"The Los Angeles School of Urbanism: An Intellectual History"

Michael Dear

Editors' Introduction

In this provocative essay, University of California, Berkeley, professor of city and regional planning Michael Dear summarizes a radically different model of the logic behind the spatial structure of regions than Ernest Burgess's classical model. Dear's model reflects postmodernist thinking, particularly ideas of an important group of Southern California intellectuals identified as the Los Angeles school of urbanism. One good way to think about the internal structure of city-regions is by contrasting the Burgess model (representative of the Chicago school of sociology) and the LA school model (as described by Dear).

"Schools" of thought are sometimes defined when a group of individuals at some place and time develop a reasonably consistent body of ideas that is different enough from other ideas at the time that it qualifies as something special. Members of the "Dutch school" of painters in the Netherlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example, worked in a distinct style that set them apart from other artists of the time. Anyone comparing a Dutch landscape painting from that school would immediately see that it is dramatically different from, for example, a landscape painted by a painter in the nineteenth-century French Impressionist school of art. Within the Dutch school, Rembrandt's style was different from Johannes Vermeer's and while they were both impressionists, Claude Monet's painting style is different from Pierre-August Renoir's style.

Similarly, the Los Angeles school of urbanism consists of the work of a group of intellectual mavericks with different approaches, but who share enough in common that they self-identify and are identified by others as a distinct school of urbanist thought. Dear considers their point of view radically different from earlier modernist points of view.

The LA school of urbanism includes neo-Marxist geographers, left-wing urban sociologists, postmodernist architectural critics, labor historians and other Southern California intellectuals. Mike Davis, the author of "Fortress L.A." (p. 195), is a member of the LA school and coined the term "LA school".

LA school members consider themselves postmodernists. They distinguish their approach to cities from modernists like Le Corbusier (p. 336). In the selection that follows, Dear characterizes the Burgess concentric zone model of the internal structure of the city as in the modernist tradition..

According to Dear, key differences between modernist and postmodernist views as represented by the Burgess and LA school models are that:

- Burgess and other modernists view city-regions as coherent regional systems in which the central business district (CBD) organizes the rest of city space and the metropolitan hinterland beyond the formal city limits. In contrast postmodernist members of the LA school view city-regions as fragmented, with different areas influenced largely by global, rather than purely local, forces. LA school theorists argue that CBDs no longer act as centers defining the city-region. Rather, they argue that urban peripheries are organizing what remains of the center.

- According to Dear, Burgess believed that the personal choices of individuals shape overall urban conditions. In contrast Dear and LA theorists believe that great global structural forces determine metropolitan spatial structure. They believe that global corporate-dominated connectivity, is balancing or even offsetting individual-centered agency in urban processes.
- Burgess and his Chicago school colleagues held an essentially teleological view of urban evolution. They believed cities were evolving to ever more advanced and modern levels. The LA school questions that assumption. They see the evolution of cities as a nonlinear, chaotic process. They see many pathological aspects of postmodern LA that make it arguably a much less advanced city than many earlier cities. LA school members generally share Mike Davis's dystopianism (p. 195).
- Postmodernist concepts include the World City (a few urban centers controlling the world economy), the Dual City (increasingly polarized by race, class, income, and gender), the Hybrid City (characterized by new hybrid communities), and Cybercity (in which digital connectivity shapes all aspects of urban life).

The most compelling metaphor Dear and his colleague Steven Flusty use to describe the LA school paradigm is "Keno capitalism". Keno is a game in which a square in a rectangular grid is selected by chance. That event triggers activity in squares closest to the selected square. Different random squares on the board may be in play at any time. Squares which are furthest from the selected square(s) have little or activity. Players with "winning" squares, selected by chance win; players with squares furthest from the selected squares lose the game. Substituting a real-world land parcel for the Keno square, Dear and Flusty argue that in Los Angeles and other of the world's most dynamic metropolitan regions global development consortia choose land parcels for development nearly at random and inject a huge amount of capital to develop mega projects there. Often they might as well choose one parcel as another. Land values on and right around the chosen parcels skyrocket and the selection of the parcels touches off a whole string of development activities nearby. Other parcels in the metropolitan region – often in the periphery rather than the city itself – are also being selected, and frantic development activity occurs close to them as well. In between the Keno-like winning parcels little development activity occurs, or neighborhoods decline. A metropolitan region experiencing this form of development becomes, in Dear's words, "a noncontiguous collage of parcelized, consumption-oriented landscapes linked only by the (dis) information superhighway". An aerial photograph of such a region would look like a Keno board with apparently random spots of intense development here and there and little activity elsewhere. Dear notes that existing (modernist) forms are not completely irrelevant. Their past influence is discernible in postmodern landscapes and they continue to modestly influence the emerging spaces of postmodernity.

