Forgetting postmodernism? Recuperating a social history of local knowledge
David Ley
*Prog Hum Geogr* 2003; 27; 537
DOI: 10.1191/0309132503ph448oa

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/27/5/537
Forgetting postmodernism?
Recuperating a social history of
local knowledge

David Ley

Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6T 1Z2, Canada

Abstract: After making a substantial impact across the social sciences and humanities for more than a decade, interest in postmodernism is waning, creating an opportunity to reassess this theoretical programme free of the hyperbole that frequently surrounded discussion in the past. In its contextualism and critique of metanarratives, I approach postmodernism as a form of local knowledge, characterized as knowledge inevitably framed through the here of our collective presence and the now of our collective interests. Knowledge in short is group-centred, and chronocentric in its privileging of the current. This argument is extended to the idea and practice of modernism in the built environment, and contrasted with a postmodernism that reflexively works from an epistemology and ontology of the local. I suggest that lessons drawn from a critical postmodernism, emanating from the social movements of the 1965–75 period, have had constructive results in the built environment. As such, the legacy of postmodernism should not be forgotten as its life cycle seemingly draws to a close.

Key words: modernism, postmodernism, social space, chronocentricity, localism, built environment.

I Introduction

Might this new Rome actually be more provincial than its provinces?


It is 10 years since I wrote a paper on postmodernism, a short article that began with the vexed question, ‘What is there left to say about postmodernism?’ (Ley, 1993a). After all, this unusually promiscuous theoretical programme had already burrowed its way across every discipline in the humanities and social sciences,1 had demanded

*This paper was originally delivered as the Progress in Human Geography lecture at the Annual Conference of the Association of American Geographers in New Orleans, USA, March 2003.
recognition and response from most existing theoretical and conceptual positions. Its imperial ambitions had allowed no hiding place for literatures it engaged. From an obscure origin located by Perry Anderson (1998) in Hispanic literary circles in the 1930s, postmodernism became a European manifesto in the 1970s, expanding to the Americas and quickly to Japan (Miyoshi and Harootunian, 1989), and more recently reaching China (Dirlik and Zhang, 2000).

My sense of finality in 1993 was mistaken. According to the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), another 577 journal articles or journal book reviews were written between 1993 and 2002 that included the term post(-)modernism in their titles. The frenzy has been intensified in the humanities, where the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (AHCI) lists 997 titles in the past decade. This count is limited to titles and does not take account of the term’s inclusion in article abstracts or key words, nor journal articles that use instead the forms ‘post(-)modern’ or ‘post(-)modernity’, nor the titles of other types of publications such as chapters in books. The measure of the reach of postmodernism used here, then, represents a conservative culling from the literature.

If not an intellectual spectacle, the project of postmodernism is most certainly a scholarly event of some magnitude. In this paper I consider this phenomenon from the perspective of a social history of knowledge. My concern is not to move formally into science studies where other geographers have spoken with considerable authority (Barnes, 1996; 2001; Bassett, 1999). Nor is this a detailed historical study of the places and spaces of scientific production (Livingstone, 2003). Rather what I have in mind is to examine the biography of a theoretical programme, postmodernism, its promising adolescence and young adulthood, its controversial middle age and its largely un lamented demise. Like all biographers, I will argue for the advantage of some distance from that life and its passions, and like many biographers suggest a reassessment of it. The argument will move beyond the immediate contexts of intellectual production, the academic work, to the broader contexts of social, economic and political life, as these changed dramatically between the 1960s and the birth of postmodernism and the 1980s–1990s, its adulthood. Moreover, we will see too the international variability in these contexts, including in some respects the exceptionalism of the USA. Like the spatiality of the enlightenment (Livingstone and Withers, 1999), there is also a geography to postmodernism.

The play of contingency and context has been an emphasis of postmodern authors, with a scepticism of grand theory or the metanarrative, and a second theme of the paper will be to consider the social grounding of knowledge and practice in the modern-postmodern debate over the construction of the built environment. Despite claims to the contrary, intellectual knowledge in the modern movement was inlaid with partiality and partisanship, not unlike everyday knowledge, features some distance from a model of cool rationality. Knowledge of course is related to practice, and we shall see that these characteristics of local knowledge were also pervasive in the application of modern principles to urban development, despite claims to universalism and a superior vantage point, deficits that contributed to modernism’s destructive consequences in the post-1945 city. This is where postmodern epistemological critique has some bite, but the paper will end with practice, by attempting to recuperate contexts in which postmodernism as local knowledge and practice may move beyond critique to prove socially constructive, though not unproblematically so, in the built environment.

The trajectory of this paper, then, will begin by showing the salience of local
knowledge in scholarship, conceived as a social project, and extend that insight to the
debate between modernism and postmodernism as competing theories to shape the
built environment. Whereas modernism claimed a universal reach, postmodernism is
strongest when it follows its intuition toward contextuality and local knowledge. We
shall see that a critical postmodernism has the potential to attain reflexivity, because its
contextual epistemology supports a local ontology, whereas for modernism the claim to
universalism was contradicted by an all too provincial social lifeworld. In the hands of
power, however, particular intersubjective conventions might yet assume the stature of
laws of urban development.

II The life cycle of a concept

Looking at the life cycle of postmodernism, it is clear that, despite its prominence in the
social sciences in the 1990s, the term has a longer and deeper history in the humanities
(Figure 1). The first entry in the AHCI dates from 1975, and in the early years it led the
SSCI by 5–8 years, a substantial lead time considering the speed of information dis-
semination even 25 years ago.2 The early AHCI entries are primarily in architecture and
the built environment accompanied by literary studies; citations from philosophy and
cultural and media studies occurred later. Another tendency is the concentration of
European, especially German, entries in the early years. Other European and even some
Japanese listings are prominent, while, despite the numerical advantage of English-

Figure 1 Citation counts for post(-)modernism in AHCI and SSCI,
1975–2002

Downloaded from http://phg.sagepub.com at MEMORIAL UNIV OF NEWFOUNDLAND on February 8, 2010
language and American journals in the AHCI, American contributions are disproportionately small for the first decade. A major surge in entries occurred in 1987, rising to a peak of 153 in 1992, and a second peak of 151 two years later, thereafter falling back to 31 listings in 2002.

The first social science entry was recorded in 1981, and double figures were not attained until 1987 (Figure 1). Entries then rose quickly to reach a peak of 89 in 1992, declining to 22 citations in 2002. The reach across disciplines continues to be expansive, with 2002 entries including articles from economics, education, family therapy, geography, nursing, organization theory, psychiatry, psychology and sociology. Even in decline, postmodernism continues to engage a broad swath of disciplines in the social sciences. From the beginning the literature was lively; article titles, both endorsing and chastising postmodernism, could be ironic, playful or downright abusive. An abiding feature of the literature has been its ready stimulation of passion, revealing even to the most sceptical that science can be both hot and cold, sweet and sour.

