

THE QUESTION OF THE “MODERN” IN ARCHITECTURE A HISTORIC OPEN DEBATE

PATRIZIA MELLO

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Abstract

Taking its cue from the theme of “Absorbing Modernity” assigned to the countries participating in the 14th International Architecture Exhibition, the aim of this essay is to trace out a path of reflection on Modernism and on what makes its lesson still vivid today. What are the most meaningful moments of a long-sighted critical processing of the values transmitted by modernity? A historical-critical examination has brought out a common thread linking the work of outstanding personalities, for instance El Lissitzky in the early twentieth century or Cedric Price in the 1960s, in terms of key themes of modernity like an emphasis on social values and the sense of democracy in design, up to the current situation in which we find ourselves faced with an attention to the social that overflows to the point of resetting the official character of architecture in favor of its progressive fusion with events, whether real or virtual.

In architecture, all is in metamorphosis.

Generic themes – some of them of great duration – appear and reappear in ever changing forms.

William J. R. Curtis

One of the sections of the 14th International Architecture Exhibition¹, entitled *Absorbing Modernity 1914-2014*, is aimed at understanding the ways in which the principles tied to the birth of Modernism were absorbed on an international level through forms of contradiction, emancipation, or simple habituation to the artistic languages used by the great thinkers of modernity. It may be helpful to investigate more fully and evaluate some of the themes that emerged in order to shed light on one of the most controversial topics in the history of architecture and its destiny, up to the situation of the present day. The relations between contributions made in different periods in the course of the twentieth century, often inspired by the same principles and values but with different results, cause us to reflect on the import of an architectural thought that is rigorous and captivating at the same time, like a wave that leads to action, spurs ideas and underpins all the adventures rising from it, above and beyond what continues to perpetuate its absorption in a negative sense. Curtis himself refers to the existence of a great number of “cultures of modernity” which in turn drew (sometimes unconsciously) on preceding modern prototypes, or took advantage in full awareness of these sources of inspiration. “I have elsewhere compared the situation to a ‘delta’ in which the main currents continue to flow down diverse channels. Some dry up. Some are renewed by deep sources. Overall, the river continues to move” (Curtis 1998, p. 9). In this direction, the experience of Modernism can turn into a characteristic call to reflect on the architect’s role, the far-sightedness of the thought, the fully political character of a profession that today has become faded and clouded by events that often have very little of the edifying about them.

A turning point for architecture, a new face for mankind

The revolutionary value of the concept of “modernity” is not only connected with a desire to make a *tabula rasa* of the past but above all to the wish to impose a shift on events, a real form of acceleration of events by means of a vocabulary made up of abbreviations, types, elements of construction, in order to give a new face to the time through the way in which space is occupied and lived, from the smallest to the biggest, from the most intimate to the showiest. This was a language that in and of itself tended to produce globalizing effects involving the most diverse places and the most varied cultures.

¹ *Fundamentals* is the title of the 14th International Architecture Exhibition, directed by Rem Koolhaas (Venice, 7 June – 23 November, 2014), made up of three main sections: *Absorbing Modernity: 1914-2014*, the national pavilions; *Monditalia* at the Arsenale (an overview of Italy made up of 82 films and 41 research projects, characterized by the fusion of architecture with the dance, music, theatre and cinema sectors of the Biennale); *Elements of Architecture* in the central pavilion (ancient, past, present, and future examples of the principal elements of architecture placed in comparison in rooms each devoted to a single element). See VV.AA. 2014a.

Society as a whole, its needs, the improvement of living conditions, a life regulated by the punctuality of events, essential landscapes for supporting a well-defined daily life of gestures, simplified, easy to approach, and salvific compared to a past that was in some ways cruel in its creative emphasis, that had exasperated class differences, contained form in content and content in pure vanity – these are some of the main concerns underlying a movement that imposed a turning point on architecture and gave a new face to mankind. The most representative movement is without a shadow of a doubt *l'Unité d'Habitation* (1947-1952) by Le Corbusier, the standard-bearer of a mature modernity that knew how to pick its way through the countless streams of a past that was no longer credible and the necessities of a present dominated by the urban, with relations among people increasingly preponderant over an architecture already relegated to a subordinate role, an architecture that would very soon make way for the accumulated energy that the cities would unceasingly set free, flying in the face of any presumption of planning the various intensities, their physical placement, or their recognizability².

A society-building, a building-society, as can be sought and found in some symptomatic contemporary achievements. *De Rotterdam* (1997-2013), the recently finished skyscraper designed by Koolhaas, a condensation of constructional and relational energies no longer distinct, no longer separate, but conceived to create “volume” together, quantity in the city. As the project report notes, urban density and diversity are the guiding principles of this building that aims above all at the fruitful exchange among different types of functionality³. The *Market Hall* (2004-2014), always in Rotterdam, designed by MVRDV: a large covered market whose outer walls (an imposing arch decorated on the interior by an evocative mural of fruit and vegetables) are made up of private homes that face directly onto the market and the various gathering spots set up inside it. As though to say: it is the residences themselves that delineate the public space, which thus becomes the beating heart of domestic life, no longer distinct but right at hand, as one of the many links with which to connect daily in an intimate, familiar way (Mello 2015a).



Figure 1. and 2. MVRDV, Market Hall, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2004-2014

This is a sign of a modernity absorbed and fully digested, fed to the future which has – perforce – altered its initial plan. Nonetheless it remains latent, on tiptoe, as an indelible imprint of a path undertaken on which there is no going back, no erasing one's steps, a *one-way street*, as demonstrated by the insufficient and useless injections of history inflicted on architecture by those who have attacked Modernism from up close, fighting against the stasis of meaning (the spectre of white walls and precise interiors), the aura of salvation that had – in their opinion – emptied of content a healthy flow of existence, by its very nature contradictory and elusive.

