

# After Modernism: What Happened to Architecture's Social Project?

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Today, as the world teeters on the edge of a new millennium, saddled with unprecedented technological capability as well as untold human suffering, architects concerned with the global transformations of civil society are wrestling with the problems of how to theorize and practice progressive political architecture. The central questions are: What constitutes the social project in architecture in the current historical context? What are its parameters? What are the discourses and practices central to such a project, and how does this project intersect with others? In addressing these questions, a critical reassessment of the dominant understanding of the dialectical relationship between architecture and society propagated throughout institutional domains is long overdue. How architects construct an understanding of the social world and how that construct affects possibilities for practice are pivotal questions for architects who desire success in challenging the status quo, in constructing new social formations and new identities, and in helping reconstruct a viable democratic public life in the face of inexorable forces driving economic growth, destroying global ecology, homogenizing culture, and privatizing the public realm. These questions locate our point of departure for constructing a social project for architecture. The purpose of this paper, then, is three fold: (1) to analyze the recent trends and convergence of late capitalism and postmodernism theory in order to (2) to see how architecture has responded to these dynamic conditions, which we regard as strategies of retreat, and (3) to suggest the first steps for the reorientation of critical constructive practices.<sup>1</sup>

The making of architecture is a social practice and is unavoidably an epistemological activity.<sup>2</sup> Much of what we know of institutions, the distribution of power, social relations, cultural values, and everyday life is mediated by the built environment. Thus, *to make architecture is to construct knowledge, to build vision.* To make architecture is to map the world in some way, to intervene, to signify: it is *political.* Architecture, then, lies at the intersection of power, relations of production, culture, and representation, and is instrumental to the construction of our identities and our differences, to shaping how we know the world. Histori-

cally, this practice has constructed the environments that house the dominant culture and, as such, has acted—*de facto* or by intent—to construct consciousness through lived experience. Ironically, the most recognized "failure" of modern architecture is its *success* in constructing a hegemonic corporate culture.

Yet the modernist tradition of critical and oppositional social practices, while marginal, is nonetheless substantial. Critical practices in architecture that recognize their social character, attempt to alter relations of power, and pursue what we will continue to call the social project in architecture have a long history and continue today. "The social project" adopted by the modern movement in architecture pledged generations of architects to the betterment of society. As a particular form of modernity's program of social progress, this social project had a distinct character: it broke with architecture's traditional service to the status quo and committed architectural practice to the emancipation of humankind. Its strategic power rested in the social potential of technological advancement. The potential of mass production to enable mass distribution called for the elevation of images to further consumption and the design of type-forms for industrial production. Architects embraced the imperatives for innovation by new materials, technologies, and production processes as well as Fordian, Lasallian, and Marxian theories of progress.

During the past three decades, however, this progressive social imperative in architecture has lost its moral authority and hence its momentum. The near annihilation of this emancipatory project follows numerous shifts in historical conditions. First, the historical period is radically different in political economic terms, as the moment of European socialist revolution between the two world wars has seemingly overnight become the moment of global capitalism's greatest victory. Second, there is a widespread loss of faith in the Enlightenment promise of inevitable progress as 'truth' and 'reason' have failed to advance the human condition. Third, profound philosophical and political disorientation has ensued in the face of collapsing socialist experiments in altering the mode of production, experiments

that were of great interest to early modernists, many of whom were socialists. And fourth, varied anti-totalitarian schemata from poststructuralist philosophies to 'free market' ideologies are proliferating across the globe by the culture industry. These shifts mark basic changes in the political economy and culture on the one hand, and in the nature of theory construction on the other—in what is being distinguished as the postmodern condition and postmodernism theory respectively.

As these changes correspond to a profound worsening of social life, the emancipatory social project of modernity—to the extent that it is critically transformed to seek radical societal change within the most advanced forms of modern capitalism—still orients the practice of many to envision a future that is not a past. From fights to gain worker rights for immigrants to campaigns that oppose environmental racism, from the defense of *Roe v. Wade* and affirmative action to the rejection of federal "Weed and Seed" welfare and "Family Values" censorship of art, from demands for affordable housing to enactments of radical performance art, the struggle to advance the human condition—in full recognition of the failed experiments around us—persists. And the struggle on the part of politically progressive, 'organic' intellectuals from factory floors to university halls to define the present historical period, to describe its characteristics, and to generate responsive social practices has spawned a multiplicity of discourses and accompanying strategies, each engendering a field of debate that itself includes a diverse set of voices.

The field of architecture is no exception in its proliferation of discourses. Indeed, the varieties of postmodern architectural practice—from historicism to deconstructivism—have come to emblemize postmodern culture at large. Having been among the first fields to critique the effects of its own aesthetic modernism and declare a break, architecture is now posited by various theoretical frameworks to offer, alternately, a prime expression of the fractured sensibilities produced by the contemporary postmodern condition and/or an anticipatory vision of the reformed sensibilities of a perhaps better posthumanist future. Within the array of responses to the crises of modernity, and to the undisputed failures within modernism in architecture in particular, reside practices that specifically seek to change the political status quo of power relations in daily life. A renewed understanding of a social project for architecture seems not only possible, but is presently emerging.

