

The Story of **POST-MODERNISM**
Charles Jencks

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Five Decades of the Ironic, Iconic and Critical in Architecture
Charles Jencks



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To all those who have resisted the false imperative of the zeitgeist.

Front cover: Madelon Vriesendorp (artwork) and Charles Jencks (iconography), *The Cosmic Eye Sees Post-Modernism: Fifty Years, Five Traditions*. Reading left to right are a few of the streams discussed in this book: Contextual Counterpoint, Patterned Ornament, Iconic Building and Landforms. Pondering Rem Koolhaas' *The City of the Captive Globe*, 1978, the cosmic eye reflects on natural metaphors as they float through the heavens, just as Claude Nicolas Ledoux prophesied: 'There is the architect, up among the whirlwinds and clouds that battle to dominate the skies.'
(*L'architecture ...*, Vol I, p 195.)

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Louis Kahn, *Salk Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, California, 1962-5*

One of the first Cosmic Landscapes of Post-Modernism, this court frames the sun's axis with its water channel and walls of rustic teak and concrete. The laboratories are open, collective spaces, but each individual study looks out to the Pacific Ocean as the scientist tries to decode nature's secrets. Horizon lines of architecture complete those of the sky and water. As Frank Gehry said, 'the Modern Movement was all mechanical, that's why the Post-Modern thing happened ... and Lou Kahn was kind of a breath of fresh air of that [new movement] in America and my first works come out of my reverence for him.' Quoted from film, *My Architect*, 2004, by Nathaniel Kahn.



Post-Modernism Resurgent?

Since the Millennium Post-Modernism, in all but name, has returned as a major movement in the arts. How has this happened? With the revisiting of ornament and pattern-making in architecture and the arts, the explosive growth in iconic buildings and landmark sculptures-works that are symbolic and highly communicative – many of the post-modern concerns of the 1970s and 1980s have become central to society.

Most importantly, pluralism has been accepted as the global order of cultures, the post-modern commitment to the many-voiced discourse that the contemporary novel celebrates. At any international art fair such as London's *Frieze*, over a hundred approaches are evident, and today in the world of architecture this market pluralism is almost as rich and tolerant of difference. Market diversity may not realise the post-modern ideal of political toleration, but it is an improvement on the dominance of one cultural mode, whether Classical, national or Modern.

Beyond revisiting ornament, iconography and pluralism there are other post-modern 'returns', some which remind one of the old definition of 'revolution': 'to revolve back' to a better past. The origin of this metaphor, planetary revolutions, also underscores the fact that the cosmic world view is an example of such a post-modern return. It is an inspiration for some architects designing iconic buildings, a subject I will look at in conclusion. But each chapter treats of the re-emergent themes such as a 'new complexity theory'; or the way urban areas can be stitched together by a 'contextual counterpoint', two more key ideas I highlight in this resurgent tradition.

What is a typical Post-Modern building? One that is hybrid, one that dramatises the mixture of opposing periods – the past, present and future – to create a miniature 'time-city'. Hence it is based on multiple codes, combining Modern universal technology and local culture, in a recognisable

'double-coding', its characteristic style. The typical Post-Modern building speaks on several levels at once, to high and low culture, and acknowledges the global situation where no single culture can speak for the entire world. Heightened communication is thus a goal, conveying heightened consciousness of our plural situation. A PM classic is James Stirling's addition to the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. Its double-coding mixes Modern elements with traditional and vernacular ones, three styles sometimes compete on one facade. But the irony is that Stirling uses High-Tech decoratively, to tell the visitor how to move through this complex site. Brightly coloured steel is thus used as symbolic ornament while traditional masonry works best as temperature control: such inversions in Post-Modernism always make you smile with their knowing irony.

However, for an architectural movement evolving over 50 years, no building can encompass its rich variety, or be typical. Those constructed in the 1980s, like Stirling's, may feature opposite codes, but the wider tradition with which I am concerned may use different tactics to achieve similar ends. Today, for instance, digital ornament and complexity are folded into a seamless whole, although the goal is still to heighten communication and encompass difference.

