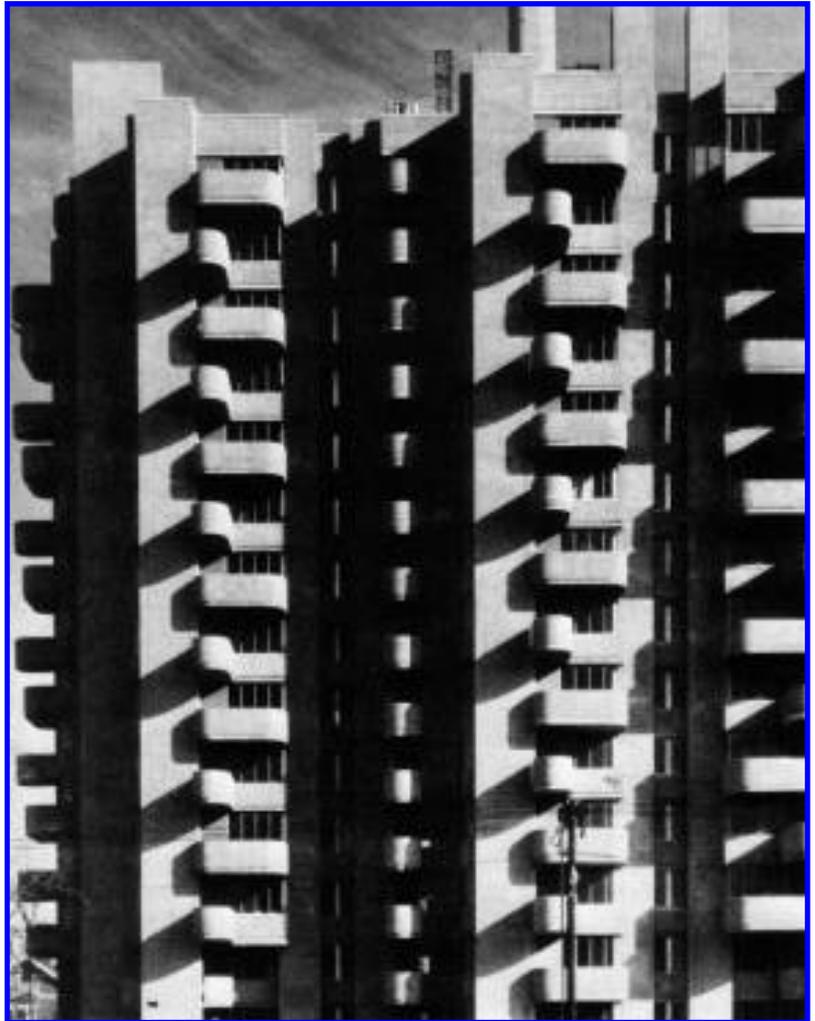


Paul Rudolph. Crawford Manor,
New Haven, Connecticut, 1966.
Source: Robert Venturi,
Denise Scott Brown, and
Steven Izenour, *Learning from
Las Vegas*, 1972.



Architecture's Image Problem: Have We Ever Been Postmodern?

REINHOLD MARTIN

It remains surprising how many influential accounts of cultural postmodernism make reference to architecture. For example, in his 1984 essay, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," reprinted in his 1991 book of the same name, Fredric Jameson acknowledges that his conception of postmodernism initially emerged from architectural debates.¹ Likewise, Andreas Huyssen credits architecture with helping to disseminate the term *postmodernism*, originally from literature, into the expanded aesthetic sphere during the 1970s and offers a subtle reading of architecture's deployment of postmodern motifs. In contrast, David Harvey offers a vividly reductive juxtaposition of Le Corbusier's unrealized tabula rasa Plan Voisin for central Paris with an implied realization in New York's Stuyvesant Town apartments, as an opening backdrop against which postmodernism stakes its cultural and aesthetic claim. And finally, Jean-François Lyotard takes care to distance himself from architectural postmodernisms in the opening lines of his "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?," reprimanding architects for "throwing out the baby of experimentation with the bathwater of functionalism."² So, at a moment when accounts of modernity's exhaustion are themselves being revisited, perhaps a reconsideration of certain widely held assumptions regarding "postmodern" architecture is in order.

Of such accounts, Jameson's stands out for the pride of place it accords architecture and architectural issues. In his foreword to the 1984 English translation of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (for which "What Is Postmodernism?" served as an appendix), Jameson goes so far as to say—with respect to Jürgen Habermas's denunciation of postmodernism's "explicit repudiation of the [revolutionary or critical] modernist tradition" as expressing a "new cultural conservatism"—that "[Habermas's] diagnosis is confirmed by that area in which the question of postmodernism has been most acutely posed, namely in architecture."³ Jameson clearly regrets postmodern architecture's abandonment of both political and aesthetic utopias. Still, he defends its playfulness, its self-conscious superficiality, as well as its populist willingness to "learn from Las Vegas," against Habermas's recalcitrant modernism. Jameson also defends

postmodern architecture against what he sees as a master narrative lurking within Lyotard's attack on master narratives: a neomodernist promise of the "new," now in the form of scientific rather than aesthetic innovation, sneaking in through the back door of postmodernist allusion and historical quotation. But if Jameson can describe this moment in Lyotard's argument as a productive contradiction, we can find a comparable moment within Jameson's own argument, one that privileges aesthetic narratives drawn from architecture at the expense of those narratives that architecture draws from science, including the peculiar afterlife of a systems model. This moment involves the question of authenticity, although formulated in terms that, like Lyotard's invocation of authentic (i.e., still modern) scientific innovation as against aesthetic reproduction, merely shadow those of the official postmodernisms that raged through architectural discourse and beyond during the 1970s and 1980s.