### THE LATE CAPITALIST CONDITION: POLITICAL ECONOMY

What, then, of current societal directions? How might a renewed assessment of architecture's social project benefit from recent characterizations of the current social condition? Keeping in sight the dialectical relationship between culture and political economy, critics and theorists of all stripes have tried their hand at characterizing the contemporary condi-

tion. Some scholars such as Cornel West in his important 1990 essay, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," mark the global scale of the changes taking place before us, pointing to the decentering of Europe, the centering of the United States, and the decolonization of Asia and Africa.<sup>1</sup> In 1917, V.I. Lenin, in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* was anticipating these transformations not only from competitive to monopoly capitalism, but the emerging phase of capitalist expansion which by necessity viewed the globe as the marketplace.<sup>4</sup> By 1975, political economist Ernst Mandel described the "long waves" of capitalist development in his ground-breaking text *Late Capitalism*, identifying the most recent expansionary long wave as starting with the victory of European fascism and the growth of Anglo-American war economies in the 1940s.<sup>5</sup> By 1984, the American marxist Fredric Jameson, in his critical "Forward to Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*," supported Mandel's thesis by critiquing the postmodern positions that proclaimed an end to capitalism:

All the features mobilized by [conservative intellectual Daniel] Bell to document the end of capitalism as such—in particular the new primacy of science and technological invention, and the technocracy generated by that privileged position, as well as the shift from the older industrial technologies to the newer information ones—can be accounted for...as indices of a new and powerful, original, global expansion of capitalism, which now specifically penetrates the hitherto precapitalist enclaves of Third World agriculture and of First World culture, in which in other words, capital more definitively secures *the colonization of Nature and the Unconscious*...<sup>6</sup>

Theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah in *Critical Inquiry* observed that, the global capitalist economy "has turned every element of the real into a sign, and the sign reads 'for sale.'"<sup>7</sup> Such global shifts have created a new spatiality as well as new experiences of space and time. Marshall McLuhan's dictum about the world becoming a global village is now all too apparent: distinctions between First and Third Worlds are blurred, evidenced by the growing throngs of people who toil endlessly in modern-day sweat shops in the long shadows of corporate skyscrapers.

Many terms have come to characterize these shifting conditions: postindustrialism, postmodernism, post-fordism, to name three. In his incisive book *New Times*, cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes of *New Times* as interpreted by the nuances of these terms.<sup>1</sup> For Hall, *New Times* are not adequately captured by any of these terms taken singularly. But together, interrelationally, they reveal profound shifts in how life is lived economically and culturally. In the economic sphere, Hall characterizes change "in the technical organization of industrial capitalist production" and the creation of "new productive regimes" as exemplary of the shift from fordism to post-fordism. Fordism is that "era

of mass production, with its standardised products, concentrations of capital and its 'Taylorist' forms of work organization and discipline." Post-fordism refers to the shift to information technologies, mass communication, and electronically transmitted information that enables geographically dispersed production units to be integrated into a "more flexible, specialised, and decentralised form of work organization." This is an economy dominated by multinational corporations, whose playing field is now truly that—multinational—and thereby able, as economist John Urry says, to undermine "the coherence, wholeness, and unity of individual societies" by the "globalisation of new economic, social, and political relationships."<sup>9</sup> Consequently, within first world countries white collar and service work has come to displace "the manual working class" as big centralized plants follow the path of the dinosaur and off-shore production becomes the rule. All this conspires to thrust consumption into the driver's seat, reflected by "greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging and design, on the 'targeting' of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture rather than by...social class." All the while, the division widens between those whose income makes them viable consumers and those who, while displaced from the classic work force, nonetheless make up an impoverished international working class. As planner Peter Marcuse asserted in his 1988 article "Neutralizing Homelessness," in the time since 1980, 44 percent of all new jobs created in the United States paid below poverty wages.<sup>10</sup> Conditions have only worsened since then."

While the foregoing analyses are primarily economic, others have foregrounded the equally significant shifts within culture. By 1984 Fredric Jameson in "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," and by 1989 David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, were elaborating postmodernity as a cultural expression of lived experience within the new conditions of capitalism.<sup>12</sup> In a lived experience that privileges "ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic," it is difficult to make sense of things.<sup>13</sup> In *New Times* Hall elaborates,

'Post-Fordism' ...is as much a description of cultural as of economic change. Indeed, that distinction is now quite useless. Culture has ceased (if ever it was—which I doubt) to be a decorative addendum to the 'hard world' of production and things, the icing on the cake of the material world. The word is now as 'material' as the world. Through design, technology and styling, 'aesthetics' has already penetrated the world of modern production. Through marketing, layout and style, the 'image' provides the mode of representation and fictional narrativisation of the body on which so much of modern consumption depends. Modern culture is relentlessly material in its practices and modes of production. And the material world of commodities and technologies is profoundly cultural.<sup>14</sup>

Architecture is shamefully complicitous in these latter trends in that image and other modes of aesthetic differentiation are now key to general economic production. As Stephen Kieran writes, the driving force behind architects "in the Marketing Age, is to establish distinctly different styles and forms."<sup>15</sup> Hence to state that the so-called "age of postmodernism" marks a time of upheaval and reorganization is now to state the obvious. Such sweeping restructuring confuses and bewilders human lived experience. Individuals experience a crisis in the inability to explain the relationship of 'self' to the social world. The question of identity reaches crisis proportions. Architectural critic Liane Lefaivre has captured the experience of this crisis in her article "Constructing the Body, Gender, and Space."

