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*«As we know, both the party and the revolt can only go on for a few hours, after which the authorities will break it up, eliminate the guilty, restore the built environment to its proper squalor and the city to its established order. The party is over.»*

**BLOCK TO BLOCK  
BLACK AND HISPANIC YOUTH  
AGAINST NEW YORK CITY  
Lorenzo Lazzari**

Lorenzo Lazzari studied architecture at the IUAV in Venice and at ETSAB in Barcelona. In 2017 he was co-curator of the editorial project *Devenirs* (IUAV). In 2018 he was a research fellow at the «clusterLAB LSD: Forme del Displaying», also a collaborator at “MeLa Media Lab” and teaching assistant for the degree courses for Architecture as well as Theatre and Performing Arts. He has curated the exhibition *Body Downtown* at Spazio Gino Valle, IUAV. His recent publication «Storytelling «No New York» appeared in *MONU*, 29. His research ranges from political analysis of urban festivals to the representation of memory in the domestic space.

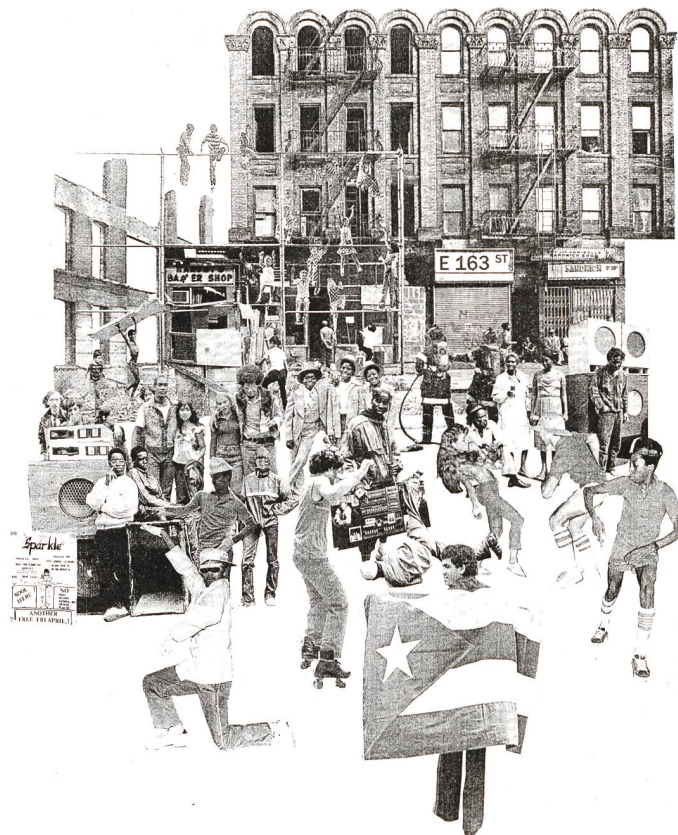
In a two-minute sequence from *Underground*—a 1976 documentary directed by Emile de Antonio, depicting the thoughts and actions of the Weather Underground Organisation, a radical US group formed within the Students for a Democratic Society during the '69 protests<sup>1</sup>—the montage shows three different scenes in succession: the smashed windows of Banco de Ponce at the Rockefeller Center after the Weathermen bomb-attack on 16 June 1975; the pristine US tourist facilities in Puerto Rico; the contrast with New York's South Bronx by the mid-1970s. The political stance is a clear rejection of the imperialist system that made Puerto Rico, from the Commonwealth of '52, into a disjointed territory of economic exploitation.