For the problem is not the refusal of Modernity, but a detailing understanding and possible updating of it, as emerges from the dense historical investigation enacted in this exhibition by the individual nations in order to bring out salient moments of dialogue with the incipit of Modernity and the key principles unfurled, always and in any case in the direction of an architecture that is now politicized with respect to the past. Because it is precisely this political character, thus the value of democracy associated with the birth of Modernism, that is the tangible sign of the change, since everything – from the type of simplified language so as to be globally accessible, to the building costs – went in the direction of engaging in political action by means of architecture and producing architecture inspired by new egalitarian and democratic principles.

At the worst, absorbing modernity has meant accepting its logic feeding a project meagre in content which has however become the reigning substance of outskirts and suburbs of the most important and illustrious cities of

² In this regard, I would like to cite Mello P. 2015a, pp. 71-74.

³ “De Rotterdam is conceived as a vertical city: three interconnected mixed-use towers accommodating offices, apartments, a hotel, conference facilities, shops, restaurants, and cafes. The project began in 1997. Construction started at the end of 2009, with completion in 2013. The towers are part of the ongoing redevelopment of the old harbour district of Wilhelminapier, next to the Erasmus Bridge”. See <http://www.oma.eu/projects/1997/de-rotterdam/>

our time. Representative in this regard is the neologism coined for the Israeli pavilion, *The Urburb*, which points a finger at the absurd nature of modernist urban planning dictated from above, which over time has revealed itself to be nothing more than a miscellany of attempts to give a sense to urban and suburban growth, leading to the triumph of the hybrid (as an illegitimate child of modernity), halfway between romanticism and biting economic utility: from the garden cities of the early twentieth century to the low-cost housing projects of the 1950s to the anonymous tenements of the contemporary outer city⁴. *The Urburb* seems, ultimately, a euphemism for what Koolhaas would have called “junk space,” as the characteristic trademark of contemporary urban space, outside any logic of planning and exact functional definition of events.

The built sediment of modernization is not modern architecture - Koolhaas states - but junk space... Junk space is what remains after modernization has run its course, or, rather, the container in which modernization takes place. ...Junk space is the real thing. The twentieth century has developed it, and the next century will be its apotheosis. ... Junk space is beyond pattern, geometry or recognition. It's beyond memory even, because it can never be grasped, and, because it can never be grasped, it is literally unmemorable (Koolhaas 2001, p. 36).

Whereas the most “classic” double meaning tied to the concept of “modernity,” in particular to the desire to update the domestic environment, emerges poignantly in the question chosen by Jean-Louis Cohen for the French pavilion, *La modernité, promesse ou menace?*, since everything that modernity presents in its technological efficiency, in the minimalism of the forms, in the absence of ornaments, can in a short time turn into a real threat to the self, whose unconscious desires flounder in the struggle with extra-functioning, over-determined worlds, nothing other than the equivalent in the private sphere of the urban planning presumption mentioned above. Proof of this is the Villa Arpel, the modernly welcoming (?) domestic universe, around which the characters in the legendary Jacques Tati's movie *Mon Oncle* (1958) revolve like guinea pigs, presented in the pavilion as a 1:10 scale model⁵.

On the side of the Modern: the export and spread of ideas, methods, values

Forms of Freedom: African Independence and Nordic Models tells the story of a “modernist” type of architecture disseminated in Africa in the 1960s, born of a partnership with the Scandinavian countries (politically “pure” because not compromised by episodes of colonialism), and little known in books on the history of architecture⁶. In reality, the Scandinavian architects literally exported modern architecture to Africa, contributing to a new image of the countries there. Tanzania, Kenya, and Zambia, which achieved independence in the 1960s, viewed the Scandinavian countries as the example of social democracy to which they should aspire as life models and which they could set up on their own soil thanks to the architects who could create new forms, “freed” of useless epoch-making frills, simplified and representative at the same time, and the kind best suited for interpreting this newly-acquired freedom. This is the case of the *Kenyatta International Conference Centre* (1966-1973), a 32-story tower, designed by the Norwegian architect Karl Henrik Nøstvik (1925-1992) and commissioned by Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta (1889-1978)⁷. The tower, symbol of social and political ascent, looms over Nairobi as a cylinder of concentric rings with a panoramic view from the roof. But the *Zanzibar Conference Center* (1974, never built) was the project in which Nøstvik unleashed his creativity and ingeniousness to produce an exalted civic meaning: the circular shape of the building spreads out like a fan in a symbolic way, emanating grandeur and simplicity at the same time in one sole act of composition⁸.

Of course, modern architecture presents all the requisites for export: the globalizing effects that Koolhaas treated in the show, emphasizing the generic nature that would end up cancelling out national identities, can

⁴ *The Urburb*, Israeli pavilion, 2014 Architecture Biennale, commissioners: Michal Gov, Arad Turgeman; curators and exhibitors: Ori Scialom, Roy Brand, Keren Yeala Golan.

⁵ *La modernité, promesse ou menace?*, French pavilion, 2014 Architecture Biennale, commissioner: Institut Français, Ministry of Culture and Communication – direction générale des patrimoines; curator: Jean-Louis Cohen.

⁶ *Forms of Freedom: African Independence and Nordic Models*, pavilion of the Scandinavian countries Finland, Norway, and Sweden, 2014 Architecture Biennale, commissioner: The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Norway; curator: Nina Berre.

⁷ Nøstvik worked for the Kenyan Government in the Ministry of Works in 1965 until the completion of the KICC (Kenyatta International Conference Centre), officially opened in 1973 for the first World Bank Conference in Africa. It is well-known that President Kenyatta continued to maintain excellent relations with England and America and that he was heatedly protested in Kenya for corruption and mismanagement of national property. His son Uhuru Kenyatta is currently president of the country.

⁸ The building, commissioned by Aboud Jumbe, second president of Zanzibar (from 1972 to 1984), was conceived to hold 2500 people. Located in the far northern part of the city, near the Ya Bwawani hotel, it included a restaurant seating 500, a supermarket and a theatre. In 1978 Nøstvik built a discotheque and a swimming pool near the site where the Convention Centre, which was never built, would have stood.

be seen in the case in point in a salvific sense to help others to be born, to feed hopes in people who for years had had none.

