

# Ornament, Crime and Society: the English Debate in 1978

John Maule McKean

Review of Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, London, Academy Editions, nuova edizione ampliata, 1978  
David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture: The Development of a Theme in Architectural History and Theory from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977

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‘Why are you all so scared of discussing ornament?’

It was a touchy question put by the urbane court jester of British architecture, Charles Jencks to a gathering of architects who’d actually come together to listen to Jim Stirling.

Participation, that centre of lively debate some years back when even the British government was recommending it, has palled (having scarcely had any rigorous trial). Even vandalism, its illegitimate brother, hasn’t quite the excitement of last year. Today the architectural discussion in Britain centres on ornament as crime. From one view, it may seem a very different debate; but is it really?

Two brilliant week long summer events, Robin Middleton’s Beaux-Arts fest at the Architectural Association followed shortly by Peter Cook’s Art Net Rally ‘Aesthetics again?’, have offered Londoners a welcome chance to see how the very varied debate is moving.

It is perhaps more revealing that in print this debate is having to centre on two books of lesser importance: Charles Jencks’ *Post Modern Architecture*, published a year ago and now just out in a much enlarged (and improved) edition, and David Watkin’s *Morality and Architecture*, published at the end of last year and hotly debated since.

Although each author spoke at one of these two rallies, neither volume was mentioned there, where platforms were given to critics from John Summerson to Kenneth Frampton, to Beaux Arts experts from Europe and America, to architects from Jim Stirling to Richard Rogers, Robert Venturi to Leon Krier, from Peter Eisenmann, to Paolo Portoghesi. And neither of these slim volumes would have helped the debate much. Yet each in its eccentric ways lays ghosts, flogs dead horses and overstates the case: that the Modern Movement is dead. Jencks, a witty and sharp writer, erects his fragile ‘post modern’ umbrella over the motley collected works of all those architects today who, he claims, are operating ‘double coding’: whose buildings, in Jencks’ rather simple linguistic analogy, speak on two levels at once. He spans the gamut of today’s fashions, from English vernacular to the New York Five, from Port Grimaud to Charles Moore, from

garbage housing to the Kriers, ending with Antonio Gaudi whom he calls the only really successful post-modern architect. A number of

Le Corbusier's best buildings for example, would also fit Jencks' favourite adjectives ('ambiguous', 'fragmented', 'complex', 'with a rich layering of space', etc.) rather better than many of the works he does include. But such thoughts don't interrupt his narrative which engagingly attacks an architecture which is too explicit and boring, which is too simple and inarticulate, operates in a restricted system of expression, and is illegible to an untutored public. The problem is that these ills he equates with the Modern Movement, rather than with bad, impoverished architectural design.

David Watkin's book (perhaps to Jencks' embarrassment) is in ways similar, but this is a mischievous if not downright malicious piece of reactionary propaganda posing as academic righteousness. Full of tendentious sneers and gratuitous insult, while purporting to argue against the moral purpose in architecture from Pugin to Pevsner and the Modern Movement, it reveals itself as a violently anti-socialist tirade.

'It's principal claim to originality', philosophy professor Richard Wollheim wrote recently, 'is the total absence of sympathy with the topic on which its polemic is conducted'. It is a corpse not worth picking at; having been adequately dismembered, its nastiness and stupidities brilliantly flayed by Reyner Banham (*Times Literary Supplement* 12.2.78 p. 191), and its likely consequences more subtly dissected by Robin Evans, (*Architectural Design* May/June 1978 p 276).

But in a sense Watkin's hollow diatribe was as necessary as Jencks' shallow case; for, although 'the old Puritan idea that simplicity is moral and elaboration immoral', (of which on pages 38-39 Watkin accuses Le Corbusier), makes me assume he's never seen a Corbusier building, we have enough evidence of the sterility of modern architecture for Watkin's boorishness to claim an excited following. Watkin, setting up the arid polarity of formalism (good architecture) versus socialism (bad architecture), can only retreat into the suggestion that the architect renounce all interest in the social milieu created by his work, to become the mere stylist of museum exhibits.

The Modern Movement claimed to be the only true architecture for the people; but it was unintelligible to them. 'Anything which reminds one of the past is a vice' (as Watkin wildly caricatures Pevsner). Now, we need an architecture which speaks also to the public at large, and which is conscious of what it is doing. Thus Jencks' post-modern covers 'only those designers who are aware of architecture as a language'.

