On the possibility of writing/ describing architecture. From erudition to virtuality via a polemic

Bruno Vayssire

Translator: Charles Penwarden

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- 1 The selection we have here is eminently representative of the kind of thing that is published–apart, that is, from guides, which sell the best, and luxurious, privately printed hagiographies of living architects (often paid for by construction firms). This selection, not really for the general public, comes outside the architecture/art coffee table book category.
- 2 It contains two opposing groups of three: on one side, two erudite historical volumes setting out to present the work of the Ecole des Chartes, in an almost friends-only publishing enterprise impelled by the determination of a small group of doctoral students working with the charismatic professor Jean-Michel Leniaud, plus a monograph on Watelet, an architect and decorator from Lige, who died in 1910. Unlike the first two,

rather Spartan editions, this last book contains abundant colour illustrations. In fact, such books are extremely rare in France. This one could only come from a country that is in advance of us in that its heritage policies enjoy greater support not only from government but also from the (general) public. This is due to the fruitful competition between the Walloon and Flemish provinces as they vie to prove their greater “Belgianness”, doing so that much more earnestly when it comes to the 19th century, a period that saw not only the birth of this dual nation, which has no history of autonomy before then, but also the apogee of its industrial prosperity. Thus ideology is never far from architecture. Leniaud’s scholars also study this aspect of things.

- 3 On the other side, we have three “hip” publications, firmly focused on the present. Three (publishing) *coups*. First of all, bravo to the essay on “dislocation” and the relations between philosophy and architecture–today’s that is: definitely not to be confused with the Derridian deconstruction of ten years ago. Next up, a broadside without a hint of really serious thought or in-depth analysis. The work of a journalist at *Elle* who has some scores to settle, its disjointed, superficial and partisan content is often very funny–if, that is, you happen to be one of the hundred or so Parisians who are in the know and concerned about the doings of the architectural and media in-crowd. And finally, closely linked to the other two, the hefty catalogue of the latest *Archilab* architecture festival in Orléans. Here are a hundred-odd totally virtual projects exploring the theme of tomorrow’s dwellings, and conscientiously injecting copious amounts of edgy morphing, lots of mutant facades and plug-in connections. Have the avant-gardes stood still ever since the “entrails architecture” advocated by Archigram in Great Britain from 1957 onwards? Today, at least, their fight seems more urgent, more just.
- 4 The only thing these six publications share is an elitism that confines them to their respective worlds, from the Ecole des Chartes to the religions section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (not to be confused with the sixth section of the Ecoles des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales), from the new philosophers of space (the foremost being Jean-Luc Nancy, who wrote Benoît Goetz’s preface) to their translators towards fashionable young architects-on-paper. Only Philippe Trétiack, with his demagogically (and very post-’68) titled tract would claim to be acting for the good of the (general) public. In fact, the criticisms he levels at the excellent *Parpaing*, which publisher J-M. Place courageously sells at petrol stations for 10 Francs, apply most of all to himself: “the idea is excellent, but the product is hopelessly amateurish” (p.122). Trétiack’s out-and-out anti-intellectualism may give him mass appeal, but that is also the danger with his book, the only one here to be (over-?) widely distributed. This is, after all, only a collection of columns: often, it is true, they are on-target and sharp, but here they simply pile up, without the overarching argument that would make this book truly “thoughtful”.
- 5 Well, he may not have “hanged the architects”, but at least he will have made us smile. He wanted to be an architecture writer, and he is about the only French journalist on the subject with any courage. Trouble is, the general public (and this reviewer) won’t really understand the deeper significance of all his judgements. There is nothing here on museums, except a chapter title; nothing on ideologies, whereas the Guimet article in LHA is superb, as is Goetz’s book.
- 6 LHA, *Livraisons d’histoire de l’architecture*, its two singular nouns almost suggesting that there is only way to reread history and architecture, rescues the unpublished writings of doctoral students from oblivion. The intention is praiseworthy, even if the endogamous relations between the advisory and editorial boards suggest that the view here is

essentially that of Paris IV university, far from the other *coteries* of historians. Now, this cultivated “fanzine” from the most traditionalist art history background also happens to contain—in addition to consummate erudition—some genuine pieces of research full of judgements and insights about the relations between institutions and creators.

- 7 The critical synthesis on the analysis of architectural periods from the 18th century to around 1970, by the above-mentioned scholars, along with a few specialists in publishing history, suggests that we swap our “heuristic hedonism” for a real quantitative method so that France, the laggard of G7 countries when it comes to architecture studies, would have less to be embarrassed about. The analysis is comprehensive, going from the adjacent advertising to the status of the visual image, from the ideologies of writers to indexes, and not forgetting the non-specialist press.
- 8 B. Goetz is a Heidegger specialist, but also pretty good on Hegel and Benjamin, not to forget Simmel, Blanchot and Deleuze. And for once, here he does full justice to these thinkers, setting them on a rock-solid Kantian ground. Following Sylvianne Agacinski, Daniel Payot and Jean-Christophe Bailly, he offers us a brilliant philosophical rereading of architecture (or, more accurately, vice versa). Sadly, he does not get beyond the proto-relations of outside and inside of “unsayable” space (Le Corbusier), “seen” from an ethical viewpoint. His extended passages on town planning (as a practice) and the architectural project at issue today move away from the everyday axioms of the profession, thus allowing him to avoid the trap of hasty prescription.
- 9 In contrast, *Archilab* is a huge catalogue, stretching between chic virtuality and fresh-faced ecology. The union of these two tendencies has given rise to a plethora of edgy projects using deformable walls. Still, this all takes us to the heart of the current debate about architecture: how to get away from the general mediocrity? As it happens, the answers given here are as imaginative as they are seductive, and the difficulty of their construction only makes them more enticing.