

Rehabilitation. *The legacy of the Modern Movement. An anthology of 13+1 texts*

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This book collects texts dealing with the legacy of the modernist architecture that knew its heyday somewhere between 1920 and 1950. The selection makes no claim to be exhaustive; the main aim is to reconstruct a theoretical and historical evolution. Therefore, this anthology does not try to define what architectural modernism ‘really’ was – instead, it looks at the way writers, historians, critics, architects and philosophers have positioned themselves and their era in connection to and in confrontation with this Modern Movement.

That is why texts written between 1920 and 1950 are mostly absent. Many famous authors were an eyewitness to the beginnings of modernity, modernism and the Modern Movement in architecture. But very few of them have succeeded in combining these revolutionary events with the immediate construction of a historical perspective. Walter Benjamin is one of them: his short essay ‘Experience and Poverty’, written in 1933, combines the happy and progressive undertones of modernism, with a subtle but unmistakable criticism of modernity. Benjamin explains how the architecture of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier is unthinkable without the atrocities of World War I and the abstractions of the Industrial Revolution.

Modernism is rooted in a profound ‘poverty’ and in an impossibility of truly human – or at least classic and old-fashioned – ‘experience’. Although this state does lead to new beginnings and affirmative possibilities – it goes hand in hand with ‘a total absence of illusion’ and with inhuman situations. This dialectic has, even in our time, not reached a synthesis; these two extremes are the poles that have defined the magnetic field of our dealings with the Modern Movement. It was Benjamin who first understood that this field is modern life itself, and that every reaction to modernity in general, crystallizes and is most eminently present in a reaction to modernist architecture. It is, in other words, quite possible to say: tell me what you think about modernist architecture, and I will tell you who you are.

‘They have “devoured” everything,’ Benjamin writes, ‘both “culture and people”, and they have had such a surfeit that it has exhausted them.’ The modernists have swallowed and digested history, and this has enabled them to make a clean break, and develop their radical modernist architecture. Nowadays, at the beginning of the 21st century, the impression might develop that we, in our turn, have ‘devoured and digested’ modernism and modernity itself. The texts that are gathered in this collection show testimonies of this process of digestion, and hint at the amount of material that is still waiting to be effectively devoured.

1.

The enormous enterprise of coming to terms with modernist architecture starts at an early stage, at a time when many of the emblematic realisations are not yet conceived. In 1931, the director of the still very young Museum of Modern Art in New York, Alfred Barr, asks architect Philip Johnson and architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock to organize an international exhibition of modern architecture. Hitchcock and Johnson coin one of the many terms that have circulated since the thirties to point at modernist architecture: the International Style. As this epithet indicates, they regard modernist architecture as one of the first truly global, or at least transatlantic, cultural phenomena. The exhibition and the catalogue show works from European and American pioneers, but it does also include a section devoted to the ‘Extent of

Modern Architecture' in which lesser-known and more nationally diverse work is shown.

In the article that is reproduced here, Henry-Russell Hitchcock looks back on 'The International Style' in 1951, by commenting directly on his introduction from 1931. Calling a style international seems an impossible or paradoxical thing to do: a style is a set of features that define something or someone, and that install a clear distinction from everyone or everything else. When a style is international, it belongs to everyone, and it is no longer a style. As early as 1951, Hitchcock is putting the generalizing aspects of the Modern Movement into perspective: it should not 'be considered the only proper pattern or program for modern architecture.' So modernism is a style after all: one can choose for it, but one can neglect it as well. Directly after World War II, the revolutionary and all-embracing aspects of modernist architecture are left behind. The modernists are not to be followed irrationally; 'The mistake made by many readers', writes Hitchcock, 'was to assume that what the authors offered as a diagnosis and a prognosis was intended to be used as an academic rule-book.' Nevertheless, this is exactly what happens in the fifties and sixties: modernism becomes a style in the pejorative sense of the word: it is reproduced endlessly in the form of second-rate versions; it soon is truly 'international', but it has lost most of its value in the process.

2.