This theme of exportability distinguishes also the Russian pavilion, entitled *Fair Enough*, in which a real international fair is installed, simulating the possibility of advertising and marketing some of the most interesting ideas cultivated in Russia in the years of urban modernization because of the topical nature of their content. "Russia's Past, Our Present" is the slogan chosen with the aim of "engaging the past as a means of better understanding the present and generating ideas for the future"⁹.

Inside the pavilion are real fair booths, each one representing a single fictional company that could model its business today on the ideas of the past, bringing their contents up to date (Lissitzky; VKhUTEMAS Training; Moscow Metro Worldwide; Shaping Inspiration, etc.)¹⁰.

In this case, then, exportability over time is the value put into play, compared to an historical period that among other things had as protagonists in Russia the most important architects and artists, who with their ideas contributed to the theoretical elaboration of Modernism. Certainly Constructivism was the "functional" political turning point that marked the history of modern architecture, tying its destiny more than ever to the expectations of society, the possibilities of representing its values and contents in a direct, unconventional way. Just as for the exponents of De Stijl, the construction process, is taken to its farthest consequences and exhibited as the one best suited to express the needs of society, the masses, in accordance with a refined plan of building solutions that, in their elementarity, contain all the force of a reborn, convincing world.

Construction is aspiration to create a single, concrete object, El Lissitzky (1890-1914) stated. As opposed to composition, which does nothing but debate the various formal possibilities, building declares. The compass is the scalpel of construction, the paintbrush is the instrument of composition¹¹.

This sense of affirmation is soon translated into that of society itself, whose equivalent is represented by spaces symbolic of the life redemption that has taken place, the new rights acquired, of which the so-called "clubs" for Russian workers are the living testimony, social condensers:

in which the worker, of whatever age, the entire mass of labourers, find a chance for recreation and relaxation after a day of work, where they could find a new burst of energy. Here children, youths, adults, the middle-aged and all the others must be trained, outside the family, to become all together new citizens of a collective. Here their interests must broaden. The clubs' task is the liberation of people, not – as it was before – with the tools of the State and the Church.... It is clear that we should create spaces that can be transformed and adapted to different uses and different kinds of movement. The crucial moment for a club is that of mass automatism, and this is because the crowd has not come together to be entertained, but so that it can achieve maximum distraction. The club has to become the high school of the new civilization (Lissitzky 1929-1930, pp. 310-311).

The dynamism instilled in each construction is therefore fundamental, referring directly back to the versatility of the spaces created by the architecture, to their being an "instrument" more than a building immobile in time.

Lissitzky is one of the architects whose work is advertised in the *Fair Enough* pavilion, with the installation he made in 1928 for the Press Exhibition in Cologne. "For this pavilion, Lissitzky stated, I had designed a photomontage frieze which was 24 meters long and 3.5 meters wide. It became the model for all those gigantic montages, which became the symbol for future exhibitions. For this work I received much appreciation from the state" (Burgos, Garrido 2004, pp. 148-149).

The photomontage in question was made introducing diverse elements – objects, collages, sculptures, light effects – until he had created a veritable environment in which one could immerse oneself and take active part,

⁹ See VV.AA. 2014b, p. 11. Russian pavilion, 2014 Architecture, commissioner: Semyon Mikhailovsky; curator: Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design (Anton Kalgaev, Brendan McGetrick, Daria Paramonova).

¹⁰ "We present an exhibition as an expo," the catalogue says, "adopting the look and logic of the trade fair in order to acknowledge its influence and take advantage of its efficiency as a design. Rather than presenting a linear story of Russia's modernization, Fair Enough applies architecture history to meet contemporary needs. The exhibition takes urban ideas from the past century – some celebrated, some obscure; some seemingly outdated, some supposed failures – and gives them new purpose. To maximize its utility, each exhibited projects is stripped to its conceptual essence". Ibid., 10-11.

¹¹ El Lissitzky 1920-1921 in Quilici 1978, p. 105. With his invention of "prons" Lissitzky found an efficacious way of generating volume, not through the conjecture of form, but through the effectiveness of the relation among the parts/geometric shapes brought into play and their intrinsic expressiveness. In this lies the potency of the thought of a personality like Lissitzky, a topic to which we shall return.

supported by the various media in play, their symbolic import and the messages they conveyed. At the entrance loomed a sort of printing press with a series of rollers that unfurled information, simulating the printing of a newspaper. Among the topics treated were the conditions of life of the proletariat, agriculture, the electrification of the country, life under the new political system, and so on.

As the catalogue says:

Lissitzky breaks the idea of a single path and a single perspective, replacing it with a multiplicity and simultaneity of information and ways of perception in the midst of which the beholder becomes an active participant on the level of physical movement as well as through active meaning making, operating without a conventional base of operations¹².



Figure 3. El Lissitzky's Soviet pavilion at the Press Exhibition in Cologne, Germany, 1928

The historic installation can be compared to the complexity of a “hypertext” with which one interacts daily, by opening, for example, a random Google page, where the user can move about autonomously, be immersed in a simultaneous multifaceted vision of information, build his own path of learning and further investigation. Thus the existence of a Lissitzky company is fully plausible, with its own booth, which today – thanks to the use of electronic tools – could be dedicated to developing and decanting the multimedia effects produced at the time by this great Russian artist and architect, who is one of the most interesting cases of innovation of the languages and ways of conceiving the practice of planning and design in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Lissitzky's thought moves easily back and forth between theory and practice. His Prouns (understood as “the station where one changes from painting to architecture”), real exercises in the birth of forms, dense and rarefied at the same time, hold the material together without the encumbrance of its actual weight, finally freed of the rhetoric of frills; for it is the balance among the various geometries, their mutual exchange of energy, the tension set up among the parts that causes volume to bloom forth. As Mart Stam wrote in 1966 about Prouns:

They are compositions with an unusually powerful spatial effect. The impression is no longer of something standing, but of something floating, resting in space. There is no ground floor plan, no elevation, no top and no bottom... all the lines and all the planes go on into an infinite space and it is this infinity which they must have (Burgos, Garrido 2004, p. 78).

