The death and resurrection of postmodern architecture

by Roger Kimball


It is obvious to anyone interested in contemporary architecture that the last ten or fifteen years have been a time of tremendous ferment, energy, and above all confusion for this most public of the arts. While a handful of star architects continue to bask in glamour and celebrity, there is widespread suspicion that the profession as a whole is in disarray. The carousel of architectural “styles” that one has seen whiz past with dizzying rapidity, the succession of pretentious, aggressively mediocre buildings that litter our cities’ skylines, the plethora of arcane theories advanced to “explain” every conceivable species of architectural practice—all this has left the world of architecture a bit stunned and uncertain where to turn for direction. The confident rise of postmodernism in the Seventies and early Eighties has been succeeded by a period of doubt and reassessment. Not that there is much indication that the paraphernalia of postmodernism is losing popularity. On the contrary, postmodernist grandiosity remains the order of the day among most corporate clients and ambitious homebuilders hoping to make an architectural “statement.” But neither architects, nor their clients, nor the public at large seem quite so sure these days that the answer to the much publicized failings of modernist architecture is to be found in skyscrapers bedizened with Chippendale tops and pastel facades, or in houses decked out with pseudo-Palladian windows and slapdash historicist ornamentation.

The resulting atmosphere is one of frenetic indecision. Amidst talk of the death of postmodernism and speculation about the next wave of architectural fashion, vanguard spokesmen for the profession seem deeply divided: apologetic and querulous by turns, longing to proselytize yet lacking a compelling vision of the future. In this situation, perhaps the most helpful service a critic can render is to provide a kind of “report from the front” on some of the major controversies and ideas that are unfolding in architectural circles today. Two recent events—a symposium on architectural education that was held at Princeton University and a debate sponsored by the Parsons School of Design in New York City—offered a good sampling of the principal campaigns now being waged in elite architectural circles. Indeed, taken together with a handful of books recently published by some of the participants at those events, they may be said to epitomize the
conflicted spirit of contemporary architecture and are thus worth discussing at some length.

Let us begin with “Architecture and Education: The Past Twenty-Five Years and Assumptions for the Future,” a day-long symposium sponsored by the Princeton School of Architecture earlier this year. Convened to honor Princeton’s premier postmodernist architect, Michael Graves, on the occasion of his twenty-fifth year teaching at the university, the symposium drew an enthusiastic audience of several hundred students, faculty, and interested outsiders, who crowded into McCosh Hall to witness the proceedings. One has not heard quite so much about Mr. Graves lately; but the man who brought us the Portland Public Service Building, the Humana building, the proposal to expand the Whitney Museum of American Art, and sundry other delights (an exhibition of drawings and models by Mr. Graves was on view next door to remind us of his contributions to architecture) continues to occupy a central place in the architectural limelight. And as limelight is attracted by limelight, it was not surprising that the symposium’s participants included such luminaries as Peter Eisenman, Robert Venturi, Robert A. M. Stern, and Frank Gehry.

The festivities began with some brief remarks by Robert Maxwell, dean of the School of Architecture. Looking back over the changes that had taken place in architectural education during the last twenty-five years, he spoke enthusiastically about the stewardship of his predecessor, Robert Geddes, made some obligatory criticisms of modernist architecture, and praised what he called the “semiotic revolution” in architecture—that university-born revolution that encourages us to treat architecture as a kind of “text” to be deciphered and that went hand in hand with the flowering of postmodernism. As Dean Maxwell rightly noted, the application of semiotics to architecture began in the Sixties and was given a tremendous boost by Robert Venturi’s notorious 1972 manifesto glorifying the semantic richness of the urban strip, *Learning from Las Vegas*. Venturi “crossed semiotics with communications and produced postmodernism,” Dean Maxwell told us with undisguised pride.
Despite this revolution, however, the good dean also assured us that education at Princeton’s School of Architecture had not changed nearly so much as had the practice of architecture over the last quarter century. At Princeton, there was still an “unchanging emphasis on history and theory and a continuing search for a dialogue that will give meaning to practice.” An “unchanging” emphasis, it should be noted, that nevertheless has brought with it all manner of “semiotic” innovations, including the newest wrinkle in architectural theory, “deconstructivism.” This barbarous neologism—which derives from the more familiar term “deconstruction”—denotes a theory and practice of architecture motivated largely by various ideas and catch-phrases appropriated from chic literary theory. One thus sees architects obsessed with language, rejecting traditional aesthetic values like clarity, order, and harmony, and designing buildings that seek to undermine or “deconstruct” such conventional “prejudices” as the desire for comfort, stability, and commodiousness. So it turns out that the great thing about Princeton’s pluralistic ethos is that it can embrace a theory that is utterly at odds with everything traditional architectural pedagogy taught and yet somehow, miraculously, it can remain “unchanged.”

