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Tracing and Redrawing: Visual Strategies for Memory and Transformation in the Built Landscape

This article explores the layered nature of the built landscape in U.S. cities shaped by policies of segregation, demolition, and displacement. Focusing on three case studies—Sekou Cooke's We Outchea, Yolande Daniels' Black City, and the Westside Evolves initiative in Chattanooga—it examines how contemporary methods of graphic representation reclaim erased memory and reconstruct cultural heritage in urban contexts where physical continuity has been lost. Through visual overlays, digital mapping, and participatory art, these projects expand the definition of preservation to include intangible, symbolic, and collective dimensions. The article argues that palimpsestic representation offers not only a tool of analysis but also a political and cultural strategy for documenting, understanding, and transforming the built environment.

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INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how visual representation functions as both a cognitive tool and an instrument of memory-making in contexts of urban erasure and transformation. It explores how architectural drawing, digital collage, cartographic layering, and speculative visualizations serve not merely as means of communication, but as methods of critical inquiry—approaches that allow us to understand and reconfigure the built landscape as a palimpsest of social, political, and cultural layers. Representation, in this sense, is not a passive mirror of the real, but an active terrain where past and future are negotiated, especially in neighborhoods shaped by racialized disinvestment and planning ideologies of rupture.

This article contributes to the current international reflection on how knowledge of the built landscape—material and immaterial—can be advanced through multidisciplinary, graphic, and specialized means. The constructed environment must be interpreted as a stratified palimpsest that reflects not only architectural interventions, but also community practices, memory, trauma, and resilience. This inquiry thus places particular emphasis on non-traditional, layered forms of representation—visual instruments that confront the absence of physical heritage with techniques of symbolic recovery.

The article is structured in three parts. First, it outlines the American historical context of housing policy, focusing on how tools like redlining maps, zoning codes, and infrastructural planning created systemic racial inequalities in the urban fabric. This section also introduces the concept of the city as palimpsest, drawing on authors such as Pierre Nora, Marc Augé, Michel de Certeau, and Miguel Guitart to argue that collective memory is always spatial and often visually encoded—even when the material traces have been erased.

The second section presents two case studies from Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America (MoMA, 2021), with particular attention to how architectural drawing becomes a vehicle for resistance. In Sekou Cooke's We Outchea, urban memory is reconstructed through visual sampling and digital remix: speculative 3D renderings "scratch" and subtract from existing building masses, intersecting demolished structures with future ones to produce a speculative palimpsest. His graphic language draws from hip-hop's performative logic to visualize cultural survival amidst spatial erasure. Yolande Daniels's Black City superimposes Sanborn fire insurance maps onto contemporary city plans, revealing the structural underpinning of racialized planning. Her work transforms cartography into an act of unveiling, where ghost geographies are brought to the surface through digital layering. In both cases, drawings and mappings are not illustrative—they are analytical, mnemonic, and critical.

The third section examines Westside Evolves, a large-scale housing redevelopment in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Here, the physical traces of the past are largely being erased; yet a representational effort persists. Memory is channeled not through architectural preservation, but through visual storytelling, photo archives, and oral narratives gathered by artists and residents. Design workshops, community maps, and graphic storytelling projects such as the Life Book become alternative layers in a palimpsest without material continuity. This highlights the shift from heritage as built form to heritage as affective and representational trace—a vital insight for any approach to memory in urban design.

Methodologically, the article combines a literature review with direct engagement with the authors and institutions behind these projects. Access to unpublished design documents illuminated the conceptual intentions behind the projects and informed this research. The work critically examines how digital and analog graphic tools are used to propose new architectures and recover lost ones, representing what is no longer visible and reinserting it into the collective consciousness.

CONTEXTUAL LAYERS: REPRESENTATION AND SPATIAL INEQUALITY IN THE AMERICAN URBAN LANDSCAPE

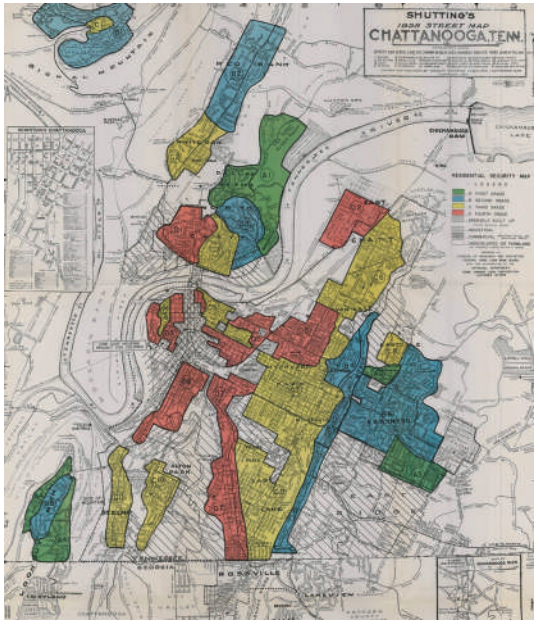

Fig. 1 - 1935 Historic Redlining Map of Chattanooga, TN. Courtesy of the University of Richmond.

