

THE POSTWAR POSTSCRIPTS OF *COLLAGE CITY*

Exploring the rhetorical integrations of race and geometry in
'Contextualism,' 1963-1978

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This essay examines the historical debates between proponents of contextualism in architecture and the advocacy planners of the late 1960s in order to explore the critical stakes of the neoliberal metaphors used to promote contextualism in *Collage City*. In 1978, Cornell University Professors Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter teamed up to write a summary text for their architectural research on the postwar city entitled *Collage City*. In this text, the author's outlined a 'democratic' urban design strategy that was structured to enable competing interests to cooperate in a comprehensive restoration (or recontextualization) of the fragmented state of American cities. Using Karl Popper's neoliberal conception of 'the Open Society' as a guide, Rowe and Koetter endorsed a retreat from any modern architectural discourse that emulated the historical determinisms of Marxist and Hegelian utopian models. In their estimation, the deterministic tendencies of these models were too rigid to accommodate the piecemeal nature of a city's natural development. What this amounted to politically was a retreat from the reform politics that were an essential ideological component of utopian modernisms of the 1920s and 30s. Despite the fact that Rowe and Koetter's contextualism locked the architect-planner into a pictorial display of difference that did not immediately redress the city's politics, the segregated character of North American cities often forced the role that race and place into the public reception of their work.

The research in this essay proposes that Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's endorsement of American liberalism as a conceptual model for urban design seriously faltered under the challenges that racial segregation presented to city building in the historical context of the 1960s. During this decade, urban theorists explicitly related the health and growth of the city to issues of racial segregation, and this discourse became especially contentious when its proponents discussed the renovation of America's ghettos. Such viewpoints are recorded in texts like Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto: the Dilemmas of Social Power* (1965), Stokeley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's *Black Power: the Politics of Liberation* (1967), and even officially sponsored reports by Urban Renewal agencies like Jeanne R. Lowe's *Urban Renewal in Flux: the New York View* (1966). As we will read below, Black Power ideology successfully made inroads into the thinking of prominent postwar minority architects who would directly challenge the benevolence of Rowe and Koetter's contextualism for minority communities. This political struggle between the traditional values of liberal democracies and the radical interpretation of liberalism as an obstacle to racial equality was a powerful undercurrent to Rowe and Koetter's construction of a democratic urban design theory.

Despite the inherent conservatism of Rowe and Koetter's neoliberalism, the architectural techniques they applied were uniquely poised to serve advocacy planners in at least one unexpected way; the aesthetic strategies of contextualism offered all urban designers a critical means of representing the political forces that preconditioned the city's geometry. Rowe's Urban Design studio at Cornell University often engaged in a figure-ground analysis of urban configurations as a form of site study that later informed student intervention. In many ways, these exercises routinely exceeded their intended aesthetic purposes by documented

other aspects of urban space, including the physical boundaries that geometrically indexed the segregated enclaves of American cities. Using the racial import of these figure-ground studies as a prompt, we will isolate the implicit radical potential of these aesthetic techniques for revealing the sociological issues that were made taboo by Rowe's architectural scholarship of the 1960s. Reading a radical potential in the aesthetic techniques of contextualism problematizes the purely architectural rationale of Rowe's research, which aligns the diagnostic power of his techniques with the location of a sociological element in the city's development. This reading puts one particular aspect of Rowe and Koetter's architectural formalism in conversation with the reform politics of minority architects and advocacy planner's of the period, offering something of a postscript to the theoretical standoff traditionally depicted in contemporary histories on postwar architectural discourse.

URBAN RENEWAL, ADVOCACY PLANNING, AND 'CONTEXTUALISM', 1966

Locating a critical relationship between Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's theory of contextualism and the sociological concerns of postwar reformers is squarely antithetical to the self-proclaimed intentions of their architectural research. In volume three of the 1996 memoir *As I Was Saying: Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays*, Rowe explicitly stated that the work of his Urban Design Studio "was never concerned with the dispossessed and the poor," but was based on the simple assumption that "all would benefit" from his formalist approach to the city.¹ Yet, despite this disavowal many of the design problems handled by the 1960s Cornell Urban Design

¹ Rowe, Colin. "Introduction," *As I Was Saying: Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays, Volume Three: Urbanistics*, edited by Alexander Caragonne (Cambridge, Mass & London, England: MIT Press, 1996) pp.2-3

studio explicitly dealt with the type of sites that were targets of Urban Renewal legislation. This overlap between urban renewal sites and the potential of contextualism made it very hard to avoid assessing how each strategy dealt with the racial politics of American cities. It was becoming clear by the late 1960s that many were becoming “disillusioned with physical redevelopment without social change,” an explicit challenge to the purely physical policy of ‘slum clearance’ that drove Urban Renewal in the 1950s. But the question remained, ‘What other alternatives existed?’ The Museum of Modern Art tried to answer that very question in 1966 with the exhibition “The New City: Architecture and Urban Renewal” in 1966. Colin Rowe led a team of six architects to prepare a reimagining of Central Harlem with their developing theory of contextualism. At this point in the 1960s the theory of contextualism was not yet fully formed, and this experiment was in many ways a showcase of its possibilities.

