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Godlewski, Joseph

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The Tragicomic Televisual Ghetto: Popular Representations of Race and Space at Chicago's Cabrini-Green

by Joseph Godlewski

Abstract

The production of cultural perceptions in mass media is linked to the project of urban renewal and institutionalized racism. Popular television shows like *Good Times*, so infused with progressive ideals and issues of social relevance, were able to convey a normative view of "the projects" as an inherently failed space. This article presents a history of cultural translation and racial relations against a backdrop of American housing policy in the post-war era.

The 1970s television show, *Good Times*, which earned the status as one of the first "black sitcoms," told the story of a morally strong family enduring life in "the projects" of Chicago. Experiencing a kind of racialized modernity, social mobility for the Evans family was continually fraught and "progress" was agonizingly and circularly deferred in weekly half-hour segments. In their perpetual struggle, the show's characters can be seen as engaged with what Cornel West has called the "ignoble paradox of modernity."¹ (West 1999, 53) Its serious themes, though, were punctuated by witty lines and the enigmatic catchphrase "Dyn-o-mite!" emphatically uttered by the family's eldest son and star of the show, J.J. Evans.

Provocatively, the setting of this comedy was the Chicago Housing Authority's now infamous low-income housing project, Cabrini-Green. Though not overtly stated on the show, an analysis of its opening and closing sequences as well as its set design unmistakably demonstrate its very particular architectural setting within a produced televisual geography. Rather than dismissing this choice of venue as an amusing archi-historical anecdote, a closer examination of the history of Cabrini-

¹ West argues this paradox is the fact that democracy flourished for Europeans alongside the growth of the transatlantic slave trade and New World slavery. He writes that the "great irony of black striving in America is that the ignoble paradox of modernity has yielded deep black allegiances to the promise of American democracy." 53.

Green, American public housing policy, and *Good Times* reveals a much richer constellation of cultural translation and knowledge production. How, for example, did public housing in the United States devolve to a state where the obviousness of its inefficacy had become “common sense” by the 1970s? Why was the call for demolishing 3200 low-income units at Cabrini-Green considered a self-evident act of *development* in the 1990s? What role did media and pop cultural representations of public housing projects have in abetting or contesting these assumptions?

Without a doubt, the answer to these are extraordinarily complex and a comprehensive response is beyond the scope of this article; however we can take Cabrini-Green as a case study and analyze how its discourse of disaster was systematically produced and historically supported by, among other things, racist institutional mechanisms, political jockeying, and the often overlooked hegemonic effects of popular culture. What is striking is how a show like *Good Times*, so infused with progressive ideals and issues of social relevance was so easily able to convey a normative view of “the projects” as an inherently failed space. The intention of this article is to explore why this idea is so pervasive and analyze how historically Cabrini-Green came to be synonymous with “infamy,” “failure,” and “tragedy.” How did it become, “known the nation over as one of the most disastrous experiments in public housing,” (Egan 1986, 8) or in *Newsweek’s* opinion, “America’s most notorious housing development:”?(*Newsweek* 1989, 24-26) This article argues that, rather than separate and innocent acts of entertainment, media representations of racial and spatial segregation like those depicted in *Good Times* actually play a central role in prefiguring conceptions of public housing and urban space. As Rabinow claims, representations are social facts with tangible consequences. (Rabinow 1986) These representations are inevitably polysemic in nature and the experience of these representations is undoubtedly different for a white and admittedly dislocated (spatially, temporally, culturally, socio-economically, etc.) audience member like myself versus that of a black television viewer. The effects of these representations however, often neglected, cannot be dismissed as merely reflective afterthoughts or provisional cultural expressions.

