Introduction

In game two of the 1977 World Series a helicopter broadcasted into the living rooms of millions of American homes a live image of a building ablaze just a few blocks from Yankee Stadium. At that same moment, the sports broadcaster Howard Cosell announced: ‘There it is, ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx is burning’.

On 16 May 2010, more than 30 years after, *The New York Post* (Flood 2010) published an article that stated that Cosell had never pronounced such words. The reporter, in going through all the tapes of the game, never actually heard Cosell use that famous phrase. Instead, it was likely that journalists covering the game, and for that matter the blaze, had placed afterwards the catchy phrase in Cosell’s mouth.

What is even more surprising is that *The New York Post* is writing about this more than three decades after the fact. The truth is, to this day, the phrase is still recognised and greatly utilised, having been used as the title for a book published in 2006, *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx is Burning* (Mahler 2005), and a miniseries based on the book and aired on ESPN in 2007, *The Bronx is Burning* (Chechik 2007).

Another theory is that the phrase was first employed in an episode aired in 1972 of a BBC series entitled *Man Alive*. The episode was called *The Bronx is Burning* (Morton 1972). The short documentary feeds its content from interviewing the mostly white firefighting members of Engine Company 82. The end result is an episode filled with racial assumptions that mainly places the blame of the fires on young ethnic minorities – who supposedly behave outside the accepted cultural norms and ideals of the US white suburban population. In the only brief moment where some of the young people of colour are interviewed, they are asked for the reasons why they started the fires in the first place – assuming they are the sole culprits and without any other empiric evidence or mention of the other reasons why the Bronx was really burning.

Midway through the documentary, the only black firefighter of Engine Company 82 is interviewed. He is only asked if being black made a difference when interacting with the residents, who again are assumed to be to blame for the fires. This underlying sense of racism and Otherness that is present throughout the documentary is also symptomatic of how government
officials and other white Bronx residents were referring to and treating the mostly black and Puerto Rican populations living in the borough. The Bronx-born philosopher Marshall Berman states, ‘The defamation of the Bronx helped to create a language for the much more extensive and profound defamation of New York’ (Berman 2016: 126–127). This speaks volumes to the way in which language is used as an ideological tool for racism and prejudice. Berman goes on to say:

Observers of the Bronx’s troubles, including many New Yorkers, developed an elaborate vocabulary of deflection and denial, which very soon would be used against New York itself. ‘What’s wrong with these people? Why are they doing this to themselves?’ Magic words like these transform victims of misery and misfortune into perverse perpetrators of malice. Social scientists got millions of dollars in grants, from foundations and federal agencies, to explore the character defects of poor people from the Bronx that led them – here was another dehumanizing cliché of those days – ‘to foul their own nest’.

The charged language utilised to describe these people of colour ignores the fact that between the end of the 1950s, and to a great extent until the 1980s, these communities were confronted with public policies that, some because of inaction and others stemming from direct measures, provoked the abandonment of great swaths of the Bronx. This led to a political and economic climate that provoked the burning of buildings in the South Bronx.

Dissecting some of the reasons why the Bronx burned

By simply partaking in a brief historical inquiry, one quickly realises that these fires were caused by a long list of reasons, among them that fires were started by landlords who, amongst other things, were looking to collect property insurance and come out with at least some profit for what was already considered a lost cause. In that sense, not only landlords, but financial and insurance institutions and the local and federal governments were also to blame for these fires via a complex web of actions: nationwide cuts on federal spending and national economic recession; an almost bankrupt city implementing austerity measures to deal with deindustrialisation; banks redlining areas to exclude them from property improvement loans; lack of resources and interest from fire marshals to investigate cause of fires and identify arson; quick and easy payoffs of insurance claims for burned down buildings; looters burning abandoned or inhabited buildings to facilitate the extraction of valuable metals; a huge influx of welfare recipients that, because of lack of heat or state of disrepair of building, got bumped up on the list to relocate if the building had burned down; and political manoeuvres by city elected officials that gave tenants the right to pay only one dollar in monthly rent if any, however minor, building violation was reported (Jonnes 2002: 202). In that sense, a perfect storm for destruction was set in motion, and its path crossed straight through the heart of the South Bronx and most of its geographies. The tenants that stayed, or that arrived here because they did not have any other alternative, suffered and went through unimaginable circumstances.

