

# TEMPORARY CONTRACTS: THE ECONOMY OF THE POST-INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE

ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Corporate America has become increasingly ruled by the concept of the temporary contract. It comes into play in terms of the planned obsolescence of goods, the diversification of holdings and dismantling of the spoils from mergers and acquisitions, and in a similar vein, the treatment of employees and built facilities alike as disposable assets. These practices, sometimes referred to as Flexible Accumulation, have come to dominate what is commonly known as the post-industrial economy. In conjunction with post-industrial technologies—computers and telecommunications, the post-industrial economy has produced a series of distinct post-industrial landscapes. This paper looks more closely at these practices and the resulting landscapes of short-term profits and low commitments. While my research has focused on the development of post-industrialism in the United States, its inherently global nature is reproducing similar patterns in developing and developed economies throughout the world.

Evidence of the temporary contract's ubiquity in post-industrial society surrounds us. In the US the divorce rate hovers at over 50%. One out of five households moves every year. Countless large corporations have sold or moved out of their signature downtown headquarters skyscrapers. Malls built in the 1970s are in more need of either a face lift or retirement than many commercial buildings built 50 or 100 years earlier. Leasing, whether of automobiles or real estate, has gained significant market share from owning. The largest single employer in the country is Manpower Inc., a temporary employment agency. The percentage of workers belonging to unions is lower now than it was in the 1930s before membership was legalized. Nearly three quarters of all households have had a close encounter with layoffs since 1980.<sup>1</sup> And, while much is made of the 8.5 million new jobs created during the Clinton administration, the cynical response is often, "yeah, and I hold two of them."<sup>2</sup> One third of all US employment and one half of UK employment is non full-time and the percentages continue to rise as does the use of subcontracting as a means of avoiding long-term commitments and paying benefits.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is no wonder that so many school age children are now being medicated to treat Attention Deficit Disorder—the inability to concentrate for more than a short span of time. The environment in which they are growing up is one increasingly dominated by short-term transactions. The social contracts of their grandparents have been ruptured. Marriage vows, the family homestead, corporate stability, and job security have faded from prominence in the ever-evolving, non-stop world of GATT and NAFTA, cyberspace, freeways, and 24-hour convenience marts—all manifestations in one way or another of post-industrialism.

In the scope of this paper I will define post-industrial-

ism as the convergence of the "Information Age" and the "Service Economy." The collapse of business as usual for American corporations in the 1970s due to increasing competition from the recovered economies of Japan and Germany, the steady saturation of demand, and stagflation resulted in a shift from strategies of high volume mass production (Fordism) to high quality consumer responsive flexible production (Post-Fordism.<sup>4</sup>) Speed of innovation and changeable product lines became key strategies of inducing demand but required retooled and increasingly computerized equipment and coordination. This occurred simultaneously with the development and mass production of computers and telecommunication networks—the post-industrial technologies. The availability of digital technologies and the need to better coordinate supply and demand, (after the overproduction and recessions of the '70s) led to a new corporate reliance on information about markets and inventories. New jobs opened up in information services such as market research, advertising, or financial services while telecommunications networks allowed corporations to shift manufacturing jobs to cheaper labor pools overseas or in the suburbs, or to replace them altogether through automation. While manufacturing is still an important function of the post-industrial economy, its dominance has been eclipsed by the production of images and information. A new set of values has accompanied this expansion of instantaneous communication, dematerialized media and disposable products. Speed, mobility, and malleability have not only become the mantras of corporate survival, (witness the reverence for downsizing and re-engineering,) they have emerged as central attributes of cultural production. David Harvey's seminal book, *The Condition of Postmodernity*<sup>5</sup> argued that the transition from the rigidities of Fordism to more flexible modes of capital accumulation combined with what he called the experience of 'time-space compression' (courtesy of telecommunications, mass media, jet travel, etc.) led to the rise of postmodernist cultural forms—an aesthetic of the fictional, the spectacular, the ephemeral, and the hybrid. Harvey equates postmodernism's aesthetic of speed, mobility and malleability with the post-industrial economy. Beyond the stylistic expression of instantaneity, I am interested in examining how these economic conditions and practices have led to an equally ephemeral and compressed occupation of the low-commitment, leased and 25-year amortized landscape.

Today the post-industrial economy is characterized by four inter-related characteristics each of which contributes to the growth in temporary contracts in its own way: reliance on telecommunications and information processing; more jobs in services than in manufacturing; globally integrated markets for both production and consumption; and the mobility of capital.