Good Times was one of several shows produced by Norman Lear in the 1970s which attempted to address serious political and social issues within the constraints of the half-hour commercial television sitcom format. Other productions like *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *One Day at a Time*, and *The Jeffersons* put forth a fairly liberal social agenda while simultaneously garnering Lear commercial success and critical acclaim. *Good Times* was not an exception to this success and aired on CBS from 1974 to 1979, becoming, as the *New York Times* termed it, “the first series about a real ghetto family.” (Kasindorf 1973, 226 in Campbell 2007)

Explicitly didactic, the show embedded public-service announcements within its plot lines and comedic one-liners. All of the main characters on the show were black and, in a representational inversion of earlier television eras, it was the white characters that were often presented in a mocking manner. The show was a Nielsen ratings success while managing to address issues as varied as teen pregnancy, alcoholism, gun control, child abuse, and racism. In retrospect, it's arguably a show which could not be produced today, at least not on network television. Edgy plot lines included an episode where the Evans family's politically vocal son Michael refers to George Washington as a "white racist," an episode in which J.J. supposedly contracts venereal disease, or another about an impoverished neighbor who is reduced to eating dog food. At the time, *TV Guide's* critic lauded it as "the best new show with a first rate cast." *Ebony* magazine praised the show calling it "the tube's best effort to date showing a real slice of ghetto black life." Cultural critic Donald Bogle notes the show was "edgy, pushy, and in-your-face about its issues" and considered it "a breakthrough because it acknowledged poverty and other urban ills confronting a segment of the African-American community." (Bogle 2001, 199) Emblematic of this view, in 2006, the show was bestowed the TV Land "Impact Award" recognizing its lasting influence on television and its progressive social message.² (2006 TV Land Awards)

Though generally seen as a show which positively changed the course of black portrayals on television, cultural critics and television historians have often problematized the star character of J.J. Evans (played by Jimmie Walker) for falling into stereotyped and racist "coon-like" representations of the African-American male. They argue the buffoonish J.J. harkened back to the Stepin Fetchit characters of early radio and television shows such as *Amos n' Andy* and the jester-like entertainers of blackface minstrelsy. J.J. is seen as a retrograde ploy for garnering ratings by appealing to the audience's racist sensibilities.³ (Means Coleman 2000) Though it's easy to agree with the widely held analysis, this criticism is far too narrow and simplistic obscuring, among other things, the hegemonic message the show conveys about race and public housing.⁴ Instead, perhaps a more productive lens for viewing *Good Times* is Cornel West's understanding of the "tragicomic" as "the ability

² The award was presented to the surviving members of the show by Quentin Tarantino.

³ J.J.'s role was a contentious issue on the set and eventually led to the departure of the father character portrayed by John Amos and the mother character portrayed by Esther Rolle. John Amos went on to star as the elder Kunta Kinte in the television mini-series *Roots*.

⁴ Further, characterizing J.J. as a passive subject or minstrel character is far too simplistic and negates the overtly satirical sarcasm and acerbic criticality often put forth by his character.

to laugh and retain a sense of life's joy—to preserve hope even while staring in the face of hate and hypocrisy." (West 2004, 16) This hopeful reading though, is repeatedly challenged by the show's representation of space. Often neglected, the perpetually malfunctioning space of *Good Times* perversely became an object of ridicule. Liberal storylines and straw-man character criticisms tend to occlude the effects of the loaded architectural iconography lurking just over J.J.'s shoulder. Lear's parody of "the projects" hinged on a derisive spatial logic, legitimizing normative notions of social housing as a public folly to be abandoned. The point here, of course, is not to draw a direct causal relationship between a singular 1970s sitcom and subsequent policy decisions, but to historically situate the production of specific cultural artifacts and examine how they construct a particular and stereotyped cognitive map of "the projects."

The opening credits of *Good Times* begin abruptly with a voice-over by the father character, James Evans exclaiming, "Live! From Studio City in Hollywood!" as the camera presents the audience with, in de Certeau's terms, a "panorama city" view of Chicago's downtown skyline from east to west. Oddly, the locus of the program is visually tied to a specific time and place, yet it's simultaneously undermined by the phonetic proclamation of its place in the produced imaginary space of Hollywood. The connection to a particular place is further established with views of Chicago's urban core, the Loop, and the Chicago River. Ultimately, the camera stops and zooms in northward and pauses on the cluster of brick and concrete towers comprising the Cabrini-Green housing project. Various shots around the towers from ground level further establish the project's proximity to Chicago's Gold Coast with the Hancock Tower clearly visible on the horizon. Finally, the camera zooms in to a specific window, presumably J.J. and the Evans family's apartment and the concluding shot shows the interior living room with one of J.J.'s paintings portraying the family on an easel set before a window with a view of the project's infamous brick edifices perspectively receding into the distance beyond.⁵

