



Justice et injustices spatiales, Nanterre 2008

*Kitchenettes, The Robert Taylor Homes,
and the Racial Spatial Order of Chicago*
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et l'Ordre Spatial Raciste de Chicago*

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What spatial order structures Black American urban communities and what impact does it have production of subjectivities? To answer these questions, this paper historically examines the prisonization and ever-present forms of carcerality that structure “free” Black urban communities. Drawing on the important insights of Black prisoners, Black literary artists, social theorists, and geographers, this paper illuminates the symbiosis between the “free world” and the prison world as it applies to poor and working class Black communities. When the Second World War ended, the federal government passed legislation to build public housing in cities. Chicago desperately needed housing to accommodate Black migration. The city built the new housing projects in the “Black Belt”. The most notorious were the Robert Taylor Homes. These Stalinist inspired domiciles, which consisted of twenty-eight sixteen story indistinguishable building, housed more than twenty thousand poor people. Spatially, it was isolated from the broader community; on one side, railroad tracks, on the other, a massive expressway. Architecturally, European modernist designers like Le Corbusier and city planners emphasized “open spaces” at the perimeter of the complex. More like “dead spaces”, the design plans further isolated Robert Taylor. As the levels of violence increased in the project, the city instituted an array of carceral procedures: video surveillance, curfews, a special police force, residents had to carry identification badges to enter buildings, limited visitation, and fences that covered the entire building. It’s no wonder that residents dubbed the project a “vertical prison”. This paper argues the spatial order of kitchenettes and Robert Taylor, and the tactics used to contain its residents, was informed by the logic of prison punishment.

