, and intensity of commitment have been crucial to the project's success, but that vision has been made manifest through communal effort.

⁶⁸My information on specific developments within Project Row Houses has been drawn from a variety of sources, including PRH's archival and publicity materials, Tom Finkelpearl's interview with Rick Lowe, my conversations with Lowe, Grotfeldt and others involved with the project, and my own experience with PRH. Quotes, points of divergence, and unusual pieces of information have been cited individually.

Born in 1961 in Eufaula, Alabama, Lowe studied landscape painting at Columbus College, a small school in Georgia. Training in a such a venerable genre might have led Lowe to an easel-bound career. Once he finished school, however, Lowe began making art intended to reach audiences outside traditional venues. In 1983, for instance, after finishing school and moving to Mississippi, he and a friend created a drive-through exhibit and encouraged passing motorists to “drive off the main drag through [the friend’s] little U-shaped driveway and check out the art. That was [Lowe’s] first attempt to find a different audience.”⁶⁹ When Lowe moved to Houston a few years later and settled in the Third Ward, he made installations and paintings that addressed social issues, but presented these works in alternative spaces and museums rather than trying to recapture the truly alternative audiences reached in the drive-through piece. Lowe began to feel, however, that the museum and gallery-goers were not connecting with his work in any meaningful way, and in 1988, he decided to take a break from art.⁷⁰

After spending time learning about his adopted neighborhood, reading up on African-American culture, and supporting himself as a craftsman, Lowe began making art again. He focused his energies on the Third Ward, and in 1990 made the first of several outdoor installations intended to raise community awareness about political issues such as police brutality and domestic violence. These works of art helped crystallize several issues for Lowe. Describing community response to the first of these pieces, he said: “It was very important for me because it showed me that there was an appreciation for aesthetics in the African-American community. I had somehow been convinced that it wasn’t there. You know the attitude, “Uneducated, poor people don’t have the ability to

⁶⁹The information in this paragraph is derived from Lowe’s comments in an unpublished interview between Rick Lowe and Tom Finkelpearl made public in the reading room in the *Uncommon Sense* exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, March 16 - July 6, 1997, 1.

⁷⁰Lowe described audience responses to an installation he created for a group exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum in 1988 as key to this decision. He had created a piece in response to a lynching that had occurred in Mississippi, and most of the people who saw the work were white and middle class. “I didn’t sense sincerity among the viewers in relation to my work. It was at that point that I decided this was not the right place for my work. I was dealing with the wrong people.” Finkelpearl interview, 2. For brief information on Lowe’s contribution to the exhibition, see *The First Texas Triennial* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1988): 40-41.

appreciate the fine arts.”⁷¹ Lowe decided to focus on this community as his primary audience, rather than trying to reach everyone.

Several overlapping events in the early 1990s prepared Lowe to focus his artistic and activist ideals into those rows of shotgun houses. First, in 1991, the Snug Harbor Cultural Center invited him to create a piece for its annual outdoor sculpture show on Staten Island. Lowe chose to address the African-American struggle for justice, and decided to “build a little house for the installation, to make the house a part of the piece and the piece a part of the house. . . [he] liked the way that worked out, and started thinking that maybe that would be the idea — to make houses for other people to use in their own way.” Second, during the early 1990s Lowe met periodically with six other black artists for casual discussions on the importance of reconnecting African-American artists and communities. One of the ideas that emerged in that process centered on creating installations in houses.⁷² Third, when Lowe co-curated *Fresh Visions / New Voices: Emerging African-American Artists in Texas* for the Glassell School of Art during 1992, one artist suggested building a house as part of the exhibition.⁷³ Finally, Lowe studied with John Biggers at Texas Southern University during this period, and developed a deep respect for Biggers’ interest in reclaiming and celebrating African-American heritage as well as for the older artist’s use of the shotgun house as a potent symbol of that heritage.⁷⁴

These events led to a pivotal moment. Late one afternoon in the summer of 1992, Lowe drove past the group of abandoned shotgun-style row houses at 2500 Holman. The decrepit houses, lit by the slanting glow of fading sunlight, immediately recalled Biggers’

⁷¹Finkelpearl interview, 4.

⁷²The artists included James Bettison, Bert Long, Jesse Lott, Floyd Newsum, Bert Samples, and George Smith. All except Long later created installations in PRH’s Artists’ Houses.

⁷³Joseph Havel, an artist and the Assistant Director at the Glassell School of Art (a division of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) co-curated the exhibition. See *Fresh Visions / New Voices: Emerging African-American Artists in Texas*, Exh. cat. (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1992).

⁷⁴Lowe went on to describe “the way that [Biggers] used the houses was pretty incredible. He used them as the foundation for his composition, but also he used them as the foundation for the people that he was portraying in his work. It was around that time that it hit me that we should find an area that was historically significant to the community and bring it to life.” Finkelpearl, 5.

paintings. Lowe's response to the site involved aesthetics; he has cited the importance of its visual appeal, and described the houses as "found objects." He also responded to the history and culture represented by those houses. "What I could see there, was that row of 20 to 30 shotgun houses representing a lifestyle that is peculiar to African-American heritage that you don't see a lot of anymore. A long row of houses, with people on the porches interacting and sharing. I started to look at that as something that is beautiful that is dying . . ." ⁷⁵ The combination of visual potency, cultural symbolism and transformative potential embedded in this place all played into Lowe's choice of 2500 Holman Street as the site of a project that would combine community interaction and temporary art installations.

Recycled Structures, Redux

It took two years of persistent, creative, collaborative work to renovate the decrepit shotgun houses and to activate their symbolic potential. (Figs. 14, 15 and 16) Two major components of this process — the acquisition and renovation of the houses at 2500 Holman Street — began the literal and metaphoric process of rooting the project within its place.

The acquisition of the shotguns and the land on which they stand necessarily became the first part of this effort. As the summer of 1992 eased into fall, Rick Lowe began "trying to figure out how to set up a mechanism that would allow this idea to grow." ⁷⁶ Established arts organizations in Houston provided early support for the project, nurturing its ideas and sponsoring crucial grant proposals on its behalf. ⁷⁷

⁷⁵ As quoted in Frederick Kaimann, "Project Row Houses saves houses, minds with art," *Birmingham News* (June 4, 1995): 6F.

⁷⁶Finkelpearl, 6

⁷⁷DiverseWorks, Houston's largest alternative space, sponsored successful umbrella grants (a process facilitated by Lowe's position as a board member), as did the Community Artists' Collective, a smaller space focused on African-American artists. DiverseWorks' sponsorship of a grant to the National Endowment for the Arts' Art in Public Places program was especially important. It garnered \$25,000 along with a the glowing, if premature, stamp of approval as the model community arts project for 1993, which surely added to the project's appeal to other funders. These early fund-raising efforts also helped to spread the word about the project among several facets of the Houston art community.

Concurrently, Lowe sifted through county records to find the property's owner. In December, 1992, he finally contacted the owner, Chung Chu, an architect living in Taiwan, and in September 1993, PRH negotiated a lease-purchase agreement.

This agreement should have put the houses safely into PRH's hands, but complications soon emerged that almost killed the fledgling project by taking away its place. Chu still owed money on the property to its previous owner, Luke Cash, who foreclosed in March 1994. PRH did not advertise the fact that it had, in effect, become a squatter, and maintained a poker-smooth public face while negotiating with Cash. As Deborah Grotfeldt, who had joined the project as Managing Director in 1993, said later, however, "behind the scenes we were freaking out."⁷⁸ This level of insecurity lasted for some time. Finally, while at a party, Grotfeldt quietly mentioned the problem to two of the project's supporters, Isaac and Sheila Heimbinder. As Grotfeldt described it, "Isaac turned to Sheila and said, 'Do you think we ought to buy it for them?'"⁷⁹ She apparently said yes, for in January, 1995, the Heimbinder Family Foundation provided PRH a mortgage loan to purchase the property. If the loan is paid off as planned in June, 1998, PRH itself will own both the shotgun houses and the land that sustains them.⁷⁹

This wrangling over the property happened well after the second part of embedding the project in its place — the renovation — had begun. Lowe and his cohorts had started recycling the decrepit shotguns in September 1993, when the initial lease was arranged. With the assistance of other volunteers, Lowe, his studio-mates, and some of the artists involved in the original discussions began clearing the site. Their first major clean-up filled a 40-yard dumpster with syringes, overgrowth and assorted trash. This cleansing removed the tawdry detritus of the site's recent past, although that layer of

⁷⁸Deborah Grotfeldt in conversation with the author, November 25, 1997.

⁷⁹John Baran, an urban planning / art history doctoral candidate and Round 7 artist, is working with PRH on a proposal for a Community Development Block Grant to raise the funds necessary to pay off the loan. Ibid.

place-history remains vivid in most descriptions of PRH as a counterpoint to its current vibrancy.

While weekend volunteers cleared the site, Lowe and studio mate Dean Ruck began real renovation on one house, ignoring the advice from friendly contractors that the houses were not worth the effort. As Lowe described it, "if there was an old window frame that couldn't be purchased for less than \$1,000, we just made a piece that fit, whereas most contractors don't think that way. We started tearing out the rotten parts, moving along, kind of sculpting this house."⁸⁰ They approached the site with creativity and an ability to see potential in available materials, treating the houses like found objects to be transformed into sculptural assemblages rather than as a standard renovation project.

At this stage of the project, many of the volunteer workers came from outside the Third Ward. In addition to the artists and other individual volunteers, several corporations donated time and materials. Amoco Corporation, for instance, selected PRH for its annual volunteer day, and gave over 200 employees from around the nation time off to work on exterior renovations. In addition, all of Houston's major visual arts institutions joined the House Challenge, the brainchild of Paul Winkler, director of The Menil Collection.⁸¹ Winkler offered to supply the staff time and materials necessary to renovate one house, and suggested that Lowe throw down the gauntlet to the other museums. The Contemporary Arts Museum, DiverseWorks Art Space, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston agreed to pay for materials and send staff to renovate one shotgun house each.

⁸⁰Finkelpearl, 7.

⁸¹According to Lowe, Winkler "has about as working class an attitude as you'll ever find in a museum director. He drives a pick-up truck. He was one of the first people to roll up his sleeves and come out and start tearing stuff out and building stuff up." (Finkelpearl, 7) The Menil Collection, which is surrounded by residential bungalows owned by the Collection, provides an institutional counterpoint to PRH. The Menil Collection was built to be integrated into its surroundings. It was designed so that many of the everyday spaces of the museum, from frame-shop to conservation lab, are visible from the outside, which allows an interpenetration of work, life, and art rare in museum spaces.

This moment provided my first point of contact with Project Row Houses. During PRH's nascent stages, I worked as the curatorial assistant at the Contemporary Arts Museum. Summer months at CAM offered more free moments than others; between the enervating weather and the languor of the off-season, work flowed at a slower pace than normal. When the House Challenge was brought up at a staff meeting, most of us were able and willing to get away from our desks. For me, part of the appeal lay in the chance to assuage some lingering museum-guilt, that suspicion that we were not really touching people, and that our work was becoming abstracted from life and meaning.

We spent several days at PRH, immersed in the liquid heat of July. All of the interior dividing walls of CAM's shotgun had to be removed (in other houses, rooms were left intact to allow a range of potential artistic uses). This allowed me to spend one whole day inside, wearing a dust filter and pounding walls with a crowbar. On other days, we spent hours clearing debris, shoring up floorboards, or lost in the intermittent rhythm of scraping, priming and painting. Through the course of this process, I relished the labor, the sweat, and the visible progress, as well as the camaraderie and banter among the various groups at work. This could be dismissed as the idealistic response of a privileged white woman playing dress-up with a borrowed blue collar, but it felt real, and it hooked me and my colleagues into following the progress of the project. The House Challenge helped establish PRH as a promising new addition to the Houston scene, and as Lowe said, this common work was "part of the point—all of these people working side by side in the Third Ward."⁸² Such collaborative effort reinforces the importance of communal labor in building the art of place. (Fig. 15)

Of course, the presence of all these outsiders complicated PRH's relationship with its immediate neighbors, and might have alienated the very people Lowe had imagined as PRH's core audience. Early on, for instance, the project held a reception for potential funders, complete with a police officer to watch their cars. After the event,

⁸²Finkelpearl, 9.

criticism circled back to Lowe that “the community didn’t need a wine and cheese place for middle class white folks to come hang out.”⁸³ Even after the renovation process had been underway for several months, neighborhood people rarely offered to help if outsiders were present. According to Lowe, on many “weekends, I was the only person here working. So they would come and help out. I think they actually felt more comfortable coming when I was the only person because they didn’t have to interact with people they didn’t really know. There may be a kind of fear of not understanding each other In the beginning when white groups started coming in to volunteer I’m sure a lot of people thought it was just going to be something that a group of white people were going to do in their community, kind of taking over.”⁸⁴ Eventually, the community rallied behind the project, and the Trinity United Methodist Church, located across the street, the Missouri City Chapter of an African-American women’s group called Links, the Coleman/Whitfield family, and Betty Pecore took up the challenge to renovate the remaining artists’ houses.

Such tensions highlight the balance of skills necessary to bring the art of place into being. This kind of project may bring together disparate groups that must then work through the suspicions harbored about each other’s needs, interests, and motivations. The process of working together toward a common vision may create a space where boundary-crossings becomes possible. For that to happen, however, the people involved must utilize their creativity, pragmatism, diplomacy, and good humor, as well as a keen sensitivity to place. Even with those skills, the difficulties of building broad base of support without alienating a core audience may never be entirely resolved.

Between the fall months of 1993 and those of 1994, many hours of creative labor, gallons of sweat, and pounds of materials had been put into the transformation of the houses by people from within and beyond the Third Ward. By September, 1994, one

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Finkelpearl, 9-10.

house had been renovated entirely to code as an office. Eight more had been prepared for temporary installation projects (seven Artists' Houses and one Spoken Word House), and the exteriors of the rest had been repaired and painted. On October 18, 1994, Project Row Houses unveiled the first round of artist's installations amidst food, music, proclamations, and a steady rain. At that opening celebration, over 1,000 people walked through houses that had been crumbling a year earlier. Those houses now stood resplendent with sturdy porches, stabilized roof peaks and bright white paint. (Fig. 16)

This process of renovation and transformation provides one key to PRH's involvement with place: its attention to the symbolic power of reviving the shotgun houses. Such a sensibility resonates within the Third Ward, although it seems rare in the rest of Houston. Skyscrapers, strip-malls and the vaulting complexities of freeway interchanges dominate the rest of the cityscape. Despite some recent interest in renovating existing structures,⁸⁵ most developers favor the economic efficacy of either pushing into new territory at the city's elastic borders, or of demolishing and rebuilding within the city's interior. This puts Houston well within a strand of modernism that political scientist Marshall Berman calls "the expressway world": the idea that Progress must knock down all that came before in order to make room for the new, bulldozing the particularity and history of places in the process.⁸⁶ The Third Ward, however, retained many historic places. This may relate in part to economics, for the area has not been the focus of much development interest, and so has not had as many occasions to make the choice between renovation and razing. Still, attention to the communal history within existing places, and to infusing new life into existing structures, seems evident in the Third Ward, for several places near PRH prefigure its symbolically potent, recycling sensibility.

⁸⁵Over the past few years, developers have begun to show an interest in renovating structures. This has been particularly true in downtown Houston with high-profile conversions such as the historic Rice Hotel's transformation into high-rent lofts.

⁸⁶See Marshall Berman, "Robert Moses: The Expressway World," in *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982): 290-311.

As with The Flower Man's Technicolor decorations and the Rev. Smith's transmutation of a crackhouse into a rehab center, the spruced-up row houses possess a symbolic resonance unavailable to new structures. As Grotfeldt notes, "the shotguns were disparaged as a symbol of shame. Now here they stand. They're white, shiny, beautiful and safe. It goes to show what's possible."⁸⁷ By renovating the exteriors of all the houses even though PRH only had immediate use for nine of them, the project also made an immediate, highly visible improvement to the neighborhood. This demonstrated the seriousness of the project and PRH's commitment to the community at an early stage in its development. In addition, the familiar, culturally weighted forms of the houses may have acted almost like camouflage. By housing innovative programs and contemporary art within familiar, welcoming structures, PRH could integrate its programs within the community more seamlessly, and less threateningly, than if they had built a new structure at 2500 Holman Street.

By renovating the shotguns, PRH also made a connection between the area's vibrant past and a potentially bright future, an arc that bypasses the years when the abandoned houses were littered with needles and cans. This aspect of PRH's past should not, however, be whitewashed to match the newly pristine houses. Even the unsavory history of a place contributes to its character, and bears remembering. Neither should this bit of history be exaggerated to make the shotgun houses' transformation more dramatic. Although the associations that we build into places will always be subjective combinations of myth, memory, and history, a too-selective place-memory runs the risk of reducing it to kitsch or romanticism.

