PARSE

Hip-Hop City

An Interview with Craig Wilkins by Dave Beech and Erling Björgvinsson

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.70733/bewqjs8jfnkf

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Erling Björgvinsson: Since your talk at the PARSE conference focused on educational questions we wanted to focus on your practice here. Our first question concerns an issue that you raise in your book on diversity among architects, where you refer to bell hooks. You emphasise the importance of critique as a concrete oppositional practice rather than mere theorising. How does this play out in your practice and in particular in relation to Detroit?

Craig Wilkins: I don't know how to answer that. Let me start this way: that's a position that I've come to, it's not one that I started out with. I got there through a variety of means, the beginning of which probably has its roots about twenty years ago, when I began my quest or my search or journey or interest into hip-hop architecture. Now, it is just simply something that I do it's a mode of operation that I don't think that much about. So, when I get asked questions about that, I have to remind myself that that's how I practise. When you're in it it is difficult to think about: I'm just doing it. I would trace it back to when I realised I was feeling a certain level of disquiet in my career, and probably had been for a while. There was a disconnect between my position as an African American male and my position as an architect. Those two things don't always come together neatly or nicely. I was a bit naive going into the profession and I didn't necessarily think that that was going to be much of a cause for concern for me. As it became clear, I had to figure out a strategy: if I wanted to stay in the profession of architecture I had to figure out a way in which I could make myself OK with this apparent disconnect and whether there was something that I could do about it. And I didn't necessarily have the tools. I wasn't taught in school how to navigate what were seemingly two different worlds. Most of my professors not most of them, all of my professors were white. That's not necessarily something they had to deal with. And even if it was, I don't know if they would have brought it into the classroom: it was a different time. This was back in the mid-1980s. I was not necessarily putting any onus on them at the time. It just was what it was. But I began to try to figure out a way in which I could be OK going to work in the morning, and I could in some way, shape or form be helpful to my community while there. I had to figure out what those tools were and how I could do that. I just happened to be the kind of person who likes to know, I'm a knowledge-seeker. I just began to read: I would read anything I could possibly get my hands on, about the urban condition, about design, about planning, about critical race theory. Anything that could help me get a handle on or begin to make a bridge between my professional world and my personal world. And through this sort of osmosis, I began to be or developed this kind of critical/creative model of how to go about practising architecture. Unfortunately, it led to me having to leave my quite enjoyable, comfortable position at an architectural firm and do two things: firstly, open up my own practice, and secondly, continue this knowledge quest by pursuing a PhD. So, that's sort of where I think the seeds of my critical work were sown, where the rubber meets the road, so to speak: the kind of work that I'm

doing now which is very similar to that path that started twenty years ago. I'm still writing, and the practice that I do now is seriously based in I guess this is probably a good way to say it, it may not be all that accurate a critique of the excesses of capitalism, for lack of a better term. For better or worse, it is the system that we are in. It probably won't be the system in I don't know the next couple of centuries, but that's where we are. The system creates haves, have-lesses, and have-nots, where the haves and the have-lesses need less of an advocate than the have-nots. I don't see those things as a natural fait accompli, I see those things as actually being constructed by the system that we are in. And therefore it is much more useful for me to apply my skills in the areas of the have-nots, for lack of a better term. And that requires you to be both strategic and critical about your interventions and what you plan to get from them and who you're doing it for. So, it's certainly not where I started out, but that's where I am now.

Dave Beech: On a very concrete level, you are in Detroit, which is a specific economic, geographic cultural space. Some see it as the future and some see it as this warning. Could you give an example of how your critique is carried out in that particular context?

