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Jenck's "Enigmatic Signifier" and Cathartic Narrative

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Emmanuel Rubio,
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Abstract: In his article "Jenck's 'Enigmatic Signifier' and Cathartic Narrative" Emmanuel Rubio takes Charles Jencks's definition of the "enigmatic signifier" as a point of departure. For Jencks, the post-modern "iconic building" should present a "redundancy of popular signs and metaphors" that allows for multiple interpretations. But these numerous metaphorical references could also be inserted in a less simultaneous network to construct a narrative sequence. As one of these sequences, the "cathartic narrative," which is particularly adapted to the troubled era of post-modernity, is defined as a narrative that brings back, in a symbolic way, memories and experiences of past suffering, before it gets through the ordeals of the community and gives actual relief. The Selfridges department store in Birmingham analyzed by Jencks offers a good example of this process. By reading the story of Birmingham's difficult modernization through its architecture, the "cathartic narrative" is able to propose another pattern for modern and postmodern monumentality.

Emmanuel RUBIO

Jenck's 'Enigmatic Signifier' and Cathartic Narrative

My point of departure is the work of Charles Jencks, which in my opinion allows a consistent metaphorical analysis of architecture. Admittedly, this approach cannot take into account the architectural phenomenon as a whole, but this is not my point. I focus, from within Jencks's own perspective, on one of its major issues. Jencks began to advocate a kind of appropriateness of the architectural metaphor: "The question obviously arises of how appropriate these metaphors are to the building's function and its symbolic role" (*The New Paradigm* 28). The witty list of "inadvertent malaprops" and "slips-of-the-metaphors" (*The New Paradigm* 34, 17) at the beginning of *The New Paradigm in Architecture* follows the same direction and tends to describe the postmodern position as a renewed interest in the symbolic reading of architecture. Soon, however, Jencks put forward the concept of the "enigmatic signifier" as the main characteristic of the postmodern monument and he stressed ambiguity rather than appropriateness. Of course, it was a way of applying Robert Venturi's thought in his *Complexity and Contradictions in Architecture* to the field of semantics. Nevertheless, solid arguments were still necessary to support the methodological shift. The indictment of a narrow-minded functionalism, inspired by Aldo Rossi, could fulfill this purpose: "While a building may stand three hundred years, the way people regard and use it may change every decade. … If architecture is to communicate as intended it should avoid signs that have only one meaning and, secondly, it should be over-coded, using a redundancy of popular signs and metaphors to survive the transformation of fast-changing codes, and codes of the locale (*New Paradigm* 34). But Jencks also developed a fascinating argument in *The Iconic Building, the Power of Enigma*, which establishes the connection between "enigmatic signifier" and the end of the so-called grand narratives. The idea is simple: "Absence of strong belief in any metanarrative, ideology, or religion has characterized postmodern culture for several decades and is a strong motivation for the iconic building to become an enigma" (*Iconic* 195). However, the suggestion is all the more relevant because it allows Jencks to implicitly respond to the worrying issues concerning the city core that are formulated by Siegfried Giedion in *Architektur und Gemeinschaft*: "we have no well-defined social structure and it should not even be whished for in a transition period where social differences are becoming blurred. We have no fervent religious conviction whose strength could radiate on all realms of life. The only conviction that stays alive … is that the city, as it is today, is monstrous. Starting from this conviction, we can understand the efforts made today in numerous places of the world to create symbols for a better life of the community" (Giedion 74; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Clearly, the enigmatic signifier matches the needs of the transition period that Giedion refers to.

