

# Canons in Crossfire

On the Importance of Critical Modernism, by **Charles Jencks**

THE IDEA THAT THERE IS A CANON of modern architecture is, paradoxically, insisted upon by people who know perfectly well that there is no such thing. Neutral, abstract, and in some variant of the International Style, this great white canon causes mental snowblindness, convincing people that a single modernism exists—at the same time as they dismiss the idea as absurd. This contradiction, entrenched in the architectural landscape, opens up important issues; but before pursuing them, let us consider other fields where canons carry a bigger charge, for instance, religion, literature, and Modern art.

For the Pope there are the canonic scriptures and doctrines that define Catholicism, and it falls to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and its prefect, Cardinal Ratzinger, to define those canons. Successor to the Inquisition, this Congregation effectively shores up orthodoxy and expels those who deviate from the doctrinal line, such as the creative Catholics Matthew Fox and Hans Kung. For F.R. Leavis, and many literary critics, there was a canonic Great

Tradition of literature that always needed asserting, upholding, and reevaluating by those of supposedly superior sensibility.<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom recently has defined a broader set of great works in his defense of an embattled tradition, and he has given it a suitably definitive appellation, *The Western Canon*.<sup>2</sup>

For Alfred H. Barr and the founders of the Museum of Modern Art, the canonic story of Modern art led from Neo-Impressionism through Fauvism to Cubism, the Bauhaus and Modern Architecture (capitalized, as the gospel ought to be). This canonic trajectory led directly to Abstract Art, and it determined the arrangement of works in the galleries of MoMA right into the 1980s. This canon also justified a view of history as aiming toward abstraction as its goal, and, at the same time, validated the major bloodline of Modern artists from Picasso through Jackson Pollock, a lineage sanctioned in the critical writings of Clement Greenberg. This orthodoxy lasted until just last year, when the refurbishment of MoMA—and of course of Post-Modernism too—forced an en-

tire reevaluation of the collection, at which point a messy and interesting set of plural categories led to a reconceptualization of the history of modern art. The new groupings, categorized by subject rather than historical period, varied in cogency, as did the similar new arrangement at the Tate Modern in London. (This shift in canons is, of course, only a provisional attempt to contend with the challenge of pluralism. One looks forward to the next, and more considered, synthesis.)

For Sigfried Giedion, as I was taught at Harvard in the 1960s, there was a “New Tradition” of Modern architects that needed defending and promoting (subtracted of Expressionists and others who did not fit within the canon according to CIAM). For Bruno Zevi, there was a similar great tradition, but it culminated in the very architects Giedion had dismissed as “transitory facts.” And so it went, and so it goes. When I was a young historian studying under Reyner Banham, I wrote a paper, “History as Myth,” which showed how each successive historian rewrote the script of modernism by putting back into the story some of what the previous critic had excised, only to perpetuate a new bias of his own. Banham was no exception to the rule, as he enjoyed pointing out, and when once questioned on this process of historians’ one-upmanship and asked how to explain it, he said, “apostolic succession.” Modern architectural historians, like defenders of the True Faith, were people of the book; they passed on beliefs by studying and worshipping in the same church.

The delicious irony of this situation was inescapable, for the tradition being canonized was purportedly based on revolution; one has to remember hard what modernism once claimed to be: avant-garde, revolutionary, new, idealistic, utopian. The idea of being radical and progressive and shocking carried modernism throughout the 19th century and up to the 1930s. How, I once asked Philip Johnson, could the Museum of *Modern Art* be

both a museum *and* radical, both “the American canonization of something that had been done,” the Establishment, *and* adversarial? “Easy,” he answered with stunning pragmatic nonchalance, “It succeeded. . . . You can still have the paradox and fortunately go on designing anyway you like.” Canons are there to be affirmed and broken according to a logic no one understands. Modernism means both the triumph of corporate conformity and its constant overthrow, an idea I would christen “Johnson’s Confusion,” since he pointed it out so clearly.<sup>3</sup>

Direct contradictions are no harder for the High Church of Modernism than they are for the Vatican. In fact, both thrive on them. We are back at the paradox with which I started; but before addressing it directly, I want to rehearse the architecture of the last century and, with the aid of a diagram, put forward the proposition that there is also a tradition that bubbles away under the surface: critical modernism. Whereas canonic modernism today dominates the academies and institutes of architecture, as well as the architecture of big-city downtowns, critical modernism is a creative avant-garde always reloading its canons in response to a perceived imbalance and, of course, a creative opportunity.

