

*By way of an Introduction: These pages contain individual chapters from my 1990 book, *Postmodern Sophistications*. I have obtained the rights to the essays am making them available separately. The entire text of the book is also available on Research Gate.*

The underlying aim of this collection of essays was to question the opposition between the Sophists and Plato. That classic dispute has been the model for many discussions of tensions within our society:: on the one hand you have the clever manipulative salesmen who care nothing about truth. On the other hand the rigorous scientific investigation that never quite makes contact with politics. Rootless nihilism vs. naturally grounded values. Anarchy vs. Rules.

In this book I developed a pragmatic middleground, using themes from Heidegger and Dewey; in later writings I rely more on Hegel. But the point remains the same: don't listen to the Straussians and others who try to force on our politics or art or philosophy a simple opposition between truth-loving traditionalists (Socrates) and flaky relativistic postmoderns (the Sophists). It was not so simple in Greece and it's not so simple today.

Part of the book deals with postmodern critiques of rational knowledge, with Lyotard and Habermas on center stage. Their opposition between postmodern and modern views remains relevant, although post-1990 developments in deconstruction and critical theory have widened and deepened the debate. The points made in these essays remain useful, if not complete.

The second part of the book deals with architecture. The word postmodern has gone out of fashion in architecture. But the earlier use of the term for an attempt to bring substantive content into formal modernity retains important.

My conclusions about postmodern architecture's failure to escape modern distance from history also remain true, as does my argument that that proclaimed modern distance from history is itself an illusion, that we are more embedded in history than the moderns wanted to think, although that embodiment is not as total and restrictive as we have imagined true of our ancestors.

If you find any of these ideas useful, true, provocative, let me know. If you find them absurd or useless airy nothings, I'd still be delighted to learn from your reactions.

David Kolb, January 2018

Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Bates College

davkolb@gmail.com, www.dkolb.org, mobile 547 868 4713

This final essay asks how we bring together the multiple dimensions of our historical location.

14. Building Together / Buildings Together

We have to build together since our products refuse to stand apart. Despite what is said in the critiques of modernity, we need to be mindful of the whole. Unlike the other arts in which totality has been attacked, architecture exists in a finite real space. Buildings stand together in the space of our daily activities, not only in the space created by criticism and artistic reference. Like texts and paintings, buildings may have complex relations one to another, with all the "intertextuality" desired, but buildings also stand immobile blocking one another's view. One painting does not have to be demolished to make room for another. Places cannot ignore one another completely; too much must be shared by way of services and infrastructure. A city forms a whole no matter what we do, and we live with the results. So even if we are opposed to the notion of a total vision, we have to care for the city as a whole. But what is this care that is not a total vision?

With this question we return to issues raised earlier with the Sophists and the Habermas/Lyotard debate. Can we be self-critical without a universal project? Socrates either never finishes, or appears as one more cabal. If his wisdom is unavailable, we might try liberal tolerance, but the city cannot be cared for by the simple principle of respecting one another's projects. There is not enough space and time, and we share too much. Your building may overshadow mine, or strain the transit system, or destroy the scale. When

mutual respect gives way to regulation and bargaining, the planning czars become only another voice in the crowd, since there are many kinds of force that can be brought to bear by all the parties concerned. Lyotard's more avant-garde vision of justice also fails in the city context; faced with building together (rather than against) it reduces to a liberalism that does not demand internal self-criticism.

I have urged self-criticism by metaphorical extension and rereading the past. In our world of many languages and forms of life, we need a multiplicity of interactions and a care for the whole, but how do we *build* that?[begin note] Jencks contends that "the truth of city building today is that good architecture and good urbanism are opposed. . . . good architects, like good artists, are primarily concerned with the language of form, while good urbanists must have an equal commitment to the things that erode such a language: compromise, democracy, pluralism, entrepreneurial skill and patience" (1987, 258-9). No one can deny the difficulty of the problems of building together, but they are not helped by a modernist isolation of the language of form, even if this is the way most architects are trained.

Is there a Postmodern World?

