SPATIAL SOCIAL THEORY
APPLIED TO THE KWANZAA PLAYGROUND:
IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS
FOR ART EDUCATORS

A Thesis
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Space, also referred to as geography, is neither passive nor natural. Space is constructed by social, political, and economic forces. Likewise, these forces are shaped and influenced by space. When geography is assumed to be simple physical matter easily measured and delineated by yardsticks, maps, and graphing tools, we become blind to the social and cultural meanings, assumptions, and power-laden relationships that are embedded in the geographies in which we live and learn. The purpose of this thesis is to provide a grounding in the study of space—an inquiry born out of the field of social or cultural geography, and identified here as spatial social theory—and suggest how this theory is useful to the field of art education. This thesis provides an example of a spatial analysis. Applied to a neighborhood art and play space in Columbus, Ohio known as the Kwanzaa Playground, spatial social theory sheds light on how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces are embedded in space. This thesis concludes by suggesting some ways in which art educators can become attuned to the spaces in which they live, work, and teach. Awareness of spatial relations is particularly important for art educators who are often default representatives of hegemonic institutions such as government-funded art agencies, museums, and public classrooms. Thus, recognizing how spatial relations can codify, reify, or resist power structures, and potentially marginalize particular populations, is an essential tool for art educators seeking to effectively reach diverse populations and contribute to positive social change.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It was a summer day in 1993 when nine-year-old Calid Bowen got a splinter in his hand from the swing set at his neighborhood park. Frustrated with the aging and neglected play equipment, Calid turned to his mother and asked why they couldn’t have a new playground. When Shirley Bowen heard this simple question from her exasperated son “everything,” as she says, “came together.” She answered Calid, “You know, we can and we can make ours special and different” (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998).

It was at that moment that I really, really knew that this might be an opportunity to bring together all of the things that have been with me in my life, the wonderful power of art to be inspiring, to be spiritually instructive, [and] to function as a real vehicle for educating people, and particularly, for reaching children. (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998)

Drawing on her belief system, her past experiences as an artist and art educator, and the wisdom and input of her friends, Bowen began to conceptualize a play space that would be unique, creative, safe, arts-filled, and culturally rich. Today, thanks to the collaborative efforts of her community, that play space is a reality. Dedicated on May 5, 1995, the Kwanzaa Playground is Ohio’s first African-centered playground. As “special and different” as she promised her son, the Kwanzaa Playground is based in African-rooted philosophies and cultures, and incorporates seven functional artworks by seven nationally recognized local artists.

This public space, infused with art, culture, and the idea of community strength is, among many other things, an example of a transformation of a social space. More
than a renovation, this once-dilapidated play space was re-envisioned into a meaningful, artistic, and culturally relevant neighborhood place designed by and for the community that primarily uses it. Its reshaping in the mid-1990s more accurately reflected, and reinforced, the neighborhood’s dominant cultural identity at the time.

I begin with this brief description of the Kwanzaa Playground, because it is one of a handful of living examples that I will use to bring substance to a concept that is the primary subject of this inquiry—the politics of space. In this paper, I endeavor to explain and expound upon the meaning and implications of spatial social theory, and to illustrate its relevance for art educators.

Politics of Space

Identified as a discipline of study under the terms social geography, cultural geography, or critical human geography, the field of spatial politics crosses disciplines, cropping up in literature, geography, sociology, cultural studies, urban planning, and other fields of study. In simple terms, the theory contends that an understanding of space is essential. Placement, positioning, geography, lateral relationships: these are all meaningful. In the book, *Place and the Politics of Identity* (1993) sociologist Michael Keith and geographer Steve Pile write that the term “spatiality” can be used,

To capture the ways in which the social and spatial are inextricably realized one in the other; to conjure up the circumstances in which society and space are simultaneously realized by thinking, feeling, doing individuals and also to conjure up the many different conditions in which such realizations are experienced by thinking, feeling, doing subjects. (p.6)

The central idea, then, is that space is not natural but constructed, physically and metaphorically. According to Keith and Pile (1993), “Spacialities have always produced landscapes that are loaded with ethical, epistemological and aesthetic meanings” (p. 26). Importantly, the authors then add, “almost invariably these are contested” (p. 26). Thus, space should not be thought of as benign or innocent, but constructing—both produced and re-producing.
Keith and Pile along with other authors I will be considering in this study—Rosalyn Deutsche, Barnor Hesse, Barbara Hooper, bell hooks, Doreen Massey, Edward Soja, Sharon Zukin—show that space structures and is structured by power relations. Keith and Pile (1993) explain that, “all spacialities are political because they are the (covert) medium and (disguised) expression of asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 38).

Space then,

Can . . . be recognized as an active constitutive component of, hegemonic power: an element in the fragmentation, dislocation and weakening of class power . . . both the medium and message of domination and subordination. . . It tells you where you are and it puts you there. (p. 37)

But, these hegemonic constructions can be challenged. “Space can be seen to be full of gaps, contradictions, folds and tears. Through these, marginalized communities may be able to inscribe themselves into new geographies” (Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 36). bell hooks (1990) calls these new geographies “communities of resistance” (p. 149) or “sites of resistance” (p. 151).

As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, “the politics of location” necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision. . . For me this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a “safe” place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance. (p. 145-149)

Significance

This framework, where the formation, use, and conception of space is political—affecting and expressing social relations—allows an important perspective for art educators. Often working in and for hegemonic institutions, such as government-funded art agencies, museums, and public classrooms, art educators can benefit from an awareness of and ability to analyze the social construction of space. Many educators work in institutions with mission statements emphasizing accessibility and the need for a broad reach that touches different socio-economic, cultural, and learning groups.
Thus, becoming attuned to how spacial relations can codify or reify power structures, and potentially marginalize particular populations is an essential tool for any art educator interested in improving his or her effectiveness. As important for the art educator, is an awareness of co-existing counter-hegemonic geographies; to understand the “folds and tears” communities carve—i.e., the “sites of resistance.”

**Design, Methodology, and Analysis**

This study begins with a discussion on spatial social theory. Drawing from the theoretical writings of postmodern geographers such as Edward Soja, David Harvey, and Doreen Massey, in the chapter titled “Why Space Matters: An Explanation of Spatial Social Theory” I will attempt to elucidate more clearly the often-hazy concepts of spatial social theory. In addition, looking at the writings of cultural critic bell hooks I will discuss, more in-depth, the notion of counter-hegemonic productions of space, and the relevance of hook’s concept of “sites of resistance.”

The third chapter, “Spatial Theory and Art in Public Places” looks at specific public art projects to reveal how the politics of space can play out in real world situations. There is a plethora of literature about public art issues, the first half of this chapter draws on the writings of four authors—Suzanne Lacy, Erika Doss, Rosalyn Deutsche, and Dolores Hayden. Through these authors I look at the politics of space in the realm of public art—both how power structures can be embedded and resisted. In the second half of this chapter I look at one specific project, the Kwanzaa Playground. The aforementioned theories related to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic productions of space will serve as my lens.

**Data collection methods.** My discussion of the Kwanzaa Playground Project will involve methods taken from case study and ethnographic research, namely, interviews, observation, and a study of any literature generated by or about the project. I do not see any logic in separating these methods of inquiry in time. Concurrently, I interviewed,
observed, and researched. Interviewees included Kwanzaa Playground Project founder Shirley Bowen, Columbus Department of Recreation and Parks landscape architect Maureen Lorenz, some of the artists involved in the project—William Agnew, Larry Winston Collins, and Pheoris West—and Dr. Vesta Daniel, a professor of Art Education at The Ohio State University who has researched the Kwanzaa Playground project extensively, structured a number of university courses around the project, and who introduced me to the Kwanzaa Playground in the mid-90s. Though key issues were addressed in each interview, I did not use a formal set of questions repeated alike in each interview. I used the semi-structured interviewing method because, as Reinharz (1992) has pointed out, “interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (p.19). In addition, rather than transcribing word-for-word each interview I provide so-called “essence transcriptions” summarizing and quoting their words.

Data analysis. I triangulated these different sources of information—interview, observation, and literature study—looking particularly at issues related to the politics of space. I looked for answers to the questions: How does spatial politics play out in public art spaces such as the Kwanzaa Playground and others identified in this paper? What can art educators draw from these specific examples to help learn about the social construction of space and how it influences their art education experiences?

The fourth chapter “Spatial Theory and Museums, Classrooms, and Beyond” will suggest how we might apply what has been learned in the more-documented arena of public art to other art education situations. Because this discipline (art education) is less concerned with “aggregates than individuals,” experiential learning is quite pertinent (Donmoyer, 1990, p.197). Though the description and proposed implications I draw from looking at the spatial politics of the Kwanzaa playground project and other public art projects will undoubtedly be unique, others can draw on them to gain
meaning or knowledge useful in other situations through the processes of "assimilation, accommodation, integration, and differentiation" described by Donmoyer (p. 197). Thus, in this concluding chapter I will suggest how an awareness of the politics of space can assist art educators in developing strategies to reach a broader population and marginalized groups by becoming aware of spatially embedded power structures and the notion of contested space and sites of resistance. Applying this outlook to the classroom and other educational settings is a new area of inquiry, of which I can only hope to scratch the surface. It is a small step in an attempt to help art educators become that much more effective for the benefit of all they serve—students, museum and gallery-goers, and art users and patrons of all types.
CHAPTER 2

WHY SPACE MATTERS: AN EXPLANATION OF SPATIAL SOCIAL THEORY

Space

In the 1980s a new geographical language appeared on the scene of social theory. Words like landscape, terrain, mapping, shape, place, space, and spatiality cropped up on book covers and conference papers in the fields of urban planning, sociology, geography, literature, and art criticism. This terminology reflected the growing perspective that “space matters.” The essential premise is that space is not innocent, nor is it natural. Rather, space is shaped by human social and economic relations, and space also exerts influence on these relations. Henri Lefebvre (1976), a French philosopher who, as early as the 1960s started examining the importance of space, explains that space is “literally filled with ideologies” (in Soja, 1989, p. 80).

Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic. If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be ‘purely’ formal, the epitome of rational abstraction, it is precisely because it has been occupied and used, and has already been the focus of past processes whose traces are not always evident on the landscape. (in Soja, p. 80)

What is space? Like we think of time in terms of the hands of a watch, we can think of space in terms of square feet. But, though these constructions are necessary for everyday use, we know time to be a more complicated concept. And, so is the case with space. Space can be an amorphous, vague term referring both to territory—be it mental or physical—and to a method—looking at human existence not just linearly but laterally.
What is meant by the term space and its importance for understanding the social world, identity, and economic, and cultural power will become more clear in the following discussion on how space has been conceptualized previously in geography and social theory.

