

The Reason I Laugh or:

The Topsy-Turvydom of Post-Modern Architectural Ethics

A Conversation with Charles Jencks

If there is anyone from the world of architecture who knows how to mobilise the press and television for his ideas (and to tailor his ideas to suit the media), then it is certainly the architect/writer/critic Charles Jencks. With an unremitting stream of books, articles, guest editorships, panel discussions, lectures and television appearances, he has grown into a provocateur of world repute, an *enfant terrible* among architects. His name seems to be forever connected with Post-Modernism, since the publication in 1977 of his book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, in which he applied the term originally used for some time in literary theory to architecture. According to Jencks, Post-Modernism meant radical eclecticism.

Jencks is above all radically eclectic himself, having at his disposal an enormous reservoir of theories, labels and flexible contents, which he freely draws on. His strongest point is the incorporating of new movements and trends into historical frameworks of development, in a way that suggests that Jencks has seen things coming. Rather than surprise, one invariably gets the feeling in reading his texts that the new was inevitably about to arrive. Jencks himself is not so much a prophet, however, as a chronicler of history. It is as though he continually manages to keep pace with the merry-go-round known as pluralism. Jencks is journalist par excellence of pluralism, a man who, in the words of Stig Dagerman, 'practises the art of being late as early as possible'.

The journalist always reacts secondarily, living from the facts of others. He or she chases reality, which, because of the nature of time, is always running on ahead. This is why articles and news items constantly show signs of short-windedness and forgetfulness, giving rise to a situation in which intellectual topoi or metaphors are deployed in a clichéd way, and prevailing prejudices are reinforced. What's more, the journalist, simply through his function, is a part of a mechanism that not only represents reality but also actually produces it. There has to be news to sell, and what news sells the best? Ultimately the only thing to be called news will be what offers 'infotainment'. Journalism in fact stands at the birthplace of *The Society of the Spectacle* and it is this society itself which is the sole fact that journalism itself is responsible for. It is actually a meta-fact.

But Charles Jencks is more than just a journalist, he is also a critic. He does not go in for continual changes of subject, he is not a victim of the issues of the day. Criticism means testing and in this sense it is just as primary. Although secondary as a medium, it will create a space of its own, which in its turn can then be occupied by (in this case) architecture. For Jencks and his work, semiology is apparently the ideal entry to every imaginable type of architecture. Having begun in the sixties as an advocate of the democratising of architecture, Jencks saw in semiology the path to a notion of architecture supportable for years to come: the theory of 'double coding'. If architecture is communication, then try as architect to communicate with everyone. It is this view that has guided him through all sorts of architecture and provided him with the criteria for architectural criticism, the only constant being a plea for architecture that is in dialogue with the public, whatever that might precisely mean for Jencks. A critique which is also fed, of course, by a great passion for the building industry itself, as well as for art and literature.

Even though Jencks is a prime example of the adolescent who is unable to really decide on something, he is certainly persistent in his method. In 1986 appeared *Post-Modernism, the New Classicism in Art and Architecture*. Jencks' aim is to have done with the tendency to call Post-Modernist everything that deviates from the fossilised modernist standard (steel skeletons covered by a membrane of glass). Holding the patent on the term as an architectural notion, he defines it further: the movement that, from the Modernism of Baudelaire through to Baudrillard, attempts to form a bridge to time-honoured humanism. He argues for the rehabilitation of the Classical canon as this was the only thing able to suggest a harmony, 'even if it's not there at all'. This ironic addition is obviously the pivot on which everything turns. It's no longer necessary for there to be a meaning for his method, the method itself has to be heroically maintained. For Jencks, 'Free Style Classicism' is the field where this irony can remain recognisable.

Charles Jencks, the David Attenborough of architecture, tireless observer of the species that populate the world of building, and moreover futurologist, accountant, mastermind, show-off. Finally: critic, author of many a book of the month. A 'free style' mental gymnast talking about the last days of mankind and what's simply going to happen afterwards. 'Here he is: Mister Charles Jencks!'



Charles Jencks

Klaus Staeck, Es rôhrt zum Himmel, 1974

In the first chapter of your book *The New Moderns, From Late to Neo-Modernism* (London, 1990, p. 20) you write:

'In the final analysis Modernism is the ideology and style of modernisation and both will last until the Second and Third Worlds are fully industrialised and the problems of modernisation are so acute everywhere that the Post-Modern paradigm is adopted by the whole world. At that point ecology and semiology, not economy and materialism, will be the leading modes of thought.'

Could you explain why this shift will take place?

From a materialistic angle industrialisation in the Second and Third Worlds is going to create such tremendous pollution that it will also create eco-catastrophes. No one is yet politically willing to do much about it, so we are on a collision course. People will not solve their problems until they have to, or even until after they had to. I think that's typical of the way cultures react. They react to crisis, when it becomes unthinkable not to react. I predict that we'll continue to pollute the world and eventually we'll use up most of its resources because of modernisation: no one wants to abandon production. In that sense we are still Young

Moderns. Especially the Second and Third Worlders, who want to modernise. All these people are skating on ever-thinner ice. But the shift of thought will emerge when people are forced to change because of the ecological contradictions.

Ecology is a prerequisite of survival. But what about semiology? There you enter the cultural field.

