The Good Life: Consumption of Readymades/ Construction of Events

KENNETH WARRINER Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Here all things are available according to desire, and are on display in order to suggest the desire.

- Paul and Percival Goodman¹

The desire for the new, however degraded by consumer culture, is also at the same time a desire that can exceed the logic of capitalist modernity by its hope for something external to that system.

- Jonathan Crary²

I. CONSUMERIST-EQUIVALENCE SET-UPS

Is there any way, in the wake of Heroic Modernism's failed social project, to believe that we could construct material environments supportive of a more democratic and sustainable, less privatized, manipulative, and numbing, way of life? Can architects even ask such a question today without laboriously pre-arming themselves against charges of naiveté, or social engineering, or ignorance of the "real" formative processes constructing our settlements?

The ideals and mechanisms of centralized comprehensive planning have been largely abandoned, as incapable of fulfilling most of the targeted goals, and as often damaging in the unintended consequences of those goals actually achieved. The belief that individual architectural projects could contribute to an overall good or just life vanished along with the notion of the master-plan. We rarely imagine influencing the developmental direction of a city or anything large-scale, except perhaps as a privately financed suburbtowns and themed developments. By default, architects have been left with two ideologically charged myths which contain just enough appeal to gain popular commitment, while masking their effective content:

There is no need for large-scale design or planning; selforganizing market mechanisms are more efficient and register people's real desires.

Infrastructural networks, material as well as institutional, are put in place in response to publicly agreed-upon needs and as such, are outside the purview of architectural practices.

Most of those who sponsor and regulate the design and construction of the built environment share these beliefs.

We now see architecture as a series of self-contained easilyidentifiable packages of need-satisfiers, arrayed within a relatively neutral access matrix. In short, items arrayed as in a supermarket.³ Were supermarkets not closed systems requiring check-out gates, they and contemporary settlements would share roughly the same organizational set-up, if not the same geometry. From a home base (equivalent to the store entry), we move through neutral paths to targeted items appealingly designed to satisfy our needs and pleasures. We "get" them, as readymades,⁴ prepackaged. The readymades are sorted into homogeneous groupings to foster competition among the similar offerings.

Of course contemporary settlement patterns are far from closed systems and cannot utilize the precise selling optimization of the supermarket set-up, and are not designed as a single machine. But as with supermarket operations, there is a contemporary logic in prepackaging items of experience, in offering readymades, in breaking up the flow of experience into identifiable units that can be competitively marketed – both the necessary experiences (work, schooling, etc.) and those of pleasure and leisure (entertainment, cultural offerings, etc.). The tendency is familiar enough through numerous accounts of modernization's rationalization processes.

Considerable emotional energy is expended in positioning oneself to get the specific ready-made experiences we each have learned to prefer. But what is disturbing is the overall passivity generated, not in selection, but in their reception, the lack of constructive involvement with these prepackaged equivalent experiences. We "get" experiences, "reading" the meanings already designed into them, in contrast to making or constructing meaningful experience with others. The ready-made forecloses the possibility of the unpredictable event, where meanings grow out of engaging with particular situations, with particular relations to others, to self, to the world.

In contemporary life we construct fewer and fewer experiences for ourselves, and even fewer jointly with others. The institutional set-ups affording such social construction barely survive; they are supplanted either by those which offer necessary amelioration (that is, services necessary to compensate for the structural displacements required by modernization), or they operate to facilitate private selfimproving passions, such as body-building or sharpening one's investment skills or developing the kinds of competencies sellable on the labor market.

In short, most of us do dulling work to get money to buy some pleasure and distraction, and as well, some recreation to be refreshed to work some more. This is a painfully cynical image; it should prompt us to wrest from it more optimistic design practices.

The obvious target here is our turn from living lives centered around the intimacies of direct production and use, to the life dominated by exchange-values and abstract equivalencies, and, as they say, lives "given meaning" through consumption.⁵ For things and experiences to operate as consumable items in a system of exchange, they must be measured. As Adorno and Horkheimer have noted: "Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract qualities."⁶ A long critical tradition has elaborated this shift from use-values to exchange-values, almost always taking the position that a fundamental, true or good condition which has been lost. The call typically is for resistance.

