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Architecture between Myth of Progress and Disenchantment

Hélène Jannière

Translator: Simon Pleasance

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Pionniers de l'architecture moderne, une anthologie, (sous la dir. de Jean-Claude Ludi), Lausanne : Presses polytechniques et universitaires, 2002

1   Between the wars, architects were anything but sparing when it came to producing polemical and theoretical writings, and that period has already given rise to several anthologies. The merit of Jean-Claude Ludi's book, *Pionniers de l'architecture moderne : une anthologie,* is that it offers French-speaking readers writings by several foreign architects (Erich Mendelsohn, Hannes Meyer, Rudolf M. Schindler, Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud, Giovanni Michelucci, Moshe J.Ginsburg), whose constructed work has caused us to overlook their theoretical output. We can accordingly discover texts which can only stimulate, even if they are at times on the sidelines with regard to modern architectural manifestos, which are liberally reproduced–Michelucci's explanatory notice about the project for Florence's railway station (1933), Hannes Meyer's report on the organization of work in the design of social neighbourhoods in Germany and in the Soviet Union. In the comparative analysis of these texts–mainly from the 1920s and 1930s–the author lays claim to an epistemological stance, making use of concepts developed by the architecturology of Philippe Boudon. He aims at updating the design-oriented approach of these architects, at the risk of identifying in their writings, in an inductive way, an

architecturology, before any such term was invented. The recurrent and critically unquestioning use of the phrase "pioneers of modern architecture", defined as conveyors of social progress and the stylistic break with the eclecticism of the 19th century, nevertheless puts across a monolithic, not to say simplistic vision, running counter to the historical readings recently undertaken on the Modern Movement.

2   Another impossible-to-find text, *Delirious New York* (original edition, 1978) by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, is not an attempt to define "Manhattanism" as a style complementing the long list of 20th century isms, but rather an effort to polemically establish a "retroactive manifesto of Manhattan". Retroactive, because what was then involved for Koolhaas was retracing the unwitting and unformulated theory which presided over the *manifesto-less* collective experimentation that, between 1890 and 1940, made Manhattan the place of the culture of modernity and congestion. Written in 1978, while architectural postmodernism was developing on the other side of the Atlantic, and the urbanism of the modern movement was once and for all discredited, *Delirious New York* was not a mere critique of functionalism. Though based on fiction and irony, its aim was to formulate an urban theory for the late 20th century, by re-evaluating density in urban culture. Its re-publication has nevertheless gained by presenting an historical explanation of this 1978 text, and analysing the subsequent shifts in the author's stances to do with things urban (*SMLXL*, 1995[1]; *Mutations*, 2000[2]).

3   While Rem Koolhaas came to a "theory" of the skyscraper as one of the bases of urban density, Aaron Betsky proposes in *Lignes d'Horizon : l'architecture et son site* variations on an architectural type: the "skyscraper". It is not a matter of an ecological, landscaped or contextual architecture, in the most current sense of these terms, but of constructions which regard the earth's surface as a fully-fledged architectural feature, instead of denying it (the way skyscrapers do, "sublimation of the defensive concept" of architecture. Aaron Betsky identifies four approaches which might progressively culminate in the quest for a "quintessence" of architecture: fashioning the earth by way of technologies, offering new spatial experiences by revealing the potential of what lies beneath, and lastly deploying the earth, and re-creating a "new nature" through the artifice which, in the final analysis, forms all architecture. This very well illustrated book, which is a presentation of projects rather than a critical analysis, tends at times to re-read the history of 20th century architecture by over-subjecting it to these four categories.

4   Diametrically opposed to the optimistic and heroic history of the "pioneers" of modern architecture, and contrasting with any quest for the essence of architecture in technology, matter and denseness, *Masse, mémoire, fiction* envisages the disappearance of architecture as symbolic form, social project and materiality. François Séguret reckons that architecture is at once *over-exposed* in the current context of visualization *ad nauseam* and continual flow of media imagery, and absorbed by the new social imperatives: heritage, communication, museum policies. This splitting of the symbolic and political dimensions of architecture results from the increasing dissociation between formal interplay and matter, form and mass. The essay describes the semantic profusion of architecture in the postmodern condition dominated by the shapeless; it analyses its new relations with forms of representation, in the current reign of screens which, by permitting limitless formal manipulation, lead paradoxically to the destruction of forms. The fact is that, unlike art, architecture has not undertaken the work of "optical distancing" making it possible to understand that electronic systems of mass

communication are, today, no more than an uninterrupted flow of particles which "lets everything be seen without displaying anything". This process of aestheticization also invades all aspects of things urban. Referring to Koolhaas's *SMLXL*, François Séguret shows that the dispersal and loss of centrality in present-day cities can dovetail perfectly with heritage-related policies, these too being ways of showing off a city that has turned into a communications medium.

5   This essay focuses on the disappearance of the powers and meanings ordinarily assigned to architecture, but it does not for all that adopt any position nostalgic for a vanished order: on the contrary, it rises up against phonily conservative practices. *Masse, mémoire, fiction* is radically polemical, and at once stimulating and disconcerting; it gets us to wonder whether, as the subtitle ironically announces, architecture has (really) *lost its shadow.*

NOTES

1. *SMLXL,* Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas & Bruce Mau. Rotterdam : 010 Publishers, 1995

2. *Mutations : Rem Koolhaas.* Barcelone ; Bordeaux : ACTAR : Arc en Rêve Centre d'architecture, 2000