Critical Modernism is an idea whose time has come. The temperature of daily life is going up, and it isn’t just global warming. Problems of an advanced civilisation are now understood to be chronic, a byproduct of success: pollution, congestion and the lack of wilderness, clean water and solitude. Many such problems are caused by overpopulation, but the more a country is modernised the more endemic they are because they spring from the same Pandora’s Box: a growing economy and the complexity of its interconnections. It is usually called by one, or all, of the three M-words, Modernity, Modernisation and Modernism. These come as a cohesive bundle. Once a country has a modernising economy and technology, they acquire a style and ideology of progressive modernity, and a culture of modernism. That has been true in the west since, surprisingly, the fourth century. Then the Christians tried to modernise the pagan world of Rome and uttered the hopeful injunction *modernus.* With the “good” *maniera moderna* recommended by Filarete and Vasari in the Renaissance and the rise of global capitalism at the same time, the 3-M’s have tightly coupled ever since.

Irrespective of labels, with the evolution of society problems multiply until they reach a critical mass or critical bifurcation point. This truth has been illuminated by the science of “self-organising criticality” and become widely known in several examples – the Perfect Storm, the stock-market crash, and the nuclear chain reaction. It also helps explain why, when modernism is so ubiquitous today, and in such previously undeveloped places as Dubai, it is likely to become self-consciously critical, a Modernism\(^2\) or Modernism\(^3\). Reflecting on the problems caused by oneself is an introspection likely to make one more mature, ironic and sceptical – in a word critical. Consider those who have a well-developed culture of fixing their own self-inflicted problems, that is, architects and builders. Wisely they have internalised a set of nostrums that deal with Pandora’s Troubles. “Murphy’s Law”, or the customary fact that “anything that can go wrong will go wrong,” is not only true of the building trade, but finds its counterpart in military and political equivalents (SNAFU is the most famous, “situation normal, all f... up”). That is the usual condition of the modern world, and that message is around.

* The essay “Why Critical Modernism?” has been reprinted here by the kind permission of the author. It replaces a presentation of the same title made at the Workshop by Charles Jencks.
Scepticism

In the 1960s the young generation became sceptical because of the lies politicians told about Vietnam. In the 2000s there was no draft and hence no generational disenchantment, but today because Iraq young and old know their politicians are lying. According to YouGov and other polls of February 2007, 16% of the British believed Prime Minister Blair was telling the truth, 50% that Britain had gotten worse over the last year and that the country will be a still worse place to live in five years. The verdict? Widespread disenchantment, private wealth and public squalor, give them bread and circuses. By 2007 most had accepted their leader was “Tony Bliar”, that Blying was common, that Cash for Honours was the norm. The choice was clear: either be cynical or critical.

In architecture and planning, the sceptical Jeremy Paxman of BBC Newsnight cross-examined the man who put in the winning bid for the London Olympics. Was it not strange, Paxman asked, that this bid was economical with the truth, that the estimate sprawled from £3 to £6 to £9 and then some billions? “Well, it won’t it?” That was the brazen answer of a government committed to Blying, and in this case making the arts community pay for the bread, circus and expensive architecture. John Tulsa and those dependent on art grants were not amused. Lies about Iraq are only the most public form of general disenchantment.

Bush portrait from US war dead, 2004, anonymous picture of the President made from photos of the first 1000 Americans killed. The “excess” Iraqi dead, continuously suppressed by governments, was estimated in 2006 by independent experts at 655,000. Where denial exists, Critical Modernism uses cool description. (Artist unknown, circulated on the Internet).
Angry serene

When 84% of a country believe its Prime Minister is only loosely connected to the truth, you can bet scepticism has become the reigning style and habit of mind. Such moods change the arts and architecture. Since Look Back in Anger and the Angry Young Man of the 1950s, since Francis Bacon’s characters writhed in cages and Brutalism dominated the housing scene, more recently since Martin Amis and Damien Hirst augmented this tradition, the art of anger has been a primary mode. With Brit Art it is as common as, in the 19th century novel, the blush on the cheek of a virgin. The point for a Critical Modernism is that if chronic problems with modernisation and anger can be assumed, if they are widespread and now completely conventional, then the critical need not be the choleric. The new style is controlled, not the sullen but the Angry Serene. Damien Hirst adopts this mode in his best work, his “crucifixions of nature” (flayed sheep on the cross), a comment on Francis Bacon. The American artist Brian Tolle is ultra cool in his depictions of a country divided into the blue and red States, by the 2004 presidential election.