The Western world is undergoing one of the deepest cognitive crises in its history. Recategorization is occurring at all levels of life, from the most mundane to the most momentous. We are witnessing the questioning of centuries-old received truths, about childhood, family, rationality, race, sexuality, gender, architecture, and the built environment. Fundamental beliefs upon which we base not only our knowledge of the world but also our actions in it, are being revised.<sup>16</sup>

Cornel West describes "random nouns" within black communities: "The collapse of meaning in life--the eclipse of hope and absence of love of self and others, the breakdown of family and neighborhood bonds"--has led to the "social deracination and cultural denudement of urban dwellers, especially children." West continues: "We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks—family, friends, school—that sustain some sense of purpose in life."<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, Fredric Jameson, engaging Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, describes the postmodern condition as a schizophrenic experience, where life is little more than a "series of pure and unrelated presents."<sup>18</sup> But for Jameson, and for us, this fracturing of lived experience is not in any way to be misunderstood as a disintegration of the social systems which remain our concern. "[P]ostmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order..., but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systematic modification of capitalism itself."<sup>19</sup>

### THE AFTER-MODERNISM DISCOURSE: POSTMODERNISM THEORY

Changing spatialities, the colonization of nature and psyche, rootlessness, hopelessness, discontinuity, schizophrenia: these are indeed strange new times, a fact that is not only lived but reverberates through the state of theory and criticism. Discursive complexity now marks every discipline and professional field. While no discipline or field has ever been undifferentiated, the extent of heterogeneity within and among disciplines has never been so pronounced and celebrated. Propelled by new categories of experience, changes

in sensibilities, new modes of representation, and an almost visceral fascination with the exotic and the Other, postmodern criticism and theory reveal, and cultural practices articulate, the multiplicity of difference, the indeterminacy of language, the variety of subject positions, and the breakdown of boundaries. No wonder someone like Daniel Bell, a widely known conservative intellectual, can proclaim he is a "socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture."<sup>20</sup>

We use Daniel Bell to illustrate at least two characteristic features of the postmodern condition as they regard theory and criticism. First is the organization of disparate and contrary elements into a fractured heterogeneity, and second, an uncertainty about the clarity of intellectual domains, their boundaries, and their interrelations.

Through the various Marxian, Freudian, and Nietzschean critiques of humanism, structuralism, and positivism, an Inheritance of critical inquiry which already resided within so-called Modernism became conflated in the 1960s and 1970s with this new assertion of a break from Modernism. Within the Marxian framework, the primary distinctions made between modernism and postmodernism as periods are more satisfactorily explained as different fragments of historical production sliding against each other in any given time frame. As Ernst Bloch wrote in the 1920s, "Modernism must thus be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development, the 'simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous,' the 'synchronicity of the non-synchronous': the coexistence of realities from radically different moments in history."<sup>21</sup> The Marxism that has come to be called "totalizing" and therefore "totalitarian," is the same philosophical tradition that (along with those spawned by Nietzsche and Freud) initiated the critique of humanism and its idealist centrality of the transcendental subject, that is, it was among the first posthumanist discourses. Marxism, while maintaining many aspects of the humanism, idealism, and positivism that characterized Enlightenment theory, nonetheless, must be understood as standing squarely in opposition to their premises.

Additionally, post-theories of cultural production had been developing in Europe among those who carried the legacy of Freud and Nietzsche as well. Thus philosopher Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* in 1968 challenged the logocentrism and false objectivity of the Enlightenment promise of progress in contradistinction to Ernst Mandel's political economy or Robert Venturi's rejection of the elitism of the avant-garde. And psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan working within structuralism's contributions while critiquing it, conceived of the humanist subject as an unstable socially-constructed but uniquely- experienced entity.

Thus what may appear as 'modern' in the stylistic character of constructivism is already in contemporary cultural theorist Peter Burger's interpretation in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, post-humanist in its rejection of human subjectivity.<sup>22</sup> For us, the ambiguous and often conflicting attributes

of modernism theory itself as a period in intellectual history may be understood as signaling the underlying social transformation of capitalism in the era of 'modernity'. The two concepts of modernity well described by Hilde Heynen in *Assemblage*—modernity as a programmatic emancipatory project and modernity as a transitory "fugitive" reality—coexist. And theorization of these two dialectically related understandings continues throughout the shifting historical periods. Our contemporary approach to the critique and production of culture, thus, requires the acceptance, and indeed the incorporation, of these conflicting historical specificities.

While we tolerate, even embrace, this ambiguity, it is nonetheless true that the coalescence of certain "principles" of postmodernism theory are having their own significant historical effect. In some ways, the postmodern persuasion of uncertainty, heterogeneity, and the lack of definite answers, is positive. For example, it can empower subaltern groups in the struggle to gain voice and identity within and against the totalizing narratives of modernism. Writer and filmmaker Pratibha Parmar is particularly instructive here when she writes:

In these postmodernist times the question of identity has taken on colossal weight particularly for those of us who are post-colonial migrants inhabiting histories of diaspora. Being cast into the role of the Other, marginalised, discriminated against and too often invisible, not only within everyday discourses of affirmation but also within the 'grand narratives' of European thought, black women in particular have fought to assert privately and publicly our sense of self a self that is rooted in particular histories, cultures and languages.<sup>23</sup>

But while this struggle to shed the mantle of modernism's homogenizing force in order to affirm marginal identities is good, many who might identify themselves as residing on the "postmodern Left" have failed to move beyond this singular notion of empowering disenfranchised groups to form a larger, collective counter-hegemonic project. The result has been what cultural theorist Jonathon Rutherford has called "categorical politics": a recognition of the right and power of autonomy on the part of oppressed groups but not necessarily a recognition of the need for such groups to ally, in solidarity, in larger social movements.<sup>24</sup> For some this is precisely the problem with much of postmodern theory and criticism. As Steven Best and Douglas Kellner assert, "postmodern theory splits capitalist society into separate and unmediated realms, analyzing culture in isolation from the economy, or politics apart from the conjuncture of business and government."<sup>25</sup> If isolation of subject areas were not enough, Jim Merod, in his assessment of the public responsibility of the critic, states that "criticism now tends more than ever toward a rarefied self-interest, as if writing and the critical act were severed from the institutional practices that define a capitalist society."<sup>26</sup> Postmodernism theorist

Christopher Norris says something similar, "we have reached a point where theory has effectively turned against itself, generating a form of extreme epistemological scepticism which reduces everything—philosophy, politics, criticism, and 'theory' alike—to a dead level of persuasive or rhetorical effect...."<sup>27</sup> Refusal to advance a progressive strategy does nothing to undermine the hegemony of the dominant capitalist culture.

