
Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization Reflections on "Post-Modernism" in the American City

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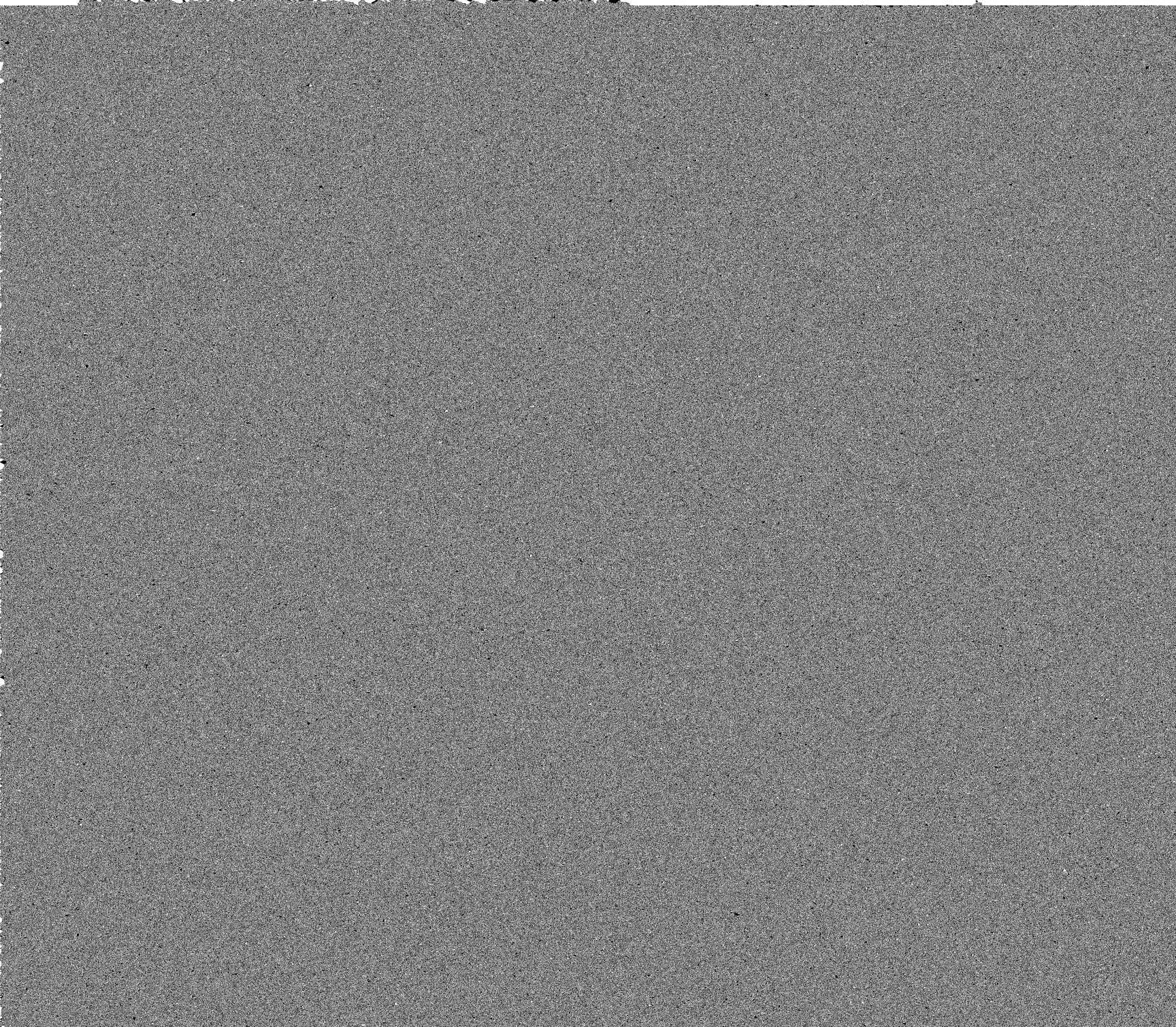
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Flexible Accumulation Through Liberalization



Introduction

Charles Jencks dates the symbolic end of modernist architecture and the passage to the post-modern as 3:32 p.m. on July 15th, 1972, when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development (a version of Le Corbusier's "machine for modern living") was dynamited as an unlivable environment for the low-income people it housed.¹ Shortly thereafter, President Nixon officially declared the urban crisis over.

Nineteen seventy-two is not a bad date for symbolizing all kinds of other transitions in the political economy of advanced capitalism. It is roughly since then that the capitalist world, shaken out of the suffocating torpor of the stagflation that brought the long postwar boom to a wimpering end, has begun to evolve a seemingly new and quite different regime of capital accumulation. Set in motion during the severe recession of 1973-5 and further consolidated during the equally savage deflation of 1981-2 (the "Reagan" recession), the new regime is marked by a startling flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption.² It has, at the same time, entrained rapid shifts in the patterning of uneven development, both between sectors and geographical regions—a process aided by the rapid evolution of entirely new financial systems and markets. These enhanced powers of flexibility and mobility have permitted the new regime to be imposed upon a labour force already weakened by two savage bouts of deflation that saw unemployment rise to unprecedented post-war levels in all the advanced capitalist countries (save, perhaps, Japan). Rapid displacements, for example, from the advanced capitalist countries to the newly industrializing countries, or from skilled manufacturing to unskilled service jobs, hammered home the weakness of labour and its inability to resist sustained levels of high unemployment, rapid destruction and reconstruction of skills, and modest (if any) increases in the real wage. Political economic circumstances also undermined the power of the state to protect the social wage, even in those countries with governments seriously committed to defense of the welfare state. Although the politics of resistance may have varied, austerity and fiscal retrenchment, sometimes accompanied by the resurgence of a virulent neo-conservatism, have become widespread in the advanced capitalist world.

What is remarkable about cultural and intellectual life since 1972 is how it, too, has been radically transformed in ways that appear to parallel these political-economic transformations. Consider, for example, the practices of "high modernity of the international style" as practiced in 1972. Modernism had by then lost all semblance of social critique. The protopolitical or Utopian program (the transformation of all social life by way of the transformation of space) had failed and modernism had

¹ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 4th ed. (London: Academy Editions, 1984), p. 9.