On the above I have two remarks. The first concerns the meaning that architecture can produce. According to Giedion, architecture expresses convictions and one of such relates to the monstrosity of cities. Therefore, the question could be phrased as follows: why is architecture unable to express this monstrosity, instead of promoting an enigmatic void? Or, put differently, why could it not define this monstrosity as its metaphorical basis? The suggestion may seem odd at first, but Jencks's thought, even if he never brings up this working hypothesis, is not so far removed from this idea. Indeed, Jencks notices the disquieting symbols used in certain contemporary buildings and he posits their potential to express evil: "If global society has no overriding beliefs, an ideological or religious direction in common, and yet at the same time commissions international superstars to fly around the world designing iconic buildings, then certain contradictions will come, inevitably, to the surface. Such things as death, catastrophe, and personal tragedy, all seen in the abstract, might take the place previously occupied by religious tropes and dogmas" (*Iconic* 98). Nevertheless, it remains difficult to combine the expression of our present times with Giedion's intention to create "symbols for a better life of the community." For this reason, Jencks speaks of "contradictions.

My second comment pertains to methodology. If the enigmatic signifier is defined by its numerous metaphors, it becomes possible to examine the links between the latter. This task is difficult when we remain on a metaphoric level, where the suggested images can only be superimposed on each other without being mixed. However, there is at least one other option, which would be to insert the metaphors into a narrative network that leads from one metaphor to another. Worth considering are

Marion Vriesendorp's drawings, which are reprinted in *The Iconic Building* and depict the underlying structures of some of the buildings analyzed by Jencks. Would it not be possible to consider them as a set of narrative items, waiting to be combined, or, more specifically, as a set of narrative items in a constant movement of recombination? I will try to answer this question by means of an example: the Selfridges department store in Birmingham (*Future Systems* 2001-2003) (Jencks, *Iconic* 16). In her "Metaphorical Analysis," Marion Vriesendorp develops the positive or negative associations of ideas proposed by Jencks, the architects, and the inhabitants of Birmingham. These conjured-up images include feminine shapes, a breast wrapped in thin cloth, a light dress, a tongue, a kind of Cyclops, and someone swimming inside a rib cage. The link with the actual views of the building is as clear as can be and the photographs inserted by Jencks near Vriesendorp's drawings make the comparison easy (*Iconic* 14-15).

Figure 1: Future Systems, Selfridges, Birmingham.
Photo Christophe Finot. Copyright release Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Figure 2: Future Systems, Selfridges, Birmingham, interior.
Photo Mcginnly. Copyright release Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Figure 3: Future Systems, Selfridges, Birmingham.
Photo Ell Brown. Copyright release Creative Commons (CC BY 2.0)

Figure 4: Future Systems, Selfridges, Birmingham, escalators.
Photo Mcginnly. Copyright release Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

But what is also striking about Vriesendorp's work is the fact that the vertical reading from top to bottom (that is, following a traditional narrative code, not so common for comics, but natural for film-sequences) reveals a narrative pattern that ranges from feminine and erotic shapes, striptease, and French kiss to the sexual conclusion where the frightening Cyclops is suddenly revealed. The last vignette, in a most scary way, shows the sudden metamorphosis of the body into the skeleton and fatal prison.

Of course, Vriesendorp's drawings are as suggestive as the buildings they comment on. The last vignette, for instance, conjures up associations with poor Pinocchio in the whale's stomach, or even Jonah. One could also change the place of the vignettes and with it the reading order, which would then disclose a narrative evolving from sexual anxiety to the joyful discovery of the female body. It is important to note, at this point, that the reading order tends to be determined by the way in which the building is used, and this is the case in two different ways. A first important aspect is the function of the architectural construct. Studied by a critical sociologist, consumption can easily be linked up with the siren song, leading from desire to death; but buying fashionable clothes can also be interpreted in a sexier way. Secondly, the reading order can be determined by the user's route. In our case, the route from the metal-frozen exterior to the super-sexualized interior suggests a demonstrably positive progression. In addition, the user's story is not the only story that can be expressed by such a narrative pattern: did the architects not want "that the building itself would become a genuine catalyst for urban regeneration" (*Future Systems* <http://www.future-systems.com> [the website does not exist any more])? The harshness of the aluminum discs could, in such a regeneration narrative, recall the industrial past of the city, which had been in crisis since the eighties, while the commercial revival would, on the other hand, be embodied in very feminine shapes. Unsurprisingly, the architects themselves propose one of these ambivalent sets of metaphors so dear to Jencks when they compare the aluminum discs with "the scales of a snake and the sequins of a Paco Rabanne dress" (*Future Systems* <http://www.future-systems.com> [the website does not exist any more]). Clearly, the *fin-de-siècle* interpretation is never far away.

