

STARS, SWATCHES, AND SWEETS

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Thoughts on Post-Fordist Production and the Star System in Architecture

BY ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES

Architects tend to refer to themselves as visual people. Though we often employ this as an excuse for our poor writing skills, it also points out our fascination with visual information, our interest in making sense out of visual relationships and our love for making things that are understood largely in visual, as well as visceral, terms. Lately however—perhaps because I have been writing more than designing—I have been thinking about those aspects of our profession that are less visible, such as the economic conditions of production, and how they relate to that which is made highly visible, such as the Star System. I'm referring to the structure of contemporary architectural practice and the way in which its discourse elevates certain designers to the status of stars. The stars' works, published in magazines and monographs, are what Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital" in a global system. As status symbols, the buildings are valued for their ability to portray their patrons as world-class consumers. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or Richard Meier's Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona are prime examples of this. The Star System's high visibility aesthetics of consumption appears to be linked to the visual suppression of the conditions of production. This is particularly true today because of the way post-industrial technologies and post-fordist economic practices have widened the gap between production and consumption. Though this gap is most evident in items of mass production, from electronics to clothing, it may also explain why the Star

System has emerged with such force in architecture in recent decades.

fordism

Post-fordist production can be most easily understood in relation to the fordist model of the assembly line which dominated American manufacturing from the 1920s to the 1970s. Dependent upon steady labor, it evolved into a dynamic, but relatively stable, unionized system where productivity increases were tied to wage increases which in turn increased consumer demand, further sustaining the system. Henry Ford is credited with recognizing that it was in his interest to pay his workers enough that they could afford to buy one of his cars. Rather than skimping on wages, he kept costs down with the economies of scale of the assembly line and routinized tasks. A pyramidal system of large central plants run by large corporations, it nonetheless recognized its dependence upon its producers also being consumers and paid relatively high wages to those at its base.¹ For the majority of the population, incomes rose and wealth was more equitably distributed than in any period before or after. The physical work involved with making things was not only respected, it was honored as "The American Way" and the sure route to joining the middle class and its consumer lifestyle.

The realms of consumption and production were also integrated in the product itself. The assembly line was geared to turning out mass quantities of the same product, an *objet type*. Model Ts were only made in black. Their exposed frame and joints were designed to ease the process of assembly so as to further reduce their cost and make them more affordable to more consumers. It isn't until the industry had expanded to multiple plants that more models became available, and car bodies designed to appeal to different consumer groups were placed over the frame. This gradual separation of the exterior package from the internal performance of the engine and frame, a separation that can be considered in terms of a distinction between the realms of the consumer and the producer, now allows individual consumers to design their own option packages of finishes and accessories. This flexibility and ability to customize the product is one of the key aspects of post-fordist production.

post-fordism

By the 1970s the rigidities of the fordist model proved increasingly cumbersome and detrimental in the face of the saturation of consumer demand at home, stagflation, and increased competition from the recovered economies of Japan

and Germany.² As a result, manufacturers began to adopt the more flexible strategies of post-fordist production methods. Computers and telecommunications allowed capital to become more flexible and mobile. Instead of high volume production, manufacturers began to concentrate on offering higher value—more customizable options, more attention to consumer differentiation. Instead of the less stratified, one-model-fits-all approach of fordism, post-fordism distinguished deluxe models from base models, allowing for greater class distinctions, or what in advertising circles is referred to as market segmentation. This was enabled by the growth in information technologies and their application towards more sophisticated market research and automated production.

