RICE UNIVERSITY

Architecture for Hiding People

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Master of Architecture

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HOUSTON, TEXAS
April 2023
Architecture for Hiding People
There are many conditions that render people “hidden.” Through an exploration of hiding and what it entails, a civic center was built for the contemporary imaginary. In this installment, Architecture for Hiding People focuses on the fictive institution, The New Center for Housing Equity, Palm Springs. Through defining spatial relationships and narrative creation, it explores the topics of institutional visibility and representation.
My advisor, Troy Schaum —

Thank you for your patience and for your generosity with your time. Thank you for your sense of humor, your quick mind, your creativity, and your straightforwardness.
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On Hiding

There is a collective imagination of hiding as a physical act, one that involves some level of engagement in clandestine activities, or, alternately, some level of identification with groups that must remain hidden in times of conflict or persecution. Hiding can be imposed upon an individual or group through conditions that render them powerless, and being hidden can also imply some level of erasure. Forcing a class of people to remain physically hidden from society is part of a matrix of control.

Despite this, hiding can provide possible autonomy away from watchful and oppressive eyes (Haitian marronage, lost tribes, Wakanda). Hiding is a crucial aspect of the architectural lineage of the oppressed — in particular, the act of hiding in plain sight. Hiding in plain sight can occur in conditions of contextual ubiquity (or, plain site: the DMV, the jungle, international style office buildings, ‘mumblecore’ architecture). The question of what hiding is does not lend itself to an easy answer. Typically, it implies some level of physical removal or obscuration from a space, and it usually does not refer to the act of being “hidden” — it is almost always something that the individual does to themselves in response to external perceived threats. Whether these threats are real or imaginary does not seem to matter. Those who provide the threats typically have some power over the individual who is going into hiding, or they are threatening the individual with some form of violence. While the threat of violence isn’t a necessity for holding power over an individual, it is often co-occurring. We can get a sense of this in progressive literature on “coming out of the closet,” i.e. leaving hiding, or even in right-wing literature on sensing that you are in a group termed the “silent majority.”

We imagine outlaws going into hiding, as well as dissidents and spies.

Hiding is a way to stay safe for a future life where the freedom to live becomes available to you. We think of Anne Frank and The Underground Railroad.

How to Not Be Seen, A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File, Hito Steyerl, 2013
When we are held captive, kidnapped, or similarly confined, we are not considered to be hidden. This is an interesting phenomenon, as we find ourselves faced with the institution of the prison and carcerality.

Do those who are kept behind lock and key find themselves to be hidden people?

To be physically hidden and to not choose it is the stuff of nightmares. We consider this forceful removal of an individual from society to be one of the most terrifying forms of violence — to be locked away, to be thrown in a tower, to be held in any condition parallel to a dungeon. As Jarrett M. Drake writes in *Archives, Prisons, and the Ethnography of Exchange*:

> When housed independently, most archives border on invisibility — their opacity communicating to passerby that they ought to, indeed, pass by. This assumes, of course, that the archive is located somewhere that someone might pass by. Yet the opposite tends to be true. Traffic flows, or lack thereof, structure archives — few people stumble into them merely by curiosity, chance, or happenstance.

Despite this, hiding has existed as a form of maintaining autonomy by many groups throughout history, and we see this reflected in underground hideouts (*Underground*, Kusturica, 1995), Haitian marronage in mountain encampments, Jewish settlers coming to the Spanish colonies of the Americas under the guise of being Catholic colonists (*Cryptojews*), among others. Within these examples alone, there is physically hiding in a different “plane” (beneath the ground), the idea of “passing” as something else (Jewish subjects masquerading as Catholic colonists to practice in secret), and utilizing a treacherous terrain to accomplish the feat of escaping colonial oppressors.

He then continues on to apply this same logic to that of a prison. A binary is introduced between those who are “free” and those who are “hidden.”
There are many other conditions that render people “hidden,” and they are overwhelmingly mundane. As Hito Steyerl states in *How To Not Be Seen, a Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, one of the ways to become invisible is “being female and over fifty.”