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In the United States, the built environment is the outcome of deeply layered policies and cultural processes, where representation—both visual and spatial—has long served as an instrument of power. Rather than reflecting neutral development, the American urban landscape has been shaped by a history of deliberate interventions that produced segregation, disinvestment, and spatial inequality (Rothstein, 2018). Understanding this built terrain as a palimpsest requires close attention not only to what has been constructed or demolished, but to the visual tools that mediated these actions: maps, codes, drawings, and plans.[1]

A striking example of such representational power is found in the redlining maps created by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation in the 1930s (Figure 01). These color-coded maps, developed under federal guidance, codified racial bias into the urban fabric. Neighborhoods with Black or immigrant residents were marked in red—"hazardous"—and denied mortgage access, while white areas were rendered green, primed for investment. These maps were not descriptive; they were prescriptive. They materialized racial hierarchies in visual form and determined who could access the American dream of homeownership and who would remain locked in cycles of spatial exclusion (Krumholz, 2013; Reardon & Raciti, 2019; Raciti & Reardon, 2025).

Such mappings were not isolated artifacts but part of a broader apparatus of technocratic urbanism.

Fig. 2 - Cooke and Yolande's projects exhibited at MoMA. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY.

Fig. 3 - Map of Syracuse, with selected sites for study in orange. Courtesy of Sekou Cooke studio.

In the postwar period, large-scale infrastructure projects and "urban renewal" plans deployed visual instruments—grids, renderings, clearance diagrams—that conveyed a promise of modernity while concealing social violence. The abstract clarity of these diagrams belied the lived realities they disrupted: displacement, cultural loss, and severed social networks. The planner's drawing became a tool of erasure as much as of design.

The history of American planning reveals a paradox: while claiming neutrality, professional tools often reinforced structural inequality. Planning is never ideologically empty.[2] To draw a zoning map or design a housing development is to make political decisions about who belongs, who benefits, and who is rendered invisible. What appears as bureaucratic logic—minimum lot sizes, setback lines, density limits—often functions as a means of social stratification (Davidoff & Davidoff, 1971).

In response, counter-mapping and community-led representation have emerged as acts of resistance. Beginning in the 1960s, movements for advocacy planning and citizen participation challenged the top-down narratives embedded in official maps and drawings.[3] These alternative representations—hand-drawn neighborhood plans, oral histories, photo archives—offered not only competing visions of place but new ways of knowing and managing the built environment.

Today, the legacy of exclusion is etched into the

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American city's spatial form, but also into its representational memory. Any effort to preserve, transform, or reinterpret the built landscape must contend with this dual history: of what was drawn, and what was deliberately left out. Recognizing the graphic and symbolic power of architectural and planning tools is essential to developing more just and inclusive approaches to design and heritage. Only by layering multiple narratives—technical, historical, and experiential—can we begin to redraw the American urban palimpsest in ways that honor both permanence and transformation.[4]

THE CITY AS PALIMPSEST

A city is the material expression of a collective condition—a social artifact shaped by ideologies, memory, and power (Schmid, 2008). It is continually rewritten, accumulating traces that give form to identity. The geography of a place becomes known through an accumulation of fragments, detours, and incidents that sediment meaning, "adding up" over time (Corner, 1992). This composite accumulation—a dialogue between past and present—evokes the idea of the palimpsest: a surface of ongoing inscription and erasure where multiple temporalities coexist. Through this sedimentation, the city reveals both its history and its collective memory.[5]

Understanding the city as a palimpsest means viewing it not as a finished object but as an incomplete narrative in constant negotiation.[6] The palimpsest is thus not merely a metaphor, but rather an epistemological tool that enables us to resist social amnesia by acknowledging the coexistence of that which is no longer visible yet remains socially and culturally present (Jodelet, 2010).

