The spirit of adhocism and brilliant selective editing

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Abstract

In “Urgency and Purpose,” the first section of “The Spirit of Adhocism,” the first chapter of Part One of *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* (1972), Charles Jencks includes an extended quotation from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* (1966). The 116-word block, which provides a loose definition of the “bricoleur,” begins with a three-point ellipsis, and includes two further three-point ellipses. In his *New Society* article “Bricologues à la lanterne” (1976), Reyner Banham describes this quotation as “a brilliant piece of selective editing from which the original meaning has been totally mislaid.” Viewed biographically, the interaction expresses a deteriorating interpersonal relationship between former doctoral student and supervisor. Viewed formally, however, Jencks’s quotation and Banham’s critique prompt questions about the rules and impacts of quotations within architectural discourse.

This paper will investigate the textual properties of Jencks’s quotation of Lévi-Strauss in the contexts of Banham’s evaluation of its functioning. It will involve two parts. The first part of the paper will interrogate the parameters Banham might have applied to conclude Jencks’s Lévi-Strauss quotation is a misrepresentation of the original text. It will scrutinise the editing that transformed Lévi-Strauss’s original piece of writing into Jencks’s fragment. The use of typographical ellipses in relation to excluded words and concepts will be of particular significance. The second part of the paper will reframe the apparent sarcasm within Banham’s assertion and probe how Jencks’s quotation might indeed be deemed “brilliant”. It will consider how a quotation might function effectively despite failing to accurately relay its source. Metatextual aspects of the quotation will form the basis of this second part, which will highlight the significance of the discursive function of “The Spirit of Adhocism.”
**Quotation**

The first edition of *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* was published in 1972. The book has two distinct parts: part one was written by Charles Jencks; part two by Nathan Silver. In their book chapter “Postmodernism: Style and Subversion,” Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt include Jencks and Silver’s titular neologism in what they refer to as “an exhausting range of *noms de plume* [for] and sub-genres [of]” postmodernism: “radical design, adhocism, counter-design, transavantgardism, neo-expressionism, radical eclecticism, [and] critical regionalism.” At the time of its publication however, *Adhocism* was an idiosyncratic extension of the widespread counter-cultural trajectory of the 1960s, and a challenge to architectural orthodoxy – what Kenneth Frampton, in his 1974 review of the book, calls “the so-called purist tradition of twentieth century architectural culture.”

Jencks’ presentation of “adhocism” in *Adhocism* rests on a concept developed by the French structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss. In “Urgency and Purpose,” the first section of “The Spirit of Adhocism,” the first chapter of the first part of the book, Jencks writes:

> … the “bricoleur” is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. … The “bricoleur” is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with “whatever is at hand”. … the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the “bricoleur” by inclination or necessity always remains within them.

This quotation establishes the figure of the bricoleur both as the embodiment of a long-held and resurgent mode of creativity, and as an agent of resistance towards and potential instrument for the transformation of design and architecture culture. The bricoleur and the associated practice of “bricolage” ground the remainder of Jencks’ section of the book.

Five years after the publication of *Adhocism*, Peter Reyner Banham wrote the essayistic book-review-cum-article “Bricologues à la lanterne” for the “Arts and Society” section of *New Society* – a journal that served as “a forum for the new intelligentsia” spawned by the expansion of higher education in Britain from the early 1960s. Banham was Jencks’ doctoral supervisor from 1966 to 1970. This long association would have afforded the
celebrated critic the chance to develop a sophisticated understanding of Jencks’ intellectual practice and discursive ambition. In “Bricologues à la lanterne,” however, Banham is far from subtle. His general attack is directed at what he labels “Lévistrology,” a trend besetting architecture’s “world of discourse” that he claims casts The Savage Mind (1966) – the English translation of Lévi-Strauss’s La Pensée Sauvage (1962) – as “almost the Third Testament, so every word in it ha[s] to be read as gospel.”

The major thrust of “Bricologues à la lanterne” focuses on Jencks. The critique is at its most bellicose when Banham includes the quotation above; explains that the quotation is “the actual Lévi-Strauss words as quoted in the most consequential bricological text to date, Adhocism by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver”; and declares the textual fragment “a brilliant piece of selective editing from which the original meaning has been totally mislaid,” before recommending his readers “go back to the [original] text (around page 16 in most translations)” to see for themselves. In conjunction with the image of a noose hung from a streetlamp that heads the article’s title, this sarcasm-laden assessment reads as a final and fatal judgment.

