

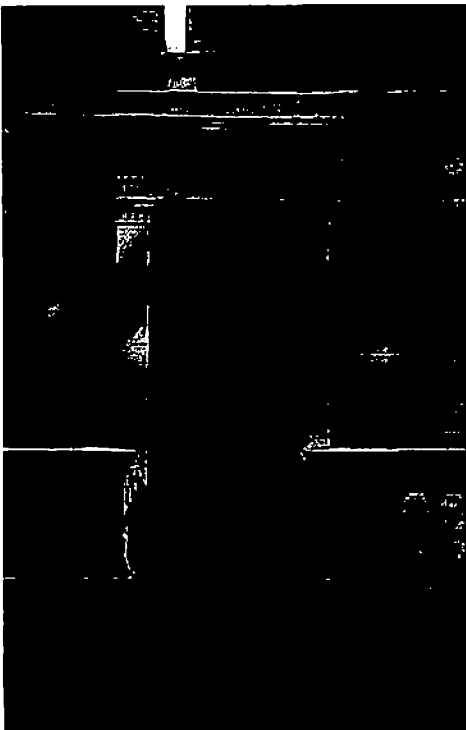
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JENCKS, C.
1985

CHAPTER V

Towards a Symbolic Architecture: The Thematic House

1 THEMATIC HOUSE from the street, night view. The two chimneys, London columns, focus the west elevation over an S-curved roof, a Hildebrandtian motif, while the arched windows, face motifs, focus the views out of the house onto the trees.

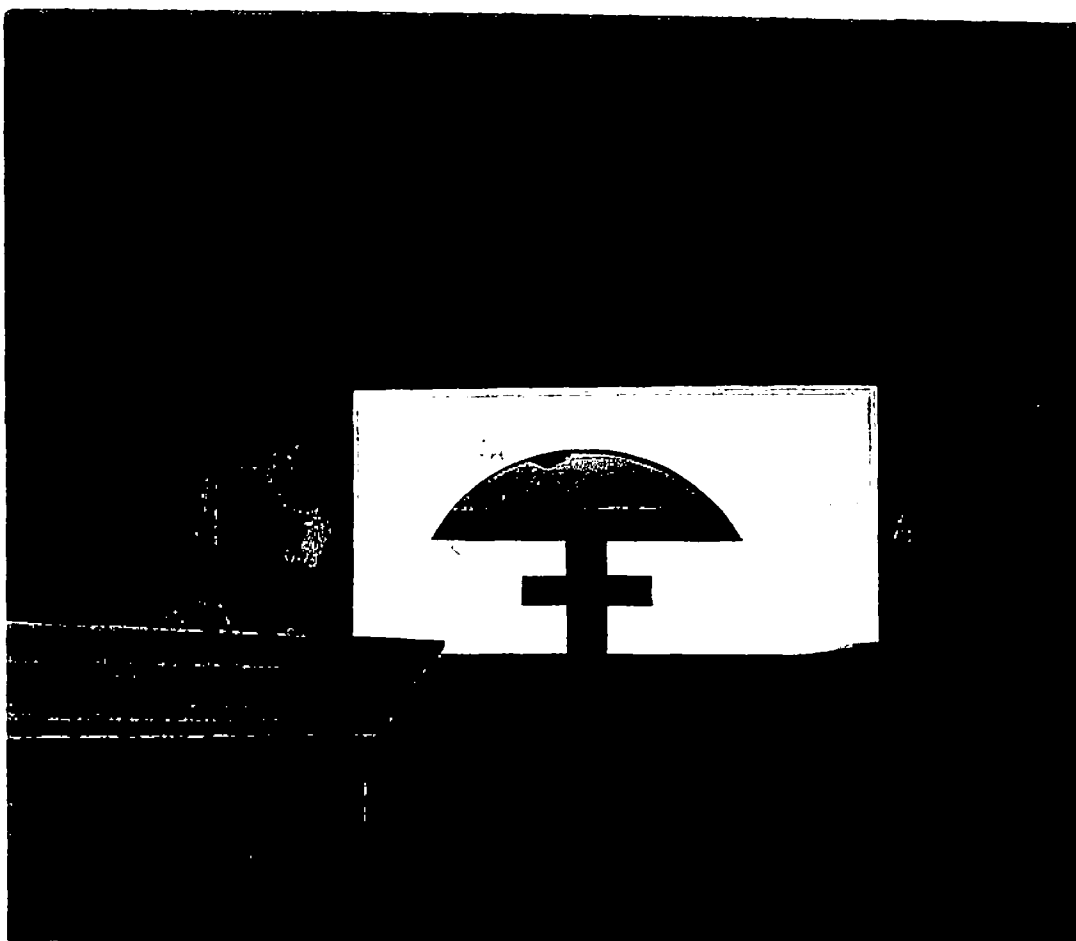
2 Front door with its stylised body, head and initials of all the family. The letter-box is the heart.



