

Globalization and Architectural Practices: A Double Project

CAROL BURNS
Harvard University

INTRODUCTION

"Globalization and Architectural Practices" is a topic that addresses enormous historical and material territories. This paper discusses contemporary changes in global communications and finance to describe: (1) effects on development and construction; (2) challenges posed to the meaning of cities and the welfare of societies by the emergence of "the space of flows"¹ and (3) the position of architecture, connected as it is to physical places pressured by the space of telematics. While the rise of world culture is not obviously linked immediately to design practices, the impact of these phenomena on architecture and urban design practices today shows the magnitude and complexity of forces that shape the arena within which architects perform.

What exactly is globalization? Manuel Castells defines it as "the process by which human activity becomes organized in interactive networks of performance that function on a planetary scale in real time."² With origins in economics and technologies, especially information technologies and electronic communications, these processes have led to transformations and extensions of capital, marked by increased mobility and measured in the great increases in volume and velocity of exchange. Results are wide-ranging: international trade now dominates advanced economies; management has changed focus from production to finance; the service sector has grown generally, and the ascendance of sophisticated services has shifted tasks from the shop floor to the office design room.

Historians and sociologists, especially those concerned with translocal process (Dennis Hodgson) and with the global systems associated with capitalism (Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, Charles Wolf) have understood the world as congeries of large-scale interactions, as it has been for many centuries. Travelers, merchants, pilgrims, and conquerors have long traversed the globe. In the last century, a technological explosion has occurred in transportation and information. Marshall McLuhan, among others, sought to theorize this world as a global village. With the rise of a new media order, communities with "no sense of place" are

created by media (Joshua Meyrowitz). The world is now described as rhizomatic, nomadic, even schizophrenic (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari). Theories of rootlessness, alienation and psychological distance between individuals and groups, on the one hand, and fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity on the other exemplify the double-sided potential of globalizing processes. Castells, underscoring his agreement with David Harvey that space and time are social constructs, states that both have been changed by technological revolution and by socioeconomic restructuring. This transformative effect on space and time—and on notions of space and time—makes the topic important to designers of culturally embedded artifacts.

Since professions must actively shape their arena from within, designers must be aware and informed of forces that are only apparently "extra-disciplinary." I propose that architecture is as an artifact supporting human activity and embedded in social, economic, and political conditions. The work of architecture is necessarily place-bound and time-specific. The best architecture is designed in consideration of the next larger scale (a chair in relation to a room; a building to a city). Likewise, a professional practice (constituted by artifactual works) is designed in response to the culture within which it operates.

Global change affects architectural professional practice. "Time-space compression" has an enormous influence on how practicing architects work and live: travel time increases; time horizons for completing work shorten; wage-labor on a project-by-project basis rises; huge projects create entire city sectors in little time (doubtless with negative impact on the quality of design); more projects have multiple architects; capital requirements for starting up architectural practices become significant due to computerization; the entry-level path into the field as a draftsman becomes less clear. Most profoundly, the process of building production is being revolutionized with computer-aided design and manufacturing. Potentially, this could eliminate intermediate production and communication processes and could place architects in more direct contact with fabricators and with the economies of projects. Frank Gehry has said, "This could

return architects to the position of master builders."⁸ These trends concur with changes afforded by information technologies, and architects should pursue them.

The modern world is now an interactive system that is strikingly new in order and intensity and that can no longer be understood in terms of existing models of center and periphery, push-pull, or consumption versus production. Phenomena of globalization will be traced here through their effects within three areas of activity: the economic, with emphasis on the financial sector; the political, in particular the nation-state; and the cultural, as through societies and cities. This summation, drawn from social sciences theory, relates the complexity of this worldwide system with dynamic disjunctures between economy, politics, and civil society. Finally, the implications for architecture will be examined, in an effort to situate it in relation to these conditions.

The Financial Sector : The Economic

The period following World War II was characterized in the US by an economic expansion with the capacity to provide growing income and opportunities in a momentum maintained from 1948 through 1972. The end of the postwar boom and the ensuing "relative decline" of the US (economically and culturally) has been a subject of concern and rhetoric all across the political spectrum. By the early 1970s, a complex of economic forces (including inflation, recession, the 1973 OPEC oil price increase and Arab embargo) ended this historical expansion and set in motion a whole set of processes that began the shift from what David Harvey calls "Fordism" to "flexible accumulation."⁹ This is characterized by flexibility with respect to labor markets, labor processes, consumption patterns, and products. It has entailed a new round in what he calls "time-space compression": the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while faster communications and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions over an ever wider and variegated space. These changes have had enormous significance for industry. Industry, traditionally tied by locational constraints to raw material sources or markets, has become much more footloose.