Culture does not consist primarily of material goods, although material goods provide a certain basis for culture. We still live in a materialistic culture, but we will move back to the larger Western paradigm which is the *Graeco-Gothic* ideal of culture. When you ask me what is the measure of mankind, I answer it is culture. What is culture? Culture is meanings, information, words, and all the texts. That's not destructive to the eco-sphere and it's ultimately why people enjoy living. This understanding will dawn on people just because it's good for them or because it's true. Because there is still a pursuit of material ends and there is still a pursuit of control and power over those material ends, we will continue to be on this collision course. And morally it's indefensible to say that the Second and Third World cannot enjoy material goods as long as we are enjoying them. But if we are not going to give them up, we are all going to pollute the world till the eco-crash comes.

You describe it as a kind of confrontation between the material world-view and the semiological world-view. But one could also say that the semiological world-view sustains the materialistic world-view in a more subtle way, since nowadays semiology is paramount in many cultural fields. For example in architecture. Every architect once in a while speaks about 'using signs'.

Exactly, just as they are speaking about ecology. Both ecology and semiotics have permeated mass culture. It's true. But the fact that things are debased and vulgarised doesn't make them less true, or any less important. We have a whole lot of green products but they make no difference to the destruction of the ecosystem. Nevertheless people are happy if they buy them, and that is part of the culture of going green. It is one of the paradoxes of mass culture.

If we may suggest the opposite: that in the Brave New World materialistic multinational power could make use of semiology as a kind of tranquilliser. Could that be true?

It definitely is true. Advertisers like Saatchi & Saatchi are capitalising on it. It's a powerful truth. But the fact that it can be exploited doesn't change the main point. Maybe you are Baudrillardians who are obsessed by the pollutant qualities of the information age, but it is not the only level.

What should be the subject of architecture, according to this multilayering of culture?

I think you can't generalise about the subject of architecture for all time. One could say that for all of us there are subjects such as the human body, the relation to nature (two of the great classical themes), the relation to construction and the relation to place. There are a whole lot of answers to your question, none of which is the answer. If you ask me what is the universe, as seen from a Post-Modern perspective, I think you can represent that. In a way my house is an attempt at an open ended Post-Modern text. We never knew exactly what the overall text was, but there is a double limitation; one is the form, a kind of 'Free Style Classicism' out of wood, and the other is the limitation to certain themes about the cosmos and about time.

You have to show the conflicts as well as the coherence. The problem with deconstruction is that it fetishises conflict, as does a certain kind of Post-Modernism. Always showing conflicts becomes another kind of essentialism.

Why are you so anxious to define the deconstructivists?

Because you have to see how typically Modern, with all its deficiencies, the deconstructivists are. You can step back and ask why are they doing this to us. It's once again the producer's control over the consumer. To gain control over the client and creative autonomy. In the nineteenth century the Modernists fought for autonomy. They didn't want to be a subservient tailor, but rather a doctor, or politician, or the prophet belonging to the Modern Movement in art and architecture. In the 1820s Saint-Simon and others gave the avant-garde its prophetic role; they would lead society and produce what they wanted. In a sense that artistic autonomy is what Modernism and its continual revolutions are about. They say 'the public be damned, client be damned and consumer be damned, we are going to give you what we want'. They are carving out a free space for themselves. I should emphasise that the key idea on the Post-Modern agenda is to give equal power to producers and consumers, and this leads to its typical eclectic style and double-coding.

David Kolb in his book Post-Modern Sophistications, Philosophy, Architecture and Tradition, (Chicago, 1990, p. 105) reproaches your eclecticism for being as modern as the Modern exclusivism of the twenties.

He says:

'If we would escape the modern, we must avoid the temptation of saying that after the complete barrier between the architect and history we now have a complete freedom with history. To flip from no access to total access is to stay within the Modern. Perhaps we need to envision more carefully what would be truly beyond the Modern: the switch from "all or none" to "some".'

I understand why Kolb is critical of an absolute freedom and the idea that all styles 'may be played with'; of course that often trivialises style and history. But the point is that today all styles are equally open to adaptation and transformation, and it depends on the local context, the client, the function and several other concerns, including the architect's desire, which style or styles are in fact used. We are not in a nineteenth-century position which argued for the revival of one as against another, because now all are accessible. And the radical eclecticism consists in choosing the 'correct style or styles for the job' based on the many factors I have just mentioned. This is the positive kind of freedom we have. In that sense it already is the switch Kolb asks for, from 'all or none' to 'some'. Look at Venturi's recently completed extension to the National Gallery – a new classicism, a new black Miesian façade, new vernacular at the back, and on the inside new Tuscan – only 'some' styles, all relevant to the job.

But the problem is that there is no qualitative difference between the Modern anti-style and the Post-Modern embrace of all styles. What stays the same is 'the distance due to self-awareness'.