James Stirling and Michael Wilford, *Neue Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, 1977-84*

High-Tech marks the route and entrances, Classical banded forms touch the ground, while vernacular stucco makes up most of the scheme and ties it into the neighbourhood. A classic case of contextual counterpoint.



Moreover, as an unfinished movement of five decades, Post-Modernism is still contentious, and critics disagree over its meaning. The different spellings reflect this, including the streamlined version of a single word, Postmodernism. Yet, since critics agree that the designation refers to the era of pluralism *after* Modernism, I prefer the *hyphenated* version, a spelling that underscores its double-coding. It is of course tiresome to reread the same phrase again and again, so I will refer to pm, lower case, when it is a general social phenomenon, PM when it is the artistic or cultural movement, and PoMo when it is the mass-cultural genre, or even kitsch. Need it be said that the era of post-modernity only refers to a *minority* of culture where Modernism, modernisation and modernity are still the desired states of much of the globe?

Post-Modernism or PM = The artistic or cultural movement

PoMo = the mass cultural genre

pm = the general social phenomenon

And it is even more plural than that. From an anthropological viewpoint 50 per cent of the world is emerging from a village and agrarian culture. Some 50 per cent, according to widely disseminated United Nations statistics,¹ now live in cities, but in places like India 80 per cent still work the land. Furthermore, in the world of architecture the Neo-Traditions are on the rise with a Modern Classicism. So let us leave behind dreams (and nightmares) of an integrated world civilisation and acknowledge the valid parallel cultures that Post-Modernism has admitted into its pantheon.

The Back Story

Behind the architecture and the arts there are four large forces – social, economic, technical and ecological – that have shaped this 50-year period and in another 50 years historians will no doubt understand this background much better than we do. I will not foreground it and am concerned with the emergent arts, individual architects and a host of small groups seeking modest goals. Occasionally, however, such things as the leading economic pressures will be mentioned and how relatively powerless architects are in their dealing with the four forces. Like politicians, they may pretend to be in charge and shape society – this is a large part of their hope and mental equipment – but it is mostly an accident if they do so.

We live, globally at least, in a period where the 500 largest transnationals, and a few sovereign funds and nations, control most of the world finance and trade (if control is the proper word for the credit crunch). Ironically, and that word is never far from the pages of this book, bankers were called several times, in this period, The Masters of the Universe, and they indeed paid themselves accordingly; but they were

clearly out of control. Yet what bankers financed – giant architecture and the bigger art market – has had an effect that must be noted in the back story to the forward Story of Post-Modernism. Imagine the average, large iconic building of 1920s capitalism, the Chrysler or Empire State Building. They housed a million square feet and cost, say, \$500 million in today's terms. This is one-third of the size of present leviathans.

Le Corbusier called the grand masters of his time ‘captains of industry’ and this metaphor served Modernism quite well in designing them big buildings that looked like ships. Historians point out that the Ford Motor Company and, even more, General Motors were the quintessential Modern institutions and, again, Le Corbusier crafted an architecture built on their principles of Taylorisation and repeated mass production. ‘You can have any Ford as long as it is stereotyped.’ The mental set, institutional arrangements and technical production that went with General Motors became *the* way to think about success and the future, before it became the dinosaur we know today, to be propped up by deficit spending and Chinese money.² By contrast, post-modernisation has meant the electronic global village since the 1960s, Google since the 2000s, and mass *customisation* since the computer created Post-Fordism (sometime in the 1980s).

I will assume this back story and only occasionally point out how post-modern digital creation and production are changing architecture, ornament and pattern making. I should also mention here, because also it will recur in passing, the enormous change in scale of commissions. Under Late Capitalism the super-large contracts of the Empire State Building have become the giga-large commissions of Dubai. The Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the world's largest skyscraper, is more than twice the size of its 1930s predecessors and cost roughly three times their amount, or

\$1.5 billion. Another mega-project in Las Vegas, called City Center and financed partly from Dubai, cost a bankrupting \$8.5 billion. Major architects tried to tame this Las Vegas beast and may not have succeeded. I do not blame them for trying to improve leviathans, deal with conglomerate clients and packaged financial instruments, CDOs and CDSs, 'instruments of mass destruction' that Warren Buffett and George Soros are trying hard to understand (and failing). This is the background to our time and iconic building and instead of be labouring the point and failures I concentrate on the successes.