Figure 5: Franz von Stuck, *The Sin* (1893), Neue Pinakothek, München.
Copyright release Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

It has become clear that, on the basis of a narrative reading of architectural metaphors, we can define two types of narrative. The first one, which could be called a potential narrative, combines several characteristics at the same time: the outside of the Selfridges building is at once cold and delicately curved, extremely closed but nonetheless attractive. The second narrative presents fewer theoretical problems, since it implies a temporal process and is defined by the user's route or activity. In this context, it is important to bear in mind how modern architecture promoted the *promenade architecturale* and, in doing so, was driven to use narrative or cinematic presentation, as is illustrated by Le Corbusier's letter to Mrs Meyer. Such a *promenade* is in most cases an abstract one, offering pure shapes and lights. But the architectural tradition does not lack examples of routes "*à programme*", as they can be seen in the Desert of Retz, or, more generally, in the "Carte du tendre" designed by Madeleine de Scudery in *Clélie*.

All elements need then to be brought together in order to develop this article's main argument. For, if we accept the concept of an architectural narrative — be it potential or not — it becomes possible to imagine a way for architecture to present a disaster and at the same time surmount it in view of a new future. This is the exact kind of logic that my concept of "cathartic architecture," developed elsewhere, depends on (see Rubio, *Vers*). "Cathartic architecture" presents itself as a way to respond to disaster by incorporating it into the architectural design — thus creating the possibility of a renewed, but also reduced, symbolic, temporary experience of disaster. The term itself, "cathartic," refers to theatre rather than narrative. It also implies a real efficiency of the architectural process. By bringing back memories and experiences of past terrors and suffering in a symbolic way, and subsequently giving actual relief, architecture can indeed endeavor to get through the ordeals of community. Using the traditional modern terminology, we can even put forward the idea of a cathartic function for architecture, or at least for a specific kind of architecture. Nonetheless, the fact remains that this dramatic interpretation implies the actualization of a narrative while using or interpreting architecture — and, as such, comes close to our common concern. The concept of a cathartic architecture cannot simply replace the enigmatic signifier. Firstly, this is because the architectural narrative — especially when it combines simultaneous signs, and can only be described as potential — can only be ambiguous, and sometimes even generates opposite meanings. The point was all too obvious for the analysis of Selfridges. De facto, the cathartic narrative can never be the only one possible, even when the architectural theme is overtly linked with disaster. In *Vers une architecture cathartique*, for example, I was thus led to develop the concept of a Nietzschean architecture, which adopts a different approach to disaster and danger. Furthermore, numerous narratives might prove to be unsusceptible to an aesthetic of disaster — even if the very idea of a narrative implies at least an accident, a perturbation. Finally, the cathartic architecture differs from the enigmatic signifier because

it can also be applied to less ambiguous buildings, or, put simply, to buildings more concerned with disaster.

