THE LANGUAGE OF
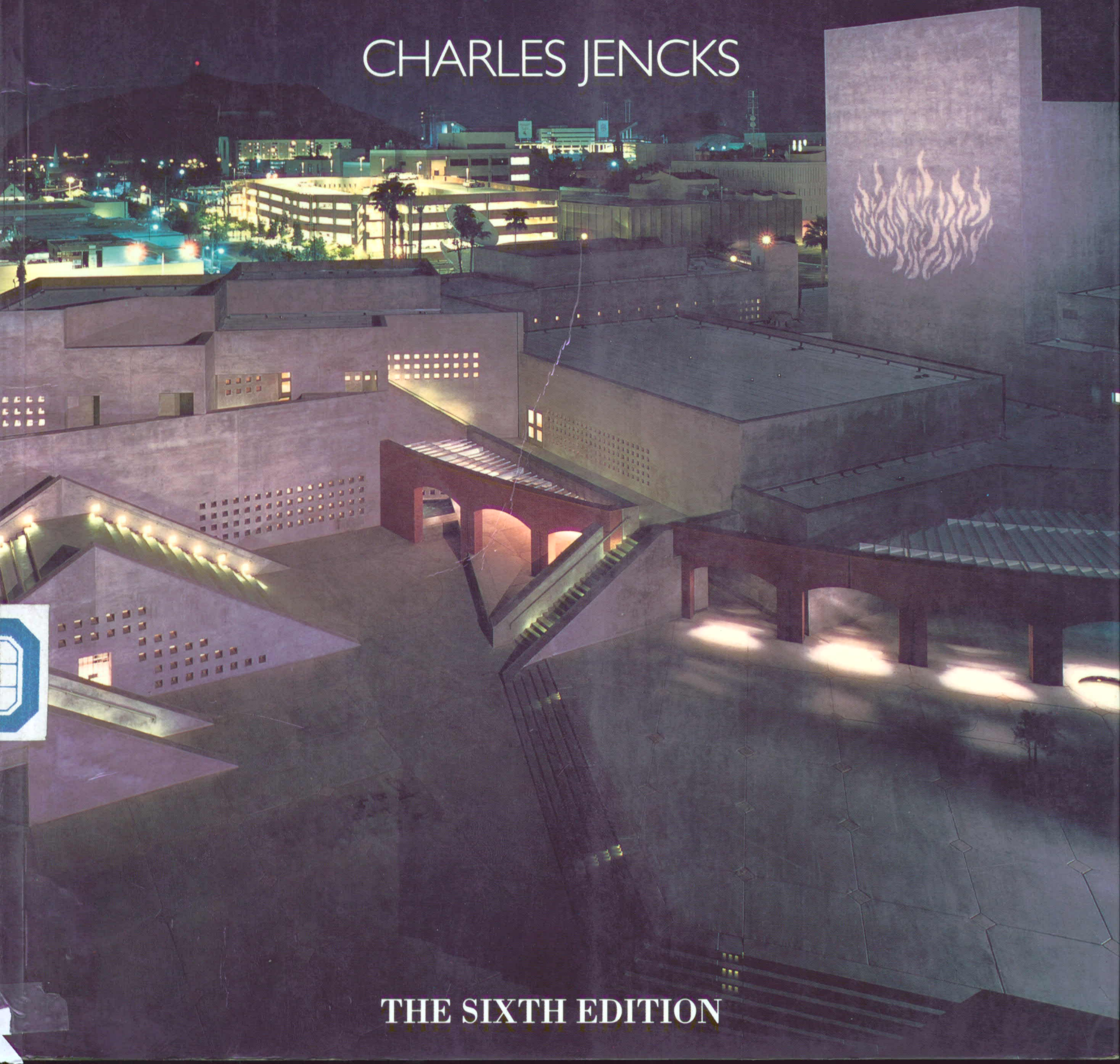# POST-MODERN ARCHITECTURE

CHARLES JENCKS

THE SIXTH EDITION

THE LANGUAGE OF
POST-MODERN ARCHITECTURE
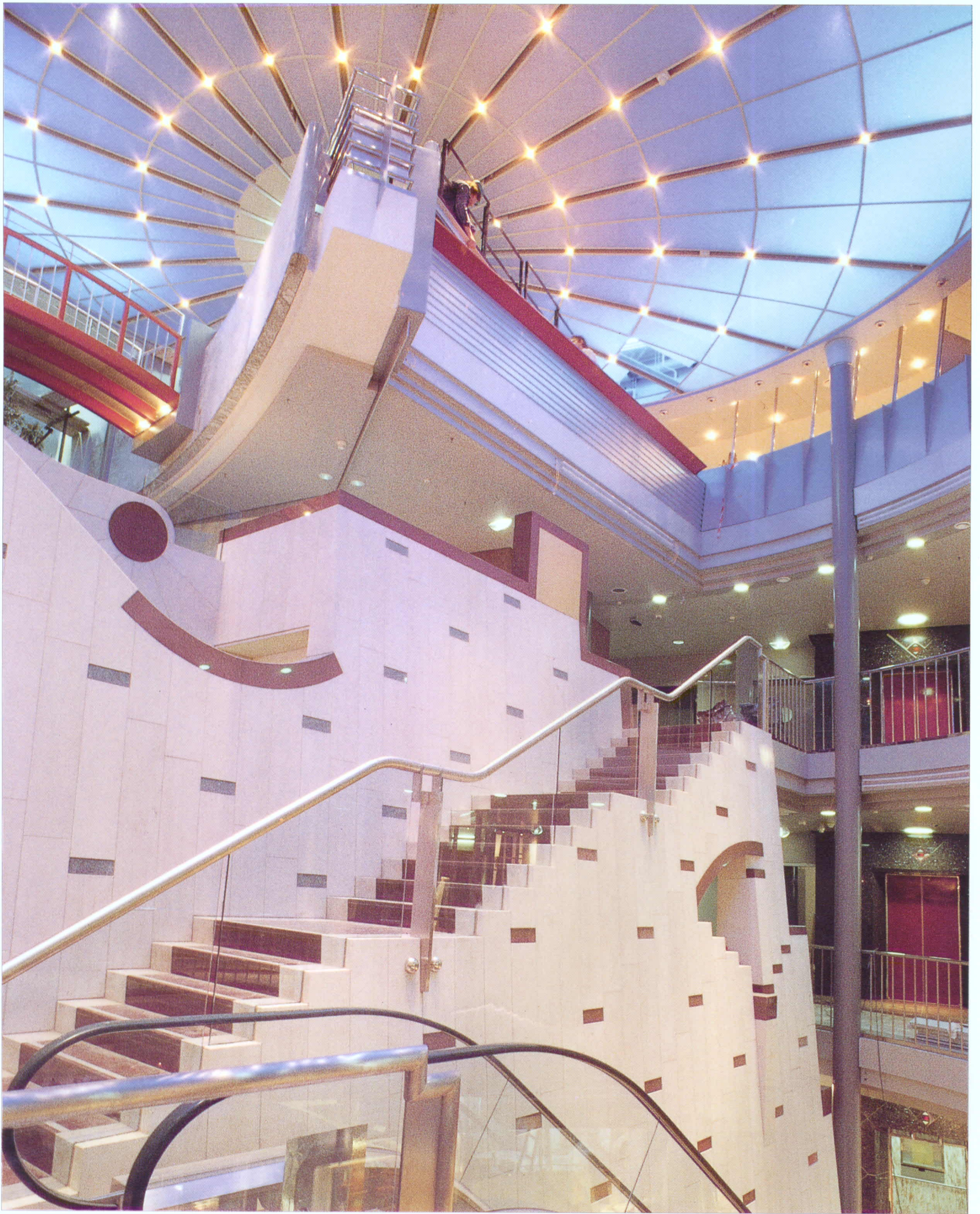## THE SIXTH EDITION

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ANTOINE PREDOCK, *Fine Arts Center, Arizona State University*, Tempe, 1987-89: 'small-block planning'

ACADEMY EDITIONS

KISHO KUROKAWA, *Museum of Contemporary Art*, Hiroshima, 1988: 'symbiosis of past, present and future'

