# Postmodernism and planning

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**Abstract.** Postmodernism seems able to embrace any discourse on style, architecture, literature, with equal facility. Yet its erratic and chameleon-like form renders it susceptible to quick dismissal. In this essay, I attempt a tolerant assessment of the meaning of postmodernism as it applies to planning. The notions of postmodernism as style, as method, and as epoch are examined. The history of planning from 1945 to 1985 is deconstructed, and reveals the pastiche of 'postmodern planning'. A metalanguage for discourse on a reconstructed planning theory suggests three evaluative dimensions: function–context; commodification–noncommodification; and penetration–participation.

## 1 Introduction

"Unfortunately, 'postmodern' is a term *bon à tout faire*. I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user of the term happens to like. Further, there seems to be an attempt to make it increasingly retroactive: first it was apparently applied to certain writers or artists active in the last twenty years, then gradually it reached the beginning of the century, then still further back. And this reverse procedure continues; soon the postmodern category will include Homer."

Eco, *Postscript to the Name of the Rose* (1984, pages 65–66)

This essay is an exploration of discontinuities and contingencies. It is an attempt to place meaning about significant breaks in the evolution of discourse on planning, and about the social conditions surrounding such discourse[1]. My purpose is to "unravel an alien system of meaning", that is, to focus not on the familiar, but to pick at the discourse where it is most opaque (Darnton, 1985, pages 4–5). 'Postmodernism' represents one such point of entry. It seems to have generated intense interest in (for example) architecture, yet it has not yet percolated through to planning. Moreover, its precise import is exceedingly vague. As Jencks (1984, page 5) observes,

"Defining our world today as Post-Modern is rather like defining women as 'non-men'. It doesn't tell us very much, either flattering or predictive. All it says is what we have left—the Modern world, which is paradoxically doomed, like an obsolete futurist, to extinction."

The paradoxical popularity of something as ambiguous as postmodernism is the opaque puzzle assailed in this essay.

I seek to support four basic notions in this paper. First, that the resurgence of academic conservatism, the rebirth of interest in social theory, and the rise of postmodernism are not unrelated events. Instead they are part of a single trend in the

[1] Throughout this essay, the term 'planning' is intended to encompass such conventional distinctions as those between 'planning theory' and 'planning practice', and 'urban' and 'regional' planning. Where these conventional terms are utilized in the text, it is solely for the sake of emphasis.

redefinition of social theory (section 2). Second, that the term 'postmodernism' has three distinct meanings, which refer to a style, a method, and an epoch, respectively. Postmodern method is equated with the thrust toward deconstruction, while the epochal connotations of postmodernism attempt to locate the time–space coordinates of contemporary 'postmodern hyperspace' (section 3). Third, that it is useful to define a 'postmodern planning' for use as a hermeneutic device in deconstructing current planning theory (section 4). And, fourth, that the reconstruction of theory requires a 'metalanguage' which would allow comparative discourse on the many components of planning (section 5).

## 2 Social theory and the rise of postmodernism

Postmodernism has risen to prominence just at a time of peculiar ferment in the social sciences. This ferment has two distinct components: first, a concerted general attack on the legitimacy of social science; and second, a renaissance in the specific realm of social theory. In the social sciences in general, the pervasive atmosphere of economic crisis and cutback has unleashed a new conservatism in academia. This is hardly surprising: in some countries, tertiary education as a whole has been gutted; in others, the selective pruning of whole departments is not uncommon. The search for 'job-relevant' education has particularly afflicted the social sciences which traditionally have not streamed their graduates into direct career paths. The defensive posture subsequently adopted by many disciplines has had a contradictory impact. On the one hand, most disciplines have erected strong protectionist barriers to ward off outside attacks. This has usually been accompanied by a self-conscious attempt to recover the disciplinary center—to retrieve the traditional core from a past when each discipline was more secure. On the other hand, the protectionist forces causing convergence within disciplines are complemented by divergent forces which (paradoxically) emanate from the same philosophical conservatism. Just as some practitioners are seeking to protect the disciplinary center, self-doubt has propelled others to establish subdisciplinary 'special interest' groups, or to turn to related disciplines for recognition and approval. Under this divergent impetus, disciplinary cores threaten to evaporate just when tight defensive circles have been drawn around them.

In contrast to the social sciences in general, the specific realm of social theory has just passed through two decades of remarkable efflorescence, especially in neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian thought. Significant shifts have occurred (for example) in the theory of the state, and in the analysis of urban and regional development. At the same time, the teaching of social theory has gained a new prominence and intellectual respectability. This resurgence could be seen as yet one more skirmish in the war of intellectual fashions. Except for one thing: that many practitioners in several disciplines now perceive a common ground for discourse. *Their core concern is with the structure and evolution of society over time and space.* This 'movement' may have special prominence in human geography and history, the two disciplines with special claims to space and time. But it is also strongly rooted in sociology, some other social sciences, and to a lesser extent in the humanities and some natural sciences.

The search for a common ground in social theory is, I believe, the single most important trend in contemporary social science. It is not a coincidence that the revitalized social theory is surfacing at the same time as postmodernism. But will the glitter of postmodern chic outshine the repolished social theory? Or will both movements be sunk without trace by a resurgent conservatism?

## 3 The meanings of postmodernism

"The 'Post-Modern' is neither a canon of writers nor a body of criticism, though it is often applied to literature of, roughly, the last twenty years. The very term signifies a simultaneous continuity and renunciation, a generation strong enough to dissolve the old order, but too weak to marshal the centrifugal forces it has released. This new literature founders in its own hard won heterogeneity, and tends to lose the sense of itself as a human institution. My account is accordingly a survey of attitudes and tendencies, gestures and drifts, alibis and advertisements, cliches and obfuscations, which comprise an institution without a theory."