Within geography, the earliest entries included papers by Michael Dear (1986) and David Harvey (1987), among the pioneers in discussing the field in the social sciences. Their work on the city intersected with an earlier literature on postmodernism in architecture and design permitting ready dissemination from the arts into the social sciences. For some years after the publication of Harvey’s influential book, The condition of postmodernity (1989), postmodernism seized the intellectual agenda in urban and cultural studies. The condition generated extraordinary attention, registering around 2500 citations on the Web of science; the prominence it brought to the debate was widely felt, showing up for example in Gregory’s Geographical imaginations (1994) which included almost 70 index entries to postmodernism, and more to postmodernity and postmodern geography.

If we bracket geographical work around the bookends of Harvey’s The condition of postmodernity, published in 1989, and Dear’s The postmodern urban condition, from 2000, one can see from the powerful imagery of their dustjacket artwork the intense values elicited by the postmodern problematic. For a study that was critical of postmodernism, Harvey’s cover illustration was curiously suggestive of positive change. Its striking image, ‘Dream of liberty’, was conceived in 1974 by Madelon Vriesendorp, wife and partner of Rem Koolhaas in an architectural practice established in London but whose creative force was most fully developed in New York. Their practice has been identified with various postmodern design projects and ‘Dream of liberty’ shows the mythic figure breaking loose from within the iron cage of modernism exemplified by New York’s twentieth-century skyscrapers. The symbols of a decaying civilization are confirmed by the ruins of earlier civilizations strewn across the horizon, at the foot of an escarpment symbolizing a sharp break to the landscape occupied by the icons of modernity. In the context of their architectural practice, and the content of the artwork itself, the allusions in this image must be directed toward setting aside the failed model of the modernist city and its replacement by a dream for a more democratic urban future.

Michael Dear’s choice of cover art for The postmodern urban condition could not be more contrary. In his book, Dear (somewhat awkwardly) identifies Los Angeles as exemplar of the postmodern city. Despite the author’s continuing adherence to some form of postmodern project, the city he describes is as dark as any film noir. Replacing the relatively innocuous urban models of the modern city derived from the Chicago
School, Dear assembles a sombre archetype of the postmodern city, including such features as containment centres, the disinformation superhighway, spectacles, consumption opportunities, street warfare, corporate citadels, ‘cyburbia’ and gated communities. Here are the categories that are said to comprise the postmodern city in 2000, and appropriately the artwork on Dear’s book cover is a painting, dated to 1990, by Carlos Almaraz, the late Mexican-American artist based in Los Angeles, entitled ‘West coast crash’. It is a spectacle of destruction: the automobile and the highway, key agents of progress in dreams of the modern city, are now the site of devastation. The bright lights have become those of a blazing inferno, a particularly contemporary incarnation of an old allegory, and anticipating the 1992 riots.

I will make more of these contrasts between 1974 and 1990 later in this paper in considering the changing content of postmodern urbanism over time, but first I want to return to the phenomenon, to the extraordinary kerfuffle as postmodernism elbowed its way to the forefront of the intellectual agenda in the 1990s.

III The diffusion of an idea

In the early 1990s, postmodernism had the appearance, in Kuhnian terms, of a new paradigm in the making. It was subversive in its critique of metanarratives, the broad categories for organizing knowledge that had gone before. It not only intimated an intellectual succession in the arts and humanities, but more audaciously threatened presuppositions of the enlightenment project, the foundation upon which western views of science and societal progress were erected. Its standpoint or perspectival theory argued that over time conventions pragmatically agreed upon by a community of scholars tended to become mistaken for universal laws, just as societal arrangements that benefited an elite, for example the idea of the unmediated public sphere, could be raised to the level of moral imperatives. Its criticism then was launched across a vast intellectual and political front. No wonder the programme was explosive, eliciting conversion, conversation and condemnation. Much was on offer, much was at risk. At stake were not just theoretical and political convictions but also existing assets of intellectual capital that were threatened with a sharp devaluation.

Returning then to the phenomenon of postmodernism as a social fact, let us reconsider the dissemination of the concept illustrated by Figure 1. If we treat the final entry in 2002 as near the end of the concept cycle – and clearly by 2002 we are well into the downslope of citations – the graph may be redrawn as an S-shaped curve (Figure 2). This is the familiar curve for the adoption of innovations, reminding us that the dissemination of an intellectual idea may be recast in the more prosaic language of information diffusion (Gatrell, 1984). From this perspective, we can speak of opinion leaders and laggards in the adoption of the idea, of the bandwagon or contagion effect associated with the rapid take-up of the innovation. We need to remember of course that reception needs to be treated with care; a citation may indicate not adoption but opposition; after all Harvey’s *Condition of postmodernity* was a critical response to an intellectual programme that had grown so vigorous that he considered it worth the effort of book-length resistance (Harvey, 2002).

*The condition of postmodernity* is widely regarded as a political intervention in debates around postmodernism; but, for now, I need only make a much weaker claim that it
was a social practice. Writing and reading indicate the existence of an unusual community that does not require propinquity. Yet it is a community nonetheless. If the social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz was correct when he claimed that for informed music lovers intersubjective understanding is possible with dead composers (Schutz, 1951), then sharing meaning together is certainly possible through communication with geographically distant contemporaries. The absorption and exchange of information establishes a shared project.

The point I am making is simple but important. Despite the apparent role of the single individual (or small group) in authorship, the practice of writing, reading, speaking and thinking is inherently and unavoidably social, admission to a game already in play, or, as Bourdieu (1988) might put it, entry to a field that has already been structured. That structure (like all diffusion surfaces) includes opinion leaders, barriers to communication and networks more and less commonly travelled. Across that field the postmodern project blazed like a meteor in the 1990s, lighting up networks, flashing through some, blocked initially from others. Through these networks communication took place, evoking the interpersonal characteristics common to the arrival of all new innovations: risk-taking, emulation, imitation, trust, suspicion, rejection. As risk-takers, the pioneers acted on a hunch with incomplete information but with a sense of the scale of the intellectual issues at stake. During the bandwagon phase, adopters were persuaded to emulate or imitate opinion leaders, whose influence they accepted, suspending perhaps their own critical faculties before the brilliant sheen of new ideas and the rhetorical power and prestige of significant others. Here was the scholarly

---

**Figure 2** Cumulative citation counts for post(-)modernism in SSCI, 1981–2002
equivalent of a boom mentality, the thoughts and actions of a bull market. Social relations intervened at each stage in the adoption process, for, as Hägerstrand (1967) observed, innovation always occurs within a decidedly social milieu. My argument here is not to press a strong constructionism that oversocializes the whole process, but rather with Bourdieu (1988: xii) to suggest that ‘social science may expect to derive its most decisive progress from a constant effort to undertake a sociological critique of [its own] reasoning’.

