Postindustrialisation in the Present Tense

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Paolo Portoghesi's 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale may not exactly represent the genesis of postmodernism, but it certainly codifies its institutionalisation as an architectural paradigm. That year, which incidentally was the first in which there was an exclusively architectural section of the Venice Biennale, named as its theme the emancipatory condition from which architecture could flourish after modernism: 'la presenza del passato' (the presence of the past). In the case of Venice, postmodernism was imagined not only as a horizontalisation of an aesthetic history, but just as much as a wager on an alternative economic and social trajectory through the economic uncertainty of postindustrialisation in the wake of the quick death of the welfare state only a few years earlier. Critics on the left tend to plot the explicit neoliberalisation of the global economy somewhere between when Nixon took office in 1969 and the oil shocks in 1973 and 1975, which for some – such as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt and Maurizio Lazzarato, to name only a few – is shorthand for a radically new logic of global accumulation, and for others – such as David Harvey, Robert Brenner and Moishe Postone – marks an intensification of the capitalist value form at a larger scale. Of course, in a general sense it is not controversial to frame postmodernism and neoliberalism as contemporaneous with one another. That relationship has been well traced at this point and needs no reiteration here. My interest is instead in forwarding an argument about two fairly benign, though as I shall suggest later, central features of the relationship between culture and economics as it unfolded then and to a large extent is unfolding today.

My argument puts the Biennale at the center of exchanges between the social world of cultural capital and the urban world of economic capital at a moment and in spaces of postindustrial transition. After the occupations that took place in Milan during the 1968 Triennale, the Biennale reorganised itself, serialising what was at first a political struggle over the relationship between the aesthetics and politics of economic development. By 1980, and with an autonomous section dedicated to architecture in Venice, its regularity overlapped with successive waves of reinvestment into the cultural capacity of the city. The exhibition's current capacity to frame cultural exchange came as a consequence not of its geographical reproducibility, however, but of its commitment to public works and cultural-economic stimulation during the years that have now become synonymous with the exhaustion of modernism and the euphoria of postindustrial forms of production.

Culture for the New Economy

Portoghesi's theme for the 1980 exhibition imagined an explicit synthesis with the disciplinary register of that earlier crisis of modernism, from which emerged, perhaps more interestingly for our purposes here, a thesis on the politics of postindustrial production in non-capital cities: 'Postindustrial society … will no longer need great convulsive concentrations and *villes tentaculaires*, just as modern industry no longer needs cathedrals of work. Small cities will once again play a role not only in the consumption and passive reception of the culture of the metropolis, but also in autonomous creation and valid interlocution.'[1] In Portoghesi's account, 'a new synchronic vision of History that ultimately becomes an infinite warehouse for images and suggestions from which architects can freely draw shapes, styles and decorative elements'[2] would give shape to this new geography of the postindustrial society. What marked the first Venice Biennale as postmodern, in other words, had as much to do with its internal content, a decisively synchronic aesthetic of historical styles, as it did with the city's decision to share its lease on key Venetian buildings with the Biennale, whose role had quickly shifted from staging the city to shaping it. In 1980, this came in the form of retrofitting the Corderie dell'Arsenale, 'the largest pre-industrial production centre of the world'[3] originally built for nautical production in the fourteenth century, as the primary site for the architecture exhibition.[4] A megastructure for an entirely different moment of collective use – the production, that is, of merchant ships at the height of the Venetian empire – in 1980 the Arsenale materialized the new economic function of cultural centers in graduated economies. At the time, this meant utilising the husk of older modes of production for a post-Fordist economy driven by the fantasy that creativity and innovation, rather than production in the older sense, fuel growth, and that building for

culture amounts to an investment in the future wealth of a city.

Inside the refurbished Arsenale, Portoghesi featured the transportable *Strada Novissima* (New Street) consisting of storefront-like facades on the other side of which were single-architect exhibitions. Portoghesi would explain in that year's Biennale catalogue that the motivation for the street was to contain any and all architectural styles in one continuous space. On a material level, 'the street is built in temporary materials using refined artisan techniques that the world of cinema has miraculously saved'.[5] On a conceptual level, the wager is that 'in a city reinterpreted in function of the new collective needs, the temporary space can reacquire its importance and become an instrument for the socialization of urban space and the continual creative reinterpretation of its appearance.'[6] The new street is meant to prefigure, in other words, a world where culture is the organizing principle of the city, and not an economy of exploitation.