In the city where Critical Modernism has developed furthest, Berlin, the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang has created an installation that is a composed response to the terrors and catastrophes of modernity. Ninety-nine wolves jump across space – the ultimate image of herd mentality – and hit the glass wall. Using gunpowder to create explosion paintings typifies the Angry Serene. Cai gathers a crowd of onlookers in a gallery courtyard, places stencils of wolves on a huge canvas, sets off a controlled explosion, then displays the blackened silhouettes as if they were art works lifted from Lascaux. Nothing is more raw and primitive than this, nothing as sophisticated. The Angry Serene depends for its charge on presenting the nastiness and horror of the modern world with an unruffled professionalism. No wonder these artists look to Renaissance sprezzatura, when skill at making the difficult look easy was also admired.
Cai Guo-Qiang, Head On, a three-part installation at the German Guggenheim, Berlin, 2006. A wolf pack leaps to the attack, only coming to its downfall when it hits the glass wall. The drawing (above) Vortex, was created by detonating varieties of gunpowder (seen in the explosion) below stencils of wolves, thus giving the ghost image of a prehistoric cave painting. The 99 life-size wolves were constructed from painted sheepskins stuffed with hay and given marble eyes. (C. Jencks)

Cross-coding

Except for Hiroshima, Berlin is the city that suffered the most under modernity so it is no surprise that it has some of the best works of Critical Modernism. There are the many monuments to war and occupation, the two prominent Holocaust memorials by Daniel Libeskind and Peter Eisenman, and the paintings and sculpture of Anselm Kiefer. That a major
art has emerged from catastrophe is no small feat. More important, that the Germans have faced and debated their recent past in the Bundestag and allowed these unwelcome facts to be memorialised right in the heart of parliament (with Russian graffiti) shows that denial and lying need not dominate public discourse. There is now a style of acknowledging the past, displaying the facts without rhetoric, that is typified by Eisenman’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Abstract, descriptive and neutral it calls on the ubiquitous white cube of 1920s modernism, although here in Berlin to symbolise the dead they are grey cubes and in the form of graves. That makes the modern cliché iconic, semantic, gives it a spiritual role more than its meaning as the aesthetic of emptiness.

The critical approach stems as much from the complexities of contemporary life as it does the problems and tragedies. Hence if one were to list the canonic works of Critical Modernism they would include the buildings that have emerged through algorithmic design, specifically the complex ones. The most striking example of this is Toyo Ito and Cecil Balmond’s 2002 Serpentine Pavilion a perfect answer to Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion because it shows the new interest in the fractal geometry of nature, forms that mirror the processes of the cosmos. Generated by the algorithm of an expanding and rotating square, this simple formula is allowed to create a very complex, self-similar geometry in plan, elevation, section and detail.

Toyo Ito and Cecil Balmond, Serpentine Pavilion, London 2002. A clear use of a simple algorithm to generate a beautiful structure. This is modified in colour, size and shape to capture its natural green and blue setting in a striking way. (C.Jencks)
Just as the simple formula of the Mandelbrot Set, \( Z = Z^2 + C \), creates the most unified form of variety, a symbol of nature’s complexity, so too does this rotating square. Computer design has now made the generation of complexity more economical and so the convention of Critical Modernism is to take several algorithms and cross-code them at once. Eisenman’s City of Culture in Santiago typifies the mixed coding.

What makes it more critical than the usual computer design is the way that conflicting codes with historical and cultural meaning play as much of a role as functional ones. To think critically is to set one set of ideas against another, to confront opposites, to admit difficulties, to stop denying the realities of modern life and start making a stark but sensual art from their conjunction. A building that does this creatively is Rem Koolhaas’ Casa da Musica, a severe icon of minerals on the outside (it won a competition as the “diamond that fell from the sky”) cross-coded with local Portuguese codes and a dramatic hollowed out space.
Rem Koolhaas, Casa da Musica, Porto, 2005. Opaque “milky quartz”, a mineral icon won the competition with other metaphors. (C. Jencks)
Younger designers who stem from these three architects, FOA, UN Studio, Greg Lynn, swerve away from their exemplars exhibiting another aspect of the critical. When one examines the last two hundred years of Modernism a pattern of critical swerving can be found. Who did the Futurists criticise — the Fauves; who berated the Futurists for warlike art — the Dadaists; who passed judgement on the Dadaists — the Surrealists; and so it goes. As Harold Bloom showed in The Anxiety of Influence, the modern poet has to adopt a double stance, honouring the exemplars while modifying their message. This creates the immanent dialectic of modernism and the swerving pattern of history, it helps explain why the standard diagram of Modern Art, the one that Alfred Barr fashioned for MoMA in 1935 is philosophically flawed. He drew a map of the zeitgeist, lines of force ending in the box of MODERN ARCHITECTURE and abstract art, ruthlessly cutting that Dadaism and Surrealism which wasn’t abstract. As Karl Popper argued a belief in the zeitgeist was what the Reactionary Modernists Hitler and Stalin foisted on followers, and as he further pointed out a Critical Rationalism is one answer to those who believe in a deterministic spirit of the age.