Organization Development

Although as the founding visionary behind PRH, media and art-world attention has centered on Rick Lowe, Deborah Grotfeldt has been a crucial partner in bringing PRH

⁸⁷As quoted in Kaimman, 6F.

to life. (Fig. 17) Grotfeldt joined the project as Managing Director in October, 1993, bringing her own varied skills and sensibilities to the project. Also an artist, Grotfeldt shares Lowe's belief in the importance of countering stereotypes about art as something detached from experience, and of artists as isolated individualists. Sounding similar notes to Suzanne Lacy's description of new genre public artists, Grotfeldt has pointed out the creativity, energy, fundraising ability, political savvy, comfort with materials, and the ability to articulate a vision that artists can bring to projects. She describes "the artist as agent," a visionary capable of seeing the world in fresh ways and then transforming that vision into concrete form.⁸⁸

Grotfeldt also brings a wealth of practical skills to her work at PRH. She had learned about the construction business when working with her husband on various contracting projects, experience that facilitated PRH's renovation.⁸⁹ Along with her familiarity with the sometimes mundane activities necessary to create art or make buildings, eight years as DiverseWorks' Assistant Director honed Grotfeldt's administrative and fundraising skills. In a slightly perverse way, the color of Grotfeldt's skin might also be an asset to PRH. As a white woman, her presence may help keep the project from being pegged too tightly as an African-American-only project. She notes that conversations about race occur naturally there. She sees one of the unexpected side benefits of PRH as its facilitation of cross-cultural dialogue in a place where African-Americans feel ownership, and which exposes other groups to the complexities of black life in the Third Ward.⁹⁰ Although such border crossings raise problems (the risk of turning the project into a "wine and cheese hangout" on display, or of leeching the place

⁸⁸Grotfeldt's quotes on this page are drawn from a conversation with the author, November 5, 1996.

⁸⁹She first met Lowe in the mid-1980s when they shared the prosaic experience of painting a shopping mall, and also worked with him to form the now-defunct Union of Independent Artists, a group that tried to bring artists together to address common concerns. Ibid.

⁹⁰Like Lowe, she has heard a few complaints that too many white people like herself have been involved at PRH, either as participating artists, volunteers or visitors. Ibid.

from the place if it became a tourist destination)⁹¹ they can also enrich the experiences of all concerned, and help prevent a degeneration into simplistic or essentialist assumptions.

After Grotfeldt joined PRH, the project began to coalesce into its present loose structure. While the first phase of renovation occurred, less visible work of planning and organization design took place. The project acquired some of the standard accouterments of U.S. arts organizations: official non-profit status (February 1994) and a Board of Directors (March 1994).⁹² Meanwhile, PRH began to make plans for the houses not already in use for art or office space. (Fig. 18) They hoped to find ways to meet more community needs without sacrificing the overall goal of using the energy of artists to integrate art and life in this place.

One of the results of this process, the Young Mothers Residential Program (YMRP), taps into the social activism and engagement with community that recurs in the art of place. The idea emerged in part from PRH's need for sustainable funding sources to counter the shrinking pool of federal, state and local public money targeted at art. A city official suggested renting the remaining 14 houses and using the money to support the project. This sparked Grotfeldt's idea to use some of the houses for single mothers, an idea which evolved into the Young Mothers Residential Project.⁹³ Instead of using the houses for profit, however, PRH raised funds and collaborators to provide young single mothers and their children with rent-free homes for one year, a mentor (who also lives on site), day care facilities, and involvement in the creative life of PRH.

⁹¹This problem recalls the issue of desegregation, which paradoxically may have actually weakened the interior cohesion of the African-American community.

⁹²Unlike many American museums, whose patrons are intimately involved in the operation of the institution, PRH has been primarily staff driven. According to Grotfeldt, the Board's involvement with PRH has varied according to the interests of individual members, and the Board has had little formal interaction with PRH. Conversation with the author, November 25, 1997.

⁹³The project grew out of this idea, and was refined through work of a team that collaborated on an unsuccessful grant proposal. Foundation and corporate support followed (including the sponsored renovation of the mentor's house), and the project finally came together when PRH convinced US Homes Corporation to sponsor the interior renovation of the YMRP houses. Every year at the National Home Builders' convention in Houston, the corporation builds a house in the suburbs, which is furnished by another company and featured in *Woman's Day* magazine. For the 1996 show, those resources were transferred to the young mothers' houses, which were fully renovated and furnished.

This program addresses a serious need in the neighborhood, and serves to further integrate PRH into the life of its community. Although a fence that protects the YMRP shotguns from too many curious stares also places a slight barrier between it and the rest of the project, PRH has found several ways to involve the young women in its activities. Two women from the program's first year now teach in the After-School Arts Program. Others have participated in the creation of art installations, whether through casual interaction with artists working on site or through more formal participation, such as Celia Muñoz's project (discussed in the following chapter). (Fig. 25) Their children play among the shotgun houses, whose importance as a symbol of community is reinforced by a group of miniature shotguns used as playhouses. (Fig. 20) Grotfeldt feels that PRH should, and will, do even more to involve the young mothers into its programs. Still, the YMRP goes a long way toward integrating art and life and work, and also activates the place-history of the shotguns. The communal mingling of strong young women and their children among shotgun houses recalls the rows of regal women John Biggers painted, standing proud and together in front of rhythmic gabled roofs. (Fig. 9) It may yet be imperfect, but the program suits its place.⁹⁴

The Young Mother's Program is one of PRH's largest programs apart from its art installations, but other shorter-term programs abound, as do less formal uses that link the project to its place. One of the houses doubles as a conference room for local meetings, and community members sometimes use PRH's computers and fax machine. The shotguns have also housed temporary, place-centered projects. Blues artist Kinney Abair, for instance, collaborated with music producer David Thompson to create *The Row House Sessions*. This as-yet unreleased CD emphasized place on several levels. Abair,

⁹⁴Other projects include an after-school arts program set in one of the houses, in which Houston artists teach art to neighborhood children. A community garden in the backyard green space is run in collaboration with Urban Harvest. Two former Teach for America workers developed Project Chrysalis at PRH. In this program, neighborhood kids create local history projects and are taught conflict resolution through art. The project was so successful that Houston Independent School District picked it up, and it now occurs in schools rather than at PRH. Another house has been turned into a store for neighborhood women to sell crafts, and another has become the Projects Gallery, which is used primarily to display the work of artists from the community.

who has lived in the Third Ward for several decades, inflects his blues with a range of other musical forms, spinning out infectious stories of black urban life. This creolized mix of music, rooted in African-American cultural forms and experience but not limited to them, seems perfectly at home at PRH. The recording process also reinforced this link to place. During the sessions, held in one of PRH's shotguns over two sticky nights in June, 1996, Thompson captured the ambient sounds of the neighborhood. Cicadas buzz low between two cuts on the album.⁹⁵ This recording also connects music to place in a less literal way. Blues traditionally features a repertoire of standard rhythms, chord progressions, and lyrical structures that mark a familiar musical heritage, but innovative content can be housed within that traditional form. Project Row Houses functions in much the same way.

Curatorial Processes

The Artists' Houses formed the core of Lowe's initial vision to transform decrepit shotguns into a "guerrilla" public art project by creating installations in the abandoned houses. Lowe quickly discarded "guerrilla" in favor of a more place-centered adjective, "lasting." He realized that the project could become especially vital and meaningful through a long-term, multi-faceted interaction with its place⁹⁶ and he and Grotfeldt have expanded the project significantly beyond that initial moment of vision. Still, the core idea of bringing artists to the Third Ward to create installations in the shotguns remained central. As the project has developed, eight of the twenty-two houses at PRH have become the Artists' Houses. (Fig. 19) In these shotguns, artists create temporary installations (one of these, The Spoken Word House, focuses on oral and literary rather than visual art). The installations usually remain on view for six months, with new

⁹⁵David Thompson in conversation with the artist, September, 1997. See also unreleased liner notes by folklorist Roger Wood.

⁹⁶Finkelpearl, 6.

rounds of installations opening every spring and fall. Seven rounds have occurred as of this writing. (See Appendix A for the names of the artists and the titles of their projects.)

These artists have been chosen to participate at PRH in a variety of ways, although most rounds have been curated or co-curated by Lowe. “Facilitated” may actually be a better term than “curated,” for Lowe grouped artists with some care about balancing media, background and gender, but let them work with few directives and no overarching set of curatorial precepts. In some cases Lowe sought the artists out, and in other cases PRH received unsolicited proposals for projects.

This fluid, experimental approach has been echoed by artist Tierney Malone, who created work for Round One, and then curated Rounds Four and Five. After pursuing standard curatorial routes — culling through proposals, talking with colleagues and galleries and artists, gathering materials and sifting through them — Malone narrowed his lists and invited artists to participate. At one point, he considered building installations around a theme, such as a show of all women artists, but “realized [he] was limiting [himself] by trying to make artists fit into a particular category or mode . . . [organizing a round is] a more intuitive process.”⁹⁷ Instead, he tried to keep the process open, and described his attitude as “I trust you. Whatever you bring to the table’s cool. I know your work, and I have faith in you.”⁹⁸ As these comments suggest, Malone saw himself as a facilitator more than a curator, a response that resonates within the larger context of PRH’s ideals. Malone relinquished some of the power he might have claimed as curator in favor of a more open-ended interaction among equals. Similarly, PRH has adopted a low-key, flexible relationship with its community, a mode of interaction built on trust and mutual respect rather than a hierarchical “we-know-what’s-right-for-you” attitude.

The project also tried to avoid making assumptions about the connections among art, race, and audience responsiveness. Although PRH has sometimes been billed as an

⁹⁷Tierney Malone in conversation with the author, December 2, 1996.

⁹⁸Ibid.

African-American project, and African-Americans living in the Third Ward form its core audience, PRH did not make the essentialist assumption that the artists who participate in the project must also be African-American. Round One consisted of African-American artists working in the region, for PRH wanted to build a relationship with its community by starting out with artists who shared its ethnic heritage. Later rounds, however, have included artists of other ethnicities: several European-American artists, a few Latinas, a Pakistani, an Armenian, and a few Asian-Americans. (All rounds have featured a balance of men and women.)

The fact that later rounds feature a mix of artists from Houston and far beyond raises a series of questions. How do you address place in a meaningful way if you come from a different place, and if you spend a limited amount of time there? Without creativity, skill, intelligence and empathy, such projects run the risk of becoming site-specific rather than place-sensitive. As Malone noted, “as PRH evolves they’re going to find a way to work that out. One way may be to select artists far in advance, give them time to really think things through sincerely . . . I’ve been troubled by some artists in the past whose work has been so socially oriented that they’ve come across as missionaries. I want artists who aren’t black to express themselves based on their work, on the house, and find a way to naturally include their surroundings. By no means do I want people to feel compelled to express themselves in some socially aware way.”

PRH also avoided any prescriptions that its artists must make African-American art. Such a requirement would have been quite difficult to define, and would have raised a number of difficult questions. Does all work made by African-American artists qualify as African-American art, or does that adjective require a conscious choice by the artist, a declaration of ethnic attention or political intention? Can artists of other ethnicities make African-American art if they address issues of race in their work? How do culture, class and gender intersect with these issues? In terms of the audience, would a black Jamaican

artist of Afro-Caribbean heritage necessarily create work more relevant to residents of the Third Ward than that of a white artist of Italian heritage from another part of Houston?

An African-American viewer and a Jamaican artist would probably share brown skin pigmentation. As Cornel West has noted, dark skin could create a bond, as it would mark both as potential targets of discrimination in a white-dominated society, and would provide access to a shared history of resistance.⁹⁹ An Italian-American artist, however, might share bonds of class, gender, or Houstonian culture with Third Ward residents. Either artist might incorporate his or her background into a work of art, which could create layers of meaning most accessible to those who share that heritage or life experience. Skin color and African heritage, however, offer only two of many ways to connect with the Third Ward.

As Lowe described it, early on he and his core group of artist friends “realized that the best approach was to let people take the houses and do whatever their creative impulse encouraged them to do, just let it go.”¹⁰⁰ The project’s leaders also encouraged the artists to respond to their surroundings through the content of their work, the processes involved in creating it, or by creating workshops or other programs to involve community members.¹⁰¹ Rather than boxing in creative possibilities by focusing on race, then, PRH used place (of which African-American heritage is one of many components) as a way to encourage meaningful connections among artists, art and its core audience.

Without referring to the current discourse about place, Malone remarked that the ideals and location of PRH made attention to surroundings almost inescapable. “First, one has to consider the house, the structure, the history. I’ve seen some artists who ignored all that and turned it into a white box devoid of history. I encouraged the artists to let the house be a collaborator in what they did. The artist can do anything in the

⁹⁹In his essay “The Perils of Racial Reasoning,” West describes blackness as “a social and ethical construct.” See *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994): 39.

¹⁰⁰Finkelparl, 9.

¹⁰¹PRH made this programmatic aspect optional when it became clear that not all artists possessed the interest or skills necessary to make such programs meaningful or effective.

house except change the physical external structure . . . There are an infinite number of possibilities within that.”¹⁰² Malone’s disapproval of artists who transformed the shotguns into white boxes, floating free from spatial or temporal constraints, recalls the opposition between the art of place and the white cube I proposed earlier. His statement also recalls one of the key attributes of the art of place: the use of art to activate the history and culture that can accumulate within places. Many installations at PRH have responded to this aspect of place; such responses and others will be examined in the following chapter.

The early stages of renovating the property, bringing meaningful programs to life, and developing a flexible curatorial strategy for the artists’ projects all highlight the creative vision and collaborative processes that make the art of place possible. PRH’s programs and administrative processes involve a sensitivity to the current needs and place-history of 2500 Holman Street. Like any artists, the creators of PRH saw possibility within materials that had gone unnoticed by others; through a combination of individual leadership and collaborative effort they have activated that potential. This artistic working process might be considered art in itself, an activist social sculpture rooted in a particular place. Project Row Houses, embedded in its place, becomes a work in progress and a working process.

¹⁰²Ibid.

Chapter IV

ART IN THE HOUSE

The art of place permeates the entirety of Project Row Houses, and can also be separated out under the peaked roofs of each of the seven Artists' Houses and the Spoken Word House. Several installations will be examined in relation to the characteristics of the art of place, and some of the difficulties inherent in coming to critical terms with this work will be explored.

The Art of Place and the Place of Art in the Houses

The idea of place provides a filter for the many issues that could be addressed when writing about Project Row Houses, which is an ever-changing, living organism. In proposing characteristics for the art of place, I have attempted to build a thinking model as a way to approach both PRH and the art created in the houses. These characteristics are not meant to be prescriptive, or all-inclusive, but rather to offer terms with which to think, talk, and write.

Place-centered motifs and practices recurred throughout the seven rounds of installations that have occurred as of this writing, covering the period October 1994 through October 1997. Place adopted many guises in these installations, appearing in themes and imagery chosen by the artists, in the process of creating the work, and in interactions among art, artists, and community. In the following, I will trace some aspects of the art of place through the art in the houses, with a few caveats. Artists often adopted multiple strategies to activate place, and so might easily have been placed in more than one of the following categories. In addition, the scope of this paper precludes attention to every single installation, so I have chosen a few specific examples to ground my discussion of the art of place within the artist's houses. Finally, as Malone noted,

some artists chose to use their shotguns as white cube gallery spaces, which puts them outside this discussion of place.

• Place-Specific Work

The art of place becomes embedded in its place. This may seem simplistic, but bears stressing. While the ideas and ideals that undergird a place-specific project may be transferable, the specifics of its physicality and its resonance with place-history can not be relocated to another place.

Most of the works discussed in the following shared this quality of being inextricable from their place. One installation, however, brought this issue to the forefront of the work's content, and of the visitor's experience of the piece. In *Peek*, 1996, Sharon Englestein made a meticulous scale model of her shotgun and placed it on a pedestal in the center of the house. "I wanted the piece to be inherently linked to its particular environment," she said, "but at the same time viewed rather than entered."¹⁰³ The almost uncanny doubling of this house-within-the-house induced perceptual dislocation, which then shifted into a heightened awareness of the physical qualities of the shotgun. Engelstein moved beyond the realm of the well-crafted double take by inviting other artists to create miniature installations within her house. In doing so, she mirrored the processes of change and collaboration that take place at PRH as well as its physical context. *Peek* thus incorporated the most recent layer of the shotgun's place history. Although this project built on Engelstein's previous work as a sculptor and as the curator-creator of a short-lived miniature gallery, neither the perceptual shifts nor the immediate contextual reference of her project would have worked in any other location.

In his installation, *Echo*, 1995, painter Whitfield Lovell honored the "unsung heroes of our heritage" who had lived in the row houses, and who nurtured African-American culture through their lives and their stories. This memorial took two forms. In

¹⁰³Artist's statement, PRH brochure, 1996.

the tiny back bedroom of his shotgun, Lovell created a tableau of mid-century, middle-class black life: a neatly made bed with a snappy fedora placed expectantly in the center, a half-drunk glass set on the dressing table, photographs leaning against the wall, a dress hanging from a hook on the door. (Fig. 21) The entrance to this room had been blocked, and recorded tinny music and muffled voices invoked the lives that had moved through this room. These sounds made it seem that I had been allowed to peek into the past, into a moment in process rather than one long over.¹⁰⁴

Lovell left the rest of the rooms bare except for debris swept into corners and a gathering of ghost-like people, nearly life-size and delicately drawn in black so that stately brown people seemed to meet my gaze from within the plank walls. (Fig. 21) According to Lovell, these elegiac presences, drawn from anonymous studio portraits photographed during the early part of the century, “attempt to symbolize those lives, the lives of the actual persons who once inhabited the row houses and the legacy of a people.”¹⁰⁵ They bore dignified witness to aspects of the house’s history that might, but should not, be forgotten.