Though Dean Maxwell’s remarks were generously laced with the good-humored, self-congratulatory platitudes that academic administrators are expected to emit on such occasions, he did obliquely touch upon two points that have come to be central to most contemporary academic thinking about architecture and that were much in evidence at Princeton that day: 1) the contention that modernist architecture was a social and artistic failure that postmodernism has begun to remedy, and 2) the view that architecture is essentially a “narrative” art. One could not be certain that Dean Maxwell appreciated the troubling implications of these ideas, especially the second; one sensed, indeed, that his avuncular, jokey style and what we might call his academic ecumenicism effectively insulate him from having to contemplate the intellectual or artistic consequences of the ideas he routinely bestows his blessing on as dean. But it soon became clear that several of his distinguished colleagues grasped the radical drift of these two ideas with all possible clarity.

Anthony Vidler, for example, who teaches the history of architecture at Princeton and who made a name for himself in avant-garde circles for his contributions to the prestigious architecture magazine *Oppositions* in the Seventies, provided us with an astringently academic lecture on the history of architecture and architectural theory in the university. Professor Vidler’s lecture aimed to show that, once they had been enshrined in the university, the main task of the history and theory of architecture was to uncover the “hidden premises” of the profession and to spark students “to interrogate the limits of their own practice.” Supported by a *mélange* of quotations from or allusions to writers as various as the architectural historian Colin Rowe, the literary critic Harold Bloom, and the philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce and Michel Foucault, Professor Vidler championed the contemporary role of architectural history in the university because it made students “uncomfortable” and helped them to “think past” the traditional models of architecture (to what?), because it encouraged them to investigate “the politics of discourse” that was
entrenched in the profession, and because it led them to question the unfortunate “hegemony” of the reigning educational system. Here again we can see the extent to which fashionable ideas from departments of English and comparative literature have seeped into architectural theory: Professor Vidler’s talk was hardly more than a tapestry of clichés bemoaning the ideological nature of traditional educational hierarchies and asserting the essentially subversive nature of history and theory.

But while he adhered strictly to the orthodox academic position that orthodoxy must be questioned and exposed, Professor Vidler’s lecture was no match, either in entertainment value or in defiant insouciance, for the contributions of Peter Eisenman, who spoke next and who made it his business to speak often from the floor as the day went on. Now Mr. Eisenman is a curious case. Excepting Philip Johnson and maybe one or two others, he is as well known and greatly honored as any American architect living. He has taught at Princeton, at Harvard, at Yale, at Cooper Union, and many other institutions; his fame is international: scarcely a panel of American architects is drawn up for a foreign legation in which his name does not figure. And he is one of only seven architects whose work has been chosen to appear in Philip Johnson’s much anticipated exhibition of “Deconstructivist Architecture,” which is scheduled to open at the Museum of Modern Art this month (about which more below).

But on what does Mr. Eisenman’s reputation rest? A founder and for several years the director of the fabled Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, he was also an editor and guiding force of *Oppositions* for many years, and was consequently in a position to influence the course of intellectual debate about architectural matters. What has he built? A few houses in the Sixties and Seventies, a fire station, a housing project in Berlin, and, at the moment, a biology center for the University of Frankfurt. Not a great deal more. But Mr. Eisenman has something else that has catapulted him into the forefront of architectural discourse: his language is adamantly, famously, extravagantly obscure. Indeed, judging from the respectful laughter of his audience at Princeton, people, expecting him to be unintelligible, want him to be outrageously unintelligible—the idea being, I gather, that if he is going to be obscure he may as well be amusingly so.
And Mr. Eisenman can be quite amusing. There is something of the intellectual agent provocateur about him: he delights in stirring up controversy and strife. Accordingly, he began his ex tempore remarks with a couple of anecdotes whose main intent would seem to have been to insult his colleagues. The first was mildly obscene and not worth repeating; but the second had a peculiar pertinence and deserves to be recounted. When visiting the zoo in London, Mr. Eisenman told us, he especially liked to see the tea party put on Friday afternoons by the monkeys. Dressed up in the appropriate clothes, some would be coaxed to play maid and go through the motions of serving, while others would sit around as master and mistress. There they were, playacting, chattering away to themselves, Mr. Eisenman observed, “but they never knew what they were saying.” This might, he suggested, have some relevance to what was going on that day at Princeton.