Unzipping Modernism, cover of Critical Modernism, 2007, shows the Alfred Barr diagram of 1935 parting for a more complex view of competing traditions, pink blobs restored to their semi-autonomy. (C. Jencks)
Critical Modernism unzips the zeitgeist view of history, the great white elephant theory that shows multiple bloodlines leading inexorably toward a single conclusion. Modernism, as an underground tradition, has always been critical of itself and others even if the MoMA of all views sees it all aiming in one direction. It is true Corporate Modemism and the white cube are dominant around the world, statistically. But the deeper truth is that the critical and the modern have formed a dynamic hybrid where the scepticism of the former and the transcendence of the latter make a potent cocktail, the creative tradition that lasts.

Can Modernism grow up?

Let me sum up the argument so far. The hypothesis is that nearly everyone today is one sort of Prefix-Modernist or another; that it is much harder to escape the totalising forces of the global market, electronic network and world civilisation than thirty years ago. Even so-called anti-modemists are drawn into this global logic and its assumptions. Or, as with al-Qaeda as John Gray has shown, the assumptions actually stem from modernity. That is why, today, difference has to be played out in the prefix not the suffix of the definition.

Secondly, and on the question of negative motivation, there is a mounting wave of angst pushing a large part of this global civilisation into criticality – the pervasive scepticism, a simmering and serene anger, the elective dictatorships and their constant lying, the catastrophes of modernity, genocide, global warming, Celebrity Big Brother. This part of the summary could go on, the critical temperament is today, as they say, over-determined. This does not mean something positive has to come from it. Cynicism and apathy also follow from these same trends; inaction and solipsism.

Beyond this, the critical temperament is quite different from the creative, it engages other parts of the body and brain, it tends to dampen willpower and taking risks, it tends to the precautionary principle not the projective. This is why architects, who are always engaged in convincing their clients of a future-world, a fantasy where risk is essential to success, are suspicious of the critical and why there is a “post-critical” movement gaining strength. Creativity entails the momentary relaxation of the critical in order to go beyond the present impasse, the customary categories. This point was implied by Rem Koolhaas in a 1994 debate between two groups that were later to style themselves as “the critical and post-critical”. As he stated the pragmatic side. The problem with the prevailing discourse of architectural criticism is (the) inability to recognise there is in the deepest motivations of architecture something that cannot be critical.²


² These points and the quote are discussed in George Baird, “Criticality” and its Discontents. Harvard Design Magazine 21, (Fall 2004/Winter 2005) pp. 16-21. The debate goes back to an article Michael Hays wrote at the same time Kenneth Frampton was writing on Critical Regionalism, “Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form”, Yale Architecture Journal, Perspecta 21, 1984. Those whom Baird characterises on the “critical” side of the debate beside Peter Eisenman include Manfredo Tafuri, Michael Hays, Diller and Scofidio and Michael Sorkin while those on the “post-critical” side include theorists Michael Speaks, Robert Somol, Sarah Whiting and many of the pragmatic Dutch followers of Rem Koolhaas.
This something is now called the projective side of architectural projects, but it could be generalised even further to the modernist impulse, the desire to go beyond and transcend the present situation. Indeed the romantic and post-modern aim of transcendence – getting “after”, “over”, “away from” customary categories – complements the “critical” quite effectively. The conjunction critical-modernism is thus a potent mixture, an oxymoron with wings, a potentially effective cocktail if one can get the mixture right.

Even then there is no guarantee of positive results; much more is needed in the cocktail. At a minimum, a self-conscious awareness of the cultural situation is called for, a maturing process that confronts the historical truths of the many modernisms; the problems they have caused, the opportunities they have opened. Timothy Ferris has described the emergence of our cosmic situation as the Coming of Age in the Milky Way (1988), and one might adopt the same metaphor. After two hundred years of one modernism replacing another, this might result in a more reflexive movement, one mature enough to reflect on its own dark side while celebrating creativity, a tradition come of age. What are the prospects of this?