Space/History

Though a conception of space as dynamic has not been completely absent from social theory, historically, space has more often been conceived as static. This misconception meant, according to critical geographer Edward Soja (1989), that while “at every scale of life, from the global to the local, the spatial organization of society was being restructured” (p. 34), critical social theorists remained blinded to these processes. Soja describes modern geography from the 1920s to recent years as a strictly applied discipline that was isolated from social theory. Finding a home in state economic and military interests, geography:

was reduced primarily to the accumulation, classification, and theoretically innocent representation of factual material describing the areal differentiation of the earth’s surface—to the study of outcomes, the end products of dynamic processes best understood by others. Geography thus also treated space as the domain of the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile—a world of passivity and measurement rather than action and meaning. Accurate packages of such geographical information continued to be of use to the state, in the East and West, for military intelligence, economic planning, and imperial administration. (p. 37)

The perception of space as dead was prevalent in critical social theory as well. In his book Postmodern Geographies, Soja (1989) presents a few theories to explain this. Caught in a human vs. nature dichotomy, social theory, from the 1920s, focused on the human will and human consciousness. Nature and the environment were overlooked and subordinate. Space was matter and materiality to be transcended by the acting human subject.

Part of the story of the submergence of space in early twentieth-century social theory is probably related to the explicit theoretical rejection of environmental
causality and all physical or external explanations of social processes and the
formation of human consciousness. Society and history were being separated
from nature and naively given environments to bestow upon them what might be
termed a relative autonomy of the social from the spatial. Blocked from seeing
the production of space as a social process rooted in the same problematic as the
making of history, critical social theory tended to project human geography on to
the physical background of society, thus allowing its powerful structuring effect to
be thrown away with the dirty bathwater of a rejected environmental determinism.
(p. 35)

Geographer, Doreen Massey (1993) identifies another value-laden dichotomy—
male versus female. Time became aligned with history, reason, progression, action,
and masculinity while space became aligned with its opposites—body, emotion, stasis,
passivity, aesthetics, and femininity. As Massey writes, “where time is dynamism,
dislocation, and History, and space is stasis, space is coded female and denigrated” (p.
149). Utilizing the early philosophical conception that male “reason” is needed to tame
female “disorder,” Massey goes on to say, “but where space is chaos . . . then time is
Order . . . and space is still coded female, only in this context interpreted as threatening”
(p. 149).

According to Soja (1989), Marxist social theorists also resisted a spatialized
perspective. A theory that hinged on the idea of a dialectical historical materialism,
traditional Marxism viewed geography as “reactionary and capitalist” whereas “history
and becoming” were seen as “revolutionary” (p. 19). A localized perspective also was
accused of draining and fragmenting the energies of a united revolutionary class.

Those seeking a demise of capitalism . . . tended to see spatial consciousness and
identity—in localisms or regionalisms or nationalisms—a dangerous fetter on the
rise of a united world proletariat, a false consciousness inherently antagonistic to
the revolutionary subjectivity and objective historical project of the working class.
(p. 35)

For these reasons and others, social theory, has been dominated by a “temporal
master-narrative” (Soja, 1989, p. 11). History and biography are “the privileged
interpretive perspective(s)” (p. 36). “Putting phenomena in a temporal sequence” was
seen as “much more significant and revealing to social theorists of every stripe than putting them beside each other in space” (p. 36).

Swimming against the tide, Henri Lefebvre, the author of *The Production of Space* (1974), had been making the connection between the spatial and the social since the 1960s. Thinker Rosalyn Deutsche (1996) described his project as signifying “that the organization of the city and of space in general is neither natural nor uniformly advantageous” (p. xiv). But, as Edward Soja (1989) points out, “hidden” geographies can be found in the writings of two other prominent thinkers, Michel Foucault, a cultural critic concerned with power relations and the ideas of surveillance, incarceration, and discipline, and John Berger, writer and art critic. Each stays just shy of relegating the same importance to space as they do to time, nonetheless Soja points out how each has flirted with a different way of conceiving the world and how each even prophesied this shift in perspective.

Foucault (1986) writes that while, “the great obsession of the nineteenth century was . . . history with its themes of development and suspension, . . . of crisis and cycle, of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men” the present will “perhaps” be “the epoch of space” (in Soja, 1989, p. 10).

We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (in Soja, p. 10)

Though this was written in 1986, as early as 1977 Foucault recognized the importance of a spatialized awareness.

A whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers (both of these terms in the plural)—from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat.” (in Soja, p. 21)

In John Berger’s discussion of the modern portrait and the modern novel, Soja (1989) identifies a burgeoning recognition of the importance of space. Berger
calls attention to a “shift” in the mediums of art and literature which “hinges around
the impress of simultaneity versus sequence, spatiality versus historicity, geography
versus biography” (p.23). These identified shifts in, as Berger says, ‘the look of things’
means that “we can no longer depend on a story-line unfolding sequentially, an ever-
accumulating history marching straight forward in plot and denouement, for too much
is happening against the grain of time, too much is continually traversing the story-line
laterally” (p. 23).

By contrasting history and space, it may seem, at least so far in this discussion,
that history and geography have been pitted one against the other, yet the idea is to
dissolve the dualism itself. History is not to be replaced with geography. Instead, asserts
Soja (1989), the goal is to be aware of the interplay between history and geography; to be
positioned both on the vertical axis of time and the horizontal axis of space; to consider
the “making of geography” as well as the “making of history” (p.1); to think in terms of
both tradition and territory.

The importance of space and the different ways it can be structured and conceived
are essential ideas in the film “Claiming Open Spaces.” Directed by Austin Allen (1995),
this film looks at the role public parks play in African American communities throughout
the states. The film looks at five such parks—Franklin Park in Columbus, Detroit’s Belle
Isle, Defremery Park in Oakland, Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, Alabama, and
Congo Square/Armstrong Park in New Orleans. Allen shows both how black populations
used these public parks as a meeting ground, a kind of neighborhood backyard, and
also how these public parks became spaces of conflicts as city governments, planning
departments, and police departments threatened each with closing or, minimally, limited
their use. In his film, Allen interviews landscape architect Walter Hood. His words,
quoted at length below, allow for a more practical understanding of the connection
between the spatial and the social.
African Americans, or various subculture groups within this society, they have to fit into a framework that is totally alien to them. I think I used the example of the English open lot plan, which is basically the single family detached house. Making a correlation between that and the extended family or the more community-based activities that occur in ethnic communities: they don’t fit. So, what you find are those groups improvising within that and changing that structure. The lot lines are the still the same, the houses are still in the same position, but the activities start to take place in different areas and it starts to reshape the environment. Sidewalks are used to just walk in this society. If you are hanging on the sidewalk you are just loitering, or selling drugs, or doing something bad. But in this community people are out having fun, listening to music, they open the windows up on the second floor, put the speaker’s there, bring the couch outside, the TV outside, they want to be outside. But the framework doesn’t allow for that, so they have to change the framework—the front yard becomes the living room, the sidewalk becomes the hallway.

I have presented this brief story of the spatial hermeneutic in social theory not only as an orienting device but to help define this concept of space and the spatiality of social life. Since it has been far from the norm in social theory, this method of interpretation and making meaning can be confusing. But by coming at it through different thinkers and looking at its place within a field previously dominated by historical methodologies, I hope to allow the concept to become clearer.

**Space/Power**

Evidenced in the above discussion is the idea that space is not just meaningful, it is meaningful in relation to power. Space structures and is structured by power relations. Indeed, in *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) part of Soja’s project (following the work of Lefebvre) is to analyze the geography of capitalism. This geography is typified by “uneven development”—dominant cores and subordinate peripheries.

Concretized and created spatiality . . . has been progressively ‘occupied’ by an advancing capitalism, fragmented into parcels, homogenized into discrete commodities, organized into locations of control, and extended to the global scale. The survival of capitalism has depended upon this distinctive production and occupation of a fragmented, homogenized and hierarchically structured space—achieved largely through bureaucratically (that is to say, state) controlled collective consumption, the differentiation of centres and peripheries at multiple scales, and the penetration of state power into everyday life. (p. 92)
Geographer David Harvey (1993) also engages in a neo-Marxist analysis of geography. This type of analysis of the capitalist production of space relates geography and political power, looking at, for example, elements such as the location of industry and roads; land use; and unequal development. One example of this type of analysis is Harvey’s thesis that urbanization created a spatial-social reality that weakened rural areas and shifted the power from labor to capitalists.

Those living in relatively geographically isolated rural towns...are, consequentially, easy prey for an industry seeking a cheap, unorganized and easily disciplined labour force...We should pay close attention to the industrial structures developing in rural and small-town settings in the United States, for it is here that the decline of agricultural employment (to say nothing of the rash of farming bankruptcies) over the past decade or so has left behind a relatively isolated industrial reserve army...which is far more vulnerable to exploitation than its urban counterpart. American industry has long used spatial dispersal and the geographical isolation of employees as one of its prime mechanisms of labour control. (p. 42-43)

Furthermore, according to Harvey (1993), within this capitalist production of space, the urban working-class is likewise weakened. Creating company-towns in rural settings not only allows capitalists to draw on a more easily manipulated and non-unionized labor force, it turns centers that have a history of politicized labor movements into unemployment zones.

The manufacturing sectors of central cities, which have always been more vulnerable to expressions of organized discontent or political regulation, have been reduced to zones of either high unemployment (cities like Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Baltimore have seen their traditional blue-collar manufacturing employment cut in half in the last 20 years) or unorganized sweatshop-style industries. The non-financial zones of inner-cities...have increasingly become...centres of unemployment and oppression (of the sort which led to the recent explosion in Los Angeles) rather than centres of labour exploitation and working-class political organization of the classic sort. (p. 43)

Sociologist Sharon Zukin (1992) also sees within capitalism a geography dominated by market forces and consumption. In her analysis, place has traditionally been the spatial form that “anchors” people to the social world (p. 223). But as market
forces have “annihilated place-based community,” (p. 240) markets have become “the economic forces that detach people from established social institutions” (p. 223). The resulting worst-case scenario is “a socio-spatial identity derived purely from what we consume” (p. 243).

Neil Smith and Cindi Katz (1993) suggest that the traditional conception of space as dead or empty is a result, itself, of capitalism. It is a result that only supports capitalism because a taken-for-granted, natural construction of space allows space to hide consequences; it allows power structures to remain unseen.

