

*Towards an Iconography of the Present*

*This piece was published in Log, a new journal focussing on the current state of architecture and the contemporary city. Here, Jencks homes in on the irony underlying the current desire for the certainties of iconic buildings in the context of the shifting heterogeneity of urban life. But, as Jencks suggests, contradictions such as those between fundamental laws and local contingencies often provide the way forward.*

... An iconography of the contemporary world is not an optional extra or a stylistic add-on but an inevitable by-product of building, so we might as well make part of it an intentional choice and enjoy the fate rather than suffer it badly.

Just as inevitable, as Erwin Panofsky pointed out, is the fact that architecture accidentally reveals an underlying *iconology*, the hidden symbolism behind its conscious intentions, and the further perplexity that no single *iconography* is adequate to the plurality of global cultures.<sup>1</sup> The Modernist response to this variety, as much as that of Prince Charles, contains an element of nostalgia for an integrated culture, and that sentiment looks more and more problematic. Contemporary iconography must start from the position of multiple-coding, the choice to include and dispute other codes and tastes, as well as to build one's own. Moreover, 'cross-coding' is intrinsically more engaging to a contemporary sensibility formed in cultural diversity. It feels more real than single-issue architecture ... [p 101]

**Relativism of the Open Society**

...The iconic building as a genre concerned mostly with its own iconicity is now the foremost category of architecture in the world. Clients routinely ask for a landmark both to put themselves on the map and, as an alibi, regenerate a rustbelt city. They demand an icon without having the faintest idea of iconography, or what all their excessive cash and architectural jazz could possibly symbolize ... [p 102]

Examples of iconic architects producing iconic buildings for shopping, or any urban pretext, could be multiplied, but the point will be granted. The open society no longer shows the kind of coherence in urban, economic or social value that prevailed in traditional societies. Just as anything can be a work of art today, as Arthur Danto has argued, and the hierarchical genre categories of art no longer apply, so

too with architecture. In the present mediated world, anything, and anybody, can be an icon ... [p 103]

The few good iconic buildings, Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall, Norman Foster's Swiss Re skyscraper, Peter Eisenman's work in Santiago are unlikely to have emerged in another era. Their radical shapes and virtuosity would have been suppressed as presumptuous, as challenging the urban and social hierarchies ... [p 104]

... the iconic building has important characteristics.<sup>2</sup> It is invariably a new conventional sign, an enigmatic signifier, which contains several intended metaphors and a few unintended ones; the paranoid mixture drives the building to the top of international consciousness.

The questions to be asked of these landmarks are those that Umberto Eco posed many years ago when he broached the problem of the 'open work'. In what ways are the enigmatic works of art coded so as to guide a reading? There are, as he points out, limits of interpretation built into the open work and it is these that the architect can choose and direct ... [p 104]

### **Cosmogenesis**

It is the first, basic level that might provide one new iconography. Cosmogenesis, the unfolding universe as a process, carries all the subsequent natures and is more fundamental, older and perhaps destined to outlast the others. It is therefore the ultimate referent for art and architecture. Among many things, this could mean that cosmogenesis would sublate the historic metanarratives that have dominated cultures – the myths, religions and creation stories that explain where we come from and who we are. To put it in Fuller's terms again, it would provide the operating manual for spaceship earth, but also, and just as importantly, the ornamental programme for designers. This would be an unusual mixture of science and visual languages. Secondly, the investigation of cosmogenesis would provide a series of new themata. The basic laws of the universe would become protagonists, the constants of nature and organizing units would become particular icons: black holes, DNA, gravity, the atomic model. All these are the distinctive units of the universe, from the quark to the molecule of life to the great wall of galaxies. These are the main actors in the script that has lasted, as far as we have recently found out, 13.7 billion years and, when it finally finds a Dante, it might be every bit as interesting as a *Divine Comedy* ... [p 106]

Thirdly, architectural and design languages might be based on the myriad patterns of organization that these laws reveal, and which the computer is so good at explicating: strange attractors, fractals, complex morphological shapes of folding

and close-packing. Pulling all this together is an evolutionary tale of development, cosmogenesis, the story of the universe unfolding towards greater complexity and increasing sentience. In spite of this progressive slant, it is a narrative punctuated by accident, upheavals and catastrophe ... [p 106]

### **Cross-coding and Parity**

For these and other reasons we might imagine a Manichean iconology supporting a mixed iconography (again I use the distinctions of the art historian Erwin Panofsky).

In effect, this view would lead to a cross-coding, the mixture of an iconography based on cosmogenic themes set against another set of codes based on our contingent desires. Biomimesis, or morphology, set some of these themes, but so too does our existence as cultural beings rooted in a particular historical situation. These two basic codes may be, as they often are, incommensurable and at odds ... [p 107]

In these examples there is a parity between the codes of nature and those that are local and architecture-specific. The juxtaposition between these themes and languages heightens consciousness, and is more stimulating than architecture based on restricted codes. Also such contrasts are metaphysically pleasing, because they make one more aware of the ways we relate, and do not relate, to nature. To hold contradictions in the mind is itself interesting ... [p 107]

- 1 See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Doubleday, New York, pp. 28–33. He distinguishes between iconology, as pertaining to the study of the unconscious symbols and symptoms of an age conveyed by an art work, and iconography, the intended and conventional meanings. Such distinctions of meaning in architecture were the foundation for *Meaning in Architecture*, edited by Charles Jencks and George Baird, London and New York, 1969, and *Signs, Symbols and Architecture*, edited by Charles Jencks, Geoffrey Broadbent, Richard Bunt, London, New York, 1980.
- 2 For an analysis, see Charles Jencks, *The Iconic Building – The Power of the Enigma*, Francis Lincoln, London; Rizzoli, New York, 2005.

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