AJM & BLR, Landeszentralbank, Frankfurt

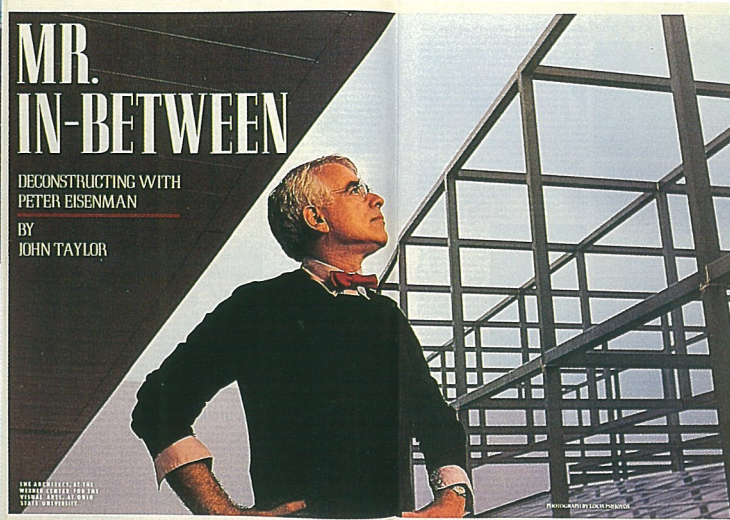
It's true that the 'Post-Modern' stands with the 'Moderns' in recognising our distance from historical models, a 'distance due to self-awareness' and the interruption of cultural continuity by modernism, industrialisation and the materialist interpretation of life. This indeed makes monoculture impossible and irony necessary – if hardly sufficient. Too much irony, or predictable irony, is as boring as naive or dumb or straightforward functionalism. The eighties saw the acceptance of pluralism and an irony which signals distance: these attainments can now be taken for granted, as new goals on the Post-Modern agenda are set. Look at the greening of the city and big business, at the Landeszentralbank in Frankfurt. The roofscape and six gardens of that building show one important goal of the future movement.

Even if you succeed in making clear the difference between late Modern deconstructivism and Post-Modern eclecticism, your analysis of deconstructivism will remain a sociological one; you look to their practice from the outside. But from the inside they see themselves in a more philosophical way. They don't see themselves as producers because the category of production is not valid any more, it's a term of a mechanistic world-view. Deconstructivists see their own products as text. There is a very substantial difference between text and product because there is no producer behind text.

For them you mean, but that's just pure ideology. Because there is always a producer and in this case it is them.

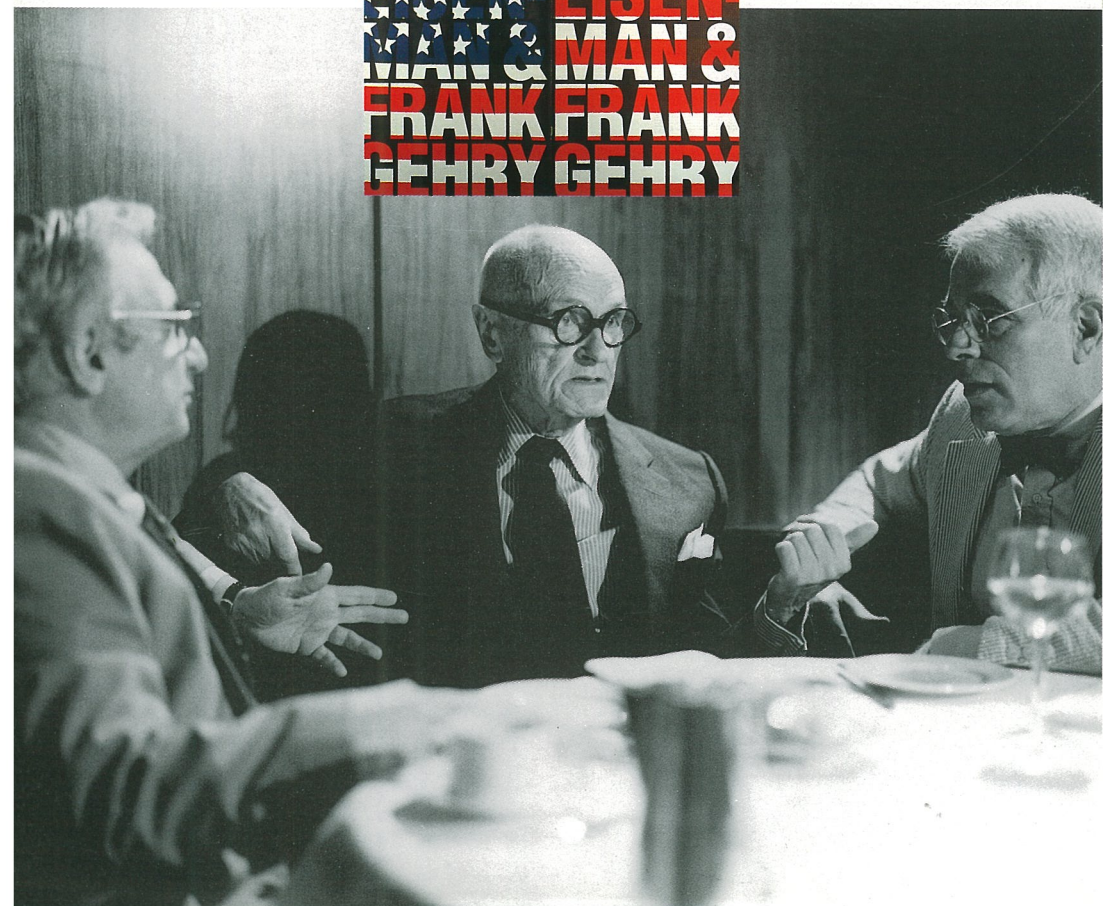


Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, National Gallery, Sainsbury wing (extension), London, 1991



The architect Peter Eisenman at the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 1989

**PETER
EISEN
MAN &
FRANK
FRANK
GEHRY
GEHRY**



Philip Johnson (commissioner), Peter Eisenman and Frank Gehry (architects selected to represent the United States in the Venice Biennial 1991) at the Four Seasons, New York, 1991

If they describe themselves as post Classical, while you describe them in terms of a Classical Modern position, we'll have a Babel. Of course they understand you perfectly if you are analysing them in that way, but they don't really want to communicate in those terms. How can you construct a framework for communication with people you don't want to understand on their terms, and who don't want to accept yours?