THE THEMATIC HOUSE IN LONDON IS OUR MOST sustained attempt to face directly the question of meaning. What, in this agnostic age, is there to symbolise beyond the perennial themes of comfort and fashion? It would be difficult for me to sustain a belief in any point of religious dogma – to design a house based, like Tresham's Triangular Lodge, on the Trinity, for example – while the themes selected by twentieth-century architects, such as Frank Lloyd Wright in his Hollyhock House, seem limited in range. Historically, we are placed at a point of scepticism – scientists, cosmologists and theologians cannot even begin to agree on the nature of the universe – and many recent architects have celebrated relatively trivial subjects. We have therefore chosen an historical perspective that represents time, both cosmic and everyday. Instead of proclaiming certainties of belief, we use the hypotheses of science and conventional wisdom as guides. The notion is that even in a secular age, there are still objective standards worthy of symbolic expression in architecture, art and ornament, and these are the standards by which we orientate ourselves.

The THEMATIC HOUSE is the reworking of an 1840s building that ends a short row of three 'late-Georgian' terrace houses. Because of the context, the existing grammar of the surrounding buildings had to be respected and we made only small variations on their themes for the house's facade. But as one circles the house, from public street front to semi-public side to more private garden, this grammar becomes more and more expressive and individual (1): for instance the top floor dormer windows on the front, which resemble those of our neighbour, are at the back multiplied to express one of the important themes of the house – the suggestion of a face.

The front door of the THEMATIC HOUSE also has a stylised face where other Georgian houses might have a fanlight. Below it, mouldings suggest abstractions of the body (the hands signalled by two doorknobs) surrounded by abstractions of all the family's initials – C, J, M, L – some of them back to front (2). I have tried to keep most of the symbols abstract or relatively hidden since, unlike painting or literature, architecture cannot afford to tell a story the whole time. It must be background as well as foreground, and so far as symbolism is concerned, I have adopted a strategy of abstract representation, stylising the salient parts of an image (for example the eyes, nose and mouth of a face) then generalising them into geometric forms which can be varied endlessly. There is a face house in Japan which is so literal that the front door swallows the inhabitant every night. More satisfactory to



The Chinese Poet holds an ampulla in the shape of a pagoda. This is the symbol of divinity and its central column is the centre of the universe. The sign the poet is represented by is the lotus flower. The lotus was originally a symbol of the sun in ancient Egypt, then a symbol of the continual renewal of life. It still had the same significance when it migrated to India, and thence to China and Japan.

Hadrian has the sign of the Pantheon which was built under his rule. The dome of the Pantheon represents the cosmos and the 'eye' in the dome is the sun. The four walls of the interior under the dome each have a sculpture – representing the four seasons. Abbot Suger rebuilt St Denis in the reign of Louis VII. He holds an eagle with the sign of the fleur-de-lys on it, the emblem of the French monarchy and symbol of life. The symbol of the eagle is explained under Erasmus, the next figure. It is relevant to Abbot Suger as he spent much time speculating on the metaphysics of light and it was said that 'everything that shone stimulated him'.

Erasmus, translator of the New Testament, is shown reading a book with an eagle on it. The eagle is a Christian symbol of ascension because of its powerful upward flight, with 'its gaze fixed on the sun'.

The Jesuit Astrologer holds an astrolabe. On it is a symbol of wisdom, the serpent, which I have drawn eating its own tail to represent eternity, adapting it to the theme of my work.

John Donne, the metaphysical poet, is given the sign of the broken column (the support of life being broken) as in the Renaissance era this meant death, a recurrent theme in his work. Death, specifically the skull, together with a book (which he is holding) was a symbol of time.

Borromini was the architect of S. Ivo della Sapienza. Here he is drawn next to its pinnacle, which is divided into seven parts to create another ziggurat. The spiral symbol of growth is drawn onto the pinnacle emphasising its twining shape.