The museum’s Director of Architecture, Arthur Drexler, was determined to be as comprehensive as possible in addressing the contemporary issues of City Planning, all while highlighting the continuity between modern urbanism and postwar solutions. Perhaps he was acutely aware of how the two introductory essays of the show’s catalogue delineated the oppositional, but complimentary philosophies of postwar architectural discourse. In the first essay Sidney J. Frigand, the former Deputy Executive Director of the New York City Planning Commission, summarized the Planning challenges that emerged in the previous decade of work on the city. He directly addressed the issues of racial representation in the decision making process when he wrote that one of “the newest and most publicized source of pressures” calling for an innovative approach to the city came “from the ghettos of the city.” By Frigand’s estimation, the mobilization of advocates for America’s ghettos was “a voice that will grow

louder, not weaker, if we refuse to answer.”² Elizabeth Kessler wrote the second essay of the catalogue, entitled “New Towns, New Cities.” Her essay was a historical summary of late nineteenth and twentieth century attempts by architects to fashion comprehensive solutions for new towns and cities. The New Town movement was initiated by Ebenezer Howard’s 1898 text *The Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. Kessler traced the historical dissemination of Howard’s proposal of satellite towns – which were essentially new settlements that separated residential fabric and industrial uses with a ‘green belt’ of landscaping – to towns like Tapiola Garden City (6 miles outside of Helsinki, Finland), Cumbernauld New Town (15 miles outside of Glasgow, Scotland), and Reston, Virginia (18 miles outside of Washington, DC). She contrasted the British origins of New Town philosophy with Le Corbusier’s Voisin Plan (c.1925) and Ville Radieuse (c.1929-35), the two models most readily associated with the architectural notion of the ‘tower in the park.’

It is interesting to note that Rowe and Koetter polemically emulated Kassel’s history of modern urbanism in *Collage City*, pejoratively referring to the legacy of New Town’s as the “Townscape” pastiche in the postwar period, and citing the postwar banalization of Le Corbusier’s urban plans as one source of the slum clearance policies of the 40s and 50s. Yet, even before 1978, Kassel’s disjunction between New Towns and the ‘tower in the park’ were clear visual motifs in the Cornell team’s use of contextualism as an alternative to the urban renewal policies. [Figs. 1, 2] The urban solution they proposed successfully depicted the two competing models of urban occupation later recorded in *Collage City*, “the traditional city of

² Frigand, Sidney J. “A Perspective on Planning,” *The New City: Architecture and Urban Renewal* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1967), pp. 2-7 (p. 4)

solid mass with spaces cut out, and the city of towers in the park”.³ While subsequent contextualist solutions would seek to integrate these two geometries into a third type of hybrid urban fabric, this project suffered from a complete lack of formal integration. The advocacy Planner Richard Hatch even criticized this solution’s juxtaposition of a tower in the city around the restoration of historic Harlem (i.e. ethnographically black) building fabric for effectively hardening the racial segregation between Harlem and Morningside Heights that already plagued the area.⁴ As Rowe would later admit in *As I Was Saying*, Harlem proved to be such a difficult case study in part because it had a “sociological cross to bear,” a condition he felt was “unfortunate” because it diverted attention away from the conceptual strengths of contextualism.⁵

In terms of the architectural rationale for the project, there were several features of the Cornell team’s proposal that were later included in the publication *Collage City*. First, the team looked for a natural relationship between the physical elements of the site and ideal geometries that the architect could intuit from the city’s current configuration. For example, the team used certain geographic elements to locate Harlem as a discreet area of New York City; the diagonals of 125th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue that sat north of Morningside Heights was one such boundary, as were the northern edges of Central Park and the eastern edges of the Harlem River. Harlem as a whole was further broken down into its Western,

³ Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins and David Fishman (eds), “Harlem and Upper Manhattan,” in *New York 1960: architecture and urbanism between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York, The Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 860

⁴ See C. Richard Hatch, “The Museum of Modern Art Discovers Harlem,” *Architectural Forum* 126 (March 1967): pp. 38-47

⁵ Colin Rowe. “The New City: Architecture and Urban Renewal,” *As I Was Saying: Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays, Volume Three: Urbanistics*, edited by Alexander Caragone (Cambridge, Mass & London, England: MIT Press, 1996) pp. 87-96 (p. 88)

Central, and Eastern districts by other local geographic markers; the physical escarpments of St. Nicholas and Morningside Parks established the linear boundary between West Harlem (middle-class neighborhood) and Central Harlem (working-class neighborhood), while Mount Morris Park (now, Marcus Garvey Park) and the Railroad viaduct running along Park Avenue were used to designate the linear boundary between Central Harlem ('Black Harlem') and West Harlem ('Spanish Harlem' or the 'El Barrio'). As we can see, these geographical boundaries seemed to emulate the class and racial segregation of Harlem as a block in the 1960s, a fact that was never explicitly mentioned in the MOMA show. The Cornell team used these ordinal geometries to break Central Harlem into three vertical bands which they used to partition the site, as they stated in the exhibition catalogue:

Implicit in the site is a division into three zones. Two of them should be developed as "the city in a park"; the third zone has been least interrupted by new housing and still retains the grid plan of the traditional city; its character should be preserved and improved.⁶

A comparison of the urban plan of Harlem before and after contextualism reveals quite a bit of what could be termed 'slum clearance' along the two perimeter zones of Central Harlem, creating something of a green belt around this section of the city.

Since much of pre-contextualist Central Harlem consisted of a good degree of nineteenth century fabric, as was manifest by the Sanborn maps of the area [Figs. 3, 4], one wonders why the Cornell team did not invert their solution and extend Central Park directly from the north to the foot of the new stadium they added to the site. This configuration would have forced all of New York to come through all of Harlem to access the new amenities of the

⁶ See Arthur Drexler, "Architecture and Urban Renewal," in *The New City: Architecture and Urban Renewal* (New York: MOMA, 1966), pp.24

area, instead of creating a museum fragment of Central Harlem that was buffered from its surrounding context by parkland on either side. Considering the class distinctions that existed between West and Central Harlem, and the racial distinctions that separated all three, it is hard not to read a racial character to the increased separation that the 1966 solution brought to the site. However, when one considers the sensitivity with which the Cornell team transformed the typical block layouts of Harlem's nineteenth century urban fabric [Fig. 3] it is clear that something interesting was beginning to happen at the micro scale. Small neighborhood centers have been placed in the back alleys of each block. In addition, certain blocks seemed to reclaim vacant land for more open space. At this smaller scale, certain formal moves did seem to reflect an intimate understanding of the needs of Harlem, although these small moves were never explicitly explained in the MOMA show. [Figs. 5, 6]

