...You assume the buildings and
The small print roadways and
The cornered accidents
Of roof and oozing tar and ordinary concrete
Zigzag. Well.
It is not beautiful.
It never was.
These are the shaven
Private parts
The city show
Of what somebody means
When he don’t even bother
Just to say
“I don’t give a goddam”
(and)
“I hate you.”

--excerpt from draft of poem “Sweetwater Poem Number One,” enclosed in letter to Frances Fox Piven, Aug 12, 1971, College Archives of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College

Place, Emotion, and Racial/Environmental Justice in Harlem : June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller's 1965 "Architextual" Collaboration
My talk focuses on environmental and social justice as an intervention into the materiality of urban planning in a collaboration between June Jordan, and R. Buckminster Fuller. Both interdisciplinary thinkers and civic environmentalists, they illustrate the concept that “that environmental quality and economic and social health are mutually constitutive” (Shutkin 14). I situate their project “Skyrise for Harlem,” an architectural redesign of Harlem that challenged many of the dominant practices of urban planning in the 1960s, within the paradigm of urban environmental justice, as theorized by Robert Bullard, Dorceta Taylor, Lawrence Buell, Joni Adamson and others. Environment justice activists claim that where we live, work, play, and pray constitutes our environment, and that poor communities and communities of color have been burdened with disproportionate toxic exposures as well as neglect and discrimination. Environmental justice became “one of the largest and most active social movements in the U.S.… addressing the concerns of urbanites and people of color that had been overlooked by mainstream environmental organizations…” (Bennett, 169) The movement is made up of thousands of grassroots groups. It is my intention to position Skyrise for Harlem as a design and philosophy in critical environmental justice studies and the actions and intentions of its creators as a model for social justice citizenship. I’ve coined the term “architextural” to emphasize architecture as text, and text as a thickly descriptive, multidimensional (a pre-computerized version of hypertext), serving as a scaffold on which to build a vision of hope and embodied structure. Jordan originally conceptualized this project as a “threshold” or gateway into new possibilities for Harlem—where she
felt there had been “no threshold.” She wrote: “In Harlem what does entrance mean? On one side of the door there is the street of no human direction. On the other side is a hallway leading to a closet of inconsequence…being born only to continue dying” (Letter to Fuller, June 18, 1964, from the personal collection of Shoji Sadao). She saw Harlem in 1964 as an example of “the multiplying forms of paralysis suffered by every resident of NYC, and of the American metropolis.” (Letter to BF, June 18, 1964).

June Jordan was a poet, essayist, orator, Black English advocate and social justice activist, a teacher, a lover and an intellectual who died of breast cancer in 2002. She transformed the bounds of self and society with a revolutionary vision, and is an unacknowledged poet-philosopher of urban environmental justice. She textually and visually mapped the dimensions of psyche and race, political economy, language and place. Early in her career, Jordan studied architecture and design with Herbert Gans, a leading sociologist of urban planning at the time (at Barnard), as a fellow in Environmental Design at the American Academy in Rome, and as a researcher and writer on housing and economic conditions on the Lower East Side of Manhattan for Mobilization for Youth. She advocated a transformative urban planning that has never been thoroughly acknowledged or explored in her legacy as a poet and thinker; she collaborated in 1964-65 with Fuller, an engineer, architect, mathematician and