Echo’s beauty and power led to an attempt to preserve part of the installation, for after a museum expressed interest in buying it, some of the panels were removed and replaced with panels from another nearby shotgun.¹⁰⁶ Although the urge to preserve the piece makes sense, the complicated beauty that resonated within the shotgun would surely be lost in translation to a gallery or any other neutral setting. The piece’s effectiveness lay in its intelligent and evocative response to place; take away its shotgun home and *Echo* will lose its complexity and soul.

¹⁰⁴The room’s literal inaccessibility might be seen as a jab at the velvet-roped period rooms museums use to display upper-crust lifestyles.

¹⁰⁵Although Lovell’s project was created in the spring of 1996, it remained on view through two subsequent rounds of installations. A room at the front of the house was transformed into another tableau of mid-century African-American life by artist Fred Wilson during the second of those installations. Quote from artist’s statement, PRH brochure, 1995.

¹⁰⁶The sale did not take place, and the artist currently has the panels. Grotfeldt in conversation with the author, November 25, 1997.

• The Archeology of History and Memory

The artist of place pays attention to the layers of content in circulation around places, or buried under their surfaces. The actual history of a place forms some of these layers. It includes the actions that have occurred or words that have been spoken there, changes in the landscape, the structures built or destroyed, and the individuals who have paused or passed through a place. In other words, a place's history encompasses its official, recorded story as well as elements that figure into its past but might be elided from standard accounts. The stories and memories in circulation around a place form an alternative to the dominant official discourses. These narratives, which are revived and revised continually, may or may not match up with a place's actual history, but they saturate and become intrinsic to its character and are every bit as important as any empirical facts.

One characteristic of the art of place, then, would be the artistic recovery of layered history and memory and its creative transformation into tangible form. Indeed, the recovery and presentation of this place-content might become a resistant practice to counter cultural amnesia and dominant versions of history. For example, Teshome H. Gabriel has described the related practice of some Third World filmmakers who work as guardians of popular memory.¹⁰⁷ Many of their films incorporate alternatives to the (sometimes repressive) official versions of history, which then become spurs to growth and social engagement. Although not place-based, the Third Aesthetic described by Gabriel offers an instructive parallel practice, especially when contrasted with the hegemonic potency of many official or commercial versions of place-history. Apparent in locations from The Alamo to Disneyland, these responses to place can easily slide into commercial pastiche or placid romanticism. Such responses to the history and memory

¹⁰⁷See Teshome H. Gabriel, "Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetic," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1989): 53-64.

within places can be pitfalls for artists as well. As a final cautionary note, attention to history and memory does not guarantee that artists will create compelling or meaningful work. Some artists have worked as archeologists of popular memory, exposing and preserving facets of the culture and heritage of the Third Ward community that surrounds Project Row Houses. Although I will discuss projects by Barsamian, Vicki Meek, and Kaneem Smith here, Lovell's project could easily fit here as well.

The Armenian artist Barsamian used his house to gather memories of the Third Ward, continuing the traditional use of the porch as a "talking place" where people come together to share the stories that weave popular memory together. He combined visual art and collective theater by building a full-scale replica of a shotgun facade in the interior of his house. (Fig. 23) The porch of this house-within-a-house became a stage periodically for members of the community who shared stories about their lives with audiences arrayed along wood-plank benches. Barsamian thus focused attention on the row house porch as the site of story-telling, an everyday place which has long been the transmission-point for a living, communal history. He imagined this history as built from individual voices, each one "a fragile thread" that could "ignite the passions of creativity." Through this process, Barsamian acknowledged the way that the multiplicity of stories that form place-history can become the spark for creative acts. He also emphasized the communal work of this process, titling his project *Our House*, 1996, and describing it as a "collaboration with the people of the Third Ward."¹⁰⁸

The piece surely came to life most vibrantly on the evenings when people crowded into the shotgun to share their stories. Even when not activated by storytellers and their audience, however, their voices could easily be imagined. This implicit, now absent, presence recalled the many people that had passed through this house, and whose forgotten stories formed part of its buried place-history. *Our House* held layers of visual interest as well. Lace hung in windows created a tactile contrast to the roughness of the

¹⁰⁸Artist's statement, PRH brochure, 1996.

benches, and the work, like Engelstein's, provoked an increased attention to the materiality of the shotgun through the repetition of its form. Barsamian's transformation of the porch into a stage also blurred several binary distinctions: between inside and outside, public and private, artist and audience, self and community. In doing so, it recalled the interrelationship between the communal use of space within the shotgun compound, and the popular memory nurtured within it.

For her *2517 Memory House*, 1994, Dallas-based artist Vicki Meek spent time with older neighborhood residents gathering stories that inspired her installation.¹⁰⁹ Meek silk-screened fabric panels with images that evoked these stories and draped them from the ceiling. (Fig. 24) These bits of community history took solid form in the scabs of paint and old staples that Meek left protruding from the warped wood of the shotgun's walls. As she described it, Meek "wanted to retain the integrity of the house, respecting its life scars, celebrating its endurance against many odds. In many ways the house became a metaphor for the deteriorating community in which it sits. On the surface it appeared devastated, depressed, and hopeless. But scratch just a bit of that surface, and the life-sustaining stories, the history of the community springs forth. . ." ¹¹⁰ She intended to "reconnect the viewer with past history throughout the process of remembering." ¹¹¹

Meek approached the project, then, as an archeologist of memory, recovering personal histories and transforming them into a tangible form whose effect could not be recreated in another place. This process also allowed the creation of many kinds of bonds: between artist and the community members she interviewed, between community members for whom the piece could spark discussion about past and future, between visitors from outside who might be moved to imagine the complex points of connection

¹⁰⁹She planned to put an ad in the paper, but word of her interest got out and people took the initiative to call her. See Vicki Meek, "2517 Memory House," in *Circa* (Fall 1995): 16-17

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹¹Artist's statement, PRH brochure, 1994.

and divergence between themselves and the people whose individual stories shimmered through Meek's art.

Other artists drew on popular memory linking diasporic peoples to an African heritage. In *The Resurfacing Mortification of the Past is Inevitable*, 1996, Kaneem Smith took an abstracted approach to this subject matter in an installation that, she said, attempted to "bridge the gap of the historical past with my current existence as an American artist of African descent."¹¹² In this work, she strung several attenuated, canoe-like sculptures — translucent skins stretched taut over gangly frames — at varied distances from the shotgun's ceiling. She covered the floor with a thick soft layer of pine mulch that exuded complex earthy scents as footsteps sank into it, activating touch and smell for a place-centered synesthesia. The vessels, suspended between earth and ceiling (*le ciel*, the sky, the heavens) also evoked the Middle Passage, a portion of history that until recently was often elided from mainstream history but which has had an enduring impact on the lives and in the memories of the African-American residents of the Third Ward.¹¹³

• Collective Practice and Common Work

The artist of place opposes the Romantic ideal of the genius artist sweating out the agonies of inspiration in an isolated garret. Despite being contested by many artists over the past century, this cliché persists, along with its cousins, the irresponsible bohemian

¹¹²Artist's statement, PRH brochure, 1997.

¹¹³Other installations have recovered African-American diasporic culture and heritage. George Smith, for instance, made African-influenced shrines and an altar in 1994. (Smith is Kaneem Smith's father.) In 1995, Leamon Green created an installation addressing the storytelling and collective work involved in the African-American quilting tradition. In *The Universal Family Album: Words to Live By*, 1996, Pat Ward Williams projected a changing array of folk sayings and other "words of wisdom" on her shotgun's walls, which were covered with old family snapshots. As she described it, "photographs in the African-American community give us access to political and social attitudes of those outside and inside the family pictured . . . These aphorisms, familiar to many people, have made the diaspora of African people 'one village.'" (Artist's statement, PRH brochure, 1996.) All of these installations explored ways that art and life are entwined (through such common activities as worship, quilting, taking snapshots, talking). In all, diasporic culture was rooted in place; its recovery and celebration suggested the strengthening of communal bonds.

and the artistic agent provocateur. The artist of place, however, can take art far beyond those models by acting as a communicator, a visionary, an organizer, an activist, or a facilitator. Rather than working in isolation, the artist of place might collaborate with community members, artists, historians, architects, planners, visitors to the work, or any of a host of others. The artist of place may hold on to some tried-and-true artistic characteristics such as energy, creativity, vision, or the ability to transform humble materials into something beautiful, but puts those qualities to use in a manner that engages place.

The collaborative work often involved in creating the art of place may help to demystify the creative process, bringing art out of the garret and into active engagement with place and with people. Such collaborative labor may be motivated by politics and the sorts of activist sensibility noted by Lacy in her description of new genre public art. It may also contribute to the expansion of the boundaries of art, and to the creation of place. Jeff Kelley has described this practice as the “common work” necessary to maintain values and to represent place in art. For Kelley, the work of art is a verb, a process.

Simply through their presence working in the Third Ward rather than in a studio or museum, each of the artists has interacted with place and community to some degree. Doors usually remain open while the artists create their installations, making the creative process as visible, and as accessible to the community, as possible. Many artists have taken this one step further through workshops or other educational programs in conjunction with their projects. A few, however, have made collaborative process a central component of their work.

In her project *Patterned: After Biggers* 1997, Celia Muñoz created an installation that evoked the ways that layers of place-history build over time, through the shared activities of many people. (In this case, Muñoz responded to the work of the artist who had worked in the space immediately prior to Muñoz and to the young mothers at PRH,

wrapping the whole in the ideals found in John Biggers' canvases.) To mirror the processes she saw at work in the YMRP, Muñoz invited her daughter to collaborate on the project, and the two created computer-altered photographs of the young mothers living at PRH. Each photograph consisted of a diptych, with the woman and her child on the left, and her shotgun on the right. They made two photographs of each woman, one of front, one from the back. Muñoz also corresponded with these women, and screened excerpts from these texts on the walls of the shotgun.

These texts and the photographs filled the walls above a magnificently patterned floor. (Fig. 24) The Islamic-inspired designs had been created by Bert Samples in a previous installation dealing with diasporic visual and musical rhythms. By retaining and acknowledging Samples' creation, Muñoz made visible one of the layers of history within her house, and enhanced the rich associations among visible pattern (in her photographs, Samples' floor, the geometric forms in Biggers' paintings) and living acts of patterning, of repeating patterns of culture and life through generations (in Biggers' paintings and Samples' piece, in her experience working with her daughter and the young mothers, and in their own activities of child-rearing and living).

For his installation *Third Ward Archive*, Tracy Hicks gave community members disposable cameras, and asked them to take photographs of the Third Ward. He lined the walls of his shotgun with shelves of mason jars, which became repositories for these photographs. Over the course of the installation, these jars filled with pictures and with scraps of paper, for Hicks invited all visitors to add their thoughts if the pictures triggered memories, giving names and history to mute images and anonymous faces. (Figs. 25 and 26) Although in standard usage the mason jars might have been tightly capped to preserve their contents, here they were opened into a living, collective history. This process twisted the standard perception of an archive as a sealed, official source of information, becoming instead a subjective, changing, and publicly available repository of popular memory.

These ideas proved more compelling than my experience of the *Third Ward Archive*. Rows of mason jars and awkward snapshots of strangers did not hold my attention very long. Still, for people from the neighborhood, who either took the photographs or had personal connections to the places and faces on display, the archive must have offered more sustained pleasure. One newspaper photograph, for instance, showed a child in the installation holding a jar. According to the accompanying story, the jar contained a picture of her grandmother, who had lived in this shotgun and watched its fortunes shift over time. As the child's mother said, "our kids don't have to go through the killing and shooting we've seen,"¹¹⁴ and *Third Ward Archive* suggested the possibility of building forward through collaboration while sustaining memories of the past.

• Transformation and Renewal

The art of place may enact transformation of several kinds, especially when addressing places where poor or marginalized communities now live. Actual changes in places may be a goal of projects that combine art and social activism, or projects may be designed to foster temporary shifts of perception or create idea-models that make visible the latent possibilities within people and places. (The use of humble or cast-off materials may be effective in this process, both because of their ready availability and because of the symbolic punch made possible through their transformation into art.)

Dan Havel's *The Magisterium*, 1997, reached for this level of metaphor by alluding to the possibility of transforming people or materials through artistic and alchemical processes. (Fig. 27) His mystical laboratory evoked processes of change and

¹¹⁴As quoted in Cynthia Thomas, "Lowe and Behold" *Houston Chronicle* (October 13, 1996): 1F. Several other projects involved intense collaboration with neighborhood children. To create his *Hope Apothecary*, 1994, Tierney Malone collaborated with 9th and 11th graders at nearby Yates High School. The students helped install the piece, brainstormed on problems within their community and proposed solutions, and then translated those ideas into visual "products" to display in the store. The artist hoped that "this activity [would] foster support and involvement by the young people in the community." Artist's statement, PRH brochure, 1994. In *Re-Collections* 1994, Annette Lawrence worked with local kids who made drawings on brown paper bags, an easily available, humble material. Lawrence stretched strings from floor to ceiling throughout her shotgun, and wove the children's drawings between the strings, literally adding their creativity to the fabric of that place.

transformation, as in the alchemist's transmutation of base metals into gold. He also focused attention on the importance of the knowledge gained through those processes, which he held to be as, or more, important as the end product. Both these ideas echoed with PRH's sensibility, with its emphasis on fluid processes and its transformation of once-decrepit shotgun houses. Indeed, in his artist's statement Havel described Project Row Houses as "a glowing example of the alchemical transformation of material through human spirit."¹¹⁵

Such abstract allusions to PRH, however, were not enough to make this piece effective art of place. As critic Shaila Dewan noted, the piece's stasis belied the intended metaphor of process and transformation¹¹⁶ which in turn weakened the connection to place. *The Magisterium* worked as a handsome and fairly interesting installation piece, with its well-crafted implements and poetic sensibility. Havel did not, however, integrate the project into its site as fully as he had in his earlier projects in Houston's West End neighborhood, *Alchemy House* and *O House*. Unlike those earlier works *The Magisterium* would probably have retained its integrity in another setting, and thus could not be considered fully a work of place.

The idea metaphoric connections between transformations of place and people remain crucial to Project Row Houses as a whole. Places can not be transformed without having some degree of control over them (through communal agreement that places are held in common, through subversive acts, or by law, through rental or outright ownership). The artistic transformation and renewal of places might thus correspond to a sense of self-improvement, self-empowerment, or will. This transformation might shade into the spiritual or the resistant. The latter echoes bell hooks' description of African-

¹¹⁵Jesse Lott's *The Drawing Room*, 1994, also explicitly addressed transformation. Writing about his installation, which functioned almost as a drawing workshop, Lott said, "an artist possesses the power to transform objects and add new value to them. This transformation . . . can create a revolution in the mind of an individual that is creative and expansive, not destructive." Artist's statement, PRH brochure, 1994.

¹¹⁶Dewan, "Site, or Sight?" in *Houston Press* (September 4-10, 1997): 47.

American vernacular architecture, where she notes the importance of having control over one's own space, no matter how humble. She writes that Southern

“black folks equated freedom with the passage into a life where they would have the right to exercise control over space on their own behalf, where they would imagine, design, and create spaces that would respond to the needs of their lives, their communities, their families. Growing up in a world where black working-class and “po’ folk,” as well as the black well-to-do, were deeply concerned with the aesthetics of space, I learned to see freedom as always and intimately linked to the issue of transforming space.”¹¹⁷

This transformation of space recurs at PRH, both in the project's recycling of the shotgun houses and through the twice-a-year influx of new art into those once-domestic spaces.

• Place-centered Synesthesia

As it brings art into the living context of a community, the art of place can activate the whole array of senses. As Dolores Hayden writes, it is place's “assault on all the ways of knowing (sight, sound, smell, touch and taste) that makes it powerful as a source of memory, as a weave where one strand ties in another.”¹¹⁸ This synesthesia points up one of the traditional, indeed definitional, limitations of visual art: its visual-ness, its over-emphasis on that which delights the eye rather than that which also animates ear, nose, skin and tongue. As described by O'Doherty, many responses to modern art as presented in the white cube centered on the disembodied, refined Eye, and its more down-to-earth sidekick, the Spectator.¹¹⁹ With the art of place, the terms change. The eye

¹¹⁷hooks, 47.

¹¹⁸Hayden, 18.

¹¹⁹O'Doherty describes the Spectator as a writer's stand-in, always “on call, he staggers into place before every new work that requires his presence . . . ‘The viewer feels . . .’; ‘the observer notices . . .’; ‘the spectator moves . . .’ . . . Art conjugates him, but he is a sluggish verb, eager to carry the weight of meaning but not always up to it.” He goes on to describe the elite Eye, who “can be trained in a way the Spectator cannot. It is a finely tuned, even noble organ, esthetically and socially superior to the Spectator.” They sometimes fight (“The Eye looks down on the Spectator; the Spectator thinks the Eye is out of touch with real life.”) and occasionally cooperate (sometimes the “Spectator's other senses, always there in the raw, were infused with some of the Eye's fine discriminations.”) O'Doherty, 39- 41; 50; 52.

remains important, but loses its capital-letter status. The Eye becomes re-embodied, and “the Spectator” or “the viewer” becomes “the experiencer,” “the visitor,” “the collaborator” or “the participant.” Its placement in the rather messy “real world,” can help the art of place foster the integration of sensual, conceptual and aesthetic responses.

Many of the projects created a place-centered synesthesia that activated the visitor’s senses over time. Kaneem Smith’s installation, for instance, drew part of its power from the scent of the peat, and its tactile presence underfoot, and Lovell’s made effective use of sound.