Some of the most visible critics of Rowe and Koetter's 1966 MOMA submission came directly from within architectural discourse. Minority architects Richard Hatch, founder of the advocacy planning group The Architectural Renewal Committee of Harlem (ARCH), and his peer Max Bond, a Harvard graduate and noted African American architect, were two figures that directly challenged the relevance of contextualism for American cities. Hatch wrote an essay in 1967 polemically entitled "The Museum of Modern Art discovers Harlem," in which he criticized the proposal. One historian summarized his views this way in the monograph *New York 1960*:

Hatch questioned the provision of so much space for offices and factories "with midtown only ten minutes away by subway." He criticized the near-wholesale abandonment of the area's grid plan, which provided "legibility and accessibility," and was appalled by the team's proposal to close 125th Street to crosstown through traffic. He also found the planned reduction of residential density "morally and politically unacceptable," and felt the project would result in "an upper-middle class semisuburb – a pleasant, high-rent district inhabited by people who are not afraid to walk in sparsely protected parks." But the real failure of the plan, Hatch concluded, "lies in its lack of comprehension of growth in time, and, hence, its inability to guide

us in the incremental activities which would produce a loosening of the grid at a socially permissible cost. Any plan that does not include a satisfactory explanation of the intermediate steps in its achievement must, today, be prima facie suspect.”⁷

As an alternative, ARCH proposed an approach to the city that developed its formal strategies from an analysis of the informal patterns of a “neighborhood’s street-oriented culture.”⁸

Though their work was admittedly piecemeal, and like many other advocacy planning initiatives began as an attempt to block what they saw as harmful elements of existing design proposals, the political implications of using quotidian practices and direct neighborhood participation to create design solutions presented a clear alternative to the Cornell submission to MOMA. It was precisely in these moments of ideological conflict that Rowe and Koetter’s transcultural approach to urban design could be seen as fostering an ethical poverty within architectural discourse. This interpretation is ironic as *Collage City* has been celebrated in architectural circles for its critical emphasis on postmodern heterogeneity, albeit at the formal level. As a result of these and other critical challenges to contextualism, Rowe and several of his students penned a series of defenses in architectural journals of the 1970s, characterizing their approach as an innovative and ethical material practice.⁹

DEFENDING ‘CONTEXTUALISM’: *OPPOSITIONS* AND *COLLAGE CITY*, 1976-1978

The first defense of contextualism was penned by Stuart Cohen in the architectural journal *Oppositions* in 1976. Cohen was one of the first few students at Cornell to take Rowe’s Urban

⁷ Stern et. al., 860

⁸ Stern et. al., 859

⁹ See for example, Stuart Cohen’s essay “Physical Context / Cultural Context: Including it All,” reprinted in *Oppositions Reader*, edited by K. Michael Hays (Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), pp.65-104

Design studio and he helped coin the term 'contextualism' with Thomas Schumacher in 1965. His essay, "Physical Context / Cultural Context: Including it All," anticipated many of the arguments that Rowe and Koetter would use two years later in *Collage City*. In 1976, Cohen described contextualism as "an empirical theory" of urban design that primarily dealt with the physical elements of the city. Despite this physical focus however, he argued that it was still an ethical practice:

It was assumed that one could morally operate this way, making decisions that did not relate to many of our urban problems because Modern architecture had already amply illustrated the inability of built form alone to solve problems of largely social or economic origin. These assumptions were not seen as an argument against the need for social relevancy in urban planning and architecture; rather it was felt that other values were also important. These values, largely visual and spatial, were, like a specific design solution, to be intuited from an accepted local context, a site and its surroundings... It was to produce a physical continuity of urban form that, if not literally an extension of the style of the adjacent architecture and urban fabric, would suggest the process of accretion by which the traditional city had developed.¹⁰

Cohen went one step further than Rowe in this essay by admitting that some "need for social relevancy in architecture and urban planning," although he did not detail on what grounds this relationship might be accomplished. Most of his essay detailed how an "empirical" approach to the city permitted three postwar architects to make clear formal decisions that reconfigured the fragmented urban fabric of their respective cities. Implicit in Cohen's reliance on the empirical character of existing physical contexts is the notion that a city should be a filled entity. Vacant lots, left over spaces, or derelict districts needed to be filled as blighted areas of the urban fabric. In addition, like Rowe and Koetter two years later, Cohen expressed a clear preference for urban forms that "would suggest the process of accretion by which the

¹⁰ Cohen, 67

traditional city developed.”¹¹ This preference for the Renaissance model of accretion is an important element to remember as Rowe and Koetter would parallel this physical preference for a traditional conceptual tool; the critical utopias of the Renaissance.

Rowe and Koetter would elevate the empirical assumptions of Cohen’s article into a full-fledged manifesto in 1978, but the most important aspect of this extension was the decidedly political character of their work. According to Rowe and Koetter, only a “Politics of ‘Bricolage’” could guide the architect’s decisions to resolve the geometric collisions of the city’s grids. Their use of the term ‘politics’ then should be interpreted as a regulatory principle that dictated the values of the architect, much like the values of a political party (at least in theory) guides those of its members. By employing the politics of Bricolage then, architects would never have to rigidly measure the success of their physical interventions with the complete transformation of the entire city; just like the American system of democracy, a ‘democratic’ principle would regulate the formal interaction of the city’s fragments. Despite the metaphorical nature of their use of politics, there is evidence in Colin Rowe’s early writings that only a liberalist interpretation of politics would do for American architecture. For example, he wrote in the Introduction to *Five Architects* that American formalism operated completely differently from European formalism in architecture as a result of the stability of American democracy as an ideology. In comparison to the socialist aims of early modern architects like Hannes Meyer and even Le Corbusier, who sought to transform the bourgeois sensibilities of their respective publics, American architecture was shown to have been appropriate from the beginning by the commercial values of society. In a pragmatic tone then, Rowe and Koetter’s theory of

¹¹ Ibid

contextualism emulated the behavior of American democracy in order to avoid the terrible misalignment that forced earlier modern architecture to fail. This viewpoint would account for the staunchly “middle-class” character of the Cornell team’s 1966 solution for Harlem, New York.