In equitable and historically continuous environments, the layering of the city is often legible. In many European cities, urban form evolves gradually, and the memory of place remains materially embedded in the built fabric. This kind of continuity reflects a sensitivity to what already exists, reinforcing a collective identity anchored in physical permanence. Here, the ground operates as a critical archive that can record, preserve, reveal, and conceal the memory of places—and ultimately their identities—through the experience of its material attributes over time (Guitart, 2010). By contrast, in the American urban landscape—particularly in racially marginalized contexts—the palimpsest is violently interrupted. As urban renewal, highway construction, and redlining reconfigured cities during the 20th century, they did so by bulldozing entire neighborhoods, flattening material strata, and severing the continuity between past and present. In these places, the memory of what once existed no longer survives materially but must instead be reconstructed through intangible means: oral histories, photographic records, symbolic overlays, and alternative forms of mapping.

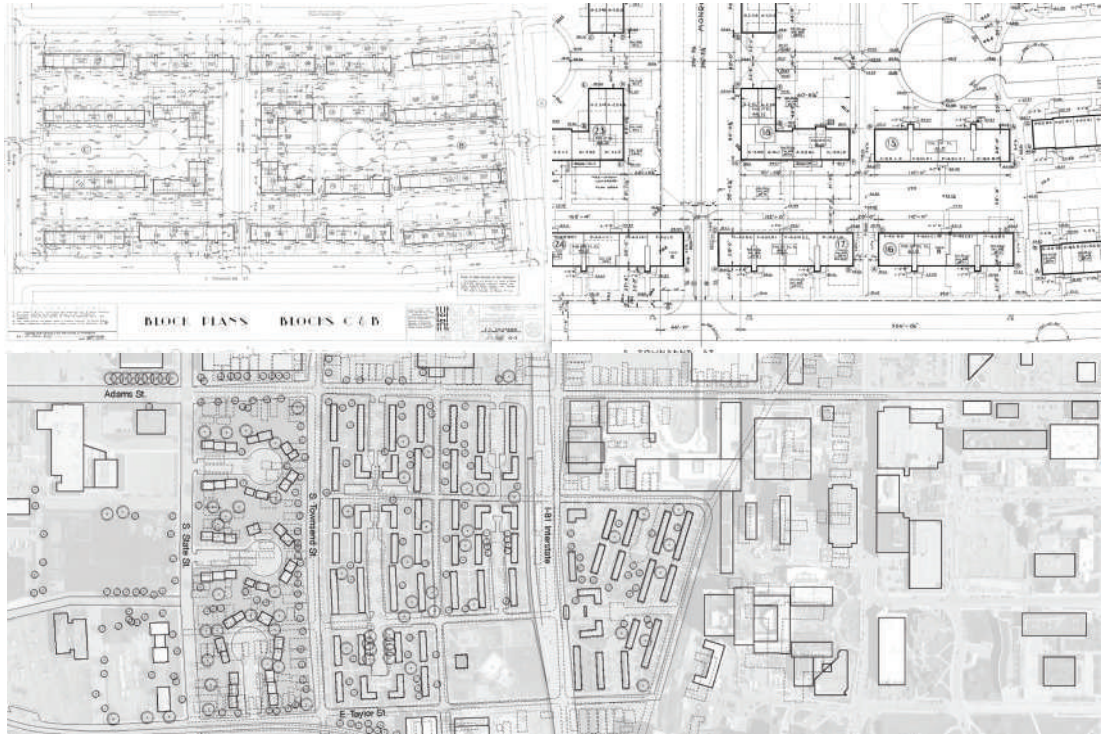

Fig. 4 - Previous layers of the city appear dotted and superimposed with new public housing schemes in Syracuse. We Outchea project. Courtesy of Sekou Cooke studio.

This absence of material remains demands new modes of representation—hybrid techniques capable of mediating between memory and transformation. When physical continuity is lost, traditional urban plans and cartographies fall short. Instead, practices such as layered visual mapping, digital collage, narrative cartography, and 3D speculative reconstruction become crucial tools. They allow us to visualize erased landscapes and propose new readings of place, where spatial knowledge is built from memory as much as from form.

