Modern Architecture, Promise or Menace?

Jean-Louis Cohen

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/2186
DOI: 10.4000/lettre-cdf.2186
ISSN: 2109-9219

This article is a translation of:
L’architecture moderne, promesse ou menace ? - URL : https://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/3060 [fr]

Publisher
Collège de France

Printed version
Number of pages: 60-61
ISSN: 1628-2329

Electronic reference
Jean-Louis Cohen, "Modern Architecture, Promise or Menace?", La lettre du Collège de France [Online], 9 | 2015, Online since 28 September 2015, connection on 17 August 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/2186 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/lettre-cdf.2186

This text was automatically generated on 17 August 2022.

All rights reserved
Modern Architecture, Promise or Menace?

Jean-Louis Cohen

EDITOR'S NOTE

Source: La lettre, no. 39, March 2015

Contrary to what the myth of the irresistible progress of forms and techniques would have us believe, the experience of architectural modernity is not just one of success.
Many of the expectations generated by the industrial era – which led to remarkable experiments – were not met, and the early moderns’ attempts were often disfigured once scaled to the mass production of public operators or the private sector. The promise of a better life heralded by garden cities, high-rise housing schemes and urban renovations, and symbolized by new aesthetics, was short-lived. Social issues transformed the reality and meaning of works that were at odds with the discourses and theoretical projects from which they derived.

Echoing the fourteenth Venice Architecture Biennale, which sought to convey how modernity had been “absorbed” – as Rem Koolhaas put it – by the different national cultures, this symposium analysed the state of modern France’s architecture from a European perspective, combining the approaches of historians, architects, social scientists, and public actors. Theoretical positions and relations with intellectuals and politicians were considered from a research point of view, while practitioners attested to the influence that the most memorable projects and buildings still have today.

In his paper on political aesthetics and architecture, the art historian Christian Freigang, professor at the Free University of Berlin, discussed August Perret’s theories in the context of France’s cultural controversies before 1914 and during the 1930s. Looking at the discourse and work of Marcel Lods, a radical modern architect of the following generation, historian Pieter Uyttenhove showed how the issue of mass collective housing transformed professionals’ representation of themselves in the social field.

Historian Pascal Ory, professor at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, examined architects’ capacity to act as public intellectuals. He focused on the history of
French culture in the 1930s and in the contemporary era, to formulate new hypotheses regarding the social figure of the architect.

In response to his arguments, sociologist Jean-Louis Violeau, professor at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Malaquais, compared the May 1968 crisis with the political situation in May 1981, thus highlighting the new ideals and practices through which architects endeavoured to rebuild their relationship with reality. The town planner Vincent Feltesse, president of the Fédération Nationale des Agences d'Urbanisme, adopted a more political perspective. He described the experiments conducted at the head of Bordeaux's urban community's planning office, designed to bring urban projects closer to their addressees, as regards both their social content and their spatial form.

The specific configuration of French modernity was considered from several points of view. Historian Carlo Olmo, professor at the Polytechnic University of Turin, contrasted post-war Italy with the French situation in order to assess the latter's originality. Jean-Louis Cohen, professor of architectural history at New York University and a pluri-annual visiting professor at the Collège de France, considered forms of collaboration between architects and engineers, as well as European critics' interpretations of French production. Vanessa Grossman, a PhD student in the history of architecture at Princeton University, explored the formation and transformation of the notion of “brutalism”, often applied indiscriminately to describe 1950s and 1960s buildings.

As a counterpoint to these historical analyses, two practitioners shared their thoughts on the modern buildings and urban complexes informing their projects: Marc Barani discussed his interpretation of Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre and Le Corbusier's Cabanon; and Gaëlle Péneau presented a set of modern architectures in the Nantes area that punctuated her intellectual and professional journey. In so doing she highlighted the extent to which historical themes continue to inform practice today.

* Videos of the symposium are available at www.college-de-france.fr, on the professor's page.

* As part of his teaching at the Collège de France, Jean-Louis Cohen organized a symposium on “Architecture - Between Practice and Scientific Knowledge” held on 16 January 2015.


The exhibition explored developments in architecture during the Second World War, analysing the effects of the conflict on the built environment and on the discipline itself.

It thus filled a considerable historical gap, by examining the works and achievements of the architects and designers active in the main countries involved in the war. It showed how the war accelerated technological innovation processes and triggered a change of mind-sets, leading to the unchallenged supremacy of modern architecture after 1945.

AUTHOR

JEAN-LOUIS COHEN

Collège de France Pluri-Annual Visiting Professor
Sheldon H. Solow Professor in the History of Architecture, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University