

«I'm a storyteller»

Interview with Jean-Louis Cohen

Marta Sequeira

msequeira@autonoma.pt

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Centro de Estudos sobre a Mudança Socioeconómica e o Território (DINÂMIA'CET), Lisboa, Portugal

CEACT/UAL – Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, Portugal

Rute Figueiredo

rfigueiredo@autonoma.pt

Escola Superior Artística do Porto (ESAP), Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo (CEAA), Porto, Portugal

CEACT/UAL – Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, Portugal

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*Jean-Louis Cohen was brought up during the Cold War in Paris, between the portraits of Einstein and Stalin, in a family of left-wing scientists. Regardless of having become an architect, a different professional career of his parents, they had inevitably marked his future. The rigorous way in which he later worked as an architectural historian is symptomatic of this, as is the way in which he maintained a heterodox left-wing ideology that accompanied him throughout his life. He studied in Paris at a time when it was possible to attend a lecture by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the philosopher Michel Foucault or the writer Roland Barthes within a 500-metre radius. But it was Jean Prouvé's classes — who was, after all, a metalworker and self-taught architect — that made him realise that architecture is, above all, an activity of action and of construction. He started travelling at that time. Firstly, to visit works of architecture, and later to reveal them to the world (a task he never abandoned). With a unique critical sense, Cohen has spent his life dismantling some of the false and clear ideas on which Western historiography has been based. He has organised some of the most extraordinary architectural exhibitions of the 21st century, such as *Architecture in Uniform: Designing and Building for the Second World War* (2011), *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes* (2013), *Modernity: Promise or Menace?* (2014) or the most recent *Building a new New World: Amerikanizm in Russian Architecture* (2020). Jean-Louis Cohen was not just one of the most important contemporary architectural historians. He was much more than that. Given his eclectic nature he impersonated the architectural historian of contemporaneity himself. He left us unexpectedly on 7 August 2023. When we conducted this interview, we were far from knowing that it would be one of his last, nor that it would take place just*

before he gave one of his last lectures, as part of the PhD in Contemporary Architecture at the Autonomous University of Lisbon. In this interview, he portrayed himself as a storyteller, underscoring that his research evolves through the narrative act — whether in a classroom, an exhibition, or a book. The various mediums that characterised his prolific output were essentially tools for testing his thoughts and advancing toward his overarching goal: the pursuit of knowledge.

Thank you for accepting our interview request. How was your academic journey as an architectural student at the *École Spécial d'Architecture* as well as your experience at *Unité Pédagogique n.º 6* in Paris? What was your approach as a student of architecture during those formative years?

If we're really going back to the beginning of things, it's worth noting that my initial predisposition was towards a scientific path, in accordance with my family tradition. However, during my high school years, my growing passion for cinema and the broader realm of art led me to enrol in the *École Spéciale d'Architecture*. This institution, established in the late 19th century under the influence of Viollet-le-Duc, stood as a parallel and notably progressive institution in comparison to the *École des Beaux-Arts*. The *École Spéciale d'Architecture*, placed at the time a strong emphasis on hygienic and the scientific dimensions of architecture. It was a pioneering institution, and it seemed a more objective alternative to the *Beaux-Arts*, which — even before '68 — had long been mired in confusion.





Were there any significant individuals who left a strong and lasting impact during the time you've spent at this institution?