According to Marc Augé, meaningful places, or

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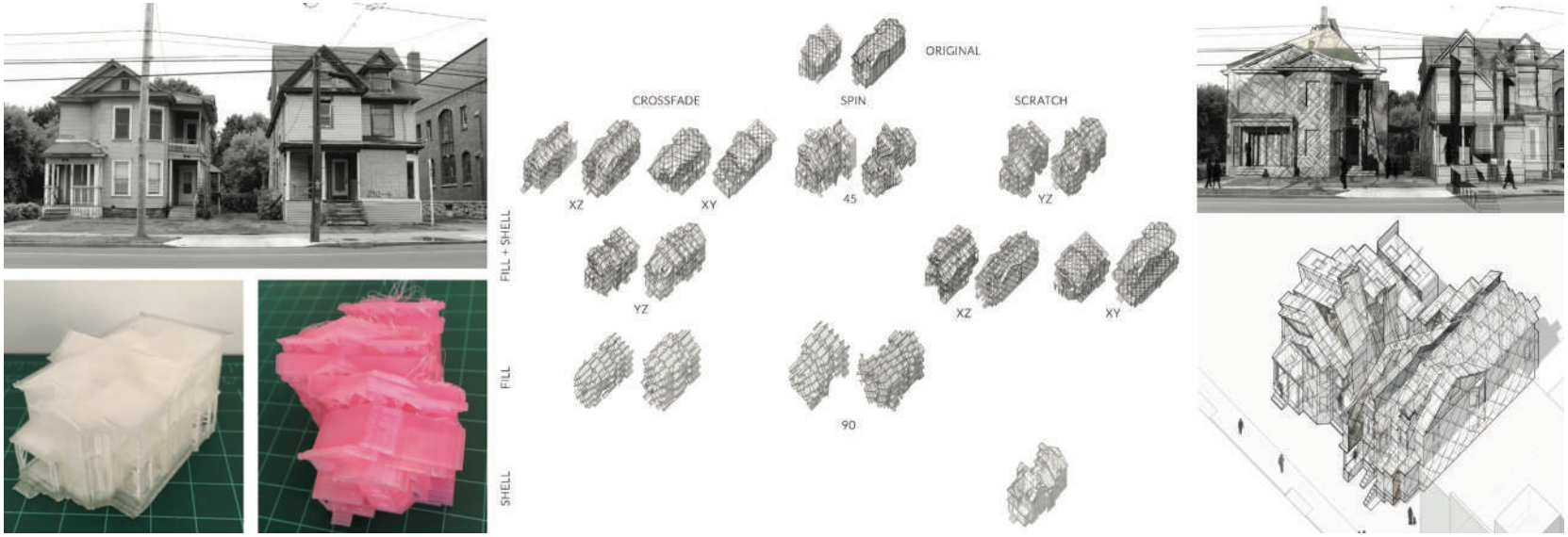

Fig. 5 - In 3D Turntables, Sekou Cooke translates DJ techniques into digital fabrication by manipulating 3D printing processes. Applied to models of abandoned Syracuse buildings, this method explores memory and transformative architectural reconstruction. Courtesy of Sekou Cooke studio.

lieux anthropologiques, are those that are identitary, relational, and historical. They enable individuals to recognize themselves in space and find continuity (1995). Similarly, Michel de Certeau reminds us that the city is shaped not only from above by planning but also from below by practice. The "pedestrian speech acts" of everyday users inscribe meaning upon the built environment, layering symbolic narratives over formal structures. Extending this, Georg Simmel's phenomenological insight underscores that memory is not solely visual or cognitive; it is bodily and experiential. It follows that our methods of representation must also evolve—capable of capturing not only the geometry of space but the temporal and affective textures embedded within it.

MAPPING BLACK HISTORIES: LAYERING, SAMPLING, AND REWRITING THE URBAN ARCHIVE

The Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America exhibition (MoMA, 2021) challenged the presumed neutrality of architectural history, exposing how the built environment in the U.S. has been shaped by racialized policies (Cheng et al, 2020). The exhibition asserts that racial injustice is fundamentally spatial and that dismantling racism requires new architectural forms and representational strategies that can capture the invisible scaffolding of structural racism and spatial violence.

The featured architects created critical interventions that reassembled existing visual, oral, and cartographic archives into spatial narratives of resistance and reparation (Anderson & Wilson, 2021). Two standout projects, We Outchea by Sekou Cooke and Black City: The Los Angeles Edition by J. Yolande Daniels, reconstruct vanished Black geographies through techniques akin to hip-hop DJing: sampling, remixing, and layering. These works serve as historical cartographies that are essential for understanding how territories and cities have changed over time. They reveal the spatial traces of past injustices by treating

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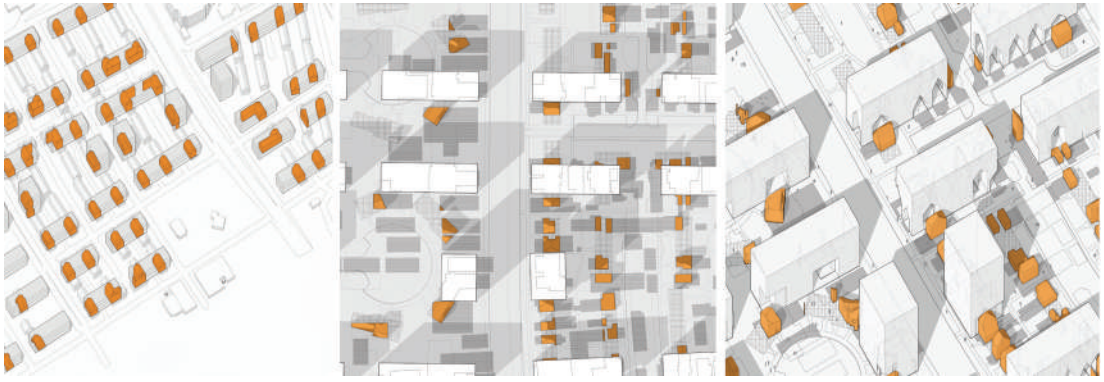