If we think now about the photomontage set up in Cologne, it is evident that the matrix is still the same. Indeed, in my opinion, the technique of photomontage, too, is tied to the capacity to put together individual meaningful bits of a broader discourse, whether spatial or communicational in nature.

The sense of boundlessness, of something that begins something else but without making its development definitive – like a gear mechanism improbably free in time and space to multiply and extend its effects of

¹² See VV.AA. 2014b, p. 94. The catalogue produced by Lissitzky reflected the complexity of intent of the installation: it was one single photomontage that opened like an accordion, inviting readers to a free association of meanings. “It does not rely only on the power of the images of the exhibits, but combines them with other imagery and texts to create new layers of meaning, which not only support but also add to, and alter the original meanings of the exhibits. The catalogue gives another chance to juxtapose the different exhibits and create new paths of interpretation”.

organization of signs, contents, messages – can be compared, to my mind, to the same principles that enable Modernism to operate on the urban level, setting in motion a sort of grammar that each time could be picked up again, amplified, pursued... keeping the past on standby. Proof of this is the concept of Wolkenbügel (a sort of final result of the studies on “prouns”), which can also be thought of as the meaningful junction for containing “centralized services” on the urban level, the starting point of a building system which could be repeated as is.

He was thinking about a system, about an infrastructure for the city, like a water tank, the bastion of a military fortress or a metro station,” Burgos and Garrido say. “The project had the structure, size and approach of a great civil work, which as often happens could be repeated without important variations” (ibid., p. 26).

The issue of urban infrastructure is today especially topical in relation to the possibility of raising the quality of metropolitan areas that have grown uncontrollably in a way that is disorienting for everyone and which only with the vitalizing effect of certain public improvements could attain a minimum of sense and character.

Another example is the “modernist” type lesson enacted by the booth devoted to the so-called VKhuTEMAs Training, the unique pedagogical method adopted in the Higher Artistic and Technical Studios created in Russia along the lines of the German Bauhaus immediately after the October Revolution¹³. As in the Bauhaus, all the disciplines of art were experienced together under the common banner of injecting art into daily life, in particular into mass production¹⁴.

This pedagogical method is characterized by the desire to go beyond a formative process based only on learning to one centred on the possibility of raising new questions and issues as the lessons unfolded. As is written in the catalogue: “The teachers and students of VKhUTEMAS developed an approach without precedent, in which the process of teaching and learning served as a vehicle for venturing into the unknown. Studio teaching became a laboratory method, a way of testing different iterations over and over again”¹⁵. Evidence of this is the teaching method of Nikolay Ladovsky (1881-1941), who in his courses on the concept of “space” asked questions outside the most orthodox debate on Rationalism, aiming at spotlighting the perceptive effects of the various spaces, distancing himself from the rigor of the productivist current of Constructivism represented within VKhUTEMAS by Rodčenko, reaching the point in 1921 of proclaiming, “Space, not stone, is the material of architecture”¹⁶.

Vieri Quilici says this about Ladovsky:

The distance, or at least the *distinction between representation* (of a project as given spatiality) *and perception*, is admitted: rather, it becomes the object of study and observation. The laboratory is no longer the magic place of invention, where the instruments come to life and guide the hand of the artist/medium, but becomes the site of a continual working-out of the instruments of planning and design (Quilici 1980, p. 54).

¹³ Anna Bokov, a scholar of Soviet design education and avant-garde practices of the early twentieth century at Yale University, traces in the catalogue a reconstruction of this teaching method and what this might mean for breaking ground in the training of young designers. See VV.AA. 2014b, pp. 100-111.

¹⁴ VKhuTEMAs was comprised of eight art and production departments: Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, Graphics, Textiles, Ceramics, Wood and Metalworking. Teaching there were the leading lights of the Russian avant-garde: Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, Alexander Vesnin and Lyubov Popova, Boris Korolev and Anton Lavinsky, Nikolay Ladovsky and Vladimir Krinsky, El Lissitzky and Vladimir Tatlin, Gustav Klutiz and Moisei Ginzburg. Closed in 1930 with the rise of Stalin, it had many more students than the Bauhaus; for example, enrolled in the 1924-1925 academic year were 1445 students, compared with 127 at the Bauhaus. As opposed to the Bauhaus, which until 1927 did not have an architecture department, VKhUtemas from the beginning included architecture in both introductory and advanced courses. Furthermore, VKhUtemas went beyond the desire to unite art and technology, aspiring to the creation of a proletarian version of that union, to the point of accepting a possible disassociation between the two. On this subject, see also: “Per una nuova pedagogia architettonica: Ladovskij e il Vchutemas,” in Quilici 1978, pp. 64-81. At the end of the essay, the author highlights the difference between the Bauhaus and VKhUtemas, stressing the pedagogical vocation of Constructivism as opposed to the more experimental and empirical attitude of the Rationalism of Gropius.

¹⁵ VV.AA. 2014b, p. 106. The introductory courses (the workshops that made up the “Core Curriculum”) in graphics, colour, volume and space, ending up becoming real experiences that served as vehicles for innovation and the development of the modernist language.

¹⁶ The course in the concept of space was the first to assign modern architecture to the mass majority of students. It very soon became a basic course, developed in particular by Ladovsky, who wrote a short essay entitled “Fondamenti per l’elaborazione di una teoria dell’architettura” [Fundamentals of Architectural Theory]. For him, Architectural Rationalism, as he called his doctrine, was analogous to the technical rationalism, but operated in terms of perception, rather than labor and material. Rationalists aimed to create a self-referential system, a new grammar of architecture based on abstract elements. In his essay, Ladovsky listed the formal qualities that would serve as the proto-elements for the new architectural order. “In the perception of the material form as such, we can recognize the expression of its qualities: 1) Geometric – relationship of surfaces, corners, etc.; 2) Physical – weight, mass, etc.; 3) Mechanical – stability, mobility; 4) Logical – articulation of surface as such and of surface bounding volume. Depending on the articulation of size and quantity we can talk about: a) Strength and Weakness; b) Growth and Invariability; c) Finiteness and Infinity” (Ladovsky 1926, p. 246).