It might seem strange that the fate and the evolution of modern architecture are inextricably bound up with its own historiography. On the other hand, architecture does not exist when it is not spoken about; what we talk about when we talk about architecture is an equal and undeniable part of architecture itself. The re-evaluation of the strange but wonderful buildings that were built by such confident individuals during the twenties and the thirties, takes up a lot of space in architectural thought ever since. Immediately, however, the criticism of historiography emerges: not only is the architecture of the recent past evaluated, historians compare and weigh each other's methods.

In 1962, the British critic and architect Alan Colquhoun reviews *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, published in 1960 by Reyner Banham. Banham's book is one of the first post-war histories of the Modern Movement, and as the title states, it interprets modernist architecture as an embodiment of the conditions of its own era. By preferring the architecture of the futurists and of Buckminster Fuller to that of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, Banham wants to underscore that modernist architecture was never modern enough. It always presented a compromise between tradition and progress, and therefore could never unfold its truly utopian potential. Colquhoun does not follow Banham in his disapproval of this halfheartedness: 'Banham has demonstrated that many of the overt aims of the movement were not achieved; but it may as well be that these aims themselves were often of doubtful value, and that the true meaning of the movement lies in the unconscious substratum of the theory and is to be recognized in the works themselves.'

3.

The most joyful and grateful homage that has been paid to modernist architecture is written down in 1965 by Alison and Peter Smithson. Already in 1959, the Smithsons start, together with architects such as Aldo van Eyck or Giancarlo de Carlo, the splinter group Team X. This faction tears itself off from the institutionalized CIAM (the 'Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne') in order to keep alive the true

progressive and social nature of modernist architecture. In their own publication 'The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture', The Smithsons are first in developing a method of dealing with the Modern Movement that still stands strong today, and that is already apparent in the review by Alan Colquhoun. Modernist architecture should not be regarded and preserved as a whole; it is not a coherent and comprehensive theory or an ideological view on society or the future of mankind – the legacy of the Modern Movement is intrinsically *architectural*. It involves itself with design methods, formal characteristics, and programmatic decisions. Not by accident, the most famous and most quoted fragment of Le Corbusier's many writings, would become this one (from *Vers une architecture* from 1923): 'L'architecture est le jeu, savant, correcte et magnifique des volumes sous la lumière.'

The Smithsons start their heroic period of the Modern Movement in 1910 – and already close it up in 1929, 'when absolute conviction in the movement died'. They select a canon of images of realisations – by Loos, Gropius, Le Corbusier, Perret and Oud – but do not explicitly theorize the movement as a *movement*. What matters to them, and to many subsequent generations of architects, are the concrete works in itself, as emblematic and heroic examples. 'The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture is the rock on which we stand,' they write. 'Through it we feel the continuity of history and the necessity of achieving our own idea of order.' The modernist architecture presented here, however, is no such thing as a rock made by natural history – it more likely resembles a neatly built wall, in which the individual buildings are the bricks.

4.

From that point onwards, the evaluation of contemporary architecture will necessarily be grounded on a comparison with the avant-garde of the twenties and the thirties. It is as if architecture is defined in these decennia: every new form of architecture can be different or not, but it can never succeed in being *not* relative to the Modern Movement. The British but Americanised architectural historian Colin Rowe shows the extent of this predicament very clearly in his introduction to the book *Five Architects*, the catalogue to an exhibition that presents (in 1967 and again in the MoMa) the work of five emerging American architectural practices, later on known as the New York Five: Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hedjuk and Richard Meier.

Rowe announces two features that in the seventies and the eighties would start to dominate the architectural debate – and overshadow the Modern Movement. Firstly: modernist architecture was not concerned with the production of meaning; and secondly: since World War II modernist architecture has started to dominate the world in a watered-down, commercial and worthless form. Rowe counters these arguments by calling into life something that could be called the architectural 'author': the architect does not simply follow or execute the demands of society or of technological developments. This position – indeed exemplified by the New York Five – paves the way for a specific kind of architectural autonomy that does not explicitly concern itself with utopian or social objectives. 'It is an argument', Rowe writes, 'largely about the physique of building and only indirectly about its morale.' One could, in retrospect and as a blow-up of Rowe's writings, define the time of the Modern Movement as the last era in which the physique and the morale of architecture succeeded in appearing to be one and the same.

5.