While I was at *École Spéciale*, the professors were not particularly influential. But during that period, I began working during the summer months on construction sites in Marseille (in the construction of prefabricated schools), and I began exploring the works of Le Corbusier and Gaudi, who served as a source of inspiration for me. I also delved into a significant amount of reading, with a focus on American and Italian architectural literature. I sought wisdom in the translated works of Bruno Zevi, Robert Venturi and Kevin Lynch, which were being disseminated in France. The year of 1968 placed me at the epicentre of a significant movement. At that time, the *École Spéciale* undertook a remarkable transformation. We welcomed a new director, Mark Emery, who also happened to be the editor of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. With his leadership, the school underwent a profound change, ushering in influential figures like Paul Virilio, Anatole Kopp, and numerous sociologists connected with Henri Lefebvre. The institution was revitalised and became a very active centre of intellectual debate. Nevertheless, as time went on, I began to find the school's focus somewhat limiting. Subsequently, I transitioned to an emerging educational institution that had branched out from the *École des Beaux-Arts*: the *Unité Pédagogique d'Architecture n.º 6 (UPA n.º 6)*, which is now the *École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-La Villette*. It was a big mess, but also highly enriching, characterised by a diverse group of individuals and fascinating educators. Our academic environment was a captivating mix of passionate activists like Roland Castro, alongside individuals with more conservative viewpoints, such as Jean Faugeron. We were privileged to learn from pioneering figures in ecological architecture, including the dynamic couple Georges and Jeanne-Marie Alexandroff, and were guided by a structural engineering genius named David George Emmerich. Moreover, we were fortunate to have great minds in the social sciences contributing to our education. Landscape architecture was a subject taught by none other than Bernard Lassus. Nonetheless, the most transformative experience during those years was our weekly sojourns, often in the company of friends, to attend the lectures by Jean Prouvé at the *Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers*. This institution was not primarily an architectural school; rather, it functioned as a continuing education technical school. Jean Prouvé had an exceptional ability to convey the essence of architecture through vivid three-hour lectures in which he would illustrate, on a 10-metre blackboard, how to design and build a house, an aeroplane or a car. This experience instilled in us the understanding that architecture was fundamentally about tangible, practical creation. Paris at that time was a big playground. Within a 500-metre radius, you could go to a seminar by Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault or Roland Barthes: you had easy access to these people. Also, I started being interested in going to places to see buildings. Naturally, I had to experience the work of Le Corbusier. I made a trip to Barcelona in 1968 and a trip to Germany in 1969. My architectural exploration extended to England, where I nurtured a profound passion for the work of James Stirling, whom I consider to be the most interesting architect of his generation. My architectural journey also took me to Italy and started being interested in writing history.



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What sparked your interest in exploring architectural history and writing about it?

In 1973, I completed my diploma. During my time at UPA n.º 6, there was no formal emphasis on Design. For my thesis, I crafted a work titled “Is there such a thing as working-class architecture?” This thesis delved into the intersection of architecture and politics, offering a provocative perspective on the subject matter. It caught the attention of Manfredo Tafuri and his group, who invited me to Venice for further discussions and collaboration. I had the opportunity then to meet Anatole Kopp, who had published a foundational book, in 1967, titled *Ville et Révolution* which explored the experiences of the Russian avant-garde. Inspired by Kopp's work, I embarked on journeys to Russia and Italy very early in my career, even before completing my formal education. My interest in Italy was driven not only by architectural reasons but also by political ones. I was actively involved in the French Communist Party and served as the head of their Architecture Study Committee. However, I leaned more towards the Italian approach, which was less Stalinist and more revisionist and democratic in its mindset. For instance, at the age of 24, I wrote my first piece on contemporary architecture, focusing on the 1973 Triennale in Milan, featuring an architecture section curated by Aldo Rossi. This article was published in the monthly magazine for intellectuals associated with the Communist Party. In 1973, I began making regular trips to Moscow, engaging with individuals from the avant-garde and producing written works on the subject. Simultaneously, my interest in design persisted, and in parallel I undertook urban design projects. In 1982, I collaborated with Alexandre Chemetov, a landscape architect and a friend of mine, for the Parc de La Villette competition. We came very close to winning,

and had the results been different, my career might have taken a completely different direction.

Did you consciously choose to pursue a career in architectural history over architectural practice or did it happen by chance?

