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Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism

It has become customary for historians to speak about the death of the Victorian Age in 1914, or the reign of a politico-monetary Long Sixteenth Century persisting well into the middle of the calendrical 17th century. By the same token, there are innumerable incitements in contemporary cultural, if not political, analysis to regard the Old Twentieth Century—defined, preeminently, by the two Great Wars and their attendant revolutions—as having drawn to a close sometime between the Beats and The Punks, Sartre and Foucault. Fredric Jameson's recent essay, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capital' (NLR 146), is an audacious attempt to argue the case for such an epochal transition. Indeed, Jameson, charting a caesura from the beginning of the 'long Sixties', goes as far as to suggest the ascendency of a new, 'postmodernist' sensibility or cultural attitude, overwhelmed in a delusionary, depthless Present, and deprived of historical coordinates, imaginative empathy, or even existential *angst.* With extraordinary facility for unexpected connections and contrasts (as between architecture and war reporting), he stalks the logic of the new cultural order—based on the manic reprocessing and 'cannibalizing' of its own images—through various manifestations in current writing, poetry, music and film. It is, however, architecture, 'the privileged aesthetic language', that reveals the most systematic, virtually 'unmediated' relationship between postmodern experience and the structures of Late Capitalism. Thus, according to Jameson, the 'new world space of multinational capital' finds its 'impossible' representation in the mirror-glass and steel 'hyperspaces' of the Los Angeles Bonaventure Hotel and other contemporary urban megastructures.

This vision of the end of the twentieth century as the triumph of postmodernism—and, correlatively, the conception of postmodernism as the cultural 'dominant' corresponding to the highest, 'purest' stage of capitalism—has an exhilarating allure. It regiments sundry partial, discrepant observations into a coherent focus, while providing some sure footing on that most slippery of terrains for Marxists: the theorization of contemporaneity. The ability to summarize vast tracts of modern and postmodern history, to focus their respective vectors in exemplary instances or moments, and to provide a synoptic overview of how the

pieces in this complex puzzle fit together—this is an achievement to which few can lay claim, and for which contemporary workers in the fields of culture, politics and history must be continually grateful. But like all imposing totalizations (modes of thought that Althusser, among others, has taught us to be wary of), Jameson's postmodernism tends to homogenize the details of the contemporary landscape, to subsume under a master concept too many contradictory phenomena which, though undoubtedly visible in the same chronological moment, are nonetheless separated in their true temporalities.

To begin with a merely formal complaint. The category 'cultural dominant', which occupies such a crucial epistemological position in Jameson's argument, seems as if it might be just another name for that elusive Great White Whale of cultural criticism—the specific *object* thereof—which so many have pursued, struggled with for a while (some drowning in due course) and, then, invariably lost hold of. Described in Jameson as a 'force field', 'systematic cultural norm', or 'cultural language', postmodernism in its dominative or hegemonic position seems variously to assume the status of 'sensibility', 'aesthetic', 'cultural apparatus', even 'episteme'. A continuous slippage between subjective and objective moments, spectator and spectacle, begs the introduction of that necessary though not sufficient clarification which Perry Anderson (in debate over the meaning of modernism with Marshall Berman in NLR 144) makes between the *experience* of (post-) modernity and the *vision* of (post-)modernism.

Even more problematic is the assertion that postmodernism is the cultural logic of Late Capitalism, successor to modernism and realism as the respective cultures of the monopoly and competitive stages of capitalism. This concept of the three stages of capital and the three stages of bourgeois culture may strike some as the return of essentialism and reductionism with a vengeance. Certainly there is a superficial similarity, at least, with that neatly ordered, old-fashioned world of conveniently correspondent superstructures that we associate with Comintern Marxism after Lenin. But even if we set aside the question of whether Jameson is operating as a kind of Lukács manqué, there are intractable difficulties in establishing a first 'fit' between postmodernism and Mandel's concept of the late-capitalist stage.