When one interprets the pragmatic implications of Rowe and Koetter’s theory of contextualism, their proposal consisted of a great degree of capitulation to the existing contexts of American cities. Since a part of this context was, at least for Colin Rowe, the neoliberal biases of American democracy, then his reference to politics went beyond a metaphorical model that directed the architect’s interventions. The contributions of every architect in American society by definition were appropriated by the social values of American liberalism. Knowing that their designs would inevitably work in concert with American values, Rowe and Koetter fashioned contextualism as a symbolic representation of the very process that relegated the architect to the role of taste maker. In addition, if the constitution of the urban fabric was thought to implicitly reflect the political consensus of its citizenry, a ‘social contract’ that reflected the values of ‘the Open Society,’ then it was futile for the architect to introduce a new political philosophy in their design work.

The inherent danger of this particular interpretation of American liberalism was that, as an architectural strategy, it ran the risk of perpetuating a ‘tyranny of the majority’ in terms of the stylistic preferences the architect revised for contemporary uses. For this reason, Rowe and Koetter constructed a dialectical image of contextualism that characterized the sensibilities of the architect-planner as an aesthetic mediator of competing architectural styles. For example, the appendix of *Collage City* provided a transhistorical (if not fully transcultural) menagerie of

urban forms to inspire future architects. These urban forms were of different styles and epochs, although mostly 'Western' in focus. Cohen aptly described this pluralist dynamic two years earlier in *Oppositions* when he said the "issues of site planning dealing with the relationship of one building to another are not seen as prescribing a building's architectural vocabulary, that is, its style."¹² Following the explanation of the *bricoleur* found in Claude Levi Strauss's *The Savage Mind*, the architect-planner was depicted as being partly a 'scientist' and partly an 'opportunist.'¹³ In interpreting the expanded import that Rowe and Koetter's neoliberal metaphor for the city it is possible to see how the resolution of conflicting geometries could be symbolically interpreted as an aesthetic resolution of the tensions and disagreements inherent to the history of architecture as represented by the fragments that existed in American cities. What's more, the very geometry make-up of each city could be interpreted as the direct result of political decisions made by its citizenry, making the literal politics of a city an a priori condition of urban design.

It was in the service of constructing an image of cooperative politics that Rowe and Koetter directly referenced American black politics in their text. This section appropriately appears in the section of the text entitled "Collision City and the Politics of Bricolage":

But the issue may, and without extravagance, be equipped with a far more literal illustration; and such words as integration and segregation (related to both politics and perception) can scarcely lead us elsewhere than to the predicament of the American Black community. There was, and is, the ideal of integration and there was, and is, the ideal of segregation: but, if both ideals may be supported by a

¹² Cohen, 67

¹³ *Collage City*, 104-5; We have preferred Levi-Strauss because, in his discussion, with its emphasis on making, it is far more possible for the architect to recognize something of himself. For, if we can divest ourselves of the deceptions of professional *amour propre* and accepted academic theory, the description of the 'bricoleur' is far more of a 'real-life' specification of what the architect-urbanist is and does than any fantasy deriving from 'methodology' and 'systemics'... The savage mind of the bricoleur! The domesticated mind of the engineer/scientist! The interaction of these two conditions! The artist (architect) as both something of a bricoleur and something of a scientist!... *this is only once more to intimate the role of 'bricolage' which politics so much resembles and city planning surely should.*

variety of arguments, proper and improper, there remains the evidence that, when gross injustice begins to be removed, the barriers which were formerly maintainable from the outside are just as reconstructable from within... in spite of the abstract universal goals demanded by theoretical liberalism, there still remains the problem of identity, with its related problems of absorption and extinction of specific type... It is a history of the open field as an idea, the closed field as a fact; and it is because... the recent history of black liberties in the United States is so illuminating... that we felt compelled to cite it as a classical – perhaps *the* classical – illustration of a general predicament.¹⁴

While this reference to “American black politics” primarily served as a representative image of the protracted character of American liberal democracy, the nature of this citation implicitly circumscribed an assimilationist image of black citizenship as the only “proper” illustration of postwar American politics. This characterization implicitly challenged the rights and liberties that were won through violent protests in the 1960s. The delineating boundary that was being drawn between the ‘proper’ and the ‘improper’ forms of minority participation, both political and aesthetic, signaled a neoliberal image of non-violent and cooperative democracy that Rowe and Koetter endorsed in their text. This binary image of blackness recalls the 1966 battle of words with Richard Hatch, who as an Advocacy Planner applied his SNCC training to develop an institutional mechanism to challenge the assumptions of the Cornell submission. Using the ‘proper’ and cooperative image of blackness put forth in *Collage City*, Cornell’s proposal can be seen as the result of a desire to give blacks the middle-class status that eluded them historically, as well as a drastic attempt to domesticate the physical proximity of newly elevated Harlemites from those Americans already benefitting from middle-class citizenship. If we take Hatch’s 1966 critique into consideration, then the gentrification that would probably result

¹⁴ *Collage City*, 116-7

from this proposal would have transformed Harlem from “Black America’s Capital City”¹⁵ into a museum set-piece for consumer speculation.