² See P. A. Armstrong, A. Glyn, and J. Harrison, *Capitalism Since World War Two* (London: Fontana, 1984); M. A. Aglietta, *A Theory of Regulation* (London: NLB, 1974); M. Piore and C. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); A. Scott and M. Storper, eds., *Production, Work, Territory: The Geographical Anatomy of Industrial Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986); and Harvey, "The Geographical and Geopolitical Consequences of the Transition From Fordist to Flexible Accumulation (Presented at the Conference on America's New Economic Geography, Washington, D. C., April 29-30, 1987).

become closely linked to capital accumulation through a project of Fordist modernization characterized by rationality, functionality, and efficiency.³ By 1972, modernist architecture was as stifling and torporous as the corporate power it represented. Stagflation in architectural practice paralleled the stagflation of capitalism (perhaps it was no accident that Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour published *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972).⁴ Critics of modernity had been around for a very long time (think of Jane Jacobs's *Life and Death of Great American Cities*, published in 1961) and there was a sense, of course, in which the revolutionary cultural movement of the 1960s was fashioned as a critical response to rationality, functionality, and efficiency in everything. But it took the 1973 crisis to shake up the relationship between art and society to allow post-modernism to become both accepted and institutionalized.

"Post-modernism" is, however, a most contentious term. Most agree that it entails some kind of reaction to "modernism." But since the meaning of that term is a muddle, the reactions to it are doubly so. There appears, however, to be some kind of consensus "that the typical post-modernist artifact is playful, pluralist, self-ironizing and even schizoid; and that it reacts to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity." Furthermore, "its stance towards cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche, and its contrived depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities, sometimes by a brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock."⁵ But even in a field like architecture, where the "artifact" is clearly in view and where writers like Jencks have sought to define what post-modernism is about, the meaning and definition of the term still remains in contention.⁶ In other fields, where post-modernism has become intertwined with post-structuralism, deconstruction, and the like, matters have become even more obscure.⁷ In the urban context, therefore, I shall simply characterize post-modernism as signifying a break with the idea that planning and development should focus on large-scale, technologically rational, austere and functionally efficient "international style" design, and that vernacular traditions, local history, and specialized spatial designs ranging from functions of intimacy to grand spectacle should be approached with a much greater eclecticism of style.

This kind of post-modernism, it seems to me, seeks some kind of accommodation with the more flexible regime of accumulation that has emerged since 1973. It has sought a creative and active, rather than a passive, role in the promotion of new cultural attitudes and practices consistent with flexible accumulation, even though some of its defenders, such as Frampton, see it as containing potentialities for resistance as well as conformity to capitalist imperatives.⁸ The institutionalization and hegemony of "post-modernism" rests, therefore, upon the creation of a distinctive "cultural logic" in late capitalism.⁹

³ F. Jameson, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Post modern Debate," *New German Critique* 33: pp. 53-65.

⁴ R. Venturi, D. Scott-Brown, and S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).

⁵ T. Eagleton, "Awakening from Modernity," *Times Literary Supplement* February 20, 1987.

⁶ Jencks, *Post-Modern Architecture*.

One other element to the picture must be considered. Not only have capitalism and its associated cultural and ideological practices together undergone a sea change, but our “discourses” (to use the current buzz-word) have likewise shifted. The deconstruction of structuralist interpretations, the abandonment of theory for empiricism in much of social science, the general backing away from Marxism (for both political and intellectual reasons) and the sense of futility in the realm of real representation (the impenetrability of “the other” and the reduction of all meaning to a “text”) make it very difficult to preserve any sense of continuity to our understanding of that transformation that set in around 1972. We talked about the world in a different way, used a different language then, compared to now. Yet here, too, I think a case can be made that the political-economic transformation achieved through a succession of economic crises and working class defeats have affected discourses as well as cultural and ideological practices.¹⁰ That sounds like, and is, old-fashioned Marxian argument. But I cannot help but be impressed at the way in which a whole world of thought and cultural practice, of economy and institutions, of politics and ways of relating, began to crumble as we watched the dust explode upwards and the walls of Pruitt-Igoe come crashing down.

Flexible Accumulation Through Urbanization

An understanding of urbanization, I have argued elsewhere, is critical for understanding the historical geography of capitalism.¹¹ It has partly been through shifts in the urban process that the new systems of flexible accumulation have been so successfully implanted. But also, as various historians of the rise of modernism have pointed out, there is an intimate connection between aesthetic and cultural movement and the changing nature of the urban experience.¹² It seems reasonable, therefore, to look at transitions in the urban process as a key point of integration of the political-economic move towards flexible accumulation and the cultural-aesthetic trend towards post-modernism.

Urbanization has, like everything else, dramatically changed its spots in the United States since 1972. The global deflation of 1973-5 put incredible pressure on the employment base of many urban regions. A combination of shrinking markets, unemployment, rapid shifts in spatial constraints and the global division of labour, capital flight, plant closings, technological and financial reorganization, lay at the

⁷ See A. Huyssen, “Mapping the Post Modern,” *New German Critique* 33: pp. 5-52.

⁸ K. Frampton, “Critical Regionalism: Speculations on an Architecture of Resistance.” in C. Johnson, ed., *The City in Conflict* (London: Mansell, 1985).

⁹ Jameson, “Post Modernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146: pp. 53-92.

¹⁰ See D. Harvey and A. Scott, “Practice of Human Geography, Theory, and Specificity in the Transition from Fordism to flexible Accumulation” in W. MacMillan, ed *Remodelling Geography* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, forthcoming).

¹¹ Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985); idem, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

¹² M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane, *Modernism* (Hammondsworth: Pelican, 1976) T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985) and D. Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1986).

root of that pressure. The geographical dispersal was not only to other regions and nations, it included yet another phase of urban deconcentration of populations and production beyond the suburbs and into rural and small-town America in a way that almost seemed like the fulfillment of Marx's prediction of the "urbanization of the countryside". Fixed capital investments and physical infrastructures in existing locations were consequently threatened with massive devaluation, thus undermining the property tax base and fiscal capacity of many urban governments at a time of increasing social need. To the degree that federal redistributions also became harder to capture (this was the import of Nixon's declaration in 1973), so social consumption was reduced, forcing more and more governments to a political economy of retrenchment and disciplinary action against municipal employees and the local real wage. It was exactly in such a context that New York City went into technical bankruptcy in 1975, presaging a wave of fiscal distress and radical restructuring for many U. S. cities.¹³

Ruling class alliances in urban regions were willy-nilly forced (no matter what their composition) to adopt a much more competitive posture. Managerialism, so characteristic of urban governance in the 1960s, was replaced by entrepreneurialism as the main motif of urban action.¹⁴ The rise of the "entrepreneurial city" meant increased inter-urban competition across a number of dimensions. I have elsewhere argued that the competition can best be broken down into four different forms: (a) competition for position in the international division of labour; (b) competition for position as centers of consumption; (c) competition for control and command functions (financial and administrative powers in particular); and (d) competition for governmental redistributions (which in the United States, as Markusen has shown,¹⁵ focused heavily these last few years on military expenditures).¹⁶ These four options are not mutually exclusive, and the uneven fortunes of urban regions have depended upon the mix and timing of strategies pursued in relation to global shifts.