These qualities formed the pedagogical basis for the Space course, and eventually developed into assignments on the articulation of Form, Space, Volume, Rhythm, Structure, Balance and Mass, and Weight.

In reality, Ladovsky's position initiates a morphological approach in a psychological key, as is evidenced also by the clay models he had the students make, echoing – with the use of this highly malleable material – a sort of connection between mind, body, and material in which it was possible to come into physical contact with the birth of the forms and the idea of space connected with them.

Experience like the VKhUtemas or the Bauhaus itself, making due allowance for the differences, remain among the milestones of the history of Modernism, pointing to the desire to make planning and design come alive, exploring the entire range of its generative dynamics, with the goal being to educate in the broadest sense to planning, without disciplinary boundaries, using every means possible, to elevate the qualitative and aesthetic level of mass production and ensure for all a high percentage of daily beauty, opening the world up to the beautiful and the beautiful to the variety of the world. To set these experiences in motion took uncommon courage and virtue.

Being an architect, we have a very simple tool which is available for our work. We have to make space... Make a space for a man in a way that living in this space becomes a kind of tool for each one to get a little more understanding about his existence. I think I belong to that group who finds, by working, also the meaning of life (Bakema 1962, p. 80).

These are the words of Jaap Bakema (1914-1981)¹⁷, a historic member of Team 10, to whom the Dutch pavilion is dedicated with the title *Open: A Bakema Celebration*¹⁸. From the very beginning of his notes on the possible developments of the lesson of the “modern,” Bakema posits the question of an architecture capable of acting in society, as a form of identification of social concerns and their characteristic variety. As early as 1942, discussing with Willem Kloos the topic of “functional architecture,” he stated: “The architectural form must not express only functions; it must not be purely functional, but become function in itself: function of the form” (Gubitosi, Izzo 1974, p. 16). One might add: “social function of the form,” as indeed was promoted by the members of Team 10, who were among the first to reflect on an objective detachment from social problems once the avant-garde thrust of the theories and teachings of the masters of Modernism had run its course.

For Bakema, too, then, the creation of space is a fundamental issue since our life takes place inside it, to the point of making us aware of it. With a profound sense of realism, Bakema goes even further, declaring: “It would be better if, in electoral campaigns, the politicians showed on their posters not so much their faces as the type of built environment that would result from their political intentions” (Ibid., 41).

Looking at some of the buildings actually constructed, Bakema's innovative contribution lies especially in his desire to combine the functional components dynamically so as to unleash energy in the form, vitality in the form, yielding a personalization of the spaces created, as for example happens in the realization of the residential complex for one-thousand families called *'t Hooi* (1961-1973)¹⁹, where the guiding principle is that of providing a minimal house, which can be expanded and transformed, to the greatest possible number of owners. This principle can be summed up in the idea of what Bakema called the “visual group,” which he developed after 1945 to respond to the demands of an egalitarian society: a housing unit of a mixed typology ranging from flats for the single individual, to houses for the young couple and the family with children, to houses for the elderly. As a unit for urbanization, the visual group encompasses all walks of life. It forms a micro-society that reflects the larger society and it aims to make an inclusive, open society a reality at the smallest scale of the neighbourhood.

These are the most up-to-the-minute aspects of Bakema's work. The idea of creating an architecture that is no longer standard but, I would say, standardized for change, to accommodate diversity, to create a community, a

¹⁷ Bakema's name is associated professionally with that of Johannes Hendrik Van Den Broek (1898-1978), who in 1947 became rector of the Technical High School in Delft, where he invited many young architects to teach. Thus in 1948 Van Den Broek, busier than ever with professional commitments, asked Bakema to become his partner, founding a joint design firm. In late 1962 and early 1963 Bakema acquired national renown with the television programme “From Chair to City,” which led to the publication of *From Chair to City; A Story of People and Space* (1964).

¹⁸ *Open. A Bakema Celebration*, Dutch pavilion, 2014 Architecture Biennale, commissioner: Het Nieuwe Instituut; curators: Guus Beumer, Dirk van den Heuvel. The reference is to the exhibition on the work of the Van den Broek en Bakema firm held in Rotterdam in 1962 with the unusual title *Building for an Open Society*. “The exhibition was organized for the occasion of the Prix de la Critique in 1961, which was awarded to Van den Broek en Bakema with a special mention to Bakema himself as a leader of the so-called ‘Otterlo-group’ or better-known as ‘Team 10’. The jury praised Bakema and the office for their achievements in modern architecture, how they had found a balance between the ‘emphasis on human relations’ on the one hand and the ‘possibility for personal freedom and intimacy’ on the other. The jury report concluded their design work was a major contribution to a ‘functional, human and democratic art of building’”. Van den Heuvel 2014, in VV.AA. 2014c, p. 3.

¹⁹ The complex was built at Voensel-Eindhoven, in collaboration with J.M. Stokla and G. Lans.

society over time – these are all aspects that could be applied today to a multicultural, mobile society that is hard to categorize.

In the project realized for the Osaka international exposition in 1970, the casual sense of the spaces, their interweave of different functions is reinforced by the use of media that enable the creation of a sort of fluid, enveloping architecture capable of entertaining the public, going beyond the silence of classic perimeter walls. As Bakema himself said in his lecture in Naples in 1974 in conjunction with the 4th Architecture Exhibition, where his work was presented:

With a team that included Carel Weeber as co-architect, Jan Wrijman as director, Louis Andriessen as composer and Wim Crouwel as graphic artist and designer, we succeeded in making a building in which visitors could move through the space, on foot or by escalator, stop and observe at their pleasure, in a complete, integrated experience of space, images, and sound; fifteen screens for movies and eight for projecting slides, plus continuous transmission of music, in one sole conception, in a free and harmonious impression of Holland: the impression of an active democracy, of a modern country, an open, stimulating and international society (Bakema 1974, p. 50).

On the exterior, the pavilion is designed to resemble a large machine made up of rotating parts. The reference is to Lissitzky and the above-mentioned Wolkenbügel (1924), a project that fascinated Bakema. The rotation corresponds also to the desire to channel flows and functions in multiple directions. Even the vital energy of the public is thus transformed into formal complexity.

