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Charles Jencks and the historiography of Post-Modernism

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The history of Post-Modern Architecture was to a large extent tied to the name of Charles Jencks, who played an operative role in promoting the movement, much like his predecessor Sigfried Giedion had done for Modern Architecture in the 1930s. Like Giedion, Jencks was a prolific writer and a protagonist of a radical change in the direction of architecture. In the thirty-five year period from the appearance of his first book in 1971, Jencks published more than twenty four works, not counting the ones he edited or co-edited. And like Giedion, Jencks also attempted to reach a synthesis of opposites, by including disparate examples within his original ‘canon’, extending it in its last revision to include works by Eisenman and Tschumi, as Giedion had done by the inclusion of Aalto and Utzon in his later editions of *Space, Time and Architecture*. This paper will discuss Jenck's historiography of Post-Modernism by looking at the seminal texts that he wrote from 1970 until 2007, beginning with *Architecture 2000* and ending with *Critical Modernism*. The main focus of this article is critically to examine his major work, the *Language of Post Modernism*, and to trace its evolution as a means of evaluating his contribution to the development of this movement, as well as to architectural historiography.

Beginnings
Charles Jencks appeared on the architectural scene with his first solo book, *Architecture 2000: Prediction and Methods*, which already indicated in its subtitle the tendency of its author towards premonition and the projection of new trends. Jencks owed this tendency in part to his mentor, Reyner Banham, who was consistently on the lookout for the new trends of the future. Although the two historians took radically opposite directions regarding the development of architecture, Jencks shared his mentor's interest in questioning prevailing ‘histories’ of architecture, as well as his interest in popular culture and its manifestations in the field of design, from graphics to car styling to architecture. Despite their differences which translated sometimes into sharp debates, Banham occasionally showed his affection for Jencks, the critic who shared with him a great passion for architecture.

*Architecture 2000* came out in 1971, and proposed an original reading of the development of architecture in the twentieth century as a sequence of six major traditions. Jencks defined the six major traditions that frame the development of Post-Modernism by looking at the seminal texts that he wrote from 1970 until 2007, beginning with *Architecture 2000* and ending with *Critical Modernism*. The main focus of this article is critically to examine his major work, the *Language of Post Modernism*, and to trace its evolution as a means of evaluating his contribution to the development of this movement, as well as to architectural historiography.
self-conscious level in the 1980s). Future tendencies
could also be projected based on certain assump-
tions, such as ‘service-state anonymous architec-
ture’, at the unself-conscious level at the end of
the twentieth century. Surprisingly, the term Post-
Modernism did not yet figure anywhere on this
chart, despite the fact that some seminal ‘post-
modern’ works had already appeared on the
scene, namely Venturi’s Mother House and Guild
House. Within the time-frame in which it should
appear we find instead the ‘Neo-Fascist’ tendency
characterised by vast urban schemes. There is only
a passing reference in the text to the work of
Venturi, specifically his project for a Football Hall
of Fame, which is considered in the light of contem-
porary semiological interests. In a structuralist vein,
Jencks attempted to account for all the movements
pervading architecture, from pop culture to trans-
port systems along with developments in cyber-
netics and politics.

Structuralist developments in the humanities had
a great influence on Jencks, who borrowed from
semiotics certain key notions that would serve him
in the formulation of his theoretical framework.
The question of how, and by what process, the
meaning of an architectural work is arrived at,
how aesthetic evaluations are made, could not
have come at a more propitious time when the
foundations of the Modern Movement were being
questioned in the context of major social, political
and urban changes. In this context, Jencks co-
edited a book of essays on semiotic interpretations
in architecture, under the title Meaning in Architec-
ture. Jencks used the semantic platform to argue
for a multiplicity of meanings and to open the field
to certain manifestations that had been repressed
by Modernism. For Jencks, the principal interest
through this approach was to break the rigid
categories in which architecture had been framed,
ie, the spatial and functional paradigms.

In this, he based his argument on the ‘architectural
sign’, analysed into its two constituents, the signifier,
which he called the ‘expression plane’, and the signi-
fied, or ‘content plane’. Signifiers give architecture its
expression, according to Jencks, ie, form, space,
surface, colour and texture; while signifieds consti-
tute the set of ideas to which these signifiers directly
or indirectly refer. From this he deduced the ‘fluidity’
of the semantic field in architecture, which accounts
for the change in meaning that some forms or build-
ings undergo through time. For example, the purist
architecture of the 1920s may have connoted func-
tionality and flexibility at that time, but could
connote something altogether different today. Semiotics gave a reasonable explanation of the
change in value and meaning that different works
undergo through time, confirming the necessity for
a more nuanced reading of architecture that disman-
tles the strict ideologies of Modernism.

