

# Writing the history of modern architecture after the fall of the Iron Curtain

Review of:

Hans Ibelings, *European Architecture since 1890*, Amsterdam: SUN, 2011, 236 pp., 735 col. illus. 38 EUR, ISBN 978 90 8506 8815

It might appear that students of modern architecture have a plethora of publications to choose from. However, most of these books attract attention only by offering a mass of color images, while the accompanying texts are either quite shallow or else based on long surpassed ideas and notions. To find an innovative approach, especially in a thematically encompassing work, is rare.

There were efforts to write the history of modern architecture even before Le Corbusier designed the famous Villa Savoye and Mies van der Rohe excelled with his Barcelona exhibition pavilion. However, these efforts stemmed from architects themselves, and the resulting texts had the qualities of manifestoes or polemics, rather than of a historian's discourse. In 1936, Nikolaus Pevsner published a book about the pioneers of the Modernist movement, and five years later, the art historian Sigfried Giedion followed with a best-selling work about a similar topic.<sup>1</sup> Yet even these publications ostentatiously pursued promotional, or even propagandist, goals – by striving to demonstrate the historical legitimacy of the functionalist avant-garde and to highlight its revolutionary role and its status of a decisive historical turn. Whether the key criterion was novelty and timeliness, or on the contrary a timeless and eternal validity, in either case was the Modernist movement put on a pedestal as the only correct form, and the abstract white cube was presented as the absolute ideal and a Hegelian transcending perfection of the previous development. It was characteristic that both Pevsner and Giedion were primarily interested in the aesthetic aspect of these objects, while completely ignoring the architect's task to make a steady, reliable building or to fill out a purposeful blueprint. This kind of interpretation was shown as inadequate already in the 1960s, and from then on, Pevsner's and Giedion's works have been criticized as clever manipulations with facts, driven by the effort to reach conclusions that have been set in advance.<sup>2</sup> The characterizations of modern architecture they provide are never descriptive, but rather always to a degree normative. Nowadays there is a broad consensus that modernity had more numerous forms, and contained more inner contradictions, than the promoters of the avant-garde were willing to admit.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the mythologies they produced not only falsify the story of modern architecture and marginalize any achievement that does not fit their adopted schema, but also, as pointed out by

<sup>1</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, London: Faber & Faber, 1936. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture. The growth of a New Tradition*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941.

<sup>2</sup> Panayotis Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*, Cambridge, Mass. – London: MIT Press, 1999, 23 and 150.

<sup>3</sup> Werner Oechslin, *Kulturgeschichte der Modernen Architektur*, in: *Moderne entwerfen. Architektur und Kulturgeschichte*, Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 1999, 11-43.

Reyner Banham, conceal the fact that the Modernist movement remained a utopia, never fulfilling its proclaimed goal – to provide the environment for an ideal community of free individuals.<sup>4</sup>

One crucial incentive for a substantive revision of the historiography of architecture was the advance of postmodern relativism: history, until then understood as a single grand narrative, has lost its previous universality and coherence; no more does it consist of a chain of causes and necessary effects, whose logic determines that architecture must develop this and no other way. It is more and more strongly apparent that the Modernist movement comprised several different, often mutually incompatible lines of development, running not subsequently but rather in parallel. This is why Kenneth Frampton – to take one example – composed his *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* as a loose set of stories.<sup>5</sup> However, his book is a proof of the inertial force of the reductive concept of Modernism whose key elements remain the avant-garde, revolution, innovation, and progress. Are there any alternative paths that the historiography of modern architecture might take?

An answer is sought by *European Architecture since 1890*, the new book of the Dutch architectural critic and historian Hans Ibelings, well-known as the founder and long-time editor of the *A10* review. His ambition is not to pursue empiricist, positivist history, such that it would offer 'objective' knowledge and explanation of all past events. On the contrary, Ibelings is sharply aware that all writing of history is substantially conditioned by the cultural context of our own times, and that even the selection and ordering of 'facts' bears the mark of the intellectual interests of the present day. For Ibelings, the key impulses of all recent historiography are provided by two overlapping viewpoints: the historical situation after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the postmodern critique of modernity. This defines his effort to show that 'Europe encompasses more than Western Europe here and architecture more than modernism' (107).