The building on the show was a humorously abject space. Whether it was a crumbling ceiling falling onto J.J.'s head at the breakfast table, the slapstick gangs in the building's hallways, or the lazy custodian affectionately called "Buffalo Butt," the space of *Good Times* was one which was comically fraught. Instead of being portrayed seriously or as something which heeded political action, the decay of the Evans family's building oddly became a subject for generating comedy. Toeing the uneasy line between satire and stereotype, jokes about living conditions in this cartoon ghetto usually opted for the latter. The elevator was a

⁵ The opening title sequence was slightly adjusted throughout the show's run interspersed with interior action shots of each actor with the credits; however the general spatial logic remained the same.

recurring display of the building's dysfunction. Located just outside the Evans' door, it was the object of droll contempt. It was a technological disaster, a site for crime, or a place where the local "wino" camped out. Housing was a sad bi-product of a bureaucratic and inefficient system of rules and regulations, an unfortunate experience that had to be endured and ultimately escaped.

As if to confirm the implied moral order underpinning the Chicago School of Urban Sociology's concentric zone model, the aspirational "escape" narrative of *Good Times* provided evidence in burlesque.⁶ Urbanistically, the weekly tribulations faced by the Evans family unwittingly substantiated Burgess's organic conception of the "metabolism of the city" 60 years earlier. Their aspirations to move outward from the "zone of deterioration" and participate in the Darwinian struggle of "succession" towards the "more desirable regions of the residential zone" were naturalized as part of a dynamic process. (Burgess 1925) *Good Times* validated the "urban ideology" latent within the human ecological paradigm of the Chicago School and later critiqued by Castells (1977) in *The Urban Question*.

This is not to say horrific conditions did not exist in *Good Times'* Cabrini-Green or that the space of its public housing was somehow beyond critique; however, largely due to the constraints of the half-hour format, interjected by commercials, and the stipulation that it had to be "funny", the problems on *Good Times* we're often de-historicized and naturalized, aestheticized to the point of being acceptable. The institutional and socio-spatial mechanisms of control which engendered these conditions, so powerfully documented by Drake and Cayton's (1993 [1945]) *Black Metropolis* or Hirsch's (1983) *Making of the Second Ghetto*, could not be addressed. The systematic process of "*de jure* segregation" described by Peter Hall, instead, had to comedically be taken as a matter of fact. (Hall 2002, 447) "The projects," by metonymy, were a joke. They suffered from, in Baudrillard's terms, "the obscenity of obviousness." (Baudrillard 1986, 27) Race was performed and conceptually linked to a normative view of the urbanistically pathological "projects" before a live studio audience and broadcast to the American public beyond.

The question of *Good Times'* particular site specificity is one without a singular answer, though possible explanations complicate the relationship between representations and the reality they portray. One

⁶ Other black sitcoms premised on the "escape" narrative include *Diff'rent Strokes* in which a wealthy white Park Avenue resident bizarrely picks up two African American boys from the streets of Harlem, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* which largely repeats this plotline (except the rich family is black) and *The Bernie Mac Show*. Coincidentally, Bernie Mac takes in his niece and nephew into his suburban home after their residence in Cabrini Green.

reason for *Good Times'* Cabrini-Green setting choice may have involved Lear's writers. Lear hired two African-Americans, Eric Monte and Mike Evans, to develop a distinctively African-American sitcom. Monte had grown up in Cabrini-Green and hitchhiked to Hollywood to become a television writer and was "motivated to reconstruct the image of African-Americans on television." (Baudrilard, 122) His experiences provided a wellspring of material for the show, though his contentious relationship with Lear over script content eventually resulted in his departure and a million dollar legal settlement. The contested space of the set between the then predominately white writers and black actors prefigured the ideological theater of the show. Sadly, by 2003, Monte had become addicted to crack cocaine and was living in a Salvation Army homeless shelter at the time of a recent public radio interview. (Dunn 2006) It is as though Monte's life story had unwittingly traced the same historical trajectory of American public housing.