Karen Sanders’ *Camera House* engaged place in a manner that combined lyricism with a blunt transcription of reality. Sanders collaborated with members of an arts program at Houston’s Irvinton Village housing project (where she worked as Artist in Residence) to transform her house into a camera obscura. Through this process, pinhole lenses projected inverted images of the shotgun’s Third Ward surroundings onto the walls of its interior. These shifting, upside-down images contradicted expectations for photography, which we generally encounter as a static picture. They dislocated perceptions of place as well, for they flipped inside and outside by bringing the neighborhood indoors, blurring distinctions between interior and exterior, house and community. When projected images covered visitors, separation of art, self, and community blurred as well.

Sanders’ project also embraced the synesthesia and sensitivity to time that the art of place can activate. In order to see the camera obscura images when I visited, for instance, I spent fifteen minutes standing still while my eyes adjusted, and absorbed the tactile qualities of that particular darkness. That quiet time induced attention to the close humidity of the air, the scuffing of a companion’s breath, the rattle and Doppler bleed of music from passing cars, the smells of cut grass and mildewed wood. Eventually, misty images materialized on the walls. These ephemeral photographic traces of people and things suggested the ways that the community left invisible but indelible marks on the

shotgun and its inhabitants. Those images, in tandem with the sensory perceptions activated by waiting, evoked the ways place-identity accrues and makes itself manifest over time. Although the mechanics of Sanders' installation could have been recreated in other places — artists from Houstonian Dan Havel to British Stephen Pippen have created room-sized camera obscura — its particular qualities could not be recreated elsewhere, and the synesthesia and the image/memory traces activated place on several levels.

• Home Places

As discussed earlier, homes offer a strong hook for the art of place (house is to home as site is to place). When linked into the ideas of control over personal and communal space discussed by hooks, the idea of home also dovetails with the oppositional, activist sensibility found in much art of place. (This category may be more accurately classified as a sub-genre of the art of place than as a characteristic of the art of place overall. Since it bears particular relevance to Project Row Houses, however, I chose to include it.)

Sculptors Paul Kittelson and Carter Ernst collaborated on *The Full House*, 1995, a piece that literally played with the idea of home. The couple worked with one of the shotguns in which rooms had been left structurally intact (in many of the shotguns, non-supporting walls had been removed to leave a more open, flexible space). Ernst and Kittelson explored the varied uses of each room, and used them, lightly, as metaphors for “the different facets of our lives that make us whole,” with the living room as social space, dining room as spiritual, bathroom as biological, bedroom as psychological, kitchen as creative. They injected a large dose of humor and a sense of fun into the work, with primary-colored furniture, odd shifts of scale and spatial orientation, and floor of clay that could become creative fodder for any visitor. (Fig. 28) By turning the shotgun into a topsy-turvy domestic playground, Kittelson and Ernst created a festive, welcoming, space full of life and energy (and, often, romping kids as well).

Natalie Lovejoy's *Lost Innocence*, 1997, examined a much darker side of home life and place-memory. In this piece the artist worked through a history of sexual abuse. In one room she let a pair of men's slippers standing before a child's bed evoke this past, (Fig. 29) while in others a life-size cut out of an African-American girl (perhaps the artist) stood as a more literal reminder (Fig. 30). This poignant figure stood mutely amidst a cartoonish, colorful tableau of home life made awful by texts that marked rooms and house not as place of safety or shelter but of abuse. Lovejoy used the concreteness of shotgun setting to anchor her memories of a hellish childhood, using the power of place to spark a visceral reaction. Like Muñoz, Lovejoy also activated the place-history of this particular house by incorporating an element of a previous installation. She left one of Lovell's drawings from *Echo* visible, thereby transforming the figure into a witness, if not a guardian. (Fig. 31)

• Multiple Media

Just as more than one person often makes the art of place, such work often involves more than one medium. Singular objects in traditional media — paintings, sculptures, photographs — may appear, but usually combined with other materials into installations. Smell, taste, touch, and hearing may be activated by other materials, in addition to sight. Text may evoke the place's history by retelling or alluding to stories and memories, or by presenting less subjective information. Tableaux may re-imagine aspects of place history, and may use objects drawn from the surroundings, for history accumulates in objects as well as places. (A recycling sensibility, set in opposition to our dominant consumer culture, may also be at work.) In addition, in some cases, the tangible, physical part of the art may be less important to the artist than performances, collaborative exchanges and other ephemeral actions.

• Activating the Visitor's Experience

Place-centered projects such as Project Row Houses require different approaches to art-viewing than would be possible in traditional, neutral gallery or museum spaces. If the visitor lives nearby, she may bring personal knowledge of the place, and comfort in her surroundings to her encounter with the art. If the visitor comes from outside the neighborhood, he may seek out a guide, or go in a group to ease the discomfort of moving beyond familiar zones. In any case, this visitor will have the experience of driving or walking some distance and possibly of moving through unfamiliar territory. He will absorb some impressions of his surroundings, and the immediacy of that context will shade his experience of the work of art at that place. In the art of place, the visitor encounters both the work and its location.

In some cases, as in Meek's, Hicks', and Barsamian's projects, the visitor may have participated in the making of the work, or be asked to add to it. This active involvement in the creative process brings visitor, artist, and work into a collaborative connection, rather than the common and more passive system in which the Spectator merely completes the meaning of an otherwise static piece. This strand of the art of place also reinforces the notion of the work as an organic, collaborative process that exists and changes over time, in a real place.

Critical Issues

Although most of the installations described above activated my mind and senses to powerful effect, some seemed trite, slapdash, or dull, and like some ancient incantation, those adjectives called forth the specter of Quality. Did my pallid response to some installations indicate that they lacked quality? I will not make that claim, for the notion that quality exists seems beleaguered these days. Once iron-clad, theories of universally perceivable quality have been corroded by the rushing mix of cultures in our present world. Western-biased art historical connoisseurship has given way to the realization that different standards of quality apply at varying points in time, and among diverse cultures.

Should quality be dismissed altogether, then, in favor of a wholly relativistic approach? Certainly we all bring varied perspectives, theoretical filters and life experiences into any encounter with a work of art, and this cultural baggage weights our assessment of those encounters. My reaction to those installations has been colored by many facets of my background, and offer only one set of responses among many possibilities. Still, I do not want to careen from the rarefied world of the Eye's judgments into a relativistic acceptance of everything the artists chose to create at PRH. Artists should be held accountable to some standards of excellence. But how to articulate those standards?

This question (the specter of Quality) haunts recent discourse about the artistic practices I have associated with the art of place. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, for instance, offers three essays under the title "The Problems of Criticism."¹²⁰ In his essay, artist Allan Kaprow, the ringmaster of Happenings and other attempts to blend art and life, describes an art education project in which he participated during the late 1960s. Kaprow wonders whether the project could or should be discussed as art, and if so, whether it constituted good art.¹²¹ He notes the problems inherent in bringing criteria associated with high art to bear on activities he termed "the art/life game." "The means by which we measure success and failure in such fleeting art must obviously shift from the aesthetics of the self-contained painting or sculpture . . . Success and failure become provisional judgments, instantly subject (like the weather) to change."¹²² In her essay, Arlene Raven discusses her struggles as a critic to find a position between making value

¹²⁰Michael Brenson also addressed these issues in relation to *Culture in Action*. See 40- 46 of his catalogue essay, "Healing in Time."

¹²¹Kaprow, "Success and Failure When Art Changes," in *Mapping the Terrain*, 156.

¹²²"When art as a practice is intentionally blurred with the multitude of other identities and activities we like to call life, it becomes subject to all the problems, conditions, and limitations of those activities, as well as their unique freedoms (for instance, the freedom to do site-specific art while driving along a freeway to one's job, rather than being constrained by the walls of a gallery; or the freedom to engage in education or community work as art). Kaprow, 157.

judgments and becoming an uncritical advocate, noting that “good intentions and even hard work to actualize them don’t ensure good art.”¹²³

As the final essayist in this section, Suzanne Lacy offers a subtle analysis of some of the issues at stake and proposes possible solutions.¹²⁴ She offers several analytic concepts (interaction, audience, intention and effectiveness) that might be applied critically to new genre public art in general, and to Project Row Houses in particular. Discussing interactivity, Lacy proposes a continuum of roles that artists might adopt (experiencer, reporter, analyst, activist). These categories might provide a point of entry for a critic, to be supplemented by “such issues as audience size, use of media, and artists’ methodology, contextualizing those evaluations within a more specific analysis of the work’s interactivity.”¹²⁵ At Project Row Houses, these categories could clarify the type of interaction at hand, so that a piece such as Lovell’s evocation of place-experience would not be criticized as, say, a failed attempt to generate activism.

To address issues of audience, Lacy suggests the importance of examining the degree to which “audience participation forms and informs the work — how it functions as integral to the work’s structure” and proposes a model of concentric circles moving out from the work. These circles represent possible audiences, ranging from those who conceived and took responsibility for the work, to collaborators, to volunteers and performers, to the immediate audience, to the media audience, and to the audience of myth and memory. “This model charges the construction of audience with activity rather than simply identity.”¹²⁶ The importance of such distinctions seems clear from my assessment of Hicks’ Third Ward Archive; like many works at PRH perceptions of quality may vary depending on the visitor’s level of involvement in the work’s creation.

¹²³Raven, “Word of Honor,” in *Mapping the Terrain*, 168.

¹²⁴Lacy, “Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art,” in *Mapping the Terrain*.

¹²⁵Ibid, 177.

¹²⁶Ibid, 180.

Next, Lacy tackles intention. Although she acknowledges that the artist's stated intentions may not "express the multiple, including unconscious, levels on which art operates . . . [A]rtists' expressions of intention are nevertheless signposts" for critical evaluation and may allow discussion of the belief systems at play in the work."¹²⁷ Some of the installations at PRH, for instance, were intended as laboratories or places of experimentation rather than displays of perfectly finished products. As Malone noted, PRH provides an opportunity for artists to "step outside their comfort zone, push the limits of their own expression, delve into ideas they've had but haven't had the chance to explore. Lots of the results from that are intangible. You can't see them, but exchanges that artists have while working on site, things that they take away afterwards, can change them as well as their audience."¹²⁸ Such experimental efforts may fail, but as part of a working process they may open new ways of thinking and creating for artists later in their careers. The importance of such invisible processes also fits within two of Lacy's other concentric circles of audience: collaborators and volunteers. Although their creative interactions with a project may not be accessible to many of PRH's visitors, they form an important part of any quality assessments.

Finally, in discussing effectiveness, Lacy notes the sometimes messy blur between social science and criticism that can occur when dealing with new genre public art. "Perceived notions of change based on political and sociological models and extrapolated from personal experiential reports are necessary but insufficient in evaluating new genre public art. This work also functions, as does all art, as a representation or model . . . It is possible that process-oriented public art is at its most powerful when, as with most visual art forms, it operates as a symbol. The relationship of demonstrable effects to the

¹²⁷This becomes problematic, for how "can a materialized belief system be evaluated?" Ibid, 181. Lacy also noted the importance of evaluating a critics' intentions, which may or may not intersect with the artist's belief system.

¹²⁸Tierney Malone in conversation with the author, December 2, 1996.

impact of a metaphor must be grappled with as this work attempts to function simultaneously within both social and aesthetic traditions.”¹²⁹

This final point bears remembering, for aesthetics remain a hugely important part of any art’s contribution to the world. In order for the art of place to be truly vibrant, it requires a sensual aesthetic power and layered, thoughtful, place-sensitive conception. Assessment may be difficult, for like quality, aesthetic standards vary widely. Still, aesthetics should be held in tandem with issues of audience, interaction, effectiveness and intention.¹³⁰ In addition, these terms offer analytical criteria rather than a recipe for success. The ineffable qualities of a powerful, imaginative and lasting work of art can not be prescribed, and may not be activated even when an artist pays attention to place. To paraphrase Raven, neither a good place nor good intentions ensure good art.

The most successful projects at PRH, in my judgment, have been those in which the artist responded to the shotgun house in a thoughtful, sensitive manner so that both the place and the piece drew strength from one another. I also responded strongly to projects that involved acts of paying attention or bearing witness, whether to popular memory, an actual past or a present moment. A concrete form that activated both mind and senses enhanced my appreciation of projects that also involved less tangible processes of collaboration and interaction. Satisfying concrete form did not necessarily fall into traditional aesthetics. It might be found in a work of art that unfolded into layered readings, but beauty and pleasure of some kind remained crucial to my full engagement with the installations. This may only go partially towards addressing the issue of quality, for as Lacy notes, I occupy only one among many possible audiences for the work.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 183-184.

¹³⁰Jessica Cusick, Houston’s Public Art Director, reminded me of the importance of aesthetics in a conversation in December, 1997. She also noted the problems generated by the current popularity of the term “place” among public artists and public art administrators. When attention to place becomes prescriptive, or is used without genuine commitment and sensitivity, it can foster weak projects.

At any given time, the visitor can experience eight separate installations at Project Row Houses, another factor which should be noted in any assessment of overall quality. By placing installations within individual shotgun houses, PRH increases the likelihood that some will appeal to the visitor's sensibility, and that others will challenge his or her ideals and artistic preferences. By having multiple installations on view at once, of varying interest to different visitors, PRH (unintentionally) affirms the use of multiple points of view discussed by Gabriel in relation to Third Cinema. No Round tells a dominating or linear story. Placed in identical houses, each installation is given equal weight, and PRH avoids prescribing a hierarchical relationship among different approaches to artmaking.

Epilogue

PROJECTIONS IN TIME AND SPACE

Project Row Houses recently entered the third phase of its existence. Now that the shotgun houses have been renovated and filled with a solid core of programs, the project must discover ways to sustain and challenge its ideals over time. This many-textured process centers on two interlocking needs: to maintain a fresh and energetic vision and to remain place-sensitive so the project does not ossify over time.

This development will require the passing of skills and values from the current leadership to a younger generation, continuing the sort of transmission of culture that has occurred in so many other shotgun houses over the years. Founding Director Lowe travels often to work on related projects, and Executive Director Grotfeldt may some day move on to other work as well. Over the past few years, however, they have trained a series of able young people (primarily artists) in the work of running PRH. They encourage staff members to continue pushing their own artistic careers, with the assumption that the work they do at PRH feeds into their other art and vice versa.¹³¹ With luck, some of these artists will step forward with the combination of creative pragmatism and charismatic vision necessary to carry PRH's founding ideals into the future.

More immediately, over the next few years PRH will expand the physical size of its creative community. The project is raising money to buy vacant land behind PRH, which it hopes to fill with low-cost, space-efficient new houses, designed by architecture students participating in the Rice Building Workshop. They plan to rent the houses to artists as combination living and studio space, to use them to house temporary artists in residence, and also as subsidized homes for women moving on from the Young Mothers' Residential Program. In a later phase of the project, PRH hopes to buy and build these

¹³¹Grotfeldt in conversation with the author, November 25, 1997.

houses on scattered sites around the neighborhood. Through this process they will train neighborhood people in the craft of building. The houses will then be sold to community residents at an extremely low cost, with a small profit margin built in to generate a sustainable source of income for PRH while providing needed housing.¹³²

The ideals and accomplishments of Project Row Houses offer an immensely appealing model. Discussions have ebbed and flowed over the possibility of creating PRH-type projects in Los Angeles, Birmingham, East St. Louis, and Dallas, and other communities have requested information from PRH in the hopes of sparking similar programs.¹³³ In order to share its expertise and ideas, PRH has explored the possibility of setting up a foundation that would serve as a think tank, resource and training center, and source of financial support for like-minded projects. All projects involved would be rooted in art and culture, emphasize process, and be place specific (keyed to the architecture and demography of the community, and meshed with the vision of people carrying out the project).¹³⁴ At present, this foundation is only a dream, but PRH recently applied for a grant to bring various interested parties together to hash out the practicalities of making it real.

All parties should be wary of the potential problems of transplanting PRH's ideals to other places. In Houston, the project works in large part because of its sensitivity to a particular place, and through the charismatic, sensitive, pragmatic leadership of several people with a deeply felt commitment to the project and the Third Ward. The ideals may be suited to other communities, but the specifics cannot be transferred. PRH has no intention of promoting cookie-cutter projects, but it may not be able to control the efforts of others who may lack its commitment to the power of place.

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³The project in Dallas was dropped after preliminary discussions, but the project in East St. Louis may still happen, given time and resources. Los Angeles and Birmingham are discussed below.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

People in Los Angeles and Birmingham, Alabama, have already started work towards a PRH style project, with varying degrees of success. During the summer of 1997, I traveled to visit these potential sites. These brief visits, while not enough to sustain an in-depth site analysis, exposed some of the potential benefits and drawbacks of Project Row Houses as a model for place-centered public art and community revitalization.

Los Angeles: Uncommon Sense

For *Uncommon Sense*, a recent exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, curators Tom Finkelpearl and Julie Lazar invited six artists including Rick Lowe to create projects that expanded traditional art exhibition beyond the boundaries of the museum.¹³⁵ Lowe chose to work within the Watts neighborhood to create a project that will be similar to PRH in some ways and radically different in others. Although his project was conceived on the occasion of the exhibition, and included an installation in the museum, (Fig. 31) it will continue after *Uncommon Sense* closes, without any official involvement from the museum.

As with PRH, place seems to be playing a crucial role in the development of the Watts House Project. Like the Greater Third Ward in Houston, Watts includes a mix of economic levels, encompassing some new developments, some middle class areas, some lower class pockets and areas of real poverty. The neighborhood also possesses a complicated, layered ethnic history. Although often associated with African-Americans (as in the riots in 1965 and those following Rodney King's trial in 1992, the area's population contains a smattering of Asian-Americans and European-Americans, and large numbers of both African-Americans and Latinos.

