



## Hip Hop Meets Architecture in the Work of U-M Detroit Design Center Prof

By: Dennis Archambault

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As a graduate student in Cultural Studies at the University of Minnesota, Craig Wilkins was struck by how people define space at hip hop raves. In the midst of dance, human presence defines architecture, not the other way around.

An avid dancer, Wilkins hung out at raves in the Minneapolis area when Prince was rising in popularity. He was fascinated with how music and dancing creates an identity and function for space.

"No matter how many different kinds of people come to a rave, there's a moment in that rave where everybody's on the same page. Everybody's in the same place, whether that place is in aware house, an open field...I'm like, man that's a phenomenal, wonderful thing. Are there any other ways that can happen? How might I be able to make that architectural? Basically what architects do is shape space. If music can help create space and can help create identity, what kind of identity would a hip hop space make?"

Fast forward 20 years, Wilkins is in Detroit, a professor of architecture at the University of Michigan and the director of the university's [Detroit Community Design Center](#). He dances less, but retains an appreciation of hip hop and the notion that human activity defines architecture, not the other way around.



Wilkins, an African American in a field representing few like him, has combined his hip hop ideas with mentoring young African-American students in an innovative book, "The Aesthetics of Equity," published last year by the University of Minnesota Press. A manifesto on hip hop architecture for professionals and students that challenges the traditional view of architecture and its inclusion of African Americans, the book is written in two voices – that of a scholar and a student. The hip-hop sections tend to be shorter and wittier, but no less complete than the academic sections, written in proper scholarly rhetoric.

Born in the poverty of the Bronx, "hip hop culture has taken things considered garbage, has rescued them and taken things that have been considered dispensable and made them indispensable," he says. The use of turntables and scratchy LPs, at a time when CDs were defining recorded sound, became a laboratory of sound. "What they did was rescue the turntable, and they used it in a way that it was not designed for. The turntable is a passive instrument. You play a record on it. They used in a diametrically opposed way. It's an active instrument now."

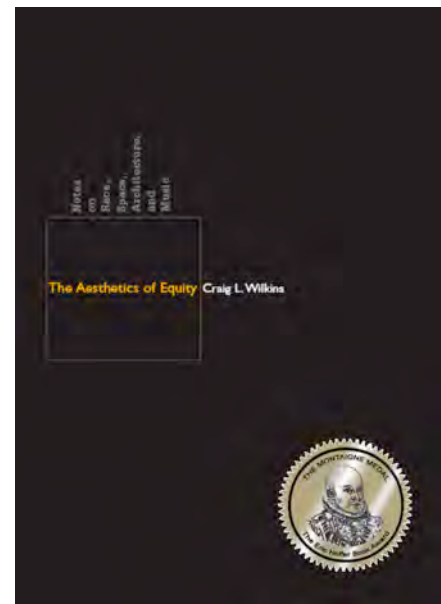
Culturally, hip hop created an avenue for "dispensable" people to become "indispensable." To get out of the Bronx, "you either had to be shockingly brilliant, which is almost impossible to do with the quality of the schools, or you had to be physically talented; you had to be a basketball player, a football player, something....Hip hop changed the rules. You could take a cassette player, go in the basement of your parent's house and rap all day, come out and sell it and become an entrepreneur. And eventually you sell it to a record company and how you become a recording artist. From there you become yet another kind of entrepreneur."

Wilkins reasons that you can also make "dispensable" material "indispensable" in architecture. "(Hip hop) had huge possibilities in terms of sustainability...If it can be realized, it is groundbreaking. It meaningful concern.

"We don't bulldoze buildings like we used to, because that just creates waste. We now deconstruct buildings so we can those materials again. The entire argument for sustainability comes out of the hip hop mentality. What sustainability is about is using things in an efficient manner, rethinking how material gets used and how material gets made.

"What we've come to understand about space is a very Cartesian (philosopher René Descartes) view of space – this wide, that long...that abstract notion of space. Hip hop space is not like that at all. Hip hop space is a space that only becomes a space when people are in it; when people interact with it.

"How do we know we are in a classroom? From a Lockean (philosopher John Locke) perspective, we know we're in four walls that have defined the space...from a hip hop perspective, those things don't



matter. The reason you know you're in a classroom is because there is a teacher and a student and they are interacting...and that teacher, in that interaction, can become the student, as the student can become a teacher."

Wilkins' connection between architecture and music is both traditional and innovative, says Kenneth Crutcher, president of the Detroit Chapter of the [National Organization for Minority Architects](#) and adjunct lecturer at [Lawrence Technological University](#). Architecture, he says, has been referred to as "frozen music." What's different is that Wilkins says hip hop not only defines the artistic appearance of a structure, but the function of its design. Most significant, hip hop "is an African American invention." Our perception of space and aesthetics are based on Western tradition, he says, concurring with Wilkins. "To apply an African American art form like hip hop to architecture is significant."

Crutcher, whose architecture firm, [Crutcher Studio](#), designed Lola's restaurant in Harmony Park/Paradise Valley, says that hip hop has permeated culture on all levels and has become a universal music genre. Many architects have drawn their ideas from hip hop, though few may have noticed. "Some of their edgy styles and use of raw materials, whether they admit it or not,(has) urban feel, urban character."

As an educator, Crutcher also appreciates Wilkins' effort to write the book in a student dialect. Chapter 4, "Space-Action," is required reading in his design studio. The concept of space being taught when he was a student was not something familiar to Crutcher's experience growing up in Detroit. "There was no translation. You had to do a lot of reading and some of it didn't make sense" Wilkins explains that "this is what the professor will say to you and this is what he's really saying."

In the "Remix" section of Chapter 4, Wilkins writes: "So dig. There is another way of looking at space, eh? Who knew? Actually, there is a shit load of ways, but first, let's look at ol' Lockey (John Locke) boy again. He really believes that the only way we can know space is to touch it or see it. That's an interesting point – but is that really true?"

Although Wilkins' book is directed to African American students and colleagues, it has a universal quality. "A lot of the themes I talk about in the book are beyond people of color," he says.



When you talk about the way we are taught to see the world...it allows for certain things to happen and it excludes certain things. When I talk about looking at space as designers – not from an abstract perspective but from an engaged perspective, a real perspective that puts people at the center of the creation of space, not on the periphery of the space, that transcends color; it has nothing to do with color.

"What it comes down to, as a designer, what do you think your responsibility is? Is it to the form of the building or the people who inhabit it? Is it to the client who pays for the building or is it society that has to interact with that building? Those things have no color."

If architecture abruptly changes, like break dancing, this could be a moment where "a rupture in the dance is necessary," says Wilkins. "The old solutions no longer apply. Our problems at this time are different. Architecture should be about that, about responding to society now, all of society, for the future."

In a place like Detroit, where there hasn't been much building going on lately, and many questions loom about its economic and social future, Craig Wilkins projects a street-smart prophetic vision: "Let's get started...It's gonna be a lil' sumpin' sumpin' special."

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