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1 “Mobilization for Youth was the first Great Society agency. It opened in 1962 on New York’s Lower East Side, the precursor of seventeen such agencies established in sixteen major cities in the in the early 1960s with federal anti-delinquency money…To most of the adults on the Lower East Side, MFY was symbolized by its store-front service centers, to which residents were encouraged to bring their daily problems of living under the welfare state,” from Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. London: Tavistock Publications, 1972.290.
poet, best known for his geodesic dome designs, and also for what he called “Comprehensive Anticipatory Design Science,” to attempt and solve humanity’s major problems through the use of technology, supporting more people with less resources (“Who is Fuller,” 2). Their redesign of Harlem featured elevated, conical-shaped towers supported by central masts with one hundred levels (see figure 1) built over existing housing units containing new dwelling space, parking ramps and suspension bridges cutting through the towers and creating a connecting road. The plan also included an expansion of green space, more leisure areas, and new thoroughfares. It aimed to keep residents and community intact and to take into account the psychological state of living in an area deemed a “ghetto.” This architecture challenged typical urban planning schemes of the time and the practice and rhetoric of “slum clearance.” She claimed that Skyrise for Harlem is the way to “rescue” a quarter of a million lives by completely transforming the environment; she went on to describe the history of Harlem’s disenfranchisement, the lack of the city’s master plan for Harlem, and the effects of the recent riots on the psyche of residents. Then, she laid out the full plan of the “radical landscapes” she and Fuller proposed. In a letter she wrote to New York City Housing commissioner William Reid, Jordan requested annual reports and fact sheets about construction in New York City and cost of dwelling unit for the average family. She would use some statistics to make the point about neglect in Harlem housing, and also to show the efficacy and viability of the Harlem redesign from a fiscal as well as enlightened utopian perspective (Oct 23,
What is especially vexing is that Jordan’s role in the Harlem redesign project was minimized or omitted at the time the plan was publicly unveiled in *Esquire* (where Jordan wrote it under her married name, Meyer, but she was not given credit in the article as co-creator). At the Whitney Museum’s exhibit (New York City, June 26-Sept. 21, 2008) “Buckminster Fuller, Starting with the Universe” the original drawing of the Harlem Redesign was featured, but credited to Fuller and his architectural partner Shoji Sadao, who actually did the drawing according to Fuller’s specification. Jordan’s name and collaborative role were omitted on the placard that accompanied the illustration. In my essay in the journal *Discourse*, and in lectures like this, I hope to set the record straight by examining the process through which they collaborated, and the result of their synergistic thinking. Jordan and Fuller believed that the architectural and spatial environment play an essential role in the attitude, self worth, memory, and life experience within a community, a philosophy that fits within what Eric Gary Anderson calls the ecosocial, focusing on “local communities that prepare the way for critical discussion of the blighted, traumatized and traumatic social and cultural histories that play out in built and natural environments,” (195). I am interested in exploring the historically situated ecosocial contexts in which Fuller

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2 Conversation with Shoji Sadao, Oct. 7, 2008. I wish to thank Mr. Sadao for speaking with me and for giving me access to his personal collection from which I quote in this essay. I also wish to thank Marilyn Morgan, curator of the June Jordan Papers at the Schlesinger Library, for her guidance. I wish to acknowledge and thank The Research Foundation at CUNY for a grant that supported this research and also enabled me to hire Vanessa Goresuch who helped with research.

3 After I discussed the matter with the curators at the Whitney and provided some textual proof, Jordan’s name was added for future viewings of the exhibit.
and Jordan were working and to examine what individual philosophies and experiences brought to bear on this project and in public memory. I draw on archival materials that include their correspondence.

Jordan’s work is concerned with what we would now call critical race theory. Built from legal studies and other interdisciplinary fields, it illustrates a deep understanding that people of color speak from an experience often framed by racism and therefore have perspectives that are different from the dominant culture of hegemonic whiteness. The Harlem project was a way to work with one of her mentors who happened to be white, to “design a three-dimensional, an enviable, exemplary life situation for Harlem residents, who otherwise, had to outmaneuver New York City’s Tactical Police force, rats, a destructive and compulsory system of education…too often, urban renewal meant Negro removal..” (Jordan,“Forward,” 10; “Letter to RBF” 24 Civil Wars). Jordan is concerned with “unmasking” the structures, processes and settings that undermine Harlem housing and in doing so, she intervenes in the environmental and social conditions that are reproduced and socialized. Therefore, she should be acknowledged as initiating in the mid 1960s what Cindi Katz calls for in today’s neoliberal privatized world, “a collective responsibility for social reproduction” (106).
Figure 1 Rendering of “A Skyrise for Harlem,” design by Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao, which appeared in the *Esquire* essay written and conceptualized by Jordan.
The “New York” Approach to Urban Renewal

