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Modernity and Housing

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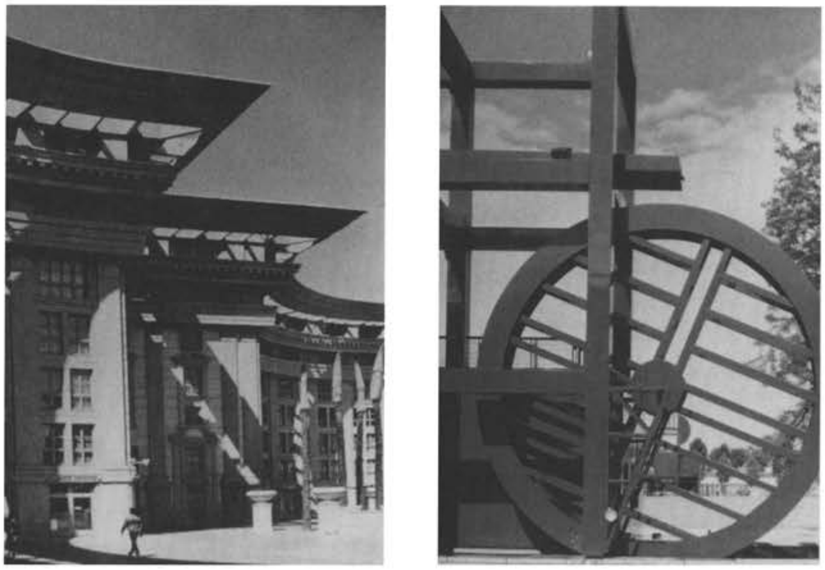
Orthodox and Post Modernity

Clear definitions are often difficult to sustain even in the best of circumstances, let alone among broad cultural categories that inevitably appear to be somewhat arbitrary. Recently, considerable effort has been made to distinguish postmodernity as a state of existence from modernity, its immediate forerunner. In a number of circles, a very definite break has been declared, along with pronouncements that we are now living in a new era (Vattimo 1988). By contrast, in other circles modernity continues to be seen as an "unfinished project" (Habermas 1981, 1987). In still others it is regarded as having become "modernism beyond utopianism, scientism and foundationalism, in short, a postmetaphysical modernism" (Wellmer 1991, p. viii). Certainly in architecture, where modernity tends to be closely associated with the orthodox inheritance of the avant-garde movements at the beginning of this century, at least two reactions have set in. There has been an attempt, first, to reestablish continuity with earlier architectural traditions, and, second, to expand the formal architectural repertoire without resorting to historical circumstances (figure 48). Nevertheless, both within architecture and more broadly, the postmodern condition generally appears to be identified with a reaction to specific



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Two conditions of architectural postmodernity: Antigone at Montpellier by Ricardo Bofill, 1979–1983, and La Villette by Bernard Tschumi, 1987.

difficulties with modernism, rather than a completely new or different proposal (Habermas 1981, 1987, Colquhoun 1989). Moreover, as Huyssen astutely observes, more often than not postmodernism seems to assume a version of modernity only rooted in the high culture of the 1950s and 1960s, far removed from its earlier adversarial beginnings (Huyssen 1986). In this reactive stance alone, modernity would still seem to be exerting considerable influence. Rather than a definitive break or rupture, it seems that we may be confronting another shift in the grander scheme of things and the emergence of another version of modernity. The magnitude of the shift remains to be seen. So far it does not seem to be simply a next phase or obvious sequel.

Intellectual Conditions

Beyond an absence of metaphysical commitment, the intellectual condition of modernity has been defined mainly by specialization and antinomies related to subject-centered reason. For instance, without a broad framework to unite them, we are immediately confronted with sharp divisions among science, poetry, and morality, as well as the inherent opposition between a drive toward rationality, harmony, and the perfectibility of the human condition, on the one hand, and nihilism, discord, and acknowledgment of human limitations on the other. From one side of modernity comes the assertion that the logical-empirical orthodoxy of positive science lies at the very foundation of all knowledge. Furthermore, the fruits of this knowledge are progressive and their continual pursuit and application through technology is an essential and desirable aspect of the modern condition. It is a matter of freedom not only by helping to overcome the privations of toil, poverty, and disease, but by maintaining the future open. By contrast, from the other side comes a direct challenge to this authority through the assertion that there are other kinds of knowledge, such as "knowing how" and myths, that also provide real and legitimate frameworks for human action. Moreover, from this vantage point the alleged foundational aspect of scientific knowledge about human affairs is simply opinion, with corresponding elements of persuasion and rhetoric. This position also calls into question the efficacy of the positivist reliance on hypothetico-deductive methods of reasoning, replacing this mode of thinking with hermeneutic methods of analysis (Bernstein 1976, 1983). Throughout, the concept of what legitimately guides human action and what brings such a guideline into being are seriously questioned. Far from being only a contemporary occurrence, however, aspects of both sides extend well back into the nineteenth century. Even during the heyday of positive human science, alternative positions were already under discussion. As we have seen, the conditions of historical knowledge about human affairs also changed appreciably during the nineteenth century, as did disciplinary areas like anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Seemingly, for every step made in a foundational direction a charge of arbitrariness could be made with equal vigor from the other direction.

