

Afterthoughts on Architectural Cynicism

Henri Raymond

Just as there is an architectural triumphalism, so there is also a triumph of architecture: the purportedly universal urge to build, extending from silos to cathedrals and incorporating as it were the visible world. This triumph is also that of a profession whose practitioners until recently numbered in the hundreds, and presently in the hundreds of thousands, if only as a result of population increases. Yet, if we talk about the triumph of architecture, it is no longer so clear nowadays what this is meant to refer to: to the wondrous proliferation of architectural designs? To the emergence of more and more colossal architectural objects? To the universal competence of the architects?

The notion of 'architecture' is being stretched so far that it no longer means very much, and in several cases gaps are left that have to be filled with great difficulty: ambitious housing development projects that go wrong, areas of conflict between engineers and architects, planning that presupposes radical social changes and sinks into monstrosities (as in Ceausescu's Romania certainly, but what a lesson this contains for us!). In addition there is the enormous gulf that yawns between the public and architecture.



374

Nobody is able to adequately explain why the Opéra Bastille is a failure, although everybody agrees that it is. Von Spreckelsen's La Grande Arche in Paris La Défense is praised in the same way without valid arguments. It's a question of a crisis in architecture criticism which seems to have forgotten its relationship with a public, even with the sophisticated sector. At its best this criticism is an explanation of the most monumental errors; somewhat as though one were to replace music theory by Mozart's musical jokes which merely show the mistakes without referring to the rudiments of composition theory. The loss of a critique grounded in the rules of art is initially seen as a liberation from academicism. This issue is not to be dealt with hastily, but it has to be acknowledged that, with the abolition of the rule as an intervening factor, architecture can only measure its results against an immanent efficiency modelled on technology's 'Knowledge is Power'. To be sure, this commitment to results is particularly connected with projects initiated by the government or other bureaucratic organisations; yet even then, albeit less and less, it is possible to speak of a relation between commission and project. Nevertheless, even in this relation the influence of techno-bureaucratic structures makes itself felt, especially when it comes to regulations, which in their turn are governed by the commitment to results.



? What you see as the confusion of categories between Nature and Art assumes that these are categories. Against this we could say the following: even though there may have been a time when these categories corresponded to reality, we have gradually had to reach the conclusion that this opposition has been bridged by the artificial. Nature and Art have been reconciled through the artificiality of everything imaginable. On what grounds do you continue to adhere to a duality reminiscent of the eighteenth century?

! I used the term 'nature' in a monolithic sense of an object that 'falls from the sky', in other words an object that lacks meaning (like Mont Blanc, for example). I distinguish this 'natural' architecture from architecture with a rule. It is true that I passed over Boullée, who conferred patents of nobility on this Natura Artificialis by introducing pyramids, spheres and other so-called 'primary' forms in architecture schools. It is thus a question of a dualism within architecture. But one would do well to see skyscrapers, for example, or the Tour Montparnasse as objects with an intentional form rather than as actually made things. Henri Lefebvre spoke in this connection of *mimesis* as opposed to *poiesis*.

Cynicism in architecture, monumental mis-culture, are the elements in a mediatisation of architecture which addresses itself directly to the public, speculating on the pulverisation of values and conventions and on the swift disappearance of a 'system of fine art' whose future home is the world of postcards.

?! Who is this 'everyone'? There are also many people who, precisely on the grounds of an analysis such as yours, are looking for an alternative, not in rhetoric but in a phenomenological experience.

Efficiency versus Art

With the development of functionalism, what we call efficiency has acquired two sides. On the one hand the architect is obliged to achieve results that express a utopian goal. This is what happens with the big collective apartment blocks, where a way of life is made into a project, but it also happens when a building is adapted to the continuous progress of medical science. On the other hand, since the beginning of the Modern Movement, efficiency has partly been seen as the architect's duty to respect certain rules that are not of an aesthetic nature but are meant to have a specific immanent effect. ★ Instead of the rules that have to be observed in order to ensure order and beauty, what we have are just the building's appearance and, nowadays in particular, its media-effect, which is now given the task of making a particular impression, one that may well still be rooted in a number of few rules but which can just as well be based on no clear rule whatsoever.