Arguably, during this period, no other municipality in the United States was more associated with urban detriment. The borough suffered a huge drop in population in the late 1960s and the 1970s that culminated in a tide of arson. When the flames finally subsided in the early 1980s the outcome was stark. The South Bronx had lost 60 per cent of its population and 40 per cent of its total housing units (Gonzalez 2004: 122). It is no surprise that so many people would start saying that the Bronx had burned down.
Statement and methodology

Language is a powerful tool. It can be used as a means to shape and manipulate knowledge, and it can be co-opted and employed as a political mechanism for empowerment and resistance. The verbal economies that nurture the perception of the South Bronx are highly volatile and can be used in different ways by its diverse actors. To this day, that infamous phrase, ‘the Bronx is burning’, is still overheard at Bronx Community Board gatherings, tenant association meetings, public hearings and government outreach sessions to describe what is still considered one of the darkest periods in the history of the city. Even though development and improvements have occurred since the 1980s, the physical and social impacts of this period are still very present in the minds and everyday lives of its residents.

The current scepticism from the community towards any project or government endeavour is very real and is part of a political climate that one has to keep in mind before initiating any kind of conversation or exchange with residents. For too much time backs were being turned towards Bronx residents and to their clamours for social and urban improvements. Instead, for decades, the only investments in infrastructure the Bronx would receive were ones that benefited its close neighbours in Manhattan (water treatment and trash plants, food distribution centres with fresh products for populations outside the Bronx, amongst many others) or institutions that the privileged sectors did not want in their vicinities (for instance juvenile detention centres and homeless shelters, etc.). However, a lot has changed since this period, and today one can see affordable multifamily residential development and relatively small, yet significant increases in market rate housing – all standing in stark contrast to the handful of empty lots that are still left from this period and the low-scale redevelopment that occurred immediately after the fires.

In utilising a Lefebvrian approach, the juncture of what physically remains of this period of blight – now visually represented by new contrasting developments that fill formerly empty sites, public housing towers placed on vast green surroundings or one- to two-story residential homes that at one moment in time were thought to be the only alternative for development – and the verbal economy that is reproduced by its urban actors helps to continuously remind these communities of a not-so-distant period of neglect and racial injustice that for far too many continues to this day.

Through recent literature, interviews and field work, it is the aim of this chapter to illustrate how the constantly narrated space of the ‘Bronx is burning’ days, when combined with the collective memories of the everyday social rhythms of the period just before the fires, nurtured the will of these communities to rebuild. Today, the physical/visual disjunction of multiple and contrasting building types and spaces not only contribute to a recurrent visual reproduction of the rebuilding process after the fires, but also provide the physical traces to the ideological, economic and political underpinnings that shaped the rebuilding process itself. In unravelling this intersection of language and space – studying what is/was narrated, and dissecting what is/was seen – we can start to understand how charged memories of the near and distant past became perennial tools for the political action of minorities and communities of colour in the South Bronx.

Introduction to key Lefebvrian terms

The production of space is simultaneously physical – things in space – and at the same time, charged with assumptions, meanings and prejudices – constructed thoughts about space. One could argue that the South Bronx is a great example of how the machinations of the triad of space operate. Language plays a dual role in this understanding; on the one hand it is employed
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as a powerful tool to justly or unjustly describe and relate to a place, and on the other, the prowess of language is also reflected and solidified in the idiom of the built environment. Both interpretations work together to possibly subject a place to disinvestment, abandonment and neglect, but can also be repurposed into a language of empowerment, reconstruction and community prosperity.

This interplay between language and the built environment can also be further understood via another less well-known Lefebvrian concept: rhythmanalysis. Lefebvre saw rhythmanalysis as a pulse of the everyday, which stood in stark contrast to systems of power – such as that of a capitalist system. The everyday is shaped by the rhythm of biological bodies, but these bodies in turn produce social rhythms. However, Lefebvre believed that the rhythmanalyst does not simply analyse the body as a subject but uses the body as the first point of analysis and a tool for subsequent investigations – the body serves as a metronome.

In a similar way that Walter Benjamin described the flâneur (see Benjamin 1999), Lefebvre talks about the rhythmanalist. However, in contrast to the flâneur, who wanders and passively observes the new social order of the city, the rhythmanalist tries to unravel, through the present image, the presence of objects – its historical, political and ideological realms.

This stress on the mode of analysis rather than analysis of rhythms is what is meant by rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004: 6). In his book, by utilising a Mediterranean town as a case study, Lefebvre discusses how through routines and everyday rhythms people are able to resist political domination of space. In times of turmoil, these rhythms are determined by alliances, and space is appropriated from oppressive political powers.