Newman, *The Post-modern Aura* (1985, page 1)

Clarifying postmodernism is a task made even more difficult by the ambiguity implicit in the term 'modernism'. Berman argues that it is difficult to define when the 'modern' period began, and that those who are waiting for the end of the modern age "can be assured of steady work" (1982, page 347). Our modern roots, he claims, go back two hundred years. The 20th century maelstrom of 'modernization' has released a variety of visions which enable the prescient to grasp and change contemporary culture. These changing visions and values can be grouped together under the name of 'modernism'. Berman (1982, pages 15–24) observed that the burgeoning world modernism has, however, been shattered into a multitude of fragments with incommensurable private languages. Hence, we find ourselves in a modern world which has lost connection with the roots of its modernity. Twentieth-century writers and thinkers betray this in "a radical flattening of perspective and shrinkage of imaginative range" (Berman, 1982, page 24).

A particular vision of 'affirmative' modernism in the late 1960s gave rise to a series of mixed-media productions and performances which aimed to break down the boundaries of artistic specializations. The aim of these 'postmodernists' was to open up

"the immense variety and richness of things, materials and ideas that the modern world inexhaustibly brought forth. They breathed fresh air and playfulness into a cultural ambience which in the 1950s had become unbearably solemn, rigid and closed" (Berman, 1982, page 32).

These fervent attempts to be modernistic—to make oneself at home in the maelstrom through connecting the turbulent present with the past and future—largely failed. Hence, Berman claims, people no longer make the larger connection which modernity entails. Many intellectuals have retreated to structuralism, embraced the 'mystique' of postmodernism, or have split modernity again into its components.

If this account is accurate, then the opacity surrounding postmodernism is at least rendered explicable. As Eco (1984, pages 66–68) suggests, a moment arises when the 'modern' (any avant-garde) can go no further. The 'postmodern' response is to recognize that the past (since it cannot be destroyed, because its destruction would lead to silence) must be revisited. But it is revisited with irony, a self-consciousness, and not with innocence. Postmodernism demands, in order to be understood, not the negation of the past, but its ironic rethinking. [Berman (1982, page 14) quotes Kierkegaard to the effect that the deepest modern seriousness must express itself through irony.] Eco concludes that postmodernism should not then be regarded as a chronologically defined trend, but as an "ideal category"; every period must inevitably have its own postmodernism (Eco, 1984, page 66).

It is in Eco's sense that I wish to approach the question of planning and postmodernism. Let us grant that the modern world (conceptually and practically) is highly fragmented and awash in incommensurable private languages; contemporary discourse is progressively diminished in its perspective and imaginative range.

The 'postmodern' reaction is therefore an inevitable appraisal of our current modernism. The present is being ironically reinterpreted with the benefit of hindsight. Planning, in this essay, is being passed through the postmodern matrix.

The immense challenge posed by this task should not be underestimated. It invokes nothing less than a need for a 'metalanguage'—a language to discuss the language used in planning discourse. Many argue that such a metalanguage does not exist; Norris (1982, page 87) follows Foucault in suggesting that

"texts and interpretative strategies compete for domination in a field staked out by no single order of validating method".

However, Berman (1982, pages 34–35) points out the potentially stifling restraint imposed by this viewpoint: we should not comfortably concede the impossibility of connected discourse. In what follows, I am prepared to assume that such a metalanguage is possible, even though it cannot be fully constructed within the scope of this essay.

I begin my analysis by examining three distinct meanings in contemporary postmodernism: style, method, and epoch. Part of the confusion about the term postmodernism results from this multiple usage, and from the fact that some writers seem to imply all three meanings simultaneously. I examine postmodern style first simply because it is easiest, and not because it is chronologically first to appear in the present round of postmodernism.

### 3.1 *Postmodernism as style*

Most cities have, by now, been tainted or blessed by postmodern architecture. In Los Angeles, Portman's 1976 Bonaventure Hotel (figure 1) is the most-quoted example, but the tradition continues in Isozaki's just-completed Museum of Contemporary Art (figure 2). (Both buildings are part of the downtown Bunker Hill redevelopment.) The term postmodernism is used to mark an architectural departure from the modern style. No destination was specified for that departure, but this central ambiguity was part of the seductiveness of postmodernism. Some advocates of the postmodern no doubt had the intention of creating a new building style for popular consumption. But the postmodern architecture craze did not catch on because of its popular appeal. Instead, it has been hailed because it provides architects with the opportunity to comment on previous stylist genres, often caustically and with wit. Paradox and irony are everything in postmodern architecture (Jencks, 1984). Postmodernism thus became an internal dialogue for the initiated. Buildings assumed an iconography (or signification) directed both at previous architectural styles and at anticipated critics of the new building itself. The post-modern building has become a self-referential symbol and commentary. In many cities, traditional designs of every era, embellished with witty devices, have begun to appear; it seems to matter little that few people understand the points of reference in these devices.

Of course, advocates of postmodern architecture do not share this sceptical view. Jencks (1984), for example, takes the trend very seriously, placing much emphasis on the demands by public and client for a new building style.

"Post-Modern Architecture is doubly-coded, half-Modern and half-conventional, in its attempt to communicate with both the public and a concerned minority, usually architects" (1984, page 6).

Jencks recognizes that it is difficult to adopt a plural coding without degenerating into compromise and unintended pastiche. Indeed, his periodization of the post-modern architectural movement includes the following components: historicism, straight revivalism, neovernacular, ad hoc urbanism, metaphor and metaphysics, and postmodern space (1984, page 80). Several other themes are added to these (for example, radical eclecticism) as his book proceeds through successive editions.