However, the most significant changes have been in the realm of finance. New financial systems put into place since 1972 changed the balance of forces at work in the international economy, giving much more autonomy to the banking and financial system relative to corporate, state, and personal financing. One result has been an efflorescence and transformation in financial markets. The boundaries between distinct functions like banking, brokerage, financial services, housing finance, and consumer credit have become porous. Computerization and electronic communications have stressed the significance of instantaneous international coordination of financial flows. "Banking is rapidly becoming indifferent to the constraints of time, place and currency."⁴ This proliferation has been particularly associated with the

growth of paper entrepreneurialism, including the highly publicized merger and takeover mania of the 1980s. McKinsey and Company estimated in the early 1990s that of the \$800 billion traded every day in the world's currency markets, only \$20 to \$25 billion was exchanged in goods and services.

The explosion in new financial instruments and markets, coupled with the rise of highly sophisticated systems of financial coordination on a planetary scale, provides a financial system through which much of the geographical and temporal flexibility of liquid assets has been achieved. Capital has an enhanced capacity to switch flows around; though its movement is material, it is oblivious to the constraints of time and space that normally pin down material activities. In the US, this occurred with the deregulation of a financial system that had been circumscribed since the reforms of the 1930s. The formation of a world stock and commodity futures markets, currency and interest rate swaps, together with the accelerated geographical mobility of funds, meant, for the first time, the formation of a single world-wide market for money and credit supply. Effectively, there has been a complete reorganization of the international financial system and the emergence of greatly enhanced powers of financial coordination. The effect on the structure of the financial sector has been a dual movement: at one extreme is the coalescence of financial conglomerates of extraordinary far-reaching power; at the other is a rapid proliferation and decentralization of financial activities and flows through the creation of entirely new financial instruments and markets.

This movement in a dual direction, concentrating and extending at either end of the spectrum, constitutes the polarizing effects of globalization. It is a double movement across a spectrum, with effects proliferating at the opposite ends. These two movements are not independent of each other; they are intrinsically cross-connected. Though they are opposite in direction, each brings the potential for the other into being. This displacement from a distribution across a range to a ramified concentration at either end is echoed in many of the changes already wrought by these emerging forces (by now over twenty years in the making).

The Nation-State : The Political

National economies, greatly affected by these transformations, are without instrumental means for directly regulating international financial flows. This is partly because multinational corporations fragment production processes across national territories. Also, the major economies are now dependent on patterns of world trade. Thirdly, internationalized banking forms, which had been based in national currencies prior to the 1970s, are now essentially privatized and outside the control of either national governments or international regulatory bodies.

The increasing powers of coordination lodged within the world's financial system have therefore emerged to some

degree at the expense of the power of the nation state to control money flow and, hence, its own fiscal and monetary policy. "America is not doing very well, but its corporations are doing just fine."⁵ The breakdown, in 1971, of the Bretton Woods agreement to fix the price of gold and the convertibility of the dollar was acknowledgment that the United States lost the power to control international fiscal and monetary policy single-handedly.

These changes have registered in the domestic sphere. In the early 1970s in the US, the financial sector was subordinate to Congress and the White House, and the total of financial trades conducted by American firms or on American exchanges over an entire year was less than the gross national product. By the 1990s, however, the financial sector had swollen to an annual volume of trading thirty or forty times greater than the real economy (although the latter is where ordinary Americans earn their livelihoods).

The weakening of the nation state as an autonomous power has enormous bearing on politics and political discourse. If America's elected officeholders face shrinking control over the real economy, it is partly because they have so little hold over the financial economy, and because the latter is slowly overtaking the former. Though the nation-state does retain important powers to discipline labor and to intervene in financial flows and markets, it has nevertheless become more vulnerable to fiscal crisis and the discipline of international money.