A third concept – architectonics – is key to this particular chapter. Lefebvre explains that ‘The task of architectonics is to describe, analyse and explain this persistence, which is often evoked in the metaphorical shorthand of strata, periods, sedimentary layers, and so on’ (Lefebvre 1991: 229). Through an architectonic exercise, the current physical outcome of the Bronx is burning days will be briefly studied, and in the process unravel the political and social frameworks that led to this specific physical outcome.

Finally, there is the narrated. Time and repetition, when applied to language, bring to the forefront the importance of what is verbally expressed, how it reverberates in memory and in turn is structured in space. In a recent article published in City and State New York titled ‘Re-brand-ing the Bronx’, it is discussed, from mostly a public relations perspective, how the Bronx’s past is verbally handled. The article has multiple quotes from elected officials, demonstrating different rhetorical approaches to the Bronx is burning days. For example, Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. is quoted as saying, regarding 1970s-era stereotypes (Trangle 2016: 16):

you don’t want people to forget either. You don’t want people to forget the struggles… you have to strike a balance. You want people to recognize the gains, rather, and you don’t want them to forget the struggles. How do you recognize the gains? It’s only by reminding folks of what it used to be like.

Diaz is of course recognising how powerful both the memories of the fires and of actually overcoming and rebuilding are. He wants to ensure generations of newcomers know about these events. However, in that same article, Derek Mueller, a board member of the Digital Rhetoric Collaborative, speaks of the political motives behind this utilisation of language: ‘It’s an exercise in contrast, and contrast underscored with political credit to current leaders and their deeds’ (Trangle 2016: 16). Language ends up being a mechanism for people in power to frame their policies against a backdrop of past detriment – in order to highlight and
differentiate their decisions from any form of negative criticism. Through contrast, the stories behind the fires and subsequent rebuilding are verbally co-opted to position current processes and decisions.

The article proves how the past can be interpreted in multiple manners – transformed into rhetorical constructs – in which alluding to the days that the Bronx was in blight and decay helps you gain control of a present narrative. In today’s case, politicians allude to the fires precisely because so much has changed since they occurred. Redevelopment today is situated in a very different political and spatial context than when people were rebuilding decades ago.

Another recent example of how the Bronx is burning’s meaning can be readily interchangeable was evidenced with a private party hosted by developers in a site where three market rate towers are slated for development. The party took place in the Port Morris area of the South Bronx in October of 2015. Officially titled Macabre Suite, star-studded guests such as Adrien Brody, Kendall Jenner and Naomi Campbell were encouraged to use the hashtag #bronxisburning in their social media updates. The party included bullet-riddled cars and dumpster fires that guests could take pictures with. Although Diaz, Jr. was in attendance, Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito quickly pointed in her Twitter account to the insensitivity of theming and naming the party in this manner (Ellman 2015). This just proves how problematic any reference to the fires can still be to residents, especially when it brings any allusion of being pushed out again – in this case not through fires, but through the spectre of gentrification.

How it got rebuilt: interviews with key figures in the Bronx

As we stated before, it can be argued that when the community groups that decided to rebuild the Bronx were confronted with such a behemoth of a challenge, they were both thinking of the social arrhythmia and physical detriment of the Bronx during the fires, and the period of strong and vibrant everyday rhythms before they started to occur. In this section we will discuss, through a handful of conducted interviews, the simultaneities at play with the narrated processes in and of the Bronx.

Angel Garcia is a researcher on the Bronx and resident of the public housing project right next to the Jackson Avenue station of the two and five lines. When asked about the physical remnants of the Bronx is burning days he narrates the scene that unravels when riding the elevated train along Westchester Avenue from East 149th Street east to the Bronx River. Angel speaks about what he termed a ‘dissonance’ of the built environment from the pocket of ‘nice homes’ – as he describes them – on Intervale Avenue to the empty lots along Simpson Street and Freeman Avenue. Angel asks himself, ‘Why are these [empty] lots here? It’s a legitimate question. It looks from another area’. He goes on to talk about the contrasts between the old Bronx churches and the ranch houses at Charlotte Gardens: ‘It’s an unusual thing! Well kept, but odd… Dissonant… Not a consistency among them’ (Garcia 2017)

