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Reinnovating the African-American Shotgun House

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A row of shotgun houses derives its power and its timeless, universal appeal from the rhythmic recurrence of simple geometric forms and elements. Artist John Biggers, who was born in a shotgun house in Gastonia, N.C., uses the shotgun house as a recurring symbol of the African-American cultural landscape throughout his work. His paintings of shotguns reveal the poetry inherent in the repetition of this simple house form.

When Houston artist Rick Lowe discovered an abandoned, desolate lot of twenty-two identical shotgun houses in the city's predominately African-American Third Ward, he thought of Biggers. Lowe realized that the site could provide both a powerful and

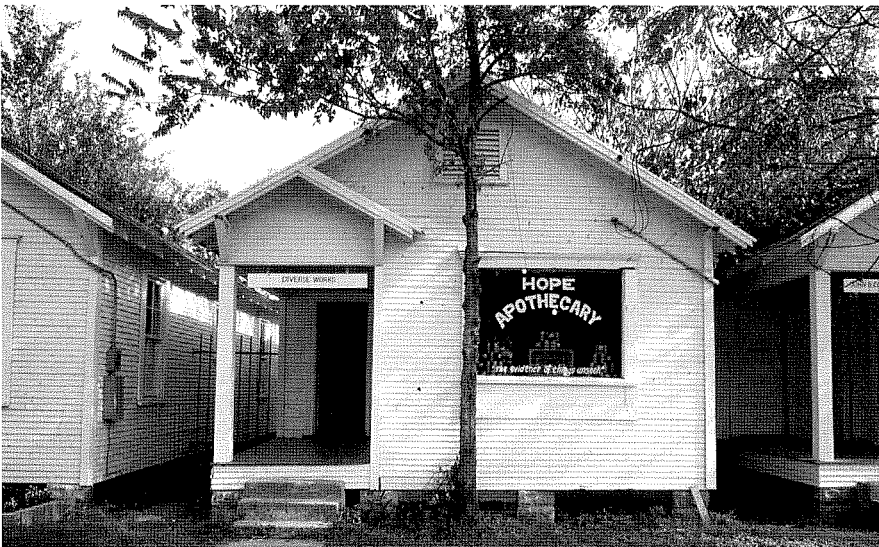
accessible material link to the African-American past and a setting within which the work of contemporary African-American artists could be produced and experienced.

Lowe's vision evolved into a non-profit organization, Project Row Houses, which purchased the property and, with the help of hundreds of volunteers, rescued them from demolition. The result is an important prototypical public art project that encompasses not only the production of art, but also art and cultural education, historic preservation, neighborhood revitalization and community service.

Since Lowe conceived the project in the summer of 1992, eight of the houses have been opened to the public with revolving art installations. Artists spend six-month residencies at the site and in the surrounding community, each developing concepts to transform one house. One house serves as the project's business office and another as an artists' residence. The remaining houses are being restored for community service programs and low-income transitional housing. Lowe is also negotiating the purchase of an adjacent two-story storefront that would be adapted as a multi-media performing arts center.

When the Project Row House structures were built in the late 1930s, the Third Ward was a flourishing business district and the neighborhood's

Tierney Malone, *The Hope Apothecary*.
(Project Row Houses)



(Quote by John Biggers)