Glance at the evolutionary tree of the 20th century that I have constructed around six underlying traditions.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the main narrative does not belong to any building type, movement, or individual. It quickly dismisses any idea of a single canon—white, machine aesthetic, abstract, or minimalist. Rather, it displays a competitive drama, a dynamic and turbulent flow of ideas, social movements, technical forces, and individuals, all jockeying for position. A movement or an individual may be momentarily in the public eye and enjoy media power, but such notoriety rarely lasts more than five years and usually not more than two. It is true that certain architects of the previous century—how strange those words ring for Old Mod-

ernists—exerted creative forces that lasted far longer. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was a power to reckon with in the 1920s and 1960s. Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Alvar Aalto, who with Mies made up the big four, were seminal for decades. And Louis Kahn, James Stirling, Norman Foster, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, and Rem Koolhaas, the little six, each had two small periods of influence. But these protean characters, to stay relevant and on top, also had to reinvent themselves every ten years or so.

The notion that there is a “ten-year rule” of reinvention for the creative genius in the 20th century has been well argued by the Harvard cognitive scientist Howard Gardner. In *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi*, Gardner studies these major Modernists, showing how they made breakthroughs or creatively shifted their thinking every ten years.<sup>5</sup> In a recent 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.”<sup>6</sup> Well, could this be possible—even before the century was over and Frank Gehry was given a shot at the title? I think the answer is “yes,” as I argue at length and as the diagram shows. Le Corbusier appears on this chart at five points: as the seminal designer of the “Heroic Period” of the 1920s; as a forceful thinker of a new (and rather unfortunate) urbanism; as the leader of CIAM and the movement to design mass housing after the war; as a harbinger of Post-Modernism with the church at Ronchamp and the symbolic architecture of Chandigarh; and, at the end of his life, as a forerunner of High-Tech, with his pavilions in Brussels and Zürich. No other architect was so creative in so many different traditions. Not for nothing was he seen as “the Picasso of architecture”; and importantly for my argument, the

seminal buildings of each of his creative periods expressed different canons. (Many critics and architects, including Nikolaus Pevsner and James Stirling, were upset when Ronchamp, with its primitive expression, seemed to deny Le Corbusier's devotion to the Machine Aesthetic.) There was no single "Modern Architecture" to which he was faithful—only, perhaps, the basic principle of being critical and creative.

But the point of my argument is slightly different than Howard Gardner's. While agreeing with his analysis, I think that one of the important reasons for the demonic creativity of his seven "geniuses" is that the last century was uncommonly turbulent. My di-

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agram, with its tortuous blobs, is meant to capture this condition of continual revolution. At any one time, the 20th-century architect has had to face three or four competing movements of architecture and respond to broad changes in technology, social forces, style, and ideology—not to mention world wars and such large impersonal realities as the rise of the internet and digital media. It was an exhausting century. As the Chinese proverb puts it: May you be cursed to live in interesting times. To keep at the top of the profession, or at least stay influential, an architect has had to revolutionize his ideas about every ten years. In other words, the impetus for creativity comes from without as much as from within.

But no matter how beneficent this perpetual upheaval and reinvention may have been for architecture, it has not been good for the environment. For one thing, the ideas being constantly reinvented have been *his* ideas—*men* have dominated the revolutionary period; among the 400 protean creators gathered in my diagram,

there are few women. An urbanism both more feminine and also more coherent would have been far superior to the characteristically masculine, over-rationalized, and badly related boxes that have marred our cities. For another thing, continual revolution, or the constant change of fashion, business cycles, technical innovations, and social transformations, has meant that most architecture, like most production in the other arts, has lacked the depth and perfection possible in earlier centuries. It is hard to master an art while surfing the waves of "what's next." Nonetheless, that is what the past century has been, a constant motion of whirls and eddies. My diagram shows about 100 trends and technical

forces, and sixty movements, many of them "isms"—like Futurism, Purism, Expressionism, Brutalism, or Metabolism—that became "was-isms." Riding these waves as a leader is exhilarating, until inevitably the neo-follower surfs on by.