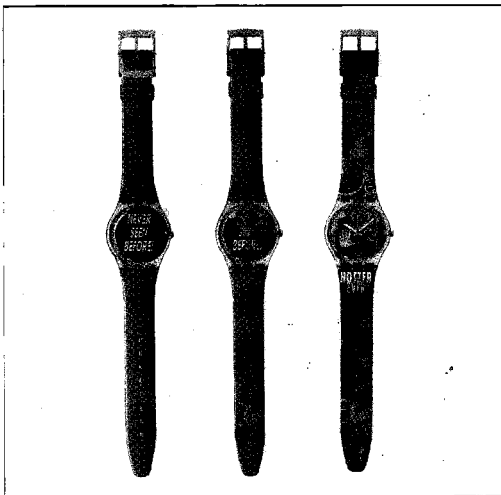
Today, robotics and retoolable machinery are able to produce small batches of differentiated products for different segments of the market, (while also allowing manufacturers to rely less on unionized labor and suffer less the demand for

wage increases in the face of inflation without productivity gains.) The ability of Advertising to create consumer desire for products independent of their performance plays a larger role in industry. Increasingly, the role of the designer is directed towards exciting the consumer, less regard is given to the performance or means of construction/production of the object. The strategy of Swatch watch design—various surface designs laid over the same, inexpensive functional core components—exemplifies the role and position in production of the designer in post-fordist production.³ This role is not to enhance any functionality of the

watch: it is to enhance sales. By producing various, distinctive watches, these designers allow consumers to distinguish themselves through their individual selections.

Swatch watch design is analogous to architecture at a variety of levels. Option packages on finishes in new condominiums or houses in subdivisions come to mind. First, buyers are allowed to customize the home through selecting vinyl siding versus brick veneer, or laminate versus wood kitchen cabinet doors. In these examples, the architecture is assumed to be the unchanging template, while the surface

style is a changeable commodity selected by the consumer. In large commercial buildings, the same model holds, only the architect takes the place of the consumer in designing the surfaces. Referring to how formulaic the unchanging template has become, Robert Gutman quotes a large Texas developer saying, "We've done so many large office buildings, we're able to make 90% of the decisions before the architect draws a line."⁴ More like the



Swatch or car-designer, the architect is increasingly seen as the designer of the package alone, the surfaces designed to appeal to consumers' emotions and desires. The moment of invention occurs in the representational or associational imagery, the dressing applied over a conventional construction.

postmodernism as niche marketing

Postmodern architecture's focus on decorated sheds, symbolic surfaces, and referential meaning participates in exactly this kind of attention to the packaging. Architect



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Stephen Kieran has described postmodernism's varied signature styles in terms of niche marketing.⁵ From a marketer's perspective, the designs of Morphosis, Richard Meier, or Robert Stern can easily be respectively matched to their appeal within particular consumer "lifestyle clusters" of *Bohemian Mix*, *Furs and Station Wagons*, or *Blueblood Estates*.⁶ By the same logic, the design movements of the past thirty years, (structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstructivism, neo-rationalism, neo-historicism, critical regionalism, etc.) can be seen as a collective effort by the profession to provide consumers with the level of product choice consistent with the expectations of post-fordist production.

This is counter to the movements' original intentions. Postmodernism's emphasis on theory and cultural criticism was intended to orient the profession away from the mainstream consumerism that had come to dominate it in the fifties and sixties,⁷

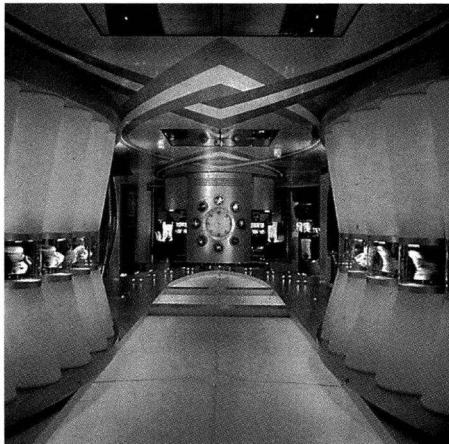
towards a more intellectual basis for form-making. The formalism of Colin Rowe, the populism of Venturi and Scott Brown, followed by structuralism, and later post-structuralism operated as uncontaminated domains in which architects advanced the discipline independent of either the realms of consumption or production. By focusing on form as the vehicle for meaning Venturi and Scott Brown's decorated sheds, Rossi's typological transformations, and Eisenman's deconstructions all maintain critical distance from the social and economic conditions of society itself. Issues of production and use are seen as largely irrelevant to the meaning of the building. They are dismissed as

circumstantial, as outside the essence of architecture. The result is that both deconstructivism and postmodern historicism have become styles that hardly challenge the social systems within which they operate. The various 'isms' of postmodernism have tried to redesign and redefine architecture independent of trying to reform society or social experience. Whether conventionally expressed or not, social hierarchies and the modes of production are accepted as givens, outside the concern (or control) of the architect.⁸