Prince Hito is wearing the sign of the chrysanthemum, the national flower of Japan and a favourite of the Japanese Emperors for many centuries.

Thomas Jefferson has a vase at his side which comes from the Roman 'Maison Carrée' at Nîmes. The plan of the University of Virginia is drawn on it. In designing the University, Jefferson conceived a central Pantheon-like rotunda with colonnades linking small temple-like pavilions.

Hannah Arendt is holding a papyrus scroll of the Jewish laws. I visualised her in this way because one of her books is titled 'Between Past and Future' and a scroll is generally used as a symbol of life and time, with the inscription on one side of it representing the past, and the inscription on the other the future.

On one side of the projecting corner is the sun with the emblem of the crow, on the other the moon with a three-legged toad – a figure from Chinese legend. At the base of the loggia is a vase with the sign for water, symbol of regeneration. Sprouting from the vase is a twig, the tree of life and knowledge.

I don't expect everyone looking at the symbols to understand their significance, because that would require a certain amount of research. However, I find the signs illustrating the symbols intriguing in themselves; mysterious, as for example, Egyptian hieroglyphics or Arabic and Chinese characters are to those who do not know their significance. The viewer is invited to take part in the slow process of reading the painting and the fact that some objects held by the figures and names inscribed on

the wall can only be seen in their entire form from certain viewpoints increases the difficulty of grasping the whole meaning immediately.

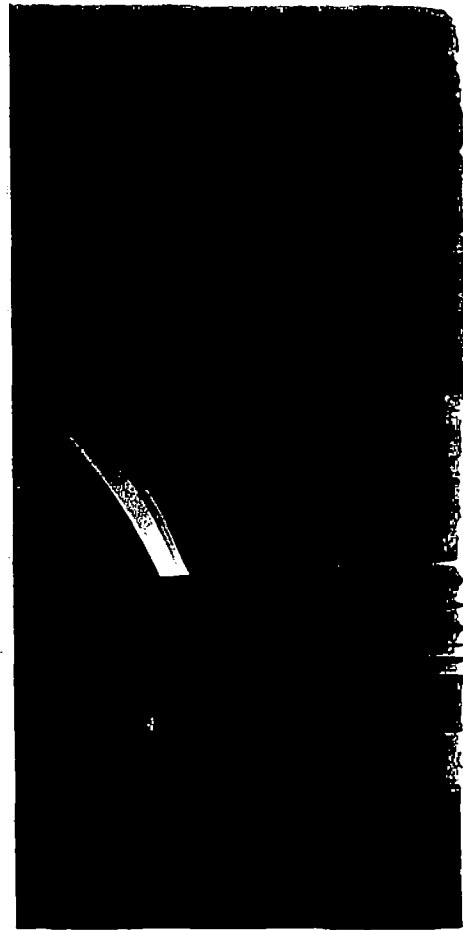
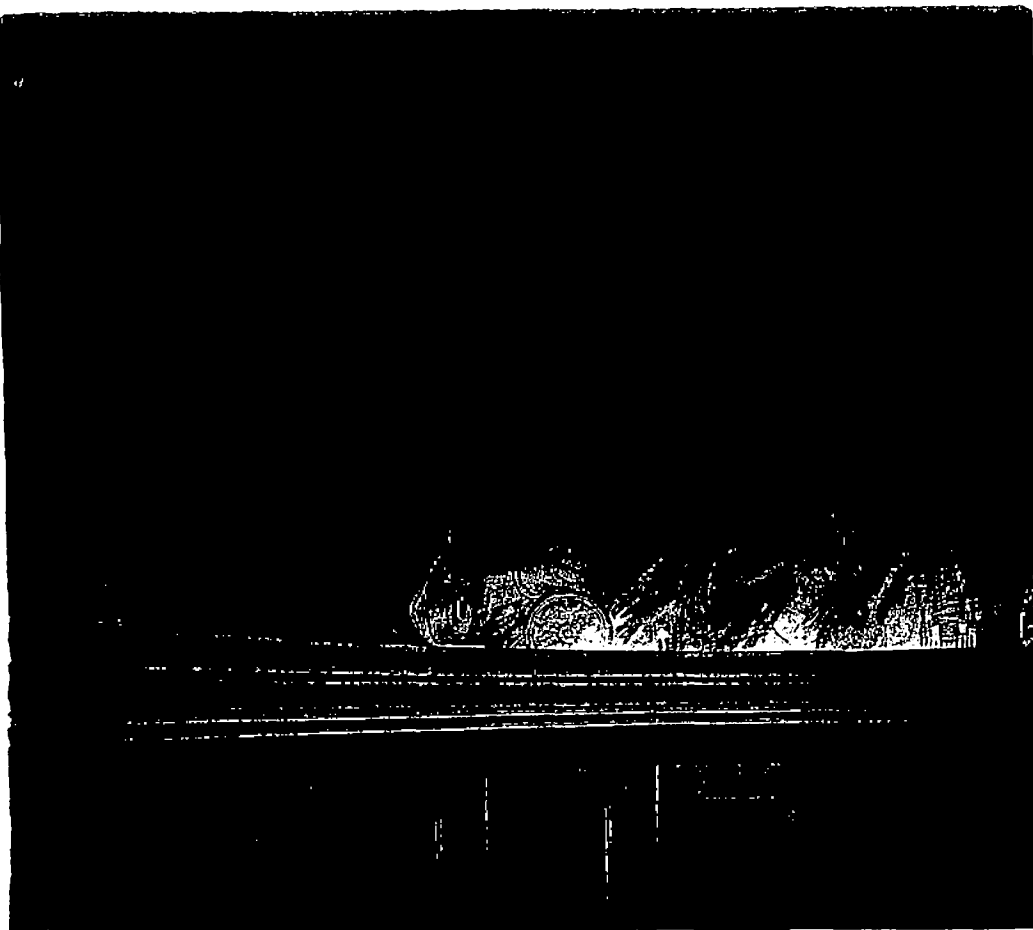
I did not try to make portraits, in the sense of reproducing the exact physiognomy of each person. I used photographs or else used people to whom I am related as though they were actors. I tried to give a different 'skin' to people that I know so that I felt closer to the work that I was making. I used my brother as a model for John Donne and Pythagoras; Roger Kennedy, a psychiatrist friend, for Hadrian; and Pat Moynihan for Abbot Suger. The face of the Jesuit astronomer was based on Luciano, one of my students. Hannah Arendt came from my grandmother and the 'putti', my daughter, Christiana.