The relatively narrow historical band for the pre-eminence of postmodernism in theoretical debate in the humanities and social sciences, of 10, at most 20, years, raises other questions about the specificity of knowledge. One of the earlier discussions in the sociology of knowledge comprised the distinctive worldview and stock of knowledge held by a generational unit (Mannheim, 1952). What then are the implications of a literature that is contained within the boundaries of a narrow historical period and a single generational unit? What particular social inflections to intellectual knowledge may be introduced by such temporal specificity? Another gnawing historical issue emerges from generational analysis. Is knowledge gained by a generational unit salient only for the issues at hand for that generation? Any belief in a cumulative intellectual project, in the enlightenment view of progress, could not countenance such a proposition. Knowledge gained is knowledge not only for the here and now but for the long haul, for a continuing endeavour – yet what of a debate that attracts vast intellectual energy but then disappears off the citation map, which we can anticipate will be the fate of postmodernism in the near future? Was it all a matter of whistling in the wind, of ‘vanity, vanity, all is vanity’ as the author of Ecclesiastes proffered? Was the concept indeed useless, were the holdouts and the sceptics right, or have we simply got bored by it, as we were earlier bored by central place theory? What does progress in human geography (or the social sciences at large) mean in such a life cycle of knowledge?

There is a cynical answer to this question. It would begin by suggesting an analogy between the knowledge cycle and the product cycle. It would argue that in intellectual work human capital is measured in terms of the possession of theoretical knowledge. Making a claim to a new theoretical perspective is a grab for human capital, and the more wide-ranging the ambition the more capital there is at stake. Such a territorial claim will be resisted by other theorists in this zero-sum field, for they may well face displacement from the market of ideas with severe depreciation of their own stock of knowledge. In this highly competitive marketplace, claim and counterclaim fight it out until the debate is exhausted. Other new entrants to the market arrive; the concept has generated all the returns it can. It is outmoded, obsolete, boring and discarded.

There are weaknesses with this scenario. It assumes a strong constructionist position, that knowledge is no more than a means to an end, the acquisition of human capital. Undoubtedly, there are occasions when such careerism shapes the terms of debate, but I think there is a more rewarding line of interpretation.

**IV The space-time contours of everyday knowledge**

In their remarkable synthesis of the sociology of knowledge a generation ago, Berger and Luckmann observed how ‘The reality of everyday life is organised around the
“here” of my body and the “now” of my present’ (1967: 22). From the actor’s perspective – whether the actor is an individual, a group or an institution – experience unfolds around the space-time coordinates of one’s physical presence and interests at hand. This anthropocentric view of knowledge defined the same contours of everyday life that Torsten Hägerstrand (1967) was simultaneously modelling in his seminal research on innovation diffusion in central Sweden, where he demonstrated the importance of imitation, of social interaction based upon proximate relations of familiarity and trust, in shaping the spatial configuration of diffusion. This was a major insight because the dominant model in much of the spatial analysis of the 1960s (and later) worked with the building block of that lonely (and all too modern) individual, rational economic man, bereft of friends and family, indeed without a social life. Instead, Hägerstrand conceived of a social space, comprising the geographical extent of social networks, through which innovations passed. In the context of rural Sweden in the first half of the twentieth century, networks were tightly bounded geographically. Today in metropolitan society, social networks would escape such a tyranny of distance, while remaining concentrated within a social space of like-minded individuals. For example, in his extension of Hägerstrand’s method to the diffusion of the AIDS epidemic in North America, Peter Gould (1993) showed how, in the early stages of the disease, cases occurred in the spatially dispersed gay neighbourhoods of major cities across the continent, with a simultaneous concentration of cases within each neighbourhood. The social network continues to be a vehicle for transmission even as, with a declining friction of distance, its nodes are now more commonly spatially dispersed.

From the social space demarcated by social networks, Hägerstrand (1967) depicted the information field of the small communities of central Sweden, including the settlement of Asby. In his famous map of a collective information field centred upon Asby, a map distorted by the highly localized and dense social interaction of this rural district, he portrayed the biased surface of geographical knowledge that emerged from networks closely bounded by the friction of distance. We would not expect to find such a continuous and tightly packed information field today. More common would be a discontinuous map with dispersed nodes of familiarity coinciding with more scattered social networks. The important property of the information field is not its spatial compactness or dispersal but rather its partiality, whether it is compact or dispersed. Here is the provincialism of everyday life, the geographical boundedness of knowledge and action.

Besides the here of my body – the spatiality of everyday knowledge – Hägerstrand considered the now of my present, its temporality. His later emphasis, in time geography, on the time-space routines of everyday life was anticipated in the temporality of the diffusion process. Innovation is about novelty, about ‘nowness’, and the adoption curve identified the responsiveness of different actors to information about a novelty moving through a social space. Pioneers were imitated by a larger number of actors through the take-off phase of adoption and then later, past its peak, more isolated or sceptical adopters picked up the innovation.

A third element needs to be added to the formal time-space contours of everyday life. Space and time not only have a form, but, as humanistic geography insisted, they also have a meaning. Evaluation is intrinsic to everyday life. In social space the diffusion of an innovation already implies a social network where imitation works through bonds of familiarity, trust and emulation, as well as through competition and rivalry. It is a
long-established regularity that repeated interaction through social networks enhances intersubjectivity, the sharing of common values and interests, a convergence in meaning structures. Newcomb (1966), a social psychologist, concluded that ‘there is, in fact, no social phenomenon which can be more commonly observed than the tendency for freely communicating persons to resemble one another in orientation towards objects of common concern’. Similarly, Weick (1969: 14) observed: ‘Undoubtedly the most prominent assertion in group research is that people like and interact with those who are most similar to them.’ Within social networks there are pressures toward conformity and the regulation of difference – and thereby inclinations as well toward partiality, partisanship and provincialism. Moreover, within networks, whether informal or institutional, shared attitudes are normative, regarded as appropriate and correct, so that considerable group resources are expended in upholding such normativity.

The valuation of time is equally partial. The innovator, in particular, privileges the new over the old; the temporal band around the present is highly esteemed. The innovator as such shares the modern impulse to value change over continuity, progress over tradition. With Henry Ford, the innovator reckons that history is bunk.

I now want to ask a subversive question: are these characteristics of knowledge in the everyday lifeworld shared at all by scientific practice, including the life cycle of postmodernism? Are we all residents of our own Asbys?

V Scientific knowledge as local knowledge: a group-centred reality

Scientific knowledge claims to have turned its back upon provincial and partisan knowledge, just as cosmopolitan modern society has evacuated the Asbys of the world for city life. Reason is cool and detached, its range universal, its methods standardized, precluding the intervention of distorting social interests. In this section I develop an argument consistent with a critical postmodernism to challenge that dichotomy and its imputed hierarchy. Despite enlightenment claims to the contrary, intellectual knowledge is at least in part a form of local knowledge. It is partial, and in two respects. First, like all local knowledge it is incomplete; second, it is also partisan, evoking powerful if not always articulated values. As the theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff (1995) has asked, can the scientist become a different person by exchanging an overcoat for a lab coat in entering the laboratory each day?