For a period, I engaged in both architectural practice and writing. At some point, maybe I had more fun writing — and more success too. My teaching journey initially began in Nantes and later in Paris, shortly after graduating in 1975. Between 1979 and 1983, I had a unique experience working at the Ministry of Housing, where I oversaw the architectural research program. It was fun giving money to architects and not so much to schools to do research in history and theory. I took the initiative to reform and institutionalise the research program, instigating systematic research across a range of architectural fields while maintaining my teaching commitments. After the La Villette competition and a couple of others, I found increasing success in publishing. My experiences in Russia and Germany played pivotal roles in my publications and contributed to this success. I was close to people running architecture at the *Centre Georges Pompidou* which led to my first exhibition there (*L'Espace urbain en URSS 1917-1978*) in 1978. This exhibition was focused on contemporary Soviet architecture and was co-curated by Alexeï Gutnov, a Russian who headed one of the most intriguing and innovative groups within the new Russian architectural *avant-garde*. In 1979, I became part of the team responsible for an exhibition titled *Paris-Moscou: 1900-1939*. This experience proved to be highly influential. Additionally, I published a book in which I invited Manfredo Tafuri and Marco de Michelis to collaborate on topics related to Russia. In parallel, I started slowly to work on Le Corbusier. By that point, at the young age of 30, I had already achieved the rank of almost a full professor.



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Before completing your doctorate? Was there any influence on your academic career by the fact that you've presented a Ph.D. thesis?

It was worth noting that, at that time, there were no formal doctorate programs in architecture, and they were not widely seen as or of value. The decision to pursue a Ph.D. came out from my belief that it would be a means of intellectual growth. I did contemplate pursuing a Ph.D. with a focus on the sociological and political aspects of architecture, but then, a series of events unfolded. I made the decision to discontinue my affiliation with the French Communist Party, as it was experiencing a concerning period marked by new forms of sectarianism. I started attending classes taught by Hubert Damisch at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, an art historian with a broad range of interests, including architecture. I worked on my Ph.D. with him who, interestingly, never read it, not even before my thesis defence.

How did the US academic environment crucially shape your research path?

I was starting to contemplate opportunities for teaching in the United States. I had many friends from the *Beaux-Arts* who were studying with Louis Kahn, in Philadelphia. But my move to the US didn't occur until 1981. My political affiliations as a "red" made it particularly difficult to get an American visa, but after a while, during the summer of 1981, I finally obtained it and made my way to New York and Los Angeles. I already knew Kenneth Frampton, Diana Agrest, Mario Gandelsonas and Anthony Vidler (who invited me to give my first lecture at Princeton). I also travelled to Los Angeles where I met and spent a substantial amount of time with Frank Gehry. In 1985 I started giving lectures and seminars regularly within the Ph.D. program at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and pursued as a scholar at the National Gallery in Washington. I had the opportunity to teach for one semester at Harvard, and for two semesters at Columbia University. Marvin Trachtenberg, a Renaissance historian, reached out to inquire if I would be interested in a position at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. Initially, I declined the offer, but further on, I accepted the position on a half-time basis, a commitment that spanned a decade. Throughout this period, I continued to teach in architecture schools and later at the Institute of Urban Planning in Paris.

How did you come to create the architecture doctoral program in architecture in France?

As mentioned, during my first trip to the US in 1981 I was responsible for the architectural research programme of the Ministry of Housing. It became evident to me that a meaningful connection between research and education could not be established without architects properly trained as doctorates. For this reason, I conducted a comprehensive inquiry into existing architectural Ph.D. programs, visiting institutions such as MIT, Columbia, and Yale. I compiled my findings and penned a memo advocating for the creation of doctoral programs in architecture. Around 1987, I remained actively engaged in developing the then called *Certificat d'études approfondies*, creating three one-year post-professional programs. The first was on urban architecture, the second on the oriental city, and the third on domestic architecture. It wasn't until around 1990 that we managed to win the battle and convince the ministry that establishing architectural doctorates was a legitimate endeavour. But we faced a significant obstacle: the schools of architecture did not have the authority to confer such a degree; it was an exclusive domain of universities. For this reason, we joined forces with five prominent schools of



architecture, each contributing with their best faculty members. We combined the three *Certificat d'études approfondies* in urban, oriental, and domestic architecture into one comprehensive program. We then approached the Town Planning Institute at the University of Paris 8, which was affiliated with one or two of these certificates. We proposed a collaborative approach: the schools of architecture would create the doctoral program, while the university would provide the degree. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, as the university's courses were under-subscribed, and we could guide our students into them. This collaborative program was named *Le projet architectural et urbain, théories et dispositifs* and was co-led by three individuals to legitimise it: Yanis Tsiomis, Monique Eleb and myself. And we had people like Bruno Fortier, Pierre Clément, Pierre Pinon, Bernard Huet and Philippe Andre: a fantastic dream team of people. From 1991 to 2005, we operated this program, which produced 400 post-professional master's graduates and 80 doctorates. Many of these individuals, including several from outside France, have gone on to hold influential positions in various institutions and have played pivotal roles in architectural education. This initiative proved to be a transformative experience for an entire generation.