Modern Movements in Architecture

Two years after his first work, Jencks published his
Modern Movements in Architecture, a text largely
based on his PhD dissertation written under the
supervision of Banham. One can trace in this book
the source of the ‘six traditions’ outlined in Architec-
ture 2000. Jencks used the same chart as the histori-
cal organiser of the different movements in
architecture, stressing the role of politics in each
case, and emphasising the ‘plurality’ of approaches
within Modernism. He rejected any reductive approach to architecture, attempting a more comprehensive reading, even questioning the validity of any overarching category such as ‘Modern Architecture’. Instead he stressed that:

[...] architectural traditions are rich and complex in their profusion and any attempt to reduce them to some simplistic notion of ‘modern’ or ‘the true style’ would be myopic and destructive. It is the historian’s obligation to search for the plurality of creative movements and individuals where he can find them, and elucidate their creativity.10

The first chapter of Modern Movements was devoted to a survey of the ‘six traditions’, after which Jencks proceeded to examine the work of Mies, Gropius, Wright, Le Corbusier and Aalto, before turning his attention to contemporary American and British architects from Paul Rudolph, Louis Kahn and Robert Venturi to Alison and Peter Smithson and James Stirling. Also covered were a number of international figures such as Niemeyer, Bakema, van Eyck, Rogers and Tange. More significantly, this is the first text in which Jencks discussed the work of architects who would later play a major role as ‘post-modernists’, namely Venturi and Moore. In a chapter that divided American architecture of that period into two categories, ‘camp’ and ‘non-camp’, the former including figures like Paul Rudolph, Edward Durell Stone, Eero Saarinen and even Bruce Goff, Jencks relegated Venturi and Moore to the non-camp group, along with Jose Luis Sert and Louis Kahn.

He vaguely articulated the difference between ‘camp’ and ‘non-camp’, defining the former as an architecture that relies heavily on a univalent statement, with Rudolph’s Yale School of Architecture as a paradigmatic example, whereas the latter mediates between the private and public realm, growing at a slower pace. Of the latter, Venturi’s Mother House presented a good example, as it played on the opposition between external symmetry and internal complexity. In a positive tone, Jencks commended Venturi’s work and his manifesto Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture — which ‘effectively challenged the prevailing exclusivist arguments for purity and restriction’ — for expanding the repertoire of available references that a pluralist society should normally have.11

Although Jencks already betrayed a slight affinity to these works, his predictions of future trends did not yet lead to their categorisation in a separate group, nor was there any premonition in this text of the rôle that Venturi and Moore would come to play in the emerging movement, as they were lumped together with Sert, Kahn and even Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles, whose controversial Boston City Hall was paradoxically included in the ‘non-camp’ group while in fact it exhibited the same symptoms of a ‘univalent’ approach as Rudolph’s Yale School.

The book ended with a manifesto-style postscript entitled ‘Architecture and Revolution’ in which Jencks reminded the reader of the problematic condition of architecture, a condition which resulted from the contemporary loss of faith in both politics and religion. In the midst of this ‘crisis’, few architects had begun to search for a way out, efforts that, for Jencks, should take note of the historical forms of organisation which have historically promoted a positive public realm, such
as the Greek agora, the Roman forum and the Mediaeval communes. Jencks concluded with a radical statement, reversing Le Corbusier’s famous dictum:

But today if we are to have a credible architecture, it must be supported by a popular revolution that ends in a credible public realm, the council system. Architecture and revolution.12

The Language of Post-Modern Architecture

Charles Jencks’s major publication appeared at the end of the 1970s, a few years after the Modern Movements in Architecture. The Language of Post-Modern Architecture went into eight editions, in each case readjusting the defining parameters of the new movement that was predicted by its author to supersede the Modern Movement.13 In this ‘manifesto’, Jencks projected the emerging trends in architecture under this new label, giving it by the same token, as Giedion had done for Modernism, an historical legitimacy.14

Jencks’s manifesto was originally a concise book consisting of three main chapters, covering just one hundred and four pages in its first edition. In the first part, the author articulated his argument on the ‘death of modern architecture’, a death that he situated precisely on 15th July, 1972, the day the Pruitt-Igoe Housing in St Louis, a symbol of all that went wrong in modern urbanism, was demolished.15 Jencks went on to discuss some of the reasons that precipitated the end of the Modern Movement, especially focusing on two causes: the formal impoverishment caused by the dogmatic application of its principles, and the loss of its own content in the process, ie, its social goals. He gave the example of Mies as the epitome of the Modernist failure, illustrating it by the semantic confusion and impoverishment that his work exhibits, as in the examples of the IIT campus buildings:

So we see the factory is a classroom, the cathedral is a boiler house, the boiler house is a chapel, and the President’s temple is the School of Architecture. […] Of course Mies didn’t intend these propositions, but his commitment to reductive formal values inadvertently betrays them.16

Even well-intentioned projects by some of the reformers were criticised for failing to re-establish this lost connection between architecture and its public, and ultimately for failing to ‘communicate’ in a legible language; as in the case of Alison and Peter Smithson who, in their Robin Hood Gardens project, aimed at providing a community building with a level of individual expression and identity, but failed to achieve these objectives.17 Lamenting the loss of interest in public projects, Jencks criticised those architects who had only come to terms with the change in social values out of despair, a case in point being Venturi who expressed this condition in his dictum ‘Main Street is almost all right’:

Architecture obviously reflects what a society holds important, what it values both spiritually and in terms of cash. In the pre-industrial past the major areas for expression were the temple, the church, the palace, agora, meeting house, country house and city hall; while in the present, extra money is spent on hotels, restaurants and all those commercial building types I have mentioned. Public housing and buildings expressing the local community or the public realm receive
the cutbacks. Buildings representing consumer values generate the investment.\textsuperscript{18}

For Jencks, the social goals of the Modern Movement had been hijacked by commercial interests, emptying their forms of their original content. Faced with consumerism in the West and state capitalism in the East, the contemporary architect had no choice, if he/she wanted to re-establish a certain purpose for his/her work, but to use a language understood by the local culture. The heroic attempts of the Modernists to establish a universal language expressive of and conducive to greater social goals had clearly failed.

After this ‘diagnosis’ of all that went wrong in architecture, Jencks elaborated in the second chapter the ‘modes of architectural communication’, based to a large degree on his earlier interpretations of semiotics in architecture.\textsuperscript{19} Jencks started with the first element of architectural language, the ‘metaphor’, with a number of illustrations showing how architectural works are invariably read by architects and the public at large. The example of the Sydney Opera House is instructive for its abundance of metaphors, leading to various representations of the building in academic circles as well as in the public press. Jencks articulated his distinct position, different from Venturi’s, which is appreciative of both ‘ducks’ and ‘decorated sheds’ as necessary for communication:

Clearly the Sydney Opera House is a duck for Venturi, and he wishes to underplay this form of expression because he thinks it has been overdone by the modern movement. I would disagree with this historical judgement, and take even greater exception to the attitudes implied behind it. Venturi, like the typical modernist that he wishes to supplant, is adopting the tactic of exclusive inversion. He is cutting out a whole area of architectural communication, duck buildings, (technically speaking iconic signs), in order to make his preferred mode, decorated sheds (symbolic signs) that much more potent.\textsuperscript{20}

Jencks further explained the subtlety of metaphors and their nuances:

[...] the more the metaphors, the greater the drama, and the more they are slightly suggestive, the greater the mystery. A mixed metaphor is strong, as every student of Shakespeare knows, but a suggested one is powerful.\textsuperscript{21}

Thus, a hot-dog stand that looks like a giant hot-dog, definitely communicates at a certain level, but does not constitute a rich source of metaphors. It is a duck, but an obvious one. An example of a more sophisticated duck with suggestive metaphors is the TWA terminal by Saarinen, which is evocative of ‘flight’ through its formal and spatial articulations. Le Corbusier’s Chapel in Ronchamp constitutes one of the most effective examples of suggested metaphor. This chapel, which alternately evokes a ship, hands joined in prayer, a nun’s hat or an actual duck, is rich in visual codes that operate at a subconscious level, unlike obvious ‘signs’, such as the hot-dog stand:

Le Corbusier only admitted to two metaphors, both of which are esoteric: the ‘visual acoustics’ of the curving walls which shape the four horizons as if they were ‘sounds’ [...] and the ‘crab shell’ form of the roof. But the building has many more metaphors than this, so many that it is overcoded, saturated with possible interpretations.\textsuperscript{22}
Jencks discussed also the other components of architectural communication: words, syntax and semantics. He identified the words of this language with elements such as doors, windows, columns, partitions, etc., and the significance that these elements get from their position in their physical context, as well as the code that the interpreter has at his disposal to understand them, differentiating between iconic, symbolic and indexical signs. A good example of the manipulation of combination rules can be found in Michael Graves’s early work, while Eisenman’s syntactical games ‘dazzle the eye, confuse the mind, and ultimately signify for him the process that generated them’. Clearly, for Jencks, the reduction of language to one of its parameters, ie, syntactics or semantics, fails to produce a fully communicative work. Modern architecture had developed its own semantic code, albeit reduced to a set of personal styles, each characteristic of a different architect. This is what led to monotonous languages that did not express the plurality of styles.

