

2-1. Explain how the logic of the "Big House" and "Slave Quarters" might have structured an entire territorial system in the United States.

Sprawl - the New Mt. Vernon

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I read the phrase “territorial system” on two levels: a physical configuration such as the juxtaposition of the “Big House” to the “Slave Quarters”; Or an attitude of territoriality – an obsession with privacy and property which both the “Big House” and the “Slave Quarters” sought, but neither achieved. While specific physical configurations reminiscent of the “Big House”/“Slave Quarters” dichotomy exist in the U.S., territoriality is the lasting legacy of southern estates in our communities.

Carl Anthony presents the “Big House”/“Slave Quarters” dichotomy in his description of Mt. Vernon: “The mansion is flanked by large trees, emphasizing the importance of the big house, making it distant and monumental, while at the same time screening the dependencies.” Anthony quotes a guidebook as saying “only a carefully developed plan could have subordinated them [the slaves] in such proximity to the main household and, at the same time, incorporated them as harmonious units of the group.” Therefore, my literal read of “territorial system” is a physical juxtaposition of social strata resulting in tension.

In Washington D.C., urban areas with some of the worst living conditions in the country are physically adjacent to government headquarters. Most likely, many who live in these poor neighborhoods are societal servants, allowing the city – and therefore the nation’s government – to function smoothly. Not surprisingly, D.C. consistently has one of the highest crime rates in the country. Ironically, Anthony quotes Washington Irving as saying “A large Virginia estate was a little empire. The mansion house was the seat of government, with its numerous dependencies, such as kitchens, smoke house, [etc.]” (article 1, p. 13). Although this urban condition is prevalent throughout the U.S., it is not unique to the U.S. Rather, it occurs all over the world wherever social stratification is superimposed on density.

One consequence of density + subordination on large southern estates was complete lack of privacy. The slaves were watched at all times, although Anthony comments that the typical screening of the dependencies “was probably welcomed by the slaves because it afforded them some privacy from the activities of the main house.” (article 1, p. 13). For slaves, a lack of privacy was equivalent to a lack of freedom. Slave owners, on the other hand, became oppressed by their own system. When estates often housed ten slaves for every white person, the slaves infiltrated every facet of daily life, which many estate owners including Jefferson found “annoying”. As one slave owner described: “From morning to night, wherever we turn, their faces meet our eyes.” (article 2, p. 13).

The single territorial system unique to and most characteristic of the U.S. is sprawl.

Sprawl exemplifies our national obsession with privacy. In sprawling suburbs, everyone owns their own house, their own beautiful lawn, and their own car. Planned communities have a greater sense of isolation than “community”. We strive for a life of leisure, where we want everything handed to us on a silver platter, regardless of how it got there. We refuse to acknowledge the systems which support our livelihoods, perpetuating the least sustainable lifestyles in the world. We want to live in the Big House.

“The architecture of slavery ... tells of the hunger to create at any price an illusion of wealth, beauty, ease and graciousness in a land of harsh realities.” (article 1, p. 9). McMansions, anyone?

Jimmy Shen

An aspect of the relationship between the “Big House” and “Slave Quarters” can perhaps be described as a boundary where the front side of the grounds serves to communicate a public face and hidden behind the mechanism that sustains it. Everything about the “Big House” is designed to convey an image of importance and wealth. From the lengthened approach to the entrance from the driveway, to the flanking of the mansion with large trees to draw emphasis to its grandeur, the “Big House” can be compared to the contemporary American Façade. The “Slave Quarters” would be the building itself functioning to sustain the image of the façade. It can be seen as Venturi’s culture of the sign where the maximum amount of energy in the design is put into the creation of this façade and the building that is supporting the façade is created with only utilitarian concerns in mind. With the façade there is also the will to create an idyllic world, one that exists only in fantasy designed to hide the rawness of the reality. It is a processed space that is experienced, like the contemporary amusement park, the space used to generate and support the illusion is much more extensive than the amusement space itself. This frontal structuring can be seen throughout the US extending even to the urban scale where whole streets are lined with façades that describe much less substantial buildings. Places like Los Angeles and Las Vegas for example are cities that are designed so that a typical tourist visits the image rather than the reality. The whole experience has been predefined by capitalist interest. Entire areas of cities are designed to similar affect where investment is placed upon tourist destinations and major transportation nodes and lines, existing almost as islands of development often with clear boundaries that delineate these spaces from poorer areas where there is minimal economic interest, places visited only by those that reside there.

This model can be extended to the whole of the United States with its relationship with its overseas territories and commonwealths like Guam and Porto Rico. And perhaps on a greater scale including the international economic and political relationships of its multinational corporations with countries like China or Saudi Arabia for example. The model of the “Big House” and the “Slave Quarters” is prevalent everywhere in multiple scales in architectural and urban space, but the forces of capitalism prevent us from peaking behind its barriers. And perhaps these barriers are more impermeable today than ever before.