De-Centering Culture:
Designing an arena for debate and transformation

by

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DE-CENTERING CULTURE:  
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the display of culture has been engulfed by consumption. Hereby lies the danger of designing a building [center] for cultural identity. There is a tendency to use building to emphasize the event and festival, which may be successful in terms of economic expectations, but convert art into a commodity. This, as a phenomenon, promotes false unities between individuals and leads to fallacious stereotyping of groups. It is by this manner that the "culture" of the other is objectivized, along with the individual.

This thesis project consists of designing a Performance Arts Center for a minority Latino community within the affluent South End, in Boston. Potentially, art can serve as a dialogue between equals. Through a space dedicated to performance and art, it is possible to establish an arena for the discussion of identities, not only for the people of a neighborhood but also for people in the rest of the city. It should describe, and serve as an example for, ever developing and transforming narratives that make up the whole concept of "cultural identity".
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HISTORY

During the 1960's, a group of Hispanic immigrants was living in Parcel 19, the area between Tremont and Washington streets in Boston, Massachusetts. This group of people were later to be displaced, according to the Urban Renewal Plan the city had devised for the South End. The Emergency Tenant Council (ETC), a group of mostly Puerto Rican tenants, was created in an effort to help the residents remain in their location and fight the substandard conditions of their existing housing. The result was a massive mobilization. The residents got together and created their well known motto: "No nos mudaremos de la Parcela 19!" (We shall not be moved from Parcel 19!).

The residents were not only allowed to stay and create a neighborhood, but they surpassed everyone's expectations by creating one of the most successful self-run, publicly owned housing projects in the country at that time, calling it Villa Victoria (Victory Village).

The actual design of the community was a result of intense collaboration between the people of the neighborhood, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and the architect, John A. Sharrat, of Boston. According to the people who worked in the design, to get the residents involved in the process, a slideshow was presented to them, with images of "Puerto Rican scenes" from the island, so that they would choose the nature of the spaces they desired. The slideshow also showed many of them in the photographs. It transcended the architectural and became more about the people in the community.
It was this resident participation that gave the neighborhood a “Puerto Rican flavor”, with houses containing gated front lawns that overlooked each other, common pedestrian streets in between the row of houses, multiple plazas, and areas protected from transit so that children could play freely.

The construction of the neighborhood not only re-affirmed the group’s identity as an actual community, but it also paved the way for the emergence of several cultural organizations, such as the IBA (Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion)², which took on the job of preserving and promoting Latin culture throughout the community and beyond, to other Hispanic communities in the city of Boston.

Many residents agreed that the mid-1980’s represented the peak the “golden days” of the community, referring to the large amount of resources that were available to the residents: A day-care center, a launderette, and a credit union; at one time there even used to be an on-site closed circuit television station. In 1980, a solar greenhouse project was started to provide the community with its own grown food and to show the children of the neighborhood lessons in biology. It was more than a gardening program; it represented the community’s push toward self-sufficiency. Even though community participation went down in later years, there is still much interest in maintaining Villa Victoria as an active voice for the Hispanics living in Boston.

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Fig. 2
Luggage of a migrant worker.
Fig. 3
Images from the early days of Villa Victoria, in the 1970's.
THE IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

The importance of the community's history led the initial research towards the origins and background of this immigrant community. Back in the island of Puerto Rico in the 1950's, there commonly existed communities such as "El Fanguito", from a crowded slum in the mangroves of Santurce that, when received eviction notices, would disassemble their houses, transport the wood planks and wood panels to the other side of the lagoon, and set them up again. With displacement being such a critical aspect of their lives, the idea of some sort of permanence became an increasingly desirable issue; and so, every day activities such as music, dancing, and cooking became part of that permanence, developing them as ideals of identity and ways of acquiring meaning. In Stuart Hall's words: "such images offer a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas."
It is by this way that performance gained the importance that it did for these people, continuing, on their migration outside the island, to the cities of the United States. The research then went on to analyze specific elements of their performance, particularly the lyrics of songs. Among some of the most important of the findings, were:

i. Like is mentioned before, the importance of permanence, grounding, and artistic performance as a means to achieve it.