In the poetic realm conditions have been little different. Shortly after the beginning of the nineteenth century, if not before, the hegemony of the classical ideal and its working methods was strongly challenged on a number of points. The German poet Schiller's distinction, for instance, between the sentimental and the naive drew a strong line between methodical, almost arm's-length pursuit of formal ideals and the instinctive, natural, and emotive response of naive genius (Dilthey 1959, Schiller 1961). Later this was to become a significant concept in the emergence of romanticism. Indeed, in many modern definitions of classicism, beyond simply thematic and formal imitations of Greco-Roman models, a contrasting reference has been made to romanticism, and vice versa (Barzun 1961, Preminger 1965, Drabble 1985). Thus, in what amounted to definition by virtue of an antithesis, characteristics like objectivity, clarity, and idealistic imitation are juxtaposed against imaginative free play, originality, and functionally associative imagery. Well-known romantic and classical tendencies vied with each other in many forms of artistic expression throughout the nineteenth century, and architecture was no exception (Early 1965). Moreover, Poggioli's more recent division between "humanist" and "romantic" versions of modernism maintains the distinction well into the contemporary era (Poggioli 1968). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, classical ideals were also further challenged from another direction. Nietzsche, for example, interposed the Dionysian proclivities of hubris and excess against the Apollonian wisdom of moderation, self-knowledge, and self-control (Spears 1970). In so doing, he also remade the idea of an art work as a matter of experience as much as of judgment (Löwith 1964).

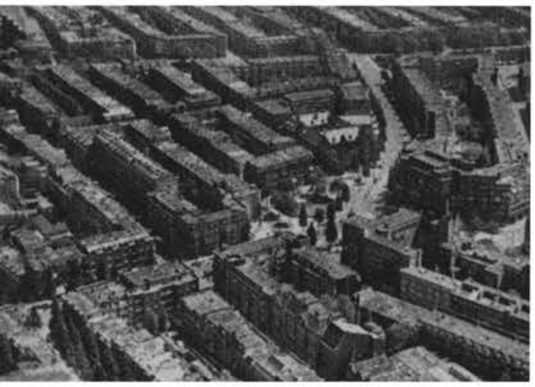
Given the antinomies and specialized character of modernity's intellectual terrain, invariably positions seemed to change. Progress is in the eye of the beholder, although we undoubtedly know more today than we did before, at least in different ways. If anything, the early relativism of the modern intellectual outlook has become confirmed further, and nonfoundational areas of knowledge have largely replaced a verified system of truths. Or, as Connor argues, postmodernism is an intellectual process of making distinctions and then resolving the differences thus created with new thinking. Inevitably it is inward-turning, and the constant process of renewal disturbs metanarratives dependent upon foundational truths (Connor 1989).