It is not space *per se* that expresses power, but the thoroughly naturalized absolute conception of space that grew up with capitalism, and which expresses a very specific tyranny of power. (Smith & Katz, 1993, p. 76)

Still, other theorists point out the limitations of a purely class-conscious or market-based analysis of power relations. They claim the neo-Marxist perspective ignores how complex, interacting relations of power that attempt to subjugate women, feminists, African-Americans, Hispanics, and other marginalized groups are played out in the landscape. Barnor Hesse (1993), for instance, examining the untold story of black settlements in Britain, identifies the social-spatial force of racism:

The ‘here and now’ of our ‘social imaginaries’ . . . encounter articulations of timed-spaced tracings of 300 years of African enslavement; the exploitative, violent division of the world into sublime Europe and savage/exotic non-Europe . . . and the alternating invocations of ‘peoples without histories’ and ‘natives’ from another time. (p. 166)

Rosalyn Deutsche in her book, *Evictions* (1996), criticizes the neo-Marxist thesis, as put forth particularly by Harvey, that class is the “single antagonism.” (p. xix). She contests the space of *discourse on space* by showing that “the repression of feminism [in critical human geography] is a structural, not an incidental, element of the group’s foundationalist social theory and unitarian epistemology” (p. xix). This editing out of other social forces, such as racism and sexism, results in the “production and maintenance of masculinist space” (p. xix).
Space/Folds and Tears

It is these writers, concerned with the multiple dimensions of power relations, who shift the focus of spatial analyses from the hegemonic structure towards “communities of resistance” (hooks, 1990, p.149). Geographies can be studied critically as “spaces of radical opportunity” (1993, Soja and Hopper, p. 194). This direction is mentioned but not explored in Postmodern Geographies (1989). In this book, Soja’s references to counter-hegemonic practice are few, such as the following found in the last chapters:

There is . . . always room for resistance, rejection, and redirection in the nonetheless structured field of urban locales, creating an active politics of spatiality, struggles for place, space, and position within the regionalized and nodal urban landscape. (p. 235)

There is a growing realization that labour, and all other segments of society peripheralized and dominated in one way or another by capitalist development and restructuring must seek to create spatially conscious counter-strategies at every geographical scale, in a multiplicity of locales, to compete for control over the restructuring of space. (p. 173)

These counter-strategies are what Foucault called “little tactics of the habitat” and they are what Zukin has termed “the vernacular of the powerless.” In a later essay from 1993, Soja and his co-author Barbara Hooper, not only replace the word “capitalism” with “hegemonic power,” acknowledging the multiple sources of oppression, but like Deutsche and Hesse, he and Hooper turn their energies towards spatially conscious “counter-strategies” (p. 200). Instead of concentrating on the difference that space makes they concentrate on, as reads the title of their essay, “The Spaces that Difference Makes.”

What “difference makes” (referring to counter-hegemonic practices, spaces, identities, etc.) are not just “little tactics” nor are they “of the powerless,” implying the private, personal, small-scale, and marginalized, they are, in hook’s (1990) words, “sites of resistance” (p. 151) that can exist locally and globally in physical and intellectual spaces. Because all space is contested—pluralistic, with multiple stories, multiple
conceptions, and multiple uses—all space is a potential site of resistance. For bell hooks, who Soja and Hooper rely heavily on in their analysis, the “margin” is an important site of resistance. hooks reformulates the conception of the margin (or Soja’s “periphery”), so that it is not a position imposed by hegemonic power, but a chosen position. It is too simple to think of power relations stranding the less economically and culturally powerful in dispossessed spaces. The margin is not “a site of deprivation” it is “a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (hooks, p. 149).

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfills desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world. (p. 153)

In reclaiming the space of the margin, hooks also warns against an idealized conceptualization of this space.

I am not trying to romantically re-inscribe the notion of that space of marginality where the oppressed live apart from their oppressors as “pure.” I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance. And since we are well able to name the nature of that repression we know better the margin as site of deprivation. We are more silent when it comes to speaking of the margin as site of resistance. We are more often silenced when it comes to speaking of the margin as site of resistance. (p. 151)

For bell hooks (1990) the margin is a place of “radical openness.” For her, it is a space to recover or envision personal identity and black subjectivity on one’s own terms. hooks is very personal in her writing, sharing her own location as an academic from a “poor, underclass community” who now has access to “privileged cultural settings” yet refuses to cast off all “signs” of her class and culture or “play the role of exotic other” (p. 148). To dissolve the label she disparages—“the Other”—it is necessary to create spaces
to conceptualize not opposites or binaries, but alternatives. For hooks these spaces, real and imagined, allow African-Americans “to survive whole, our souls intact” (p. 148). hooks explains that language, or finding voice, is one site of resistance:

The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle . . . I feel it even now ‘writing this piece . . . using familiar academic speech now and then, “talking the talk”—using black vernacular speech, the intimate sounds and gestures I normally save for family and loved ones. Private speech in public discourse, intimate intervention, making another text, a space that enables me to recover all that I am in language. (p. 146-147)

Barnor Hesse (1993) can be said to engage in a similar act of recovery, as he makes the concept of “Britishness” a site of resistance through examining African settlements in Britain. In his essay, Black to Front and Black Again: Racialization through Contested Times and Spaces, Hesse disturbs the “narrative-in-place” (p. 163). His spatial storytelling resists a national narrative that treats black settlement in Britain as if it were “a discrete moment or an ephemeral legacy of immigration, disappearing like a ‘foreign’ accent” (p. 168). He argues that a conception of Britishness that is closed, that can be reduced to ‘is-not is’ or ‘inside-outside’ is an impossibility considering the unbound space of the African diaspora. In other words, identity is spacialized. Being both of and outside-of, being both the same and the Other, being both Western and African and/or Caribbean, challenges a definition of Britishness based solely on race or origin. Thus, cultural or national identity itself becomes itself a site of resistance.

Another example is the field of geography itself. Rather self-referentially, Soja and Hooper (1993) claim that a space of “radical opportunity,” a “community of resistance,” a “thirddspace” (p.192) is geography itself. “Dwelling intellectually in an often forgotten periphery of utilitarian fact-gathering and map-making” (p.199) and subordinate to “hegemonic historiography” (p.200), the discipline geography, itself, has been marginalized. Soja and Hopper reclaim that intellectual space.
We suggest here that this peripheral positioning can now be used as a site of opportunity, another place of radical openness where new alternatives can be imagined and effectively practiced by consciously and strategically disordering difference and choosing marginality. (p.199)

Spatial analysis is perhaps easiest to understand when applied to territories that are physical such as the re-imagined sidewalks Walter Hood referred to in Austin Allen’s “Claiming Open Spaces.” Indeed, spatial social theory is most often applied to the study of cities. David Harvey has examined Baltimore, Edward Soja, Los Angeles, and Doreen Massey, with co-authors John Allen and Steve Pile, the city itself, in the book, *City Worlds (Understanding Cities).* The examples in the previous paragraphs involving Britishness and the field of geography show that spatial analysis is also applicable in a broader sense, covering “territories” real and imagined, landscaped and conceptualized. In the aforementioned examples it is the territories of identity and academic fields of thought that are considered spatially.

**Summary**

On the whole, the purpose of this chapter was to explain the concept of space and to provide some examples, such as Harvey’s discussion of urbanization, to show what a spatial analysis might entail. Space is produced. Space is social. It can enforce and reinforce power structures, yet space is always contested. There are fold and tears, so-called geographies of resistance, that refuse to allow these power structures to settle in.

In the next chapter I will look at public art in relation to spatial social theory. Often spearheaded by government and corporate bodies but for the benefit of the general public, public art is fertile ground to explore the notion of space as contested terrain.
CHAPTER 3

SPATIAL THEORY AND ART IN PUBLIC PLACES

From Serra’s Titled Arc to Ashcroft-offending naked statues, public art offends and delights, pleases and impassions. It is an arena of discussion, controversy and all-out battle. Spatial social theory is a broad based discipline, but perhaps because of its origins in geography, it is often drawn to the study of social organizations such as cities rather than to subjects such as art. Yet, because public art typically involves the use of city spaces for the purported benefit of the public, spatial social theory has touched on the subject of art, at least art in public places. In this chapter, I will introduce a handful of thinkers in order to discuss ways in which public art can be thought of in terms of the politics of space. In the second half of this chapter, based on my own independent research, I will look at one specific functional public art project, the Kwanzaa playground. The theory of the social production of space, bell hook’s concept of sites of resistance and examples that elucidate hook’s concept all provide an interesting framework for looking at this neighborhood space. On the map it is one city block, yet the Kwanzaa playground extends into an ideological space where alternative conceptions of space, play, and the role of art can be found.

Social Production of Space and Public Art

In 1986 an inventory of Los Angeles’s designated cultural-historic landmarks found that 97.7 percent were Anglo American, 2.3 percent were Native American, African American, Latino, or Asian American, and 4.0 percent were connected to women’s
history, Anglo or otherwise. This, in a city where collectively minorities outnumber Anglo Americans by sixty percent. According to Dolores Hayden (1995) professor of architecture, urbanism, and American Studies, the inventory shows that “three-quarters of the current population must find its public, collective past in a small fraction of the city’s monuments, or live with someone else’s choices about the city’s history” (p. 86). This is one example of how public city space, through art, is used to create one version of urban history, in this case one that denies the pluralistic experiences of its inhabitants.

So called “plop art” is another example of how power and ideology can be spatially embedded through public art. Certain types of public art can attempt to erase what a community has created—often unofficially, just by living in and using the space—with the sensibilities/ideology/aesthetics/concerns of an individual artist. Suzanne Lacy, editor of *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (1995), criticizes traditions in public art that center the artist and ignore community. Assessing the recent history of site-specific art, Lacy writes:

> What too many artists did was to parachute into a place and displace it with art . . . site specificity was really more like the imposition of a kind of disembodied museum zone onto what already had been very meaningful and present before that, which was the place. (p. 24)

More insidious, Lacy also accuses public art of being used to sweeten development packages. With a “things go down better with public art mentality, the bitter pills of development are delivered to the public” (p. 132). Thus, for instance, a new office complex that is built on top of a razed historical landmark or has displaced community housing is made more palatable by a kinetic sculpture or a marble fountain.

In light of these criticisms, Hayden and Lacy, as well as authors Erika Doss and Rosalyn Deutsche, call for a more responsible public art. One that does not displace that which already exists; one that does not enforce or reinforce a monolithic identity; one that is not the “product of experts,” but that “explicitly acknowledge(s) the participation
of diverse social groups in the production of the environment” (Deutsche, 1990, p.109); one that is not “imposed from above by state institutions or private interests...dictated by the necessities of control and profit [and] legitimized by concepts of efficiency or beauty” (p.109); and, importantly, one that does not try to please everyone, but instead one that sees controversies and battles over public art as an expression of democracy that is to be embraced rather than avoided.

Lacy (1995) calls for a new responsible, socially-obligated, public art that she calls “New Genre Public Art,” the phrase that makes up the second half of the title of her book. This type of public art she says is, “socially engaged” and “interactive... for diverse audiences” (p. 12). In new genre public art, art production and democratic participation are to coexist; artist sensibilities or state or corporate sponsors are not to take precedence over the needs of the community, and public art projects must be “listener-centered rather than vision-oriented” (p. 82). Though the perspective here is somewhat limited to the artist and to a kind-of ‘artist’s rule of conduct’ for making community-minded public art, Lacy does in fact encourage artists and anyone making decisions about public art to understand that public art is contested terrain and counter-voices need to be heard.