Not always explicitly named, the problem of authenticity looms large within those texts that stand most often as architectural harbingers of a generalized postmodernism. The most salient formulation of this problem was perhaps given by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*, written with their colleague Steven Izenour and published in 1972. Venturi and Scott Brown assert the dramatic possibility of classifying the whole of architecture into two mutually exclusive categories: the "duck" and the "decorated shed." The "duck" is named, drolly, after "The Long Island Duckling"—a duck-shaped store that sells ducks. As a general category, it refers to a building in which architectural particulars such as space, structure, and function are synthesized into an overall symbolic form or image from which they are inseparable, as in many modernist monuments. In contrast, a "decorated shed" is, like the casinos that lined the Las Vegas strip in the late 1960s, a building to which symbolism, in the form of signage and ornamental imagery, is distinctly applied like a marquee.⁴

Translated into the rudiments of an aesthetic theory, in a "duck" form and function (as well as meaning) are inseparable; in a "decorated shed" their relation is contingent, and thus a (sometimes literal) gap opens between them. Or, in the language of semiotics, in a "duck" the building *is* the sign, to the degree that signifier and signified are inseparable, while we might risk calling the sign stranded in the parking lot of a "decorated shed" a "floating" signifier. Most significant for the polemics that Venturi and Scott Brown inherited from modern architecture, in a "duck" structure and ornament are indistinguishable; in a "decorated shed" ornamental imagery and signage are disengaged from the structure supporting the building itself and are at liberty to proliferate across its surfaces and thus to suffocate the epistemological lucidity of structure-as-such so

dear to modernism.

To illustrate this, Venturi and Scott Brown provide a number of examples, including one that contrasts two mid-rise buildings designed for elderly occupants: Paul Rudolph's Crawford Manor in New Haven, which they describe as a "heroic and original" late-modernist duck, and Venturi's own Guild House in Philadelphia, which they describe as an "ugly and ordinary" decorated shed. But this is not simply a matter of one building (Crawford Manor) expressing its structural system visibly on its surfaces, and thus partaking of modernist narratives of foundational truth and attendant technoscientific myths of historical progress, while the other (Guild House) sacrifices all epistemological solidity to the ironic play of exchangeable signs. In fact, it is nearly the opposite, because Venturi and Scott Brown effectively accuse Rudolph's building, with its monolithic, rough-hewn concrete exterior, of dishonestly occluding its internal, structural "truths" (that is, its rather conventional structural frame, invisible on the surface), in favor of a mythic spatial plasticity. In contrast, they describe the articulation of Guild House—in which windows are "frankly windows" rather than abstract spatial elements—in prosaic terms that reproduce the building's artful claim to a sort of truthfulness by virtue of its avowedly pop use of culturally communicative—not to say stereotypical—elements in a kind of architectural common sense.⁵

Such a characterization might seem like a reversal, because the reader of *Learning from Las Vegas* understands throughout

Robert Venturi and John Rauch.
Guild House, Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania, 1963. Source:
Robert Venturi, Denise Scott
Brown, and Steven Izenour,
Learning from Las Vegas, 1972.



that, on the whole, Venturi and Scott Brown clearly prefer decorated sheds to ducks. And yet, they seem to defend Guild House as if it were a duck—a building in which “[t]he windows look familiar; they *look like*, as well as *are*, windows.”⁶ But this is not merely a case of visually oriented architects writing ambiguous prose. It is, I think, indicative of a foundational displacement within what was, by the time *Learning from Las Vegas* appeared, already known as postmodernism in architecture. In Venturi and Scott Brown’s characterization of their own building as “decorated shed” in contrast to Rudolph’s modern “duck,” they effectively transpose modern architecture’s “jargon of authenticity”—which sought irreducible truths in space and in structure—into the realm of ornament and signage. In other words, what is authentic—rather than contrived—at Guild House, according to its architect(s), is its decoration, which includes straightforwardly communicative graphics, appropriate materials used to signify specific meanings, oversized yet familiar windows, and a heraldic, (fake) golden television antenna mounted on the roof like a billboard, intended somewhat cynically as a “symbol for the elderly.”⁷

As Venturi and Scott Brown describe them, these are stable, transparent signs rooted in popular culture and applied to an otherwise unremarkable, functional shell. So if Guild House is indeed a decorated shed, it is only because its modernist symbolic transparencies—announced by historians like Siegfried Giedion in *Space, Time and Architecture* three decades earlier and still sought by architects like Rudolph in a visceral, spatial plasticity bursting with the rhetoric of functionality—had been transferred to the two-dimensional surface by architects like Venturi and Scott Brown. Rather than building *spaces* that verified the functionalist zeitgeist at the symbolic as well as at the practical level and could thus be construed as “authentic,” Venturi and Scott Brown essentially claimed to be building authentic *images*.

Did this transposition make Venturi and Scott Brown *post-modern*? At least one influential observer at the time did not think so, though for slightly different reasons. This observer was Charles Jencks, whose much revised and reprinted *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* of 1977 is, along with *Learning from Las Vegas*, among those texts frequently referred to by theorists of cultural postmodernism when they cite architectural examples. According to Jencks, Venturi and Scott Brown’s communicative, aesthetic populism merely inverted orthodox modernism’s noncommunicative, aesthetic elitism, while remaining committed to an “argument by taste . . . modernist at its core,” rather than to a theory that took advantage of recent developments in semiotics readily available in other fields.⁸ Thus Jencks set out to correct this oversight by describing

architecture systematically as a “language.” But this, too, had its roots in modernism.



A specifically architectural form of semiotic analysis can be traced in part to the reception, in architecture and the visual arts, of the work of the American semiotician Charles Morris, who was an important source for the notions of visual communication articulated by the artist and visual theorist Gyorgy Kepes in his widely read *Language of Vision* of 1944. Kepes, a Hungarian émigré whose primary aesthetic allegiance was to the German Bauhaus, was a colleague of the former Bauhausler László Moholy Nagy at Chicago’s New Bauhaus/Institute of Design in the early 1940s before moving to MIT’s school of architecture. While at MIT, Kepes worked closely with Kevin Lynch on strategies of visual organization and “imageability” at the scale of the city, which would form the basis of Lynch’s book *Image of the City*, published in 1960. Using Kepes’s gestalt-psychological notions of visual communication, Lynch elaborated the techniques of what Jameson would later describe—with reference to Lynch—as “cognitive mapping.”