★ On the 'rule' its origin, its function, see Epron, J.P., *L'Edifice idéal et la règle constructive*, Nancy, 1980.

The flight into efficiency has a second, more far-reaching cause, namely the rejection of the Romantic distinction between Nature and Art. The aesthetic that Romanticism imposed upon the natural subsumes Nature into Art, with the side effect that objects belonging to another world than that of the rules of art nevertheless acquire an artistic meaning.

The Modern Movement in architecture, which opposed academicism, turns spontaneous architectural forms into Art (one is reminded of Le Corbusier's photos of silos). It extends the concept of 'architecture' to natural objects such as crystals, or sees New York skyscrapers as metaphors. Thus there arises in architecture aesthetics, just as in the other arts, a confusion between the artistic and the picturesque. We saw an example of this recently when the Grande Arche was universally proclaimed as 'beautiful'; of course, like all natural arches, it is beautiful, but it is meaningless, both from the viewpoint of artistic rules, and in the sense of what may be expected from architecture as artistic activity.

After the rejection of academicisms came the period of formal efficiency, of the effect of mass and colour, derived from an erroneous image of man and from an outdated psychology. It is all to do with

linking man to nature, with a blind assumption of a harmony between the two, the perverse results of which we behold today. The Corbusian idea of deriving harmonic measurements from the 1.75 metre length of a man, which can then be multiplied by 100 or 1000, betrays ignorance concerning the relationship between the natural and the artistic.

The skyline of Manhattan, when it looks in the twilight like a mountainous horizon, can perhaps be compared with the Ecrin mountain range in the Alps – but can this sort of thing be made a basis of architecture? It is an amusing thought that, referring to completely secularised Platonic volumes, a first-class 'unculture' is being formed which wants to ground architectural certainty on rough and often chaotic effects, while Greek thought at least had the merit of having gone for advice to the gods, who were able to tame these effects and the shock that went with it. ?

Cynicism and Architectural Rhetoric

From this one can thus specify the features of an architectural cynicism, in the sense indicated by Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* a cynicism where two aspects can be discerned. The unkept promises of the Modern Project's Utopia have degenerated into a rhetoric which everyone excuses by saying that it belongs to the obligatory 'discourse' of the technostructure and therefore conforms to the expectations concomitant with an entity of measures aimed at results. ?!

In a certain sense we could say that the trimming down of architecture is being compensated for by the flowery words used to win over the major clients. What in Le Corbusier's time could still pass for a lyric illusion connected with the splendour of 'pure' forms, has now become a cumbersome linguistic exercise, part of the professional stiffness which no longer misleads anyone. But all this is cynical, because a utopian discourse is once again being sold to the people like a sort of basket full of good intentions, but you can't bring in anything oppositional, on pain of being suspected of malevolence.

It can be expected that this implicit shamelessness will last just as long as the institutions that are con-