Basically there are three choices. You can say they are right, or wrong, or half-right and half-wrong. What I'm saying is that they are wrong, by and large, when they deny that they are producers; they produce buildings, artefacts, and texts. They may have learnt those texts from someone else, they may give them some intertextuality, but the role of the author still exists. They are authors and have responsibility; to deny it is just unadulterated ideology. **It's interesting that the greatest egotists of our century have been those who denied the role of personality in creativity.** Eisenman, whom I love dearly, is the greatest egotist in architecture, and he denies his ego – which is no surprise. Because by externalising his process and getting an *Archimedean* point outside culture, he tries to say this is just intertextuality and that he is not responsible for it. Eisenman's is an extreme form of controlling the discourse. He is unassailable, because he has got the code. This is an old trick which goes back to the Greeks, if not further. You usually get caught at this trick, politically. So it's quite funny and that's why I'm laughing, because he knows he is getting caught.

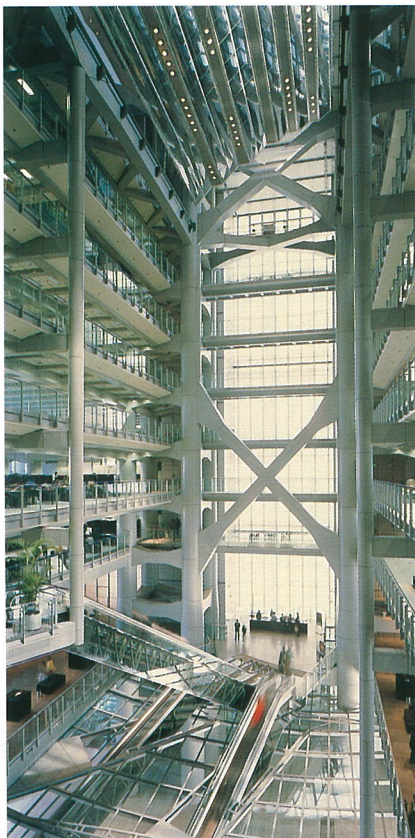
But you are still looking at it from the outside. How do you put your finger on it in such a way that he will accept the consequences and engage in a dialogue?

Peter Eisenman will not accept the consequences, but we still have a dialogue. We have a lot of conversations.

There is a human being on one side of the line, and there is another one on the other side, so in a mechanical way there is a dialogue; but is there, philosophically?

Sure, because negation is a form of dialogue and his negation, his wrapping up the whole Classical world including everybody but himself and Derrida, is an egomaniacal reading of history. He wants to impose it on the reader and on the rest of society too, to exaggerate his own importance. You can deal with that through dialogue and through conversation and see how it relates to the past and how it relates to the present. He still has to negotiate, he still has to enter into discourse with others; and that is the importance of dialogue. My metaphysic is different from his; his of three years ago, because he is now denying Derrida and deconstruction. The Pope must keep moving, the Pope of the New must never get trapped in a pigeon-hole. The New Moderns, the violated perfectionists, have a certain attitude towards society in general which is characteristic of the Modern Movement of the last 200 years. I think that their world-view is coming to an end. Of course, world-views take 400, 500 years to come to an end and they can produce wonderful things in the meantime. I think that's happening with Modernism and late Modernism. Foster's Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank is an incredible piece of idiotic overdesign which legitimates the profession. From the Hong Kong banker's point of view it signifies brute, economic and material power.

They feel like they have a very efficient mental phallus. On the other hand the profession is flattered because the building has been designed all the way through truthfully, from beginning to end. Every single nut and bolt is designed and looks good too. What's more, fourteen entire issues of architectural magazines have been devoted to that building. It has never happened in the history of the architectural profession. Even the Eiffel Tower did not get that many magazine features. Peter Eisenman and his Wexner Visual Arts Center, Ohio, have been given red carpet treatment in ten international issues. What does that tell you? It's telling you that the design world wants to hear the message of Sir Norman and Peter Eisenman. Professional fame tells you about professional ideology, the reception tells you their message wants to be heard. But their message is deeply nihilistic, something of which they are not fully aware. Norman Foster would deny it, the bank would deny it. The message is nihilistic in the sense that Nietzsche – and with him the nineteenth century – understood: technology as an end in itself generates meaninglessness. Of course the people and the profession do not understand this, but since I'm not a nihilist I can laugh at it. And yet because it represents an important trend in the profession it has to be taken seriously. I live in this culture, these are Anglophones and I can see that they are the professional dominants. They may like to think of themselves as recessive, but Sir Norman as the knighted Modernist no longer can, and neither can Eisenman as the Crown Prince of Philip Johnson. So we basically have Sir Norman and Peter Eisenman, setting two Anglophonic discourses on architecture. I would rather have a more benign philosophy and benign people dominating the architectural culture, but I realise it's a pluralist Post-Modern world, and they are, for the moment, leaders.

