

REVIEW

Narratives of Modern Architecture as One. A Review of *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889*

The Future of Architecture: Since 1889, Jean-Louis Cohen, London: Phaidon, 2012,
528 pages, 300 color and 300 b/w illustrations, ISBN: 9780714845982

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Writing “histories” of architecture has become a daunting task these days. The information made available by countless books, articles, dissertations and exhibitions has rendered the historian’s mission increasingly problematic, owing to the difficulty in covering the available knowledge and in organizing it under the form of a coherent narrative. These complications are particularly evident in the new wave of “global histories” that came to the fore during the last 10-15 years, volumes whose chronologies are often challenged by the non-linearity of world-wide historical events; but they are equally apparent in texts aimed at exploring the architecture of the 20th century, where the multiplication of actors, events and geographical settings is even further magnified. Few others authors could have embarked on such a venture as Jean-Louis Cohen, a historian with an extensive experience as an educator, researcher and curator and with an uncommon mastery of languages. Drawing from his wide familiarity with subjects as diverse as Le Corbusier, Soviet Russia, the architecture in the colonies, Americanization, or the Second World War, Cohen has written a book, *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889*, which aims to offer an answer to all these questions.

Composed of thirty chapters and illustrated by almost 600 illustrations (with a rather schematic bibliography at the end), *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889* departs from familiar themes, such as the introduction of innovative technological systems (steel and reinforced concrete). It then moves to analyze the interconnection of architecture with early 20th-century avant-garde movements, the effects produced on design practices by the diffusion of mass production, the increased importance acquired by the metropolitan milieu (with the consequences on housing policies), the consolidation of modern design during the 1920s and 1930s and the resistance it faced. In its central part, the book looks at the attempts made during the postwar years at reconsidering prewar ideas of modernism, the international circulation of architectural models determined by the consolidation of American and

Soviet cultural hegemony during the Cold War, and the burgeoning of disparate attitudes and tendencies in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Finally, the volume closes with a reflection on the renewed (and somewhat contradictory) optimism for technology that has marked the last two decades and with an overview of the present condition of architecture.

As it is the case for any other book that in the past has been devoted to the subject, *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889* is forced to confront the uncertainty of the chronological boundaries of its own account. Recognizing the limits of “the very delimitation ‘twentieth century’”, the volume appropriately accepts a perspective that includes antecedents and codas, one that, somewhat ironically, transforms what Eric Hobsbawm famously termed the “short century” into a long chain of events. Adopting the Universal Exhibition that took place in Paris in 1889 as a symbolic starting point, Cohen identifies a number of phenomena that instigated change: the convergence of industrialization and urbanization, the rise of social democracy, the emergence of the social sciences, as well as the increased dissemination of design culture and the expansion (both materially and culturally) of its potential audience and base of users. At stake, of course, is what “modern” has come to mean in the architectural discourse. Breaking away, as it might be expected, from notions based almost exclusively on form and style, Cohen embraces a broad definition of “modernity” that – in his words – “cannot be reduced to the fetish of ‘novitas’, of the new for newness’s sake”: a strategy that is intended to place the reader in the condition to fathom the relationship between events – theories, projects, plans, and buildings – and to recognize the interlacement of factors that determined the evolution of the last 120 years of architecture.

Once again, the question of the concatenation of diverse historical episodes brings back the problem of chronology and the complication of composing a “tale” with often diverging developments. Cohen overtly borrows Fernand Braudel’s concept of multiple temporalities – which the French historian applied to the study of the Mediterranean basin – to operate an analysis of buildings

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and projects based on the notion of “stylistic co-existence”, supplying a tool to recognize areas or times characterized by coincidences of attitudes or by intersections leading to hybridization or compromise. Albeit at various degree effective, this approach has the merit of regrouping the narrative, giving the text a coherence and fluidity that is indispensable to a volume that aims at a “synthetic” view of the architectural history of a given period. Ultimately, Cohen tries to use architecture as the evidence of wider phenomena, steering his writing towards an examination of formal change as one possible by-product of social and technological modernization.

