

Conceptualising Modernist Architecture in Trans- Cultural Spaces, Interview with Kobena Mercer, 2011

Kobena Mercer: Art and architecture have become increasingly closely connected, but in contrast to artists whose sculpture explores the purely formal properties of space, or architects who have constructed gallery spaces for the exhibition of art, your work has a strong historical or even archeological dimension with regards to our understanding of architecture in colonial or post-colonial contexts. How did your research interests in colonial architecture come about, and how would you characterize the conceptual issues that you set out to explore in works such as *Kasbah* (2007)?

Kader Attia: In my opinion, History of Art and Architecture is a way to create images that have both an aesthetic and ethical interest. You can see this from the Egyptian pyramids to the cathedrals and the skyscrapers. But, whereas the reason for being of sculpture has always questioned the spatial issue, architecture aims at both containing space, while at the same time occupying it. Like sculpture, architecture is a volume located into space, but it also contains an inner space, with a purpose: it could be a private space, in which you spend a part of your life, or offices, in which you work, a jail, or also a public space.

One architect, whose work is, for me, very much related to this issue is Roland Simounet. Roland Simounet was born in Algeria in 1927 at Guyotville. He was a student of Le Corbusier. As an architect, Simounet has an interesting background. Indeed, before he became a student of Le Corbusier, Simounet had graduated at Paris Fine Arts School. The influence of Le Corbusier on all his students was incredibly strong, especially with «Le Modulor». «Le Modulor» is a theoretical project, which deals with the balance between the private space and the way the Human Being occupies it.

In the early 1950s, Simounet built his first social housing projects in Morocco and Algeria. He discovered that, at the end of the day, the workers – who generally countrymen that came to the city to get a job – used to take some materials left on the garbage of the building site, such as big sticks of wood, corrugated iron, or pieces of broken bricks.

At this time, following the idea of «Le Modulor», Simounet was looking for the best way to use the private space for his social housing project. So, at the end of one

day of work, out of curiosity, he followed some of his workers who going back home, to see how they used these materials. Not so far from the building site, he discovered an area, where the workers had built a shantytown. Simounet asked his assistant to take all the dimensions of the inner spaces of the workers' shantytown or bidonville: to measure the space between two different houses, the difference between the public and the private space, the feature of these private spaces, and so forth. Then, he compared these dimensions to «Le Modulor», and what Roland Simounet found was that the shantytown's dimensions were almost exactly the same as «Le Modulor»'s ones. Why? Because the poverty of these workers had led them to bring the feature of the private spaces in this shantytown to the essential. After he had taken the measurements of how the inner spaces were shared in these houses, Simounet discovered that everything was brought to its essential necessity: no superficiality, no unneeded details. The simplicity of the private space was almost the same as the ideal one described by «The Modulor».

After that, most of the private spaces of Simounet's housing projects were based on theories that had been inspired through both "The Modulor" and the observation of the shantytown built by his workers.

He also found out that this group of vernacular constructions were organised in a very similar way as the Casbah in the city of Algiers or other old Medinas. Like Le Corbusier, who discovered the Casbah in Algiers at the end of the 1920's, Simounet continued his master's fascination with Mediterranean architecture. You could say that Roland Simounet was one of Le Corbusier's students who was the most aware of what he had seen in the city of Ghardaia, when he spent 5 weeks there in 1931, amazed when he saw Maghreb vernacular architecture for the first time. (1)

Then, Le Corbusier used to say to his students: «We will always be back to the eternal architecture of the Mediterranean Sea». For him, Mediterranean architecture had something to do with spirituality and functionality. Spirituality for the relation with the elements – light, wind, etc..., and functionality for its roofs, terraces, on which people were living, spending time, walking... For instance, he noticed that you can cross Algiers' Casbah, walking from one roof to the other.

Hence «Kasbah» is an installation based on these historical issues, both aesthetic and ethical, about the real roots of aesthetic modernity in European architecture. As an artwork made by an Algerian artist born in France, this work is one sign of reappropriation among endless possibilities. A syncretism between tradition and modernity that expresses itself into another time, contemporaneity. The time I have spent, since I was born, between France and Algeria has always been psychologically tough. Through a work like «Kasbah», I am trying to rebuild something that seemed to be missing -an historical lapse.