¹³⁵For more thorough information on the exhibition, see the catalogue, *Uncommon Sense* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997). An informative brochure also accompanied the exhibition.

The place that Lowe has chosen offers similar symbolic possibilities to the rows of shotguns back in Houston. The Watts Towers, a renowned folk art site, centers the setting. These elegant spires, created over a span of thirty years by Italian immigrant Simon Rodia, stand as a powerful symbol of the integration of art and daily life, and of the transformation of humble materials into something wonderful through artistic vision and hard work. Facing the towers, a row of one-story houses seemed a likely setting for a PRH-style group of artists' houses and community services. (Fig. 32) (Although these houses lack the architectural unity of PRH's shotguns they include one shotgun built by a man who moved to LA from the rural south, bringing that resonant architectural style with him.)

Lowe hoped to take advantage of the site's visual power, as well as its history as a focal point for cultural activism in the neighborhood.¹³⁶ Now run by the city of Los Angeles, the Watts Towers Arts Center presents exhibitions and runs a variety of arts education programs targeted primarily at neighborhood children. The site also anchors the Cultural Crescent Master Plan, an ambitious, city-funded redevelopment plan that proposes landscaping to link the towers to a proposed commercial and cultural center, and that mentioned artist-in-residence program as one possible improvement.¹³⁷ The situation, then, was in many ways more complicated than in Houston, where Lowe had already established a network of supportive colleagues and contacts, knew the community intimately, and had chosen a site with enormous potential but little history of artistic activism. In Los Angeles, Lowe had to adapt his strategies to the history, the needs and the politics of this particular place.

Lowe has attempted to build support on a number of levels. He tapped into the community of younger African-American artists, for instance, by recruiting Edgar

¹³⁶This activism dates back at least to the mid-1950s, when, after Rodia moved away from the site, a group banded together to save the Towers from demolition. This group took over the care of the Towers and built an art center on site; people involved with the committee also met on site to discuss art and activism. John Outterbridge and Diane Hall in conversation with the author, May 22, 1997.

¹³⁷Cultural Crescent Master Plan, available in the reading room materials accompanying *Uncommon Sense* at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997.

Arceneux, a smart, articulate young man who has been a major force in keeping the nascent project rolling between Lowe's trips to Los Angeles. Together, they are working to create some immediate, tangible manifestation of the project in order to get local people really involved.

This sort of involvement can be tricky to negotiate. As Mark Greenwood, Director of the Watts Towers Art Center has noted, "you can't come in here with a missionary attitude, because people will nail your ass to a cross."¹³⁸ Meaningful, mutual interaction requires a delicate balance between listening to the needs of various elements within the community, and bringing leadership and charisma to bear so the consensus building doesn't mire down in a chorus of competing desires. Lowe hopes to address these issues in part by creating an artists' residency program at the site so that participating artists would really have time to become integrated in place.¹³⁹ A resident artist could move things forward in a truly meaningful, fully place-sensitive way: "by listening keenly, little opportunities emerge . . . having an artist on site allows a listening ear."¹⁴⁰ Lowe is also fully aware of the potential of a resident artist to create work that activates place by learning from and using local histories and myths. "In order for projects to be special and significant, it is important to be rooted in history. Myth can be so strong, a story could be built in the process of building the piece."

Paradoxically, some members of the older generation of African-American artists (particularly those who had been involved in the committee to save the Watts Towers) seem to feel that Lowe has not paid enough attention to the place-history of the site and

¹³⁸Mark Greenwood in conversation with the author, May 19, 1997.

¹³⁹This was proposed in the Cultural Crescent Master plan, and may be the first major component of the Watts House Project to fall into place. Although Lowe's initial hopes of purchasing some of the adjacent houses were scuttled by Los Angeles' inflated property values, a small warehouse around the corner may become available, although city regulations about the liability problems of having anyone live on city property may cause problems if the project remains associated with the Watts Towers Art Center, which is run by the city.

¹⁴⁰Lowe in public meeting at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, May 22, 1997. He also described a group of Tibetan monks who had done a residency in the neighborhood doing sand paintings, and "after a month residency were low riding with the kids."

his role within it.¹⁴¹ Another potential problem in addressing place has emerged from the museum's involvement in the project. Both Green and Arceneux have noted community perceptions of the museum as an elite and imperialistic institution; as Arceneux put it, "a lot of people see MOCA as an institutional machine incorporating ideas from outside but leaving the source of the influences out in the cold . . . [Sometimes people feel that] museums always do this, sucking the soul out of a community." Arceneux went on, however, to note the importance of MOCA's role in facilitating and funding the early stages of the project, as well as the importance of breaking down boundaries by getting people from Watts in the museum, and by taking MOCA's constituents out to Watts.

Birmingham: Lost Potential?

In 1996, Space One Eleven, an artists' space in Birmingham, Alabama, presented an exhibition that combined information about PRH with the work of 16 artists associated with the project. The installation, designed by Sheryl Tucker, evoked the Row House context through spare means. Each artist's work appeared within a slender wooden framework that delineated the basic geometry of the row house: raised floor, narrow room, peaked roof. (Fig. 33) In addition to clueing visitors in to the unusual original context of the art on display, this reiteration of the shotgun form created a symbolic link between PRH and the blocks of shotguns that pepper Birmingham.

This link suggested possibilities for the future. Space One Eleven (SOE) shares PRH's integration of art and activism, combining studio and exhibition space with arts education and community revitalization programs that have been recognized by Jane Alexander, Chairwoman of the National Endowment of the Art, and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton.¹⁴² SOE perceived PRH as a model for a similar project in Birmingham,

¹⁴¹According to artist John Outterbridge, "this is a long term process being extended. I don't want to see history going down forgotten. This is part of a process that's been going on for a long time, and is being taken further into the future. It's a fabric." Outterbridge and Hall in conversation with the author, May 22, 1997.

¹⁴²Allen Frame, "Building Arts Programs, Brick by Brick," *The New York Times* (August 7, 1994): 22

and the exhibit was only the most visible facet of a series of discussions and site visits undertaken in the hopes of bringing the ethos of PRH's shotguns to the "Magic City."

SOE co-founder Ann Arrasmith thought of the rows of shotguns in the Titusville neighborhood of Birmingham as a potential site. In some ways similar to Third Ward, this African-American community dates back to the 19th century. The neighborhood became a vibrant middle-class area in early decades of the 20th, home to black professionals and cultural events such as vaudeville tours and silent movie screenings, but has declined with an aging population and decrepit housing stock. Arrasmith took Rick Lowe to visit Titusville, and he saw enormous potential in a group of row houses facing a park.

According to community activist Lynn Battle, who has been involved in these conversations, this site would have been ideal for a modified version of PRH.¹⁴³ She saw the shotguns as repositories of communal history, full of symbolic resonance. She worried about kids growing up in shotguns, noting that "you draw your self esteem from your surroundings. I was talking to a local leader who said 'nothing good ever comes from row houses.' People associate shame with these houses. . . but they're an important part of history." Battle envisioned the houses transformed into a gathering point for the community to come together and recover a vanishing communal, cultural life. "Things that used to make this community strong are gone now. You can't get piano lessons anymore." Rather than trying to recreate the programs at PRH, however, she imagined a response specific to the community's needs. "We don't need homes for pregnant women, we need places for kids to learn about art without buses. We need places for the older women to quilt. Houses could hold women's arts, a place for the older men to sit around and banter . . . art, music, plays, spoken word . . . [the houses] could be a place to

4A, and Thomas Hargrove, "City arts program draws praise," *Birmingham Post-Herald* (April 29, 1996).

¹⁴³Lynn Battle in conversation with the author and Bryan Warren, Programs Director at SOE, June 5, 1997.

sustain the history of the community.”¹⁴⁴ She went on to note a revitalization partnership between the community and the University of Alabama, Titusville 2000, which was tearing down old houses in order to build new ones: “We’re losing the home places.”

Although not an artist, Battle’s description of the Titusville shotguns and their potential uses echoed some characteristics of the art of place: a focus on communal effort, sensitivity to the needs and desires of the community, emphasis on the structures and symbols and stories that bind groups together, an activist sensibility. She reiterated the need for communal effort to preserve a rich but endangered place-history, and to find gathering points to share the stories and memories that create and sustain communities. Battle also paid great attention to the symbolic potential of the shotguns; she took the associations that circle around these structures, and this place, quite seriously.

Titusville seemed a solid candidate for a new version of Project Row Houses, with its rich local history, current need, and shotguns ripe for artistic revitalization. As of this writing, however, a host of problems has prevented that from occurring. These problems highlight the difficulties involved in transplanting PRH’s ideals, even in soil as fertile as Titusville’s seemed. The central problem, it seems, has been a lack of leadership. Although Lowe’s visits and PRH’s ideals sparked a great deal of discussion, no one took the responsibility to take that raw energy and transform it into something tangible. SOE and Battle were already committed to other projects, and despite interest in Titusville and in the arts community, no one took ownership of the project. This left ideas floating without being actualized; as Battle described it, they needed “somebody wearing the ‘I’m in charge’ hat.” Bryan Warren, Programs Director at SOE, emphasized that the local situation was stagnant and politicized enough that only someone from outside Birmingham would have the mobility to generate any momentum. For a while, Lowe had hoped that another artist associated with PRH would move to Birmingham for that

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

purpose, but it never happened, and Lowe himself was stretched thin by flying between Houston and Los Angeles. Grotfeldt and Space One Eleven still hope to make something work in Birmingham (perhaps through the umbrella organization discussed earlier), but the prospects look slim at present.

These difficulties underscore one of the paradoxes of the art of place: although it privileges communal over solo efforts, a charismatic individual may be required in order for anything to get done. Although no longer privileged as a genius, the artist remains necessary as a catalyst. If a place-sensitive artist, or group of artists and others, had taken responsibility for leading the effort in Birmingham, they might have provided a focal point for all that artistic vision, creativity, flexibility, and organizational skill. They might have circumnavigated the roadblocks, or used them as an opportunity to rethink the project, as Lowe, Arceneaux and the rest have been doing in Los Angeles. There, Lowe described the sort of paradigm shift necessary to make these projects work: “We don’t see problems, or conflicts, but other opportunities and solutions.”¹⁴⁵

A Point of Departure

Throughout this thesis, I used the notion of place as a theoretical filter through which to analyze the ever-changing, organic development of Project Row Houses. Place has been crucial to PRH; the characteristics of the art of place apply equally to the project’s history and to much of the art it has presented. PRH exudes place-specificity, and could never be extracted from the Third Ward without losing its vigor, purpose and soul. The project has drawn aesthetic and symbolic impact from its transformation of the shotgun houses the recovery of the resistant history they contain. PRH has become a home-place for artists and others, one created by visionary artists able to mobilize many voices and many hands towards a common purpose. Above all, PRH has integrated art

¹⁴⁵Rick Lowe at a public meeting at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, May 22, 1997.

into life of its community with pragmatic and flexible social ideals, place-sensitive programs, aesthetic power, and an exuberant, genuine, generous spirit.

Project Row Houses resonates because many people desire place-centered community so intensely, and deeply want art to be a part of the rhythms of their lives. PRH has addressed those needs by integrating the creativity of artists into the specificity of a place, and while it sports some flaws and rough places and will continue to grow and change, Project Row Houses seems remarkably successful thus far. While the art of place offers a framework for its activities and the art PRH presents, it can also be extended beyond 2500 Holman Street. Imaginative, genuine, unromantic art of place seems an important strand of contemporary practice; I hope artists continue to pay attention to its many-faceted possibilities.

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- Project Row Houses printed matter, including detailed chronology and artists' cards accompanying projects through Fall 1997.
- Printed matter from Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Space One Eleven, and the Watts Towers Cultural Center.

APPENDIX A: ARTISTS EXHIBITED AT PROJECT ROW HOUSES

Rounds One Through Seven, October 1994 - October 1997

ARTIST	TITLE
Round One October 1994 - March 1995	
Steven Bernard Jones	Scarification
Annette Lawrence	Re-Collections
Jesse Lott	The Drawing Room
Tierney Malone	The Hope Apothocary
David McGee	Landscape of Soul
Vicki Meek	2517 Memory House
Floyd Newsom	Tribal Markings
Collette Veasey-Cullors	"Our " Children
Bobbie Wallace Wright	Spoken Word House
Round Two April - September, 1995	
Radcliffe Bailey	Sacred Grace
Leamon Greene	untitled
Earlie Hudnall	untitled
Paul Kittelson/Carter Ernst	The Full House
Fletcher Mackey	Drift
Anastasia Sams	Intonement
George Smith	Ancestral Shrine
Roots Collective	Spoken Word House
Round Three October 1995 - March 1996	
Anitra Blayton	Time That Steel Binds
Henry Ray Clark	If You Mess With Me I Will Kill You
Ben DeSoto	Never Forgotten
Jean Lacy	The Trinity Methodist Commission
Whitfield Lovell	Echo
Bob Powell	In This House
Sheila Pree	Black Power
Joseph Dixon	Recycled Matter-Real (Projects Gallery)

Round Four March - September 1996	
Albert Chong	Ancestral Dialogues: The Photographs of Albert Chong
Selven O'Keefe Jarmon	Fashion as Metaphor
Karen Sanders	Camera House
Fred Wilson	untitled (addition to Whitfield Lovell's piece)
Pat Ward Williams	The Universal Family Album: Words to Live By
April - September 1996	
James Bettison	The Head, a Heart, My Hands
Marsha Dorsey Outlaw	A Hair Museum
Tracy Hicks	Third Ward Archive
Shazia Sikander	Knock Knock, Who's There? Mithilia, Mithilia Who?
Summer 1996	
Y. David Chung	untitled (Projects Gallery)
Round Five October 1996 - March 1997	
The Blues and the Abstract Truth	untitled
Barsamian	Our House
Sharon Engelstein et al.	Peek
Ron Smith/Sebastian Whitaker	Woodshedding
Greg Tate	My Darling Gremlin
Angela Williamston	Blowin' Up A Spot! Media Arts Project (Spoken Word House)
continuing projects	
Tracy Hicks	Third Ward Archive
Whitfield Lovell / Fred Wilson	Echo / untitled
Round Six April - September 1997	
Michelle Engelman	Lighthouse/Spirit House
Jameelah	Strictly Roots
Dan Havel	The Magisterium
Natalie Lovejoy	Lost Innocence
Motapa	untitled
Bert Samples	Eyuphuro

Kaneem Smith	The Resurfacing Mortification of the Past is Inevitable
continuing project	
Angela Williamston	Blowin' Up A Spot! Media Arts Project (Spoken Word House)
Round 7 October 1997 - March 1998	
Dottie Allen	Out of the Fields
John Baran	untitled
Stanford Carpenter	Imagining the MFZ & Other Tidbits of Dope Spaces
Naomi Carrier	House Full O'Blues: A Tribute to Eugene Carrier (1946-1997)
Colette Gaiter	Space/Race
Celia Muñoz	Patterned: After Biggers
Josefa Vaughan	House of Daddy Dreams
Garry Reece	Identity and the Bi-Ethnic Child (Spoken Word House)

All the artists in Round One were African-American. Later rounds, however, have included artists of many different ethnicities. Most rounds have also featured a balance of male and female artists.

APPENDIX B: ILLUSTRATIONS

Unless otherwise noted, reproductions of photographs
are drawn from Project Row House's slide archive.

