

Concepts of Space in American Culture: An Introduction

Klaus Benesch

I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.

Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*

Spatium est ordo coexistendi.

G. W. Leibniz, *Initia rerum metaphysica*

What can be more suitable for a collection of essays dedicated to the contentious issue of space in American culture at the turn from the second to the third millennium than to begin with a text bluntly titled *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods?* Its author, Charles Jencks, is well known as an influential voice in postmodern debates and an astute critic of twentieth century architectural history. A former student of architect and historian Sigfried Giedion, Jencks published in 1977 a groundbreaking study of the language of postmodern architecture in which he argued that unlike the monumental design of high modernism, postmodern architecture addresses and communicates with a "spatial" reading public by way of complex semiotic strategies. Rather than privileging an overarching abstract idea (like their modernist predecessors), postmodern architects tend to engage the human in an interactive dialog with her/his urban surrounds, a dialog in which architecture becomes an aesthetic object accessible primarily by way of semiotic analysis. If *Language of Post-Modern Architecture* turns on the important idea, as Fredric Jameson keenly observed, that architecture "reinforces a [spatial] ideology of communication" (n2, 420), Jencks's earlier, lesser known study of architecture's immediate future, *Architecture 2000* (1971), appears to be even more relevant with regard to spatial considerations and ideologies in American culture.

While the title clearly refers to the realm of architecture and therefore, by way of implication, to the problem of space, its heuristic value for a "spatial" analysis of culture has more to do with the fact that Jencks sets out to define space as a fundamental category of human life, a site where different trends and traditions meet and where projections of the future blur with both memories of the past and the contested conventions of the present. Reviewing major trends in the history of modern and postmodern architecture, Jencks posits a general inclination towards a technology-driven evolutionary progress, a belief in technology's power to increase both "*efficiency* and the independence of, or *control* over, the environment" (13). Yet if computerized planning, new high-tech material, and the artificial environments of amusement parks, shopping malls or fake recreational worlds (such as Tokyo's gigantic "Summerland") corroborate this powerful "myth of the machine," there is also evidence that technological innovation has "both controlled, positive consequences and uncontrolled negative ones" (16), depending on whether one looks at biological and cultural systems as *open* or *closed*.^[1] Though far from being a Luddite or technophobe, Jencks questions the ideology of technological progress by showing that the future remains vastly unpredictably and that the alleged negentropic effects of technological encroachment of natural spaces on a lower level are usually thwarted by a loss of control on a higher level.^[2] Since open systems such as society and culture have an innate tendency towards continual self-transcendence, the number of possible consequences of any form of progress within those systems is by necessity infinite and, thus, incalculable.

Jencks's *Architecture 2000* delineates a decisive shift from landscape to technoscape in industrial societies, a merging of nature, culture, and the machine that renders effete any attempt to distinguish between acts of nature and those unleashed by human agency. It also registers a loss of boundary between country and city (a boundary Raymond Williams, two years later, found equally obsolete yet quite persistent as cultural mythology), a merging of outdoors and indoors environments, of day and night, summer and winter, north and south. Regardless of whether one fully agrees with Jencks's contention of a widespread waning of the nature-culture paradigm, his other argument, namely, that within this context of dissolution and lack of (spatial) orientation "the arts induce [a] state of organization in us more effectively than the sciences because the artist is capable of presenting and reconciling a wide

range of impulses whereas the scientist or statesman can concentrate at best on a few" (118), appears to be largely indisputable.^[3] Yet how do artists organize or articulate these fundamental spatial concerns and why is it that by engaging aesthetic artifacts we often learn more about the status of space in a particular culture than by merely moving around in the actual geo-physical spaces of that culture? To answer these crucial questions about the perennial relation between space and the arts in America a brief excursion seems in order here.

