



## 20 NEW IFE: REBIRTH OF A NATION

**Scott Lawrence Ruff**

If asked the question, what is African-American Architecture?, most, if not all people's minds would draw a blank. This is because the African-American culture has yet to fully enter into contemporary architectural discourse. As stated by Cornell West:

Architecture is the last discipline in the humanities to be affected by the crisis of the professional, cultural and managerial strata in American society. This crisis is three fold: that of political legitimacy, intellectual orientation and social identity.<sup>1</sup>

What is put forth in this paper/project is an effort to begin a serious and critical dialogue as to the nature of an African-American Architecture. Three questions will be addressed in this investigation: 1) Where does one begin this investigation? 2) What principles of design surface as possible tools and guide lines? 3) What is the nature of the space that manifests from this study?

To investigate these questions one must probe deeply into the context of the people, the history which has forged an amalgamation of African cultures into a nation. A history which consists of over three hundred years of slavery and genocide. The varied psychological effects of the traumas of dislocation, alienation, and exile upon the minds and spirits of a people. Also, all forms of cultural expression must be synthesized and used in order to manifest an audible, articulate architecture which communes with the being of all people.

In this investigation architecture of Western and North Western Africa was studied, pattern designs found in African textiles and African-American quilts were analyzed. The vital theories and principles that connect these visual expressions of a people to the music produced and the spirituality lived were identified. The elements and principles that were discovered were then applied to the formation of a State Capital for the city of Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C. is currently a territory of the U.S., not part of any state. Also the city has a 70%—plus African-American population.<sup>2</sup> These two factors create an open field in the political realm for the implementation of an African-American (State)ment of true cultural freedom. The freedom to develop as an independent people in relationship with other independent people of the United States and the world.

I could not conjure my God in this place, and it seemed  
His failure. Surprise ... overwhelmed me.

Lorene Carey

*Scott Lawrence Ruff is an Assistant Professor at Hampton University and is a visiting lecturer at Cornell University and The State University of New York at Buffalo. He holds Bachelor of Architecture and Masters of Architecture degrees from Cornell University.*

New Ife is a project that was first conceived when I was a graduate student in architecture at Cornell University. As an undergraduate I struggled with architecture and after a time I