HANS HOLLEIN, *Haas Haus* interior, Vienna, 1990: 'the interior public realm

ALDO ROSSI, *Hotel Il Palazzo*, Fukuoka, 1990: 'Post-Modern Classicism'

THE LANGUAGE OF
POST-MODERN ARCHITECTURE

VENTURI, SCOTT BROWN AND ASSOCIATES, *National Gallery Extension*, London, 1991: 'heteromorphic contextualism'

To Maggie

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INTRODUCTION
Death for Rebirth

Now that Post-Modern architecture has triumphed around the world, many people have declared it dead. This, the fate of all successful movements, is something to be celebrated. Born in a fit of love, they grow to maturity all too quickly, are vulgarised, mass-produced and finally assigned to the scrap-heap of history. The same thing happened to Modernism, as the reader will shortly discover, so it is no surprise that those who arrived first at the morgue to certify the new Post-Modern corpse – and see it stayed buried – were none other than the Neo-Modernists. This occurred in 1982, and the participants at this convivial wake brought along doctored photographs of Michael Graves' Portland Building blowing up, as if to reassure themselves of the truth.

By 1986 – ironically, just when many of the world's largest architectural practices were shifting to a Post-Modern mode – the Italian magazine *Modo* announced with an air of revelation that the style was old hat. Not to be outdone at late discovery was the President of the Royal Institute of British Architects who, in 1989, attacked the genre as 'bimbo architecture' and declared for the Year 2000: 'we simply cannot go to the Millennium Ball wearing the threadbare rags of Post-Modernism'. Out of fashion? If ever there were proof of a movement's continued vitality it was these obituaries and attacks, for who is going to waste time flogging a dead style? As if to underline this, the President promptly apologised for his flagellation of the anti-chic and asked a major Post-Modern architect for forgiveness. Such are the vicissitudes of the Style Wars. But there is more than style at stake.

Inevitably, the life and death of an architectural movement, like civilisation, is based on a biological metaphor: but this is only somewhat relevant to anything as complex as an architectural language. Columns and curtain walls come and go irrespective of cultural health. However, many people felt liberated from the dogma and strictures of Modernism when, along with Peter Blake and other architectural medics, I took its failing pulse in the 1970s. As John Summerson later wrote of these diagnoses – 'in the 1980s it has become fashionable to declare the Modern Movement dead. As a serious statement this is arguable, but it is an interesting idea – perhaps the first really inspiring new idea since the Movement was born. It is, anyway, liberating'.

The notion of death frees one from the tyranny of the prevailing orthodoxy and since Modernism had a virtual stranglehold on the profession and academies from the late 1930s to the 1970s, many architects and much of the public were exhilarated. Modern Architecture was no longer a necessity and the idea of the *Zeitgeist* and technological determinism – or, indeed, any determinism – was

1 KISHO KUROKAWA, *Museum of Contemporary Art*, Hiroshima, 1988. By clothing ambiguously a traditional shape (the pitched roof evokes the Edo storehouse) in a futuristic material and then giving it somewhat western mouldings, Kurokawa blends past, present and future in a complete synthesis.

discredited. Architecture could again be based on context, mood, culture, ornament, or almost whatever mattered to the architect and client. And, it has to be added today, the 'death of Post-Modernism' produced a similar relief, for that also loosened the bonds of professional doctrine and tyrannical fashion, and increased freedom of choice.

Pluralism versus Monism

Thankfully, today no single orthodoxy dominates Western society: neither the Pre-Modernism advocated by Prince Charles, the Neo-Modernism advocated by his adversary the President of the RIBA, nor the Post-Modernism caught in a cross-fire between the two camps. If anything reigns it is pluralism – and that 'ism' is incapable of ruling since it depends on fostering choice. There is a paradox here because pluralism is *the* Post-Modern ideology above all others. How can this condition exist without the triumph of the Post-Modern style? Because, as even the remaining Modernists now grant, we live in a post-modern era, the information age where plural cultures compete and there is simply no dominant cultural style or ethos. Or if, say, Deconstruction is fashionable in 1989, it is declared *passé* in two years – the average age of an architectural movement in the global village.