At the same time another large, social shift might be considered positive. Instead of being corporate buildings as they were in the 1950s, the leading building tasks tend to be culture centres, museums and national landmarks. Or, where commerce is setting the pace, as with automobile corporations in Germany, they have become like the BMW temple and Mercedes shrine the new cathedrals of a secular culture. The museum as cathedral, and the avant-garde as its priestly class, was proposed in the 19th century, and while this shift affords many possibilities for architectural invention and expression, its iconological implications have to be mentioned. Iconology is the study of hidden and underlying symbols, iconography the explications of conscious intentions and conventions, and such terms will recur throughout this investigation because they are very important to communication and the story of post-modernism. But, again, I will only touch on these subjects in passing, not deal with them in depth.

This is a survey of an architectural movement within a plural world culture and of necessity must sketch some major subjects of the much bigger picture: that is, what I take to be those issues and buildings. Not only is the back story of post-modernism one of a shift in size, money, building type, electronic production and iconology, but it is

one of place: from the West towards the East, and China. I will cover only part of this, obviously, but, perhaps more than most contemporary historians, I have visited much. I have walked through something like 90 per cent of the buildings discussed, and photographed almost all of them. Historical writing would stop if the writer had to visit every building, and my photographs are not as technically proficient as those of the professionals, but at least they are fresh and make my points. So there are trade-offs involved. But I have learned a lesson through the historians I have been fortunate to know, and sometimes study with - Sigfried Giedion, Eduard Sekler, Joseph Rykwert, Reyner Banham and Vincent Scully. To be honest to a building, to love its virtues and understand its failures, to feel its place in the landscape and city, one has to go there, to see and to feel. Architecture is like a person. If you write on someone you have never met it is one kind of research project, engaging with the remains of evidence and your own historical imagination. By contrast, an authorised biography of a living subject can be persuasive and passionate in all the wrong kinds of way; and a building can trick and seduce you momentarily, too. But woe to the commentator who treats architecture as an illustration for his theories alone, and never responds to its actual charm and mysteries, its use, living style and place: bloodless, sexless, pluperfect history Reyner Banham called it.

Some Debts Acknowledged

My involvement with the characters and buildings of Post-Modernism has been constant since the 1960s, and continues to be so. Since I first used the term polemically in 1975, borrowing a negative usage from literature and

turning it positive, I have been a participant, partisan and sometime critic of PM architecture. The seven books on the subject mentioned shortly came after my debates in Holland, 1975, and articles published there. The first writing in Britain was 'The Rise of Post-Modern Architecture', published in the *Architectural Association Quarterly*, 1975, where I was teaching. Since then I have lived close to many of the architects, events and building moments - such as the Bilbao Effect - described in this narrative. EH Gombrich, who mentioned Post-Modernism in later editions of his *Story of Art*, influenced my thinking, as did so many others mentioned in the text and footnotes.

In this book I have tried to strike a balance between narrative and brief analysis. These are very awkward, jealous and demanding twins for the historian, as Gombrich pointed out. Each has to be given its due but also kept in check, lest the story and time outdistance the thought, or vice versa. The same is true of the other competitive siblings of history, the balance between celebrating buildings and criticising them, or understanding the architect's intentions, but seeing behind them.

Writings of my own that I have drawn on include several books on Post-Modernism. Among the major ones there is *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 1977, and later versions through to the seventh edition, rewritten as *The New Paradigm in Architecture*, 2002. *Post-Modern Classicism, an Architectural Design* of 1980 became a book of art and architecture in 1985. *What is Post-Modernism?* first was a talk in Germany published in 1985, and its fifth, expanded edition was rewritten entirely as *Critical Modernism*, 2007. *The Post-Modern Reader*, 1992, and second edition 2011 contains my overview of the post-modern condition as a whole. Finally, *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe*, 1995, and *The Iconic Building*, 2005, bring up the iconographic and cosmic themes of the

movement. Common threads continue throughout these changing editions, or 'evolotomes' as I call them, because they do evolve with events. The continuous strands stress the linguistic role of architecture and its plural audience as well as the ironic returns to ornament, metaphor and history. As for the science, it relates to complexity theories and the story of the universe, our cosmic iconography.