It was in part through this heightened inter-urban competition that flexible accumulation took such firm hold. However, the result has been rapid oscillations in urban fortunes and in the patterning of uneven geographical development.¹⁷ Houston and Denver, both boom towns in the mid-1970s, were suddenly caught short in the collapse of oil prices after 1981; Silicon Valley, the high-tech wonder of new products and new employment in the 1970s, has suddenly lost its competitive edge;

¹³ I. Szelenyi, ed., *Cities in Recession: Critical Responses to the Urban Policies of the New Right* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984); P. Clavel, J. Forester, and W. Goldsmith, *Urban and Regional Planning in an Age of Austerity* (New York: Pergamon, 1983); S. Fainstain, N. Fainstain, R. Hill, D. Judd, and M. Smith, *Restructuring the City* (New York: Longman, 1986); and W. Tabb, *The Long Default* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982).

¹⁴ R. Hanson, ed., *Rethinking Urban Policy: Urban Development in an Advanced Economy* (Washington, D. C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1983) and J. Bouinot, ed., *L'Action Economique des Grandes Villes en France et a l'Etranger* (Paris: Economica, 1987).

¹⁵ A. Markusen, "Defense Spending: A Successful Industrial Policy," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 10 (1986): pp. 105-22.

¹⁶ Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), chapter 8.

¹⁷ N. Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

while New York and the once-jaded economies of New England are rebounding vigorously in the 1980s on the basis of expanding command and control functions and even new-found manufacturing strength. Two other more general effects have then followed.

First, inter-urban competition has opened spaces within which the new and more flexible labour processes could be more easily implanted and has opened the way to much more flexible currents of geographical mobility than was the case before 1973. Concern for a favorable “business climate,” for example, has pushed urban governments to all kinds of measures (from wage-disciplining to public investments) in order to attract economic development, but in the process this concern has lessened the cost of change of location to the enterprise. Much of the vaunted “public-private partnership” of today amounts to a subsidy for affluent consumers, corporations, and powerful command functions to stay in town at the expense of local collective consumption for the working class and the impoverished. Second, urban governments have been forced into innovation and investment to make their cities more attractive as consumer and cultural centers. Such innovations and investments (convention centers, sports stadia, disney-worlds, down-town consumer paradises, etc.) have quickly been imitated elsewhere. Inter-urban competition thus has generated leap-frogging urban innovations in life-styles, cultural forms, products, and even political and consumer based innovation, all of which have actively promoted the transition to flexible accumulation. And herein, I shall argue, lies part of the secret of the passage to post-modernity in urban culture.

This connection can be seen in the radical reorganization of the interior spaces of the contemporary U. S. city under the impulses of inter-urban competition. I shall preface the account, however, with some general remarks on the class content of spatial practices in urban settings.

The Class Content of Spatial Practices in Urban Settings

Spatial practices in any society abound in subtleties and complexities. Since they are not innocent with respect to the accumulation of capital and the reproduction of class relations under capitalism, they are a permanent arena for social conflict and struggle. Those who have the power to command and produce space possess a vital instrumentality for the reproduction and enhancement of their own power. Any project to transform society must, therefore, grasp the complex nettle of the transformation of spatial practices.

I shall try to capture some of the complexity through construction of a “grid” of spatial practices (Table 1). Down the left hand side I range three dimensions identified in Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*:¹⁸

¹⁸ H. Lefebvre, *La Production de l’Espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974), forthcoming in English as *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).

A "Grid" of Spatial Practices

	Accessibility & Distanciation	Appropriation & Use of Space	Domination & Control of Space
Material spatial practices (experience)	Flows of goods, money, people, labour power, information, etc.; transport & communications systems; market and urban hierarchies; agglomeration	Urban built environments, social spaces of the city & other 'turf' designations; social networks of communication & mutual aid	Private property in land, state, & administrative divisions of space; exclusive communities & neighborhoods; exclusionary zoning & other forms of social control (policing and surveillance)
Representations of space (perception)	Social, psychological and physical measures of distance; mapmaking; theories of the 'friction of distance' (principle of least effort, social physics, range of a good, central place & other forms of location theory)	Personal space; mental maps of occupied space; spatial hierarchies; symbolic representation of spaces	Forbidden spaces; "territorial imperatives;" community; regional culture; nationalism; geopolitics; hierarchies
Spaces of representation (imagination)	"Media is the message" new modes of spatial transaction (radio, t.v., film, photography, painting, etc.); diffusion of "taste"	Popular spectacles— street demonstrations, riots; places of popular spectacle (streets, squares, markets); iconography and graffiti	Organized spectacles; monumentality & constructed spaces of ritual; symbolic barriers and signals of symbolic capital

Material spatial practices

refer to the physical and material flows, transfers, and inter-actions that occur in and across space in such a way as to assure production and social reproduction.

Representations of space

encompass all of the signs and significations, codes and knowledge, that allow such material practices to be talked about and understood, no matter whether in terms of everyday common sense or through the sometimes arcane jargon of the academic disciplines that deal with spatial practices (engineering, architecture, geography, planning, social ecology, and the like).

Spaces of representation

are social inventions (codes, signs, and even material constructs such as symbolic spaces, particular built environments, paintings, museums and the like) that seek to generate new meanings or possibilities for spatial practices.

Lefebvre characterizes these three dimensions as the *experienced*, the *perceived*, and the *imagined*. He regards the dialectical relations between them as the fulcrum of a dramatic tension through which the history of spatial practices can be read. The

relations are, however, problematic. A “vulgar Marxist” position would presumably hold that material spatial practices directly determine both the representations of space and the spaces of representation. Marx did not hold such a view.¹⁹ He depicts knowledge as a material productive force in the *Grundrisse* and writes in a justly famous passage in *Capital*: “What distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.”²⁰ The spaces of representation, therefore, have the potential not only to affect representation of space but also to act as a material productive force with respect to spatial practices.

But to argue that the relations between the experienced, the perceived, and the imagined are dialectically, rather than causally, determined leaves things much too vague. Bourdieu provides a clarification. He explains how “a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” can at one and the same time be put to work flexibly to “achieve infinitely diversified tasks,” while at the same time being “in the last instance” (Engels’s famous phrase) engendered out of the material experience of “objective structures” and therefore “out of the economic basis of the social formation in question.”²¹ Bourdieu accepts the “well-founded primacy of objective relations” without, however, making the false inference that the objective or structures are themselves endowed with a power of autonomous development independent of human agency.

The mediating link is provided by the concept of “habitus”—a “durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations” which “produces practices” that in turn tend to reproduce the objective conditions which produced the generative principle of habitus in the first place. The circular (even cumulative?) causation is obvious. Bourdieu’s conclusion is, however, a very striking depiction of the constraints to the power of the imagined over the experienced:

Because the habitus is an endless capacity to engender products—thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions—whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioning and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings.²²

I accept that theorization and will later make considerable use of it.