Modern Aesthetics of Space

In an influential essay, Joseph Frank famously argued that modern literature followed the plastic arts by shifting from a preoccupation with time to the preoccupation with space. Modern art, according to Frank, sought to escape the tyranny of time by replacing historical depth with a temporal continuum "in which distinctions between past and present are wiped out. [...] past and present are apprehended *spatially*, locked in a timeless unity that [...] eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition" (59). The shift from an aesthetics of time to an aesthetics of space was caused, Frank believed, by the "insecurity, instability, the feeling of loss of control over the meaning and purpose of life amidst the continuing triumphs of science and technics" (55) in the modern world. By making space rather than time the realm in which literary works unfold, modern authors tried to escape and, ultimately, transcend the "wasteland" of technological society.

Though quite a contested construct in itself, space in modern literature thus often functions as a site of aesthetic relief and regeneration. Kafka's unfinished debut novel *Amerika* (originally titled "Der Verschollene") is a good case in point. In this exemplary modernist text Kafka, who had been a secretary and lawyer at an accident insurance company for industrial workers, juxtaposes the restlessness and fast-paced rhythm of the modern bureaucratic state with an imaginary natural counter-space opaquely called the "The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma." Riding on a crowded train through the American West, the novel's picaresque hero conjures up a pristine fairyland untainted by both time and civilization, against which "everything [...] faded into comparative insignificance before the grandeur of the scene outside" (297). Kafka's naïve vision of the American West as "virgin" land clearly shares an effort of many writers to reverse the changing meaning of time and space in modern society.^[4] If the juxtaposition of natural spaces of "being" (outside of time) vs. the

cultural spaces of "becoming" (i.e., geared to historical progress) cuts through much of Western thought from Rousseau to Heidegger, there is also, however, a counter-current to the metaphysical tradition of writing nature off as the other of culture and society. As Cecelia Tichi pointed out, modern art could as well be seen as an effort to formally adopt and incorporate technological progress. According to this view much of modernist writing is marked by the authors' attempt to become an "engineer" of words and the new emphasis on space and spatial forms was but "a collaborative effort of the engineer, the architect, the fiction writer, and the poet" (16). Rather than avoiding the time-bound efficiency and functionalism of contemporary society, the machine-art of the Futurists, Dos Passos's urban novels or the minimalist poetry of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams translated the dynamic potential of the modern cityscape into the abstract, kinetic design of verbal construction. In doing so, these writers gleaned as much from the history of modern architecture, the introduction of high-speed trains, or Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* as from a literary tradition that privileged the search for ahistorical, immutable truths outside the sphere of cultural activity.

How, then, can we conceptualize the shifting experience of time-space relations in modern and postmodern societies? Obviously, we have to move away from the idea of a world "out there," a sense of space that is extrinsic and independent of the structure of our own thinking and perception. Because we live not only *in* but also *through* and *with* space, it affects every area of human existence. Living space, the German "Lebensraum," has always been a space of action, communication, and discourse; how we perceive it, appropriate it, or exploit it as resource is constantly being transformed by technological and scientific progress and its concomitant erosion of traditional worldviews. From this perspective, one can argue that time and space are in no way "objective" conceptions but are created by material conditions and social practices.^[5] Put another way, under changed economic and technological conditions, definitions of time and space change accordingly.

Postmodern Architectures of Time

There is little doubt that today, while physical space is shrinking, virtual spaces proliferate. After the era of "spatiality," that is, the imperialist exploration, usurpation, and exploitation of geo-physical spaces during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century (both on earth and in outer space), it seems as if

we have entered a new stage where space is finally replaced by time, or rather "real" time. With the advent of the personal computer and the widespread establishment of electronic mass media, space, time, and movement have acquired a new meaning. If real space has become a limited resource, cyberspace, the World Wide Web and other global electronic networks at once expanded and subverted our traditional sense of space. While we exchange data via email, explore the ever-proliferating sites of the Internet, or do business online, as cybernauts we are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. As the German art historian Bernd Meurer recently observed in an essay on "The Future of Space," "the place which we perceive as telereality and the place where we do the perceiving are synchronous. Real proximity is replaced by the image of closeness. [...] Space and time disconnect" (15).

