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## Books on Architecture: One or Two Cats Among the Publishing Pigeons

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Translator: Simon Pleasance

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# Books on Architecture: One or Two Cats Among the Publishing Pigeons

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## REFERENCES

Donnadieu, Brigitte. *L'Apprentissage du regard : leçons d'architecture de Dominique Spinetta*, Paris : Ed. de la Villette, 2002

Kaufmann, Emil. *De Ledoux à Le Corbusier : origine et développement de l'architecture autonome*, Paris : Ed. de la Villette, 2002, (Textes fondamentaux modernes)

Nuttgens, Patrick. *Histoire de l'architecture*, Paris : Phaidon, 2002

*XS : grandes idées, petites structures*, Londres : Thames & Hudson, 2002

Melvin Charney, Montréal : Musée d'art contemporain, 2002

- 1 Both the random sampling of and recent news about the publication of books on architecture are providing ample fodder. We can observe the usual tug between a fascination with images and a fetishization of the discourse, or vice versa, which seems to dictate publishing and editorial logic in terms of architecture.
- 2 Emil Kaufmann's book is the re-publication of a "cult book". Published in France for the first time in 1981, it now reappears in a form akin to the dossier, with a series of extras—the same way things are done for the DVD of a film classic. The proof of the pudding : the preface by Hubert Damisch for the 1981 edition, a postface by Daniel Rabreau, and the translation of a thrilling account by Meyer Schapiro dated 1936. It first appeared in 1933, deriving its reputation and its notoriety from its title : *De Ledoux à Le Corbusier*, extended by its subtitle, *Origine et développement de l'architecture autonome*. For Kaufmann, modern architecture, the architecture of his day, to which historians have allocated the term "international style", or which they have attributed to the "modern movement"—merely prolongs a break with the Baroque tradition brought about by the generation of those he qualifies and promotes as "revolutionary architects" in another

of his books, the better known *Trois architectes révolutionnaires : Boulée, Ledoux, Lequeu*. The book is short but complex : at once an exercise to legitimize Corbusier rationalism for which he offers a genealogy in an historical dimension, which threatens assertions referring to the *tabula rasa* of the generation of “masters” of architectural modernity, and a theoretical line of thinking about the notion of *architectural autonomy* ; a way for the author to oppose the conception of the architectural object as an organized and continuous *whole*, resulting from an economy of *sequentiality*, peculiar to the Baroque, and the plastic elementarism governed by a neo-Platonic geometry of late 18th century French architects, with Ledoux as archetype. So this book has a ground-breaking quality in the historiography of modern architecture, and it is also a real work of *theory*, as H. Damish emphasized in no uncertain terms in 1981.

- 3 This new edition is part of the Textes fondamentaux collection of Editions de la Villette, produced by the eponymous school of architecture, which vigorously heads the project for an ideal architectural library. It is from this standpoint that Brigitte Donnadiou's book fits in. The undertaking is firstly a tribute to Dominique Spinetta (1937-1996) in the form of the reinstatement of a masterly course, in the tradition of the course in the Theory of Architecture given at the Paris la Villette School of Architecture.
- 4 B. Donnadiou, his partner, bases her work on the corpus made up by her personal archive : images, sketches, writings, interspersed with notes for student courses, organized on the basis of the original course, given order by the writing of a fragmentary text and various diagrams. Dominique Spinetta never benefited from the media aura required to “gain a following” and the form of the book which reinstates his teaching carries conviction. The method consists in approaching the architectural object in a *visual* way, on differing scales in a perceptible and immediate dimension. Between the street corner, the link with the banister and the landing, and the arrangement of a square or urban sequence, a logic of looking is constructed which is keen to break with the formalism of the historical avant-gardes, against a backdrop of highlighting vernacular forms, and the flavour of the vagaries of the topology of the old city. But this manual-like project, aimed at getting the reader to develop a “designer's eye”, cannot wriggle out of one of the best shared illusions in teaching circles, in architecture and elsewhere : the belief in a quality of analysis which helps to gain access to the quality of the project, without any argy-bargy.
- 5 Everyone should also know that art for artists exists just as architecture for architects exists, and the same goes for the works of Melvin Charney. They are founded on a praxis which mixes photography, painting, drawing and installations, and stem from that kind of narcissistic mannerism bristling with rods held out and earmarked for the guild of hermeneuts and interpreters, which may well collect endless duplications and things within things, shifts of meaning, in a complexity with no object other than itself.
- 6 With *XS : Grandes idées, petites structures* we plunge into a quite different world : the elegant austerity of books contrasts with this mini-coffee-table book which right away picnics on Rem Koolhaas' famous *S M L XL*. In the preamble, which a swift perusal prompted by this kind of object might liken to the trend-setting pages of *Vogue Déco*, you will detect the aim of putting together, by way of an anthology of architectures whose shared point is the modesty of the scale and the blurring of the borderlines between design, visual arts and architecture, what I would tend to see as a treatise on architecture in an age of millenarian disillusionment. An ethics of the modest and egotistical project informs the preface which magnifies the emblematic nature of the

XS project in an historical dimension legitimized by the recourse to the long term, a reference to Bramante and Palladio.

- 7 Where general culture is concerned, Phaidon has come up with a translation of the new version (1997) of Patrick Nuttgens' *Histoire de l'architecture*, which appeared in English in 1983. The blurb warns us: "This book meets the expectations of all students interested in the history of architecture, from advanced students to postgraduates". The work is alarmingly flat and merely arduously clones the classifications of Anglo-Saxon historiography. I am proposing to send the publisher a petition to encourage, at long last, the publication in French of genetic stock like Bannister and Fletcher, Hitchcock and such as Reyner Banham. Managing to find a balance between illustrative seduction, topical subject matter, theoretical keenness and visual relevance is a demanding task which might one day release us from the superficial, incomplete and random character of specifically French architectural culture, broadly shared by the profession, and whose publishing status is at once echo, cause and consequence.