I used the pinnacle of S. Ivo as the sign for Borromini as it is the church in which I was married. The Pantheon, sign for Hadrian, is the building which my wife insists on visiting every time we go to Rome.

One sign of the zodiac – my own, the sign of Aquarius – is hidden by the loggia. I felt this was a way of putting my signature.

I thought it was important to dedicate the work to the owners of the house and for this reason I incorporated the signs of the zodiac as drawn by Charles Jencks. I also drew the signs for the figures in the same way as hieroglyphics, where the outlines are of a different colour. I did this as I was aware of Charles Jencks' interest in Egyptian art. For Maggie Keswick I chose two symbols, the moon and the sun, part of Chinese mythology, which fascinates her.

William Stok – December 1984



COSMIC AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Several theories of the history of the universe contend that it began with a Big Bang – a theory which has affinities with the model favoured by previous cosmologies, the Cosmic Egg. The Big Bang is depicted in the COSMIC OVAL above the front door, which can also be seen as a White Hole – continuous creation – pouring out of a Black Hole from the 'Anti-Universe' (3). The blue band within the painting (read from left to right, as the oblique brushstrokes imply) shows the gradual evolution of matter into elliptical and spiral galaxies – 'Time's Rhythm' – which is also represented by the red band above. Below these levels are historical figures from different cultures engaged in conversation. For instance the Egyptian architect and physician, Imhotep, looks down at his stepped pyramid while Pythagoras looks up at the heavens to confirm his theory of number. The sequence ends with Thomas Jefferson and Hannah Arendt debating cultural revolutions which derive, etymologically, from cosmic ones (2). Rather than describing our original programme, we have reproduced here the artist William Stok's reinterpretation since it is obviously closer to the final result.

I based the structure of my work on the diagram of numbers drawn on the vase which the figure of Pythagoras holds in the painting. The diagram is a triangle, made up of nine signs arranged in four horizontal bands, which correspond to the basic mathematical numbers.

Number one, the top of the triangle, is represented in the hallway by the circle in the middle of the dome.

Number two, the second band, is represented by the division of the circle into two sections, yin and yang.

Number three, the third band, corresponds to my painting which is itself divided into three horizontal sections.

