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COLONNADE PARK / MIES IN NEWARK, REVISITED

Heidrun Holzfeind (photos)

Niko Vicario (text)

In the late 1940s, Newark, New Jersey witnessed the mass migration of both manufacturing and the middle and upper classes to the growing suburbs after the industrial boom of the war years. Addressing the expansion of 'slums' and the absence of standardized urban housing, the Federal Housing Act of 1949 enabled the clearance of 'blighted areas' (largely African-American and immigrant communities) that would in turn be sold to private developers.

These developers in turn approached the cleared sites with the primary objective of constructing middle-income housing.¹ In the case of an Italian-American tenement neighborhood in Newark's First Ward, the collaboration of private real estate developer Herbert Greenwald and the Newark Housing Authority led to the demolition of 470 structures and the displacement of approximately 4,600 people.² The site was soon occupied at its center by the Columbus Homes, eight twelve story, low-income public housing units developed by the city.

Greenwald also invited Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to design three 22-story glass and steel towers – the Pavilion and Colonnade Apartments which came to occupy the borders of the site. When Mies's buildings were opened to residents in 1960, they embodied a translation of the International Style fabricated for a middle-class clientele, accompanied by the prestige of an iconic architect's signature. The Pavilion and Colonnade Apartments were nearly identical to towers Mies' office designed simultaneously for Lafayette Park in Detroit, likewise constructed on a slum clearance site.³

The prioritization of middle class residential development in these years failed to solve what was a housing crisis for the vastly expanding urban poor. Housing shortages and the racial discrimination characterizing admissions policies were chief concerns of both the political demonstrations in Newark in 1967 (dubbed 'race riots') and of the continuing momentum of the Black Power movement in the following decade. As the Newark economy stagnated in the 1970s, the Columbus Homes were gradually evacuated, having been subject to arson, vandalism, and neglect. In 1994, the buildings were planted with explosives, to be replaced soon after with the low-rise New Urbanist homes that stand today. In a speech delivered at the demolition, Newark mayor Sharpe James described the destruction of the Columbus Homes as «the end of an American dream that failed.»⁴ The adjacent middle-class dream (imbued with Mies's International Style sheen) had also declined dramatically over the course of its first three decades, dubbed by many locals 'the glass projects.'⁵

In Heidrun Holzfeind's film, *Colonnade Park* (2011), we become acquainted with the current residents of the Colon-