ii. Gathering as a realization of the performance. The existence of an audience gains importance, as it gives a sense of validation to the manifestation.

iii. As they continue moving from place to place, the sense of identity for these people becomes increasingly devoid of any geographical setting.

iv. As the development of their identity through performance continues, so do ideas of the Nation (and nationalism).

v. With the introduction of a new generation, the representation of their imagination is now moved to the cities in the US (New York, Boston), with an emerging sense denial of the island and its people. The language barrier, which used to be so important, is later broken and English is introduced in the lyrics.
vi. In the most recent years, there is a general acceptance of a fantasy, seeing identity as a social construct, independent from the place where they live or were born:

... Some people say that I'm not the real thing
Boricua, that is
Cuz I wasn't born on the enchanted island
Cuz I was born on the mainland

...what does this mean to live in between
what does it take to realize
that being boricua
is a state of mind
a state of heart
a state of soul

... I wasn't born in Puerto Rico
Puerto Rico was born in me.

Considering the history, it makes sense that the people of Villa Victoria have chosen to build a Center for the Latino (performing) Arts, as an "arena for cross-cultural arts collaboration between Latinos and the rest of the city's rich melting pot, and to foster understanding and break down barriers between cultures." They planned to do this by remodeling an old parish, next to what used to be an old Lutheran church, and now serves as the community's cultural center.

This thesis project would consist of a more encompassing program and intervention on the site. The Performing Arts Complex would consist of different kinds of performance stages, interior and exterior, a series of galleries, recording and artistic studios, among other administrative and supporting branches of the program. It has the intention of creating a space for Latino artists, artists from around the city, and the people of the South End, in order to create an adequate arena for discussing identity and cultural issues. The project is an open exploration of how architecture, or the design of any given space, may enable these ambitions to develop.
PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SITE

The initial studies were directed towards achieving an overall general understanding of the site. Research relevant to the proposed program was done on pedestrian circulation, institutions and neighborhood resources, different site zonings, building types, and the location and nature of public spaces, among other things.

The first important issue the studies showed was the virtual isolation of the community from its surrounding South End. Pedestrian circulation was reduced significantly as the Tremont Street border was transgressed. Those who actually entered the neighborhood seemed to follow the same given path, as if they were scared to explore further in. Another issue that seemed to insulate the community was the large amount of targeted resources and services that were contained within its physical boundaries. Villa Victoria has its own Post Office, Credit Union, pre-school, and a housing condominium for the disabled and elderly. There is also a number of social programs run from within the community, such as activities for the young and cultural projects by the Jorge Hernandez Cultural Center.

Outsider Circulation Diagram.
The Red lines represent the pedestrian paths and their intensity of flow, for people that do not live within Villa Victoria.
Location of Targeted services and Institutions within the Villa Victoria neighborhood.

Location and Nature of Designated Public Areas.

The neighborhood was conceived as being very public, with many spaces given for people to get together, such as plazas and "paseos"; however, with the exception of the Betances plaza, most of these designed spaces are not frequently used.
The Perimeter.

The most important and revealing research was found to be a study of Villa Victoria's perimeter, particularly its north-western side, which is made up by Tremont Street. It is the zone of most activity near the site, with cafes, restaurants, laundromats, and grocery stores, among other businesses, that are owned by both the people of Villa Victoria and people from the surrounding South End. There is an almost uniform distribution of these businesses, thus creating potential interactions between the people of the neighborhood and people from the outside.

By studying the nature of the boundaries between the neighborhood and the South End, it is possible to start understanding the dynamics between the people that inhabit both sides. It quickly became clear that to fully grasp the essences of the site, it was important to direct the research toward the human interactions in important areas; to somehow document the behaviors in key points.

Examples of 2 businesses along Tremont Street.
BEHAVIORS

The following research consisted of observing the people that lived inside Villa Victoria, as well as the people that frequented the surrounding areas; gathering not only visual but auditory information as well.