All of these have combined to generally decentralize development. While the industrial economy's basis in assembly-line mass production promoted centralization and city building, the post-industrial economy's ability to substitute electronic access for physical access has allowed for the migration of traditionally urban functions from the core to the periphery.

The interaction of post-industrial globalization and decentralization has resulted in transformed landscapes in three principal arenas: Export Processing Zones or other more informal global production sites, downtown financial centers and exurban Edge Cities.

As reflections of mobile capital, the maquiladoras in Mexico, the Export Processing Zones of Indonesia, and the Toyota and Honda plants in the midwest reveal a distinctly post-industrial landscape where production has not simply moved out of central cities, but in many cases has moved offshore. Set up to gain access to international markets as well as for the most part to cheaper, non-unionized labor, more efficient or automated equipment, cheaper rents, and cheaper shipping by truck or container ship than rail, these sites reflect the post-industrial corporations' locational flexibility. As opposed to Fordist industry's need to consolidate labor, resources, and markets, today's Post-Fordist industry tends to produce in smaller batches, often assembling parts produced from all over the globe, so as to re-sell the finished product back to the various global markets. On the one hand, this global redistribution of industrial production would seem to equalize development opportunities. However, while Henry Ford recognized that gains in productivity had to be matched by gains in consumption, and set the pattern of relatively high union wages today's multinational corporations view the market more globally and more competitively. Rather than attempting to raise wages in offshore production sites so as to boost local consumption, the ability to produce goods in one part of the world for consumption in another part of the world has led to patterns of increasing the unevenness of development. Multinational corporations operating in Export Processing Zones find it more profitable to threaten to leave than raise wages and deal with unions. In part they are able to make such threats precisely because they have distributed production around the globe. This flexibility relative to any one particular site is further increased by relying more on just-in-time deliveries, outsourcing, and subcontracting. Services are even more mobile than production. New York Life Insurance Company's processing operations are in Ireland. A developer in the UK proposed closed-circuit TV camera monitoring of shopping malls and office complexes in real-time by low-cost labor in Africa.<sup>6</sup> Exemplifying the contingency of corporate commitment to place, Timex Watches and Seabox, Inc. collaborated in 1992 on a design for a mobile assembly plant built of standard steel shipping containers rubber gasketed together and bolted to sonotube footings. With minimal disruption to production, the containers are able to be disconnected from each other and the earth, loaded onto trucks, freight trains, or ships and re-deployed. Of course, because capital is mobile, but communities are not, the disruption to the affected communities is tremendous. The "rustbelt" landscape of closed steel mills, abandoned urban warehouses, and the jobless poverty left in their wake further define the picture of the post-industrial landscape.

In New York City alone, 429,200 manufacturing jobs were lost between 1967-1987. However, the same time period saw a gain of 302,296 taxable service jobs.<sup>7</sup> White collar services

constituted between 20-40% of central city economies in 1970, but as much as 40-60% of the same economies in 1990.<sup>8</sup> The growth in services reflects the overall transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, especially in the many downtown financial centers peppered with signature headquarters buildings in the 1980s. Saskia Sassen argues that all of the decentralized development of the 1970s and 1980s has only been possible through the simultaneous consolidation of financial and legal services in select centers.<sup>9</sup> These so-called producer services (accounting, marketing, advertising, public relations, banking, insurance, real estate and law) have largely remained in the deal-making downtowns where face-to-face handshakes in the club-like, corporate boardrooms of power and the proximity to courts and government agencies have continued to assume value due to their centralized location. However, in the post-'87 more competitive '90s, stockholders are pressuring CEOs to reduce real estate expenses (typically totaling 25% of the corporate balance sheet) either by leaving prestigious addresses or by reducing from approximately 265 square feet per employee to 200 square feet.<sup>10</sup> While the CBD high-rises of producer services are a significant aspect of the post-industrial landscape it is important to remember that their benefits have been quite limited. The higher educational skills required in producer services than those required for many manufacturing jobs have left many urban poor unemployed.<sup>11</sup> And, not all central cities have managed to attract this kind of growth. About half of the 25 largest metropolitan areas in the US lost or showed no growth in population and employment between 1970 and 1990, largely because they were unable to affect the transition from manufacturing to services.<sup>12</sup> The cities with the most peripheral exurban growth have been those most in need of producer services sponsoring twin booms in the high-rise downtowns and the lowrise periphery.