Erika Doss (1995) holds to the same view, but also directly embraces contests in the public sphere as an exercise in democracy. Public controversies over art in public spaces are not to be avoided but embraced and seen for what they are: the public fighting for a voice in the public sphere.

Americans continue to respond angrily to public culture, so much so that it is rare today for any example of public art to be produced and then unveiled without heated argument and debate. The turbulent tones of the battles over public culture are certainly influenced by who the American public is and how that public is viewed by artists, art agencies, politicians, and corporations. They are furthered by how the public—broadly and specifically—constructs itself in terms of race, sex, gender, and ethnic identity. And they are advanced by the disquieting sense that little of today’s public culture is actually generated in behalf of ‘the people’
and that notions of artistic autonomy, expert social vision, and political and corporate interest dominate the public sphere. (p. 16)

Looking at various controversial art projects, Doss (1995) concludes that in our multicultural society “an authentic public art is based not on absolute agreement or the monolithic construction of identity but on the willingness to share and tolerate differing opinions and competing agendas” (p. 249). “Public art,” she says, “has the unique potential to encourage the public to realize their voice—their power—in the public sphere” (p. 249).

Rosalyn Deutsche (1996) would agree with Erika Doss that consensus over public space is not the goal. In fact, where there is consensus she would say there is suppression. This is because “social space is produced and structured by conflicts” (p. xxiv).

When space is pictured as a closed entity, conflicts—and social groups associated with conflict—appear as disturbances that enter space from the outside and must be expelled to restore harmony. (p. xxiv)

For Deutsche we must resist “nostalgic images of space that externalize and delegitimate conflict” and remember “that we cannot recover what we never had” (p. xxiv). Space has always been conflictual.

Deutsche’s book, Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics (1996) is concerned with how state institutions and private interests attempt to exclude (evict) groups from public spaces. She directly champions public art as a potential site of resistance.

A genuinely responsible public art must, in Lefebvre’s words appropriate” space from its domination by capitalist and state power. In the tradition of radical site-specific art, public art must disrupt, rather than secure, the apparent coherence of its new urban sites. (p. xvi)

Deutsche sites Wodiczko’s “Homeless Projection” as an example of this type of public art. This work involved projecting images onto public sculptures in New York’s Union Square. The statues of such historic figures as Abraham Lincoln and Lafayette were transfigured to look like the homeless. For Deutsche this work reveals the social
relations of urban redevelopment which evict and "destroy the very conditions for survival—housing and services—for residents no longer required for the city's economy" (p. xiv). She describes the significance of Wodiczko's work:

While the promoters of Union Square development used the square's historical monuments to advertise the benefits of redevelopment, Wodiczko appropriated the sculptures to create a counterimage of redevelopment. Employing slide projections that transformed the gentrified statues into homeless people, he forced the monuments to testify to the sociospatial conflicts that they were being employed to conceal. Against the city's official restoration program, Wodiczko disclosed the social divisions—and the social groups—expelled when historical monuments are presented as symbols of social cohesion. (p. xv)

Dolores Hayden is directly involved in a process of challenging embedded power structures in the space of public art by creating new art. Working in Los Angeles she was involved in many projects that helped alter the conditions of 1986 when 97.7 percent of the cities cultural-historical landmarks were Anglo American. Her book, *Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* is an outgrowth of a 10 year long non-profit venture to "situate women's history and ethnic history in downtown, in public places through experimental, collaborative projects by historians, designers, and artists" (p. xi). Hayden, through her organization "Power of Place," helped to create sites of resistance by transforming specific city spaces to represent the diversity of urban history. Some of these projects included: a permanent public art installation at the Embassy Auditorium reflecting the site's labor history, women's history and Latino history; refurbishment of the homestead of Biddy Mason, a prominent African American resident in the 1880s; and, preservation of Little Tokyo where many historic-cultural sites had been demolished.

For Hayden (1995), these projects are only possible with the direct involvement of community. A successful project needs a "community process." It is usually "face-to-face" and "requires the steady investment of time and energy." It involves, she writes, "giving respect to members of the community, listening to them and talking to them as equals, and earning their trust" (p. 229). The stepping off point for Hayden is finding out
what residents think about their own urban history and what stories they have to tell about their own local environment. Methods for this include interviews and cognitive mapping. Forums for this include public meetings and public exhibits, as well as any opportunities afforded by connections to organizations. Hayden stresses the importance of reaching out to any neighborhood organization already in place to “increase the range of people who participate” (p. 229). She advises fostering relationships with elected officials and urban planners, for, though these relationships “may range from the collegial to adversarial” (p. 234), they can be a source for factual data and relevant information on future plans from city planning departments. Lastly, Hayden stresses that participants should avoid applying strict definitions to their particular role. Fixed and predetermined ideas do not belong in community work, because as Hayden says, “citizens who undertake public urban projects will experience a transformation of roles and expectations . . . as everyone searches for a satisfactory public process” (p. 236).

Though Hayden is more detailed and practical in her approach, all the authors presented here call for an inclusive public art wherein histories, experiences, opinions and needs of the community are brought into the mix of public art. Importantly, when each consider community “participation” or “voice” it is with a spatial awareness. Similar to Hesse and hooks take on identity, community voice is not explained as closed or defined. It is not monolithic, nor centered in race or origin, singularly determined by history, but rather conceived of laterally—multivariied—so that the end goal is not consensus so much as coalition.

Each of these thinkers also share the view that public art is contested terrain, some more explicitly than others. For Doss, the dialogue inspired by public art is evidence itself that space is contested terrain, that it is full of Keith & Pile’s (1993) “gaps, contradictions, folds and tears” (p.36). Though Suzanne Lacy’s “new genre public art” is focused on widening the perspective of the artist, by insisting on addressing the
needs of the community it could be considered a “site of resistance.” Rosalyn Deutsche (1996) is more direct. She contends that a responsible public art must expose or disrupt “the authoritarian strategies that construct unitary images of social space” (p. xiii). Hayden’s work can be interpreted as doing just that, as her project, “Power of Place” reasserts the histories and experiences of the marginalized back into the landscape of Los Angeles.

A Spatial Analysis of the Kwanzaa Playground

The geography in which we live is carved, shaped and molded by social, political, and economic forces. Geography also exerts influence on these forces. Space can hide, and thereby confirm, existing power relations or it can resist them. Within the topography of Columbus, Ohio there is a space the size of a city block that contains a story, many stories, about how a community, through art, changed, controlled, and beautified a public space in ways that it became relevant to and expressive of the cultures and identities of the people who step foot in that space. The Kwanzaa Playground is not “public art” of the usual type. It is a functioning playground that incorporates art as design and as actual usable play pieces. What follows is a discussion of some of the processes and ideologies embedded in the space of the Kwanzaa Playground. The Kwanzaa Playground is a multidimensional and complex project. My discussion of the Kwanzaa Playground is limited in scope. Other researcher and authors have delved deeply into subjects such as the curricular possibilities of the Kwanzaa Playground and the Playground’s cultural and artistic components (Chanda & Daniel, 2000; Daniel, 2003; Colman, 2003). My intention here is to provide a brief history and description of the Kwanzaa Playground, and then to examine the project in light of spatial social theory, asking along the way whether the Kwanzaa Playground can be thought of as a “site of resistance.”

25
Background

*Olde Towne East.* The Kwanzaa playground is located on the near east side of Columbus Ohio, in a district known as Olde Towne East. At the turn of the century the near east side was one of the wealthier residential areas in the city. Within its borders is a stretch of East Broad Street, where still stand some of Columbus’ stateliest homes. Before the advent of the automobile this part of the city benefited from its close proximity to downtown. Remnants of carriage houses and stables can still be found in this neighborhood once traversed by horse and buggy.

African Americans have a long history in near east Columbus. Many were drawn, during the great migration that began in the 1890s and continued into the middle of the twentieth century, to this particular neighborhood for the many railroad and factory jobs (Lentz, 2003). During the early 20th century, a high-income African American neighborhood developed along Long Street and a poorer African American community known as the Blackberry Patch developed near Mt. Vernon Avenue. According to historian Ed Lentz (2003) one of the “more interesting developments in Columbus...was the emergence of a renewed and unified black community.”

By the 1920s, a black central business district had established itself along the Long Street and Mount Vernon Avenue corridors. With its own retail, commercial, and entertainment establishments, the black community of Columbus was vibrant and vital even in the face of Depression and war. (p. 130)

Columbus artist Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson has documented the unique character and vivacity of this neighborhood, in which she grew up, in her artwork and especially in her children’s book, *A Street Called Home.* This personal cartography of her childhood community is colorfully filled edge-to-edge with neighbors, children, street-sellers, pigeons, and storefronts. In this visual hum of activity, paper-doors open to highlight neighborhood characters known by the wares or services they peddle. There is the Umbrella Man, the Sockman, the Camera Man, the orange and yellow polka-dot-
dressed Chicken foot Woman, and the Brownyskin Man who calls out, “They come off the hog/ They come off his head/ They come off the hog right after he’s dead/ If you want brownyskins put your finger in the air/ the brownyskin man will be right there” (Robinson, 1997, p. 10)

In the 1940s much of the Blackberry Patch was converted into Poindexter Village one of the country’s first public housing projects. Robinson’s was one of the first families to live in Poindexter. Robinson documented this in her 1995 painting “Poindexter Village—First Families in 1940.” About the village Robinson has shared, “The first families that moved into Pondexter in 1940 were very stable, very strong, and very hardworking. They may have needed welfare but were too proud to take it. It was a wonderful, wonderful community” (Robinson, 2002, p.110). Still, according to Lentz (2003), at this time, the near east side became a “testing laboratory” for public housing and public assistance projects (p. 131). This, combined with the gradual reduction in rules restricting where African Americans could live, contributed to the flight of the black middle class from the neighborhood (Lentz, 2003). The proliferation of the automobile in the 1940s and 50s, also contributed to the migration towards the suburbs of wealthier residents of all colors. The result for the neighborhood: income levels decreased, more houses were unoccupied and deteriorating, some turned into apartments and rooming houses. But it was the building of freeways in the 1970s that split apart the neighborhood and accelerated the exodus to the suburbs (Lentz, 2003). The freeways cut through the near east side neighborhood, displacing many residents. In addition, the freeways isolated the area—literally cutting off access points to downtown. By the 1970s the near east side and Olde Towne East were struggling.

**English Park.** In 1993, the Olde Towne East city block known as English Park was centered in a low income neighborhood, predominantly African American. Though the area was home to community leaders who sponsored local programs, it was not
a politically or economically powerful sector of Columbus, Ohio. Professors of Art Education Jacqueline Chanda and Vesta Daniel (2000) describe the neighborhood in the following way:

The playground is located on a corner, in a historically African-descended community whose population is shifting. The playground is nested in an urban space characterized by a long history of visual and performing artists, writers, parks, recreation and arts centers, storytellers, alcohol and drug abusers, social service agencies, displaced small businesses, new small businesses, churches, spiritualists, professionals, and community leaders (p. 8).