CW: I can give you a couple. First, when I came back to Detroit I did my undergraduate here and then I came back twenty years later I was only going to be here for a year: I was a visiting scholar and the college decided at the time that I was here to open up a design centre. And that was one of the ways in which I was able to do my critical practice in Minneapolis and in Chicago. I was part of a design centre. Maybe I should explain what design centres are, at least here in the United States, as I'm not sure they're the same in Europe. Typically, design centres are attached to universities and institutions, but not always., there are some free-standing ones. Basically, what the free legal clinic is to the legal profession and the free medical clinic is to the medical profession, the design centre is to the architectural profession. What we do is offer professional design architecture, urban planning, urban design skills to those who may not have the kinds of funds to hire those people themselves. So we primarily work with distressed communities. Sometimes we work with municipalities, but more often than not we are involved with communities and clients who need our services in many instances desperately need our services but they don't have the funds to pay for it. So we act as a sort of non-profit or pro bono architectural firm that provides professional services to those who can least afford it. That was a way for me to be OK with finding a good situation for my way of thinking about architecture that should be grounded in the communities which it affects where people should have a say-so in the process, where there's a certain level of knowledge that exists on the ground while the typical top-down approach that architects take is part of its complicity in a system that typically ignores folks that the system determines are undesirable or less than worthy, less than useful. So when I came to Detroit they were just about to open their own design centre at the University of Michigan and they asked me if I would be its Director. And I said "yes", of course. So, I ran the design centre for eight years and that's the kind of work we did in Detroit. We were operational when Detroit went through a moment in time when it closed over 100 schools. That is an amazing number. They closed over 100 schools in about a five-year period, primarily because they no longer had the population to support these schools. Some of them were big high schools and some of them were small neighbourhood schools. So, the school board had this portfolio of 100 empty buildings that they owned and had no idea what to do with. Of course, empty buildings get vandalised, they don't get maintenance, so they become an eyesore in the neighbourhood. Not only was it a physical eyesore, but you also might say it was a spiritual eyesore: it was a symbol of a declining population at best, but also of declining importance in the city, and declining voice in the city. So, they had these things that were just sitting there. There was an interesting and perhaps forward looking individual who put out an RFP a request for proposals. They wanted to look at these schools and try to figure out what could be done with them, because they had a lot of them. And we won the bid. We worked with two prototypical schools, one on the East side and one on the West side. We worked with a big community

organisation well, I won't say a big community organisation, because it wasn't just one, it was a large swathe of the community in both locations. We worked with them for about eight months. We had meetings at least once a month, sometimes more than that depending on where we were in the work. Our office had an open-door policy people could come and see us any time of the day when we were open. And we came up with two possible reuses for both those schools. Now the city uses those two proposals when they sell schools to developers. They use that as a way to show developers that "Yes, you can do something with these facilities" and you can do something that will allow you to make whatever money that you need to make, but also be an asset in that neighbourhood in that community, because what's in that buildings are the things that they actually say they need. So, instead of just trying to sell it to the highest bidder and letting them develop anything and everything that they want, they actually have a plan now. They have a plan that is embraced, a model that people can use, a way to look at developing these buildings to the point where they will be assets to the community that already exists as well as beacons for people who aren't already in the neighbourhood. I don't know if this is accurate, but it is sort of a good way to think about it: it is the anti-gentrifier. It allows people to benefit from the asset rather than having to move away because of the asset, or because of the new way of looking at neighbourhoods. So that was one way. So that's a pretty large level, you know, influencing a hundred units all over the city.

We worked on a bunch of different levels. There were other, smaller levels of course. A couple of years ago, again because of the blighted nature of the city, the mayor at the time had a demolition programme. His goal was to demolish 2,000 empty, vacant, blighted homes a year. Two thousand a year for five years, that, again, is an amazing number. So, the idea behind that was thatyou could either clear the land for developers to come in and build new homes, or you could stop the drop in property values because vacant buildings don't help you at all it's better to be next to an open field rather than a building that's falling down. In addition, there's also the issue that people were using these places for crime, so it was just better to take them down. That was the reasoning behind it. Some of that had merit but what they weren't really looking at was the fact that even though these buildings looked vacant people might be living in them. People who had no place to go and the city didn't really have places for homeless population to be, and some people are squatters, you know. We weren't really dealing with that issue, but there were other issues that the city didn't really take into account. So they were going to tear down these buildings. Where was this material going to go? It was going to go into landfill, right? What were we going to be doing with all this material?