For Jameson it is crucial to demonstrate that the sixties are a point of rupture in the history of capitalism and culture, and to establish a 'constitutive' relationship between postmodernism, new technology (of *reproduction* rather than production) and multinational capitalism. Mandel's *Late Capitalism* (first published in 1972), however, declares in its opening sentence that its central purpose is to understand 'the long *postwar* wave of rapid growth'. All of his subsequent writings make clear that Mandel regards the real break, the definite ending of the long wave, to be the 'second slump' of 1974–75, and that exacerbated inter-imperialist rivalry to have been one of its primary features (he has criticized emphasis on 'multinationalization' as the principal characteristic of contemporary capitalism). The difference between Jameson's and Mandel's schemes is crucial: was Late Capitalism born circa 1945 or 1960? Are the Sixties the opening of a new epoch, or merely the

superheated summit of the postwar boom? Where does the Slump fit into an accounting of contemporary cultural trends?

If American architecture is taken as an example, it is clear that Mandel's is a better grid to plot the relationship between cultural forms and economic phases. As every reader of Tom Wolfe knows, the corporate 'workers' housing' of the High Modern (or International) Style totally dominated postwar urban renewal, reaching an apotheosis of sorts during the late 1960s in the construction of such surreal super-skyscrapers as the World Trade Center, the John Hancock and Sears buildings. 'Modernism', at least in architecture, remained the functional aesthetic of Late Capitalism, and the sixties must be seen as a predominantly *fin-de-siècle* decade, more a culmination than a beginning.

If Jameson's equation between postmodernism and Late Capitalism *tout court* gives way, then to what politico-economic trends can we correlate the change in sensibility represented by postmodernism? Preserving the hypothesis that the American Downtown Renaissance, and its futuristically built environments, are keys to deciphering a larger cultural and experiential pattern, I would suggest the reinterpretation of postmodernism in terms of two alternative coordinates: first, the rise of new international rentier circuits in the current crisis phase of capitalism; secondly, the definitive abandonment of the ideal of urban reform as part of the new class polarization taking place in the United States.

The Spirit of Postmodernism

In a typically Schopenhauerian flourish, Mies van der Rohe once declared that the destiny of Modern architecture was to translate 'the will of the epoch into space'; indeed the 1960s skyline bore the signature of the epoch of Fordism and the power of the Fortune 500 industrial corporations. The postmodern trend in architecture, however, has little organic or expressive relationship to industrial production or emerging technology; it is not raising 'cathedrals of the microchip' or even, primarily, singing the hymns of IBM. Instead it has given freer exhibition than ever before to the spirit of fictional capital. Revolting against the austerity of Miesian functionalism, it has broken any allusion to the production process and loosened the commodity-form of the building from its use-value supports. In doing so, it has achieved a jocular inversion of the previous relationship between monumentality and the individual commodity: Philip Johnson's Chippendale ATT Building (or the 'pink pay phone' as it is sometimes called) is one of the most popularly notorious examples of the comedic or bathetic triumph of the familiar object over abstract, functionalized structure. In the hands of postmodernist architecture the skyscraper passes from monumental machine to massive collectible. (Thus Johnson is now proposing, with his partner John Burgees, to replace the famous New York landmark of the 1 Times Square Building with a giant apple!)

How can we read this Warholesque transformation except as a complete usurpation by the logic of speculation and merchandising over residual principles of capitalist productivism? Where the 'classical' skyscraper romanticized the hegemony of corporate bureaucracy and mass pro-

duction, the postmodern tower is merely 'a package of standardized space to be gift-wrapped to the clients' taste'.[1] Indeed, the postmodernist phenomenon seems irreducibly specific to the reckless overbuilding of commercial space that has taken place since 1974, continuing frenetically even through the trough of the severe 1981–82 recession. As everyone knows, this great construction bubble has been inflated, not by expanding civilian industrial production, but by oil rents, third-world debts, military outlays, and the global flight of capital to the safe harbour of Reagan's America. This hypertrophic expansion of the financial service sector is not a new, higher stage of capitalism—even in America speculators cannot go on endlessly building' postmodernist skyscrapers for other speculators to buy—but a morbid symptom of the financial overaccumulation prolonged by the weakness of the US labour movement and productive capital's fears of a general collapse. Thus, while Jameson's account of the phenomenal reality of postmodernism is acute and penetrating, his theorization of this moment as the surface content of a deeper structure of multinational integration in the capitalist world system (Jameson significantly, and incorrectly, conflates the quite different accounts of capitalism given by Wallerstein and Mandel) misses the crucial point about contemporary capitalist structures of accumulation: that they are symptoms of global crisis, not signs of the triumph of capitalism's irresistible drive to expand.