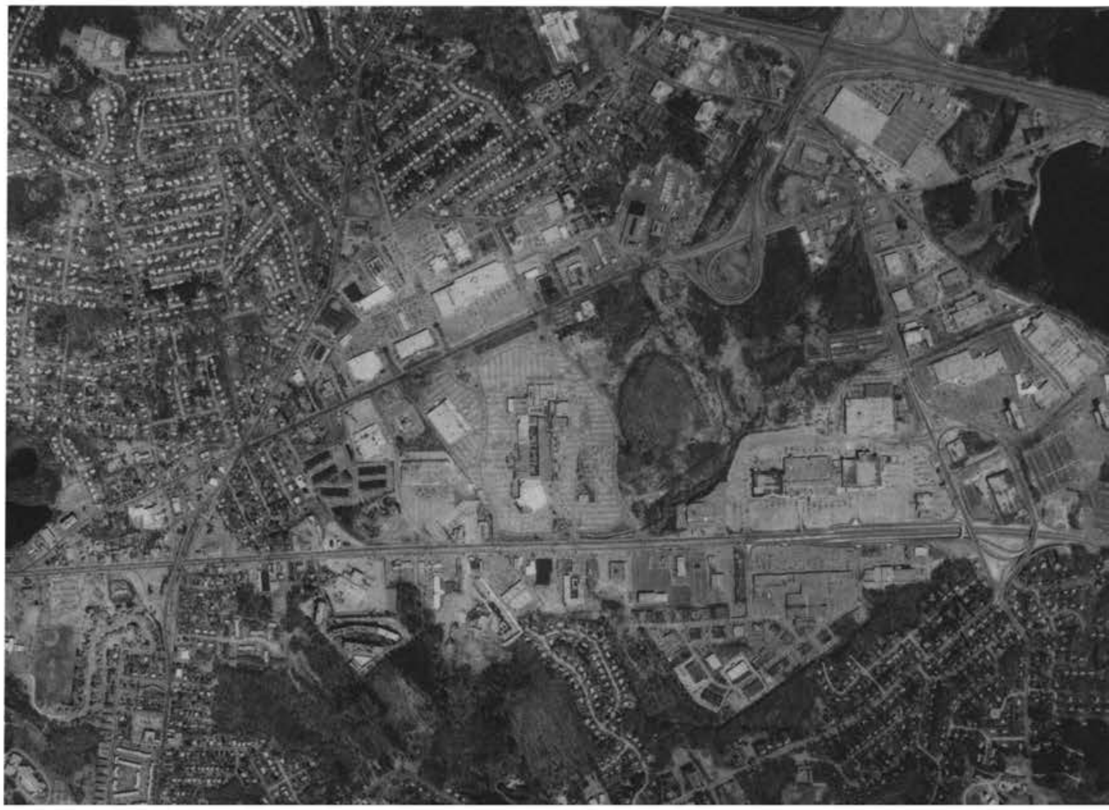
This does not, however, amount to a definitive break in the modern intellectual tradition. It simply represents, so to speak, another turn of the wheel, where one dominant outlook or process of modern sense making overcomes another. What seems to be distinctive about modernity is its variety expressed by conjunctions or amplifications of specific ideas. If we are willing to relax, for a moment, the shrillness of the voices from both positivism and historicism, then what we probably have, in architecture anyway, is another version of modernity and not, as many would have it, something entirely different.

Material Conditions

Technological advancement also appears to have resulted less in a monolithic pattern of development and behavior than in flexibility, a localization of interests, and a certain pluralism. Such an outcome probably stands to reason. We have already seen, for example, that technological advancement in the devices we use simultaneously liberates us from a consciousness of the technical effort involved. We can then focus on the commodities being produced and, therefore, on our own preferences in those regards. The result, naturally enough, is a strong tendency toward more specific requirements, distinctiveness, and individuality. The earlier, what might be called majoritarian phase of technological existence, with its strong emphasis on universal norms, mass production, and mass consumption, need no longer exist. The technological constraints have loosened and changed, resulting in what might be termed a pluralistic phase of existence, characterized by flexibility and localized distinctions. Nevertheless, throughout this transformation, the material aspect of everyday life has not changed state appreciably. Since about 1930, in most industrialized nations, the roads have been paved, houses have had electricity as well as indoor plumbing, and most families have driven cars. As already described in some detail, there have been dramatic changes in the way we conduct business, and yet the three basic sectors of industry, agriculture, and service have remained intact over the same time period. Again it is a matter of moving into a more advanced state of modernity rather than a sudden break with the immediate past altogether, although this, of course, also depends on how you draw the boundaries.

The generic form of cities themselves is a good illustration of this process of substantial transformation but without radical change. With the spatial transformation from the older monocentric to current polycentric forms of city development (figures 49 and 50), there also came changes in community attitudes toward service provision, for instance, and governance. Generally, there was a rise in both the number and diversity of special interest groups, and urban populations appeared to be more heterogeneous than ever before; moreover, protection of local interests was also on the rise. Nevertheless, the underlying modern capitalist system of property tenure, financing, and institutional provision of services, in keeping with other persistent features like automobile transportation, remained well intact. The facade of modernity may have changed, so to speak, but its basic structure was preserved.





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A nineteenth-century quarter of Amsterdam.