Without undervaluing the insights contributed by this critical tradition, it seems time to recognize capitalism's remarkable cleverness in co-opting everything operating as direct resistance. We should try instead to see if there is not some way, as in judo, where the enormous energy evident in this consumer-equivalence ethic can be harnessed to move in a different, less manipulative direction. Rather than announcing co-optable design "goals, we should place emphasis on shifting the formative processes whereby our built environment comes into being.

Design-as-judo is far from design-as-control. While the old Chinese "design" tradition of *shi* worked with the propensities latent in each given situation in judo-like ways,⁷ this attitude is rare in the West; direct control has been our hardcore design presupposition since the differentiation of labor produced the notion of expert. Modifying this historic legacy, we might, using Manuel DeLanda's formulation, imagine design to involve combinations of *meshworks* and *hierarchies*⁸ – mixtures of the self-organizing, bottom-up, tactical, opportunity-generating, and the designed, top-down, strategic, problem-solving. Precise *hierarchical* design decisions can facilitate the emergence of *self-organizing* formative processes.

Taking the myth that "self-organizing market mechanisms are more efficient [than design] and register people's real desires," we would first, following DeLanda's analysis, reject the notion that markets in their contemporary global reach are anywhere near being self-organized. None but the simplest rural fairs are other than combinations - of hierarchies of meshworks and meshworks of hierarchies.9 The actions and nature of the global market economy, while moving in self-organizing patterns at some spatio-temporal scales, is massively manipulated by a continuous stream of executive top-down hierarchical decisions. Consider, for example, the inevitable world-wide capture of internet browsing operations by Microsoft's recent inclusion of its network navigator program with its already dominant microprocessor software packages.¹⁰ "People's real desires" in such cases, with predictable circularity, are drawn into a world of expectations favoring the dominant parties who are in a position to construct the conditions which form subjectivities favorable to their interests.

We are a long way from understanding and working out design techniques that effectively use infrastructural and building interventions to direct the self-organization of our settlements. Efforts to use non-linear dynamics in modeling design practices often lead back to a naturalism more essentialist than the designer's traditional metaphysical legitimizations – origin or destiny.¹¹ In spite of this tendency for designers to polarize – design as a totally natural process or as total human control – this shift to the combinational, already beginning to be used in other disciplines, will eventually mature into working techniques in the design disciplines.

The point of all this remains: to construct "material environments supportive of a more democratic and sustainable, less privatized, manipulative, and numbing, way of life," in short, environments supporting post-consumerist subjectivities. But having a design process enabling us to work with combinations will not move us very far in this direction unless we also understand the processes which construct the subjectivities which desire the consumer society and the supermarket city in the first place. Part two looks a bit closer at the ways the physical set-up of our settlements contributes to constructing consumerist subjectivities. In part three, using the same combinations of bottom-up and top-down formative practices as have constructed contemporary subjectivities, we will explore some of the specific actions architects can take to help redirect this construction. That is, we will look at ways the architect, along with others, can influence the design of post-consumerist settlements by changing our infrastructural systems. And more directly at the architectural scale, we will consider how building projects per se may be designed to act as catalytic interventions tuned to set off self-organized change in the direction of post-consumerist subjectivities.

II. CONSTRUCTING CONSUMERIST SUBJECTIVITIES VIA THE GOOD LIFE

How have we come to embody the particular kinds of subjectivities we do, leading us to desire some conditions, regard others with fear or indifference, and never bothering to feel anything at all about still others? The psychiatrist-philosopher Félix Guattari characterizes our present societal set-ups as producing "a subjectivity of the "generalized equivalence," ... a standardized subjectivity that derives its value from its price on the mass-media market ... the way of the infantilizing consensus."¹²