Partly due to their refusal to undertake a thorough reevaluation of the contradictions inherent in the emancipatory social project and similarly because of their own problematic separation from contemporary Left social movements, then, postmodern Left theorists find themselves in a state of disarray, if not paralysis. They are splintered into competing micropolitical entities: "political ghettos of ideological purity," to use Manning Marable's terms. What is more, the preoccupation with fragmentation, indeterminacy, and disjunction, in turn, is often handled in ways that beget a despairing nihilism which forecloses agency and questions of possibility. Thus fearful of any holistic theories, or even arbitrary closures, of capitalism because they smack of totalities or grand narratives, this group of professional intellectuals abandons the chance for a wider transformative social movement. And while they swim in the fragmentary and bask in ephemerality, the universals of capitalism—private profit, market exchange, creative destruction, planned obsolescence, divided labor, technological rationality, environmental destruction—relentlessly colonize the world. Masking big sticks, big ideologies, and big economic maneuvers, the apparent atomization of the social successfully achieves hegemony by *disorientation*.<sup>28</sup>

Compare this weak, Left theorizing to the success of comparable intellectual work aligned with the political Right as it accounts for contemporary social conditions. Ironically, the Left—raising disorganization to a principle—is no match for the newly organized Right. One successful strategy is to explain social decay as the direct result of liberal policies: conjured up are such terms as "reverse discrimination," "welfare queens," black rapists and murderers," "illegal aliens," "lazy workers," "shrewish women," and "political correctness" to embolden reactionary ideology.

Supplementing these successes is what cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg critiques as the "depoliticization of politics" itself, where politics and issues are divorced from one another and positioned as affective investments, emptied of any political content. Grossberg argues convincingly that the project of the new conservatism in the US is the attempt to refigure the ground of American life: "all of the planes and domains of people's lives, all of the institutions and practices of the social formation...the very meaning of America and the vectors of its future."<sup>29</sup> What makes this attempted reconstitution so profound, however, has been the Right's ability to translate economic and ideological issues into affective sentiments—the mobilization of passion—whereby they are stripped of their complexity and reduced to mere slogans. Hence, social issues and concerns are devolved

of their complications—"Why Ask Why, Drink Bud Dry?;" citizenship and equal rights are equated to consumerism—"You've come a long way baby;" the Gulf War was couched in empty signifiers—"free Kuwait;" military missiles become the "Peacekeeper" and the "Patriot;" politics are displaced to the aesthetic and personal—Dan Quayle opted for the Vice Presidency because "it is a good career move;" and the experience of daily life is reduced to a series of unrelated "random nows"<sup>30</sup>—"Don't Worry, Be Happy." This highly successful ideological demagogery is proliferated through the popular media while postmodern Left sympathizers are satisfied to "de-center the subject."

The mobilization and ascendancy of the Right has been successful not only politically and economically, but more, culturally and pedagogically. Through the marshalling of conservative think tanks, the electronic media, the popular press, nationally syndicated columnists, groups like Accuracy in Media and the National Association of Scholars as well as numerous grassroots movements, the Right has realized big dividends in controlling the production of meaning around issues like schools, abortion, crime, and urban and state policy. The scale and scope of this organization of knowledge is unprecedented. The quest is nothing less than the orchestration of consciousness to ensure ideological hegemony and to colonize subjectivity generally. The Right's consolidation of its hegemony has been devastatingly successful.

In the 1990s, after a decade that abandoned many of the constraints on capital that were won in the interwar period and that wreaked havoc with one-country socialist experiments around the world, United States capitalism has spread further in a high-stakes grab at domination of the growing power (and increasing contradiction) of transnational capital. At the same time, the hegemony of bourgeois culture and its culture industry challenges early modernist strategies of resistance. Herein lies the value we ascribe to postmodernism theory: it challenges both the logo-Eurocentric constitution of Western bourgeois culture and the taken-for-granted emancipatory "promises" of radical and revolutionary social practices. Yet its challenge is insufficient and often reactionary. In this context, the quest for viable approaches to socially responsive architecture practice intensifies, and consideration of theories of cultural practice spawned by those who embrace this analysis of a postmodern cultural condition and offer postmodern theories, albeit highly problematic, seems worthwhile.

## ARCHITECTURE'S RESPONSE

Statements of architecture's relation to society appear in written texts from the time of Vitruvius, based on the premise that architecture engages society and that a knowledge of society and its processes and the particularities of architecture's relationship to these processes is basic to the education of architects. Architects have long since acted on the assumption that architecture participates in the formation

of social order. The goal of that social formation has changed throughout the history of the profession. But the traditional approach has intended that its architecture serve (or build) society after the likeness of a ruling power. This traditional social orientation has been periodically challenged by architects who professed social reform and sought an architecture responsive to the human condition of society in general.

