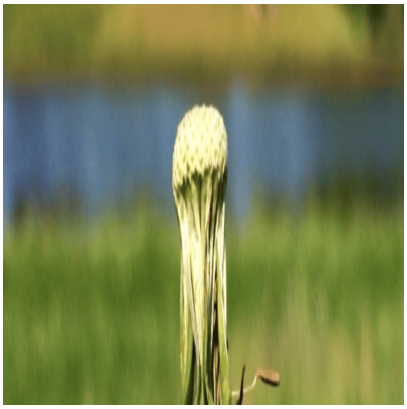


What does architecture represent?

Description

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For the architectural semiotician, buildings and building elements operate as signs, pointing to something other than themselves. So for the semiotician one of the key roles of architecture is to *represent*.

For the semiotically informed, the things of nature are amongst the targets of representation, evident in floral and foliated ornamentation, frescoes of nature scenes, shapes that resemble tree trunks, curves volutes, edges and patterns that somehow resemble or imitate (as icons) the things to which they refer.

The architect and historian Charles Jencks was amongst those in the 1980s who introduced semiotics to architecture. By the 1990s, such theorists had adopted the criticism and scepticism of the philosopher Jacques Derrida on matters to do with representation in architecture. Deconstruction and its challenges to supposed certainties, including the basics of a semiotic world view, were in full flow.

But in the 1990s Jencks affected a return to a newly reconstituted metaphysics, informed by the fields of quantum mechanics, and chaos and complexity theory. Science was leading the way, ahead of philosophers, semioticians and architects in bringing to light the nature of the universe we inhabit, and beyond.

Cosmogenesis

Jencks posited a â??cosmogenic world viewâ?•: â??It is the idea that the universe is a single, unfolding self-organising event, something more like an animal than machine, something radically interconnected and creative, an entity that jumps suddenly to higher levels of organization and delights us as it does so. Complexity Theory, the Gaia hypothesis, Chaos and Quantum theories all point in that direction, and they can give us great hope and strengthâ?• (125).

But the idea that architecture *represents* lingered in his narrative: â??The smooth growth of a wave form represents the continuity of nature, its unity and harmony, whereas the sudden twist represents the catastrophes of nature, the flip from one system to another, or the creative bifurcations which can bring progress as well as despair. Since nature shows these two properties might not a cosmogenic

architecture represent these two basic truths?â?• (48).

It is as if the architect has to take on the job of representing such up-to-date scientific understandings of the universe, a task that he took on board in some of his own landscape garden design. Thatâ??s one discourse relating architecture and nature.



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Against representation

The issue of representation surfaces again in the discourses of sustainability, and of architecture in the age of the Anthropocene. Architecture could (and does in some cases) represent in some way the crises of climate change, pollution, deforestation, massive changes in landforms, and bring such matters to awareness in powerful ways through its forms, provocations and discourses.

But architecture (amongst other complex, interrelated forces and specialisms) is clearly instrumental in the *shaping* of the world â?? not *just* representing it. (Alternatively, I could say that representation is never *mere* representation, and signs are never *just* signs.)

I was drawn to the issue of representation in a chapter in the book *Architecture in the Anthropocene*, in which designer John Palmesino says, â??It doesnâ??t work, thatâ??s the problem, the entire take on architecture as representation; as opposed to interference, constructive practice, and making things upâ?• (20).

The idea of the Anthropocene hadnâ??t yet impacted on architects in the 1990s. The Anthropocene brings to the fore the idea that architecture *changes* nature rather than simply *representing* it, and introduces powerful and sobering modifications to the discourses relating architecture to nature.

References

- Jencks, Charles. 1995. *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe, A Polemic: How Complexity Science is Changing Architecture and Culture*. London: Academy Editions
- Palmesino, John, RÃ¶nnskog, and Etienne Turpin. 2013. Matters of observation on architecture in the Anthropocene. In Etienne Turpin (ed.), *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*: 15-24. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press.

Notes

- In a chapter in *Architecture and the Anthropocene*, Mark Dorrian draws attention to radical and spectacular attempt to modify and distort geographical distributions, e.g. by creating a massive domed â??Arcticâ?• ski run in the deserts of Dubai. See Dorrian, Mark. 2013. Utopia on ice: The climate as commodity form. In Etienne Turpin (ed.), *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*: 143-152. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press.
- The picture above is a photograph of Jencksâ??s landform at the Scottish Gallery of Modern Art behind a daisy stem. According to the gallery website, â??The UEDA landform was designed on the front lawn of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. The design was inspired by patterns of nature, from meteorological effects to chaos theory. Jencks stated that â??I am trying to create a new language of landscape. If you look at the way nature organises itself, it has inherent principles of movement .. I wanted to design something which reflected these natural forces but heightened them.â?? (National Galleries of Scotland Bulletin, July and August 2002, p14).â?•

Category

1. Nature

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Tags

1. Anthropocene
2. architecture
3. nature
4. semiotics

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rcoyne99