Across the top of the grid (Table 1) I list three other aspects to spatial practice drawn from more conventional understandings:

Accessibility and distancing speak to the role of the “friction of distance” in human affairs. Distance is both a barrier to and a defense against human interaction. It imposes transaction costs upon any system of production and reproduction (particularly those based on any elaborate social division of labour, trade, and social

¹⁹ K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

²⁰ Marx, *Capital*, volume 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1967).

²¹ P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

differentiation of reproductive functions). Distanciation is simply a measure of the degree to which the friction of space has been overcome to accommodate social interaction.²³

The appropriation of space examines the way in which space is used and occupied by individuals, classes, or other social groupings. Systemitized and institutionalized appropriation may entail the production of territorially founded forms of social solidarity.

The domination of space reflects how individuals or powerful groups dominate the organization and production of space so as to exercise a greater degree of control either over the friction of distance or over the manner in which space is appropriated by themselves or others.

These three dimensions to spatial practice are not independent of each other. The friction of distance is implicit in any understanding of the domination and appropriation of space, while the persistent appropriation of a space by a particular group (say the gang that hangs out on the street corner) amounts to a *de facto* domination of that space. Furthermore, the attempt to dominate space, insofar as it requires reductions in the friction of distance (capitalism's "annihilation of space through time" for example) alters distanciation.

This grid of spatial practices tells us nothing important in itself. Spatial practices derive their efficacy in social life only through the structure of social relations within which they come into play. Under the social relations of capitalism, spatial practices become imbued with class meanings. To put it this way is not, however, to argue that spatial practices are derivative of capitalism. These spatial practices take on specific meanings and these meanings are put into motion and spaces are used in a particular way through the agency of class, gender, or other social practices.²⁴ When placed in the context of capitalist social relations and imperatives (the accumulation of capital), the grid can help us unravel some of the complexity that prevails in the field of contemporary spatial practices.

My purpose in setting up the grid was not, however, to set about a systematic exploration of the positions within it, although such an examination would be of considerable interest (and I have penned in a few controversial positionings within the grid for purposes of illustration). My purpose is to find a way to characterize the radical shifts in the class content and the nature of spatial practices that have

²² Ibid., p. 95.

²³ A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1984), p. 258-9.

²⁴ The gender, racial, ethnic, and religious contents of spatial practices also need to be considered in any full account of community formation and the production of social spaces in urban settings. A beginning has been made on the gender aspect in works by C. Stimson, ed., *Women and the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); D. Rose, "Rethinking Gentrification: Beyond the Uneven Development of Marx's Urban Theory" in *Society and Space* II (1984): p. 47-74; Shlay A. and Di Gregorio, D. "Same City, Different Worlds: Examining Gender and Work-base Differences in Perception of Neighborhood Desirability", in *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, no. 21 (1985): p. 66-86; and Smith, N., "Of Yuppies and Housing: Gentrification, Social Restructuring, and the Urban Dream," in *Society and Space*, vol. V (2, 1987): p. 151-172.

occurred over the last two decades. The pressure to reorganize the interior space of the city, for example, has been considerable under the conditions of flexible accumulation. The vitality of the central city core has been re-emphasised, themes such as the quality of urban living (gentrification, consumption palaces, and sophisticated entertainment) and enhanced social control over both public and private spaces within the city, have been of widespread significance. But the urban process has also had to cope with increasing impoverishment and unemployment, under conditions where the social wage could not be increased. Here, too, spatial practices have shifted in part towards an increasing control through a return to ghettoization (a practice that was never, of course, severely dented, let alone overcome) and the rise of new spaces where the homeless wander, the schizophrenics and discharged mental patients hang out, and the impoverished practice both new and well-tried survival strategies. How, then, are we to make sense of all this shifting and conflict-prone spatialization of class polarities? Are there ways, furthermore, to address the question of spatial empowerment of the segregated, oppressed, and impoverished populations increasingly to be found in all urban areas?

Class Practices and the Construction of Community

Different classes construct their sense of territory and community in radically different ways.²⁵ This elemental fact is often overlooked by those theorists who presume a priori that there is some ideal-typical and universal tendency for all human beings to construct a human community of a roughly similar sort, no matter what the political or economic circumstances. A study of class agency with respect to community construction under conditions of contemporary urbanization illustrates how essentially similar spatial practices can have radically different class contents.

Let us look more closely, for example, at the class practices through which communities are typically constructed in urban settings. We encounter here all the flexibility and adaptability of perceptions, appreciations, and actions that Bourdieu insists upon. But the contrast between community construction in the low-income and disempowered strata of the population and in the affluent and empowered strata is indeed striking.

Low-income populations, usually lacking the means to overcome and hence command space, find themselves for the most part trapped in space. Since ownership of even basic means of reproduction (such as housing) is restricted, the main way to dominate space is through continuous appropriation. Exchange values are scarce, and so the pursuit of use values for daily survival is central to social action. This means frequent material and interpersonal transactions and the formation of very small scale communities. Within the community space, use values get shared through some mix of mutual aid and mutual predation, creating tight but often highly conflictual interpersonal social bonding in both private and public spaces. The result is an often intense attachment to place and “turf” and to an exact

²⁵ I am here deeply indebted to the research work of Phillip Schmandt.

sense of boundaries because it is only through active appropriation that control over space is assured.

Successful control presumes a power to exclude unwanted elements. Fine-tuned ethnic, religious, racial, and status discriminations are frequently called into play within such a process of community construction. Furthermore, political organization takes a special form, generally expressive of a culture of political resistance and hostility to normal channels of political incorporation. The state is largely experienced as an agency of repressive control (in police, education, etc.) rather than as an agency that can be controlled by and bring benefits to them.²⁶ Political organizations of a participatory sort are, as Crenson observes,²⁷ weakly developed, and politics of the bourgeois sort understood as irrelevant to the procuring of the use values necessary for daily survival. Nevertheless, the state intervenes in such communities since they are vital preserves of the reserve army of the unemployed—spaces of such deprivation that all sorts of contagious social ills (from prostitution to tuberculosis) can flourish, and spaces that appear dangerous precisely because they lie outside of the normal processes of social incorporation.