In North Africa, shantytown have grown with Modernity, but they have always been seen as its garbage. But that's not what they are. They are a Modernity, the one of the people who built them, without being architects. At that point, «Kasbah» speaks as a tribute to this aesthetics and to this freedom that people take to build their home with what they found.

KM: I am curious about this aspect of rebuilding something that has gone missing. Although there is a tendency to interpret post-colonial issues in identity-based terms, so that what is missing is a psychological lack or deficit, I understand what you are saying as a critique of the standard narrative of modernism – what is

missing is the cross-cultural dynamic of borrowing and appropriation.

In «Kasbah» the body of the building has gone missing and only the roofs remain – which underlines your point about the zinc material, like the satellite dish, as one of the ‘signs of re-appropriation,’ which is an important concept of yours that I hope we can return to. But first, in light of what you say about Simounet, what are your thoughts on why Le Corbusier was so attracted to the Mediterranean in general and to the ancient Mزاب architecture of Ghardaia in particular? Was it ‘otherness’ or some element of sameness between his utopian vision and the formal simplicity found in these non-Western dwellings?

KA: Yes, indeed, in “Kasbah”, the body of the building is missing, but its absence makes us think of its presence. I often represent something by its absence, as sometimes the evocation of something is stronger than its presence. Everything that is not represented is sometimes strongly present because its absence works as its trace. It is what I try to show with works like «Untitled» (Plastic Bags), «Ghost» or «Sleeping from Memory». So what is missing in colonial architecture and art’s history has actually always been very present, as soon as we think through what Michel Foucault used to call «the archive» of something. The archive of modernist aesthetics’ architecture

is embodied by both History and its hidden part. Everything takes part to an endless structure that sometimes has failures. And in these rare failures, Art can exist... Like the piece «Kasbah», for instance.

Maybe Le Corbusier was more able than anybody else at that time to see through a failure of this cultural continuity in architecture, because of his “intuition”. When Le Corbusier was claiming that architecture will come back to the Mediterranean area, he actually was referring to Western architectural influences that exist everywhere in classical architecture – from Le Louvre, to Washington and Moscow, you can see Greek columns, frontispieces, pilasters, frieze, and so on – so the influence of this Mediterranean architecture is worldwide. Therefore, he was not initially referring to the vernacular desert architecture of the Mزاب, because at that time he had not seen it yet. But, of course, after he discovered it in 1931, he continued to speak about the «necessity to go back to the eternal architecture of the Mediterranean Sea”, now also referring to Mزاب.

Regarding its » ‘otherness’ or some element of sameness between his utopian vision and the formal simplicity found in these non-Western dwellings», as far as I am concerned, I think he found both, and that’s why Le Corbusier was so much interested in this vernacular architecture. But he also went beyond this, inventing a way to look at it: a specific way to integrate these elements of another culture into his Western aesthetics. This way of looking is an appropriation of this Thought, this culture, this aesthetics, because neither him nor History have ever recognized its importance as an inspiration on Le Corbusier’s work until now.

KM: Did Le Corbusier adopt an ethnographic attitude or did his admiration stem from a different relationship to the civilization of the desert? KA: It looks like one of the first contacts Le Corbusier had with the Mزاب valley was through the book of a sociologist named Marcel Mercier (2). I think that this ethnographic insight on Mزاب civilization came into Le Corbusier’s life at a time when he was looking for something new in architecture, that would have existed in the Mediterranean area.

Therefore, according to this, Le Corbusier has started his Algerian trip with an

observation based on an ethnographic work. But the real issue of this story is, I think, that Le Corbusier invented a new way of looking, as Picasso did with both Iberian sculpture and African masks. The way they both felt, interpreted, represented what they were looking at, the insight they had into it, is very close to the one that non-Western civilizations have nowadays on Occident's manufactured goods; a mythological reading of something that comes from the outside, not so far from a kind of exoticism that first seems exciting, then kitsch, and in the end gets recycled into something that belongs to the perceiver.