Fig. 1
Project Row Houses, Houston, Texas

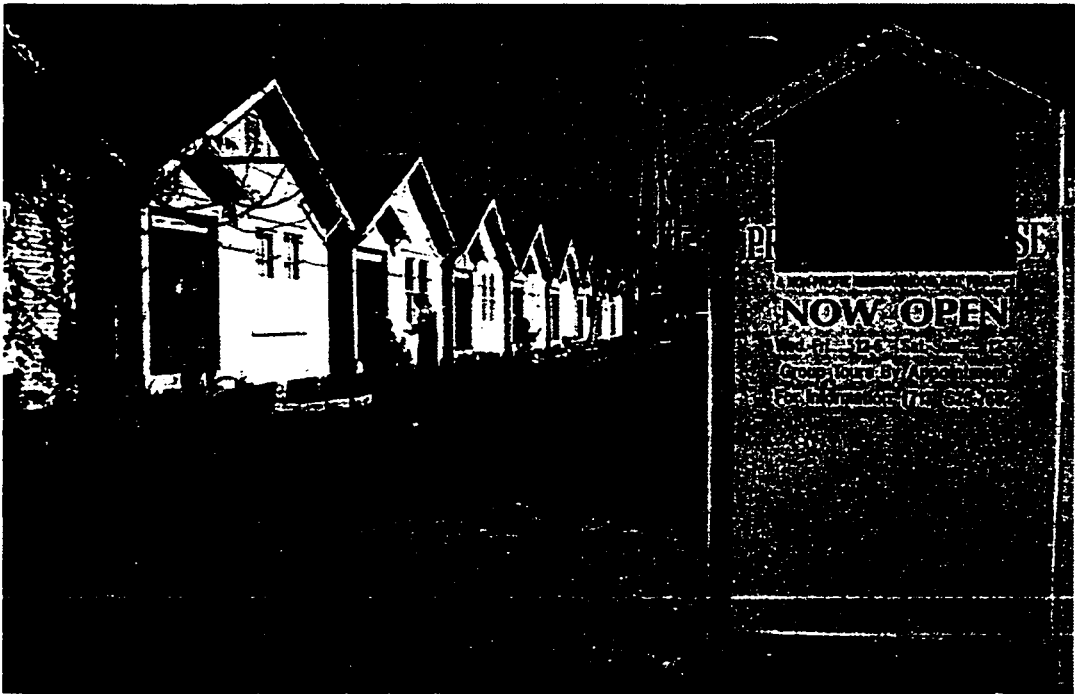


Fig. 2
Map of Third Ward Neighborhood, 1997
Courtesy the City of Houston Neighborhood Planning Office

Third Ward Neighborhood



Fig. 3
Cleveland Turner
Flower Man's House (detail)
Work in progress



Fig. 4
Project Row Houses and downtown Houston



Fig. 5

Traditional Yoruba house

Photograph and plan: John Michael Vlach, 1974

Published in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, 1986

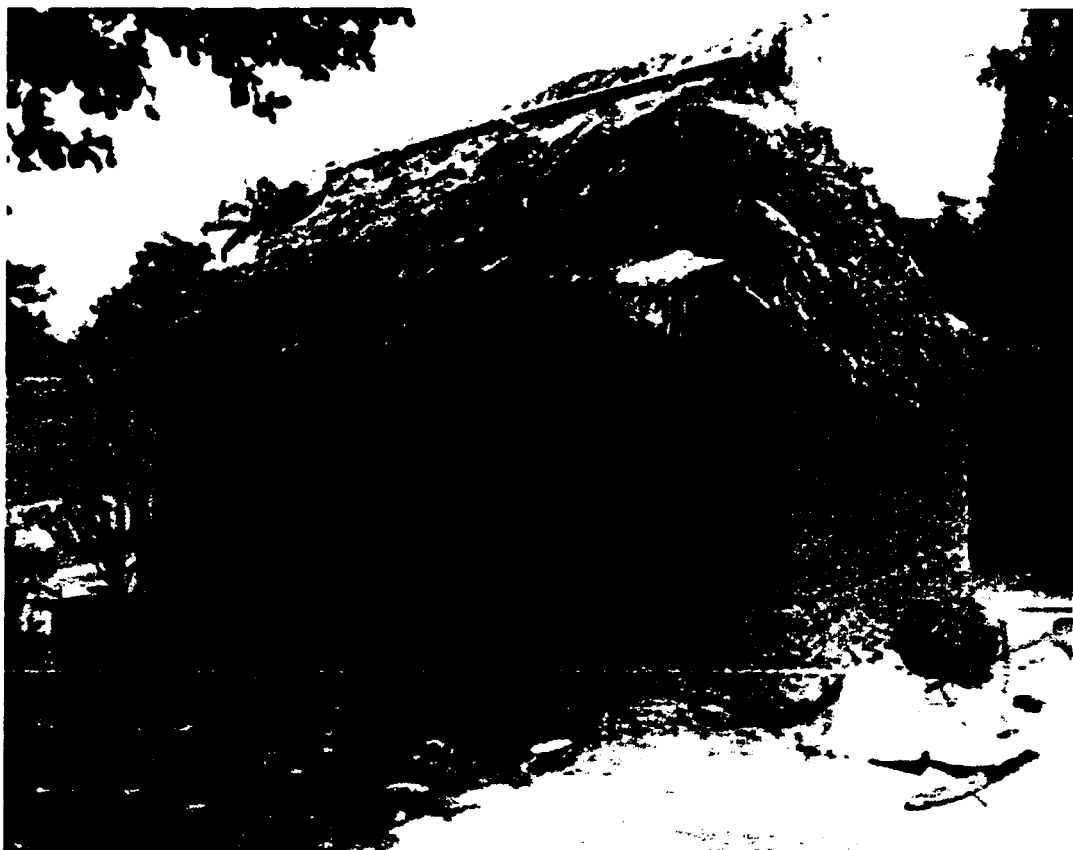


Fig. 6

Traditional Beembe House, northern Kongo, Musonda village

Photograph: Robert Farris Thompson, 1987

Published in *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art*, 1989

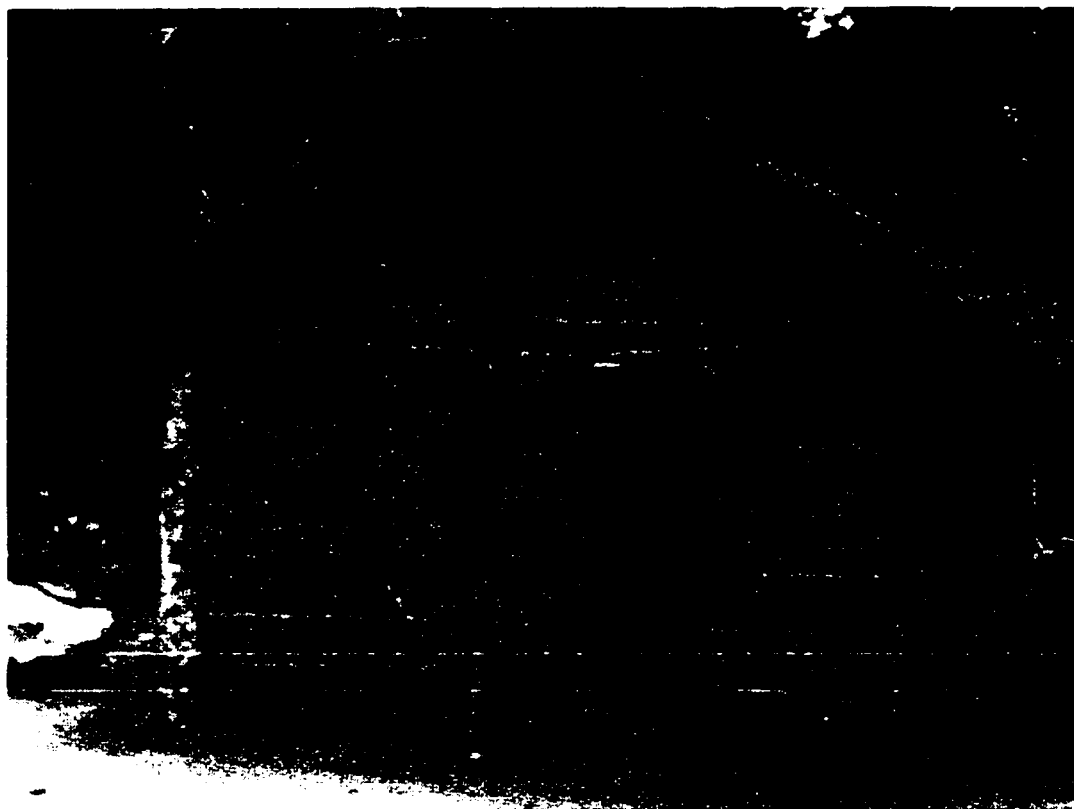


Fig. 7

Rural Haitian shotgun houses and plan

Photograph and plan: John Michael Vlach, 1973

Published in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, 1986

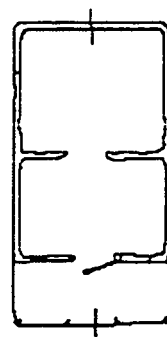
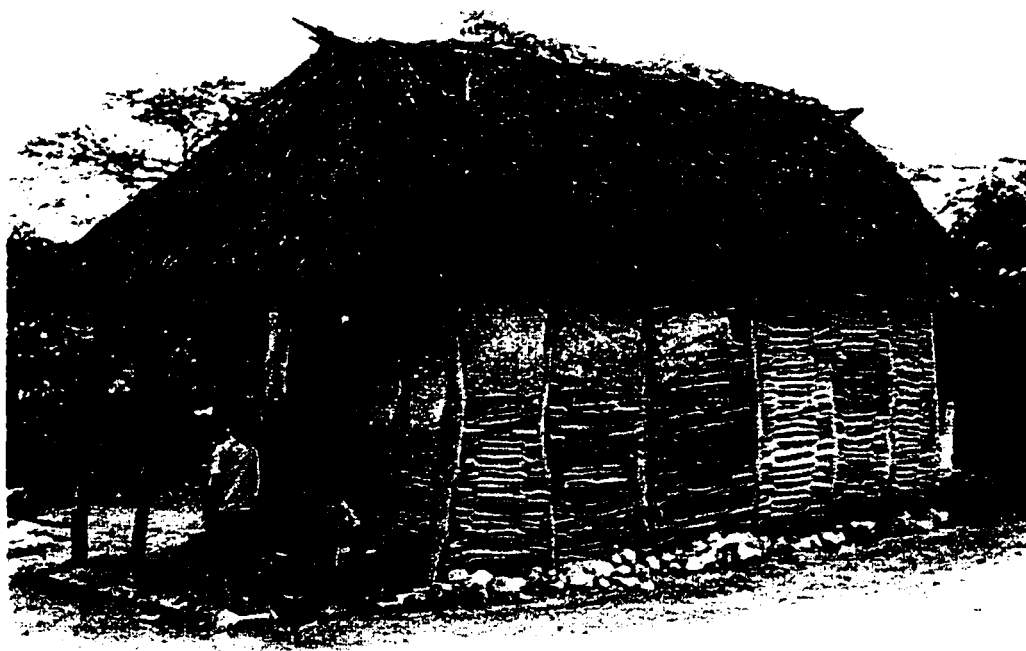


Fig. 8

Urban Haitian shotgun houses and plans

Photograph and plans: John Michael Vlach, 1973

Published in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, 1986

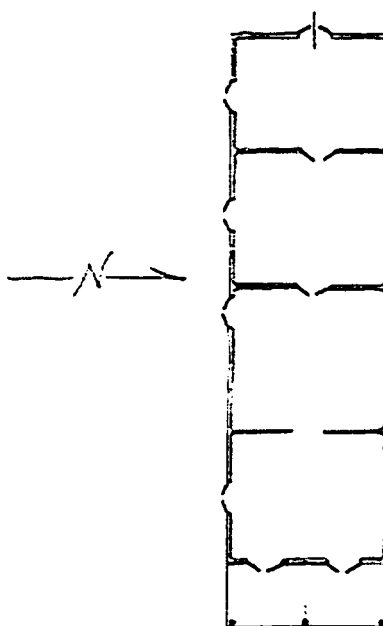
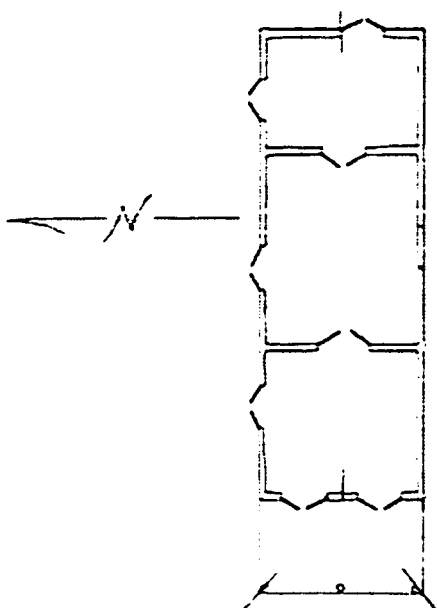
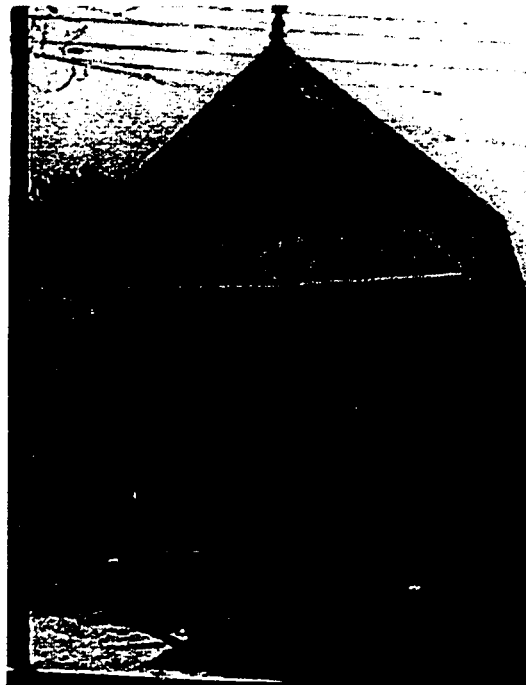


Fig. 9

John Biggers

Shotguns, 1987

oil and acrylic on canvas

Private Collection

Published in *The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room*, 1995

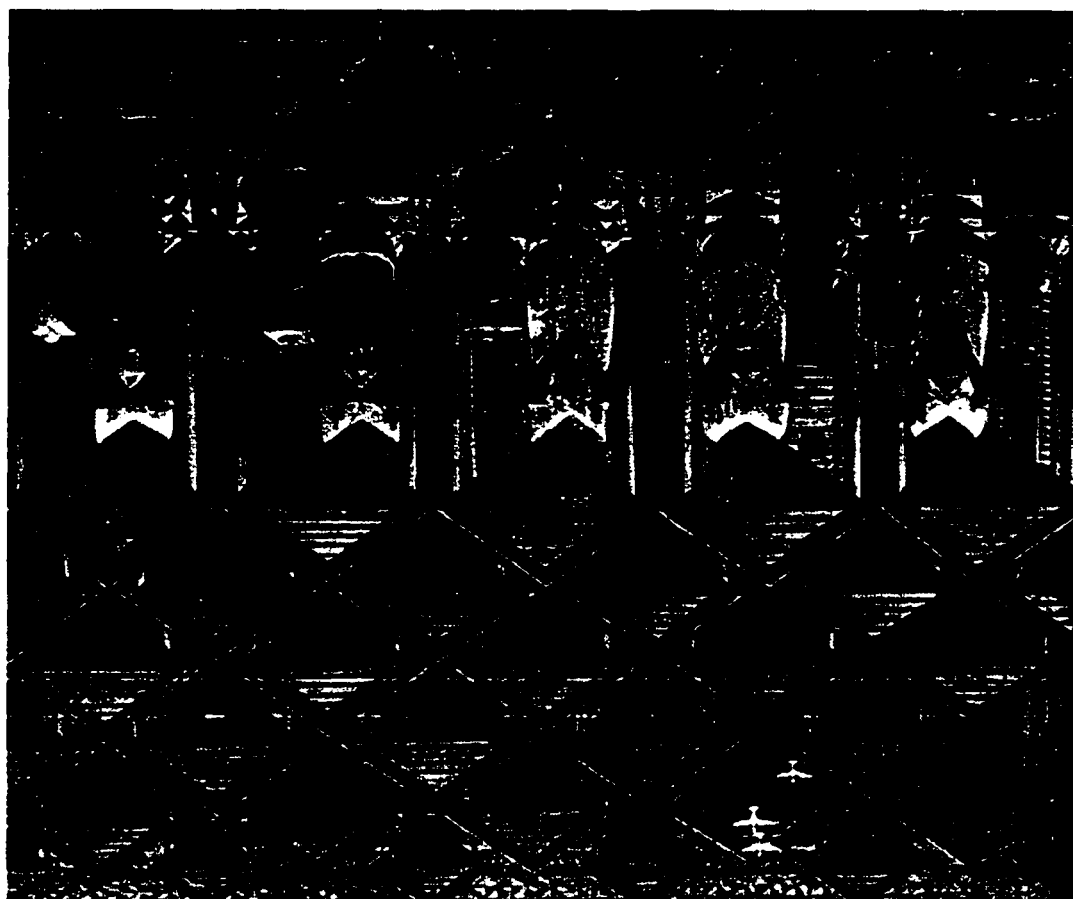


Fig. 10

Gordon Matta-Clark

Humphrey Street Splitting (detail), 1974

Published in *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, 1996



Fig. 11
John Milkovisch and family
Beer Can House (detail)
Work in progress
Photograph: the author, 1997