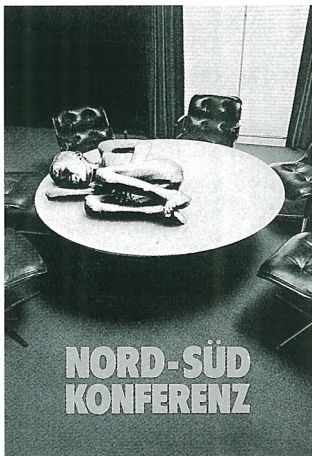


Norman Foster, Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Headquarters, 1986

This pluralist Post-Modern world could still be monolithic. In the phrase quoted above you allude to an agenda that could subvert this. How can we escape from the pluralist situation in which we accept that you are making a few converts, that Peter Eisenman, Norman Foster and the others are making a few converts, each of you with a couple of propaganda magazines at his disposal, towards the major shift within a few decades?

You can't predict the future, it's unpredictable by nature. Nevertheless, we have to formulate a 'surprise-free world' that is an extrapolation of all trends to discipline our thoughts about what is possible. Because we are all engaged in shaping the way we want it to be. If there are no surprises and things continue to develop in the way they are going, the situation in 2050 will be eco-catastrophe and semiotic glut. Those two things will force a new world-view in so far as, in Marxist terms, the substructure forces the superstructure to develop in certain ways. I'm not a determinist, but I do believe there are relations between the deep structure of society and culture. It's not a bad prediction that – as the Second and Third Worlds industrialise and post-industrialise – they will adopt a world-view which is already here today, and is the right one. I'm also slightly sanguine about it, because I'm convinced we won't shift without catastrophes.

It's paradoxical that from a macroscopic, apocalyptic point of view you see disaster coming, you foresee a situation of limitation, of narrowing down, of think globally and act locally. But how can you act locally if you think globally? The other paradox is that evidence is on your side, but at the same time you cannot escape from the fact that in the cultural field everything is accepted; all the paradigms are living peacefully together. You are the person who has evidence on your side, but you cannot convince anybody any more because there is this cacophony of private opinions.



Klaus Staeck, Nord-Süd Konferenz, 1979

Yes, in the First World, not in the Second and Third Worlds. The party is quite localised. I'm not against the party going on. The point of having a 'surprise-free world' is a set of baselines, a paradigm so you and I can talk. A set of assumptions means that we can talk about how we ought to act, assuming this hypothetical world is going to come. It has catastrophic aspects to it, but there is also hope; how do we orientate ourselves? At the same time, and again this makes me laugh, there is likely to be something from outer space, as it were, that just hits us from the side, which will enable us to throw off these assumptions. But until it does, we must use these assumptions. First of all, the feast of paradigms. They are conflicting, aren't they? Conflict can actually be a form of engagement as well as disengagement. This is one of the things of which I recently became aware. Curiously enough the system is now working 'conflictually', to use that horrible word, and quite positively it has created a space of tension between paradigms which creates the illusion of a centred culture. In other words, the tension set up between those different paradigms establishes meaning, and that gives coherence to their conflict. Or are you saying the paradigms don't talk to each other?

They need each other because only together they form the discourse, but there are no consequences of the discussions. You hear a few arguments, then you go home and you think about those arguments and use them to strengthen your own arguments. That's normal, but you also get exhausted by it, because you aren't enriched by a new situation, a new level at which you both have a short-time consensus. There is no consensus. It is not focused on consensus. It is focused on 'take what you can get and stay put, being backed up by your own subgroup'. It's reasoning without levelling.

You are talking about dissent. It can lead to a devolutionary spiral. It's not so bad for the producers, but for the consumers you get more and more fragmented, isolated environments, a whole lot of good deconstruction here, Post-Modernism there, and Classicism elsewhere, and no one is responsible for the system as a whole. I agree, there is a necessity for these hardened positions to speak with each other and have a true dialogue. I come back to dialogue as a key concept – a dialogue is positive because it is open and doesn't know where it's going. The dialogue is creative whereas a dispute is a fixing of positions in which not much is learned – except the fact that you hold a position and that it is validated by your opponents who occupy an equally stupid one. That is a good description of the Cold War of Architecture, a situation we are in, and that's not good. **The only good thing is that pluralism reigns. Pluralism is allowed to reign within the tense oppositional system, which allows new positions to have room for manoeuvre.** Think of how awful the system used to be, where you only had a monolithic discourse. Of course I'm exaggerating, but basically from the fifties to the sixties you could learn Modernism and that was it. Now you can learn Modernism and a little something else in the architectural schools; so we do have more room to breathe in the West. Modernism isn't the only dominant now, it's contested.

But if you look at an office-building by Eisenman, or one by Michael Graves, or whatever kind of office, actually the layout of the plan is almost the same, so that on the economic level and on the programmatic level there is no debate. They just copy the ingredients of the system. In 'Against Pluralism' (Recordings, Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, Washington 1985) Hal Foster made a powerful point: pluralism tends to absorb argument. Is that what you want?