In the early twentieth century, the Modern movement in architecture—a loosely coalesced agglomeration of trends, styles, and political persuasions—upheld the basic premise that architecture had the power as a social force to actually engage society and transform it. These modernists were at once architects and social advocates. To the extent that they constituted an actual movement, they believed, in common, that architecture could cure social ills and prevent (or make) revolution. Art and technology united in mass production could bring increased social welfare as well as enlightened democratic consciousness to the downtrodden masses and contribute to the inevitable forward march of human progress. Concepts like "new objectivity" asserted that the universalizing, abstract qualities of technological reproduction could bring greater equality among peoples, not only greater access to shelter but broader access to common social values and collective experience, possibly resulting in a collective internationalist style. At a time when the USSR and Germany were attempting socialist construction, and social revolution was either imminent or seemed so in many countries around the world, the concept of an objectivated internationalist architecture in intent, content, and form dovetailed exactly with the institutionalized social movements led by the communist and socialist Internationals, which were striving for the betterment of humankind across all national barriers.

By mid-century—with the failure of the Weimer experiment as well as the rejection of the avant-garde in the socialist construction in Eastern Europe—criticism of the negative social impact of modernism's objectified industrialized technological forms began to challenge received beliefs about architecture's positive engagement with society. As modern architecture's post-war phase successfully engaged society in the United States as a corporate cog and in the USSR as a repressive state apparatus, disenchantment with the potential of an architecture for social change grew. In the 1960s, a surge of grassroots social criticism found its way into the fringes of architecture. While still idealizing architecture's potential for social agency, the grassroots reformers were particularly critical of the capitalist complicity of mature modernism in the West.

By the early 1970s, evidence mounted that architecture was not the determinant progressive force that the early Modern movement had hoped to unleash. But critics such as Robert Venturi, in his period-breaking book of 1966 *Complexity and Contradiction*, granted just enough effectiveness to architectural determinism to blame the Modern movement for the alienation of people from their physical environments. Belief in the redemptive power of modern architec-

ture was ceremoniously exploded with the failed public housing project Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis. This explosion was named "the birth of postmodernism" in architecture by Charles Jencks in his 1977 book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, and thus codified the critique of modernism's failed social agenda.

In the ensuing period a shift has occurred in the belief systems of architecture—from a pursuit of architecture as an agent of material social change to an exploration of architecture as a *language* related to society as a mode of cultural expression, either affirmative of traditional bourgeois culture or resistant to it. As the dust settles over the rubble of Reaganomics, the stability of architectural meaning is being challenged in architectural offices and the studios of architecture schools everywhere. As the rate of social change advances exponentially and the nature of architectural practice is challenged every day, questions about architecture's material and cultural roles in society persist.

Postmodern theoretical trends consistent with those previously described have been evident in architecture for some time. And carrying similar, if not more exaggerated problematic characteristics, the manner by which architecture has shaped and been shaped by recent postmodern directions can be characterized as disengagement from progressive projects. Indeed, the army with multiple regiments which aligned to critique modernism in architecture has organized to actually advance a retreat through their generation of new alternative strategies that effect the withdrawal of architecture from progressive social practice. With the growth of these regiments, the political valence of architectural theorizing has shifted from investment in the development of strategies for architecture's progressive social agency to satisfaction with the crafting of tactical justifications for architecture's retreat from the crude and inhumane forces of modern social life, a nonetheless profoundly social act. General characteristics may be briefly outlined.

### Retreat into Tradition

The regiment for the retreat into tradition sees architecture as a system of signs offering lost meaning to a culturally deprived general population alienated not by social or economic poverty but by the poverty of cultural symbols that could make manifest for them a sense of continuity with past traditions. This regiment throws off the surface style of high modernism, seeing it as a vocabulary of failed elitist forms that are powerless against an increasingly fragmenting and alienating social order. To overcome the sense of loss, this Renaissance humanist return adopts popular cultural forms, or it "rediscovers" the neo-classical historicizing of cultural forms.

In either case, architecture is not understood as an agent for social change but as a language of cultural meaning and artistic expression, the renewal of a language that had been destroyed by modernism's severance with the past and the de-centering of the humanist subject. In a period of recession

in the building industry, the development of architectural language may be a constructive activity. However, unwittingly perhaps, in its retreat from modernism's progressive social agenda, this new traditionalism, this new classicism, this new universalism, constructs new unities of language and art that act in full and unabashed service to the dominant bourgeois cultural industry, the traditional social role of architecture.

### Retreat to a Strategy of Negation

In response to the traditionalist resurrection of meaning and the illusions of bourgeois subjectivity, this regiment promotes a counter-interpretation of the meaning of architecture as language. In reference to the early 20th century where the artistic avant-garde had opposed bourgeois art's affirmative character, so the new antitraditionalist architectural designers subvert the comfort of universal language and the belief in common cultural referents by articulating *difference, rupture, fragmentation*, and radical *heterogeneity*. Architecture is "the new critical art of contemporary culture."<sup>31</sup> In its politically strong form, it carries forward the avant-garde strategies of the 1920s and 1930s transformed into the 1980s and 1990s as the explicit pursuit of an oppositional *retreat* in order to disrupt the practice of architecture. However, this contemporary strategy of negation is more characteristically a resistance not to bourgeois social relations by means of social praxis but to bourgeois philosophy by means of the formal subversion of architecture's language as a foundational metaphor for the bourgeois philosophical order. Leader of this considerable movement Peter Eisenman explains, "Even as any architecture shelters, functions and conveys aesthetic meaning, a dislocating architecture must struggle against celebrating, or symbolizing these activities; it must dislocate its own meaning."<sup>32</sup>

This regiment sees it as not only possible, but also progressive to generate new forms that produce an estrangement or dialectical shock in the struggle to renew perception within a context of continual cultural commodification. Seeking to resist the construction of dominant unities, this group also resists alternatives. Its followers concentrate on the struggle within the aesthetic structures of the discipline and generate shocking negational metaphors removed from the struggle within society.