One way to unify the whole is to demand that it express some unified spirit of the age. Buildings gather up our world, and if we feel our world is distinctive we may want a distinctive new style. So it was in the nineteenth century's search for a style appropriate to their perception that a new age had dawned (cf. Crook, 1987). So it was again with the modern movement's claim that the new technological and democratic world demanded a new purity in design. Celebrating that new world turned out to be difficult, since bureaucracy and power kept slipping into what were supposed to embody progress and democracy.

So it is that postmoderns now claim the world has changed again and needs a new architecture. The self-consciously pluralistic world needs eclectic historical references, twisting and colliding styles, and irony that calls attention to itself. Again there has been a problem with what is being celebrated, the quoted historical traditions or the self-consciousness that does the quoting. Does postmodernism reveal our continuity with

traditional worlds, or does it level all traditions into a bland availability for consumption? Can it care for the whole, or only flatten it out?

With these questions we return to the issue Hegel raised in speaking of "the substance of consciousness." The modernists claimed that there was no longer any substantial content inherent in our lives. Self and society were freed from the limitations of tradition, and without any except pragmatic restrictions we faced an indefinitely open field of possibilities; this would find its embodiment in an architecture of pure form.

Postmodern writers reject these claims to purity and universality. I argued, however, that in important ways many postmoderns continue modernism. Both presuppose a version of distanced subjectivity (rational or ironic). Weber's detached manipulative subject returns in the guise of the chameleon architect who seeks to embody the postmodern condition in building forms that treat all history as equally accessible.

Notice that both modernists and postmodernists share the presupposition that there is a unified theme to our world that ought to be expressed in our buildings. While they proclaimed a revolution against nineteenth century historical styles, the modernist pioneers agreed that it was the business of the architect to express the spirit of the age.

Modern architecture] is based on the same Victorian presuppositions about architecture as undergirded the Gothic revival more than a century ago: it results, that is, from a self-conscious attempt by the architect to invent a style that will express what he presumes to be the unifying spirit of his age and that will at the same time (paradoxically enough) propagate and inculcate that spirit in a recalcitrant populace which grievously lacks it. (Smith 1971, 81)

Here are a series of nineteenth and twentieth century statements of that presupposition:

1808: The design of almost every age and country has a peculiar character . . . [every house] should maintain the character of a house of the age and country in which it is erected. (Richard Payne Knight, quoted in Crook 1987, 30)

1860: [We need] an indigenous style of our own for this age of new creations. (Thomas Harris, quoted in Crook 1987, 138)

1863: [Is] the nineteenth century condemned to end without ever possessing an architecture of its own? Is it to transmit to posterity nothing but pastiches and hybrids? (Viollet-le-Duc, quoted in Crook 1987, 85)

1902: Art as the commentator or the recorder of human life, reflecting not only its physical aspects but its mental attitude . . . registers the prevailing sentiments of its period. (Walter Crane, in the Arts and Crafts Movement, quoted in Smith 1971, 16)

1906: At no time and in no instance has Architecture been other than an index of the flow of the thought of the people--an emanation from the inmost life of the people. (Louis Sullivan, quoted in Smith 1971, 16)

1923: The character of an epoch is epitomized in its buildings. . . . A vital architectural spirit, rooted in the entire life of a people, represents the interrelation of all phases of creative effort, all arts, all techniques. (Walter Gropius, quoted from Smith 1971, 21).

1923: A great epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit. . . . Style is a unity of principle animating all the work of an epoch, the result of a state of mind which has its own special character. (Le Corbusier 1931, 3)

1983: The world now emerging is searching freely in memory, because it knows how to find its own "difference" in the removed repetitions and utilization of the entire past. (Portoghesi 1983, 13)

The delicate question is this: *are we now living in a world whose unified meaning is a new kind of multiplicity and mixture? Or does that multiplicity mean that we are not living in a world with a unified meaning at all?*

What is the difference between saying that we live in a world whose unified theme is multiplicity, and saying that we do not live in a unified world? The difference is that in the second case irony (or any other meta-attitude) is not required as the expression of the true spirit of the age, for there is no spirit of the age to express. There is no special attitude

one must have towards one's local practices or vocabulary in order to be fully in accord with the age. There is nothing that must be expressed along with the local language.