Figure 6: John Madin: Central Library, Birmingham. Photo Hamster!
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It should be noted that the case developed in this article could be considered a mitigated one. Vriesendorp's drawings help us to define a narrative part of architecture, but its frightening aspects (the associations with the Cyclops, the snake, the alien, but also its closure and stiffness) seem to be integrated into a cheerful context, which weakens the negative effect. Anxiety, here, comes down to the shiver of consumption — which can also encompass the narrative of sin. If cathartic theory can still be applied, it could have found a better case in a more oppressive building, as appears to be, to stay in Birmingham, the Central Library, erected by John Madin between 1964 and 1974. There, the roughness and anxiety are much more definite, even though the Central Library was considered to be modern when it was built and associated with positive connotations just like Selfridges is today. How can we describe Birmingham Central Library? The metaphor that most often returns — to continue along the lines of Jencks's kind of interpretation — is that of an inverted ziggurat, which has two different connotations. First, it is linked with monumentality, even a sacred one. Second, it has to do with a kind of primitivism — which was rather out of context in the seventies. It should be noted that John Madin's original design was slightly different from what Birmingham citizens could see in 1974. Originally, the whole library was to be covered with white marble. Thus, the balance between the classical monumentality and the archaic closure would have been reinforced, but budgetary restrictions led the architect to adopt raw concrete and to lose the initial balance, so that brutality and primitivism were strengthened. As a result, the expression of the community became at the very least a troubled one. This leads us back to Giedion, since the association of monumentality and primitivism was at the heart of *Architektur und Gemeinschaft*, and more particularly, at the heart of the new monumentality of the Corbusieran *unité d'habitation*. And this is no coincidence: between 1964 and 1974 the change from white marble to raw concrete was only allowed because it made the building of the Central Library partake in the architectural movement initiated by Le Corbusier's *unité d'habitation* — a movement which had largely flourished in the United Kingdom, including Lasdun's National Theatre in London, the Hayward Gallery nearby, the Smithsons's Robin Hood Gardens or Owen Luder's building in Gateshead, to list the most famous English neo-brutalist buildings. Also worth mentioning is the Boston City Hall (Kallman, McKinnel, Knowles 1962-1968) to which John Madin's design seems indebted. As such, the Central Library recalled the kind of modernity that was associated with primitivism.

Figure 7: Kallman, McKinnel & Knowles, City Hall, Boston. Photo Alvaro Galve.
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Why is the Central Library so harsh-looking, so rough-hewn? What emerges at first glance is nothing other than its closure, which, viewed from numerous angles, seems to be complete. Not even a window interrupts the long sealed upper floors which, overhanging the first floor, push its large windows back. That is where the Library finds its most aggressive posture, for with such a closure, the raw concrete is bound to evoke the military shapes that characterized its use some twenty years earlier: those of bunkers, shelters, and *Blockhaus*. In the center of Birmingham, the Central Library conjures up war rather that the sacred.

As far as London, and particularly the South Bank, is concerned, I have analyzed elsewhere how architecture directly responded to the trauma that the capital city had suffered. The neo-brutalist aesthetic in London is reminiscent of the shelters that citizens had to get into during the Blitz (Rubio 57-69). In Birmingham, then, the memory of the Second World War is also present. This is illustrated by the following quote of Prince Charles, who, in reference to the fight against the Nazis, describes the neo-brutalist Library in the *Birmingham Post* as "a place for burning books, not keeping them" (Elkes, <http://www.birminghampost.net/news/west-midlands-news/2011/04/14/prince-charles-could-be-asked-to-open-new-library-of-birmingham-65233-28517447/>). Birmingham — which, as an industrial city, took an active part in the production of British weapons and especially in the construction of the Royal Air Force Spitfire — was a natural target for German bombings. It was bombed from 9 August 1940 to 23 April 1943 and more than two thousand people were killed. More than twelve thousand houses, three hundred factories, and two hundred other buildings were destroyed. Birmingham is in fact ranked as the third most damaged city in Great Britain. In the1960s when the Central Library was designed, this dark moment was not so far behind in history and the reconstruction of Castle Vale, severely damaged because of the airport, was not finished before the end of the decade. But, at the same time, the city center was less affected than the neighborhoods around it. New Street, which leads from the Town hall to the actual Selfridges, was heavily bombed; in the Museum of Art, just in front of the Library, seven galleries had to be reconstructed. But the monumental Birmingham, including the Town Hall, as well as the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, was mainly preserved. To construct the new one, the old library, built by Martin and Chamberlain in 1882, had to be destroyed.