This paper takes as its quarry Jencks’ “Spirit of Adhocism” quotation, and Banham’s critique of its representation. It will not discuss the potential personal motivations for Banham’s belated attack on Jencks. Rather, it will conduct a text-based analysis of the significance of Lévi-Strauss in “The Spirit of Adhocism.” The paper will first study the technical aspects of the quotation, particularly its use of three-point ellipses. It will then probe the metatextual aspects of the fragment to reveal the quotation’s functioning within architectural discourse.

**Quotation, quotation**

To assess the editing involved in the Lévi-Strauss quotation in “The Spirit of Adhocism,” the original excerpt from which it is drawn is required. The below is a verbatim quotation of the section of The Savage Mind’s “The Science of the Concrete” from which the quotation in “The Spirit of Adhocism” is drawn. Note that, as per Jencks’ quotation and in keeping with Banham’s castigation, the quotation below is from the English translation and not the French original. The first and last paragraphs have been included in their entirety to contextualise the extract. For ease of reference, the sections in the Jencks quotation are marked with guillemets – i.e., <<quotation>>.

There still exists among ourselves an activity which on the technical plane gives us quite a good understanding of what a science we prefer to call “prior” rather
than “primitive,” could have been on the plane of speculation. This is what is commonly called “bricolage” in French. In its old sense the verb “bricoler” applied to ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting and riding. It was however always used with reference to some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle. And in our own time <<the “bricoleur” is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman.>> The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual “bricolage” – which explains the relation which can be perceived between the two.

Like “bricolage” on the technical plane, mythical reflection can reach brilliant unforeseen results on the intellectual plane. Conversely, attention has often been drawn to the mytho-poetical nature of “bricolage” on the plane of so-called “raw” or “naïve” art, in architectural follies like the villa of Cheval the postman or the stage sets of Georges Méliès, or, again, in the case immortalized by Dickens in Great Expectations but no doubt originally inspired by observation, of Mr Wemmick’s suburban “castle” with its miniature drawbridge, its cannon firing at nine o’clock, its bed of salad and cucumbers, thanks to which its occupants could withstand a siege if necessary …

The analogy is worth pursuing since it helps us to see the real relations between the two types of scientific knowledge we have distinguished. <<The “bricoleur” is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with “whatever is at hand”>> that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. The set of the “bricoleur’s” means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project (which would presuppose besides, that, as in the case of the
engineer, there were, at least in theory, as many sets of tools and materials or “instrumental sets,” as there are different kinds of projects). It is to be defined only by its potential use or, putting this another way and in the language of the “bricoleur” himself, because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that “they may always come in handy.” Such elements are specialized up to a point, sufficiently for the “bricoleur” not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of actual and possible relations; they are “operators” but they can be used for any operations of the same type.

The elements of mythical thought similarly lie halfway between percepts and concepts. It would be impossible to separate percepts from the concrete situations in which they appeared, while recourse to concepts would require that thought could, at least provisionally, put its projects (to use Husserl’s expression) “in brackets.” Now, there is an intermediary between images and concepts, namely signs. For signs can always be defined in the way introduced by Saussure in the case of the particular category of linguistic signs, that is, as a link between images and concepts. In the union thus brought about, images and concepts play the part of the signifying and signified respectively.

Signs resemble images in being concrete entities but they resemble concepts in their powers of reference. Neither concepts nor signs relate exclusively to themselves; either may be substituted for something else. Concepts, however, have an unlimited capacity in this respect, while signs have not. The example of the “bricoleur” helps to bring out the differences and similarities. Consider him at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem. He interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could “signify” and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize but which will ultimately differ from the instrumental set only in the internal disposition of its parts. A particular cube of oak could be a wedge to make up for the inadequate length of a plank of pine or it could be a pedestal – which would allow the grain and polish of the old wood to show to
advantage. In one case it will serve as extension, in the other as material. But the possibilities always remain limited by the particular history of each piece and by those of its features which are already determined by the use for which it was originally intended or the modifications it has undergone for other purposes. The elements which the “bricoleur” collects and uses are “pre-constrained” like the constitutive units of myth, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuvre. And the decision as to what to put in each place also depends on the possibility of putting a different element there instead, so that each choice which is made will involve a complete reorganization of the structure, which will never be the same as one vaguely imagined nor as some other which might have been preferred to it.