KM: The issue of recycling is important, and especially so in your concept of «signs of re-appropriation» that exist in the historical dialectic between various modernist utopianisms in their encounter with different vernaculars. I wonder if you could say how these 'signs of re-appropriation' impacted upon the mass housing projects that were built in Algeria and Morocco during the era of de-colonisation?

KA: First of all, my concept of re-appropriation is not only related to the idea of physical recycling. It is also a more natural notion, whereas, for me, recycling is typically cultural. The abstract aspect is natural because it is based on the simple principle that there is re-appropriation as soon as there is a dispossession of a geographical, religious or cultural territory.

So the signs of re-appropriation impacted upon the mass housing projects that were built in

Algeria and Morocco during the era of de-colonisation in a very unexpected way, especially in the early years of independence.

These first visible signs of re-appropriation immediately changed the outside aesthetic of the façade. People started to hang personal items and food, red chilis, pieces of fatty meat from lamb and sheep, and of course their clothes, in order to dry them.

While the functionality of Modern social architecture used to work as a uniform aesthetic order, it was not the space for any expression of identity. This dogma or apology of «identical is the respect of equality» rather than «equality is the respect of identities» meant that living in these buildings entailed becoming the object of the control that was built into their design, whereas when people were living in their home village and house, they were taking part in their environment and were the subjects of it.

So while the balconies had a similarity based on the same pattern and design – no colors, simple forms – this was one of the most relevant visual aspects of architectural modernism because rather than being the object of this modern functionality, people are always reappropriating their spaces, naturally, as subjects in their own right.

KM : The 'Citie Pouillon' apartment complex, for example, seems to implicate architecture as a tool of social control of the rural populations moving into the cities. Does this mean that the architecture of colonial modernism expressed the continuing power of 'the West' during the very moment of decolonisation? What would be your interpretation in the case of the Citie Verticale in Casablanca, which was a focus for the inter-disciplinary analysis that Marion Von Osten put together for the 2008 exhibition and conference, 'In the Desert of Modernity,' held in Berlin.

KA: It is worth noticing that all the social housing built by Fernand Pouillon during the 1950's in Algeria was commissioned by the French colonial power.

Why ? After World War II, the soldiers from the colonies (Senegal, Mali, Morocco, Algeria, for instance), who were sent to the battlefields came back to their colonized home country and started to claim the same rights as settlers. But they were denied this. So demonstrations, riots and the creations of independent organizations – from Algeria to Indochina, or from the Middle East to India – began to develop, essentially in poor countryside, where the revolutionary wind was blowing the most. These developments were immediately been treated violently by the colonial order and one such example would be Messali Hadj's trial or the 1945 riots in Setif in Algeria.

But why there ? Why did colonial resistance start mostly in the poor rural areas ? Because, as Jean-Paul Sartre described it in the preface of Franz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*, everywhere in the world, people from the countryside have always been those that suffer more than people from the city, even the worker classes. Because the peasantry had always had to fight both the oppression of «colonial inequalities» and the tough and uncertain climate they have then always been the ones to be most likely involved in revolution.

In this social context then, the colonial administration scheduled a whole series of architectural projects aiming at – officially – provide housing for all, but in reality, the aim was to identify, register and control contesting individuals from the countryside, who were growing in number and gaining more and more political influence over the urban populations. By making these farmers

and peasants pass from their self-built houses to planned housing on a mass scale, the colonial administration transformed them from subjects to objects of the place where they lived. In the end, this was a strategy where modernism played a part in the political goals of seeking better control of the colonised – having a monthly rent, electricity, water, and other bills to pay, meant that colonial subjects became the consuming objects of their apartments.

Regarding «Cité Verticale», first of all, I would highly recommend Marion von Osten's essay « Architecture without Architects – Another Anarchist Approach » (<http://e-flux.com/journal/view/59>), which is named after the famous title of Bernard Rudofsky's 1964 exhibition at MoMA.

For me, «Cité Verticale» is important because it reminds us of the way Modernist architecture is implicated in stealing original patterns of the non-Western culture, while pretending that it is inventing a fair and functional environment for the people.

The observations of shantytowns by Rolland Simounet, which ultimately found them to be almost similar to Le Corbusier's Modulor, certainly changed the idea of social architectures in many ways. And so in this sense, Simounet's observations indeed represented a beginning of thinking of postmodern architecture that began in the colonial context.