He was right. The uncanny aptness of Mr. Eisenman’s anecdote was brought home to me again and again as the day wore on, not least, I regret to say, during the course of his own presentation. Beginning with the charge that “we are all nostalgics” and that the symposium itself was an event of “enormous nostalgia,” he castigated postmodernism’s reactionary penchant for adopting historicist ornamentation. He then went on to predict that the generation of students from “1975 to 1985” would usher in a new era of architectural practice, a “theoretical practice energized by an idea of history.” The rise of such a practice could afford us the first opportunity to articulate a “theory”—as distinct from a mere history—of modernism, Mr. Eisenman told us. This new theory of modernism would not traffic in any nostalgia for the avant-garde but, on the contrary, would be (in his inimitable words)

\[\text{a theory of the center, that is, a theory which occupies the center. I believe only when such a theory of the center is articulated will architecture be able to transform itself as it always has and as it always will . . . . But the center that I am talking about is not a center that can be the center that we know is in the past, as a nostalgia for center. Rather, this not new but other center will be . . . an interstitial one—but one with no structure, but one also that embraces as periphery its own centric position . . . . A center no longer sustained by nostalgia and no longer sustained by univocal discourse.}\]

Of course, Mr. Eisenman was, as I noted, speaking extemporaneously; and it’s possible that my tape recorder did not catch every last word; but there is no denying that this is an expostulation of formidable elusiveness. Nor is Mr. Eisenman’s more considered prose always more intelligible. We have only to turn to his latest book, entitled Houses of Cards, to see his verbal shenanigans in top form.[1] In Houses of Cards, Mr. Eisenman presents the six houses he designed (of which only four have been built) in the Sixties and Seventies more or less as demonstration pieces to illustrate his theories about narrative architecture and about unsettling the traditional meaning of “home.” (Appropriately, the houses are not named after their owner or location but are bluntly called House i, House ii, and so on.) The book gives an unusually good sense of Mr. Eisenman’s style of thought, and it is worth taking a bit of a detour from the Princeton symposium to consider some of its more memorable highlights.
Noting that the book was assembled from fragments, Mr. Eisenman correctly observes that “it promises and prohibits access; it directs and meanders.” Helping out with the meandering are those other masters of impenetrability, the Marxist architectural critic Manfredo Tafuri and the co-editor of October, Rosalind Krauss. Mr. Eisenman reprints a 1977 essay by Miss Krauss and a 1980 essay by Mr. Tafuri, along with a new essay of his own. In the texts collected here, he writes, “as in the houses, the ideas transform and decompose. In fact, I ask that the reader augment a traditional reading of this book by also treating the texts and the book as a whole as objects, and by reading the houses, individually and in ensemble, as texts.” Presumably to help the reader augment a “traditional reading” of the book, Mr. Eisenman has included numerous sketches, drawings, and photographs of the houses, as well as photographically reproduced copies of some of his rough notes—ostentatiously crumpled, torn, and patched together, full of emendations and crossings-out. I suppose we are meant to regard these salvaged scraps (if indeed they are salvaged scraps and not carefully manufactured mementos) as the leavings of genius. They do, I admit, contribute to one’s regarding the book as an “object” rather than a text, but I am not at all sure that they deepen one’s appreciation of the architecture they are meant to comment on.

From the bits on “House iv,” for example, we learn that this work is an attempt to transcend our traditional view of designing seeing understanding our environment it is an attempt to alienate the individual from the known way in which he perceives and understands his environment.

But the notes are nothing compared to Mr. Eisenman’s essay. Grandly informing us that “the essence of the act of architecture is the dislocation of an ever-reconstituting metaphysic of architecture,” Mr. Eisenman tells us that his six houses are all “governed by the intent to define the act of architecture as the dislocation and consequent reconstitution of an ever-accruing metaphysic of architecture.” What, you ask, is “an ever-accruing metaphysic of architecture”? Mr. Eisenman never says, but it is clear that he has a special liking for the word “metaphysic.” In addition to the “metaphysic of architecture” that he is fond of invoking, we also encounter the “metaphysic of the center,” the “metaphysic of the house,” even “the metaphysic of dining.”

