

Jencks's theory of evolution

an overview of twentieth-century architecture

At the start of the twenty-first century, Charles Jencks gives a personal, perceptive and provocative summary of the architecture of the twentieth. Many will disagree with his narratives and emphases, particularly perhaps with his choice of Gaudí as the architect of the century, but now, as Jencks says, 'interpretation begins'.

Now that the century is over it is time to ask what it meant for architecture. This is a harder question than it first appears. Did Modern architecture, as its apologists claim, triumph over other contenders? What was the relationship of commercial practice to quality – did the best architects lead or only influence the profession? Did good architecture trickle-down or was it dumbed-down? Or did a hundred mini-movements tell the real story of the century; or was it like that of the past, one of spec builders, the DIY industry and self-build? In terms of sheer numbers the century has been claimed for the shed building, the factory, warehouse and its cousin, the office. In terms of cost airports have won, in terms of prestige museums, in terms of kitsch it has been shopping and mega-malls, but building-counts like body-counts only tell the background story.

The main narrative does not belong to any building type, movement, individual or sector. Rather, it belongs to a competitive drama, a dynamic and turbulent flow of ideas, social movements, technical forces and individuals all jockeying for position. Sometimes, a movement or an individual may be momentarily in the public eye and enjoy media power, but such notoriety rarely lasts for more than five years and usually for not more than two. It is true that certain architects of the previous century – how strange those words ring for Modernists – were creative forces that lasted for longer. Mies was a power to be reckoned with in the '20s and '60s. Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Aalto, who with Mies made up the big four, were seminal at more times and Kahn, Stirling, Eisenman and Gehry, the little four, each had two small periods of influence. But even these protean characters, in order to stay relevant and on top, had to reinvent themselves about every 10 years.

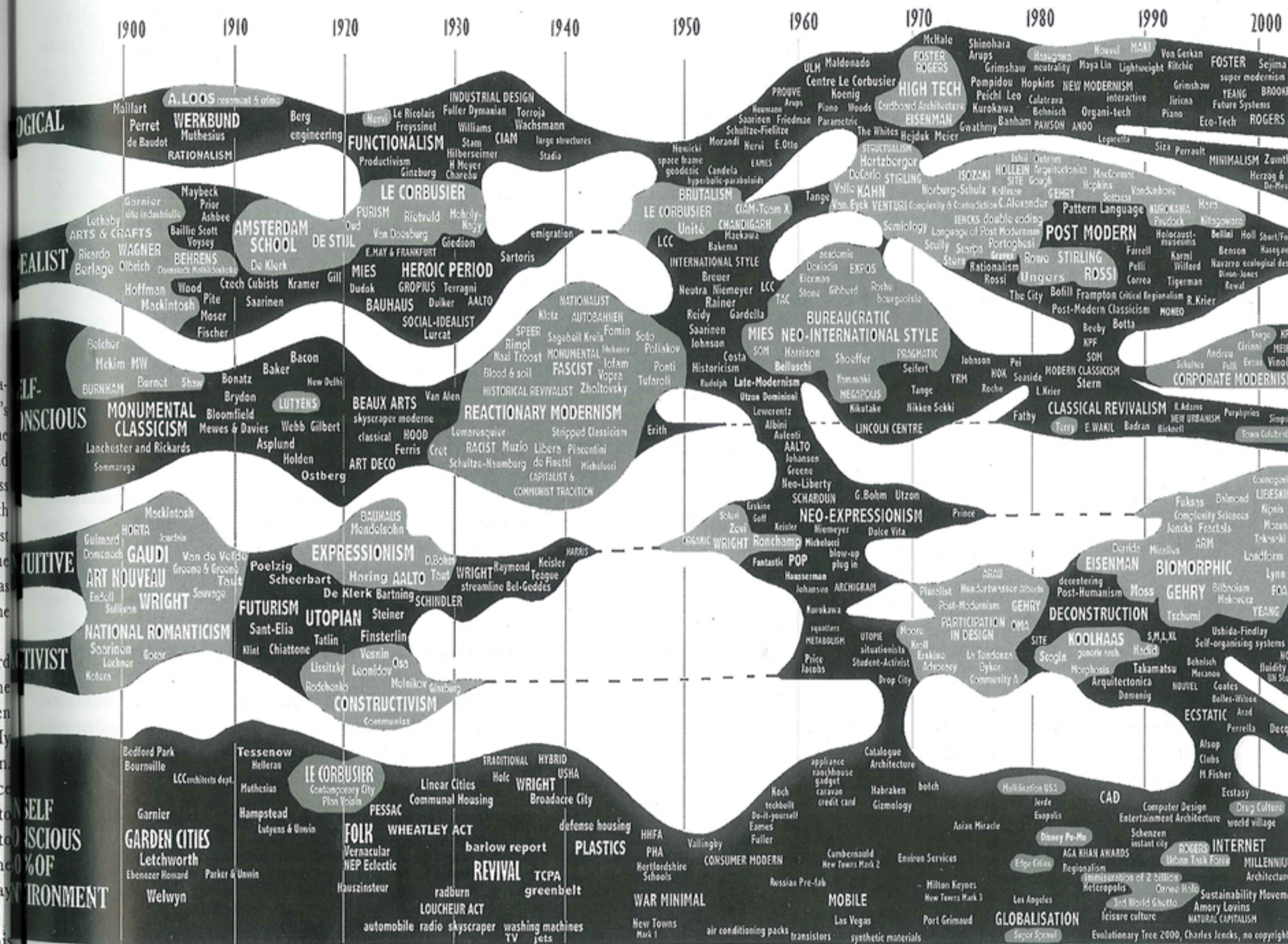
The notion that there is a '10-year rule' of reinvention for the creative genius in the twentieth century has been well argued by the Harvard cognitive scientist Howard Gardner in his book *Creating Minds*, 1993. Subtitled *An anatomy of creativity seen through the lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham and Gandhi*, it is a detailed study of these, the big seven Modernists, and it shows how they often made breakthroughs or underwent creative shifts every 10 years. In a recently finished book, *Le Corbusier and the Continual Revolution in Architecture*, I have found the same pattern in this the Proteus of design. As the Hayward Gallery put it, polemically, in the title of a 1987 retrospective Le Corbusier was 'The Architect of the Century'. Well, could this be possible – even before the century was over and Frank Gehry given a shot at the title? I