Contrast this with the practices of affluent groups, who can command space through spatial mobility and ownership of basic means of reproduction (houses, cars, etc.). Already blessed with abundant exchange values with which to sustain life, they are in no way dependent upon community-provided use values for survival. The construction of community is then geared mainly to the preservation or enhancement of exchange values. Use values relate to matters of accessibility, taste, tone, aesthetic appreciation, and the symbolic and cultural capital that goes with possession of a certain kind of “valued,” built environment. Interpersonal relations are unnecessary at the street level, and the command over space does not have to be assured through continuous appropriation. Money provides access to the community, making it less exclusionary on other grounds (residential segregation by ethnicity and even race tends to weaken the further up the income scale one goes). Boundaries are diffuse and flexible, mainly dependent upon the spatial field of externality effects that can effect individual property values. Community organizations form to take care of externality effects that can effect individual property values and maintain the “tone” of the community space. The state is seen as basically beneficial and controllable, assuring security and helping keep undesirables out, except in unusual circumstances (the location of “noxious” facilities, the construction of highways, etc.).

Distinctive spatial practices and processes of community construction—coupled with distinctive cultural practices and ideological predispositions—arise out of different material circumstances. Conditions of economic oppression and socio-political domination generate quite different kinds of spatial practices and styles of community formation than will typically be found under other class circumstances.

²⁶ P. Willis, *Learning to Labor* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977).

²⁷ M. Crenson, *Neighborhood Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

Informalization, the Production of Symbolic Capital, and the Mobilization of the Spectacle

Flexible accumulation has deeply affected class structures and political-economic possibilities so as to modify the processes of community production, while re-emphasising the importance of the class content of spatial practices. I will look briefly at three aspects of this transformation.

Impoverishment and Informalization

The United States have experienced an increase in the sheer numbers of the urban poor since 1972. The composition of this poverty population has also changed. Unemployed blue-collar workers thrown on the street by de-industrialization, and the flood of displaced people out of depressed rural or regional economies or from third-world countries, have been piled on top of what Marx called the “hospital” of the working class, left to fend for itself in the cities. In some cases, particular urban communities tied to a dominant local employment source have been plunged as a whole into a condition of impoverishment by a single plant closing. In other instances, particularly vulnerable groups, such as female-headed households, have been plunged deeper into the mire of poverty, thus creating zones where phenomena like the feminization of poverty become dominant. Fiscal constraints, of which neo-conservatism has made a political virtue rather than an economic necessity, at the same time have undercut the flow of public services, and hence the life-support mechanisms, for the mass of the unemployed and the poor.

Learning to cope and survive in urban settings on almost no income is an art that takes a while to learn. The balance between competition, mutual predation, and mutual aid has consequently shifted within low income populations. The growth of impoverishment has led, paradoxically, to a diminution of the power of some of the more positive mechanisms to cope with it. But there has also been one other dramatic response: the rise of what is known as the “informal sector” in American cities, a sector that focusses on illegal practices such as drug-trafficking, prostitution, and legal production and trading of services. Most observers agree that these practices expanded in scope and form after 1972.²⁸ Furthermore, the same phenomena were observed in European cities, thus bringing the urban process in the advanced capitalist countries as a whole much closer to the third-world urban experience.²⁹

The nature and form of informalization varies greatly, depending upon the opportunities to find local markets for goods and services, the qualities of the reserve army of labour power (its skills and aptitudes), gender relations (for women play a very conspicuous role in organizing informal economies), the presence of small-scale entrepreneurial skills, and the willingness of the authorities (regulatory and oversight

²⁸ M. Castells and A. Portes, “World Underneath: The Origins, Dynamics, and Effects of the Informal Economy,” *Conference on the Comparative Study of the Informal Sector* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University).

²⁹ N. Redclift and E. Mingione eds., *Beyond Unemployment: Household, Gender, and Subsistence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

powers like the unions) to tolerate practices that are often outside the law. Low-income communities present, in the first place, a vast reserve of labour power under strong pressure in these times to find a living of almost any sort.

Under conditions of government laxness and trade union weakness, new kinds of production of goods and services can arise, sometimes organized from outside the community, but in other instances organized by entrepreneurs within the low-income community itself. Homework has become much more prominent, allowing women, for example, to combine the tasks of child-rearing and productive labour in the same space, while saving entrepreneurs the costs of overhead (plant, lighting, etc.). Sweatshops and the informal provision of services began to emerge as vital aspects of the New York and Los Angeles economies in the 1970s and by now have become important throughout the U. S. urban system. These have been paralleled by an increasing commodification of traditional mutual aid systems within low-income communities. Baby-sitting, laundering, cleaning, fixing up, and odd jobs, which used to be swapped more as favours, are now bought and sold, sometimes on an entrepreneurial basis.

Social relations within many low-income communities have, as a consequence, become much more entrepreneurial, with all of the consequences of excessive and often extraordinary exploitation (particularly of women) in the labour process. The flow of incomes into such communities has increased, but at the expense of traditional mutual aid systems and the stronger implantation of social hierarchies within the communities themselves. The flow of value out of such communities has also increased substantially. This has led many to look with surprise at the local dynamics of urban development and to argue for the toleration, acceptance, and even encouragement of informalization, thus lending credence to the neo-conservative argument that private entrepreneurial activity is always the path to economic growth and success—as if that could solve the problems of all the poor rather than those of just a select few. Nevertheless, the growth of informalization—and the emergence of unregulated urban spaces within which such practices are tolerated—is a phenomenon thoroughly consistent with the new regime of flexible accumulation.

The Production of Symbolic Capital

The frenetic pursuit of the consumption dollars of the affluent has led to a much stronger emphasis upon product differentiation under the regime of flexible accumulation. Producers have, as a consequence, begun to explore the realms of differentiated tastes and aesthetic preferences in ways that were not so necessary under a Fordist regime of standardised accumulation through mass production. In so doing, they have re-emphasised a powerful aspect of capital accumulation: the production and consumption of what Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital.”³⁰ This has had important implications for the production and transformation of the urban spaces in which upper-income groups live.

³⁰ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp 177-97; idem, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

“Symbolic capital” is defined by Bourdieu as “the collection of luxury goods attesting the taste and distinction of the owner.” Such capital is, of course, a transformed kind of money capital, but “produces its proper effect inasmuch, and only inasmuch, as it conceals the fact that it originates in “material” forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects.” The fetishism involved is obvious, but it is here deliberately deployed to conceal, through the realms of culture and taste, the real bases of economic distinctions. Since “the most successful ideological effects are those which have no words, and ask no more than complicitous silence,” the production of symbolic capital serves ideological functions because the mechanisms through which it contributes “to the reproduction of the established order and to the perpetuation of domination remain hidden.”³¹