What happened, then? A striking photographic time-lapse sequence by Derek Fairbrother shows the destructions resulting from redevelopments in the city itself, and more particularly the demolishing of the old Victorian buildings that were nearby the new library (<http://vimeo.com/7329952>). What the sequence does not show, however, is the main destruction that led to the other ones. As a matter of fact, the replacement of the library, had already been planned as early as 1938, because the old library had become too narrow. But the old building was not demolished before the piercing of the Inner Ring Road, which — designed on a large scale, not to say a highway-scale — constitutes a kind of circular boulevard. Incidentally, the Inner Ring Road is not without relation to the war. Herbert Manzoni, who was City Surveyor since 1936, planned it during World War II while he was dealing with the war bombings and had to imagine the reconstruction of the city. But one thing is certain:

Queensway, included in the modernization plan of Birmingham and its adaptation to traffic, passes only a hundred meters away from the Town Hall and isolates the historical center from the rest of the city leaving it to the urban deserts of Highways. To be precise, we could count the different roads which, literally, pass through the library space. The Paradise Circus Queensway goes around the building on the east side; it hesitates between three and four lanes, and is located just beneath the historic square; on the west, the Queensway, half-underground, is four lanes wide; it runs alongside the other part of the Paradise Circus Queensway, which adds four more lanes. The three of them join together less than fifty meters south and north of the library, which had to develop footbridges to be in contact with the rest of city:

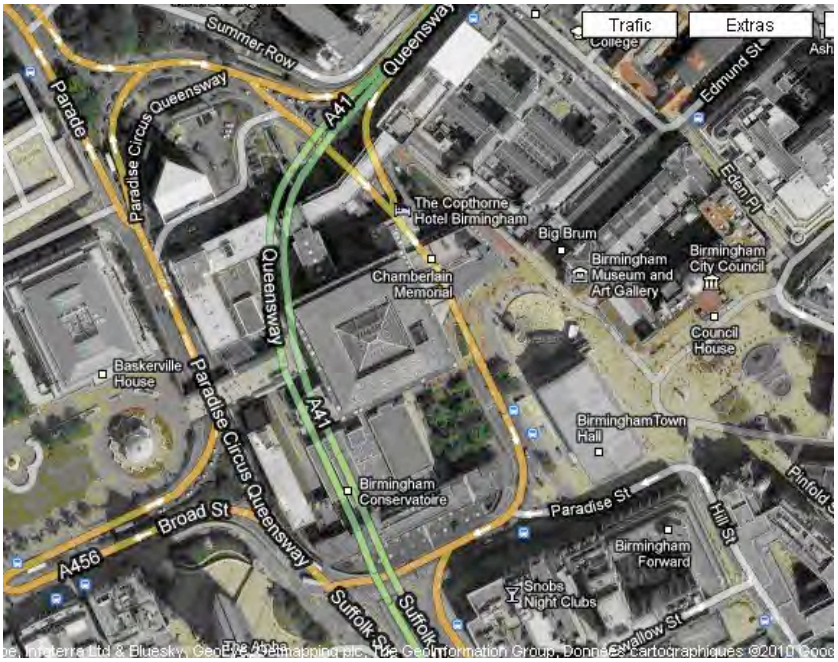

Figure 8a: Central Library, Birmingham. Copyright release GoogleMaps, public domain.

Figure 8b: Central Library, Birmingham. Copyright release GoogleMaps, public domain.

Figure 8c: Central Library, Birmingham. Copyright release GoogleMaps, public domain.