When walking through the red light district in Amsterdam, you might notice signs that state that it is a cell phone free zone. That is, no photos of the prostitutes, their clients, or those on the street should be taken. We consider the rights of the workers, but we also feel that we should have the right to view the sexual spectacle free of repercussions or recognition. We, being the people who are traversing the space with no expectation of participating in sex. The prostitutes inhabit their viewing windows, perhaps Architecture for Showing People, and voyeuristic tourists view them.

Despite the signs that are clearly posted throughout the streets, tourists are constantly recording themselves, recording the workers in the windows while even going so far as to make eye contact with them, and recording the street life of the area. It begs the question of if the workers are in fact “seen” as individuals or just as inhabitants of a spectacle.

They are in the business of pleasure, and it doesn’t necessarily pay to react negatively to a camera or a potential client. Surely they are not monolithic in their opinion of being recorded, but it isn’t a stretch to say that when the images are replicated, it is without consent.

Where should the act of viewing stop?

Many groups of people are subjected to being invisible and hypervisible simultaneously.

Hypervisibility does not conflate with visibility as a human being. Stereotypes, race-based sexualization and sexual objectification all work towards distancing an individual from their inherent humanity for the viewer on the other side.

Just as the technology of war-time propaganda is employed to dehumanize the enemy, we have our own peacetime system of poisoning our thoughts towards others.

Erasing them, forgetting that they exist, or watching them as detached voyeurs — for power and pleasure. When we reflect on hiding, we are reflecting on articulations of power. Architecture, with its ties to capital and prestige is inextricably linked to physical and visual manifestations of power. The built environment reflects these legacies of power, and architecture itself has the ability to obscure the group and the individual beyond the basic function of shelter.
Scalar Shifts: Early Explorations

After defining the project early on as an exploration of what it means to be hidden, the motivation to define the scale for the design segment of the thesis was prioritized.

A study of scalar shifts provided the opportunity to reflect on space and scale in an abstract way. To define what was being hidden and who was being hidden, these scalar shift studies assisted in forming a set of references and a visual and verbal lexicon for the project.
Clockwise: Cupboard Image, Andrea Zittel works, Mike Kelley sculpture

As the cupboard is to the house, so the house is to the town

Cupboard House, the Smithsons

Top to Bottom: Our Lord in the Attic Museum, Amsterdam Underground railroad model
Turf Homes, Western Iceland

Obervatorium, Robert Morris
Flevoland, NL

Celestial Vault, James Turrell
The Hague, NL

SCALAR SHIFTS
Bunker cut in section, NL

Bunker, NL
The filmic universe was a relatable universe for references, as the project became increasingly narrative driven. *Black Orpheus* by Camus became another key reference, as the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice in this Brazilian retelling set the layers of Hades in a bureaucratic office building. The souls of Hades are pieces of paper, bureaucratic records representing a life, blowing through the empty corridors and removed from the promise of care.
The concept of institutional ubiquity is nothing new. We have seen it before in media such as *The Conformist* by Bertolucci, *Brazil*, or *Severance*. In *Men In Black* hiding is addressed through the use of the phrase “the last suit you’ll ever wear” — the agents are concealed through “hard deletion” (in this case the removal of fingerprints, removal of personal records), but also through workplace fashion. Anonymity is a central feature of institutional ubiquity, and it is also important as a planetary integration tool that the alien immigrants embrace and utilize with many of them moving to Queens, an immigrant heavy borough for humans as well. Spatially, the building that the *Men In Black* agency is housed in is a relatively ubiquitous building as well, the Hugh L. Carey Tunnel Ventilation Building near Battery Park. It offers little to passersby on the street. It is windowless, vague, and recessed from the sidewalk. Yet in the film, this building’s unremarkable facade houses a vibrant inner life. *The Conformist*, with its themes of a violent attempt at anonymity and “redemption” for homosexual urges through fascist assimilation was another key reference for this project. To blend into the architecture, to have a total architecture as part of a collective singular cause, to be oppressed and yet embodied by civic architecture became an aspiration of the thesis.
The New Center for Housing Equity
And so a project premise was developed: a fictional center in Palm Springs, California, for housing equity. A center that is meant to act as a form of atonement for a past of white leisure at the expense of Indigenous, Black, and Hispanic land, people, and culture. A center in a town that wants to do the right thing and has the money to prove it.

