



History of Modern Architecture Revisited

Karla Britton

Reviewed: Jean-Louis Cohen. 2012. *The Future of Architecture. Since 1889*, London and New York: Phaidon Press.

The latest work by Jean-Louis Cohen is an original contribution to the history of modern architecture. His fresh approach brings together a variety of issues seldom studied until recently, such as the importance of images and the role of colonization.

Grasping the History...

In this commandingly written and richly illustrated new book, Jean-Louis Cohen presents a comprehensive history of twentieth-century architecture that encourages a wide audience to reflect on the built environment as a primary locus for the transformation of the world's cultural terrain through the experience of modernization. The book is built around a panoramic framework of 35 chapters, each dealing with a particular tension within modern architecture's cultural evolution. *The Future of Architecture's* taxonomy thereby draws out the competing forces of cultural production in the twentieth century, extrapolating their impact into the immediate future. In this manner, it calls attention to what Cohen posits as a key unifying theme: the "slow, cumulative, and irresistible process" that is the ineluctable thrust of modernization itself.

As a combination of the author's wide-ranging historical perspective and sharp critical insight, the book ranges across a variety of themes that identify and then draw conclusions from the relationship of architecture to the major political and economic trends in the metropolitan West. Among the extraordinarily diverse topics that are treated in the book are the rapid technological and social changes of the twentieth century (more jarring than in any previous century); the building boom in New York during the 1920s; avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and De Stijl; the political consequences of the New Deal; the rise of Italian Fascism; the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European communist states; trends in architectural education; the pluralities of Postmodernism; and the surprising bi-directionality in urban planning practices in cities of Latin America, India, and North Africa.

There are, of course, particular risks that the historian faces in taking on the task of writing such an ambitious exploration of the large-scale transitions in the built environment since 1889 – risks that Cohen is willing to take and capable of overcoming. To write on such dramatic transformations inevitably requires synthesizing opposing historical readings, as well as addressing connections between buildings and other fields of inquiry such as art, technology, literature, cinema, and critical theory. Moreover, for Cohen, architecture is both a means of creative discovery as well as a reflection of the problems of historical experience, and so he is quite overt in his conviction that architecture is by nature open-ended and indeterminate. Such tensions are underscored in the almost

poetic inevitability of the title of the book – whose enigmatic syntax and punctuation immediately signal that, Janus-like, architecture simultaneously both looks forward toward constructing the future and at the same time is concerned with carrying forward the influence of the past.

... to Deal with New Issues

More emphatically than other histories of twentieth-century architecture, Cohen's book underscores the point that modernization is not inextricably tied to the *novita*, or the *new*, as an end in itself. In the manner of Eric Hobsbawm or Terence Ranger, Cohen is concerned with the study of "invented tradition" – what Edward Said described as "those modern formations that are part fantasy, part political exigency, part power-play". The book thereby moves beyond any simple ideological battlegrounds between tradition and modernism, and so not only treats the *incontestable masters* of architecture but also has a recuperative regard for the generative influence of Classicism and its relation to Modernization. These are factors that have often been ignored in historical accounts more preoccupied with the avant-garde as the generator of new ideas and forms, and Cohen does the historiography of architecture a great service in reasserting them. As one example, Cohen underscores the seminal influence of the French architect Auguste Perret (1874–1954), who served as an apologist for a modernism shaped by the rational forces and historical consciousness of longer strands of a classically based cultural tradition.

Another dimension of the book that demonstrates its cultural and intellectual breadth is its concern for the importance of the *image* as a force for the dissemination of architectural ideas on a worldwide scale. Almost as important as built works themselves, the manner of their presentation and representation both visually and theoretically is especially influential in an increasingly media-dominated environment. Cohen has a particular appreciation for the cultural and political impact of the image in setting forth the "symbolic capital" of the architect's idea of what lies behind what he or she proposes through design. With the same intentionality with which he presents actual buildings, therefore, Cohen records significant events, or notices what the art of photography reveals about a particular building, or calls attention to the contributions of a variety of other media – all by way of showing how the image imprints its subject on the collective architectural mind for future recall. The image thereby becomes an observational filter through which the idea of a work is interpreted and understood, governing the process of its *reception* into that evolving cultural repository that Cohen is at pains to document.

A particularly important dimension of the book's intellectual apparatus is its attention to the processes by which the concept of modernization was deployed architecturally on a worldwide scale. Cohen's deliberate concern for the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized is expressed through his metaphor of "the carousel of hegemonies". Through this image, he explores how porous the societies on both sides of the imperial relationship were to influences from the other, particularly through the global triumph of urbanism, the consolidation of capitalism, and the spread of the powerful nation-state. In particular, Cohen calls attention to the enormous growth in the number and importance of intellectuals and their impact on the shaping of contexts outside of Europe, underscoring what Fanon said about how "the entire Third World went into the making of Europe".

Cohen is quite explicit that he himself is a legatee of a tradition of writing on architecture mapped by scholars such as Sigfried Giedion, Manfredo Tafuri, and Kenneth Frampton. In many ways, one might regard this new book as representing a pinnacle of historical writing on architecture to date – the book is a redoubtable documentation of projects and practitioners, of buildings and their documentation. Yet after the measured progress of *The Future of Architecture's* exploration of the disruptions and continuities of modernization, the author's conclusion – which is a more deliberately polemical and demystifying account of the current state of the architectural discipline – is in many ways surprisingly trenchant. Entitled "Vanishing Points", this section observes, on the one hand, such contemporary trends as a turn away from modernism's characteristic concern for

social reform and the needs of the underclass; a self-congratulatory atmosphere in the academy; and an ironic creation of generic, banal space by the proliferation of singular, “original” architectural forms. Yet, on the other hand, Cohen also sees more compelling contributions in the work of landscape architects, and in the emerging concern for sustainable forms of building. Given Cohen’s intentionally and aptly disturbing endpoint, however, one is left wondering if his longer reading of the “future of architecture” has been more tendentious than one might first have suspected.

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