Angel is of course well-versed in the history of the Bronx. While talking to him he went into great detail about the political players and policies that led to the arson, but he can also speak at length about the urban dissonance previously mentioned. This occurred for various reasons including: lack of federal funding for dense urban typologies, a belief that home ownership – not rentals – would create a broader sense of neighbourhood ownership, bureaucratic procedures that complicated and extended the process and timeframe for building housing, a genuine interest from these community builders to invest what little money they had to also provide tenant organisation and social services to residents – thus limiting the monetary reach of what could actually be built (brick and mortar) – and lastly, but more importantly, the end
result of an area that saw huge drops in population after the fires. In the end, the new housing being built was mostly catering to the small population that remained. As Jonnes says, ‘Equally important, rebuilding with houses meant population density plummeted. There may be as many people living in one block-long section of six-story apartment houses near Charlotte Street – perhaps several thousand – as there are in block after block of the new houses’ (Jonnes 2002: 430).

Another interviewee, Dana Driskell – who was born and raised in the South Bronx, attended the locally renowned PS 31 or Castle in the Concourse and was District Manager of Community Board 3 during the late 1970s – talks in even more detail about the reasons behind this dissonance. He goes on to say, ‘Federal mortgage insurance programs were tapped to fund the ranch style houses in Charlotte Gardens – the caveat being that these funds were to be used for suburban single-family houses’ (Driskell 2017). The sheer lack of government programs to fund urban development in the Reagan years – outside his urban policy of tax incentives for urban developers – did not provide any other alternative. As Dana goes on to say during the interview, ‘it was the only way to redevelop’ (Driskell 2017).

Community organisers such as Genevieve Brook of the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes and Ed Logue – who was director of the city’s South Bronx Development Office – had the vision to rebuild in one of the most impacted areas by the fires, Charlotte Street (Christie 2009):

They wanted single-family homes; critics wanted density and multi-family dwellings, saying it would promote a lively, safe neighborhood and attract merchants. Brooks, though, knew most of the families in the area were African Americans from the South, Caribbean blacks and Puerto Ricans, and she was convinced that the long home-owning traditions of these groups would help make a community of single-family homes work.
This reconstruction and development process was in most cases supported by the triad of: Community Development Corporations (CDCs); the financial support of the Community Preservation Corporation (CPC), ‘a nonprofit arm of New York City’s major commercial banks and thrifts, lending money to small landlords in working-class neighborhoods for rehabs’ (Jonnes 2002: 395); and the expertise provided from the Ford Foundation-backed Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), which helped these groups get loans, grants or technical assistance to navigate through the bureaucratic and financial complexities required to get money for rebuilding. When these three entities were paired with federal programs such as the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977, ‘enforcing by law… that banks had a responsibility to lend money where they garnered deposits’ (Jonnes 2002: 369), and the Low Income Housing Tax Credit passed in 1986, ‘a program that provides tax write-offs to corporations and individuals who invest in creating housing for the poor’ (Jonnes 2002: 397), one is able to gain a reasonably complete grasp of how redevelopment occurred in the Bronx.

As was mentioned, the idea that home ownership was also a way to guarantee that a population stayed and felt a sense of ownership with their neighbourhood was also very informative to the way things got rebuilt. In order to ensure that people would be able to afford their new homes, a two-story housing model was dispersed all throughout different parts of the Bronx – the lower story having the potential to generate much needed income to the new buyers (Jonnes 2002: 396, 438):

The basic format was a small two- or three-family row house whose one or two rental apartments could help pay the mortgage…. The Partnership houses were a brilliant way to offer home ownership to people who could not afford a house without a rental unit to subsidize their mortgage payments. It was also a brilliant way (in once-chaotic neighborhoods) to create rental-housing units that would be tightly supervised by vigilant resident owners…. The houses have three bedrooms with two baths on the second floor. The first floor is a separate unit with two bedrooms, two baths that they can rent for a $1,000 a month to help pay the mortgage.

Yet another interviewee, Xavier Rodriguez – who recently retired from his role as District Manager at Community Board 5 and was raised in the Bronx in the 1950s after he and his mother, a Puerto Rican, left East Harlem after their building was condemned to make way for an Urban Renewal project – can speak at great lengths not only about the days of the fires and the subsequent rebuilding, but of the everyday life and social rhythms of the Bronx before the period of neglect and abandonment. Again, this is key to understanding how language was a vital force for the community rebuilding that took place. With almost the exact same level of detail, Xavier’s anecdotes can jump through all of these three important historical periods. Not only was Xavier there throughout, but he was also the Chair of Community Board 3 during the 1970s, the worst period of the fires, and in one of the most impacted areas in the South Bronx. Xavier was also present when President Carter visited, and he can intermix his anecdotes with specific knowledge of whom the political players were after this area gained all the notoriety, and what programs subsequently worked and which did not.