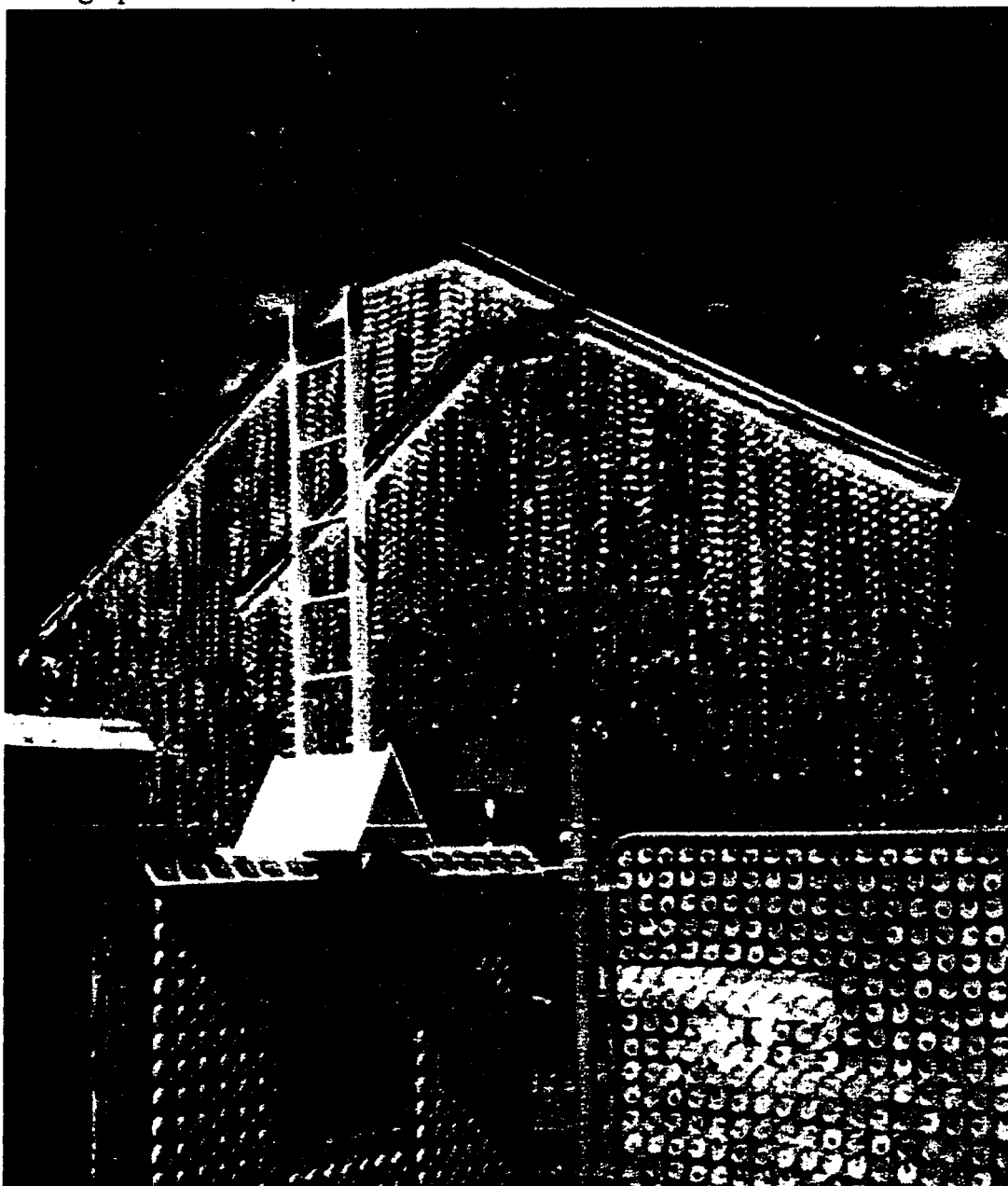


Fig. 12

Sheila Levrant de Bretteville with the Power of Place

Biddy Mason's Homestead (detail), 1989

mixed-media installation

Photograph: the author, 1997



Fig. 13
Rick Lowe
Founding Director, Project Row Houses



Fig. 14
Project Row Houses site before renovation



Fig. 15
Project Row Houses site during renovation



Fig. 16
Project Row Houses site after renovation



Fig. 17
Deborah Grotfeldt
Executive Director, Project Row Houses



Fig. 18
Site Plan, Project Row Houses, 1993

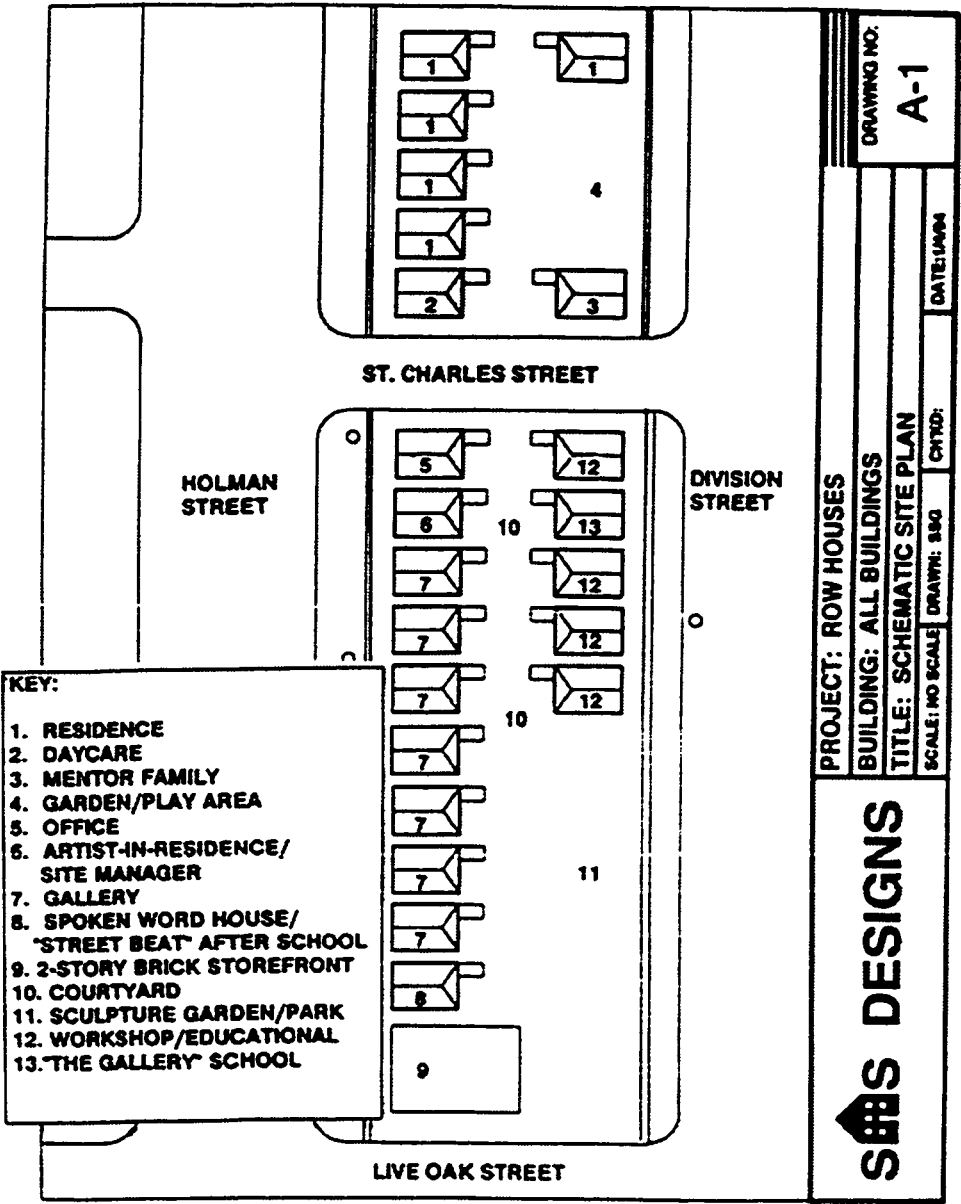


Fig. 19

Play area featuring shotgun-like structures, Project Row Houses

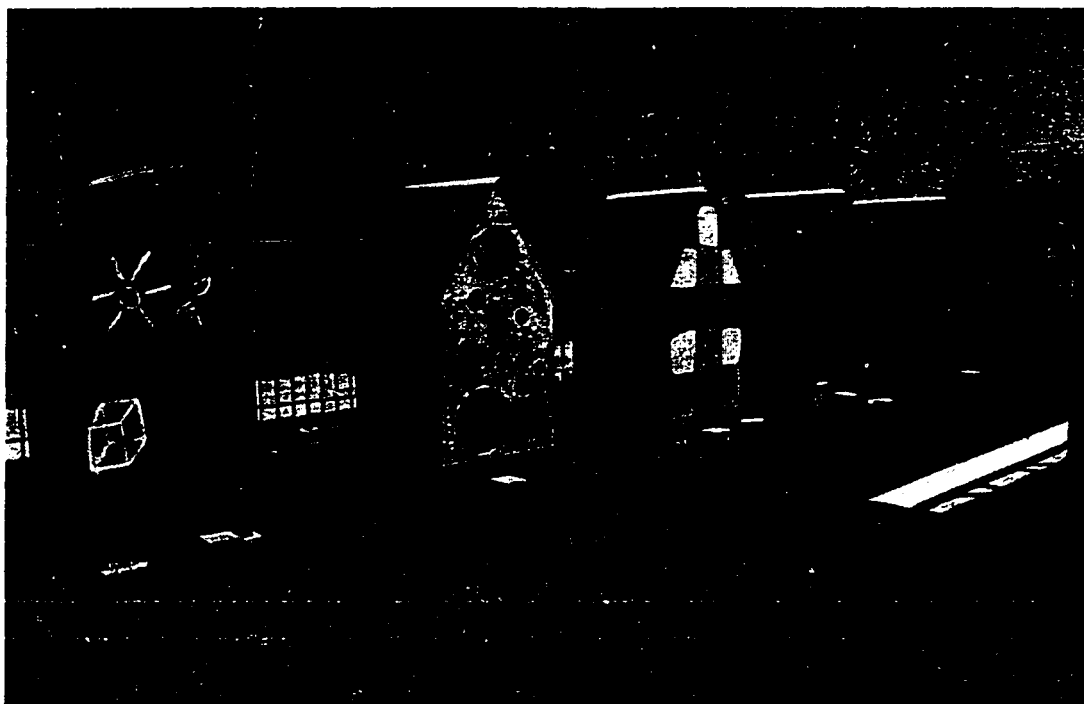


Fig. 20
Whitfield Lovell
Echo (detail), 1995
Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses



Fig. 21
Whitfield Lovell
Echo (detail), 1995
Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses

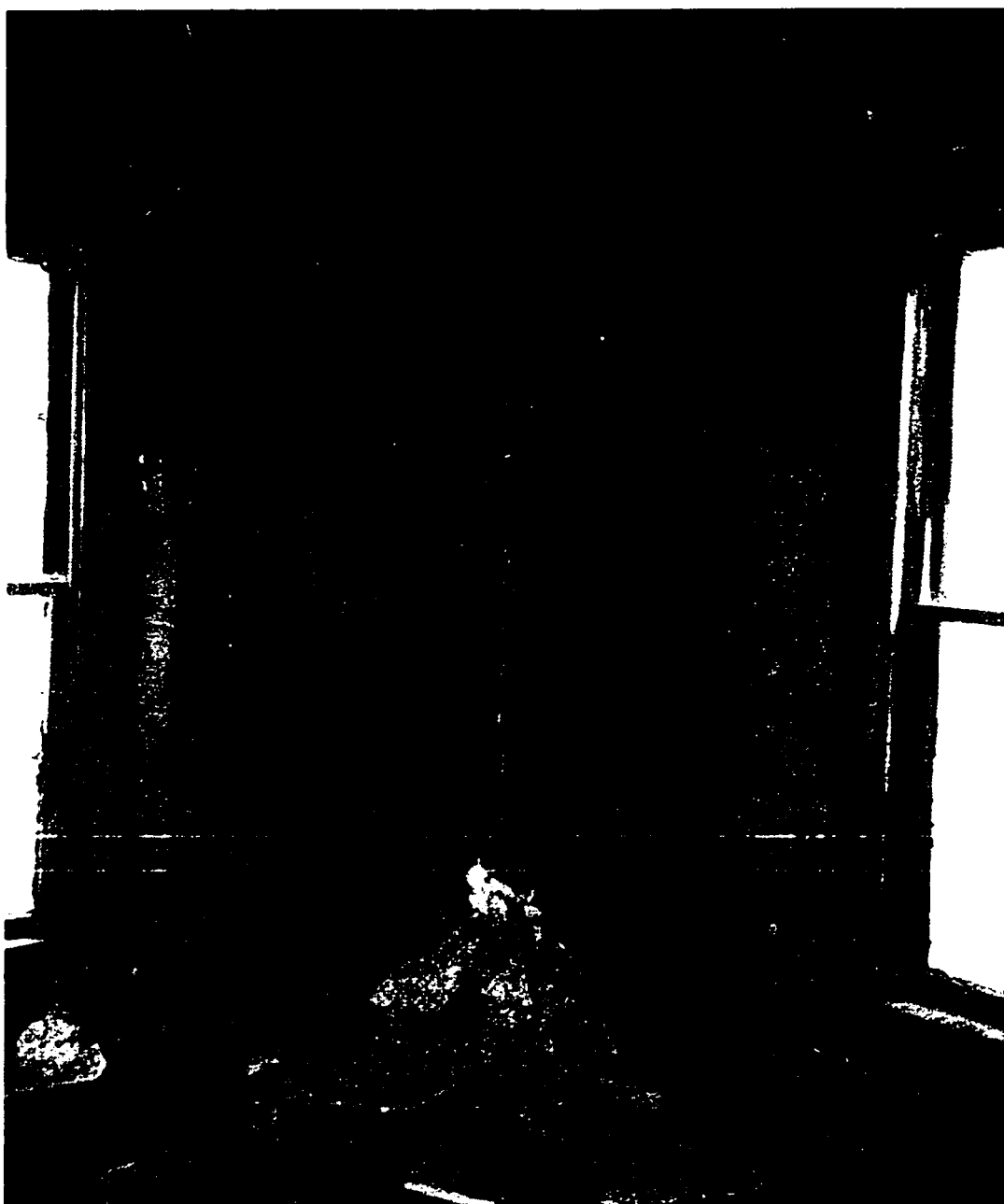


Fig. 22
Robert Barsamian
Our House (detail), 1996
Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses

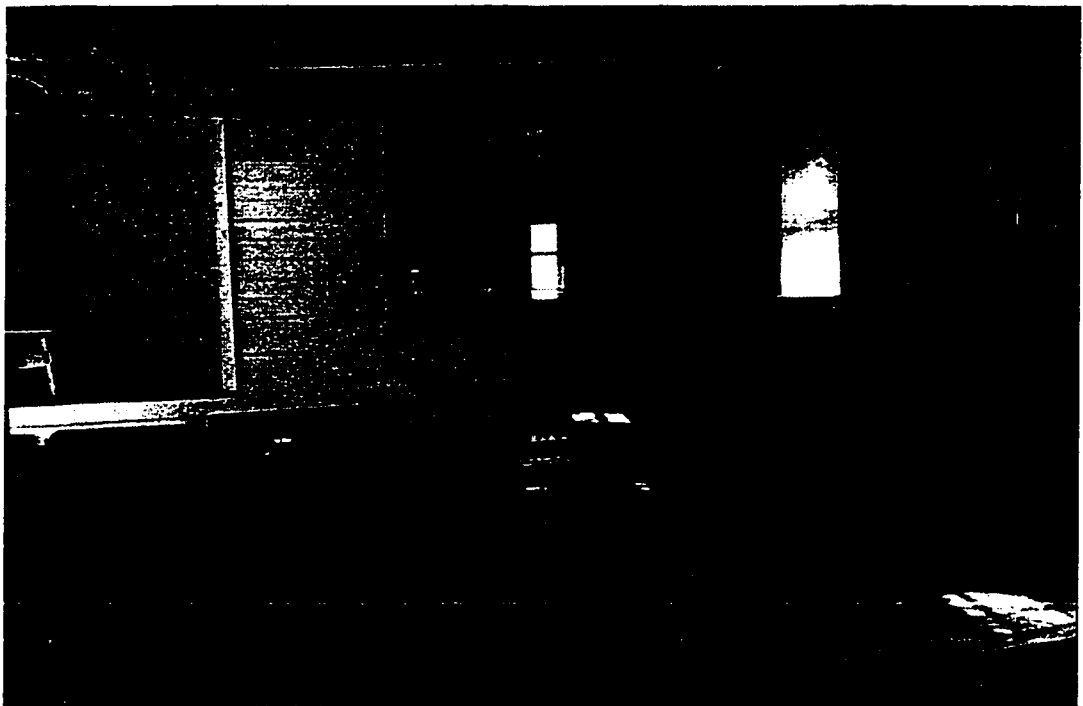


Fig. 23

Vicki Meek

2517 Memory House (detail), 1994

Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses



Fig. 24

Celia Muñoz

Patterned: After Biggers (detail), 1997

Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses



Fig. 25
 Tracy Hicks
Third Ward Archive (detail), 1996
 Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses



Fig. 26

Tracy Hicks

Third Ward Archive (detail), 1996

Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses

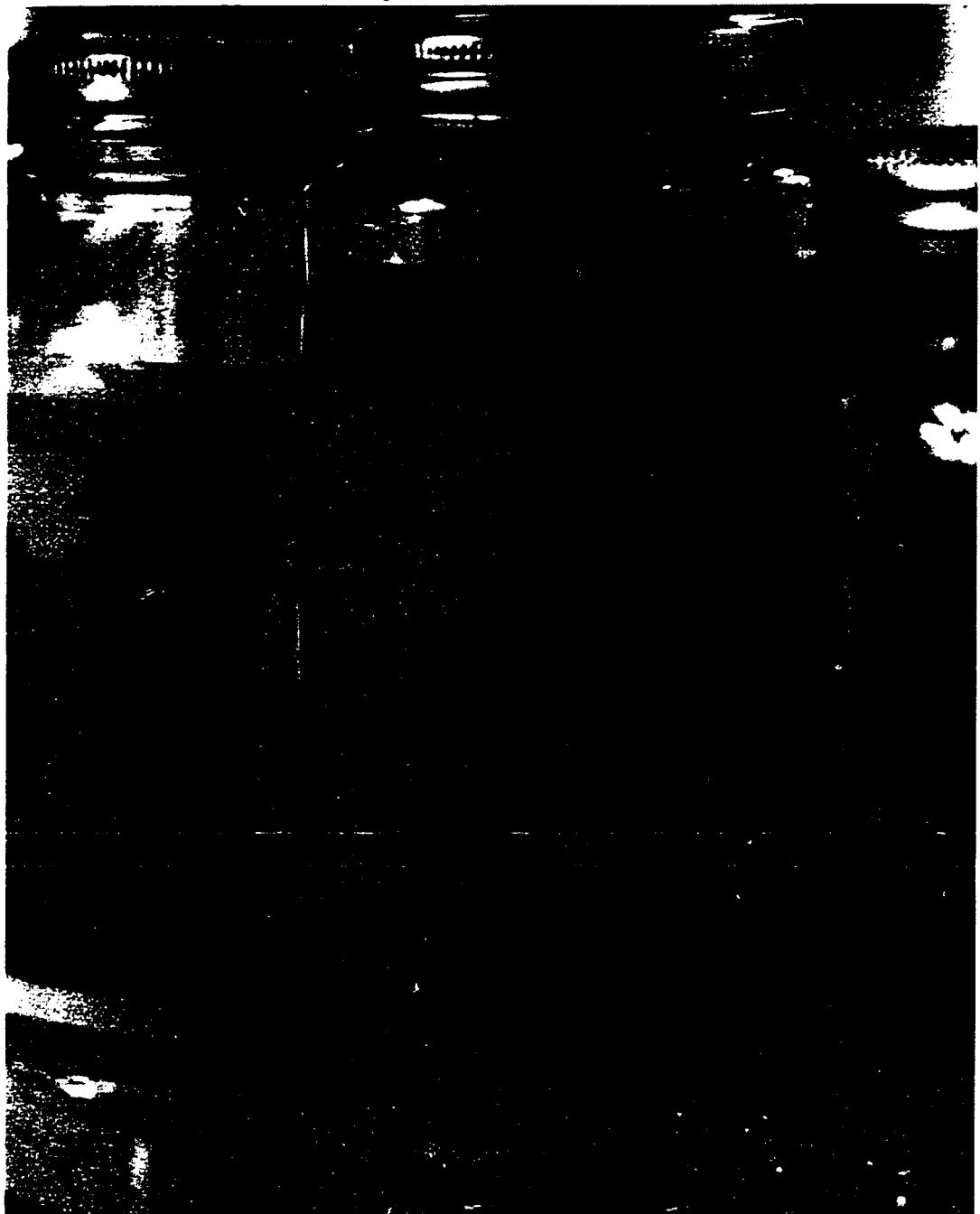


Fig. 27

Dan Havel

The Magisterium (detail), 1997

Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses

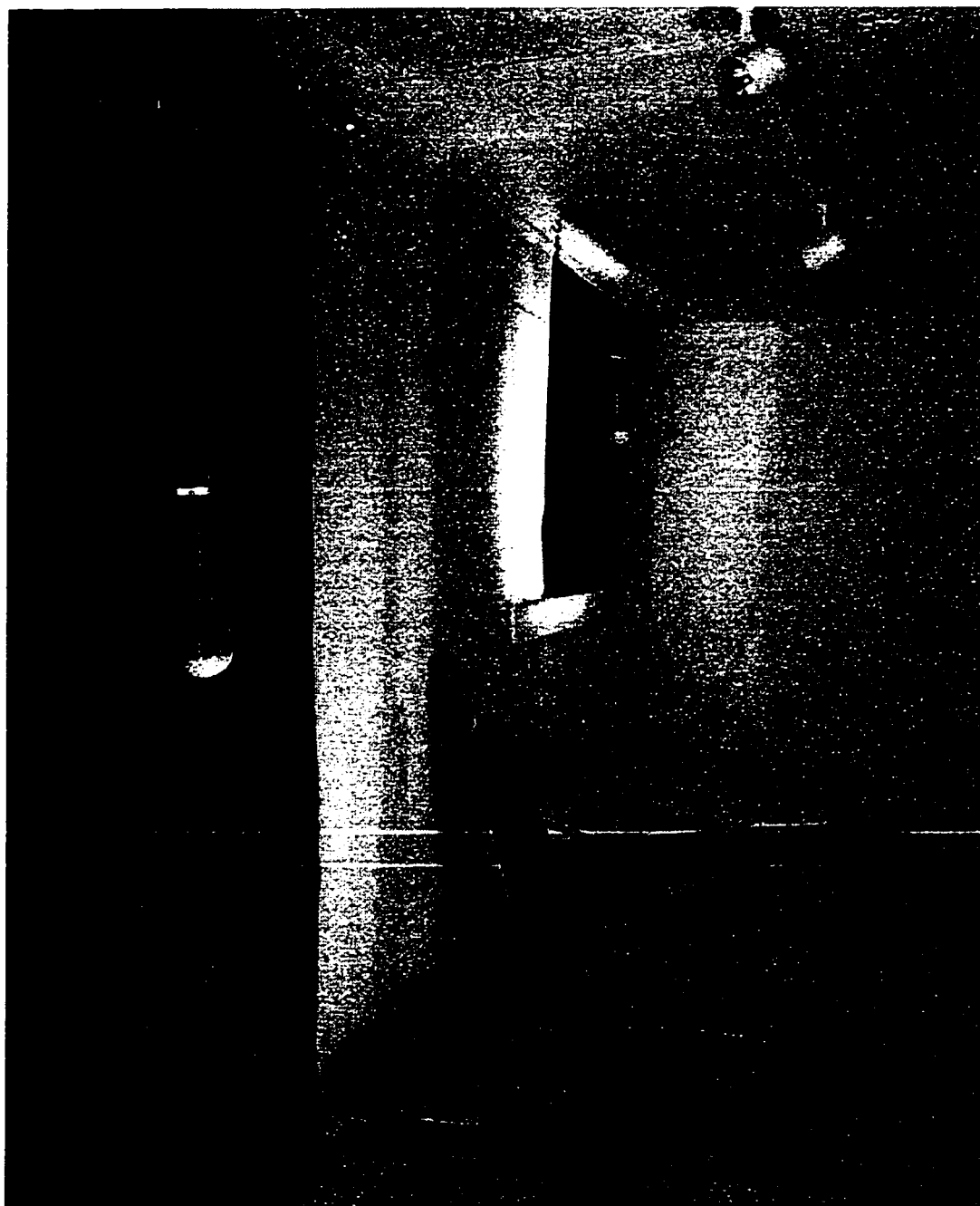


Fig. 28
Paul Kittelson and Carter Ernst
The Full House (detail), 1995
Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses

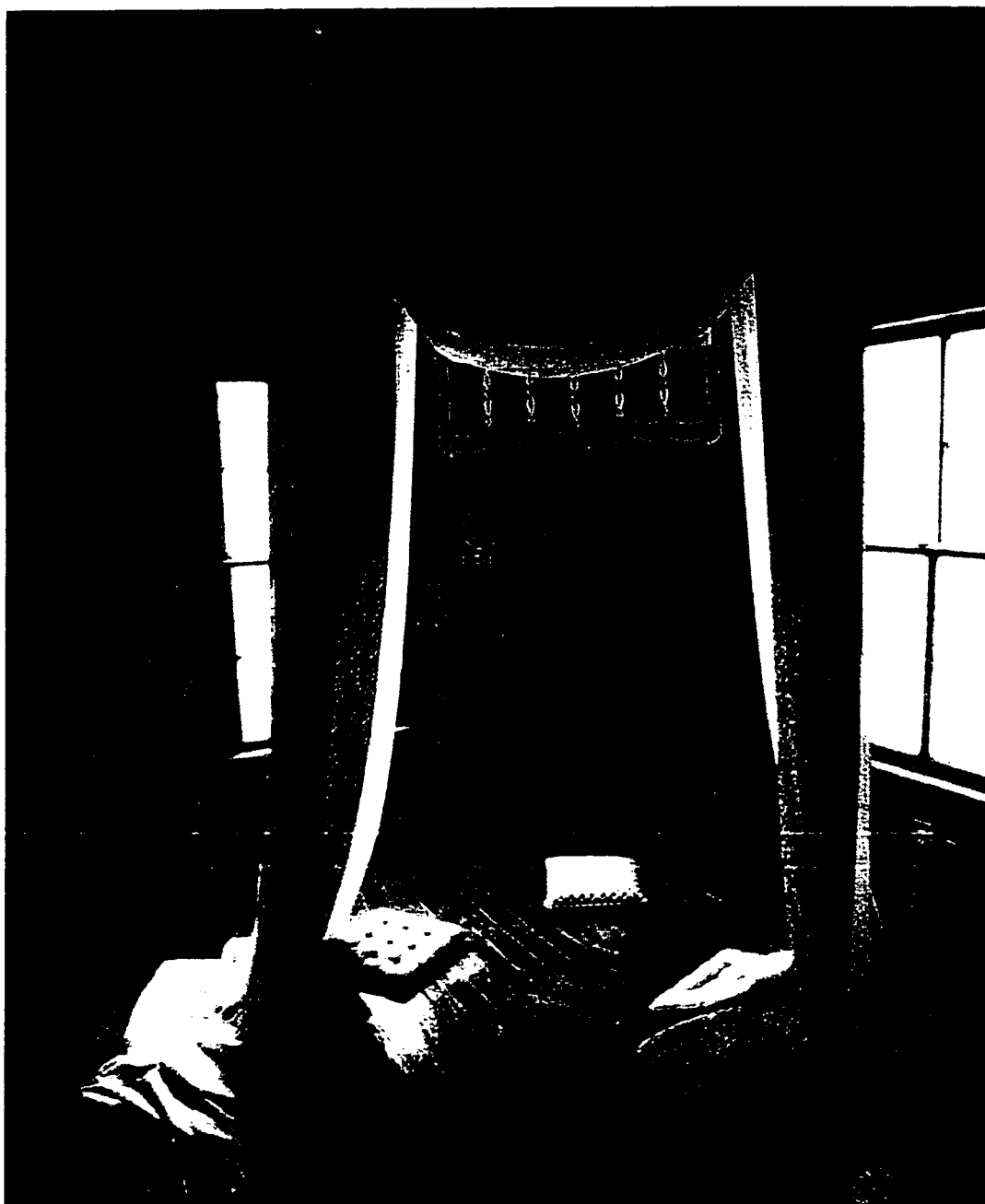


Fig. 29

Natalie Lovejoy

Lost Innocence (detail), 1997

Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses



Fig. 30
Natalie Lovejoy
Lost Innocence (detail), 1997
Mixed-media installation at Project Row Houses



Fig. 31

Rick Lowe

Watts House Project (detail), 1997

as commissioned by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), for the exhibition *Uncommon Sense*, 1997

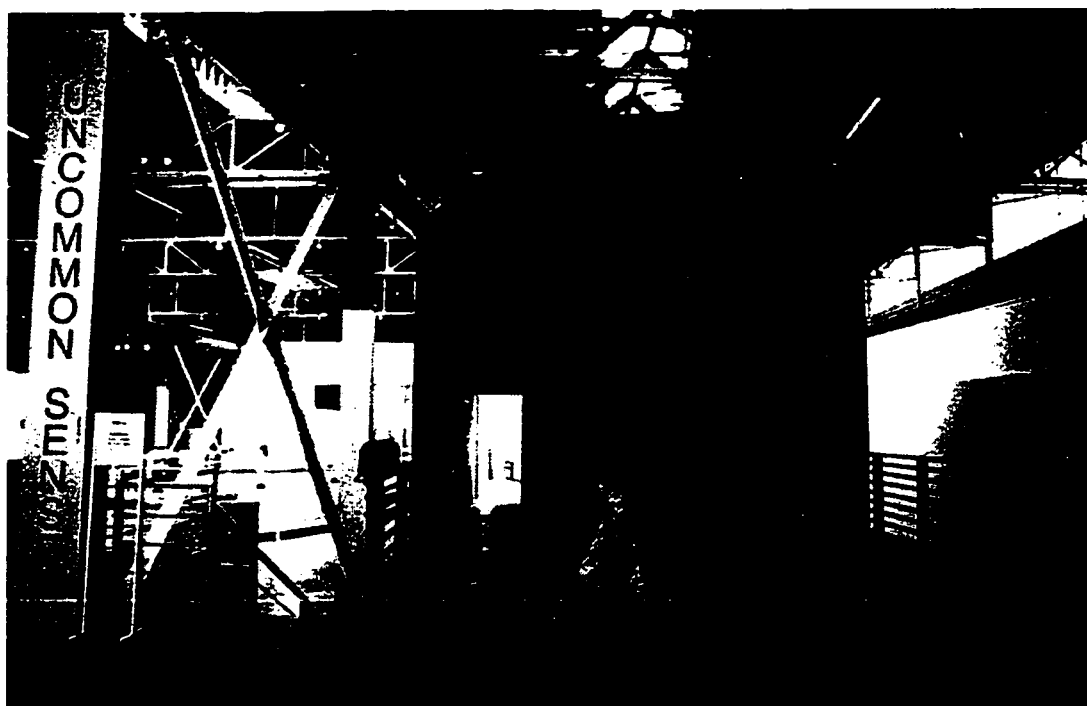


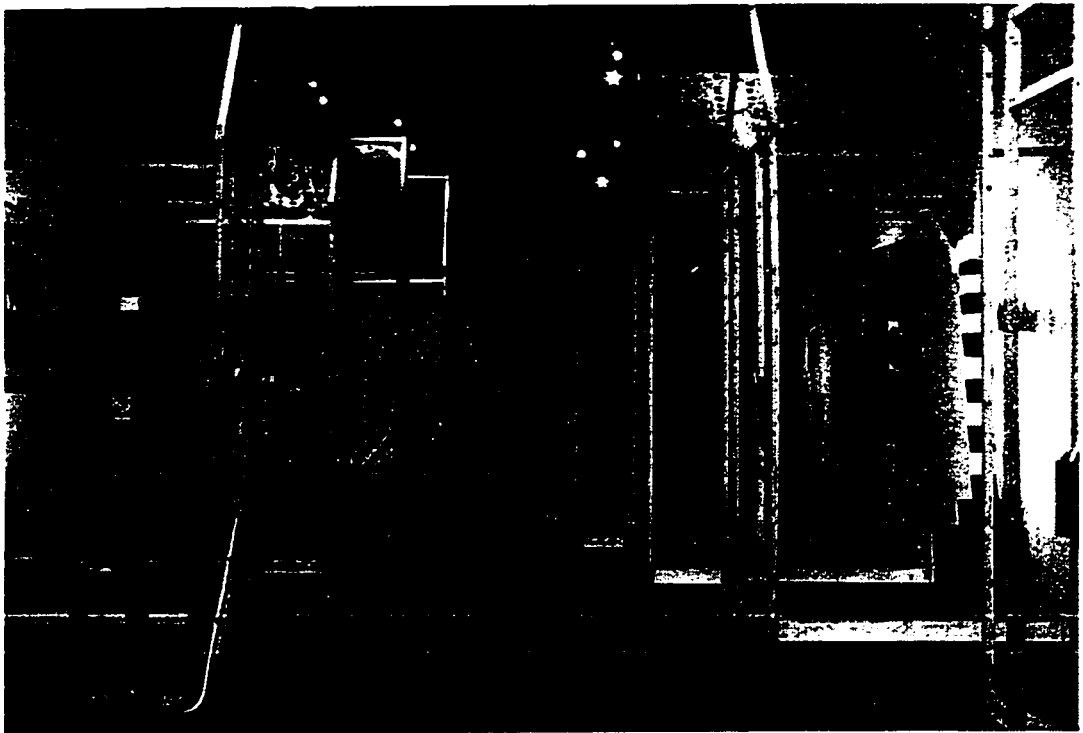
Fig. 32

Proposed site for Watts House Project, Los Angeles, California

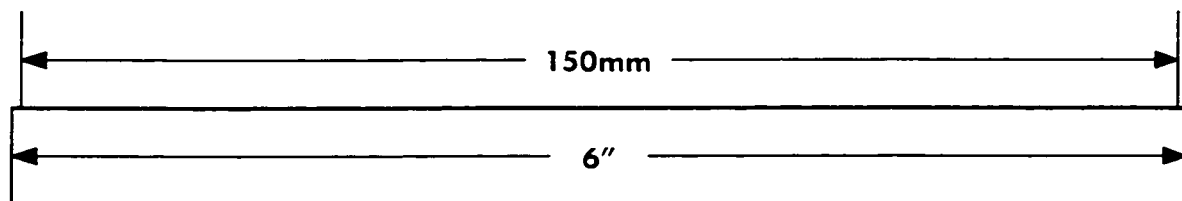
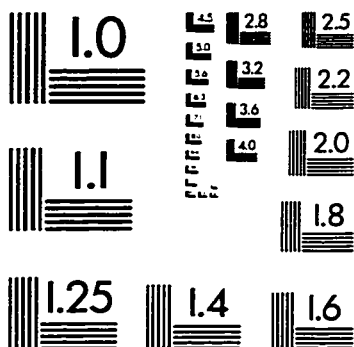
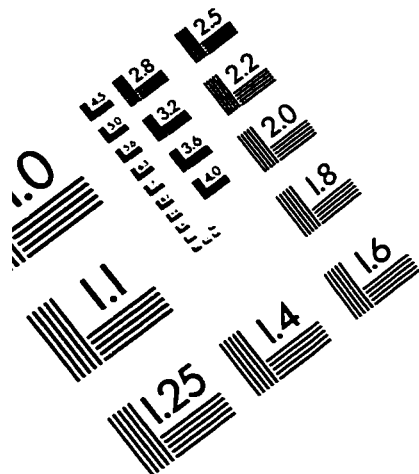
Photograph: the author, 1997



Fig. 33
Project Row Houses: A Sampler, 1996
as presented at Space One Eleven, Birmingham, Alabama



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