The history of downtown redevelopment in Los Angeles is a particularly vivid example of how the new urban 'renaissance' has increasingly become a function of international financial speculation on an unprecedented scale. In the first, immediate postwar phase, the seedy Bunker Hill area adjacent to the LA civic centre was slated for large-scale public housing. However, the traditional downtown interests, orchestrated by the *Los Angeles Times* chief political operator Asa Call, sabotaged this plan, redbaiting public housing advocates and ousting progressive Mayor Fletcher Bowron. There followed a second phase, marked by the wholesale eviction of poor working-class neighbourhoods (like the famous Chavez Ravine barrio, razed to make way for Dodger Stadium) and the repeal of earthquake height-limitations to make way for LA's first skyscrapers. Under the aegis of Call's 'Committee of Twenty-Five', a number of major corporations were persuaded to construct new headquarters in the downtown area during the 1960s. (From this period date typical modernist statements like the twin black monoliths of the ARCO Towers and the stainless steel Wells Fargo Building.) In the 1970s, however, the accelerating pace of redevelopment came under the control of offshore managers of truly vast pools of mobile capital, and individual buildings gave way to multiblock developments like the Westin Bonaventure (financed by the Japanese) and the forthcoming California Plaza (3,200,000 square feet of office space, 220,000 of retail, 750 residential units, a 100,000 square foot museum, and a five-acre park—being built by $1.5 billion of expatriate Canadian funds). Overall, foreign investors now totally dominate downtown construction, financing 32 of the 38 major skyscrapers built in the last decade.[2]

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[1] Ada Louise Huxtable, 'The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered: The Search for a Skyscraper Style', *Architectural Record,* January 1984, p. 64

[2] *Business Week,* 23 April 1984, p. 17

This transformation of a decayed precinct of downtown LA into a major financial and corporate-control node of the Pacific Rim economy (battening also on Southern California's runaway real-estate inflation and its booming defence industries)[3] has gone hand-in-hand with a precipitous deterioration of the general urban infrastructure and a new-wave immigration that has brought an estimated one million undocumented Asians, Mexicans and Central Americans into the Inner City. The capitalism of postmodernism, far from eliminating the last enclaves of precapitalist production as Jameson suggests, has brazenly recalled the most primitive forms of urban exploitation. At least 100,000 apparel homeworkers toil within a few miles radius of the Bonaventure and child labour is again a shocking problem. This restructuring of the relations of production and the productive process is, to be sure, capitalist through and through, but it represents, not some new stage in capitalist production, but a return to a sort of primitive accumulation with the valorization of capitals occurring, in part, through the production of absolute surplus value by means of the super-exploitation of the urban proletariat.

Baron Haussmann in Los Angeles

It is only within the context of this larger 'redevelopment'—the burgeoning city of third-world immigrants that totally surrounds and lays siege to the sumptuary towers of the speculators—that it is possible to grasp the real meaning of the architectural language used by John Portman and other leading downtown developers. To do so, it will be useful to distinguish between the last great Marxist theorization of the capitalist city and the quite different schema that Jameson proposes. Jameson evokes the Bonaventure as a contemporary counterpart to the role of the Parisian Arcades in Walter Benjamin's analysis of Modernism: an exemplary prism that refracts and clarifies the constituent tonalities of a particular 'urbanity'. But, where Jameson is primarily concerned to focus on the thing itself, Benjamin, in his search for the 'cultural logic' of Baudelaire's era, reconstructed the specific political and economic conditions that brought the world of the *flâneur* into being. In particular, he linked the phantasmagoria of the boulevards, crowds and arcades to the famous precursor of modern urban renewal: Baron Haussmann's counter-revolutionary restructuring of Paris in the 1850s.