In the pre-industrial past Traditional culture was the leading way of thought; during the industrial age Modernism became the most important *episteme*; while in the post-industrial period none of these competing cultures – High, Low, Traditional, Mass, Pop, Ethnic or Other – speaks for the majority of urban dwellers. Most of the time in the huge megalopolis we are all minorities – yes, even those who have cornered what used to be called 'the ruling taste', the Establishment. This can be alienating, and many people deplore the competition of language games and values, and the retreat into a previous orthodoxy, whether Modern or Traditional. But those with a Post-Modern sensibility enjoy the diversity, and know why it is necessary and positive.

What is at stake in this situation, what constitutes the new world view? Fundamentally it is the growing understanding that pluralism creates meaning; or put negatively in the cool terms of information theory, that 'where there is no difference, there is no information'. Variety of style and habitation generates meaning, because significance is generated by a field of tensions, or an oppositional system. Just one of these many systems will be explained below, but they are concerned with more than style, much more. Any architecture signifies values and supports a way of life; and these are relational matters, as much as is any aesthetic.

Traditionalists and Modernists have one thing in common: they tend to dislike pluralism and suppress it. Consider Le Corbusier's injunctions: 'The "styles" are a lie . . . Our own epoch is determining, day by day, its own style' – that is, a single one based on industrialisation and the Machine Aesthetic. Or compare this monism with Prince Charles' norms of harmonisation. When he attacked the original scheme for extending London's National Gallery, he rephrased the Modernist's plea for consistency: 'I would understand better this type of High-Tech approach if you demolished the whole of Trafalgar Square and started again with a single architect for the entire layout, but what is proposed is like a monstrous carbuncle

on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend.' The implication, with its heavy irony, is that a whole lot of aesthetically unified carbuncles would be acceptable.

The norm of stylistic harmony is upheld by architects the Prince favours – Quinlan Terry and Leon Krier – as much as it is by Late- and Neo-Modernists. Lloyds' of London, the Hong Kong Bank, the Arab Institute or little-red-fire-engine pavilions at the Parc de la Villette in Paris are all confined to a unity of material, time and mood – whatever their style. And this despite the fact that they are equivalent in size to a traditional village. When the Classical unities become this dominant, when large chunks of the environment housing thousands of people are built at a stroke in the same manner, one can speak of a totalising impulse still prevalent with the Traditionalists and traditional avant-garde. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même intégration.*

The Post-Modern Paradigm

This is not true of Post-Modern urbanism. Large developments, such as the decade of building in Berlin under IBA, mix various architects, styles, ages and uses of buildings – sometime even on the same street. While common urban typologies such as the perimeter block are adopted, and some aesthetic rules of the game are imposed, various architects are also encouraged to produce difference, using oppositions within these frameworks. By the late 1970s, this became a norm which was demonstrated in the 1980 Venice Biennale: its *Strada Novissimma* was composed as a system of differences. Soon thereafter, Rob Krier and the Berlin planners under IBA adopted the policy of hiring multiple architects for a district, and combined this strategy with infill building and rehabilitation. By the mid 1980s, the policy had disseminated to developers – Broadgate in London, Battery Park City in New York, the Faneuil Hall complex in Boston and downtown Frankfurt were typical commercial versions of the idea. What had started in 1961, when the first shot of Post-Modernism was fired by Jane Jacobs in her book the *Death and Life of Great American Cities,* had now become a mini-orthodoxy. At least one quarter of all mega-developers saw the point of diversity: mixed ages, mixed uses and complexity made economic as well as aesthetic sense.

It's fascinating that the 'Jacobite manifesto' should fit in so well with the larger Post-Modern paradigm which was growing at the time, and that she should appreciate the fact: such self-awareness is rare. If one steps back from urbanism and architecture and looks at philosophy, literature and science, one finds the same general points emerging in the sixties: the interest in interconnection and symbiosis which characterise ecology; the preoccupation with diversity and difference which typify Post-Modern philosophy and politics; and the understanding of interrelated variables on which the new 'sciences of complexity' are built. At the end of her book, in a chapter called 'The Kind of Problem a City Is', Jacobs shows that urban questions are not particularly ones of 'simplicity', nor 'disorganised complexity' – both of which characterised Modern science from Newton to the development of statistics. Rather, a city is a *problem of organised complexity* like those with which the life sciences deal.

