Architecture, Modernity and Modernization

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The way architecture relates to knowledge, literature and the city is central to this first lecture at the Collège de France. Over the last two centuries it has both erected palaces – and factories – for research, and borrowed models and metaphors from science.

Yet has science welcomed architecture as an intellectual discipline, a field of research as such? Nothing could be less certain. Since 1970, genuine scientific research has been devoted to architecture, and this has contributed to its intellectual “reconstruction” in a sense, in France. Architects were by no means the only protagonists of this collective endeavour, and their work has met with that of art historians, sociologists, geographers, and urban planners, as it has been carried out in their own disciplinary or institutional fields.

Today, challenging the history of modernity in architecture entails more than simply recording new elements of its lexicon – or, to use a linguistic model, distinguishing along syntactic lines the new modes of composition and aggregation of the forms imagined since the appearance of the “modern movement”. In the architectural field, the phenomenon of modernity proves more complex than in art or literature. The forms and spaces that make it visible are attuned to the programmes set out by the more encompassing system constituted by modernization, production, consumption, territories, and, more broadly, society – a system that has been informed by the successive hegemonies of England, Germany, and America since the nineteenth century.
Many architects have also nurtured a strong relationship with literature, proving to be readers as much as builders. Twice fifty years apart, the young Le Corbusier devoured Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, which was actually also bedside reading for many architects of his generation throughout Europe. But architects were not content with just being writers’ and philosophers’ readers; they also engaged with them, as they sometimes did with artists, and paid tribute to them. Conversely, many writers shared an interest in architecture. They reflected on its principles and relationships with the other arts and society. Examples are Paul Valéry, from 1891, and Georges Bataille, who denounced the oppressiveness of architecture. Bataille’s emotive denunciation was based on an implicit reduction of architecture to great buildings alone, in which power is concentrated. Yet it was in the twentieth century that architecture stopped addressing the aristocracy and bourgeoisie exclusively, thus making rooms for programmes tailored for the working classes.

The relationship of the architectural object to urban space and to landscape has been the centre of attention for the last fifty years. It is not just a matter of the material attunement of the building, the monument or the house to the city, or of integrating a product catering to a private commission or to a public programme within a more complex whole, determined by political and economic considerations. The objective parameters of density, height, axioly and topography gave rise to subjective artistic interpretations, articulating myths and representations, and leaving room for invention.

In order to describe architecture’s cycles of transformation, and rather than considering it as impermeable, the lectures will fully embed it in history, examining long-term historical continuities, as well as crises and shifts. This history will be approached through multiple material, including oral, archive and written sources, with buildings as primary documents enlightened by the discourses that generated and supported them. Sorting and interpreting buildings will require a constant change of focus. In echo to Siegfried Kracauer’s understanding of history, the interpretation of architecture calls for a continuous navigation between the view at urban scale, framed panoramically, that reflects social or technical policies, and the close-up view of buildings and their interior, that reflects their authors’ and inhabitants’ ideals and engagement.

• Jean-Louis Cohen also organized a symposium on the same theme (see pp. 62 - 63).