When we envisioned the creation of the Ph.D. Program in Architecture at the Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa (UAL), we've noticed that many traditional architecture Ph.D. programs, particularly in Portugal, tended to avoid reflection on contemporary issues. In response, we've aimed to establish a Ph.D. program that addresses this gap and we've appropriately named it as a Ph.D. in Contemporary Architecture. Your recent work has been dedicated to the study of both the recent past, including people like Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, as well as the present, including architects like Frank Gehry and Paulo Mendes da Rocha, who are either alive or have recently passed away. Given this focus, what do you think will be the specificities inherent to the history of the present moment? What advice would you offer to our Ph.D. students as they embark on their research journeys?

Fundamentally, dealing with human beings adds layers of complexity to the research process. Working with living witnesses, who represent the oral component of architecture, holds great importance, because archives can only provide a limited perspective. Much like in psychoanalysis, research involves a dynamic akin to *transference* and *contra-transference*. In psychoanalysis, transference signifies the patient's connection with the analyst, driven by an emotional state that compels them to share experiences. Conversely, contra-transference reflects the analyst's interest in the patient, leading to receptivity and the expression of crucial insights to shape the patient's perspective. Similarly, in research, contra-transference is very important — the relationship a researcher establishes with the subject of study. Even topics as repugnant as Nazism or Stalinism, for instance, remain valid objects of study. Nonetheless, it's crucial to inquire on the purpose of the research and to understand your own position within it.



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Can you provide us with some examples of the importance of interacting with living witnesses?

I was able to do some interviews in the 1980s, as part of a Franco-German research project that I co-lead with my colleague Hartmut Frank, Professor at the Hafen-City University of Hamburg. Since the 1980s, we have been working on the notion of occupation in architecture — that of the Germans in France in the 1940s and that of the French in Germany during the post-war period. This project fostered several publications and was at the origin of *Interférences/Interferenzen Architecture: Germany and France 1800-2000*, an exhibition held at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Strasbourg 10 years ago, in 2013. The wartime experience for architects and how people deal with architecture was at the centre of our interests and, in the 1980s, it was still possible to meet former Nazi officers, architects working for the Nazis, or former French people who were active during the occupation of Germany. In 2011, I published *Architectural in Uniform: Designing and Building for the Second World War*. In this book, I left aside the history of the French totalitarian State during the German occupation, commonly known as the Vichy regime. More recently, when I finally was able to start working on an extended edition, the witnesses and protagonists of the Vichy time were no longer with us. And it sometimes becomes very dry to not have any living witnesses to illustrate the story. No one tells you who liked whom, who hated whom, who slept with whom, who had lunch with whom, how decisions were made, how people were included or excluded from some decision processes. At the same time, you have to be careful. I subscribe to what my old friend Tafuri defended, relating history to a detective novel.



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One needs to resort to triangulation...

Yes, it's crucial to rely on witnesses but also on contradictory discourses in order to pursue evidence in the search for knowledge. The absence of witnesses, indeed, introduces some challenges in the research work. Conversely, the presence of witnesses or protagonists can be misleading if you lack sufficient background information and context. Interviews, if conducted without adequate knowledge, may lead to deceptive outcomes, where the information obtained is limited to what the researcher brings to the table. Moreover, it's essential to keep a high level of critical scrutiny, because it is not surprising that original protagonists are further contaminated by the critic's perspectives or later interpretations. And I can give you two Frank Gehry's related examples. The first one, was when I asked Gehry to speak about the Beekman Tower, built in New York at the now called 8 Spruce Street. He mentioned: "when I started working on it, I was reminded of Bernini's Santa Teresa sculpture in Rome". However, it becomes apparent that Gehry incorporated the art historian Alvin Levin's statement that remarked, "Oh Frank, this looks like Bernini". Gehry, is now 94 years old and mentally fresh, but he is really convinced that he has taken it from Bernini. That's why you must remain very careful. The second instance occurred when I asserted, "When one looks at your house in Santa Monica and the way you have partly deconstructed it, it's clear that you knew the work of Gordon Matta-Clark". Despite Gehry's denial — "no, no, I had no idea" — I found evidence supporting my claim in the Matta-Clark archive. In a letter from Gordon's agent, a woman based in Houston at the time, who wrote to Gordon, "I've met an interesting architect from Los Angeles. He has good taste in contemporary art (for an architect) and he would like to commission your work for a day". Indeed, this underscores the significance of having a broad and comprehensive knowledge base for effective



