Scholarship or Politics?
Architectural History and the Risks of Autonomy

JEAN-LOUIS COHEN
Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

My title is a parody the all too famous finale of Le Corbusier's 1923 book *Vers une architecture*: "architecture or revolution? Revolution can be avoided." This conservative position was in a certain manner turned around by my generation of intellectuals exactly forty years ago: "architecture or revolution? Architecture can be avoided" was an attitude shared by many young professionals and students.

Four decades ago, 1968 was a challenge to established institutions, such as the 150-year-old Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, as well as more modern ones, such as the Milan Triennale, closed within hours of its opening in May of that year. Among the many slogans designed by architects and seen on the walls of Paris, one proclaimed: "no to shanty-towns, no to phony towns," rejecting simultaneously the misery of immigrant housing and the technocratic solutions represented by the new towns then planned for the outskirts of the metropolis. Interestingly, the practice of architectural history was almost as shaken by events that took place around the world as professional practice would be. No historian dared to say "history or revolution? History can be avoided," but research strategies were completely reshaped by the new awareness that the practice of historical research and its institutions were inscribed in the political field.

In reading some recent dissertations in architectural history I have had the feeling that their authors self-consciously erased the political dimension of their work, as if they were embarrassed to take it into account. This attitude was particularly surprising, perhaps even shocking, when dealing with works or conjunctures in which architecture and politics were intimately intertwined. Insisting on the role of politics, it struck to me, would have led these young scholars to subscribe to the theoretical model of historians trained in the 1960s and 1970s, whereas they were precisely trying, consciously or not, to break with it. An example of this surprising elision of the political dimension is the recent research on Manfredo Tafuri. In the context of an academic recuperation ten years after his death, as if such a delay had been necessary in order to "digest" his troubling legacy, the recent scholarship erases Tafuri's civic commitment, which was so central in most of his scholarly projects.

It is not difficult to perceive the biases that have characterized my generation—the generation of '68. The acute awareness of the political character of architecture, and hence of the history of the discipline, led to outbursts of populism in the celebration of the vernacular. And my own choice to become an architect engaged in historical research and criticism, rather than in design, led me to consider questions about the articulation of space and politics. I sometimes have the feeling that the insistent depoliticization we are witnessing today is nothing but a reaction to the overpoliticization of the late 1960s. (It should be noted that a reluctance to face political issues is not the only legacy of 1968 and that some forms of overpoliticization not only survive, but also sometimes reappear, in neo-Marxist or neo-Foucaultian interpretations: the return of the repressed, in a certain manner.)

It can be disputed at any rate whether both the practice of architectural history (a term to discuss in itself in its relationships with history at large) and its institutions are inscribed in the political field—in politics as well as in policies. I am by no means limiting this field to state politics or policies. The political field includes the question of the state and its institutions, but also questions of national, regional, and supernational formations, social classes and political parties, churches, doctrines, and beliefs or "ideologies." At the risk of being somewhat superficial, I propose to differentiate several configurations of politics and the history of architecture.

Engaged Historians

The first configuration deals with the integration of the political dimension in the interpretation of patronage and of the consumption of buildings by their initial clients and their end users. At stake here is the analysis of connections between political ideologies and positions on one side, and architectural strategies on the other. In this formation, the

325

historical study of architecture is a component of politics, thanks to the construction of knowledge and discourse.

The second configuration deals with the use of architectural history by politicians and political forces. Without exaggerating their meaning, measured against the great myths on which the policies of states are built, the narratives of architectural history are used in the political field, where other types of narratives are more likely to be censored or severely repressed. Such was the case of the architecture of the 1920s avant-garde in Russia from the late 1930s to the 1960s. And some narratives can be seen with suspicion, as was the case for all the episodes of the Nazi period in Germany, without much differentiation, until almost the 1990s. Institutions, which produce or disseminate these narratives, can also be subject to constraints and forced inflections. Research itself is by no means immune to these pressures and can in some cases participate in oppression or contribute to dissidence, if not to resistance.

If we consider one of the world's most troubled areas, Israel and Palestine, it is revealing to measure the distance existing between various types of investigations. The celebration of experimental modernism as the quasi founding language of the "White City" of Tel Aviv has been the goal of many competent historical narratives. But only very few of them have ever documented the fact that the new town was not built on virgin or empty land, but on a historically developed agricultural landscape, in opposition to the Zionist fiction of "a people without land meeting a land without people." It is also true that most post-1917 maps have systematically erased traces of previous land division and use, and sometimes of buildings. So, studies such as those on Patrick Geddes' 1925 plan for Tel Aviv have a critical force when they acknowledge Palestinian presence.