The Osaka project arose at a particular moment in time. Suffice it to think of the deflecting action of “radical thought” that developed in Italy and the rest of Europe with designs that went against the current, in which social concerns boldly grabbed the spotlight, in view of a possible redemption from architectural form that organized functions and conveyed democracy but was totally unable to communicate tensions, contradictions, and fantasies of the social issues themselves²⁰. Meanwhile McLuhan’s teachings were widely absorbed, encouraging experimental designs on the theme of the interaction between media and architecture.

In the last analysis, with respect to the foregoing throws into relief the key problem at the base of the theory of Modernism. Standardized, politicized, scientifically proven democratic form is discovered to be a possible aspect for operating in favour of society and a close relationship with the built environment. It thus turns out to be part of a much larger discussion, still completely to be explored, certainly always under the banner of a reigning modernity (radiant with ideas and good intentions) but laid out in the direction of the human and of whatever in it still has to be discovered as a counterbalance to an all-encompassing project imposed from above.

Thus functionalism can find new spaces of reality in Bakema’s Osaka project, tranquillizing and avant-garde at the same time.

Maximum Society, Minimum Architecture

But the most interesting experiments are certainly the ones in which, starting from the stringency of the topic of construction, from its paring away all but the essential (as in the case of the experiences matured in Russia), we arrive several decades later at a sort of invisible architecture, thus at the very negation of the theme of construction as the foundational act of a society, in favour of a society whose actions are already in and of themselves “constructions,” and in that sense are given value. Thus it is that themes like architecture, democracy, social issues, and politics achieve forms of coexistence and total fusion, while the figure of the architect could sound hollow in relation to his historical significance of one who orders and builds beautiful forms in line with the taste of the time.

The experience of Cedric Price (1934-2003), the topic treated in the Swiss pavilion along with that of the economist and sociologist Lucius Burckhardt (1925-2003)²¹, is representative in this regard, compared to the – I would say – total absorption of modernity in its political aspects, since in Price’s designs architecture has disappeared in favour of a spirited debate on it that can occasionally assume some degree of reality, always

²⁰ Radical architecture was a meaningful moment of critical elaboration of the lesson of Modernism, in some cases taking its thought to the extreme (as is the case of groups like Archigram), in others anticipating its ultimate development and consequences on the built environment (this is the case of Italian radical architecture, in particular Archizoom and Superstudio, just to cite some examples). In the exhibition the “radical” experience is present in the Monditalia section with the installation *Radical Pedagogies: action-reaction-interaction*, a review project carried out by the Princeton University School of Architecture. On radical avant-garde in Florence, I would like to cite Mello 2015b.

²¹ Lucius Burckhardt, *Cedric Price, A stroll through a fun palace*, Swiss pavilion, 2014 Architecture Biennale, commissioner: Swiss Art Council Pro Helvetia; curator: Hans Ulrich Obrist.

very snobbish towards any ambition to form, but giving an encouraging wink to the free circulation of ideas and contents that assail the more traditional “elements” at the foundation of the discourse on construction.

In his well-known *Fun Palace* (1961), unfortunately never built, floor, ceiling, etc., are just a memory. The public moving about inside it creates a new reality that emanates design, liberates ideas, configures space, makes its way forward, acts, and permeates the site with its own character, dictating each time the need for new functions. Architecture is by this point invisible, and yet fantastically representative because, in its official character, it is devoted to diverse and manifold ways of entertaining the public; between music, theatre, and performance art, the adjective “fun” stirs up the crowds against any form of staticness of events, since the idea of Price and of Joan Littlewood (the theatrical producer and friend who sponsored the project) was to create an educational and recreational centre where users would participate personally in its life. No space is defined once and for all, with the exception of a grid of 75 steel lattice columns standing on an enormous horizontal base, over which loomed a gigantic crane as a portal. Celebrated is the transitory, thus the fleetingness of the events that in the various forms of entertainment take on a cult guise, a little like happened in the eighteenth century with Vauxhall and Ranelagh Gardens, from which Price drew inspiration.

An article that appeared in the *Tribune* in 1964 asked:

What is “Fun Palace”? The word “fun” has been devalued by advertisers – Mm-mm! Toothpaste fun! – and made sensitive people shudder. The English are supposed to take their pleasures sadly; it is time we took fun seriously... we are on the way to a dashing and invigorating kind of Socialism.

“It’s up to you how to use it”. This is a challenge. The idea is an experiment “in which all of us can realize the possibilities and delights that a 20th Century City environment owes us. It must last no longer than we need it”. This is the kind of experiment in leisure which a Socialist Britain needs²².

I would say that the Fun Palace echoes that sense of redemption analysed in the social condensers described by Lissitzky, which derive from a progressive transformation of the “palace” (in the middle-class sense) to “work palace,” then “culture palace,” and later more democratically into “club.” The Fun Palace initiates now a new kind of building for the community, helping to dissolve that aura on which palaces were based, the solid, elegant bourgeois buildings.