Postmodern urbanism as described by the LA school is characterized by edge cities, "privatopias" of homeowners' associations, "minoritization" (where the majority of the population is the non-white "other"), theme park environments, fortification, "containment centers" (prisons), and "technopoles" (geographical loci of high-tech production). Neo-Marxists members of the LA school agree with Engels (p. 46) that urban development is driven by capitalistic self-interest. Now that the scale of urbanization causes worldwide problems such as the loss of sustainability and global climate change described in Part Six on Urban Planning Theory and Practice, the consequences of Keno capitalism are potentially catastrophic.

Contrast Dear's postmodern perspective to Le Corbusier's modernist views (p. 336). Compare the first section of Nigel Taylor's article on planning theory (p. 386), which describes modernist planning theories such as the rational planning model, with the latter part of the selection which describes postmodern planning theories, such as Leonie Sandercock's concept of Cosmopolis. The rational planning model would arguably work much better in early-twentieth-century Los Angeles where development was occurring from the city center outward in predicable ways than in early-twenty-first-century Los Angeles, as described by Dear, Mike Davis (p. 195), and other LA school theorists. An approach like Sandercock's that assumes development is diverse, unpredictable, and largely influenced by exogenous world forces might be more appropriate in contemporary Los Angeles.

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Dear's books include *From Chicago to L.A.: Making Sense of Urban Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), and *The Spaces of Postmodernity* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000).

Other writings on postmodernist urban theory include Charles Jencks, *Heteropolis: Los Angeles, the Riots, and the Strange Beauty of Heteroarchitecture* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), Allen J. Scott, *Technopolis: High-Technology Development and Regional Development in Southern California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), Allen J. Scott and Edward Soja (eds), *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), and Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989).

The basic primer of the Chicago School was *The City*. Originally published in 1925, the book retains a tremendous vitality far beyond its interest as a historical document. I regard the book as emblematic of a modernist analytical paradigm that remained popular for most of the 20th century. Its assumptions included:

- a modernist view of the city as a unified whole, i.e., a coherent regional system in which the center organizes its hinterland;
- an individual-centered understanding of the urban condition; urban process in *The City* is typically grounded in the individual subjectivities of urbanites, their personal choices ultimately explaining the overall urban condition, including spatial structure, crime, poverty, and racism; and
- a linear evolutionist paradigm, in which processes lead from tradition to modernity, from primitive to advanced, from community to society, and so on.

There may be other important assumptions of the Chicago School, as represented in *The City*, that are not listed here. Finding them and identifying what is right or wrong about them is one of the tasks at hand, rather than excoriating the book's contributors for not accurately foreseeing some distant future.

The most enduring of the Chicago School models was the zonal or concentric ring theory, an account of the evolution of differentiated urban social areas by E. W. Burgess. Based on assumptions that included a uniform land surface, universal access to a single-centered city, free competition for space, and the notion that development would take place outward from a central core, Burgess concluded that the city would tend to form a series of concentric zones. The main ecological metaphors invoked to describe this dynamic were invasion, succession, and segregation, by which populations gradually filtered outward from the center as their status and level of assimilation progressed. The model was predicated on continuing high levels of immigration to the city.

At the core of Burgess' schema was the Central Business District (CBD), which was surrounded by a transitional zone, where older private houses were being converted to offices and light industry, or subdivided to form smaller dwelling units. This was the principal area to which new immigrants were attracted and it included areas of vice and unstable or mobile social groups. The transitional zone was succeed by a zone of working-men's homes, which included some of the city's oldest residential buildings inhabited by stable social groups. Beyond this, newer and larger dwellings were to be found, occupied by the middle classes. Finally, the commuters' zone was separate from the continuous built-up area of the city, where much of the zone's population was employed. Burgess' model was a broad generalization, and not intended to be taken too literally. He anticipated, for instance, that his schema would apply only in the absence of "opposing factors" such as local topography (in the case of Chicago, Lake Michigan). He also anticipated considerable internal variation within the different zones.