Looking to art once again to deliver us from the forces of social decay, these strategies of aesthetic disorientation do challenge received aesthetic beliefs and produce the subversion of aesthetic unity. But they do not offer a socially viable strategy of opposition. Perceptual renewal, or the continual realignment of structures for knowledge in order to expose their taken-for-granted character in the social world, has been a compelling strategy. The historically progressive artistic strategies of the early twentieth-century *avant-garde*—which struggled to undermine the artistic establishment in light of the growing institutionalization and commodification

of art, and to ally with social movements in their struggle for radical change—are not directly applicable today in the face of the culture industry's tremendous power of cooptation as well as the separation of postmodern experimentalists from contemporary oppositional social action. As Fredric Jameson has articulated, the early avant-garde strategies for political art did not have to confront the absorption of the unconscious and appropriation of perceptual renewal that has occurred with the postwar expansion into transnational capitalism accompanied by its colonization of not only the pre-capitalist third world but also the unconscious human mind. New strategies of negation must incorporate knowledge of this cooptive operation and establish new links to active social movements. Otherwise, the political intent that motivates the search for novelty and the constant rejection of any *natural* status for form can turn into its opposite: a means of feeding the colonization of the mind. Whatever radicality previously existed for a strategy of defamiliarization, the current destruction of the relative autonomy of culturally resistant work (in this case the cultural work of architecture), the explosion of cultural practice, and its now-complete dependence on the social formation of capitalism, delivers many experimental cultural practices directly into the pocket of late capitalism. Not only are inventive strategies of formal aesthetic subversion dubiously subversive, but they now actually supply the hegemonic commodity culture with sources of constant renewal at a time when fragmentation, not wholeness, is the lived experience, and when "difference and identity are the same"<sup>33</sup> in a global hegemonic culture.

Rapid stylistic renewal is now no signal of opposition to the *status quo*, only a sign of the infinitesimal time within which newness can be appropriated, within which shocking metaphors of resistance can be returned to construct dominating unities. Any relative autonomy that appears to exist is a momentary shift or rupture within the process of struggle and reconsolidation of the bourgeois global estate. And any truly oppositional strategy at this moment of rupture cannot be one that furthers *disorientation*. Under such conditions resistance to totalizing unities in the aesthetic realm displaces the actual site of social struggle.

It is important to recognize, additionally, the specificity of architecture as a social practice. Unlike modernist art that proposed an autonomy from the contamination of social life, and unlike avant-garde art that advanced a resistant reengagement with society in the form of active negation of its rules and institutions, early 20th century modern and avant-garde practices in *architecture* were defined by the enabling constraint of actually being an instrument of use, integral to daily life experience and the structures of society. Architecture is not only a compositional language. It is not a painting on the wall that critiques social fragmentation by creating it, that makes the familiar strange and thereby historicizes it. It is not a theatrical production that focuses attention and participation on a particular moment of critical consideration. Architecture is not even a commodity whose uncritical consumption can be resisted. Architecture is a

multifaceted site of social formation that is subject to multiple and diverse forces. It is a means of capital expansion, dependent on land ownership. It is an omnipresent surround-sound environment for subjective lived experience. And consequently, it is a medium of social-cultural interdependence and power in the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony that exceeds the fleeting stimulation and indoctrination that characterize the reception of most works of art. Thus, conscious withdrawal was never a strategy for modern architecture in its own time, and it offers no critical response to architecture's social dilemmas now. Given architecture's specific characteristics as well as the power of appropriation that characterizes the current global culture industry, contemporary architectural strategies of negation, by attempting to resuscitate strategies that only ever worked to the extent that they were linked to actual social movements and political struggles, continue to deliver architecture into the service of domination.

### Retreat to Criticism as Closure

Critique of the role of architecture in the contemporary historic period is precisely the focus of the regiment of architectural criticism. Accordingly, architecture is bourgeois; architecture is hegemonic; architecture is oppressive; architecture is logocentric; architecture is fundamentally, irrevocably, bankrupt; and the constructive practice of architecture is both false and wrong.

Based on a powerful and welcome critique of the relations of architectural production, such critics see architecture discourse on the whole as "false consciousness"—a set of notions completely and irrevocably in the service of the overarching belief system developed by the dominant power structure of advanced capitalism. And they see architectural practice as socially destructive. Believing that architecture has no progressive transformative power, all contemporary "oppositional" strategies of practice are viewed as the subjective delusions of cultural radicals who unwittingly mobilize what formative power architecture has to invigorate the bourgeoisie. As architectural critic and historian **Manfredo Tafuri** asserts, "One cannot 'anticipate' a class architecture (an architecture 'for a liberated society'); what is possible is the introduction of class criticism into architecture."<sup>34</sup> As Jameson has commented, this perspective "rests on the conviction that nothing new can be done, no fundamental changes can be made within the massive being of late capitalism."<sup>35</sup>