Concerning the last, for example, we learn that Houses iii and iv explore “an alternative process of making occupiable form . . . a process specifically developed to operate as freely as possible from
functional considerations. From a traditional point of view, several columns ‘intrude on’ and ‘disrupt’ the living and dining areas as a result of this process . . . . Nonetheless, these dislocations . . . have, according to the occupants of the house, changed the dining experience in a real and, more importantly, unpredictable fashion.” Please note that Mr. Eisenman does not assert that the occupants claim that his ill-placed columns have done anything to make “the dining experience” more pleasant. Nor would he want them to. For one of the main goals of Mr. Eisenman’s architecture (and his writing, too, one suspects) is to subvert anything so bourgeois as comfort or intelligibility. As he puts it, his houses “attempt to have little to do with the traditional and existing metaphysic of the house, the physical and psychological gratification associated with the traditional form of the house . . . in order to initiate a search for those possibilities of dwelling that may have been repressed by that metaphysic.”

In fact, if Mr. Eisenman can be said to have a thesis, it is the standard academic chestnut that the threat of modern technology, and especially of nuclear weapons, has rendered the traditional notion of home—more, the traditional notion of man—otiose. “With the scientifically orchestrated horror of Hiroshima and the consciousness of the human brutality of the Holocaust,” Mr. Eisenman gravely intones, “it became impossible for man to sustain a relationship with any of the dominant cosmologies of the past; he could no longer derive his identity from a belief in a heroic purpose and future .... Man now lives in an in extremis condition.” The most wonderful thing about this apocalyptic vision (which is much in evidence in architectural theory these days) is that it gives license to the most extraordinary claims. For if man now really lives in extremis, then of course everything can be questioned, everything overturned, with impunity, not least the traditional “anthropocentric” function of architecture. Here is Mr. Eisenman on architecture as shelter:

But shelter also exists in the mind as an idea, in its metaphysical state architecture is a conceptual reflection on physical presence, an “absence” in a material sense. From this perspective, what was earlier described as a traditional architectural history founded on dominant vectors of truth can also be seen as an ideological effort to screen architecture’s intrinsic absence behind an emphasis on its physic [sic]. It could be said that this screening is a sign of the endurance of anthropocentrism’s privileging of presence and centeredness, even beyond its own crisis.

If the issue is architecture considered as a “physic,” I suppose one could admit that there is something emetic about this passage. But what, finally, is Mr. Eisenman getting at here? Forget about the deconstructivist curlicues and non sequiturs—the prattle about the “metaphysical state of architecture,” the illogical suggestion that “a conceptual reflection on physical presence” is somehow the same as “an 'absence' in a material sense”: all that is simply part of the verbal static that automatically crackles through his speech and writing. And don’t be put off by the formidable talk of “dominant vectors of truth” or “privileging of presence and centeredness.” I know it’s nonsense, but I’m quite sure that Mr. Eisenman can’t help it: his writing has always been like this, laden with half-digested ideas and jargon culled from whatever abstruse academic theories happen to be making the rounds. Perhaps it has something to do with those monkeys he studied.
in London. But do consider the final sentence, the one suggesting that traditional architectural history is faulty because it blindly indulges in various “anthropocentric” habits. At bottom, it is nothing more than a simple-minded inversion of every tried and true tenet about the function of architecture, an inversion that is finally as insupportable as it is shocking initially. Immersed in Mr. Eisenman’s chatter, one easily forgets that architecture is essentially about building habitable buildings, buildings that we live and work in, play and worship in, not buildings that we struggle to decode.

There is a great deal more that one could say about Mr. Eisenman’s essay. Perhaps most amusing is his admission, near the end of the piece, that his houses were not as radical as he had hoped because they turned out to be “grounded in the very anthropocentric metaphysic that they were intended to contravene.” Too bad! Though in truth I have confidence that Mr. Eisenman’s current love affair with the nihilistic presuppositions of deconstruction will prove to be a great aid in expunging anything resembling an “anthropocentric metaphysic” from his architecture and his theorizing.