It is hard to say. But having been recently to Berlin and looked at how this city has begun to confront its modern catastrophes, debated them at a national political level, and then having turned them into a convincing form of art, architecture and urbanism, I would say that it at least is possible. If one capital city can begin this transformation so can another. In Berlin the process grew in the 1970s as a national reflection on the Second World War gathered strength. This self-analysis was led by cultural movements and literature, the rise of the Greens, and the criticism of the recent past by architects and urbanists. In the 1980s, as underground bunkers were dug up and the debate deepened about how to recognise this past and develop the future city, a rough consensus occurred. With respect to the Nazis remains, and evidence of the Holocaust, it was soon felt that a description of the facts, with minimum rhetoric, was the best approach. Hence the fifteen or so monuments that recognise what happened under Reactionary Modernism, hence the Holocaust memorials and museums of Libeskind and Eisenman, hence the graffiti of the occupying Russians left inside the Reichstag, hence the many works of Anselm Kiefer and contemporary artists who come to Berlin to confront this past - such as the Chinese Cai Guo-Qiangu. It is true there are many monuments around the world to many victims, and after sixty years there is even some grudging acknowledgement of what happened in the last world war. But there is no other city that has allowed, right at its heart, memorials and descriptions of the criminal acts perpetrated by its predecessors, and turned this into convincing cultural expression.

Contrast this with the situation, for instance, in Japan or America, countries that are still circumspect about their past. For instance, the Nanking Massacre, and what has been called for many years “the American Holocaust”.3 Before one can have some closure on these events, the governments have to admit the crimes, the populations have to acknowledge them, the lessons absorbed, and apologies (however inadequate) publicly carried through. No such historical process has happened in Japan and America, over these two events, and as a result the national populations are disclaiming knowledge. When people later find out the truth, it is a traumatic experience. There is then the double or triple guilt to deal with: the
acts themselves, the cover-up by their politicians, and their own complicity in not wanting to know. Digging with the spade of denial only makes the hole deeper.

As Zygmunt Bauman has shown there is a logic at work here, the one that kept America in Vietnam or Iraq long after their policies had failed – the “law of increasing guilt”. Bauman, writing on the Nazis, shows how difficult it is for politicians and ordinary people, once they have gone along with an initial decision, to change their mind and admit culpability. Much easier is to fudge and equivocate, be economical with the truth and hope other people will forget. The law of increasing guilt keeps the slaughter going well past the point when, in private, people are ready to admit they were wrong. Significantly for my argument Bauman makes these points in a book called *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989).

There is more to growing up than confronting one’s guilt. Maturity means accepting other people’s values as partially legitimate and the non-lethal conflict of views as essential to the creation of meaning. As to the latter, today most people can recognise that the “others” around the globe are other prefix-modernists, and to pick a fight over a prefix is as infantile as the war on terror. A critical view accepts the reports of the CIA and other US agencies which showed that, since 2003, the war caused many of the 11,111 terrorist incidents. Yet, actuarial reports showed the unlikely fact that those annually killed in terrorist incidents around the world (excluding Iraq) barely exceeded those who drown each year in USA bathtubs. Combining the two reports, critically, leads inexorably to the conclusion that either our trusted leaders better grow up fast or we will have to.

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3 David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust*, Columbus and the Conquest of the New World, Oxford University Press, 1992. The figures for the “population reduction” in North and South America are uncertain and have to be placed in a complex context, but vary from 100 million over 200 years to 50 million for the first fifty years from 1500. Germ warfare, consciously and semi-consciously used, was the great killer. The Europeans and British since 1492 kept on referring to the myths of the “New World”, “discovered” by Columbus along with the “Indians”, long after it was known the continent was inhabited for thousands of years. The textbooks of Japan are even worse about their massacres. The Nanking one, such as that the “official” Chinese figure of 300,000 murdered is not admitted much less the calculated genocide. The hole of denial Americans and Japanese dig is only getting deeper, a result of “the law of increasing guilt” (see text).

4 Tom Baldwin, US admits Iraq is a terror “cause”, *The Times*, April 29, 2006, p. 46; actuarial reports are in John Mueller, “A False Sense of Insecurity”, *Regulation*, Fall, 2004, pp. 42-6, bbbb@osu.edu