The claim that our age has a unified spirit seems obvious until one tries to prove it. I argue elsewhere that the notion that we live in one deeply unified world is a mistake whether it is applied to traditional society, the modern world, or to the postmodern condition (see Kolb 1986, chapters 11-12). Testing all the details of our age would be an endless task. Citing a few typical or metonymic examples does not prove a universal spirit. No social-scientific investigation could establish such a strong claim. The symptoms cited by Lyotard, Baudrillard, and others may exist; the question is whether they prove a universal condition. In fact the claim can only be supported by some elaborate philosophical scaffolding, usually Hegelian or Heideggerian, whose soundness is itself deeply suspect. Once that scaffolding is seen for what it is, the most we can claim is that there may be some very large-scale processes and movements, but they exist together with others and have no guaranteed primacy.

This means that there is no modernist or postmodernist platform from which one can survey in principle the limits of local practices and languages without the confronting those limits by working in the local languages. It means that vernacular architecture need not be a naive decline from self-consciousness. Nor is "invisible" architecture necessarily a second-rate form. You are not missing some essence of the postmodern world when you use the local vocabulary, with awareness that there are others but without ironic commentary. The limits of the local language become apparent as you speak, and you can try to extend that language.

You can be straightforward. But you will always be in context with other forms of life; there is no escaping the awareness of diversity. But there is no requirement that you signal that awareness in your every act of building.

On the other hand, none of this means that there is a requirement of straightforwardness. Saying that we can be simple does not mean that we should all be fundamentalists. To claim that there is no unified spirit of our age may seem to imply that there are at least some smaller unities. But that does not necessarily follow. I suggested

earlier that the many forms of life are not isolated or insulated worlds, or even internally unified. The individual exists as an intersection of many languages and practices; there is no automatic unity on any level, no unity that has only external relations with other unities. If there is no unified spirit of the age, neither is there a single unified spirit of America, or of Chicago, or of a Polish-American neighborhood--which is not to say that these have no characters of their own. We are all strifes and dialogues, but we are not shapeless. This multiplicity is not neat; it does not form a list; it is not made up of items with clean boundaries. Identities overlap and exceed as stories twist.

And that does not mean that the multiple worlds do not have to deal with one another, or measure up to new facts, or to the consequences of their values, to the intersection of practices, or to what the neighbors think. Or to their own internal diversity. These are issues people have always had to face, and there are good and bad ways of facing them.

We are not simply products nor simply members of anything. What it means to be "in" a language or a community already involves inner spaciousness and openness to what I have called metaphorical change. Our selves are constituted at and as the intersection of multiple language games and practices that are themselves internally multiple, the result of previous extensions and blendings. And if there is no place from which the multiplicity within and among us makes a uniquely ordered whole, that does not mean that the multiplicity is totally indeterminate, or that we see it from no where.

We can know that our lives have many contingent forms, without having to constantly advertise that fact as the unified meaning of our lives. But that fact must influence us, nonetheless. What does it mean to live such a world, if it does not mean you must adopt an ironic stance toward any given language or form of life? It means self-criticism. But how do we build that, together?

The Problem of Jumble

History may not make a whole, and within ourselves and in society there may be no neat order. But when we act, we act together. When we build, we build next to one another. Intellectual and cultural space may have a strange discontinuous topology, but

physical space remains stubbornly finite and continuous. Our buildings will stand together whether we do or not.

So the modern movement had some point in decreeing the abolition of historical jumble. What was imperialistic about modernist planning was the message that demands for historical continuity and tradition were part of the past. When a new building seemed disconnected or unintelligible, it was up to us to change. This sounds elitist and it was.