While the first two chapters were basically recapitulations of earlier ideas that he had already covered in his previously publications, the third chapter was the most significant, for it announced the coming of a new architecture, a ‘Post-Modern Architecture’. This chapter began with another evolutionary tree, this time charting the growth of this new tradition, from 1955 to 1980. This was a concise chapter of fourteen pages at the time of the first edition, and did not yet include any significant illustrations of the new style, with the exception of Venturi’s Brandt House and Stern’s ‘Residence for an Academic Couple’. These were discussed along with other works by Kurokawa and Kikutake, Lucien Kroll, Ralph Erskine and Antonio Gaudi. Yet this coming style which Jencks characterised as one of ‘radical eclecticism’ had not fully appeared yet: Several architects are moving beyond modern architecture in a tentative way, either adapting a mixture of modernist styles, or mixing these with previous modes. The results as yet are not convincing enough to speak of a totally new approach and style; they are evolutionary, not a radical departure. And it is the nature of the case that practicing architects now in their forties and trained in modernism can only make hesitant, evolutionary changes. When the present students of architecture start practicing, we should begin to see much more convincing examples of radical eclecticism, because it is only this group which is really free enough to try their hand at any possible style – ancient, modern, or hybrid.

Jencks nevertheless saw the first manifestations of this new style in works that display an ‘ad-hoc’ approach to form, combining different styles and sources in a new creative synthesis. He singled out one key building in this development, Lucien Kroll’s Medical Faculty building in Louvain, which resulted from a collaborative design process that included architect, students and construction workers (Fig. 1). Other examples came from the work of Robert Venturi, Bruce Goff and Charles Moore. Some of the architects previously labelled in opposite ‘camp’ and ‘non-camp’ categories were now lumped together as part of a single movement. Jencks concluded by citing the example of one architect who had succeeded in mastering this
‘plurality’ of languages, Antonio Gaudi. In what seems to be like a retroactive historical legitimisation, akin to Giedion’s return to the Baroque or Banham’s to Futurism, Jencks returned to Gaudi as one of the masters of this new movement in gestation. The contemporary architect was thus summoned to follow Gaudi’s example, and to develop a multi-lingual capacity to interpret cultural trends like a good anthropologist or journalist.28

The Language of Post-Modern Architecture went into several editions, each time changing the cover to reflect better the new style (Figs 2, 3). Jencks substantially rewrote the third chapter in the later editions, updating its examples and significantly revising the content. Thus, the originally venerated example of Gaudi was downplayed in subsequent editions, and the illustrations of his work as well as the discussion of the symbolism of Casa Battlo went missing. The third chapter was significantly expanded with a plethora of examples of what constituted now the ‘official’ canon of Post-Modernism, exemplified in the work of Robert Venturi, Aldo Rossi, James Stirling, Michael Graves, Robert Stern, Charles Moore, Hans Hollein, Mario Botta and
Antoine Predock, amongst others. Robert Venturi was given an honorary position in the later editions as the architect who designed the first ‘anti-monument’ of Post-Modernism, the ‘Nurses & Dentists Building’ in Philadelphia.\(^{29}\) Jencks’s shift was apparent, yet the categorisation of what fits into Post-Modernism remained elusive, although the trend was more and more centred around what he called ‘Free-Style Classicism’, ie, a modern version of neo-classicism. He eventually tried to set the standards for this new style, ranging between a ‘haute vulgarisation’ at one end and ‘pastiche’ at the other, the former being more refined and eloquent than the latter.\(^{30}\)

Jencks’s enthusiasm for the new direction taken by American and European architecture at the beginning of the 1980s, with the seminal work of Graves, Moore, Stirling and Hollein, confirmed the attribution of the ‘post-modern’ epithet to this modern version of neo-classical architecture.\(^{31}\) He would re-define Post-Modernism in his third edition as ‘an eclectic mix of traditional or local codes with Modern ones’, celebrating the conversion of one-time Modernists like James Stirling to
the new creed. And whereas he had previously been critical of certain figures like Charles Moore, he reversed his judgement at a later phase, lauding his Piazza d’Italia in New Orleans as a major monument of Post-Modernism. Even the use of certain types of clichés became a cause for celebration, as in Hans Hollein’s Austrian Travel Agency where a cocktail of signifiers refers to various destinations: [...] ruined columns impaled by chrome shafts signify travel in Greece and Italy; desert travel is communicated by bronze versions of the palm columns at the Brighton Pavilion; India by a bronze solar topee, theatre tickets by a stage curtain, air travel by birds and, ironically, the place where one pays for it all, the cashier’s desk, is signified by the outline of a Rolls Royce radiator grille. All of this is sheltered under a light-filled coffered vault reminiscent of the local Post Office Savings Bank, the magnificent ‘Modern’ space Otto Wagner built in 1906. As Post-Modernism developed throughout the 1980s, other buildings would come to occupy centre stage as eminent examples of the new style, displacing previous ones. Thus, Stirling’s Stuttgart Museum and Graves’s Humana Headquarters in Kentucky became the latest models, comparable to the Bauhaus in Dessau and the Villa Savoye, in the case of Modernism.