Pluralism absorbs argument, that's the point of dialogue; to hear all the arguments and move on from your dogmatic position to a new one. It is wrong if one doesn't arrive at a decision, or if it is not clear what the decision is. Foster is probably attacking pluralism as a form of avoiding decisions: just airing the subjects and then leaving them unresolved. Pluralism has been a form of pseudo-engagement in our culture, which doesn't mean, as Foster may imply, that it's a bad thing. It means that you haven't faced the results of the dialogue. If you follow Foster's position, you would end up in a dogmatic system where only someone knows the truth and imposes it. Then you would get action, from his point of view. I agree that liberal democratic pluralism has often ended up in talk-talk-talk. But what happened in Iraq was act-act-act and you can see what the consequences are. I really believe in a new world-view. We are at the beginning of it, not in the middle. It has been formulated by scientists, theologians, historians, but it's interestingly coherent. There are lots of areas not filled in, but you know I'm a kind of optimist.

There are at least two major tendencies in your words. First, you condemn the present-day social situation by saying we are on a collision course. Second, you accept the present-day cultural situation by saying pluralism is a good thing. After all, could pluralism be a possible sign of our ability to avoid this collision course, or could it be just a symptom of it?

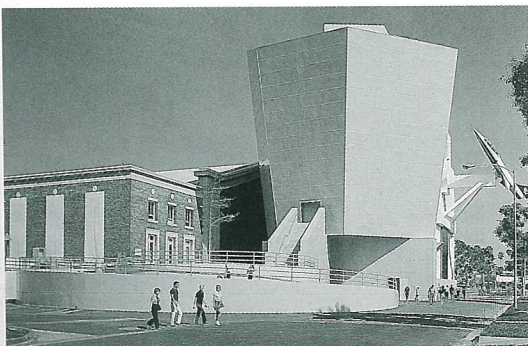
Pluralism is both the precondition for resisting further degradation of the environment and a problem in its own right. Unless different cultures have the power and willpower to assert their differences, there is little chance that the effort will be made to clean up the environment. Did you ever see a multinational agency act responsibly out of good will when it wasn't forced to? The UN, EC, Group of Seven, ASEAN, etcetera, are no different. Since all important problems are now global, there have to be global agencies to deal with them, but their responsibilities will always be pushed and monitored by nations, regions, cities and individuals. And for their activity to be effective, pluralism is the *sine qua non* (which guarantees nothing). On the other hand, pluralism does create its own problems of competition, disagreement and dissent, and therefore its own form of waste. But it is a price that has to be paid for the freedoms we enjoy. The doomsday scenario for 2050 holds that eco-catastrophe will force a world dictatorship. Let's hope it's wrong.

We think one of the main characteristics of pluralism is the dissolving of traditional borderlines in the endist universe of Francis Fukuyama. If you accept a pluralist model, you have to debunk your own border, both morally and formally. You have spoken of your house as a representation of a new Post-Modern world-view. Could you give an example of architecture which represents the dissolution of that border?

Let's take the work of Frank Gehry. Gehry dissolves his own furniture in his rooms, his funny spongy furniture made out of corrugated paper. He has used it in the insides of one of his animals rooms: it's a warm environment which has nice acoustic properties. It gives an extraordinary lift of space, as the sky comes down from the top, it's almost a sacred space with a new sound – you can hear your heart beat.

Could you find a new identity in that space?

It's just amusing, it breaks down the border between furniture, ceiling, wall and what you are sitting on. It crosses the borders between high art and low art and those between furniture and architecture and representation and detail. Most important is that Gehry managed to invent 'detail-less architecture'; there are no real joints. How do you make a mistake in this? You can't! I find it a very exciting and extremely interesting form of the Post-Modernism that we were talking about in the early seventies-ad-hocism. On the other hand (I'm sorry to get into categories and to erect borders, but you have to erect them in order to break them down, in order to think) the reason Frank isn't altogether a Post-Modernist is his disdain of context and of a dialectical relation to adjoining buildings. He will often do the knife-edge juxtaposition; something that is completely surreal, like the Surrealists' discontinuous *exquisite corpse*. Just slam his buildings next to an existing one. I tried to persuade him, saying 'Your buildings are great but why assault the buildings next to you? They have as much right to exist as yours have'. He says that he can't do it well. That's interesting! Why do so many people make deconstructivist architecture? Because it seems easier and they can't do 'good architecture' or 'competent architecture'. Let me ask you a question. How do you sue Frank Gehry, how are you going to find a failure in this kind of architecture? Previously you knew when you had a mistake; there were clear borders.



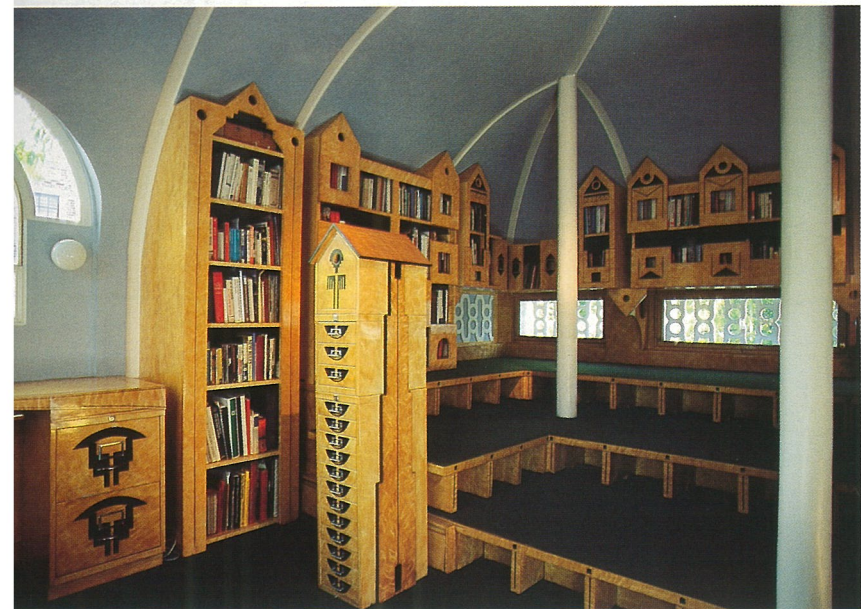
Frank Gehry, State of California Aerospace Museum, Santa Monica, 1984