What are the consequences of this far-reaching switch from space to time? While modern architecture opened up a multitude of new spaces by reorganizing the urban centers of nineteenth-century industrial cities, the postmodern transformation of space into cyberspace seemed to have reduced architectural design and city planning to merely ornamental functions of global electronic networks. Advocates of the new electronic paradigm often argue on merely practical grounds. Thus, architect Martin Pawley points out that "the traffic density of a conventional urban street system is limited by its intersections. The traffic density of an optical [or electronic] road network would be unaffected by its intersections" (41). For Pawley, the arrival of the global city network marks a "catastrophic diminution of the cultural status of architecture." Similar to the fate of painting at the hands of photography, and the fate of cinema at the hands of television and video, urban space has become "no more than the detritus of consumption [...]. In the new global city system, the old static arts, literature, painting, music, sculpture and architecture, would have no place" (39). And yet, if we consider the fact that with the constant expansion of the World Wide Web both access time and the time necessary to navigate and exploit its rhizomatic structures have also increased (and thus limited the available cyber-spatial options), not to speak of aggressive commercialization (disk space cluttered with advertising and junk mail) and widespread electronic totalitarianism (surveillance, control, and manipulation of individual choices and movements), one may well contend the glib assertion that space has now been superseded by time as the dominant cultural category.

Significantly, if also somewhat paradoxically, the most striking blow yet to the current tendency of annihilating space has been wielded by the Moslem fundamentalists who attacked the World Trade Center on September 11th. I will keep my comments brief here on the obvious and tragic repercussions of these events with regard to the topic of space and spatiality. What turned 9/11 into a powerful statement against the ongoing downgrading of "real" space versus the "virtual" spaces of electronic networks has been pointed out many times. "A small group of men have literally altered our skyline," novelist Don DeLillo wrote in an editorial of *Harper's Magazine*, now "we have fallen back in time and space" (38). Apart and beyond the inherent iconoclasm of the events, however, the physical destruction of the world's most important concentration of economic power made visible in a cataclysmic *mis-en-scène* what Saskia Sassen, in a study of globalization and global cities, describes as the spatial grounding of postindustrial capitalism: namely, that there is still a "place" or real space attached to the international centers of economic and political power. We now know that these powers are both located and locked in space; rather than entirely made of bits and bytes or run by administrators identifiable only through their email-addresses or account numbers, the global marketplace bustles with human capital. The thousands who died in the attacks had real names and were "real" people. What is more, they were not just representatives of power but also of what Sassen calls "the amalgamated other": lower-tier secretaries, the countless members of maintenance crews, service and technical staff or the Chinese street vendor and immigrant caterer who tend to be excluded from corporate culture and the dominant economic narratives.^[6] If the "neutralization of distance through telematics," Sassen convincingly argues, "has as its correlate a new type of central place" ("Economy" 75), we can hardly neglect the socio-spatial implications of the emerging global megalopolis.

What 9/11 thus has brought home with utmost clarity is that "a house," as architectural critic Mark Wigley noted, "is never innocent of the violence inside it" (qtd. in Sassen, "Economy" 83). Architecture may be an effort to arrest time by wresting and shaping a livable place from space, yet its specific design is always shaped by particular cultural values and social norms. It is here that a central paradox arises, a paradox that can be traced throughout the history of modern aesthetics and, as readers will find out, informs many of the

discussions in the present collection.^[7] The dilemma is generic with spatial representations in general but has special relevance with regard to architectural space as a contact zone of both aesthetic and social concerns. In its simplest form, it can be formulated as follows: since architectural designs are by their very nature spatializations of time, how can they adequately convey new ideas and insights vis-à-vis the flow of human experience and the change of social processes? As spatial constructs, how can they transcend their solid grounding in matter and engage in an organic relationship with their human environment? More specifically, how can architecture, as New York architects/philosophers Arakawa and Madeline Gins claim in their book *Architectural Body*, "actively participate in life and death matters" (1)?