The social space of intellectual practice comprises more and less freely communicating networks. Major boundaries between networks are defined by disciplines, which are formalized conventions for the partition of knowledge; secondary boundaries form around subject areas and theoretical perspectives. Within their borders, communities of scholars are drawn to a common purpose at hand, employ a common language, read common sources, and establish norms and joint expectations, facilitated and institutionalized through visits, seminars, conferences and specialized journals. Processes of mutual interaction, internal conformity and boundary formation define many particular social spaces. Boundaries are sustained through the identification of a joint project, a shared tradition, a specialized language and well-identified adversaries, who may be an older generation of scholars (‘the old guard’ versus ‘the young turks’) or a competing theoretical perspective. Access to the group is regulated by various processes of peer-group evaluation, while within-group coherence is indicated by a pattern of mutual
Rewards are conferred; careers are established. Work on the quantitative revolution in geography would identify many of these characteristics (Taylor, 1976; Barnes, 2001; 2003), and it is the business as usual for almost all of us. In considering an ethnography of modern thought, Geertz is not too wide of the mark when he observes that ‘most effective academic communities are not that much larger than most peasant villages and just about as ingrown’ (Geertz, 1983: 157).

My task here, in Bourdieu’s words, is to ‘exoticize the domestic’ (1988: xi), to problematize this taken-for-granted world. In the social process of knowledge production, a multitude of social spaces are constructed with dense interaction among members who share a common language, with simplification, sometimes dismissal, of other projects that lie outside. Through passion, ambition, persuasion and reason, ‘progress’ is achieved.

An outcome is the hyperspecialization and division of knowledge, scarcely communicating provincialisms, routinely lamented by scholars who wish for some coherence at least at the disciplinary or subdisciplinary level. Macrotheorists see such fragmentation as an abiding feature of the modern project. Habermas (1983) in his reflection on the consequences of enlightenment thought regretted what he saw as the ever-increasing partitioning of knowledge. Authors influenced by postmodernism have carried this insight further, regarding it as a starting-point for inquiry, not its termination. Difference, the fragmentation of plural subcultures, is treated as normative in everyday life and in scholarship and our task must be to understand and cope with it. In an exegesis of contemporary society, Michael Maffesoli (1996) in *The time of the tribes* identifies consensus among like-minded others within ‘neo-tribal’ social spaces as not only ubiquitous but also extended to ethics and justice that are similarly defined relative to a particular social group. In reflection on scholarly communities, Rorty makes the neopragmatist argument that knowledge is group-centred, incommensurate across group boundaries, and, outrageously but consistently, claims that truth is ‘entirely a matter of solidarity’ (Rorty, 1991: 32). Here is the danger of ingrown communities of all kinds.

The life cycle of postmodernism throws light on this argument. First, its diffusion curve through the humanities and social sciences shows the characteristic trend of the dissemination of information through social space, with its function resembling the classic curve of innovation adoption in everyday life (Figure 2); but, second, its diffusion shows that isolation within particular modes of understanding (Rorty’s problem of incommensurability) is not a necessity. Paradigm shocks, such as the postmodern prospectus, can crash across theoretical and disciplinary boundaries extending far beyond a narrow field. Postmodernism might be endorsed, it might be resisted, but it could not be ignored. Barriers to diffusion existed, for example between the humanities and the social sciences or between scholars in Europe and those in the USA, introducing delays to the transmission process. Yet this is no different from the normal diffusion of an innovation. A key point here, for theory (and democratic practice), is that social networks have some porosity to conversations across their borders, and thus to development and change; local knowledge need not follow Rorty’s strong constructionist programme of hermetically separate speech communities.
I have suggested that the reality of social science research is group-centred, organized around the ‘here of my [collective] body’. I want now to look at the temporality of the research process and suggest that in its reference points it also follows the model of everyday life, focused around the ‘now of my present’.

This case is not difficult to advance. The commitment to progress has become equated with a commitment to innovation. The very idea of progress in geography is identified with the modernist shock of the new. As in Henry Ford’s show-rooms, there are new models on display each year. In the spirit of the innovator, advancement, progress, the meritorious is elided with novelty. There is a valuing here that requires exposure and critique. It is the new that merits approval; the old is, well, passé, with its intellectual capital fast depreciating. As we change our cars, we should surely change our references.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Hermann Bahr, a prophet of modernity, announced: ‘I am modern . . . this means that I hate everything that already exists’ (cited in Frisby, 2001: 188). Though a polemical example, the achievement of modernism was often associated with a trashing of the past. This view of history and temporality bears the traits of what Jean Baudrillard (1975) described as chronocentricity, an excessive elevation of the present as a special era, worthy of particular attention. For such a prejudice, the present is regarded as a threshold of epochal change, a fulcrum in the sweep of history. This tendency shows no sign of weakening, as we recall the breathless sequence of epochal breaks identified in human geography in the past generation: postindustrialism, post-fordism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postnationalism, post-marxism. It all makes our era, ‘the now of my present’, an essential historic fulcrum. The same hubris was expressed by Owen Glyndwr in Henry IV: Part I who claimed that on the day of his birth ‘the frame and huge foundations of the earth shaked like a coward’.

Such a distinctive view of temporality is a defining characteristic of modernism as local knowledge. The shock of the new is welcomed, there is an exaggeration of the significance of the present, a loss of collective memory, even a dismissal of the past as unworthy, a moral failure. Such an intensification of the present is historically shallow. While assembling a new theoretical product with a capacity to create new human capital, it hastens also the capacity to forget. Erection of the ‘posts’ is an exercise in boundary formation, an exclusion and devaluation of the past, including its capacity to measure the present. It is a distinctive mark of modern hubris that earlier understanding is consigned to oblivion, its standards of accountability forgotten.

As we move to the built environment to see the outworking of the theoretical argument developed so far, I shall make the case that the modern project to transform cities was itself a product of local knowledge, constructed around the here of a privileged social space and the now of a passionately favoured present. Of course every social network occupies space and time, and for such a critique to assume any bite it needs to be
demonstrated that the partial and partisan viewpoint of a social network distorts its capacity to engage the world. With the modern movement in architecture and planning there is, however, a second target for such a critique. The universal claims of the modernists, their appropriation of the enlightenment ideals of progress, science and technology, make them especially vulnerable to an argument that their solutions were exercises in local knowledge. Theirs was a global project of remarkable audacity, fired by the zeal of discerning a borderless, egalitarian and future-looking world. It took 50 years for this utopian project to unravel and for its destructive effects upon the experience of urban life to be acknowledged.

The advancement of the modern project was far from an exercise in pure reason, but was presented with an intensity that employed every weapon of communication. Rationality was fortified by a varied repertoire, including polemic and abuse. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the chronocentricity of the early modernists, whose attacks on historicism concealed a yet more hermetic historicism constructed around modernity itself.