All the key Post-Modern sciences are rooted in this new *episteme* – ecology,

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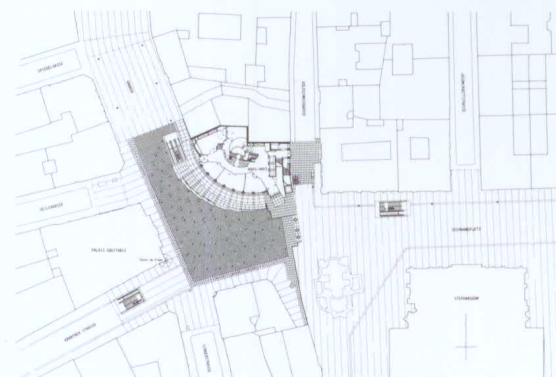
2, 2a HANS HOLLEIN, *Haas-Haus*, St Stevens Square, Vienna, 1988-90. This infill building of mixed use – shops, offices, restaurants, interior piazza etc – completes a corner site next to a medieval cathedral and meditates between the four different styles of the adjacent buildings (Gothic, Baroque, turn of the century, 1950s Modern). Responding to the complex and contradictory urban pressures, it transforms the pale green building to its left into a stepped square motif, then into a Modern curtain wall, then into a curved cylinder that recalls an ancient fortification that stood here. This shape also contains the space with the cathedral and turns the corner as the building then takes up the grammar of the back street. A Post-Modern chameleon building, like James Stirling's Tate Addition (1980-87), it also has a Classical temple and Modern cantilever on the roof. Like Kurokawa, Hollein refers to this time-building as a 'symbiosis' of past, present and future.

ethology, biology, holography, the cognitive sciences, psycholinguistics, semiology, chaos theory, neural nets, and so on. Almost all of these deal with feedback, non-linear equations and sudden self-organising phenomena, whereas the Modern sciences, as Jacobs argues, deal with dual- or multi-variable statistical issues. The 'sciences of simplicity' — Newton's laws of gravity and the workings of the solar system are the prototypes — established the Modern paradigm, while the sciences of complexity — Noam Chomsky's ideas of deep structure, or Ilya Prigogine's of self-organisation are the archetypes — created the Post-Modern *episteme*. So we have an implicit consensus, or an overlap of thought patterns and heuristic models centering on pluralism and complexity. Organised complexity as idea, fact and style typifies the urbanism of Jane Jacobs, the architecture of Robert Venturi and the literature of Umberto Eco — which is why these disparate manifestations help sum up the Post-Modern paradigm. Indeed, Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* 1966 is considered, after Jacobs' book, the second major treatise to start defining Post-Modern architecture.

What is Post-Modern Architecture?

Post-Modern architecture is obviously concerned with more than *pluralism* and *complexity*, although these two key words begin to locate its centre. To suggest the wealth of concepts involved in its definition, I will briefly summarise and emphasise some of the essential definers.

The primary strategy architects have created to articulate the pluralism of culture is that of *double-coding*: mixing their own professional tastes and technical 3 skills with those of their ultimate clients — the inhabitants. Double-coding exists at many levels and has done so in several periods: it may be an ancient temple which mixes abstract geometry and representational sculpture, high and low art. It may be the Post-Modern Classicism of James Stirling that contrasts monumental and high-tech codes; or vernacular and commercial codes, as in the case of Charles Moore. The dualities invariably contrast the local with the contemporary — hence the label Post-*Modern*. But whatever the combination, it is the concept of coding itself which is essential to this growing tradition.

Modern architects simply, and somewhat naively, perceived and constructed the meanings they cared about in architecture. This could be successful or disastrous, as I point out in the first two sections of this book. By contrast, Post-Modernists are keenly aware that architecture is a *language* perceived through codes, and that codes and therefore actual seeing differs somewhat in every culture. Hence the complex relation of the architect to the client — again partly explicable by an emergent science of complexity, semiotics: the theory of signs. This theory forms the background for Part Two, and is one of the crucial ways in which Post-Modern thought differs from its predecessor; but this book is about a growing tradition of architecture, not its intellectual foundations. I have tried to give just enough theory here to explain the main concepts of architectural semiotics and drive home the point that, for Post-Modernists, the perceptual codes of the users are just as important as those of the architects — another reason for double-coding. Modernists and Traditionalists, by contrast, focus on the producers.