Going down Tremont Street, from the direction of Massachusetts Avenue, an immense amount of activity can be sensed. The sound of buses and cars overshadow the conversations of the people in the sidewalks and even the sometimes large groups of people that gather in front of the cafes when the weather permits. It is a bit quieter early during the week days, when a lot of the pedestrians seem to be of an elderly age, but as soon as the afternoon comes, people of all age groups flood the streets.

Turning right on West Dedham street takes one right into the heart of Plaza Betcances, were the older people are frequently seen playing dominoes. The bustle of Tremont disappears suddenly, as a quieter and seemingly calmer environment emerges. This sensation does not last long though, because further down the street, a car is parked and blasting salsa music at full volume, with several people singing along.

This seems to be the everyday in Villa Victoria. Spaces of quiet calmness alternate with those of sudden outburst or unexpected spontaneity. Overall, it is sensed to be a unique space, a different environment from the one perceived minutes back, transcended by the very palpable threshold of Tremont. There is no sign that says “this is Villa Victoria”, but the houses, the people, the sounds, almost everything, serve as very evident notices, announcing that the South End has been left behind.
A young woman and small boy stroll leisurely by the 'Paseo'.

A group of teenagers hang out at the beginning of the 'Paseo'.

Three men stroll from Tremont St. to West Newton towards Shawmut Ave.

Kids play on the swings as adults looking over them converse with each other in the playground next to the pre school and JHCC.

Families move out to the front patios and street as they socialize with each other.
Nature and location of behaviors within the neighborhood.

Documentation was done on the main points of congregation, or interactive activity, within Villa Victoria. It revealed the areas that possessed the most common activities and their character, from most public to most private, the nature of the residents, and their level of involvement.
THE PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF THE SITE

The studies on behaviors showed that the interaction between the people of Villa Victoria and the outside were of a highly "performative" nature. There are several spaces within the community where the residents gather. These areas were frequently used for collective activities such as talking, singing, dancing, and even flirting, and arguing. Overall these spaces manifested moments of unique expressions, where a conscious manifestation of the collective culture seemed to manifest itself. The diagram labeled "behavioral conclusions" shows these areas as darker red. The lighter areas are the results; they represent areas where "culture" is not so consciously manifested, but seen in a more passive way.

People from the surrounding neighborhoods in the South End portray a similar pattern. Areas in darker blue are precincts in which these people manifest themselves collectively with ease, (cafés for example); places where Villa Victoria residents rarely venture into. The result is an interesting dynamic of interaction.
The context of the Villa Victoria community infiltrates the surrounding sections of the South End, and as one side acts (or performs) the other equally counteracts or (counter-performs). What this means is that, given that performance is important for displaying their identity, there is a large amount of conscious (or direct) performance within the Villa Victoria community. As a direct result of this, there is an inevitable unconscious (or indirect) performance of the people in surrounding areas.

Given the conclusion that there were essentially two areas with the most amount of collective activity within Villa Victoria, (a "Paseo" in between row houses (1), and the other bordering the western side of Plaza Betances (2)), an intervention on the site would require these two areas to remain unperturbed.

A third area, O'Day park, seems to be the most adequate location for any form of large intervention on the neighborhood. It emulates the areas of collective activity, being next to them, while activating a mostly unused part of the neighborhood. The shape of the location makes it readily visible from Tremont Street, and therefore could connect the architecture with the "performative" energy that is occurring on that street.
DESIGN APPROACH
SITE INTERVENTION PROPOSALS

The initial steps in the design process consisted of determining the nature of the architectural intervention on the site, considering the research up to that point:

The first scheme (image 1) consisted of establishing a literal physical connection between Tremont Street and the site O’Day Park, as a means to introduce people into the neighborhood and lead them into some sort of building. A diagonal was also introduced to break the orthogonal grid of the streets.

Later schemes leaned more towards a less intrusive and less built arrangement. The third scheme (image 3) shows how the area in between existing buildings was starting to be considered, and began to inform on the character of the program that was going to occupy those spaces.

It led to the fourth scheme (image 4), an important point in the development. In it, an actual building is located in O’Day park, but it is much smaller. The rest of the program is assigned to other parts of the neighborhood, residual spaces, particularly zones within buildings, which were currently not in use but showed enormous potential.