According to the 1990 Census, in the four Census blocks surrounding English Park, the average annual median household income was $11,223. For the state of Ohio this figure was $28,706, for Columbus: $30,610. Twenty percent of the 818 households in these four-census blocks were owner-occupied, 23% were vacant, and 56% were rentals. Just under 33% of the population aged 25 and older had attended one year of college or more, 27.8% had not received a high school diploma. Unemployment levels were at 13% for the area, but, significantly, 960 of the 1,755 people 16 years and over reported that they were not at the time actively seeking employment and thus were not counted as part of the labor force. Because labor force is the denominator used when calculating the unemployment rate, these 960 non-employed persons were not included in the 13% unemployment rate. Also, according to the 1990 Census over half the population, 51.2%, were living below the poverty rate.

If in 1993—the year Shirley Bowen was inspired to transform and improve English Park—we were to draw up a map of Columbus’ political and economic power, the area surrounding what is now the Kwanzaa playground could easily be interpreted as one of Edward Soja’s “peripheries.” Not a “dominant core,” the area truly shouldered the worst results of “uneven development.” The result, for this city block bordered by Bryden, Wilson, and Linwood streets, was neglect. “The swings were broken,” said Bowen, “the ground uneven, in fact it had potholes that became sinkholes when it
rained. The chain-link fence was an eyesore” (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998). Recreation and Parks landscape architect Maureen Lorenz confirms Bowen’s assessment: “It was a dilapidated little playground in a horrible state” (Lorenz, personal communication, May 13, 1998).

According to Lorenz, when she first heard from Shirley Bowen, English Park was already on the department’s priority list for renovation. But when Bowen promised her son a better playground it wasn’t just a splinter-less swing set and landscaped greenspace that she imagined. She looked beyond traditional, accepted playground design and play-elements and re-envisioned the space based on its location, and on the people who utilized it on a day-to-day basis. Bowen felt that a new slide was not what the neighborhood needed, but instead “a quality space for children, making something positive happen in the community politically, as well as artistically, culturally, and socially. Every element selected had to reflect some of these altruistic, spiritual goals” (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998). And importantly, in Bowen’s vision, the community would be actively engaged in the playground’s transformation and maintenance.

The First Steps

**Community.** The Kwanzaa Playground was created in living rooms not boardrooms. Bowen called on friends, community leaders and artists to revision this neighborhood space, eventually creating an organization, Children’s Africentric Playground (CAP), which partnered with other organizations such as the Africentric Personal Development Shop (APDS). Bowen said that one of the most “exciting” aspects of the project for her was “how it brought people together” (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998). Seven artists created and donated functional art for the park, community groups partnered to write grants, the volunteers were too many to count, and financial donations came from arts councils, corporate giving, and neighborhood kids.
emptying the pennies out of their piggy banks. Bowen is particularly moved by all the individual contributions. "The dollar bills and quarters that people gave us were just as important, as were the children who made tiles for the playground, and the people who came out to the activities to support the project." To maintain momentum, interest, and involvement while the two-year project was still in the works, various events were held at the park. Some of these included outdoor movies at the unfinished park ("movies in the park after dark") and an airplane show where children built paper airplanes and the National Guard wheeled in a real jet from a nearby Air Force base. Children, the primary users of the space, were very involved with the project. More than 1,200 participated, through school or other community projects. Many crafted the tiles that decorate the park and one of the artworks—William Agnew's ceramic pedestals that mark the east side entrance to the park. About his contribution to the park, Agnew said, "I wanted the children who use the playground to take some ownership in the artwork and it was a real joy trying to put that together...and having kids around saying 'there's my tile, there's my tile or 'my tile's in there' and bringing other people around to show them their part in the artwork" (Agnew, personal communication, May 12, 1998). Children, in fact, chose the name for the playground, which appropriately means "children" or in the more poetic translation from Swahili, "first fruits of the harvest."

When told how impressive it was to have such committed community involvement, Bowen replied: "Yes. But that is the way it should be" (Bowen, personal communication, April 20, 1995). A cornerstone of her thinking and of the African-rooted principles that guided the re-visioning of the playground is the idea that being a part of a community means being responsible for that community. When the park was dedicated on a showery spring day in May 1995, 700 rain-drenched people gathered for the event. "They all knew they were a part of it," said Bowen, explaining the large turn-out (Bowen,
personal communication, May 11, 1998). For Bowen, the community process involved in creating the space influenced the meaningfulness of the space itself.

Philosophy. The conceptual underpinnings of the playground design are rooted in African values. Bowen says this project was germinating in her for 20 years or more. From when she first saw the PBS children’s show Sesame Street in the 1960s she knew someday she would “do something.” “Though it was important to teach children how to read, culturally [the show] was kind of biased . . . at that time I made a pledge to myself that somehow we need to get images to children . . . introduce images of our own African history to our children” (Bowen, personal communication, June 21, 1997). Pheoris West, an artist and educator involved in the Kwanzaa Playground Project, explains how the conceptual framework for the playground evolved: “Initially our concern was to provide a safe play environment for the children, but as we discussed it we found that one of the things children need is reaffirmation of culture. Generally, you do find that in a park, although you’re not always aware of it because it is establishing maybe a mainstream culture, and you take it for granted. Whereas in the African American community, there really wasn’t anything in the park that reaffirmed African American culture” (West, personal communication, May 12, 1998).

According to West and Bowen, one vital aspect of African American culture is the role of the arts in everyday life. Bowen explains:

I accept the African tradition, where art assumes a central social function; and the artist consciously works to sustain, perpetuate and grow the culture (through whatever medium he or she chooses or is given). At any time or all at once, the artist doubles as educator, mediator, critic, psychic healer, historian, protector, or enabler. The entire community, its customs and values, its history and politics become the palette from which the artist creates, giving honor to the Creator and her or his ancestors on behalf of the community. From this conceptual frame, Kwanzaa Playground came into being. (Bowen, 1997, p.2)
Rather than just slip elements of art and culture into the pre-existing playground, the space was gutted and created anew. The following description best reveals how African-centered principles and culture are embedded in the Kwanzaa Playground.

**Description**

An aerial view (Figure 3.1) shows that the park is landscaped in the shape of a human body. The path is shaped like a human with a head, a midsection, arms, shoulders, and feet.

![Aerial view of Kwanzaa Playground](image)

**Figure 3.1.** Aerial view of the Kwanzaa Playground

This configuration, according to West, is based on the anthropomorphic design of certain villages in Africa. Bowen refers to this form as “the first ancestor” and explains that it symbolizes how all are connected by being “created from the same source” (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998). Artist Queen Brooks’ colorful “African Portal” (Figure 3.2) marks the main entrance to the park. The wooden gateway
is adorned with symbols of African culture, including Adinkra designs and masks, such as the *Semufu Kpelie*. Brooks created the portal, with its symbols and spirits, to invite and welcome children into the playground and also to serve as a protector of the playground and all those who enter.

![Figure 3.2. African Portal by Queen Brooks](image)

![Figure 3.3. African Tell-A-Story Board by Larry Winston Collins](image)

Along the lower body of the first ancestor is the "African Tell-A-Story Board," created by artist Larry Winston Collins (Figure 3.3). Nine connected wooden blocks,
painted on all four sides with images inspired by both African and American cultures, are housed in a simultaneously square and circular structure that symbolizes the home, the sun and the circle of life. The blocks can be swiveled and turned to create visual and spoken stories. For the artist, it was important that the Tell-A-Story board be read from both sides and that the picture book could be multi-directional—circular, up, down, back to front—and not limited to a linear narrative (Collins, personal communication, June 21, 1997).

Figure 3.4. Baobab Tree
Sculpture by Andrew Scott

Figure 3.5. Adinkra Fence by Andrew Scott

At the head of the playground is the Baobab Tree Sculpture (Figure 3.4). Artist Andrew F. Scott created this functional play piece as an abstraction of the baobab tree commonly found in Eastern Africa. Strikingly disproportionate, this tree has a wide barrel-like trunk and smaller knurled limbs that resemble roots. One Bushmen legend
has it that this tree fell upside down from the heavens, leaving the roots exposed to the sky. In some African cultures the baobab is the community gathering place, a spot where stories are told and passed down. It is because it symbolizes a place of knowledge that the red, grid-like steel sculpture is placed at the head of the first ancestor. Scott also created the Adinkra fence (Figure 3.5), which runs along the back edge of the playground, and incorporates symbols of African wisdom, such as the two headed crocodile with one stomach (Funtummiredeku Denkyemmireku), a symbol of unity in diversity, and the heart shaped Sankofa symbolizing the importance of the past and “returning to ourselves” in order to move forward.

Two ceramic pedestals (Figure 3.6) created by artist William Agnew border the east entrance to the park. The icons are intended to ward off negative forces. In addition the pedestals are decorated with tiles created by neighborhood children, affectively providing individuals with a sense of ownership and responsibility for the space.

![Ceramic pedestals by William Agnew](image.png)

**Figure 3.6.** Ceramic pedestals by William Agnew
Figure 3.7. Thrones to the Earth and Sky by Barbara Chavous

By the feet of the human path is artist Barbara Chavous’ "Thrones to the Earth and Sky," decorated wooden chairs of varying sizes accessible to both adults and children (Figure 3.7). Their circular placement in relation to each other reinforces the holistic principle that guides the playground, as does their placement within the park, which allows a view, and therefore a connection to, the whole playground. Besides the functional artworks, the playground also contains traditional play equipment—slides, sandboxes, etc. Located at the first ancestor’s feet and along its trunk, the equipment is incorporated into the overall design, all part of the “special and different” place Shirley Bowen had promised her son.

Because the Department of Recreation and Parks must treat the playground, at least financially, the same as any other city park there is nothing “special and different” about the city’s maintenance of the park. The artworks are leased to the park and it is expected that the artists will be responsible for upkeep. Larry Winston Collins, for instance, has fixed up the African Tell-A-Story Board and Queen Brooks was involved
in repainting the faded African Portal (Daniel, personal communication, April 7, 2004). In addition, it is expected that the community would continue to secure grants for any special maintenance. According to Lorenz, this situation worked well for the first several years, but as people have been moving out of the neighborhood and the city, there has been less activity. The Kwanzaa Playground is dependent on community involvement. Because the upkeep of the functional artworks is beyond the budget of the Department of Recreation and Parks, the Kwanzaa Playground is still dependent on the efforts of individuals and the community.