The shift to the consumer ethic accumulated from countless unnoticed bits of spontaneous and self-organizing action combined with sweeping preplanned but short-ranged executive initiatives, often of daring and efficacious insight. Search for the best bargain to keep up with the neighbors, hybridized with build a Suez Canal. As abundance becomes commonplace, contemporary life in the developed world increasingly turns to expanding consumption as its defacto public goal, no longer preoccupied with the struggle to achieve adequate production. While public figures routinely proffer a rhetoric of other more noble themes as our societal aspirations, such as democracy, equity and justice - through education and the insurance of opportunity, the effective "motor" of our economy without which these desirable conditions are seen as unattainable, is said to be an ever-expanding economic system, which in turn must be fueled by ever-expanding consumption of the system's so-called limitless productive capacity. While numerous non-economic issues such as revived nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms actively shape our lives, their influence is constraining, not productive like the market. We have come to believe that not only is the market benevolently self-organizing, but, in the name of the "good life," the market as well positions us all as players within its grid, if we cooperate and work toward its most efficient performance. Even those segments of the world population unaffected directly by the latest patterns of consumption - those struggling for simple survival - are caught up in the machinations of a global economy now structurally dependent on expansion per se, whose chief means to that end is the creation of subjectivities desiring new and ever more interesting experiences, especially the kinds that can never be sated.

Consumption today, as generalized acquisition and "using-up," must be taken broadly: not only getting and exhausting material goods and services, but getting and playing out good experiences and information – new and "interesting" ideas and images, distractions from routine, voyages into the ideal, safe "adventures," and so on. Architects are regarded as experts in providing good experiences, perfected settings, ideal representational or expressive images, readymade for consumption.

Among groups and individuals subject to different pressures or having different historical inclinations, there are, to be sure, different versions of what "good" amounts to, in material items and services, in information, and in life experiences generally. Giving it names such as multiculturalism, or pluralism, we make much of this recognition as evidence of freedom in America, in the Free World, as long as the differences involve only choices among experiences the market is able to provide. In response to this diversification of interests, up-to-date marketing and flexible production processes are combined by successful entrepreneurs to cater to minutely discriminating preferences of each separate market niche, relaxing the Fordist imperative to construct a mass desire for the same pleasures and expressions of taste.

Yet in experiences and information as well as in goods and services, rather than seeking substantive differences, we seem to prefer different versions of the same; we desire only the marginally differentiated. Even acknowledging an increasingly segregated and differentiated population, most of us are attracted to the same types of things and experiences every one else is getting, but with enough apparent difference to mark a distinctive taste, to proclaim a specific individual identity or peer group membership.

As Foucault and others have shown,¹³ in a society infused with the feeling that we are all essentially autonomous and competing individuals relatively un-beholden to binding cultural traditions or collective concerns, we carefully and ceaselessly register ourselves against the norms which float through our everyday life-practices: intelligence, sanity, sexual competence, bodily appeal, productivity, self-reliance, gender clarity, even degree of neatness, being the more obvious examples. In our social and private lives we measure ourselves, and we ask to be measured, against these images of normalcy - images of the idealized condition, established, with our tacit consent, by the experts within the various disciplinary bureaucracies and played on effectively by the expanded media apparatus14 and the market-generators. To complement our self-measuring, we willingly authorize the state or its institutional agents to certify the authenticity and safety of everything that is too technical to grasp quickly or that moves through our expanded choice-range too fast. Those of us engaged in such activities, architects, for example, ask to be measured against the normal so that others, busy in a fastmoving world, will be able to know we are capable, and we will also not have to compete against the "unqualified."

On the modern promise of upward social mobility, many aspire, and actively compete, to exceed the norms, but in an even more emotional and rudimentary way almost everyone simply wants to be regarded as at least falling within the normal. While constrained by the stereotypes given at birth by one's society - gender and ethnicity especially - we nevertheless construct identities intersubjectively among those who are significant to us. But increasingly a major part of this intersubjective play turns on self-construction, on representing our putative uniqueness through the acquisition of distinctive personal experiences and possessions - differences that mark each as individual but are still carefully selected from within the approved range of items our peers regard as normal. Normalcy is seen as human nature; to be other than normal is to be un-natural, and who likes that tag? Those who's livelihood comes from influencing the character and magnitude of consumption - architects, for example work with normalization in ingenious ways, the end result being a massive desire, in the free-fall of a world that seems open to almost any interpretation, to place ourselves somewhere relative to stable norms, with participation in the practices of normalized consumption being one compelling way.

