PARADOX OF PLACE
Edward Hillel

Space is neither free nor neutral. It is always owned and spoken for, either by governments or other public entities, or privately by individuals or corporations. In this capacity space is "real-estate", and necessarily serves the interests of its owners. If it fails to do so, the reason is either benign neglect or calculated abandonment. What can photography show us about the nature of space, especially a culturally contested, historically significant urban landscape like Harlem? This is a central question posed by *125th: Time in Harlem*.

Since its birth nearly 400 years ago, Harlem's priorities have often been at odds with those of the prevailing powers. Beginning with clashes between native Lenape Indians and the island's first European settlers, Dutch Harlem claimed its own municipal status and independent judiciary, until it was annexed as part of New York where German, Irish, Italian, Jewish, African-American, Caribbean, Russian and Puerto Rican migrants competed for space and resources. Harlem is not just another New York neighborhood, but a unique place strongly defined by its relationship to indigenous cultural development. This has been especially true for Harlem's Black community, a mix of African Americans and people from the African Diaspora. The Harlem Renaissance (a flowering of artistic and political activity) and Harlem's significant place in the civil rights movement cemented its place as America's "Black Mecca," and catapulted Harlem internationally as a global icon. Indeed, Harlem can quite justifiably claim to be the locus of 20th century American culture.

125th Street cuts across uptown Manhattan from the Harlem to the Hudson River. Harlem's "main street", and its economic and cultural backbone has played an important role in many of these developments. Race riots and public marches, legendary performances by the likes of James Brown, Ella Fitzgerald and Michael Jackson, speeches by Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, the arrival of Fidel Castro in 1960 and the presence of former President Bill Clinton's office since 2001, have all cemented 125th Street's historic significance. Today 125th is experiencing dramatic change that will continue into the next decade and beyond. Now also known as Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., its current status is a fragile balance of commerce, community, culture, history and serendipity. Even as Harlem's "Main Street" was being named one of America's great streets by the American Planning Association - the only street in New York to receive this honor[1] - it has become the latest battleground between city planners who want to see it developed, and some local people and businesses who fear they will be forced out in the march of gentrification.

Harlem's future is currently confronted by two massive urban projects: Columbia University's grand campus expansion, and New York City's 125th St. "River to River" zoning law. These initiatives will upscale land-use and economic development, drastically increase density and height, create new jobs and local opportunities, and relocate long-term local businesses and residents. This process is already underway and will inevitably transform present-day Harlem. *125th St: Time in Harlem* examines Harlem's paradox of place: the tension between the everyday reality of it streets - often contentious, always complex, and the cultural brand it has established in our collective imagination.

[1] In 2007 The American Planning Association selected 10 great streets across America. In choosing 125th the judges commented on the street's ability to "maintain a strong identity through periods of tremendous population growth and infrastructural strain, disinvestment, and urban renewal. In addition it is a piston of economic, social, cultural, and transit activity for Harlem, with increasingly more walkable and livable places ".

HARLEM TIME AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTER

It is perhaps no coincidence that the rise of Harlem as a cultural icon coincided with the birth of documentary photography. No sooner had the heady days of the Harlem Renaissance ended, dissipated like a puff of smoke by the anxieties of the Great Depression and the truth that Roosevelt's promise of a New Deal was in fact a Raw Deal[2], than Harlem experienced what Adam Clayton Powell Jr., called Harlem's "first great riot." And it was in all likelihood one of the nation's first "Leica moments". Until the end of the Harlem Renaissance, Harlem's "photographic archive" had consisted mainly of studio and location portraits from photographers James Van der Zee and Morgan and Marvin Smith. In contrast, the development of high-quality portable hand-held cameras, roll film and lightweight flash equipment enabled rapid and sequential shooting under uncontrolled or quickly changing conditions, and revolutionized picture-making overnight. The possibilities of "instant-capture" attracted politically engaged activists, writers and photographers to explore new forms of visual storytelling. This 'decisive moment' revolution did not only change the way photographers documented reality; it also encouraged them to think about photography in new ways.