In New York City, this was the era of the influence of master builder and urban planner Robert Moses on the one hand, and Jane Jacobs, the critic of much traditional urban planning, on the other. While Moses had no “operative role” in the public housing program, his developments displaced vast numbers of people living in the projects and so called slums. Critics, echoing Jacobs, have been asking “were the areas being cleared really occupied by slums beyond rehabilitation? Was not a distinctive New York City fabric, a mix of housing, stores, churches, small factories and varied other uses, being swept away for the cold monoliths of modernist architecture and planning? Jacobs was interested in the ways in which human beings live and thrive in layered complexity and seeming chaos. The modernist planners used deductive reasoning to find principles by which to plan cities. Among these policies the most violent was urban renewal; the most prevalent was and is the separation of uses (i.e. residential, industrial, commercial).

These policies, Jacobs claimed, destroy communities and innovative economies by creating isolated, unnatural urban spaces. In their place Jacobs advocated a dense and mixed-use urban aesthetic that would preserve the uniqueness inherent in individual neighborhoods. Joel Schwartz called the tactics used by Moses and others in post World War II urban planning “the New

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4 “Slum clearance affected black New Yorkers more profoundly than others…the discrimination in the housing market and the limited options available to blacks landed them in other slums, but Moses did not recognize this problem,” (Ballon, “Robert Moses and Urban Renewal,” in Ballon and Jackson, 102).
York Approach” which was part of the move towards what we now refer to as neoliberalism and privatization:

With the language of modern city planning, sponsors privately arranged the transformation of neighborhoods, calculated what they regarded as limits of black and working-class removals, and pressed their schemes on Moses. They believed they could bulldoze and build on progressive terms, only to discover that Moses took their proposals as points of departure for grandiose programs…(preface xix).

I would place Jordan and Fuller’s collaboration squarely in the corner of Jacobs’ approach, as they create a mixed-use aesthetic from the ground up in their Skyrise, but offer additional emphasis on the relationship between race, class, and place. Jordan brought her own experience to her architextural ecosocial advocacy. She had worked on Fred Wiseman’s film, The Cool World, “a movie about black kids and how they die…” (Letter to Jane Cooper, Feb 19, 1970. June Jordan Papers MC 513, Box 62, folder 23, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University) and had written a long essay on her response to this film. She was searching for and finding multiple mentors and thinkers with whom she could exchange ideas, never content to limit herself to only one category. But it is significant in critical race theory that experience is embedded into one’s projects. “Contextual reasoning” is another way to describe it—and this type of inquiry is often at the center of environmental justice narratives written by women of color—“combining personal stories and empirical data to convince others of the connection between pollution and discrimination,” (Verchick 67). Whether it is her essays, notes, or letters, Jordan may include data, poetry, lists, and allusions to other texts and rhythms. She used her
experience of growing up in Bedford Stuyvesant to challenge the discourse that was being generated about African-American experience as a kind of pathology. She objected to

“facile references to Black communities as ‘breeding grounds of despair’ or ‘culturally deprived’… That was not the truth. There are grounds for despair in the suburbs… In Bedford-Stuyvesant, I learned all about white history and white literature, but I lived and learned about my own as well. My father marched me to the Museum of Natural History and to the Planetarium… while my mother picked up ‘the slack’ by riding me by trolley car, to public libraries. (“For My American Family, 7).”

