

Ghardaia – Le Corbusier

My researches have led me to be more and more interested in the notion of "signs of re-appropriation". It is important for me, especially when talking about some "post-modernist" architectural theories that were experimented early 50's, in Algeria, by Fernand Pouillon, and then implemented in the French banlieues, before being spread all around the world. Several modernist social housing created in Algiers by Fernand Pouillon, like "Dar Essaada" or "Cité Confort", have prefigured the ones massively built during the 1960s and 1970s in France. There is something premonitory in the energy hurriedly captured before Algeria's independence to complete these building sites in Algiers and others cities. These projects, developed about ten years before independence, seem to have been the laboratories of post-colonization social control through housing and urbanism. They anticipate the massive constructions of the "dormitory towns", intended to gather the streams of economic immigrants from the "future former colonies": a cheap workforce, even easier to exploit than during the colonial period. Indeed, as they are no longer French, they are "not at home anymore", and are thus less particular about their living conditions. All the more so in France, where these people went from shanty towns (bidonvilles)- like the ones of Nanterre or Juvisy (where my parents were living), in that time small villages – to concrete, seemingly functional, huge blocks.

It is an "endless story".

This social architecture theory of "housing for all" was in fact an instrument of power. It was a tool to control the "natives" (indigènes). By moving them from a rural environment, where they had spaces to exist, develop, and preserve their identity and stay strong enough to rebel (like with the first "post war" important riots in Sétif in 1945), to a squared urban environment, where, gathered in blocks and assimilated to an anonymous area – to which they have to adapt (not the contrary), they become easier to control.

By having them pass from "houses" to "housing", social modernist plans pretend to improve their life, but in reality it makes them weak by dissolving their identity and any desire to exist as individuals, which is diluted in "the masses".

What I am talking about here is History's cynicism. In addition to the pictures of Pouillon's buildings I make on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea, I have done researches into what has influenced them. Anyone that takes a closer look at Le Corbusier's life will soon see the importance of his trip in Algeria in the early 1930s, and particularly the shock he felt when discovering the Mزاب architectures of Ghardaia, in the middle of the Algerian desert. The principles of the Mزاب houses strongly influenced his "Athens' Charter". Some elements of the rules of this charter – like the "terrace roof" or the "free facade" – are indeed already present in these 11th century architectures of the North African desert.

The big issue for me, as an Algerian born French, who has grown up between these two worlds, also as someone who lived 3 years in Congo Brazzaville and Kinshasa, between the traditional Teke culture and some post modern experimentations of Jean Prouvé ("the Tropical houses"), is to understand and show the process of cultural spaces' re-appropriation. The question is how, beyond these historical reference points, artists from North Africa and its Diaspora, who circulates between pre modernist and post modernist cultural influences, from their origins to their formally limited interpretations, from a functional art to an architectural aesthetics of what Le Corbusier would have called "a balance between order and emotions", how art is always deeply influenced by an interpretation, which aims at appropriating another cultural space?

In several of my works, I have developed in Algeria or Congo, I aim to show the natural instinct of people to readapt to their changing environment. They re-appropriate it through found materials, which are not products of their cultural environment, but brought from the global one (corrugated steel, plastic cans and plastic bags, etc.).

I speak about the necessity of re-appropriation because I think about people who have been dispossessed by Universalism (a powerful system of appropriation developed to apply theoretically and physically the Occidental mind's hegemony, and to synthesize the non Occidental world as another global entity, to bind it easily to the global system, whereas it has always been multiple).

Mزاب aesthetic has strongly influenced Le Corbusier, in a moment of his life he was looking for "the aesthetic of the Mediterranean architecture". But unfortunately, this aesthetics has been simply and quickly readapted and spread through the world with the "post-modernist" aesthetic of his successors...especially with the social housing

buildings.

A year ago, I met a Middle East philosopher, who told me that Islam could not have been developed outside of the desert; Because it is a religion of the desert for the desert. I think that, coming from the desert, with a natural fascination for elements like Earth, Air, Fire and Water, Muslims may have invented a different way of thinking, in between Asia and Occident. Whereas the Occident has always seen them as Iconoclasts, because, like in Judaism, in Islam, the representation of God is rather done through texts than by pictures, (Icons in Christianity), actually they were simply inventing a modern language of visual art...

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