So there are many debts, some acknowledged here and some hiding between the lines. The photographs that are not my own were often given to me by the architects, and are so noted. Where there is a known photographer they are credited. As for the bumpy words of this book, as several of the recent ones, they have benefited from the sharp eyes of my editor at Wileys. Helen Castle, who initiated the idea of *The Story of Post-Modernism*, has as usual ironed out many of the wrinkles. My wife Louisa Lane Fox and Denise Bratton have also suggested changes. They have been helpful with correcting my misguided judgements and facts. And my PA Gillian Innes, Caroline Ellerby, Tom Windross and Andrea Bettella have helped with the photos and layout of the book. Following the poet Don Paterson's thanks to his astute proofreaders, who excised the larger infelicities, I would like to say that all the mistakes that remain are entirely their fault. But I own the blunders, and am grateful for their judicious advice.

And Especially Madelon

Exceptional thanks goes to Madelon Vriesendorp, with whom I have worked since 1995 on a few landscape models and many drawings. Her painting for the cover, showing five different streams of post-modernism, captures the colourful and vigorous pluralism of these movements as well as their cosmic setting. As CN Ledoux prophesied, 'There is the architect, up among the whirlwinds and clouds that battle to

dominate the skies,' and Madelon has shied neither from this galactic battle nor the watchful eye of the universe. Her inventive wit is also evident in the way she summarises a building's gesture in the white on black drawings throughout this book, combining caricature with analytical visual thinking. Together we have sketched some of the metaphors I and other critics have applied to iconic buildings. We have tried to find the underlying image, or suggestive detail – always a search with the pen. But the drawings, except in a few instances, are hers.

They highlight analogies that are either obvious, or implicitly coded, in parts of a structure. Semiotics, the theory of signs, contends that the *iconic sign* communicates through a relationship 'in *some* respects' between two entities, for instance the sound and sense in poetry. For architecture the iconic sign can be in the shape, overall image or a few details; but one must remember the warning 'in some respects', and add another insight of semiotics. The 'some respects' also depend on the codes of the viewer, and the mood, since the same iconic shapes can turn haters into iconoclasts. As for the genre of sketching metaphors, it reveals cartoons for thought not the final word on the worth of a building. My view of the iconic building's value, and its enigmatic signifier, depends on the subtle ambiguities of veiled meanings and this is why there are many shown by Madelon, not one. It is how they relate to a building's greater task and context that is the crucial thing, its multiple meaning.

Part I

The Perfect Storm of Post-Modernism

Herzog & de Meuron, *CaixaForum*, Madrid, 2001-8

This building summarises several post-modern themes with its contextual counterpoint and recycling of the older building, its stitching together of the urban fabric and expressing the green imperative, its appeal to history and the future, with its ironic signs dramatising the old and new.



On 30 October 1991 at 7am US Eastern Standard Time, a gathering storm reached maximum force. Thirty-nine-foot

waves crashed over sea walls, boats sank, a fisherman was blown from a bridge in New York, and mansions along the Upper East Coast were drowned in horizontal rain. Popularly this was the 'Halloween Storm', because it played havoc over this period of obligatory play. But, the five-day event was officially termed the 'perfect storm' by the US National Weather Service, and it was this phrase that captured the public's imagination leading to the bestseller of Sebastian Junger and the film that followed it.

'Perfect' meant a rare combination of things that came into focus at the same time, a confluence of various events. A very cold, high pressure front came in from Canada and cut the legs off a very low, hot front - Hurricane Grace - moving up from the south. Grace zigzagged towards the land but was finally pulled into the rotating cyclone located east of Cape Cod. These two spirals combined energies as they were fed by the summer heat stored off Florida. The ocean waves were whipped up to ever larger size by winds that lasted over five days. And then the full moon gave an extra twist of gravity to this vicious cocktail, as the two storms became one big perfection. Thus the largest flood banks of the Eastern seaboard were broken, as indeed the largest flood records.