It is the lowrise exurban landscape of suburban sport utility vehicles, big floor plate low-rise office buildings, and big box retail which is where the post-industrial economy has been most active. Over the past twenty-twenty-five years, the industrial economy's model of jobs in downtown skyscrapers or inner ring factories surrounded by bedroom suburbs has been dramatically transformed. Manufacturing, especially light manufacturing, wholesaling, large-scale retail, commercial back-office space, as well as headquarters campuses have flooded the suburban and exurban peripheries. The following are merely a few statistics which illustrate the degree of change. Whereas 25% of all office stock in 1970 was in the suburbs, that figure climbed to 57% by 1993.<sup>13</sup> By 1988 over 70% of the commercial office space of the cities of Detroit, Dallas and Atlanta, lay outside the CBD.<sup>14</sup> While employment in the CBD of most central cities grew during the 1980s at about 1% annually, the suburbs grew at about 3.4%.<sup>15</sup> While central cities housed approximately 42% of corporate headquarters in 1984, by the early 1990s this number was down to 29%, due to relocations to the suburbs.<sup>16</sup> Since the 1970s the majority of Americans in metropolitan areas have lived in the suburbs. Between 1980 and 1990, the rate of population growth in the suburbs more than doubled the central cities pace. And between 1977 and 1987, two-thirds of new employment growth in America's 60 largest metropolitan areas was located in the suburbs. Over the same period, the suburbs captured 120% of the net job growth in manufacturing, while central cities suffered absolute losses in manufacturing employment.<sup>17</sup> By 1989, it was estimated that three million acres of

farmland were being converted to other uses every year.<sup>18</sup> In 1992, it was estimated that at least five and a half square miles of rural land were being converted each day to urban, suburban or other uses.<sup>19</sup>

Ubiquitous and yet anonymous, seemingly without design, pockets of strip malls, office parks, and gated condominium developments have erupted, sclerosis-like, along the increasingly clogged multi-lane arteries of late 20th century suburban-rural fringes. Alternately referred to as beltway boomtowns, exurbs, post-suburban development, or Edge Cities, these asphalt spreads of isolated office pods with the occasional upscale sylvan office campus, interspersed with commercial franchises and townhouse clusters, typically locate at suburban spoke-and-hub highway intersections next to regional shopping malls.<sup>20</sup> While suburbs initially used zoning to permit only residential uses, the replacement of manufacturing jobs by "clean" clerical jobs at computer terminals, or the relatively cleaner jobs of light manufacturing have opened the suburbs to the workplace. The infinite stretch of the computer umbilical cord and the information basis of much of the service economy, allowed this satelliting of operations that no longer required an expensive downtown address. It was assisted by the interstate beltway system. Initially constructed to allow through traffic to bypass major cities, it turned out to also provide easy access to cheap, minimally administered land and had the double advantage of being in proximity to a particularly docile, non-unionized, educated labor force: suburban housewives and single women. Industrial and office parks, wholesaling, and distribution centers have sprung up in locations with easy access to the interstates and airports. As the direct result of mobile capital and corporate strategies of Flexible Accumulation (attention to producing short-term profits through diversification and distribution of production)—aided and abetted by digital technology, Edge Cities provide us with the most telling example yet of the attributes of the post-industrial landscape. Cities only in scale, they have little sense of community (few churches, bowling leagues, Rotary or Kiwanis Clubs, etc.) few public services and almost no public space. Built completely around the highly publicly subsidized highway infrastructure, public transit, even sidewalks are generally non-existent in Edge Cities. This is a landscape of low-density mixed uses, isolated on asphalt islands clipped to the main multi-lane arterials. It is designed to be zipped through within the hermetic containment of the private car. Though notorious for traffic jams, it is meant to celebrate the convenience of instantaneous consumption married to mobility. It is neither concerned with nor apologetic for its future, the future of an aging population, or the future of fossil fuels on which it is currently so dependent.

