

The New Localism: Design's Possibilities in Global Restructuring

STEPHEN LUONI
University of Florida

Introduction

The categories First and Third World were coined at a time when capital formation and economic identity were regulated at the national scale. The recent emergence of the local as a self-sufficient economic entity competitive on a global scale challenges identities neatly constructed in terms of national sovereignty. The first part of this essay explores the entropic nature of capital as both First and Third World countries now experience similar developmental dynamics in the erosion of economic nationalism. Since local economic entrepreneurialism has become a dominant force in the global production of wealth, local social and cultural capital is a critical resource in the incubation of regional economic activity to establish market distinction. The second part of the essay explores the centrality of the design professions in the organization of local cultural capital to generate economic development. Through a case study that involves local restructuring forced by global competition, issues concerning resource availability, the aesthetics of fear, and “green” public realms are discussed as factors that have shaped the design process. The essay calls for layered multidisciplinary design processes engaged in the construction of recombinant landscapes.

Globalization

While globalization has always figured as a prominent historical strategy in capitalistic processes, the expediency and range of its contemporary dynamics has prompted unanticipated social and geographic restructuring. Populations in both First and Third Worlds have seen their livelihoods suddenly expanded or paralyzed given their degree of participation in global networks of wealth production. In this economic age of “flexible accumulation”, production assets from facilities, equipment and suppliers, to labor are no longer bound to any single place as corporate discipline more readily exploits the unevenness between world labor markets, national currencies, and costs of resource extraction. Localities can no longer count on the stability that traditional political-economic arrangements insured. Such Fordist era arrangements were based on strong nation-states’ capacities to regulate their country’s economic metabolism through wealth containment and redistribution policies. Known as economic nationalism, collaboration between private industry’s commitment to the local welfare and Keynesian public management policy worked to mitigate the effects of uneven economic development as they buffered localities from the economic downturns inevitable in capitalism’s dynamics (see Harvey, 1989).

However, one of the unintended consequences of the post-Fordist deindustrialization of the West has been the “hollowing out of the state” (Clarke and Gaille, 1998, 34) as state regulatory authority has shifted to supranational (i.e. World Bank, IMF, OPEC, NAFTA, G7) and subnational scales of governance. Contrary to one prevailing view of globalization that assumes the homogenization of essential political, economic and cultural practices at supranational scales, subnational, or local, economies are proving to be the engines that drive the global economy. With the substantial erosion of state-directed regulatory mechanisms, local economies are more exposed to the unmitigated deleterious and profitable effects of global economic activity, contributing to an accelerated unevenness between neighboring territories. The more entrepreneurial local economies, some ironically surrounded by abject poverty (e.g. Silicon Valley, Orange County, Asian Tiger megacities, international tourist zones, and Sunbelt technology corridors), exert inordinate impacts on world economic output that overshadow most countries’ GNPs. Under the traditional economic nationalism of Fordist regimes, economic development policy tended toward a universal science with states pursuing the same portfolio of regulatory instruments for their respective economies. Local strategies of wealth production in our post-Fordist era, however, are more contextually responsive to regional dynamics (Clarke and Gaille). Globalization is anything but monolithic.

Reversing Marxist metanarratives of economic determinism, the prospect of regional economic sustainability appears to be, and more so than we thought, a function of its unique cultural and human resources—its social capital—and the ability to politically organize those resources towards entrepreneurial ends. Local governments have shifted from a managerial role that served place-bound industry to an entrepreneurial role more concerned with the incubation of social capital to attract and create economic development. In the quest to distinguish themselves from neighboring communities and other competitive markets, localities are harnessing their indigenous cultural and environmental resources as “livability” assets to establish market distinction. There is nothing new in this, as speculation-minded municipal boosterism—especially in America—has been a significant factor contributing to population shifts since the middle of the last century (Boorstin, 1965). What is ironic is that this stepped-up attention to place accompanies the contemporary shrinkage of distance and the seeming lack of resistance to mobility. Perhaps then, *resistance is offered through the creation of distance locally*. This could not be better evidenced than

by the “secession” of the elite or the fortunate class from local social and urban fabrics in the creation of more risk-averse lifeworlds. In no time in modern history has spatial segregation of class been so acute, where the elite have more in common with the elite of other continents than the citizens of their own blood and soil (Bauman, 1998; Lasch, 1995; Reich, 1989).