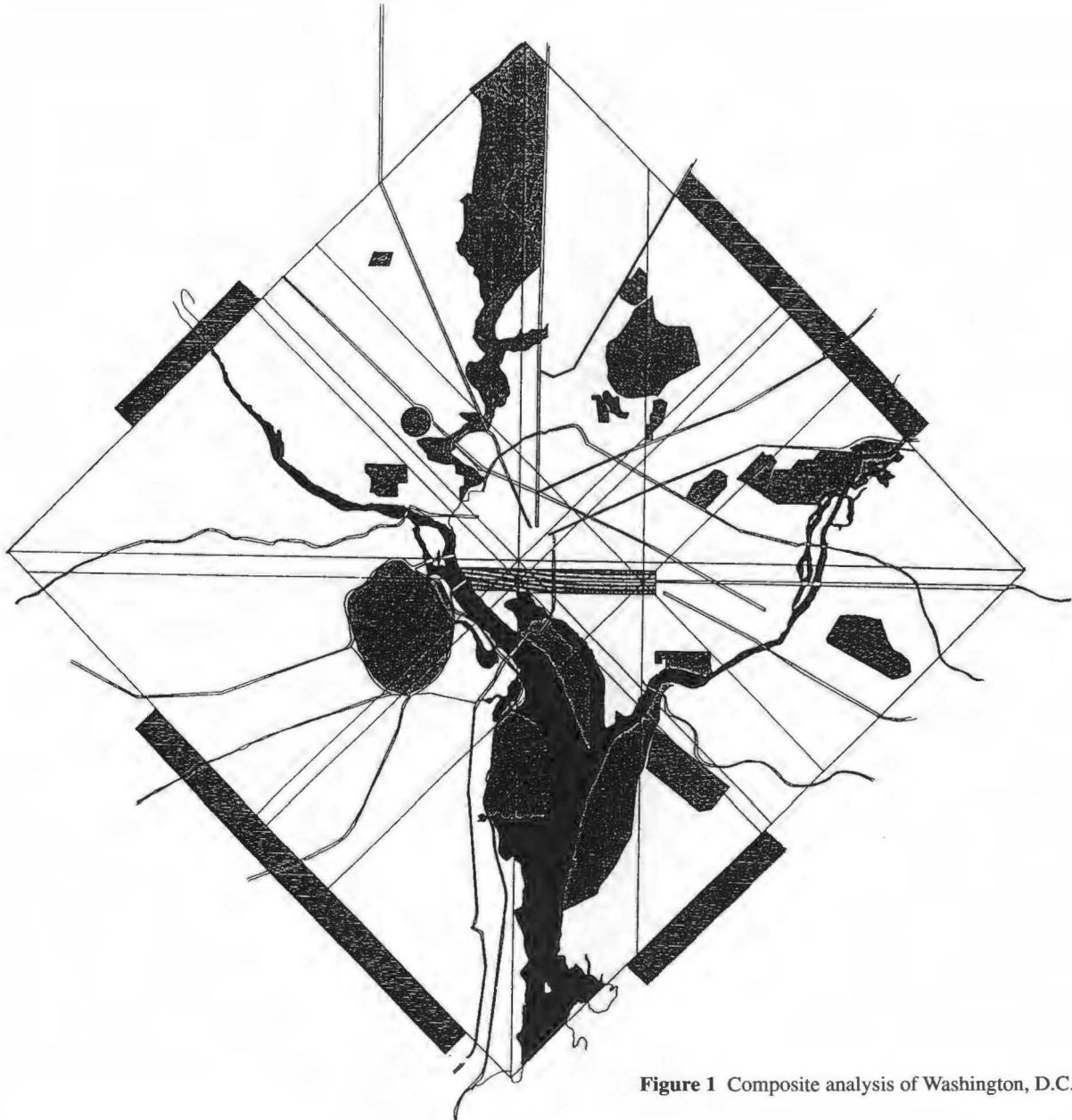


Figure 1 Composite analysis of Washington, D.C.

achieved a certain amount of academic success, but by the end of my undergraduate career, I felt much like the above quote, empty. I was still searching for myself in the lessons, and to my dismay couldn't find myself. I had a great deal of exposure to contemporary European thought in architecture. I was even exposed to a great deal of Asian philosophy and design theory, but there were no courses on African-American thought and philosophy in architecture. That became my focus in graduate school: African and African-American aesthetics. Early in my graduate studies I came across an article in *Ebony* magazine, that was focused upon Jesse Jackson and the attempt at designating Washington, D.C. as a State, the 51st state of the United States of America. As I continued to read the all too short article, too short because of my intense interest, the article began to articulate some very interesting

statistics, of the demographics of Washington, D.C. and the City-State's contribution to this nation.

The District of Colombia has more residents than four states. The residents of the district pay more taxes than the residents of nine states, and they pay more taxes per capita than the residents of 49 states. More residents from D.C. died in Vietnam per capita than the residents from 47 states.<sup>3</sup>

If Washington, D.C. became a state it would be given two seats in the Senate (one of which would almost assuredly be African-American), two seats in Congress and a governor. All of whom, even if they were not African-American would

have to address the issues of the large African-American population of their state. In short, by making such a move the United States would give the African-American culture something it should have been given at the abolition of slavery, political and economic compensation and power. This would commence the healing process, and negate some of the schizophrenic paradoxes which have existed since the nation's inception.

A common question asked is: Why are so many African-Americans in the Washington, D.C. area? Not to go too deeply into a history lesson and discussion on the migration of African-Americans in the United States, the answer exists in the geographic position of D.C. and its political status as the Nation's Capital. The city lies just across, what is commonly referred to as the Mason Dixon line, a line that, in general, separated the free states from the states that practiced slavery. Many freedmen settled here to work and work against slavery. That was the first wave of African-American settlement. The next wave came after the abolishment of slavery, D.C. became a refuge from angry Southerners, in as much that the city was the seat, the heart, of the government that emancipated them. During the twentieth century, the growth of industry and the promise of government jobs became the magnet.

The project begins looking at the area formerly known as Washington, D.C. from the perspective of many African-Americans. To many African-Americans, the design of D.C. was done by not Charles L'Enfant but by Benjamin Bannaker, an African-American mathematician, inventor, astronomer and surveyor of the 18th century. He is recorded as the surveyor of the D.C. area. This misunderstanding of his role in the development of the Nation's Capital is used as a starting point for the design of a new state and state capital. In general the role of a surveyor is to mark the boundaries of a tract of land, to determine shape, extent, contour, position, elevation etc. The area is analyzed from the perspective of its original boundaries, which included the area known as Alexandria, VA., its natural boundaries and its man-made boundaries. In (Fig. 1) a composite of smaller analysis studies is shown. Articulated in this composition are the axis of the diamond shape and the axis that divide the city into quadrants. The water ways, which divide the city with natural boundaries. Florida Ave., once called Boundary Street, separates the federal portion of the city from the general domestic areas. The many open areas of land, such as; airports, parks, etc. The strong line that divides the city racially. Suppressed systems such as the public transportation system. These boundaries, many of which are invisible, are physically articulated/ marked throughout the city, as the implementation of the new State structure. In doing so the work of Benjamin Bannaker is forever visible as an integral part of the development of New Ife, and the Nation's Capital.