The concept of «Cité Verticale» was also based on the analysis of local architectural behaviors and necessities. But, in my opinion, this conceptual approach, among many others, had already been sketched by Le Corbusier, who used to compare the «Cité Radieuse» – a project building in Marseille (1945-1952) – to the oldest city of Ghardaia, named «Beni Isguen». Le Corbusier was fascinated by the very simple

and easy way the streets of Beni Isguen are connected to each other and to the surrounding habitations. He claimed that his «Cité Radieuse» was «a vertical application of Beni Isguen». That's why I think that the idea of the verticality of the urban space was both invented and applied before the «Cité verticale» of Georges Candilis and Shadrach Woods.

The transfer of vernacular African-Arab-Berber urbanism, and its promiscuity between private and public space, had begun with the «Cité Radieuse». In this building, Le Corbusier created corridors so wide and long that he called them «les rues» (streets). Through these streets, kids could go directly to school by bicycle, moving through their home street to elevators that would bring them the ground floors where the street of the school was located. So the conception of verticality of the «cité» was already a Modern project, also inspired in the colonial space, like the «Cité Horizontale».

What the architects of the «Cité Verticale» did, like Simounet's researches, are in continuity with this appropriation, with a certain amnesia, even if they were claiming the contrary. The irony of both this amnesia and these fantasies is the way they spread their theories. The biggest rupture with Le Corbusier's and Gropius' legacy had created the Team X group. One of their core ideas was to create an architecture aiming at taking its subject (the inhabitant's culture, social habits, economical situation, and so on) as the complementary issue of the home space. For instance, in the «Cité Verticale», balconies are inspired by patios that originally are the spaces which bind the home space to the outside. In Morocco, this works amazingly, but unfortunately, it doesn't work worldwide. That's why I think it is an irony. An experimentation in the colonial space, especially in Africa, can be relevant, but only in its area. It is exactly what happened with Jean Prouvé's «Maison Tropicale», built in Brazzaville. Two years ago, I saw this «Maison Tropicale» installed in Paris, in front of the Seine river. It was sad. I think we should pay

attention to projects that have been created in the tropical area, by inhabitants of this space, whose style – «tropicalism» – is the beginning of an interesting reappropriation of modernity, like Lina Bo Bardi in Brazil.

Last year, as I was in the city of Sheffield in UK, I had another example of this application of experimentations in the colonial space, taken out of their original context and applied in a Western country, without being adapted to this new environment. I visited a series of buildings made by the same architects that created «Cité Verticale» – Georges Candilis and Shadrach Woods. I found it very interesting how these 5 or 6 buildings were bound together with bridges that worked as both outside corridors and streets for the milk delivery man. The fact that the public and the private spaces were that close, without interfering with each other, made me think about the «Cité Verticale». But this delocalisation of observations that had begun in North African shantytowns, and their application in other situations, raises some questions about whether this approach could work in a Western context?

The core issue of the Sheffield housing projects is the emphasis on circulation through the outside corridors, which are kind of streets that connect each the buildings of this «cité.» They are wide enough to allow a small car to deliver milk to each door, as well functioning as playgrounds for kids, just like in the «Cité Radieuse». So this application of a spatial order that is both function and promiscuous, and which was derived from the Mediterranean Medina was

interesting to me because it was totally unexpected. But is this unexpectedness relevant?

The fact that Sheffield buildings were empty and undergoing reconstruction gained my attention most of all. The people who used to live here were «socially excluded.» The buildings' location was outside the city's center. So the more I examined these buildings, the more the feeling I had about this project was a bitter one. Did Candilis and Woods truly believe in their theories about considering the humanity of the inhabitants rather than the formal design of the architecture in these buildings? If that was their thought, then they failed, not only because the buildings were placed outside of the city centre, but also because the appropriation of the «self-centrist» urban-ist structure of the African vernacular city had nothing really to do with North Occidental urban behavior. In all the old African medinas – from the Casbah of Algiers, to Gardaia, Timimoun, Fez, Djenné, Mopti, for instance – vernacular architectures are alive, without the need for state planning. The life that goes into the city is the last architectural element of the quality of urban space, but it is what binds spaces together and makes a city truly alive.