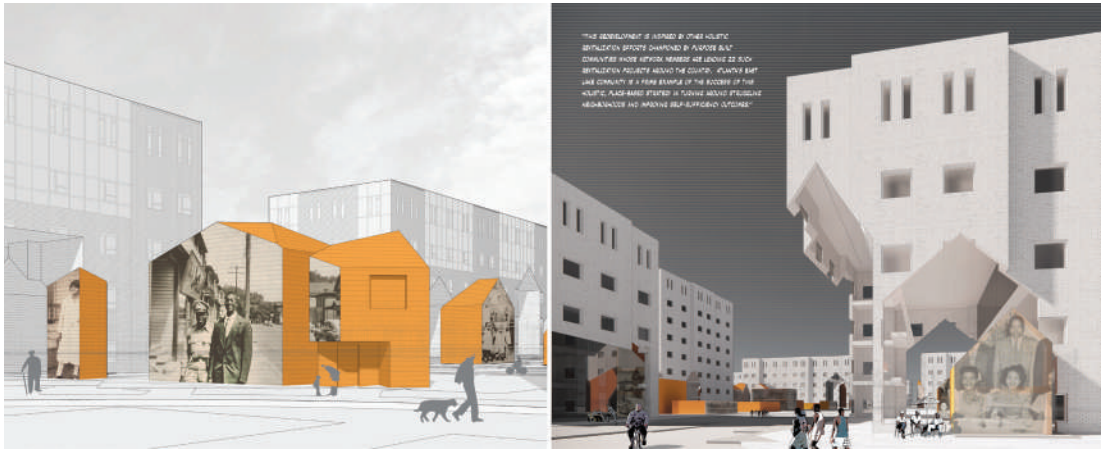

Fig. 6 - (Top) Past urban forms are carved out from new mixed-use housing developments. These act as spaces of collective memory and encounters. Courtesy of Sekou Cooke studio.

Fig. 7 - (Bottom) Images from the project where past and present coexist. Courtesy of Sekou Cooke studio.

the ground itself as a contested terrain shaped by race, memory, and power (Figure 2). Beyond depicting physical space, these maps serve as historical documents reflecting the culture, technology, and politics of the societies that created them (Valentino & Corgiolu, 2025). When carefully analyzed, these maps reveal key insights into both material changes in landscapes and broader civilizational developments (Valentino, 2020). By overlaying maps, images, and fragments, these projects reinscribe hidden narratives into the urban fabric, offering models for spatial justice that are grounded in memory and collective identity.

Sekou Cooke: We Outchea (2021)

Sekou Cooke's We Outchea: Hip Hop Fabrications and Public Space is a speculative architectural project responding to the violent history of urban renewal in Syracuse, New York. The project focuses on two historically significant and spatially connected sites: Pioneer Homes, one of the earliest public housing projects in the U.S., born from a "slum-clearance" initiative, and the 15th Ward, a once-thriving Black neighborhood demolished in the 1960s to make way for Interstate 81. Today, both areas are once again threatened by displacement under a new redevelopment initiative known as Blueprint 15, which proposes to replace existing housing with a mixed-income model, echoing past patterns of urban renewal and gentrification (Figure 03).
Rooted in hip-hop culture, We Outchea's design methodology uses sampling, remixing, and scratching techniques to layer historical maps, images, and narratives as raw material. This material is manipulated to reconstruct a memory-scape of what was lost. Images of the former neighborhood are inserted into renderings of the imagined future, revealing subtractive voids that show where new buildings will rise. Intersections and overlaps between the past and present are emphasized rather than erased.
Just as a DJ scratches, loops, and blends existing tracks to produce something radically new, Cooke overlaps the past and present to form a palimpse-

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stic vision of urban memory. His collaged plans include the dotted-line footprints of demolished homes set against the projected outlines of new, mixed-income developments (Figure 04). Ghosted images of demolished homes, streets, and gathering spaces appear as intentional voids or subtractions within the geometry of future developments. "This time," the project declares, "we shall not be moved" (Hernández, 2021).