Additionally, what was unravelled during the conversation with Xavier was that not only is the repetition of language – both spatial and narrated – of the Bronx is burning days a key mechanism for communities to decide to fight back and rebuild but, additionally, the verbal economy that describes what the Bronx was like before the fires – full of healthy and everyday social rhythms – is a missing component to understand why people decided to stay and improve in the first place. Yet, as Xavier describes, it is assumed that the people who drove these everyday
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rhythms of social life before the fires were the Jewish and white European descendants that decided to leave once the fires started, yet people of colour such as Xavier were also here before the blight. He goes on to describe this period (Rodriguez 2017):

This was the best part of my life. We moved into a two-bedroom apartment on Fulton Avenue in 1957 or 1958 in a lower class Russian Jewish community. My mother was able get credit at the local grocery store that Mrs. Rosenberg owned. We were part of the community.

However, by the time Xavier was 12 years old and had reached middle school, Fulton Avenue had changed drastically. It was the 1960s and the arson had started, and in fact, in 1969, Xavier’s own building on 173rd and Fulton was set ablaze while he was living in an apartment there. A lot had transpired since his mother was able to get groceries on credit a little over a decade before.

Afterwards, when the Bronx started to rebuild, mostly the Catholic institutions such as Nehemiah Homes and Father Gigante’s group, the Southeast Bronx Community Organization (SBCO), were building small houses and duplexes. As Xavier says, although the quality was shoddy and the aesthetics secondary, these houses created a sense of pride and perimeters of five to ten blocks without any crime.

Additionally, the community’s will to rebuild – nurtured by how life in the Bronx was before the fires – not only energised those who stayed, but even drove some former Bronx residents to return. ‘Another good sign is that many people who fled the area in the 70s are moving back’ (Worth 1999).

Even the reasons for rebuilding Charlotte Gardens stem from an odd interplay of factors, including a powerful symbolic one. President Carter had stood there, so rebuilding here would only mean things stood to improve elsewhere. The physical outcome of how Charlotte Gardens looks stems from a desire to visually represent the ideal of the suburban home with white picket fences (Jonnes 2002: 376). It could be argued that even though federal housing programs were contracting, and this was the only way housing could get built here, the contrast with the surrounding context was done almost purposefully. Charlotte Gardens had to represent wholesome ideals: home ownership and pride, and a safe and protected environs. The fact that Charlotte Gardens was showcased as a great success all over newspapers, magazines and different TV shows, and as a symbol of things to come, speaks volumes to the capacity of architecture to represent a new vibrant social order that was similar in nature to the one present before the fires. Just gutting and rehabilitating an old tenement building was not as potent a signifier in this case. The fact that later developments incorporated typologies with higher densities not only points to an improving New York City housing market, but also to just how exceptional and unique the symbolic nature of Charlotte Gardens was (Ryan 2012: 29).

Much like previous endeavours before and after this, what was coveted was reestablishing the social vibrancy of neighbourhoods – not a literal recreation of how things looked in the past. In any case, this would have been impossible given the economic limitations of the time. A few examples: Irma Fleck’s empty lots as urban gardens; Ramon Rueda’s sweat equity, rehabbing of abandoned buildings and an idea for an urban village with his People’s Development Corporation; and Ramon Velez spearheading the Model Cities program (with limited success) in Mott Haven, with its mix of open spaces, building rehabs and the offering of social services, are not only examples of urban models that are a product of the economic and political climate of the time, but also of an urge to create new vehicles that promote and are conducive to the social vibrancy that existed before the fires broke out.
Professor Mark Naison of Fordham University also had a chance to interview Dana Driskell in the fall of 2015 (Driskell 2015). Similar to Xavier Rodriguez, Dana describes his time growing up in the Bronx before the fires in the 1950s and early 60s. His descriptions pretty much follow the script of how life was around this period. His father was a union worker for a sheet metal manufacturer, and his mother a homemaker until she and his father separated and she began working at different garment centres across the city. Before that, his grandfather had come from Florida and ended up owning three buildings in the Bronx – one of which Dana grew up in on 165th and Brook Avenue. When encountering Dana’s description of his neighbourhood, one can quickly tell it was a vibrant sector full of public life (Driskell 2015):

But in general I think it was a pretty stable environment at least maybe through mid-sixties, late-sixties….and there was always a neighbor looking out the window and if you didn’t do the right thing they would report to mom or they would feel its ok to discipline you or warn you away. So it was a neighborhood, a family type of environment.