The engineer no doubt also cross-examines his resources. The existence of an “interlocutor” is in his case due to the fact that his means, power and knowledge are never unlimited and that in this negative form he meets resistance with which he has to come to terms. It might be said that the engineer questions the universe, while the “bricoleur” addresses himself to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavours, that is, only a sub-set of the culture. Again, Information Theory shows that it is possible, and often useful, to reduce the physicists’ approaches to a sort of dialogue with nature. This would make the distinction we are trying to draw less clearcut. There remains however a difference even if one takes into account the fact that the scientist never carries on a dialogue with nature pure and simple but rather with a particular relationship between nature and culture definable in terms of his particular period and civilization and the material means at his disposal. He is no more able than the “bricoleur” to do whatever he wishes when he is presented with a given task. He too has to begin by making a catalogue of a previously determined set consisting of theoretical and practical knowledge, of technical means, which restrict the possible solutions.

The difference is therefore less absolute than it might appear. It remains a real one, however, in that <<the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the “bricoleur” by inclination or necessity always remains within them.>> This is another way of saying that the engineer works by means of concepts and the
“bricoleur” by means of signs. The sets which each employs are at different distances from the poles on the axis of opposition between nature and culture. One way indeed in which signs can be opposed to concepts is that whereas concepts aim to be wholly transparent with respect to reality, signs allow and even require the interposing and incorporation of a certain amount of human culture into reality. Signs, in Peirce’s vigorous phrase “address somebody.”

The guillemets in the quotation above help expose two notable aspects of the “Spirit of Adhocism” quotation. One, unlike the polemical pamphlet “Zukunftsfhilologie!” [“Future Philology!”], Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s critique of Frederick Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music, the “Spirit of Adhocism” quotation does not contain any mis- or pseudo-quotations. The words Jencks uses replicate the cited reference without fault. This accords with standard procedure, and conforms to Banham’s assessment of the editing as “selective,” rather than “erroneous,” “unscholarly,” or even “fraudulent.” Two, Jencks’ quotation is a fraction of the length of the original. The excerpt from “The Science of the Concrete” that constitutes this paper’s second quotation runs to 1,444 words. This number can be reduced to 1,254 words if the opening and closing segments included in this paper’s quotation for context are removed. By contrast, the “Spirit of Adhocism” quotation, this paper’s first quotation, totals a mere 118 words. The quotation in “The Spirit of Adhocism” is thus less than ten percent of the length of the segment of “The Science of the Concrete” from which it was extracted. This vast abridgement provides grounds for challenging the “Spirit of Adhocism” quotation’s ability to comprehensively convey the source.

The 1,136 words included in the quoted section of “The Science of the Concrete” but missing from the quotation in “The Spirit of Adhocism” are not totally unaccounted for by Jencks. Their absence is signified by three-point typographical ellipses. Including the set that unnecessarily begin the quotation, there are three ellipses.

Strict rules for typographical ellipsis use have never been universally agreed upon. The Chicago Manual of Style and the Modern Language Association have developed their own standards. These largely focus on typographical convention – the spacing of the three points, their relation to other punctuation marks, and so on – rather than the nature of the omission they signify. Dictionary definitions are more explicit in this regard. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines ellipsis as “[t]he omission of one or more words in a sentence, which would be needed to complete the grammatical construction or fully to express the sense.” Using such a dictionary definition, the three-point ellipses included in
the “Spirit of Adhocism” quotation are incorrect. Rather than standing for removed words within a sentence, the ellipses in the quotation cover considerable sections of text: the first, unnecessary ellipsis stands for a vague but potentially vast amount of words, perhaps stretching to the beginning of the chapter; the second ellipsis stands for 194 words, in six sentences; and the third ellipsis stands for 944 words, stretching over thirty-three sentences, forming three full paragraphs and two remainders.

The dictionary definition of ellipsis and the grammatical rules that govern the use of the typographical signifier are well suited to linguistic theory that understands syntax as an autonomous system. This perspective underwrites the generative linguistic tradition promoted by Noam Chomsky. The work of Chomsky has been used in the past to support architectural theory and practice – for example, syntax and deep structure ground the analytics and diagrammatic operations that produced the Giuseppe Terragni studies, the numbered house projects, and the discourse on autonomy produced by Peter Eisenman. But such concerns are far from the work of both Jencks and Banham: the former’s long-held interest in language – which began with work addressing “meaning in architecture,” and continued into his promotion of Post-Modern and iconic architecture – focuses around semiotics, particularly its semantic dimension, and specifically metaphor; the latter’s dedication to modern culture and technology focuses largely on aformal compositions, and frameworks enlivened by infrastructure, widgets, and gizmos.

