

Architecture, Globalization and the Politics of Production

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INTRODUCTION

It is now widely understood that globalization allows the relationship between production and consumption to be geographically separated, and reconstituted in ways that make the exploitative underside of global capitalism invisible from those who benefit most from its surplus. Until recently, the techniques associated with the global restructuring of industry, including subcontracting, outsourcing to cheaper labor markets, and the conquest of "uneven geographies" of production, have been associated primarily with the manufacturing of goods.¹ However, over the last two decades, these techniques have been adopted in the service sectors of postindustrial economies, including architecture.² New possibilities for the "bundling" and exchange of architectural knowledge over geographic time and space are restructuring the organization of professional work, and raising new questions about the politics of architectural identity in a global context.³ I explore these changes in this paper through the discussion of an exemplary Canadian architectural firm that operates in the profitable, if unstable disjuncture between global currency markets and speculative real estate development. I explore the firm's growing role as a "production house" for signature American architects, and consider the consequences for the design process and the politics of professional identity. In the second part of the paper I maintain that the global reorganization of corporate practice is intertwined with (and was perhaps even prefigured by), changes in architectural education, and its position within an increasingly corporate, transnational university. Here "vertically integrated" modernist educational systems have been replaced or overlaid with increasingly specialized and "flexible" forms of training. I suggest that professional pedagogy, though often situated in a divided relation to practice, nevertheless increasingly reproduces the same model of atomized knowledge. I argue that techniques of displacement are now defining both education and practice, reshaping the professional division of labor on a global scale, commodifying difference in education,

and intensifying the definition of building process as "technical" exchange rather than social production.

Architectural theory and criticism has remained largely silent about these developments. Much of the debate about the impact of global processes on architecture has focused on design strategies in isolation from their contexts of production, and in doing so effaces the relationship between, for example, the design process, the changing structure of architectural education, and the organization of the professional firm. This paper shifts attention from the "globalized" architectural object to the subjects and social relations that constitute it as such. This shift is important because it permits us to open up architectural education and the profession as realms of power-laden cultural practices, and to speculate on the reciprocity between these practices and the production of social space in the global city.

GABARDINE CLADDING

A recent J. Crew catalogue (a popular US-based mail order clothing company) chooses an urban loft of a 30-something architect as the setting for its Fall 2000 line of clothing.⁴ When read in the North American context, the sequence of images offered here defines what might be called a synchronic warehouse for postindustrial design culture.⁵ There is the Eames chair, the curving white walls redolent of Le Corbusier and his late modern emulators, and tellingly, an Oriental rug in the middle-ground, there to imply (perhaps after Saskia Sassen), a point of "command and control" of global symbolic resources.⁶ Our architect surges towards us: "Complete: gabardine, refined wool." Another lofty image shows the architect at ease in a Saarinen chair, surrounded by other detemporalized Euro-American fragments: a postcard of an "old master" juxtaposed with a schedule pinned to the wall. There is nostalgia here for the "old days" of international modernism.

when nations were nations, and professional men were (white) men. Whiteness is the libidinal glue that holds the scene/seen together, one in which the imaginary fullness of the "international" is now lost to the global. The architect is casually positioned within this symbolic economy, aloft in Gabardine and free to choose.

North of the US border, in the suburban hinterland of a large Canadian city, the idealized world of the gabardine clad architect finds its material realization in a converted industrial shed, now the home of a large architectural firm with over 150 employees. It is a place defined not only by its location on the edge of exurban sprawl, but in relation to the depressed value of the Canadian dollar in global currency markets. This has extended Canada's "branch plant economy" into the realm of professional services.⁷ Indeed the history of the firm (which I describe here in generic terms to stress its status as an emerging model of global practice) recapitulates crucial aspects of the reorganization of Keynesian economies into their current post-Keynesian, neo-liberal, and global form. The origins of the firm can be traced to the 1960s when it was concerned with designing "international style" buildings for the Canadian welfare state. Until several years ago, the firm was located in a downtown historic building. As the firm's work shifted from regionally-based commissions to those that are increasingly connected to the operations of global corporate capital, the need for a visible location with symbolic connections to the historic city center became largely redundant.⁸ Moving to a new location in the exurbs was part of a deliberate "stripping down" of excess expenditure on symbolic capital, a "whiting out" that is characteristic of the hinterland that now surrounds the firm.