Other urbanists subsequently noted the tendency for cities to grow in star-shaped rather than concentric form, along highways that radiate from a center with contrasting land uses in the interstices. This observation gave rise to a sector theory of urban structure, an idea advanced in the late 1930s by Homer Hoyt (1933, 1939), who observed that once variations arose

in land uses near the city center, they tended to persist as the city expanded. Distinctive sectors thus grew out from the CBD, often organized along major highways. Hoyt emphasized that "nonrational" factors could alter urban form, as when skillful promotion influenced the direction of speculative development. He also understood that older buildings could still reflect a concentric ring structure, and that sectors may not be internally homogeneous at one point in time.

The complexities of real-world urbanism were further taken up in the multiple nuclei theory of Chauncey Harris and Edward Ullman (1945). They proposed that cities have a cellular structure in which land uses develop around multiple growth-nuclei within the metropolis as a consequence of accessibility-induced variations in the land-rent surface and agglomeration (dis)economics. Harris and Ullman also allowed that real-world urban structure is determined by broader social and economic forces, the influence of history, and international influences. But whatever the precise reasons for their origin, once nuclei have been established, general growth forces reinforce their preexisting patterns.

Much of the urban research agenda of the 20th century has been predicated on the precepts of the concentric zone, sector, and multiple nuclei theories of urban structure. Their influences can be seen directly in factorial ecologies of intra-urban structure, land-rent models, studies of urban economies and diseconomies of scale, and designs for ideal cities and neighborhoods. The specific and persistent popularity of the Chicago concentric ring model is harder to explain, however, given the proliferation of evidence in support of alternative theories. The most likely reasons for its endurance are related to its beguiling simplicity and the enormous volume of publications produced by adherents of the Chicago School . . . .

In the final chapter of *The City*, Louis Wirth (1925) provided a magisterial review of the field of urban sociology, titled (with deceptive simplicity, and astonishing self-effacement) "A Bibliography of the Urban Community." But what Wirth did in this chapter, in a remarkably prescient way, was to summarize the fundamental premises of the Chicago School, and to isolate two fundamental features of the urban condition that were to rise to prominence at the beginning of the 21st century. Specifically, Wirth established that the city lies at the center of, and provides the organizational logic for, a complex regional hinterland based on trade:

> Far from being an arbitrary clustering of people and buildings, the city is the nucleus of a wider zone of activity from which it draws its resources and over which it exerts its influence. The city and its hinterland represent two phases of the same mechanism which may be analyzed from various points of view . . . .

He also noted that the development of satellite cities is characteristic of the latest phases of city growth, and that the location of such satellites can exert a determining influence upon the direction of growth:

> One of the latest phases of city growth is the development of satellite cities. These are generally industrial units growing up outside of the boundaries of the administrative city, which, however, are dependent upon the city proper for their existence. Often they become incorporated into the city proper after the city has inundated them, and thus lose their identity. The location of such satellites may exert a determining influence upon the direction of the city's growth. These satellites become culturally a part of the city long before they are actually incorporated into it . . . .

Wirth further observed that modern communications have transformed the world into a single mechanism, where the global and the local intersect decisively and continuously:

> With the advent of modern methods of communication the whole world has been transformed into a single mechanism of which a country or a city is merely an integral part. The specialization of function, which has been a concomitant of city growth, has created a state of interdependence of world-wide proportions. Fluctuations in the price of wheat on the Chicago Grain Exchange reverberate to the remotest part of the globe, and a new invention anywhere will soon have to be reckoned with at points far from its origin. The city has become a highly sensitive unit in this complex mechanism, and in turn acts as a transmitter of such stimulation as it receives to a local area. This is a true of economic and political as it is of social and intellectual life. . . .

And there, in a sense, you have it. From a few, relatively humble first steps, we gaze out over the abyss – the

yawning gap of an intellectual fault line separating Chicago from Los Angeles. In a few short paragraphs, Wirth anticipated the pivotal moments that characterize Chicago-style urbanism – those primitives that eventually will separate it from an LA-style urbanism. He effectively foreshadowed avant la lettre the shift from what I term a "modern" to a "postmodern" city, and, in so doing, the necessity of the transition from the Chicago to the LA School. For it is no longer the center that organizes the urban hinterlands, but the hinterlands that determine what remains of the center. The imperatives of fragmentation have become the principal dynamic in contemporary cities; the 21st century's emerging world cities (including LA) are ground-zero loci in a communications-driven globalizing political economy.