**Quotation, rhetoric**

The dictionary definition of ellipsis is less relevant to more recent work in linguistics by scholars such as George Lakoff that stresses the cognitive aspect of grammar. Under such frameworks, grammatical structures are not fixed conventions based on strict rules, but are rather dynamic elements of a neurally-located symbolic order that contribute to overall meaning production. Cognitive linguistics’ concentration on communication encourages analysis of the elided words based on the use and effect of the three points in context. It proposes that while typographical ellipses signify the removal of information present in the original text, their rhetorical significance pertains more to the text in which they appear.

Under a cognitive framework, ellipses are devices that focus attention on the most relevant aspects of a referenced textual fragment and make the text in which they appear more concise and coherent. From this perspective, the assessment of the selectiveness of a quotation’s editing should determine whether it misrepresents the original text by removing information essential to its proper meaning, regardless of its disciplining through syntax.
Cross-referencing the quotations in “The Spirit of Adhocism” and “The Science of the Concrete” reveals some clear gaps. For example, using the third three-point ellipsis, Jencks removes some qualification and oscillation present in Lévi-Strauss. The original text includes the following:

Information Theory shows that it is possible, and often useful, to reduce the physicists’ approaches to a sort of dialogue with nature. This would make the distinction we are trying to draw less clearcut. There remains however a difference even if one takes into account the fact that the scientist never carries on a dialogue with nature pure and simple but rather with a particular relationship between nature and culture definable in terms of his particular period and civilization and the material means at his disposal. He is no more able than the “bricoleur” to do whatever he wishes when he is presented with a given task. He too has to begin by making a catalogue of a previously determined set consisting of theoretical and practical knowledge, of technical means, which restrict the possible solutions. The difference is therefore less absolute than it might appear. It remains a real one, however.24

This section does not advance the message, and can be best understood as a digression. Jencks removes the loop and its resultant uncertainty. The move strengthens the argument. Like Lévi-Strauss, Jencks ultimately looks to make a distinction, to propose a clear-cut opposition; and his concision helps remove the doubt Lévi-Strauss’ excursion includes.

The third three-point ellipsis also effects omissions that are arguably more substantive. It removes references to key concepts and sources. “The Science of the Concrete” includes a mention of the significant theoretician Ferdinand de Saussure:

Now, there is an intermediary between images and concepts, namely signs. For signs can always be defined in the way introduced by Saussure in the case of the particular category of linguistic signs, that is, as a link between images and concepts. In the union thus brought about, images and concepts play the part of the signifying and signified respectively.25

It also makes reference to Charles Sanders Peirce: “Signs, in Peirce’s vigorous phrase ‘address somebody’.”26 Both names are omitted from the “Spirit of Adhocism” quotation.
Perhaps even more revealing, despite its importance to Lévi-Strauss’ work and to structuralist thought more broadly, Jencks does not use the term “sign” once in his part of *Adhocism*. Neither does he mention semiology or semiotics. Indeed, Jencks’ use of the term “structural” in the book is restricted to discussing the physical properties of buildings. This reveals the intellectual distance between *Adhocism* and the academic concerns of Jencks’ 1969 chapter “Semiology and Architecture”; but it does not necessarily distort the message in “The Science of the Concrete.”

There is no general rule of writing that demands the inclusion of every aspect of an appropriated source into the argument or material of a text incorporating quotation. Indeed, communicative efficiency is a commonsense expectation. Summarising and reducing excessive prolixity into basic language is a widely-held constituent of rhetorical success. In this sense, Banham’s assessment that the quotation in “The Spirit of Adhocism” is a “brilliant piece of selective editing” might be understood as begrudging acknowledgement: bending but not breaking conventions of written communication, three-point ellipses have been used to effect acts of omission and reframing that result in a clear rhetorical impact.

The most contentious aspect involved in editing is not omission but re-framing. This is a key issue for Banham in “Bricologues à la lanterne.” In his reading, *The Savage Mind* is not focused on acts of technical and material construction, but rather on ideological construction. He argues that “the bricoleur is not part of any anthropological statement or argument, but more like an extended metaphor or parabolic gloss on one”; that *The Savage Mind* is concerned with theorising the nature and formation of myths, and “The Science of the Concrete” employs the “bricoleur” analogically to help express the closed world of signs that supports mythological thought. When Banham asserts that Jencks frames “an elegantly contrived but trifling metaphor ... as a revelation about the nature of design,” he is working to articulate what he sees as a case of myopia: a focus on an illustrative figure that leaves the central topic of myth a blur. Again, however, a sharpening of focus does not inevitably result in a situation in which “the original meaning has been totally mislaid.” Nor does it seem grounds for a public hanging.