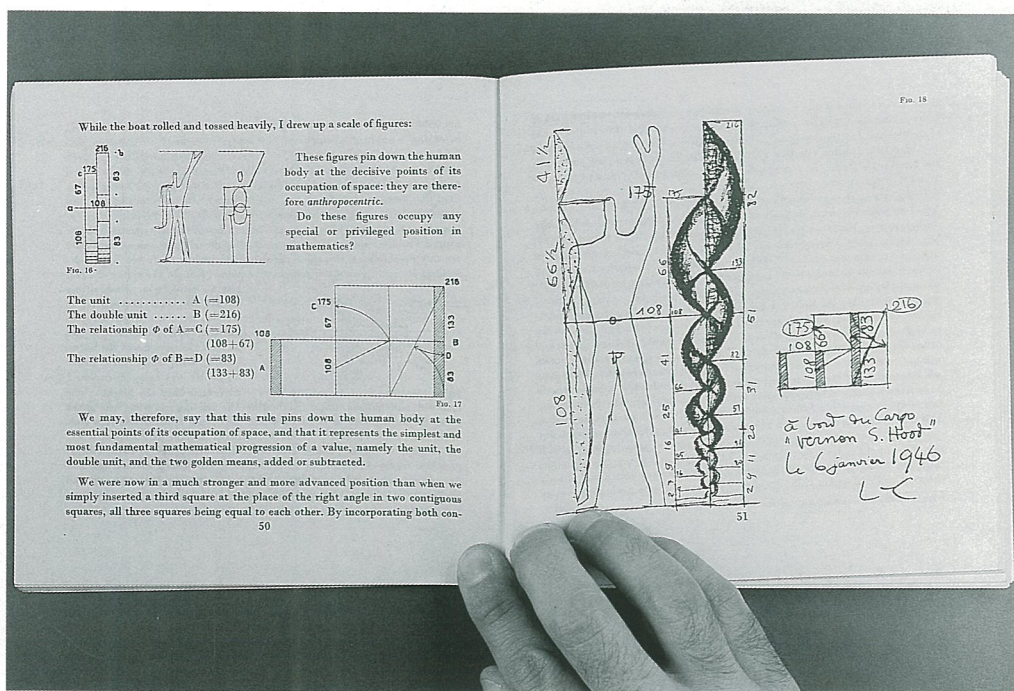


tent with it and promote it further. Yet a few recent examples indicate that it is dangerous to speculate on the 'radiant future' that Zinoviev talks about.

The second aspect of architectural cynicism tends to reduce the architectural to media effects, in other words to rely on the absence of architectural judgement on the part of the public. With the aid of procedures that are largely propagandistic in nature, attempts are made to mislead the public through all manner of publicity campaigns. 'Events' are created around monuments that stand for themselves, outside of any context and in the absence of any rule. When Bernard Huet defines in this way an architecture 'against the city',[★] he is alluding to this succession of 'punchy campaigns' that have no correlation and are contrary to all the rules. This aspect is particularly strong in Paris where the megalomania of those in power has expressed itself in a shambles of arbitrarily scattered objects (the Opéra Bastille, the Grande Bibliothèque, and the Ministère des Finances), so that urban space is strewn with monuments that have no reference at all to any communally-held culture and therefore should be called a-cultural.

Cynicism in architecture, monumental mis-culture, are the elements in a mediatisation of architecture which addresses itself directly to the public, speculating on the pulverisation of values and conventions and on the swift disappearance of a 'system of fine art' whose future home is the world of postcards.

★ Huet, Bernard, 'l'Architecture contre la ville', in *AMC* 14, December 1986.



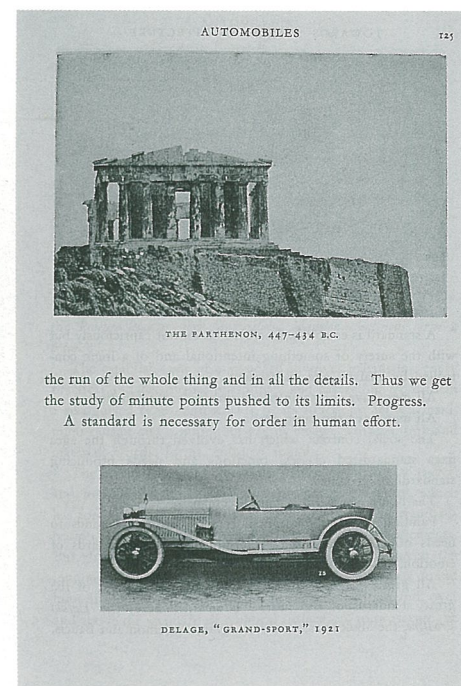
Le Corbusier, Double page from *The Modulor* (or. ed. 1948)

Indeed, those who reply to architectural surveys often lack a well-developed stylistic judgement; but it would be too hazardous to draw from this the conclusion that all information concerning architecture can henceforth be limited to the language of the elite on the one hand and the silent, stupefied passivity of the television viewer on the other hand.

Metaphors as Refuge for Absurdity

We can now understand why metaphorising is completely accepted in architecture at the moment; it is no longer a violation of the rules but a way of working aimed at an immediate effect. Rather than an effect of aristocratic irony (as in Bomarzo), it is more an attempt to suggest a connection based on nothing other than an easy allusion. Looking at recent work by Simounet (an apartment block at St Denis), one sees that even in a design group that is not without talent, the architecture supports promotional references to the feudal past of St Denis. That this reference is meaningless from the inhabitants' point of view, as well as from the viewpoint of urban planning, is of no importance for it is simply a matter of giving a pseudo-historical name to a media-image. Even though we have to repeat that it is still a talented piece of work.?