The focus on theory, like the focus on form, has distanced design from the concerns of production. Like Swatches or different car bodies, the various postmodernisms have focused the role of the designer solely on the visible meanings conveyed by the package.

the star system

The Star System embodies the changed role of the designer under post-fordism and within post-modernism. Rather than being called upon to inte-



grate expression and construction, art and industry, or the realms of consumption and production, the designer is increasingly focused solely on eliciting consumer desire. The media—magazines, monographs, museum exhibitions, even television talk shows—feed and construct consumer desire through their promotion of ever new images, which it is the Star designer's role to provide. This dissemination of images and discourse about design serves the cultural elite's need to distinguish themselves from the masses. If the mass produced *objet type* served a growing middle class, the proliferation of design choices under post-fordism serve a more differentiated social structure—especially with the



media's association of products with different market segments and ranking of their desirability. The Star designers tend to serve the most elite class and its institutions.⁹ Beyond providing rationally based buildings, the Star designers provide the emotionally based images of symbolic capital. This capital is as international as the media through which it is conveyed.

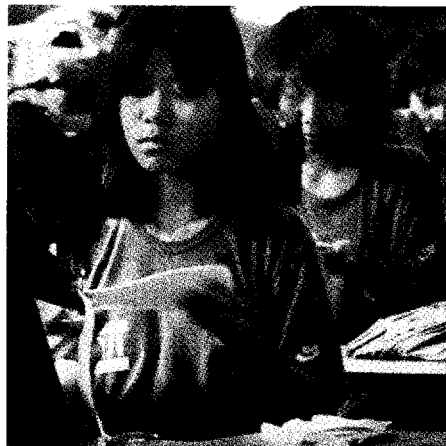
the globalization of consumption

Renowned business consultant Kenichi Ohmae has studied global consumption patterns and observes that once a developing country's per capita income rises above \$5000 US, its consumers' taste preferences converge and become more like those of the US.¹⁰ The globalization of consumption patterns is most apparent at the upper end of the income scale where Rolexes, Rolls Royces and, increasingly, Star Architects are internationally recognized. A

consequence of this is that architecture, like a watch or a car, becomes a commodity, a mobile status symbol, autonomous from the society and place in which it is built. Aldo Rossi, known for his interest in vernacular types and a place-based architecture, decried the fact that when hired to build a hotel in Japan the client did not want it to reflect Japanese collective memory. He wanted a "signature" (i.e., Italian) Rossi building.¹¹ Jean Nouvel has commented on a similar phenomenon within France. Since the construction of Mitterand's *Grand Projects*, Nouvel claims that the mayors of all the other French cities now informally compete with one another to get their own buildings by the

same architects.¹² The point is not about asking talented designers to work with and express qualities about the particular people and place. It is about producing a recognizable name-brand product that identifies the patrons—often the city itself—as members of an elite. The designer's role becomes that of making the city into a consumer of architecture.

the globalization of production



The mobility of Star architects to work in various corners of the globe is only possible given the mobility of capital and information in the post-fordist, post-industrial economy. Robert Reich, former secretary of labor under Clinton, has described the global nature of contemporary production at length. He writes: "Consider some examples: Precision ice hockey equipment is designed in Sweden, financed in Canada, and assembled in Cleveland

and Denmark for distribution in North America and Europe respectively, out of alloys whose molecular structure was researched and patented in Delaware and fabricated in Japan."¹³

Traditionally constructed out of materials at hand, buildings today are not so different from Reich's hockey skates. Sweets Catalog places a vast array of prefabricated components at the architects hand even if these components need to be shipped from across the country to the building site. On particularly large or complex projects, architects search out materials and labor worldwide. Renzo Piano's Kansai