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The spatial mosaic of a mid to late twentieth-century city: Framingham in the Boston metropolitan area, 1978.

At this juncture we can return to the two moments in time that will form the basis for most of the subsequent discussion of the architecture of modern housing. To summarize, the first, between 1920 and 1930, coincided with a euphoric yet practical moment in the positivist and historicist development of modernity. It was a period that capitalized on the fruits of avant-gardism, prominently identified with a progressive confidence in the future, and made a substantive break with past traditions. It was a moment, we are often told, when time stood still somewhere between the ever present and the near future. New materials, new fabrication techniques, new social relations, or at the very least their promise, meant new forms for a new age, potentially one of great social progress.

This was also a moment that coincided with the early era of the second industrial revolution and its emphasis on big business, throughput, corporate management, and technocracy. Mass production brought ideas about operating efficiencies, organization, and standardization into every walk of life, not to mention a corresponding allowance and encouragement of mass consumption. Urbanism began to yield a more spatially compartmentalized environment for most people and a preference for suburban dwelling environments.

The second moment, between 1970 and 1980, more or less coincided with a time of almost universal uncertainty and potential instability. It was a period of postmodernism, or certainly of nonfoundational modernism, when second thoughts were being given to the lack of continuity with past traditions and it began to seem more important to respond to local contexts and cultural points of view. By contrast to earlier eras, the real temporal scope of activities had become dramatically shorter, and their effective spatial boundaries were drawn much wider. The result was a further reinforcement, if not original cause, of backward-looking, localized responses. Paradoxically perhaps, as one aspect of modernity's time frame became compressed, another, the sense of historical time, became elongated. Almost simultaneously the philosophical undermining of foundational positions about the world, the last of which could well have been embodied in the technological orientation of the second industrial revolution, greatly circumscribed the authority of prevailing aesthetic doctrines, inviting a search for other spatial and expressive orders.

This moment also coincided with new technological arrangements that were erasing the old rigidities of the second industrial revolution and taking the world into a new era of organizational flexibility, time responsiveness, and more individualized production and consumption. Centralized, hierarchically focused patterns of spatial organization and settlement were being replaced by dispersed, multiple concentrations of urban activity that were essentially nonhierarchical and distinct. In both the modern and the postmodern moments, however, what was decisive was time and the manner in which time was allowed to influence spatial conceptions, either literally or with reference to imagination and history. Thus, each modern housing project, usually in more ways than one, was very much in its own time, if not in its own place.

Surrounding and connecting the two episodes is a web of longer-term trends and influences. At the outset, the rise of modern housing had at least a rhetorical emphasis on the substance and spirit of a new age. The preceding and contemporary avant-garde emphasis was pushed productively toward new forms through a rationalized process of mass production. It was, nevertheless, also a time during which past sensibilities about settlement, especially in the form of small or manageable communities, were not abandoned but given a renewed emphasis. As we shall see, for housing the period from 1920 to 1930, and especially from 1925 to 1930 when general circumstances were relatively stable, was a synthesis, awkward at times, between a variety of planning and design influences, both traditional and new.

In the aftermath of this period, however, primarily in post–World War II housing developments in both Europe and the United States, the modern technical orientation, held artfully in check during the twenties and early thirties, took over almost completely, obliterating important spatial distinctions in the terrain of our daily lives. The result was often monotonous blocks of flats and towers, bereft of any immediate or local character, or, primarily in the case of the United States, row upon row of single-family detached tract housing with much the same lack of distinction. A misplaced faith in modern essentialism, reinforced as much as anything by the postwar tide of the technical temperament, reduced the frame of design reference for large amounts of housing to a bare caricature. Furthermore, the perceived scale and complexity of urban development increased substantially, again invited by apparent technical capacities for management. As time wore on, however, the upgrading of technical prowess failed to keep pace with unresolved problems and the entire edifice began to crumble.

Fortunately, realignment of the ideological landscapes during the seventies, if not before, began rejuvenating the circumstances of modern housing. In keeping with emerging postmodern attitudes born of uncertainty and senses of difference, the hegemony of entrenched, orthodox modern positions was challenged and upset. Conceptual processes of distinction and merger came into play; a historical condition began to be returned to housing, sometimes with a vengeance, and a renewed emphasis was placed upon localizing dwelling situations. The resulting pluralism of project forms and appearances underscores the apparent decline of a foundational narrative to architecture. In the broader interest of humanism, however, it reminds us of the need for a method of sustaining the design of good modern housing.