Spatial Strategies of the Local: Organizing Cultural Capital

If indeed, “distance as a social product” (Bauman, 1998, 12) motivates market differentiation between localities, the local restructuring of space presages very different possibilities for the public realm. Since local efforts are highly nuanced by the degree of local entrepreneurialism in leveraging social capital, it is difficult to track common points of success or failure because no one local developmental profile mirrors another. What we can attempt to ascertain are the institutional assumptions underpinning contemporary spatial development and design culture’s varied roles in organizing cultural capital. What are the differences between contemporary trends in the production of space and previous modernist conceptions of space? At the risk of simplifying the distinction, modernist conceptions of space maintained traditional organic relationships between work, home, leisure, and utility. Notwithstanding the invention of new planning vocabularies, modern organization of place continued to manifest the unities intrinsic to work that privileged the material economy as design maximized these relations through the “Taylorization” of city, work and home. Contemporary productions of space work through a combination of material economies and new symbolic economies that create value outside the traditional systems of production. In the latter, design moves beyond the rationalization of urban assets demanded by the material economy to function as an instrument for either the intensification of laden cultural capital or the thematization of place to create value.

Examples of value-laden thinking in contemporary spatial production can be seen in the green and heritage movements as they manifest and reproduce the value of good stewardship. The provision of “green” infrastructure and sustainability protocols as economic development tools by historically progressive regions attract socially conscious, enterprising residents and businesses—a reversal of smoke stack-chasing municipal policies prevalent during economic nationalism. Growth is cast in performative criteria other than an economic bottom line. Alternatively, large, dense cities have capitalized on their ethnic and artistic heritages for instance, by incubating the restaurant as a multidisciplinary cultural site, providing entrepreneurial opportunities for restaurateurs, artists, and actors alike. Sharon Zukin discusses the restaurant’s role in facilitating the accumulation of local cultural capital through a synthesis of innovations in cuisine, architectural design and theatre.

“Besides the food itself, a widespread perception of artists’

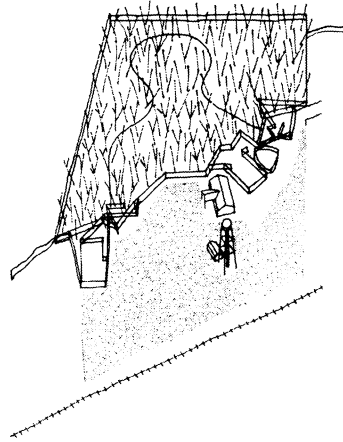


importance to a restaurant’s ambience has helped renew the reputation of restaurants as centers of urban cultural consciousness. Using the arts labor force as waiters has also helped represent restaurant work as part of middle-class culture in the form of cuisine rather than working-class culture in the form of taking orders and clearing tables.... This opening up of cultural consumption has in turned enabled certain types of restaurants to play a major role in a city’s symbolic economy” (Zukin, 1995, 154).

Value-laden thinking in context-structuring processes builds upon a location’s intrinsic comparative advantages rather than creates new aspatial, ahistorical identities. Its underlying institutional imperative operates through connectivity as opposed to the fabrication of distance that achieves market differentiation.

The more dominant contemporary production of space operates as a *value-imposed* process, where content is appended to space—as in thematization—to establish market differentiation and customer gratification. Though most local development engages a combination of value-laden and value-imposed strategies, the emphasis on the latter points to the extent to which market logic has become a consuming force in the contemporary production of space. In his charting of the transformation from industrial society to the information society, author and futurist Rolf Jensen (1999) outlines a compelling case for the forthcoming transformation to the “dream society”. In the dream society, the economic and political viability of a commodity, be it space, service or a product, will hinge not on its intrinsic value, but rather on the story that it projects. Though this is not unlike how fashion as a system of signification works, Jensen’s paradigm goes beyond the cycle of appearances to the new epistemology of the media governing the construction of environments and social relationships. With more buying power, an atrophied communal sensibility, and an entrenched, self-absorbed need to project personal identity, our purchases become more based on unfulfilled or fabricated emotional needs; the commodity with the best story wins. Indeed, the story is often a distraction from any authentic history, or even its substitute. Design has leveraged cultural production such that space becomes a pure spectacle removed from the dynamics of everyday life. Witness the powerful role of thematized space in the development of the entertainment economy.