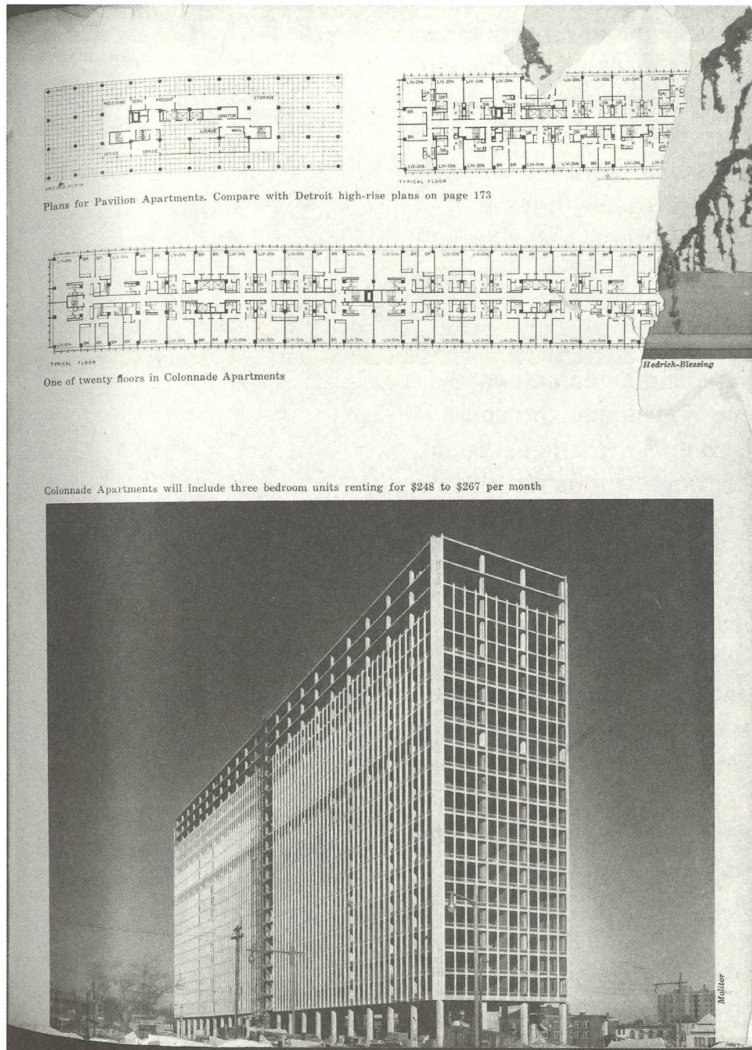


fig. a
Mies archive drawings
Architectural Record, April 1960, p. 165-180

nade and Pavilion Apartments. The film incorporates Mies's towers as a structuring framework; the window panes serve to connect the private world of an apartment to the expanse of Newark beyond and around it. Mies's modernism is here not the primary subject but rather the *mise-en-scène* for alternate operations – namely, private lives that overflow the standardized shells in which we encounter them. We meet, amongst others, a criminal lawyer, an artist, and a flight attendant. When the buildings opened in 1960, they courted a white middle-class population steadily departing the city; Holzfeind's film reveals that the building's tenants are now strikingly diverse and international.

Whereas the lobby maintains the strict restraint of a modernist pavilion – Barcelona chairs and a geometrically printed carpet are the only decor in evidence, the apartments, behind the curtain wall, contain myriad collections developed through the years – salvaged industrial objects, African masks, soda bought in bulk. A few tenants have introduced informal systems to the building that produce new community logics – a video lending library, a mail collection service. While some speak of neighborhood crime, one older gentleman shares a yellowed brochure marking the buildings' vernissage. Amongst Holzfeind's subjects, nonlinear narratives aggregate, constructing an emergent historical arc through recalled memories (of a residents' dance club, of riots, of rent strikes) interwoven with other recollections – for instance, a 1980s modeling career evidenced by a scrap book. Just as the film produces an archive, so too are its subjects archivists.

In conjunction with Colonnade Park, Holzfeind produced photographs documenting the site. During the photo-development process, the lab's error became Holzfeind's boon; the prints were delivered streaked and speckled with purplish-blue (sometimes pink) chemical solution. In the resulting images, a whimsical layer is superimposed between the slide film (Holzfeind's composition) and that which it indexes (a corridor, a view from the window, a cathedral in the distance). Between the Colonnade and Pavilion Apartments and these photographs, the spills and splotches displace both the Mies buildings and their 2010 imaging into a hazy third temporality.

- 1 Mumford, Kevin, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007) and Harold Kaplan, *Urban Renewal Politics: Slum Clearance in Newark* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963).
- 2 Immerso, Michael, *Newark's Little Italy: The Vanished First Ward* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 140.
- 3 *Mies in America*, ed. Phyllis Lambert (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), p. 357.
- 4 James, Sharpe, as quoted in Clifford J. Levy, «4 High Rises Torn Down By Newark,» *New York Times*, March 7, 1994, accessed at www.nytimes.com, accessed May 12, 2010.
- 5 Schwab, David, «Colonnade Residents Protesting Conditions,» publication not identified, October, 1994, archive at the Newark Public Library.

Niko Vicario, born 1982 is a PhD student in the History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art at MIT. In 2010, he participated in the research project and exhibition «Living Modern», curated by Laura Barlow and including new work by Heidrun Holzfeind and Damon Rich concerning the site of Mies's buildings in Newark. He holds an MA in Curatorial Studies from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College and a BA in Art History from Vassar College. He is currently based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