If few of the speakers at Princeton were as radical as Mr. Eisenman, none were as dazzlingly obscurantist. In fact, after Mr. Eisenman’s brief presentation, the proceedings were often downright dull until nearly the end of the day. There was a forgettable response to Professor Vidler’s and Mr. Eisenman’s talks. Then the architectural historian Demetri Porphyrios, who is known especially for his work on the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, purveyed another terribly academic lecture on the evolution of architectural theory over the last twenty-five years. His essential message seems to have been that modernism has been revealed as bankrupt. In Professor Porphyrios’s own terms, modern eclecticism and post-structuralism have assumed dominance and have mounted a “totally devastating critique of the ontological assumptions and also the aesthetics of modernism.” Just how this was accomplished was not specified—perhaps because it is easier simply to assume a “totally devastating critique of ontological assumptions” than it is to recount it convincingly. In any case, Professor Porphyrios went on to provide us with a kind of catalogue of different versions of postmodernism, correctly noting that Robert Venturi’s celebrated notion of architecture as a “decorated shed”—that is to say, as a neutral box to which ornament is arbitrarily applied—is presupposed by all versions of postmodernism. His reflections were generally insightful, but it was difficult to know quite where he stood on many issues: in the end, one was left with a multitude of intelligent distinctions but no coherent point of view—a situation that is not exactly rare at such academic gatherings.

The following presentations can be passed over quickly. Robert Venturi, who spoke next, was perhaps the most disappointing speaker of the day. One naturally expected something quite engaging from the author of Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1966), that self-described “gentle manifesto” that has often been credited with inaugurating the turn to postmodernist architecture. But in the event, he did little more than offer a few reminiscences on the deplorable state of architectural education in the 1940s, when the modernism of Gropius was regnant, and
laud Princeton for its consistently “non-doctrinaire” approach to education.

Mr. Venturi’s presentation was succeeded by a round-table discussion moderated by the art historian Irving Lavin. Rather like Dean Maxwell, Professor Lavin is one of those liberal academics who treat every new intellectual fashion as an expression of the beneficent spirit of pluralism. Accordingly, and again rather like Dean Maxwell, Professor Lavin appeared to be in favor of everything and against nothing—except, of course, any position that presumed to question the cogency or desirability of those new intellectual fashions, for such questioning betrayed a lamentable lack of the pluralistic spirit. Thus he admitted that the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable fell from grace in his eyes when she dared to criticize postmodernism. In Professor Lavin’s view, postmodernism is an attempt to reconstruct “the ancient legacy of culture”—a bizarre thought, really, since postmodernism is no more concerned with the “ancient legacy of culture” than is Vogue magazine. But it was no more bizarre than his later suggestion that one of the nifty things about deconstruction was that it might provide a “common ground” between modernism and postmodernism or that it had something to do with “man’s eternal search for a noble ideal of harmony, balance, and perfection, or with his equally eternal struggle with irrationality, instability, and chaos.” In other words, for Professor Lavin, deconstruction was hardly to be distinguished from classical humanism.

After lunch, the architects Robert A. M. Stern and Frank Gehry made brief presentations. Mr. Stern ran through an honor roll of architects who influenced him (what could be more exciting?), concluding with some heady praise for Michael Graves. Frank Gehry—who is just now one of the “hottest” architects practicing[2] and another one of the seven chosen for Philip Johnson’s “Deconstructivist Architecture” exhibition—did little more than supply us with a narrated slide show of some of his work. The afternoon wound down with some remarks by the English architect Alan Colquhoun on Lévi-Strauss, semiology, and postmodernism, a final round table moderated by Dean Maxwell, and a few words of thanks from Michael Graves.

Dean Maxwell began the round-table discussion by professing his pluralistic credentials: “I disagree with everybody who has a final answer,” he assured us, “and I agree with everybody . . . who believes that constant change is the order of the day.” But Mr. Eisenman was having none of this wishy-washy, Heraclitean liberalism. He rose from his place in the audience to expound a bit about deconstruction, the end of Western metaphysics, and to announce that “we are all a bunch of old fogeys holding on to a teetering system.” “The only truth today is that we are found with the loss of truth,” he told us darkly, as if such second-hand Nietzschean sentiments were a startling revelation—or, indeed, as if they were apodictically true.

Despite Mr. Eisenman’s plea that we study things “not as truth but as some sort of knowledge that can be opened up and studied” (?!), despite Mr. Colquhoun’s insistence that “education is always a matter of inculcating a certain ideology,” and so on, it was often easy to forget that this symposium was supposed to deal with the subject of architectural education. It was with considerable interest, then, that I listened to a woman from the audience ask the distinguished
members of the panel to compare the requirements for architectural education today with the requirements for a degree in engineering, music, and mathematics. It was, I thought, an unusually intelligent question. A full answer would have had to say something about those aspects of architecture that are akin to art and craft as well as about those that are straightforwardly matters of calculation and engineering. A full answer, indeed, would have said a good deal about the hybrid nature of architecture, its functional and its aesthetic claims, its sometimes uneasy place between engineering and art. But the question was not deemed serious by Messrs. Maxwell and company. After a brief embarrassed silence, there were a few halfhearted attempts to dismiss the question with ridicule or patronizing obfuscation. Perhaps this means that Dean Maxwell disagrees not only with “everybody who has a final answer,” but even with those who ask questions that might admit of such answers. It’s a wonderful philosophy for an academic dean.