Like every patricide, the attack on and the critique of modernist architecture has always been a way of trying to justify the inevitable condition of contemporary architecture. Because contemporary architecture can no longer resemble the modernist examples, the ancestors, or at least their legacies, are condemned and murdered. No one has popularized – and caricatured in spite of himself – this attitude more attractively than the American architectural theoretician Charles Jencks. In a way, Jencks does to the critique and the evaluation of modernism, what the building industry and the property development do to the Modern Movement.

In fact, Charles Jencks succeeded in defining the exact beginning of what came to be known as postmodernism – in the most literal sense the end of modernism or at least the condition that emerges ‘after’ modernism. ‘Modern architecture’, he writes in his many times republished book *The language of post-modern architecture*, ‘expired finally and completely in 1972, after having been flogged to death remorselessly for ten years by critics such as Jane Jacobs; and the fact that many so-called modern architects can still go around practising a trade as if it were alive can be taken as one of the great curiosities of our age.’ According to Jencks, modern architecture died in St Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. when the ‘infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite.’ The rise of postmodernist architecture can begin.

6.

And still, in more sophisticated intellectual milieus, the debate on modernist architecture continues. As it proved impossible to define an era or a style without referring to modernism, even in a time when ‘historicizing’ architecture seems the rule, the design methods of for example Le Corbusier keep on provoking interest and wonder. The American architect Peter Eisenman presents in his writings and in his architecture, a highly conscious and cerebral appropriation of the attainments of modernism.

In his essay ‘Aspects of Modernism: Maison Dom-ino and the Self-Referential Sign’, Eisenman describes ‘the birth of a Modernist sensibility that is to parallel and even supersede classical Western thought’.

The Maison Dom-ino was developed in 1914 by Le Corbusier as the building principle of the ‘free plan’ or the ‘plan libre’. By radically simplifying the building structure, it became possible for architects to create a floor plan that was by no means whatsoever bound by external obligations or conditions. On the one hand, the free plan made it possible, in an era of post-war reconstruction, to build houses quickly and rationally. On the other hand, the architectural program could be developed flexibly and at free will. Eisenman interprets the oeuvre of Le Corbusier in particular and of the Modern Movement in general as ‘an architecture about architecture’: it is no longer concerned with social or historical ideals, but refers only to itself. In a reaction to earlier readings of modernism (by, for example, Colin Rowe), Eisenman hollows out the classic and humanist utopian potential of modernism, and rescues it for a self-conscious and realist era, far beyond any form of illusion.

7.

It becomes clear that many of the postwar (and post-sixties) disillusiones, that only sharpened and severed in the seventies, use the Modern Movement as a means of expression. The tiredness of the modernists of which Benjamin spoke repeats itself in this decennium – this time not as a manifestation of a radical new program for

architecture, but as a regression to much older architectural traditions, or to a refutation of the more active and progressive reaction to tiredness: modernism. Many is the magazine, the book or the round-table conference that is devoted to 'the end of modernism and thereafter'. In 1980, students of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, set up a new magazine called *The Harvard Architecture Review* – volume 1 is called: 'Beyond the Modern Movement'. In the editorial, the negative influence of modernist architecture is clearly realized: 'architecture "Beyond the Modern Movement" can thus be understood as a reactionary phenomenon opposed to a commonly perceived antagonist, with its roots in a long line of criticism of Modern Movement Architecture.' The magazine, as the editorial explains, devotes itself to complicate this statement: as nobody really knows for sure what the 'Modern Movement' was, how could a reaction to it be univocal? The themes that are discussed, remain many-sided: history, cultural allusionism, anti-utopianism, contextualism, formal concerns – and again the battle with the angel of meaning and referential form: 'What is architecture to signify beyond its own self-explication?'

8.

Many individual architects have embodied these questions, evolutions and issues in their own oeuvre – certainly in the United States where, in a certain sense, every new architectural phase was 'imported' from abroad. Like his more famous colleague Frank O. Gehry from Los Angeles, Stanley Tigerman is an architect from Chicago whose architectural output went through some dramatic and improbable changes. And again all these changes rotated around the Modern Movement, and the question how to deal with it. As Tigerman's book *Versus. An American architect's alternatives* from 1982 shows, he has built in every possible style and every possible way – from orthodox modernism over eclectic postmodernism to vernacular pop-architecture. In *Versus*, Tigerman reproduces a photo-collage from 1978, entitled 'The Titanic'. It depicts Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's iconic Crown Hall for the Illinois Institute of Technology – which houses the School of Architecture – sinking into Lake Michigan. It is not architecture proper that is perishing – it is the *education* of architecture that is drowning: the older generation of architects does no longer know how to instruct their successors. A letter to Mies accompanies the drawing. 'Dear Mies,' writes Tigerman, 'I miss you. I wish you were here to see what's happened.' This letter, together with the collage and Tigerman's own designs, show how uncertain and groundless the state of contemporary architecture had become, beyond the Modern Movement.