*

Since we believe that space, place, and architecture both reflect and create the cultural specificity of any society (and thereby clearly participate in "life and death" matters) and that, when it comes to America, space, as Charles Olson noted, has been perhaps the most important single driving force not only to build a new nation but to imagine one, we invited in the fall of 2001 a number of eminent scholars, artists and political activists to an international conference at the University of Bayreuth (Germany), entitled "From Landscape to Technoscape: Contestations of Space in American Culture." Though not all participants in the conference were able to contribute to the larger project of the present collection, much of its scope and initial interdisciplinary fervor has been preserved in the selection of the following essays.^[8]

As many of the contributions make clear, America's sense of space has always been tied to what Hayden White called the "narrativization" of real events. If the awe-inspiring manifestations of nature in America (Niagara Falls, Virginia's Natural Bridge, the Grand Canyon, etc.) were often used as a foil for projecting utopian visions and idealizations of the nation's exceptional place among the nations of the world, the rapid technological progress and its concomitant appropriation of natural spaces served equally well, as David Nye argued, to promote the dominant cultural idiom of exploration and conquest. From the beginning, American attitudes towards *space* were thus utterly

contradictory if not paradoxical; a paradox that scholars tried to capture in such hybrid concepts as the "middle landscape" (Leo Marx), an "engineered New Earth" (Cecelia Tichi), or the "technological sublime" (David Nye).

Yet not only was America's concept of *space* paradoxical, it has always also been a contested terrain, a site of continuous social and cultural conflict. Many foundational issues in American history (the dislocation of Native and African Americans, the geo-political implications of nation-building, immigration and transmigration, the increasing division and "clustering" of contemporary American society, etc.) involve differing ideals and notions of space. Quite literally, space or, more accurately, its "warring" ideological appropriations formed the arena where America's search for identity (national, political, cultural) has been staged. If American democracy, as Frederick Jackson Turner claimed, "is born of free land," then its history may well be defined as the history of the fierce struggles to gain and maintain power over both the geographical, social, and political spaces of America and its concomitant narratives.

To be sure, all of the following essays reflect and add to earlier critical studies of the political, cultural, and aesthetic implications of space in America. While the pioneering works of Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, Perry Miller, Leo Marx, Annette Kolodny, Barbara Novak, and Cecelia Tichi drew attention to the ideological inscriptions and aesthetic representations of nature and landscape from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, historians of technology, sociologists, and critics of architecture such as Lewis Mumford, Thomas P. Hughes, Jane Jacobs, Langdon Winner, Stephen Kern, David Nye or Mike Davis examined the succeeding transformation of American concepts of space within the proliferating technological environments of the twentieth century. More recently, electronic extensions into cyberspace, on the one hand, and the successful exploration and "colonization" of the intra-human, microscopic spaces of genetic engineering, on the other, initiated a further, perhaps even more dramatic redefinition of space in American culture. If the present collection of essays unavoidably fails to cover the full trajectory of these critical and discursive shifts, we nevertheless hope that by the sheer number and range of topics, interests, and critical approaches the essays gathered here will help to open up further and exciting new avenues of inquiry into the tangled relations of space in America.

Works Cited

- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*. 1869. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Benesch, Klaus. "Writing Machines: Technology and the Failures of Representation in the Work of Franz Kafka." *Reading Matters: Narrative in the New Ecology of Media*. Ed. Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997. 76-95.
- Carlyle, Thomas. "The Sign of the Times." *Edinburgh Review* 49 (1829): 439-59.
- Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz*. London: Verso, 1990.
- DeLillo, Don. "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September." *Harper's Magazine* (December 2001): 34-40.
- Einstein, Albert. Preface. *Concepts of Space*. By Max Jammer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1954.
- Frank, Joseph. "Spatial Form in Modern Literature." *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1968. 3-62.
- Giedion, Sigfried. *Mechanization Takes Command*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1948.
- Gins, Madeline, and Arakawa. *Architectural Body*. Tuscaloosa/London: The U of Alabama P, 2002.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- Hughes, Thomas P. *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993.
- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House, 1961.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991.
- Jencks, Charles A. *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods*. New York/Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1971.
- . *The Language of Post-modern Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1977.
- Kafka, Franz. *Amerika*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken, 1974.
- Kern, Stephen. *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984.
- . *The Lay of the Land*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1975.
- Kwinter, Sanford. *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2001.
- Leibniz, G. W. *Hauptschriften zur Grundlegung der Philosophie*. Ed. Ernst Cassirer. Leipzig 1904.
- Lewis, R. W. B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.

- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1964.
- Meurer, Bernd. "The Future of Space." *The Future of Space*. Ed. Bernd Meurer. Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 1994. 13-36.
- Miller, Perry. *Errand into the Wilderness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Mumford, Lewis. *The Myth of the Machine. Vol. II: The Pentagon of Power*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.
- . *The Myth of the Machine. Vol. I: Technics and Human Development*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967.
- . *Technics and Civilization*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1934.
- Novak, Barbara. *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875*. New York: Oxford UP, 1980.
- Nye, David E. *American Technological Sublime*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994.
- . *Narratives and Spaces. Technology and the Construction of American Culture*. Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1997.
- , ed. *Technologies of Landscape: From Reaping to Recycling*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997.
- Olson, Charles. *Call Me Ishmael. A Study of Melville*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1947.
- Pawley, Martin. "The Redundancy of Urban Space." *Future of Space*. Ed. Bernd Meurer. Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 1994. 37-58.
- Sassen, Saskia. "Economy and Culture in the Global City." *The Future of Space*. Ed. Bernd Meurer. Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 1994. 71-89.
- . *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. New York: Princeton UP, 2001.
- Slotkin, Richard. "Myth and the Production of History." *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986. 70-90.
- Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land. The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971.
- Taylor, Frederick Winslow. *Principles of Scientific Management*. 1911. New York: Harper & Row, 1947.
- Tichi, Cecelia. *New World, New Earth: Environmental Reform in American Literature from the Puritans Through Whitman*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979.
- . *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America*. Chapel Hill/London: The U of North Carolina P, 1987.
- White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1982.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- Winner, Langdon. *Autonomous Technology*. Cambridge: MIT, 1977.

Notes

- [1] Criticism and critical studies of this modern belief in technology abound. See, among many others, the canonical texts by Carlyle, Arnold, Marcuse, and Mumford.
- [2] Jencks mentions the invention of the railroad or automobile that "did represent an increase in control, speed and energy over horse-drawn vehicles [but] also brought with it a decrease in control over pollution, noise and traffic jams" (*Architecture 2000* 15).
- [3] Albert Einstein, in a revealing foreword (in German) to Max Jammer's magisterial study *Concepts of Space* (1954) makes a similar point as to the often myopic scope of the physicist and natural scientist. See Einstein, Preface.
- [4] The "myth" of the frontier as counter-image to American progress during the nineteenth century is well documented (cf. Smith; Slotkin). That it even served the fledgling writer from Prague, who has never been to America nor, for that matter, has traveled much in Europe either, as a foil onto which he could project his anxiety about the pressures of bureaucratic time lends ample proof to both the mythopoeic power of space and the role of myth in the cultural construction of ideal spaces. For Kafka's idiosyncratic writing style as a literary response to the modern recoding of social space and time by accelerated technological innovation, see Benesch and, more recently, Kwinter (104-211).
- [5] A comprehensive assessment of social practices and their impact on the changing role of space in modern and postmodern society can be found in Harvey 201-323.
- [6] For a more detailed analysis of this issue, see Sassen, *Global City*.
- [7] I here follow in part Harvey's discussion of time-space relations in postmodern society (206-7). His main concern, how different forms of spatialization inhibit or facilitate processes of social change, overlaps with the larger scope and range of topics to be discussed on the following pages.
- [8] While others, such as Arakawa, Madeline Gins, and Robin Collin, who, because of 9/11, could not join us then, actively supported and contributed to the book.