

From Le Droit à la Ville to “Rechte Räume”: Legacies and legends of the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City

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INTRODUCTION

In 1975 Léon Krier assembled *Architecture Rationnelle: Témoignages en Faveur de la Reconstruction de la Ville Européenne*. Denouncing the functionalist urban planning promoted by Le Corbusier and his acolytes, this publication launched a plea to embrace the traditionalist city as a new aesthetic and political model for urban design, and fuelled the rise of the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City.¹ Arguing for the rediscovery of pre-modernist urban forms, the return to traditional building techniques, and a greater distinction between city and countryside, this movement ostensibly defied the emancipatory aspirations of modernism. Yet, one of its key underpinnings was the desire to resist the annihilation of difference under capitalist urban development, as well as the profession's alliance with capitalist development *in se*, which in many European cities had resulted in the displacement of large swathes of – often socio-economically vulnerable – inner-city residents. For instance, Chapter X of the *Déclaration de Bruxelles*, published by the Archives d'Architecture Moderne (AAM) following the 1978 Reconstruction of the European City colloquium,² was entitled *Le Droit à la Ville* and pinpointed Marolles, a densely populated working-class district at the heart of Brussels, as “the last bastion of difference [and a] stain of freedom at the gates of a landlocked world.”³

Thanks to their populist appeal and resonance with contemporary efforts towards sustainability – reuse rather than renewal – and cultural

1 Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 28–29

2 This book/manifesto was published by the AAM in 1980, after the international colloquium *La Reconstruction de la Ville Européenne* had taken place in Brussels between 15 and 17 November 1978. The manifesto was signed by those who participated in the colloquium, including André Barey, Jean Castex, Antoine Grumbach, Bernard Huet, Léon Krier, Pierre Laconte, Jacques Lucan, Pierluigi Nicolín, Philippe Panerai, and Maurice Culot, who had hosted the conference. André Barey (ed.), *Déclaration de Bruxelles* (Brussels: Editions des Archives d'Architecture Moderne 1980).

3 Original quote: ‘... les Marolles constituent le dernier bastion de la différence. Un souille de liberté aux portes d'un monde encagé.’ Barey, *Déclaration de Bruxelles*, 79–80.

conservation,⁴ the ideas promoted by the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City became widespread. In Europe, they inspired numerous urban reconstruction projects, whereas in the United States they informed the rise of new urbanism; a building approach that has since become intricately associated with a neotraditional form of city building that is, often, highly profit-driven. Today, reconstruction projects undertaken in Europe founded on the principles promoted by the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City are not only considered conservative, but have also become associated with right-wing politics, as is exemplified by the current issue of the journal *ARCH+* on *Rechte Räume* (right-wing spaces).⁵ However, the movement's origins were more complex and multifaceted than these current connotations would suggest.

With this paper we attempt to untangle some of this complex history, by focusing on two key tensions that were innate to the movement's conception. First, we analyse the political ambiguity that was engrained in the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City from its very foundation, namely the simultaneous adoption of both progressive and reactive concepts and beliefs. Subsequently, we posit that this political ambiguity resulted in a field of tension between politics and aesthetics, which was expressed in the tools that those involved in the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City used, as well as in the roles that they adopted. Intended as a position piece and a tentative effort towards an agenda for future research, this paper does not present finite conclusions, but seeks to open up the discussion by exploring new pathways to examine the legacies and legends of the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City.

POLITICAL AMBIGUITIES

In Brussels, the Reconstruction of the European City originated in the urban activism of the Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaines (ARAU) which, along with architects affiliated to the AAM and architecture students of La Cambre, resisted the destruction of the historic city by functionalist urban planning. Founded in 1969 by urban sociologist René Schoonbrodt, theologian and priest Jacques Van der Biest and Maurice Culot, an architect and teacher at La Cambre, the ARAU was influenced by Henri Lefebvre's *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968).⁶ Its foundation had been spurred by the so-called Battle of the Marolles. In the 1860s, this area in Brussels had been gravely affected by urban redevelopment efforts. To enable the construction of architect Joseph Poelaert's mammoth Palace of Justice, a section of the Marolles was demolished and many residents were forcibly relocated. One hundred years later, in the 1960s, history threatened to repeat itself when an extension to Poelaert's building was proposed. However, this time

4 For instance, 1975 was the European Architectural Heritage Year.

5 'Rechte Räume: Bericht einer Europareise', *ARCH+* 235 (May 2019).