This method echoes Cooke's broader research on hip-hop architecture (Cooke, 2014; Cooke, 2019). In previous works, Cooke critiques the legacy of modernist urban planning, which deployed abstract tools such as grids to enforce racial and spatial hierarchies under the guise of neutrality. The grid, Cooke argues, was the formal expression of systemic exclusion—a tool used to separate, rationalize, and control. By contrast, hip-hop emerged as a cultural and spatial rebellion, a bottom-up practice that transformed the oppressive urban landscape into a stage for improvisation, resistance, and identity (Cooke, 2021) (Figure 05).

The project redefines the architect's role, shifting the focus from controlling form to collaborating in an ongoing, dynamic cultural process. Furthermore, Cooke views architecture as a medium of care and repair. Through his work, he confronts the consequences of racialized planning and spatial violence by reclaiming the city as a site of community expression and historical continuity. Rather than starting from scratch, he envisions a layered ground—a field of contested narratives where the past is not overwritten, but rather composed anew (Figures 06 & 07).

Gordon Matta-Clark's influence is evident: while Matta-Clark used cuts to expose the spatial contradictions of urban systems, Cooke transforms those cuts into spaces of possibility. The act of subtraction becomes generative. His work is not just formal, but also deeply political. He asks what it would mean to design with communities instead of on them, to let the logic of improvisation, memory, and collective authorship guide the reimagination of sites long subjected to top-down control.

Yolande Daniels: Black City (2021)

Where Cooke uses remix as an act of future-making, Yolande Daniels approaches architecture as an act of forensic recovery. Her project, Black City: The Los Angeles Edition, constructs a spatial narrative that excavates the multiple, overlapping histories of Black, Brown, and Asian communities in the city. Using ghost maps, timelines, and dictionary plates, Daniels reveals how urban space has repeatedly been reshaped by colonization, migration, and resistance.

Historic layers—Spanish colonial roads, Black settlements, redlined districts—are projected onto contemporary cityscapes, generating a spectral urbanism where the visible and invisible cohabitate. The past does not merely inform the present—it inhabits it. The project unfolds as a kind of 3D atlas, combining cartographic overlays with biographical fragments and etymological explorations. It is not merely about documentation, but about reassembling an epistemology of place—an alternative spatial archive where material, linguistic, and cultural histories converge (Figure 08).

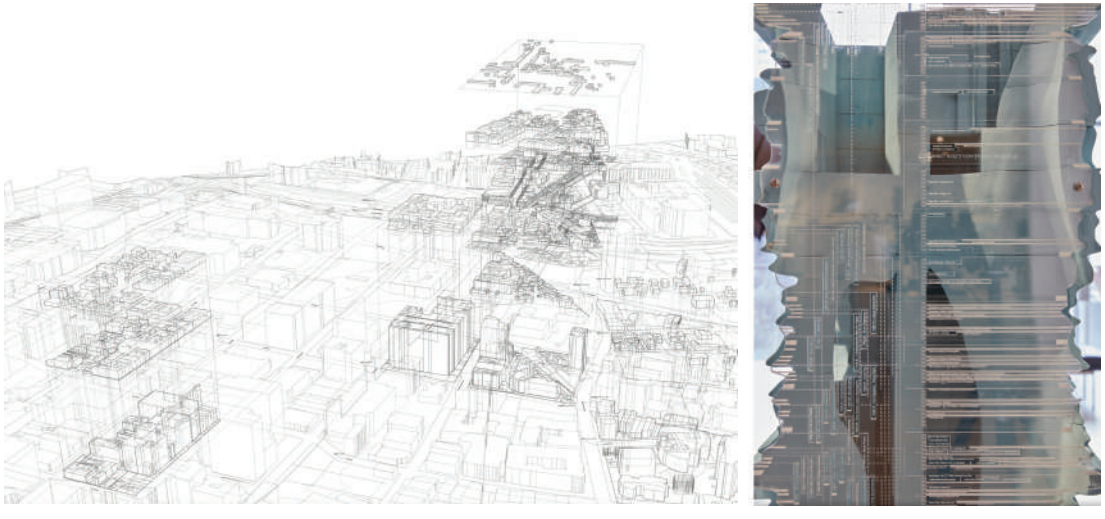

Fig. 8 - Overlapping drawings from the Black City project. Courtesy of Yolande Daniels.

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Fig. 9 - Aerial view of College Hill Courts today. On the right are images of the proposed development. Courtesy of Chattanooga Design Studio.

