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How Architecture Killed New York Hip Hop

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Monday, 27 December 2010 03:30



Music videos such as that for The Message which featured Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five rhyming on a decaying street corner in the Bronx was stunning to the world. The sound was almost futuristic, but the backdrop was beyond gritty. Much of the early hip hop culture stemmed from the socio-economic struggles experienced in decrepit urban landscapes of New York, which is why the culture found affinity in other parts of the city and later the world. Now 40 years after, the South Bronx, and New York City in general, have gradually sanitized their grittiness through city improvement projects and new developments. How can a New York rapper appear to have 'streetcred' in video or be inspired by the surroundings when the hood has gone from gritty to gentrified?

To really appreciate this shift, let us setup the role of architecture in the early days of hip hop culture.

In 1969, the City passed a bill which they thought would solve the problem of decaying buildings, which saw landlords charged penalties for not maintaining their properties. When a tenant filed a violation found in their buildings, they were allowed to pay one dollar-a-month rent until improvements satisfactory to the City were done. The violation could have been as simple as a 1 inch hole in the wall or deficient heating. Obviously, some tenants took advantage of this and felt justified to destroy or vandalize their apartments and then claim it was a violation against the landlord. As a result, many landlords saw building maintenance as irrelevant and three strategies arose: abandonment, "milking" and arson. Due to the high costs of operating a building some landlords were content with just abandoning their buildings, rather than pay to operate them. "Milking" was a term for a landlord providing minimal service to tenants, while not paying the City property taxes, but still collecting rents. Arson, was the most used strategy and was the most profitable, since landlords could burn their own properties down or pay young kids \$3 to \$5 dollars to do it; subsequently collecting insurance payments. Insurance companies neglected due diligence which made it possible for landlords who had several fires associated with their name to continue to receive payments.

Abandoned buildings and those slightly occupied became targets for scavengers known as "finishers", who striped apartments of copper pipes and other materials of value they could sell to get their fix.

Despite the situation, some hardened tenants found ways to survive. Those who lived in buildings without heat survived the winters by wearing jackets indoors and using their gas stoves to generate heat. If the electricity was shutoff, tenants would haphazardly attach wires to street lights. If the water was shutoff or finishers had stolen the plumbing, tenants would gather water from fire hydrants in whatever containers they had.

The City's response to abandonment by landlords was to "accelerate the drain by planned shrinkage", which meant saving money by targeting abandoned areas. They considered closing subway stations, hospitals, precincts, firehouses and schools. The goal was to slowly get tenants to vacate certain neighborhoods, leaving them deserted, in hopes that large portions of could be razed and rebuilt.

In areas like the South Bronx and Bedford-Stuyvesant, and other neighborhoods that were mainly occupied by visible minorities, there was a feeling of contempt for slumlords, the police, the City and the overall system. In some cases, banks sold foreclosed mortgages to unsuitable criminals for low prices just to rid themselves of the buildings. There was a feeling that banks, insurance companies and real estate developers in the city were content to see neighborhoods with African Americans and Puerto Ricans deteriorate. Drugs, crime, arson and poverty took control leaving the city's officialdom without a clue how to resolve the situation.

As a consequence of this broken system, hip hop culture grew as a response to indifferent city officials, cops and landlords. It became a way for some citizens to express their displeasure and a refusal to be broken under the circumstances. The hip hop response wasn't just musical, it was also a way of interpreting the neighborhood, representing a way of thinking and expressing a reality, using spoken word, dance, fashion and graffiti. At its core, it was a form of social activism created from nothing, by people who had next to nothing.

The decaying urban landscape, with streets littered with abandoned cars and blocks sparsely populated by dilapidated buildings gave hip hop its visual 'streetcred'. People in Harlem, Lower East Side, Staten Island, New Lots and Bedford-Stuyvesant found affinity with the hip hop response. Writers scribed graffiti on buildings and on subway cars, taking messages, stories, statements and brands; above and below ground, from Wakefield 241 Street to Flatbush Av Brooklyn College, making the trains billboards for running hip hop themes. Whether it was in rhyming, breaking, writing or spinning records, people used their reality to express

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their identity. Hip Hop elements, when expressed gave people a sense of importance. Even though the system saw them as irrelevant, hip hop followers defiantly expressed that they were very relevant.

Could it be that the popularization of this culture gave people the idea that neighborhoods needed "sprucing up"? Music videos like The Message showed the whole world what the 'hood' in New York City was like. As the kids say, 'it was real talk'.

Now, with the context which gave birth to hip hop gone, it becomes difficult for New York rappers to continue the lifestyle in the same manner while still appearing to be 'street'. The gangs, drugs, violence and poverty may still remain in smaller doses, but beautification projects and gentrification have altered the scenery. The gritty Bronx slowly got replaced by the flowery Bronx. Not that these improvements in architecture and urbanism are not welcomed, because they are. But when considering the question as to why New York has lost its title as the mecca of hip hop, the improving image of the city over the last 30 must be held in consideration. Also, affordability of New York City real estate, even in the outer boroughs, has skyrocketed since the early days of hip hop, making it difficult for artists to make a living doing music in the city unless they happen to be one of the big names. Other than Jay-Z, Cam'ron, Nas or 50 Cent, New York is almost irrelevant in hip hop these days. In contrast, places like Atlanta, New Orleans, Miami and Houston have usurped New York's hip hop rule.

There are several New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) projects that are the latest examples of the improving ghettos. Projects still in development such as Bedford-Stuyvesant Street Project, Jamaica Rezoning Plan, South Bronx Initiative Plan, South Bronx Greenway project, and completed projects like Gateway Center at Bronx Terminal Market offer contrasting images to the hood-like streetscape a rapper would draw from for inspiration. On the website for the Sustainable South Bronx (www.ssbx.org), it says "The South Bronx Greenway will create bike and pedestrian paths around the Hunts Point and Port Morris waterfront." Who would ever imagine the day would come when people would consider going for a leisurely cycle in Hunts Point?

Some claim that New York hip hop began to decline when it was sanitized for the mainstream in the mid 1980's (break dancing showdowns were organized outside Lincoln Center); when major record labels commoditized the culture in the 1990's or when Southern rappers changed the game to be about 'bling bling' in the early 2000's. Certainly, these arguments are may have some validity. However, in terms of New York hip hop, it can also be said that the city's improving urban landscape from the desolate and depressed 1970's to the suburbanization and gentrification of today, have made it difficult for New York hip hop artists to draw inspiration from their surroundings like Grandmaster Flash and retain their streetcred.

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