Schemes 5 to 8 are explorations on possible relationships between the main building and the built forms, distributed in different ways throughout the community. The diagrams started to show a duality of freestanding building vs. built environment within an existing space; all these concepts analogous to ideas that were simultaneously materializing on the project’s program.
CONCEPTS

The project's program consisted of areas designed for the display of culture, particularly through the art of performance.

Like the behaviors diagrams revealed, the program was also two-fold. In designing a building for "the portrayal of culture or identity" there exist two possible approaches: focusing on the exhibited, institutional, marketed, and consumed part of cultural display, or on the more organic, interpreted, adaptable, and ever transforming aspect of culture.

The "consumed" perspective on culture focuses on the event and festival as way to represent and communicate. In his book, Everyday life in the Modern World, Lefevre talks about the emergence of leisure in society, and how culture has become a "generalized display". "Man the consumer" absorbs not the real substances, but signs, loose references to the actual thing.

Actual culture is not a fixed or given entity, and should not be considered an ideology. It is an ever-transforming phenomenon that is created by the circumstances of interaction between people at a given condition. The circumstances under which humans interact play a critical role in the conception of these social ideals.
Neighborhood's Residual Spaces.
Villa Victoria contains numerous spaces with enormous potential that could be renovated and converted for spaces of improvised performance. These spaces would be adaptable to the resident's given needs and connected to the main building by a series of architectural elements, in the form of an overall complex.
The previous conclusion led to the establishment of a more architectural resolution. The nature of the neighborhood spaces were going to be designed for the duality of this culture exhibition.

The scheme proposals made it evident that a single building would not be the best answer. And so, a main building is to be located in O’Day park, a point of high visibility from the busy Tremont Street. It would serve as a central piece that branches out into the unused residual spaces in the community. Whereas the building works as a means to bring people in, once in, one has visual contact with the built spaces incorporated into the neighborhood. The nature of these spaces would be different from the main building in that they are more adaptable. Despite the building being highly institutional, the built interventions would be more organic, more personal, more dynamic. They would talk about the previously mentioned duality of a pre-conceived idea of culture vs. the ever changing and transforming aspect of culture.

In order to achieve this goal, initial steps were taken to identify the character of the main building. It would later determine how the dialogue with the neighborhood’s built spaces will be realized.

Conceptual Sketch.
The drawing shows possible physical and programmatic relationships between the main building and the outside built forms.
Conceptual Model #1.
The initial conceptual model designed for the institution-like building emerges from the idea of display. The program could be arranged in terms of what is exhibited or hidden, in relation to its role in the “production” of culture.

Another important concept introduced is mostly formal, the idea of the “pocket”. Concave forms create spaces of collection, areas of gathering that could contrast with areas of separation from the building, zones of more disengagement.
The second conceptual model went more into the actual considerations of the site. Means for collecting the people from Tremont Street were explored, by making the front of the building a concave wall, which created a fairly large plaza in front. Different quadrants started to develop around the building, with different program zones assigned to each. A main element in the construction, the Auditorium, was located so that people overflowed from the plaza into that space. Another element introduced was the vertical circulation by means of a ramp, which, at least visually, tied the quadrants together. It also determined the zones of display, since from one of the quadrants parts of the program started to be seen as display windows. At this same point was an outside auditorium.

The third conceptual model was a continuation of ideas established in the second, but the gesture of the building was emphasized, with the ramp constituting itself as a point of importance. The ramp wrapped around the building, itself being an object of display. It is by this way that the ramp transcended from being merely a means of verticality, but became more of a secondary street, a raised plaza from where performances could be seen or practiced. Another important advancement was making the quadrant bordering the ramp and overlooking the Cultural Center, a zone where the adaptable structures could be set up and continue onto the neighborhood. The concave wall that overlooked the plaza was made into an exhibition wall with the ramp going through it. By this way, the main elements of the design were established.
Conceptual Model #3. Shows a quadrant containing the initial elements of the adaptable structures, later to be introduced into the neighborhood.
The major elements that played into the design of the main building were determined to be: the "Vertical Street" (the ramp), the Auditorium, and the supporting "Display Program".