This trend of criticism has helped to unmask the recurring illusion of architecture's own redemption and has contributed the understanding that it is not only *bad architecture* that has produced alienation in late capitalism: "...[T]he principle task of ideological criticism is to do away with impotent and ineffectual myths, which so often serve as illusions that permit the survival of anachronistic 'hopes in design.'"<sup>36</sup> Struggling against bourgeois hegemony by concentrating on the generation of shoclung metaphors in the social (rather

than the aesthetic) domain, and convinced of the return to cultural domination of any professed "alternative" construction, this point of view has also produced a closure on the entire project of architecture—"uselessly painful"<sup>37</sup>—because there is no escape. Disallowing any vision of the future, slandering hope as a humanist lie, and seeing no possibility of struggle within the structures for knowledge of the field of architecture, this acceptance of *life-lived-within-the-critique* must realize the inevitability of its own socially constructive practice: Only the critic is allowed to create, and then there is closure. However, we do not grant such a possibility of critical distance, of analysis from the outside. Critics *are* practitioners and cannot find comfort in the rejection of individual architects or "projects." Such a rejection of the pursuit of radical, oppositional, of anticipatory practices leaves social movements completely disarmed in the continual cultural-political struggle within the contradictions of capitalism.

### Retreat into Socially Responsible Process

Any work grappling with architecture's social project must engage those battalions professing design consideration of user needs, social factors, participatory strategies, in short, social responsibility, precisely because it will be with such forces that this book will likely be positioned.

This regiment articulates useful goals and principles. For example, in March 1993 a worldwide show of student design projects was organized in New York by Pratt Institute in collaboration with Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility to examine *What is Socially Responsible Design?*, an effort requiring exhibit reviewers to engage one another about the project of social responsibility in order to make selections. After two exhausting days, the following consensus was reached:

Socially responsible design celebrates social, cultural, ethnic, gender and sexuality differences; is critical of existing asymmetrical social structures and relationships of power and seeks to redistribute power and resources more equitably; changes society; continually calls into question its own social, cultural, and philosophical premises and, through a continuing dialectic, seeks to ensure that its ends are consistent with its means; seeks in its process, to develop strategies for public intervention and participatory democracy.

Socially responsible design recognizes that only those people affected by an environment have any right to its determination; avoids the use of mystifying private or professional languages; takes as its frame of reference the collective meanings of empowerment; recognizes that the process of empowerment can only be a process of self-empowerment, and that designers must engage in a process of mutually empowering experiences with the disempowered; recognizes that the process of participatory self-empowerment is a never-ending,

ongoing struggle—that there is no 'ideal' or utopian state that can ever be attained.<sup>38</sup>

We do not quote these passages at length unproblematically. Some of this wording we find troubling, but we can agree with the overall tone as well as many of the specifics, some of which inform this book. As well, within social responsibility the position is clear that the built environment is a social, cultural, and political product, and disengagement from social practice is not at issue. And as Stephen Klein writes in his introductory essay to the show's catalogue, "Most often [architecture] is the product of the dominant culture and, as such, assists that culture in maintaining its hegemony. Designers, architects and planners often reinforce the existing order by shaping spaces and objects that support its interests of money and power and by creating its symbols. In this system style changes assume great importance..."<sup>39</sup> We find these assumptions about the role of style, symbols, in short, aesthetics, correct. We thus find it curious that "many of the projects in the exhibition do not look out of the ordinary. Aesthetic issues, such as the role of aesthetics in reproducing the dominant order or multicultural alternatives to the dominant Eurocentric styles are for the most part absent...[T]he salient stylistic characteristic of these projects is their lack of style."<sup>40</sup>

This is disturbing, because it speaks of failures within the inner ranks of those committed to social responsibility to take up aesthetic production in the interests of counter-hegemonic culture. In other words, this regiment retreats by privileging process over product, believing, for example, that "the true significance of participation lies in its effects on the participants, not on architecture," or similarly, "the paramount purpose of participation is not good buildings, but good citizens in a good society."<sup>41</sup> Aesthetics are relegated to inconsequential status, largely unimportant, rejected as if they are rejectable. Herein lies the contradiction with the advocates for social responsibility: they grant the political power of aesthetics to secure hegemony but they do not take responsibility for their own aesthetic production. They understand how aesthetics can be used by formalists in alliance with dominant interests to reproduce the status quo, but they retreat from the potential of aesthetics as an apparatus of power to promote oppositional cultural production.<sup>42</sup>

### CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIVE PRACTICE: REORIENTATION

The cultivation of a culture of resistance-through-retreat, which refuses to engage the struggle of social movements or proposes no constructive strategy, has no place in a struggle to define an anti-hegemonic social project for architecture. While it is fair to say that any constructive practice is always partially utopian and always co-optable, it must also be said that resistance through retreat is a more advanced path to commodification.

The "wrenching of propriety"<sup>v41</sup> from any knowledge construction is a critical strategic practice of construction in

itself. And all these varieties of practice produce particular problems for knowledge construction. But the experimentation with formal processes of structuration without the engagement of social forces—the generative *form* without the professed intent or political *content*—produces a local view of self-referential formal autonomy that plays a strategic role in supporting the social status quo. And critical social practices of architecture that do not engage the interdependence of formal aesthetic articulation and social and cultural order—the professed intent without form and content—makes a statement in history but misses a major sphere of architecture's historical activity, that is, its power to affect culture through lived experience. Further, the analysis that satisfies itself with the detailed descriptive critique of this interdependence of architecture and society but refuses any constructive practice of design—the form and content without the profession of intent—makes its living within the discourse of the field by refusing any strategy of social practice that would seek intentionally to change it.

Resistance to the hegemony of bourgeois humanism through our suicide as socially produced subjects does not remove us from our historical practice as social agents. The problem of agency rises ever present.<sup>44</sup> Any critical practitioner of architectural design or discourse who does not locate themselves on the global social battlefield—as a strategist, not a map drawer but a drawer of lines of march, as a generator of structures for knowledge for social action—will be among the first intellectuals to serve the hegemonic class.