Many of the themes that were bandied about at Princeton were also on display at a debate on the subject of “Postmodernist Classicism versus Narrative and De-construction in Architecture” which was sponsored by the graduate program in architecture and design criticism at the Parsons School of Design one evening last winter. Moderated by Newsweek architecture writer Douglas Davis, the debate was between the architect and architectural critic Charles Jencks and James Wines, an architect and chairman of the environmental design department at Parsons. Mr. Jencks is best known for his tireless proselytizing on behalf of postmodernism; it was he, in fact, who gave the term currency in the first edition of his book The Language of Post-Modem Architecture. Mr. Wines—who first made his reputation as a sculptor in the Sixties—is the founder of site, an “architectural and environmental art group” formed in 1970 “for the purpose of exploring new ways to bring a heightened level of communication and psychological content to buildings, interiors, and public spaces.” He has emerged in recent years as one of the leading practitioners of deconstructivist architecture or (as he prefers to denominate it) “de-architecture.”

Mr. Jencks spoke first and presented himself as the champion of “postmodern classicism,” a phenomenon that he describes as the third stage of postmodernism. The first stage, according to his scheme, occurred in the 1960s and was essentially a reaction against the strictures of modernism; the second stage, which the 1970s ushered in, was a period of “pluralism and eclecticism.” Now, according to Mr. Jencks, mature postmodernism “has adopted a classical language.” In vocabulary somewhat reminiscent of Peter Eisenman (though it’s likely that the influence went the other way), Mr. Jencks described the modern secular world as shot through with a “nostalgia for the center.” In his view—and here he takes a very different position from Mr. Eisenman—architecture should seek to recover the center for our de-centered world. His prescription for this task is the frankly symbolic architecture of postmodern classicism.

This is not to say that postmodern classicism recovers any actual center—any binding social, religious, or philosophical order—but merely that it plays with the classical symbols of past systems in order to recapture the aura or illusion of belonging to a greater whole. Mr. Jencks enumerated various characteristics of postmodern classicism—its supposition that “disharmony is
harmony,” for example, or the large role that wit and humor play in its concoctions—but his main point, a point that is illustrated in lavish detail in his new book on the subject,[3] was that the deliberately historicizing symbolism employed by postmodern classicism can provide a quasi-spiritual answer to secular man’s real spiritual longings for order and meaning. While he distinguishes postmodern classicism from the “decorated sheds” of Robert Venturi—the symbolic ornamentation he has in mind is not just “stuck on” as it is in Venturi’s buildings—at bottom they amount to two versions of the same thing: both advocate arbitrarily applied ornamentation, but for Mr. Jencks the arbitrariness is half-concealed under the cloak of an elaborate and edifying symbol system.

Mr. Wines began his presentation by noting that he and Mr. Jencks share a concern with the “communicative or public nature of architecture,” but that they differed on the “sources” of communication. In many respects, Mr. Wines’ position is closer to Mr. Eisenman’s than to Mr. Jencks’s. Though not nearly as adept at manipulating language to provide camouflage as Mr. Eisenman, he nevertheless shares many of his basic suppositions about the situation of architecture in the contemporary world. For example, he concurs with Mr. Eisenman that postmodernism’s return to classical iconography is reactionary, and he indulges in a similar pre-packaged apocalyptic vision: “We now live in a time of universal melancholy and troubled dreams, a time of introspection and foreboding choices,” he writes in his recent book and credo, De-architecture.[4] For Mr. Wines, too, it would seem that the chief task of architecture today is to dislocate and discommode. As he explains in his book, “De-architecture is a way of dissecting, shattering, dissolving, inverting, and transforming certain fixed prejudices about buildings, in the interests of discovering revelations among the fragments.” Like so many others these days, both Mr. Wines and Mr. Eisenman assume that asserting something about the aim or meaning of a building is tantamount to accomplishing it. But in art, as in life, there is often a great gap between assertion and accomplishment. A poorly designed dining room is meant to challenge the conventional “metaphysic of dining,” but is really only a poorly designed dining room; a dilapidated-looking building is meant to challenge our consumeristic “prejudices,” but is really just another ugly building.