As we have described it, cynicism in architecture should be able to boast excellent prospects. In the



Le Corbusier, page from *Towards a New Architecture* (or. ed. 1923)

? You were talking about renouncing an immanent rule. The architecture you are condemning, however, is also based on a rule. When Ricardo Bofill builds a 'Versailles for the ordinary citizen' in Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, he is appealing to a rather elementary urge for distinction on the part of the future inhabitants. The system of fine arts that you see parked in the world of postcards, makes its return in a prestigious, commercial scenography. It could be argued, then, that the world of postcards is coming into our very homes. Would it not be better to say that the rule has been turned into money, rather than having been abandoned?

! These days an architect cannot sell because he knows how to apply the Rules. He sells because his product is mediated by the application of rules as regards familiarity, repute, prominence. His product does not bear the stamp of competence 'in accordance with the rules', but just his signature: 'Chemetov', 'Nouvel' or 'Bofill'. Knowing the rule is as Johann Sebastian Bach said, 'Anyone who does his best, like I do, can accomplish the same.'

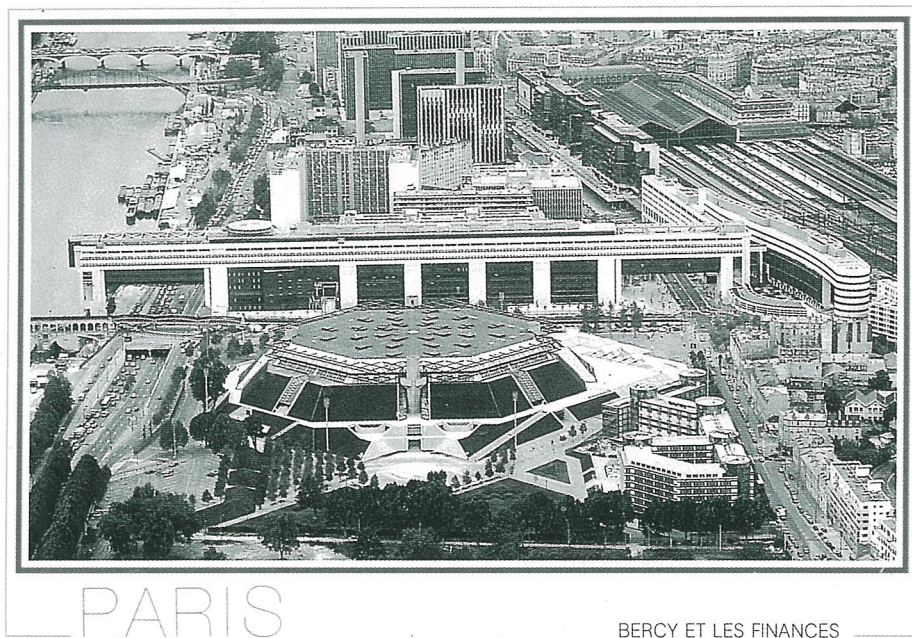
? On which ground do you think this memory still exists?

! A broad subject! What I can say is that architectural memory is connected with the practice of taste, beginning with the postcard display. This rootedness that I mentioned itself draws from the thin layer of hardly conscious, but lasting 'culture' that our civilisation carries along without knowing clearly what it should do with it: even the worst composer of random music needs Baroque music in order to assert his own identity. Otherwise he would be nobody and nothing.

most developed and most bureaucratic countries the connection between architecture and techno-structure seems to be a guarantee against all too radical aesthetic and social intervention; just as the cynical standpoint involves a succession of fashions, the replacement of Post-Modernism by high-tech with a little bit of cultural sauce carries no risk at all. And yet, by paying attention to such risks in this essay, it has been our intention to shift the perspective and to make a number of openings.

To shift the perspective is also for us a return to the historical, but by this we do not mean a propaganda machine focused, as in the Renaissance, on traditions which can be identified with the straightjacket of a shaken moral order. What we envisage is a return to a knowledge of the connections between architecture and society; not in the sense that Arnold Hauser gave to this, but rather in the way that Pierre Francastel has sketched it.