Diagrams were made to determine the optimum position of the ramp. This was of a major importance because the ramp would serve as a means of expression for the people of the neighborhood. It could not be designed with only practicality in mind. The behavior analysis showed that the residents congregated frequently and at unconventional spaces. The ramp, which would tie all the program parts together and provide a multiplicity of views could be considered as a perfect space(s) for the community to spontaneously gather to observe or perform.

The auditorium was also of great importance because it was the space for formal or "produced" performance. It had to occupy a space of hierarchy within the institution-like building, without cutting off the two sides of the site. By this way, the auditorium was made to be an open space where, when the weather permit, people could walk through. A continuation of the neighborhood could then be perceived across it, instead of it being sensed as a boundary.

Program Relationship Diagram.
The diagram shows how the auditorium came to be located in the bottom of the building as a permeable space, with the exhibition ramp overlooking the plaza and Tremont street. The different quadrants are shown, and the "display" program is lifted and located directly above the auditorium.
Diagrams displaying multiple options for the program parts.
The next step went into determining the more formal characteristics of the building, and in that way continue defining the program parts. Three models were made, considering: the ramp, the auditorium, the spaces located over the auditorium, and another vertical element introduced: a staircase with elevator.

The importance of this models lie mostly in defining the staircase-elevator element and the spaces over the auditorium. The staircase and elevator volume became a wedge looking over the cultural center. It evolved into an important piece and, like the ramp, was a point were critical views were going to be defined.

The spaces above the auditorium started to take on some definition. Like the initial conceptual model, transparent and opaque walls alternated with open and closed spaces. The open spaces would later become terraces and roof gardens, while the closed spaces, perceived more as volumes, were to contain the required Performance Center program, such as the studios. The models showed a departure from a more conventional organization of single or double loaded corridors with the program pieces adjacent at either side.

The shape of the floor plates and volumes responded not only to the immediate site, but to the views at given points, as one ascended to the different parts of the building.
Sketch models on formal analysis.
The final sketch model for the building was a collection of all previous explorations and analyses on the program and site:

The auditorium space gained the importance it required by being open to most of the site, on both sides of the building. By permitting the passing of people it connected the two edges, activating the western side, which is the one of less activity. It also created a sense of transparency at the ground level, different from what would be perceived from an imposing massive volume. The entrance to the building was emphasized as a pocket (seen in plan), as well as each of the side entrances of the auditorium.

Given that the auditorium occupies mostly all of the first floor, the rest of the program is located on top. The top floors where designed to be mostly open floors with self-contained volumes, which are like smaller buildings themselves. The impression it gave is that the plaza had been raised to above the auditorium, and an independent city of buildings was built around this new plaza.

The ramp edges at both the eastern and western side contain balconies which establish a visual dialogue between building and site. As one goes up in the building, the floor plates reduce in area, until the last one becomes merely a roof garden, containing only the radio station. At a lower level, the terraces and smaller gardens respond to the views of areas in the neighborhood (like the quadrant with the outside auditorium), while at the higher levels the views respond more to the views of the city. At the roof garden level, the building height is just above the horizon of rooftops in the neighborhood. The orientation towards the Prudential Center, a symbol that is frequently used to represent the city of Boston, talks about this two building-entities looking over each other at a distance, in a way similar to the relationship between the people of Villa Victoria and the rest of the people in the city.

### BUILDING PROGRAM PARTS

(And approximate square footage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Part</th>
<th>Square Footage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Auditorium</td>
<td>5500 ft²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressing Rooms</td>
<td>400 ft²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing Studio</td>
<td>800 ft²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenery/Electrical</td>
<td>600 ft²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording Studio</td>
<td>1400 ft²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box Office</td>
<td>180 ft²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom/Flexible</td>
<td>900 ft²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater</td>
<td>900 ft²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Station</td>
<td>400 ft²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices</td>
<td>1000 ft²</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Plus Terraces, Gardens, Circulation, and the supporting program.**
Main Building Final Sketch Model.
THE PERFORMANCE BUILDING & SCHEME
**FINAL MODELS**

The sketch models and diagrams concluded with the development of a final scheme, relating the building with the neighborhood of Villa Victoria. The terraces, gardens, and volumes that had been designed, looked over chosen parts of the neighborhood.