Over this stony shore the waves of the current architectural debate are washing. The moral purity of the true style, and its associated paternalism, has certainly withered away; as Paolo Portoghesi said at Art Net, as if it were a novel critique; the widespread indifference which architecture receives is based on its narrow utilitarian intentions. For a decade now, as Kenneth Frampton's carefully considered paper at Art Net put it, architects have been increasingly aware 'that the reductive codes of the Modern Movement had led to an impoverishment of the urban environment'. And so now we are shown how, from Venturi at *Beaux-Arts* to Stirling and Portoghesi at *Art Net*, they have been developing along this line. The new social demand, it now appears, will not be for 'participation' but for 'legibility'. The public, if it cannot act, should at least comprehend.

It is an image of this mood that a key event at *Beaux-Arts* (and certainly the virtuoso performance of the summer) was Neil Levine's analysis of Labrouste's Ste. Geneviève library as a sophisticated post-modern ('double coded') monument which, literally, could be read - to some extent spontaneously by the untutored, and ultimately, of course, having its meticulous complex programme unravelled by the literati. Here a heroic icon for the Modern Movement for different reasons - its clarity, 'honesty' of structural expression, etc. - could neatly take on a similar role for the post-moderns. I'm afraid, however, that for the followers of Jencks it will be too ordered, not funky, not populist enough, for their taste. And it sure is a question of taste.

Forever slightly apart from the pack. Peter Smithson, who has been thinking about decoration for a decade since his Milan Triennale show in 1968, managed at the *Beaux-Arts rally* to follow Levine's tour de force with his own quiet musings on Labrouste's Paestum drawings, from which with charm, humour and amazing dexterity, he moved to Christmas decorations in artificial moss and fairy lights.

'Greek architecture', Smithson murmured, 'is a fabric capable of attachments', and from the swags on Labrouste's Ste Geneviève facade he led via Piero della Francesca into theories of decoration and ritual, the adding of layers of meaning. 'We need historical reference without overt eclecticism' he suggested.

But today, this is not going far enough for most. The Smithson argument is charming and allusive, with his thoughts on covering a naked fabric with activities and a decoration which is actually implied by that fabric, an idea which might not seem far from the Dutch school, as seen inside Herman Herzberger's Centraal Beheer in Apeldoorn. They are certainly calling for an added layer of richness and meaning, but this remains a long way from Venturi and his admirers, where self-indulgent pop imagery - the double coded sugar on the pill - is sprouting its new jungle. Smithson's Robin Hood Lane housing, of course, like Herzberger's old people's home, tells a different story from their words, as smart Jencksian critics never tire of pointing out. Their first impression is drab and municipal; of 'them' rather than 'us'. The Smithsons, sensing a post-modern mood at *Art Net*, refused to join in. 'Now is the era of rag-pickers and antique dealers', they said. 'So be it; it is no joy to fight the Zeitgeist...'

Had they stayed, they might have seen how at least in that they weren't alone, even if outnumbered. Bernard Tschumi railed against 'the ghost in the castle, an air of necrophilia, the creeping cowardice of the New Decoration, or post modernism...' and Rem Koolhaas of OMA harangued against going back on victories won forty years ago.

The post-modern context was provokingly situated when Tony Vidler at the *Beaux Arts* paralleled Kaufmann's *Ledoux to Corbu* span with their reductionist contemporaries, from Durand to Hilbesheimer. He suggested that just as Durand opened up the way for eclecticism, so with Hilbesheimer and the cardboard rationalists of the '30s the way was opened for 'what we are told we should call post-modernism'.

The cue was for Roberto Venturi who, showing recent work, developed the argument for 'a symbolism of the ordinary in ornament applied to shelter'. 'Architecture' - he almost used Ruskin's own words - 'is shelter with decoration or with symbols on it'. Using their (his and Denise Scott-Brown's) well known

categories, Venturi sensed that 'the classical duck' may be becoming fashionable, but what we needed, on the other hand, was 'classicist sheds. That is, witty and not correct use of the classics, selective not universal, for example putting a classic front on a modern back...'