First of all, then, his book is a valuable attempt to contribute to a more balanced image of Europe in the history of 20th-century architecture. Whereas previous synthetic works assumed and openly declared the cultural hegemony of the West, Ibelings offers an alternative view, as he demonstrates that there was remarkable architecture produced also outside the established European center, primarily in the Central and Eastern region of the continent. His specialty is the architecture of the countries that composed the former Yugoslavia: here, the designing and projecting practice was not insulated from West European developments even after World War Two. Yet Ibelings demonstrates interest also in other countries of the former Soviet Bloc: there are representative selections of Polish, Czech and Baltic architecture (with a substantially weaker choice of the works of Hungarian or Slovak architects). The book deserves attention already for this effort to introduce these projects, as well as works from other parts of Europe, into the international context.

<sup>4</sup> Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, London: Architectural Press; New York: Praeger, 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture. A Critical History*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1980.

The informed reader will not be surprised by Ibelings' observation that even during the Cold War period there were parallels and similarities, surmounting the ideological barrier, between the architectures of the capitalist West and the Eastern Bloc. However, Ibelings' interest in such correlations and hidden analogies is systematic. His comparisons are intended as a frontal attack against the methodological malpractice of writing history within national rubrics; Ibelings cites here the present-day *histoire croisée* as an investigation into trans-border relationships. He focusses on analogical forms and notions, often with a local or regional content, which appear simultaneously in various contexts: such are, for instance, the surprising similarities between the work of Antoni Gaudí and that of the Hungarian architect Ödön Lechner. Formerly, such contemporaneous links were usually interpreted as the product of a hard-to-define 'spirit of the times'. In present-day art theory, issues of space and time are either discreetly avoided, or else generously ceded to the newly constituted art geography – yet even so one cannot overlook the fact that bodies of knowledge and opinions, interests and tastes transcending specific local conditions are often shared in various parts of the continent. Ibelings' explanation employs the term 'informal collaboration', introduced already in the 1940s by H. G. Barnett for independent and often simultaneous phenomena, arisen in the absence of any direct communication.<sup>6</sup>

Adopting a postmodern perspective, Ibelings shakes up the established interpretations of 20th-century architecture by re-introducing authors – viewed by the Modernist historiography as representatives of the regressive forces and as artistic reactionaries – who rejected a split with the tradition. Ibelings correctly observes that apart from offering an echo of the past, the traditionalists also strove to create something contemporary and new. In calling for the restoration and re-energizing of the established forms, and in demanding an architectonic expression not bound by the present moment, they presented a legitimate response to the accelerating process of changes and to the accompanying fragmentation and disintegration of the modern experience: theirs were 'responses to novel situation which take the form of reference to old situations' (156), as Eric Hobsbawm put the matter.<sup>7</sup> According to Ibelings, traditionalism and functionalism are often linked by a shared preference for simplicity and reduction – which is one more reason why the author recommends to view them not as exclusive opposites but rather as two ranges in a continuum which also comprises expressionism, the art deco, the monumental classicism, regionalism and other trends. He points out that the architects of the period between the wars were only rarely fanatic proponents of sharply delineated positions, as they were simplistically presented by the 'canonical historians', and that their careers often demonstrate a variety of approaches, and a wavering among different styles. Even programmatic functionalists did not always and under all conditions stick to the notion that form is the automatic solution to any given problem: function was not understood as limited to the pragmatic,

<sup>6</sup> H. G. Barnett, *Innovation. The Basis of Cultural Change*, New York, Toronto, London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1953.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in: Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 1-14.

utilitarian purpose, and the requirements imposed on architecture included an emotional effect.