Number four, the fourth band, refers to the four walls of the hallway and also the sides of the quadrangle inside the ellipse on the floor, which represents the earth.

I selected one of the primary colours for each of the three lower bands of the painting – red, blue, and yellowish brown. This follows the conception of the celestial hierarchy formulated by Dionysius Exiguus in the fifth century. Red for the seraphim, those nearest to God, blue for the cherubim, angels and sky, and yellow for the earth.

In the first band the serpent with its undulating form contains a sign of the zodiac in each one of its twelve curves. The serpentine line attempts to imitate the flowing of the river, the god Oceanus.

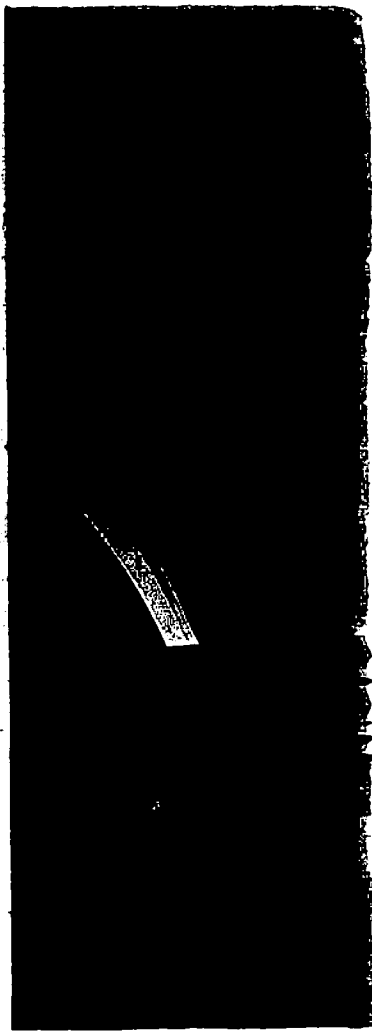
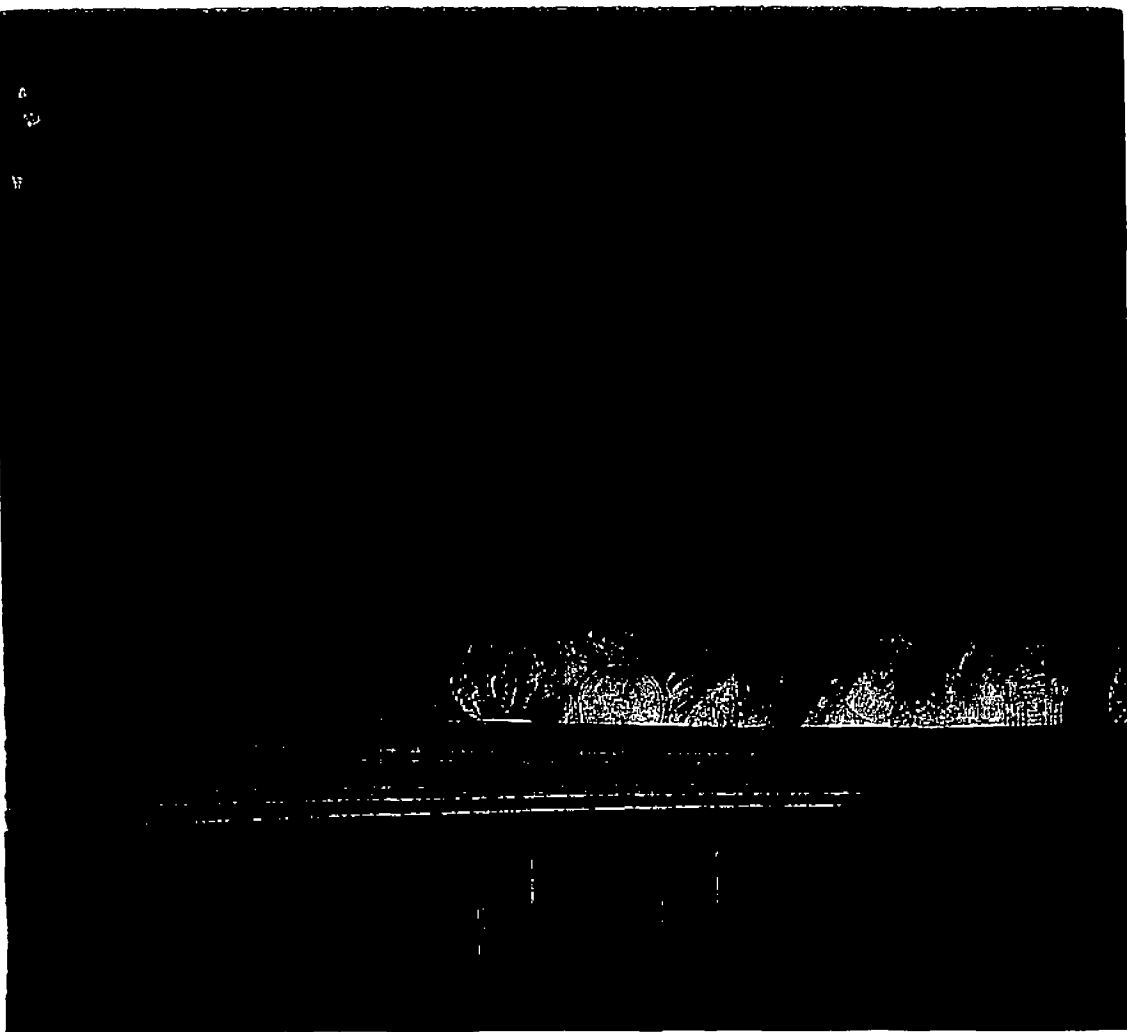
In the second band the elliptic shape above the front door represents the Big Bang, and also echoes the Tantric Cosmic Egg, symbol of creation. I have used the ellipse because it is an integral part of the design of the house, for example in the dome in the hall and the drawn ellipse on the floor. The elliptic shape refers to Kepler's discovery of the shape of the earth's path round