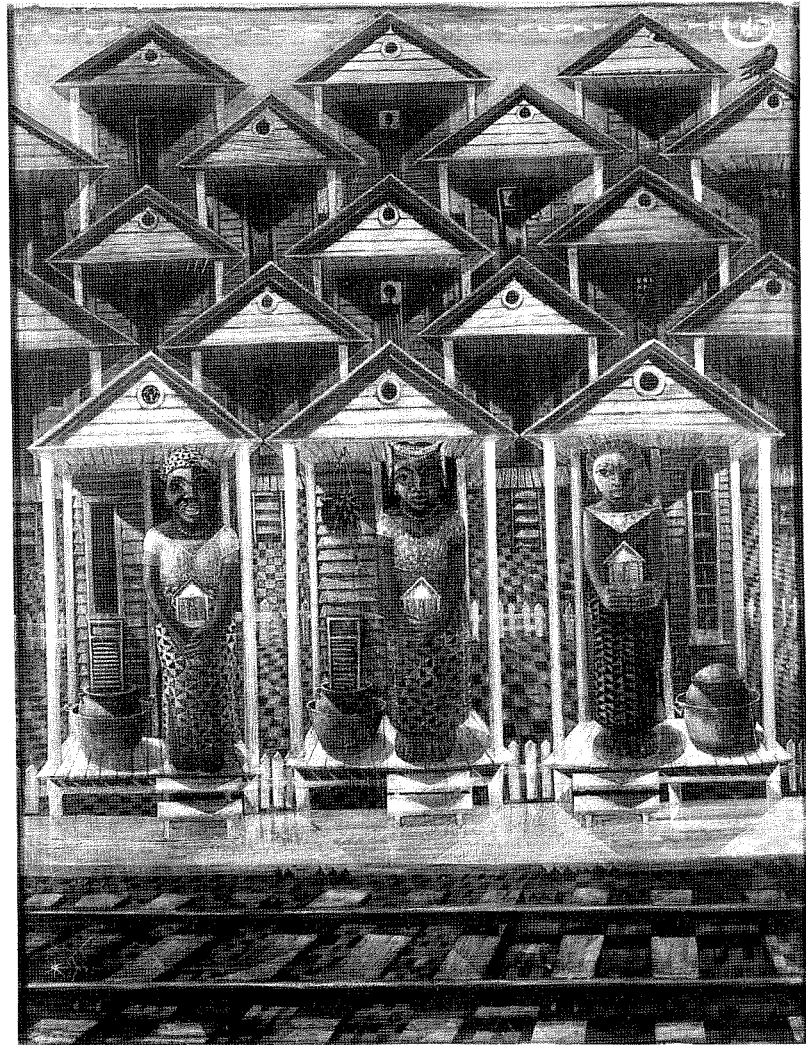
I see them as I walk the Fourth

population was split between African-Americans and immigrant whites. Frank and Katie Trombatore, an Italian family, built the houses as rental property adjacent to the two-story storefront, where they lived and operated a grocery store.

The one and one-half square block site originally included thirty houses arranged in two parallel rows. One row faced a narrow alley to the north, the other faced a major thoroughfare. The tiny (six hundred square feet), one-story houses are elevated on stone footings and are separated by side yards only three feet wide. As with Biggers' paintings of shotguns, the striking presence of the Project Row House site comes from the repetition of the houses' spare, identical elements — factory-made, double-hung windows, standardized wooden attic grills, prefabricated concrete steps and a single square post on the front porch.

Shotgun Form and African-American Identity

According to American folk architecture historians, the shotgun house is one room wide, one story tall and several rooms deep, has its primary entrance in the gable end and has no hallways. The term "shotgun" was coined because one could shoot a bullet through the front door and have it exit



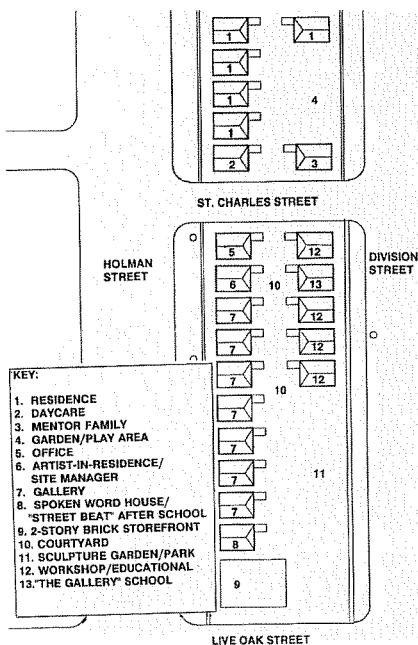
John Biggers, *Shotguns, Fourth Ward* (1987). Acrylic and oil on board. Courtesy Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Va.

through the back door without piercing any walls. This plan also makes the narrow houses well-suited to the hot Southern climate because it allows cross ventilation from front to back.

The project's clapboard houses are typical of the shotgun in their general appearance, but, in fact, they are a hybrid of the shotgun and the compressed bungalow, with gabled tin roof tops, long narrow plans and shallow rear porches. The houses represent one of the many variations on the shotgun found in African-American communities across the country.

Ward of Houston, the rhythm

In addition to accommodation, both retention and reinterpretation occurred; certain cultural traits and practices were passed on unaltered while others were integrated with Native-American and European practices, evolving into what might be considered African-American traditions. — Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), xxiii.



