

LONDON.

radical postmodernism.

c.jencks

Jack Self: I would like to start by checking my facts. In the AA archives I recently came across what seemed to be a parody of your work, a racy article titled Dr. Jencks on Sex and Communication. Are you the author of this 1975 Ghost-Dance Times piece?

Charles Jencks: Yes, I am.

JS: In the section called The Phallacy of Symbols you write "It is possible to whip a little life into any bit of failed eroticism by viewing it behind frosted glass," is the prefix "Radical" an attempt to sex-up postmodernism?

CJ: What are you getting at?

JS: You spoke of the repression and embarrassment that architects have about postmodernism and I was wondering —

CJ: I was speaking about the iconic building, which is a source of embarrassment for purists, for minimalists, for those pursuing austerity, and it puts the architect in a maddening double bind. The iconic building stems from the end of the monument; the end of the monument stems from the fact that, since at least the French Revolution, architects have been unable to pin society down on what it wants, and what it wants to symbolise. So there's an iconic crisis. The problem with the iconic building is that if you're asked to do one and society doesn't tell you what it is — that is, what they want to pay you extra money for — it puts the architect in this invidious, paradoxical situation of having to do something that goes against their training and nature, it's an embarrassing position.

The role of architecture for the last 3000 years wasn't social housing or building systems, it was the design of honorific, symbolic and rhetorical buildings — the church, the palace, the city hall, the law courts, the libraries... maybe 1% of all buildings.

By contrast, the modernist ideology of architecture was, in pure

Marxist terms, a system designed to make more work for architects — from 1% of the buildings to 40%! And naturally, they did everything to prove, to persuade, to cajole, society that they were in charge of the environment. They even claimed they could solve class struggle with buildings. 'Revolution can be avoided', Le Corbusier says, 'by mass-produced housing'. And they tried, and they failed dismally. In other words they did what any Marxist would say they would do: architects adopt a professional ideology, obfuscate the actual situation, and then grab more control. Just like millions of bankers today. In this situation it's not what people perceive, because ideology clouds the mind.

Architectural ideology is incredibly strong on poor young minds, and they don't perceive this. What they perceive is the architecture of good intentions. And they've been trained ideologically to be in denial about the more sinister processes at work. And so naturally, and paradoxically, a young group like FAT who are coming on the scene are embarrassed about resisting these processes. And they adopt postmodernism for all these really bizarre reasons — because it's the most taboo style, the most hated, and therefore the most radical — it's an argument, but also a clever kind of tactical position. It's a smokescreen for their true agenda, which is to express working class tastes. In other words, as I tried to get them to admit, it's the taste culture and the lack of representation among the working class (such as it is) in Manchester for instance, that they're representing.

JS: This moral underpinning sounds a lot like positive discrimination.

CJ: Postmodern liberalism first requires that the modernist state be fought for. You have to get a nation's cultural and legal system to be impartial, especially ethnically and racially. In other words, treating everyone equally. Of course nowhere is perfect, but after you've reached a kind of equality you have to have positive discrimination for those cultures which are being wiped out by the

marketplace. And postmodern liberalism is a very moral multiculturalism. As you no doubt know, David Cameron is trying to suppress this now. He recognises that once people can speak English in this country and can communicate, then they have a right to the judges, the legal system and so forth, and then they have a right to have their culture recognised. That's the postmodern liberal position, and its moral. London could be called the most heteropolitan city in the world — with the most minorities, and no absolute majority. Morally, an architect in this situation has to be an advocate of the ethnic group.

JS: I'd like to come back to something you mentioned in your lecture, the success of postmodernism as a commercial style. The perception of my generation is largely that postmodernism was the architectural monument for neoliberal economic theory, and therefore deeply immoral.

CJ: That's wrong in two ways. Firstly, as I've pointed out, if you do a statistical head count, you find that late-capitalism commissions more dumb boxes with funny shapes than it does postmodern buildings, even kitsch or po-mo ones. All the large, boring, twisted boxes with funny shapes belong to an architecture based on Credit Default Swaps, which no one, not even George Soros [the man who broke the Bank of England], can understand.

It is simply wrong of the Marxist Frederic Jameson to align that style towards postmodernism. He takes the Bonaventure centre in Los Angeles, which is a completely late-modern building as his prime example. But he's not an architectural historian. So, he's wrong, he's just dead wrong.

Jameson is right, however, in the sense that postmodernists were corrupted by Reagan and Thatcher. Look at Michael Graves: a classic case of a very strong, interesting, postmodern-urbanist who by 1983 (after his Louisville Humana building) really goes off the rails and gets into megabuilds. Then he suffers from all the faults of modernism. I've been saying this since that very moment. Unfortunately, people still

assume that postmodernism is what it was in 1981, even the Victoria & Albert's recent exhibition makes this mistake. Postmodernism is in fact a movement in all the arts and culture that continues to the present day, it's much bigger than one style for three years, in fact that's its great strength, it's a worldview.