Before considering the specific 'counter-revolutionary' context of today's Downtown revival, however, it may be helpful briefly to consider the genealogy of modern megastructures like the Bonaventure. It is fair to say that all current multi-block, multi-purpose developments descend from the model of Rockefeller Center, built between 1931 and 1940. The Italian Marxist, Manfredo Tafuri,[4] in his brilliant account of the Center's architectural history, has emphasized how a generation of designers' and planners' hopes for architectural reform were focused on

[3] For a provocative analysis of contemporary Los Angeles as a hybrid 'Singapore–Houston–New York', see Edward Soja, Rebecca Morales and Goetz Wolff, 'Urban Restructuring: An Analysis of Social and Spatial Change in Los Angeles', *Economic Geography*, 59, 2 (April 1983).

[4] Manfredo Tafuri, 'The Disenchanted Mountain: The Skyscraper and the City', in Ciucci et al., eds, *The American City,* London 1980.

the Rockefellers' great project, with its proposed centralization of work, residence and recreation in coordinated structures. In the end, however, 'all concepts accepted were stripped of any Utopian character', the final plan for the development was of 'a contained and rational concentration, an oasis of order—a closed and circumscribed intervention'. Built at the height of the New Deal, Rockefeller Center clearly showed the limits of capitalist urban design—indeed, the impossibility of planning the American city on any large or comprehensive scale.

Still, compared with today's downtown megastructures, Rockefeller Center interacted vitally with La Guardia's New York: its famous Plaza (originally intended to be a latter-day Garden of Babylon) and mass amusements became a magnetic attraction for a varied and representative Manhattan public. In the early postwar period its scheme was copied in a number of Northern urban redevelopment plans (notably, in Philadelphia's Penn Center, Chicago's Civic Center, and Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle). But increasingly the Rockefeller strategy of using vitalized public spaces to valorize private speculation was undermined by the crisis of the inner city, as industry fled to the suburbs, followed by the white working class, and the downtown residential districts filled up with the displaced Southern poor. The wave of ghetto insurrections between 1964 and 1969 powerfully concentrated the attention of urban developers and corporate architects on the problem of cordoning off the downtown financial districts, and other zones of high property values, from inner-city residential neighbourhoods. Genuine public spaces, whether as parks, streets, places of entertainment, or in urban transport, were devalued as amenities and redefined as planning problems to be eliminated or privatized.[5]

Although in a few American cities (usually with dominant university–hospital–office economies, as in Boston and San Francisco) the new rich and middle classes are gentrifying the entire urban core, in most large city centres redevelopment has produced only skyscraper-fortress enclaves. For the wealthy, token few of the Downtown salariat and managerial workforce who actually choose to live within the skyscrape, two different architectural solutions have arisen to the problem of guaranteeing their segregation and security. One has been the erection of new superskyscrapers, integrating residential space, what Tafuri correctly calls 'gigantic antiurbane machines'. The other strategy, pioneered by hotel architect John Portman, and designed to mollify the skyscraper's inhumanity, was to incorporate pseudo-natural, pseudo-public spaces within the building itself. Drawing on Frank Lloyd

[5] In his discussion of architectural modernism's propensity to an elite, urban 'pastoralism', Marshall Berman quotes Le Corbusier's 1929 slogan, 'we must kill the street!' According to Berman, the inner logic of the new urban environment, 'from Atlanta's Peachtree Plaza to Detroit's Renaissance Center', has been the functional segmentation and class segregation of the 'old modern street, with its volatile mixture of people and traffic, businesses and homes, rich and poor'. (*All That Is Solid Melts Into Air,* Verso, London 1983, p. 168.) Unfortunately, Berman's otherwise splendid evocation of modernist New York pays no more attention than Jameson's portrait of postmodernist Los Angeles to the decisive role of urban counter-insurgency in defining the essential terms of the contemporary built environment. Since the ghetto rebellions of the late 1960s a racist, as well as class, imperative of spatial separation has been paramount in urban development. No wonder, then, that the contemporary American inner city resembles nothing so much as the classical colonial city, with the towers of the white rulers and colons militarily set off from the casbah or indigenous city.