Left: Site plan.

Below: Volunteers refurbishing the exterior of the abandoned shotgun houses. (Stephen L. Clark)



The shotgun house and its many hybrids have long been identified with the African-American cultural landscape. The shotgun was introduced to the U.S. by free Haitians who settled in New Orleans after the Haitian slave rebellion against the French in the early nineteenth century. The Haitians, in essence, reconnected African Americans with the socially intimate housing space that many historians believe evolved from the narrow, one-room units of the Yoruba compound in West Africa — where most slaves brought to America were captured.

The shotgun form grew out of the value traditional African society placed on the continuity of the extended family and a reverence for one's ancestors. The lives of family and clan members were so interwoven with each other that the boundaries between self, family and community were ambiguous. The architecture of the Yoruba compound reflected the lack of importance Africans gave to individuals within the dwelling unit. The emphasis was, instead, on the celebration of family life and the development of interpersonal relationships. The one-room units of the Yoruba compound were used mostly for sleeping and surrounded a large, communal space where the rituals of day-to-day existence were performed.¹

Even as transformed by Caribbean and European building techniques, the shotgun house expresses the enduring social values and cultural traditions of generations of African-Americans. For newly freed African Americans, the shotgun was not only a symbol of freedom but also a means of defining themselves as a united community outside of the confines of slavery. The identical facades of a row of shotgun houses create a sense of collective identity; the front porches transform the street edge into a community gathering space.

of their light and shadow,

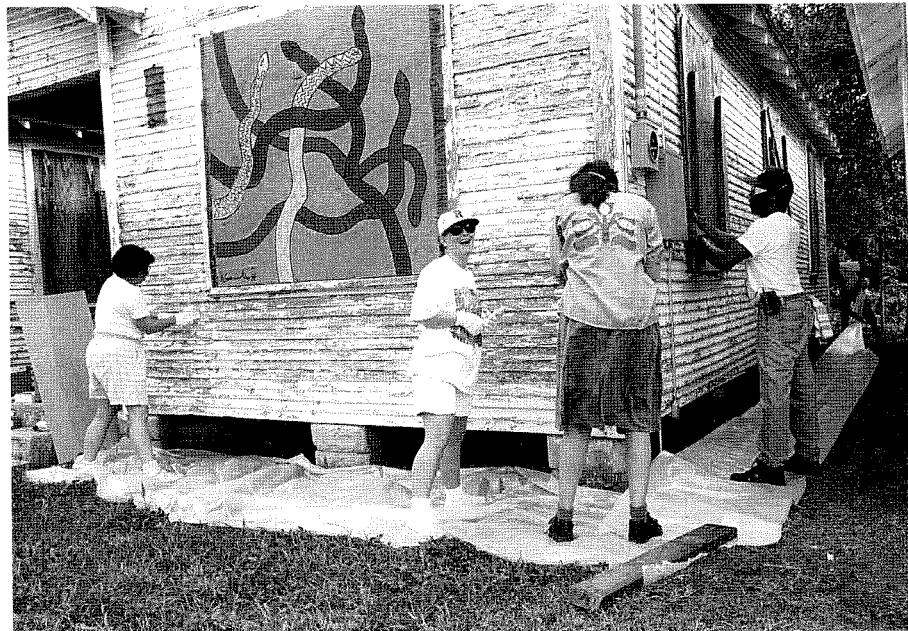
Much of life on the Project Row House site, like that of the Yoruba compound, took place outside the tiny houses in the collective outdoor room framed by the two rows of houses. Punctuated by large trees, rusted clothesline posts and the porches that Biggers called the “talking places” where men “can discuss the meaning of Bible,”² this common green space gives the site a distinctive rural character although it is located in an inner-city neighborhood.

Project Row Houses Begins

The Third Ward’s economic decline is evidenced by the large numbers of boarded up and abandoned houses and empty lots scattered throughout the neighborhood. Despite thriving African-American churches and public institutions, the neighborhood’s lack of a viable private enterprise has fostered a high unemployment rate and its associated ills — poverty, crime, deteriorating housing and poor health care for the community’s citizens.³

Like Biggers, Lowe has always believed that art was capable of spiritually healing the lives of individuals and communities by helping people “recognize the beauty and wisdom in their own culture.” His idea to create temporary public art installations in African-American neighborhoods grew out of discussions several African-American artists in Houston were having about how they could make their work more accessible to the African-American community.