Figure 9: Centenary square, Birmingham, with, in the background, the Central Library, the Town Hall.
Photo Andy G. Copyright release Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Figure 10: John Madin: Central Library, Birmingham. Photo Simon Felton.
Copyright release Creative Commons (CC BY-ND 2.0)

The Central Library not only looks like a fortress, but can also be said to function as one. It reacts to the violence of modern urbanism, as some of its British brutalist predecessors did — the Boston City Hall, for instance, which followed the new urban planning of Boston in 1963 — as if stylistic debts were firmly anchored in the urban situation of the two buildings (see Rubio 69-75, 86-93). Clearly, the

Central Library protects the monumental and historic center from traffic, thus contributing to its isolation and enclosure. Its expressive strength cannot be understood without taking into account the way it embodies the violence of destruction that storms the city and carries the curse of the military bombings from the past. Its frightening design expresses nothing but the harshness of the aggression that the neoclassical monumentality of the Town Hall must be protected from. The Library, as the military metaphor suggests, dramatizes the threat it defies. And all of this, originally, promoted a cathartic narrative, starting from the building's function. Expressing the destructive forces of the time, the Library is nevertheless intended to preserve the past, and corresponds to the Museum which is located at the other side of the historical square. The users' route follows the same direction. The large inner space is clear and bright, due to the zenithal light provided by the inverted ziggurat – so that the reader walks from a frightening space to a welcoming one, safely protected from the dangers outside, and restoring the public square that was threatened by the highways. But this interpretation could also be reversed: the emptiness of the central inner court, out of proportion, can prevent the reassuring sensation of an inner space and betray the fate of the real public square. Such a reaction is all the more possible if we consider that one part of the old library's interior, the Shakespeare Memorial Room, was dismantled, stored, and re-erected in the School of Music Complex, and was opened to the public on City Centre Discovery Day: at the moment the new library was being built, an idealized picture of the public interior was created, a picture that the new interior could never correspond to (see Shakespeare Memorial Room <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/smr>).

The same kind of ambiguity can be found on the outside, since the frightening appearance of the building should, at least in theory, be counterbalanced. Its massive silhouette, while disquieting, at the same time contributes to the concealment of the road network and defines the public square as a well-protected area. Moreover, its monumentality relates to the neo-classical Town Hall and Museum, and, as such, completes the representation of the city and restores the democratic space of the Agora. Here, the importance of the ziggurat should have been reinforced by the marble, since a high price was paid for replacing it by concrete: the potential cathartic narrative did not function quite as well without this classical index of monumentality.

Figure 11: Victoria Square, with the neo-classical Town Hall on the left and the Museum on the right, protected by the Central Library in the middle. Photo Gavin Warrins. Copyright release Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Figure 12: Bull Ring, Birmingham. Photo West Midlands Police.
Copyright release Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Incidentally or not, a similar dialogue between contrasting periods and styles can be found in the case of Selfridges. Indeed, Selfridges is close to an old church, near a pedestrian area that is reminiscent of the Town Hall square. The architects themselves promote this "relationship to the church" and argue that the two buildings represent "the religious and commercial lives of the city that have evolved side by side over hundreds of years" (Future Systems <http://www.future-systems.com/architecture/architecture_03.html> the website does not exist any more). As was the case for the Library, the enormous building designed by Future Systems faces the church, and, as such, creates a peaceful public square; it also protects the whole pedestrian area of the shopping center by drawing a massive angle. The aesthetic use of shields, in this context, is explicit, and does not evoke the scales of a snake or sequins, but a war situation. And it is not even hard to identify the enemies, whose assault the commercial area must be protected from. The four lanes of Moor Street run all along the most hermetically closed side of the building, and beyond them, the railroad, leading to the Birmingham Moor Street Rail Station. The Cyclops faces this side, at the corner between Moor Street, Park Street and the railway, as if to confront the danger it symbolically expresses. Moreover, the striking footbridge that allows him to swallow the customers comes directly from the Park Street car parks. Here, too, the architectural shape dramatizes the situation in the city before leading to a regenerated public space or the sexualized interior of Selfridges itself.