**Figure 1.** Bonaventure Hotel, 1974–76 (architects John Portman & Associates): Figueroa and W. 5th Street. Best seen from the freeway; the vicinity of the hotel is not made for pedestrians. Often referred to as the archetype of early postmodernism in Los Angeles.
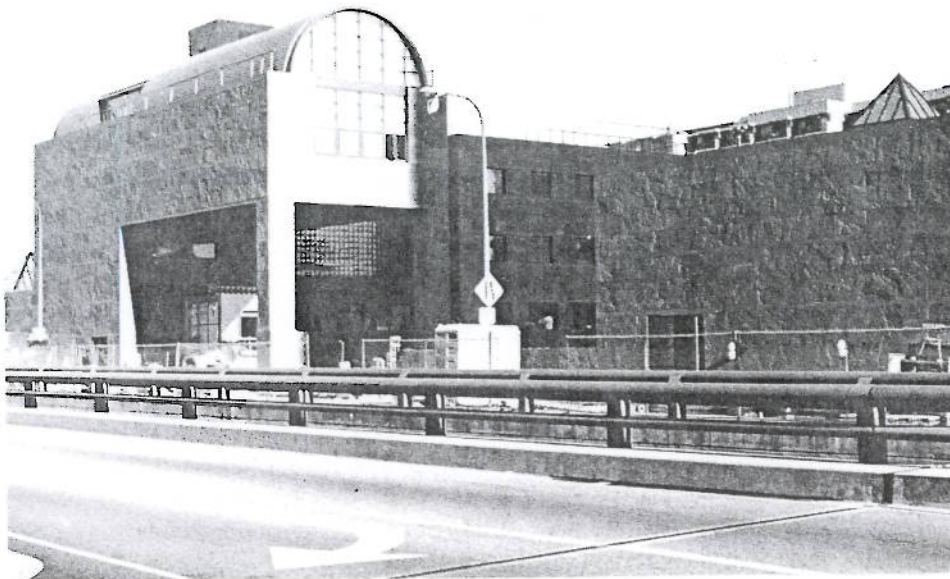


**Figure 2.** Museum of Contemporary Art (architect Arata Isozaki). Under construction. The latest in postmodern architecture, a few blocks from the Bonaventure Hotel.

Jencks (1984, page 88) argues that the way to avoid degenerate pastiche is through participatory design, in which clients subject the designer to "codes not necessarily his own in a way he can respect them".

To a critical but uninitiated outsider, postmodern architecture seems on occasion to be fun, sometimes clever, and even attractive. It has apparently rejuvenated a somewhat jaded, directionless profession. (Architecture has certainly not been immune from the economic and political vagaries discussed in the introduction to this essay.) However, beyond its origins as a stylistic device, postmodern architecture remains a singularly superficial philosophy. As it has done before in its history, architecture seems once again to have established a rhetorical code solely for the benefit of architects.

### 3.2 Postmodernism as method

The birth of the current postmodernism occurred in the mid-1960s in literary theory. The revolt against modernism sparked a proliferation of activity, including structuralism and the mystique of postmodernism (Berman, 1982, introduction). However, in the inevitable battle for intellectual prominence, one dimension of the revolt quickly occupied the foreground: deconstruction.

"Deconstruction is avowedly 'post-structuralist' in its refusal to accept the idea of structure as in any sense given or objectively 'there' in the text. Above all, it questions the assumption ... that structures of meaning correspond to some deep-laid mental 'set' or pattern of mind which determines the limits of intelligibility. ... Deconstruction, on the contrary, starts out by vigorously *suspending* this assumed correspondence between mind, meaning and the concept of method which claims to unite them" (Norris, 1982, page 3).

Deconstruction may be seen as a revolt against too rigid conventions of method and language. In literary analysis, critics such as Derrida and de Man have rejected the strict demarcation between literary language and critical discourse. They have argued that writing, "with its own dialectic of blindness and insight, precedes all the categories that conventional wisdom has tried to impose on it"— thus refusing the traditional priorities which govern the relation between critical and creative language (Norris, 1982, pages 21–23). This is, of course, the thrust behind Derrida's 'grammatology', or science of writing and textuality in general.

The infinitely hermeneutic world implied by deconstruction has caused a great deal of discomfort for many. For example, Graff (1979) has commented that the door has been opened to an unbounded scepticism which acknowledges merely the infinite possibilities of textual inscription. Derrida himself has emphasized the ludic, that is, playful, dimension of his writing, as well as its deliberately anarchic thrust (Norris, 1982). One of the biggest difficulties facing deconstructionists is the task of reconstruction. So much effort has been put into 'unpacking' the meaning of the text, and its relation to author and reader, that literary theory now seems in a state of total disarray—an "institution without a theory", in Newman's words. There are more than a few signs that the deconstructionist movement is being overtaken by literary showmanship and academic intrigue[2].

However one views deconstruction, it would be foolish to dismiss two of its essential objects: the essentially hermeneutic nature of discourse; and the importance of the text. It seems to me that postmodern architecture, for example, has derived a major impetus through an analogous deconstruction of the language or text of architectural style. The architectural device which decomposes various elements of building style into its component parts, then ironically reassembles a new whole,

[2]See, for instance, the hilarious exchange of letters which followed a recent *New York Times Magazine* article entitled "The tyranny of the Yale critics" (1986).

finds a ready analog in the practice of deconstruction. Moreover, I believe that the centrifugal forces implicit in a deconstructionist criticism are analogous to the forces which fling insecure scholars out of their disciplines into ancillary fields in pursuit of credibility and reward. The search for subdisciplinary identity is quintessentially a deconstructionist thrust.

What I am proposing is that deconstruction may be regarded as the method of postmodernism. This equation may trouble some, so it requires elaboration. According to Foster (1985, page xi), the purpose of deconstructing modernism is "to open its closed systems ... to challenge its master narratives with the 'discourse of others'". The reconstructive agenda thus implied encompasses what Foster (1985, page xii) calls a postmodernism of *reaction* and a postmodernism of *resistance*. The first repudiates deconstruction to celebrate the status quo; it is conceived essentially as therapeutic or cosmetic—a retreat to the lost verities of tradition. The second mode of resistance seeks to use deconstruction to resist the status quo. It desires to change the object and its social context.

The distinction between reaction and resistance is crucial in understanding the evolution of the postmodern agenda. It highlights the political nature of the reconstructive choices which follow upon deconstruction. In essence, it opposes a rhetoric of the status quo (reaction) with an agenda for political change (resistance). Postmodern architecture has adopted the first mode; Foster advocates the second 'oppositional' or 'resistant' postmodernism. For him,

"postmodernism is best conceived as a conflict of new and old modes—cultural and economic ...—and of the interests vested therein" (page xi).

His oppositional postmodernism is

"*concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition*, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo-historical forms, *with a critique of origins*, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliation" (page xii, emphases added).

The political agenda implied by an oppositional postmodernism is undoubtedly of major significance. However, I want to suggest that the methodological tenor of resistance is equally important. It implies a methodology of opposition, one that takes the master narratives of prior traditions and seeks to question their authority. It rejects claims of undisputed authority, or demands for allegiance (Owens, 1985, page 58). This counter practice of "interference" (Said, 1985, page 157) is exactly deconstructive in its intent. I believe it constitutes the methodological heart of postmodern praxis.