The book is a praiseworthy attempt to find room for 'lesser masters' and to admit, beyond the avant-gardes, also the more moderate efforts aiming at an expression of the new *Zeitgeist*. However, it may well be that even more inspiring is the other guiding line of Ibelings' presentation – his revision of the purely aesthetic perspective on modern architecture. Both Giedion and Pevsner could still view the modern architectonic achievements as primarily visual objects, whose crucial qualities are of a purely morphological nature. Yet already their successor Leonardo Benevolo demonstrates that, whereas in the past architecture was one of the arts, in the 20th century art became merely one variable among the characteristics of the discipline.<sup>8</sup> Ibelings' considerations are not limited to a more precise description of the relationship between construction, function and the aesthetic qualities. He sees a crucial dimension of 20th-century European architecture in its social function. Therefore, after the three chronological chapters where he uncovers the sequences and synchronicities of the various lines of development, the following four thematic chapters strive for a cross-sectional view and for an investigation of how architecture and urbanism contributed to the shape and the dynamics of modern societies. He inquires into the links between designing, industrialization and urbanization, into modern architectonic institutions and the modifications of the designing practice, into the relationship of architecture and the public, into the diffusion of ideas as well as into the various particular configurations of linking architecture and political power.

The genealogy of this approach in the historiography of architecture is long, and the most extreme manner of this kind of interpretation was the vulgar Marxist notion that cultural superstructure is dependent on the realm of social-economic relations. According to the simplifying schematicism of this origin, all traditional approaches were expressive of the notion of a hierarchical social order, whereas the avant-garde had a necessary connection with Left political thought. In this view, monumental architecture ought to be typical for authoritative states, whereas programs of welfare housing would be the feature of democratic societies. Yet we know well that the repertory of the classicist tradition was employed for the purposes of representation both by the totalitarian regimes in Germany, the Soviet Union and Italy and by the liberal political systems of France, Britain or the US between the wars. Similarly, programmes of welfare housing were pursued even in Stalin's Russia and Salazar's Portugal. Ibelings offers here numerous other evidence of the complicated and ambiguous relationship between architectural forms and politics – including some noteworthy examples of the expression of national identity by means of modern architecture.

The author succeeded in making such a complex survey of modern architecture – one presenting a number of interesting insights and eschewing the tendentious trivializations that have been chronic in this historical discipline – available in only slightly over 200 pages, including more than 700 small images. Of

<sup>8</sup> Leonardo Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1971. Cf. Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*, 108.

course, given these limits of space, Ibelings could not avoid a certain degree of superficiality and excessive brevity. He shows he is aware of this weakness when he describes his book not as a history but rather 'as an *idea* of a transnational history of that European architecture' (119). It is also clear that the author is not an academic with a background in long-term researches but rather a publicist whose conclusions are largely dependent on secondary literature. In this respect, the parts devoted to contemporary architecture prove better than, say, the paragraphs on the production from the turn of the century, where one would be hard pressed to pinpoint any new findings. Yet even leaving aside the shortcuts caused by the restrictions of space and by the choice to target a broad readership, we can take a moment to consider the limitations and stumbling blocks of the adopted approach. In his search for parallels, cross-references and cross-fertilizations, Ibelings shows a clear preference for the axis of identity as against the axis of differences. However, in a genuine comparative analysis, the detection of similarities can always be merely the first step, to be followed by an inquiry into the differences – and only grasping those will provide the attained interpretation with the necessary plasticity of relief. If we show the co-existence of various as well as contradictory developmental lines and events, we must view their links as not immobile but rather as dynamic, with various positions mutually delineated according to the logic of action and reaction, in a poignant dialogue with the other positions – and we can then hardly imagine their demarcating lines separated from the process of these positioning struggles. Ibelings is undercut here both by his method of search for analogies and by his conscious limiting of the investigated material to executed buildings – while leaving aside unrealized projects as well as published manifestoes. In the context of the present-day historiography of architecture, which perhaps draws too heavily upon the statements of the artists and mostly fails to deduce meaning out of the forms themselves, such an approach can awaken a degree of sympathy. However, at the end of the day, the prevailing sentiment is a feeling of frustration regarding all that is biased and simplified, and thus of a disappointment, as the reader's initial expectations are fulfilled only in part.

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