The employees are a set of young and diverse professionals. Yet, the funds for the project could have built affordable housing for roughly 500 people — and instead houses 40.

It features a crypt-like area beneath the pool for viewing the swimmers and also for nightlife, which can be entered through a bathroom stall. Housing is designed to have an unhealthy relationship with the workspace. Fracturing leads below from the Earth, and the building spills outwards. The center was never meant to accomplish its stated goals: the bodies of the workers are seen as progress enough. This center is a monument — built, like many things, for optics in an age of reliance upon the language of the visual.

Through an exploration of what hiding can entail, a typology was selected: that of the civic institution. From there, the thesis was developed from this question:

*What if there was an office that was made to be seen, yet the inhabitants were constantly rendered invisible yet hypervisible?*
The town of Palm Springs was selected based on its relationship to leisure, mid-century architecture, progressivism, and its history as a higher-end vacation destination at the expense of Indigenous, Hispanic, and Black inhabitants. In 1968, California Deputy Attorney General Loren Miller Jr. reported that Palm Springs had subjected its own citizens to a ‘city-engineered holocaust.’
The exploration of who has to remain hidden, why they have to remain hidden, and who is hiding them was a central and early aspect of the thesis. Defining what hiding meant architecturally shifted the project to consider the user, or the body in space. The reality of architecture’s relationship with capital and visibility had to be acknowledged once the project became about a “building.”

The impetus for the thesis was partially based on a personal query from about a decade ago: put very simply, how would the built environment change if individuals who have historically not had access to the world of designing and building were able to articulate their vision of how spaces should look? This question of who is able to articulate their creative vision through the exterior of a building has not included a particularly diverse set of people. Yet this project does not aim to empower: this project is comfortable with futility. Here, the architecture does not provide autonomy for the imagined inhabitants: it fully belongs to a hypothetical set of well-off townsfolk and donors. The workers are meant to be a relatively diverse set of people, although perhaps this is not rooted in an economic or class-based diversity. They are imagined to be professionals with master’s degrees, the kind of people who have backgrounds in social justice and housing equity, the kind of people who would see this as a dream job.

The project is set in Palm Springs to allow for a deep tension, as a location with an ample amount of money, a racialized history of exclusion, and as a location that would house the desire to make amends with the past through an ambitious public project.
and so the town of Palm Springs, California, built a new center for housing equity & equality...

... and flew in a set of diverse and accomplished staff members after intensive rounds of rigorous interviews.

These new workers realized very quickly that any roadblocks in working towards equitable housing came from the exact people who hired them.

In fact, it seemed that they were strategically prevented from doing their jobs.

And so the center became a desert refuge for these workers, a testament built by the town to progress, as a form of atonement, a memorial to the racialized violence of the past.

while multiple factors further pushed the workers to retreat within its newly minted quarters.

Excerpts from final presentation, 2023
In this universe, the golf course with its artificial turf and reliance on water is transformed into a xeriscaped park, much like the one directly south of the course that was built with public Measure J funds. There is a true precedent for the siting of the complex, but the project remains in a dream-like realm.

While the script read at the presentation proclaims that the complex is California Modern, it is not — it physically does away with every concern of California Modern architecture. The windows are not a primary concern, the material is a heavy unspecified earthen material, and the views framed are never defined outside of vague, sometimes unbelievable, perspectives. Counter to this architecture that proclaims that aesthetic and physical pleasure are more important than environmental engagement, this complex cuts deeply into the land with a proclamation of asceticism and militarism.