In contrast to the monolithic image of cooperative blackness, Carmichael and Hamilton’s *Black Power: the Politics of Liberation* was especially influential to the parties described in this essay who opposed the physical and political assumptions of contextualism. This text is important in this context as it not only provides us with a theoretical counterpoint to Rowe and Koetter’s neoliberal image of American democracy, but it directly influenced the design philosophy of ARCH in the 1960s. Carmichael and Hamilton theorized the affect of ethnic privilege on political representation, which for them was manifest most strikingly by the postwar segregation of the inner-city:

Black people in the United States have a colonial relationship to the larger society, a relationship characterized by institutional racism. That colonial status operates in three areas – political, economic, social... Colonial subjects have their political decisions made for them by their colonial masters and those decisions are handed down directly or through a process of indirect rule.¹⁶

According to this view of American politics, blacks were not free citizens as they did not have the power to make their own decisions or control their own space in America; a situation that was reflected in the organization of the MOMA show wherein no community groups were consulted before any design decisions were made. In a comparative vein then, as *Collage City* constructed an image of American democracy which assumed that Black American’s already benefitted from the rights of full citizenship, *Black Power* argued that Black America had yet to attain full freedom from the colonial dependence that prevented them from participating as full

¹⁵ *New York 1960*, 857

¹⁶ Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, “White Power: the colonial situation,” *Black Power: the Politics of Liberation* (Vintage Edition, 1992), 6

citizens. To keep to the parallel between the images of blackness that Rowe and Koetter constructed in *Collage City*, the ‘improper’ image of blackness that was touted by radical social movements of the postwar period was constructed “from within” the black community. Rowe and Koetter’s attempts to domesticate this ‘improper’ radicalism hints at the fault lines along which their neoliberal assumptions of the peaceful negotiation of “the open field as an idea” and “the closed idea as a fact” were most sensitive to in the late 1960s.

Another historical event that seemed to directly parallel the detente between autonomy and engagement in architectural discourse was the internal political struggle that preceded the radical student protests at Cornell University in 1969. The crisis of Cornell '69, as it has come to be called, is most notoriously remembered as the day the Afro-American Society (AAS) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) collaborated in an armed takeover of the student union on campus. However, as Donald Alexander Downs helps us to appreciate, this show of force was the final straw in the year long ideological conflict between oppositional political ideals held by the faculty, the University President and radicalized segments of the student body at Cornell University. During the course of the 1960s as radicalism slowly increased, the faculty continued to defend traditional liberal arts values like individualism and academic freedom against radical student’s claims that the abstract ideals of liberalism were really a mask for the institutional racism perpetuated by its social elite.¹⁷

Several aspects of this conflict make it pertinent for our consideration of Rowe and Koetter’s contextualism. The year 1969 was a seminal year in Colin Rowe’s architectural research at Cornell University. His urban design studio reached an apotheosis in the theory of

¹⁷ Donald Alexander Downs. *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1999)

contextualism in their study of Buffalo, New York, the principles and techniques of which would later prove instrumental to the publication of *Collage City*. Considering the fact that the Black Power ideology offered a competing model of American blackness to that of full-citizenship, it is important to not how this ideology made inroads into the historical sites related to Colin Rowe's urban design research. At Cornell University, the student leadership of AAS had been trained in political resistance tactics by Stokeley Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) the summer before the crisis.¹⁸

In the spring of 1969, armed black students took over Willard Straight Hall for two days in an effort to secure curricular and safety reforms for minority students. Days before the protest, unknown assailants had publicly burned a cross in front of the black women's dorm on campus, which compounded an earlier attack on three black female students. AAS leaders Tom Jones and Eric Evans had unsuccessfully petitioned for an Afro-American studies program in the fall with then University President James A. Perkins, an advocate of social justice in University education. The presence of guns on an Ivy League campus provided these events with the kind of media spin that outpaced prior student protests of the period. A photograph of African American students toting rifles and bandoliers was later nominated for, and won the 1969 Pulitzer in Photography. Despite the administration's promises to honor an agreement that was reached with AAS to free the student union, a faculty summit later decided to renege on this decision. In the end, the entire student body of Cornell University was called together to renegotiate the terms of the AAS / administration agreement, effectively subverting the voice of the black minority.

¹⁸ Downs, 66

While Cornell students at large, both in 1969 and today, seemed to recognize the historical and transformative nature of these events, Rowe's personal reflections were marked by a sense of reserve:

In spite of the hostility to Le Corbusier and Ludwig Hilberseimer, in its early years the studio was still accustomed to long skinny buildings; but this Zilenbau fixation seems absolutely to have disappeared as a result of Paris 1968 / Cornell 1969. But if Paris 1968 must be one of the most crucial twentieth century dates and the Cornell scene a year later must be an entirely minor affair, I should still say that when, after a few months in Rome at the American Academy, I returned to Ithaca in January 1970, it was to an entirely different body of students. A great cultural event had occurred; but the students were not at all hostile. Simply they had become determined that Zilenbau were not their thing; and, from then on, it was to be trad city with trad city blocks... and so we continued with some change of style and something of that attrition of quality which is always associated with a revolutionary aftermath.¹⁹

So categorical was the separation of literal politics and architectural form in Colin Rowe's mind, that he marked the change at Cornell in 1969 in terms of stylistic preference. For him, like many other avant-garde architects of the postwar period, the definitive challenge to architecture had already taken place in the Parisian student riots at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1968. It seems that, at least for Rowe, the AAS student protest not only had very little influence on architectural discourse, but that in terms of time it simply arrived a little too late to claim any prominence in his mind.

In contrast to the architectural critics who have read *Collage City* for its transhistorical commitments, this essay considers Rowe and Koetter's 1978 references to advocacy planning and American black politics as a reaction to the ideological conflicts between architectural autonomy and social engagement they experienced in their work during the 1960s. In essence, Rowe and Koetter's reference of black politics can be seen as an attempt to get the final word

¹⁹ *As I Was Saying*, 3

on the direction of postwar urban design; not only did their neoliberal metaphors for contextualism transform the literal concern for social justice into an aesthetic methodology for redressing the problems of the city, but in light of Rowe's defense of autonomy these references also amounted to a revisionist account of the merits of advocacy planning as proposed by ARCH in 1966.