Drawing on her background as both an architect and theorist, Daniels critiques the supposed objectivity of conventional cartography and architectural practice. Her methodology aligns with that of vernacular historians, who emphasize the exclusion of nonwhite and nonmale figures from traditional architectural records. In this vein, Black City is a form of critical cartography, building history from presence and absence, silence and trace.

Through her project, Daniels recovers overlooked narratives and embeds them into the visible fabric of the city. She preserves marginalized histories and reveals how these histories shape contemporary life. Her work becomes a political act, offering tools for remembering differently and challenging dominant historiographies of the American city.

These two projects are connected not by style or typology, but by method: layering, cutting, remixing, and reprojecting. These are political choices, not just aesthetic ones. As Robin D.G. Kelley notes, "Dismantling racism depends on transforming the built environment" (Anderson & Wilson, 2021). While urban planning has long been a mechanism of disenfranchisement, these projects offer an alternative model where the tools of representation are used to reveal rather than conceal and to enrich rather than flatten the urban narrative.

Westside Evolves (2020-today)

The Westside of Chattanooga is one of the city's oldest neighborhoods, home today to more than 1,500 families—predominantly Black and low-income. Despite its physical proximity to downtown, the neighborhood remains economically and socially disconnected. Historically, the area has witnessed multiple waves of displacement: first from Native American land dispossession, later from post-Civil War segregation, and again during mid-20th-century urban renewal. The construction of US-27 and the Golden Gateway project displaced over 1,400 residents and fractured the neighborhood's social and spatial fabric.

What remains—public housing such as Gateway Tower and College Hill Courts—represents both shelter and systemic neglect. While these buildings are structurally viable, they carry the weight of economic marginalization, poor infrastructure, and decades of underinvestment. With over 60 percent of residents earning less than $15,000 annually and nearly 30 percent living with a disability, the area's challenges are both spatial and structural.

The Plan

Launched in 2020, the Westside Evolves Transformation Plan is a collaboration between the Chattanooga Housing Authority, the City of Chattanooga, and the Chattanooga Design Studio. Rather than focusing solely on housing, the initiative approaches redevelopment holistically—emphasizing education, early childhood care, employment pathways, and equitable access to public ameni-

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Fig. 10 - (Top) Community engagement activities took many forms. Courtesy of Chattanooga Design Studio.

Fig. 11 - (Bottom) Mapping exercises created during community workshops. Courtesy of Chattanooga Design Studio.

ties. At its core is a reimagined neighborhood vision that includes mixed-income housing, green corridors, walkable infrastructure, and new retail and service opportunities (Figure 09).
Yet the plan's most profound challenge lies not in the logistics of construction, but in the symbolic and cultural weight of what is being replaced. The demolition of existing public housing is not simply an administrative decision; it is a cultural response to community trauma and a desire for liberation from stigmatized architecture. As one resident noted, "We don't want a reminder. We want a future."
At the same time, the preservation of the built landscape must go beyond monuments and icons. It involves recognizing everyday artifacts—street grids, social centers, public housing—as material evidence of the knowledge and technologies that shaped local life. While heritage value is often reserved for formal architecture, the cultural significance of "minor" elements remains underacknowledged. Westside Evolves raises difficult but essential questions: What forms of memory deserve to be preserved? And how can we design futures without severing the traces of the past?

Community engagement as Representational Method

The Westside Evolves planning process exemplifies a deeply participatory and culturally grounded model of community engagement, one that acknowledges the mistrust produced by decades of disinvestment, displacement, and exclusionary planning. From the outset, the initiative placed graphic and representational tools at the center of its methodology—not only to communicate, but to co-produce knowledge about the built environment and its transformation.
More than 700 residents—82% of those living in public housing—contributed to the planning through door-to-door surveys, voting tools, public workshops, and informal interviews (Figures 10 & 11). But beyond this conventional feedback gathering, a distinct emphasis was placed on visual and narrative forms of representation. Activity books,

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site-specific mapping exercises, and interactive installations allowed residents to articulate spatial concerns and memories in non-technical formats. These tools acted not merely as communication strategies but as mechanisms of collective authorship, visualizing what otherwise remained unspoken or intangible.

A cornerstone of this effort was the Imagination Team, a collective of six local artists who served as mediators between design professionals and the community. Their work extended conventional urban representation by incorporating collage, photography, oral storytelling, poetry, and memory mapping into the planning process. In particular, the Memory Room became a site of informal archiving and spatial reflection, where residents contributed photographs and narratives to document neighborhood change. These materials were then translated into visual formats—posters, drawings, maps—that circulated throughout the community.