Another, perhaps more telling reason for *Good Times'* site specificity was the fact that after the 1972 nationally-televised implosion of St. Louis' Pruitt-Igoe project, Cabrini-Green arguably inherited the title of America's most well-known and infamous public housing project. Regarding Pruitt-Igoe, architectural critic Charles Jencks famously proclaimed, "Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts)." (Jencks 1977, 9) The event simultaneously ushered in a period in which the tenets of modern architecture were to be reassessed and the viability of the social project of public housing was seriously questioned (if not disparaged). Two years after Pruitt-Igoe's "final *coup de grâce* by dynamite," (Jencks 1977, 9) J.J. was weekly reciting "Dyn-o-mite!" from within the walls of Cabrini-Green to a rapt television audience. Rhetorically, *Good Times* took off where Pruitt-Igoe's spectacular destruction began in denigrating public housing's social efficacy in the minds of the American public. Much like Katherine Bristol's effort to expose the "Pruitt-Igoe Myth," where the responsibility for the failure of public housing was shifted from institutional and structural forces to designers thus legitimizing the architectural profession, (Bristol 1991) *Good Times* oblique spatial message served to undermine its otherwise progressive social agenda, legitimizing public disinvestments in social housing while normalizing living conditions within.

As intriguing as the show's choice of a Chicago setting was, its representation of space at the scale of the apartment was remarkable as well. Though aesthetically "dirtied" around the edges, the *mise en scène* of the Evans' living unit was distortedly large, bright, and middle-class for one purportedly existing in Cabrini-Green. The set offered a misleadingly capacious unit ostensibly stretched to accommodate the actors' movements. One can visualize cameras offering only jarring close-

ups of characters if the apartment were to be presented anywhere near realistically. In this sense, the physical space within which the Evans' existed was thus minstrelized much more so than any of its characters' specific traits, producing a deformed and entertaining image of "real ghetto life." The hyperreal spatial manifestation however, became the imagined reality of "the projects" for the dislocated television viewer of *Good Times*. AlSayyad's (2006) focus in *Cinematic Urbanism* on how images help reconfigure urban reality, and vice versa, played itself out on the television screen. The boundaries between real and filmic space were dissolved and society became to know "itself unreflexively only through reflections that flow(ed) from the camera's eye." (AlSayyad 2006, 2)⁷

Subsequently, Cabrini-Green and the fiscal armature of US public housing policy experienced a generalized trajectory of decline. The "already-ruinous situation [had] degenerated into a full-scale catastrophe, considering that only one percent of the US property market in 1980 was publicly owned, as opposed to 46 percent in England and Wales (before the onslaught of privatization instigated by the Thatcher government)." (Jackson 1985, 224) In parallel, *Good Times* served as a form of constructed visibility in which difference was staged and performed. It created a backward and malfunctioning "other" space serving to constitute a "normal" urban Self. Existing peripherally in the audience's spatial imaginary, the show simultaneously aestheticized and confirmed racial difference much the same way the minstrel show or the Chicago's Columbian Exhibition did 75 years earlier. Culture and media critic Robin Means Coleman writes, "the ghetto...became palatable...It gave comfort to White America that social programs could be replaced with a good pair of bootstraps." (Means Coleman 2000, 91) In *Color Adjustment*, Marlon Briggs' documentary on black televisual representation, Henry Louis Gates concludes that *Good Times*, by presenting yet mocking the hellish conditions in the ghetto, "represented the greatest potential yet was.. [ultimately] .. the greatest failure." (Briggs 1991)

In contrast to other housing projects located at the urban periphery and in predominately black neighborhoods, Cabrini-Green existed as an island of poverty within an affluent section of the city's North Side. Unlike the Robert Taylor Homes, the largest public housing project in the world when it opened in 1962 and located in Chicago's southside Black Belt, Cabrini-Green was built near the luxurious areas of the Gold Coast. The real estate on which it was constructed was not only highly visible, but highly valuable, and "extremely enticing to realtors." (D'Eramo 2002, 316) Because of its enclave-like nature, it was also the most visible