The firm's portfolio now includes prestige office towers for corporations with global name recognition, in locations extending from Manhattan to cities in the newly industrializing nations of South-East Asia. It has acted as the production architect on all these projects, but the designer of none. The firm increasingly operates as a "back-of-house" operation to "front-of-house" signature architects located in the U.S. The largely invisible location requires the firm's employees to commute through a landscape of call centers, big box stores and condominiums, all of which serve as a subtle, if daily reminder of the close proximity of their own professional identity to that of others working in a booming back-of-house corporate landscape.

INSIDE THE SYNCHRONIC WAREHOUSE

The firm's "lofty" interior, replete with timber beams and industrial lighting, recalls the studied casualness of its idealized consumer counterpart. Yet the work regime here is conducted at the frantic pace of "disorganized capitalism."⁹ Here, buildings emerge less as complete entities than as components that are joined together and moved between service contexts as

quickly as possible. The traditional linear sequence of operation, beginning with initial design, and concluding with specifications and shop drawings, has been uncoupled: the "design" is typically supplied by an "outside consultant," in some cases after the working drawings have begun. For a recent office tower overseas, the pilings for the building were planned to allow multiple configurations for the building's height and location of the service core: the developer offered the prime tenant a choice of different facades, each by a different signature architect. Work on the cladding details began before the so-called "design" architect was named, and the interior package began ahead of the working drawings for the core and structure. A senior executive for the developer of the project describes the process as "turbo-track architecture."

This conception of professional knowledge, in which everyone is working on "packages" instead of buildings, is accompanied by a reorganization of architectural identity. The dissociation of the technical knowledge of building from any relationship to the site, and its social and historical context is subsumed under the sign of service, where technical proficiency becomes the primary standard of professionalism. The segmented way in which buildings are produced often mirrors the socially segregated landscapes they constitute and are designed for. The millions of square feet the firm is currently detailing include a completely self-enclosed, high-security social universe for a US-based financial services conglomerate, containing a head office and "corporate university" with its own "hotel"; a headquarters for a multinational bank located within an urban "enterprise zone" surrounded by other white collars services and amenities: as well as more mundane projects, including a suburban "back of house" service center for a major Canadian bank—a low echelon social bubble accessible only by car, with deep floor plates and its own internal cafeteria. Each of these projects is a socially homogenous island that is serviced by a second layer of invisible and low paid workers who polish the form after construction is complete. At the same time, the component elements are interchangeable, and in this respect the firm is continuously at work on one space of 10 million square feet at various stages of construction, spread across three continents.¹⁰

THE WORKSHOPS OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The "turbo track" working method of corporate practice finds its academic equivalent in models of post-Fordist architectural education that are flexible and decentered. In postindustrial economies, these are replacing the standardized year system of modernist consensus with smaller teaching clusters, defined by a plurality of competing design ideologies. The national and regional variations of the system are part of its flexibility. Here I will offer only the most general outline of its development within the Anglo-American academic system, focusing less on the content of courses than the pedagogy of professional

identity that is constituted by the way they are administered and consumed in a larger system of knowledge and power.