The freedom of capital to move across political boundaries has contributed to the decline of the middle class and its distinctive culture, in which a sense of historical continuity and of place were prominent features. This is an important example in the social sphere of the double-sided polarizing movement of globalization. In assessing the status of the middle classes, Christopher Lasch concludes that the ills of democracy in the US today arise from economic elites abdicating responsibility for the communities that business exists to serve. "The trouble is, Corporate America is surviving at the expense of Household America."⁶ With the decline of centralized industry and unions, the middle class has seen rising debt, falling incomes, and unrelenting job insecurity. This weakening of the middle class (in which education is an ever-more determining factor) sets the stage for the emergence of an increasingly segregated "underclass" and the already too-familiar worry that, for the first time in American history, children will not live as well as their parents. In parallel, the old social-democratic remedies have proved themselves no longer workable because the interests of various parts of the traditional social-democratic constituency had begun to diverge. Regressive social and political phenomena have resulted: the emergence of identity groups, each with its own brand of exclusiveness, and the rise of xenophobia and tribalism. At the same time, the ideology of the free market, which sees the state as the enemy, has come back in apparent triumph.

This resonates with the recent Republican ascendancy and the public's current anger with government. The wide-

spread desire within the electorate to cut taxes and federal spending stems from this larger transformation in the economy, one that may be beyond the power of the government to affect. Anger at the government stems in large part from the declining living standards and stagnant incomes of the middle class, which have little to do with federal policy and much to do with the emergence of the world-wide financial economy. No amount of cutting taxes or eliminating programs on the part of the government could possibly counter this shift, which has taken place in the disjunct sphere of global economics. Many argue that the only lever for state operations is to increase government investment in and incentives for such things as education, infrastructure, research and development, aimed at the long-term increase in national productivity and with it national incomes and standards of living.

Cities and Societies : The Cultural

Global phenomena have affected the spatial structuring of civil and urban society in multiple dimensions. Decentralizing sociocultural processes have transformed the dominant organizational patterns of advanced Western societies from *above*. Major socio-cultural changes are marked by: the decline in population in the cities and the extensive process of "counter-urbanization"; the spatial dispersion of employment; the reduced significance of "regions" as organizational entities; and the declining significance of the "city" for oppositional activity. At the same time, other forces have operated from *below*: the decline of mass organizations; the increased emphasis upon the "local," from ideological sects to market niches; and the transgression of fixed boundaries by new cultural forms, such as ethnic diasporas and population migrations. The pressure of these forces from above and below retraces the polarizing motion of globalization, concentrating and extending activity at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. Additionally, the growth in the size and effectiveness of the service sector has transformed such societies from *within*, as in the emergence of the service classes. The service class has realized considerable power, which has emphasized a stratification system based upon individual "achievement," the emergence of "service class" issues in politics, nontraditional professionalization strategies, and new cross-cutting forms of social division and cultural conflict.

The contrast between capital and civil society becomes more heightened as money becomes more boundless and yet labor remains local. Wage-labor is necessarily spatially located, constrained by proximity, and attached to a specific "place"; by contrast, money is progressively characterized by the principle of "spatial indifference." Localities are relatively unstructured by relations of production and much more subject to determination and change effected through civil society. The important linkages within the city today are those which pass through the household, through civil society, not through local private or public enterprises. There

are profound discontinuities between contemporary hypermobility of certain forms of money and existing social practices within civil society. The latter revolve around and presuppose individual people residing within a particular spatial location (street, town, countryside, region, nation) at a given period of time. As Melvin Webber says:

The physical place becomes an extension of one's ego. The outer world of neighborhood-based peer groups, neighborhood-based family, and the physical neighborhood place itself seems to become internalized in inseparable aspects of one's inner perception of self. . . . One's conception of himself [sic] and of his place in society is thus subtly merged with his conception of the spatially limited territory of limited social interaction.

Cities and their neighborhoods are often cited as public institutions in which differences can be transcended, or offset, in an everyday discourse that city dwellers have in common. Emerson held that conversation is the city's *raison d'être*. This can hardly be more apposite at a time when life in the cities is being abandoned for self-segregation in outlying areas. Likewise, the notion of architecture as the embodiment of a shared public culture has come under increasing scrutiny. Contemporary culture, operating through a combination of often figural, anti-auratic, electronic and spectacular symbols, has had the effect of disintegrating older modes of individual and collective identity. The central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus to proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular. The great traditional questions of causality, contingency and prediction in the human sciences need to be asked in a way that relies on images of flow and uncertainty, rather than on older images of order, stability and system.

Without doubt, the "place" of architecture as an artifact embedded in social, economic, and cultural conditions is problematized by the disjunctions across these conditions.

ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

The dual motion of globalization provides a structure for locating problems and possibilities for architecture as a discipline. The dissociation from history and "problems of meaning" resulting from globalization poses a dilemma for architecture, as does the creation of a new space, which, though it is social, is an abstract space, beyond tangibility. These dilemmas make it difficult to situate the profession's historical dedication to place-making. Architecture is necessarily place-based; however, today this may or may not matter.