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Airport is so large that the demand for electricians and welders during construction far surpassed local, even regional supply. At the peak of construction, 10,000 laborers speaking 30 different languages were working on site.¹⁴ At the same time, the contract for the pre-fabricated steel components was sourced to various international suppliers so as to pull on multiple steel stocks rather than risk depleting a single supplier before completion. A different but related example is the CADD-CAM (Computer Aided Drafting and Design—Computer Aided Manufacturing) process employed by Frank Gehry's office. Using software

produced for the automobile and aerospace industries, Gehry's office uses a triple axle camera to generate digital models from wood and chipboard models with complex curves and unclassifiable geometries. The information from the digital model can be fed more or less directly to triple-axle milling, cutting, and bending machines to produce the extremely customized pieces making up Gehry's sculptural surfaces. However, the machines capable of handling such

information on pieces the size of building materials, are globally dispersed. Jim Glymph from Gehry's office describes the bidding process in global terms: they tend to have the stone cut in France, the metal bent in Kansas, the steel milled in Japan, etc., etc.¹⁵ Both Gehry's and Piano's buildings are being produced more and more like cars or hockey skates. The global resources that are marshaled together could be distributed anywhere. In terms of production, such architecture is a mobile commodity.

spatial separation of producers from consumers

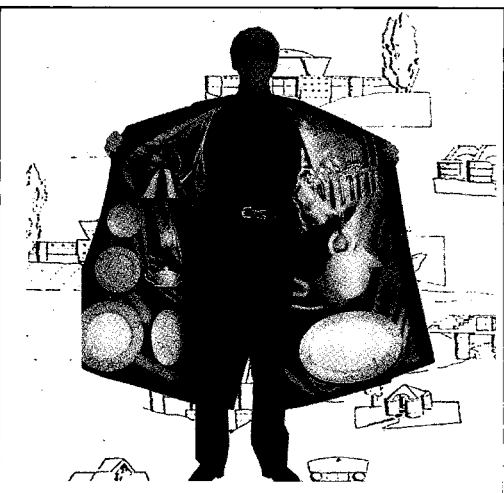
In architecture, the post-fordist separation of the realm of consumption from the realm of production is most visible in the Star System. But even more significant, although far less visible, is the spatial separation of producers from consumers that has accompanied the widening income gap between them. While the richest fifth of the world's population had 30 times the wealth of the poorest fifth in 1960, by 1989 they controlled 59 times more wealth.¹⁶ This is the

same time period of the ascendancy of post-fordism, the weakening of unions, the increasing mobility of capital, and the outsourcing of labor. Instead of Henry Ford's commitment to pay his producers enough to also be his consumers, post-fordism relies on cheap labor, often in developing countries, and then sells its goods to consumers back in the developed economies.

Post-fordism's competitiveness relies on uneven development and the spatial

separation and distinction of producers from consumers. The Star System's almost exclusive engagement with elite consumers reinforces the invisibility of labor and production.

In the developed countries, this is augmented by the way the service economy has redefined the nature of work. Manual labor or the making of tangible things has been devalued relative to working with numbers or information. Reich divides jobs into three categories: symbolic analysts, in-person services, and routine producers. While the salaries of



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symbolic analysts have soared, the other two have fallen since the 1960s.¹⁷ Production and labor are increasingly invisible. Digital processes appear effortless and have generated discussion of the end of work. Manufacturing has moved out of the cities, and in many cases, out of the G7 countries. Our cities and public spaces are dominated solely by the spaces of consumption.¹⁸ While we are increasingly surrounded by elaborate Nuketowns and banal strip malls, we get little reference to the third world sweatshops on which both depend for much of their production. The global decentralization of the economy is mirrored in the exurban decentralization of sprawl where gated communities and wealthy enclaves further separate the rich from the poor, making each invisible to the other.