The moderns oscillated between the total plan that rigidly controlled every aspect of the city, and the practice of making each building an isolated monument with no regard for its neighbors. There are, however, more kinds of architectural whole than these. Colin Rowe's eloquent attack on modernist planning points to other wholes, especially his "collage city" where many intentions and small domains coexist without being neatly integrated (Rowe 1976). Most postmodern architects have embraced some descendant of this picture, although there ought to be some difference between a collage and an arbitrary collection of objects.

We are left with the jumbled cities the moderns were trying to avoid and to which they finally contributed. We cannot solve the problem of jumble by returning to some imagined uniform community and a hierarchical set of building types. Should we then just learn to love what we have?

Around many cities, towers rise here and there, separately and in small clusters, above a carpet of low-rise buildings and tree-shaded streets. The overall outline is reminiscent of Le Corbusier's dream city of neatly separated perfect towers rising above a park. But these are not modernist forms: these buildings are in competition for tenants, so each strives to be different from the rest. At the feet of the towers lies neither Le Corbusier's park nor Jane Jacob's urban mix, but tract housing, condo developments, and commercial strips.

Is this a satisfactory urban form? People are buying the condos and flocking to the malls; is this what they want? If we are suspicious of the elitism of the modernists, we should be slow to condemn recent developments. One might argue that the new suburban (some have called them "post-suburban") centers are a new community arrangement that

we have yet to learn to do well. Why not let the normal forces of markets and popular dynamics take their natural course? Here is a typical defense:

People forget that Venice was built by hook or by crook. Venice was as mercantilist as Tysons [a suburban center outside Washington]. It was full of land speculators and developers. The merchants' primary concern was about the flow of goods, of traffic. Those who now romanticize Venice collapse 1000 years of history. Venice is a monument to a dynamic process, not great urban planning. It is hard for us to imagine, but the architectural harmony of the Piazza San Marco was an accident. It was built over centuries by people who were constantly worried whether they had enough money. (Dennis Romano, quoted in the Washington Post, Sunday, June 19, 1988, p. A16.)

This quote is misleading in the usual American way: it pictures the only options as centralized planning or the free market. Those who produced the buildings around the Piazza San Marco looked at the whole they were making. They did not make context-ignoring monuments or ironic rhapsodies.

The defense of sprawl and jumble continues: people will get the cities they want; if they wanted more they could protest. The architect should speak the people's language, doing it a little better, adding some art, but not assuming the role of Cultural Tutor.

This sounds reasonable, but like all invocations of the invisible hand it ignores the fact of differential access to power. In our age the sources of decision about building are not easily located or influenced when people want to mount a protest. We are not necessarily "the people" who "want" what we get. Architecture is reduced to its commercial common denominator, a shapeless mass now resurfaced with historical goodies. We live amid the results by learning not to look, but we owe ourselves an environment that we can respect.

The aesthetic and planning consequences of the laissez-faire position have often been associated with Robert Venturi's slogans that "Main Street is almost all right" and that we should "learn from Las Vegas." In their defense of popular culture Venturi and Scott

Brown do oppose the elitism of "European critics" who see "consumer folk culture" as only "the manufactured fantasies of mass taste." In line with American populism and pragmatism they see people's preferences as something to be trusted, especially on those occasions when those preferences can be manifested in a less constrained environment.

Why must architects continue to believe that when "the masses" are "educated" they'll want what the architects want? Why do we turn to exotic folk cultures, as interpreted by other architects . . . rather than learning directly from the cultures around us? (Venturi and Scott Brown 1984, 35)

Venturi's position is more nuanced than appears from the way he is often cited. He does emphasize the need to abandon dreams of formal purity and to learn from the vitality and complexity of the actual urban landscape. He insists that the contemporary city can teach us not to oversimplify. Variety has its price, however; in our world we cannot develop a new building type for every function and every group. Instead Venturi encourages a symbolic architecture of "decorated sheds," plain forms with applied decoration that advertises history and current use. We should deal with pluralism by allowing symbols, rather than forms, to proliferate. The whole becomes an assemblage of symbols in space.