Foucault, in considering the role the modern state plays in our consumer ethic, says "the state's power ... is both an *individualizing* and a *totalizing* form of power. Never, I think, in the history of human societies ... has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques, and of totalizing procedures."¹⁵ (emphasis added) In this situation one of our greatest social bonds is our common participation in the private self-determined activity of consumption.

The Aristotelian notion of the Good Life, the attainment of man's highest potential or end – reason, in this teleological view – was to be achieved jointly with others through the exercise of the virtues in the governance of the polis.¹⁶ For much of Western history this connection with something beyond individual satisfaction continued in one form or another: each person was to contribute something of his or her capacities to God's glory, or to the solidarity and benefit of one's community. The rise of the modern individual begins a radical shift in this notion of the Good Life, as Alisdair MacIntyre notes: "For liberal individualism a community is simply an arena in which individuals each pursue their own self-chosen conception of the good life, and political institutions exist to provide that degree of order which makes such self-determined activity possible."¹⁷

With the blessing of a certain kind of freedom that, once attained, seems unlikely to be relinquished, most of us in the developed

countries now see the Good Life much like a straightforward model of private bookkeeping: each of us, as individual or as a member of a particular community-of-interest, strives to get the greatest number of good experiences (goods and services, information, experiences) and to avoid the greatest number of conditions toward which we feel indifference or consider bad.

This notion of the Good Life – more good, fewer indifferent and bad experiences – is prone to an ever-accelerating pace and insatiable appetite for attention diversions and sensual titillations; indifference to those with insufficient means to pay; social isolation and withdrawal of challenging unfamiliarity in the quest for guaranteed, predictable, homogenized outcomes; public acceptance of outright greed as success; and the like. Many believe the desire for this Good Life, and the self-organizing market mechanism said to make it possible, are both unstoppable; they quibble with the range and quality and quantity of the experiences offered, but not the autonomy of the items offered, as in the supermarket.

But there are gaps in the consumerist logic supporting this Good Life, areas of experience and imaginative venture into which no plus and minus accounting intrudes, gaps in its emotional appeal, and in the processes through which it is expressed and reproduced. As de Certeau shows, the hegemony of consumption may yet be subvertable.¹⁸ Consumerism's gaps offer some points of catalytic entry for interventionist architectural practices.

III. BOTTOM-UP CATALYTIC INTERVENTIONS

Let's assume, for the foreseeable future, the Good Life as bookkeeping continues: more good, fewer indifferent and bad experiences. While the consumption of material goods may eventually respond to the limits of global sustainability, the attitude toward consumption of information, images, and good experiences seems likely to continue, if not accelerate. The freedom of choice among experiences has an inexhaustible virtual range of combinations, from which could be actualized ethical-aesthetic and institutional inventions of a magnitude and quality we have no way of presently imagining. And can the self-inflicted passivity of the readymade really be everyone's choice forever? With some sustained encouragement it is possible to imagine a sizable shift from the passively consumed ready-made to more direct locally-constructed event experiences.

If we assume, contra the pessimistic Tafuri mindset,¹⁹ an ongoing reciprocal interaction between societal change and the agency of physical environments, we may ask: what changes within architectural practices might contribute to the acceleration of these slight movements toward a post-consumerist subjectivity? What kinds of physical set-ups might help construct a subjectivity that does not seek return to the integrated universes of value of the archaic or premodern, but one in which the individual autonomy and heterogeneity we have achieved may release a creative "manner of being," a "processual immanence"²⁰ not imaginable from within our present culture of normalization and equivalence?

