

A new era, for a post-capitalist architecture?

What is the commonality between :

- The "natural death" of 2700 migrant workers on construction sites in Qatar.
- A golden palace at €2.35 billion for French justice.
- Giant airport erected to the glory of the authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party.
- An apartment rented 10000\$ per month in Manhattan.
- The construction of a foundation dedicated to luxury at 114285€ per square meter in Paris.
- A Californian headquarters visible from the stratosphere.
- And a construction sector responsible for 40% of the world's CO2 emissions?

This list is not exhaustive, but let's leave this question open for a little while, we will come back to it a little later.

Because for the moment, if frugality were an Olympic discipline and if the world of contemporary architecture were a nation, the latter, although accustomed to competitions, would certainly not be invited to compete, we could read in the verdict of the said rejection: « still too harmful influence on society ».

But the architectural community would not be the only one to be refused access to compete.

The Olympic Committee would also reject the applications of a majority of actors at the helm of the construction sector, those responsible for public and institutional policies, the financial community, real estate development, industrial lobbies, communicators, etc. The Olympic Committee would also reject the applications of a majority of actors in the construction sector, those responsible for public and institutional policies, the financial community, real estate development, industrial lobbies, communicators, etc.

All of these people would probably not have the opportunity to brandish the flame in an excited stadium, at least not yet and not in the current state of affairs.

But why on earth this subliminal image?

Because acting frugally is not an easy thing to do in the construction industry. But, also because « Architecture is a combat sport » *once titled a French expert in cement product placement*, this is certainly not totally false, but it is not totally true, either. In the same way as the urban planner, the landscaper, the landscape designer, etc., the architect chooses the battle he wants to wage. This professional, indispensable to the maintenance of the relations of domination of the ruling class and the perpetuation of the capitalist model, is sometimes subject to chronic schizophrenia. By wanting to work for the good of the community and in the service of the subjects while gaining prestige and heritage in the service of the prince.

Contemporary architecture, which represents a kind of constructive synthesis of the world, is in many ways a formidable indicator of the state of health of our society. By mirror effect, it is therefore not surprising to note that the professions that produce it are subject to certain deviations. But the harm produced on society by the construction sector is not only the cause of a systemic failure or the result of questionable state and political choices. Nor is this evil the cause of the dispossession of original know-how or of the increasing weight of regulatory and technical constraints encountered by the profession.

Indeed, this evil is above all of an intimate nature, it is intrinsically linked to the responsibility of each individual, to the responsibility of each stakeholder in a project. « Tell me who you work for and I'll tell you who you are », a somewhat simplistic adage on paper, but nevertheless quite revealing for our « little study of trends in the field ».

Indeed, I choose to contribute to such and such a project with full knowledge of the causes. I know the impact of my decisions and the impact of my design on the entire « production » chain. I know the impact of my socio-political positioning on the territory where I intervene and, ultimately, my influence on society as a whole.

It's all a question of choice;

_Unfortunately, there are authoritarian regimes in the world that kill, oppress and violate the individual liberties of entire populations. I am thinking in particular of China and certain countries in the Arab world. I choose to put my image, my skills and those of my agency at the service of a construction project for one of these regimes. So be it, but this does not mean that through my project I am offering a form of progressive liberalism to decision-makers in search of democracy. This decision is more akin to cynical behavior and signing a pact with the devil. After all, I choose in full consciousness to be at the service of repressive powers. I promote their influence and then accept their financial rewards, only to end up swelling my portfolio with « exotic references ». Far from being a rigid, binary approach that tries to distinguish between good and bad sponsors, it is a lack of integrity that I am talking about. But why see evil everywhere, you may ask? A good architecture « always » has the capacity to positively influence its environment, even in the worst socio-political contexts, it is historically proven...