### 3.3 *Postmodernism as epoch*

Perhaps the grandest dimension of postmodernism is the last: its claim to represent an epochal transition. In some sense or other, most proponents of ideas or movements wish to appear 'modern' (compare Eco, 1984). This may take a relatively innocuous form, as in the desire to appear fashionable or to represent a break with precedent. More substantially, a movement might experience a period of reflection during which it becomes self-conscious of its collective identity in a given period (Foster, 1985, page x). The sum of self-awareness, of a shared culture, of a niche in time–space might then be adopted to ascribe an historical limit to the movement. It is in this sense that we may speak of postmodernism as an epoch of transition, as some kind of "radical break" with the past (Jameson, 1984, page 53).

The central issue in assessing postmodernism as epoch is the problem of theorizing contemporaneity (Davis, 1985, page 107). How can we begin to interpret the overall significance of an infinity of overlapping realities? Obviously, the simultaneous appearance of two objects at the same chronological moment

need not imply a causal relation. The time–space landscape is more likely to consist of a melange of the obsolete, current, and newborn artifacts comingling anachronistically in each region. How do we make sense of this variety?

Jameson is the author of an audacious claim that postmodernism is more than a style. It is:

"A periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order" (1985, page 113).

Needless to say, it is not easy to recognize the emergent order. This may be because radical breaks between periods

"do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuration [sic] of a certain number of elements already given; features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now became dominant, and features that had been dominant again became secondary" (page 123).

Despite these problems of identification, Jameson asserts that the total ensemble of presences and differences has accumulated into a postmodern "cultural dominant". It has been generated by the "late capitalist" era of commodity production, which has imposed its own peculiar cultural stamp on society. The imprint thus left is characterized by a new depthlessness, in which reality is visible only through a multitude of superficial reflections; by a dominant mode of pastiche, a "stupendous proliferation of social codes" including the random cannibalization of architectural styles; and by a consequent loss of historical coordinates (Jameson, 1984, pages 55–65).

Space and time take on a new significance in postmodern culture. According to Jameson (1984, pages 83–84), old systems of organization and perception have been destroyed, and replaced by a postmodern *hyperspace*. Space and time have been stretched to accommodate the multinational global space of advanced capitalism. Because we are currently unable to grasp the coordinates of this space, Jameson (1984, page 92) calls for a new "global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as spatial scale". One key to the new map is architecture, the "privileged aesthetic language" (page 79) which best illuminates the "virtually unmediated" relationship between culture and commodity production (page 56).

Jameson's project simultaneously *liberates* the concept of postmodernism to imply something much more than architectural filigree, but also imposes a tremendous *burden of proof* on those who would use the concept in any historical sense. What is especially challenging is (1) his appeal to time–space relations in understanding postmodern hyperspace, and (2) his focus on the built environment as the 'text' for decoding this hyperspace.

Davis (1985) is profoundly critical of Jameson's view of the radical break implied in postmodernism. He argues that it is unreasonable to read too much into postmodern architecture, which

"has little organic or expressive relationship to industrial production or emerging technology; it is not raising 'cathedrals of the microchip' … [Whereas] the 'classical' skyscraper romanticized the hegemony of corporate bureaucracy and mass production, the postmodern tower is merely 'a package of standardized space to be gift-wrapped to the clients' taste" (Davis, 1985, pages 108–109).

He also warns of the methodological dangers in subsuming

"under a *master concept* too many contradictory phenomena which, though undoubtedly visible in the same chronological moment, are nonetheless separated in their true temporalities" (Davis, 1985, page 107).

Last, Davis argues that Jameson does not successfully link postmodernism with multinational capitalism to create a new epoch. Instead, Davis (1985, page 108)

deliberately adopts the notion of *late* capitalism to emphasize postmodernism as (if anything) a decadent *fin-de-siècle frisson*, a culmination more than a beginning.

### 3.4 *An assessment*

The hysteria surrounding the rhetoric of postmodern architectural *style* masks a more profound logic: that is, the way in which the spatial form of the built environment reflects, and in turn conditions, social relations over time and space. This is not simply an architectural issue, although architecture is part of the sociospatial dialectic. I wish to collapse the distinction between 'architecture' and the 'built environment', and to privilege the latter concept in discourse, since it encapsulates all forms of human structure (including the fabric of systems of production, for example). My view of what has come to be called the 'urban question' is that the built environment is both the product of, and the mediator between, social relations. Because of the inertia inherent in physical structures, obsolescent and newly forming structures will exist side-by-side in the environment, thus adding to the complexity of interpretation. The city is certainly a product of capitalism, but it is an exceedingly complex ensemble of signs and signatures. Architectural decoration is one key to decoding, but the structure of city systems over time and space is an infinitely more powerful instrument.

The *methodological* innovations implied by postmodernism are more far-reaching. The deconstruction of modernism and a postmodern-induced reconstruction have spawned an extraordinarily rich series of projects in the social sciences and humanities. These are not confined by conventional disciplinary boundaries, and are typified by the work of Foucault, and by semiotics (for example, Blonsky, 1985). The plurality of discourse released by such work has severely undermined traditional interpretive or academic communities (the evaporating center discussed earlier). Oppositional postmodernism uses this instability constructively. It calls for: a critique of the existing master narratives (the 'supreme fictions' in Foster's terms); a refusal to privilege any particular discourse; a restoration of the constructive tension between different theories; and a willingness to trace the social origins of intellectual bias (see Foster, 1985, page xv; Jameson, 1984, pages 74–78; Owens, 1985, pages 63–64; Said, 1985). This should not be taken to imply that a comfortable pluralism characterizes postmodernism. Jameson (1985, page 112) regards a plurality of discourse as characteristic of postmodernism; but the purpose of deconstruction is to turn reason against itself to bring out its tacit dependence on other repressed or unrecognized levels of meaning. It seeks to undo the given order of intellectual priorities plus the conceptual system that makes this ordering possible (Norris, 1982, pages 31, 64).