Analysis

**Kwanzaa Playground and the Social Production of Space.** The development of the near east side of Columbus, as previously described, betrays spatial social forces at work. If, in Lefebvre's words, the topography of the area has "an air of neutrality" or the layout seems "the epitome of rational abstraction," it is only because "traces" of "past processes" are "not always evident on the landscape" (1976b, p.31 in Soja, p.80). As an example, in this context, take the placement of freeways. In the 1940s and 50s the area along Mt. Vernon Avenue was a bustling, thriving community. The cultural richness and vivacity of this area has been well documented (Lentz, 2003; Robinson, 1997; Robinson, 2002). But today some of the evidence of its past vitality has been removed. The construction of the I-71 freeway cut into this neighborhood. Though not at its heyday when the freeway came through—the area was economically disadvantaged and already experiencing business and residential flight—the forced relocations caused by the freeway construction further hindered the neighborhood. In addition, the carving up of land created by the freeway acted upon the neighborhood by further isolating and segregating the community by cutting off access points to neighboring downtown. Today, a map of the area shows that it is bordered on the west, south and north by three different freeways. A drive along the edges of these throughways demonstrates the limited number
of access points in and out of the neighborhood. Resident, community activist, and one-time member of the near east side commission, Curley McDonald, makes the point that the experience of other more affluent neighborhoods was quite different. The near east’s closest neighbor, a politically and economically advantaged community called Bexley, escaped the carving force of the new interstates. I-70 jogs around Bexley’s city limits.

During the 70’s, late 60’s, they were building all these highways and they were relocating all these people. If you take [Interstate] 70 - have you ever been on 70? Is it strange to you that 70 comes in, and it goes out and around? It doesn’t come through Bexley straight. No, it curves around Bexley. See, they were relocating an awful lot of black folks into other black neighborhoods. I’m not saying that some were already heading that way. But primarily, black neighborhoods. Every city. Check it out. That’s where they put the freeways. Of course, if you’re poor it doesn’t make a difference, because they don’t care. They’ll just take your land. And then if you go back and check the records, see who owned the property of all these freeway homes, people who knew. It was done by design, it’s not paranoia. I’ve driven on 70, and it should have gone straight through Bexley. But they curved it around… *(Welcome to the Kwanzaa Playground* web site)

A lack of economic and political clout left the near east side of Columbus more vulnerable to city planning that altered the neighborhood in a destructive way. Thus, the geography of the near east side cannot be said to be the result of natural forces or logical design, but, instead, was produced by social forces. Importantly, this altered geography continues to act upon social relations, in this case both by initially disrupting a community and hiding some of its history, and by further segregating and isolating the community by limiting access. In Soja’s analysis, this isolated and neglected part of town would be a “periphery.” Hooks might call it a “margin.” In any case, the results of this uneven development filtered down to a city block—a playground called English Park, owned and maintained by the city of Columbus—which fell into neglect. This is the physical area that Shirley Bowen set her sights on, but because nature and environment are not dead or static but loaded with meaning and messages, Bowen was not just interested in a physical renovation but a psychological one. A key idea of spatial theory is that social, political, and economic forces are embedded in space, and the structure of
space exerts influence on these forces. Bowen didn’t need to read Soja or other theorists to know this, it is clear in her actions. Bowen wasn’t just after a new swing set, she understood that this dilapidated playspace was sending a negative message to her son, to other kids, and to the whole community, and in her estimation the neighborhood was in need of a different kind of message, a positive message, one that would be culturally-affirming and pedagogical. Bowen was disturbed that this environment did not express the history and culture of its inhabitants. So she re-visioned the space—to make it functional and useable as a playground, yes—but also to embody positive and culturally relevant content. When she talks about the Kwanzaa Playground project she identifies it as a “positive force,” a way to connect African American children to their history, to experience community-building and to “reduce the threat of racism and internalized oppression.” (Bowen, 1997, p. 3) Importantly, she and her partners linked the social and conceptual elements embedded in the re-visioned physical space to direct effects on users of the space and those in the neighborhood. This linking of physical transformation to tangible psychic implications is evidenced in the following excerpts from a Kwanzaa Playground grant application:

[This grant] seeks support to complete a culturally-specific renovation of a neighborhood playground where artists and residents bond in defense of children threatened by crime, violence and alcohol and other drug abuse. As in traditional African culture, art will be created for its functional capacity. Art directly linked to the ritual of play, will assume an active role, delivering character-building messages in form and substance. Safe and dynamic play would be informed by art of seven renowned Columbus-based, African-American artists.

The goal was to build a ‘new’ playground, informed by art to encourage self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-esteem in young children.

Visitors will see outstanding art, play on unique apparatus, and learn character-building messages from African and African-American culture. This project will heighten appreciation for positive African American cultural icons, improve cross-generational and interracial relations and fortify at-risk youth against substance abuse, crime and violence. (The Africentric Personal Development Shop, Inc., 1994)
The physical space of the Kwanzaa Playground covers one city block, easily located on a map, but the Kwanzaa Playground, as the above excerpts attest, extends into an ideological space. Broadly speaking, as Bowen (1997) puts it, the space “combines form and function with a positive message.” (p. 2). More specifically, the space reflects African diasporic cultural values and identities, including the value of community and the centralized role of art—a “real African concept,” says Bowen (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998).

The Kwanzaa Playground also calls into question accepted concepts of playgrounds. The human path, for instance, and the tile work made by neighborhood children, are examples of alternatives to accepted physical layout. While the collusion of art, play, and cultural elements and symbols presents an alternate conception of the role a playground, or even a community space, can, and perhaps should, have in childhood development. For Bowen, it is essential that children have the opportunity to be in a space “where the whole concept of gaining knowledge and increasing knowledge is really heightened while you have fun” (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998).

The impact of the Kwanzaa Playground extends beyond the immediate neighborhood into schools, the university and a Columbus museum. About the playground, Bowen (1997) has written, “Not only has it transformed an eyesore into a compelling and provocative artscape, it has also inspired curriculum for teacher training courses and social service workshops, provided new resources for reaching children in turmoil, reduced crime in a community and uplifted the role of the arts in community healing” (p. 2). The playground is studied in classrooms at the Ohio State University. Dr. Vesta Daniel has offered a number of courses that incorporate the Kwanzaa Playground project. The Kwanzaa Playground was the focal point of a 1997 National Colloquium for Teaching Contemporary Art designed by Daniel and her colleague, Dr. Jaqueline Chanda. It is also part of a lesson plan in a nationally-distributed elementary level textbook, and it
inspired a Summer 1997 exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art. Curated by Chanda and Daniel, *African Influences in Contemporary Art: Artists of the Kwanzaa Playground* featured the work of the seven artists of the playground and was nominated by the Greater Columbus Arts Council for an Artistic Excellence Award. Though, it is difficult to track or determine causation, Bowen, who lives in the area, felt that after work on the playground began drug trafficking and prostitution declined, though she allows it could have been due to the attention centered on the playground. According to Lorenz, like all public spaces, the Kwanzaa Playground has suffered some vandalism, but it has been limited mostly to markings on the picnic table. “Maybe it is the sweat equity,” Lorenz says, “but the department monitored the park and watched the levels [of vandalism] go down—as did other unsavory activities” (Lorenz, personal communication, May 13, 1998).

When looking at this area and its transformation into the Kwanzaa Playground we see the ideologies and processes embedded in, acting on, and emanating from the space. It is tied to economics. It is tied to identity. It is tied to social forces—both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. In fact, this space—neglected, dilapidated and marginalized, but then reshaped and reformed from within—seems to be a textbook example of hook’s “site of resistance.” By resisting dominant culturally-embedded notions and the economy of neglect branded on this neighborhood one would have to say yes, this is a site of resistance. Yet looking at the development of Bowen’s idea, the process through which it came to fruition and the broad and positive reverberations it launched even outside its own neighborhood makes one wonder if hook’s concept and terminology is more adversarial than appropriate for what happened to this particular piece of land on Bryden Road. Similar to hooks, the authors in the first half of this chapter discuss public art projects in battle terms. They call for public art that is “disruptive” and exposes “authoritarian strategies.” Their ubiquitous phrase is “contested terrain.” Again, like
hook’s “site of resistance,” does the Kwanzaa Playground project fit this mold? It is to this question I now turn.

The Kwanzaa Playground as a “Site of Resistance.” Today, the near east side neighborhood can most definitely be described as contested terrain. This is outlined quite clearly in the 2003 documentary film “Flag Wars” which shows the painful friction between long-time, mostly African American residents and “renovators”—young, often gay, white professionals. The scenario has been repeated in many American cities: The combination of turn of the Century Victorian architecture and middle-to-low income population and low-property values becomes ripe ground for so-called gentrification or rehab-wars. One conflict that was followed in “Flag Wars” was that between a local resident and the neighborhood commission. Baba Olugbala could be called a pioneer renovator. He rehabbed his residence back in the 1970s. His house became a community space with a gallery and art classes for children. It is also a meeting place. When plans for the Kwanzaa Playground were germinating, Olugbala’s home was used for meetings and gatherings. When I visited the Kwanzaa Playground with a college classroom taught by Dr. Daniel, it was to Olugbala’s house that we gathered afterwards for discussion.

In front of Olugbala’s house is a sign carved in wood, identifying his gallery. The sign, the neighborhood commission decided, is out of accord with the newly-imposed historical standards. “Flag Wars” follows the long battle that ensued, which cost Olugbala a great deal of time in court and an estimated $10,000, before the charge against him was dismissed. This battle crystallized the change and conflict in this neighborhood and, in particular, highlighted the real danger of a lived history being displaced. It is important to note that other long-standing residents whose homes were also threatened do not necessarily share Olugbala’s political know-how, economic means, and experience in community activism.
Though a battle for the neighborhood is being waged today and though it has had important ramifications for the present-day Kwanzaa Playground (which I will discuss later), at the time that the idea for the Kwanzaa Playground began percolating through the community, gentrification was not nearly as widespread. It was not the main motivator for Bowen though it did already play some part in her thinking, as evidenced in the following remark. After mentioning the influx of young white professionals into the neighborhood, Bowen said,

The neighborhood was changing. We wanted to make African American youth more aware of what it means to hold on to your community. Hopefully help those outside the African American community understand African heritage in a new and novel way and get everyone interested in what was happening with the young people in our neighborhood. (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998)

Perhaps the Kwanzaa Playground could not have come together as smoothly today as it did in the mid-90s. Bowen was once praised for throwing a pebble in a pond, creating a ripple of community improvement which reverberated outwards creating bigger and bigger ripples. According to Bowen, the moment may have been as important as the pebble. “When you throw a pebble in sometimes you have to throw it in at the right time and all of these things come together and you see that it works because everybody’s ready to move forward at that time” (Bowen, personal communication, June 21, 1997).