Historians and architects have also dealt with even more burning issues. With their 2002 book *A Civilian Occupation, the Politics of Israeli Architecture* and the eponymous exhibition, Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman have documented the process of occupation on the West Bank of the Jordan River and used an historical method to map explicitly the implicit strategy of panoptical control and land confiscation, and to describe the type of architecture shaped to give a sense of local identity to the colonists. This type of "hot" history is clearly engaged in today's politics, as is the case with postcolonial studies.

Research can also involve self-censorship in order to adjust to a particular political ideal at a given moment. What comes to mind is the suspicion met in the 1980s by scholars who were beginning to study the architecture of bourgeois domestic space in Paris, at a time when politically "correct" scholars were studying exclusively working-class housing,

preferably in the suburbs. This political bias was particularly unfortunate, as most working-class housing types were, for a long period of time, simplified derivations of bourgeois types or urban transcriptions of rural ones.

The direct use of historians by politicians is another configuration of architectural history and politics worth mentioning here. The engagement of historians such as Louis Hautecœur and to a certain extent Pierre Lavedan in the Vichy collaborationist administration—parallel to the one of Le Corbusier, but based on different motivations— can be interpreted as a desire to serve the country in a tragic moment, if one follows a representation then common that, against Germany, De Gaulle was the sword and Pétain the shield. But personal ambitions and desires of vengeance undoubtedly played a significant role.

There is also the direct involvement of historians in politics, exemplified by the engagement of many research assistants and junior faculty members of the Department of History at the Venice Istituto Universitario di Architettura in political life as elected members of municipal and regional assemblies in the early 1970s, during the years of Berlinguer's "Historical Compromise." There was the precedent of Bruno Zevi's Associazione per l'architettura organica in the mid-1940s, whose members ran for elected offices, and the present mayor of Venice, historian Massimo Cacciari, a philosopher teaching in the Department of History, has continued political and scholarly careers to this day. A certain form of reciprocal instrumentalization can be identified in these experiences. If politicians have "their" own historians and sometimes "their" own history, historians also have "their" own politicians, women or men with whom they establish alliances to develop projects, from research programs to exhibitions and publications, and to create scholarly institutions.

Interpreting Totalitarianism and Resistance

Political determinations of architecture culture have been the object of much research since the 1960s. Consider, for example, research on the three main totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century: Nazi, Italian fascist, and Soviet. A superficial definition of what might have been an architecture called "Nazi," "fascist," or "Stalinist," to take only the most obvious cases, has now been superseded by better documented and more nuanced studies, first of all thanks to the exploration of hitherto tightly closed archives. Interpretations shaped in the recent decades have been based on a careful reconstruction of the temporal structures in which these encounters have taken place, leading sometimes to entirely different diachronic divisions.

In this respect, it is now clear that, far from being completely banned in 1933, the design strategies of radical modernism prospered under Nazism, most notably in the spheres of industrial architecture and housing. This sometimes embarrassing continuity is represented in the personality of Ernst Neufert, the main collaborator of Albert Speer from 1938 to the end of the war. Neufert had been the head of Walter Gropius's office, most notably at the time of the construction of the Dessau Bauhaus. More globally, pre-Nazi positions centered on the value of traditional architecture, which were hegemonic within the movement for artistic reform and *Heimatschutz* before 1914, also survived into the early 1950s.

Dealing with Italian fascism, it is no longer valid to argue that the regime either systematically privileged neo-Roman monumentalism or, symmetrically, firmly encouraged modernism after the episode of Mussolini's support to Giovanni Michelucci's entry in the Florence station competition of 1931. What appears now as the most plausible interpretation is what I would call the reciprocal instrumentalization of certain circles of the regime by specific groups of architects. The lasting professional power of Marcello Piacentini, based on multiple levels of corruption, cannot be explained otherwise, and even less the troubling diversity of architectural production during the fascist *ventennio*. New studies, for instance those by Paolo Nicoloso, have also revealed how historians, in a certain manner, interiorized the ideological—if not propagandistic—representation of fascism as a unified, homogeneous body. The conflicts between hierarchs, between cultures, and also between the state and private agents, such as Olivetti, are better understood in their effects on patronage and criticism.