As America's black metropolis, Harlem was a beehive of social encounter, teeming with warmth, music, faith, anger and a resolute determination to overcome racial and class injustice. Harlem's residents pleaded, rioted, innovated and marched to get their share of the American Pie, even while its wide streets and distinctive architecture were left to deteriorate. This social cauldron would make Harlem a magnet for ambitious photographers. Aaron Siskind, Ralph Ellison, Gordon Parks, Roy DeCarava, Weegee, Richard Avedon, among many others, were attracted to Harlem's rich cultural milieu, so much so that according to writer Susan Blair[3] the birth and development of documentary photography was influenced greatly by the unfolding story of 20th century Harlem.

125th: Time in Harlem is anchored in this tradition of the engaged document, and was conceived as a collaboration between Isaac Diggs and Edward Hillel (IDEH), two photographers with a prior photographic "claim" to Harlem. Diggs moved to Harlem in 1995 and began documenting its streets with a 35mm Leica and black-and-white film in classic street photography style. Hillel spent time in Harlem making a documentary film and photographing between 1989 and 1990, and in 2003 when he moved there from Paris, continued to photograph the community with film and digital cameras. After being introduced by a mutual friend, Diggs and Hillel saw a unique opportunity to work together photographing Harlem's current moment of transformation.

In so doing both photographers realized their collaboration would challenge the paradigm of the street photographer as "lone-wolf" who navigates the world, quickly and expressively giving its chaos form and meaning. Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and Daido Moriyama, for example, exemplify this approach. At inception the decision was made to use a tripod mounted 4x5 camera which necessitates a slower approach to image making; such a tool can also capture the literal and figurative textures of a given space in precise detail, thus strongly

[2] By 1935, the black population in Harlem had increased by 800%. It was the most densely-populated housing tract in the country, with the highest rates of infant mortality in the city, and an astronomical unemployment rate; *The Complete Report of Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935*, New York, Arno Press 1969

[3] Susan Blair, *Harlem Crossroads, Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century, Princeton University Press*, 2007

communicating the layers of time and sense of place essential to the project.

But even among photographers who have explored the world, and specifically urban spaces, at a slower pace using large format cameras– Eugene Atget, Walker Evans, Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld come to mind – there exists an important difference. In making *125th: Time in Harlem* Diggs and Hillel always worked together in the field. Each image in the series is the result of an on-site vibrant dialogue between the two concerning technical and aesthetic decisions such as lens choices, perspective, vantage point, framing and other issues that emerge in the making of photographs. This method slows down the process even more. It encourages an awareness of the symbolic significance and multiple aspects of the urban landscape: its culture and history, its signage and vernacular building styles, its street fashions and varieties. Often the photographers' conversations engaged curious passers-by and residents of the neighborhood who became impromptu subjects within the photographs. Each plate thus becomes an imprint of an extended encounter that contains layers of cultural, economic, and social meanings.

Initially motivated by 125th Street's unique contribution to the history of Harlem, the decision to photograph it exclusively conveys a preference to "range widely by digging deeply". Much like the practice of zen, the photographers walked back and forth across 125th Street, revisiting the same corners and buildings. The series thus explores a thin patch of urban terrain in a concerted in-depth manner: the same locations are seen on different days, from different viewpoints, within different visual relationships, while the street is always present or implied, inside or just beyond the frame. In this way *125th: Time in Harlem* functions much like Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film "Rashomon" in its exploration of a formal paradox: how can a fragment also function as a whole? This question inherent to the photographic encounter and photography in general, becomes paramount in a series that examines a single place as intensely as these do. While each photograph is formally constructed and carefully considered, it is but a single "witness" among many others testifying about 125th street. Whether looking at one photograph or all of them, the viewer now constructs his own version of an iconic place whose past, present and future are in constant flux.