And so we are led back to Jameson, who famously called for an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping” by which a bewildered subject might regain orientation in the delirium of postmodern space.⁹ In the same essay, Jameson also referred to *Learning from Las Vegas* as emblematic of the general, postmodernist “effacement . . . of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture.” As such, he saw this architectural treatise as representative of numerous aesthetic practices that no longer merely “quoted” mass culture (à la Joyce or Mahler) but rather, thoroughly incorporated “this whole degraded landscape of ‘schlock’ and kitsch” into their fabric. Taken together, they corresponded to what Jameson called the “rise of aesthetic populism,” which he was quick to correlate with the new, “purer” stage of capitalist development that the economist Ernest Mandel had called “late capitalism,” the scope of which was so vast and encompassing (today: “global”) that it defied older modes of cognition and therefore required new tools of orientation and analysis.¹⁰

And yet, Jameson supplied the details of how the architecture of the 1970s performed this correlation and crystallized the need for such tools in an example substantially different from Venturi and Scott Brown’s ironic populism. This was Jameson’s rather delirious reading of the intricate, disorienting “public” interior spaces of the Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, an assembly of mirrored cylinders designed by the architect-developer John Portman and completed in 1977.

According to Jameson, what makes the architecture of the hotel postmodern is precisely that it is neither mere style nor mere symptom (a mere surface expression of economic forces). Rather, it is a world unto itself, an enormous perpetual motion machine that effectively *models* the vast decenterings of global capital. In this “new machine,” cause and effect, base and superstructure, time and space continually trade places in a manner comparable with postmodern warfare, as exemplified by Jameson in a hallucinatory quotation from the journalist Michael Herr’s account of his experiences in Vietnam:

In the months after I got back the hundreds of helicopters I’d flown in began to draw together until they’d formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right hand–left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder.¹¹

For Jameson, Herr’s linguistic efforts represent an attempt to devise a new mode of description adequate to a new kind of war, characterized by the “breakdown of all previous narrative paradigms, along with the breakdown of any shared language.”¹² Elsewhere in the essay, Jameson describes this in psychoanalytic terms as a Lacanian “breakdown of the signifying chain.”¹³ In both cases, the result is a heterogeneous field of nonreferential signifiers unmoored from their orientation in narrative time and set adrift in a temporal disequilibrium that, in turn, corresponds to a “crisis in historicity.” This crisis will eventually be written as the end of history and its replacement by an eternal present of simultaneous, interchangeable signs. All of which is, again, given its most tangible manifestation in what Jameson calls the “postmodern space” exemplified by Portman’s hotel, because

something else does tend to emerge in the most energetic postmodernist texts, and it is the sense that beyond all thematics or content the work seems somehow to tap the networks of reproductive process and thereby to afford us some glimpse into a postmodern or technological sublime, whose power or authenticity is documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space in emergence around us. Architecture therefore remains in this sense the privileged aesthetic



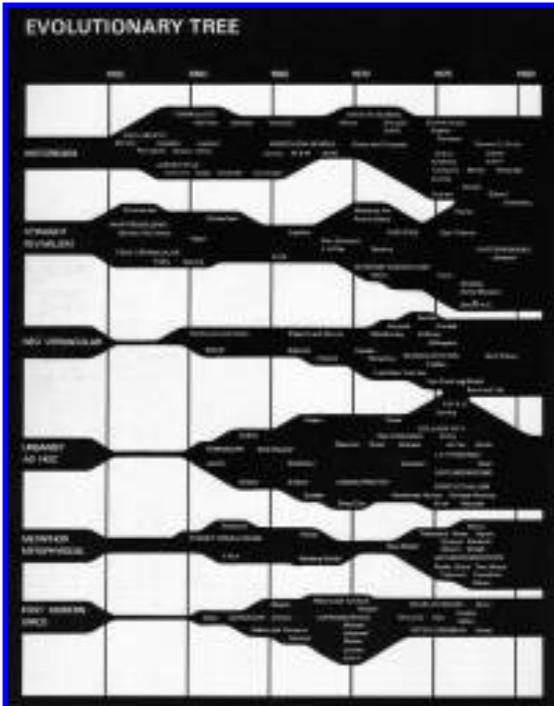
language; and the distorting and fragmenting reflexions of one enormous glass surface to the other can be taken as paradigmatic of the central role of process and reproduction in postmodernist culture.¹⁴

Taken at face value, such assertions would suggest that further evidence of postmodernism's own "authenticity"—its powerfully euphoric, schizoid affect—might be found within architectural discourse itself. Yet, in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* we find Jencks condemning Portman's hotel as an overblown, mirrored "jewel," the lavishness of which reflects the increasing privatization of large-scale public works, in the form of large hotels and other commercial buildings—monuments to "private wealth and public squalor."¹⁵ Elsewhere, Jencks illustrates more favorably an explicitly "schizo" mixed-use building in Rome—so designated by critics for its literal superimposition of three architectural styles, one atop the other—as stark evidence of a postmodern stylistic "impurity."¹⁶ But he assimilates both Portman's commercialism (a more literal reading of the "late capitalist" hotel than Jameson's metaphorically spatial one) and "schizophrenic" stylistic juxtaposition into an overall narrative of historical development that ultimately serves to domesticate the postmodernist "impurities" also identified by Venturi and Scott Brown in the promiscuous slippages of Las Vegas's signs.

Jencks does this by reproducing a systems model that had already entered architecture, through the discourse of Kepes and others, by way of innovations in theoretical biology and communications theory that had coalesced into the multidisciplinary science of cybernetics. By the early 1970s, this assemblage had been articulated as a science of the "environment"—visual, technological, and biological—by figures as diverse as Lynch (Jameson's reference), Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, and others.¹⁷ In *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* this external environment is internalized in the form of an "evolutionary tree" of architectural styles that Jencks constructs to illustrate the emergence of distinct strains of postmodernism gradually converging in the Babel of architectural languages that he calls "radical eclecticism." Modeled after a linguistic tree, this roots-and-branches version of architectural history posits a pluralistic future that corresponds with the choice-driven pluralities of global consumerism. As Jencks puts it, "eclecticism is the

Opposite: John Portman.
Bonaventure Hotel,
Los Angeles, California,
1977.