The seventh edition called for a careful repositioning, lest the new style fall into ‘kitsch’, as larger commissions, especially by corporate giants like Disney, began to swamp the practices of Post-Modern architects. This fear of the end prompted Jencks to preface his edition of 1991 with the ominous essay ‘Death for Rebirth’, in which he wryly refuted the detractors who, since 1982, had been announcing the imminent death of post-modernism. Jencks conceded that movements do reach an end, and that Post-Modernism would not escape this predicament, but unlike the previous dogmatic movements, its death could be a liberating event which would free it once again from any dogmatism. For him, the central ideology of Post-Modernism remained ‘pluralism’, which still expressed the condition of the present times. In this essay, Jencks threw the blame for this movement’s lapse into historicism on Paolo Portoghesi and Robert Stern, forgetting his own role in this: [...] Stern and Portoghesi, through their writing, architecture and exhibitions, have led the movement towards the historicism to which much of the public—sadly—reduces it. While their work often has a creative integrity, the genre that follows it is frequently commercialised cliché.

In the course of the same essay, commenting on his rival Heinrich Klotz’s survey of Post-Modernism, Jencks disagreed with Klotz’s inclusion of the work of Rem Koolhaas, John Hejduk and Richard Meier in the history of Post-Modernism, despite their ironic and revisionist interpretations of Modernism. Jencks did not seem to see, as Klotz did, the wider manifestations of this movement, which could be expanded to include such examples. He would nevertheless make a major reversal on this same issue in the final edition of the book.

If the Modern Movement died tragically on 15th July, 1972, as Jencks had earlier claimed, no specific date could be pinned down for the death of Post-Modernism, a process which began at the end of its golden period, the 1980s, but was protracted
over the next decade. This translated into the waning of this style in most major cities, and the rise of new trends from deconstruction to other forms of post-modernism. This change was reflected around 1990 in some major review magazines, especially *Architectural Design*, which gradually shifted its attention from Post-Modernism to new themes such as *Deconstruction* (1988, 1989, 1990), *New Spirit in Architecture* (1991), *Free Space Architecture* (1991) and other topics. Still, Jencks maintained his faith. In one of the last issues of *Architectural Design* to be dedicated to Post-Modernism, Jencks reiterated his continued proclamation of faith in the movement.

**The Jumping Universe**

A few years later, Jencks shifted his attention to new theories that dealt with the beginnings of the universe or ‘cosmogenesis’, publishing a new book entitled *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* (Fig. 4), in which he posited a new aesthetic theory that was bound to evolve out of the emerging new worldview:

> A new shared language of expression is growing, an aesthetic of undulating movement, of surprising, billowing crystals, fractured planes, and spiraling growth, of wave-forms, twists and folds — a language more in tune with an unfolding, jumping cosmos than the rigid architectures of the past.

Failing to draw any connection between this new language and the classical language of Post-Modernism that he had vigorously promoted during the previous decade, Jencks now celebrated the works of architects like Eisenman, Hadid, Gehry and Libeskind, who appeared at the forefront of this radical development. Yet by relating these architectural developments to current scientific theories of fractals and quantum physics, theories that he defined as ‘post-modern’ in opposition to the more simplistic ‘modernist’ scientific theories, Jencks attempted to show the presumed continuity between his earlier formulations and the new theories he was propounding.

Further, the inclusive approach of post-modernist thinking could be, in Jencks’s view, continuously
Thus, the eclecticism of the early post-modernists like Venturi and Stirling could be seen in continuity with the earlier works of Gehry, which then abruptly shifted to the new language first witnessed in the Vitra Museum and later expounded in the Disney Concert Hall and the Bilbao Museum. The principle of complexity which is derived from this new conception of the universe thus opens the possibility for a diverse and inclusive reading of architectural works that fall within this new paradigm, under the different labels of ‘organic’ architecture (Bruce Goff), ‘green architecture’ (James Wines/SITE), ‘Organitech’ (Calatrava), ‘cosmic architecture’ (Isozaki, Mozuna, Hasegawa) and the ultimate ‘cosmogenic architecture’ of a completely rehabilitated Peter Eisenman (Fig. 5).
Somewhat reminiscent of Giedion’s work, the text of *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* is replete with re-affirmations of the necessary link between the new aesthetic movement and the contemporary scientific theories of the universe, within a ‘space-time’ conception that presents itself as a more contemporary and adequate representation of the cosmic order than the so-called ‘modernist’ theories. This attempt to legitimise aesthetic theories as integral components of a more universal, scientific order go back to Renaissance theories of universal harmony, and have been central to twentieth-century thought, especially in Giedion’s work. Jencks reaffirmed in his own way that:

There is nothing more important today than understanding the key role of complexity in the universe. Over time it builds everything we value and love. […]

In this sense we are built into and out of cosmic time; we are not alienated from the universe, as the Existentialists had it, but are absolute cosmic gestation.45

Concluding, using Giedion’s ‘space-time’ terminology: Since 1983, the meter has been redefined by international agreement as the distance that light travels through a vacuum, i.e. in 1/299,792,458 of a second. Thus the ultimate unit of space is derived from an atomic unit of time — a convergence of space-time universality […]46

The New Paradigm in Architecture

*The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* appears to have played the role of the midwife for the final comeback of *The Language of Post-modernism*, with its noticeable reduction to a subtitle under the main heading of *The New Paradigm in Architecture*.47 Here, the author made a final move to redraw the lines of the movement, assimilating retroactively some works that he had previously dismissed as being unrelated to Post-Modernism. In this edition, Libeskind’s Jewish Museum figures prominently on the front cover, displacing the last post-modernist work to occupy the previous edition’s cover, Predock’s Fine Arts Center at Arizona State University.

The apologetic started off this time with a reframing of the basic premises of the movement, in a tone that brings to mind his mentor Banham’s premonitory projections:

My argument is that we are at the beginning of a new way of constructing architecture and conceiving cities, that it has grown out of the Post-Modern movement in the sciences and elsewhere, but that it has not yet grown up. The new paradigm exists but somewhat ambiguously. It is past the birth pangs, but still in infancy, and there is much to be decided on how it is going to develop and mature.48

The same arguments for the ‘new paradigm’ which appeared in *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* are presented here again, as legitimising factors for this shift which started around 1960 with Jane Jacobs and Robert Venturi. In this sense, Jencks reaffirmed the continuity between the earlier Post-Modernism, now labelled ‘Complexity I’, and the later developments, labelled ‘Complexity II’.49 He also took this opportunity to draw a brief historiography of this work, acknowledging the different changes it went through as a result of a ‘ceaseless critical dialogue with the imminent past’.50
The transition towards the last two chapters dedicated to the ‘New Paradigm’ occurs smoothly as a subsection is now added at the end of the third chapter of the previous edition, entitled ‘Heteropolis’. Under ‘Heteropolis’, we find the work of Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas and other Dutch architects, as well as Alessandro Mendini and Ashton, Raggatt, McDougall. Whereas Gehry’s eclecticism makes it easy, or even imperative, to draw his work in as a major representative of this transition between the two phases of Post-Modernism, the inclusion of Koolhaas requires a more nuanced explanation, as he is seen to waver in a grey zone:

His projects, because they are radical mixtures of urban functions, are even Post-Modern when they exploit metaphor, symbolism and the radical diversity of function. But his intentions remain ironic and descriptive about amnesia and the tabula rasa; as an ultra-Modernist he looks to exploit, not counter, these forces.

The concluding chapters explore the ‘new paradigm’ in architecture, with its major example being Peter Eisenman’s latest work, the Aronoff Center in Cincinnati, as well as projects by Greg Lynn, UN Studio, Calatrava and others. The second manifestation of the new paradigm is represented under ‘Fractal Architecture’ featuring in this case Libeskind’s Jewish Museum, in addition to works by Foreign Office Architects, Coop Himmelblau, and the ‘Fluid Fractals’ of Frank Gehry best translated in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which is compared in its metaphorical richness to the Chapel of Ronchamp.

**Conclusion: the return of Modernism?**

In his latest, and perhaps not his last book, Jencks attempted once again to redraw the lines and redefine the ‘new paradigm’, this time by an operation that brings back Modernism into the picture alongside its antithesis, Post-Modernism, within a great unifying synthesis. This new paradigm is given the title Critical Modernism and is seen to be in succession to Post-Modernism, as can be insinuated from the subtitle: *where is postmodernism going?*

One finds here again all the issues with which Jencks had constantly struggled, rendered in a journalistic style that picks up various manifestations and happenings in culture, art, science, to emphasise this paradigmatic shift now affecting the world. Implicitly, there survives in Jencks a ‘modernist’ principle that sees these various and often conflicting phenomena to be all part of one ‘complex’ order. But what were the reasons for this shift in nomenclature? Was it the realisation that Post-Modernism had finally run its full course, and that Modernism was now back with more vigour on the architectural scene? Jencks gave some of the reasons behind this new formulation:

Such are the movements under way towards a more hybrid, integrated world — a mongrelised globe from one point of view — a world in constant and instantaneous communication across its boundaries. At the same time, I will argue, there is also at work a hidden tradition of reflection and reaction to all this cross-border modernization, the Critical Modernism of my title. Unlike many of the other trends and agendas discussed.
here, this is not yet a conscious movement but an underground or tacit process, the activity of modernism in its constantly reflexive stage, a stage that looks back critically in order to go forward.\(^{54}\)

Both Modernism and Post-Modernism can be seen now in a new light, which accepts their accomplishments as well as their failures, in a new synthesis. Jencks further explained:

Now that post-modernism is no longer a runaway fashion or despised corrupter of the modern faith, it is easier to attend to its peculiar charm and quality. This is the taste for the hybrid moment, the instant of creation, when two different systems are suddenly conjoined so that one can appreciate both sides of the equation and their union.\(^{55}\)

In other words, the moment appeared ripe for an historical reconciliation between these two movements, which for Jencks had been engaged in a constant tug of war since the 1970s, in which he was of course one of the principal instigators. Beyond the first two chapters that go over the well-rehearsed discussions of Post-Modernism in its architectural and artistic manifestations, it is the subsequent chapters that form the thesis of this book, projecting a ‘universal’ history as the foundation for its theoretical argument. Here, various facts on social and political transformations, global economic changes and contemporary scientific theories are combined with commentaries on current political and environmental issues such as the War in Iraq and Global Warming, to reaffirm the complex and ‘heterarchic’ nature of our world and to argue for appropriate symbolic or iconographic representations of this new complex ‘order’, some of which, by the author himself, veer towards the utterly naïve.\(^{56}\)

In the end, the most appropriate paradigm to reflect the contemporary condition seems to be that of ‘critical modernism’, a ‘tradition’, according to Jencks, which has been continuous and implicit within modernism, and which had appeared more explicitly since the 1960s.\(^{57}\) The main aspects or levels of this new ‘critical modernism’ are three: critical iconography, critical coding and critical spirituality. While critical iconography is challenged to deal poetically with the reinvention of a language that represents the current cosmology, critical coding would reflect on the ‘codes of expression’, a concept that appears to resurrect the old semiotic planes of semantics and syntax.\(^{58}\)

The third level, ‘critical spirituality’, is a rather new addition to the theoretical framework. Here Jencks posited what appears to be an original thought, the overcoming of the historical dichotomies of body/mind and matter/spirit to result in a new conception that brings together these opposites into a comprehensive unity.

Giedion, in his conclusion to the last edition of *Space, Time and Architecture*, had voiced a similar emotional appeal that stressed the necessity of reaching towards a union of art and science, both tools of the human intellect, and for the restoration of the rôle of ‘feeling’ in human work, along with ‘thinking’.\(^{59}\) Giedion’s ‘feeling’ may be the other term for Jencks’s ‘spiritual’. Jencks may be seen to have had similar aims to Giedion, despite their differences in depth and style, as well as historical agenda.\(^{50}\) And like Giedion, even exceeding him,
Jencks was equally guilty of an ‘operative’ rôle in which history was submitted to a subjective will that manipulates various architectural elements in order to legitimise specific historical constructs; constructs that appear at first to be historically determined and inevitable, only to reveal later under the pressures of unexpected historical developments their openness to revision and re-codification. The notion that Architecture should always reflect the tendencies of its time was a central principle in Giedion’s understanding of architecture and appears also as a constant principle in Jencks’s various turns and shifts.

Charles Jencks has definitely left his mark on the history of architecture as the main apostle of Post-Modernism, as much as Banham is remembered for his championing of a machine aesthetic and Giedion for his definition of Modernism. Yet for some historians and critics, his lack of consistency puts him in the category of sensational reporters rather than serious historians. Also, his reading of architecture, restricted to a visual ‘decoding’ that leaves issues of construction and technical developments aside, leaves a lot to be desired. In contrast to Giedion and Banham, Jencks did not have the same patience with history. His inner drive towards premonition and his desire to remain at the vanguard of historic developments may be the fatal reason behind his constant shifts, which can be read as a sign of superficiality. But that may be again a characteristic of our times.

Notes and references
5. Ibid., p. 114: Venturi is mentioned in the ‘Idealist Tradition’ chapter along with James Stirling and Jose Luis Sert.
The first section of this book contained five seminal essays by Charles Jencks, Françoise Choay, Gillo Dorfles and Geoffrey Broadbent, whilst the second and third parts contained a number of essays by George Baird, Aldo van Eyck, Kenneth Frampton, Joseph Rykwert and others.