⁷ AlSayyad's book argues urbanism cannot be understood outside the space of the celluloid city and that the boundary between the real and the "reel" has dissolved.

public housing complex to the city's white residents. This high degree of visibility instigates a complex set of socio-spatial processes of power. Communications theorist Matthew Murray applied a Foucauldian analysis of Cabrini-Green, concluding "division was the discursive and spatial strategy" used. The discourse of a wild group of gangs ruling the projects was used to set the space apart. The reasoning went that "in order to rescue the rest of the community from the menace, it will have to consent willingly to extreme discipline while the gangs are being physically repressed." The control operates on the popular discourse of the ghetto "as a landscape of gratuitous abandonment." (Murray 1995, 315-321)

Cabrini Green's precarious position in the mediascape and urban fabric of Chicago made it highly susceptible to all kinds of political jockeying. In March of 1981, in an attempt to repair her damaged image amongst black constituents, Chicago's then Mayor Jane Byrne announced she and her husband would transplant themselves from their Gold Coast apartment into Cabrini-Green, where they would live "for as long as it takes to clean it up." During the twenty-five days of her highly publicized stay (ostensibly long enough to "clean things up"), the number of police patrols and arrests in the area shot up and crime declined. However, the act was generally regarded as a public relations stunt with little lasting value. Instead, the media exposure added to the already high visibility of the project and codified Cabrini-Green as a wild zone of criminal dysfunction. Writing of the disjoint in perception, Kleppner notes the "widespread belief among blacks was that Mayor Byrne regarded them as subjects rather than citizens of their city." (Kleppner 1995, 315) In the end, it seems Byrne's venture into the ghetto was much the same as Norman Lear's - a spectacularized extraterritorial excursion into abject "other" space of the ghetto. It was perhaps a well-intentioned white liberal gesture with ultimately deleterious discursive effects, somehow managing to distance Cabrini-Green even further from the normal functioning space of the urban core, amplifying its state of impossibility.

The final episode of *Good Times*, entitled "End of the Rainbow," aired on August 1, 1979. Just months after Thatcher's election in the UK and a year before Reagan's ascendancy, the show depicted a mawkishly happy ending through a bizarre tale of ghetto transcendence. As if to confirm critics' disdain for the star's cartoonish behavior and portrayal of racial stereotypes, J.J. earned a high-paying job illustrating comic books. His sister announced she was pregnant while her husband revealed his leg injury had miraculously healed and was offered a contract to play football with the Chicago Bears. With the money, they would move to an upscale downtown penthouse asking their mother to go with them. The show ended with a freeze frame of the mother, Florida Evans, embracing

the family's neighbor, Wilona, who by sheer coincidence was moving into the same building! And all of this was told with a straight face. Their *deus ex machina* had come to lift them from the comic horrors of the ghetto. They were improbably propelled forward, achieving a caricature of their aspirations and leaving the exhausted "projects" in their wake. Witnessing all of this, one is impelled to view cultural representations in their context and contemplate their semantic value. Rather than artifacts in isolation, they should be viewed as points in a larger, more dynamic circuit of cultural translation and knowledge production. What is it we're laughing at when we watch an episode of *Good Times* and what does it mean? Is it "the situation" depicted which arouses laughter, or is it ours? Are we perversely laughing in unison at the institutional and physical violence which facilitates the ghettoization of our cities? Or are we laughing as though to affirm our position outside and consent to the destruction of our own internalized colonies like Cabrini-Green? I'm reminded of Adorno and Horkheimer's (1983, 141) acerbic insight regarding the culture industry, "To laugh at something is to deride it... Such a laughing audience is a parody of humanity... Their harmony is a caricature of solidarity."

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Joseph Godlewski is a PhD student in Architecture at the University of California at Berkeley. He received his undergraduate degree in architecture from Syracuse University and has since worked on several projects in the United States and Europe, notably with Eisenman Architects in New York City and Marc Kocher dipl.-Arch in Zurich, Switzerland. He received his Master of Science degree in Architectural History and Theory from UC Berkeley and his current research focuses on urbanization in the developing world and the interrelationship between economics and the cultural production of space. He serves as a graduate student instructor in the Architecture and City Planning departments.