Elements such as trees, benches, and floor finishes created a sort of compound, or complex; which led people into both the open and semi-closed spaces for improvised performance, by means of paths. These spaces and performances could be seen from the observation points of the building, and the building can be seen from the performance points. Again, there is a dialogue established between seeing and being seen.

The ultimate connection is that with Plaza Betances and the activity surrounding it. Even if a person in the building does not physically reach the Plaza, its energy and importance would still be perceived from several key points of observation.
The northern facade composed of the ramp and some exhibition space looks over the plaza, which itself leads out onto adapted performance spaces in the neighborhood. It is an imposing view seen from Tremont Street, with trees and landscape leading people in.
The already existing spaces in between the row of houses are continued until overflowing onto the plaza. There is a sense of continuation with the spaces of the neighborhood, as the site remains completely permeable. The model shows how the openings in the building, particularly the balconies in the ramp, correspond to the houses and open spaces.
The eastern side of the building contains the outside auditorium, which is almost a continuation of the interior one. A space in between the Performance Building and the apartment building next to it, creates a wedge that pushes people in from the other side. Green landscape complements the plaza and creates pockets of spaces that flow into each other. The idea of the terraces can more clearly be seen in this view of the model, with multiple spaces looking over each other.
There is a marked continuation of the view that comes from Tremont Street as the building is seen to emerge only slightly; enough to be seen but not so much that it blocks out the neighborhood on its southern side. The building can be seen emerging from the ground, from the level of the open auditorium, to compacting itself and becoming less built towards the upper levels.
The spaces adapted for improvised performance in several parts of the neighborhood consist of elements such as modifiable stages, resurfacing, and series of lighting elements, that double as structures for supporting some overhead canvases, working as shielding covering. These elements are fully alterable, and can accommodate for size or type of gathering. The enclosure of these spaces, which used to be in degraded condition, are replaced with transparent sturdy walls and gates, similar to ones found in the performance building. By this way, a visual and material relationship is established between the main building and the organic spaces.
**FINAL DRAWINGS**

The Ground Plan shows the flow of the different zones into each other, and the flow outward onto the spaces within the neighborhood. The inside auditorium can remain completely open during the summer days or close completely over the winter time. At some given periods, two or even one of the parts of the auditorium can remain closed, while the other parts remain open to the site. The dotted line elements on the western side of the building represent the area where the canvases can be arranged to accommodate a space of outside performance.
Second Floor Plan.
The second floor plan is the level that contains the largest expanse of open space terraces and gardens, at a level closest to the site ground level. These terraces become outside space when the building closes up completely over the winter. An interior garden remains, however, with a skylight overhead. The enclosed volumes at this level correspond to the dancing studio and the music practice room.
Third Floor Plan.
The third floor plan, being more detached from the ground, contains a smaller amount of terraces and gardens. The enclosed volumes at this level are the classroom/flexible theater and the recording booth mezzanine, whose volume mimics the apartment building adjacent to it, adapting the building to the neighborhood’s landscape.
Fourth Floor Plan.
The fourth floor plan is the level for the offices with an opening onto an outside deck. The interior of the offices, like the rest of the building, contains mostly open space with offices and cubicles being mostly individual volumes. The exhibition ramp ends at this level and access is given at this point, to the final upper level.
Basement Plan.
Contains the dressing rooms, scenery room, and main bathrooms.

Fifth Floor Plan.
The final floor plan consists of the roof, garden, and radio station. The level serves as an exhibition tower for accessing views to different parts of the city. A smaller staircase leads to the top of the radio station, to a level which would be among the highest in the neighborhood.
The Section and Axonometric drawings show the relationship between the proposed parts and the neighborhood, demonstrating the minimal level of intrusiveness the scheme requires, while establishing a perceivable network.