When Lowe stumbled upon the site of identical housing in the Third Ward, he recognized its striking resemblance to many of Biggers’ paintings and felt that it would be an ideal place “to engage the ordinary people of the community in a dialogue with the



Volunteers refurbishing the exterior of the abandoned shotgun houses. (Stephen L. Clark)

arts. The physical (shotgun) houses have relevance to people in the area, those who grew up in the houses or lived near them.”⁴

By summer 1993, Project Row Houses had been incorporated as a nonprofit organization, had obtained a five-year, lease-purchase agreement for the site and had been awarded \$41,000 in grants from local and national arts foundations. Lowe, who supplemented his artist’s income with carpentry work, began renovating the first house himself with the goal of opening the project to the public within the year.

Lowe had originally intended to acquire only ten of the site’s houses and use them as art installation spaces, but it became clear that much more funding from foundation and government sources would be available for housing than for galleries. A low-income hous-

In general, aesthetic education has been treated as a kind of supplement to the development of intellectual knowledge. The results are not convincing, as is proved by the present crisis.... The reason is that one has concentrated too much on the aspect of expression, without simultaneously developing the sense of what should be expressed. Modern art is a mere display of “means.” ... What we need is a better understanding of the (inter-connectedness of the) world.”
— Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Architecture: Meaning and Place* (New York, Electa/Rizzoli, 1988), 14.

the triangle of their gables,

As a Negro, I do not need to go looking for "happenings," the absurd, or the surreal, because I have seen things that neither Dali, Beckett, Ionesco nor any of the others could have thought possible; and to see these things I did not need to do more than look out of my studio window above the Apollo theatre on 125th Street. So, you see, this experience allows me to represent in the means of today, another view of the world.
— Romare Bearden, quoted in Campbell and Patton, *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1991), 44.

ing component would provide ongoing income to keep the galleries open, and by acquiring all the houses on the site, the project could control the ensemble of buildings and spaces.

Lowe and co-director Deborah Grotfeldt assembled a multidisciplinary team of community members, social workers, artists and architects to apply for a HUD grant that would provide funding for restoring the site. The application was unsuccessful, but the process led to the development of a master plan that would include all of houses on the site, including seven as transitional housing for low-income families and five for community service projects. One house would become the Spoken Word House for poetry readings and writers' workshops.

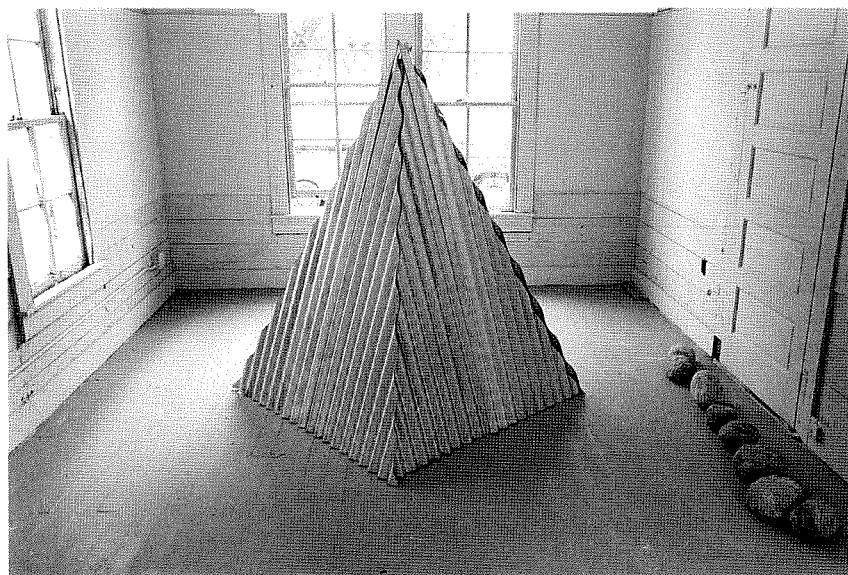
The adjacent two-story storefront, an integral part of the site, would serve as an ideal landmark for the project as a multimedia performing arts center. The center would be programmed in conjunction with the artists' installations and provide income for the project. An open space where five houses had been demolished would be developed as a

community sculpture and vegetable garden and would visually unite the houses and the two-story storefront.

