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KADER ATTIA: Looking at this photograph depicting one of Pouillon's buildings covered with satellite dishes in Algiers, I wonder how such accumulation should be interpreted. Although the satellite dishes reveal a certain cultural poverty, they are turned towards the outside world. During the 90s, they were turned to France or the United States, and since 9/11 they face the Gulf. News from *Al Jazeera* and all the soap operas produced in Arabian countries are really popular everywhere in Northern Africa. To me, each of these satellite dishes echoes an individual; they are like voices or mouths saying something. Eventually, this picture also helps us to understand that architecture is not only a static but also an organic thing, and just like a living body, it is an ever-changing entity. By the way, this concern about the body is the main focus of one major concept in architectural modernism: Le Corbusier's Modulor.

RICHARD KLEIN: At the time, the Modulor had a mission in relation to normality. Le Corbusier's idea was to adapt proportions according to the human body and not strictly mathematic data or measurements matching the industrial production of objects. This is why, despite everything that has been said, the Modulor embodied a form of resistance against a normalization in which only parameters were production means and that made the standards even more "prescriptive", if we may say so. There is a kind of humanist dimension to the Modulor: it is the human body that should dictate measurements to architecture. The dimensions of machines should not dictate the size of architectural items. Le Corbusier says: "Look, the navel of a man who is 1.83m tall is at 113 cm, so 113 cm will be used as a reference." Noticing Roland Simounet's position towards the Modulor is interesting because he, just like other architects, adapted the Modulor to Muslim living conditions and drew his own conclusions. Since the body was positioned differently in space, he came up with new proportions and new mathematic relations to the ground.

K. A.: Therefore, according to you or people like Simounet, the body cannot be dissociated from architecture...

R. K.: Absolutely. Simounet even thought of body positions according to organization in space. The fact that he studied sitting positions is meaningful. Everything in his work bore the idea that what is accessory in architecture should be moved aside. He rather had what usually entered the finishing part included in the construction process itself: being able to sit on the edge of a window, where there is a view, close to where the body will be cooled... I think this is about this position of the body in space thing. Therefore this concern about the body inside the other body, meaning architecture, is closely linked to measurements: how are we supposed to establish the correct proportions in what we are going to build?

K. A.: Does it mean that he was looking for common sense ?

R. K.: He was...

K. A.: Speaking of "common sense", here I'm referring to André Ravéreau. He wrote a lot about Ghardaïa and the Kasbah, especially in a book entitled *Et le Site créa la ville*, in which he insists on the use of this notion of common sense by this particular architecture.

R. K.: Yes, not common sense in the debased meaning sometimes used. And Ravéreau, of course. Simounet also showed interest in what attracted Ravéreau's attention. And then Simounet found interest in the Mzab, just like Ravéreau.

K. A.: He studied the Mzab.

R. K.: Right. One thing he was obsessed with were the pipe systems in buildings, even at latitudes where you don't at all face the same concerns as in the Mzab. You'll never see even the slightest soil downpipe in any of the buildings he made in France. He was looking for ways to drain water away. This, incidentally, brought him some trouble...

K. A.: Are the pipe systems hidden?

R. K.: They are. He included them in drainage channels, for example, or in shadow gaps. There's no gutter, no soil downpipe. And he truly owed this to studying vernacular architectures. But you see, the way the body determines architecture and the way architecture is determined by the environment are fundamental.

K. A.: I was thinking about Pygmy houses, which to me are the best example in matters of ephemeral houses, since Pygmy peoples from Congo, Central Africa and Cameroon live in shack-like constructions but they never stay more than three weeks in the same place. Plus, these constructions also illustrate the kind of preoccupation you talked about with Simounet: how to cope with water issues inside this ephemeral house in a tropical and equatorial area. You know, due to the heat and violent rain showers every evening, at the end of the day... So, in the end, things move on and yet always come back to the same place. Issues discussed by Simounet somehow fall under the field of architecture genealogy.

R. K.: Yes, in its fundamental and primordial aspects.

K. A.: Another topic I would like to discuss with you is that of social housing projects and their failure.

R. K.: I don't necessarily have such a negative opinion on social housing, even though some of them are a sort of treason in the sense that some principles established by Le Corbusier and others have been interpreted in an extremely poor fashion. Some structures, even those that look a bit plain, still possess a few qualities that deserve to be highlighted more often. Le Corbusier had to take full symbolic responsibility for the "failure of social housing". Similarly, we tend nowadays to reject concrete a bit too quickly. When you know about the history of this material, you realize the arguments against it are sometimes false.

