Portrait. Jean-Louis Cohen

Maristella Casciato

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Traduit du français par Cadine Navarro

Jean-Louis Cohen

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- 1 While reading again the portrait of Jean-Louis Cohen¹, published in the *Dictionary of 20th Century Architecture* (2000), I realise that over the past ten years the historian's intellectual biography has been enriched with countless new themes and contributions, to the point of overshadowing what he had himself produced in the last quarter of the century.
- 2 Without forgetting his many faceted activities and production (books, essays, exhibitions, conferences and without considering his participation in the project for the realisation of the City of Architecture and Patrimony, until 2003), I would like to start here with his most recent publication – the monumental *L'Architecture au future depuis 1889* –, in order to underline a few essential reflections with regards to such an important historian at the dawn of a globalized millennium.
- 3 J-L. Cohen's way of looking at things has always been transversal. He uses a geographical and temporal approach that has totally blown apart traditional notions of influence, style and form found in more classical historiography. Simultaneously, he has replaced the sirens of ideology by an analysis of architectural and urban transformations that is based, in the author's own words, upon the concept of « inter-urbanity » that is to say a reading of the complex relations that follow the emergence of important phenomena: changes of class and of social thought, the appearance of new building materials and the internationalisation of forms.
- 4 History borrows quite a sinuous path, but historians are not only content to paint large frescos, they also are able, as does J-L. Cohen, to penetrate its architecture and its building blocks as well as its topographical and anthropic inter-relations. In *Architecture en uniforme* (2011), J.L. Cohen very clearly develops this approach of history based upon textual and phenomenal relations. The author transgresses the historiographical stance which considers the 20th century world wars as blank pages. According to his thesis, the war years, and more specifically the second World War, display a new type of architectural production and are marked by an accelerated development of building techniques. The rupture caused by the conflict stands at the very heart of modernity and its esthetics and establishes its definitive affirmation today.
- 5 The richness of a historical approach permeates the vast editorial production of J-L. Cohen. Every reference in his work represents a fundamental link which clearly explains the rapport my generation has with architecture.
- 6 The research concerning the architecture of the revolutionary period in the Soviet Union which he started in the 70s, took into account his love of Italy and the teachings of Manfredo Tafuri at the Venice School of Architecture. His studies of the contributions made by European architects for the construction of cities in the Soviet Union constitute the foundation of the book: *Le Corbusier et la mystique de l'U.R.S.S.: théories et projets pour Moscou* which he published in 1987. His critical readings of the theories and projects of the French-Swiss architect is at the core of the reflections J-L. Cohen has been conducting for three decades. It has helped him crystallize his thoughts: starting with the years of *L'Encyclopédie* published for the occasion of the centennial at the Pompidou Museum in 1987, going on to his English translation of the classic *Vers une architecture* for the Getty research Institute in 2007 and *Le Corbusier Le Grand* in 2008, a volume made up of documents and drawings which are kept at the Le Corbusier Foundation. This “patient research” is based upon a rigorous study of the sources. Later, in the fall of 2012 will

follow the first Le Corbusier exhibition in Moscow and the huge retrospective entitled *Le Corbusier: Landscapes for the MachineAge* at the MoMA in June 2013.

NOTES

1. Architect and historian of architecture, J-L. Cohen was born in Paris where he received his architecture diploma in 1974. In 1985 he successfully defended his Doctoral Thesis on André Lurçat, it was published in 1995. In 1982 at the EHESS, together with Hubert Damisch he starts researching the circulation of American cultural models in Europe - a research which came to fruition at the International Conference on *Americanism and Modernity: the American Ideal in Architecture and Urbanism* (1993) which later became the object of the exhibition *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge* (1995) After teaching for several years in France, where he was an ardent supporter of architectural research in schools of architecture and universities, J-L. Cohen is currently Professor occupying the Sheldon H. Sollow chair of History of Architecture at the New York University Institute of Fine Arts.