_History also shows that « big projects » have excited people since the dawn of time. I make the choice to honor one of them, or rather one of these financial investments. Moreover, often with a cultural vocation, I am honoring this order that will cost taxpayers several hundred million euros. An order that will absorb whole sections of a territory's budget and will give me the opportunity to produce « the » much-desired heritage symbol. I haven't really done the community a service by offering an identity anchor for a place that originally lacked one. I have devastated part of the local social fabric and have self-assigned a duty of remembrance by placing an object in the landscape commemorating the power of my sponsor. Instead, I gave in to a form of egocentrism and enslavement. Like many (too many) before me, I imposed « my » monumentality on a territory, the expression of an irrepressible desire to mark my time and my passage among men. But as the sociologist Jean-Pierre Garnier puts it so well: « *I would at most leave a trace in space if I didn't leave a trace in history* ». So, what is the point of persisting longer in the cult of man's eternal work?

_Speaking of works, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, and I quote: « *Architecture is fixed music* », how can we not adhere to this poetic image? Except that, in reality, some architects have the unfortunate tendency to make a lot (too much) of noise in an urban context that is already inaudible. Me, I do my part, I choose to bring an aesthetic dimension, a form, a singular materiality to my building. Here again, I wish to produce a « symbol », if possible identifiable thanks to its avant-gardism. But why not! If this « symbol » is not overpriced, energy-consuming and ostentatious to the eye of the passer-by and an entire neighborhood. Because, indeed, and all too often, my approach is not really a gift of creativity for the common

good and for the « diversity » of a place. Because indeed, and all too often, my approach is not really a gift of creativity for the common good and for the « mix » of a place. By acting in this way, I rather act as an empty memory through gesticulation and I affirm a little more the speculative character of my profession through my project, which has become an object. I install in the landscape a consumer product on a large scale, for communication purposes for my client, but above all to feed the panel of my references that will ultimately constitute, « my work ». Finally, isn't « this product placement » an additional representation of a civilizational narcissism of which I am (also) the vector, or even the puppet?

_Other creative geniuses find it « cool » to see a future where we could wander around in a pretty, generously green Smart City, have our new cell phone delivered via a drone and drive around in a pretty, autonomous car (carbon neutral, of course). Finally, the vision of a ghetto of the rich optimized by big data. So, I'm an architect, I have an « innovative spirit »! So I choose to work on this type of project. More by calculation than by real conviction, it's above all because my forecast shows me that this type of order is going to make me earn a tidy sum of money in the future! Naturally, I'm wallowing in the chimeras of Greentech to satisfy my appetite and that of this formidable « new industrial era ». The latest model imagined by a capitalism ever more in search of influence. Isn't this a bias aimed only at generating new industrial markets and further accentuating the advent of an Orwellian world? In any case, it is certainly not the state of mind required to face in a relevant way the challenges of our time and those to come. But the future will show it sooner or later, and hopefully it won't be too late?

_For now, like any company, I have to pay my bills, my employees, my travel expenses, etc., nothing incredible you will tell me. Except when I pay them with petrodollars from the Gulf countries because I built them their latest (no pun intended) « pharaonic » project. Apart from feeding my turnover, I have also contributed to the fact that thousands of workers, migrants, uprooted from their families, paid three euros a day and working in deplorable sanitary conditions have come to lose at best, their dignity, at worst, their lives on my sites. I know, however, that this type of project does not help these authoritarian regimes to gain access to democracy and poor men to a decent source of income. But it's always the same old story, from slavery in ancient Egypt to the present day, so why not continue this long tradition of domination? After all, the money is there, and even if it's at the expense of humans working closely or remotely on my project, I have bills to pay! But maybe if I'm not a human-centered person. Should I be more demanding from the start in terms of the choice of my clients? Not all money is good to take, especially when this money is earned at the expense of my « peers ».

_Speaking of money, on a global market scale, the numbers speak for themselves, the construction sector occupies a very large shopwindow. For my part, I have an agency and I choose to sell some of my products to my clients, who are often very wealthy, of course. I can offer to cut open the desert mountain to accommodate the « resort » of a wealthy Saudi clientele. To build the gleaming airport. To build the mixed program of a shopping mall and office floors (and in wood, please, it's more consensual!). I can produce the equipment to the glory of the listed group. Propose the high-performance concrete facade to dress the museum or even create the district of standardized housing according to the prescriptions of industrial lobbies. I agree to contribute to these « markets », while society expects me to radically change my construction practice. But don't let that stop you! In all schizophrenia, my agency

and I publicly sign a charter in order to do everything possible to face the Climate, Social and Ecological Emergency. I don't know if the term hypocrisy is the most appropriate in this case, but to plead for a low carbon development that respects living things while continuing to happily concrete my environment is either an abdication or pure madness (or maybe both?).