While Jordan was concerned about economic and environmental blight on the lives of the poor, Buckminster Fuller emphasized scientific and social invention as intervention, in the utopian technological mode, where hybridization of form and function go beyond the temporal. A “philosopher of shelter,” he saw housing as a problem “linked to invisible networks of distribution and social organization, as well as selection of the appropriate materials and building methods,” (Gorman 9). He also believed that reforming the environment would cause people to change, not vice-verse, and that nature offers the solutions to use in built environments, therefore applying concepts from nature to technology, and culture: “you apply the solutions which nature has devised in the synergetic operation of molecules,” (Goldstein, 8). Today that is called biomimicry and many environmental activists have taken an interest in it. Jordan and Fuller came at the problems of urban renewal with different backgrounds and priorities, but found inspiration and balance in joining forces.

In a letter to Fuller, Jordan wrote that it was important to convey to the public that Harlem needed “radical reconstruction rather than mere improvement
into the middle-class physical chaos prized by the rest of the city.” To illustrate
polarities that illuminate each other she wrote a poem in two columns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harlem</th>
<th>Buckminster Fuller</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The most Debased condition</td>
<td>The most visionary hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of man</td>
<td>for man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetual Impotency</td>
<td>Infinite Potency Because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Of Indefinite Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within a Finite Universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ghetto Closet</td>
<td>The World Universe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Oct. 12, 1964, Private collection of Shoji Sadao)

“Skyrise for Harlem: Not Anywhere But Up”

“Skyrise for Harlem,” was a spatial and psychological revisioning of
traditional “urban renewal,” which as Jordan wrote was “frequently a pretext for
permanent expulsion of the Negro population.” Jordan sought to “rescue a
quarter of a million lives, by completely transforming their environment…as
Harlem will widen from river to river…Partial renovation is not enough. Piecemeal
healing provides temporary relief at best. A half century of neglect requires
exorcism.” (Esquire 109-111). Instead of moving residents out of their homes
during the construction or of removing them through eminent domain, they
proposed to build structures over the already standing buildings, so “no one will
move anywhere but up.”

Building “up” on top of a structure made sense for Fuller; as early as 1928
he devised an approach to housing he called “4D” or four dimensions, the forth
one being time as he saw buildings as temporal and spatial. Fuller’s designs from
this period are conceptualized as mobile, movable, and erectable, and all are to be delivered by air.\(^5\) They expected the project could be completed in three years; the first year, Jordan wrote, “will be spent in what R. Buckminster Fuller describes as ‘tooling up’: organizing the mass production of structural parts and utility units, including all basic furniture “(Esquire 109).

Jordan explained how schools, traffic, parks, shopping areas, playgrounds, parking, and even a bridge connecting Harlem beyond greater New York would revitalize the community. “It would demonstrate the rational feasibility of beautiful and low-cost shelter integral to a comprehensively conceived new community for human beings” (“Letter” 24). For Jordan, what is inside and outside of a building can “influence our moods and psychology, our conversations and silences, our sense of place and history” (Orr, B6-7). In an unpublished manuscript that didn’t make it in to the Esquire piece, she wrote

where we are is a matter of architecture…there is no evading architecture, no fruitful denial…(June Jordan Papers MC 513,Box 33, file 11, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University ).

A Hunch to Be Gambled Upon

Jordan’s interest in this project was in part spurred by the Harlem riots of 1964, which she had predicted would happen and that filled her with anger. She also thought back through her family trauma where she was bullied by her father, from whose hands her uncle, a probation officer, had to remove “a chair, or knife, or whatever…” (Civil Wars, xi). She recognized that her father beat her “because

\(^5\) According to Gorman, “often overlooked as a mere eccentricity or a historical anomaly of the Zeppelin age, air delivery of housing was a central principle of Fuller’s approach to design (36).
he himself felt bullied and despised by strangers more powerful than he would ever be,” (Civil Wars 134) Thus this dual awareness of the trauma and indelible memory of violence that is both personal and collective, cyclical and contextual also provides the textual bridge that led her to Fuller.