If you ignore signs as 'visual pollution,' you are lost. If you look for 'spaces between buildings' in Las Vegas, you are lost. If you see the buildings of urban sprawl as forms making space, they are pathetic--mere pimples in an amorphous landscape. As architecture, urban sprawl is a failure; as space, it is nothing. It is when you see the buildings as symbols in space, not forms in space, that the landscape takes on quality and meaning. And when you see no buildings at all, at night when virtually only the illuminated signs are visible, you see the Strip in its pure state" (Venturi and Scott Brown 1984, 63)

. This dematerialized cityscape fits well with discussions by Baudrillard and others about our dissolution into simulacra. But buildings have both more solidity and more variability to their being than that talk allows.[end note]

The symbols need not be clamorous in the Las Vegas manner. Venturi's design for the new wing of the National Gallery in London shows the subtlety of his approach. The building is a simple mass decorated on each facade to match the neighborhood that the side faces. This "serial contextualism" allows the building to avoid competing with the famous monuments in the vicinity, while quietly "calling attention at every turn to its own polite behavior" (Boles 1987).

Yet Venturi's symbolic method could lead to a second-level uniformity, where all buildings displayed themselves in the same manner no matter how different their logos might be. Compared to that strategy, the postmodern attempt to discover new building forms or rework old ones offers more variation of type, but it makes for more another kind of clutter. While individual programs and sites might respond to the needs and histories and taste cultures of the clients, the whole city would not cohere. Disneyland does have a greater variety of building forms than Las Vegas, but is it a solution to the problem of jumble?

One might claim that the many different architectural forms in a postmodern city could be unified by their common ironic tone. I argued, however, that the kind of irony associated with most postmodern meta-theories creates only a decorated version of the modernist city, which either lacks coherence or imposes far too much uniformity.

It is possible to build a public space that celebrates and yet remains ironic. Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans seemed to have worked well for the local Italian community. The ironies that it proclaimed to the knowledgeable critic did not seem to bother the local inhabitants; this is an example of Jencks's double coding. We should worry, however, that such showy postmodern historicism works best in commercial buildings where what is celebrated is consumption and fantasy. Kenneth Frampton attacked these as "cardboard scenography" such "never-ending fashionable displays" (Frampton 1982, 76).

Frampton is sweeping in his condemnation. He lumps together the populism he attributes to Venturi, the ironic historicism of Moore, the deconstructive experiments of Eisenman, and Gehry's dissections of form. But these move in different directions and

respond to different problems. The first two are concerned to manipulate signifieds, the last two to question the fixity of the signifiers. It is the Venturi and Moore styles which are most easily cheapened.

This begins to wear thin as it becomes a standardized language for commercial developments whose claim to historical memory have no more validity than their older cousins' claim to functional rationality.

Leon Krier's acerbic sketches pillory awkward postmodern juxtapositions of one shape after another (cf. Porphyrios 1984). His own solution offers a classical vocabulary that is capable of wide variations. It seems doubtful that this would bring the heterogeneity Americans treasure in their cities, but it raises the key questions: what does it mean for a city or a neighborhood or a region to cohere architecturally? Is coherence the only alternative to jumble?

The way artists change their rules makes it impossible to find useful general criteria of coherence for works of art. Even the negative criterion of avoiding contradiction has problems with metaphorical discourse, so it is of little help in art, where contradiction is not precisely defined (and in so far as it is, can be used toward new forms). We are not going to come up with any clear positive or negative criteria for a coherent city. Even functional inconveniences might work well on other levels, as when disruptions in smooth traffic patterns create opportunities for interaction and festivity.

The problem of coherence is finally the same as the problem of appropriate and disciplined judgment, as when we estimate the success of metaphorical changes in a vocabulary. There are no rules, but that is not to say that the judgment is arbitrary, or that one person may not possess more than another.

We saw in the last chapter how strong rereadings of history can extend architectural language. The same strategy can also be applied synchronically to the city. The urban context can be treated much as I suggested that historical precedents be treated. We care how what we build relates to what is around, but we cannot rely on some secret essence or unified spirit of the locality; it could be that we reread the context and our building changes the place by completing a form or function that was not quite there

before.