The shift toward an LA School may be regarded as a move away from modernist perspectives on the city (à la Chicago School) to a postmodern view of urban process. We are all by now aware that the tenets of modernist thought have been undermined, discredited; in their place, a multiplicity of new ways of knowing have been substituted. Analogously, in postmodern cities, the logics of previous urbanisms have evaporated; and, in the absence of a single new imperative, multiple (ir)rationalities clamor to fill the vacuum. The LA School is distinguishable from the Chicago precepts (as noted above) by the following counterpropositions:

- Traditional concepts of urban form imagine the city organized around a central core; in a revised theory, the urban peripheries are organizing what remains of the center.
- A global, corporate-dominated connectivity is balancing, even offsetting, individual-centered agency in urban processes.
- A linear evolutionist urban paradigm has been usurped by a nonlinear, chaotic process that includes pathological forms such as common-interest developments (CIDs), and life-threatening environmental degradation (e.g. global warming).

In empirical terms, the urban dynamics driving these tendencies are by now well known. They include: *World City*: the emergence of a relatively few centers of command and control in a globalizing economy; *Dual City*: an increasing social polarization, i.e., the increasing gap between rich and poor, between nations, between the powerful and the powerless, between different ethnic, racial, and religious groupings, and between genders; *Hybrid City*: the ubiquity of fragmentation both in material and cognitive life, including the collapse of conventional communities, and the rise of new cultural categories and spaces, including especially cultural hybrids; and *Cybercity*: the challenges of the information age, especially the seemingly ubiquitous capacity of connectivity to supplant the constraints of place.

"Keno capitalism" is the synoptic term that Steven Flusty and I have adopted to describe the spatial manifestations that are consequent upon the (postmodern) urban condition implied by these assumptions. Urbanization is occurring on a quasi-random field of opportunities in which each space is (in principle) equally available through its connection with the information superhighway. . . . Capital touches down as if by chance on a parcel of land, ignoring the opportunities on intervening lots, thus sparking the development process. The relationship between development of one parcel and nondevelopment of another is a disjointed, seemingly unrelated affair. While not truly a random process, it is evident that the traditional, center-driven agglomeration economies that have guided urban development in the past no longer generally apply. Conventional city form, Chicago-style, is sacrificed in favor of a noncontiguous collage of parcelized, consumption-oriented landscapes devoid of conventional centers yet wired into electronic propinquity and nominally unified by the mythologies of the (dis)information superhighway. In such landscapes, "city centers" become almost an externality of fragmented urbanism; they are frequently grafted onto the landscape as a (much later) afterthought by developers and politicians concerned with identity and tradition. Conventions of "suburbanization" are also redundant in an urban process that bears no relationship to a core-related decentralization.

I am insisting on the term "postmodern" as a vehicle for examining LA urbanism for a number of reasons, even though many protagonists in the debates surrounding the LA School have explicitly distanced themselves from the precepts of postmodernism. I have long understood postmodernism as a concept that embraces three principal referents:

- A series of distinctive cultural and stylistic practices that are in and of themselves intrinsically interesting;
- The totality of such practices, viewed as a cultural ensemble characteristic of the contemporary epoch

of capitalism (often referred to as postmodernity); and

- A set philosophical and methodological discourses antagonistic to the precepts of Enlightenment thought, most particularly the hegemony of any single intellectual persuasion.

Implicit in each of these approaches is the notion of a "radical break," i.e., a discontinuity between past and present political, sociocultural and economic trends. My working hypothesis is that there is sufficient evidence to support the notion that we are witnessing a radical break in each of these three categories. This is the fundamental promise of the revolution prefigured by the LA School; this is why it is so revolutionary in its recapitulation of urban theory.

The localization (sometimes literally the concretization) of these diverse dynamics is creating the emerging time-space fabric of a postmodern society. This is not to suggest that existing (modernist) rationalities have been obliterated from the urban landscape or from our mind-sets; on the contrary, they persist as palimpsests of earlier logics, and continue to influence the emerging spaces of postmodernity. For instance, they are presently serving to consolidate the power of existing place-based centers of communication technologies, even as such technologies are supposed to liberate development from the constraints of place. However, newer urban places, such as LA, are being created by different intentionalities, just as older places such as Chicago are being overlain by the altered intentionalities of postmodernity. Nor am I suggesting that earlier theoretical logics have been (or should be) entirely usurped. For instance, in his revision of the Chicago School, Andrew Abbott . . . claimed that the "variables paradigm" of quantitative sociology has been exhausted, and that the "cornerstone of the Chicago vision was location" – points of departure that I regard as totally consistent with the time-space obsessions of the LA School of postmodern urbanism. Another example of overlap between modern and postmodern in current urban sociology is Michael Peter Smith's evocation of a transnational urbanism . . . .

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