THE POSTWAR POSTSCRIPTS OF *COLLAGE CITY*, 1978 AND BEYOND

After considering the Cornell school's continual resistance to inflect the demands of social justice into their theory of contextualism, one might assume that their neoliberal framework for urban design completely circumscribed their potential to directly address the physical reality of minority communities. However, a closer examination of the aesthetic techniques associated with contextualism reveals a latent potentiality that dovetails with postwar efforts to interpret and subvert the physical effect of racial politics on the city. This potential was manifest in Rowe and Koetter's discussion of the ideological functions of utopia in *Collage City*. The drew a contrast between the heuristic function of the Renaissance "classical utopia" as "didactic illustrations, to be apprehended not so much for themselves but as the indices of a better world,"²⁰ and the literal projections of the post-Enlightenment "activist utopia," which was "seen as a vehicle for the literal deliverance and transformation of society as a whole."²¹ According to the arguments forwarded in the text, the classical utopia historically provided the architect with a powerful aesthetic means of representing and maintaining the conceptual

²⁰ *Collage City*, 11

²¹ *Collage City*, 15

relationship between a city's collective politics and the physical transformation of the urban environments. The only proviso on this relationship was that it was best maintained when it was engaged as a conceptual exercise [Fig. 11]:

And, instead, if one chooses to inspect it, the classical utopia will offer itself largely as an object of contemplation. Its mode of existence will be quiet and, maybe, even a little ironical. It will behave as a detached reference, as an informing power, as rather more of an heuristic device than any form of directly applicable instrument... As with the advice of Machiavelli, the ideal city of the Renaissance was primarily a vehicle for the provision of information to the prince; and, as an extension of this, it was also an agent for the maintenance and decorous representation of the state. Social criticism it no doubt was: but it still offered not so much a future ideal as an hypothetical one.²²

The full consideration of what the renovation of the classical utopia might have meant for the theory of contextualism brings us full circle with the Harlem, New York show of 1966. For if, as Rowe and Koetter seem to suggest, one should not take every urban design proposal as a literal projective plan for the city, but instead as a heuristic means of representing its political possibilities, then the Harlem show was just as much about what the Cornell team believed America should look like as what it was a demonstration of what it was physically capable of becoming. Using this logic, the analytical techniques of contextualism could easily have been employed as a form of site study capable of revealing the concomitant relationships between race and place embedded in the geometries of the postwar city. A brief comparison of three site study maps taken from Rowe's Urban Design studio (Buffalo, New York; c.1969) with the aerial photo of Harlem included in MOMA's 1966 exhibition might permit us to see the latent potential of contextualism for revealing the rhetorical integrations of race and geometry. [Figs.

²² *Collage City*, 4

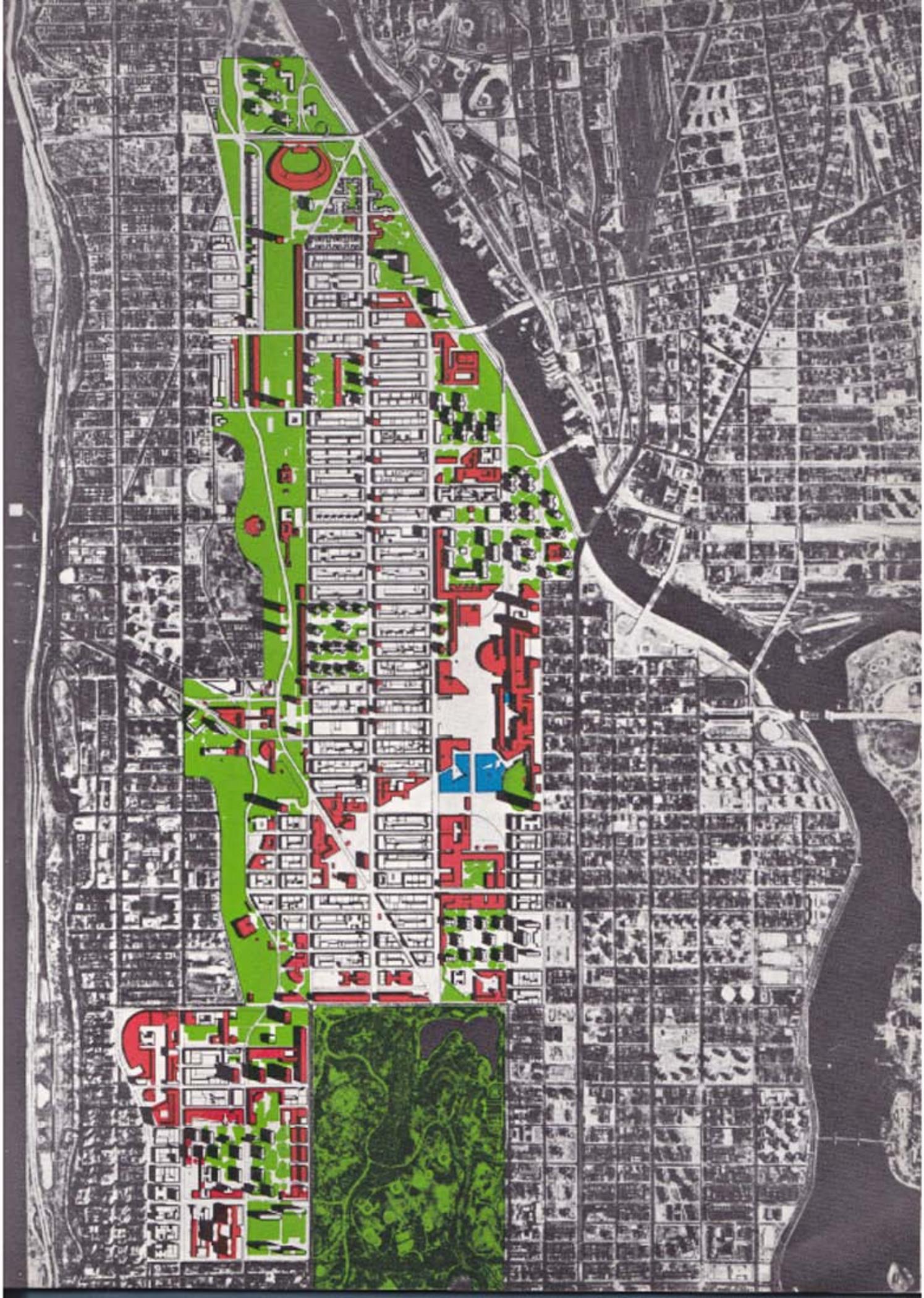
7, 8, 9] Another diagram taken from the 1969 studio visualizes the morphology that results from the political and geographic factors that delimit a city's boundaries. [Fig. 10]