Design tasks and intellectual possibilities open up with these problematics. Opportunities and problems arise at both ends of the spectrum. The world of telematics is not displacing the world of physicality; rather it reciprocates through

dual motion, connecting quite directly and placing unprecedented pressure on particular physical locations. Local places are transformed as global capital extends its reach to them. The opportunity for architects is to ascertain what "local" means now, not turning away from higher-level developments but directly facing them at the opposite pole. Architecture so conceived is in a double location, which, ironically, may or may not be a location at all.

In economic analysis, architecture is cast in a chain of double roles. The architect provides "services," in the tradition of the professions. Architectural services result in durable goods—real estate. This combination of service-making and goods-making is one double role for architecture. Such goods may be seen as a commodity, in that real estate can be bought and sold; however, they are also crucial for the necessary investments in "human capital," and so are productivity-enhancing tools. In this double role, architecture comprises consumption and production capacity at the same time. Design may therefore be an expense, but it is also an investment. Design can be seen to create value (and have costs) that have not been part of the standard equations. In economic terminology, architecture is services *and* goods, consumption *and* production, expense *and* investment.

"Post modern" culture has been theorized from various disciplines (Harvey, in geography; Frederic Jameson, in literary criticism; many others) all deeply concerned with architecture. I speculate that this is attributable to the double roles architecture plays in multiple dimensions. Architecture has an uncanny ability to be and do and allow more than one thing in the same place at the same time. Criticism of design projects discerns "double readings." Buildings can have "double programs," overlapping spaces or activities. This capacity in architecture for "physics and metaphysics" has been recognized by many architects (for example, Aldo van Eyck's "twin phenomena"). Now, architects and urban designers need also to have a double agenda in a global world; where place is denied, place must be made.

The politics of implementing an agenda in architecture are ever more complex in a global world. The rigor of three-dimensional thinking can be turned into a useful marketing commodity by being appropriated as a tectonic image. Kenneth Frampton in the early 1980's identified architectural practices based on regionalism or specific places as a possible architecture of resistance; in the polarizing movement connecting one extreme to its (only apparently) inverse, such architecture is now subject to nostalgic utilization. Even in relation to the social construct of time, the politics of establishing and maintaining a position of integrity are intensely complicated: academics and other professionals are perpetually sentenced (it seems) to "retarded time," preserving and maintaining positions against the changes that time brings. This may be a necessary part of a mission to avoid "explosive" and "erratic" times, and so restore to us some sense of "lasting" time (a world also populated by ecologists and theologians). Against this rear-guard stance it is easy to theorize a position that propagates

a relativist outlook that recognizes no limits on individual self-realization (thereby ironically contribute to the undermining of common cultural standards) or a skeptical outlook that yields to consumerist demands.

This leads to the double identity of architecture as a social construct. Because building requires enormous resources, architecture is usually undertaken for the "status quo," those with money and power. Because architecture is a physical support for human activities, it operates in conditions of change inherent to society, which is everywhere always dynamic. Following the logic of the double project, this would suggest that architects also understand that there is a double temporal project associated with the double spatial project brought about by globalization.

To conclude with observations made at the start: the history of social change is in part captured by the history of conceptions of space and time, and their ideological uses. Therefore, any project to transform society must grasp the complex nexus of the transformation of spatial and temporal conceptions and practices. It should be noted that, historically, breakthrough-level transformations in finance and technology are brutal for several generations before they are benevolent. They erode the living standards of ordinary folk and destabilize governments unable to interpret the complex

new political and economic universe. The great bulk of the profits invariably goes to a small elite able to harness and ride the new techniques, technologies, and opportunities. Nevertheless, if architects and urban designers understand the complexities of the situation, they can take on the double project of working on the situation (to change it) as they work within it. As participants in the global world, we all have a stake in what happens everywhere else. As architects in an increasingly placeless world, we may find that architecture becomes, paradoxically, more important.

NOTES

¹ Described by Manuel Castells as "simultaneous social practices carried out in non-contiguous space" in a symposium on "Global Economics and Architectural Practices" at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, 1994.

² Manuel Castells, *ibid.*

³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Cambridge and Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1993.

⁴ *Financial Times*, 8 May 1987.

⁵ Floyd Norris, "Market Watch" column, *New York Times*, 1992.

⁶ *Business Week*.

⁷ Melvin Webber, 1964, *Explorations into Urban Structure*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964.

⁸ In conversation with the author.