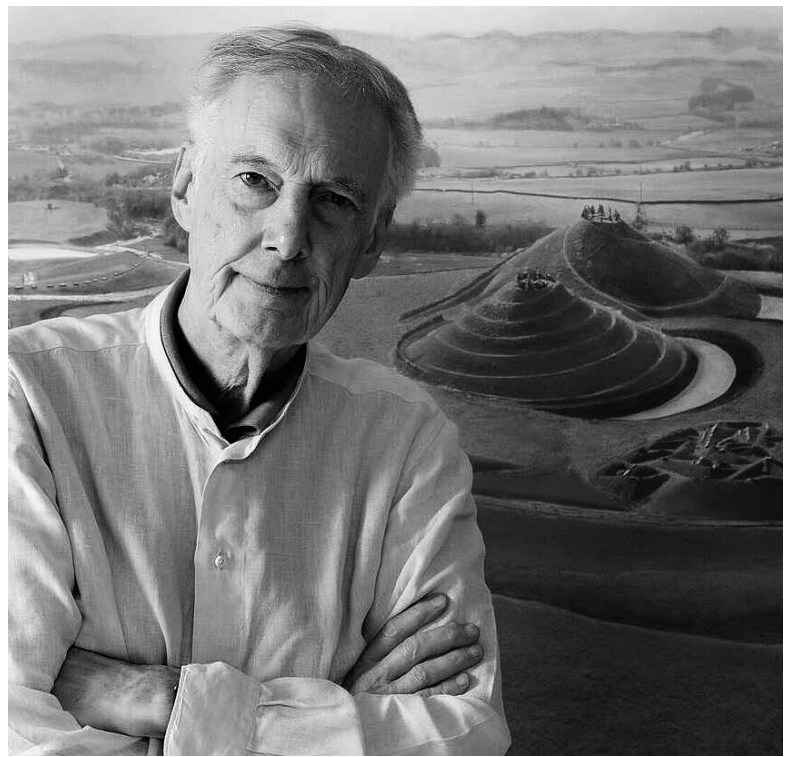


# Charles Jencks:

1939–2019

Terry Farrell

Charles Jencks was a breath of fresh air. From the outset, I was intrigued by his freewheeling interpretations of the architectural scene. He was amusing and didn't mind what he said and indeed about who he said it of. In Britain, he was seen as an outsider from the east coast of America and was determined to go and find his own course and his own thinking in an independent way. I first remember Charles Jencks as being one of the leading lights at the RIBA conference at Hull in the mid-1970s where he was seen to be ostensibly challenging modernism, but he was in a way establishing himself as a leader of criticism, thought, and theory in architecture, and he quickly developed a full blown support for postmodernism. I remember well that he frequently said that he was searching to establish a 'new paradigm' in architecture. I realised then I had met someone with ambitions to lead the thinking about architecture in an unafraid and very American way.



1 Charles Jencks.

This obituary is inevitably a collection of personal reminiscences rather than a detailed account of Charles Jencks's life because his life and mine came together at certain points in time in an overlapping and, for me, an intense and personal way. I first met him with Nick Grimshaw, around the time when Nick and I gave lectures on our work at Charles's invitation at the Architectural Association and later at the RIBA. Nick and I were beginning to question the direction of our firm, Farrell/Grimshaw, and Charles Jencks performed a vital role in the eventual separation of our partnership [1]. He identified the 'London School' as he called it, of the

high-tech architects including Fosters, Rogers, Hopkins, and Farrell/Grimshaw. Nick reacted vehemently against this classification, and I was also critical of his viewpoint, but at the same time I was intrigued – where did it come from? What were its origins and had he detected doubts I was having about the direction, and orthodoxy as it had become, of high tech particularly in London? Nick and I lectured and revealed the differences between us, for the first time in a fundamental way, and Charles was definitely an enabler in this split.

I didn't even agree with him about the idea that Pruitt-Igoe began it all with postmodernism.

For me it began much earlier in other fields and with the atomic bomb unnerving the Western world's belief, up until that point in time, of science being a good thing. Also, Bob Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* preceded Pruitt Igoe and Charles's interventions in the mid-to-late 1970s by ten years. But he was riding a wave and was a great publicist and indeed self-publicist.

