

“*From Coffee Cup to Plan*”, a most successful slogan of the modern, combined William Morris’ idea that “...*architecture...represents the whole of modifications and alterations carried out on the earth’s surface with the exception of the pure desert*”, with the early XX century faith that industrial mass-production and enlightened planning could easily face all problems. At that time this concept appeared promising true, particularly for places like the newly born Soviet Union, where everything was to be rebuilt from ground.

But, in the second half of the century, that sentence was unduly interpreted in the sense that professional architects were entitled to design everything, just because they inherited the prestige conquered by modern architectural language between the two wars. A fatally wrong assumption that could easily be confuted, as it actually happened, since we were, and still are, surrounded by vernacular objects, whose functional value is above doubt, that haven’t been designed at all (Rudofsky’s *Architecture without architects*), and also by ordinary machine-produced, well-working, anonymous industrial objects that don’t need “architectural” stamp (Venturi’s industrial vernacular). The path from that false assumption, that discredited modern ideals, to the present degraded situation, where the notion of architecture, far from stretching “from coffee cup to plan”, is shrinking to a limited number of autonomous “monuments”, de-signed by world famous stars, was easier than we could think.

Actually we could imagine that, in post-fordist time, cultural capitalism, controlling the space of production and levelling the contents of cultural industry, would widen the distance between architectural modernism and the everyday: borrow its language for corporate buildings, trendy museums, and wealthy homes. But we could hardly expect that, within the same process, modern heritage would be absorbed into the art historians’ domain, to become the endless field of a practice of literal conservation of the whole architecture of XX century. At this stage “*from coffee cup to plan*” could really revert to a program of soulless restoration and raise the same doubts and objections expressed by critics like Leonardo Benevolo¹ and Martin Pawley² when they first visited some heroic relics of the modernity, like Bauhaus and villa Savoy.

Nobody would now deny that saving (and even rebuilding) icons of the modernity has greatly contributed to remind us of its ideals, but we mustn’t forget, as stated by Anatole Kopp in 1988,³ that those building belong to a time when Modern “*was a cause and was not a style*”. Pressed by the tragic events that shaped the first half of XX century, architects of the interwar period had reached such a dramatic consciousness. Today, only if it is wholly intended to establish the possible outlines for a world after the present one, can the salvation of the Modern acquire significance, as a tradition and as a vision. Will we be able to perform this task in front of the present environmental crisis? Perhaps only in this way can the conservation of modern buildings and artefacts continue its mission without betraying the original ideals. “*Without Rhetoric*”, title of A&P Smithson essay⁴ of 1973 in which they presented their personal and original research into the roots of modernity, a permanent dialog with the “masters” to support their own everyday architectural practice, could contribute to show the right way to define a proper attitude toward effective conservation of modern heritage.

If we see rhetoric, in our field, as literal application of a language because of its (former) prestige, then the option “without rhetoric” could embody our effort to reduce the importance of language as a separate phenomenon in itself: in this perspective the conservation of the Modern should first attempt to abandon the idea of philological restitution as an absolute myth.

Anyway, beyond the motto title, the Smithsons worked out their pamphlet as a documented reflection on the material and concrete nature of the Modern Project trying to explain its works in terms of space, function and construction.

At book opening they in fact declare: «*We write to make ourselves see what we have got in the inescapable present . . . to give another interpretation of the same ruins . . . to show a glimpse of another aesthetic*»⁵ Further on they quote Mies van Der Rohe: «. . . *we ask a rose only that it be a*

ALISON & PETER SMITHSON
WITHOUT RHETORIC—AN
ARCHITECTURAL AESTHETIC
1955–1972

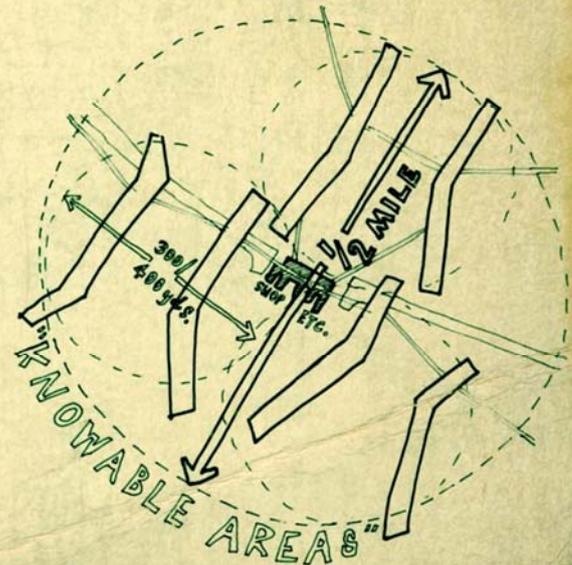


Fig. 1 Front cover of A&P Smithson book *Without Rhetoric*

rose; we ask of a potato only that it be a potato. Philosophically speaking, only then do they exist» and «Architecture begins when two bricks are put carefully together».⁶