Yet notwithstanding some rhetoric to the contrary, Mr. Wines differs from Mr. Eisenman in his continued adherence to the idea of architecture as an autonomous art. “De-architecture’s basic premise,” he writes, “is that art, not design, is the supreme mission of a building, and that the creative process must be revised to reflect this objective.” In fact, looking through his book and considering the work of site, it soon becomes clear that while Mr. Wines has given up the title of sculptor, his ambition has remained essentially sculptural: site’s installations are basically large environmental sculptures, some of which happen to be habitable.[5]

Not that he doesn’t have large, existential ambitions for site’s projects. “Rarely,” he writes, “have contemporary buildings come close to the kind of sociological and psychological content expressed in, say, a Beckett play, a Magritte painting, or a Chaplin film.” Clearly he looks to site to
supply this content. But what do Mr. Wines’s examples tell us about his conception of architecture? Is the sort of “sociological and psychological content” to which he alludes something we would wish to find embodied in our buildings? Think of it: an office building that reminded one of Waiting for Godot or Endgame, a home as unsettling as a Magritte painting, a factory as zany as a film by Charlie Chaplin. Does it sound like a wonderful idea? Note that Mr. Wines suggests that this paucity of “sociological and psychological content” is a particular problem for contemporary buildings. Are we then to assume that older buildings possess a greater measure of such “content”? Chartres Cathedral is one of Mr. Wines’s favorite architectural monuments from the past; he discusses it at length as a model of “narrative” architecture. Does Chartres, then, “come close to the kind of sociological and psychological content expressed in, say, a Beckett play, a Magritte painting, or a Chaplin film”?

In the end, Mr. Wines emerges as a kind of anemic, halfhearted imitation of someone like Mr. Eisenman; he mimics a good deal of radical rhetoric but his emphasis on communication binds him to a rather traditional humanistic sentiment; and though site’s projects are among the most arrogant and high-handed I have seen in recent years, they do not really express the kind of fundamental challenge to traditional architectural practice that Mr. Eisenman, for example, advocates. Quite different is the position preached by Mr. Jencks. For where Messrs. Wines and Eisenman are nihilists in the apocalyptic mode, Mr. Jencks is a happy nihilist. Like his colleagues—at least, like Mr. Eisenman—he assumes that the modern secular world has lost any compelling foundation for shared social meaning; but unlike them, he has no scruples about fabricating a false foundation out of promiscuous fragments gathered from the past. Mr. Jencks’s basic message seems to be: if we cannot overcome the modern world, at least we can forget it.

The saccharine, archaizing spirit at work in Mr. Jencks’s latest version of postmodernism is on full view in his new book, Towards A Symbolic Architecture: The Thematic House. Beginning with a chapter called “Fables for our Time,” Mr. Jencks advocates “the conscious reassertion of the symbolic programme, the idea that every client and architect should make up an iconographic contract as explicit as their economic one” as “first steps in a new tradition, or perhaps the revival of an old one.” Not surprisingly, words like “fable” and “parable” are featured in his exposition, and he sprinkles his text with lots of fake Latin names, capitalized abstract nouns, and deliberately archaic drawings with legends like “meaning triumphs over time.”

After some general considerations about the troubled place of architecture in a secular world, Mr. Jencks reviews three of his own architectural projects, including one that incorporates the texts of Milton’s poems L’Allegro and Il Penseroso as mood-setters and thematic pointers for a house and garden in California. But the bulk of the book is devoted to an examination of “The Thematic House,” Mr. Jencks’s extraordinary renovation of an 1840s London town-house for himself and his family. Beginning with the front door, which sports cleverly stylized initials of each of the family members, the whole house is an elaborate confection of symbolic motifs. The main downstairs rooms are each associated with one or another of the seasons and are decorated accordingly:
spring, summer, Indian summer, autumn, and winter; “Winter” boasts a fireplace designed by Michael Graves. Inside the front door, there is a mirrored room that Jencks dubs the Cosmic Oval, in which the two main themes of the house—cosmic time and cultural time—are given preliminary expression in a mural showing, in Mr. Jencks’s words, the “evolution of the galaxies after the Big Bang.” There is also a portrait frieze painted by William Stok depicting a dozen cultural “paragons,” including the emperor Hadrian, and Thomas Jefferson conversing with Hannah Arendt. In the bathroom on the ground floor—the Cosmic Loo, in Jencks’s terminology—we have a complicated paint scheme with “light greys below, bright multi-colors in the middle and infinite cosmic gloom above, as in Westminster Cathedral.”