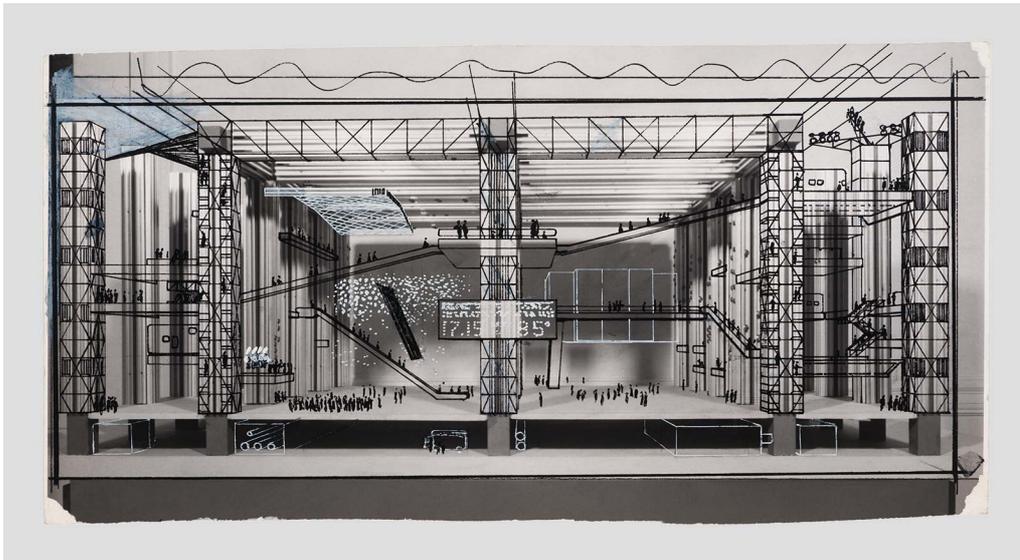


Figure 4. Cedric Price, Fun Palace, project, interior perspective, 1964

In the early 1970s Price did build in London the Inter-Action arts centre (1972-1974), an architectural mechanism whose purpose is to give vitality to the daily life of an outlying neighbourhood by introducing a series of functions that involve the people of the community (a space for shows, a snack bar, gym, periodicals library, rehearsal rooms, sewing rooms for making costumes, nurseries, etc.). In this case, too, architecture is relegated to the background: the structure is a light framework into which various volumes can be inserted, some of them transportable cells (as for the service units).

²² *Play, Ideas for Socialist Britain*, Tribune, 24 July, 1964, published in <http://www.cca.qc.ca/en/collection/283-cedric-price-fun-palace>. Price's archive is on deposit at the Canadian Centre of Architecture. In 1999, the CCA sponsored the exhibition *Cedric Price: Mean Time - 19 October 1999 to 27 February 2000*, Octagonal Gallery.

Interviewed by B. J. Archer on the place architecture occupies in his thought, in the contemporary architectural context and in the overall context of Modernism, Price answered:

I think that buildings in fact would become possibly monumentally sublime if their lifetime was far more sensitively attuned to their usefulness. I think the best products come from assuming the value of, or measuring the value of a worthwhile process; and I very much suspect architecture that is produced as a response to an immediate problem. The only reason for architecture is to provide conditions that were hitherto considered impossible. If you just reproduce conditions that are already found in other architectures, then you are wasting your life... Architecture is peripheral to the most valuable social aims. I wish it were less peripheral, and that's why I'm an architect (Price 1978, p. 21).

At the beginning of the interview Price states: "It is probably through sheer exhaustion that some architects will simplify just what social well-being is into allying it with three-dimensional form too early on. Health clinics aren't as important as good health" (ibid, p. 20).

As Koolhaas himself notes: "The Venturis hoped to discover in the commercial vernacular an energy that could revive architecture. Price wanted to deflate architecture to the point where it became indistinguishable from the ordinary" (Koolhaas 2014 p. 14). Architecture and the daily unfolding of events coincide. The flows of existence are the same ones that design roads and paths, a little like it is possible to learn by applying the so-called "science of strolling" invented by Burckhardt, which he called "strollology," certainly one of the points of contact between the innovations brought into the urban field by these two unique individuals. "Strollology examines the sequences in which a person perceives his surroundings" (Burckhardt 1996, p. 239).

The vitality of the social sphere versus architecture

Modernism would do nothing other than spread profusely ideas and concepts that conveyed a new way of living, moving about, being outdoors, and interacting with others. The social sphere was thus exalted in its productive efficiency, its possibility to become the mechanism for a life that was efficient, essential, never redundant. Each person, returning home, should be able to recognize himself as part of the idea of a new world, finding nothing more than an exemplary life, a little cog in a great, fascinating machine with various planes, various levels, various dimensions, qualitatively above reproach.

The utility to which Price alludes is a central concern. At the beginning of the twentieth century the world needed to be renewed, and man needed to find new certainties, to rise to the surface in his ideal dimension.

Everything that came later, the absorption of modernity, is an open story that is moving in the direction of facts, ideas, personalities and their insights, also with regard to the concept of a profession as a mission whose various protagonists felt vested from the beginning, by devoting themselves to others, with the constant discovery of others. It is precisely this last motive that characterizes the absorption of modernity up to today: discovering others leads to formalizing ever new uses, until they can become, as in Price's case, a minefield for the architectural profession, calling its obviousness and objectives into question.

A certain constructional elementariness of the modern way of framing architecture and the built environment and the desire to reduce and emphasize, besides being concepts directly tied to the rampant mechanization of the twentieth century and to the need for rapid rebuilding of countries afflicted by repeated war damage, are reconnaissance actions on the part of architecture in order to be able to manage and handle its future automatically, almost instantaneously, under the banner of reason, of what therefore does not leave room for doubt or compromise, under the banner of high construction quality and a democratic aesthetic that reinvigorates the wilted gaze of history by channelling it in the direction of the needs of the present. It is an objective thought that can take root anywhere the need and utility are felt, free to move about from one continent to the other without a break.

To do this it was necessary to reduce, synthesize and break down in an elementary fashion the "fundamental" significant steps underlying every construction. In this direction, the same "elements" of construction that Koolhaas chose to retrace through history in this Biennale echo the key principles of modernity tied to making maximum use of each element in its relative capacity to characterize – individually – a building. The same elementariness can then lead to paradoxical operations like the one done by Price.

In an article on the Fun Palace, Mark Wigley wrote:

If Price was the 'No. 1 Anti-architect,' as he himself called himself, his method for destabilizing architecture was simply to dig ever deeper into each of his most elementary operations. Research was a weapon. By trying obsessively to 'reduce the reach of my ignorance,' Price presented a project so ambitious in its conceptual, technical, spatial, and social newness as to condition all of us still today. Instead of designing a building, he redesigned the figure of the architect (Wigley 2004, p. 16).