Wright's many experiments in search of an aesthetic of open space and endless movement, essays which include the 'lost' Larkin Building, the Johnson Wax Building and the Guggenheim Museum, Portman changed the theory of hotel design by showing that sizeable interior space could be a practical investment. The prototype of Portmanesque space—spaceship elevators, multi-storey atrium lobby, and so on—was the Hyatt—Regency built in 1967 in Atlanta's Peachtree Center. It is important to provide a concise image of the setting and external function of this 'mother of Bonaventure': 'Downtown Atlanta rises above its surrounding city like a walled fortress from another age. The citadel is anchored to the south by the international trade centre and buttressed by the municipal stadium. To the north, the walls and walkways of John Portman's Peachtree Center stand watch over the acres of automobiles that pack both flanks of the city's long ridge. The sunken moat of I–85, with its flowing lanes of traffic, reaches around the eastern base of the hill from south to north, protecting lawyers, bankers, consultants and regional executives from the intrusion of low-income neighbourhoods.'[6]

It is not surprising that Los Angeles's Portman-built new downtown (like that of Detroit, or Houston) reproduces more or less exactly the besieged landscape of Peachtree Center: the new Figueroa and Bunker Hill complexes are formed in the same protective maze of freeways, moats, concrete parapets, and asphalt no-man's-lands. What is missing from Jameson's otherwise vivid description of the Bonaventure is the savagery of its insertion into the surround city. To say that a structure of this type 'turns its back away' is surely an understatement, while to speak of its 'popular' character is to miss the point of its systematic segregation from the great Hispanic–Asian city outside (whose crowds prefer the open space of the old Plaza). Indeed, it is virtually to endorse the master illusion that Portman seeks to convey: that he has recreated within the precious spaces of his super-lobbies the genuine popular texture of city life.

In fact, Portman has only built large vivariums for the upper middle classes, protected by astonishingly complex security systems. Most of the new downtown centres might as well have been built on the third moon of Jupiter. Their fundamental logic is that of a claustrophobic space colony attempting to miniaturize nature within itself. Thus the Bonaventure reconstructs a nostalgic Southern California in aspic: orange trees, fountains, flowering vines, and clean air. Outside, in a smog-poisoned reality, vast mirrored surfaces reflect away not only the misery of the larger city, but also its irrepressible vibrancy and quest for authenticity (including the most exciting neighbourhood mural movement in North America).

Finally, it should be noted that where the aim of Portman is to dissimulate and 'humanize' the fortress function of his buildings, another postmodernist vanguard is increasingly iconizing that function in its designs. Recently opened off Wall Street, 33 Maiden Lane by Philip Johnson is a 26-storey imitation of the Tower of London, advertised

[6] Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America,* Chapel Hill 1983, p. 143.

as the 'state of the art in luxury accommodation . . . with emphasis on security'. Meanwhile Johnson and his partner, John Burgee, are working on the prospective 'Trump Castle' for Gotham City's own JR, 37-year-old billionaire developer, Donald Trump.[7] According to its advance publicity, Trump Castle will be a medievalized Bonaventure, with six coned and crenellated cylinders, plated in gold leaf, and surrounded by a real moat with drawbridges. These current designs for fortified skyscrapers indicate a vogue for battlements not seen since the great armoury boom that followed the Labour Rebellion of 1877. In so doing, they also signal the coercive intent of postmodernist architecture in its ambition, not to hegemonize the city in the fashion of the great modernist buildings, but rather to polarize it into radically antagonistic spaces.

This profoundly anti-urban impulse, inspired by unfettered financial forces and a Haussmannian logic of social control, seems to me to constitute the real *Zeitgeist* of postmodernism. At the same time, however, it reveals 'postmodernism'—at least in its architectual incarnations and sensibilities—as little more than a decadent trope of a massified modernism, a sympathetic correlate to Reaganism and the end of urban reform. As such it hardly seems a possible entry-way to the new forms of collective social practice towards which Jameson's essay ultimately beckons us.

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[7] Trump Castle will complement previously built Trump Plaza and Trump Tower. The latter boasts of being the most exclusive address in the world, with condominia so expensive, at up to $10 million each, that 'only the likes of Johnny Carson and Steven Spielberg can afford them'. *(New York Times Magazine,* 8 April 1983.)