There is a danger that competing "summaries" of the city could set off a new level of jumble. But no one is on a meta-level with respect to all the rest, and my attempted general statement becomes another local performance to be reread in turn.

In a sense the city could become not an collection of monuments but "an immense construction site of traces and residues" always being reworked with a care for our fragile inhabitation. (The quoted phrase originally was used to describe the situation of the third world today. It is from Remo Guidieri, reproduced in Vattimo 1988, 158.)

The classical ideal of hierarchical centered unity has a strong hold on our image of the city. The idea of a unified city with its integrated design and culture does not describe our lives any more, but we yearn for its order. This makes it difficult to envision other kinds of urban wholes. Habermas remarks that "the urban agglomerations have outgrown the old concept of the city that people so cherish" (Habermas 1985a, 327).

I mentioned above Rowe's "collage city;" there is also Kisho Kurokawa's notion of an intermediate continuum, and the process of planning by incremental rereading, as discussed by Christopher Alexander (1988). [begin note] Kurokawa has written about the different kind of coming together that he finds in the Japanese tradition. He discusses spaces and continua that link disparate elements into "intermediate" states (1988, 64ff).

Japanese culture has taken in and preserved a multiplicity of meanings and forms without reducing them to one core identity or to one organized system. As Kurokawa shows, this is reflected in the design even of single rooms. He also makes provocative remarks concerning the analogues, in city planning, of Western surgical intervention and Chinese herbal medicine (88). He does not, however, discuss the hierarchical ingredient in Japanese culture that always tries, announces its success, and fails to overcome the disparateness of spatial and cultural intermediate zones. [end note]

Still, the classical exemplars cannot be simply denied; doing so allows them to continue to dominate us as that which is to be avoided. They need to be opened up; we have to find their limits. Perhaps paradoxically, if we had more buildings built in a deconstructive manner they could enhance the togetherness of the city, although not its

coherence in any usual sense. If we had more buildings that were self-consciously marginal, participating in but making visible the codes that pervade the city, we would be more aware of our common definitions, and their limits, and of our common plight. Such buildings would not be a solution to the problem of designing the average building that fills the urban fabric, but they might help us build together without enforcing any one central identity.

Regionalism and the Consumer Society

I spoke in the previous chapter of a strategy that Kenneth Frampton refers to as "critical regionalism." Unlike a simple regionalism that seeks to maintain unquestioned coherence with given local forms, critical regionalism works with the tension between universal and local culture. As a general strategy I find this appealing because it recognizes that we are not wholly immersed in either a regional or a universal context.

But Frampton's chosen examples do not always encourage his strategy. For one thing, his examples seem too timid in their use of regional vocabulary. For instance, if we compare the principles and the examples found in Frampton (1982), we find that while the examples are all of high quality, they remain modernist experiments with function and form. With the exception of Utzon's church, they could be transplanted to other contexts without much difficulty. (The examples cited in Frampton (1982) include Gwathmey's Perinton Housing, Ciriani's Noisy I, Kleihues' Vinetaplatz Block, Utzon's Bagsvaerd Church, and Pelli's San Bernardino City Hall. Compare these examples to the BBPR Chase Manhattan Bank in Milan (presented in Klotz 1988); the bank keeps to the modernist vocabulary but manages to make local and contextual references more strongly than do Frampton's examples.)

That Frampton is basically a modernist is a description that I presume he, like Habermas, would cheerfully accept, since for both of them the alternatives to modernism are regressive tradition (what I called "simple regionalism") or nihilistic play. Neither of these alternatives allows the kind of self-criticism they deem necessary in our world today. But are these the only choices?

Frampton pictures waves of commercial jumble beating against resistant enclaves.

He urges us to create "bounded urban fragment against which the inundation of the placeless, consumerist environment will find itself momentarily checked" (1982, 82). He sees the need for "monuments . . . bounded realms and large-scale representative forms . . . within which the memory and practice of a liberative culture can still be nurtured and sustained" (1982, 26). Instead of the dialectic of local and universal Frampton described in the statement quoted in the last chapter, these statements conceptualize the city as a war between two factors, straightforward regional identities and undifferentiated consumerism. We recognize again the problematic dichotomy between simple inhabitation and placeless distance.