On the Section drawing specifically, the levels and orientations of the building are shown in relation to the existing structures of the site.
RENDERINGS

View from Alleyway, South of Building.
Spaces within the neighborhood blend with the spaces surrounding the building.
The image shows the flow of one space onto another, as well as the designed views of the city.
Interior view of Exhibition Ramp.
The interior of the ramp is actually a semi-exterior space separated from the plaza by a permeable screen. In this space, non-perishable pieces of art may be exhibited (like a mural, for example), and instances of performance can occur, since it is a very open, wide, and adaptable space.
**View of Eastern facade.**

This facade shows the largest amount of terraces and gardens, and is the facade that corresponds to the side of most housing. The terraces end up being analogous to stages; the perfect spaces for the mentioned seeing and being seen.
View of Western facade.
The western facade coincides with the area of the exterior auditorium and the section of the site where the adaptable structures and canvases can be set up. This facade is the most transparent, with a view into the interior garden, as well as to other mezzanines and terraces within the building.
View of Northern facade and Main Entrance.
The northern facade's importance lies in it being the receiving point of the people from their entrance from Tremont Street. The plaza in front lends itself to a multiplicity of uses, including an important gathering point for the people of the Villa Victoria community.
CONCLUSION

For years, the people of Villa Victoria have felt marginalized from their surroundings and the city. Recently, they have taken the initiative to reach out to different groups on the outside, in an effort to become more integrated with the rest of the South End, and the city of Boston.

They offer themselves; their music, dance, and artistic performance as a means of communication, as a way of opening doors between people with different backgrounds. This gesture merits an architecture worthy of it. An architectural gesture that reaches out at the same time it provides for all the internal processes occurring within this very unique community.

It might be too ambitious to allege that a single building can change a person’s point of view regarding another person, or another group of people; but architecture’s ability to transmit ideas should not be taken for granted. Our built surroundings are full of multiple meanings, and how a space is organized a lot of times has an impression on how one interacts with the people that inhabit that space. It might not be in the architect’s hands to impose a point of view, but it is socially responsible of him/her to manifest a comment regarding the new arena of human interaction that he is creating.

This thesis demonstrates some ways in which architecture may be modified in order to proclaim this mentioned social comment while creating a space for the adequate exhibition of a group’s collective ideals and behaviors, that is commonly known as “culture”.

All this being said, the main conclusion derived from the design process is that the architect can not take this task on by himself. The major weaknesses of the design lied precisely in the fact that much of the decisions lacked that level of social meaning needed in such a project.
A higher level of social and even political meaning could have been achieved if the role of the residents played a bigger part in the process. Even the limited opportunity of exposure with them, proved they possessed a large amount of insight, and a fresh perspective on these problems that could have helped in the design process and in the breaking of existing preconceptions.

The project would have also been helped by the input of an artist. During the final review, one of the most notable comments made was regarding the adaptable built spaces in the neighborhood. Multiple interesting artistic and innovative ideas were given for these spaces, none of which had been considered in the process. In focusing too much on the architectural, some opportunities were missed; opportunities that could had informed some meritable improvements on the building.

Regardless of the possible outcomes for this project, it is a worthy exploration on the transcending of architecture into the social and cultural realm. Hopefully, it can serve as an example for other such explorations in the search for the role of architecture in our modern society.
NOTES

1 Small, Mario Luis. 2001. *How Neighborhoods Matter: Community participation and social isolation in a Puerto Rican housing project.*

2 *Inquilino,* refers to a resident or “tenant”.


4 Maria Fernandez. “Ode to a Diaporican”/poem.


Figure 1. Zoning map taken from the Boston Redevelopment Authority's web site: http://www.ci.boston.ma.us/bra/


All other images are made by the author.


South End Urban Renewal Plan; Boston, Boston Redevelopment Authority, 1965.


Interview with Luis Aponte-Pares, October 2003. Current member of the ETC board and supporter of the community since its early days.


Johnson, Kemba. "Raising El Barrio", (exhibition review); *City Limits*, 1999 June, v.24, n.6, p.5


Samuels, Linda. "47 Frames: a collaborative production between a second year studio at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the Cypher Collective of New York City"; *Journal of Architecture Education* 2001 May, v. 54, pg.255.