Any critical practitioner who deconstructs western architecture and philosophy but refuses to see his or her own place of reconstruction is doomed to return appropriated and re-(up)right architecture.<sup>45</sup> All practices construct. The question cannot be how to resist construction of a project but rather how to understand the dynamic moments of struggle in the structuring of knowledge as a social, pedagogical practice with particular historical character and how to generate strategies that engage society and enable progressive social change. It may be then that in an historic period of bourgeois hegemony-by-disorientation, a pedagogical practice of reorientation would be a subversive act. In this light we recognize several key elements of the reconstructed social project we advocate: the desire to redeem the commitment of architects to progressive social agency, which gave Modernism its project, while we constructively learn from the critique of Modernism's many immaturities, mistakes, and downright social abuses; the intent to recoup the social militance of the term "critical" in the face of its widespread cooptation; the adherence to develop strategies for practice that address their intent, form, and content to the contradictions of the contemporary historical context; the willingness to stand for a race, gender, and class politics in constructive resistance to many of the popular contemporary trends that define the political economy of the academy and architectural practice; and the commitment to link the practices of

architecture with the activities of progressive social movements. It is only by continual rearticulation, reorientation (even *re-placement*) of one's own social being and a constant *re-placing* of one's lived experience in relation to architecture and society that a conscious critical strategy of constructive anti-hegemony can develop.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This paper is a version of the Introduction of our co-edited book, *Architecture's Social Project: Critical Discourses and Contemporary Practice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 1996).
- <sup>2</sup> See Thomas A. Dutton, *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1991); and Lian Hurst Mann, *Architecture as Social Strategy: Structures for Knowledge for Change* (PhD Dissertation: University of California at Berkeley, 1990) for elaborations on this perspective which have formed the basis of this common work.
- <sup>3</sup> Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," *October* 53 (1990).
- <sup>4</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916; New York: International Publishers, 1971).
- <sup>5</sup> Ernst Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975).
- <sup>6</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Forward," in Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xiv.
- <sup>7</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post in Postmodernism the Post in Postcolonial?" in *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991).
- <sup>8</sup> Stuart Hall, "The New Times" in *New Times* (New York: Verso Press, 1990).
- <sup>9</sup> John Urry, "The End of Organized Capitalism," in *ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Peter Marcuse, "Neutralizing Homeslessness," in *Socialist Review*, vol. 18, no. 1 (January-March 1988).
- <sup>11</sup> See Donald L. Bartlett and James B. Steele, *America: What Ent Wrong?* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1992) based upon their award-winning series of articles about the redistribution of income in the 1980s in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.
- <sup>12</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logis of Late Capitalism," in *New Left Review*, no. 146 (July-August), pp. 59-92; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1989).
- <sup>13</sup> David Harvey, *ibid.*, p. 44.
- <sup>14</sup> Stuart Hall, "New Times."
- <sup>15</sup> Steve Kieran, "The Architecture of Plenty," in *Harvard Architecture Review* 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Liane Lefaivre, "Constructing the Body, Gender, and Space," in *Design Book Review*, Issue 25 (Summer 1992), p. 35.
- <sup>17</sup> Cornel West, "Learning to Talk of Race," *The New York Times Magazine* (August 2, 1992), p. 26.
- <sup>18</sup> Jameson,
- <sup>19</sup> Jameson, "Postmodernism ...," xii.
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Arac, ed., *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), p. xiii.
- <sup>21</sup> Ernst Block, "Nonsynchronism and Dialectics," *New German Critique* 11 (Spring 1977), 22-28 PM 307.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- <sup>23</sup> Pratibha Parmar, "Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation," in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p. 106.
- <sup>24</sup> Jonathan Rutherford, "A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference," in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*.
- <sup>25</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Investigations* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), p. 289.
- <sup>26</sup> Jim Merod, *The Political Responsibility of the Critic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 2.
- <sup>27</sup> Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 4.
- <sup>28</sup> Lian Hurst Mann, *Architecture as Social Strategy*.
- <sup>29</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*.
- <sup>30</sup> Cornel West, "Learning to Talk of Race."
- <sup>31</sup> Irvine symposium, *Postmodernism and Beyond: Architecture as the Critical Art of Contemporary Culture*, Irvine, California (1989).
- <sup>32</sup> Peter Eisenman, *The House of Cards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 189.
- <sup>33</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Varieties of Historicism."
- <sup>34</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, trans. Giorgio Verrecchia (New York: Harper and Row, 1980)p. iii.
- <sup>35</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," 87.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.
- <sup>38</sup> Stephan Marc Klein, Introduction to the Catalogue *What is Socially Responsibly Design?* (New York: Pratt Institute and Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility, 1993).
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> C. Richard Hatch, ed., *The Scope of Social Architecture* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984), pp. 8,9.
- <sup>42</sup> Much of the work of Tony Shuman is directly about this role of form and aesthetics in promoting culture in alternative directions. See Tony Schuman, "Forms of Resistance: Politics, Culture and Architecture," in Thomas A. Dutton, ed., *Voices in Architectural Education*.
- <sup>43</sup> Demda, "White Mythology."
- <sup>44</sup> See Mann, *Architecture as Social Strategy* for elaboration of this discussion.
- <sup>45</sup> See Ann Bergren, "Architecture, Gender, Philosophy," in eds., Jeffrey Kipnis, and Richard Burdett, *Strategies in Architectural Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).