The looming blockbuster markets of the dream society are not so much commodity or information-based, as they are story-



based. Jensen outlines six markets that will define future cultural orientations: 1) the market for adventure, 2) the market for togetherness, love and friendship, 3) the market for care, 4) the who-am-I market, 5) the market for peace of mind, 6) and the market for convictions (1999, 51). Needs once met through everyday social and familial relationships, will be satisfied through these burgeoning consumer networks underwritten by the media. Like sociologist Marc Auge, “we could ask the question as to whether all relationships established by means of media—whatever the degree of originality—can be traced back to a primarily symbolic deficit, to the difficulty of creating a social tie in situ” (1997, 22). Modes of belonging in these narrative-based landscapes assume lifestyle choices that appear less like the investment that comes from citizenship or stewardship and more like that from customer satisfaction. Institutional arrangements based on an exclusive relationship to the image produce an “ego bereft of ties and identity carriers that is in danger of being swallowed up by the world of images in which it hopes to find itself” (Auge, 1997, 22). Clearly, these markets’ answer to the uncertainties and dislocations attending globalization will only exacerbate its effects.

For example, doesn’t New Urbanism’s popularity stem from its promise of the return of urbanity, community and family in satisfying the market for togetherness, friendship and love? Yet its brand of urbanism, without the risk of difference and exposure to the “other” that cities always ensured, makes it more amenable to those markets seeking peace of mind. Likewise, gated communities appeal through their creation of distance, a most effective form of market distinction in a genre of monolithic development where the planning and the architecture are the same from China and Italy, to Canada. Its politics of withdrawal and private governance, now desired by the middle-class, promises peace of mind. Entertainment landscapes, from the self-contained entities of Disney to the inner-city themed festival shopping environments sporting branded “exotic” goods,

ironically fulfill the desire for adventure even though the space, architecture, food, wares and people are a replicate cross-section of everyday suburban culture from which most patrons come. For the price of park admission, peace of mind is obtained, as suburbia itself has grown more unpredictable and less secure than its leisurely offspring. The common stratagem shared by value-imposed spatial scenarios is the attempt to establish differentiation from surrounding development of marginal difference through symbolic discourse. Through the enfranchisement of pleasure, everyday life is becoming more organized by the logic of the resort and its gentrified conceptions of well being.

Role of the Design Professions

How might design production challenge the pervasive logic of the resort and its hotel culture? In his writing on non-places, Auge (1995, 1997) distinguishes between place as a social lifeworld constructed through an engaged *imagination* and non-place as a social product positioned by *fictionalization*. As per Jensen’s “dream society”, fictionalization is an instrument of value-imposition projected onto generic networks like airports, transportation corridors, shopping malls, and other exurban interstices—“spaces of solitude” that invite their emptiness to be filled. If design professions inherently broker in imaginative work, perhaps the most needed and compelling work is the construction of *recombinant landscapes*, “to resymbolize the real and, in one fell swoop, to reawaken the imaginary and the city and also to re-establish the social bond—the narrow path between place and non-place” (Auge, 1997, 24). Recombinant landscapes are cross-disciplinary formations of urban, environmental and social systems not present in their respective parent typologies of organization. Design becomes an inherently *ecological* form of thinking as it recombines economic systems with civic infrastructure and cultural capital in an expanded understanding of functionalism that avoids the theatricalization of the city. This is what Dutch architects and planners Matthijs Bouw and Joost Meuwissen mean by “organizational depth” (Bouw and Meuwissen, 1998). Rather than simulate complexity or rely on the impositional yet discontinuous nature of collage, organizational depth “intensifies all that is existing” and extends it throughout the city. The real task is to build intelligence back into our landscapes and infrastructures that resists the monolithic tendencies of technology and symbolism. In his challenge to the hegemony of symbolic discourse in design, James Corner asks:

“... is it possible to realign the landscape architectural project toward the productive and participatory phenomena of the everyday, working landscape? By this I mean to suggest a return neither to agrarian existence nor to functionalist practices but rather to emphasize the experiential intimacies of engagement, participation, and use over time, and to place geometrical and formal concerns in the service of human economy. In this sense, the city is as much a participatory landscape as are the highly

technological energy and agricultural fields of the Southwest, the worked plots of private gardens, and the activities circulating across vast urban surfaces. Similarly, we might say that gardens are defined less by formal appearances than through the *activities* of gardening, just as agricultural fields derive their form from the logistics of farming, and cities from the flows, processes, and forces of urbanization. In the working *landschaft*, performance and event assumes precedence over appearance and sign” (1999, 159).

Perhaps architecture will renew its status as a knowledge-based discipline through new synthetic practices that engage those unique programmatic forces shaping local reconfigurations. Design based solely on time worn typological practices, both in terms of architectural and urban space falls short of satisfying the conceptual challenges posed by contemporary coalitions between material, cultural, and resource networks.

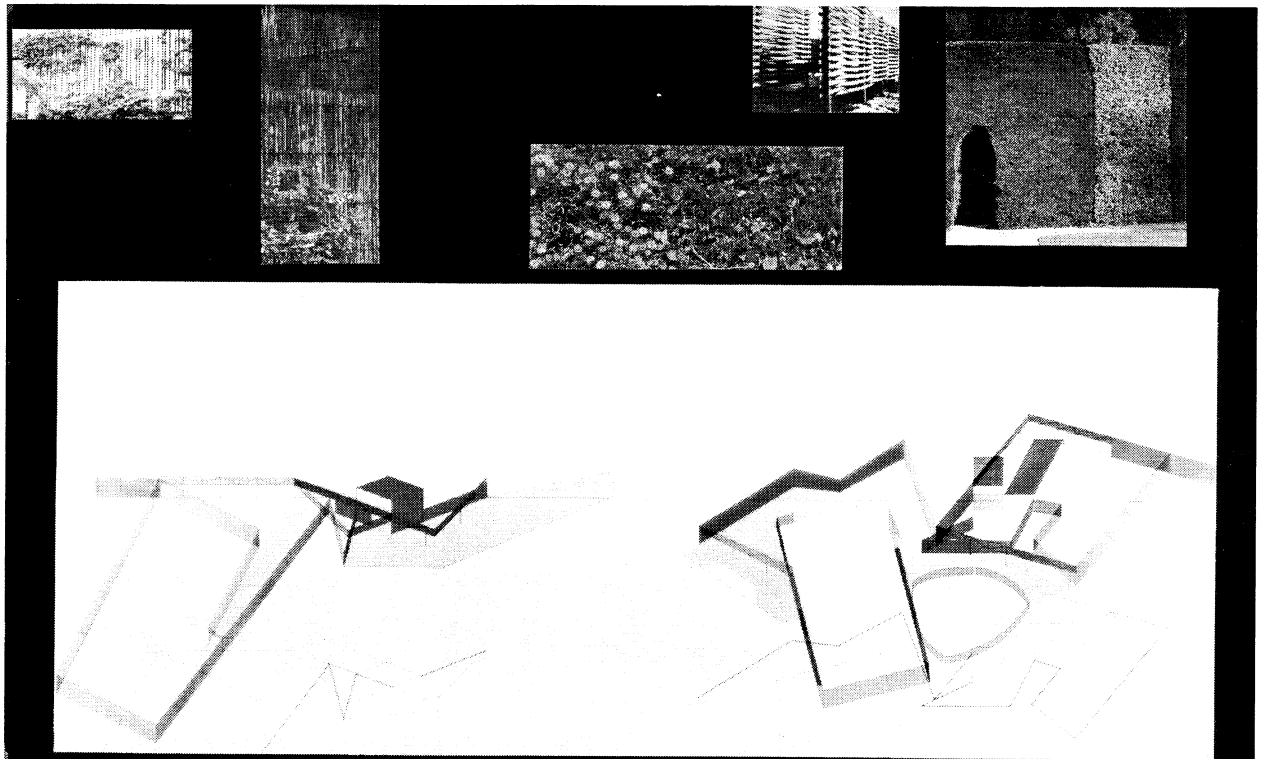
The Post-NAFTA Landscape: Recombinant Landscape for Brooker, Florida