Below: Charles Jencks.
"Evolutionary Tree," in Jencks,
*The Language of Post-Modern
Architecture* (1977).



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natural evolution of a culture with choice.”¹⁸ Further, and distinct from the piously univocal modernist past out of which it evolved, such a future found its architectural expression in the diverse, image-based codes Jencks tracks throughout the book, some of which draw from historical styles (including modernism) and others from various vernaculars.

Again, as described by Jencks, the “evolution” toward a post-modern future was, oddly enough, “natural.” One consequence of this, consistent with Jameson’s characterization of postmodernism’s late capitalist exuberance, was the naturalization of consumerist variety in architectural form. Describing the rapid dissemination of diverse visual codes around the world, Jencks observes that “any middle-class urbanite from Teheran to Tokyo is bound to have a well-stocked, indeed over-stocked, ‘image-bank’ that is continually restuffed by travel and magazines.”¹⁹ As the natural outcome of evolutionary processes traceable linguistically within the images themselves, Jencks attributes to this state of affairs a certain inevitability, whereby any effort to transform the situation structurally is absorbed preemptively as just one more utterance spoken into the void of radical eclecticism.

Earlier in the book, Jencks offers another, related chart describing what he calls “three systems of architectural production” intended to account for the “crisis in architecture” out of which postmodernism emerged.²⁰ The result, in this instance, is a quasi-structuralist—indeed, even crypto-Marxist—account of forces of production (“systems”) conspiring to disarm an ultimately superstructural modern architecture of its transformative potential. Seen as deep background, Jencks’s “three systems” represented by three kinds of clients—private individuals, public institutions, and developers—constitute a kind of external economic environment in which the internal stylistic evolution announced by the second chart occurs. Linking the two charts brings to the surface another linkage that extends far beyond the limited, quasi-populist theories expounded by Jencks himself and accounts, in architectural terms, for the rhetorical capacity of postmodernism to assert “late capitalism” as its *sine qua non*. For written into the economies represented by Jencks’s three systems is the Greek root *oikos*, or home, that confers upon the word *economy* the sense of something like the law, or *nomos*, of the home. As expressions of this *oikos*, the home lying within all economies, Jencks’s three systems can be described as an *eco*-system, both in the sense of the traditional association of that term with natural *ecologies* and in the sense of the association of that term with natural *economies*. Another name for this ecosystem is consumer capitalism, built on cycles of stylistic innovation that upset systemic equilibrium so that it can be restored at a higher level. It is the given, the taken for

granted, the new or second nature not only uncontested but *sought* by Jencks's book.



Jencks was hardly the only writer to assimilate the proliferation of consumerist imagery into an ecological model during the 1970s. For example, on two occasions in *Postmodernism*, Jameson cites Susan Sontag's 1977 classic, *On Photography*, to describe the suffocating totality or closure of the postmodern system of images. Specifically, Jameson cites Sontag's recommendation, in her book's closing lines, of what she calls a "conservationist remedy"—or, as she puts it, "an ecology not only of real things but of images as well."²¹ For Jameson, this is a "classically liberal" solution to the challenges of postmodernism—"nothing in excess!"—that is overdetermined by more radical alternatives figured negatively for Sontag by the suppression of images in Maoist China. The ecological model, then, while therapeutic, tends to foreclose any utopian alternative by virtue of its emphasis on homeostatic balance, despite the frequent association of the two terms, *ecology* and *utopia*.

Similarly, in his evolutionary chart of postmodern languages proliferating in the polyphony of "radical eclecticism," Jencks deploys an effectively homeostatic, ecological model precisely to avert any radical, unforeseen break in a global economy of architectural styles circulating within a global economy of architectural production and consumption. In other words, there is nothing radical about "radical eclecticism." Instead, the phrase encodes an unspoken anxiety that corresponds quite closely to what Jameson has called the "anxiety of Utopia," but the fear in this case is not so much of a revolutionary event (à la 1968) as of a revolutionary image—a destabilizing image or style that is not anticipated by the system and that the system therefore cannot simply absorb—an image that Lyotard might have called authentically "postmodern."

This anxiety is played out vividly in Jencks's earlier and most overtly prospective book, a book about the future itself. *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods* was published in 1971. In an opening chapter on the methodological pitfalls of futurology, Jencks links his efforts to predict the future of architecture to what he calls "critical evolution," which is based on recombining the dissected elements of a "system" rather than accepting its totality as inevitable.²² At one level, what he means here by "system" is what structural linguistics would call *langue*—the organizing structures of language, as distinct from their specific manifestations in *parole*. But *Architecture 2000* already contains the architecture-as-language premise of Jencks's later book on postmodernism. In addition, in describing struc-

tural, linguistic change as evolutionary, it much more explicitly attributes to the deep structures of architectural language all the characteristics of a biological system.

Jencks acknowledges as much by comparing, in a footnote, the structuralist *langue* with the closed system of systems theory (with its origins in theoretical biology) taken to a logical conclusion that, according to Jencks, amounts to a fatalistic view of history visible in apologists for a technocratic future, such as Daniel Bell. In his own effort to steer away from such fatalism, Jencks prefers to follow systems theory in describing history as an “open system.” Thus the term *critical* in his notion of “critical evolution,” which itself modifies the arguments of the biologist and patron of modern architecture Julian Huxley in his *Evolution in Action* of 1953. In this popular work, Huxley develops his thesis on the emergence of a second-order evolution in which humanity is able to shape its destiny by using the instruments of culture, including both science and art, to intervene in biological evolution. For Huxley earlier in his career (in the 1920s) this meant eugenics, while for Jencks in 1971 it meant genetic engineering, whose future impact on architecture is the subject of his concluding chapter.