The South Bronx might seem far away from all this, yet it arguably shares a controversial common space since it housed most of the Puerto Rican population who had left the island of Borikén. In the South Bronx, as in Lower Manhattan, the architectural vision had been disfigured by the decline of manufacturing industry as well as the phenomenon of white flight. The energy crisis of '73 did not help the situation and in '75 New York City plunged towards financial collapse, accumulating a deficit of three billion dollars.<sup>2</sup> The excoriated facades and broken windows of the tenements—buildings built in the nineteenth century to accommodate the masses of workers who migrated to New York—were just the economic consequence of buildings that no longer generated any real profit for the landlord. Proprietors no longer carried out regular maintenance on these properties, they evaded taxes on them and occasionally used arson in order to fraudulently wangle an insurance claim. The tenant, part of a social class without means, had no choice but to remain in the building, under conditions of utter precariousness, accepting a level of dilapidation that conjures up war-torn cityscapes, where murders, robberies and drugs were the order of the day.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as *Parasite 2.0* put it, Robert Moses's project for the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which began in '48 and ended in '72, was «...clearly aiming to remove the 'weaker' sections of society from a city whose value began to grow more and more and in which the right to space was not for everyone».<sup>4</sup> At the end of the 1960s, young Puerto Ricans and Afro-Americans, mostly teens, sought to escape reality by forming violent gangs. Amongst these were Savage Skulls, Black Spades, Savage Nomads and the Ghetto Brothers<sup>5</sup>, all of whom fighting for years over the rubble of the Bronx, in what the community worker in the documentary *80 Blocks from Tiffany's* (1979) by Gary Weis termed a 'land of nowhere».

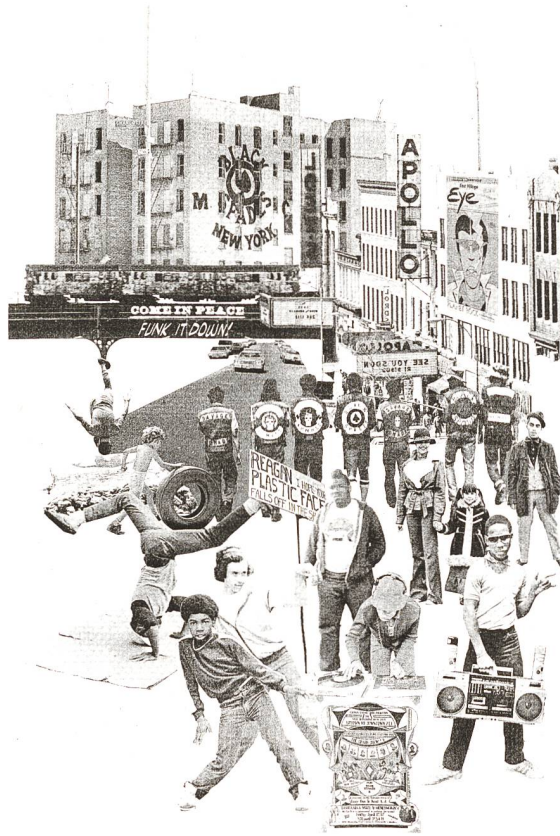
Far from mythologizing those events, I am more interested in understanding the forms of collective action that led to a reversal of course through a jovial reactivation of the post-industrial city. In fact, it was the young gang members themselves who, after the Hoe Avenue Peace Meeting of 8 December 1971, realised that they could reverse, reinterpret and reinvent the socio-political conditions in which they had grown up, gradually giving up inter-gang violence.



Lorenzo Lazzari, Untitled (The Block Party)  
Digital collage, 2018



Lorenzo Lazzari, Untitled (The Block Party)  
Digital collage, 2018



Lorenzo Lazzari, Untitled (The Block Party)  
Digital collage, 2018



Lorenzo Lazzari, Untitled (The Block Party)  
Digital collage, 2018

Under the new visionary guidance of the Puerto Rican Ghetto Brothers, the Jamaican Kool Herc and the enigmatic ex-Black Spades warlord and founder of Universal Zulu Nation, Afrika Bambaataa<sup>6</sup>, «youthful energies turned from nihilistic implosion to creative explosion [...] the kind of power that came from celebrating being young and free. [...] Gangs were dissolving. The new kids coming up were obsessed with flash, style, sabor. For them, the block party—not the political party—was the space of possibility».<sup>7</sup>

The block party actually derives from a practice from the past. Back in 1918 there was a moment «where the neighbors, especially the people belonging to that particular street which is to hold the festivity, give a party along a specified block in their immediate vicinity»<sup>8</sup> with a particular sense of community, mixing different ethnicities and nationalities, both immigrant and naturalised Americans: «...in some of the poorest of neighborhoods they make their dingy streets and barren-looking tenement buildings so changed and so different in appearance that street after street looks as though it had been given over entirely for a street carnival, and as though no poverty or dirt could be behind it all. The parties are given by all races. There are some where every face seen is of a foreign cast. There are Italians, who revel in block parties; there are Irish, who love these neighbourly, sociable affairs; there are Jews of all nationalities; and there are Americans who have before been stiff with their neighbours but now enjoy block parties».<sup>9</sup>

