Radiators

Evi Hall

The Cosmic House is built around columns of light and heat. In the Summer Room you'll find a south-facing window with a curved rail punctuated by a graphic sun cutout, fitting the expandable Sun Table neatly into its alcove. Step back and the room appears at its best angle. The arching banister, table and sun rays – 'murderous "arrows from afar,"' writes Jencks in *Towards a Symbolic Architecture* – are framed by the classical squareness of two rectangular radiators either side, streaming sun and tall ridged pillars of metal warming the room. The radiators look like columns, their bodies designed, in Jencks' words, as 'flutes surmounted by light sconces in the shape and colour of a quarter sun'.

Radiators provide a gravitational pull in any room. They're a resting place for hands, backs, bums, their grills pleasantly indenting into our soft flesh. Yet we never quite know what to do with them visually. A few variations on the classic finned radiator exist, and some homeowners opt for slatted or trellised covers, endeavouring to aestheticise or hide them entirely. Often radiators are summarily painted over, gathering whorls, drips and splatters, an attempt to make them fade away.

Where radiators are not presented as columns – a recurring motif of the house – Jencks too has plumped for the painted treatment, albeit a Jencksian one. At the top of the house the radiators are painted a clouded sky blue, melding into the heavens, whilst in the Architectural Library the radiators lie low, painted in the same brooding Biedermeire wood grain that graces some of the MDF furniture and panelling of The Cosmic House. For Jencks, this is not just a disguise. These surfaces, like the armchairs of the Winter Room are '… painted in *tromp l'oeil* with a wood grain that elaborates the theme of cosmic activity. What appears to be fibrous swirls and knots are in fact representations of nebulae and stars.'

Today, amidst climate and energy crises, we are moving away from conventional gas-boiler convection radiators. In Salford, UK, for instance, you'll find the Energy House 2.0, an industrial hangar laboratory storing two full-size houses in its climate-controlled belly. It's the inverse of The Cosmic House in almost every way. Large residential housing developers use Energy House 2.0 as a testing ground for heating systems that will be rolled out into thousands of three- and four-bedroom identikit housing developments across the UK. Energy House 2.0's homes are blandly digestible in design: red brick, white walled, grey

toned, nuclear family appropriate. The houses, and the radiators within them, are designed for economical and regulatory efficiency: scientific, marketable, consumer friendly.

If Energy House 2.0 is an engineered, commercial approach to domestic heating, then The Cosmic House is a romantic and holistic one, in which architecture and heating attempt to fuse. Historically, domestic heat has switched from a commanding central hearth to sidelined, sock-drying radiators. Today, once again, the aesthetic problem of the radiator is evolving into the aesthetic problem of whatever will replace it – air-source heat pumps, infra-red panels, electric radiators. But perhaps there's room to solve this as a whole, a Jencksian ambition, 'So [that] passive solar heating, real radiator heating and symbolic heat are all brought together in one elaborate equation of sign and symbol'.