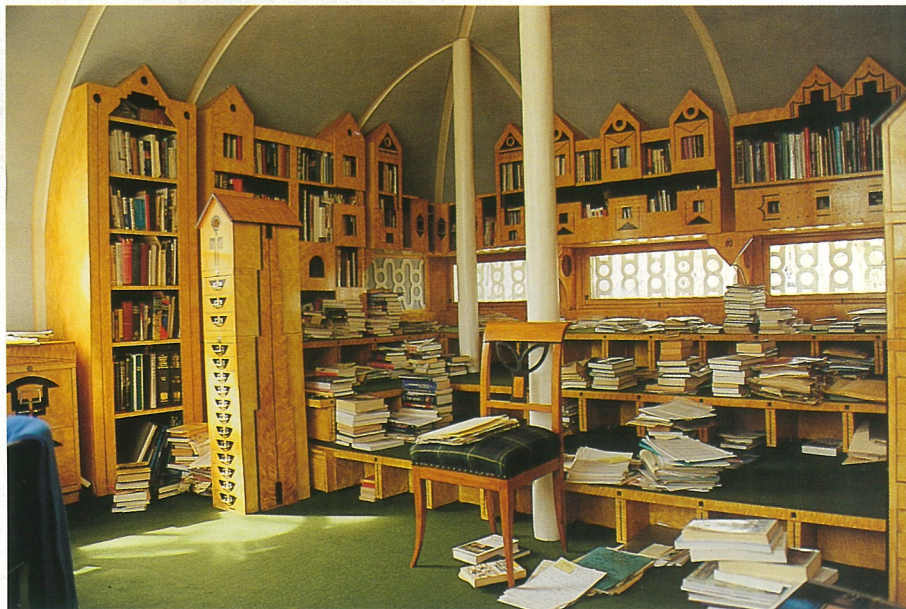
Charles Jencks and Terry Farrell, Thematic House, London, 1985



Bernard Prinz, Wie Sie wurden, was Sie sind, installation, 1982



Charles Jencks and Terry Farrell, Thematic House, London, 1985



'The book of stone, so solid and so durable, would give way to the book of paper, even more solid and more durable.' (Victor Hugo)
David Mach, Here to Stay, installation Glasgow, 1990 (Twelve giant columns consisting of 100 tons of magazines and newspapers)

You can attack him; on the level of the programme for instance. We have to dig in the programme of the building itself to see if he has found the right solution or not. Many of Gehry's buildings are fragmented. But should he use the same kind of fragmentarism and the same kind of structure for every kind of building? It depends very much on what kind of building it is and where the building is located. Gehry is used to a certain kind of style, he knows it very well but it is only linguistic professionalism for him. It seems to be very difficult for architects to invent another kind of form each and every time. Don't you think it's very important to interpret the programme and then try to find a kind of form to use?

I agree. I would certainly suggest that for working in different styles, it is a necessity to be radically eclectic. You can't assume that Frank Gehry's style will work well for more than five or six things. It happens to work very well for small block planning, in the Loyola Law School and in the Aerospace Museum, both in Los Angeles. The feeling of flying, machinery and dynamism on the inside is wonderful and the outside it's fine. It's not successful around the back, however, because the previously existing brick building comes up and he slams into it – assaults it. It's the avant-garde beating, a kind of a dullard, which creates a great tension. So, funnily it's on scale with Los Angeles, it's an urban building; but around the back it's a Modernist bully. I would advocate some joint to show that a transplant is possible between his language and the neighbour's. The difficulty is how to teach an architect to master four languages and to be original and good enough – whatever these words mean.

Let's look at it from the public's point of view. You think people should have the capacity to be critical and when they have an increased awareness they can be critical. Can architecture make people more conscious, does it help them to reflect on society?

I don't think architecture usually makes us reflect on society unless we are told that this is an architecture that should make you reflect on society. The point is, everything is a sign of something else. And everything is interpreted by another sign and we are all of us 'interpretants' in the Peircian semiotic sense. That is, everything you think and everything I think, all this conversation, is a series of signs from other interpretants. The Modernist position of Richard Meier, Norman Foster and the classical position of Quinlan Terry are not trying to make us conscious of the contradictions of signs. They want to repress consciousness of difference. They want to pretend their approach is natural, integral and consistent, so they won't enter into this kind of debate. My feeling is that the architect in an open society should design an open structure. Perhaps to build a building within a building. When I first wrote about Post-Modernists in 1975, I said that architects are hopeless at designing interiors and understanding what normal people want. Therefore, let the architect design his spaces, structures and abstractions, which he does well, but afterwards let an interior designer, or someone else, add the missing meaning on another level. If architects can't do it and interior designers can, why not? We are a free culture. I hire you because you do nice spaces. Okay? And then I get rid of you. I get someone else to finish it, to do what I want. That leads to double design, double coding, producer and consumer oriented.

