Lovers of lexicography are indebted to Johnson's painstaking and idiosyncratic search for meaning amidst the changing world of the 18th Century. His approach: to trace a genealogy of usage through quotations, was held together with his characteristic wit and opinions. It was to be over one hundred years before anyone would attempt such a dictionary again.

The classic penguin dictionaries on architecture and building, have through numerous reprints and revised editions, safeguarded our access to the semi-arcane terminology of architecture.

Few have tried to map the definitions, ideologies and endless jargon emanating from the world of contemporary architecture. While visions, manifestoes, and declarations continue to pack out the architecture bookshelves, any attempt at an A-Z has been offered only as an aside. The dictionary that runs throughout Rem Koolhaas's S.M.L.XL has triggered many similar and bizarre attempts at a related personal glossary. So too the dna like chains of 'isms' propagated by Charles Jencks, which simply provide ever more theories, rather than explain or define any of them.

The Metropolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture (MDAA) is an epic etymological project. It searches for words, meanings and definitions amidst our contemporary architectural maelstrom. Preferring a diversity of authors, voices and contributors it is a curious cultural panorama of our architectural words and ideas in the information age.

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decipher the curiosities of our age that shapes our architectural lexicon. "black holes", 'fuzzy logic', 'McGuffins', 'fourth worlds', and 'Gibson's spawn' are some of the terms we encounter across this pixelated, information filled network. It is full of projects, diagrams, photographs, musical scores and a lot more besides.

The metropolis of the past has become a 'metapolis': a multicity composed of information. Beyond this lies 'urburbia' which supports colonies of 'home-workers' feeding the information economy. We are told "...our society has mutated into a society of entertainment...where entertainment means consuming."

This book is a wonderfully oblique view of architecture: a sort of distorting prism to look afresh at the operations and ideas of architecture. It is an ambitious and energetic attempt to search for meaning in our rapidly changing world. In the face of our frenetic and constantly shifting 'information age', it can only ever be incomplete. But much like Johnson's dictionary, it savours the search. Its devious humour and rich multi-layered barrage of words and information is an open challenge to the way we think about architecture.

What Johnson would have made of it all we will never know. When questioned about the suitability of his qualifications for compiling his own dictionary he replied "...ignorance, pure ignorance." Perhaps this is a good starting point. When we search for culture we search to find our language. The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture will help us unravel something of our current architectural babble.

Paul Clarke

The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture
City, technology and society in the information age
By Manuel Casta, Vincenzo Gaulli, Willy Muller, Federico Soriana, Fernando Porras, Jose Morales
Coordinated by Susanna Clos Price: £15

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This dictionary is not an absolute, singular or complete vision, but as it says "...brings together a shared restless-mindedness." Words, language and ideas are constantly played with throughout the book - both the actual words listed and in their definitions. Symbols in the margin provide a key that reveals the authors of each definition and a cross referencing system allows the sourcing of associated terms and meanings. "...we have not sought to classify...in closed categories, but rather to venture, like explorers into still fresh, emergent and untamed territories."

Amidst the words that we would expect in such a dictionary: 'e-city', 'folds', 'blobs', 'fractal', 'cloning', 'hybrid', 'chaos' and 'recycle' we are introduced to some new ones and unusual terminologies: 'chunking', 'blondie', 'dirty details', 'fresh conservation' and 'Swiss knife.' In this dictionary there is no revisiting the mantras of "form follows function" or "less is more" but we are asked instead to absorb words of wisdom from the movies: take John Travolta's advice and "What ever you do, do it cool baby."

There is no Mies, Corb or Kahn but instead their comic counterparts: Buster Keaton and the Marx brothers. They offer us alternative strategies of a distinctly non-linear approach. The strange and fragmented 'cut and paste' Photoshop world we inhabit, is rolled out into an intriguing alphabetical bundle of knowledge. The book zips through all kinds of possibilities for architecture. We are free to engage, assemble and