**Quotation, discourse**

The keys to the unlocking the discursive functioning of Jencks’ quotation can be found in another of the condemnations present in “Bricologues à la lanterne.” Levelling his words squarely at Jencks, Banham claims Lévi-Strauss “is very handy for academics bricolating theories out of other people’s books.” Clearly, this type of authorship is contrary to Banham’s epistemological position: he claims it results in myths – adhocism being one of
the “dottier” ones\textsuperscript{31} – that “[can] be injurious to your health.”\textsuperscript{32} Banham's position is in keeping with Frampton, whose review of \textit{Adhocism} begins with an epigraph featuring the Walrus from Lewis Carroll’s \textit{Through the Looking Glass}, and includes the assessment that Jencks and Silver's book is “nothing if not exemplary of itself,” its “two separate parts” “[l]ike two ends of an ill-fitting pantomime horse.”\textsuperscript{33}

Banham and Frampton fail to appreciate the potential for architectural writing to realise powerful effects through its poetic function. Their myopia prevents them from seeing that the quotation in “The Spirit of Adhocism” works through a conceptual metaphor. Its significance comes from its expression of the concrete materiality of architectural theory discourse. Banham asserts that within \textit{The Savage Mind}, the bricoleur works “to illuminate a point about the nature of mythologies – that they are cobbled up ad hoc out of folk tales and fables that are to hand.”\textsuperscript{34} The “Spirit of Adhocism” quotation illuminates the very same point: the quotation’s overtly-ad-hoc, cobbled-together presence in the text embodies purposeful, discursive action that exploits available means. Using bricolage to construct written content on bricolage reinforces the underlying concept. Stressing the sign-based nature of communication expresses the contingent and pre-constrained nature of texts.

The specifics of the quotation in “The Spirit of Adhocism” strengthen the metaphor. The gospel-like status of \textit{The Savage Mind} makes it an especially appropriate source. By using popular and readily available resources – “whatever is at hand” – the quotation embodies the type of pragmatic creativity it promotes: an engagement based not on static and resolute rules, but on relative, negotiated, contingent use. The extremeness of the three-point ellipsis use epitomises “Urgency and Purpose,” the unscholarly editing actually helping to highlight both the mechanics and communicative impact of bricolage. The quotation in “The Spirit of Adhocism” does what it says, and says what it does.

While in keeping with Lévi-Strauss’ theory, the “Spirit of Adhocism” quotation’s metaphoric effect helps establish the bricoleur as a mythical figure in its new context, its discursive significance might be best evidenced through its byproducts. Again, Banham helps articulate this in “Bricologues à la lanterne." He laments the fact that \textit{Adhocism} helps restructure his “world of discourse” by setting up a dichotomy; yet he responds with his own, strongly drawn opposition: “[Jencks and Silver] discovered bricolage not for what it was – the way the world has always worked – but as a gospel of salvation. And since a gospel needs a Satan, the engineer had an immediate role in this new bricosmology.”\textsuperscript{35} The quotation in the “Spirit of Adhocism” caricatures orthodox, heroic, capital-M Modern architecture so effectively it provokes a pseudo-religious, sectarian reaction.\textsuperscript{36}
In “The Science of the Concrete,” Lévi-Strauss includes a quotation from the anthropologist Franz Boas: “It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up, only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments.” Lévi-Strauss follows the quotation with a correction: “[p]enetrating as this comment is, it nevertheless fails to take into account that in the continual reconstruction from the same materials, it is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of means: the signified changes into the signifying and vice versa.” It is in this dynamic, reconstructive power that the quotation in “The Spirit of Adhocism” is “brilliant.” By its own simple, concrete presence, it recasts textual fragments as artefacts that “may always come in handy” as both means and ends.

Jencks’ clear-cut, amplified example suggests a general rule for architectural discourse: all quotations work through conceptual metaphor. The inclusion of a form or figure from another context into or onto a new ground necessarily gains this poetic function. Regardless of what aspect of textuality the inserted figure draws onto the ground, the effect — expressed largely through affect — is achieved through the same mechanism. “Brilliance” is one side-effect of this pattern; animosity another.

Endnotes

7 For further treatment of the relation between Jencks and Banham, see Andrew P. Steen, “The Figures of Charles Jencks, ‘Semiology and Architecture’” (PhD, University of Queensland, 2015).

While this inclusion imparts significant pressure on the paper’s word length, editing the section would have miscommunicated the editing performed by Jencks.


It should be noted that Jencks himself strengthens this effect somewhat in his own strident and defensive reaction to Frampton’s review, which cries against “Framptonian inquisitorialism” – Charles Jencks, “Reply by Charles Jencks,” Oppositions 3 (May, 1974): 106.