Jencks proposes something like a recombinant genetics operating on multiple subsystems within the bounds of the “general system” called architecture, because, as he puts it in the language of the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, “In general systems theory the machine, nature and culture are all just different levels of organized system working in opposition to the trend towards entropy or disorganization.”²³ In that sense, Jencks continues, “We can combine semi-autonomous systems to direct our evolution in a variety of ways: through piecemeal shopping, through *ad hoc* legislative reform, through political action and even through transplant surgery and genetic engineering.”²⁴ According to Jencks, the latter would yield various counterentropic genetic hybrids, mutants, and chimeras, underlying all of which would be the homeostatic “general system” itself—“late capitalism” for Jameson—that, through internal feedback-driven processes of natural selection, would reterritorialize—or domesticate—any mutation. For architecture, this would mean nothing authentically “new” under the sun, only slightly modified repetitions of existing archetypes comparable, for Jencks, to Le Corbusier’s *objets-types*, acting like what he calls “evolutionary universals.” Language becomes a primary example of this hypothesis, when Jencks asks, rhetorically, “What [i]f the linguistic universals that Noam Chomsky postulates underlie all natural languages, some of which would have to be built into any information-processing automata; or the structural universals which Lévi-Strauss contends can be found in every society?”²⁵

Lying between the concluding chapter of *Architecture 2000*

Kahn's, surprises are factored into the evolutionary equation, but under the guise of an open-ended pluralism where, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer once said about capitalist growth in general, "chance itself is planned."²⁸ The earlier chart also diagrams the deep structure of architectural history that organizes Jencks's later characterization of postmodernism just as it does his futurology: six great lineages persisting over time, crossbreeding along structural axes and yielding uninterrupted stylistic innovation while in effect still maintaining a status quo: evolution rather than revolution.

Minus the structuralism, the (albeit popularized) systems model as it persists in Jencks, with its emphasis on internal heterogeneity, bears some comparison to the far more rigorous emphasis on dissensus and paradox in Niklas Luhmann's notion of art as an autopoietic "social system." For Luhmann, all such systems maintain "organized complexity" in continual, dynamic evolution through recursive self-referentiality. Distinguished by the primacy of "second-order observations," made by an observer observing her- or himself or others observing the artwork, a distinctly "modern" (i.e., post-Enlightenment) art in this instance multiplies its terms of reference internally, while maintaining its systemic coherence or autonomy externally. Second-order observations work to increase differentiation through a paradox of observability: one can only observe oneself observing if one foregoes authentic, rooted "first-order observation" in favor of contingent "second-order observation." But, in distinction to Lyotard and, in a different sense, Jameson, and in accordance with the dynamics of the second-order or autopoietic cybernetics on which Luhmann relies, the unity of the system is maintained through its relentless drive to expand (for Luhmann: to "evolve"; for Jameson: "like capital"), through constrained innovation rather than consensus.²⁹ In the place of homeostatic balance is an apparently open-ended self-differencing, through which—again somewhat paradoxically—the "system" nevertheless consolidates itself, an effect read by Lyotard and other critics of Luhmann as a self-regulating postmodern twist on modernist administrative rationality.³⁰

Taken on their own, however, it would be difficult to say whether the traces of a systems model, which carry through into the postmodernism book as the architectural gene pool is described in more specifically linguistic terms, make Jencks himself more modern or more postmodern. Jameson, for his part, is content to treat Jencks as a spokesman for the postmodern in architecture who is nevertheless attuned to the persistence of the modern in its various guises. He further commends Jencks for emphasizing the manifest populism of postmodern architecture, which Jameson regards more as evidence of a crisscrossing of high and low, classical and vernacular, than as

a switch from one to the other. As is also typical in architectural discussions of postmodernism, Jameson makes no mention of the proto- or pseudoscientific pretensions underlying Jencks's "evolutionary trees." Given that the substance of Jencks's often contradictory and loose argument is not necessarily central to Jameson's overall thesis regarding architecture's postmodern credentials, this may not be an issue. Still, if we are to believe that what is called postmodernism in architecture, as represented discursively by works such as *Learning from Las Vegas* and *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, bears any relation to the "postmodern space" of distinctly nondiscursive buildings such as Portman's hotel, we must pursue the question further.



In his 1991 *Postmodernism*, Jameson also writes architecture into the late-capitalist equation through different channels, analyzing the early work of Frank Gehry as modeling, somewhat involuntarily and in the form of a spatial puzzle, the nearly ungraspable totality of the "power networks of so-called multinational capitalism itself."³¹ But if Jameson's vocation as a literary critic as well as his focus on postmodernism as a "cultural logic" may incline him to note the contemporaneous tendency of architectural theory toward proto-literary narrative analysis, perhaps we should insist on equal representation for *science*.

Much of what has passed as postmodernism in science has, from the point of view of its detractors at least, come precariously close to deserving the appellation "science fiction." When applied to scientific knowledge itself the phrase would be either an oxymoron, in the sense that science can by definition *never* be fiction, or quite the opposite—suggesting *all* science is, in a sense, fiction; that is, narrative, text, social construction. One figure who has traditionally been associated with the constructionist position, but who has also attempted to declare a sort of truce in the science wars by revising the terms of the debate, is the historian and philosopher of science Bruno Latour. Unwilling simply to transfer the source of scientific authority from a universalized "nature" to a relativized "culture," Latour has systematically explored the multifarious alliances between the two as constitutive of—rather than deviations from—the truth claims (and the truths) of science. So it may not be entirely fortuitous that Jameson reproduces Latour's 1984 list of sardonic synonyms for "the modern world," all of which exhibit a shared aversion to the impure, networked hybrids that Latour argues constitute the true firmament of scientific knowledge.³²

All the while eschewing the label postmodern, in *We Have Never Been Modern* of 1991, Latour designates as "nature-

cultures” the hybrid impurities on which a nonreductionist, nonessentialist, “nonmodern” science works. Their pragmatic, irreducible complexity joins these “quasi-objects” (Michel Serres) into networks of alliance and/or antagonism. These networks seem to reverse the breakdown of the signifying chain discerned by Jameson by making sense of otherwise senseless, schizoid juxtapositions found within such postmodern conditions as controversies over AIDS research as reported in newspapers—where “heads of state, chemists, biologists, desperate patients and industrialists find themselves caught up in a single uncertain story mixing biology and politics.”³³ In collecting hybrid networks into what he has elsewhere called “assemblies of assemblies,” Latour attempts to put them to work in the service of a constructive renovation of the institutions—or the “constitution”—of parliamentary democracy. Thus his proposal for an encompassing “parliament of things,” which overcomes the great nature/culture divide by bringing to the surface the political and scientific networks of humans and nonhumans—Donna Haraway’s “cyborgs”—that proliferate just beneath modernism’s dogmatic absolutes.