It was around that time in the late 1970s that he asked me to work on his house in London. I hadn't appreciated at that time that Nick's wife, Lavinia, was such a close friend of Charles's first wife whom he was divorcing to be with Maggie



2 Thematic House, a.k.a. Elemental House, Cosmic House; 19 Lansdowne Walk, Kensington & Chelsea, Greater London. Charles Jencks with Terry Farrell, 1979–85. Rear elevation from south.

Keswick. I'm sure in retrospect that it didn't go down well in Nick Grimshaw's household that I had accepted the commission to design the new house for Charles and Maggie, and it all hastened the end of Farrell/Grimshaw.

I then realised that designing the house was kind of the reverse to Lloyd Wright and Johnson's relationship, where the latter was the future client and owner of the planned waxworks building in Racine, Wisconsin. Initially, Johnson proclaimed that Wright worked for him and then it evolved into a joint endeavour and later Johnson realised and acknowledged that he worked for Wright! This was a reversal of that architect/client relationship because Charles began the project where he wasn't conversant or practically orientated with building, architecture, and the practicalities of getting things done – which I was, by that point, expert at. So I began the project fairly full-throated and prepared to be seen in the conventional way as the architect for the house, but later on

it became a collaboration, and even later, inevitably I felt, the house and its interiors were overtaken by his lead and ambition, his desire to have the house as a demonstration in reality of his architectural theories. It came to be known as the Thematic House, and in a way, it was thematic and I played a crucial role in inventing the 'themes' [2]. But Charles's contribution was to overlay it, as he did so often, with his theorising and his various personal ideas concocted from a *melée* of other personal ambitions. I remember saying half-jokingly to the team working on the project that we saw ourselves as creating drawings for the client presentation and construction, whereas Charles created sketches with his own imaginary page numbers for the book that he would eventually publish on the house.

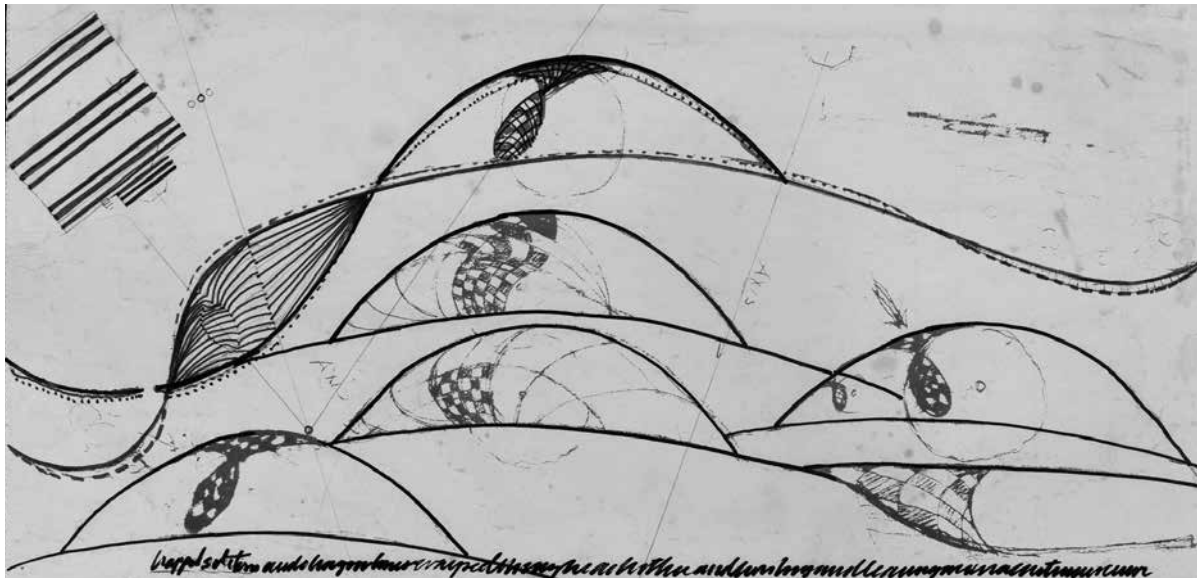
He developed this idea of his house as a demonstration of his theorising alongside Academy Editions run by Andreas Papadakis, forming an association that lasted ten to fifteen years before the press

was sold to John Wiley and Sons. During the 1980s, which began with the Thematic House in Holland Park – that he did inevitably publish a book about – he continued to be one of the leaders of outspoken thinking about architecture and its direction. In the 1980s, Academy Editions and *AD* magazine kept publishing books and editions that Charles invested a lot of energy and time in, and it became the heart and focus of architecture at this time.