I don't mean to be disparaging so much as realistic. The 20th century produced great architecture but, as Lewis Mumford often noted, great architecture that had great faults. A critical modernism acknowledges these problems, faces the horrors as much as the triumphs, and responds to them dialectically. Critical modernism is modernism critical of itself.

When historians look at the past, they typically do so with eyes carefully focused on a few canons, and these conceptual glasses can rigidly exclude the variety, contradictions, mess, and creative wealth of a period. Furthermore, as readers we often appreciate and applaud them for their myopia. All history writing is selective, and while there is no way around this, I have devised the evolutionary tree precisely to compensate for the perspectival dis-

tortions. If not wholly inclusive it is, at least, balanced in its selective effects. As can be seen in the classifiers on the far left of the diagram, the tree is based on the assumption that there are coherent traditions that tend to self-organize around underlying structures. Often opposed to each other psychologically and culturally, these deep structures act like what are called, in the esoteric science of nonlinear dynamics, "attractor basins." They attract architects to one line of development rather than to another. Why? Not only because of taste, training, education, and friendships, but also because of typecasting and of how the market encourages—almost forces—architects to have an identifiable style and skill—in a word, to specialize.

Of course, architects dislike being pigeonholed 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 different traditions, and often such an architect is pilloried for abandoning one set of canonical beliefs for another. Enough forces conspire to keep architects "on message," even when they seek, like Post-Modernists, to be pluralists.

#### SURPRISES

What tales does this turbulent blob-diagram tell? In crude terms, it reveals several unlikely points. Most architecture—80 percent?—is by non-architects, or at least is the result of larger processes that are, artistically speaking, "unself-conscious": building regulations, governmental acts, the vernacular tradition, planning laws, mass housing, the malling of the suburbs, and inventions in the technical/industrial sphere. Le Corbusier in the 1920s, Russian disurbanists in the 1930s, and Richard Rogers today (working with Tony Blair) try to affect this inchoate area, but it is, like globalization, mostly beyond anyone's control. This high proportion of nonarchitectural creativity is likely to

lessen in the future as more and more of the environment is guided by governmental and planning control, responding to economic and ecological forces. But the ironic truth remains that, in terms of control and mega-planning, the Disney Corporation has been more effective than the former Soviet Union; of course, architecturally speaking, its results have been unself-conscious vernacular pastiche, all too consciously applied.

Another surprise emerging from the diagram is that a polemical movement may not be the preserve of just one tradition. One would have thought the ecological imperative might have been monopolized by the Activist tradition, but it has been taken up by all the traditions in different ways. For instance, the classicists, following Leon Krier, have created an ecological movement they have christened with the contentious brand “New Urbanism.” New Urbanism is based on the tight village planning of a previous era, and its green credentials are presented with historicist wrappers. Then there are Post-Modern versions of green architecture, including work by SITE, Ralph Erskine, and Lucien Kroll; High-Tech versions usually called Eco-Tech (or Organi-Tech); and the Biomorphic versions of the Malaysian Ken Yeang. And there is the madly optimistic corporate-governmental version of the Sustainability Movement led by Amory Lovins. His notion is summarized in the oxymoron “Natural Capitalism,” which suggests that nature and capitalism can walk hand-in-hand in the 21st century.<sup>7</sup> My point is that, counter to intuition and previous issue-based movements, green architecture comes in all styles and traditions.

A third surprise is that we can see strange alliances within the self-conscious tradition, usually the mainstream, or what Sigfried Giedion damned as the “ruling style” of architecture. Through the 1940s, this style was mostly a version of classicism: Edwardian Baroque, Beaux-Arts Classicism, monumental stripped classicism,

or the fundamental classicism of Gunnar Asplund. When the Fascists in Italy and Spain and the leaders of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia imposed their versions of classicism as a state style, contending approaches were quashed. The diaspora of Modern architects and the waning of other approaches are clear from the diagram. Like evolutionary species whose habitat is destroyed, the Modernists became virtually extinct—or else they emigrated from Europe and the USSR.

Influenced by social geographers such as David Harvey and Jeffrey Herf, I have called these classical or monumental folk architects “Reactionary Modernists.”<sup>8</sup> Like Albert Speer, they were just as wedded to technology, economic progress, instrumental reason, and the zeitgeist as Mies, Le Corbusier, and Gropius. The fact that they persecuted functionalists and creative modernists, and adopted reactionary styles and attitudes, has obscured the deeper point that they shared the Modernists’ assumptions

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about power, mass culture, and mass production. They all were, in effect, disputing some common territory, a point that the diagram reveals, especially when modernism triumphs after the Second World War.