Other than the highway exits, the most notable landmarks in Edge Cities are the regional malls. Declining urban populations in the '70s prompted large-scale retail to also move to the booming suburbs. Feverish construction through the '80s, including inserting suburban-style malls into urban downtowns, resulted in nearly 4.6 billion square feet of total store space in the US by the 1990s, about twenty square feet for every person in the country and the addition of a major 34,000 square foot store every hour.<sup>21</sup> While population grew 10% in the '80s, retail floor space grew 80%.<sup>22</sup> However, the *Emerging Trends in Real Estate* 1996 report produced by Equitable, one of the leading real estate investment firms in the country, warns that at least 15% of the regional malls operating at the beginning of the

decade will be out of business within the next five years.<sup>23</sup> Already in 1992 3,800 dead malls were estimated to have littered the landscape.<sup>24</sup> Not only is demand saturated, but in the ever-spectacular nineties a twenty-year old mall is considered obsolete. They are either abandoned, renovated with glitzier materials, "more entertaining" public areas and more anchor stores, or they are demelled: stripped of their enclosed passages and common areas and reconfigured as power centers for big-box discounters who aren't interested in paying for shared spaces other than the parking lot.<sup>25</sup> As the closest thing to public spaces that most Edge Cities have, this trend to eliminate even the quasi-urbane common space, as well as the short life expectancy of the malls further emphasizes the temporal and commodified space of the market. Rather than the market serving as a place of gathering, a communal space of interaction for the otherwise diverse residents, the power centers are designed to maximize quick, cheap transactions. Mobility as the American Dream has resulted in a landscape of vacuous temporary contracts.

Wal-Mart, the most successful deep discount department store is also perhaps the most insidious at undercutting communal development. Initially locating in underserved rural areas while cutting out distributors and tying inventory directly to computer-controlled manufacturing, and limiting advertising, Wal-Mart aggressively undercut prices and expanded their market share. In 1995 they owned 2,133 Wal-Mart discount stores, 438 Sam's Club's, 75 deepest-discount Bud's, and 143 much larger and faster-spreading Supercenters.<sup>26</sup> Kenneth E. Stone, a professor of economics at Iowa State University estimates that

*Small towns (pop. 500-5,000) located near a Wal-Mart store tend to suffer economically. Within five years of a Wal-Mart's opening, mall towns within a 20-mile radius of the store suffered cumulative net sales reductions of 19.2 percent. Small towns much further away, (but still within driving distance) suffered sales reductions of 10.1 percent.*<sup>27</sup>

This severe negative impact on existing retail stores, many of them smaller Main St. Mom & Pops has earned Wal-Mart a reputation for killing small downtowns. Their locational strategy further constricts the noose on local businesses necks. Taking aim on a new regional market, they often simultaneously open stores of 90,000 square feet and up within 40 or 50 miles of one another, (they have 230 stores in Texas alone and account for approximately 30% of all retail sales in the state of Arkansas.<sup>28</sup>) They typically buy the land as quietly as possible, then sell it and lease the building once construction is complete. While leasing is very common in retail, Wal-Mart uses it as a strategy for pulling out of a market once it has drained the local economy and begun to compete with its own neighboring Wal-Marts. Despite continued profitability, Nowata and Pawhuska, Oklahoma's Wal-Marts closed last year in what Wal-Mart considers a consolidation of the two into a multi-acre supercenter in Bartlesville, thirty miles from each. The devastation to Nowata's tax revenues left their 1995's \$1.2 million municipal budget some \$80,000 in the red. Often, Wal-Mart will continue to hold the lease on the vacant store simply to keep competition out. In Nowata, they installed a Bud's, a motley assortment of remainders and irregulars. In the words of the former "greeter" at the Nowata Wal-Mart, "Bud's ain't got nothing. Wal-Mart had everything."<sup>29</sup> Its Main Street businesses closed, its tax base

ruined, the residents of Nowata and other similar towns gasping in the wake of Wal-Mart, find the city cutting services and themselves driving to the big impersonal supercenter for basic goods. In certain respects, though a small town, Nowata's residents are increasingly forced to behave as if they live in an Edge City. Wal-Mart's merchandise has not only homogenized consumption patterns throughout the country, it is homogenizing our experience of the landscape.

Wal-Mart's treatment of its stores and employees as disposable assets, easily sacrificed to consolidations and mergers, exemplifies corporate strategies of flexible accumulation. However, these are far from limited to retail operations. Dayton, Ohio's experience of AT&T's hostile takeover of National Cash Register and subsequent re-engineering and layoffs is not that different from Nowata's.<sup>30</sup> Downsizing and corporate relocations are commonplace. Sears sold the Sears Tower in Chicago, eliminated 50,000 jobs (not all from the headquarters) and after threats to move to Texas, relocated its headquarters to a 1.9 million-square-foot campus in Hoffman Estates, a low-density Edge City evolving 30 miles south of the city once the state and local municipality agreed to supply the land and a dedicated exit from the toll road. AT&T also sold its signature Philip Johnson-designed Manhattan high-rise to Sony and moved to horse country in New Jersey. "Golden Boy," the art deco statue from its original Manhattan location, now stands in a semi-rural field. IBM in San Jose, Bank of America in San Francisco are all similar stories.<sup>31</sup> Robert B. Reich, current Secretary of Labor, wrote in 1992,

