

THE COSMIC SPECULATION OF CHARLES JENCKS

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

The sense of panicked creativity and relentless production in the MARCH studio of the University of Ulster took a break on the 10th of March 2011 as eminent architecture theoretician Charles Jencks offered the students a space for the contemplation of what we do as architects and of our position in the cosmos as human beings.

A guest of the Landscape Institute NI, Mr. Jencks visited the University as part of the Institute's spring lecture series, but also spent the morning in the studio discussing several student projects and sharing his views on the field as he went.

During the discussions it became obvious that Mr. Jencks has a sixth sense for architectural discourse, incising projects in a way that exposes the lineage of the thoughts latent in a piece of architecture, certainly not employed knowingly by the student in question. One particular student was criticised for employing "nostalgic modernism," an interesting contradiction whereby the atheistic, anti-aesthetic modernist movement becomes both dogmatic and an aesthetic in itself.

After several informal design reviews we were treated to a panel discussion chaired by Dr. Taina Rikala, who, like Mr. Jencks, studied under the great Reyner Banham. Dr Rikala touchingly began the discussion by producing one of Banham's famous handkerchiefs, and her obvious friendship with Mr. Jencks led to an incredibly intimate and personal conversation.

There was a poignant moment when the topic of the 'Maggie's Centres' was raised. Mr. Jencks recalled the long commute with

his wife Maggie for chemotherapy which sparked the idea of the internationally renowned cancer treatment facilities and described the story of the centers as a 'story of friendships,' where the great and the good of architecture pledged their time and talent with no promise of financial return.

Mr. Jencks's evening lecture was dominated by his work as a landscape architect as opposed to the theorising he is perhaps more famous for. Beginning with his Garden of Cosmic Speculation in Dumfries, the designer described a landscape laden with symbolism relating to waveforms, fractals, particle physics, the locations of the planets and Scottish history. The story of the garden felt rather unconvincing, with much of the symbolism feeling rather clumsy and lacking subtlety. A similar design carried out for the site of CERN's hadron collider in Geneva felt much more convincing, perhaps because it possesses a particular purpose and program, something which the Scottish garden appears to lack.

Returning to his discussion of theory, Mr. Jencks discussed the new paradigms created by theoretical science and the failure of scientific language to realise what these shifts entail for our understanding of ourselves. Illustrating this point, the final slide showed a computer generated image of the universe which Mr. Jencks had sketched on, connecting dots and highlighting patterns. He described this game as "examining a latent structure that may or may not exist. This is what society is, and this is what architecture tries to do." ●

Andrew Molloy
Photos – Roy Fitzpatrick

Below / Charles Jencks and UU lecturer Paul Clarke discuss student Vincent McIluff's alternative proposal for the Titanic quarter

Right / Student Ciaran Brown receiving feedback on his docks based scheme

Below left / A packed house for the panel discussion