In this way we hope to recover something of the past that is still rooted in the memory of those who are the users of buildings and who realise that there is no such thing as a modernity without its subjects; and that this subject of aesthetics, which must govern the power of judgement, is slowly but surely becoming detached from the deceit of the media and, swimming against the stream, is rediscovering its true sources.?



PARIS

BERCY ET LES FINANCES

Paul Chemetov and Borja Huidobro, Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances, Paris, 1988



Dominique Perrault, Très Grande Bibliothèque, competition entry, Paris, 1989

The Invisible Rule

Rules – which enable architectural judgement and thus a choice to be made – do exist and are based on aesthetic criteria; but they no longer have a legitimacy, at least in the world of the profession itself which has always leaned on the same rules in order to ensure its power! However, that lack of judgemental capacities is only to be found within the profession. Behold an interesting paradox, not on the part of the architects who, by dismantling the Academy, have sawn off the branch they were sitting on, but because this dismantling has in fact not been complete: it leaves a large area of questions and contradictions open within the profession, the Bofill phenomenon being good evidence of this. We can also visit Tokyo in order to observe that behind a few 'stars' who carry out their publicity campaigns in Europe there exist qualified architects with projects that would not have been rejected by the Prix de Rome jury in pre-war France. The paradox is that this domain, dominated as it is by the rule and even by a certain academicism, is not only a concession to the clientele left behind; it is an *internal* paradox: the same architects who produce so-called pure spaces for the propertyless classes and who nowadays think of filling these spaces with Post-Modern transparency, turn out in private to be 'normal' citizens able to take care of their own spaces with common sense. Very revealing in this respect was a special issue of *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* devoted to the houses architects live in. Essentially, what this issue

Bernard Huet, rehabilitation Place de Stalingrad and Rotonde de la Villette, Paris, 1988



Charles Vandenhove, social housing 'De Liefde', Amsterdam, 1993





Yoshikuni Kamichika, Takekuni Ikeda, Sliman Herweijer, Pieter Bakker, Ted van Keulen, Jan Heeling,
Fred Hofman, Simon Levie, City Huis Ten Bosch, Holland Village, Nagasaki, 1992

showed was that hiding behind the representatives of established Modernism was often the amiable simplicity of ordinary daily life. The reader might well think that this is quite a normal thing: the commission is one thing and the architect's own house another. But can you imagine Michelangelo decorating his private quarters with Madonna's by Raphael? Where is the artist and where is the Art? But we do not want to show the architect-technocrat by means of his inconsistencies; what interests us is the way the architect's contradictions are connected with an aesthetic consensus which is much stronger and more important than he himself can imagine. Le Corbusier, with his diabolical media dexterity, thought he could make use of this inconsistency by calling out to his opponents, 'We are the new Classics!' He forgot that the Classicism prize is only awarded after at least two centuries. He didn't think of this because, for the sake of the purists, he added that genuine, original Classicism can appear in the guise of barbarity. And even to this day the Parthenon is sometimes kept in a number of French Academies wrapped up in a shoebox in order to certify the Modern Movement.

Nowadays computers have taught us that everything can be transformed into everything: the Empire State Building into a pencil, for example, or the Temple of Angkor into an Oldsmobile; which proves absolutely nothing. The invisible rule is elsewhere, not in the showing off of computers; the invisible rule is the survival, for both the public and the technocrats, of the principles that ensure that an object is made by art, for art and, besides a good deal of other judgements, demands an aesthetic judgement.?

Architectures and their domains

Nature and pseudo-nature The natural art of building did not arise from nature. It arose from the real or imaginary overpowering of natural objects (caves, crystals, vaults); it can therefore only emerge from a deliberate will to create one's own domain. Some mistakenly see this as part of human nature, which is totally fanciful (or rather erroneous) since this overpowering has to do with culture and is in no way indebted to an anthropological deduction, to man in his natural state or to cave dwellers. That is why it is also misleading when Heidegger makes his Temple arise from a landscape.