Latour intends this model to take the place of a representational one, whereby politics is a function of representatives making representations in a contractually limited space that presorts or divides materials into rigid classes of objects. Among these are nature, society, and discourse, which Latour contends

[t]he postmodern condition has recently sought to juxtapose . . . without even trying to connect them. If they are kept distinct, and if all three are separate from the work of hybridization, the image of the modern world they give is indeed terrifying: a nature and technology that are absolutely sleek; a society made up solely of false consciousness, simulacra, and illusions; a discourse consisting only in meaning effects detached from everything; and this whole world of appearances keeps afloat other disconnected elements of networks that can be combined haphazardly by collage from all places and all times. Enough, indeed, to make one contemplate jumping off a cliff.³⁴

Under Latour’s alternative model, the question of authenticity becomes a question of authentication in which truth is a function of testimony, record keeping, demonstration and counter-demonstration, and so on. And, though Latour makes no mention of architecture, like Jameson he relies on concrete spatial exemplars to make his case. Principal among these is the scientific laboratory, where apparently well-organized, objective experiments are seen to be highly mediated through—for example—the complex interplay of vacuum pumps, leaky gaskets, chicken feathers, annotation techniques, and the testimony of expert

witnesses that nevertheless yield something that can be called a scientific fact.³⁵ By virtue of their practical function within expansive philosophical and political debates, these facts, the veracity of which is authenticated pragmatically through their participation in nature-culture assemblages, in turn bear witness to the fact that “we live in communities whose social bond comes from objects fabricated in laboratories.”³⁶ Although the emphasis on contingency would at least seem to make Latour a relativist if not a postmodernist, he is quick to object that the semiotic turn that underwrote most postmodernisms (including the architectural variety) ascribed to language an undue degree of autonomy and thus overlooked its actual, mediating role in a field made up concretely of “quasi-objects” and “quasi-subjects,” or networks connecting politics, philosophy, vacuum pumps, leaky gaskets, chicken feathers, annotation techniques, and the testimony of expert witnesses. In other words, for Latour as for so many others, the problem of postmodernist semiotics is that its signs (and, we must assume, its decorated sheds) are insufficiently *real*.

Yet postmodern architects like Venturi and Scott Brown had already discovered the contrary in designing real scientific laboratories. By Latour’s own admission, the output of the late-twentieth century laboratory consisted mainly of linguistic elements, in the form of tables, charts, notes, data sets, reports, grant applications, refereed articles, and the like. In an early work devoted to this argument, he and his colleague Steve Woolgar documented field research in the anthropology of science they had performed at one such laboratory, which also happened to be a major work of late modernist architecture designed by Robert Venturi’s mentor, Louis Kahn: the Salk Institute for Biological Science in La Jolla, California.³⁷ The Salk Institute was representative of Kahn’s quest for an architecture of unmediated, metaphysical content—what Venturi would call a “duck.” It was among those modern institutions—including other scientific laboratories and a house of parliament—rendered by Kahn throughout his career as monuments that dug deep into architecture’s transhistorical reservoir of symbolic affect, manifest in the building’s ponderous concrete walls and poetically empty courtyard. Thus could Kahn describe the Salk Institute’s internal, spatial hierarchies as separating the realm of the “measurable” (the laboratory rendered as a utilitarian shell) from the “unmeasurable” (the offices and social spaces, rendered as a symbolic screen).³⁸ Such myths, both written and built, formed an important target of the postmodernist revolt personified by Venturi and Scott Brown and codified by Jencks, while also representing one of its most enduring models, as exemplified by the ongoing sponsorship Kahn received from Venturi’s supporter, the historian Vincent Scully. In contrast,

in their account of what they called “laboratory life” at Salk, Latour and Woolgar ignored architectural attempts to communicate. In place of such attempts was the architecture of taking notes, labeling samples, compiling data, inputting that data into computers (which only output more data), and so on.³⁹

“We shall emphasize image,” wrote Venturi and Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*.⁴⁰ And so they did. In many ways this process reached its apotheosis in a series of academic laboratories designed by the firm in the 1980s and 1990s which must be seen against the backdrop of those designed earlier by Kahn, including both the Salk Institute and the earlier Richards Medical Center at the University of Pennsylvania. In Venturi and Scott Brown’s “postmodern” laboratories, images applied to the surfaces of decorated sheds were inseparable from the life of the laboratory itself, inside and out. This corresponded with the thesis of “Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City,” an exhibition installed by Venturi and Scott Brown at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington in 1976. There, the lessons of Las Vegas regarding the iconography of a building’s exterior on “The Strip” and on “Main Street” were complemented with the interior iconography of “The Home,” in which everyday domestic objects and environments were decoded for their latent semiotic content. Venturi and Scott Brown brought this applied domesticity to their laboratory projects, most visibly at the Lewis Thomas Laboratory for Molecular Biology at Princeton University, completed in 1986.

The Princeton laboratory was designed in a collaboration with Payette Associates, a firm recognized for its technical expertise in the design of hospitals in the 1960s and 1970s, with Venturi and Scott Brown in charge of the outside of the building (its image) and Payette supervising the planning of the technically complex interior—a division of labor that, like the building, seemed to follow the logic of the decorated shed. The result was a variation on Kahn’s separation of the “measurable” space of the laboratory from the



“unmeasurable” symbolism dedicated to the external, social collective. Venturi described the laboratory in prosaic terms as a “generic loft building” designed for maximum flexibility, with a patterned façade adjusted to the visual rhythms of the adjacent campus buildings.⁴¹