_Other sickly behaviors include megalomania, one of the definitions of which is: « *Pathological behavior characterized by an excessive desire for fame and power* ». I'm not telling you anything new when I say that some famous (and less famous) men are dangerously ill with it. Indeed, some choose to put their genius at the service of projects with a particular flavor. This is my case when I build a Californian headquarters, visible from the stratosphere. Or when I take part in the pathetic competition for the phallism of towers in our metropolises. Ditto, when I, a « visionary », offer my services to create the « master plan » of planet Earth. Obviously, I have not yet understood that after a certain age, it is time to take off my Superman disguise and dress a little more « soberly » (it is not that we do not appreciate buildings in the shape of mountains but ...). Wouldn't it be time to break definitively with the megalomania of some men (if not to cure it)? To break with these thoughts and projects purged of all rationality? To base our present on the waste of the common good. To break the already fragile link with what will constitute tomorrow's heritage. Wouldn't that be to build our future on dangerous demonstrations of « greatness » and individual development? To the pure and simple detriment of collective logic?

It is all a question of choice, therefore, of individual responsibility and, of course, integrity. But enough of the litany. Let us return instead to our main question, what is the common point between all our initial enumerations?

> The expression of a new era!

It is clear that the ogre of neo-liberal architecture and its followers have reached a dangerous breaking point that will have to be healed. This bodes well for the future, because it is an opportunity for a global model to be urgently rethought.

Despite all these « tasks » in the history of construction and in the era of king capital, which makes our deviances all the more understandable, we will have to come to terms with our heritage and move forward. After all, we have seen others, the art of building was born with the world, the builders and their mistakes with it. Most people will not become followers of Gandhi or Lao Tzu, and we will not be able to help some men to tear themselves away from their own contemplation, or from their heritage, or even from their desire to mark eternity with their projects.

Nor will we overestimate the capacity of architecture to positively influence the life of the city or even seek our salvation in the ideology of spatiality. Changing the city to change life is a vision that no longer has much reason to exist in a sector where the cult of personality, technical utilitarianism and industrial productivism are devouring everything, block by block.

A sector that accounts for 40% of global CO2 emissions, that plunders the physical resources of the planet and contributes ever more to widening the gap between the poor and the rich. This sector has a responsibility to change its practices. It's an understatement to say this

because it is indeed an ecocide that is at work and the « big » architectural firms are partly responsible for it!

There would still be a lot more to say. But once we have tried to determine the origins of the evil, and pointed the finger at bad practices, it would be appropriate to be forceful in our proposals.

More concretely, is it possible to make the construction sector evolve « in depth » towards practices that are respectful of the planet and its inhabitants? Is a real « new deal » for architects and the construction sector conceivable? Could we reconcile our current system based on growth, productivism, comfort for the richest and at any price? With more desirable objectives which are, the reduction of environmental pollution, the reduction of social inequalities, an equitable distribution of wealth and a reasoned use of resources?

Also, and on a planetary scale, could we imagine that the building and public works sector would (finally) do its part to reduce the global temperature rise to well below 2°C (the objective of the Paris agreement). This would lead it to reduce its global greenhouse gas emissions by a factor of three by 2050. By maintaining a growth-based model. While meeting the vital needs of 10 billion people by 2050, particularly in terms of quality of life and employment?

As things stand, the answer is no in all cases. Beyond the behavior of certain men, it is well and truly physical constraints that prevent any possible conciliation between: a contemporary architecture at the service of capitalist power (with all the excesses that this implies) and the stakes of our century in terms of the management of the climatic, social and ecological emergency. These stakes which, as we know, are directly linked to our lifestyles and behaviors. It is physically impossible to reconcile a trajectory below 2°C of global warming with a model based essentially on growth (see OECD figures, The Shift Project reports, etc.).