380 **Rules – which enable architectural judgement and thus a choice to be made – do exist and are based on aesthetic criteria; but they longer have a legitimacy, at least in the world of the profession itself which has always leaned on the same rules in order to ensure its power.**

The Temple rises up from it, but it is not landscape, it sets itself *against* landscape: its intention is to infinitely expand the sacred and, as is often said, to erase Nature. But this does not mean to say that people do not recreate it. That's why Le Corbusier is ecstatic about crystals and why we stupidly continue to admire his glass vaults, these insignificant objects, reflections of... nothing.

Metaphor as criticism In my opinion the best analysis of this has been provided by Tafuri: because of its metaphorical potential architecture is becoming a domain of criticism. Tafuri has demonstrated this as far as the Post-Modern derailment of the Baroque goes; but the same could just as well be said of an architect like Venturi, whose work made Post-Modernism accepted. On rereading *Contradiction and Complexity in Architecture* (1966) one notices that a domain of architecture is formed in connection with the incapacity of the Modern Movement to express anything other than its own modernity.

But in itself a metaphorical building is not architecture; otherwise a shoe enlarged 100 times as a sign-board would also be architecture. At a certain moment then it should be obvious that metaphorical architecture does nothing other than derive its rules from something else: in the most favourable case – that of Bofill – it is a question of referring to another architecture, a solution that obviously refers to History.

Rule and its residue The best that can be said about the Rule is that it defines Art and offers a protection both to the client, who is assured of orderly work, and to the Artist, who is formed according to the rules, applies them, and thus finds protection in his own profession on account of the fact that he is schooled in the Rule. The work of J.P. Epron has shown how important it is not to confuse the Rule with Academicism, as the followers of the Modern Movement attempted to do.?

? You make it seem as though, on the subject of the beautiful and the ugly, there still exists a province of irreducible, always present experience of beauty. But how can you maintain this view after 15 years of architectural Post-Modernism, neo-Classicism and the semiotics of architecture? Besides the technologisation of architecture, we've also had its semiologisation. What leads you to think that there's still something behind it, now that the relationship between substance and sign has been broken so ceremoniously?

! Take a look at Marion Segaud's essay *Pour une Sociologie du Goût en Architecture* (Paris 1989). This dissertation, and the research accompanying it, makes it clear that the concepts of 'Beautiful' and 'Ugly' still continue to function, albeit 'in the background' (which does not mean that they are eternal). As far as 'Beautiful' and 'Ugly' go as essences, this is something that metaphysicians, philosophers, sociologists and psychologists have attempted, more or less in vain, to shed light upon; next in line are the neurologists. But we won't have to wait very long for that, if we read J.C. Changeux's very intelligent essay introducing the catalogue for the Meaux exhibition. Let me repeat: the permanence of 'Beautiful' and 'Ugly' is beyond doubt; where they come from is another question...

? The specificity of architecture you are advocating with respect to its Rule can perhaps contribute to an improvement in the quality of our built environment. But at the same time architecture is then able to protect itself improperly from the process of modernity that has inflated that rule. You cannot dispose of the deconditioning strategies of Modernism as an aberration. There was also an historical fatefulness connected with it. How can you reintroduce the rule, without the risk of historical regression?

! As you know, the Modern is a relative quality: for the Baroque period 'modern' meant respect for the Rule; for Apollinaire, Christ was 'more modern than the Eiffel Tower'. In short, whoever cuts himself off from Modernity lays the basis for a new modernity. Whichever way you look at it. For Jacques Lucan for example, 'modern' is simply what's printed in the newspapers. It's not something we have to worry about very much.

? It is striking that both you and Venturi, on the basis of a completely different understanding of quality and the essence of architecture, think you know 'what the public wants', or, as the case may be, suffers. You surely have your sources for your list of the public's wants. Why do these not correspond to Venturi's?

! Venturi has made himself useful by leaving simplists like Mies and Corbu to their cubes, their four functions, their 'less is more'. As to what the public wants, we just have to ask them. This is what Marion Segaud analyses in her thesis, which is precisely about the 'public'. For that matter, all historical research into architecture should likewise consider the public. Why do you think that architecture was dominated by such a consensus in the Baroque period? There is a similar consensus today; it's just that modern architects are unable to articulate it. To use a big word, I think Venturi's Baroque is a diversion from contemporary Modernity, just as the Baroque of the Jesuits of Perugia is a diversion from the Gesù church in Rome. And that's no small a compliment.