Her uncle taught her how to fight, but she resolved “not to run on hatred, but instead to use what I loved, words. However, beyond my own people, I did not know the content of my love. What was I for? …the agony of that moment propelled me…to R. Buckminster Fuller,” whom she had “met” in the Donnell Library in Manhattan, “photographs of his inventions led me into a biography and then into his writings…even more than Corbusier, Fuller’s thinking weighed upon my own as a hunch yet to be gambled on the American landscape where daily, deathly polarization of peoples according to skin gained in horror as white violence escalated against Black life” (Civil Wars, xvii.) Jordan, by then a struggling poet and single parent, had no money: “I put my life on the line,” she wrote, about taking on the project (Civil Wars 23). Elsewhere, she had written that another factor that drew her to Fuller was that neither of them had finished college:

It has to do with searching for the intimately kindred amid so many differences when what you respect, so often, is the difference from yourself embodied in other writers.


At the time of their collaboration, he was already an acclaimed designer and sought after planner, while she had no consistent income and was going
through a divorce from her Caucasian husband, Michael Meyer. Fuller was impressed by Jordan’s Harlem proposal and by the fact that she approached him. In a letter of recommendation he later wrote in support of a Guggenheim fellowship for Jordan, he stated “She first inquired of me what could be done for Harlem. After I told her and after I finished the design, she went to Esquire with the case and ..they agreed to publish. Here is a young woman at an extraordinary time in our history, when all of us hope to rectify the long injustice done to the human beings of dark skin, and here is an individual taking the initiative in a great competent way” (undated letter, M1090 The R. Buckminster Fuller Papers, Stanford University Special Collections and University Archives).

Scale, Green Space, and A New Reality

Jordan referred to the spatial aspects of geography and undeveloped green landscapes to make a point about the binary oppositions that are set up between rural and urban life. In this way, she anticipated one of the main threads of environmental justice, which is to challenge the polarization of these spaces and to ask for more accountability from environmentalists for urban aspects of nature and its impact on diverse populations. In a letter to Fuller, Jordan described an aerial view she had flying over Laconia, New Hampshire. She compared and contrasted the scale there with that of Harlem, as well as the potential for productive labor, sustenance, and participatory community:

As the plane tilted…I could see no one, but there was no tangible obstacle to the imagining of how this land, these contours of growth and rise and seasonal definition could nurture and extend human life. There was no obvious site that might be cleared for housing. ..And yet, I surmised no menace of elements inimical to life… It seemed that any stretch, that every slope, provided living
possibilities…this easy confidence…implies labor both feasible and quickly rewarding… By contrast, any view of Harlem will likely indicate …that survival is a mysterious and even pointless phenomenon. On the streets of Harlem, sources of sustenance are difficult to discover… Nor is labor available—that directly affects, in manifold ways, the manners of existence…This relates to our design for participation by Harlem residents in the birth of their new reality… control of the quality of survival is possible and that every life is valuable (“Letter to RBF” 25-26).

The Harlem riots were fresh in her mind; ironically they took place just days after Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law. In the July riot, Harlem erupted after what by now sounds all too familiar: the fatal shooting of James Powell, a 15-year-old unarmed African American male by a white police officer. One person was killed, more than 100 were injured and hundreds more were arrested. Jordan described it in a letter to a friend:

The cops shot from a kneeling, commandos’ comic book posture, in the middle of Seventh Avenue. We only wanted to pay homage to the kid the policeman had murdered. It was a bloody shock…The cops kept shooting and shooting. People lay all over the streets crying in pain…At one point the cops forced some of us up against a store window, and the window collapsed…I was so scared I could hardly breath..(Letter to Jane Cooper, Feb 19, 1970. June Jordan Papers MC 513, Box 62, folder 23, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University)

According to Manuel Castells, between 1964 and 1968 there were at least “329 important riots…the wave of riots in the black ghettos started in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York, in 1964, and represented the most direct challenge ever posed to the American social order, an order historically based upon racial discrimination and ethnic fragmentation among the lower classes,” (50) triggered in part by disruptive efforts of urban renewal and the so-called “war on poverty.”
Jordan wrote that the Harlem riot generated a “profusion of remedies”, but nowhere “was environmental redesign given prime emphasis” (Esquire, 111). Jordan had told Fuller that most Harlem tenements were six stories, and he came up with a plan to build the new dwellings above the old. (see figure