How, then, can we begin to discriminate amongst the cacophony of competing claims for theoretical preeminence? One primary requirement is for a 'metalanguage' which would permit dialogue across disciplinary or methodological boundaries. At the moment, we can only glimpse the structure of that metalanguage; we remain "awash in a sea of private languages" (Foster, 1985, page xiv). But our present crude vision is not discouraging if we recognize that the methodological purpose of a deconstructive postmodernism is exactly at one with the current project of social theory. They both have, as their objective, the reconstruction of the coordinates of contemporary time–space relationships (see section 2 above).

Which returns us to the question of contemporaneity. In some ways, this seems a sterile issue. What does it matter if we can or cannot say that we have entered a new *epoch*? How many artifacts do we have to accumulate before we can speak authoritatively of the existence of a cultural dominant? Postmodernism could ultimately prove to be an aberration in the evolutionary cycle, or the foreshock to

some more catastrophic change. However, it is difficult to deny the cumulative weight and speed of contemporary social change: the nuclear age, the rise of the 'Third World', deindustrialization, etc. The sense of a radical break somehow seems justifiable. It would, to say the least, be embarrassing if we overlooked this break in our unseemly haste to categorize objects and trends according to known constructs.

For the moment, therefore, let us concede the possibility of a 'postmodern planning'. (This may serve solely as a temporary hermeneutic device, but only by using the concept will we discover its utility.) A postmodern planning draws attention to the texts of planning: the built environment, the theory and practice of planning. It aims to deconstruct these textual objects, granting the possibility of a significant epochal change. A postmodernist reconstruction would then be an attempt to provide a new 'master narrative' for discourse about planning in a redefined world culture. It would be a new cognitive mapping which would self-consciously form a basis for the *next* round of narrative deconstruction and reconstruction.

## 4 Deconstructing planning
We can begin to conquer the complexity and opacity of contemporary planning by deconstructing its primary texts: the city, theory, and practice. In the scope of this paper, I can only encompass the texts of theory. [See Soja (1986) for a textual analysis of Los Angeles.] How do we begin to judge discourse in planning theory? We can follow Derrida's contention

"that thought can break with its delusive prehistory only by constantly and actively rehearsing that break" (Norris, 1982, page 127).

In this section, I outline a cognitive map of planning knowledge for the period 1945–85. This social history focuses on the broad experiences of the USA, Britain, and Canada during this period (figure 3)[3].
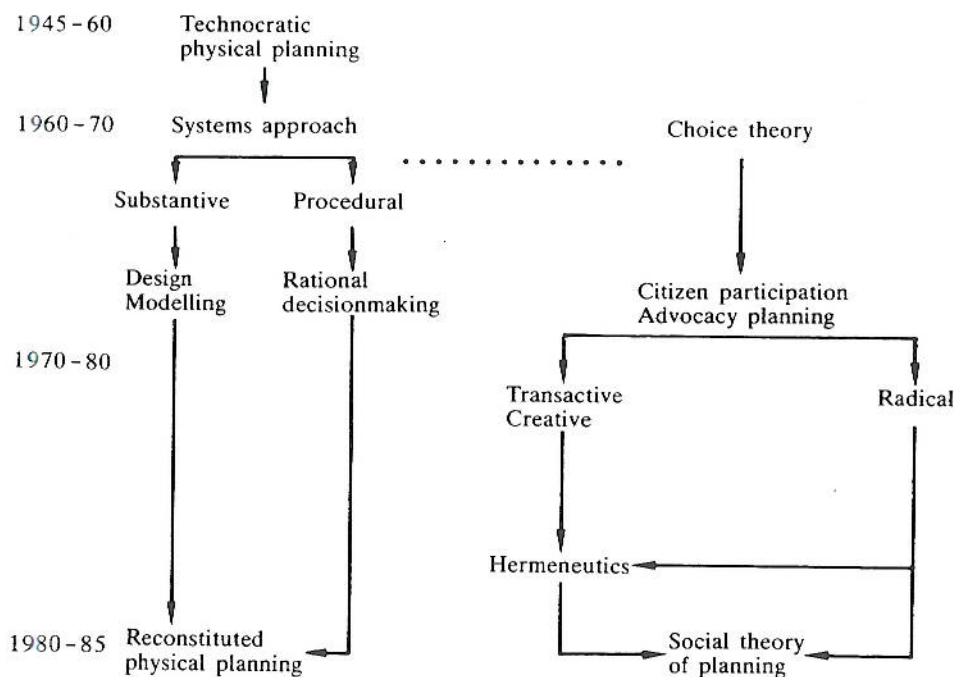


**Figure 3.** A social history of planning knowledge 1948–85.

[3]Over such a broad space of time and geographical focus, it will be impossible to provide full reference to all events, sources, and contributors. In the discussion which follows, I deal only with the broad lineaments of the social history. Any such history is likely to be an idiosyncratic combination of observer and the observed; for a somewhat different interpretation of approximately the same period, see Weaver et al (1985).

### 4.1 *A cognitive map of planning knowledge*

4.1.1 *1945–60: postwar reconstruction and the preeminence of physical land-use planning* The period following World War 2 was one of massive physical and social reconstruction. In Western Europe, extensive war damage meant that nations were necessarily preoccupied with the rebuilding efforts. It was this period that spawned, for example, the British new town legislation which was to provide an important model for controlled urban growth for the next four decades of development in Western Europe. In Canada, cities such as Toronto tentatively moved toward large-scale comprehensive metropolitan plans. In the USA, which had not suffered significant physical destruction through war, new federal initiatives were undertaken especially in the field of housing. In short, the early postwar years were a period in which an extensive (renewed) mandate was granted for state intervention in the land and property development process. In North America, it was time when the incipient planning profession consolidated its physical land-use planning identity.

4.1.2 *1960–70: the new scientism and the rise of popular planning* The decade of the 1960s was a time of remarkable ferment in planning. Two major philosophies were to impact the discipline: first, a new scientism which suggested that planning could and should take on the methodologies of the natural sciences; and, second, a new concern with populism in planning, which arose largely out of a worldwide surge in participatory democratic politics, and the consequent crisis in the profession's sense of legitimacy.