With foundation grants and favorable media reports in hand, Lowe and Grotfeldt quickly found corporations, local museums, community churches and individual donors to sponsor the galleries. The exterior of the houses would be restored to their original appearance in accordance with Texas Historical Commission guidelines, but the interior finish would be left up to the individual artists, who would transform the space with each installation.

The Art Projects

Project Row House's central mission is to establish a forum for dialogue between artists and the Third Ward community within the context of its African-American history. During a residency, an artist is required to conduct workshops with community members where they discuss their installations in the houses or give instruction on small art projects. Many of the artists' interventions are created to be completed by visitors to the space.



Ancestral shrine. George Smith. (Stephen L. Clark)

the square of the porch,

The art produced and exhibited within this framework of cultural self-definition and collective identity is inherently bound up with the traditions, history and social values of the African-American community. The project challenges each artist to interweave his personal vision with the community and the unique space of the shotgun house — echoing the traditional African artisan's creative process of melding collective values and personal visions.⁵

In her installation *Recollections*, Annette Lawrence, artist and education art curator for Houston's Children's Museum of Art, created one of the project's most holistic yet personal expressions of art, place and culture. Preferring the purity of a single vaulted space, Lawrence removed the house's interior partitions and ceiling, exposing its wooden rafters. She finished the roof and walls with sheet rock, creating a light, pristine space interrupted only by a brick chimney. The space was layered with vertical planes of strings strung from the rafters to the floor. Woven between the harp-like strings are tiny paper bag notebooks made by neighborhood children, who tell the story of the community through their eyes.

Lawrence, whose work often has musical overtones, compares her stringed installation to the "inside of a piano" and "bars of music." "I wanted my piece to be as light as possible and quiet. The strings in my piece refer to the lines of clapboard siding on the houses." The delicate installation seemed like a melody played against the heavier cadence established by the rhythm of the identical houses along the street.

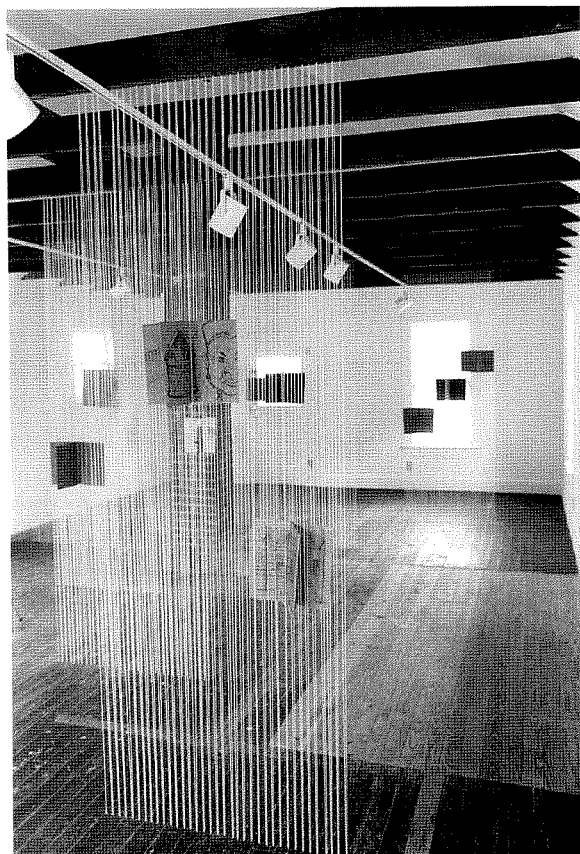
Many of the installations transform the houses with metaphysical metaphors echoing African themes of spiritual healing found in Biggers' work.

Art historian Robert Farris Thompson describes one of Biggers' paintings, *Shotguns*, as a "nkisi painting" and compares it to Grant Wood's *American Gothic*.⁶ A nkisi is a West African Kongo charm or portable shrine that is created to heal and protect its owner and contains the spirit of one's ancestors. Thompson writes:

On the front porch of each of the five closest shotgun houses appears a key feature of traditional African-American yard art: vessels by the door. They stand for African-American culture in practical, domestic acts: preparing soap, cooking pork, bathing infants. But they also signify covert spiritual protection, Grant Wood's pitchfork taken underground. The pot before the door cooks or contains more than meets the eye. It metaphysically caparisons the traditional African-American yard and houses,

Scholars of African-American culture have emphasized that the underpinning of African-American creativity is marked by constant improvisation: "It is an integral part of the process of African-art to constantly reshape the old and familiar into something modern and unique to simultaneously express one's self and reinforce the image of the community."