The lines of investigation that *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889* follows are multiple. Building a discourse that avoids the “epic” tale (as it makes explicit since its introduction), the book primarily tries to defy the idea of an un-contrasted rise of modernism during the first half of the 20th century: Cohen prefers to address his attention towards the frictions emerging from the encounter of different architectural experiences rather than pursuing the archetype of an apparent and flawless continuity. More significantly, the volume takes into account themes and subjects whose importance has been unveiled only through the process of historiographical reorientation that has taken place in recent years. Among them are the forced migrations – and the consequent diaspora of architects – of the first half of the century, a phenomenon that propelled the process of urbanization in a number of countries within and outside of Europe and that contributed to redesign the international geography of the architectural debate; or the establishment of close bi-lateral relations between specific architectural cultures – such as those that developed between Germany and Soviet Russia or Germany and Turkey during the 1920s and 1930s – that favored the circulation of information and the renovation of design practices.

The book also includes architects, movements and contexts hardly considered in previous “histories”. For example, *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889* addresses the modernist tendencies that developed in the interwar period in several East European countries, in places like Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and the Balkans; the rapid renewal of architectural languages that took place in Spain before the advent of the Francoist regime; and the experiences in design and planning in the colonies or in nations as diverse as Turkey, Iran and China. The years of the Second World War are the subject of an entire chapter; the description of the Reconstruction and the 1950s is so broad as to embrace continental Europe, the British Isles, Scandinavia, North America, the Soviet Block, North Africa, India and Japan. The various design outcomes of the alternative culture of the 1960s and 1970s are discussed in the book’s second part; last but not least, the conclusion gives due emphasis to contemporary architecture’s problematic relation to the natural and built environment. As said, this is possible thanks to the author’s past involvement in sophisticated research and scholarly endeavors and to his familiarity with several languages other than English:

the account of Russia and other Slavic countries is often “first-hand” while the description of Latin American architecture incorporates information that emerged from the work of a new generation of scholars who operate in Spanish and Portuguese.

The Future of Architecture: Since 1889 has its own shortcomings. If Cohen has succeeded to build up a coherent narrative that avoids the tropes of too many existing “histories”, several problems linger partially unresolved. America still gives the impression of remaining at times a separate tale; Louis Kahn’s apparent “solitude” – so often encountered in many other volumes on 20th-century architecture – is still in part unchallenged. One could also add that nothing is said about the role played by private collectors and, in general, by the art world in explaining the success of American avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s. But these are minor points of oversight. Works whose goal is to condense more than one hundred years of architectural history, as it is the case of *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889*, are predictably deemed to be criticized for their inevitable omissions. Much more consistent is the kind of criticism – elsewhere addressed – that emphasizes the book’s inability to consider architecture as a phenomenon that encompasses the history of the built environment as a whole and that is not limited to a few leading figures of designers and major media-attracting realizations.

This objection is indeed pertinent. Traditional “histories” do not fare well when they are called to look outside the realm of well-established narratives. This problem is even more evident today, in an age characterized by a kaleidoscopic intertwinement of phenomena related to architecture and urbanism. Tales that place an accent on master architects and individual monuments not only implicitly support the idea of a deterministic relation between architecture and “will to form”: they are also unable to document the processes of rampant urbanization occurring outside Europe and North America, to respond to the relative marginality of architectural culture in the shaping of the built environment, to take into account the gender divide typical of the professional world, and to give “voice” to (only apparently) marginal social actors.

In spite of their limits, however, books like *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889* retain their importance because of the purpose they serve: we need to remember, in fact, for what and for whom these volumes are written. Their core readership is formed in large part by students in architecture or liberal arts who require an introduction to the history of architecture, to the practice of architectural design and, in general, to the observation of the built environment. For this particular audience, these works provide an indispensable pedagogical tool for an informed study of the discipline, since alternative approaches to the teaching of architectural history have rarely proved to be effective inside a classroom. Moreover, they expose readers to basic concepts and principles, highlighting the relation between architecture and historical events and

educating to “see” buildings regardless of their supposed formal and technical “quality”. In this respect, it does not matter whether one takes into consideration Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye or the unattractive construction across the street that students can spot from their college or university’s windows: the former pretty much helps looking at the latter with a critical stance.

All in all, the strength of *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889* consists exactly in its willingness to engage in a highly problematical exercise. While imperfect, limited

or even incomplete, “histories” of architecture remain necessary, if we still believe in the centrality of culture in the pedagogical process. *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889* offers an effective and constructive synthesis, one that can be successfully used by educators to complement their teaching. It is no small thing, given the tendency towards the fragmentation of the historical discourse that derives from today’s multiplication of voices and contributors.

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