It is instructive to bring Bourdieu’s theorizations to bear upon the production of upper-class communities and their built environments. It has a lot to tell us about the material processes of gentrification, the recuperation of “history” (real, imagined, or simply re-created as pastiche) and of “community” (again, real, imagined, or simply packaged for sale by producers), and the need for embellishment decoration, and ornamentation that could function as so many codes and symbols of social distinction.³² I do not mean to argue that such phenomena are in any way new – they have been a vital feature to capitalist urbanization from the very beginning and, of course, bear more than a few echoes of distinctions passed on from older social orders. But they have become of much greater significance since 1972, in part through their proliferation into layers of the population that were hitherto denied them. Flexible accumulation permits a profitable response to the cultural discontents of the 1960s, which implied rejection of standardised accumulation and a mass culture that provided too few opportunities to capture symbolic capital. To the degree that political economic crisis encouraged the exploration of product differentiation, so the repressed market desire to acquire symbolic capital could be captured through the production of built environments.³³ And it was, of course, exactly this kind of desire that post-modernist architecture set out to satisfy. “For the middle class suburbanite,” Venturi *et al* observe, “living, not in an antebellum mansion, but in a smaller version lost in a large space, identity must come through symbolic treatment of the form of the house, either through styling provided by the developer (for instance, split-level Colonial) or through a variety of symbolic ornaments applied thereafter by the owner.”³⁴

Symbolic capital is, however, open to devaluation or enhancement through changes in taste. If symbolic capital contains a hidden power of domination, then power

³¹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 188.

³² G. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); W. Firey, “Sentiment and Symbolism as Ecological Variables”, *American Sociological Review* 10: 145–60 (1945); and M. Jager, “Class Definition and the Aesthetics of Gentrification” in N. Smith and P. Williams eds., *The Gentrification of the City* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

³³ N. Smith and M. Lefavre, “A Class Analysis of Gentrification,” in J. Palen and B. London eds., *Gentrification, Displacement and Neighborhood Revitalization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

³⁴ Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour, *Las Vegas*, p. 154.

relations are themselves vulnerable to mutations in taste. Since competition between producers and the machinations of consumers render taste insecure, struggles over fashion acquire a certain significance within the urban scene.³⁵ The power to dominate, as well as the ability to convert symbolic into money capital, becomes embedded in the cultural politics of the urban process. But that also implies that domination of space within the urban process has an even more vital cultural edge to it under a regime of flexible accumulation. To the degree that domination of whatever sort contains the potentiality of violent response on the part of the dominated, so here, too, a latent domain of conflict has been opened up for explicit articulation.

The Mobilization of the Spectacle

“Bread and Festivals” was the ancient Roman formula for social pacification of the restless plebs. The formula has been passed on into capitalist culture through, for example, Second Empire Paris, where festival and the urban spectacle became instruments of social control in a society riven by class conflict.³⁶

Since 1972, the urban spectacle has been transformed from counter-cultural events, anti-war demonstrations, street riots, and the inner-city revolutions of the 1960s. It has been captured as both a symbol and an instrument of community unification under bourgeois control in conditions where unemployment and impoverishment have been on the rise and where objective conditions of class polarization have been increasing. As part of this process, the modernist penchant for monumentality—the communication of the permanence, authority, and power of the established capitalist order—has been challenged by an “official” post-modernist style that explores the architecture of festival and spectacle, with its sense of the ephemeral, of display, and of transitory but participatory pleasure. The display of the commodity has become a central part of the spectacle, as crowds flock to gaze at them and at each other in intimate and secure spaces like Baltimore’s Harbor Place, Boston’s Faneuil Hall, and a host of enclosed shopping malls that have sprung up all over America. Even whole built environments have become centerpieces of urban spectacle and display.

This phenomenon deserves more detailed scrutiny than I can give here. It fits, of course, with urban strategies to capture consumer dollars to compensate for de-industrialization. Its undoubted commercial success rests in part on the way in which the act of buying connects to the pleasure of the spectacle in secured spaces, safe from violence or political agitation. Baltimore’s Harbor Place combines all of the bourgeois virtues that Benjamin attributed to the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris with the sense of the festival that attached to world expositions, “places of pilgrimage to the fetish Commodity.”³⁷ Debord would take it further: “the spectacle is the developed modern complement of money where the totality of the

³⁵ See S. Zurkin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

³⁶ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

³⁷ W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1973), pp 158–65.

commodity world appears as a whole, as a general equivalence for what the entire society can be and can do.” To the degree that the spectacle becomes “the common ground of deceived gaze and of false consciousness,” so it can also present itself as “an instrument of unification.”³⁸ In Baltimore, Mayor Schaefer and the urban class alliance ranged behind him, have consciously used the spectacle of Harbor Place precisely in that way, as a symbol of the supposed unity of a class-divided and racially-segregated city. Professional sports activities and events like the Los Angeles Olympic Games perform a similar function in an otherwise fragmented urban society.

Urban life, under a regime of flexible accumulation, has thus come increasingly to present itself as an “immense accumulation of spectacles,” American downtowns no longer communicate exclusively a monumental sense of power, authority, and corporate domination. Instead they express the idea of spectacle and play. It is on this terrain of the spectacle that the break into the post-modern, urban culture that has accompanied flexible accumulation has partially been fashioned, and it is in the context of such mediating images that the oppositions of class consciousness and class practices have to unfold.³⁹ But, as Debord observes, the spectacle “is never an image mounted securely and finally in place; it is always an account of the world competing with others, and meeting the resistance of different, sometimes tenacious forms of social practice.”⁴⁰

Urban Stress Under Flexible Accumulation

Flexible accumulation has had a serious impact upon all urban economies. The increasing entrepreneurialism of many urban governments (particularly those that have emphasised “public-private partnership”) has tended to reinforce it and the neoconservatism and post-modernist cultural trends that went with it. The use of increasingly scarce resources to capture development has meant that the social consumption of the poor was neglected in order to provide benefits to keep the rich and powerful in town. This was the switch in direction that President Nixon signalled when he declared the urban crisis over in 1973. What that meant, of course, was the transmutation of urban stresses into new forms.

The internal adaptations within the city likewise played their part in facilitating and fomenting flexible accumulation. Poor populations had to become much more entrepreneurial, adopting, for example, “informal” economic means to survive. Increasing competition for survival under conditions of increasing impoverishment meant serious erosion of traditional mutual aid mechanisms in urban communities that had little capacity to dominate space and were often disempowered with respect

³⁸ G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: : Black and Red Books, 1983).

³⁹ I can not resist drawing attention to the way in which Barthes (*The Pleasure of the Text* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1975]) brought the concept of *jouissance* into philosophical respectability at the same time as the exploration of the city as a theater, as a spectacle, full of play spaces became more prominent in both the theory and practice of urban design. I also suspect that the appreciation of the urban fabric as a “text” to be read and interpreted with pleasure had something to do with the tax advantages that derived to the real estate industry declaring whole segments of the city “historic preservation districts”.