Frampton's monuments and bounded realms are supposed to have a solid meaning. To those inside the region, that meaning acts as a support, and to the consumerist culture outside it acts as a brake, because that identity cannot be exchanged away. Frampton overemphasizes the immediacy of regional culture, but the "critical" side of his regionalism can correct that emphasis. The real problem is the idea of one undifferentiated consumer culture. This is a common enough idea today, and it is one more version of the modern attempt to separate form from content.

No one can deny the contemporary tendency to homogenize the environment. But is this equivalent to a way of life and culture defined purely in terms of maximizing consumption without any substantive content? The notion of a consumer culture is the backside of the modern ideal of triumphant rationality. If we have questioned the adequacy of the modern picture of a purely rational society whose projects are defined in purely formal ways, we should also question the adequacy of the notion of consumer culture.

Consumer culture does not exist as a total way of life made up only of maximizing consumption and the flow of goods. What does exist is a consumerist way of living local cultures. Only if it could have its own character independent of that multiplicity from which it arises could we say consumer culture had its own universal identity. But while the architecture and the products may be the same, they make different moves in different local games.

Cultural patterns and goals have their meaning by contrast. We can find the same fast-food emporia in New York and Tokyo, but they are inserted into different local networks. Everyone may use VCR's and eat at Macdonald's, but this does not mean that the motivation for buying is the same, nor that their use is the same, nor that their use stands in the same contrasts.

The massive influence of American products and ways of behavior all over the world should not be taken as proof that some abstractly defined consumer culture is conquering all. Insofar there is influence of one culture upon another, what is spreading is a local American culture with its own substantive content of ideals, virtues and vices--listen to the lyrics. This form of life amounts to more than sheer consumerism. It is true that this culture can be debased, but that does not render it purely abstract. It is also true that as it spreads it can weaken traditional cultures, but we should not be too quick to claim that those weakened versions become indistinguishable from one another.

We fear that the acid might eat away all the local culture, leaving only consumerist maximization. This is another version of Plato's fear. History would have made a change that abolished itself by wiping out its own genesis and internal relations. This is the modernist illusion. Our era is seen as the final expression of a universal human condition; once history has accomplished the liberation of some unchanging basic process, history becomes irrelevant. This depends on being able to separate form from content and so constitute a process with its own a-historical goals. It is against this that I have urged variations of Heidegger's notion of a "thrown project," though with more pluralism than Heidegger would allow. My attempt to keep hermeneutical depth in history is not the attempt to find a unified form or process there. Cf. Vattimo 1988.

It is misleading to think of our community values and practices as a matter of simple immediate inhabitation. It is also misleading to think of some pure force arrayed against this resistant core. Habermas's distinction between lifeworld and system is useful here. Instead of thinking about consumerism as a unified culture, think about systemic pressures on the lifeworld. These pressures are not a set of contrasts that produce meaning. They are a network of mechanisms aimed at maximizing flow and return, mechanisms which treat cultural values and roles as impediments.

What makes the system seem to be a modern incarnation of the power of the Sophist is its protean maneuverability. The system "itself" cannot be represented. It operates through endless substitutions and strategies. But we can find it in our wounded places. We experience it in the weakening of identities. Also, we experience it because architecture and city planning deal not only with the infinity of exchange and spectacle but also with particular limits: where does the sunlight fall, and will the building overload the sewers? These reveal systemic effects and constraints.

In talking about the inscription of the system on our social body I am in danger of romanticizing some virginal social unit. Foucault attacks an analogous illusion in his discussion of sexuality when he argues that we have no unified sexuality waiting to be uncovered, but only scattered economies of desire and pleasure to be let free in their multiplicity (Foucault 1980). Actually, though, his point supports mine. I agree that there is no unified social body to be recovered. But systemic imperatives work at simplifying our social inhabitation into a commodified simulacrum of itself, all surface and show and peak experience. The loss of multiplicity and interpretative potential reveals the systemic pressures.