Working as architects, little can be done to directly influence the design of infrastructural set-ups, and more particularly, the ways they will combine to produce unexpected effects. Relatively little solid understanding is available in any case as to their combinational effects – an area in need of some solid research among information scientists, civil engineers, architects, cultural analysts. But direct action is possible which would weaken our structural dependency on at least one infrastructural set-up within our low-density dispersed settlements: the highway. Especially tyrannical in its consumption of space, time and resources, and ecologically debilitating, the highway fosters incessant isolated mechanical movement and wasteful, a-social low-density land uses. Any design project that by any affordable means can be linked to more than one material transportation mode should be. Designing to densities which make choices of modes of movement economically possible – walking, public

transportation, bicycling, as well as private automobiles – should be an ethical imperative for architects in all cases where persuasion is not overwhelmed by irreversible decisions. If the ecological perspective has taught us anything is should be that a diversity of means in the long run is superior to any optimization of a singular mode. Architects and their professional associations can contribute to civic demonstration projects designed to influence the public's, and eventually the market's, complex perceptions of the issues involved in settlement dispersal and concentration. While infrastructural decisions are executive, hierarchical, not made by any naturally selforganizing process, and even though they exhibit poorly understood emergent capacities once in operation within the larger field situation, their productive powers can be redirected by design.²¹

At the local scale, a notion of design is possible whereby one assumes that, while each successive increment of construction is a singular event with its own range of immediate affordances, effects and affective powers, it is at the same time a tactical²² catalytic intervention opportunistically influencing the emergent potential of the larger situation of which it is a part, and thus in return, the assemblage of local built events comprising the larger situation.²³ Understood in this way we would concentrate on its catalytic productivity, less on attempting to control behaviors through topological organization and semiotics. Recognizing the indeterminacy of the affordances, effects, and affects it produces, the designer would make weakened control a virtue, setting up material conditions of imaginative provocation, while defamiliarizing the dulling routines of passive institutional framings, turning the question of "What do we do here together?" back to those who are at hand, moving toward the aleatory event, not pre-decided.

Among institutions, now typically withdrawn behind a moat of space in the dispersed settlement, (the shopping mall simply makes a bigger, basically homogeneous package), there are many ways to construct physical set-ups affording renegotiation of boundaries that could offer combinational options to the single-purpose, singleidentity stance felt to be necessary in the present brand-name competition. Retaining just enough distinctness to continue the purposes for which they were instituted, an expanded range of opportunities could be suggested to "consumers," depending on the affiliations chosen for temporary conjoining among institutions.

Within the worlds of those precisely defined targeted institutions of both required and optional attendance, there are ways to arrange the physical set-ups to provoke, or at least hint at, a turn from passively "getting" the experience to a *construction of experience with others*. This is not to endorse the reactionary return to purified identities promoted by many communitarian sentiments; if supported by the mediating atmosphere of sympathetic institutions, the construction of shared experience would be by and among subjectivities with *heterogeneous* interests and capabilities, offering not confirmation one's place relative to the normal, but the creation of new relationships, new modes of expression, inquiry, productive adventure.

And last, there is all the swarming buzzing facticity of the material world so lacking in coherent visual form as to be not quite subject to placement in stable categories, to not being represented as namable items or pictured as discrete recognizable entities, and thus cannot be accorded the status of the real in our present culture of equivalence, of circulating exchange. Yes, the media try to capture this as contextual or background ambiance to enhance the consumable package's appeal, but this absorption always fails. Considered as chaos, designers, among others, assume it their duty to give it order. But there is promise here: with some designed interventions, background may emerge as event, and while sometimes it will be necessary to destroy the monstrous outcomes of such provocations, in the end such experiments suggest we may have the ingredients for optimism still.