In the case of the Soviet Union, the image of violent repression of the constructivist avant-garde by the Communist Party's politics has now lost its appeal. Thanks to the work of scholars such as Hugh Hudson Jr. or Elisabeth Essaian, it is obvious now that rival factions within the modernist camp begged in the early 1930s for the arbitration of the party. One understands much more clearly the personal engagement of Stalin in a series of decisions dealing with Moscow, from the final layout of Boris Iofan's Palace of Soviets to the razing of the Sukharevskaia Tower, against a memorable petition of architects and historians. In parallel, the continuity of neoclassical culture in the work of Ivan Zholtovsky and in the context of Saint Petersburg, Petrograd, and Leningrad from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1950s becomes clearer. In this framework, the constructivist episode appears now as very tiny and most fragile.

History can sometimes also become a medium of dissidence, if not of resistance. During the 1930s, the study groups at Moscow's Academy of Architecture initiated a sort of interior exile by focusing on the work of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Auguste Choisy, and Leone Battista Alberti rather than on the more usable legacy of Andrea Palladio, and by avoiding the simplified adaptation of Leninist clichés to architecture.

Thirty years later, it was dangerous for a scholar to mention, let alone analyze, pre-Soviet modern architectural cultures in the Baltic or the Caucasian republics of a slowly dying Soviet Union, and resurrecting the saga of constructivism in Moscow was even riskier. Selim Khan-Magomedov, who had been the first historian to rehabilitate Konstantin Melnikov and Ivan Leonidov, had to change his dissertation topic in order to write on the popular architecture of Daghestan—by no mean an uninteresting topic, but one that was safely apolitical.

History as a Vehicle for Legitimacy

A common feature of the three main totalitarian regimes was their attempts at grounding their policies in glorious pasts. The construction of collective identities is based on shaping and using schemes of memory in which edifices and territories play an eminent role, thanks to their capacity to crystallize experience and create markers populations are able to perceive. Within this framework, architectural history has been mobilized in order to produce mythical narratives indispensable to policies of occupation or colonization, as well as to the policies of emancipation that have followed.

Focusing on borders as territories for observation is certainly of great interest for historians of politics or culture, and in the realm of architecture, many disputed territories offer stimulating areas of research, such as the boundaries between France and Italy, Italy and Austria, Mexico and the United States, or territories subject to imperial policies such as the ones lying between Austro-Hungary and Russia.

Hartmut Frank and I have monitored, if you will, the boundary between Germany and France. This thick and highly movable boundary is a linear assembly of territories that was called the "Spanish Road" at the time of the Renaissance, and could be brought even further back to Lotharingia, a state born out from the carving of Charlemagne's empire in the ninth century. The boundary has repeatedly changed following occupations and annexations between 1871 and 1955. In each phase of the troubled destiny of this region, architectural history has been more or less firmly "invited" to participate to the shaping of circumstantial myths and to their materialization in what I would call built fetishes. The Germans continuously studied

and celebrated the Strasburg cathedral and the landscape of Alsatian or Lorrain villages, organizing cleansing campaigns to "sweep out the French beret" and "*entwelschen*," or "de-Frenchize," the urban landscape, much as they did in occupied Poland. During the phases of Gallic hegemony, for instance after 1945, the study and celebration of traces of French-inspired classicism and the revival of the Revolution and the First Empire's attempt at creating monumental markers were significant components of the policies at work. In each phase, historical narratives tailored to the political designs of the moment were commissioned, supported, funded, published, and exhibited.

If we now move south to territories colonized by the French in Algeria and Morocco, to focus on areas with which I am most familiar, architectural history has continually been mobilized to justify and buttress governmental policies. Pioneering historical enquiries conducted by French archeologists and architectural historians in the mid-nineteenth century have supplied usable images and patterns for the policy of "arabisance" implemented at the turn of the twentieth century by Governor-General Jonnard in Algeria.

The building of the French Protectorate in Morocco by General Lyautey beginning in 1912 encouraged a similar wave of urban and architectural history. The notion of "protecting" existing cultures led to extremely refined investigations of domestic architecture and of urban culture in sophisticated cities such as Fès or Rabat, often performed by scholars who would embrace in later moments the cause of Moroccan independence.

In 1986, perhaps under the impact of postmodernism, but more probably moved by the desire to build monumental markers confirming the preeminence of his dynasty, the late Moroccan king Hassan II shaped a program of Marocanity, based on the revival of colonial neo-Moorish composition and modernized by the introduction of glazed surfaces. The astonishing modernist buildings of the period from 1920 to 1960 were officially considered for several decades as the very expression of colonization, and then condemned as highly incorrect politically, but they have now become acceptable. Yet despite the scholarly attention they have received, these building are all too often viewed exclusively according to formalist schemes of perception and labeled simply as "art deco," without being considered in the field of conflicts in which they have emerged.