writing, emphasising the need to go beyond mere trust in the interviewee's statements. This is why I do believe that the conventional PhD's format, in which people are expected to complete their doctoral work in just three years, may not be the most convenient model. Furthermore, in the field of architecture, a broader training in the humanities is key and only universities where you get the best people in the adjacent disciplines can really produce strong and relevant work.

Contemporary architectural production and the challenges it encounters have held a prominent position in editorial and curatorial circles. In line with this fact, the curricular plan of our PhD course includes seminars and research methodologies, but also, editorial and curatorial practices. At the curatorial practices' seminar, we have been reflecting on the intellectual work that goes far beyond the materiality of the exhibition. We are particularly interested in the forms of asserting a narrative, and in the constellation of social and conceptual relationships that supports the production of a curatorial project in the field of architecture. In the remarkable work you have been developing in curating exhibitions since the late 70's, that became landmarks, to what extent is it possible to identify a precise *modus operandi* that guides your practice as curator?

I have the perception that my practice as curator doesn't follow a linear trajectory — starting from research, then moving to the exhibition, and finally culminating in the book. The exhibition I am currently curating at Casa da Arquitectura, *Constructed Geographies: Paulo Mendes da Rocha*, is an exception, as it was accomplished in a very brief timeframe. Actually, it is a project which has suffered a lot since Paulo passed away — it would have been so different with him in the room! Nonetheless, in curatorial projects such as the *Interferenzen/Interferences Allemagne – France 1800-2000* (2013) or in *Building a new New World: Amerikanizm in Russian Architecture* (2019), but also in *Des Fortifs au Périph* (2021), or my work on Le Corbusier, I do believe that it is possible to identify a common iterative and integrative process between research, exhibition, and book. These projects may have had rather straightforward beginnings, but they evolved through an ongoing and cohesive approach. On the *Architecture in Uniform* (2011) case, for example, I started working in the 1980s on occupation's architecture, in a project supported by substantial funding from the Volkswagen Foundation. Their generous funding enabled us to open up four full-time positions and generated a sizable French-German team of collaborators for two years.

And how did the investigation unfold in that case?

It all started in Turin, in the early 1980s, during a conference I gave on post-war European architecture. I finally realised then: "I am tired of the post-war. Everyone discusses it. Why no one wants to address war? I will make war". The first step was to engender a seminar, in which I crafted scholarly pieces and launched topics to be explored not only by the research students but also in the scope of my own (then ongoing) investigations. At that time, I mentioned my strong interest in the topic to Mirko Zardini, former director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, and I deliniated an exhibition project where the three components worked together — teaching, curating, writing. While working on an exhibition that encompassed collected documents from very distinct archival structures, from very diverse countries — including Germany, Italy,

Russia, United States, United Kingdom, and France —, I was able to find new materials that significantly reshaped and reordered the contents of the book. In the end, my writing was powerfully influenced by the nature of such findings, and I was confronted with information that I might not have discovered if I had not been involved in the exhibition process. The three components that I have been talking about form a kind of zigzagging pattern. But the time spent in the research process is of no less importance. If this research had been done in three years instead of ten, it would have not been the same. Going back to your question, my *modus operandi* is precisely grounded on this key triangulation (teaching, curating, writing). And, for an oral person like myself, it is a fundamental mechanism: I am a storyteller. For me, every exhibition has a story and tells another story. In order to write the story and place it on the walls, I need to explain it and share it in a classroom or at a dinner table.