It is now almost three decades since the late Alvin Boyarsky arrived at the Architectural Association in London from the Chicago Circle Campus of the University of Illinois to reshape the school's floundering program into what became known as the Unit System. At the time Boyarsky took on the AA, the school was near collapse, having refused assimilation into the state-run system, and as a result, losing its mandatory grant status. It was forced to generate its operating budget through student fees, which rose quickly to levels that far outstripped those of any comparable British institution, making the AA inaccessible to all but the most wealthy "home" students. The division of the school into "units" or specialized design studios (where a 10-12 students study under a well-known designer/architect) allowed it to immediately differentiate itself (both pedagogically and from an international marketing standpoint), from the homogenous models that defined other schools in the UK at the time. The apparent open-endedness of the school was counter-balanced by the now legendary status of Boyarsky as the signature editor behind the signature architects at the school.¹¹

In retrospect, what was promoted in the '70s as a radical assault on the institutions of higher education has transformed into its reverse. In the UK, where the Thatcher era ended with the de facto abolition of tenure and dramatic reductions in full-time positions, the unit system has proved instrumental in managing an educational context now organized around part-time, contract labor. The system allows the fragmentation of the learning process into parcels that can be "outsourced" to part-time teachers; at the same time, because the system operates through the "theming" of architectural ideologies, it repays lost wages in the symbolic capital of an evolving architectural star system. The poster advertising the current academic year at the Bartlett School of Architecture, which now operates a version of the unit system, encapsulates this symbolic order, by superimposing the school's name as a surrealist product label across a random grid of choice.¹²

In the US, flexible models have emerged differentially in relation to their Fordist counterparts: many graduate schools now construct their curriculum as epochal transitions in miniature, moving students from the older year system to "units" or "concentrations" in the final segment of the program. The result is to establish the latter as the progressive development of the former. It is perhaps not surprising that this system is now finding its spatial realization in the urban loft or converted warehouse, as in the recent move by Sci Arc to an industrial warehouse in downtown Los Angeles¹³, or the earlier move by CCAC to a converted bus shed in San Francisco. In each case, the warehouse is appropriated as a flexible space that periodizes the Fordist industrial past as a nostalgic frame for the

education of "symbolic analysts" in the post-industrial present.¹⁴

Any discussion of "post-Fordist" tendencies in US-based architectural education is immediately complicated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which seeks to harmonize economic activity (including professional services) to a single set of regulatory norms that will ultimately link Canada, the U.S. and Mexico together. Indeed, NAAB guidelines are not only employed as the basis for the accreditation of schools in Canada; they have also become increasingly influential in international contexts outside the domain of NAFTA.¹⁵ While the emergence of pluralist, "unit"-based models may represent an attempt to redefine the professional as a flexible specialist (and permit innovations in the re-structuring of intellectual labor in universities that are similar to those in the U.K.), such practices also need to be understood in relation to an institutional and administrative structure that regulates architectural education, through both formal and informal means, according to the demands of a US-based model. The two tendencies at work in this process – towards flexibility and standardization – underscore the logic of globalization as a chain of related but contradictory effects, simultaneously local and global, differentiated and centralized, at the level of architectural education.

My intention is not to argue that an increasingly "flexibilized" system in its various forms is better or worse than the vertically organized one it is transforming, but rather, to point to the redefinition of the relationship between education and professional practice it helps to institute. Because the flexible system is institutionalized as a democracy of consumer choice, it leads to a disaggregated program template, offering a potentially infinite number of ways to sequence knowledge. The student obtains the "right to assemble" differentiated models of learning out of the raw materials supplied by the system. On the one hand, this is positive, because – if aligned with ongoing dialogues around contested political visions and social issues – it allows the possibility of critical engagement with political movements, both within and outside the academy. Recent program concentrations emerging in the US and the UK concerned with the politics of race and identity, or "architecture and activism"¹⁶ are the beginning of such links. On the other hand, the system can also dissolve into a landscape of atomized difference that is not dissimilar to the "packaging" of knowledge in turbo-track practice, thereby setting up education as the uncritical staging ground for "technified" practice.

Perhaps it is around the issues of time, and its control and compression as the corollary of globalization, that this turbo-relationship becomes clearest. Time is the ideological binding agent that increasingly holds operations in both practice and education together, while keeping their respective elements apart. The outline of the synchronic warehouse appears amid the blur of mounting deadlines and assignments. Time manage-

ment becomes an essential skill. Time must be produced together with assigned work in order to remain in the system, establishing the production of time as an index of success.