Figure 2 This shows the interior and cross sections of the conical towers that would be build over existing tenements.
The first floor of the new buildings would correspond with the seventh floor of the old—during construction, the residents would continue living in the old housing; then once the new structures stood completed, the old would be razed, and Harlem families would “literally move up into their new homes. The enormous ground area freed would now be converted into communal open space for recreation, parking, and so forth” (“Letter to R. Buckminster Fuller,” Civil Wars, 24). The design was intended to achieve economies of cost per unit as the result of scale: “providing for the total redevelopment of a community of 250,000 …it would have enormous national, showcase impact…demonstrating the rational feasibility of beautiful and low-cost shelter integral to a comprehensively conceived new community for human beings”(24). In the article Jordan wrote for Esquire to describe the plan, she detailed how “Fuller’s circular decked towers are fireproof and may be delivered in large sections by helicopter.” Inside, a system of ramps would offer a parking system as well as shops, game room, and workshops, with “an average of 1200 square feet per family as against an average of 720 in today’s public housing” (111). A similar conical shaped, multi-leveled parking ramp had been rendered by Fuller as early as 1933, when he proposed it as a garage for the Chicago World’s Fair. Fuller, who considered Henry Ford the greatest artist of the 20th Century (Gorman 194) was inspired by automotive and aerospace technologies, and it may seem odd to us that he conceptualized the car and dwelling unit as compatible mates for a radical design, but he did. Fuller also couldn’t help but be influenced by the “vertical urbanism” of New York City that had been dominant since the 1930s when
skyscrapers were idolized as a form of mass consumption and progress (Axelrod, 1); Fuller was impressed by mass production and the economy of resource consumption which would explain this type of dwelling for Harlem residents. Jordan was excited by this new paradigm and seemed to ignore the fact that the track record for Fuller’s designs becoming a reality was actually very low.

They also envisioned more green space for Harlem and the creation of new interstices that could impact and perhaps lower the crime rate: “an arterial system of green spaces leading to water: an arterial system psychologically operative from any position in Harlem. For example, a concentric design with the perimeter touching water east and west…an emergence from an alleyway into a danger zone vulnerable to enemies approaching in at least two directions…I am appealing for as many curvilinear features of street patterning as possible…all of these undesirable effects now result from the gridiron layout of city blocks” (CW 27). Hence, Jordan thought that the grid pattern of New York’s streets actually was a factor in the high crime rate; she called the pattern a “psychological crucifixion “(CW 27). Instead she envisioned what today we call “traffic calming” or greening the streets for public access: “walkblocks and roadsides...if parking facilities were sufficiently numerous, we could allow space only for the passage of one automobile...permit no street parking and reserve the gained area for foot mobility and public seating” (Letter to RBF, Sept. 20, 1964, personal collection of Shoji Sadao).

Ironically, when Esquire published the article describing the project, the editors succumbed to the stereotype Jordan had sought to challenge and
exhibited racism and sexism. They changed her headline from “Skyrise for Harlem” to “Instant Slum Clearance,” and attributed the entire project to Fuller, omitting Jordan’s prominent role and ultimately dismissing it as “a utopian plan.” Earlier, she wrote to Fuller than the editor thought her idea “was a way of dreaming…but what I hope…is this permanent rescue of half a million people would not be dreaming, nor even a modest proposal…it would become a public blueprint that would be profoundly irresistible.” (Letter to RBF, 18 June, 1964). By 1972, Fuller wrote that the plan had not yet been realized in Harlem, “but had a great favorable affect on urbanism,” (letter to Radcliffe Institute, 11-28-72) and Jordan told Fuller that the Museum of Modern Art in NYC had an architectural exhibition with four plans to make Manhattan more livable “there presented as practicable …are many of our ideas for Harlem’s transformation…perhaps implementation will occur, after all…” (Letter to RBF, 3/1/67, June Jordan Papers MC 513, Box 33, Folder 11, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University). Both Fuller and Jordan continued to work on urban transformations through architecture and text, engaging in civic environmentalism, and seeing design and place as part of the texture of healing, sustainability, and survival for disempowered people.