The new scientism which shook most social sciences in the 1960s was represented in planning as a commitment to systems theory. It provoked a fundamental shift toward rationality and was the initial impetus toward the substantive–procedural rift in planning. The substantive focus (on the objects being planned) served to propel the existing practice of land-use planning toward a more 'scientific' approach akin to the rationality of engineering or architectural building methods. The rational substantive approach received a strong reinforcement and consolidation through the advent of mathematical model-building in planning. The use of quantitative methods in computer-based, large-scale land-use and transportation models was particularly prominent in the USA. It provided a considerable legitimacy for believers in the scientific method of planning. This was further reinforced by the spillover from computer-assisted methods of architectural design.

The movement toward scientific planning was accelerated by what was initially perceived as a competing theoretical domain. Procedural theories of planning also derived from rational systems models. However, as applied to planning, they laid emphasis on the administrative and managerial context of planning decisions. They sought to establish rules of rational decisionmaking and to pursue the reasons for irrationality in the practice of planning. Although many writers later pointed to the damaging effects of the procedural–substantive dichotomy, and the ultimate need for both in planning, the dichotomy had a strong appeal for protagonists in each camp. Its legacy persists to the present day.

As well as being a decade of scientific optimism, the 1960s was also a highly charged political decade. In planning, this took the form of growing citizens' involvement in planning decisions within the general context of an increasingly participatory democratic politics. Very importantly, at the same time, professional planners began a deep search for their sources of legitimacy. A loose coalition of essentially liberal-minded planners rallied under the banner of a 'choice theory' of planning. This somewhat ill-defined theory emphasized the significance of citizen choice in, and even control over, planning decisions. As it became obvious that

citizen participation did not significantly alter the balance of power in development decisions, advocacy planning enjoyed a relatively brief vogue as a means of enfranchising citizen groups. The net effect of 1960s populism was to place planning irrevocably on the political agenda. Perhaps in no period since has the structure of political power been so rawly exposed as in these early community battles.

4.1.3 *1970–80: the emergence of a critical left* The optimism and prosperity of the 1960s spilled over into the early years of the next decade. In this more committed, relatively tolerant climate, two overtly ideological concepts of planning emerged. The first was the movement toward transactive (or creative) planning; the second was a more radical critique—a firestorm of criticism ignited by a rejection of both the transactive philosophy and the studied apoliticism of the rationalists. The transactive–creative approach in planning emphasized 'mutual learning', a creative use of a community's intelligence and planners' skills to invent the urban future. The lineage of this approach can be directly traced to an underlying belief in rationality and a commitment to involving communities in planning their futures. Transactive–creative planning was essentially an atheoretical view of planning, and as such, it was uncomfortable for those who did not share its essentially liberal-democratic ideology.

The radical critique which resurfaced in the mid-1970s was largely provoked by the perceived inadequacy of the theoretical bases for the new planning. Critics argued for a social theory of planning which would specifically incorporate its political economic setting. Deriving impetus initially from a neo-Marxist or materialist philosophy, they emphasized the essentially subordinate role of planning in the context of capitalist urbanization. The radical critique provided a new way of thinking about planning. However, the debate was generally conducted at such a high level of abstraction that practitioners and theoreticians alike had difficulty in linking it to everyday practice. Moreover, many of its supporters themselves seemed incapable or unwilling to dig themselves out of the trap of 'structuralist inactivity' into which their view of planning had led them.

Then, in the late 1970s, a potential resolution of the liberal–radical split was plucked from the social theory of the Frankfurt School, and of Habermas in particular. The phenomenological and hermeneutic schools of thought became influential for two reasons. First, hermeneutics offered a firm theoretical basis for the essentially dialectical or interpretive method which was implicit in transactive–creative planning. Second, it provided the option for a new alliance with the radical left without the need to espouse Marxism. In short, hermeneutics provided a new theoretical and practical legitimacy where it was urgently needed.

4.1.4 *1980–85: a frenzy of discourse and the retreat to origins* The recession-ridden 1980s have been accompanied by an increasing frenzy of discourse on planning. Doubts and uncertainties began to assail the left, and an increasingly 'bullish' center-right coalition began to reassert itself. The net effects have been a retreat from context and a rediscovery of function in planning.

In the first place, the sparkling promise of hermeneutics did not translate readily into practice, nor was its theoretical promise being realized. Second, radical critics became quiescent. For some, the increasingly strident political conservatism was cause enough for retreat; others were absorbed into the search for a wider social theory of planning. Whatever political commitment remained seems to have become somewhat diluted. Kiernan's (1983) "politics of positive discrimination" (for instance) builds a new planning from the social context of Marx, plus Weberian notions of key bureaucrats, and guides the systems with Rawlsian notions of justice.

In the vacuum left by the apparent retreat of the social theorists, and in a conservative economic and political culture, a new attempt now appears to be underway to recapture the center ground in planning. Planning is being defined again as land-use planning. This retreat to the traditional core of the discipline is undoubtedly an effort to reaffirm the identity of planning and to demarcate clearly its professional 'turf'. The core movement reveals itself in many ways, as (for instance) in direct attacks on social theories of planning which are perceived as harming the professional credibility of planning. It is also evident from a new emphasis on 'public–private partnerships' in the land-development process.

But the strongest evidence for a revitalization of traditional land-use planning lies in (a) the rejection of what is perceived to be 'practice-irrelevant' theory, and (b) the rebirth of physical planning theory. This trend (the two themes are surely manifestations of but a single event) is well represented in Breheny's revealingly entitled article "A practical view of planning theory". Breheny (1983, page 106) seems to identify with those:

"who are concerned to pin down the essential features of planning *before* proceeding with the task of theory building" (emphasis added).

Not surprisingly, he is led to conclude that:

"Land-use ... planning is concerned with government intervention in the private land-development process. ... The role of planners is to assist in the administration of this activity and in helping governments make and implement decisions".