A critique of built environments inspired by the past was prevalent among clusters of progressive intellectuals in European capital cities around the turn of the twentieth century. In his superb interpretation of the debate around the redevelopment of Vienna’s Ringstrasse in the late nineteenth century, Carl Schorske (1981) reviews the stirrings of modernism in the career of the architect Otto Wagner, who in rejecting ‘the yammering of the historicists’ endorsed the principle that ‘the only possible point of departure for our artistic creation is modern life’ (cited in Schorske, 1981: 96, 74; also Frisby, 2001). The presentism of Wagner and a new generation of artists and intellectuals across many disciplines was exemplified in the Vienna Secession, an aesthetic break with Austrian tradition in the 1890s to embrace broader European innovations in the arts, a movement anchored upon the slogan ‘To the Age its Art, to Art its Freedom’. For another Viennese architect, Adolf Loos, however, the Secession and its elevation of art nouveau was still too much of a compromise with decadent traditionalism, which he condemned in his remarkable 1908 polemic, Ornament and crime, advocating instead buildings whose exteriors were purist in form, clean white cubes and rectangles, stripped of any decorative impulse, forms that Le Corbusier and others perfected 20 years later (Borsi and Godoli, 1986; Frampton, 1985). Loos has been widely identified as a pioneer of the modern movement, and he carried his provocations against bourgeois culture to the gates of imperial power, designing a plain, unadorned building opposite the Hapsburg palace whose ‘very simplicity and functionality were regarded as an intentional insult to the Emperor’ (Janik and Toulmin, 1973: 100).

Traditional bourgeois styles, both interior and exterior, raised the hackles of modernists and became boundary markers, rallying points for rites of inclusion and exclusion. The young Frank Lloyd Wright railed against middle-class American home decoration in 1894, where ‘too many houses . . . are mere notion stores, bazaars and junk shops’ (Wright, 1975: 235), while a generation later, as modernism had entered its mature phase, Le Corbusier continued the tirade against the bourgeois home and its ‘conglomeration of useless and disparate objects . . . the intolerable witnesses to a dead spirit’ (Le Corbusier, 1927: 18, 91). In startling consistency with other spatial arts and sciences, Le Corbusier identified the need for a new design language, a transition from ‘the elementary satisfactions of decoration’ to the ‘higher satisfactions of mathematics’ (1927: 139), for, anticipating his later use in planning exercises of Walter Christaller’s
central place theory (Frampton, 1985), he wrote that ‘geometry is the language of man’ (Le Corbusier, 1927: 72).

The chronocentricity of progressive thought shaped Le Corbusier’s project, from his journal L’esprit nouveau to his definitive manifesto *Towards a new architecture*. The new spirit was the machine-age aesthetic, the product of the alliance of technology and commerce in the achievement of mass production. Factories, grain elevators and modern transportation were among the emblems of the new spirit. Almost a quarter of *Towards a new architecture* is given over to the admiration of steamships, aircraft and automobiles; ‘The steamship’, Le Corbusier noted, ‘is the first stage in the realization of a world organized according to the new spirit’ (1927: 103). In contrast to existing houses, an ‘old coach full of tuberculosis’, grain elevators and factories were pure, unadorned, geometric and true to the spirit of the age, altogether ‘the magnificent first-fruits of the new age’ (1927: 277, 284). There is more than a hint of a Hegelian *geist* in such paeans; in a Darwinian age, too, the necessity for modernism was also the evolutionary necessity for a superior life-form.

The chronocentricity of modernism sharply delimited superior and inferior cultural content as well as building forms, and its system of valuation was generous in the attribution of purity, truth and morality to the modern project. Giedion (1967), a student of Le Corbusier, has a section entitled ‘The demand for morality in architecture’ in his authoritative apologetic for the modern movement. In all of this, we see the conventional configuration of local knowledge, charged with positive meaning around the now of our present. No less was it knowledge for a subject, a view from somewhere, less the inevitable universal truth it was proclaimed to be and more the view of a social network of progressive pan-European intellectuals and artists with an agenda they believed in ardently.

Networking among this elite was well established even in an era of more limited travel and communication. Consider the social space of Adolf Loos who travelled as a young man from Vienna to Chicago for the Columbian Exposition in 1893. There he became familiar with the pioneering modernist work of Louis Sullivan, and Sullivan’s essay ‘Ornament in architecture’ that influenced his own 1908 treatise ‘Ornament and crime’ (Frampton, 1985: 90). Sullivan, meanwhile, who is said to have coined the modern slogan ‘form follows function’, had a student in the 1890s, Frank Lloyd Wright, whose panelled home interiors matched some of the opulent interiors (but plain exteriors) designed by Loos. Back in Vienna, he was in the midst of experimental artists, including the composer Schoenberg and the expressionist painter, Kokoschka (Schorske, 1981), while the purist designs and preference for white cubist forms in his mature phase were noted by artists further afield, including the painter/architect Le Corbusier in Paris, whose Purist group reprinted the French translation of ‘Ornament and crime’ in 1920 (Frampton, 1985). In the 1920s, Loos spent several years in Paris in avant garde circles before returning to Vienna, where his exposition on the language of geometry in the development of form had brought his ideas into contact with Ludwig Wittgenstein some years earlier. Loos had assisted Wittgenstein in his search for a publisher for the *Tractatus* (Janik and Veigl, 1998), and it was with the aid of Loos’s practice that Wittgenstein designed an astonishing family home that was a crisp synthesis of architectural modernism and logical positivism (Leitner, 1976; 2000; Galison, 1990). Its consistent cubist geometry exemplified Loos’s purist instincts, with a rejection of ornamentation, with no carpets or shades to cover bare light bulbs, and
denial of any regional or historical association – except of course for the particular meanings of modernism itself. Like the Vienna Circle of logical positivists, the Wittgenstein home exemplified commitment to a seemingly universal vocabulary, beyond culture, beyond history, precise and self-referential. Requiring technical standards so accurate that local engineers had difficulty matching them, the building was, as Wittgenstein’s sister complained, a ‘house turned logic’, devoid of human proportions (Leitner, 1976: 23). The same complaint would arise some 30 years later as a triumphant modernism rebuilt cities around the world, destroying old and familiar forms, displacing whole neighbourhoods (particularly of disenfranchised poorer residents), replacing cultural and historical associations with the shock of the new.

In outlining the professional life and travels of Adolf Loos we follow a social network to the USA that included Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, a sojourn in Paris interacting with Le Corbusier, and a home base in Vienna where Loos was a central player in a dense network of intellectuals and artists in diverse fields from painting, music and architecture to Wittgenstein and the philosophy of science. Here was a common project, intellectuals in major centres, in separate but interlocking disciplines and professions who comprised the scattered nodes of an international social network. Despite different national languages, they shared a joint vocabulary, spoke in common metaphors. Consider the modernist idea of the machine-age aesthetic (Trommler, 1995). The paradigmatic case is Le Corbusier’s famous aphorism that ‘a house is a machine for living in’, but Charles Jencks has retrieved widespread disciplinary identification with the same metaphor in the 1920s, across a broad set of European artists. A French essayist claimed that ‘a book is a machine for reading’, a Russian theatre director that ‘the theatre is a machine for acting’, an artist that a painting is ‘a machine for moving us’, and this strange fusion of culture and technology was brought to its climax in Marcel Duchamp’s claim that ‘the idea is the machine for making art’ (Jencks, 1973: 32). The sharing of metaphor identified a shared fixation and membership in a common club.