The more we produce architecture, buildings, urban spaces, the more energy we consume, the more growth increases, the more heritage increases, the more GDP increases, the more prestige for some people increases...but unfortunately CO₂ also increases and so do the social and environmental disasters we are experiencing with it!

The economy (including Greentech's economy), greenhouse gas emissions and the social disasters that accompany them are evolving on the same curve. Staying on a model of economic growth and resource extraction, therefore, continuing to build and produce a whole bunch of projects and objects, is to deepen our socio-environmental debt even further.

We've been told this for a long time; remember a certain Club of Rome in 1968...

The more we grow and build, the more we increase our dependence on fossil resources. The more vulnerable we will be when these resources become scarcer (which has already begun), it is inevitable. Perpetual growth will not allow us to eclipse the sun to keep us warm! (Sorry to disappoint you, potential admirer of geoengineering).

The world at its end and the laws of physics are impenetrable. A slowdown in growth is in any case already at work and we are going to suffer it. No wonder when we know that to meet the current needs of humanity, we would actually need 1.6 planet Earths. A new era, a new deal, that's all well and good, but at what price and in what way?

Should we enter into liberticidal evolutionary schemes to respond to the planet's challenges?

Probably yes.

With a view to slowing growth chosen rather than suffered. It seems to me that starting by defining precisely what "our essential needs" are would be a good start. The world currently has around 3.5 million active architects who "produce" the architecture we need, but also the architecture we don't have, where we have never needed it.

Do we need the Smart City? A brand-new natural history museum? The three-hundred-meter-high tower? The €12 billion airport? A gleaming philharmonic orchestra? A €580 million technological toy to reprocess our waste? From the luxury villa? Demonstrations of singularity within the large real estate complexes? etc. etc. etc.

Because to avoid making an already critical situation worse. Future action will inevitably have to be at the crossroads of voluntary degrowth (and on all levels: construction, mobility, leisure, heritage, etc.) and the social and solidarity economy. Rehabilitate the already existing heritage, promote short supply chains and the reuse of materials. To set up a cooperative economy, to develop local sectors and know-how on a regional scale. Etc.

The large agencies (and the smaller ones too) and the so-called "stars of the profession", have more than ever the duty to set an example, to students of architecture, engineering and urban planning schools, etc., and especially to the public opinion. But do they even want to? Indeed, it seems to me that, if they do not want to change their own practices, perhaps it is time for those who have abdicated and whose work harms society to change course and consider retraining (or early retirement)?

Indeed, the current 7.5 billion inhabitants and the 10 billion to come will need much more than architecture to live with dignity.

Perhaps it is time to consider a complete and multilateral overhaul of the programs taught in architecture and engineering schools around the world?

Perhaps it is time to act in real cooperation and to set up a true international consortium between schools, agencies, companies and states that do and think architecture on a daily basis?

Perhaps it is time to put an end to the competition of professionals through the logic of competitions and public contracts which develop individualism and considerably harm the logic of collective interest and the construction of a more united world?

Perhaps it is time to finally turn away from the vain, narcissistic and prestigious architecture of power whose only considerations are aesthetic and economic?

Perhaps it is time to react in order to avoid the decline of architectural doctrines and the dissolution of criticism in public space?

But perhaps it would be time to do much less architecture, but in a fairer, more sober and respectful manner of the living?

Nicolas Abdelkader

"We can only speak of architecture when the architect, the mason and the occupant are a unit, that is to say one and the same person. Everything else is not architecture, it is only a criminal action that has become form. Man must regain the critical and creative function that he has lost and without which he ceases to exist as a man! In order to save functional architecture from moral ruin, it will be necessary to spread a decomposition product on clean glass walls and smooth concrete surfaces so that the fungus of mould can settle in. And it is only as a result of the creative mould, from which we have much to learn, that new and wonderful architecture will be born".

Friendensreich Hundertwasser, "Mould Manifesto against Rationalism in Architecture".