KM: Perhaps the, the last aspect of the relationship between modernism and colonialism, as seen through the lens of architecture, is evoked by the video piece of yours – «Normal City» -included in the 'In the Desert of Modernity' exhibition. This concerns the modernist high rise apartment block which, in suburbs of Paris and other French cities, has become the social setting for the political protests articulated by post-migrant generations. Is it fair to say that such mass housing projects have a necessary correlation with the politics of post-colonialism?

KA: I think that, at the beginning, when these housing projects were built, there was indeed a correlation with the politics of post-colonialism as most of the inhabitants were, and are still now, from the ex-colonies. In Garges-les-Gonnesses, the cité I grew up in, in the North of Paris, in the 1990's, more than 60 different languages and dialects were registered in the same living space, all coming from the former French and British colonial empires.

Beside this, all these housing projects were built in the outskirts of the big cities, in their peripheries, so they were isolated and outside the economical centers. The plan, once seen in this way, was to colonize the people who live there. There is clear continuity with how colonized people were always on the periphery of the political, economical and cultural power. So while ex-colonial migrants are tolerated as a productive workforce, there is no way they mix with the rest of the population. They are here to be economically exploited, not to take part to the society's life. One significant example of this 'post-colonial' politics is that, until today, such migrant workers do not have the right to vote.

Moreover, their standard of living is much lower than the rest of the society. These poor populations are then gathered in what we can call social ghettos.

For me, this urban organization embodies, in the most perverse way, the concept of «Man exploiting Man». And the most absurd aspect of this exploitation is the fact that these people, coming from the former colonies, who live in these buildings, are the exact same people who actually built them in the 1960s.

As during colonial times, the integration of these people from the former colonies, has not been done. This is an original failure that has been passed on to the following generations. Successive governments have let this situation deteriorate,

maintaining these neighborhoods in the status of areas of «exclusion.» This is in the direct line of post-colonial politics, but it pushes the residents of these housing projects to another level by creating such ghettos, in which ethnic, social, and economical minorities are gathered in grey monotone and uniform buildings that more or less just annihilate their identity. So in this situation, colonization is then reproduced by such housing as colonization of the mind, even if nowadays, we are not officially in the colonial era anymore, I think that what is now at stake when the term 'post-colonial' is used is the prolongation of the desire for domination of one society on its minorities.

The social housing built between the 1960's and the 1980's that I show in the three video films called «Normal city» is indeed an examination of the following on of the relation between colonialism and social housing in massive buildings that have been erected outside the former colonial empire's capitals and main cities, particularly in France. The videos show facades of social housing buildings that are shot in the same neighborhood. On each facade, all the apartments look the same, excepted one of them. In this apparently normal and ordered grid, one balcony is different. We don't know why, but we feel that something is not really working as it should...

But I should add that this «Normal City» aims at speaking beyond colonialism as an historical and a geographical issue. It goes beyond this issue, as I think it also has to do with human beings' natural desire for power over the other, which always exists in two ways : domination and contempt. This is why areas outside the major cities – the so-called periferies and «banlieues» – always embody the place of excluded people for the European psyche. These phobias actually come from the Middle Ages, when such areas used to be zones of containment of leprosy. Even after the disappearance of leprosy as a disease, which was the worst imaginable fear of the Middle Age, these 'excluded' spaces outside cities have remained, for centuries, the embodiment of fear (3).

Creating such poor, grey, monotonous and impersonal buildings, outside economic, political and cultural centers, in which any subject is alienated as just a small part of a huge grid of identical rectangular windows, is maybe the way to control his otherness. This is the 'other,' as a subject, that power actually fears as its death, is maybe the answer to the question we will have to solve for the future generations.

(1) see Alex Gerber, «L'Algérie de Le Corbusier, Les Voyages de 1931», Thesis No 1077 (1992), presented at the Department of Architecture at l'Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale of Lausanne – Switzerland.

(2) «La Civilisation urbaine au Mزاب, Etude de sociologie africaine», Marcel Mercier, Alger, imprimerie Emile Pfister, 1922.

(3) «Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason», Michel Foucault,

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