Rowe and Koetter's interpretation of the city as a grid of confluent forces, both geometric and political, might possibly exceed the historicist and formalist associations typically attributed to their work. In their attempts to sidestep the architect-planner's literal engagement with politics, they were forced to read the city's configuration as the accumulated result of social, political and architectural decisions. Ironically, their interpretation of the city as an urban field of political relations not only permitted the neoliberal architect to read the political values of its configuration, but it implicitly permitted more radically oriented players to critique this same idea. While not endorsing a return to contextualism, this essay reads an implicit radical potential in the aesthetic techniques associated with its practice. Teasing out the full implications of this technique will require situating the themes and proponents of *Collage City* more fully into the postwar context of the 1960s.

- *Modification of existing grid plan*
- *Housing without relocation*
- *Waterfront renewal*
- *New land*

Figure 1 - Overall plan of Harlem, NY with the four areas of the exhibition highlighted in different colors. Cornell team is in green. (c.1966)





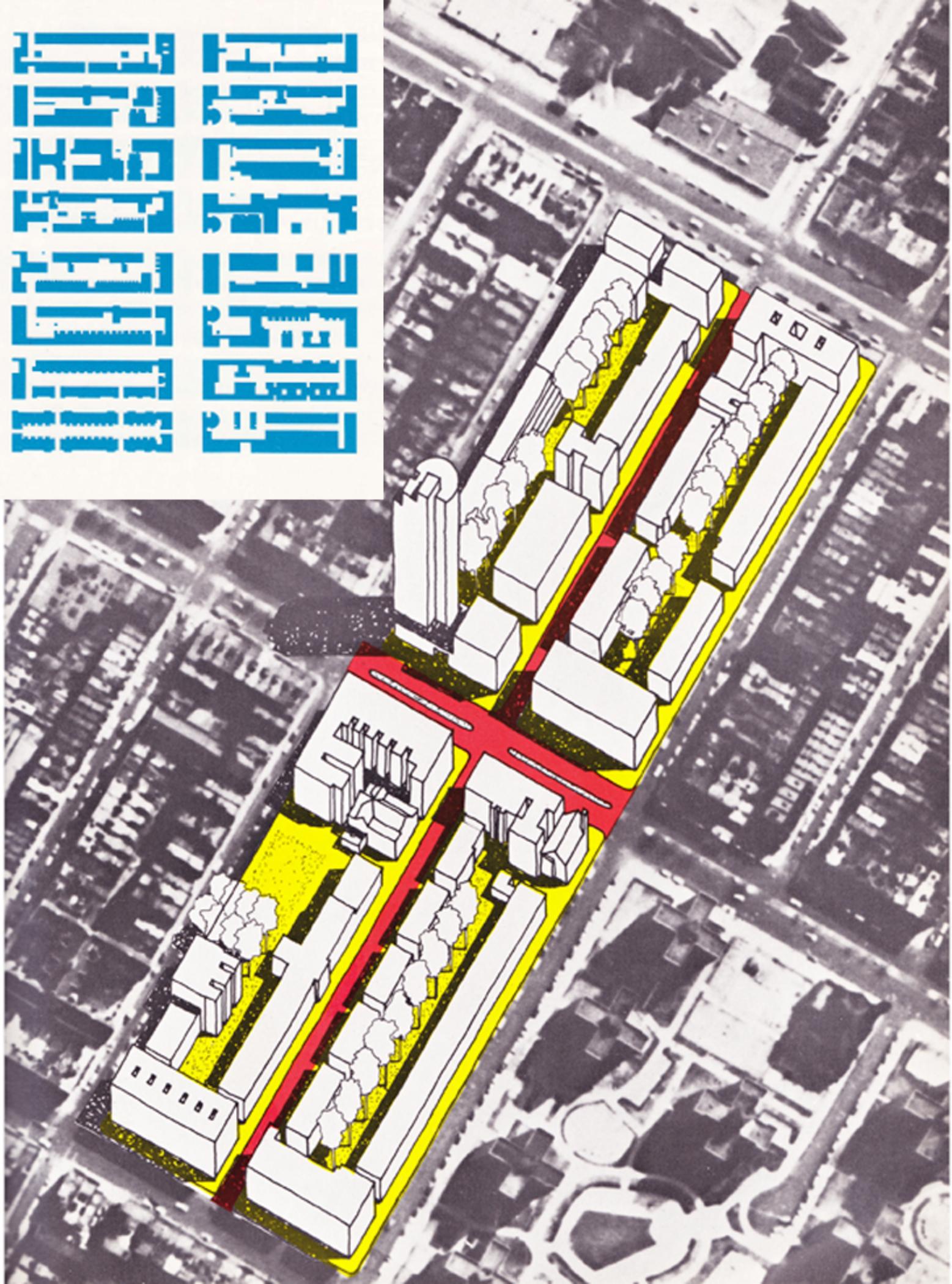
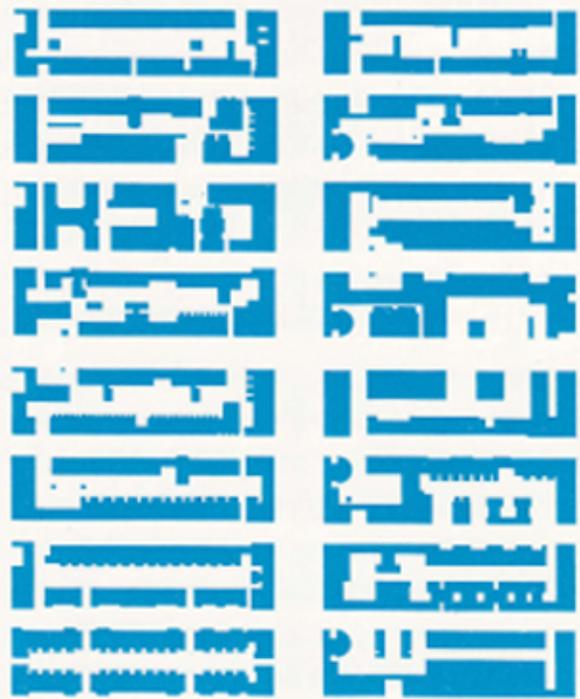