### 4.2 *The ascendancy of pastiche*

Postmodern planning appears as a *pastiche of practices*. 'Planning theory' has been isolated as a babel of languages, most of which are voluntarily ignored by practitioners. 'Planning practice' has devolved into a ritualized choreography of routines. One dimension of practice has been deeply embedded in the apparatus of the state. There it is highly insulated and free from capture or influence. In essence, planning serves to legitimize the actions of the state. The second dimension of practice is part of land and property development interests. It is equally insulated, a passive tool capable of only the most muted social criticism. In this case, planning serves to legitimize the actions of capital. In its roles as legitimator of state and capital, planning resembles architecture. (But note one crucial and inexplicable difference: architecture has always sought to rationalize or to conceal its subordinate role by wider appeals to art, philosophy, history; planning, in contrast, has studiously rejected such engagement, including even a link to social sciences.)

The notion of a pastiche of practice is intended to convey the ensemble of free-floating, unsystematized 'theories' illustrated in figure 3. Discourse around planning theory is essentially splintered. Since each approach has its advocate, pastiche is in the ascendancy. Paradoxically, however, the dominant focus of discourse in all narratives is increasingly being restricted. For instance, the long heritage of utopian concerns has been excised from our vocabulary. In addition, the ideological commitment of the 1960s and 1970s has lost much of its power of persuasion, having retreated into its own version of pastiche (a little bit of Marx, a touch of Weber, stir with Rawls).

The preeminent discourse in the future planning pastiche is likely to be that which best supports the evolving postmodern hyperspace. So we need to consider the time–space coordinates of this putative space. Its fundamental characteristic is that time and space have been stretched to create a new global political economy.

Over much of the world, capitalist exchange relations predominate; production and distribution systems are organized on a global scale; world politics is dominated by the nuclear survival issue. Social relations in everyday life are equally impacted. A culture of (predominantly US) commercialism dominates taste, culture, and fashion. Traditional social organizations and belief systems are usurped and distorted. Communities atrophy, and social networks shrink. Life becomes a ritualized choreography of signs, symbols, and expectations led by and mirrored in the media (especially advertising).

Postmodernism is a political economy of social dislocation. Time and space are now ordered differently and no longer exert the influence to which we are accustomed. The diverse spaces which we inhabit no longer intersect neatly; social space, political space, economic space, and physical space are increasingly 'out of fit'. Few have the resources or the ability to overcome this dislocation of spheres. Jameson (1985) argued that we are unable even to grasp the coordinates of these spheres at this moment.

Pursuing this logic, the postmodern city should be an atomized city—a world pastiche of built environments in unsynchronized, aesthetic–functional disharmony. The example which comes immediately to mind is that of the classic downtown renewal schemes: Bunker Hill in Los Angeles, with its string of modern baubles hung indelicately across a landscape of enduring inner-city networks[4]; the Renaissance center in Detroit; and the Eaton Center in Toronto. These examples find their suburban analog in the vast expanses of prepackaged life-styles and physical settings in Orange County (Mission Viejo, for example), and—somewhat downmarket—in the Inland Empire. Davis (1985) has suggested that the postmodern city is fuelled by international capital and spatial differentiation. But it seems to me that the seeds of postmodernism were planted by the state-sponsored urban renewal schemes of the 1960s. As public funds dried up, a voracious finance capital crossed the world in search of profit. The institutionalized profession of planning was coopted by the state to support urban renewal, and remained in position as private capital moved in. So, cities no longer grow 'organically', that is, as a result of a myriad public–private tensions. The postmodern city is a deliberate mutation engendered by a bureaucratic state and a corporate civil society. Both spheres are driven by economic return, in fiscal or in profit forms. The postmodern city has become a mutant money machine, driven by the twin engines of (state) penetration and (corporate) commodification.

The planning that is now developing is intended to support this machine. Planners are increasingly being pressed to legitimate actions by state and civil society in the mutation of the built environment. The planning role ultimately may be reduced to that of a facilitator; the planning process reduced to commodified 'bits' susceptible to an instrumental logic. (It is in this sense that we can speak of a new depthlessness in planning.) Already planners are operating special areas where regular zoning restrictions have been suspended; already there are courses in 'public–private' enterprise in planning schools. We are poised, it seems, to create a truly postmodern planning—a planning of filigree, of decoration. The profession may yet be canonized as the fig leaf which discreetly covers the enterprises of state and civil society.

What might we expect to happen to discourse in postmodern planning? Two scenarios might be drawn. First, let us assume that we have entered a long period of recession or no-growth. Under such circumstances, the retrenchment which we

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[4]It is part of planning policy in downtown Los Angeles to 'contain' the Skid Row area to a smaller zone more distant from the revitalized core (Dear and Wolch, 1986).

are currently experiencing in planning is likely to accelerate. Planning will survive purely as a subordinate technocracy, in which discourse on what we currently call substantive planning will predominate. The 'development planner' will be the dominant species. Second, let us assume economic recovery. I would then anticipate a relatively long but slow period of expansion during which a chastened profession will seek to retain its credibility and its roots. The planning discourse is likely to be one in which pastiche is tolerated. We would be doomed to relive the expansionary experiences of the past two decades. By the year 2000, we should essentially be in the same spot as we are today. The pastiche of practice will likely be as confusing then as it seems now.

## 5 Reconstructing planning discourse

"... how did someone situated somewhere within the middle classes read a city under the Old Regime? The *Description* actually provided three readings. It presented Montpellier as a procession of dignities, then as a set of estates, and finally as the scene of a style of living. ... The author went on for hundreds of pages, piling description upon description, because he was driven by a need to make sense of his world and he could not find a framework adequate to the task."
Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*
(1985, pages 139–140)

An oppositional postmodernism rejects claims of undisputed authority, whatever their source (scholars, paradigms, etc). To be 'truly postmodern', then, we should immediately attack the potential tyranny of the preceding interpretation (section 4)! This can be achieved through deliberately rehearsing a break with the essentially linear history so far reported; through a reconstruction of the future archeology of planning. To do this, we require a metalanguage which will challenge the existing narrative as well as lay the groundwork for its own supersession.

### 5.1 *A metalanguage for discourse*
As we have seen, the postmodern city is a consequence of state penetration and corporate commodification in the urban process. These two emphases provide a basis for structuring the metalanguage of planning discourse. From section 4, a preliminary partitioning of the linguistic space along a *functional–contextual* spectrum is suggested. The first emphasizes the things planning does (its functions); the second, the social setting of planning (its context). Overemphasis on the first can lead to naive empiricism; on the second, to undisciplined abstractionism. Two other dimensions derive from the postmodern hyperspace[5].
1 *Commodification*: the extent to which the tasks and products of planning can be timed, routinized, priced, and sold. This is akin to a notion of 'performativity'. Its antithesis is a *noncommodified* form, which presumably would not lend itself to capitalist manipulation.
2 *Penetration*: the extent to which state intervention has proceeded in planning, implying increased social control over everyday life. Its antithesis is the *participation* mode of planning, implying a high degree of local autonomy.