We at the design centre also noticed another issue that was happening in the city. Because of its financial difficulties, the public transportation system was less than adequate, or less than what it could be. So, typically, people were waiting maybe two, two and a half hours, for a bus. That's unacceptable, particularly when only 40% of the people who lived within the boundaries of Detroit had an automobile, which was the number at the time, I don't know if it is the same now. That was interesting and probably shocking because this was the centre of the auto industry, but that was the number. So, lots of people depended on the bus, and the bus was unreliable. The highest percentage of people who took the bus we found were the elderly and young people, who were going back and forth to high school and things like that. So, think about this for a second: you're elderly, you don't have access to an automobile, you have to take the bus so you have to go grocery shopping on the bus, you have to see your doctor and your dentist on the bus. I mean, if you're grocery shopping, that takes a day, an entire day. If you're grocery shopping, especially in the summer time, there are things you just cannot buy. You can't buy ice cream because by the time you get home it's ruined. If you've got to wait two and a half hours and then take your trip and your trip might be another forty-five minutes there are certain things you simply cannot buy. Then on top of that you're waiting at bus stops that are ill-defined, close to the edge of the street so they are dangerous and there's no place for you to sit. You are asking people in their seventies to stand for two and a half hours with groceries or whatever else they have until the bus comes. That's unconscionable. We recognised

that we couldn't do anything by ourselves about the bus system. We could become part of advocacy groups, which we did, to advocate for a better transportation system. And we really couldn't do anything about them demolishing homes; we thought it was a bad idea and made our voice heard on that, but that was a policy issue for the city. But we could do something about making the bus trip a little more humane. And the reason I told you about the homes is that what we ended up doing was finding out which homes were going to be demolished, then going in and taking as many of the doors from those places as possible, taking as much of the stud work as possible, and we went around the city and hired artists and created what we called "door stops" instead of bus stops. So we created these seating units, these artistically painted seating units, from discarded materials, or soon-to-be discarded materials, and we used them strategically around the city to provide people with a place to sit to make their travel just a little bit more humane, but also as a way to critique the city's policy and interest in creating a public transportation system that actually worked for the people who actually needed it. So, it was a small project, but it actually achieved a lot of the things that we actually thought we could do as a design centre and as architects and urban planners.

I guess the third might be the continued interest in pursuing hip-hop architecture here in Detroit not necessarily just in Detroit but hip-hop architecture in general which sort of ties in a lot of these critiques that we have just been talking about. Hopefully that gives you some insight.

EB: Actually, you just ended on what the next question touches on. It's very interesting what you say: it's related to your stance on alternative space how can alternative space be achieved? To some degree you've touched on it and in your writing you are critical of Michel Foucault's idea of heterotopia. You suggest a celebratory heterotopia, which you connect to hip-hop, as you were mentioning, and its reconfiguration of centre versus periphery and its different understanding and practice of temporality and subjectivities. Could you continue from where you ended: on the celebratory heterotopias and its relation to hip-hop?