Figure 4 - Aerial view of proposed changes to Harlem, NY (c.1966)

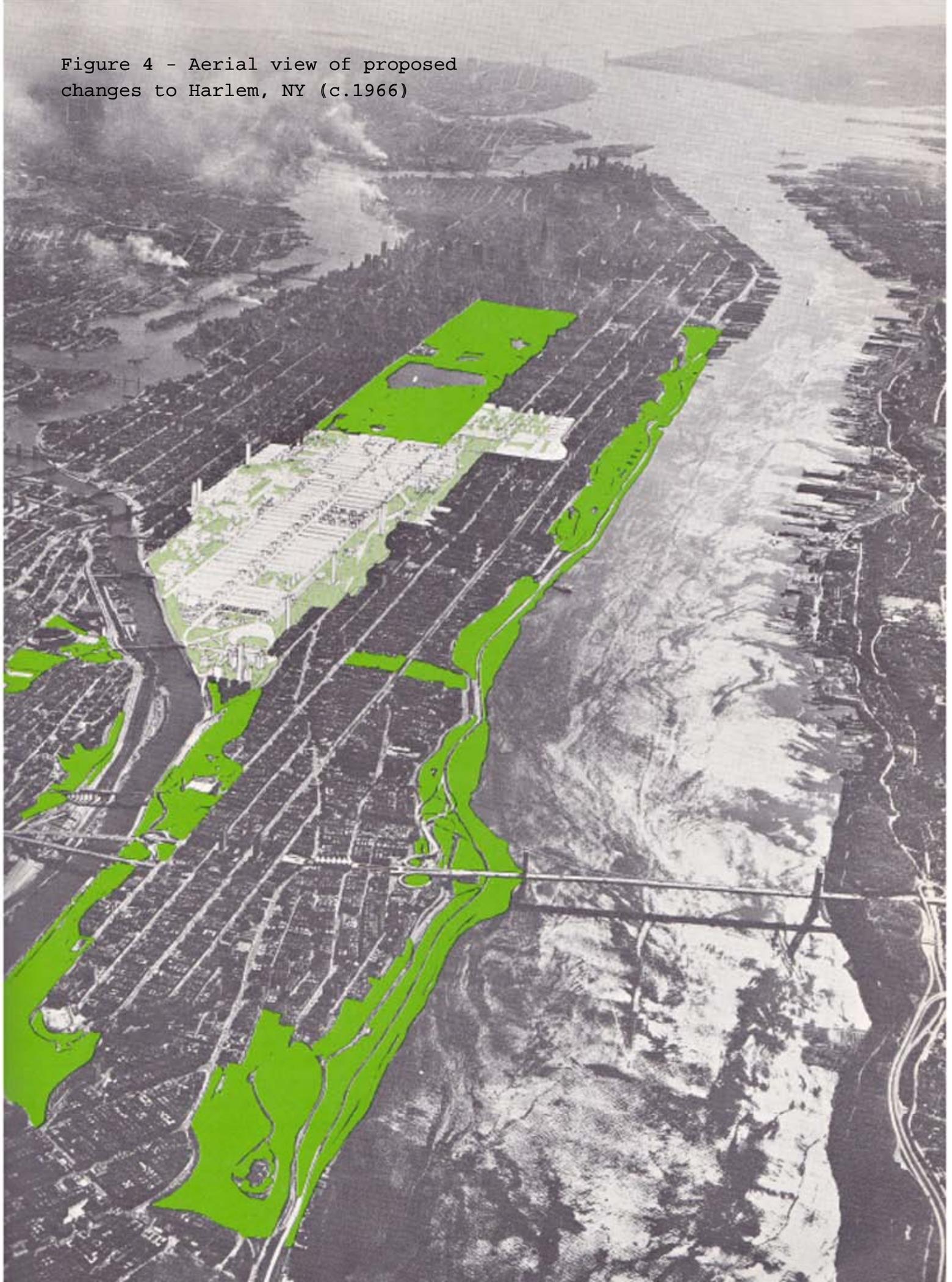




Figure 7 - "Points and lines of prominence"
Buffalo, NY Urban Design Studio (c.1969)



Figure 8 - "Areas of collision"
Buffalo, NY Urban Design Studio (c.1969)



Figure 9 - "System of Parks"
 Buffalo, NY Urban Design Studio (c.1969)

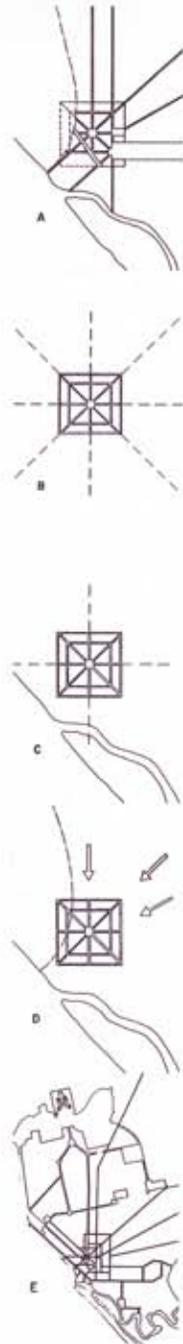


Figure 10 - Diagram of gradual
 growth of Buffalo, NY
 (c.1969)



Figure 11 - Frontispiece of Thomas Moore's Utopia (c.1516)