Expiating Vandalism

One of the most acute points of encounter between architecture and politics is the question of the monument. Revolutions have often led to outbursts of vandalism, some-times followed by campaigns of preservation. The creation of Alexandre Lenoir's Musée des Monuments français in 1795 was nothing but a meager compensation for the loss of many structures such as the Cluny Abbey following the Revolution. Yet it carried forward not only the idea of the architectural museums, but also the paradigm of chronological organization of collections by centuries, which has been fundamental in the establishment of modern museum galleries. In post-Commune Paris after 1871, the Renaissance Tuileries were rebuildable, but the Third Republic refused to restore a symbol of absolutism. At the same time, the church of Paul Abadie on the top of Montmartre was built and interpreted as an expiation of the Commune, although the initial impulse predated the Commune.

Another example of revolutionary vandalism, one of many thousands in Russia, was the demolition of Konstantin Ton's Church of Christ Savior in 1931 to erect the Palace of Soviets, a technically unbuildable structure, and here, the post-Soviet symbolical expiation was to recreate the very building that had been erased. Unfortunately, in today's Moscow, the situation of radical buildings is more problematic. With constructivism reduced to pure signs—deprived of its initial utopian meaning—and rebuilt classicism, Stalinist kitsch has become a leading model. Modernism is marginalized.

In Berlin, the sense of the loss during World War II has led to an entire range of policies in which historians have been invited to participate. Erich Mendelsohn's Berliner Tageblatt building has been restored, as a symbol of Weimar's free press perhaps and an homage to the publisher Mosse. Inversely, restoring Paul Wallot's Reichstag cupola was perceived as a celebration of Wilhelmian and Nazi nationalism, and Norman Foster won a competition to crown the original building with a transparent roof meant to celebrate the new Berlin Republic.

Other buildings in Berlin prove more difficult to deal with. The ruling regime is now rebuilding the baroque palace that had been demolished in 1949 by the German Democratic Republic. This operation is fraught with many political meanings and compromised by incomplete archeological evidence. The same cannot be said of Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Bauakademie, also destroyed to give way to a mediocre ministry. The documentation of the building is better and its meaning is different as this institution was part of the enlightened policies of Prussia to train architects and craftspeople.

The Obligation of History

La Muette, the U-shaped housing project built in 1935 by Beaudouin, Lods, and Prouvé outside Paris, was perhaps the

most technologically advanced construction in all Europe at the time, with its steel skeleton and precast dry-mounted concrete panels. Remote and without connection to Paris, the project was to be inhabited by forced tenants—policemen and their families. Still empty in 1940, after the Nazi invasion the panoptically composed building became a transit camp in which one hundred thousand Jews were imprisoned on their way to the death camps. Exactly at this time, José Luis Sert illustrated La Muette as a sort of housing paradise in his book *Can Our Cities Survive?* (1942). What is the meaning of this place today? How can you research its history without taking into account the specific role that urban design and architecture have played in its destiny, and its change in a matter of years from a sort of healing heterotopia for workers to another heterotopia, a hellish one?

I would contrast what I call the obligation of history to the obligation of memory, which is so often invoked. In *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli* (*Memory, History, Forgetting*), philosopher Paul Ricœur considers memory as "the appropriate vis-à-vis of history." Against the frequent manipulations of memory, on which politics are often based, against mythologies, history is able to—and has to—shape verifiable knowledge, the only one capable of leading to strategies of conservation having some objectivity.

It seems logical to conclude by wondering what political mission can be assigned to architectural history in the first decade of the millennium. History is a method in the struggle against the repression and oblivion to which the "losers" and "defeated" are condemned. I allude to populations and social groups, but also to architects and movements that are associated with now marginalized political forces and ignored by dominant historical narratives. To extend the field of this reflection, I would also contend that history has also a particular meaning in the field of practice, allowing an escape, an alternative, from the cult of absolute novelty. Tafuri's words, according to which there is no criticism, only history, are probably excessive, but they remain an indispensable warning, as history is always navigating between the temptation of knowledge disconnected from today's fights and the legitimization of current practice.

Transgressing conceptual and territorial limits positions architectural history to resist and overcome both paranoia and schizophrenia—overcome the paranoid version of an architecture rigidly determined by politics and the schizoid vision of an architecture of pure form itself defining its social end. Only so is it possible to abandon the illusion of a practice of architectural history that is uncontaminated by politics. The illusion of an autonomous research strategy, totally watertight to political pressure and immune from the interiorization of politics by scholars themselves, must be dissolved. The pressure of politics should remain for today's historians a point of attention and a source of fruitful anxiety. "History or Revolution?" There is no need to avoid revolutions—conceptual ones.

Note