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In 2014, the exhibition *Modernity: Promise or Menace?* that you have curated for the French Pavilion, awarded a special Mention Winner by the Venice Architecture Biennale and was praised by architectural journals as a critical discourse. May your work be considered as an act of inquiry and critical reflection?

For me, an exhibition is a unique opportunity to play in space with knowledge. This perspective reflects the ongoing debate focused on the exercise of architectural design and architectural research. Honestly, it is a sort of schizophrenia because, in my view, we can't do both things at the same time. I don't know many people who can do it in an efficient way — in other words, people who try to manage different things at the same

time, end up doing nothing efficiently. Those are the ones who have assistants to work on the exhibitions, who have assistants who replace them to teach, who leave and come for the first lecture and the final jury, and who have good partners in the office to do the dirty work, while they do inspired sketches. With some exceptions, this is not a realistic model. Exhibitions may have an integrative potential and are a sort of therapy, because while displaying knowledge into space, it activates new orders of thought and creates connections which go far beyond the ones possible into a book, in which the process of leafing through the pages, chapter to chapter, is a linear one. Or even the ones provided by a website, in which the contents are hierarchised into a tree shape structure. At the end, an exhibition is essentially an experience, in the deeper sense of the word. It is, truly, an experience of space where you see different layers and angles at the same time: what is in front of you; what is up on the wall; having a view of what is on the left and on the right; what you will see next; and still thinking about in what you have just seen, which is now at your back.



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But do you define a precise trajectory for each exhibition, or do you try to suggest that one should freely redraw a pathway in order to follow the displayed contents?

In fact, an exhibition produces a very rich experience — it is a sort of orchestration of discovery. Even without programming the trajectory (in the sense that you have mentioned), by the movement of your body, and your mind, and your eyes; by the environment which is structured by materials, by text, by images, by models, by film, you get a kaleidoscopic experience which is extremely fruitful. It might be more superficial,

as well. But, in the end, the catalogues and books produced in the scope of an exhibition extend such experience over time — you can read, return, revive it afterwards.



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In 2020, Paolo Baratta stressed the role architecture can play at large-scale exhibitions and what such exhibitions can offer to society. He stated: “An exhibition asks its visitors to be willing to broaden their gaze; it asks its curator to become both scientist and dramaturge”. In which of these roles would you place your action as curator?

I do agree with that double profile of the curator’s action. In my personal experience, every exhibition is a scientific process of research, and encompasses a dramatic dimension, as well. Especially when you’re talking about individuals, but even more dramatic when you are talking about complex topics such as war. There is always an epic dimension, which I like to reinforce in the space performed. The way you take a visitor by the hand through unexpected episodes is always rewarded.

As an architectural historian, you have always been dealing with memory, but you have also been exploring memory as a vision of the future — the “memory of the future”, “utopia”, the “world to come”. This year, the Venice Architecture Biennale, directed by the Ghanaian Scottish architect Lesley Lokko, includes “future” in the official title of the International Exhibition (The Laboratory of the Future), however under an activist perspective. What kind of “futures” would you predict and search to answer this topic?

Very difficult question, indeed. I've been trained to be an optimist. In the 1970s, when my generation was beginning, we had the perception that everything seemed possible. We were witnessing the death of functionalism and the so-called modern movement. New ideas were popping up: architecture interested in the city, becoming more social, more intellectual. There were jobs everywhere. I've been prepared for incredible optimism and expansion. Yet now that we see the planet is doomed, that jobs are no longer easy achievements, that we hardly understand what is going on, we are distant from such optimistic feelings. I am hesitant to speak about the future at large. Firstly, because if most of the back then future towns are already today's towns, we must deal with what we already have. What can be done to structure the future is to build significant islands of intellectual consistency. Serious history books, useful exhibitions, well trained people with a critical mind and the ability to change. I think we must work on specific programmes in order to teach the emerging generation, first to love architecture; second to know it; and third to practice it. And this should be achieved through the two enduring vectors of architecture: the book and the building.



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