the sun, and it can also be found in the structure of the atom. I imagined the elliptic shape in the atom as a representation of the microcosm, with respect to the elliptic shape of the earth's circumvolution, parabola of a comet, or shape of a galaxy, the macrocosm. This band represents the beginning of the world after the Big Bang and the inclined, parallel brushstrokes, which become darker as they move away from the light source, signify the growth of the cosmos from the first elements in creation, helium and hydrogen. The galaxies formed from the cosmos are depicted around the walls and they return to the ultimate collapse of matter in the universe, the Black Hole.

In the third band twelve eminent historical figures are depicted. In cosmology the number twelve stands for the macrocosm and I intended my work to be linked with the cosmos, not the earth. The figures are not shown in full, but just to the waist, like the sculpted busts in the two rooms adjoining the entrance. Each person is represented by a sign, a 'hieroglyphic' with a symbolic meaning which unites the figures.

Imhotep has the sign of the ziggurat to represent the fact that he was the first architect in Egypt to create a building made in stepped form. The ziggurat was built in imitation of sacred mountains; it was called the mountain of god or the heel of heaven. It was composed of seven steps – seven was thought of as the number of perfection, a sacred number. Imhotep is connected to the next figure, Pythagoras. They both made use of mathematics, the Egyptian for functional reasons and the Greek for abstract or metaphysical reasons. Both Imhotep and Pythagoras were adulated as god-like figures after their deaths.

Pythagoras has the diagram he designed which consists of the first nine numbers. Once again this is in the shape of a ziggurat.



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TOWARDS A SYMBOLIC ARCHITECTURE

JENCKS CHARLES, Rizzoli International Publications, Incorporated,
\$60.00 ISBN 0-8478-0659-6

Jencks's Thematic House in London, a reworking of an 1840s townhouse, fulfills his view that modern architecture can embody personal symbolism. The entrance room, called the Cosmic Oval, is meant to suggest the Big Bang. On its walls, huge, fiery figures of Thomas Jefferson, Hannah Arendt and Pythagoras debate and ponder. Most of the other rooms illustrate a specific theme, with arcane borrowings that range from Baroque to Art Nouveau. Depending upon the viewer's taste, this microcosm of the universe is either a messy, eclectic riot of styles or a dream vision. An influential architect and critic, Jencks discusses Egypt's pyramids, Chinese gardens and Gaudi's buildings as examples of symbolic architecture. While one can applaud his plea to reunite the everyday with the cosmos, his own buildings directed to this end are cold and contrived. The rest of this lavishly illustrated essay deals with the Elemental House in Los Angeles, a studio isolated in the woods and a converted Scottish farm, all designed or built by Jencks. December (11/8/85)

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JENCKS, C.