The strategy used to place the State Capitol, is done with the desire to make a commentary on the centralized and imperialistic organization of the Federal Mall and its relation to the entire city. It is envisioned that the state would be based upon a decentralized scheme, one that would absorb the centralized Federal Mall into its system, but not destroy

its strength. This idea comes from the incorporation of concepts of pluralism and multiple hierarchy within the city (ideas derived from the investigation of African aesthetics). In Herman Hertzberger's book, *Lessons for Students in Architecture* he calls this the concept of "Equivalence";

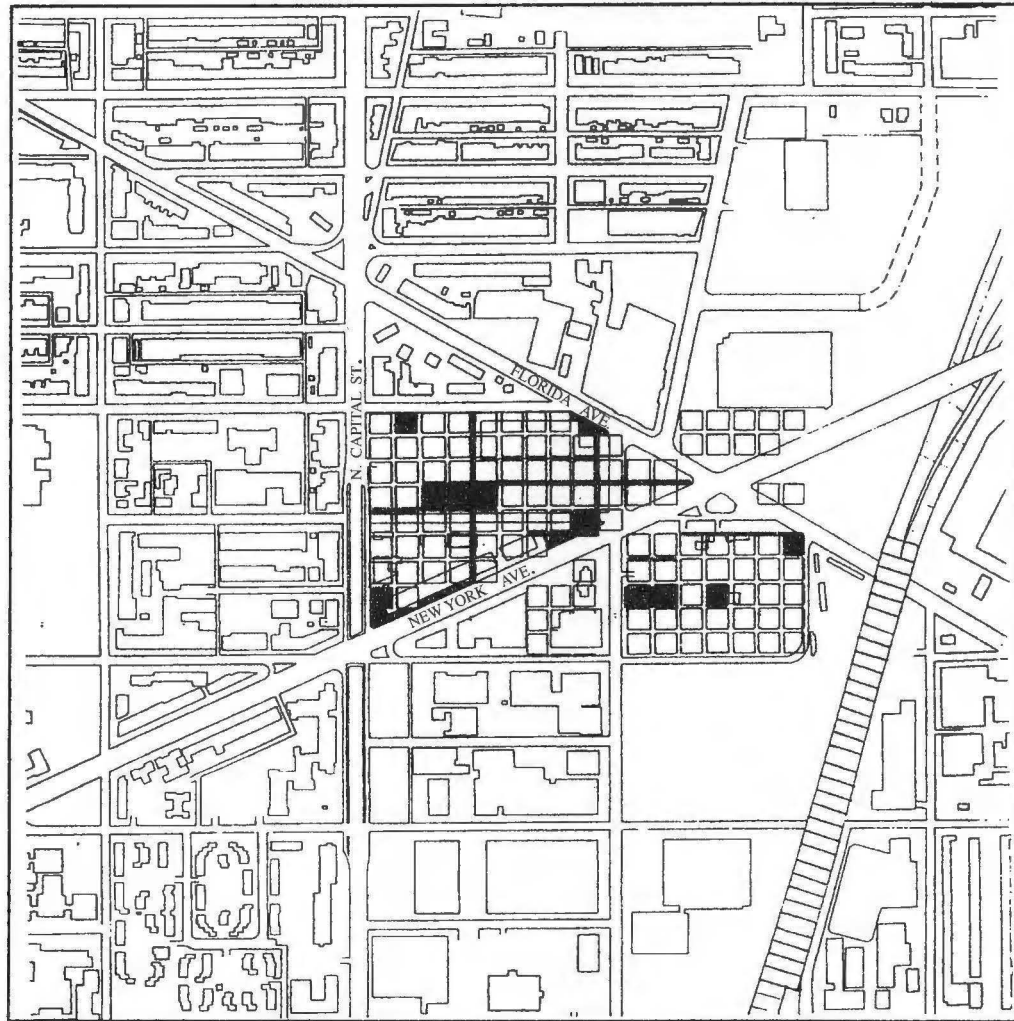
When something that was a secondary feature in one situation can become the main feature in another, in other words that both features can adapt to specific conditions, then we have a system of values in which there is no hierarchy of importance among component parts. And when, for instance, something in any architectonic ordering, an element or an organization of elements, can perform different functions depending on its placement in different situations, then its value is no longer constant.<sup>4</sup>

