

Fulcrum

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labelling architecture.

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Fulcrum: *Is there a possibility for a New-Modernism?*

Anthony Vidler: In a way, that really depends on the wide range of different definitions of Modernism.

F: *Firstly, architecturally speaking?*

AV: Some people feel that there is a very great difference between Modernism and Modernism as defined by art criticism, as it appears after the Second War.

Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss, and company, established Modernism as a mode of recognising a kind of continuity with the 19th century. But actually, their definitions for art had very little to do with the Modern movement in architecture as it was in the 1900s up to the 1930s. So in that sense we've always been in Modernity and, as Bruno Latour says, "we will never ever be Modern". There was always Modernity.

I really don't like to periodise or characterise as a kind of conventional art historical raster. In that sense I'm not an art historian, I'm an architectural historian. However, the Crystal Palace could be observed as Modern.

Equally, many of our contemporary buildings that I would call ahistorical, driven, architectures of technology... or architectures of parametricism... are certainly not concerned with the kinds of Post-Modernism that Charlie Jencks recognises in his theory of historical quotation, for example.

Whether that's new or old, it's contemporary. I just don't believe that these kinds of flags are necessary for interrogating the questions that architecture has to interrogate... To ask if there is a possibility for a New-Modernism sounds more like a style question than it does an operative question.

For me there are certain principles embodied in the architecture of the 1920s that called itself Modern. These were social, and to a certain extent functional. I think it's a political question, whether or not those principles or ethics can actually be retrieved by society at any particular point within the present; in the way contemporary art retrieves them for the present.

F: *Do you think there is, within this contemporary realm, an architecture that has a degree of honesty in the way it assesses social considerations?*

AV: That depends on the client, whether it's a public client or a private client, it either does or does not address those questions. There are many technologically efficient architectures now that seem to do the job they're asked to do. But I don't think any particular technology, or any particular style, is necessarily ethically honest or dishonest. As James Gowan once said, "it has to do the job". If the job asked by society is to be an authentic social job, and it does that job with good materials, and it's well constructed, and it doesn't leak, and it shelters, and it looks fine, and it is perpetually interesting, then it has done the job. Whether it's contextually opposed or contextually unopposed, that depends on the context.

If you're building a large blue object in the middle of a medieval city or baroque city like Graz, that's one form of a contextualism, which is a kind of 'I am not contextual, I am an elephant in the city, I am the colour blue'. Or if you're someone who, like Leslie Martin, in the centre of Cambridge developed Kettle's Yard with a sense of contextualism, then you're sensitive in form and scale. Both are equally valid.

F: *On the matter of labelling in architecture, you have spoken of New-Parametricism, what is that?*

AV: I should have put it in quotation marks — "New Parametricism". It's obviously a reference to our friend, Patrik Schumacher. Historically, what I am interested in is numerical architecture before numerology, or digital number structures actually refined to the point of high-level computation programs. So I'm talking about Iannis Xenakis for example, whose number theory was deeply connected to musical theory. His structural or constructional inventions are also related to the kind of topological questions that are now addressed by many parametric considerations. If you listen to Mario Carpo as a historian, he will tell you "we've always, always been digital". I think one has to draw a certain distance between the digits that are used in Egyptian architecture and the digits that are used in zeros and ones for a high-level program, but to a certain extent, I think this:

The development and use of the new technologies of representation, production, and/or construction — technologies of iterating design concepts and design products — still leads to the question...

what is the social, political and contextual relationship of the design to itself, and what it is for? This still leaves occupation and its accommodation up to the architect. It's not autonomous.

F: *Do you think New-Parametricism has the same capabilities of performing socially or politically through its materiality?*

AV: It depends what it's used for, it's the dialectics of the Enlightenment. Every technology can be put to constructive or nonconstructive uses. To me it's like asking if a pencil is good or bad — it's what it's used for.

I have no fear of present technologies, I only have a strong desire to ask the question: To what end, and to what extent that X is produced, does it create a fundamental social gain? It doesn't matter to me what "style" is effected. Sometimes what seems to be a caricature of a previous style, when considered historically, can be seen as a witty play on that style, as many of the Victorian Gothic buildings, which were execrated by the Modernists. Now we love them, because they had wit, and they also have authenticity in their wit, and I think Koolhaas has authenticity in his irony sometimes.

All those questions of how the social is represented, how it's given form and shape, have the possibility of a kind of internal authenticity, whether it's formal or whether it's allusive, whether it's in the old ethic of Brutalism — true to its materials — or whatever it is. But it seems to me that it is a matter of judgment; there is something much more important, which is the social role of the building or the context.

F: *Is it necessary to try to label styles?*

AV: Art historians have always thought so. So the development of art history after Burckhardt in the 19th century has led to endless debates on the head of a pin, in terms of: is it Renaissance, is it Baroque, when

does the period begin, when does a period end? Well it can't be Baroque, because it's not Renaissance, but if it can't be Baroque then is it Mannerist, and we invented that one, and then so on. I find them equally problematic as arguments in relationship to what I would regard as the foundations of a history. History itself is, of course, a temporal overlay, an arbitrary temporal overlay, on events.