CONCLUSION: LOFTY SPACES

If the cultural critic Bill Readings is correct, the issues I have outlined here are at least partly consistent with wider changes in the structure of the Anglo American academy since the 1970s. He has argued that the salient feature of the university today is its continuing claim of separate status even as it moves more closely to embrace corporate wealth and its management techniques. We have gone, Readings argues, from the ethnocentric university of national culture, to the transnational university of excellence, where excellence is defined according to abstract statistical measures, accountants' surveys, marketing campaigns and the repositioning of students as customers. The call for "excellence," Readings writes, "overcomes the problem of the question of value across disciplines, since excellence is the common denominator of good research in all fields."¹⁷ The rhetoric of excellence thus allows the university "to understand itself solely in terms of the (technical) structure of corporate administration."¹⁸ As David Harvey has noted, a "key slippage then occurs, as the quite proper demand that the university be accountable gets translated into the reductionist idea that everything is simply a matter of accounting."¹⁹

Capitalism expands through the conquest of uneven geographies, displacing the underside of exploitation to "other" places. I have suggested here that these techniques of displacement are now redefining the politics of architectural education and professional practice. Much of the critical work on globalization in architecture has focused on the architectural object as both the site and agent of globalization. In doing so, the chain of productive relations embedded in building, and the networks of power they construct across time and space, are left unexamined. This allows architecture to claim a radical politics at the level of design, while perpetuating the very conditions it claims to transform at the level of professional practice. Indeed, recent discussions of professional practice have largely adopted the neo-liberal agenda of globalization, and virtually collapsed it into a single Darwinian narrative of "adapt or die."²⁰

Architectural theory and criticism has remained largely silent about these changes. This is partly to do with theory's space in architectural education, which, as I have suggested, is itself an effect of the emergence of the flexible system of difference I have described above. Any attempt to deal with the impact of globalization in the realm outside architecture's institutions must simultaneously unravel it from within, turning the operations of theory back on the discipline in a way that expands and deepens our understanding of architectural practices as power-laden cultural practices. This would move architecture beyond a concern with uncritical assimilation to

globalizing professional norms, and towards an understanding of how those norms have changed over time, what is at stake in them, and for whom.

NOTES

¹The global dynamics of uneven development has been widely examined in Marxist geography and urban studies. The phenomenon was initially studied at the regional and national levels in pioneering works such as Dorson Massey's *Spatial Divisions of Labor: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Neil Smith's *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991). The geographical displacement of production is also central to David Harvey's thesis on Postfordism, as outlined in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1989). While Harvey situates uneven development in an international frame, he does so from an explicitly Euro-American perspective, and in relation to the so-called "crisis condition" of advanced capitalism in the West. More recently scholars have theorized the global reorganization of production in terms of transnational social networks, in a way that acknowledges the multicentric basis of global production, thereby moving away from "core/periphery" models that locate causality in the core. For an overview of this debate see Michael P. Smith, *Transnational Urbanism* (Oxford: Blackwell UK, 2001). For interesting case studies that further challenge the core/periphery model and introduce questions of gender and race see: Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Take On the Global Factory* (South End Press, 2001), Barbara Hanlon, *Women and Work in the Global Factory: The Case Study of the Maquiladoras in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985)

²The problem is clearly formulated by A.D. King in "Architecture, Capital and the Globalization of Culture," in Mike Featherstone ed., *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization, and Modernity* (London: Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990)pp. 211-222

³Dana Cuff, "The Political Paradoxes of Practice: Political Economy of Local and Global Practice," *ARQ* Vol. 3 no. 1 (1999), pp. 77-88

⁴J. Crew Fall 2000 catalogue (Lynchburg, PA: J. Crew Corp, 2000)

⁵I have borrowed this term from Arjun Appadurai, who writes: "The past is now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting, to which recourse can be taken as appropriate, depending on the movie to be made, the scene to be enacted, the hostages to be rescued." See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 30

⁶Sassen defines global cities as "command and control centers" for the global economy, where flows of information and capital intersect and are managed. See: *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001)