But at either end of the building’s rectangular volume, Venturi and his colleagues had requested an anomaly in the spatial rhythms. Payette Associates complied by supplying small, informal lounges, intended to encourage social interaction among researchers in a field that exists only by virtue of its interdisciplinary linkages. These, along with many of the other details of the building’s interior, were executed by Venturi and Scott Brown in keeping with the user-friendly iconographic accessibility for which the firm had become known. Like the windows that are “frankly windows” at Guild House, those portions of the building’s interior devoted to socializing—also acknowledged by Latour and Woolgar (as well as by Venturi’s clients) as instrumental to the linguistic output of “laboratory life”—carried a rhetorical straightforwardness that Venturi described as “accommodating a permanent ambience where one anticipates the comfort of the familiar.” This was in contrast to the relative neutrality of the laboratory spaces themselves, which were flexible sheds designed to anticipate change in a “clutter of creative action, analytical, intuitive, physical” no different from the clamor of inscription Latour found at Salk.⁴²

Thus at Princeton, specialists in higher eukaryotes could socialize with specialists in lower eukaryotes in a soft, comfortable, Venturi-designed window nook, and those focusing on virology could share their insights over coffee with specialists in plants. The “signs of life” that Venturi and Scott Brown had read into suburban domesticity now helped organize the life of the scientific laboratory. To what end? Not only to domesticate science within the postmodern *oikos*, or home, offered by an ecology of codified images first mapped out—with scientific earnestness—by Jencks, but to feed such imagery back into science itself, as a functional necessity for the postmodern scientific innovation on which Lyotard wagered. Aesthetics and technoscientific knowledge are inseparable here—the lounges and other trimmings, and the “laboratory life” they represent, are more than mere ideology. They are real, in the operative sense that the building deploys the communicative functionality of images over and above the mechanized functionality of space. Whether modern or postmodern, Venturi and Scott

Opposite: Louis Kahn.
Salk Institute for Biological
Studies, La Jolla, California,
1965.

Below: Robert Venturi and
Denise Scott Brown.
Lewis Thomas Laboratory,
Princeton University,
Princeton, New Jersey, 1986.



Brown's laboratory architecture thus also conforms with Jencks's homeostatic project by translating a reassuring domesticity into the realm of the scientific imaginary—a familiar, fragile image of a home, supporting a schizoid, postmodern science presided over by nature-culture hybrids with interchangeable names like Genentech and Genzyme—in other words, science fiction.



The imaging of science would be carried forward in other laboratory commissions that fell to the Venturi and Scott Brown firm in the 1980s and 1990s. And if the instrumental feedback of positivist theories of social communication into the laboratory environment also seems to confirm Latour's early account of the laboratory as a social field that is constantly writing and rewriting itself, the difference is that by now architecture had entered the picture, making its own contribution to all the socializing, all the writing, all the "communication." But it had not entered the picture merely as a flexible loft space that accommodates these practices. Architecture had entered the agonistic field of postmodern science *as an image*—an image of domesticity, a sign of life, of couches, coffee, and community, the raw materials of the *oikos* of both economics and ecology.

An ecological model is also at the center of Latour's expanded "parliament of things" (or of nature-culture hybrids). But unlike Jencks's, Latour's ecology is not a naturalizing one. As elaborated elsewhere, it is a political ecology that refuses the reduction of nature to the terms of either of the two "eco" sciences—the "'warm, green' nature of the ecologists," or the "red in tooth and claw" law of the jungle of a fundamentalist economics.⁴³ In Latour's model, the naturalized *oikos*, or home, of both ecology and economy is split into two houses of parliament, in a "new bicameralism" that displaces the modernist partition of facts versus values onto two levels of political activity. The first house is charged with "taking into account" and with asking "How many are we?" by staging the manifold perplexities of hybridized nature-cultures as practical, always politicized questions of enumeration and verification, in which the pragmatic authentication of data replaces the metaphysics of authenticity. Meanwhile the second house is charged with asking the question "Can we live together?" and with arranging in rank order the priorities associated with each fact and each constituency.

Latour's proposition revolves around a new division of labor for professionals, a redistribution of "skills for the collective" in which each is expected to make an equal if distinct contribution. There are roles for scientists (to "make the world speak"), politicians (to mediate and compromise), economists (to model),

and moralists (to force the collective to see itself from the point of view of those who have been excluded).⁴⁴ But given that Latour follows this list with instructions for what he calls “the organization of the construction site” in preparation for erecting the new parliamentary edifice, it may surprise that he designates no role for architects. Rather, architects (including, perhaps, Latour himself) seem to perform a kind of metapolitics by constructing the space in which it all happens—again, a doubled-up house of parliament modeled on a scientific laboratory. According to its metaphorical architect, this new double house actually contains “flowing basins, as multiple as rivers, as dispersed as tributaries, as wild as the brooks on a map of France.” Before such multiplicities, camouflaged as houses, “no entity is asked to declare, before its propositions are taken seriously, whether it is natural or artificial, attached or detached, objective or subjective, rational or irrational” or, we can add, authentic or inauthentic.⁴⁵ Thus to postmodernist “multiculturalism” is added what Latour calls “multinaturalism,” and the science wars, far from being concluded, are extended into a “war of the worlds” that seeks to replace the transcendentalism of modernist science and the relativism of postmodernist multiculturalism with—again an architectural metaphor—the “common world to be built,” the *oikos* of both economy and ecology.⁴⁶

But here is Latour’s subterfuge, his rhetorical sleight of hand. Claiming that

I have no utopia to propose, no critical denunciation to proffer, no revolution to hope for. . . . Far from designing a world to come, I have only made up for lost time by putting words to alliances, congregations, synergies that already exist everywhere and that only the ancient prejudices kept us from seeing,

he takes architecture for granted.⁴⁷ That is, in contrast to Jameson, who perhaps overplays architecture’s antimetaphysical postmodernity, Latour treats it as a near-metaphysical constant by failing to take architecture’s own discourse and production into account as an element of the dynamic, non-modern assemblages he enumerates. Latour takes architecture for granted not only in the sense of the a priori spatial organization of politics into two houses but in the sense of the proliferation of images that architecture had historically and concretely become, including the architecture of the scientific laboratory. And yet, as a political ecologist supplying what he calls “the designation of the edifice to be built,” Latour assumes the duties of an architect, a custodian of the future who nevertheless refuses to name himself as such, who declares that it all exists already—in other words, an architect truly deserving

of the name: postmodern.