However, he had to reinvent himself when postmodernism became no longer such a good thing stylistically and he reinvented himself as a commentator and critic on architecture – which I think he was well equipped to do. He presented himself not only as a critic but architect, sculptor, landscaper, and eventually benefactor and client. By that time – as the client acting for Maggie's Centres for cancer care – he had brought together all manner of architects, all stars. He became not just an ordinary benefactor but also a super-client of international reputation.

I remember a particular dinner in a mews house in Regent's Park hosted by Sir John and Lady Clare, Charles's wife Maggie's parents, which took place I think in the late 1970s, aimed at introducing Sir John to all the leading architects of the day – Norman Foster and his wife Wendy were there, Nick and Lavinia Grimshaw, etc. But it reinforced for me the connection with China and Jardin Matheson (Sir John's company) and indeed the Scottish Lowlands, Dumfriesshire, particularly where Jardin Matheson's origins lay – and all of this was on display that evening. And so it was not London but in the lowlands of Scotland where Charles and Maggie's energies were next applied.

I think it is overlooked how much Maggie Keswick had to do with the Thematic House. Indeed, the same can be said of her work with Charles and with Frank Gehry and others at Portrack (their house in Dumfriesshire, which was I assumed primarily her house). She, I also assumed, used her financial clout to lead the garden layouts, first with its sublime contouring of the grassed mounds that she created there. When I first visited I could see that Charles's ambitions were invested in other parts of the gardens and intertwined heavy



3 Charles Jencks (1939), *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation*, c. 1992. Print with coloured inks, 210 x 420 mm.

messaging and cosmic intellectualising of the landscape [3]. But the sweep and the curves of the sheer and swooping grass banks, I believe, were Maggie's doing primarily and it was presented to me in that way at the beginning of my first tour. I visited many times to meet many other artists and architects as Charles was a great collector of people and a great stimulus for discussion, and this was, I felt at the time, his primary contribution to architecture.

Later on, when Maggie had passed away, I introduced him to the Dean Gallery. I was now able to promote him and his hunger for actual design appointments and was able to recommend him for the Dean Gallery mounds. The landscape project there was a superb achievement that afterwards Charles inimitably declined was part of the masterplan, and believed was all his own doing [4]. But in the detailing and the thoroughness with which he did the work in collaboration with our office (where his daughter Lily worked at the time, who did much of the legwork) it was very successful. I was impressed by the determination and the design detail that he got into as he realised the banks, lakes, and soaring sweeps of the mounds. Like the Thematic House, he had cleverly – even brilliantly – absorbed what others did and built on this to invent himself as in command of this landscaping field. I used to say to the team, somewhat unfairly, that he was a

better post-rationalist than postmodernist.

After finishing the Dean Gallery, I was approached by Matt Ridley, my client on the Life Centre in Newcastle, to redesign the interiors of his house at Blagdon in Northumberland, including the former library. But we agreed it would not be a good idea as he was the chairman of the Life Centre client body, and so I recommended Charles. He worked on the interiors of the house as the designer, and indeed went on to design a landscape to remediate an open-cast mining site on Matt's estate in Northumberland, reinforcing his role as a landscaper with a worldwide reputation [5]. The ultimate product was somewhat kitsch and far removed from their joint original ideas on the sublime and somewhat tasteful earthforms of Dumfries and the Dean Gallery, and Charles as good as acknowledged it was kitsch with his famous line 'if you don't like kitsch, get out of the kitchen'. He could be self-effacing and outspoken without the measured words of the British upper-class manner, and he sought a reputation, while remaining a jaundiced observer of reputations.