While growing up in the neighbourhood, Dana loved all kinds of music, but he had a special interest in salsa music – his current office at the Department of City Planning is covered with old salsa concert posters from the 1970s. His interest in musicians such as Eddie Palmieri and Tito Rodriguez comes from his godmother, who was Puerto Rican and who also lived nearby. Jazz and doo-wop also fascinated Dana, and even though he was too young to go to clubs such as the Boston Road Ballroom and the ones along McKinley Square, he can describe the social and public scene along this stretch (Driskell 2015):

I can remember the clubs that were up in McKinley Square: the Blue Morocco and the 845. Now of course I was too young to attend,… But I can remember just the impression – you going through McKinley Square and its Saturday night and it was, not like a Times Square but everyone had their neon lights and some of their music would be coming —….it was a hot spot… it was just a kaleidoscope of the different clubs… and the music coming out and the well dressed guys and the cars parked in the front… you know that this was something happening. And there would always be the, the posters up and down the blocks during the week advertising this person is coming in…. a lot of the big acts would come through.

Dana goes on to describe how this scene started to fade out in the early 1970s, and how it also coincided with some of the blue-collar jobs disappearing due to deindustrialisation in the northeast region and the strong sentiment of dispossession this produced in the community. The Cross-Bronx Expressway had also cut through the heart of the Bronx, disconnecting neighbourhoods and negatively impacting the social life of these areas. Yet there were also wider systemic racial issues that were additionally affecting these communities of colour – that also led to the subsequent nationwide Civil Rights Movement. These all coincided with a time when Dana was becoming much more politicised; assisting in a teacher’s strike and starting a political action committee at his high school, and attending anti-war protests. Dana is but one of many examples of Bronxites who became more politically active around this time. This, in conjunction with the charged memories of daily social rhythms, public life and music on the streets helped feed the will to resist and rebuild in the South Bronx.

Said Bronx music could be considered the perfect metaphor for the social vibrancy and diversity of the Bronx. The birthplace of hip-hop and 1970s salsa, the Bronx’s rhythms continued through the fires and were also significantly strengthened by them. An urban language of
sorts, the music of the Bronx speaks volumes of the will to persevere, to rebuild and to rees-
establish the former social rhythms of the Bronx. Marshall Berman states when describing his
impression of ‘The Message’ by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (Berman 2016: 131):
The prospects look bleak. And yet, and yet, the rapper can’t help but see: sometimes, some-
how – we don’t know how, but somehow – it’s possible to emerge from the vortex of hor-
or and violence. You can come from ruins, yet not yourself be ruined. Social disintegration
and existential desperation can be sources of life and creative energy. Our first hit rappers
know something that Hegel said modern men and women had to learn: they know how
to ‘look the negative in the face and live with it’. They have looked the ruins in the face,
and they have lived with them, and they have come through. Now they can see and feel
their way to new life.

In that sense, the Bronx rapper is the rhythmmanalist par excellence. These young black, Puerto
Rican and mostly minority groups of kids were able to take the language of the streets – or
for that matter, even the lack of an actual street – and turn it, in the spirit of Lefebvre, into a
vigorou example of the intersection of language and space. In the same manner that hip-hop
culture has spread and become popular all around the world, the stories of the Bronx is burning
have also traversed the globe – simultaneously being renowned as a place of destruction and
re-flourishing.

Conclusions

Today, the Bronx’s comeback is a case study that could serve communities being afflicted by
extreme fiscal austerity measures, exploitative speculation of land values, deindustrialisation
or displacement though gentrification or conflict. In its process of rebuilding, Bronx residents cre-
ated a diverse and novel array of visual, rhetorical and sonorous patterns of language that are still
narrated and physically evidenced throughout different parts of the borough.

As discussed before, Bronxites overcame the charged language and prejudiced set of actions
being utilised against them and turned the ‘Bronx is burning’ phrase into a repurposed narrative
for resistance and activism. These communities now live surrounded by the powerful remnants
of the co-opted rhythms of the time before the fires, and the new idioms that sprung from the
aftermath of destruction and the subsequent rebuilding of the South Bronx.

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