Historically, I am interested in why and how labels are applied. The Smithsons and Banham adopted the term Brutalism and then tried to drop it. It became a word of broad application, for a vast range of buildings that were very non-Smithson. That's fascinating: why it was, and what happened, and then to what extent a particular genre which becomes recognisably about raw concrete, large-scale volumes, abstract massing, a kind of monumentality... Those questions are important, in relationship to the social role of architecture, at that moment in time. But I am not going to engage in long discussions in whether or not a building is Brutalist or not Brutalist, because it doesn't mean anything in that sense. It only means something if it was called Brutalist in order to do something with it, or say something about it.

F: *Is there a style you would use to describe the now, the current?*

AV: It's very plural, very different, very cultural, in an international context. In the States you have a whole fleet of young post-critical architects who are interested in building solidly, with good materials, in what I would call 'Dwell', which can be called a style. But "Post-Modern Classicism", as per my friend Leon Krier, why not? Although I feel that there is a certain gratuitousness in imitating ancient technologies with new technologies.

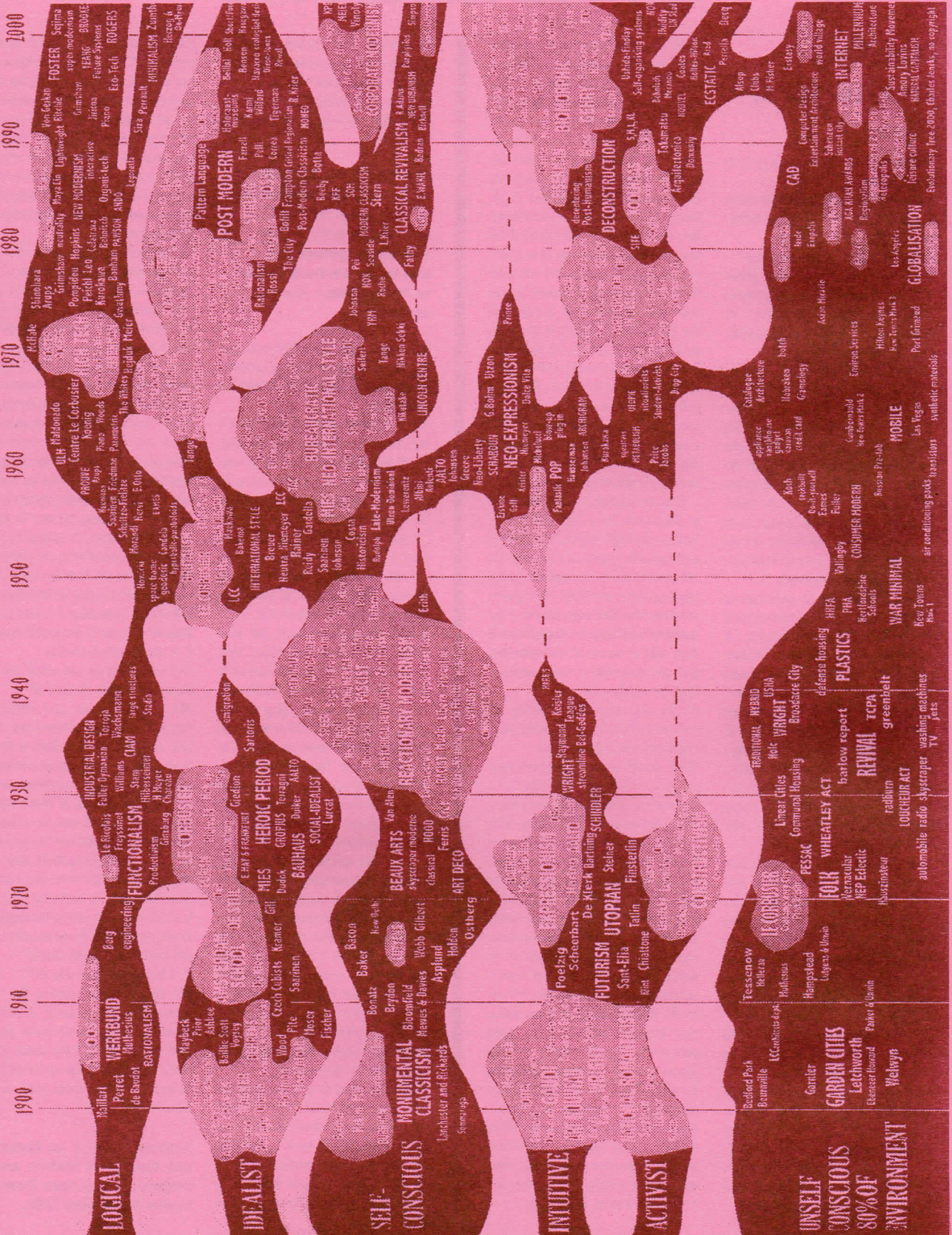
F: *Yes, merely to achieve an affect...*

AV: Right, like "Plastic Gothic" —

F: *What about a firm like FAT?*

AV: I'm not naming names. But, you know some Renaissance architects faked up Roman architecture pretty well too, so I'm not in the blame game here. Everybody fakes up everything, in order to make some point about something.

Anthony Vidler is an historian and theorist of modern architecture. He has been Dean of Cooper Union since 2002.



"The Century is Over, Evolutionary Tree of Twentieth-Century Architecture" by Charles Jencks, 2000