The true inheritors of the postwar mainstream were the big corporate modernists, and they have been so ever since. They appear small in my diagram because their creativity has not been that significant. In terms of volume of work, however, they have greatly overshadowed the four other conscious traditions. This begins to explain the paradox with which I started. Modernism does indeed exist as the mainstream, a corporate one, but the more creative movements that contest it are critical of this dominance

and the harm it does to the environment. Too often and easily, we term both the larger corporate modernism *and* the reactions to it “modernist,” without much reflection on the glaring contradiction inherent in this confusion.

The evolutionary tree also shows how the mainstream is constantly attracted back to stripped classicism or degree-zero modernism. Although they are all very different, Lincoln Center in New York and twenty other cultural centers in America during the 1960s are in this bloodline, as is the Modern Classicism of Robert A.M. Stern and Demetri Porphyrios. The corporate modernism of Renzo Piano in Berlin, and even Richard Meier at the Getty, is not too far away from this “strange attractor.” Why? The institutional forces of production and patronage favor an impersonal, abstract, semiclassical sobriety. In Giedion’s view, the “ruling taste” is usually pulled towards this attractor basin, even if today the idea might have given him pause for thought.

But this tendency of the “ruling taste” toward self-conscious traditionalism and now corporate modernism is inherent in critical modernism, which always reacts against the dominant. Consider Le Corbusier himself in the 1960s, at the height of his fame, when he was bitterly fighting the destruction of Paris by grandiose modernist projects, such as Bernard Zehrfuss’s big dumb dome in La Defense. Or, as he fulminated somewhat earlier, “In 1956 L-C was asked to accept membership of the Institut de France (Academie des Beaux Arts) in Paris: ‘Thank you, never!’ . . . My name would serve as a banner to conceal the present evolution of the Ecole des Beaux Arts towards a superficial modernism.”<sup>9</sup> Le Corbusier’s outburst is a good example

of what I mean by critical modernism as a constant, underground contradictory force; but, unfortunately, his example was not heeded, and “superficial modernism” has been dominant ever since.

Yet mainstream culture is not always located on this axis. Several important exceptions occurred when Expressionism, the Bauhaus, and the Heroic Period dominated for a few years in the 1920s, or when Post-Modernism did in the early 1980s, or Art Nouveau and National Romanticism did at the start of the century. Hector Guimard in Paris, Victor Horta in Belgium, Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Glasgow, Eliel Saarinen and Lars Sonck in Helsinki, Otto Wagner in Vienna, and my favorite architect, Antonio Gaudí, in Barcelona—all became momentary leaders of a major public architecture, if only for a few years and in a few cities.

#### GAUDÍ

My bias shows through the evolutionary tree at one point. Nikolaus Pevsner dismissed most of the movements cited just above as “transitory fashions,” and for Sigfried Giedion, except for the Heroic Period, they were not “constituent facts.” One remembers how modernist historians, like revisionist apparatchiks airbrushing Trotsky out of photographs, liked to clean up uncomfortable facts. Interpretation and judgment distort all historical selection. My argument for placing Antonio Gaudí as *the* architect of the century, on a par with Le Corbusier, does not rest on his influence, city planning, or theoretical contribution. Rather, it rests on his creative brilliance in turning city building and structure into a high art. No other architect managed to get craftsmen, artists, and even patrons working together on such a large and complete scale. His works remain the standard for the integration of all the arts at the highest creative and symbolic level.

The reason his work has such creative depth is that he took a long time—the kind of time that few 20th-

century architects would allow themselves—to innovate at all levels. Depth requires time, and since, in the marketplace, time is money, depth is in short supply. Gaudí’s architecture exploits all sorts of new structural types—such as the hyperbolic paraboloid—if not for the very first time, then for the first time in a seminal way. He makes diverse form-types his own by giving them forceful and poetic expression. Moreover, he bends structural rationalism to expressive ends. For instance, while the Italian engineer Pier Luigi Nervi makes an ordered art from showing the isostatic lines of force in his concrete ceilings—for instance, in the Palazzo del Lavoro in Turin—Gaudí takes the same forces and expresses them dynamically, pushing against each other, like the straining muscles of an athlete. Concrete becomes animated, humorous, related to our body and moods. Beyond this, in buildings such as the Casa Batlló, he uses technological and structural innovations for symbolic and political ends—to present the sufferings of the Catalans under the dragon of Castile. His structural and material inventions are always means to a larger intention, and it is this overall meaning that gives Gaudí’s work enormous symbolic depth. It communicates up and down the scales, from the everyday and local to the cosmic. By comparison, the work of Mies and Aalto seems to me too abstract, that of Le Corbusier and Wright too cut off from the language of the street, that of Eisenman too cerebral, that of Gehry too formalist.