K. A.: What do you mean by "when you know about the history" of concrete?

R. K.: It was invented to imitate stone. Even if its production enables industrialization, it's a material made of elements carrying very tight bounds to the ground, to earth. This can be seen with the textures of reinforced concrete used in France by Le Corbusier and others such as Auguste Perret. It is therefore a paradox. People are emotionally attached to the long-lasting character of stone and reject concrete, often due to its assimilation with industrialization and mass production.

But, back to Le Corbusier, he remains stuck between the assertion that his name means the failure of social housing projects and some sort of formalist worship from many of my fellow architects. In the 80-90s, neo-corbusianism chose white architectures from Le Corbusier's projects from the 20s, while at the time he hadn't yet shown interest in vernacular architecture in the way you mentioned earlier. Hence the fact that these projects from Le Corbusier received positive critiques from architectural and artistic schools of thought. Neo-corbusianism was considered a shield against the postmodernism of the 1970-80s.

K. A.: You mentioned interesting examples of social housing projects and two pictures came to my mind: the first one is the vertical city planned under Écochard's management in Casablanca, where you can see a vertical application of a medina with every balcony corresponding to the inside yard of a small house. The second one is Jean Nouvel's project in Nîmes conducted in the early 1980s which, to me, is a sort of replica or continuity, perhaps a reinterpretation, of something close to Le Corbusier.

R. K.: *The Nemausus.*

K. A.: There's the name. Still, successful cases remain seldom. The cynical paradox of the failure of social housing is that while colonial territory was an experimental field for young Western architects, the perfect place for building and coming up with new ideas and offering modern things, it's the people from this same colonial territory who came to live in Western housing complexes after independence movements (at least in France, Italy, Germany, Holland, Belgium, etc). And I find it important not to lose track of this history; from Le Corbusier's *The Voyage to the East*, Ghardaïa, and all architectural projects built in former colonies, to the construction of social housing blocks. I also wonder what it would take to revive an utopian project like the *Cité Radieuse* in light of the failure of social housing.

R. K.: I guess you're right to highlight this aspect. It is even more complex when you know that not only did people go to live there but also that architects who had been working in colonial territories came back to metropolitan France as well. They're the same people. Let's name Candilis, for example. He worked with Écochard in Morocco, then came back in the 1950s and kept on building in Île-de-France, Marseilles and other places.

Let's talk about the Parisian suburb of Sarcelles... It was designed by two architects with different yet academic styles: Boileau and Labourdette. When you have a close look at some buildings in Sarcelles, you'll find them very interesting on both a formal and material point of view: some areas there, especially the smallest buildings, make use of stone masonry. This is also why, despite all modifications, these buildings still show a bit of dignity: thanks to well-set stones and a good design. There are more experimental and also more formalist areas in Sarcelles, with a more pronounced technical aspect. In the 1950-60s, taller buildings with filling panels looked elegant in France. In the film *Any Number can Win*, you can see Jean Gabin take a train at Gare du Nord and get off at what would become the Garges-Sarcelles station. So he gets off and heads home where his wife is waiting for him, for he just got out of jail. Sarcelles is under construction and he walks around the

neighborhood. You have to have watched the first minutes of the film to picture the shock this place represented. I've always wondered why it's treated in such a negative way. Sociology played a part there, as well as changes in population; actually, a lot of things can explain it. Contemporary artists such as you and Cyprien Gaillard and Matthieu Pernot, who work on these matters, are constantly asking: did we even have a look at these buildings before condemning them?

K. A.: I lived for about five years (from my teens to early adult years) in one of those small stone buildings near Sarcelles station. You're right; they still have dignity. Yet, to me there's a great difference between those small stone buildings, structures by people like Fernand Pouillon in Pantin, and constructions by architects who asked the right questions, had a sense of space and saw things the right way... I remember moving from the social housing block in Garges-lès-Gonesse, that I left at the age of seventeen for my sister's flat in a small building in Sarcelles. It just changed my life. Every time I happen to pass by Garges, I go and check my old neighborhood: places like *Les Doucettes* or *La Muette* that are extremely poor despite plans for renovation or decorating. All of this never dragged *La Muette*, for example, out of poverty. I think one of the greatest problems is to have created mushroom cities in the middle of nowhere: they were isolated. When I grew up there, the Louvre was free one day a week; on Sundays, I think. To me, this meant more than venturing inside Ali Baba's cave, this place was like another world... When I began visiting the Louvre, I understood the necessity of moving. Plus, I soon realized I was considered the black sheep among my friends in the block; I was the one who didn't do things like others did, even though I didn't always see it at the time. Looking back, I would say one of the biggest failures of the housing complex plan was to create slums isolated from one another, where entire populations were verticalized and given an illusion of superiority. That, too, is the modern illusion. Whole cities have been piled up on limited areas just like in Goussainville (les Grandes Bornes) or Gennevilliers; these places are in the middle of nowhere or surrounded by fields. I don't know if you could quote people who constructed completely isolated blocks like those... I think social trouble in France, and in many other European countries, is mostly due to poverty in both material and cultural programs. And it's the isolation we're talking about that causes cultural poverty, the fact people are piled upon one another, yet out of each other's reach.