“...exemption from global freedoms tends to rebound in the fortification of localities. Rejection prompts the efforts to cir-

cumscribe localities after the pattern of concentration camps. Rejection of the rejectors prompts the effort to transform the locality into a fortress. The two efforts reinforce each other’s effects, and between themselves make sure that fragmentation and estrangement ‘at the bottom’ remain the twin siblings of globalization ‘at the top’.”

Zygmunt Bauman, Globalization: The Human Consequences

Brooker, Florida is the classic case of a local economy forced to retool after its collapse as a result of deregulated global trading patterns. NAFTA sealed the fate of small-grower agricultural economies like Brooker’s by enabling the Mexican farmer to put a tomato on our dinner tables at a cheaper cost than his American counterpart. Like many other rural communities, Brooker’s monolithic economy never cultivated the entrepreneurial instinct necessary for productive participation in globalizing processes—hence, their “exemption from global freedoms”. Globalism happened to them, not because of remoteness—many metropolitan areas experienced similar dislocations—but rather, because of their inability to define new hybrid identities and opportunities. The region’s ongoing reconfiguration fulfills Bauman’s thesis on the downsides of globalization’s polarizing tendencies, particularly in regards to



the fortification of localities. In the hollowing out of the state, the one political initiative still expected of the weakened state involves the issue of law and order; “an issue which, inevitably translates in practice as orderly—safe—existence for some, all the awesome and threatening force of the law for the others” (Bauman, 1998, 103).

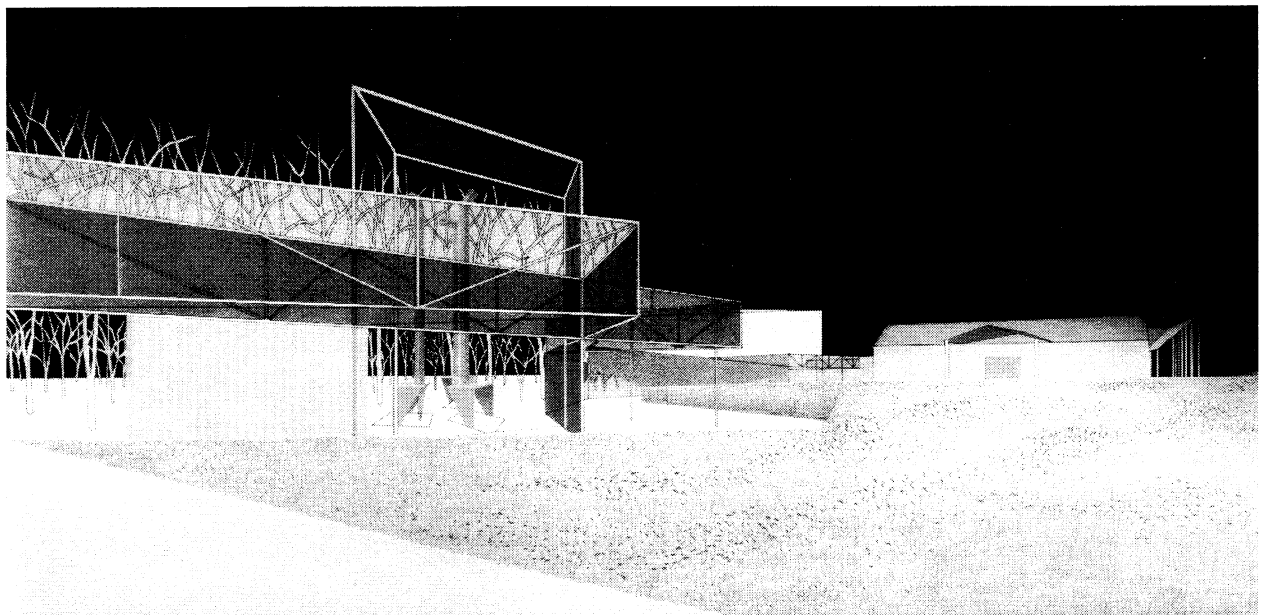
The market’s demand for global law and local order, and the reciprocal social production of fear are played out in Brooker’s renewed economic landscape. Correction facilities have become the area’s sustaining industry, as farmers become prison guards and marginal rural economies become hostage to the largesse of state welfare initiatives (80% of Florida’s hardened criminal population are incarcerated within an 80 mile radius of Brooker). The burgeoning prison industry of the 1990s, the ultimate logic in the fortification of the local, parallels the fortification of the public realm.