Happily, this ill wind blew somebody good. It gave journalists an apt metaphor for economic collapse that has served the world well since 2007, and its storm clouds provide me with the silver lining of an explanation. That is, how in the mid-1970s, the most forceful streams of architecture suddenly coalesced into a river flood that burst its banks to become a spreading delta with a common force. The Perfect Delta? It does not sound as effective as Storm, but it conveys a better idea - the shared pluralism gathering around the confluence of powerful trends.

This mutual focus was soon called Post-Modernism, and it became a movement in the arts, sciences, philosophy and

one of the strongest developments in recent architecture, outlasting all the other 'isms'. Indeed, it became one of the few global cultural movements to be initiated and led by architecture, for a very good reason. Architecture, as we will see, faces the problems of Modernism more directly than the other arts: the dilemmas of bigness, mass production, anonymous living and neutral agnosticism. 'The Dumb Box', that famous blank character dominating every downtown since the 1960s, was to be lampooned and vilified many times. And, as we will see, there are many post-modern alternatives, from the ad hoc collage of difference to the computerised synthesis of complexity, from contextual counterpoint to iconic buildings. These are just four rejoinders to modern alienation, four themes of this book. But, it is important to acknowledge that, like many of the other attendant problems of Modernism, looked at with adjusted spectacles they were, paradoxically, a mark of success. After all, the neutral architecture of the business world was not just what Norman Mailer called it - 'empty landscapes of psychosis' - but an actual *goal* for many Modernists.¹

Le Corbusier, *Villa Savoye*, Poissy, 1929-31

Modernism, during its Heroic Period of the 1920s, was an expressive and creative movement that adopted the metaphor of the machine. Le Corbusier's epigram 'the house is a machine for living in' was here translated into a white cube elevated above the landscape with the ground floor determined by the turning circle of the owner's automobile. The cosmic roofscape and *promenade architecturale* were themes taken up later by Post-Modernists.





So, in telling the story of Post-Modern architecture (or PM, or PoMo, among its aliases) one must keep in mind an important truth of pluralism: the acknowledgement of difference in all its wonderful and horrible richness. With this complex truth comes a necessary mental set: irony. *Positive*, enjoyable irony, not its negative and exploitive first cousin, cynicism. One must remember that Post-Modernism is the direct son or daughter of Modernism and like all offspring owes a lot to its parent - above all the duty to criticise the family mess. It is the loyal and sometimes disagreeable opposition. As Oscar Wilde observed of the past, the one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it, and with pleasure one might add. So, let us survey the growth of the Perfect River Delta with affection but irony, aware of the fact that all rivers carry mud and that the slippery tributaries of PoMo can be as dirty as their parent, Modernism. I believe the former is often an improvement on the latter - and this book will so argue - but sometimes it is just as bad. PM irony is not an optional extra, but a friendly companion to keep in

mind as we examine the forces that coalesced into a global movement in the arts.

The Moral Failures of Modernism

The Pioneers of the Modern Movement (capitalised like religious prophets) were idealistic, left-leaning and good healthy men. In the 1920s they built a few masterpieces of the new white architecture – Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion, the social housing of Ernst May, Walter Gropius’ Bauhaus, a hospital of Alvar Aalto, some private houses of Le Corbusier. Their forging of a new tradition, the International Style, and their forum for debate, CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne), were positive moves creating a public realm. When started on their ‘Crusade’, as Le Corbusier himself was to style The Faith of The New, they had good intentions. But, by the 1930s, as the Reactionary Modernism of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco and Stalin gained strength, something began to go wrong and part of the problem was philosophical.

Within Modernism there was a strong belief in the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age, the idea that history had an inevitable, impersonal force that must triumph over individuals and morality. Hitler believed in this force of destiny, and so did his henchman Goebbels who often appealed to the zeitgeist: ‘It is the most essential principle of our victoriously conquering movement that the individual has been dethroned.’² Mies had emphasised a related impersonal force of technology – ‘the individual is losing significance; his destiny is no longer what interests us’. And Le Corbusier constantly expressed a similar form of determinism in his calls to action. A typical one declares:

'industry, overwhelming us like a flood which rolls on towards its destined ends, has furnished us with new tools ...'