But if Latour's parliament is modeled on a scientific laboratory, his concluding propositions might be different if the architecture in question is seen less metaphorically and more literally. After all, since at least the 1970s what was called "ecology" amounted in political terms not to a set of imperatives drawn from direct experience of the ecosphere but from calculated assessments of *risk* generated in the laboratory—including the risk of ecological and/or economic catastrophe. Thus the linguistic units coming out of laboratories constitute, among other things, the actual, raw materials of a "risk society" and as such are comparable to the risk/reward calculations organizing Jameson's "colonization of the future."⁴⁸ In this light, the function of Jencks's evolutionary trees and of Venturi and Scott Brown's domesticated laboratories was to manage both the ontological and the practical risks—and both the crises of authenticity and of authentication—brought about by the recognition that signs, symbols, and images were real and not merely ideological decoration applied to utilitarian sheds. This, then, was and remains architecture's image problem: the problem of taking into account architecture-as-image. Not as some grand illusion or mere surface effect but as a concrete instrument that writes what we might call a science fiction—in this case about science itself.

Jameson, for his part, would find a different postmodernity in certain authors of science fiction. As with his appreciation of Herr's linguistic innovations in narrating the war in Vietnam in nonlinear antinarratives, Jameson sees in the writings of J.G. Ballard, for example, a way of narrating postmodern space-time. He associates Ballard's science fiction with what he calls a "spatialization of the temporal" imbued with a disaggregating tendency toward entropy⁴⁹—which is precisely the opposite of the anti-entropic, homeostatic naturalism of Jencks's evolutionary trees and of Venturi and Scott Brown's docile laboratories. And if, as Jameson is at pains to show, his privileging of architectural examples to describe this spatialization is not intended to restrict postmodern space-time to a leisure-entertainment experience, whether in Los Angeles or Las Vegas, Portman's hotel becomes a kind of science fiction architecture, a defamiliarized world unto itself in which the human subject is literally "lost in space."⁵⁰

In the mid-1970s, as architects like Venturi and Scott Brown were actively rejecting modernist utopias with their slogan "Main Street is almost all right," as Jencks was drawing up the family trees of "radical eclecticism," and as Latour was stalking scientists at the Salk Institute, Jameson was working through the utopian science fiction of Ursula Le Guin, among others. He concluded that Le Guin's ambivalent or even dark projections

of utopian socioecological experiments, such as the rough-and-ready anarchism of the planet Anarres in *The Dispossessed* (1974), are evidence not of “utopia as such, but rather our own incapacity to conceive it in the first place.”⁵¹

To Le Guin’s novels we can add the science fiction architecture of Venturi and Scott Brown, and many others climbing Jencks’s evolutionary trees, but in reverse. For what we have in the ecology of styles of which these laboratories and the discourse surrounding them form a part is a willing concession—a sigh of resignation—it is almost all right not to be able to imagine any alternative. Latour, the political ecologist, has attempted from the side of science to denaturalize a related system of signs without giving up entirely on their content. Projected onto Jencks, such a perspective would identify the trees on which his architectural “languages” hang—as well as the paradoxical teleology they uphold—as still belonging to the species “modern” for their uncontested naturalism. The same applies to Venturi and Scott Brown’s attempts to advance a theory of authentic architectural language attuned to messages coming from below. By contrast, if the scientific laboratory is among the sites in which modernity’s legitimation crises are played out and where a real, material struggle over signs and their meaning occurs, its architecture, too, must be among the variables in the post-postmodern equation.

After all, is it not possible to imagine that, with perfect reflexivity, the *politics* of political ecology might lie in some small part in the struggle over specifically and irreducibly *architectural* images—images of laboratories as images, perhaps—that actively reimagine and reorganize, rather than domesticate, the relation between nature and culture—*as images*? Far from constituting one more set of consumables for Jencks’s “radical eclecticism” and unlike those images that make up the *oikos*—the well-kept if more inclusive house of both ecology and economics on which Latour ultimately stakes his claim—such images could legitimately be called authentic. But their authenticity would lie neither in their immediate legibility nor in their free play. Instead, it would lie in their very real capacity to stir the imagination toward something different, something like what modernists used to call utopia, which to our tired, postmodern eyes might yet again be new.

Notes

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3. Fredric Jameson, foreword to *The Postmodern Condition*, by Lyotard, xvii.

4. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 87–90.

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6. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, 91.

7. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, 92.

8. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 87–88.

9. Jameson, "Postmodernism," 89.

10. Jameson, "Postmodernism," 54–55.

11. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Knopf, 1977), quoted in Jameson, "Postmodernism," 84.

12. Jameson, "Postmodernism," 84.

13. Jameson, "Postmodernism," 71–73.

14. Jameson, "Postmodernism," 79.

15. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 35.

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17. See Reinhold Martin, "Environment, c. 1973," *Grey Room* 14 (Winter 2004), 78–101; and Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

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19. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 127.

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21. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 185.

22. Charles Jencks, *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 32.

23. Jencks, *Architecture 2000*, 118.

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28. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993), 146. Jencks's source for the notion of "frameworks for speculation" and "surprise free" projections is Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Wiener, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).
29. Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), esp. ch. 2, 6. Jameson compares Luhmann's notion of differentiation with the differential expansion of capital in *A Singular Modernity*, 89.
30. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 61–62.
31. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 127.
32. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 378–379. The chart is from Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 207.
33. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.
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37. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1979).
38. Louis Kahn, *What Will Be Has Always Been: The Words of Louis I. Kahn*, ed. Richard Saul Wurman (New York: Access Press/Rizzoli, 1986), 216.
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41. Robert Venturi, "Thoughts on the Architecture of the Scientific Workplace: Community, Change, and Continuity," in *The Architecture of Science*, ed. Peter Galison and Emily Thompson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 390.
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43. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 132.
44. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 136–161.
45. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 165, 161.
46. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 220.
47. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 163.
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50. See Mark Wigley, "Lost and found," in *You Are Here: Architecture and Information Flows*, ed. Laura Kurgan and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1995), 171–185.
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