Aren't there talents who can do both?

There are, certainly. But they are marginalised because our culture does not really regard them as professionals. As our culture says divide and conquer, they all hire another profession. Architects do not know how to design fabric – things that people touch, and the software. We still live in a Modern era, where to produce the hardware is the basic name of the game, whereas we ought to be designing symbolic programmes and meanings as well.

Your analysis leads to the conclusion that there are two poles: on the one hand the absolutely programmed space which you mentioned in Stirling's Staatsgalerie for example, which implies a kind of coverage of art in a very sequenced, ordered and traditional way. The other pole, which is more based on El Lissitzky, was a heroic effort to let people act themselves. This refers to the whole Modern programme of transparent architecture, to withdraw as a specialist and give the occupant a wide berth for action.

Like Gropius, by whom I was trained. Gropius said provide an abstract structure and after a while people will be forced to act. They are like humus which grows like some kind of fungus. The object will force them. And then everything will be okay in fifty years. But **if you really want to make a pearl, you have to put some grit in an oyster. I don't give the oyster an abstract box and say 'make a pearl'**. That is why Gropius' American period did not produce great things.

In the twentieth century there is an odd opposition between the architecture that offers the people a stage for action, and the absence of integrated personalities who really know what they want in a fragmented

world. There used to be quite a few fragmented people around, who wanted to be helped, not being positioned on a neutral stage. So architecture offered something to people who could not understand the offer; it was an offer for people who didn't see what this offer was all about. They were in need of symbols, signs, they wanted a narrative.

The architect's view of the perfect noble savage is an intellectual like themselves, who will be provoked by an open structure to do something. By contrast, I think you have to give a structure for people to react to, a catalyst. If you are designing a museum, you need a symbolic programme, and the ability to design art-specific spaces, whereas museum curators want an abstract background. So they force architects into the Richard Meier mould, as at Frankfurt. This furniture museum has a set of white rooms in the International Style, where light dances around quite nicely. But this decontextualises art and leads to great historical anomalies. When you enter, you go up the ramp, and you arrive in the twentieth century; then you move to the fifteenth century, and then to the eighteenth century and then finally to Turkey and Islam. It's like Disneyland, except there is no comprehensible sequence and art-specific design. There is no attempt to articulate a sequence of different cultures, to explain and enhance different experience. It is outrageous that we do this. You can design highly specific spaces from time to time, even in a randomised, open structure. That's why I have criticised Richard Rogers' Centre Pompidou, with all its openness. After ten years they had Gae Aulenti redesign some interiors and define particular places. That is where I come back to the oyster and the grit. You need a symbolic programme and you derive this from the function, the context and the client.

But in negative terms then, you end up designing for people who are lost.

An open work has two separate meanings. First, as with Shakespeare, you have great works of art, which are capable of offering an unlimited number of interpretations. Second, the work that has not been finished, and the perceiver creates the closure. These are two quite different meanings of openness, both necessary. If I supply you with a lot of symbols in this house, as an architect I allow you to put them together to make your own narrative, or to make your own interpretation. If I tried it with none, you would not be interested, you would not be engaged. You have to give people something to chew on.

But, referring to your remarks about the ironic symbolisation of the programme. What if the programme is too serious and too clogged with historical meaning?

There isn't anything too serious. A sign is always ambiguous, even a single sign, such as a cross. This can be interpreted either by someone who is not a Christian, or it can be interpreted by someone who is in a rebellious mood. All you have to do is decontextualise the sign or recontextualise it, or alter it in some way, so it immediately suggests that it is contesting the very thing it is upholding. I suppose that is, again, a Post-Modern position. In Post-Modern literature it is the complicity with the power structure and the subversion of its ends. You go along with the system of power, to a degree, in order to bend its direction, or change its meaning. Because otherwise it won't listen to you. And even in direct opposition, you are still honouring its existence. When you engage a culture you either oppose it, or try to subvert it from within. Subverting it from within is probably the more interesting. But then you have to be conscious of what sort of subversion you are attempting. You have to be a sociologist and a psychoanalyst as well as an architect. You have to get in there and find out what are the forces of the moment and the eternal forces, and mediate between them. That is why I respect Michael Graves and Philip Johnson – and also their attempts to engage mass culture. I think it is an important part of the Post-Modern agenda to break through and communicate with society. But very few people, and certainly not Johnson and Graves, can do it without end up losing direction, and losing what they want to communicate.

Are you the exception?

I am not arguing for a Post-Modern position exclusively. I am arguing for pluralism, and believe that the meaning of Post-Modernism is only within a spectrum of other positions. It is important to see the structure of tensions being created by different positions in confrontation. I believe there is nothing outside of the system. To a certain degree then upholding the system is important – so pluralism and meaning can exist. You have an obligation to the system of meaning quite apart from the position you cut within it. I owe something to my enemies, because without them my position would be undefined. If I were to win I would lose. If they were to win I would lose. The whole system of meaning depends on oppositions.