Besides their own exhibits, compositions and buildings, members of these networks formalized their group identity and advanced their common project through pamphlets, periodicals, manifestos, conferences and organizations. Of these, the most celebrated were the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne, ten congresses of European architects held between 1928 and 1956 to propagate modern architecture and planning as a global response to the challenges and opportunities of industrialization and urbanization. Exuding prophetic zeal and an imperial global range, claiming the authority of science, the ineluctability of the spirit of the age, the prescience of a god’s-eye view of the city, this partisan group strove to transform urban landscapes in modern idiom. Their local knowledge, empowered by corporate leaders in the public and private sectors, was impressed upon the city for 50 years. One such powerful civic bureaucrat was Robert Moses, the implacable builder of New York’s highways and public works for several decades, master of urban renewal, and much admired by Le Corbusier’s student Giedion as the bearer of modernization to the city. His urban vision was single-minded: ‘more houses in the way . . . more people in the way – that’s all . . . . When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax’ (cited in Berman, 1982: 183–84). His task, as Robert Moses saw it, was to detonate the pettiness of local knowledge that blocked the progressive march of his grand works.
With Robert Moses we return finally to New York, and the ‘Dream of liberty’. Under urban modernism, liberty had become imprisoned in a system where cities were being rebuilt by a cadre of architect-planners and public officials in the name of progress and without reference to an excluded public. There was, predictably, a patronizing and dismissive view of the undifferentiated ‘masses’. Giedion’s synthesis of the modern project in architecture and planning said it most clearly: Of course, the [architectural] problems that have to be solved are not posed by any conscious expression of the masses. For many reasons their conscious mind is always ready to say “No” to new artistic experiences’ (1967: 598). The viewpoint of this leading spokesman for the modern project is akin to the ethnocentric worldview of the imperial Chinese for whom the people beyond their boundaries were regarded quite simply as members of the zone of cultureless savagery. This transhistorical linkage may be less fanciful than it seems, for fear of the potentially unstable masses was a constant preoccupation of elites in Europe’s industrial cities. With characteristic flair, Le Corbusier saw the urban alternatives to be ‘architecture or revolution’, while Gustave Le Bon (1895) in Psychologie des foules argued that ‘the crowd state and the domination of crowds is equivalent to the barbarian state, or a return to it’ (cited in Brantlinger, 1983: 168).

In the 1960s, however, in city after city, in particular places, the crowds became definable faces as citizens organized against the tyrannies of urban clear-cutting performed by corporate leaders in the name of Le Corbusier’s 1920s image of the high-rise, freeway city. Few of these struggles have been documented, though some were collected by Jane Jacobs (1961) in her famous treatise against the ravages of modern urban planning. She recounts in detail the self-appointed god’s-eye view of the urban planners of the 1950s, an unreflexive view from on high, disregarding the experiences of citizens at ground level that muddied the clarity of their vision. Against an epistemology of the disinterested expert, she inserted the street knowledge of everyday life; against the ontology of the faceless masses, she counterposed the identity of particular voices and neighbourhoods; and, against the quiescent politics of formal democracy, she urged the activism of participatory democracy. This intuition for local knowledge and practice and against a posturing god’s-eye view of context-free rationalism has matured in many locations in the past generation, challenging the detached schemes of engineers, resource managers, development planners and corporate elites with the insights of local knowledge, including a new respect for traditional ecological knowledge (Berkes et al., 2000; Wenzel, 1999). With Huyssen (1984), one can see here a menu ‘to unlock the critical moment in postmodernism’.

Many commentators on postmodernism in recent years seem to have forgotten the social turbulence of its founding decade, 1965–75. The challenge of what Lefebvre (1967) called ‘the right to the city’ was repeated in a whole range of social movements, including environmentalism, civil rights and the anti-war movement. Despite their evident differences, these movements contained important conceptual and political similarities. Consider, for example, the competing social paradigms identified by the environmental movement of the 1970s (Table 1). Note the emphasis on use value not exchange value in economic relations, participatory non-hierarchical relations in politics, small-scale communal relations in society, and the limits to science in episte-
ology. Many of these attributes of critical environmentalism were shared with critical postmodernism. They were part of a broader ideology that promoted pluralism, cultural difference and social inclusion in policies advancing gender and lifestyle equality, anti-racism and multiculturalism.

I have discussed elsewhere the development of urban planning and design models incorporating these principles of critical postmodernism in urban Canada during the 1970s and 1980s (Ley, 1987; 1993b; 1996; Ley and Mills, 1993). Consider the large state-led projects of St Lawrence in Toronto and False Creek in Vancouver on inner-city brownfield sites built self-consciously to oppose the modernist impulses in both cities in the 1950s and 1960s, impulses that had led to widespread citizen opposition demanding a new urbanism. Heavy subsidies permitted the mixing of social classes and lifestyle groups, pitting an ontology of pluralism and difference against an ontology of the undifferentiated masses (Figure 3). The use of Christopher Alexander’s pattern language in False Creek introduced a design vocabulary sensitive to uses and users, and a participatory process helped define priorities. Housing was low-rise, of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Competing social paradigms (source: Cotgrove and Duff, 1980)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dominant social paradigm</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alternative environmental paradigm</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Core values</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material (economic growth)</td>
<td>Non-material (self-actualization)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural environment valued as resource</td>
<td>Natural environment intrinsically valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domination over nature</td>
<td>Harmony with nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market forces</td>
<td>Public interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk and reward</td>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards for achievement</td>
<td>Incomes related to need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentials</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual self-help</td>
<td>Collective/social provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Polity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritative structures (experts influential)</td>
<td>Participative structures (citizen/worker involvement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Non-hierarchical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law and order</td>
<td>Liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Society</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralized</td>
<td>Decentralized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large-scale</td>
<td>Small-scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associational</td>
<td>Communal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordered</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ample reserves</td>
<td>Earth’s resources limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature hostile/neutral</td>
<td>Nature benign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment controllable</td>
<td>Nature delicately balanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in science and technology</td>
<td>Limits to science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality of means</td>
<td>Rationality of ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation of fact/value, thought/feeling</td>
<td>Integration of fact/value, thought/feeling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
human scale, and diversity of style, materials and colours was encouraged through the use of different architects and builders. Symbolic programmes in building design, landscaping and signage sought to advance local and regional contextualism. Community development was promoted by the decision in False Creek to construct housing in circular modules, with the hollow centre of each module planned as public open space for socializing around a barbecue pit, children’s play equipment or a shared garden. Here are some of the motifs of the alternative social paradigm inscribed into the built environment.