It is more reminiscent of fortification. The office occupies the smallest footprint possible, facing out into a walled courtyard with an obscured subterranean life beneath, and the housing is dug deep into the Earth.

This is a true desert architecture, beyond optics in the physical sense: it provides shade, thermal mass through the submersion in earth, ample covering from the sun for passersby and protection from the environment. You don’t see the desert, you feel it. The implication of the walkway that is cut in the earth is that it is a continuation of the Cactus to Clouds Trail, connecting this complex to the mountains towering over the town. In this way too, the desert is an unspoken force.

The only mention of it is when the audience is asked to imagine the hot desert air. Yet, the desert as a space-maker is crucial in the imagining of the project.

The desert is a space that allows for physical entrapment through its inherently hostile conditions. If you have experienced a year in the desert without rain, viewed the baked mountainside, felt the blow-dryer hot air, you know that this is a place that is quickly changeable with the ability to be deeply hostile to human life. It doesn’t matter how dressed up it is or how removed from it we may be through thermal conditioning. When we truly experience the desert, we know that it has the potential to be a space of isolation, of simultaneously waking up the senses, of forcing us to feel discomfort. It is not a neutral environment or a landscape of “nothingness.”

In this imaginary universe, the inhabitants of the building recede further into the center of the complex, into these crypt-like spaces, in order to escape the heat and sun and views of the oppressive mountains (not to mention their employers).
In this project, a secret staircase in a bathroom stall (a reference to gay cruising culture) leads to a sublevel that features a bar and windows that face into the pool. This space becomes the backdrop for nightlife and for the residents to reclaim their sense of self.

This element of the project is loosely based on the rent-party, or as Adrienne Brown writes in *Working to Get Free at The Rent Party*, “rent parties also facilitated the sensory dispossession of their guests in crowded spaces where ‘bedlam reigned,’ as one attendee described. Known for good music, hearty food, bad liquor, low lights, close dancing, late nights, and the occasional violent incident, rent parties were places for attendees to let loose and rub up against just about anybody while assisting their neighbors in avoiding dispossession for another month.”

One of the few (if not only) times that a black woman appears in the architectural canon is in the figure of Josephine Baker in the namesake Adolf Loos house.
The project was set up as an installation for the final review, with the drawings mounted on standing wooden boards. There were no chairs, and all of the audience and jury members were to stand. The presentation format was meant to push the audience members to engage with the work, for the work to take up space, and for the format of the typical review to be disrupted.

It was also meant to call attention to the fact that the review was a performance, that the project was atypical, and that the script was a crucial element. This style of presentation meant that the reading of the script must be particularly deliberate, and that the architect/performer’s presence must overtake the room.

The presentation rendered the presenter as hypervisible, yet in control, in direct opposition to the characters described in the script.
The general thesis set-up, including the model and materials, was meant to be reminiscent of the thesis projects of the 80s and 90s. This time period proved seminal to the inspiration for the project. It’s no accident that the plans and line drawings were inspired by Libeskind and his attempt to find a contemporary Jewish architecture that was capable of communicating culture, growth and trauma. The concept of a cut in the earth and the fracturing outwards from it, with a geometric “spilling” to articulate a sense of fragmentation was also inspired by this time period. With a 3’x3’ model with a thick heavy gesso layer, a smaller number of drawings, a larger number of physical elements, and a conceptually driven project, the thesis was meant to exist as a continuation of an intellectual and academic query.
References

Dylan Rodriguez
Adrienne Brown
James Graham
Brett Story
Jarrett M. Drake
Stephen Dillon
Sable Elyse Smith
Anne Spice
Wendy L. Wright
Mabel O. Wilson
Leslie Dodick
Jasmine Svedullah
Edited by
Isabelle Kirkham-Lewitt
Columbia Books on Architecture and the City

Paths to Prison: On the Architectures of Carcerality

An additional expression of gratitude:
Kristina Kennedy — this project and my graduate experience was made better through your guidance and support. Thank you.