3 DUAL CODING, *Temple of Artemis* at Corcyra, early 6th century BC. The typical Greek pediment shows the mixture of meanings, popular and élite, which could be read by different groups of people, on different levels. Here the running Gorgon, Medusa, with her snakes, and the rampant lion-panthers, and the various acts of murder are all represented dramatically in strong colour. This representational art literally breaks the abstract geometry at the top, but elsewhere harmony and implicit metaphor reign. Human proportions, visual refinements and a pure architecture of syntactic elements also have their place. Two different languages, each with its own integrity and audience.

There is more to Post-Modern architecture than its conception as a multi-level language. If one were to list the defining characteristics they would extend far beyond the four or five stylistic categories that historians usually apply to a period – for instance, the four that Hitchcock and Johnson found in the International Style in 1932. Anthony Blunt, in a polemical analysis, *Some Uses and Misuses of the Terms Baroque and Rococo as Applied to Architecture,* finds the historian cannot work with fewer than ten definers. It could be worse. In my own attempt to classify Late, Neo and Post-Modern architecture, I found at least thirty important design ideas, ideological definers and stylistic preoccupations – and there are obviously more. Architectural movements are as complex to define as bird species are for the taxonomist, and demand the synthesising of many characteristics into a whole. The historian classifies overlapping sets of definers by family resemblances, as the philosopher Wittgenstein put it – and this is partly a global, and partly an inductive judgement.

The characteristics of the Post-Modern come from its attempt to cut across the spectrum of tastes with a variety of styles: thus it seeks a *radical eclecticism,* or a multiple-coding, as well as the double logic I have already mentioned. Readers will find subsections devoted to this, as well as the other key definers: *historicism, contextualism,* the new *complex post-modern space, metaphor* and *abstract representation.* The motives extend beyond this to the search for a *relevant ornament,* a *contextual symbolism,* an *anthropomorphism* – in short, to the search for a *suitable content* to represent.

There are indeed more than thirty norms and forms which define the movement, and these will be explored in the pages following Part Two. For other writers, the situation is somewhat simpler. In *The Doubles of Post-Modernism,* 1980, the architect Robert Stern supports a 'traditional post-modernism' which is concerned with *historical continuity* and, like this book, the 'struggle for cultural coherence that is not falsely monolithic': that is, one based on architectural 'form as communicating sign' which a wide public can understand. Elsewhere he mentions as essential an intense concern for 'ornament', 'context', and 'historical allusion'.

Paolo Portoghesi, in *Postmodern, The Architecture of a Postindustrial Society,* 1982, not only places emphasis on the *information society,* but again on the idea of *historical continuity* and the role of *city typologies* in sustaining this. Thus Stern and Portoghesi, through their writing, architecture and exhibitions, have led the movement towards the historicism to which much of the public – sadly – reduces it. While their work often has a creative integrity, the genre which follows it is frequently commercialised cliché.