Then there is the central staircase, the Solar Stair, whose spiral is meant to recall “spiral galaxies, dna, cyclical motion,” according to Mr. Jencks. It is also an abstract representation of the solar year: cast in concrete, its fifty-two steps, each of which is inscribed with seven grooves, make a grand total of three hundred and sixty-five “days.” The Black Hole, a mosaic by Eduardo Paolozzi at the bottom of the stairs, is meant to symbolize cosmic gloom or something, and on and on it goes, every room in the house weighted down with its load of symbols and inscriptions.

As Mr. Jencks himself has pointed out, there has always been a large element of Camp in postmodernist architecture. But with his “Thematic House” and theory of symbolic architecture, Mr. Jencks has gone beyond Camp and pushed postmodernism firmly in the direction of kitsch. The difference is that where the Camp sensibility retains sufficient self-consciousness to play with the sentimentalized products of bad taste, the kitsch sensibility surrenders to them and to the sentimentalized version of reality they promise. Hitherto, postmodernist architecture was funny on purpose; with his “Thematic House,” Mr. Jencks is only unintentionally so. Though he occasionally warns the reader about the dangers of aestheticism in the course of his book, his entire presentation is little more than a recipe for an exquisitely aestheticized—and exquisitely expensive—brand of kitsch.

Between the ironic skepticism of Mr. Eisenman and the cloying sentimentalizations of Mr. Jencks there is not much to choose. It is difficult to say which impulse, if either, will assume dominance in architecture. Since sentimentality exercises a seemingly inextinguishable appeal, one might think of betting on Mr. Jencks. But as has often been pointed out, ours is an ironic age, and the appeal of the radical skepticism preached by Mr. Eisenman and others should not be underestimated. The Museum of Modern Art, at any rate, would seem to be backing the latter movement with its exhibition of “Deconstructivist Architecture,” which includes work by Messrs. Eisenman, Gehry, and five other architects whose work self-consciously explores architectural disharmony and fragmentariness. Hailed as the successor to Mr. Johnson’s path-breaking “International Style” exhibition of modernist architecture in 1932, “Deconstructivist Architecture” has been the subject of great controversy from the moment it was announced this winter. Since the museum refused to release the text of the exhibition catalogue in advance—at least to The New Criterion—it is impossible to do more at this writing than speculate about the contents or intellectual
presuppositions of the exhibition. Yet one cannot help remarking the splendid irony that Philip Johnson, the man who once championed the austere tenets of modernist architecture, should now return to the Museum of Modern Art as the curator of an exhibition openly devoted to undermining everything that modernist architecture stood for. As always with Mr. Johnson, the joke is on us.

1. *Houses of Cards*, by Peter Eisenman, with essays by Rosalind Krauss, Peter Eisenman, and Manfredo Tafuri; Oxford University Press, 224 pages, $60. Go back to the text.
4. *De-architecture*, by James Wines; Rizzoli, 192 pages, $40. Go back to the text.
5. Probably SITE’s best-known architectural works to date are the eight showrooms designed for Best Products Company. Under the patronage of Sydney and Frances Lewis, prominent collectors of contemporary art and owners of Best Products, SITE has designed facades incorporating the principles of de-architecture. The “Indeterminate Façade” (1975) showroom in Houston, for example, “appears to be arrested somewhere between construction and demolition,” with a pile of brick punched from the top of the building and cascading down onto the entrance canopy. A more radical, and as yet unbuilt, project is the “Highrise of Homes.” In Mr. Wines’s words, this “visionary and traditional” idea provides “a matrix of housing choices” for city dwellers. Consisting of a large U-shaped steel and concrete grid eight to fifteen stories tall, the “Highrise of Homes” is meant to provide modules in which individuals could build single family houses in the style of their choice—modern, colonial, Tudor, Greek Revival, you name it. The houses on each level, clustered into “villagelike compounds,” would have access to a central elevator and core mechanical services. “The Highrise of Homes,” Mr. Wines writes, “is based on the premise that people will benefit from the personal affirmation and territorial definition associated with the detached house, even if it is in the compressed environment of a multistory building.” In reality, of course, the “Highrise of Homes” would be a grotesque architectural nightmare, as patronizing to its prospective inhabitants as it is stylistically meretricious. Go back to the text.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia* (St. Augustine’s Press) and *Who Rules? Sovereignty, Nationalism, and the Fate of Freedom in the Twenty-first Century* (Encounter Books).

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