The Rule is anchored in History; since the Renaissance it has been passed on orally in the fraternity of construction workshops. I think it is appropriate to distinguish between Rule and Doctrine: the Doctrine is the face, the proclamation of the Rule. The Rule is mainly laid down in negative examples ('do not do this') of the sort that we find with Philibert Delorme and which do not lend themselves to systematic prescriptions. Of course architectural doctrine encompasses the Rule, but in so doing it masks it so that it becomes difficult to analyse it in *opus operatum* and *modus operandi*: in an understandable pursuit of essentiality it often refers to a transcendence (particularly in the case of Philarete) or to a human measure (as with Alberti), while on the other hand Philibert Delorme's *The Art of Building* is more a collection of practical advice.

What we are left with, then, is that the considerations of architects bear as little witness these days to the existence of rules as do the views of architectural critics. Such rules nevertheless lie at the bottom of an architecture that would like to be subordinate to public judgement, instead of being satisfied with the nihil obstat of technocrats and contractors. Well then, the principles enabling judgements to be made do still exist in this public that is so disparaged:

- Symmetry as the organising principle of a building, which means not a total, but precisely a moderate symmetry, in other words one that rhymes with its surroundings.
- A building must have a beginning and an end, particularly when it is part of an urban complex.
- Without a well-defined accord between street and the pattern of moulding one lapses into a sort of 'natural architecture', in other words into nothingness. What this means is if there is no rule making the building height subservient to the possibilities of recognising architectural meanings, one ends up in imperceptibility, that is to say, in nothingness. Then the door to Venturi lies open: let's give skyscrapers skirts.
- Finally, and this is most important for the public, architecture is also the art of making the whole and the parts of a building mean something. Modern architecture has become incapable of looking for this and of grasping and communicating the sense of a building.?

What we are left with, is that the considerations of architects bear as little witness these days to the existence of rules as do the views of architectural critics. Such rules nevertheless lie at the bottom of an architecture that would like to be subordinate to public judgement, instead of being satisfied with the nihil obstat of technocrats and contractors.

381

? What do you think of the idea that the reduction of aesthetic satisfaction to the level of a picture postcard collection is a clear signal of the way involvement in the environment has been reduced to the tourist gaze, which concentrates on those very monumental 'punchy operations' that Bernard Huet talks about, and forgets what the relationship had once been between the two mastodons of urbanity and the landscape. Or should we regard the one just as much as the other as surrogates, which would then prove your assumptions of an immanent norm?

! This idea of yours is certainly a result of the hyper-elliptical nature and obscurity of Prof. Raymond. Of course you cannot equate the effect of categories of beauty with choosing postcards. Just look at home furnishings stores: there you see that people constantly follow these categories when it comes to their own home. You don't think, do you, that people buy curtains without thinking of Beauty?

Basically, the idea we stand for is as follows: unlike the plastic arts, modern architecture does not have the possibility of betting on the disappearance of aesthetic judgement; this is always present with the public and it is from this minimum that the guarantees have to come against the disasters described by Manfredo Tafuri and Bernard Huet.

Cynicism in Architecture and what comes Afterwards

Architecture in France has fallen into the hands of bureaucrats. Their simple and poorly informed idea is that this confiscation has happened for the benefit of a public that is still dumb and that will gradually gain access to happiness through information provided by the media. But we have strong doubts about whether architecture contributes to happiness – it is not its task and it is completely incapable of developing plans for this. Architectural cynicism is collapsing by itself in Vaux en Velin, just as it has collapsed in Briey or in La Courneuve. Architecture as social planning has as little sense today as 'scientific socialism'. It is a pity, but that's simply how it is. As regards the practice of aesthetic judgement we have to acknowledge that this takes place nowadays on a pile of rubble even worse than the most brutal eclecticism. One could begin to despair, but the sale of millions of picture postcards makes us confident that, far beyond this chaos, a latent order lies in wait. It needs time, a lot of time.?