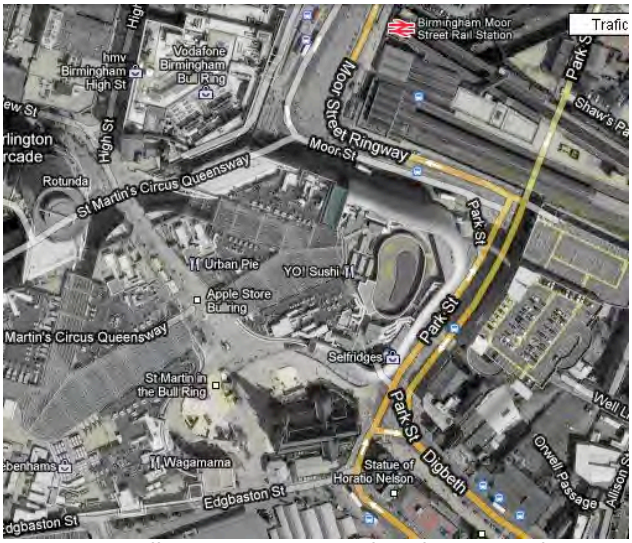

Figure 13: Bull Ring Area. Copyright release GoogleMaps, public domain.

A short survey of the history of the district reveals that the comparison is not forced. The entire Bull Ring area, a traditionally commercial area, underwent a massive transformation during the sixties, coinciding with the construction of the Inner Ring Road. As it had done for the historical center, "the Inner Ring Road at a stroke put the markets outside the city center, connected to it by a miserable subway" (Holyoak 21). The new complex, finished in 1964, combined a traditional open-air market and a hyper-modern indoor shopping centre. But the traffic conditions largely divided up the general plan. While the indoor shopping center spanned the Inner Ring Road on one side and was surrounded by four-lane roads on the other, the open-air market "was hemmed in between and underneath highways, reached only by unpleasant and disorientating subways and passages" (Holyoak 15). The entire complex quickly turned out to be a failure. As early as the eighties, the city had to plan a new redevelopment of the area. These plans included the closing of the Inner Ring Road, turning it into a bus- and taxi-only road, and the construction of a pedestrian walkway, which bridges over the top of the aforementioned road and leads from the city to the large pedestrian area of the new shopping centre, semi-indoor malls and semi-outdoor spaces (Holyoak 21). Through its very design, Selfridges takes part in this story, or rather embodies and resumes it. Indeed, in this context, the movement from the armor towards the commercial pleasure turns out to be particularly suited to the circumstances. As the spanning of the Inner Ring is repeated from one place to another, the symbolic solution, after forty years, also tends to be repeated, from the Library to the Shopping Centre, introducing a narrative leading from disaster to urban regeneration.

It is self-evident that there cannot be a unique narrative and that the various stories elaborated by *Future Systems* (the individual, collective, and historical ones) are not mutually exclusive. Giving up on the enigmatic signifier for architectural narrative studies, from this point of view, cannot restore a monological discourse, and the narrative, as demonstrated above, can always be reversed. It should be noted that the Library, in its own time, was at least as modern as Selfridges is today. After some decades, the shopping center may have lost its glamour, and come to look much more aggressive — as it already does for certain users. And yet, endowed with such a narrative power, the iconic buildings of Birmingham, its unchallenged landmarks, present paradoxical fictions — paradoxical, because the monument, traditionally, shows a positive picture of the society it represents, narrates its moments of glory, its dreams of order, whereas the stories told in Birmingham come close to nightmares. While the classical monumentality suggests the idealization of a political situation, the modern city writes the cruel tales of its own modernization – leading, beyond all historical ordeals, to a possible restoration of what was lost. This may not be the simplest way for a monumental city to grow, and the latest decision in Birmingham clearly shows the difficulties of conceiving of such a new monumentality, or to live with it: in 2010, it was decided that a new library had to be built not far from the old one. While the new building, designed by Mecanoo, is expected to be much more user-friendly, it is nonetheless hard to imagine that the new construction could ever become iconic. Should the Central Library be destroyed, as it seems to be planned now, the city may well have lost a part of its identity by negating its past. And this is the predictable result of an architectural enterprise conceived of merely in terms of convenience, and not of narratives.

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