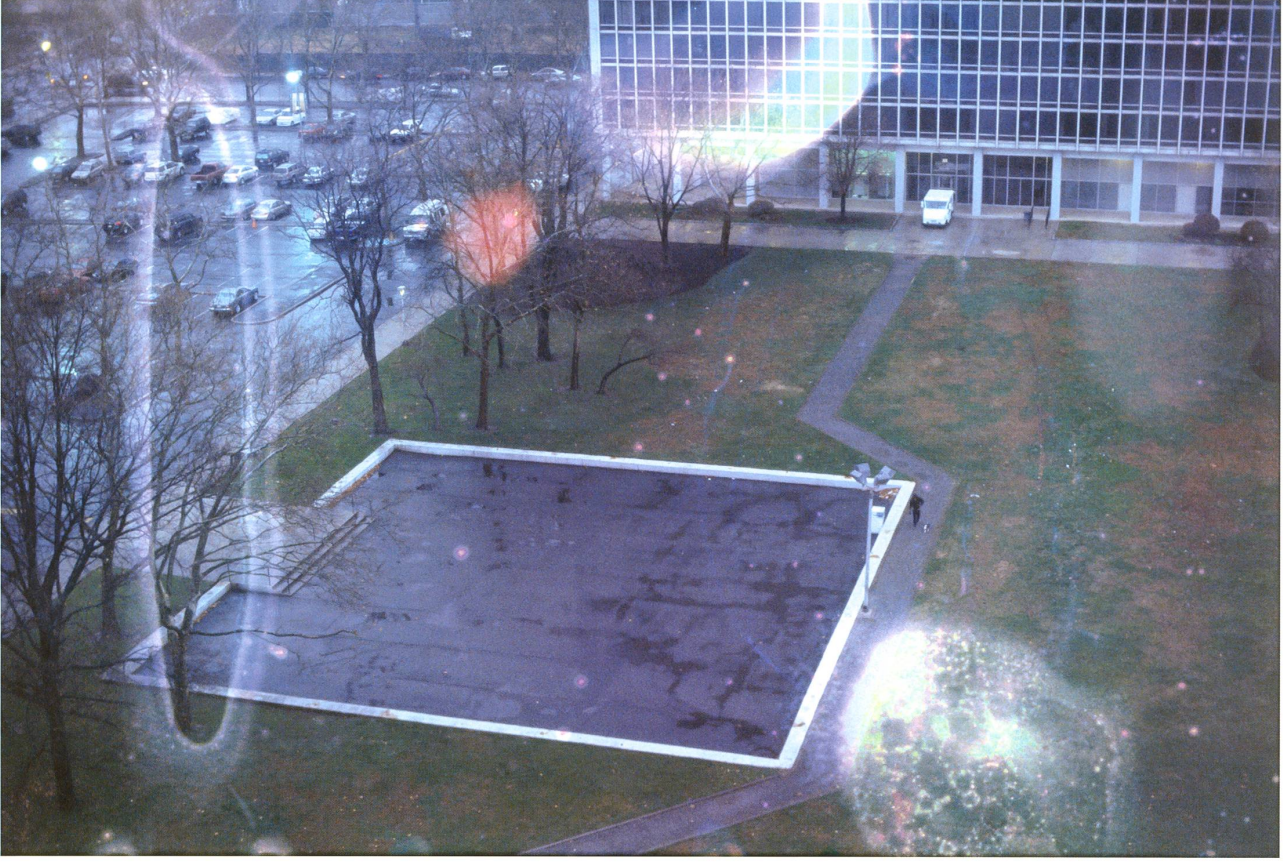


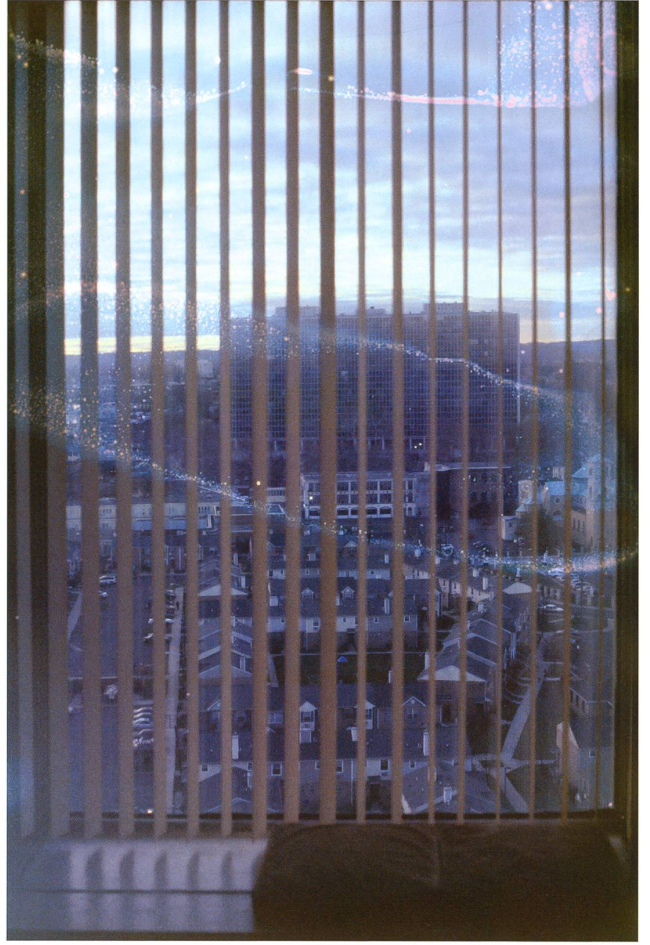
Photos: Heidrun Holzfeind
Colonnade Park, Mies in Newark Revisited (2010),
Serie von 12 C prints, 40x60 cm