Nikolaus Pevsner, a leading historian of the movement, celebrated the new abstract architecture for its cold impersonality. He ends his history, *The Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936), with the most telling slip of the pen: 'However, the great creative brain will find its own way even in times of overpowering collective energy, even with the medium of this new style of the twentieth century, which, because it is a genuine style as opposed to a passing fashion, is totalitarian.' Later he toned down the title of his book to *Pioneers of Modern Design*, changed his praiseworthy 'totalitarian' to 'universal', and, ironically, was forced by what he called 'passing fashion' to exhume his footnotes and resurrect Gaudí and Sant'Elia into the main text.³ He even graced the cover of the book with images of his dreaded enemy Art Nouveau - the very style he had condemned as passing fashion!

Antonio Gaudí, *Casa Batlló*, Barcelona 1904-5

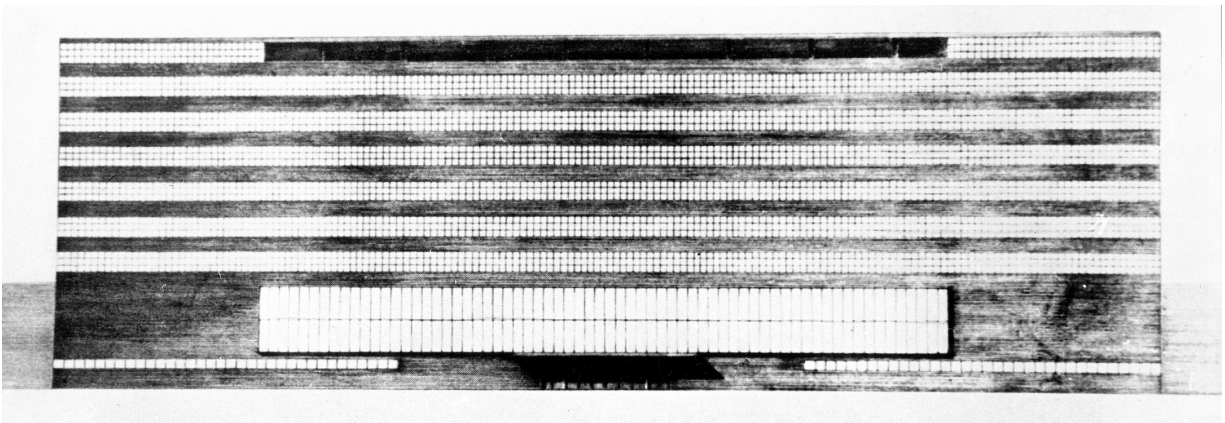
Known as 'the House of Bones', it represented Catalan victims who lived and died under Castilian rule. Such metaphorical architecture, organised as a narrative throughout the building, influenced the Post-Modern iconic building.





Mies van der Rohe, *Reichsbank Project*, 1934

The dark abstract curtain wall and remorseless repetition are harbingers of a darker International Style built in the USA, where Mies emigrated in 1937. Even in a 1930 speech in Vienna, Mies made explicit overtures to the zeitgeist: 'Let us accept changed economic and social conditions as a fact. All these take their blind and fateful course.'



'Passing Fascism?' The connection between fashion and totalitarian attitudes is no joke, and it was another refugee from Hitler who exposed these connections in a full-bodied attack on the idea of the zeitgeist, and its victims. Karl Popper wrote two epochal assaults on this mindset. The more philosophical showed how it was epitomised by Plato, and was called *The Open Society and Its Enemies, The Spell of Plato*. The earlier critique of the zeitgeist was a short paper first delivered at the time Pevsner was writing, in 1936, called 'The Poverty of Historicism'. Published as a book in 1957, it has had a great effect on post-modern theory, and was dedicated: 'In memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist or communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.'⁴

Both Pevsner and Popper, Jews who had assimilated into Christian society, were themselves semi-victims of this belief in 'the spirit of the age', as was Ernst Gombrich, the famous art historian. Because of anti-semitic restrictions on teaching, Gombrich emigrated to England in 1937 and, like Popper, he ceaselessly attacked the notion of the zeitgeist.

The irony, today more apparent than in the 1930s, was that this malign concept was largely shared by all sides, as my quotes above suggest. Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin - the totalitarians - believed in the spirit of the age, as did Le Corbusier, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Nikolaus Pevsner.