⁷The economic "harmonization" of Canadian economic regulations with those in the US, and the consequent concern about the loss of Canadian sovereignty, have been widely reported and studied in Canada following the full implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The agreement is designed to permit unrestricted movement of goods and services (including architectural services) between Canada and the US by gradually eliminating trade barriers between the two countries. The agreement has intensified Canada's "branch plant" relationship with the US. For an interesting historical overview of Canada's changing relationship with the US through the auto industry (for which the term "branch plant economy" was originally coined) see William C. Green and Ernest J. Yanarella (eds.), *North American Auto Unions in Crisis: Lean Production as Contested Terrain* (Buffalo: SUNY Press, 1996). For an overview of the nationalist response to NAFTA see Maude Barlow and Bruce Campbell, *Take Back the Nation 2: Meeting the Threat of NAFTA* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1993).

⁸The hierarchical spatial segmentation of white collar corporate labor has been ongoing since at least the end of World War II, and has intensified in the last three decades through changes in transportation and information technology.

For an interesting overview of the spatial reorganization of corporate labor, see Louise Mozingo, "The Corporate Estate in The U.S.A., 1954-64: 'Thoroughly Modern in Concept, but . . . down to earth and rugged.'" *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* Vol. 20 No. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 2000), pp. 25-56. For a detailed discussion of the reorganization of white collar labor in the context of global economic social and spatial restructuring, see: Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism. Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001)

⁹The term, referring to the spatial decentering of the operations of multinational capital, was initially developed by Claus Offe in *Disorganized Capitalism: Contemporary Transformations of Work and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985) and adapted to geography and urban studies by Scott Lash and John Urry in *The End of Organized Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK: The Polity Press, 1987)

¹⁰The social and spatial implications of global financial enclaves are analyzed in detail in Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin in "Glocal Infrastructure and the Splintering of Boundaries," in *Splintering Urbanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 304-389

¹¹See Katerina Ruedi, "Radical Revision," *Building Design* (March 15, 1991), pp. 22-24

¹²Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, promotional poster, academic year 2001-2

¹³Urban boosters in Los Angeles cite the relocation of SciArc to an industrial building in downtown Los Angeles as further evidence of the city's urban "revitalization." See for example, D.J. Waldie, "Catching the Urban Wave," in the *New York Times*, November 27, 2001. The current strategy to attract corporate capital to the center of LA with cultural and lifestyle amenities (of which SciArc is an anchor) arguably began with the Bunker Hill redevelopment

documented by Mike Davis in *City of Quartz* (London and New York: Verso, 1991)

¹⁴See Robert Reich, "The Education of a Symbolic Analyst 1& 11" in *The Work of Nations* (New York: Vintage, 1992), pp. 225-242

¹⁵See the NAAB's official web site at <http://www.naab.org/index.htm>, which now includes a section on the NAAB's international policy: "Given the increasing globalization of the profession, including American architects practicing throughout the world, architects from other countries increasingly seeking to work in the United States, . . . it seems evident that the NAAB has an implied obligation to provide assistance when it is requested, and when it truly can be of benefit to those nations."

¹⁶A graduate concentration in Architecture and Activism was implemented at the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2000. A graduate level program in Race, Identity and Architecture at Kingston University, was in the planning stages at the University of Kingston School of Architecture between 2000-2001.

¹⁷Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp.23-24

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 30

¹⁹See also David Harvey's assessment of the significance of Readings' arguments in "University Inc.," in the *Atlantic Monthly* (October, 1998).

²⁰Globalization has been widely reported in the commercial architectural press, where it has, for the most part, been represented according to the terms of neo-liberal expansion: globalization is understood as a "natural" stage in the development of markets, to which the profession (and by extension, society) must conform. See for example, Brian Richardson "Adapt or Die in a New Economy," in *Architect's Journal* (February 26, 1998), pp. 56-57, and Katherine MacInnes, "The Challenge of Globalization," in *World Architecture* 62 (January, 1998), pp. 92-93.