NOTES

- ¹ Paul Percival Goodman, Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life (New York: Vintage, 1947, 1960), p. 127.
- ² Jonathan Crary, "Capital Effects," October 56 (Spring 1991): 127.
- ³ The department store furnished the model for the "City of Efficient Consumption" in *Communitas* (see note 1). John Rajchman puts it as "Stripped from their original context, these ideas become transportable; they migrate; they are thrown together at will. Postmodernism is theoretical cannibalism; it is the *supermarket* approach to ideas... it can be made and consumed anywhere and nowhere."[emphasis added] "Postmodernism in a Nominalist Frame," *Philosophical Events: Essays* of the 80's (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 125.
- ⁴ Ready-made, as used here, from John A. Schumacher's work, indicates literally those things, ideas, services, etc. provided to us for our getting and consumption. For the philosophical position on this everyday feature of modern life, and more especially on the relations between an order of *space* (reading a world in view) and an order of *movement* (a world seen in action), see his, *Human Posture: The Nature of Inquiry* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989). I am deeply indebted to Schumacher's work.
- ⁵ See William Leiss, The Limits to Satisfaction: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), passim.
- ⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer Dialectic of Enlightenment, John Cummings, tr. (New York: Continuum, 1988 (1972)), p. 7.
- ⁷ See Francois Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, Janet Lloyd, tr. (New York: Zone Books, 1995), *passim.*
- ⁸ Manuel DeLanda, "The Geology of Morals: A Neo-Materialist Interpretation," http://www.t0.or.at/delanda/geology.htm.
- ⁹ Manuel DeLanda, "Markets and Antimarkets in the World Economy," http://www.t0.or.at/delanda/a-market.htm See also his A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History (New York: Zone Books, 1997).
- ¹⁰ As reported and editorially covered repeatedly in the November 1997 issues of *The New York Times*.
- ¹¹ See Greg Lynn, "Form and Field," *Anywise*, Cynthia C. Davidson, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 92-99.
- ¹² Félix Guattari, "Space and Corporeity," Columbia Univ., D: Columbia Documents of Architecture and Theory, 2 (1993): 139-148, 147.
- ¹³ Michel Foucault: "The moment that saw the transition from historicoritual mechanisms for the formation of individuality to the scientificodisciplinary mechanisms, when the normal took over from the ancestral, and measurement from status, thus substituting for the individuality of the memorable man that of the calculable man, that moment when the sciences of man became possible is the moment when a new technology of power and a new political anatomy of the body were implemented." *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Alan Sheridan, tr. (New* York: Pantheon Books, 1977 (1975)), p. 193.
- ¹⁴ Gwendolyn Wright notes "middle-class Victorian suburbanites wanting to believe uniqueness, yet needing the signs of social status to be recognized by others" (p. 113) and "Within carefully established dictates of taste, each [post-W.W.II suburban] family sought to give an impression of 'something different." (p. 254) in *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).
- ¹⁵ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," Hubert L. Dreyfus, Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 208.
- ¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Martin Oswald, tr. (New York: MacMillan, 1962).
- ¹⁷ After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Second Edition.(Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1984), p. 195.
- ¹⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, Steven Rendall, tr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 (1974)), p. xiv.
- ¹⁹ As architecture in this view is the superstructural expression or reflection of the societal system and its modes of production, good architecture awaits the production of a good society.
- ²⁰ The post-consumerist subjectivity suggested here is from Félix Guattari's "The New Aesthetic Paradigm," in *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, Paul Bains, Julian Pefanis, trs. (Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992 (1975)). Excepting the two phrases quoted here, (pp.106-7) the technical language has been rephrased.

- ²¹ Interesting exploratory work using complexity theory in urban planning is now available. But most, being concerned with self-organizing phenomena per se, tend to slight the dynamics of infrastructural combinations, reducing each to a simple constraint. Margaret Morse, looking at the systemic nature of freeways, malls and television as infrastructure, shows their combinational effectiveness in "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television," Logics of Television, Patricia Mellencamp, ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 193-221.
- ²² Michel de Certeau, "'Making Do': Uses and Tactics," *The Practices of Everyday Life*, Steven Rendall, tr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 (1974)), pp. 29-44.
- ²³ "I find helpful physicist David Bohm's suggestion that events influence the 'whole' rather than each other. ... Event A does not effect B but rather effects the whole system of which B is a part. Thus, it is within the context of systemic change that B is altered." William H. A. Williams, "The Nonlinear Nature of Social Time," George P. Scott, ed., *Time, Rhythms, and Chaos in the New Dialogue with Nature* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1991), pp. 147-160, 159.