

Affirming Forces: Race, Ethnicity, and Power

Black Space as Architectural Criticism: Expanding the Archive of Architectural Modernity

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Italo Calvino was one of several postwar Italian scholars to explore the latent productivity of architecture as a literary cipher for the hidden sentiments, anxieties, and structural tendencies of western modernity. His career was shaped within an intellectual context marked by an expansion of writerly genres of architectural criticism, from the art historical works of Bruno Zevi, Giulio Carlo Aragon and Leonardo Benovolto to Ernesto Rogers' editorial oversight of *Casabella*, a leading forum among architectural magazines. While the architectural themes of Calvino's literary career were perhaps most overtly explored in the novel *Invisible Cities*, his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* attests to a profound faith in literary modes of production for investigating the aporias of modern life. The following essay emulates Calvino's faith in literary explorations of modernity by speculating on the ways that postwar minority literatures on Harlem outlines the modernity of Black space in the United States.

A parallel history of Black architectural criticism is finally being mined today from within the field of literary studies. Figures such as Cheryl Fish have recovered the "ArchiTextual" themes of Black protest writers such as June Jordan, who collaborated with Buckminster Fuller in devising "The Skyrise for Harlem" in 1969. I argue that literary depictions of Black space have operated as an unacknowledged form of architectural criticism from the postwar period to the present. Within this literary tradition, a deep and provocative interpretation of Black space reveals the future trajectory of Black modernity in the built environment. Due to the hostile depiction of Black material genius as a mere vernacular form in canonical histories of Euroamerican architectural modernity, the architectural modernity of Black subjects remains invisible in our field. It is only by recalibrating our focus from Black vernacular form to Black space as an innovative medium of expression that we will recover the multitude of voices currently lost within a formalist history of the discipline.

In the spirit of Italo Calvino's fifth lecture "Multiplicity," this essay examines the conceptual parallels that emerge in literary depictions of Black space as modern infrastructure--both literally and figuratively--in postwar and contemporary novels centered in Harlem, New York. The imagery of a hidden but pervasive modern infrastructure features prominently in several works, from the sewage conduits of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) to the New York City metro in Amiri Baraka's *The Dutchman* (1964) and Colson Whitehead's *Harlem Shuffle* (2021). These infrastructures of modernization reveal the symbolic fault lines along which Black labor is expropriated to buoy official definitions of architectural modernity, even as they are made invisible by categorical labels of anonymous vernacular genius. In depicting these invisible infrastructures as symbolic processes of racialization, Black space presents a critique of official narratives of architectural modernity by calling for a conscious accounting of nonwhite contributions to the built environment. Surveying the symbolic underground of architectural modernity requires us to recognize the forms of Black creativity that exceed the vernacular but do not coincide with the formalism of Euroamerican modernity. The Black literary depictions of modern infrastructure examined here will provide us with a useful strategy for producing revisionist histories of architectural modernity that reveal the separate, but no less canonical cultural projects of African Americans in the recent and remote past.