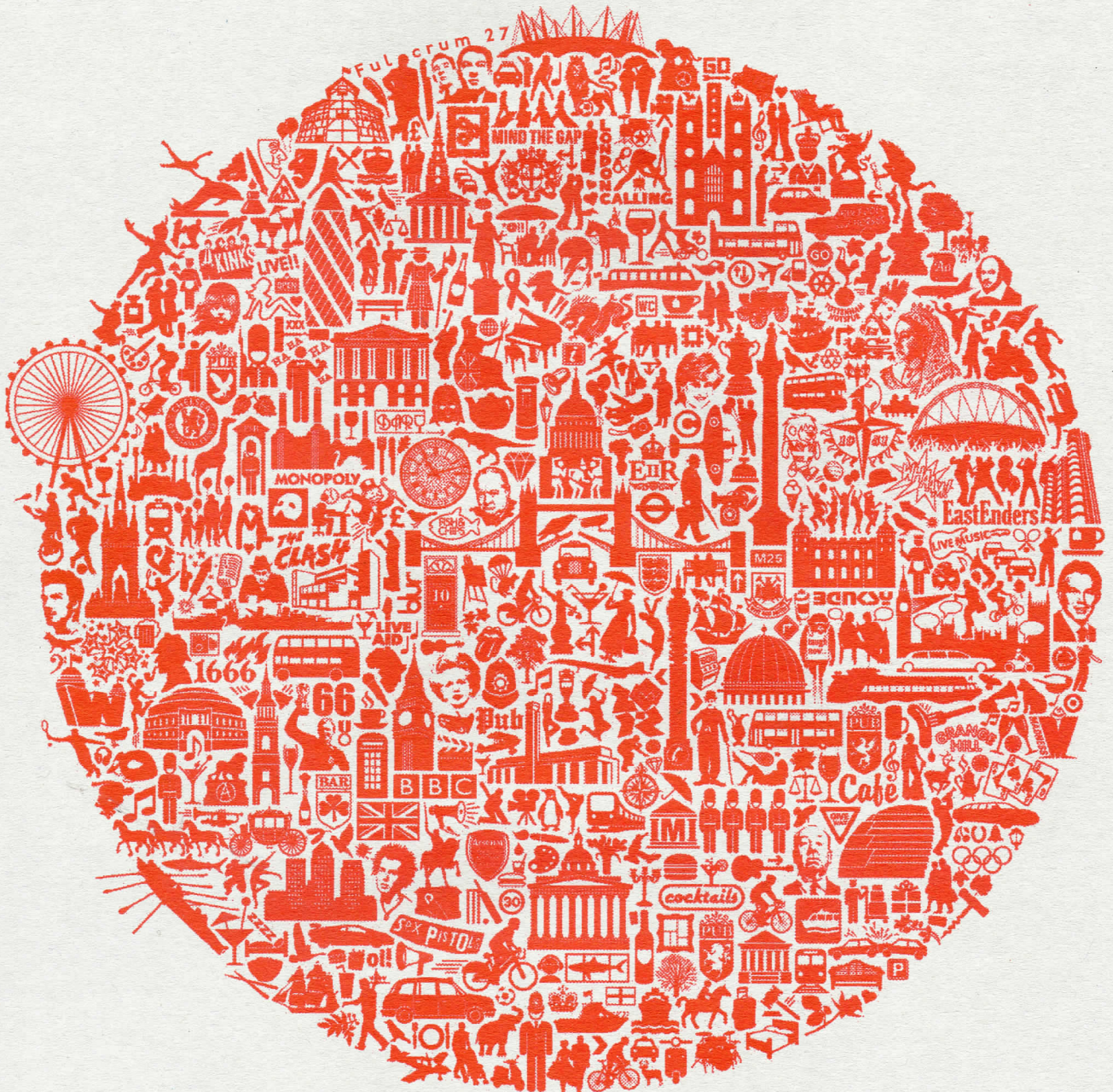
People have been declaring the iconic building dead since 2003, since Deyan Sudjic wrote 'no more icons' in his book attacking them. You should think hard about why that's false, and why architects now, more than ever, are being asked to do them. Look at Qatar, it has seventeen postmodern buildings right at its heart, they're all iconic buildings. They may be childish, they might be adolescent, but they certainly aren't late-modernist.

It comes down largely to schools of architecture. At the AA they teach digital ornament, and to produce digitally iconic things. If you go to Dubai you will meet 20 or 30 AA students searching for work. Once you open the computer's Pandora's box you can't shut it, and what comes out of it is a whole lot of styles and an irreducible global market pluralism. Not true pluralism, but global market pluralism. I compare it to the Hellenic period, when there is no global culture but everybody pretends it's a global culture. And we're seeing this today with the euro melt down.

JS: In the same way the Hellenic period prefigures the Roman Empire, do you think we're experiencing only a temporary period of instability?

CJ: The EU is a postmodern imperial project. It believes in soft power, legal rules (the EU has 80,000 rules), conformity, indirect coercion, and persuasion, together forming a kind of bureaucratic legal entity. That entity wasn't well enough formed for the euro itself, and whether it will break up, or what might follow it, is impossible to predict. Certainly though everybody in Maastricht knew it wasn't going to last.

Charles Jencks is an architectural theorist and an authority on postmodernism. He is a landscape architect, designer, and co-founder of Maggie's Cancer Caring Trust.



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FULCRUM@AASCHOOL.AC.UK / FULCRUM.AASCHOOL.AC.UK