Depending on how an element is placed, it can perform a pivotal function, it can become the center of a system in its own right. According to Hertzberger, a system in which primary and secondary elements are recognizable as such cannot but refer to a hierarchy of constant and unalterable values: a system of values which is unequivocal and which consequently precludes interpretation on more than one level.<sup>5</sup>

The design of Washington, D.C. is based upon a French Baroque plan designed by Charles L'Enfant, termed a Grand Manner plan in Spiro Kostof's book *The City Shaped*, in which he states:

The Grand Manner is not the currency of little towns. It is neither practical nor modest. Perceived as an expansive pattern of sweeping vistas, its relation to topography and prior urban arrangements is arbitrary, its effects often grandiloquent. Typically, behind designs in the Grand Manner stands a powerful, centrist State whose resources and undiluted authority make possible the extravagant urban vision of ramrod-straight avenues, vast uniformly bordered squares, and a suitable accompaniment of monumental public buildings. This is, in fact a public urbanism. It speaks of ceremony, processional intentions, a regimented public life. The street holds the promise of pomp: it traverses the city with single minded purpose and sports accessories like triumphal arches, obelisks and free standing fountains. All this architectural drama subsumes the untidiness of our common routines. Shielded by the spacious envelopes, most of us continue to manage our plain existence, ready to gather into attendant crowds when the high business of the Grand Manner city needs its popular compliment.<sup>6</sup>

Underneath the Grand Manner design lies the orthogonal grid, which has a strong foundation in the design of American cities and in the Greek formation of democratic society. Its homogeneity lends itself well to the idea that all people are created equal. No street is more important than another in its schematic make up and no one point receives preferential positions on diagonal axis or intersecting squares and circles, as is the case in Washington and other cities like Paris. The grid operates upon extremely simple principles, while it clearly sets the overall rules, it is all the more flexible, when it comes



**Figure 2** Location of the State Capital

to the detailing of each site. Its economy of means is very much like a chess board, which has an unimaginable number of possibilities.

The design of New Ife attaches on to the highly structured strategy of the grid and decreases its scale, creating a finely meshed fabric that is interwoven into the Grand Manner Plan and the existing city grid. It introduces into the city fabric an extremely tight grid, which is scaled more for pedestrian use than for automotive. Within a State Capital district would exist an ambiguity between a multiblocked mega structure on one level, a grouping of individual mid-sized buildings and very small-scaled units, all interconnecting in varied ways and levels (improvisational method: variation on a theme). The idea being, that a city is a house, a place made for comfortable formal and informal dwelling.

The program of the State is developed from an understanding of African philosophy, African aesthetic principles (characteristics) and the concept of a social democracy. African philosophy, has three major emphases; that of

spirituality, communalism, and pluralism. This leads us to what I call the store front state, the creation of mixed use areas. The state becomes self-sufficient, setting up manufacturing facilities and agricultural space, within the city/state's parameters. Each part of the State network of buildings would essentially be a microcosm of a larger urban scheme. The state areas become the formal manifestation of a government that is for the people, by the people and of the people, in other words it becomes democracy. In placing the domestic, market and civic areas in close proximity, it is hoped that the areas would remain vital during all times of the day and that the tendency of the current government, to neglect lower income areas would be deterred. The State would have to provide proper security and maintenance for its facilities and its surrounding areas, thus providing the same high quality maintenance and security for its neighbors. The program of New Ife will consist of but is not limited to: State Capital, City Halls, state farm(s), Police (security stations), housing, and various market types such as shops and cafes.

After establishing possible location(s) of the State Capital

areas, one area (Fig. 2) is used as a prototype. Its location lies on North Capital St. between Florida Ave. and New York Ave. Conceptually the idea is to place a kente cloth on the site.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cornell West, A Note on Race and Architecture, *Keeping Faith* (New York, London: Routledge), 1993, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> 1990 Census of Population: General Population Characteristics, District of Columbia (U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census), 1992, Table 3.

The percentage is actually 68.5% African-American population, as reported in the census track. I increased the number to account for the large homeless population in the city. These are people the Census Bureau cannot accurately track but abound throughout much of the D.C. urban area.

<sup>3</sup> Laura B. Randolph, What D.C. Statehood Would Mean to Black America, *Ebony Magazine*, (Chicago: Johnson Publications), October 1990, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Hertzberger. *Equivalence, Lessons for Students in Architecture* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010 Publishers), 1991, p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Spiro, Kostof. *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History* (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown & Company), 1991, p. 240.