While we can experience its effects, it seems impossible to picture the operation of the system as a whole. Habermas remarked about Venturi that "the language of this stage-set architecture indulges in a rhetoric that still seeks to express in ciphers systemic relations that can no longer be architecturally formulated" (Habermas 1985a, 328). Is this because the system is a pure power, above history and capable of infinite flexibility? Among other reasons, the operations of the current economic and productive arrangements are hard to describe because, unlike earlier arrangements, they separate their imperatives from political and religious projects. Because it has no intentions, the system is not an agent with an agenda. As a complex of impersonal mechanisms it cannot be treated as a unified actor (although insofar as the system appears in the actions of this or that corporate or governmental agent it can be dealt with as we do any "crude" power or persuasion). But the current systemic arrangements do have a definite shape, in the sense that they can be distinguished from other past or possible economic and productive arrangements.

We can't be or embody the system. To imagine that we could live the systemic imperatives in their naked state is the same mistake as to imagine that the operative form of a building could be nakedly expressed in its perceived form without entering into any new contrasts and meanings. Insofar as the systemic imperatives appear as something lived, they are already within other contexts and cultural networks. Those systems are inhabited with the spaciousness that is a condition for any inhabitation. This means that there are always discontinuities (and continuities and intersections and contrasts and differences) that provide room for metaphor and self-criticism.

Self-Criticism Together

I argued earlier that we have no single unified project of self-criticism that might be blocked or subverted. Because the occasions and projects of criticism arise in multiple and indirect ways, they cannot be systematically suppressed. We should not presume that the only way to liberate ourselves is to have a theory of the structure of the whole, so that we can oppose this total vision to current fragmentation or to oppressive totalities. There can be a liberation resulting from the tensions and crossings we find ourselves within. We can care for the whole without a map of the whole.

My effort has been to discourage absolute claims, including those made in postmodernist attacks on modernist absolutism. There is a difference between being above and being amid it all. We are building together in the shifting discourse and the shifting life. There is no guaranteed overview, but nothing is in principle hidden. We must be careful not to conceptualize this as a conflict of solid inhabitation and placeless forces.

Do we then follow Habermas's pattern, which is the old Socratic story? Yes and no. What we have is endless critique without any definitive distinction of persuasion from rational argument; this makes for discourse guided by intellectual virtues rather than transparent principles. We need dialogue, but I am suggesting a shifting that has less structural unity and yet is more tied to historical roots than Habermas (or Lyotard) would allow. But we cannot deny the role of local reflection and argument in freeing us from restrictive contexts and making it possible to build together in new ways.

In building together we cannot each go our separate ways. We should accept

Habermas's goal of open discussion and community participation, with no one barred from the circles of decision about building. That is far enough from the reality of today to be worth fighting for.[begin note] "Here and now in the face of the postmodern logic of interminable deferment and infinite regress, of floating signifiers and vanishing signifieds, here and now I face an other who demands of me an ethical response. This call of the other to be heard, and to be respected in his/her otherness, is irreducible to the parodic play of empty imitations. It breaks through the surface of mirror images, and, outfacing the void, reintroduces a dimension of depth and height. The face of the other resists assimilation to the dehumanizing processes of commodification" (Kearney 1987, 42).

Habermas is right that we need to encourage self-examination and reflection on our own vulnerabilities and limitations. But rational agreement is only one kind of appropriate, disciplined judgment, and being convinced to change our beliefs is only one way of altering the language we speak.

I recall the Apollo astronauts' photo of the earth rising in the distance above the moon's horizon. That picture appeared so many times in magazines and on posters. It spoke to an awareness of our situation in a fragile whole, but the photo did not argue for any of the rival claims to total vision. Often the photo was presented in appeals for nuclear and ecological good sense, in the hope that concern for all life's flourishing might help us avoid catastrophe. But this awareness and concern is not only for the grand scale; we need such it in the city, too. There we should take account of one another with an eye to the fragility of the whole, without imposing any particular systematic view of that whole.