The social reproduction of fear is writ large in Brooker’s open public space. Upon demolition of the farmers market—once the civic nucleus for this town of 500—Brooker proposed to sequester its reclaimed central public space (five percent of the town’s area) as a municipal park behind an eight foot high security fence. The disappearance of civic life behind a public fortified zone disciplined by surveillance technologies consisting of “no trespassing” signs, security cameras, and the installation of a decoy police car was motivated by the twin concerns for consumer safety—translated into fear of accident and injury litigation—and defensive surveillance—translated into discouraging access and congregation by “undesirables”.

Brooker’s insistence on a perimeter fence coupled with the project’s low budget (\$100,000) compelled a design solution composed primarily from fencing. How could walls be designed to invite their crossing rather than to serve to divide?

Recognizing the need to 1) secure the drainage basin in the woodlands, 2) secure the recreational components of the park after daylight and 3) construct a low-maintenance design, the proposed scheme layers the zones of security from minimum to maximum in the effort to reopen the site to the town. Various recreational and leisure components, a storm water retention pond, new parking, and pedestrian amenities for the existing community center are woven into a programmatic band between the existing woodland and proposed wildflower meadow. Tailored in native vegetative systems, fencing clads the programmatic band and meadow in a flexible sartorial urbanism fitting of the area’s rustic dignity. The live horticulture of this vertical garden serves as a food and habitat source for area wildlife and is reminiscent of the biotechnology in the green infrastructures of John Todd’s “living machines”. The park’s productivity extends the legacy of the worked agricultural landscape and recalls the area’s spatial rhythms of woodlands and meadows as it weaves urban components in a green seam between the two agrarian ecosystems.

The hybridizing tendencies of the proposal escape typological categorization as it aims to recombine sociological, ecological, and resource networks in a leveraged organization of local cultural capital. Confronting value-laden and value-im-



posed spatial productions, recombination's sociological prospects emerge from both the reawakening of a traditional urbanism with its ethos of connection and spontaneity, and those over-determined spatial realities organized by the symbolic system of fear that globalization prompts. Rather than oppose the value-imposed orientations dominant in Jensen's "dream society", recombination deliberately intersects the material culture of place-bound systems with the symbolic discourse of non-place. Recombination's technological possibilities lie in the proposal's ecological capacity to integrate human and other natural habitats that amplify biological complexity and diversity. The productivity of recombination's infrastructure stems from the understanding that every ecological relationship is in turn a political and social relationship. Most importantly, design does not need to operate from highly capitalized contexts that demand exorbitant cost expenditures for new buildings and infrastructure. Rather, landscape could be employed as a connective framework that organizes multiple functions and local resource networks while facilitating the ongoing conjunction of familiar and foreign spatial traditions in new functional alliances. Like successful urban nodes that create value around them, ecologies could be catalytic agents for new development. After all, the region's social and material heritage is tied to its historic capacities for stewardship and productivity of the land—its cultural capital. While the proposal has no direct economic development impact, the reconfiguration of Brooker's public space does improve its livability profile as erstwhile farming communities compete for market share in the burgeoning real estate development descending upon North Central Florida. Recombination expands upon the classic modernist notion of functionalism in all of its emancipatory social, material and aesthetic intelligence to construct new ecologies of space that engage the

numerous social formations emerging in the intersections between the global and the local.

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