

Signs of reappropriation

Our economy is a system in which amnesia and sophism fuel short-term vision and thought. People do not invest in a real thing anymore. Today, it is always about “the option to buy” any and every commodity. Similarly, this thinking draws horizons that paint in glowing colors that some how guarantee “a return on investment,” but reality soon reveals the off judiciousness in such actions. In this formal and consensual way of thinking which is flattered by rhetoric, one certainty makes the other obsolete. Throughout this process, we classify what looks like incoherency as non-sense. And yet, history teaches us why it is always in the heart of metamorphosis and precariousness that true continuation lays.

These photographs of 11th century architecture, recently taken in the city of Ghardaia, Algeria, reveal this. This city is situated in the deep Algerian Sahara, which was visited by Le Corbusier, one of Modernism’s genius and has since silently influenced a lot of minds. Today, this region is an amazing laboratory for “signs of cultural re-appropriation”.

Why?

The aesthetics of its minimalist and thousand year-old architecture, made of lime and gypsum, is, for a short time, re-appropriated by its inhabitants to realize local contemporary street furniture, like public toilets. This act, (which counters the importation of Western contemporary street furniture) is, in its spatial and temporal context, the sign of a change. It is an innovation within the space of an urban environment that continues the historical evolution of vernacular architecture, by and for Ghardaia’s inhabitants. But is this a part of a post-modernity that extends beyond the Occident?

Anticipating the necessary debate on post-modernism and what will come after inevitably raises the issue of an archeology of modernity. However, even if the reading of this archeology is based on a vocabulary made of several layers of influences, ultimately spirituality and light can be seen as the basis of this minimalist desert architecture. This basis can also be found in the radical purity of mausoleums like the black cube of the Kaaba in Mecca, as well as in the houses and urban areas of the medinas of the Ibadite people from this part of the Sahara. In this architecture, Le Corbusier found the essential and poetic aesthetics he had been seeking—ideas based on the humility and spirituality that is necessary to sustain man’s life in the desert. These ideas are ultimately the pillars of the Mزاب civilization.

When Le Corbusier discovered Marcel Mercier’s book "La Civilisation urbaine au Mزاب, Etude de sociologie africaine" (Urban civilization in Mزاب. A study on African sociology), which was published in 1922, he was seeking what he called “the eternal Mediterranean architecture,” which would later have a great impact on him during his first visit to the Casbah of Algiers. But, after the two lectures he delivered at the University of Algiers in 1931, he went for the first time to the city of Ghardaia, then to the Ksar (the medina) of Beni Isguen. The uncommonly constructed architecture moved him deeply and presented him with answers to his questions. Ultimately, his thoughts on the city’s culture and structure would even appear in his later architectural realizations.

The appropriation of the details and some of fundamental principles of Mزاب architecture, like those of Sidi Brahim’s mausoleum, can be seen as a citation. Alex Gerber points this out when he evokes the Ronchamp chapel in his thesis "L'Algérie de Le Corbusier, les voyages de 1931" (Le Corbusier’s Algeria, the journeys in 1931). This notation anticipates some directions of Le Corbusier’s manifesto, “the Athens Charter”, like the “terrace roof” and the “free façade”. The globalization of modern architecture, some elements of which have gone through the modern and post-modern eras, has westernized some elements of non-Western housing, like the “terrace roof”, which was originally designed to allow people the appreciation of fresh air at the end of the day in the Sahara. So, is modernity inevitably fed by otherness or does it live as a parasite on it?

Le Corbusier has never stopped showing his admiration for this vernacular architecture, which, according to him combines “order with emotion”. This notion continues to influence the realizations of other modernist architects, like Roland Simounet (who was a student of Le Corbusier), or Luiz Barragan of Mexico (who often saw Le Corbusier in Paris after he returned from Ghardaia in 1933). It is undeniably present through the first post-modernist experimentations for social housing, like the “Cité Radieuse”, and above all those of Fernand Pouillon in Algeria, which will later influence many dormitory towns all around the world. “Emotion” has slowly let “order” take its place.

This influence leads us to think that evolution of modern and post-modern aesthetics in architecture, like the influence of “Africanicity” on Western modern art, calls for an ethical way of re-thinking about post-modern and post-colonial cultural history beginning with one critical question: Does it mean that this history is shared by the two parts, but built in the shadow of Western thought’s hegemony? Or vice versa?

It might be neither one nor the other; the influence that exists between two cultures is never one way, but always two ways. This is the case for the reading of signs of cultural re-appropriation, which seems to precede an evolution.

Instinct for the native production of a modernity – which occurs through a process of digesting what one learns from the other, then sublimating it – can not exist and be read from a single geographical and cultural perspective, but rather from both. Nevertheless, the Western-oriented reading of modern history is always generated from this side of world, even when the Occident has been inspired by unknown ways of thinking. Baroque architecture is a good example: a synthesized Western vision, fed by a desire for exoticism and aroused by the myth of the new world. And does this phenomenon happen outside the Occident?

Among the different objects I observed during my numerous trips to the Congo, one of them still keeps me thinking. It is a raffia cloth, a “nshakokot,” traditionally worn by princesses of the Kuba society. This cloth is considered royal, its colors are natural and its surface covered with two dimensional abstract patterns. In some places, this cloth has been damaged; one can guess with holes and tears. I say “guess”, because the holes are in fact covered with “repair patches” made of European fabric which include the pink gingham fabric and patterns that are radically different from the light brown and soft yellow natural colors of the original raffia. Yet, the embroidery that holds these “repair patches” together features the same weave technique and displays the same attention given to the original patterns: it is indeed a repair.

But why is this repair so meticulous, with the newly added gingham fabric so carefully integrated into the original textile as added value? Is it a modern interpretation of a traditional object, giving it a huge symbolic – imported – value, as scholar Achille Mbembe writes when evoking “le potentat colonial” (the colonial potentate)? Or is it a re-appropriation of the freedom to give new meaning and power to what an individual chooses, even if this seems, on the surface, somewhat trivial?

From which cultural space can this act be read? What kind of horizon does it draw? Where is this horizon located? Can this horizon be seen as the intermediary space that separates and binds two modernities? Two cultures? Two worlds?

Maintaining this space as a “no man’s land” has guaranteed the binary notion of civilization (Western and non-Western) through history. However it is, like the fold of a sheet of paper, the space that both separates two distinct but interdependent histories and also binds them. The inevitable acknowledgement of the language of signs of cultural re-appropriation may one day broaden our view of this undeniable hybrid space, which is, in reality essential to the production and continuation of things and to our existence as a whole.

Bibliography:

- Serge Gruzinski: "The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization", Routledge, 2002
 - "Towards a new architecture", Le Corbusier, BN Publishing
 - "Le Mzab, une leçon d'architecture", by Andre Ravereau, Hassan Fathy, et Manuelle Roche, Paris, Sindbad Editions, 1981
 - "La Civilisation urbaine au Mzab, Etude de sociologie africaine", Marcel Mercier, Alger, impr. de E. Pfister, 1922.
 - M. Alex Gerber's thesis: "L'Algérie de Le Corbusier, les voyages de 1931", thesis n°1077, 1992, presented at the architectural department of the Federal Polytechnique School of Lausanne
 - "Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architectures", by Bernard Rudofsky, University of New Mexico Press, Reprint: 15 juillet 1987
- The philosophic revues « Failles » by Alexandre et Daniel Costanzo, and « Rue Descartes » n° 58 (Achille Mbembe " Réflexion sur la Postcolonie")