Review
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Books

Modern Architecture *by Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co New York: Abrams, 1979. 448 pp, illus, $37.50.*
Modern Architecture: A Critical History *by Kenneth Frampton. New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980. 324 pp, illus, $9.95 paper.*

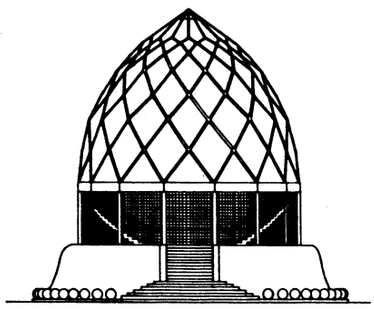
It is curious that there exists no fundamental text for the study of the history of the modern movement in architecture. Much could be said about the attitude of the modernists to history and the low profile of architectural historians in professional schools and pre-professional colleges. The modern movement has relied upon the commitment of authors like Pevsner, Giedeon, or Banham, whose personal polemic gave the perspective necessary to make the radical simplifications required to a short narrative. With the advent or structuralism in the late sixties (with its mixture of formalist linguistics, psychology, and anthropology or sociology) a more dispassionate manner began to emerge, respecting the pluralism of the subject. It traced themes and topics, continuities and discontinuities, temporal and atemporal transformations and variations within a broader field of knowledge. A larger body of historical material could be accommodated within this more systematic approach, and the dismantling of the polemical voice of the narrative allowed for the recognition of some previously neglected themes.

Tafuri and Dal Co's *Modern Architecture,* first published in Italian in 1976, is a product of this structuralist reinterpretation. The concept of type or genus was fundamental to the approach. But the two authors do not apply typology literally in terms of building typologies or morphological studies. Rather they examine typical responses to an assumed professional crisis which was occasioned by the success of the industrial revolution in the late nineteenth century. Their shared neo-Marxist interpretation of history allows for an easy collaboration, and both authors are able to integrate semiological, sociological, and psychological insights in a loose, non-mechanistic way.

Dal Co writes with a coherence, clarity and calmness which engages the reader's interest and survives translation well. His task, in the earlier chapters, is to present the power and success of primitive, frontier capitalism at its most productive; taming the American midwest and west, producing the wealth of the Great Plains and Prairies, which formed the basis for the rise of Chicago at the end of the nineteenth century. A positive value is attributed to the Loop, and to the rapid urbanization of American cities, as exemplars of the modernist cult of machine age speed and efficiency.

When compared, in Tafuri's later chapters, with the fevered, over-intellectual and non-productive European avant garde of the turn of the century and later, there is a reversal in the modernist values of Giedeon and Pevsner. The European pioneers are seen as a negative antithesis of their American counterparts. From this point on, Tafuri separates himself from more conventional histories and his voice becomes more strident and polemical. Dal Co continues to provide normative chapters, on American state planning in the New Deal, on Modern Classicism, on the role of the Masters, on Romantic Nationalism and Totalitarian regimes, as well as on planning after World War II. But Tafuri's voice and polemic predominate, repeating themes from his *Architecture and Utopia,* portraying the Werkbund, the Bauhaus, expressionism, "rigorism," the influence of cubism, purism and Dada, etc., as so many negative antitheses to the profession's dilemma.

In the search for synthesis, the modernist's preoccupation with metropolis and mass housing falls into place as another attempt to reenter the productive cycle of buiding. As a result of their social-democratic orgins, the attempts of the architects and administrations of Lyons, Amsterdam, Vienna and Frankfurt, as well as the avant garde in Russia, are seen as reformist, false ideological syntheses. While the postwar avant garde left production in the hands of mindless technocrats and commercial interests, to pursue the same chimerical solutions, only Loos, Le Corbusier and Aldo Rossi emerge unscathed from the debacle of modernism. In Tafuri's final "duet" with Dal Co, the central "silence" of Levi-Strauss and the structuralists is echoed in the central place reserved for the Loosian "silence," as interpreted by M. Cacciari in semiological and psychological terms, and reenacted by Aldo Rossi in his renunciation of architecture in order to more humbly re-enter the productive cycle.



Frampton, in his *Critical History of Modern Architecture,* ends with an identical conclusion, repeating Tafuri and Dal Co's use of Heidegger as a critical prophet and their condemnation of the avant garde. Frampton acknowledges his enormous debt to Tafuri at many points, and the main lines of his analysis repeat and amplify the structuralist approach of Tafuri. There are obvious differences, however. Frampton's account of the origins of the modern movement, the first part of the book, is far closer to that of Gideon, Pevsner, and even Banham—giving Europe a far more positive role but also tracing themes back into the Enlightenment, as did Tafuri. In the second part of the book, dealing with the modern movement, Frampton attempts to integrate three critical forces with his own areas of specialization: the Russian avant garde and the industrialization of mass housing.

The mixture of the modernist voices of Giedeon, Pevsner, and Banham, the antithetical interpretation of Rowe, as well as Tafuri's theme of critical renunciation in the work of Sullivan, Loos, and Rossi, results in a cacophany of critical voices which makes the text very dense, detailed, and difficult to read. This cacophany continues into the third part of the book, which brings themes into the post World War II era, and terminates with the Tafurian conclusion. Frampton is conscious of this cacophany, which sometimes makes his text appear like a bad translation, and he writes in the introduction of a "mosaic" of short chapters and how his "interpretative stance" had varied according to the subject under consideration. In the structuralist approach multiple voices were held within one coordinating, methodological framework and ultimately constrained by the central mystery, the "silence" of Pascale's "Hidden God." Frampton moves beyond this framework, while invoking a silence which is no longer central, nor a constraint or obstacle. Perhaps this history might be considered the first post-structuralist history, a transitional piece leading to a fully Post-modern history.

It is more probable that Frampton's ambition was to write the first textbook history of modern architecture. Tafuri's radical polemic might appear to disqualify his work from this role. Frampton's encyclopaedic and panoptic tendencies clearly indicate an attempt at the comprehensive account. The problem is that the work, with its polyphony and its multiple interpretative stances, lacks the intellectual framework with which to give a sense of coherence and order to the period. The hallmark of the textbook is a certain concern for essentials, a calmness, a sense of proportion and heirarchy, and a relatively simple chronology; not to mention a continuous narrative form and critical overview. In these terms the Tafuri and Dal Co text is perhaps the better work: it is more expensively produced, has more lavish illustrations, as well as a greater clarity. But both books illustrate the difficulty of writing a history of the modern movement in architecture. We clearly do not yet have a critical distance on the events that formed the movement. We would also appear to still share the sociological, psychological and semiological conceptual basis of modernism. As a result, for all the announcements of the death of modern architecture, a critical obituary still remains to be written—*Grahame Shane, Bennington, Vermont.*