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Postmodern urban form

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Various changes have remolded the form, character, and social functions of the North American downtown. Some of these changes had to do with the transformed nature of the economy, others with the way that people live, and still others with the way that the built environment was produced (Sudjic 1992).

The classic city form had a semantic unity; it was organized around a center within which the social practices of politics, religion, business, and culture were exercised (Gottdiener 1986). As the urban center progressively lost its role in daily life (Jackson 1980), and as its primacy ceased to be the important prerequisite for many activities, the downtown lost its significance as the unifying heart of the metropolis. Later, in response to a restructuring in the early 1970s (Soja 1989), the downtown tried to resurrect its original importance. The center became the command post of a global economy (Abbott 1993) dedicated to power, money, and modern technology (Jackson 1980).

The rise of a service economy—in which finance, marketing, and the rendering of personal services have become the cornerstones of economic activities—brought about a downtown rich in signature buildings, upscale marketplaces, convention centers, and entertainment facilities. Advances in communication and information technologies in the late twentieth century allowed global mobility and flexibility in the accumulation of capital and reduced the importance of geographic location. Thus, in addition to the global cities of the United States (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago), second-tier cities also got involved in an unprecedented competition to attract corporate investment in their downtowns (Boyer 1992). The active state involvement of the previous era declined

in favor of the increased role and significance of the private sector. Policy makers turned overwhelmingly to market-based solutions. Privatization, commercialization, and deregulation became key words for a policy that led to an increasing polarization between the haves and have-nots (Hitters 1992). As some researchers have documented (Fainstein 1994; Sudjic 1992; Grönlund 1993; Deben, Musterd, and van Weesep 1992), similar socioeconomic processes occurred simultaneously in other parts of the Western world and led to similar spatial outcomes in downtowns.

As Henri Lefebvre (1971, 31) has argued, space is political and ideological, a product “literally filled with ideologies.” If space is the product, urban design is the tool that shapes it. Urban design interprets, expresses, and legitimizes the socioeconomic processes that affect the building of cities and their spaces. In that respect, the contemporary American downtown is a product of purposeful design actions that have effectively sought to mold space according to the needs of a corporatist economy and to subordinate urban form to the logic of profit. A new urban design language has invented a new downtown urban form. Some (Jameson 1991) have argued that this language represents a complete break from modernism. Others (Harvey 1989; Berman 1986) described it as an evolutionary and transitional phase of modernism, as reflecting a late modern rather than a postmodern discourse. But even if the new language represents an evolution and not a replacement, its vocabulary, syntax, and semantics are quite different from those of modernism. In the following section we will discuss the characteristics that distinguish postmodern design from its modernist predecessor.