[5]There are, of course, many other dimensions which could be used according to an analyst's purpose. A large obligation implied by this paper is the task of systematically assessing the utility of these dimensions in metalinguistic discourse. In preparing this paper, I also considered the following pairs: normative–functional, catastrophic–incremental, justice–injustice, and reaction–resistance.

Our metalanguage for planning may therefore be structured along these three paired dimensions which are directly related to the experience of postmodern time and space. We can now speak about planning via a series of triples. For example, conventional physical planning might be characterized as a highly commodified, function-oriented exercise which facilitates state intervention. Alternatively, hermeneutics is a noncommodified form of contextual analysis which promotes democratic participation.

The point of this framework is not to show how each planning theory can be slotted into the three dimensions and described as a triple. (This is certainly possible, and revealing.) It is more important to recognize the multiple classifications to which all theories can be subjected. Hence, choice theory can be highly participative, but also a cooptive (that is, penetrative) mode; physical planning can be participatory; transactive planning can be commodified; and so on. The whole purpose of this tripartite metalanguage is to demonstrate that the functional forms of planning can be imbued with different contextual meanings. There can be many contextual mappings onto a single functional space, according to the purposes of the human agents involved in the planning exercise. The immense value of a social theory of planning is, of course, that it attempts to render determinate this ambiguous context–function mapping.

A cognitive map of planning knowledge which results from adopting the functional–contextual/commodified–noncommodified/penetrative–participative triptych is tentatively outlined in table 1. This is intended not as a unique mapping, but merely as a point of reference. Some allowance is made for the varying emphases present in the categorizations of the various approaches. Hence, procedural planning is functional but with a priority on context; transactive planning has a contextual subemphasis, but is primarily function- (that is, object-) oriented. The mapping in table 1 suggests a clear division between the physical and substantive approaches and the hermeneutic, social theory, and radical approaches. Both groups are unambiguously opposite in my three-dimensional characterizations. In Foster's terms, the first may represent a discourse of reaction; the second, of resistance. The middle ground (occupied by procedural, transactive, and choice approaches) represents an undetermined balance between reaction and resistance.

It must be emphasized that the arrangement in table 1 in no way characterizes any particular approach in planning as 'wrong'. Each approach has an emphasis which may have particular strength or value in different analytical situations.

Table 1. A cognitive map of planning knowledge.

|  | Dimensions[a] | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | F/C | C/NC | PE/PA |
| Physical | F | C | PE |
| Substantive | F | C | PE |
| Procedural | C–F | C | PE–PA |
| Transactive | F–C | NC–C | PA–PE |
| Choice | F–C | C–NC | PA–PE |
| Hermeneutics | C | NC | PA |
| Social theory | C | NC | PA |
| Radical | C | NC | PA |

[a]Key to dimensions: F/C functional–contextual, C/NC commodified–noncommodified, PE/PA penetration–participation. Combinations of these dimensions represent degrees of emphasis.

But the mapping in table 1 at least permits us to discuss the strengths and merits of various planning theories along consistent dimensions; a 'common ground' for discourse is permitted by its metalanguage. This, ultimately, is the starting point of a postmodern reconstruction of planning.

### 5.2 Superseding this narrative

Everything that has gone before in this paper may be regarded as a footnote to these final paragraphs. The next task is a deliberate deconstruction of the reconstruction proposed so far in this paper.

The effort to interrogate planning through a postmodern lens has provided a new focus on theory and practice and a clear link to contemporary social processes. But, in the event, I have to reject the notion of 'postmodern planning'. It has admirably served its function as a personal hermeneutic device. Yet to partition off an object called 'postmodern planning' seems as meaningless and confusing as it is in postmodern architecture and postmodern literature. Postmodernism should remain an ideal category (as Eco, 1984, page 66, puts it) or an ideal type, in the Weberian sense.

On the other hand, I would retain the notion of planning *in a postmodern epoch*. This term has as much meaning as other ideal types such as 'late capitalism', 'advanced capitalism', 'corporate state', and so on. It has given rise to some valuable new emphases in discourse.

1 Postmodernism provides a new focus on theorizing contemporaneity. Planning is viewed as part of time–space relations in postmodern hyperspace.

2 Postmodernism opens up a view on a possible new social order. We are invited to search for and interpret the signs and symbols of an evolving capitalism.

3 The deconstruction of master narratives has focused attention on the pastiche of planning practice. A metalanguage for discourse on pastiche is a primary goal in planning.

4 The view of the future which a context-based planning allows us to glimpse is not uplifting: it is a future of planning as filigree—a fig leaf to cover the subordination of planning to state and capital.

5 The postmodernism of resistance allows another future to be imagined: planning as a metalanguage of interference.

Hence, I would prefer to retain the notion of a 'postmodern epoch' at least until we have a clearer notion of current trends.

The intellectual tasks which remain are large. We must look again at cities with new eyes, as texts (Davis, 1985; Marchand, 1986; Soja, 1986). We must begin the hitherto neglected task of interpreting the texts of planning practice. But most of all, we need to examine critically the discourse initiated in this paper. I have revealed one possible master narrative. There are other metalanguages. Which is better? Under what circumstances? And how do we construct interpretive communities around a common basis for planning theory and practice[6].

There is another urgent need: to integrate the experiences of postmodernism with the history of social theory. The contingencies and (in)determinacies surrounding contemporary social theory must be engaged in by planners[7]. These include the concept of power, which I have barely touched upon in this essay.

[6]Some of the major concepts regarding interpretive communities are set out by Fish (1980). For an application of this concept to political discourse see Clark and Dear (1984), and to legal discourse, see Clark (1985).

[7]A comprehensive review of the relevant issues is contained in the collection of essays edited by Gregory and Urry (1985).

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