It's a full definition of the modern identity what they try to outline in several spots of the essay. Starting with a new use of materials: *«it finds its closest affinities not in a past architectural style, but in a peasant dwelling forms, which have style and are stylish but were never modish: a poetry without rhetoric. We see architecture as a direct statement of a way of life and in the past ordinary,*

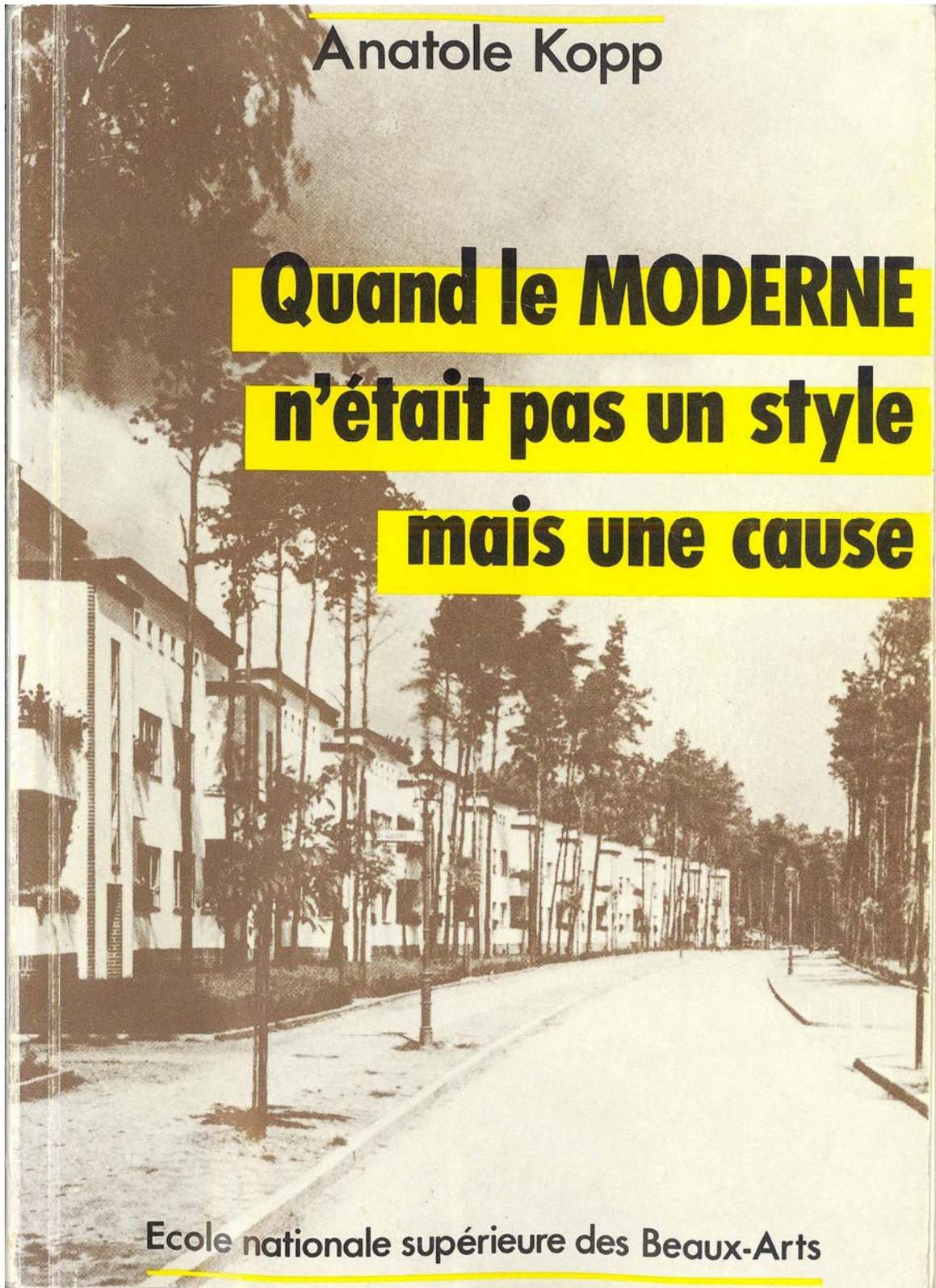


Fig. 2 Front cover of A. Kopp book *Quand le MODERNE n'était pas un style mais une cause*

prosaic life has been most succinctly economically tersely expressed in the peasant farms and the impedimenta of Mediterranean rural life that Le Corbusier had made respectable».⁷

