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Modern Design:
Social Commitment
& Quality of Life

Proceedings

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Modern Design: Social Commitment & Quality of Life

Editors

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6-9 September 2022

Universitat Politècnica de València, Valencia

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S02

A Century of Revolutions and Revolutionists

Andrea Canziani

DOCOMOMO INTERNATIONAL SPECIALIST COMMITTEE EDUCATION + TRAINING, CO-CHAIR.
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Architects, even the most revolutionary, have always needed a past to have something to distance themselves from.

Revolutionists, even architects, have always needed memory, to be sure not to retrace a revolution that had already failed in another time.

The twentieth century was a century of revolutions and revolutionists.

In architecture, the modernity of the twentieth century was born with the second industrial revolution and its social and aesthetic avant-garde was based on technology and new materials.

The rational objectivity of new technology, with the promise of infinite resources and new materials, opposed continuity, tradition and nature. It was the tool for a new architecture, able to realise a new *kunstwollen*, of which a deep sense of social responsibility was part.

Efficiency, functionality and rationality became the tools to correct the inequalities of the past and the errors of the first wild development of the industrial revolution and to give everyone functional homes, light, air and green spaces.

Actually the avant-gardist program never really came into effect (Magnago Lampugnani 2008), but the integration of technological knowledge and the arts, aimed to a unity exemplarily represented in the Bauhaus program, was the answer to the awareness of the modern world's growing complexity, that can no longer be managed without collaboration between disciplines.

Together with a new perception of the world, a new aesthetic was born, and if today we find the Van Nelle Factory or the Eiffel Tower beautiful – as Herman

Hertzberger said (2002, p. 42) – it is because our perception was gradually changed by the new ideas that these buildings expressed.

It was a permanent revolution, like the political ones that characterised the twentieth century, both proclaiming that Utopia was finally achievable, here and now.

Somehow, this is a very representative description of the last century, because “permanent” is something that lasts over time, associated with the idea of some stable availability, as well as the pure and simple dimension of duration and it is of course ontologically opposed to “revolution” as a sudden, radical, complete change. In “Back from Utopia” Hilde Heynen (2002, p. 383) argues that one of the most important lessons of modernity was the ability to criticise the *status quo* and the courage to imagine a better world and start building it. There is a very strong political message in the idea of architecture as democracy and essentiality and as a means of redistributing resources. That agenda made up of equality and quality of life still remains a reference, taken up in fact by many contemporary trends.

Today the revolution of the Modern belongs to the past. There is no longer any utopia out there.

The twentieth century saw the rise of the Modern Movement, its affirmation and its becoming just a style. And then its defeat, its contestation, the attempts to overcome it and the drama of managing its ruins. The same errors and inequalities from which it started have often been its very outcome.

In front of us there are no more avant-gardes, but archaeologies of the Modern, which are irreplaceable archives of memory and raise difficult questions of interpretation and conservation. For example, we have lost the belief that architecture and urban planning can solve social problems by themselves. Indeed, we have become aware that sometimes they are the very cause of those problems.

It would be a mistake, however, to reduce the legacy of the twentieth century to its conceptual achievements or its intangible values.

The physical presence, at the same time tactile and conceptual, of the architectures and landscapes of the modernity is essential and cannot be reduced to the mere preservation of the most iconic ones. John Ruskin said that architecture is the place of memory, a social memory that is more faithful than any text. We can live without her, but we can't remember without her. If an architecture disappears, what we lose is the possibility of renewing the stories of which it was an expression. There can therefore be no greater betrayal than thinking of resurrecting consciousness and knowledge by restoring an image. The world that produced the Esprit Nouveau Pavilion or the Bauhaus is as unreproducible as the one that informed the construction of Versailles. It is essential to be aware that our beloved modern monuments belong to a distant time in terms of culture, context and meaning. They belong to the past and this allows and obliges us to add and to keep the traces of the

time with its many scars, or we will have nothing to show by saying: "I come from there". These traces are not an eternal present, but rather a monument in the very etymological sense of warning, of remembrance. We have overcome – or at least we should – the fascination with the blank slate. We understand that Modernity can forget and has sharp tools to do so by erasing entire scenarios, but it can also remember.

At the same time, we cannot think of keeping everything from the century that has built more than all the others put together. A dilemma that troubles more and more the survival of the legacy of the modern architecture is precisely its quantitative and temporal expansion. The problem is obviously not that of selection or rankings of importance, which are meaningless because any new historiographical reconsideration would rightly call them into question, but that of developing the idea of sensitive and sensible changes, or better said: evolution.

For example, it is foolish to think that the achievements of modern architecture have no quality to communicate and, victims of the rapid obsolescence of their own century, are inadequate for the functions of contemporary life. The quality of these architectures simply disappears because they are become illegible by the incomprehension of their own inhabitants. Recognising with Gillo Dorfles a real wear of shapes and images, today's user is not so different from the user for whom they were carefully designed and made: "It is a mistake not to give the desired importance to some of the dominant factors in the current artistic situation such as: the rapidity of consumption, obsolescence (ageing) and the wear of forms and images, the symbolic value of these forms and, finally, the growing importance of kinetic stresses and in general of the 'sense of movement' in the determination of artistic forms and in the conditioning of human behaviour"(2009, p. 23).

Perhaps we would be surprised to discover that even today – in terms of physical, cultural and aesthetic performance – there are spaces for living that are more advanced than imagined; while the technological challenge has shifted to completely different fields: from the tangible materials to the intangible digital services.

Yet the commitment of the Modern towards change, new and transience, seems to have anticipated a fundamental teaching for our liquid society (Baumann, 2000), where change is a dominant and constitutive character. From the ability of the Modern to contaminate knowledge we draw on something essential for understanding this present day. Perhaps we don't really have a new Modern, even though we have a new society. Maybe we have never been modern, as Bruno Latour would tell us (1991), but for sure we have the capacity of memory to be revolutionary.

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