⁴⁰ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*.

to normal processes of political integration. The ability to dominate space through communal solidarity and mutually supportive patterns of appropriation weakened at the very moment that many spaces became vulnerable to invasion and occupation by others. A tension arose between increasing unemployment of workers in traditional occupations and the employment growth triggered by downtown revivals based on financial services and the organization of spectacles. A new and relatively affluent generation of professional and managerial workers, raised on the cultural discontents with modernism in the 1960s, came to dominate whole zones of inner-city urban space seeking product differentiation in built environments, quality of life, and command of symbolic capital. The recuperation of “history” and “community” became essential selling gimmicks to the producers of built environments. Thus the turn to post-modernist styles was institutionalized.

There are serious social and spatial stresses inherent in such a situation. To begin with, increasing class polarization (symbolized by the incredible surge in urban poverty surrounding islands of startling and conspicuous wealth) is inherently dangerous, and given the processes of community construction available to the poor, it also sets the stage for increasing racial, ethnic, religious, or simply “turf” tensions. Fundamentally different class mechanisms for defining the spatiality of community come into conflict, thus sparking running guerilla warfare over who appropriates and controls various spaces of the city. The threat of urban violence, although not of the massive sort experienced in the 1960s, looms large. The breakdown of the processes that allow the poor to construct any sort of community of mutual aid is equally dangerous since it entails an increase in individual anomie, alienation, and all of the antagonisms that derive therefrom. The few who “make it” through informal sector activity cannot compensate for the multitude who won’t. At the other end of the social scale, the search for symbolic capital introduces a cultural dimension to political economic tensions. The latter feed inter-class hostilities and prompt state interventions that further alienate low-income populations (I am thinking, for example, of the way street-corner youths get harassed in gentrifying neighborhoods). The mobilization of the spectacle has its unifying effects, but it is a fragile and uncertain tool for unification, and to the degree that it forces the consumer to become “a consumer of illusions” it contains its own specific alienations. Controlled spectacles and festivals are one thing, but riots and revolutions can also become “festivals of the people.”

But there is a further contradiction. Heightened inter-urban competition produces socially wasteful investments that contribute to, rather than ameliorate, the over-accumulation problem that lay behind the transition to flexible accumulation in the first place.⁴¹ Put simply, how many successful convention centers, sports stadia, disney worlds, and harbor places can there be? Success is often short-lived or rendered moot by competing or alternative innovations arising elsewhere. Over-investment in everything from shopping malls to cultural facilities makes the values embedded in urban space highly vulnerable to devaluation. Down-town revivals

⁴¹ Harvey and Scott, “Human Geography”.

built upon burgeoning employment in financial and real estate services where people daily process loans and real estate deals for other people employed in financial services and real estate, depend upon a huge expansion of personal, corporate, and governmental debts. If that turns sour, the effects will be far more devastating than the dynamiting of Pruitt-Igoe ever could symbolize. The rash of bank failures in Texas, Colorado, and even California (many of them attributable to over-investment in real estate) suggests that there has been serious over-investment in urban re-development.

Flexible accumulation, in short, is associated with a highly fragile patterning of urban investment, as well as with increasing social and spatial polarization of urban class antagonisms.

Political Responses

“Every established order tends to produce,” Bourdieu writes, “the naturalization of its own arbitrariness” the “most important and best concealed” mechanism for so doing is “the dialectic of the objective chances and the agent’s aspirations, out of which arises the *sense of limits*, commonly called the *sense of reality*” which is “the basis of the most ineradicable adherence to the established order.” Knowledge (perceived and imagined) thereby “becomes an integral part of the power of society to reproduce itself.” The “symbolic power to impose the principles of construction of reality—in particular, social reality—is a major dimension of political power.”⁴²

This is a key insight. It helps explain how even the most critical theorist can so easily end up reproducing “adherence to the established order.” It explains Tafuri’s conclusion (based on the history of avant-gardism and modernity in architecture) of the impossibility of any radical transformation of culture and therefore of any radical and transforming architectural practice in advance of any radical transformation in social relations.⁴³ This insight compels scepticism towards those who have recently embraced post-modernism (or radical individualism or some other aspect of contemporary practice) as a radical and liberating break with the past. There is strong evidence that post-modernity is nothing more than the cultural clothing of flexible accumulation. “Creative destruction”—that centerpiece of capitalist modernity—is just as central in daily life as it ever was. The difficulty, therefore, is to find a political response to the invariant and immutable truths of capitalism in general while responding to the particular forms of appearance that capitalism now exhibits under conditions of flexible accumulation. From that standpoint, therefore, let me explore some modest proposals.

Consider, first, exploring the interstices of present processes for points of resistance and empowerment. Decentralization and deconcentration taken together with the cultural concern with qualities of place and space, create, a political climate in which the politics of community, place, and region can unfold in new ways, at the very moment when the cultural continuity of all places is seriously threatened by flexible

⁴² Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 164.

⁴³ M. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976).

accumulation. It is out of that sort of tension that Frampton advocates a regional architecture of resistance to the homogenizing forces of global capitalism,⁴⁴ and Rossi pursues an architecture expressive of the continuity of neighbourhood tradition and collective memory.⁴⁵ The cultural theses of post-modernity are, evidently, open to radical interpretation in the cause of greater empowerment of the poor and underprivileged. But that is small beer compared to the “creative destruction” with which flexible accumulation typically scars the fabric of the city.

Flexible accumulation also opens up new paths of social change. Spatial dispersal means much greater geographical equality of opportunity to lure in new activities to even the smallest towns in the remotest region. Position within the urban hierarchy becomes less significant, and large cities lose their inherent political-economic power to dominate. Small towns that have managed to lure in new activities have often improved their position remarkably. But the chill winds of competition blow hard here too. It proves hard to hang on to activities even recently acquired. As many cities lose as gain by this. The ferment in labour markets has also undermined traditional union powers and opened up opportunities for migration, employment, and self-employment for layers in the population once denied them (although under much more competitive circumstances leading to low wages and deteriorated work conditions for women, new migrants, and ghettoized minorities). Flexible production opens up the possibility of cooperative forms of labour organization under a modicum of worker control. Piore and Sabel emphasize this argument and see this as a decisive moment in the history of capitalism when totally new and much more democratic forms of industrial organization can be implanted.⁴⁶ This style of organization can also arise through the social consolidation of “informal sector” activities as cooperative and worker-controlled endeavours.

Conditions of flexible accumulation, in short, make worker and community control appear as a feasible alternative to capitalism. The emphasis of political ideology on the left therefore has shifted towards a “feasible,” decentralized socialism, thus drawing much more inspiration from social democracy and anarchism than from traditional Marxism. This shift corresponds with the vigorous external attack and internal critique of centralized planning mechanisms in the socialist countries.⁴⁷

Political practices on the left have evolved in much the same direction. Municipal socialism in Britain, economic democracy and community control in the United States, and community mobilization by the “Greens” in West Germany illustrate the trend. There is plainly much that can be done, at both local and regional levels,

⁴⁴ Frampton, “Critical Regionalism.”