It remains to explore everything that today concerns the vitality of the social vs. architecture. If we take, for example, the type of relationality and “irrationality” developed in cyberspace²³, the various and plural forms of entertainment, the free (or almost) exploration of distant worlds, the intimate strolls through buildings, parks, entire cities... everything resounds with an overflowing sense of social issues and with a real – let’s call it that – architecture pushed into the background, occasionally visible for advertising purposes, like a product whose performance and virtues (ecological, recycled, passive, just to cite a few) have to be emphasized, without which it would have no longer a reason to exist. Pierre Lévy refers to cyberspace as one of the major arts of the twenty-first century.

The new architects, he states, can be persons coming from the traditional spheres of art or they can be engineers, creators of networks or interfaces, software inventors, groups who are part of international normalization organisms, information jurists, etc.... Our hope here is for an architecture without foundations, like that of boats, with its whole system of practical oceanography, navigation, and orientation through the currents... Far from instituting a theatre of representation, the architecture of the future assembles rafts of icons for traversing the chaos. Listening to the collective brain, translating plural thought, it erects palaces of sound, cities of voices and song, instantaneous, luminous, and as mobile as flames (Lévy 1996, pp. 132-134).

Wasn’t instantaneousness one of the characteristic traits of the Fun Palace? In light of these observations, it appears as a sort of phantasmagorical future in action, where the most efficient planning minds (Price and his friend Littlewood) devise a new way of making a world, making a society, making culture. The Fun Palace: a farewell to a type of exhausted and ineffective materiality that is a cumbersome dead weight for dreams and desires.

Elements in the midst of an identity crisis

These same architectural elements seem by now to be out of the game, and the sophisticated film montage made by Davide Rapp to introduce the historical overview of them at the Biennale looks like a last attempt to celebrate their leading role and features, in light of a hypothetical end to them. Very much in line with the cynical realism that has always distinguished Koolhaas’ way of working, the elements seem to refer to the vivisectioned body of architecture itself which, in the extreme ordinariness of things, stuns, alarms, broadens existence, moves thoughts. As though to say: architecture is nothing other than the elementary assembly of parts having a sentimental component or not, which on the whole becomes a story, a vision, an official work, poetry, spare time. But what happens to all this in the electronic age? Today, the best-known elements, linked with the realization of architecture, are called into question by computer planning which would make its existence parenthetical. In effect, windows, ceilings, doors, balconies, etc., this glorious past of buildings has been put into crisis in the electronic age. Suffice it to think of the concept of “structural surface,” in which it is the computer processing of one large element – the surface of a building – that becomes first and foremost structure, cancelling out definitively the division between Modernist-type pillars and beams. But the same things would end up now “absorbing” also many other functions, adapting to become façade, window, floor, ceiling... Exemplary in this sense is the work of an architect like Toyo Ito, who for some years has been experimenting, to the best of his ability, with the concept of “structural surface” in his projects, in view of creating a new genre of architecture, as in the case of the building he designed for Tod’s in Tokyo (2004), whose precedents can be seen in the pavilion of the Serpentine Gallery in London (2002), and even earlier in the one built in Bruges (2002). The result: spacious areas devoid of pillars, windows or doors, in other words of any architectural connotation. As Ito states: “Computer technology has revolutionized our ability to dissect structural forms – columns, beams, brace, walls”²⁴. To the point that, today, planning by parts seems to have been left behind in favour of the possibility of conceiving the design simultaneously, like a *unicum*, starting from the very conception of structure which can no longer be separated from the shape of the building.

²³ Cyberspace crosses the line of reason and feeling and every day blooms forth different and irreducible to a unity.

²⁴ VV.AA. 2006, p. 31. This exhibition was mounted in Tokyo at the Opera City Art Gallery from 7 October to 24 December 2006. For further discussion of Ito’s work, I take the liberty of referring to Mello 2008.



Figure 5. Toyo Ito, Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, London, United Kingdom, 2002

In 1964 the London magazine *20th century* published an interview by Peter Carter with Mies van der Rohe. Called to respond about the possibility of inventing new forms starting from modern technology, despite the well-known thesis that in architecture form must be a consequence of structure, the great master answered:

As I see it, there are two general bases, and you may call it the more objective. The other has a plastic basis, which you could say is emotional. You cannot mix them. Architecture is not a Martini (Carter 1964, p. 106).

Ito, on several occasions, has sought a direct confrontation with Mies (whom he particularly admired)²⁵, starting from his invaluable legacy to reach the point of putting his principles and values in question in light of the objective changes that affect the contemporary age, following in the wake of the thought of Mies himself when he stated, in a fully modern spirit:

I really believe, more and more, that architecture is closely related to the driving and sustaining forces of an epoch and can, at its best, be nothing more than an expression of these forces; it is not a fashion, nor is it something for eternity, it is a part of an epoch. To understand an epoch means to understand its essence and not everything that you see. But what is important in an epoch is very difficult to find out because there is a very slow unfolding of the great form. The great form cannot be invented by you or me but we are working on it without knowing it... Architecture is an historical process (Carter 1964, p. 106).

In this case, with reference to the possible technological innovations of the present, we are faced with an objective “overcoming” of Modernism: architecture can now turn into a Martini cocktail of excellence. It all lies in succeeding in absorbing its inebriating effects, given that, already now, it is necessary to make a distinction between the use of the computer for the purpose of pure speculation about form – and which would produce a superficial, faddish kind of innovation which changes nothing, and a type of utilization of an experimental nature, which would open up new spaces to the architect’s creativity and, consequently, new vital spaces for mankind. And wasn’t this the main objective of Modernism? Everything that the age of mechanization had served up on the architect’s plate as a possibility to change the state of “things” in view of their translation into instruments aimed at improving living conditions (mass manufacturing, economical, standard, high-quality housing) today becomes a veritable buffet to be dipped into liberally so as to reshuffle the cards, in search of new “forms of utility” in the electronic age.

²⁵ It is sufficient to read Ito’s description of the Barcelona Pavilion (1929): “It feels as if we are deep in water looking at things, and it may well be described as translucent. The infinite fluidity felt in the pavilion must arise from this translucent liquid space. What we experience here is not the flow of air but the sense of wandering and drifting gently underwater. This very sensation makes the space distinct and unique.” Ito 1997, pp. 126-129.

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