The agenda is much larger and more important than the superficial facadism to which giant commercial commissions and the Disney Corporation have bent it. But there also *is* this weakness to a certain strain of the tradition. 'Disneyworld Postmodernism', discussed in a later section, and the kitsch versions of the genre, are the main reasons critics pronounce the movement dead while it still moves. It is true, however, that the other traditions show the same problems of over-production; and these are *systemic* as I pointed out in the first edition of this book. The commercial and production viruses which contaminated Modern Architecture
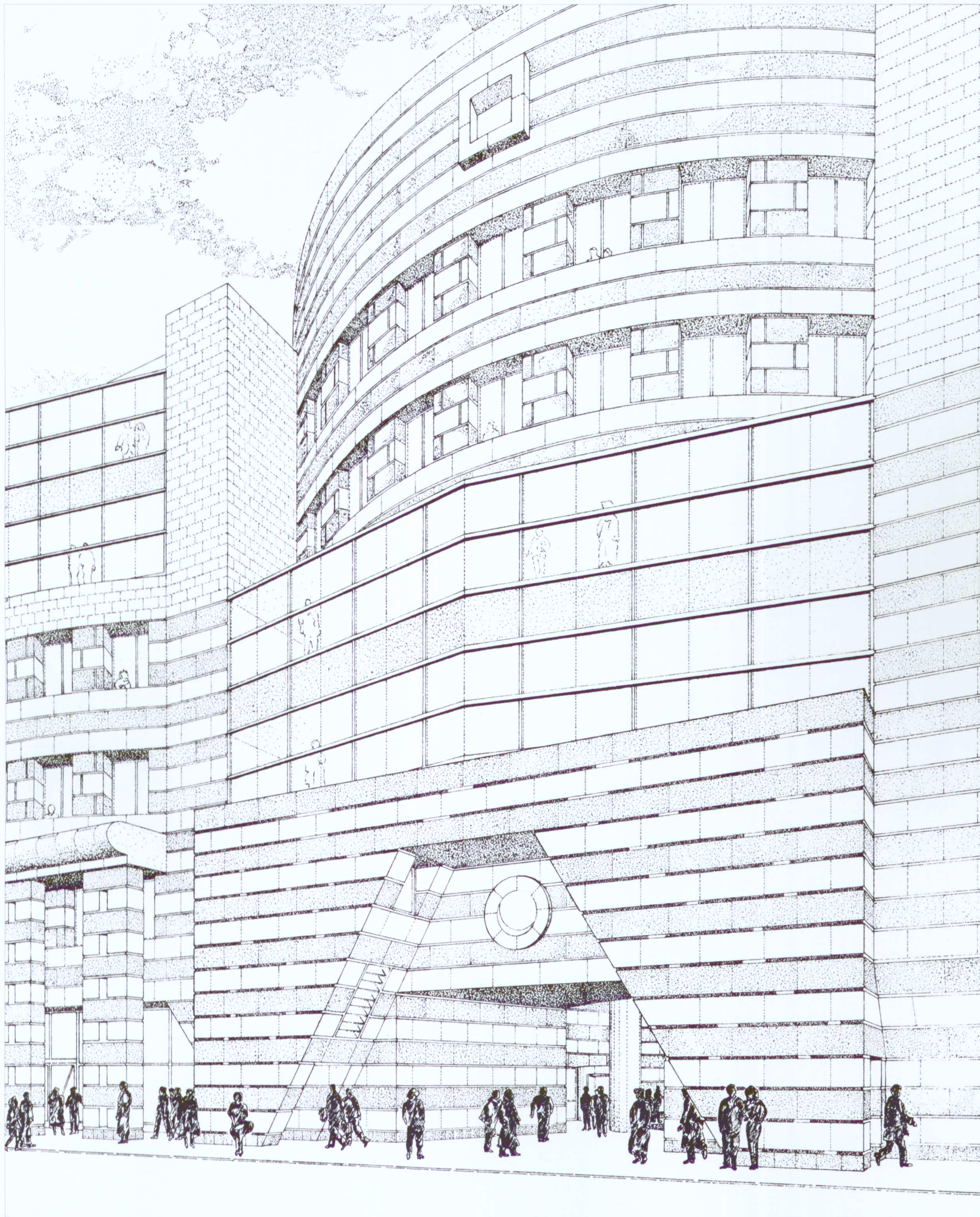
are now attacking its child. 'Fast-Food-Mega-Build' – to give it as horrible a name as I can – corrupts all movements, and as long as architecture is produced on the run, in too great volume, it will suffer these problems of over-production. They are, once again, diseases of success.

Heinrich Klotz, in *The History of Postmodern Architecture* (Germany 1984, USA 1988) offers a slightly different focus than that given here. He takes up the communicational aspect that all writers stress and bends it towards 'narrative content'. Form does not just follow function, in his definition of Post-Modern architecture, but 'fiction'. The concern for *Meaning in Architecture* (the subject of a book George Baird and I edited in 1969) becomes the central preoccupation for Klotz, and this very wide concern allows him to include many architects – Rem Koolhaas, John Hejduk and Richard Meier – who I (and no doubt they themselves) would be much happier to see in some other slot, perhaps marked 'Late-' or 'Neo-Modernist'. The three of them, as other New Moderns, have been attacking Post-Modernism since at least 1982.