think the answer is 'yes', as I argue at length and as the accompanying evolutionary tree, or diagram, shows. One will find Corbu's presence on this chart at five different points: as the leader of the 'Heroic Period' of the 1920s; as a leading thinker of a new (and rather unfortunate) urbanism; as the leader of CIAM and mass housing after the war; as a harbinger of Post-Modernism with Ronchamp and the symbolic architecture of Chandigarh; and, just at the end of his life, with his Brussels and Zurich pavilions, the forerunner of the High-Tech movement. No other architect was as creative in different traditions; not for nothing was he seen as 'the Picasso of architecture'.

But the point of my argument is slightly different than Howard Gardner's. While agreeing with his analysis, I think one of the important reasons for the demonic creativity of these seven 'geniuses' is that the last century was uncommonly turbulent. My diagram, and its tortuous blobs, captures this continual revolution. At any one time the twentieth century architect has had to face three or four competing movements of architecture, respond to changes in technology, social forces, style and ideology – not to mention world wars and such large impersonal forces as the Internet. It was an exhausting century. As the Chinese say: 'may you be condemned to live in interesting times'.

However beneficent this may be for architectural creativity this has not been healthy or good for the environment. For one thing it has been Gardner's message – the revolutionary period has been dominated by men, there are very few women among the 400 protean creators I have gathered from other writers. An urbanism both more feminine and coherent would have been far superior to the over-rationalized and badly related boxes that have formed our cities. For another thing continual revolution, or the constant change of fashion, business cycles, technical innovation and social transformation has meant that architecture, like the other arts, lacks depth and perfection. It is hard to master an art when surfing a waterfall. Nonetheless, that is what the old century has been, a turbulent motion of whirls and eddies; sometime even the whirlpool of Fascist and Nazi architecture going nowhere but down. There are about 100 trends and technical forces shown, and 60 movements, many of them 'isms' – Futurism, Purism, Expressionism, Brutalism or Metabolism – that became 'wasms'. Riding these waves as a leader is exhilarating, until the Neo-follower surfs on by.

I don't mean to be disparaging so much as realistic. The twentieth century produced great architecture but, as Lewis Mumford



Jencks's 'The Century is Over, Evolutionary Tree of Twentieth-Century Architecture' with its attractor basins.

often noted, with great faults. A critical Modernism, or Post-Modern perspective, must acknowledge these deep problems and face the horrors of the century as much as the triumphs.

The evolutionary tree and its surprising conclusions

Usually when historians look at the recent past they do so with the eyes and taste that rigidly exclude the variety, contradictions, mess and creative wealth of a period, and we applaud them for so doing. All history writing is selective and based on theories of what really matters, and there is no way around this limitation. But there are ways to compensate for perspectival distortion and over the last 30 years I have devised a method, the evolutionary tree, which if it is not completely inclusive is at least balanced in its selective effects. As can be seen in the classifiers to the extreme left of the diagram, it is based on the assumption that there are coherent traditions that tend to self-organize around underlying structures.¹ These deep structures, often opposed to each other psychologically and cultur-

ally, act like what are called, in the esoteric science of nonlinear dynamics, 'attractor basins': they attract architects to one line of development rather than another.² Why? Not only because of taste, training, education and friendships, but because of type-casting and the way the market forces architects to have an identifiable style and skill. In a word, specialization.

Of course, architects dislike being pigeon-holed as much as do politicians and writers – they too like to claim universality, freedom and openness. But it is the rare architect, such as Le Corbusier or Gehry, who can be found in several different traditions and often they are pilloried for leaving one fold for another. Enough forces conspire to keep the architect 'on message', even when they seek, like Post-Modernists, to be pluralists.

What stories does this turbulent blob-diagram tell? In crude terms it reveals some surprises. Most architecture – 80 per cent? – is by non-architects, or at least the result of larger processes that are, artistically speaking, unselfconscious: building regulations,