The crowds loved it, although mouths fell open as his slide show became a bizarre sequence of facades with huge boats on top, a classical portico to a jazz museum, small houses with vast, fat paper thin pilasters cut into by windows, two dimensional porticos and interchangeable facade expressions reminiscent - but of course as a chic send-up - of Loudon's associationism of the 1830s. 'I'd have post modern outside and Serbo-Croatian inside', quipped Venturi. But while he slammed the post-modern for calling in their own way for 'total design' ('pure modern turned out to be too easy an answer, but post modern seems to be the same thing...') that squabble remains within a rather precious clique.

And nowhere in Britain is there half the boldness of Venturi. There may be bright colours, shiny shapes and supergraphics - pop descendants of the high-tech '60s made possible today with grp claddings and double skin inflatables - but there is no Jencksian double coding there. Interestingly it was this stream, best seen in the work of Siamese twins Foster'n'rogers (separated some years ago by amazing surgery into Foster Associates and Piano + Rogers) which drew the crowds to *Art Net's rally*. And they really had few ideas (though lovely images) to show. The children of the '60s, who in that old tradition pretend their buildings to be association free (and who dares to say 'oil refinery' near the Centre Pompidou), they are far from the conscious associations for which the new so strenuously struggle.

And then there is the peculiarly British 'public authority post-modern'. The rule of development control officers - the neovernacular of brick and tile pitched roofs which conform to 'design guides', ('You will be told the permitted association!')- is indeed the post-modern in Venturi's terms, being the vernacular duck, out of Disney, Cullen's townscape and Port Grimaud.

From both of these extremes, it is a long way to the subtlety of Jim Stirling (who spoke at both the rallies). 'What I'd like most', Stirling said, defending the memory-of-gothic pointed windows and Egyptian portico on his Stuttgart museum scheme, 'is for the untutored man in the Stuttgart street to come along and say "this is a museum." We're trying to make the thing look like a museum...'

And in so saying, Stirling has let loose a well-publicised fit of pique from the sophisticated sleek Stuttgart modernists. 'Buildings', Stirling now argues, 'can take a certain load of porticos, columns...' And the force of the argument is that he is about to build them, in his brilliant Stuttgart competition winner.

While Stirling, and Paolo Portoghesi as well, showed the London audience their attempts to develop a more accessible language - replacing, in Portoghesi's words, the traditions wiped out by the Modern Movement's esperanto - Jencks attacked their associations as still too arcane. Jencks pressed his love for applied ornament as the container of meaning. Stirling patiently explained that he was not the slightest bit interested in ornament requiring traditional expertise, adding: 'Your idea of putting your finger in the market box and picking out string courses or egg and dart is kitsch and, more importantly, not very interesting anyway'.

Which only emphasises again the Beaux- Arts link. ‘Super-boring’, Stirling had said there, echoed by John Summerson who described the ‘brilliantly worked out Beaux-Arts plans... but what went on above ground was a sort of mixed salad...’

Perhaps the post-moderns show up Beaux-Arts at its worst, concentrating not on the lessons of taut and subtle planning, but on the superficially thought out appearances and applied decoration, on this mixed salad and mayonnaise.

The revival of interest in Beaux-Arts; Peter Cook’s rally being entitled (if not always about) aesthetics; even the taxonomists of the post-modern and the polemicists for the sublime a-social genius of the artist- architect; all these are reactions to our unlovely world which, from Saul Steinberg’s graph paper towers to the crude, staining, leaking, brutish concrete urban whales, is the obvious legacy of the Modern Movement.

They are all reactions to the fact that, with the scales fallen from our eyes, we see that our cities, as Krier argues so well, have lost their coherence, that the buildings around us have lost their richness of form and detail, that where they do communicate it is so often unintended and usually unattractive; in fact we see that less is indeed revealed as less.

But we are so excited with this discovery that we almost forget the difference between good and bad architecture; the difference between subtle, allusive, ambiguous, complex architecture which reveals itself slowly - say - and boring , crude, inelegant and unlovely architecture - whatever its age. We think that by putting on too many layers of icing, the bland cake will inevitably taste richer; we forget to learn from Corb as well as Kitsch, from De Stijl as well as The Strip, or from Labrouste as well as from Gaudi.

Smithson’s cool thoughts on layering (which was one of the key words in these debates) and on decoration are a long way from the naughty mouldings of Robert Stern, the free eclecticism of Piers Gough, or even the Egyptian portico of Jim Stirling. But does Venturi’s recent work do more than demonstrate the absurdity of the ‘maximalist’ corollary that more is, inevitably, more?

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John McKean 2408 words

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