Shortly after the Harlem project, Jordan, due to Fuller’s connections and recommendation, won the Prix De Rome for Environmental Design at the American Academy in Rome, and from there began fieldwork in Mississippi, where she proposed communal agrarian reform and would eventually write a novel, Okay Now, based on her experiences and interviews with Fanny Lou
Hamer and other civil rights activists; in her paper on the background of that book, she wrote “America has more than enough: more power and natural and fabricated resources to make this nation a haven for all its people…we are not helpless here in Mississippi-America…we can rescue the center city community of Brownsville, and the town of Rueville, Mississippi as surely and easily as we can rescue the Lockheed Corporation” (Controlling Intellectual Background, OK Now). She made a connection between the lives of African Americans in urban cities of the North and their post reconstruction migrations from the South: “stopping the hunger, ending the systems of spiritual starvation, Mississippi-America will demonstrate our capacity for radical, right action.” She considered cultural memory and the ecosocial effects of migration when Black Americans “trekked north to find themselves unwelcomed and unprepared for self sufficient lives in center cities that yielded so little to their needs” (June Jordan Papers MC 513, Box 49, folder 6  Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University).

Collaboration with Fuller in Harlem and through their correspondences and meetings proved a significant development for both of them as Fuller, in 1970 at age 75, emphasized in his writing that the oppressed have-nots of the world comprise 60 percent of the population and that their condition is worsened by “expenditures for weaponry, warring and adjunct activities of all the opposing forces in the world…this not only wastes human productivity, but turns its capabilities and resources towards extinction of humanity. It postpones public discovery of its potential of total human success.” (NYT, 12/11/70). He proposed
design science based on cooperation and initiative in the “earthians’ critical moment.”

Jordan and Fuller viewed the Harlem skyrise as one of those critical plans, as it interrupted and interrogated “the tacit agreement among all groups—lending institutions, fire insurance companies, and the Federal Housing administration—to redline inner city neighborhoods, denying them credit and insurance” (Medoff and Sklar, 15). In fact, according to Fuller, he and Jordan hoped to bypass such racist housing policies and achieve “integration in reverse—make living conditions so attractive as well as reasonable in rent, that white families as well as Negroes will want to move into the buildings” (“Cone Sweet Home,” Carbondale Illinoisian April 18, 1965 p. 18). Unfortunately the infrastructure and support for such a project was not there, and Fuller often moved from one project to the other without pushing for its completion.

In today’s milieu of globalized neoliberal capitalism, with its mega cities and mega slums, we need to insist on studying the effects of social, environmental and economic deprivation on the daily lives of people and their home places, the ecosocial contexts of communities and the meaning of an environmentally conscious citizenship. We need to preserve and revisit historical resistance based in race and space and not reinvent the wheel. Let us resurrect and bring to the public knowledge of transformative ideas from the 1960s that seem so relevant and prescient now. The Skyrise for Harlem project anticipated many of our goals for built environments and sustainable urban communities of today—to be affordable, accessible, ethnically diverse, aesthetically pleasing
and including a balance of green space, accessibility to water, parks, and quality of life. Jordan and Fuller believed we needed a theory of place that was scientific, spiritual and visionary "of space designed as the volumetric expression of successful existence between earth and sky; of space cherishing as it amplifies the experience of being alive, the capability of endless beginnings, and the entrusted liberty of motion…a particular space inexplorably connected to multiple spatialities…yet sheltering particular life" (CW, 28). We still search for that right balance, and should be inspired by and inclusive of Jordan and Fuller’s philosophies and passion as we formulate our present and future.

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“Who is Buckminster Fuller?”
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