CW: This idea of celebratory heterotopias comes from how Foucault was talking about heterotopias being either crisis or deviant. In a sense, his perspective discards the notion of agency; as a matter of fact, it argues that there is no agency, that you are put in one of these locations or another. My question is: why then do people choose to stay on the edge? Why do people choose the margin? They do! There's got to be a reason for that. And my argument is that people choose these spaces, they choose the margins, because that's where I don't want to say they are out of sight because that's not the truth at all because that's where they have agency. They can celebrate themselves, they can create their own cultural and spatial practices on the margins. Where I don't want to say they can't do that in the centre, but it's much, much more difficult. So, hip-hop in general is a microcosm of that. It is probably the best example that I can think of at the moment. Hip-hop came around in the mid-1970s in the Bronx, and I don't how much you know about American history or American urban history at the time, but the Bronx was a no-person's land. Politicians would come through and do photo ops in the way one walks through New Orleans after the hurricane or through a war zone. That's really how it was treated. But people were living there. They were trying to get to work every day, trying to get to school the whole nine yards. So, they literally were I don't want to say abandoned but they certainly were not high on the priority list of the municipality of New York City. So, what do you do when life has to happen and all the systems that should be available to you are either not available to you or are hostile to you? You create your own systems. Or you die. Those are your only two choices. Hip-hop was born in that moment. It was born in that moment and said "hey, we matter too! And "if you won't acknowledge us, we're going to do it for ourselves." It is that acknowledgement of this is probably a bigger term than necessary your own humanity, and your own ability to state that: to name yourself and to claim space that allows you to be yourself. If you listen to early hip-hop music there was a lot of talk about things like "I'm bigger, I'm better, I'm this, I'm that" that's a response to people or a culture or a city

saying that “you’re nothing; you’re not worth anything.” And that response is: “I’m this, I’m that, here I am, here we are!” That’s a celebratory space. That’s a place that you have taken and turned into a place that’s yours. Now, fifty years later the energy and attitude of that place has permeated almost every part of the globe, right? Hip-hop culture, its fashion and music, is everywhere. And it began from a space where people were considered disposable. So, there’s a power in choosing the margin. There’s a reason that people choose to celebrate those spaces, and choose to celebrate being on the margin. This is an example where the margin has now become the centre. It now has gravitational pull.

Now, don’t get me wrong. There are dangers to this type of positioning; external and internal forces that are always at work to destabilise that space for their own ends. Internally, these celebratory heterotopias can breed an “us versus them” mentality, a resistance to any and all engagement beyond its carefully and necessarily crafted borders. It is understandable but also self-defeating. It only continues the balkanisation the lack of acceptance of class, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities and the like that necessitated the margin in the first place. For me, the power of celebratory heterotopias is that they provide a home base, a place of reflection, connection, rejuvenation, and that steadies oneself to engage other spaces, particularly those that are not so kind. It is a space each carries into these hostile environments, knowing that what those spaces represent and what they want you to relinquish to enter is not concretised, essentialised. One can see it for what it is: simply a construct and one that can be navigated. The power of the celebratory is not so much what happens within which is indeed quite powerful and liberating but in what happens when one leaves it. I assume one could be quite happy never leaving such space, but I think the bigger questions are what effect one might have on other spaces upon leaving, purposely leaving. How can the celebratory turn the hostile into an ally? How might it become normalised? Can it be normalised? Should it? These questions cannot be answered if other spaces are not engaged and challenged.

And this brings me to the external forces that seek the celebratory. It is that very power to challenge and change that they seek. Whether it is for means political, say totalitarian regimes; social, like gender or sexuality, or better yet, the abortion debate in America; or economic, where the different is fetishised and thus marketable, the centre is always trolling the celebratory, looking for entry, an opening to control or crush. The centre will never leave the margin alone. It needs to use Foucauldian terms a crisis or deviant heterotopia; in fact, the more it can manufacture the merrier. It requires a “them” because that’s what defines an “us”, an “us” that is better, preferable, normal. But when the margin defines it, the celebratory frightens the shit out of the centre. It needs to know it can control, or if not control, defeat the celebratory. And it will seek access into it any way it can. From straight-ahead assault to subtle seduction, it makes no difference. It simply wants in. It will pretend to celebrate with you, party with you, support you, all the while looking to supplant you, subsume you, and in the end, *be* you. One need look no further to the struggle hip-hop culture is engaged in right now. The wholesale effort to commodify any and all things hip-hop, to wrest away authority, the authenticity, the very *fact* of its original producers as the commercialisation of that space proliferates across the globe is the quintessential example of the exterior threat to all things celebratory.

The celebratory is a must, it is a necessity, but it is not nirvana. Some *one* or some *thing* is always coming for it. The question is: is it friend or foe?