And continuing with the crucial question of the ever growing presence of the mechanical installations: «We should like to be aware how such a thing works, but not necessarily to see it

*work, for in our view the invention of the formal means, whereby, without display or rhetoric, we sense only the essential presence of the mechanisms supporting and servicing our buildings, it's the very hearth of the present day architecture. To make our mechanism (and remember our mechanism include our cars, delivery vehicles, railways, underground railways, monorails and so on) speak with our spaces is our central problem. (. . .) When our standards were set for us by the Church or Kings, later by Mairie and Banks those were the times for buildings which announced power with a loud voice. Now when many forces influence us, the time for rhetoric of any kind in individual buildings has passed».*⁸

So openly confident they were in the unlimited development of modern democracy and mass culture that the future they worked for couldn't be more different from our present. We need to rethink their ideas in a wider and proper way: not enclosed in the operational saving of the modern, but also explaining its utmost purposes. «*Things need to be ordinary and heroic at the same time*»⁹ could be taken as their clearest message about the specific concern that modern architect shifted upon the everyday life up to its plain domestic sense.

No doubt that today architects, as most of their clients, have long dismissed such concerns, opening the way to the ruinous present condition of housing, public leisure facilities, schools and any kind of social services that embodied a progressive view of society. But, on the other hand, this is just the reason of our inherent difficulty to conceive a true, non-rhetorical, recovery of modern built heritage without a deep reconsideration of the everyday aesthetics.

That design has to struggle for an adequate answer to a well-positioned problem (aiming at full integration of function and aesthetics) was also Le Corbusier's deep conviction.¹⁰ That is the critical point and that is why the salvation of the Modern ("From Coffee Cup to Plan") cannot be intended and dealt as an autonomous cluster of technical problems, related with the material conservation of a piece of work, the authenticity of its parts and its functional adaptation: all important aspects that must be solved only in the perspective of such Modern design attitude. Beyond the unsolved contradictions of Modernity, especially when intended as a theoretical achievement (in which architecture has sometimes proved to be able to participate), emerges the vital assumption of the importance of the process: the way to get a result is as much important as the result in itself. But in our super-modern times any kind of distance between ends and means reappears again as a largely accepted practice; and this different cultural condition might give reason of the difficulties we are now confronted with in the salvation of the Modern.

Almost twenty-five years ago, in the initially mentioned essay, Anatole Kopp had warned against the incoming adaptation of Modern architecture to the ancient rhetorical practices.¹¹

That process, along the historical conditions of the Nineties and the first decade of second Millennium, went so far to resume -to a level never reached before- the megalomaniac and exhibitionist forms of contemporary architecture.

As early as in 1962 Peter Smithson had written about some of the buildings of the heroic period, that "*they have a purity and a faith that we find almost too hard to bear*".¹² No surprise then that the cynical and acquiescent atmosphere of the last decades has become the largest obstacle to reach a coherent approach to the Modern legacy.

But, due to the ever growing economical and environmental crisis, it is equally evident that such careless condition is not going to last; and a more careful attitude towards the world -if hopefully achieved- will also determine more propitious (i.e. pertinent) conditions for saving the Modern.

NOTES

¹ See Benevolo Leonardo, *Storia dell'Architettura Moderna*, Laterza, Bari, 1975, pp. 459-463

² See Pawley, Martin, *Terminal Architecture*, Reaktion, London, 1998, p.98 and 214.

³ Kopp, Anatole, *Quand le MODERNE n'était pas un style mais une cause*, Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1988.

⁴ Smithson, Alison & Peter, *WITHOUT RHETORIC – An Architectural Aesthetic 1955-1962*, Latimer New Dimensions, London, 1973.

⁵ Ibid. p. 1.

⁶ Ibid. p. 21.

⁷ Ibid. p. 6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

⁹ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁰ See Le Corbusier, *Towards a new Architecture* (translation of 1928 printing of *Vers une architecture*, Editions Crés, Paris, 1923) Architectural Press, London, 2007, pp. 93-98.

¹¹ See Kopp, Anatole, op. cit. pp. 320-322.

¹² Smithson, Peter "Duiker and the Zonnestraal", *Forum*, vol. XVI, 1962, p1.