— John Michael Vlach, *Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), 3.



Recollections. Annette Lawrence. (Stephen L. Clark)

three over four, like the

*as do African-American bottle trees and bottle shelves and bottle-lined walks and garden beds.*⁷

Artist Tierney Malone transformed the shotgun house into a mythical drugstore, *Hope Apothecary*, a rich installation of rooms filled with bottles and cans that contain potions for curing the ills of the community. Stacked on shelves, Malone's containers are collaged with images of African-American heroes like Langston Hughes and Jackie Robinson and are juxtaposed with scenes of poverty and violence. Malone left the walls as they were — rough and textured with bent nails, staples and remnants of wall and newspaper that recall the African-American tradition of “dressing” the house to ward off evil spirits. The rooms, filled with beautifully detailed and well-crafted collaged containers, transcend the sentiment and nostalgia of the artist's message.

In Biggers' paintings the narrow, gabled elevation of the shotgun house is often abstracted as a temple-like icon and domestic chores are treated as sacred rituals. In *Shotguns* the female figures clasp tiny versions of the houses — “held like lanterns to guard the purity of the people.”⁸ The flying birds in the upper left corner and the vertical washboards on the porches represent ascension to the heavens.

George Smith, an artist and professor at Rice University, has often alluded to African and African-American burial rites and traditions in his sculpture. Like Biggers, Smith has interpreted the narrow form of the house as an ancestral shrine:

This shrine represent(s) an African-American interpretation of the Mbari shrines that are built by the Ibo people of

*Nigeria. These public shrines were used for celebration whenever it was felt that a community needed spiritual renewal or strengthening after a crisis caused by drought, war, famine or similar adversity.*⁹

Smith, in an early study for his house-shrine, explored the domestic link between African-American house and grave. In keeping with the African-American tradition of placing broken, inverted cups, saucers, dishes and other possessions of the deceased over the grave site to keep the spirit content, Smith created a sacred ring of broken white dishes in the middle of the house. “Gathering together to eat is life-affirming and china was always the family's most revered possession,” he notes.

Smith's idea of creating a shrine to African-American ancestors evolved into the construction of a wood-frame altar around a brick chimney that was once connected to a wood stove. Providing warmth in the winter and a means for cooking, the chimney was the internal focal point of the house. Smith's altar will be completed over the six-month installation period with offerings from community residents, who are invited to participate in “urban renewal through the celebration of life with art.”

Project Row Houses is a spatial unfolding of Biggers' paintings. Like *Shotguns*, Project Row Houses is also a *nkisi*. Acknowledging the healing power that comes from a connection with one's heritage, the project seeks a transformation of spirit of the Third Ward community by encompassing not only the production of art, but also art and cultural education, historic preservation, neighborhood revitalization and community service interweaves art, life, religion and philosophy. Project Row Houses, like the community it embraces, like the art it cultivates, reveals to us the interconnectness of things.

beat of a visual gospel.

Notes

1. John Michael Vlach, *Sources of the Shotgun House: African and Caribbean Antecedents for Afro-American Architecture*, Vols. I and II, Doctoral Dissertation (Indiana University, March, 1975).

2. Robert Farris Thompson, "The Song that Named the Land," in *Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989), 23-30.

3. Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press: 1987).

4. Rick Lowe, "Roundtable Discussion for the Artist and the Community: Public Art in Houston," *Art Lies* (March 1995).

5. Frank Willett, *African Art: An Introduction* (New York: Thames and Hudson 1971, 1993), 153.

6. Robert Farris Thompson, "John Biggers' Shotguns of 1987: An American Classic," *The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room* (exhibition catalogue) (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1995), 108.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. George Smith, Project Row House Artists Notes, April, 1995.

John Biggers' quote is from Robert Farris Thompson, "The Song that Named the Land," *Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989).



Scarification. Steven Bernard Jones. (Project Row Houses)