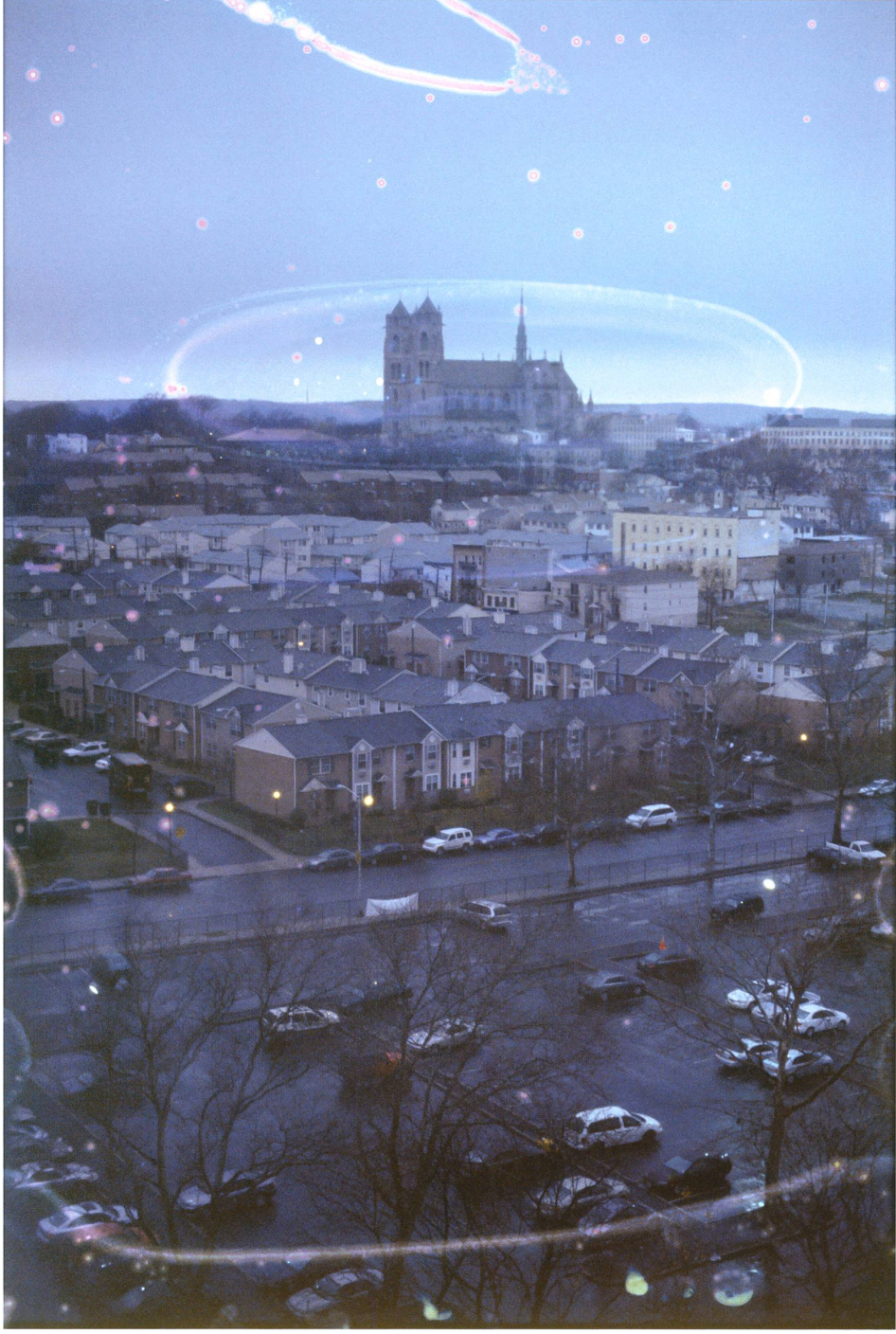


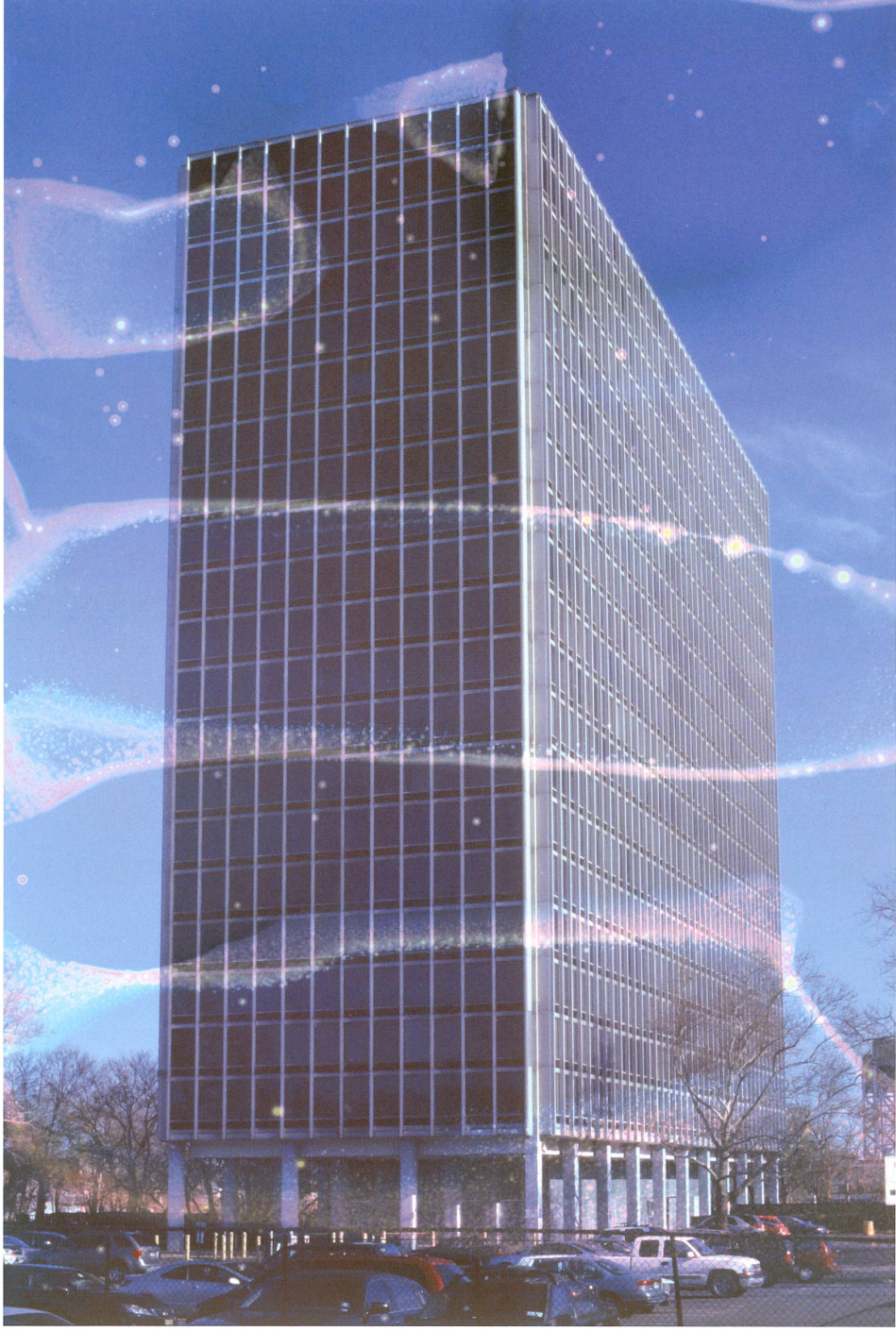












Heidrun Holzfeind, born 1972
studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Recent solo shows include CCA, Ujazdowski castle, Warsaw; De Vleeshal, Middelburg; Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City and Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck. Recent group exhibitions include CCS Bard, New York; Lentos Museum, Linz; CASM, Barcelona; Manifesta7, Trentino; Documentary Fortnight exhibition, MOMA, New York.
The series COLONNADE PARK will be part of the exhibition 'Communitas' at Camera Austria, Graz (April 9 - June 26, 2011).