⁴⁵ A. Rossi, *Architecture and the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984). Rossi, it is interesting to note, bases his theory of architectural practice on ideas of several geographers, notably Vidal de la Blanche, regarding the importance of neighbourhoods as settings for the continuity of “genres de vie” and sites of collective memory. From my standpoint, Rossi chose the wrong geographer because Vidal was notoriously reluctant, at least until the very end of his life and his seminal but much neglected *Geographie de l’Est*, to explore the dynamic transformations of social and physical landscapes wrought under capitalist social relations.

⁴⁶ M. Piore and C. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

⁴⁷ For example see A. Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983).

to defend and empower local interests. Community and religious organizations actively support plant buy-outs, fight plant closure, and otherwise support the mutual aid mechanisms of traditional, low-income community solidarity. Institutions can also be persuaded to support the thrust for greater empowerment of the populations that surround them. A sympathetic state apparatus can find ways to support cooperatives (in service provision, housing provision, and production) and perhaps can also find ways to encourage the formation of skills through the tapping of local talent. Financial institutions can be pressured into supporting community reinvestment, cooperative endeavours, and neighbourhood development corporations. Even spectacles can be organized in a political cause. Planners can try to ensure that the transformations of neighbourhood will preserve rather than destroy collective memory. Far better that a deserted factory be turned into a community center where the collective memory of those who lived and worked there is preserved, rather than that it be turned into boutiques and condos that permit the appropriation of one people's history by another.

But there are acute dangers. Both the theory and the practices have the effect of reinforcing the fragmentations and reifications. It is invidious to regard places, communities, cities, regions, or even nations as "things in themselves" at a time when the global flexibility of capitalism is greater than ever. To follow that line of thinking is to be increasingly, rather than decreasingly, vulnerable in aggregate to the extraordinary centralized power of flexible accumulation. It is just as geographically unprincipled and naive to ignore the qualities of a global process as it is to ignore the distinctive qualities of place and community. Practices fashioned only in the latter terms define a politics of adaptation and submission rather than of active resistance and of socialist transformation.

Yet a global strategy of resistance and transformation has to begin with the realities of place and community. The problem is to discover a centralized politics that matches the increasingly centralized power of flexible accumulation while remaining faithful to the grass-roots of local resistances. The "Greens" in West Germany and the Rainbow Coalition in the United States appear to be taking up such questions. The difficulty is to merge these freshly-minted ideologies with a more traditional, oppositional politics shaped in response to a previous regime of accumulation (without, however, embracing radical individualism, neo-conservatism, or post-modernism as signs of liberation). There is plenty of scope here for progressive forces at local, regional, and national levels to do the hard practical and intellectual work of creating a more-unified oppositional force out of the maelstrom of social change that flexible accumulation has unleashed.

This is mainly to speak, however, of the politics of resistance. What of the politics of some more radical transformation? While capitalism is always in a state of pre-socialism, it is scarcely on anyone's agenda these days to think about something as daring as the transition to socialism. Bordieu, perhaps, provides a clue as to why:

The critique which brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation, has as the condition of its possibility objective crisis, which in breaking the immediate fit between subjective structures and the objective structures, destroys self-evidence practically.⁴⁸

Only under conditions of crisis do we have the power to think radically new thoughts because it then becomes impossible to reproduce “the naturalization of our own arbitrariness.” All major social revolutions have been wrought in the midst of breakdown in the bourgeois ability to govern.

There are abundant cracks in the shaky edifice of modern capitalism, not a few of them generated by the stresses inherent in flexible accumulation. The world’s financial system—the central power in the present regime of accumulation—is in turmoil and weighed down with an excess of debt that puts such huge claims on future labour that it is hard to see any way to work out of it except through massive defaults, rampant inflation, or repressive deflation. The insecurity and power of creative destruction unleashed by flexible accumulation takes a terrible toll, often on many segments of a population, thus generating acute geopolitical rivalries. These could easily spin out of control (as they did in the 1930s) and break up the West as a coherent political-economic unit (protectionist and financial “wars” have been part of our daily diet of news for some time now). Though crisis prone, however, the capitalist system is not *in* crisis, and few of us care to consider how life would be if it were. Indeed, the system is so shaky that even to talk about its shakiness is seen as rocking it in unseemly ways.

This brings me to my second major point. Objective crisis may be a necessary, but never a sufficient, condition for major social transformations. The latter depend upon the rise of some political force capable of stepping into the vacuum of power and doing something truly creative with it. The nature of that political force does indeed make a difference in, to use Marx’s own polarities, the transition to barbarism or socialism. If the presently disempowered are to have a voice in that, they must first possess “the material and symbolic means of rejecting the definition of the real that is imposed on them.”⁴⁹ As Willis shows, however, the disempowered evolve their own means of symbolic representation that in many respects represent their social world more accurately than that which educators would impose upon them.⁵⁰ “Drop-out” and oppositional inner-city subcultures, with their distinctive languages, are as widespread and vibrant as they have ever been. But that language, if only because it is the language of those trapped in space, is adaptive rather than transformative with respect to global processes that preclude empowerment for the mass of the population.

Critical theory here has a role. But only if it, too, is self-critical. To begin with, all critical theory emerges as the practice of a group of “organic intellectuals” (to use Gramsci’s phrase) and its qualities therefore depend upon the class and territory in

⁴⁸ Bourdieu, *Outline*, p. 168.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵⁰ Willis, *Learning to Labor* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977).

which the practitioners have their being. Academics and professionals are not exempt. Our critical theory therefore has certain qualities that differentiate it from the critical theory expressed in working-class cultural and political practices. True empowerment for the presently disempowered must be won by struggle from below and not given out of largesse from above. The modes of class and under-class opposition to flexible accumulation therefore must be taken seriously. The problem, on all sides, is to find practices that define a language of class and territorial alliances from which more global oppositional strategies to flexible accumulation can arise.

Even that kind of critical theory cannot contain the answers. But it can at least pose the questions and in so doing reveal something of the material realities with which any transition has to cope. That is, to be sure, a small contribution. But it is out of the assemblage of such small contributions that meaningful transformations must be wrought. A critical appraisal of the current regime of flexible accumulation, of the cultural practices of post-modernity, and of the re-shaping of physical and social space through urbanization, together with reflection on the ideologies through which we understand such processes, appears as one small but necessary preparatory step towards the reconstitution of a movement of global opposition to a plainly sick and troubled capitalist hegemony.