It should be clear by now that the intrigue lies in the resulting void between buildings and not in the buildings themselves; in the forms of collective action that transform those spaces during those parties. It is the bodies of revellers which configure the space and not vice versa. Block parties took place in the street between two city blocks, simply by closing it off to traffic and tapping into the public power cables. The neighbourhood provided snacks and drinks. Youths played on turntables with the new 'Merry-Go-Round' technique. «Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together, and you will have a festival»<sup>10</sup> quipped Rousseau, describing this binomial synergy between bodies and emptiness. Those 1970s block parties were like that, there was nothing but rubble between the ruins of a devastated district such as the South Bronx. And yet it was in that void that the turntables, the modified massive sound systems, the b-boys, the DJs, the MCs and nascent hip-hop culture with its new symbols and language, all ushered in vibrant new life and all through the collective action of young bodies.

Trying to document those parties through plans, elevations or sections—the classical adjuncts of architectural representation—is a hopeless task. The informal and improvised nature of the scene involves a dynamism that cannot be captured in any measurable representation. I prefer an array of elements from an informal collection: photographs, newspaper clippings, film, flyers, posters, records—chosen, cut-out and overlapped in order to reconstruct not so much the exact replica of what they were, but rather to consider what they might have been, without presuming their real knowability. It is from this stance that I present these four collages.

## II The Party as a Political Instance

«Everyone experiences the epiphany of the same symbols—everyone's individual space, dominated by one's personal symbols, by the shelter from historical time that everyone enjoys in their individual symbology and mythology, expands, becoming the symbolic space common to an entire collective, the shelter from historical time in which the collective finds safety.»<sup>11</sup>

The Italian mythologist Furio Jesi is talking about a revolt here, but actually this consideration could also be applied to a party's description, an argument that Jesi indeed picks up several times. In particular, what unites party and revolt is a different experience of time: Both occur in a well-defined timeframe, placed outside of historical time, where normal bourgeois time is suspended. Fundamentally, in time's suspension, a community is affirmed. Like those who struggle in revolt, during party-time the dancing body declares a space, whether it is a room, a building, a square or an entire city. For the first time, the appearance of architecture does not really matter; what matters is the emptiness filled by those who are agitating. They will constitute a sacred border, where the inverse laws of the carnival will become valid; where the police and powers that be will be seen as buffoons.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that in the first hip-hop parties, even with respect to how musical instruments were used, there was this carnival desire to bend and subvert the rules of proper functioning around the implements available, not to accept them as they were, but «twisting technology into new cultural shape [...] an ingenious manipulation of the turntable».<sup>13</sup>

As we know, both the party and the revolt can only go on for a few hours, after which the authorities will break it up, eliminate the guilty, restore the built environment to its proper squalor and the city to its established order. The party is over. The revolt has ended. However, there is one profound difference between party and revolt. Maybe it is the only one—but it's the essential one: A party is able to repeat itself, a revolt cannot. After the latter the protagonists will always withdraw from the scene, whereas at the end of a party they will leave in the morning with a promise to meet again at the next one, amping up the solidarity of the community that had experienced the first collective feeling in the suspension of historical time.

Research into such festivities, even from the outset, will arrive at the point where it is impossible to take into consideration any architectural space without a thorough investigation of its relationship with the political body that acts on that space. I emphasise the use of the verb «to act» in a direction that goes from the body to the space. It is a paradigm shift that, for example, forces us to query the verb «re-develop», which subtends an action that goes from space to the body, according to a consensual policy of «nice and clean» and able to garner a «new eligibility», unquestionably the best. The block party performance instead highlights the need to wield the verb «re-activate», which implies an action—perhaps slower—of the political body upon the surrounding space.

How this type of thinking could fit into the practice of everyday architectural theory and urban planning remains to be explored; how a political

reading of a space, starting from the bodies that inhabit it, can influence an urban project or decision-making processes, likewise.

It is a question of a new type of behaviour.