Nonetheless, Heinrich Klotz is right to show the ambiguity of these practitioners – who all *revise, ironise,* and *distort* abstract Modernism – and in these weak senses are 'post'. But defining the movement by the single category 'fiction' or 'allusion and association', as he does elsewhere, is much too loose. All architecture has some representational and allusive meaning, even if it is to a previous abstraction or tradition of non-meaning (as in Hannes Meyer's work). So, otherwise exemplary as history, Klotz's definition of the subject is at once too wide, in its inclusion of Neo-Modernists, and too narrow, in its reduction to 'fiction'. We simply cannot escape the multiple definition of a plural movement – which is why the reader will here find six main strands of Post-Modernism and several key definers.

All this dispute over categories and the intentions of a movement may sound academic, or irrelevant to architectural practice – but it is not. Differences of meaning create divergences in evolution – as we have seen in the Prince of Wales' recent battle, first with the Modernists, then with the Post-Modernists.

The Failure of Prince Charles' Crusade

In 1984, on the 150th anniversary of the RIBA, Prince Charles launched what he later termed a 'crusade' – against the heathens, nihilists, abstractionists and all those who were building an anti-Christian, materialistic architecture in Britain. Character-istically, in this Holy War, he copied the example of Post-Modernists and my own use of metaphors to attack the sterile malapropisms of Mies van der Rohe and those who prefer abstract sculpture to significance. Mies' proposed skyscraper for Central London he vilified and destroyed as a 'glass stump'. Other verbal missiles stopped the 'monstrous carbuncle' designed for the National Gallery, James

4,4a Stirling's '1930s wireless' put forward also for Central London, and the 'prison
5,5a camp' proposed by Sir Philip Dowson and Arups for London's Paternoster site. As visual metaphors these exocets were wide of the mark, but as Royal bombs they were very effective. The Prince, surrounded by a coterie of Traditionalists and with TV and the newspapers egging him on, could not resist the temptation to sink the designs and reputations of England's finest professionals. He claimed in a *Sunday Times*
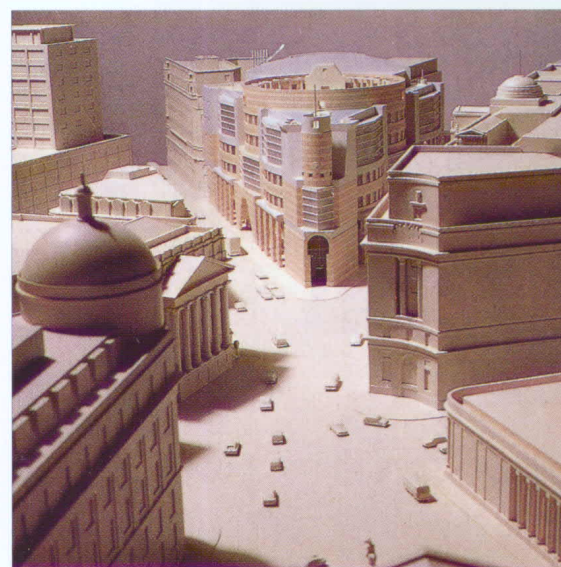
4, 4a JAMES STIRLING and MICHAEL WILFORD, *Number One Poultry Scheme*, London 1987, revised 1988, 1989. Attacked by Prince Charles as an 'old 1930s wireless', this is actually a sensitive response to a complex triangular site. It looks like everything but an old radio set: it partly alludes to the Classical masonry *and* Modern glass buildings. It also adopts a medium block size between the scale of adjacent large office blocks and the tiny medieval blocks and streets. If built this Post-Modern Classical infill would provide a *res publica* and open space – at the base and on the roof – in an area which sorely needs both. After the building's third trial, the highest court in the land, House of Lords, finally gave its approval in March 1991.