Contemporary initiatives in western Europe, Canada, Australia and elsewhere sought to move decisively away from the high-density public-housing projects built in the modern idiom that ghettoized and stigmatized the poor in cheap, alienating structures. In a devastating report in 1969 the Government of Canada terminated the public-housing programme and initiated third-sector housing that included cooperatives and non-profit providers, thereby realizing the ‘alternative social paradigm’ of the social movements of the 1965–75 era. In this decentralized model of housing management greater involvement was granted toward users; in the cooperative programme tenants participated in the design process. An experienced architect described the process in these terms: ‘Co-op housing is unique in itself. You can start from scratch with the co-op group. You meet with the group, you discuss site constraints. You blend in what they want to accomplish within the budget’ (cited in Ley, 1993b). A central courtyard is a common feature of co-ops expressing communal social ideals; in the words of an architect, ‘The built environment is a response to the social
structure of the co-op. It is focussed around communal space and the recreation room. Internal circulation all leads to this common space’. Like Jane Jacobs’s idealization of the social diversity around her home on Hudson Street in Greenwich Village, mixing of socially diverse groups was a major objective of the co-ops, with rents adjusted to income. Projects are also relatively small and ground-orientated to aid a sense of identity and belonging. There is an emphasis on design diversity countering the generic homogeneity of public housing, and a symbolically laden programme of picket fences, porches, gables and chimneys that assert domesticity. Project architects are well aware of the social programme: ‘Co-op housing expresses social concerns; a sense of community, of individuality within the community. It’s designed to be distinctive. They express themselves as a group and the pride shows. It’s not a social housing image – they don’t want project stigma’ (cited in Ley, 1993b).

The importance of historical and geographical context was explicit in this critical postmodernism. In contrast to the universalism of modernism with its radical decontextualism, regional vernacular forms provided design inspiration. Locality mattered. The representation of local memory aided identification and identity, shaped a sense of place.

The remembrance of local history and tradition has been a feature of building in western Europe since the mid-1960s. A case in point is provided by the International Building Exhibition (IBA) in Berlin which initiated a programme of urban redevelopment in 1977 that lasted more than a decade and included community services as well as medium-density housing in new and renovated structures (Miller, 1993; Ghirardo, 1996). The immediate context was social movements in Berlin that from the early 1970s urged the restoration of the war-devastated landscape, while rejecting high-rise modern structures, in a participatory programme directed by the slogan ‘democracy as construction manager’ (Ghirardo, 1996: 109). There was a severe housing shortage in the city but no appetite to repeat the insensitive housing projects of the 1960s. Inspiration came from architects critical of modernism including Aldo Rossi and Robert Venturi. A key requirement for new construction was contextualism, continuity with local history and tradition; the requirement that each building be the responsibility of a different practice guaranteed design diversity in the built environment. Particularly in the rehabilitation projects, tenant participation in design and even building often occurred. In its sympathy with traditional streetscapes, the IBA model backed resident desires for historical continuity against professional desires for radical reconstruction, a conflict of values that is ‘profound and apparently irreconcilable’ (Ghirardo, 1996: 130).

The role of government support and direction was an essential component of critical postmodernism. In many welfare states, government internalized parts of the critique of the social movements of the 1960s and launched new priorities. Wherever the social movements sought objectives not readily achieved through the market, government support was necessary. The 1970s in many countries represented the high-water mark of the welfare state and resources were available for innovative policy directions. However, as the decade advanced, budget deficits announced the coming of the fiscal crisis of the state and through the 1980s resources were steadily clawed back. In Berlin, Ghirardo (1996) noted how by the mid-1980s the later phases of the IBA were constrained by financial shortfalls and a growing neoconservative political culture. During this period and through the 1990s architecture and design increasingly reflected the private-sector objectives of a consumer culture; postmodern talents were redirected
to leisure projects, signature head offices and retail emporiums.

In the USA where a welfare state has never been fully developed, this transition came earlier, certainly by the Reagan presidency, in early form in the Nixon years. It has been noted that postmodernism has had a divergent history in Europe and America; from the beginning Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas* gave a pop culture idiom to developments in the USA, while state-supported efforts in Europe had more earnest social objectives including housing provision and the preservation of a collective historic memory (Ellin, 1996; Ghirardo, 1996).

There is sometimes confusion about the identification of postmodern urbanism in the USA. A notable example is Frederic Jameson’s (1984) misidentification of the Hotel Bonaventure in Los Angeles with postmodernism, indeed as its archetypal form; a related misclassification is Harvey’s (1989) view of the new Lloyd’s building in London, whose high-tech design represents (like the Pompidou Centre) an extreme aesthetic celebration of building technology. Both authors have an ulterior motive, to link postmodern culture with a particular phase in the development of capitalism. There is not space here to develop the category errors that this misspecification leads to, but it is a strategic periodization that drags postmodernism along in the coat-tails of ‘late capitalism’ in the 1980s and ‘neoliberalism’ in the 1990s. To weld this theoretical reduction of culture to economy we see a tendency to replace the cultural concept of postmodernism with the temporal category of postmodernity defined as the period of ascendant neoliberalism. In this restatement the postmodern is assimilated as the cultural veneer of all that occurs within the assigned historical boundaries of neoliberalism. This blunt theoretical tool no longer carries any specificity other than as an accomplice of capital. It becomes not surprisingly a term of dread, bearer of a dysfunctional urban landscape, of ‘west coast crash’.

**IX Conclusion**

In 1990, Denise Scott Brown, for long Robert Venturi’s partner, submitted that neither of them were postmodernists, and that postmodernism was perhaps dead (Ellin 1996: 57; cf. Dear, 1991). If that were true, the humanities and social sciences still found plenty to talk about over the next decade concerning the disposition of the estate. Scott Brown does, however, anticipate the distancing from postmodernism that has become commonplace in the past decade. Is the story of postmodernism a chronicle of inflated human capital, an anticipation of the fictitious capital that fed the dot.com bubble on Wall Street through the 1990s until the inevitable day of reckoning?

Perhaps. If so, it would make a grand yarn, a cautionary tale for young scholars. My own view is that some of the ideas and practices raised by critical postmodernism are too important to be dismissed so lightly. In speaking of postmodernism, I am referring to a theoretical project defined by its scepticism of grand narratives with universal claims and its defence of local knowledge, indeed its insistence that all forms of knowledge are refracted through the here of my/our body and the now of my/our present. Such perspectival or standpoint theory remains the basis of vigorous research in such fields as feminism, postcolonialism or science studies. In the specific practices of architecture and planning, the interrogation of the universal assumptions of the master plan and the unquestioned rule of the autocratic architect-developer, together
with the introduction of participatory neighbourhood plans, remain powerful contribu-
tions, while the dissolution of a uniform public interest into plural interests is surely
an accurate rendition of the multicultural city. Contextualism respecting local scale and
traditions remains a generally successful and popular design principle. Outside the city,
the recognition of traditional ecological knowledge provides a corrective to the one-
size-fits-all thinking of the organization man. While these and other attributes of a
critical postmodernism remain, the attribution is usually honoured in the breach today.
In part, postmodernism has suffered what Robert Merton called ‘obliteration by incor-
poration’ as its contributions have disseminated to related fields. At one level, it matters
little whether these insights are preserved under the name of postmodernism, or some
less offensive alternative.