The next project that Charles and I did together was a collaboration that didn't work out. It was for the Princess Diana memorial fountain competition. I vividly remember presenting it to the committee selected to choose the scheme. Charles presented first and I presented second. The two parts were completely different and unintegrated – he relied upon

a proposed built form based on theorising ideas then built literally. Whereas I relied upon a much more sculptural form that stood on its own without needing explanation. He had a lot of talking to do about his scheme and I did the opposite and presented with few words at all. I realised he had moved on and that he was intent on and believed in reinforcing his own identity artistically, and was no longer interested in collaboration as earlier on in the Thematic House with me or Maggie on the landscape mounds. It was nevertheless, and perhaps inevitably, a muddled presentation, and as a result we were not offered the job.

Later on, Charles was very kind and invited me to stay at his house in Scotland when I was going through some difficulties with my second marriage, and was very understanding as I spent a pleasant weekend with him. He was personally honest and generous with his time and I felt we had become true friends, experimenting with collaboration and discussion over years. His third wife Louisa, after Maggie died, was delightful and we socialised well, building on this friendship. But his life became full of tragedy – his daughter-in-law had a car crash and was badly hurt and Charles himself battled with cancer for a long time, however he kept going and attended many conferences on postmodernism. He was full of self-belief and determination and I was amazed he survived as long as he did. I think in the past decade he



4 The Dean Gallery mounds.



5 Northumberlandia, or The Lady of the North.

enjoyed the fact that a version of postmodernism was taken up by a new generation and was also revisited at conferences with him by the first generation of postmodernists such as Outram, Gough, Melville, and myself.

The final time I saw the Thematic House it was very much intact and virtually unaltered, which is a credit to him, and I was delighted to see this magnificent monument to postmodernism, with all its associated flaws and contradictions, preserved as Grade 1 listed as a museum for future generations. In the end I felt proud and glad of my role in creating the house; it was a tricky and impure process, but the resultant creation and his personal commitment to it was all very worthwhile indeed.

I think it would be neglectful of

me not to mention the Maggie's Centres – I use them often, particularly the Dundee and Charing Cross sites, in my presentations, to contrast the sheer messy complexity of the hospitals as they evolved and emerged, layered by many hands over time, inevitably compromised with every extension and alteration, with the purity of the speck on the landscape, which is the architecture of the Maggie's Centre. This for me encapsulates all that we have done with architecture – an exotic, exhibitionist, and indulgent way of thinking about such a narrow aspect of our environment.

This concentration on a narrow speck of its role to city making, and global warming, gets focused on the Maggie's Centre as a stylistic indulgent element, which

completely disappears from view when thinking about the bigger problems of life that Charles addressed but in a way also never addressed. He used his formidable energy, intellect, and moneyed connections, marshalling all these to support his own theories and his status among his peers: his strength and his weakness were fully on display. He was enormously successful in leading the discussion on architecture but was full of contradictions in the universality of his theorising, and generalising from the cosmic to the detail of landscaping.

With his wide-brimmed hats, scarves, double-breasted jackets, and pocket handkerchiefs he cut a dashing figure that contrasted strongly with the frequently ascetically-dressed design megastars with whom he often mixed. He was many things because he chose to aim in a seemingly uncontrolled way (albeit by British standards!) for everything that caught his magpie eye. This was his main contribution to architectural life – critic, writer, architect, landscaper, sculptor, world-renowned benefactor, and client. Charles Jencks made a strikingly creative impact on our architectural culture.

Charles Jencks is survived by his third wife, Louisa Lane Fox, his four children Ivor and Justin, John and Lily, and stepchildren Martha and Henry.

*Sir Terry Farrell CBE is the principal of Farrells Architects, with offices in London, Hong Kong, and Shanghai.*

*A prominent voice in British architecture and planning, during fifty years in practice his award-winning buildings and masterplans include Embankment Place and The Home Office in the UK. In East Asia, notable projects include Incheon airport in Seoul, Beijing and Guangzhou stations in China, the Peak Tower, Kowloon Station, and the British Consulate in Hong Kong.*

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