9.

The architecture critic and historian who acted as the true prophet of this state of things, is the Italian Manfredo Tafuri. Unrelentingly, he has examined and exposed the dark characteristics of the Modern Movement – but at the same time he has disputed the possibility of new utopian or progressive tendencies in contemporary architecture. The most famous of his essays is probably 'L'architecture dans le boudoir. The language of criticism and the criticism of language', published in 1974, in which exactly the new appeal to referentiality in architecture was attacked. Beyond the Modern Movement, there was no longer anything valuable outside of architecture, in society or in history, to which architecture could refer. Elsewhere, in *Architecture and Utopia: design and capitalist development*, Tafuri defines contemporary architecture as, in the best cases, 'sublime uselessness'.

The text by Tafuri that is selected here, is a review from Kenneth Frampton's *Modern Architecture. A Critical History*. The title of the short review consciously mimics the

title of Benjamin's text: 'Architecture and "Poverty"'. The starting point is – with a hint at Heidegger – indeed the same: modern man has lost the ability to 'live', to 'build' or to 'think' properly. The task of the critic is, as Tafuri shows here again obliquely, to question the possibility of 'styles' like postmodernism to 'heal' this poverty, on the one hand – and, on the other hand, to get rid of the myth of the perfect and utopian character of the Modern Movement. 'Regarding this fable,' Tafuri writes, 'isn't now the time to set the record straight on this ambiguous formula once and for all?'

10.

One of the attempts to set the record straight on modernist architecture, was presented by the Belgian architecture critic and historian Geert Bekaert, on the occasion of yet another round-table conference on modernism in 1986. Bekaert historicizes the problem, not by making a simple plea for historicist architecture, but by describing the problems and the fables as much older ones. 'Le problème de la modernité,' he says, 'n'est pas un problème moderne. C'est une histoire de l'éternité, comme disait Borges.' The battle between modernism and postmodernism is in his view nothing more than a battle between abstract ideas and doctrinal schools of thought, while what really matters is the work of architecture itself.

This concrete and earthly view is very applicable to the Belgian situation, and to the fate of the Modern Movement in Belgium. Moreover, in a paradoxical way, it de-historicizes modernism as a timeless way of looking at the problem of architecture and life; the Belgian situation exemplifies the fate of modernism *par excellence*. 'Le modernisme belge,' writes Bekaert, 'se caractérise par son enracinement dans le réel, son scepticisme à l'égard d'idées abstraites, son attention à une présence immédiate, une espèce de matérialisme qui ne se leurre pas de ses propres fantaisies, qui essaie de tenir ensemble des pôles contradictoires.' In this sense, the modernist tradition is older than one would think, and is still alive in contemporary architecture, as long as this architecture is prepared to be 'rooted in the real' of its time and its conditions.

Rhetorically, then, Bekaert regrets that, during the conference, no examples of 'new' architecture were shown – as a proof that modernism has always existed and will continue to exist.

11.

The situation in the Netherlands was – and still is – quite different. Dutch modernist architecture was formed by canonical and famous examples (Oud, Rietveld, Bakema), and was educated at important schools and institutions. The Dutch critic Hans van Dijk once, at a lecture in 1990, spoke of 'schoolteacher's modernism': in the Netherlands, modernist architecture has become a formulaic and academic presence since the eighties. After all the discussions about postmodernism (which never really took ground in the Benelux countries), everybody silently and without much enthusiasm returned to a watered down version of modernism. It was, to quote again Bekaert, no longer 'rooted in the real'; it did not appeal to the universal and existential core that so brilliantly came to the fore in the architecture of the Modern Movement. For many, the architecture of the Dutch Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture, is in the eighties and the nineties of the previous century, the penultimate example of an actualized, intelligent and forceful revival of modernist traditions. Architecture critic Robert Maxwell referred to Koolhaas' own study of New York, when he stated in 1981 that the architecture of OMA 'is the fire of modernism raging within the iceberg of street architecture.' In 1985, Koolhaas is