*Speed and agility are so important to the high-value enterprise that it cannot be weighed down with large overhead costs like office buildings, plan, equipment, and payroll. It must be able to switch directions quickly, pursue options when they arise, discover new linkages between problems and solutions wherever they may lie.*<sup>32</sup>

This cutting of overhead is augmented by the increasing pressure on corporations to respond to stockholders demands for profitability rather than re-investment (in workers, facilities, equipment, and research) especially in the face of recessionary revenues. When Sears announced it was discarding 50,000 jobs its stock climbed 5%, earning especially handsome dividends for the Board of Directors making the decision. John T. Preston, Director of Technology Development at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Technology Licensing Office writes:

*Much of the blame for the short-term corporate attitudes in the US may rest with our investment behavior. There have been huge shifts over the last fifty years in the buying and selling of stocks in the US. Today the net effect is that stocks are churned at a much higher rate. Money that could go into supplying growth of US industry is being speculated on instruments like 'derivatives' and 'shorts' that fail to provide a sense of ownership... There is a basic difference between the behavior of a company that has 'owners' and a company that has 'speculators.' Owners want to build fundamental strengths while speculators want to make the short-term price go up. Short-term stock prices are driven more by profit than any other factor. Thus axing long-term investment (like research and development) is the best way to drive up short term performance. Unfortunately, such*

*behavior kills the long-term fundamentals of the company. Owners invest to generate wealth, while speculators invest to shift wealth.*<sup>33</sup>

This low-commitment attitude is everywhere in the post-industrial landscape. When Crown American recently announced a 43% dividend reduction to fund mall redevelopment, the stock price immediately dropped nearly 30%.<sup>34</sup> Investment in renovation and restoration of existing facilities, like investment in research and development, though necessary for long-term viability, is a drain on short-term profits. To investors, "life cycles are squeezing down, a 30-year old building is getting old."<sup>35</sup> So instead of reinvesting in permanent settlements, we are leapfrogging each exurban ring of development in search of cheaper land further from the presumed ills of the city on which to make yet another temporary, 30-year maximum investment.

The rate at which the post-industrial economy promotes sprawl is staggering. Christopher Leinberger, a real estate analyst who has watched edge city development closely for the past decade recently noted that there is already a third tier of leap-frogging occurring to even cheaper land (warehouses are now 40-70 miles outside of city centers) and building out to even lower densities (semi-rural). The result is that while Chicago's population grew 4% between 1970-1990 its size grew 45%. Los Angeles is even more extreme. Its population grew 45% in that time period while its size grew 300%. Los Angeles is now the size of Connecticut.<sup>36</sup>

In an essay written in the 1960s Hannah Arendt distinguished between objects of culture and objects of consumption in terms of their capacity to endure versus be used up.<sup>37</sup> As she did then, she would no doubt argue today that despite our efforts to mask our production as enduring contributions to culture (multiple as we might now define culture to be), architecture in the post-industrial landscape has become commodified, designed to be consumed, and therefore inherently of only temporary value. The typical market-driven strip architecture of Butler buildings, dryvit condos, veneer office buildings, and franchise prototypes clearly serves to satisfy instant gratification rather than intergenerational responsibility. But even our ambitious (academic) attempts to produce a critical architecture have difficulty resisting succumbing to the dictates of short-term fashion. Both types of architecture tend to be consumed. Yet, though the economic and cultural commitment to the post-industrial landscape is only temporary, the environmental and social consequences of this kind of sprawl are not. As we pave paradise and further distance jobs from cities, we reproduce urban poverty and exacerbate racial segregation and mistrust. We are building neither a sustainable landscape nor a sustainable culture. yet our profession seems to barely take notice. Our magazines celebrate individual stylistic successes while our academic journals debate critical theoretical issues of marginal relationship to building. I would argue that the more we as a profession continue to ignore the dominant, mainstream built landscape, the more we marginalize our effectiveness both in the economy and in the culture. We need to wrestle with the question of how might architecture—traditionally conceived of as an enduring cultural artifact—better respond to the demands of transience, the culture of the temporary contract?

## NOTES

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7. U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, *The Technological Reshaping of Metropolitan America*, OTA-ETI-643, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, September, 1995) p. 80-85.
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