8. Ibid., p. 76.


10. Ibid., p. 27.
11. Ibid., pp. 221–2.
12. Ibid., p. 380.


15. ‘Modern Architecture died in St Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 PM (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grace by dynamite.’ Charles Jencks, The Language of Post-Modern Architecture, op. cit., p. 9.


17. Ibid., p. 24. Worth noting is that the Smithsons were considered by Banham, his mentor, as two of the pioneers of the new promising architecture that comes after the ‘First Machine Age’. See Whiteley, op. cit., pp. 123–139.


21. Ibid., p. 45.
22. Ibid., p. 48.

23. Ibid., pp. 60–63.
24. Ibid., pp. 72–73.
25. Ibid., pp. 73–85.
26. Ibid., p. 87.

27. The notion of ‘ad hoc’ goes back to another work published in 1972, which is indebted in spirit to Reyner Banham. See Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation (New York, Doubleday, 1972). Colin Rowe may also have been influential in this respect on Jencks, as he advocated a ‘bricolage’ approach to architecture and urbanism. See Fraser and Kerr, op. cit. (2007), p. 403.


31. This definition was reinforced by the direction taken by some seminal events, namely the Biennale of Venice of 1980, which is remembered for its parade of postmodern façades mounted in a Strada Novissima within the Arsenal building in Venice. Each façade was designed by a major architect to reflect an individual theme: including Stern, Venturi, Graves, Hollein, Ungers, Krier, Isozaki and Gehry. The event was organised by Robert Stern and Paolo Porthoghesi, with the


33. Ibid., p. 115.

34. Ibid., p. 142.

35. A version of this essay had appeared in a special issue of AD on ‘Postmodernism on Trial’ (London, Academy Editions, 1990). This issue also signalled the end of the movement with another essay by David Harvey entitled ‘Looking Backwards on Postmodernism’, pp. 10–12.


43. Ibid., pp. 64–73.

44. Jencks had chastised Eisenman only a few years before for his obscure and illegible architecture in the course of waging his last-ditch attack on the return of Modernism: ‘Forgetfulness is an important mental skill to cultivate and it is no surprise that our quintessential New Mod, Peter Eisenman, has made an acrostic from his name — “amnesia”. Always churning out new figures of speech and visual tropes from his rhetoric machine, he constantly moves ground that covers familiar ground, from “anti-memory” to “dissimulation”, “catachresis”, “arabesques” and so on through thirty or more terms. Each one extends his architecture in small ways giving it life, keeping it free from cliché and repetition, and yet each one recalls the constant return of the Modern to abstraction, the “other” and destruction/construction.’ From Charles Jencks’s ‘The New Moderns’, in ‘New Architecture: The New Moderns and the Super Moderns’, Architectural Design (London, 1990), pp. 6–18.


46. Ibid., p.163.


49. Ibid., pp. 2–6.

50. Ibid., p. 7.

51. Heteropolis was the title given to an earlier publication by Jencks — Heteropolis: Los Angeles, The Riots and The Strange Beauty of Hetero-Architecture (London, Academy Editions, 1993); which again shows the debt of Jencks to his mentor Banham, who was among the first to study Los Angeles as an example of the metropolis of the future.

53. Critical Modernism: where is postmodernism going?, op. cit. This publication is also a complete re-working of an earlier one which evolved out of an essay given at a conference in 1985 during the heyday of ‘classical’ Post-Modernism, and published as What is Post Modernism? (London, Academy Editions, 1986).


55. Ibid., p. 10.


57. Ibid., p. 182.

58. Jencks thus explained this second aspect in terms that open the possibility for the inclusion of fractals and other forms:

‘The second level of a critical modernism concerns a reflective response to the codes of expression. Today this might mean an unusual mixture of science and visual languages, or design codes based on the myriad patterns of organization that the fundamental laws generate. The computer is particularly adept at revealing these patterns of nature, the fractals, strange attractors, complex morphological shapes of folding, and close-packing.’ The primary example of this approach can be found in the work of Eisenman, most recent of which is his project for a city of culture in Santiago de Compostela in Spain, which ‘exemplifies the cross-coding of critical modernism, mixing at least five codes evident in the drawings with material codes related to the site and construction’: ibid., pp. 187–192.


60. Thomas Schumacher was one of the first critics to make a comparison between Giedion and Jencks in his review of The Language of Post-Modern Architecture in JAE, v.32, n.3 (February, 1979), pp. 30–31. Schumacher noted the discrepancy between Jenck’s inconsistent rhetoric and Giedion’s more logical argumentation.