interviewed by the French magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* – the title of the conversation reads: 'La deuxième chance de l'architecture moderne'. In the article reproduced here, architectural historian Stanislaus von Moos adapts a more modest stance, when he compares the architecture of Koolhaas with that of his Dutch ancestors. But also Von Moos needs to admit that here the “self-referential” symbolism of a kind that is characteristic for every tradition within the Modern Movement’ is again working at full speed.

12.

The nineties are, in architectural culture as well as elsewhere, in retrospect an age of consent: silently and more and more unconsciously, parts of the tradition of the Modern Movement that took shape between 1920 and 1950, are rehabilitated and reactivated – with both boring and thrilling results. The difficult process of positioning architecture ‘beyond the Modern Movement’ is, together with all the theoretic debates and stylistic excesses that it caused, put aside with one singular reaction: nevermind, what was it anyway? To refer to Benjamin, again: the architects have finally ‘devoured’ everything, and what is left is a somewhat pluralist architectural practice that still contains many taboos (no referentiality, no historicism, no grand-scale projects, no utopian tendencies) – but the taboos are not theorized or positively argued, and it would, as a matter of fact, be quite difficult to explain them without falling back on categories of convention or style.

A rare example of a new attempt at gaining entrance to the sources of all this contemporary architecture that cannot really explain or justify itself (outside, that is, of the position of every singular realization), takes place at the end of the century in Germany. Heinrich Klötz, architectural historian and (at the time) director of the Deutsches Architekturmuseum, applies the term ‘zweite Moderne’ in 1996 to describe contemporary art and architecture; the term itself is coined by German sociologist Ulrich Beck. This ‘second modernity’ is much more reflexive than the first one; it does not have the same hopes or illusions in changing the world, but it still uses the same techniques or strategies. The German architecture magazine *Archplus* publishes in October 1998 an issue on ‘Entwürfe zur Zweiten Moderne’, to show architectural practices that are exponents of this ‘reflexive Modern Movement’. In April 1999, a second number follows with even more theoretical stances and more design examples. In this anthology, the title pages of each chapter of this second issue are reproduced, together with important but often contradictory quotes, coming from the main participants in the debate.

13.

After sixty years of evaluating the legacy of modernist architecture that was produced between 1920 and 1950, the Modern Movement has without a doubt gained a mythical status. The classic critical reflex of abolishing every form of myth, has here, as good as elsewhere, become redundant. Of course it is still important to distinguish denotation from connotation, and to understand what the ‘Modern Movement’ stands for and what it really, underneath it all, represents – but then rather to strengthen the myth than to weaken it. We cannot do without the Modern Movement in architecture, and that is why we need to know what we, ourselves, and others, are thinking, dreaming and talking about.

The place to examine this architectural mythology is probably no longer architecture itself. The past does not return in daily life, but in a dream; in an age where architecture simply *is* modern, the modernist architecture returns in the museum. The

works of the artists that are on show in *Rehabilitation* belong to a tradition in contemporary art that could be called 'referentialism'. As André Rottmann points out in an article on these artistic practices (first published in *Texte zur Kunst*, and reproduced here as an afterthought to the anthology): 'there has been far too little interrogation of historic signs and reflexive references.' The strange thing with the exhibition *Rehabilitation* is that the art works on show all refer to an architecture that, as becomes clear in the 13 preceding texts, does – initially – not refer to anything but itself. Art that points a finger at architecture that points only at itself? Or is, ultimately, self-referential architecture mainly showing the massive amount of human activities that it could shelter, produce or stage? Trying to elucidate the reasons behind these artistic references to architecture is, in an oblique way, trying to explain what we want modernity and the Modern Movement to mean today. Modernist architecture has always tried to be as inclusive and as definite as possible: it wanted to involve everything and everyone – once and for all. Given this fatal and conclusive historical position, rehabilitating the Modern Movement remains anything but a superfluous activity.

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