There is more to it than this, however. The resistance to postmodernism was vigorous
from the start. Aldo van Eyck’s 1981 lecture to the Royal Institute of British Architects
with the title ‘Rats, posts, and other pests’ (Jencks, 1986) set the tone for ensuing debate,
for example two years later in a heated contretemps before the American Institute of
Architects (1983). Norberg-Schulz (1988) was correct to observe that the vigour of these
reprimands suggested that postmodernism was too important to ignore, its challenges
too basic to permit an understated response. The attempt to engage local folk cultures
rather than the architectural canon alone was an offence to some; a challenge to profes-
sionalism and cosmopolitanism was disdained by others; the epistemological trimming
of the universalism of the god’s-eye view punctured a modern hubris. In addition, a
predilection to see consumerism as a legitimate public culture in the USA certainly
walked a dangerous line that all too readily permitted collusion with consumerism. Yet,
as the democracy movement in Eastern Europe demonstrated, the rejection of
consumerism is typically a class position that assumes its availability. Commodification
succeeds because it contains the promise of accessible products and services; the craft
volumes for the few become the paperbacks for the many. To this degree, criticism of
the consumption rights of others needs to be carefully measured. Perhaps this is one
reason why Jameson, though prompted to do so, declined to dismiss postmodernism:
‘Think of its popular character and the relative democratization involved in various
postmodern forms . . . Postmodern architecture is demonstrably a symptom of democ-
ratization’ (Jameson, in Stephanson 1988).

The issues at stake continue to be significant, including the livability of cities, class
power and democratic process, and the complex contingencies associated with
knowledge where the inclination of modern science preferred simplicity or totality as
epistemological options. Part of the hyperbole has come from overstatement on both
sides. There is, for example, a difference between contingency and determination; the
fact that knowledge is locally positioned does not mean that it has to be false – nor that
it has to be correct – before some generic yardstick. While Richard Rorty’s strong
programme of constructionism with its incommensurate ethical and judicial solitudes
can be justified historically – consider the ‘blind spots’ of interwar fascism or Stalinism
– the strong programme tends towards an oversocialized view of human action and
attitudes. After all, the diffusion of postmodernism itself left narrow speech
communities, crossed disciplinary boundaries and entered hostile territories. The con-
temporary call to situated knowledge is a better option than a strong constructionism,
especially as it repeats long-established insights from hermeneutics. A second issue is
the desire of science for metanarratives; as Stephanson (1988) complained to Jameson,
‘... postmodernist discourse makes it difficult to say things about the whole’. The conclusion that the world is complex and messy seems an admission of failure – for geographers does it take us back to lowly idiographic ambitions? Or are we to be satisfied with more limited generalization recognizing that empirical accountability to local circumstances is a necessary control upon theoretical and ideological flights of fancy?

In practice, too, the local is an uncomfortable category. It counters neighbourhoods against cities, regions against nations, and nations against continental or global entities. Clearly there have to be larger jurisdictions than the local to manage broader practical issues, and this is a challenge for political and judicial administration. At the same time democratic accountability has to move beyond an imputed singular public interest, caricatures of the uneducated masses, and recognize the pluralism of legitimate interests in contemporary societies, which is to move out of modern assumptions and onto postmodern terrain (Mouffe, 1988). The societal contexts for such a project find a more sympathetic home in the mature welfare state with its diverse objectives than the narrower and more dangerous pursuit of neoliberalism. This need not lead, however, to a fatalistic conclusion for present or future opportunities, for why should we assume that neoliberalism is some historic end-point? The degrees of local contingency may permit solutions beyond the strictures of a corrosive neoliberalism. In this respect, it is important not to be overawed by the American condition, for in a growing number of sectors the USA is being seen as an exception to conditions and possibilities in other places. Unlike the USA, for example, Canada has eliminated its federal budget deficit and is expending part of its revenue surplus on restoring aspects of the welfare state, including $1 billion in the 2003 federal budget for housing, a policy field virtually abandoned a decade ago. The easing of the fiscal crisis of the state might reinstitute one of the conditions in which critical postmodernism secured its promising early successes. So, while postmodernism as a social fact may be passing from the literature of social science, we should not forget its important lessons concerning pluralism and localism as ingredients of democratic practice.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Trevor Barnes and Michael Dear for constructively critical readings of this manuscript. Neither of them would agree with all that appears here, and are not responsible for the direction of my interpretations. I also acknowledge the helpful responses of audiences in Nijmegen, Leipzig, New Orleans and Vancouver to earlier drafts of this paper.

Notes

1. This includes such seemingly unpromising fields as accountancy, and, well known to geographers, cartography. Among the more unlikely titles in the archive are ‘Chaucer and postmodernism’ and ‘Modernism and postmodernism in professional Rugby League’.

2. Data were extracted from a print version of the SSCI up to 1985, from a CD-ROM for the period 1986–88, and from an internet version from the Web of science since 1989. Small discrepancies existed in numbers for years when these sources overlapped. For the AHCI, a CD-ROM recorded the period...
from 1975 to 1988 with internet coverage from 1989 to the present. Of course not all journals are listed in the two indexes, and outside the English-speaking world entries are limited. Only journals claiming an international market or a national market in North America would have a strong likelihood of inclusion. In short, the data in Figure 1 are indicative, not complete.


5. Compare the parallel critique of ‘the Rodin model – the solitary thinker mulling facts or spinning fantasies’ by Geertz in an engaging essay that sets out themes in an ethnography of modern thought (Geertz, 1983: 149).

6. A number of studies have analysed citation patterns to establish research clusters. For a helpful review and sophisticated case study of the structure of the diffusion literature, see Gatrell (1984).

7. For an example in geography, note Johnston’s concern at a discipline with ‘an abundance of turbulence’ (Johnston, 1997: 386).

8. In the space constraints of an already lengthy paper, the complexity through time and across space of the modern movement will have to be overlooked (cf. Frampton, 1985). The task of stylistic classification and generalization is never straightforward in the arts and architecture, though the existence of widely cited manifestos (e.g., Le Corbusier, 1927; Giedion, 1967) eases the task for a discussion of modern architecture. In addition the massive presence of Le Corbusier as ‘world architect’ (Frampton, 2001) makes an emphasis on his remapping of the city defensible. Nor are the breaks between modernism and postmodernism complete, leading to categorical confusion (for further discussion, see Ley, 1993a; Ley and Mills, 1993).

9. This section draws in part upon an earlier essay (Ley, 1989).

10. Bernard Leitner, a Viennese architect, was the key player in saving the house from demolition in the early 1970s. Symptomatically, his rescue mission was launched from New York, by then the international centre of the market in modern art (Leitner, 2000).

11. See Tuan (1974) for this and other examples of imperial ethnocentrism. The broader narrative here is the typification of the other, where recent authors have showed numerous examples in studies of gender, race, nation, empire, etc.

12. The mismatch of categories, which includes dating postmodernism to 1940 by Jameson so that it fits Mandel’s period of late capitalism, is set out in some detail in Ley and Mills (1993). Soja (1989: 61) adds to the categorical confusion by identifying Mandel’s Marxist economics as the work of a ‘foundational postmodern geographer’.

13. For some of the challenges raised by localism in urban development, see Ley (1996: 245–49).

References


Berman, M. 1982: All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity. New York: Simon and Schuster.


—— 1993a: Postmodernism, or the cultural logic
of advanced intellectual capital. Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie 84, 171–74.