For all of its globalization, post-fordism has in fact produced a world of widened gaps and separations—between rich and poor, consumers and producers, the visible and the invisible. That the Star System tends to exacerbate these gaps raises the questions about architecture's relationship to society and ideals of social progress. Perhaps this is why architecture—like so much of contemporary culture—has stars but seems to lack leaders. Role-models are in short supply. Postmodern culture has grown cynical of utopian efforts to reform or lead society. Instead, architectural discourse and the Star System have focused on reforming architecture itself, mostly by retooling the package. What if architecture focused instead on making visible that which has become invisible? Imagine where that might lead.

notes

¹In 1997 the average hourly wage, including a significant benefits package for a low-skilled worker, at General Motors was \$44. For long the largest private employer in the US, General Motors was just surpassed by Wal-Mart whose average hourly wage, including benefits is \$10. Rebecca Blumenstein, Louise Lee, "The Changing Lot of the Hourly Worker", *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 1997, p.B1.

²By 1970 demand in US markets was largely satiated: 90% of households had a television, a refrigerator and a washing machine. By 1975, half of all Americans—as opposed to one quarter in 1950—owned a car. Michael Piore, Charles Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 184–87.

³Unlike other post-fordist products Swatches are all similarly priced and do

not in and of themselves, exacerbate class distinctions with luxury versus base models. However, according to Swatch President and CEO Nicolas Hayek, much of the company's success has to do with its deliberate positioning of itself as a relatively low-priced Swiss watch, in the company of Rolex, Piaget, etc.

⁴Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice, A Critical View*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), 34.

⁵Stephen Kieran, "The Architecture of Plenty. Theory and Design in the Marketing Age", *The Harvard Architecture Review*, vol. VI, "Patronage", (New York: Rizzoli, 1987).

⁶*Bohemian Mix, Furs and Station Wagons, and Blueblood Estates* are among the 40 Lifestyle Clusters of used to distinguish market segments in Michael J. Weiss, *The Clustering of America*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

⁷The mainstreaming of modern architecture to the American middle class through How-To books and manufacturers brochures is discussed in Mark Jarzombek, "Good Life Modernism and Beyond" in *Cornell Journal of Architecture*, vol.4 (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1977), 76–93.

⁸This is especially true of much of the recent French architecture presented in this fall's lecture series at MIT. The competition system encourages young architects to challenge formal conventions, but not the programmatic or social dictates of the brief. The results can be a very empty formalism.

⁹Weld Coxe, author of several books and articles on the marketing of architectural services, describes the profession in terms of three types of firms. He recognizes the role of the Star System in his first category: strong-idea firms. Then come: strong-service firms, (the corporate firms and standard AIA practitioners) and strong-delivery firms, (those doing formulaic work, on-time, on-budget, no leaks.) The research was conducted with David Maister and is reported in Coxe, et. al. "Charting Your Course", in *Architectural Technology*, May/June 1986, 53.

¹⁰Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State, the Rise of Regional Economies*, (New York: Free Press, 1995).

¹¹Conversation with the author, April, 1992.

¹²Lecture by Jean Nouvel, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1994.

¹³Reich, *The Work of Nations, Preparing Ourselves for 21st - Century Capitalism* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1992), 112.

¹⁴Lecture by Renzo Piano, MIT, Department of Architecture, October 28, 1997.

¹⁵An exception to this process is Gehry's "Fred and Ginger" office building in Prague. Local labor was so cheap that the local bid to hand cut the stone and construct the formwork beat out the automated machines. Lecture by Jim Glymph, MIT, Department of Architecture, April, 1997.

¹⁶Ingomar Hauchler, Paul M. Kennedy, eds, *Global Trends, The World Almanac of Development and Peace* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 53.

¹⁷Reich, *ibid*.

¹⁸Retail floor space in the US grew 80% in the 1980s! "Reinventing the Regional Mall," in *Urban Land*, February 1994, as referenced in Constance E. Beaumont, *How Superstore Sprawl Can Harm Communities* (Washington DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1994), 3.

Ellen Dunham-Jones is a practicing architect and an Assistant Professor of Architectural Design (with Green Card status into the History Theory Criticism Section) in the Department of Architecture at MIT.