In two early sections of that book, Portoghesi offers a diagnostic of the 'sick metropolis' to which postmodernism is the cure. Postindustrial society, according to his account, would combine architectural archipelagos of an earlier urban system with the new 'science of habitation, built on the ruins of the separate disciplines of urban and regional planning, geography and architecture.'[7] This latter stance towards the crumbling edifice of industrial urbanism is one premised on an understanding of finite resources outlined in his book of two years earlier – the same year as the first Biennale – *After Modern Architecture* . Modern cities, he claimed, grew in the image of the bourgeoisie, and the value form that its mode of accumulation implied was, by the time of his writing, reaching its own limit.

Culture for Accountants

Postmodernism is the answer to Portoghesi's question, 'what comes after the perpetual motion of capital when its natural alibi gives up the ghost?' Here, then, we have precisely the dialectic of economics and culture, or what Fredric Jameson would only a few years later call the cultural logic of late capitalism, except with the cultural frame of postmodernism understood as capable of supplanting its economic other. It is worth recalling that the oil crisis in the 1970s sparked a rapid reorientation of industrial resources in Italy's North, most visibly in the closure of FIAT Lingotto, which by the time of Portoghesi's writing was in the midst of Renzo Piano's cultural retrofit. Creative forms of labour were quickly being reshaped in the image of capital by the time of the 1980 exhibition. Retraining the skilled portion of the workforce was part of Progetto 80, the so-called project to move Italy's northern networks of production into the new economy. More important for our interests here, however, are the new accounting practices designed by Progetto Quadro (a subsidiary policy group to Progetto 80) to support the representation and appropriation of intangible assets and social wealth upon which the new economy was building itself.

Unlike other types of buildings, such as the manufacturing plant or warehouse, the cultural centre has no fixed trajectory of devaluation on its owner's balance-sheet. Its current cost replacement – the value that it contributes to the production process as a component of a firm's total fixed capital – is hypothetically inexhaustible, whereas keeping up with competition in other sectors (and thus with other types of buildings) is a much less certain investment. Progetto 80 set out a multi-tiered integration of the total economy with the unique invention of separately regulated cultural zones. The International Accounting Standards Committee had already abandoned the historical cost principle (the value of the building at construction minus the value it contributed to production over a set timeline), and others, including Italian accountants, had begun to follow suit by the late 1970s.

So while Portoghesi's version of postmodernism imagined a resolution to the energy crisis – a resolution that sought to replace the finite relation between capital and energy with the inexhaustible relationship between culture and the economy – investors and business owners responded by putting culture to work in the valorisation of fixed capital assets. Understood in this way, postmodernism and postindustrialisation answered two sides of the same question, with results-based management of the economy and an aesthetic regime of the inexhaustible as two idioms of that answer.

Though in recent years the discourses of postindustrial development, cultural capitalism, and creative industries have receded to the background of austerity and its discontents, the latter is still frequently cited as an exit from the former. In Liverpool, for example, (a city whose mercantile and postindustrial histories overlap with Venice's time and time again) the odd non-contradiction between austerity and creativity looks more like a tendency and a counter-tendency, where the falling rate of industrial profit and increases in fixed forms of capital gutted its working-class core in the 1970s and 80s, while the pressure to postindustrialise has put social, or more specifically, cultural energies at the core of new growth. The challenge moving forward for those still interested in what the ghosts of postmodernism offered to the project of postindustrialisation is to reframe the relation as a struggle, not over the maintenance of creativity amidst austerity, but as an exit point from that contradiction altogether.

1 Paolo Portoghesi, 'The Crisis of the City' in *Postmodern: The Architecture of the Postindustrial Society,* Rizzoli, New York, 1982, p.68.

2 labiennale.org, *La Biennale de Venezia – La Presenza del Passato,* http://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/history/..., accessed 23 August 2013.

3 Ibid.

4 As Vittorio Gregotti explains in Lea-Catherine Szacka, 'A Conversation with Vittorio Gregotti,' the two architectural exhibitions hosted by the Biennale preceding Portoghesi's first Venice Architecture Biennale also utilized the occasion to retrofit long abandoned Venetian sites of industry. By 1980, however, the practice of combining staging and retrofitting had become the norm, rather than an exception. Lea-Catherine Szacka, 'A Conversation with Vittorio Gregotti,' in *Log 20,* Fall 2010, p.39–43.

5 Paolo Portoghesi, *Postmodernism,* La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 1980, p.29.

6 Ibid.

7 Paolo Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture,* Rizzoli, New York, 1980, p.19.

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