To argue that Gaudí was the canonical architect of the century, however, reveals my partiality towards artistic and symbolic architecture, values that other critics, such as Kenneth Frampton, do not necessarily share. In an Art Net lecture of 1974, I was shocked to hear this historian dismiss Gaudí’s work as kitsch—but then Philip Johnson used to dismiss Frank Lloyd Wright as the “greatest architect of the 19th century.” The evolutionary tree is meant to make such dismissals—ones that Pevsner, Giedion,

Frampton, and Johnson are happy to commit—more difficult, or at least uncomfortable. Canons contest other canons, and critical modernism is the dialectical response of one set of beliefs toward another that has become too stereotyped, too powerful. In this sense, like Late Modernism and Post-Modernism, Critical Modernism is simply modernism critical of its own excesses.

I realize, however, that the high placement of Gaudí is a contentious claim that needs much more defense than I can offer here. Those who value the perfecting of architectural technique might proffer Mies, Kahn, or Norman Foster as canonic architects of the century. Those who value theory and education might favor Gropius at the Bauhaus or Eisenman because of his design and writing; those who prefer an understated humanism might put Aalto in this role. And what about contenders for “the little six,” what about Lutyens, Asplund, Fuller, Niemeyer, Rogers, and Piano—or another set? Many contenders for the top positions are apparent in the weighting I have given the 400 “best” architects, and they each presume different canons.

Let me reiterate the main speculation, or hypothesis—critical modernism is radically dispersed throughout the many modern movements that exist and react to each other and to the outside world. It is distributed in many places and exists in many architects, if for only a short time, for critical modernism is a process of learning through absorbing and criticizing other modernists. Moreover, what matters most is the pattern of these positions taken successively and the space of creativity they open up. One can say that the wisdom of architecture always outstrips that of any single architect, and that there is a beautiful, if messy, pattern to this history that my diagram seeks to reveal. Yes, history *is*, as Winston Churchill said, “just one crazy thing after another”—it is like a drunk wandering aimlessly. But occasionally

the drunk learns something and makes progress, just as the proto-Modern Movement of the 19th century had hoped. The problem comes when we confuse the mainstream with the critical, the white abstract style with the creative dialectic, just because they both have good claims on the word “Modern.” Those claims are socially and historically embedded, and deeply entrenched. They will not go away, so one can predict that Johnson’s Confusion, and ours, will extend into the future. But that is no reason to turn it into a theory of history and fail to discriminate, especially since a canon must aim well.

#### Acknowledgment

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#### Notes

1. See, for instance, F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948).
2. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).
3. “History as Myth” appears in *Meaning in Architecture* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1969) and “Dialogues with Philip Johnson” in *The New Moderns* (London: Academy Editions, 1990).
4. The evolutionary tree is further described in my *Le Corbusier: The Continual Revolution in Architecture* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2001).
5. Howard Gardner, *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham and Gandhi* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
6. The Hayward’s retrospective is published in *Le Corbusier, Architect of the Century* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1987).
7. Countering stereotypes, Lovins argues that, with enough efficiency, economic development and ecological growth can occur at the same time—and at four times their current rate! Natural Capitalism or wishful thinking? It is no surprise that former United States president Bill Clinton and various business leaders have applauded Lovins’s message. The trick, Lovins points out, is that we have to rethink *all* systems from the start. But as Oscar Wilde put it: “Being natural is such a very difficult pose to keep

up.” Reconciling these opposed forces will take more than a pose; it will take a raft of tax incentives and other changes that the new president George W. Bush is unlikely to accept.

8. See, for instance, Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

9. Le Corbusier, *My Work*, trans. James Palmes, introduction by Maurice Jardot (London, 1960), 49–52.

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