Symbolic landmarks such as the James A. Henry School, the "Grace Tree," and the flagpole were named and graphically represented, which elevated them as anchors of collective identity. The culmination of these efforts was the Neighborhood Life Book, a four-panel composition blending archival documents, historic photos, sketches, and community reflections into a hybrid visual narrative—a layered, living palimpsest of the neighborhood's past and aspirations. Drawing directly from lived experience, the Life Book captures the evolving identity of the Westside, creating a collective portrait of the perceived city.

In doing so, Westside Evolves moved beyond technocratic mapping and embraced a multimodal approach to representation. Echoing theorists such as Simmel and Bergson, it acknowledged that the city is not only observed, but also experienced through touch and memory. These representational strategies—iterative, embodied, and participatory—reframe urban planning as a cultural and perceptual practice (Figures 12 & 13).

Fig. 12 - Westside Life Book panels.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to contextualize the layered condition of the built landscape in the United States, where centuries of racialized planning, displacement, and urban renewal have left both physical scars and symbolic absences. To understand and preserve this complex terrain—shaped as much by what has been erased as by what endures—we must account for both material and immaterial actions. The conservation of such landscapes demands more than preservation; it requires a nuanced understanding of the cultural, political, and experiential forces that have co-authored their transformation (Cheng et al., 2020). In this context, the palimpsest offers more than metaphor. It becomes a representational and epistemological framework—a way of reading the city through traces, absences, and re-inscriptions. Particularly in contexts where the physical ground has been bulldozed or reconfigured beyond recognition, visual representation becomes an essential tool for reconstructing memory and identity. The speculative cartographies of Yolande Daniels, the layered 3D collages of Sekou Cooke, and the community-generated mappings of Westside Evolves exemplify contemporary approaches to visualizing what has been lost, contested, or si-

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lenced.
These projects demonstrate how new forms of graphic representation—combining digital tools, mapping overlays, oral testimony, collage, and performance—can not only document change but activate reflection, awareness, and agency. In doing so, they redefine what counts as cultural heritage. As Vicente Guallart argues, "to protect heritage is to expand it." Preservation must include historical documentation, symbolic landmarks, and community-driven archives. These immaterial layers allow us to trace the evolution of place even when its physical traces have vanished.
The visual outputs generated through these projects—digital maps, drawings, and interactive installations—surpass their objecthood. They become instruments of knowledge and anticipation: tools for analysis, reflection, and intervention. Their compositional strategies—what to include, what to omit, how to represent—illuminate the interpretative nature of spatial memory. These representations not only describe the city but help to imagine its possible futures, acting as visual rehearsals for purposeful urban transformation.
In neighborhoods shaped by systemic injustice, memory is not always visible—but it remains spatially relevant. The challenge is to render it legible. Whether through preservation or demolition, architecture participates in memory-making. The question becomes how to do so ethically, collectively, and visually.
Ultimately, in this landscape of contested permanence and necessary transformation, the palimpsest remains a vital conceptual and representational tool. It encourages viewing cities as dynamic terrains where layers of the past, present, and imagination can coexist, offering a dynamic sense of identity and continuity (Amoruso, 2019). In this expanded sense, graphical representation becomes an act of cultural reparation and a design strategy for justice.

Fig. 13 - Close-up photos of the Life Book. Courtesy of Chattanooga Design Studio.

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NOTES

[1] For more information on U.S. housing policies see: Kubisch, 2002; Mossberger, 2009; Kubisch, 2010; Jones & Paulsen, 2011; Vale, 2013; Hartman, 2014; HUD, 2015;

[2] Planning is inherently political and to ignore power is to reproduce it. The planner who treats all voices as equal in a structurally unequal field does not act impartially but rather reinforces the status quo (Forester, 1982; Forester, 2020).

[3] Advocacy planning (Davidoff, 1965), challenged the idea of value-neutral planning by promoting planners' active support for marginalized communities. Emphasizing pluralism, democratic participation, and social justice, advocacy planning called on professionals to represent underrepresented groups and propose alternative plans to those of powerful elites, influencing both practice and equity-focused reforms. See: Davidoff & Reiner, 1962; Krumholz & Forester, 1990; Checkoway, 1994; Clavel, 1994.

[4] Planners and architects must recognize that space is never neutral. It is always shaped by—and productive of—power relations. If they fail to act accordingly, they risk becoming complicit in the ongoing erosion of housing justice and community stability.

[5] Aldo Rossi, in The Architecture of the City (1982), describes the city as the collective memory of its people, emphasizing the connection between its material form and social life.

[6] The concept of the palimpsest, as explored by authors like Corboz, Marot, Corner, Lynch, Rossi, and Tschumi, with different observations, reflects an active and critical approach to collective memory. See: Benacer, 2022.

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