The Kwanzaa Playground is on land owned by the city. The project necessitated input and approval from outside the community. When asked if she experienced any resistance from the city government, Bowen answered, “It didn’t matter. We knew what we needed to do and we were going to do it” (Bowen, personal communication, April 20, 1995). Some of the ingredients of the Kwanzaa Playground project were sheer determination, especially Bowen’s, community support (one of the artists asked to volunteer on the project turned the question back to Bowen, pleading, “Can I be involved?”), and an enormous amount of commitment and hard work. Yet, another ingredient was partnership. Though Bowen was ready to knock down any roadblock,
the powerful, hegemonic entities she had to work with offered none. The biggest hurdle would have been the city government that owned the land. But Bowen’s first contact was encouraging. As Lorenz recalls, “Shirley came to us and said she couldn’t take that dilapidated playground anymore, and she had some ideas about it. We said, ‘Great. Let’s hear them’” (Lorenz, personal communication, May 13, 1998). Lorenz had already begun contracting for improvements but immediately scrapped those plans and listened to Bowen’s. “Shirley didn’t just have a good idea, she had a unique idea. She had community support, and when community gets involved the success ratio goes up.” Bowen’s words confirm the nature of the partnership with the city. “The entire department embraced us,” she says, and she calls the people she worked with at the Department of Recreation and Parks “angels” (Bowen, personal communication, May 11, 1998). The city had funds already earmarked for the park’s renovation, but not nearly enough for Bowen’s vision. Fund raising efforts brought in over $100,000 from the City Council. The Ohio Arts Council also contributed, as did corporate sponsors such as Bank One and general contractor John James Estes & Assoc., Inc. Bowen and the community worked with the city and corporate donors. Not the push-pull struggle outlined by Hayden or Deutsche, the only limitations put on Bowen and her team were safety limitations. All the elements of the playground had to meet guidelines for play equipment. When asked about hurdles or detractors, Bowen said that there was only one—a single neighbor. Though they met with him and heard his grievances they never reached an understanding. Though this was unfortunate it proved to be the only major conflict engendered by the project. There was discussion, there was the group process of designing the space, but the adversity and conflict described by Deutsche, Lacy, Doss, and Hayden, and implied by hooks did not seem to be part of the experience of the creation of the Kwanzaa Playground project. If we were to pull a term from spatial theory perhaps Hopper’s phrase “space of radical opportunity” rather than hook’s “site of resistance” carries the
proper connotations for the Kwanzaa Playground project. But setting aside semantics, it seems that hook’s description of her concept could almost be lifted and applied to the evolution of English Park into the Kwanzaa Playground. The following are hook’s (1990) words:

We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle…We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world. (p. 153)

Compare hook’s words with Bowen’s:

In the process of resurrecting a neglected playground, we had to heal relationships, improve communications, educate the community about the African values and concepts, and especially increase self-esteem and self-pride among children constantly threatened by crime, violence and substance abuse.” (Bowen, 1997, p. 1)

We opened new avenues for understanding our common African heritage as we set about improving the physical environment. (Bowen, 1997, p.1)

It…evolved into a grassroots effort to organize the neighborhood, and to empower people who weren’t feeling empowered to make a change and beautify the neighborhood. (Welcome to the Kwanzaa Playground web site)

A small piece of a larger story, this discussion of the Kwanzaa Playground has shared how, out of difficult economic conditions, isolation, segregation, and neglect, an ignored space, or as Bowen called it, “a really worn out, misshapen hole called a playground,” was transformed by a community (Welcome to the Kwanzaa Playground web site). The transformation was both physical and psychological, with innumerable positive reverberations through the immediate and wider community, including a reaffirmation of African American culture and diasporic identity, and an encouraged sense of pride and ownership. Or, to use hook’s words, it is a “radical creative space” from which “subjectivity” is “affirmed” and self-definition and one’s “sense of the world” can thrive. Though with implications more adversarial than evidenced in this project, hook’s notion of a site of resistance seems highly applicable to the Kwanzaa Playground Project.
In the end, there may be a myriad of idiosyncratic, one-time-only reasons for why this alternative space in a politically and economically disadvantaged community was created with the amiable support of hegemonic institutions, but it is important in itself that it did happen. Also of interest, though, is that while the project was supported, it was not, and is still not, touted or showcased by the city of Columbus, nor by such institutions as the Near East Side Commission and The Olde Towne East Neighborhood Association (OTENA). Though the unique playground has stirred up interest across the country, the city does not advertise it. “We have had calls from England, D.C., and the West coast,” Lorenz says, “yet, I don’t know if the people of Columbus know the playground is here. I was hoping Columbus would jump to the forefront and take all the accolades. Unfortunately, we got quiet” (Lorenz, personal communication, May 13, 1998). Lorenz chalks it up to humbleness. Another interpretation would suggest that despite the success of the project, it is still marginalized, “peripheralized,” if you will, by the “dominant core.” Pheoris West feels that the playground “is something Columbus should be proud of. Anyone can use the playground. Anyone can get something out of the cultural symbolism, and it is also a sculpture park, with artworks from local artists who are recognized nationally. It is a great background for community activities and,” he adds, “also it takes great pictures” (West, personal communication, May 12, 1998). Nonetheless, the city does not show it off. The Near East commission makes no mention of it on their website. The same is true on the OTENA’s website, though at oldetowne.org you can take a virtual tour of re-habbed homes and find a list of business services especially for renovators. Not embraced, nor perhaps known by the wider city, English Park, though beautified and enlivened now as the Kwanzaa Playground, in many ways, remained marginalized.

In addition, approximately six years after the dedication of the playground, the project was met with a new challenge. As explained earlier, the neighborhood has
changed a great deal since 1995. The neighborhood is now home to a number of new
inhabitants who are moving in and renovating homes in the area. Commonly called
gentrification, this phenomenon is controversial (again, the documentary “Flag Wars”
provides a good explication of the conflicting issues, complicated by the fact that often
gentrification pits two marginalized, and sometimes overlapping, groups against one
another—gays and African Americans). One school of thought suggests that gentrification
of African American neighborhoods disrupts African American political power simply
by removing the physical space needed to organize and form communities (Haymes,
1995). Through gentrification, writes Education Professor David A. Gruenewald (2003),
“African American and other marginalized communities are divided, and members of the
communities are displaced….The message here is that power depends on, is facilitated
by, and is reflected in the development and control of geographical space” (p. 630).

Gentrification of the near east side has brought new challenges to the Kwanzaa
Playground. When the Playground was designed in the mid-90s, the area was already
designated as a historical district. The project passed historical reviews and received a
certificate of appropriateness. Yet around 2000, a group of new residents campaigned the
city to change the park space, as they felt it did not match the Victorian housing stock
in the neighborhood. Though not backed by any of the civic associations, the individual
residents wrote letters to the Department of Recreation and Parks. According to Lorenz,
the residents wanted the park to reflect “their vision of the neighborhood” (personal
communication, April 16, 2004). Though the letters did not have a specific plan, one,
Lorenz remembers, requested a topiary garden. In response to these “rumblings,” as
Lorenz called them, the department said, “Nope.”

I’m paraphrasing here, but we said ‘Too damn bad.’ The playground is responsive
to the neighborhood, which is diverse. Historical preservation is one thing, but
it’s not like [the playground] is a billboard, it’s art. It’s also symbolic and I know
the neighboring settlement house uses it as an educational space. Usually issues
like this are handled by committee, but in this case there was no debate. The park
is a landmark and we are not willing to consider moving it. (Lorenz, personal communication, April 16, 2004)

Though the playground weathered this challenge, the ripe moment, that Bowen once referred to, seems to have passed. The unsuccessful movement by a group of new residents to change the playground illustrates even more how space is both full of meaning and used to create meaning. The Kwanzaa Playground is an example of a "site of resistance," a place of "radical opportunity" from which a community "inscribe themselves into new geographies" (Keith and Pile, 1993, p.36). Likewise, the campaign to dismantle the playground was also a campaign to dismantle the community identity and values inscribed in the space. The accusation of historical inaccuracy lobbed by the protesting residents is particularly illuminating. African Americans have long been a vital part of this neighborhood, but an attempt to erase the evidence of these current and past inhabitants—evidence written into spaces such as the Kwanzaa Playground—and, instead, highlighting newly rehabbed stately Victorian homes as the neighborhood’s true historical identity, is an attempt to geographically inscribe a narrative upon the space. By changing the playground, the new residents would be using geography to write history, in this case, a history that denies the African American population.

This discussion of the coming-to-be of the Kwanzaa Playground and this most recent struggle over the playground space, illustrates the theoretical concepts discussed in the previous chapter. The Kwanzaa Playground provides a real world example of how space is shaped by social forces and also how communities can resist social forces that work to marginalize or "peripheralize" them. The Kwanzaa Playground is both an artistic and educational space. At the heart of the project is the concept that art is central to human life, that it is enriching, enlivening, and importantly, that it is didactic and a carrier of culture, history and, as Bowen points out, a healing force. Having looked at this art educational space in light of spatial social theory, in the next chapter I will look at how the politics of space might have important applications in other art educational arenas.
CHAPTER 4

SPATIAL SOCIAL THEORY AND MUSEUMS, CLASSROOMS, AND OTHER SETTINGS

We form space and are formed by space. This experience is so engrained that we hardly take notice of it. Often we operate under the assumption that our surroundings are natural, or we operate simply unawares of the influencing power of space. Spatial social theory challenges us to examine the spaces we inhabit, create, and disrupt, and the meanings, ideologies, hierarchies, and power and social relations embedded, reinforced, and resisted in these spaces. In the previous chapter I showed how spatial social theory can be applied to a specific art educational setting—the Kwanzaa Playground. In this chapter, I turn to the challenge spatial social theory poses for other art educational settings. What we know already about spatial social theory points us towards a number of general questions that could be applied to any art educational setting. In the following discussion, speculative in nature, I will identify some of these questions and look particularly at implications for two common art education spaces—museums and classrooms.

Perhaps, the most obvious matter spatial social theory asks us to examine is matter itself—the actual physical layout of the art educational space. What does structure communicate? Let’s consider how we might apply this question to one particular museum space: The Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio. At the Wexner Center, the curatorial offices are located at the top of the building. To the visitor, the only
evidence of their existence are the non-descript elevator doors in an entrance foyer. The education department is located in the basement behind the cafeteria through a plain set of double doors shared by food service staff who periodically wheel through carts of dishes. The physical placement of the curatorial wing above the educational wing suggests an ideological or value placement as well. Not just at the Wexner Center, but in museums in general, the curatorial staff carry more prestige, more power, and better financial compensation than the education staff. Presumably, part of the reasoning behind the placement of the different offices is that the education staff should be closer to the exhibition level in order to serve the museum patrons (never mind that this point is somewhat reduced by the fact that the doors to the education offices are blank and look an awful lot like a service entrance). The inverse of this reasoning—that curatorial be further removed from patrons—begs the question of what kind of assumptions exist about the relationship between curatorial decisions and the actual users of the space. Looking at the layout of the Wexner Center and some of its implications is a simple first step in what should be a deeper analysis. The point, though, is to show how spatial social theory can be used to potentially unlock power structures and ideologies written into space.

Considering the physical layout of schools and classrooms can reveal a myriad of implications as well. For instance, the fact that schools tend to be self-contained structures—generally cut-off from other aspects of day-to-day life—carries with it some assumptions about education. This is suggested by Gruenewald (2003) who points out that by cutting youth off from “complex ecosystems” and “the pulse of cultural life and experience” schools “may blunt our ability to perceive.”