R. K.: You are right to find nuances, but I would like to come back to a few points. First, the serial attempts at rehabilitating, modifying and insulating the buildings. Nowadays, we scorn the concept of social housing without discussing how these projects were looked after. And often, what made some of them so awful is the way they were handled, more than their design.

I agree about the isolation. The urban point of view was a major problem considering how these areas were managed and what became of them. Nevertheless, one thing that is also criticized is their aesthetic and shape. This bothers me. They were built following the fashion of the time in the shapes people fancied then. These architects created shapes that matched the mood of the times, shapes you could also find in things people used every day. Repetition,

for instance, was a positive value, as it is present in kinetic art. When you see reproductions of these housing developments under construction, in popular press for example, you understand that they carried a positive image. I'm not saying it wasn't a mistake and a misunderstanding to confuse people's lives with such aesthetics - I'm simply taking these things into consideration. But I think we forgot these aspects a little too fast.

K. A.: To me, this is due to the fact that today, people almost systematically make the connection between the social failure of this modern project and its physicality. Architects who designed social housing complexes answered two kinds of needs: a political one and an economical one. In addition to that, the assimilation of cultures and populations inside these buildings happened through a grid system, which shaped the aesthetic of their facades, whether you fancy them or not. Once again, I follow you on this point, I'm quite sensitive to this style. But still, from an ethical perspective, what you should consider is that when you come from a village in Maghreb, Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and your name is Mamadou, son of so-and-so, and you move in a building where your identity is summed up to a mailbox (looking exactly the same as the flat and building you now live in), you suddenly drown; your subject is diluted in some sort of superior order turning you not into the subject but into the object of the environment you live in. I believe our society totally missed what matters in construction: the essential importance of not severing links, not separating populations. According to Levi-Strauss, "an isolated culture that never exchanges with another, cannot evolve", and this idea has been completely ignored in the town planning we are talking about.

R. K.: On that point I agree, of course. Meanwhile, I think it should be separated from responsibility issues, which lay on another level than the designer's. This question you are asking should also be a concern these days. Every current plan launched by the the French agency of urban renovation includes a magic phrase: to open up. And when you want to get rid of a housing project, you say it's locked. This has absolutely nothing to do with the isolation you talk about, since a given area could still be unsuccessful even with access and ways to connect. It's completely different. Perhaps I'm being too positive about that era and what was done therein light of the present situation which, to me is blind doesn't handle incoming issues the way it should. We are currently bringing people to believe that demolition can settle matters, and I think this is seldom true. Nevertheless I do share your opinion about isolation.

K. A.: I guess the time in which we live, whose technical and technological innovation grants us fantastic ways of moving and sharing every day is, paradoxically, a time of great isolation, too. We are now living in an age of fast culture and the problem with everything being available is that we get isolated from the past; we lose the continuity of things and histories. And this notion of continuity enables us to understand and appreciate a lot of things. It might even let us find an aesthetic and ethical interest in the lines of some social housing projects, and see this

architecture as a reflection of a given era. Still, no one ever talks about the symbolism of Écochard's project in Casablanca, in Morocco, but rather how his architects (George Candilis, Vladimir Bodiansky, etc.) tried to find new things while many social housing projects later ended up as failures or at least did not take the innovation of the vertical city into consideration. What was the matter then - was it economical? Did buildings under French Protectorate like the ones in Casablanca cost more than some blocks like *La Cité des 4000*, in la Courneuve? What really happened there? Was it due to a rupture between those times and places?

R. K.: There are still architects who kept on with this research and experimental practice in colonized territories. They came back with what they learned and tried to continue their work in social housing projects in the West. Candilis is one example. When he came back from Morocco, part of his work was really close to the experiments with ATBAT. His first achievements in metropolitan France were built with that knowledge. Architectural production then came under the influence of a sort of standardization, and so the possibilities for experimentation diminished. I'm currently studying an operation called "the million" for example. The goal was to build 50-square-meter two-bedroom apartments with less than a million francs in the middle of the 1950s. This standardization greatly reduced the potential of African experiments. Architects were forced to apply their knowledge to extremely restrictive standards. The few remains of African experiments in housing were hard to spot then. You have to know your trade to see all the tricks still used to be able to move around or enjoy views, but expression was far less pronounced. These experimental practices were finally overtaken by financial restriction and another reality that had to be dealt with: that of quantity.

Translated from French by Joël Mallet

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