A spatial analysis of schooling reveals that its most striking structural characteristic is the enforced isolation of children and youth from culture and ecosystem.... The point here is twofold. First, people are capable of perceiving places and learning from that direct experience. Second, our ability to perceive places can be either thwarted or fostered by educational experience. Because the structures and processes of schooling are based on institutional patterns of isolating teachers and students from places outside school, one can claim
that schools limit experience and perception; in other words, by regulating our geographical experience, schools potentially stunt human development as they help construct our lack of awareness of, our lack of connection to, and our lack of appreciation for places. (p. 625)

Thus, Gruenewald suggests that embedded in the design of schools is the ideology that learning occurs in isolation. The typical classroom space embodies the message that education occurs inside a building and is mediated by books and teachers. Though individual art educators cannot be expected to affect change at the institutional level that Gruenewald critiques, still his analysis is relevant to individual pedagogical practices. It is beyond the scope of this study to present alternative curriculums, but if schools “regulate geography” in the way Gruenewald suggests, teachers can make efforts to expand that geography by connecting learning to the “places where we live our lives.” They can do this by connecting what happens in the classroom to the culture, context, and ecological environment of students’ lives. Daniel (2003), for instance, suggests that an “integrated” curriculum that includes a “curricular anchor” can create a learning environment that reflects the notion that “education is for life.” Interestingly, one curricular anchor Daniel presents as an example is the Kwanzaa Playground. Daniel concludes that the integration of content, disciplines, and context in the classroom combined with a “concept-rich” curricular anchor creates a learning atmosphere that more accurately mirrors life.

When we teach one subject at a time without valuing the natural interrelationship of ideas and concepts across disciplines, we force students to learn within two incompatible modes: content isolation in school vs. content integration in life. If we share with our students the notion that education is for life it is possible that the process of learning can be empowering for both teachers and learners. Students at all levels have taught us that they may or may not be able to immediately grasp the process of curricular intermingling especially if it is only explored as a cerebral exercise. However, by creating integrated curricula that grow from concrete examples such as the Kwanzaa Playground we can develop our understanding of concepts formed through inquiry about something real. We can use art as the anchor for stabilizing ideas and concepts as we move through various disciplines to avoid the confusion that comes from lack of focus...when art
works are selected that are inherently interesting, worthy of inquiry, and reflective of human dilemmas they can support meaningful, lifelong learning across the curriculum. (p. 14)

Another way individual art educators can resist the notion that schools are isolating is to make the spaces students learn in less hidden. Teachers can encourage students to critically examine their school environment with the goal of making them aware of how space is influenced and influencing, and not static and accepted.

Spatial social theory suggests other questions educators should ponder about the physical layout of the classroom spaces in which they work, such as what does the placement of the art room communicate about its role in the over all curriculum? What does the configuration of school furniture within the classroom communicate about the student’s role in the process of learning? For instance, what sorts of things do the tables and desks communicate? Peer teaching? Collective work? Competition? What about teacher and administrative spaces? Is there space provided for teachers to convene and communicate with one another? Or, does the space encourage isolation?

These are just some suggested questions that can be asked about the structure and design of educational spaces. Another line of inquiry inspired by spatial social theory is the role of uniformity and diversity in these institutional educational spaces. Museums and schools are often under the control of the state, or in the case of some museums, by well-endowed private interests. As such, do they carry and reinforce the ideology of the dominant class? How much is the space institutionally controlled and how much is user-controlled? Are those not of the dominant class able to forge themselves and their identities into these spaces? Or, do these institutions reflect monolithic, naturalized, or unquestioned assumptions about art and education?

A primary role museums play, simply by placing materials within their walls, is to define what art is. Also, the arrangement of artworks within can communicate how one is to interact and make meaning from art. For instance, if the environment
encourages a hushed, orderly procedure wherein each piece is examined separately on a wall—it communicates an idea that art exists on a plane all its own, outside of context, environment, and culture. In many traditions art objects, from Appalachian baskets to quilts to African masks, are a productive and integral part of cultural life. Thus, depending on the arrangement of these objects museums can obscure the rich meanings in art works or expose them.

As temporary and occasional visitors, it is difficult for patrons to ascribe themselves into museum spaces. But artists can. For example, Rirkrit Tiravanija, a conceptual artist from Thailand, refreshingly socializes the museum space. The Wexner Center program described his exhibition, “Untitled 1999 (reading from right to left),” as “audience-driven installations.” The conceptual pieces included a kitchen wherein the artist prepared and served Thai curry, a rehearsal studio where patrons could make music together, a motor home and a glass house where children, in particular, were encouraged to play and draw. The space as rearranged and newly defined by Tiravanija brought out a number of things not typically associated with museum spaces—noise, for one, and freer movement. Gone was the tentative body language so ubiquitous in museums—hesitant steps asking, ‘Is this where I am supposed to go next?’ and questioning eyes betraying the thought ‘Am I allowed to touch this?’ One effect of Tiravanija’s conceptual pieces was to highlight how some of these elements—play, relaxation, food, openness, talk, creativity, and sociality—are usually removed from our experience of art as it is typically offered in the space of the museum.

Unlike Tiravanija, many artists do not have access to hegemonic art institutions, yet they create their own art spaces. Alternative spaces and collaboratives are examples. Potentially, all can be sites that resist the primacy of museums in defining what qualifies as art and how one should interact with art. An interesting example of a community defying even the identity of a hegemonic art institution is the young population who
redefined the expensive architecture of Eisenman’s Wexner Center not as art museum but as skateboard park. Though the institution battled with the disruptive effects of the skateboarders “grinding” on the roof of the building, at one point the Center embraced the skaters and welcomed them and their boards into the Wexner Center. A design exhibition included a fully-functional skateboard “bowl” inside of the gallery that skaters were encouraged to use for free. Though brief and temporary, the skaters were invited to enter the museum as skateboarders. This is an interesting example of a how a force seen as disruptive to the institution, inscribed itself into the institution, if only momentarily.

These are but a few examples of how art educators can use spatial social theory to examine hegemonic and counter-hegemonic cultural practices in museum spaces. Turning to public schools yields fertile terrain for examining the spatial reinforcing or resisting of ideologies and power-laden relationships. Many outside of spatial social theory have critiqued state educational institutions as a hand of capitalism—its stated purpose to create a democratic citizenry, its hidden purpose to create workers to benefit a system that depends on uneven development, or more specifically, one that depends on extracting labor or resources from one group to benefit another. Spatial social theory would add to this discussion by asking how a social institution might enact social control not by force but by creating environments conducive to the institutions ends. This is too large of a question for this inquiry, but as an example we can look at how Gruenewald (2003) applied this query to trends in student assessment when he questioned the social control embedded in requirements in the new national school policy known as No Child Left Behind.

In education today, there is an interesting and on-going interplay between the simultaneous movement towards valuing uniformity and valuing diversity. In education theory, one goal is to reach and provide educational opportunities for all populations, be they racially or economically diverse, or of differing abilities. Yet at the same time,
especially with passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, students and schools are being judged by uniform standards. Because of the demands of universal achievement testing, curriculum is becoming more and more geared towards uniformity and standardization. Presumably, the notion that all students be judged by a universal standard is based in the democratic ideal that all be judged on an equal basis. This, of course, is problematized when we consider what this basis is. After all, spatial social theory tells us that where we stand has something to do with what we know and how we think. Yet, by rendering space invisible or natural, hegemonic or dominant worldviews likewise take on an air of neutrality or become an accepted norm, obscuring other worldviews. This has strongly undemocratic implications. Based in the thinking of bell hooks, Gruenewald (2003) explains:

Conventional educational thinking and policy claim that enforcing uniform standards everywhere is a social justice issue, that it will empower marginalized groups and individuals and move them into the center of the mainstream society. Hooks and others interested in the politics of difference suggest that developing more just social relationships depends, rather, on identifying and leaning from those diverse communities of resistance that have not chosen to move toward the center but have been nurtured by the margins to think and act in ways that counter social domination…. From this perspective, the goal of closing the achievement gap (another rich geographical metaphor) can be interpreted as another act of colonization, to the extent that it disregards the potentially counter-hegemonic politics of the margin. (p. 632-633).

Gruenewald (2003) suggests an active role educators can take is to teach place-consciousness (see his article in the Fall 2003 issue of American Educational Research Journal for specific recommendations). The goal is two-fold. First, is to become aware of embedded ideologies. If ideologies are covert and disguised in space, Gruenewald suggests that a truly democratic education practice would engage students in thinking about the wealth of experience, information, and embedded meanings in space.

Systems of education that do not take on this work can be said to produce the unconscious assumption that material cultural formations—places—are natural and inevitable parts of our social and geographical landscape. Such an assumption
is dangerous because (a) it obscures the connections between education, culture, and place, (b) it releases people from their responsibility as place makers, and (c) it legitimizes the ideology that is embedded in the places we take for granted. Educational disregard for places, therefore, limits the possibilities for democracy (and for places) because it diverts the attention of citizens, educators, and students from the social, cultural, and political patterns involved in place making. (p. 627-628)

The second and related goal is to realize the full pedagogical potential of space. “Places,” writes Gruenewald (2003), “teach us who, what, and where we are as well as how we might live our lives.”

Places are fundamentally pedagogical because they are contexts for human perception and for participation with the phenomenal, ecological, and cultural world. What we know is, in large part, shaped by the kinds of places we experience and the quality of attention we give them. (p. 645)

Conclusion

My intention in writing this paper is to suggest how spatial social theory can be made relevant for the art educator. Though many have looked at issues around public art with a specialized perspective, the theory has much to offer other areas of art education. A spatial awareness can unlock previously disguised information, allowing the art educator—often working from within institutional spaces—to become more aware of forces working on or against the educator and on or against his or her students. In addition, the examples of the Kwanzaa Playground, the conceptual artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, and the Wexner Center skatebowl point to the so-called spatial folds and tears through which the marginalized create new spaces and identities.

This paper is a beginning step. There is much more research to be done on the relevance of spatial social theory to the field of art education. Art educators may be especially prepared for this task. Art educators have always paid close attention to the physical world, to objects in space, objects occupying space, and the meanings embedded within. Generally, art making is a non-linear process, and art viewing a lateral process. In a painting, for instance, much is happening simultaneously or side-by-side. For those
attuned to the visual arts, the notion that meaning is created and interpreted not just sequentially across time but simultaneously in space should be a familiar idea, perhaps to some it may even seem self-evident. My goal for this paper was to explain and expound upon the basic ideas of spatial social theory, and to suggest how this perspective can be used by art educators to better understand the influence and impact of the constructed spaces in which the educator and the student live, work, and grow. This is but a nascent inquiry. I hope continued research will yield deeper analyses and practical applications that will use the idea and implications of socially constructed space to further the field of art education.
LIST OF REFERENCES


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