6 Another, later reference was: Manuel Castells, *Luttes urbaines et pouvoir politique* (Paris: François Maspero, 1975).

the Marolliens succeeded in preventing the further demolition of their neighbourhood, spurring the budding ARAU to devote itself to supporting the urban struggle of the working classes.

Nonetheless, from the very beginning, the movement's involvement in urban struggles for the right to the city was paralleled by activism of a more cultural persuasion.⁷ In the same year that the ARAU was established, Culot co-founded the AAM in Brussels, which was dedicated to saving historic sites and monuments from demolition and to preserving the archives of architects. Culot maintained that, despite their different objectives, the actions of the ARAU and the AAM were part of the same struggle. Furthermore, in 1968, when residents of the Avenue Louise, located in a more affluent part of Brussels, fought against the construction of an office tower for the International Telephone and Telegraph Company (ITT),⁸ Culot argued that the middle-class had also become part of the *luttes urbaines*. In his article *La Longue Marche* he stressed the importance of this joint struggle – the socio-economic *and* cultural on the one hand; the working-class *and* middle-class on the other – and suggested that the press attention garnered by the ITT case benefitted the struggles of the Marolliens.⁹

If the actions of those concerned with the reconstruction of the European City were ambiguous in their political motivations, so too were the aesthetics of their projects, which eventually possessed the semantic scope to embrace contradictory political intentions.

A case in point is the 1974 Presidential Competition for Les Halles in Paris. A “Contemporary Palais Royal” is what Pierre Richard¹⁰, the personal counsellor of Valérie Giscard d’Estaing, told the newly elected French President – who was also the leader of the Independent Republicans party, which favoured economic liberalism – to promote.¹¹ The quest was to design an emblematic structure that would cover the gigantic building pit of the future underground train station cum shopping mall, and replace the by then demolished cast-iron market halls by Victor Baltard. Ricardo Bofill, a close friend of Richard, fulfilled this assignment with verve.¹² Blending architectural quotations from the French Renaissance to the Italian Baroque, he designed a sequence of squares that divided the Plateaux des Halles into smaller stages. The result anticipated the return to ‘urbanity’ and ‘quality’ that would come to characterise Giscard d’Estaing architectural and urban politics; namely the promotion of familiar environments of parks,

7 See: Maurice Culot, *Brussels Architectures from 1950 to the Present* (Brussels: AAM, 2012).

8 This tower was proposed and eventually constructed in one of the most peaceful areas of the Avenue Louise, overlooking the Abbey of La Cambre, on land donated to the City of Brussels in 1922 by the sculptor Guillaume De Groot.

9 Maurice Culot, ‘La Longue Marche’, *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* 180 (July–August 1975): 18–29.

10 Pierre Richard would later in 1987 become the Chairman of Dexia, a position that he retained until 2008.

11 Note pour le Président de la République signée Pierre Richard, 17 July 1974, Objet: Opération de l’Aménagement des Halles, 3 pages, 5AG3–2270–Quartier des Halles, Archives Nationales.

12 In the office, Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura, architect Manuel Núñez Yanowsky and poet José Agustín Goytisolo worked on this project.

baroque fountains, and Italian squares which, the President believed, were best experienced by strolling pedestrians.¹³

However, Bofill's design not only met the expectations of Giscard d'Estaing,¹⁴ but also those of Bernard Huet, the new editor-in-chief of *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* and one of the most vocal opponents of the demolition of Baltard's market halls.¹⁵ For Huet, Bofill's design combined the political demand for collective participation in public space with the art of designing the city as a collective oeuvre.¹⁶

The ambivalence of Bofill's design, which resulted from its ability to allow different ideological ambitions to be projected onto it, becomes even more palpable when one recalls that the Palais Royal was an important reference for Henri Lefebvre to illustrate the properties of a Fourierist utopia.¹⁷ Lefebvre's interest in the Palais Royal not only stemmed from its architectural properties – the sheltered garden with shopping arcades that invites daydreaming and pleasure – but also from its specific performance in pre-revolutionary Paris, as a site of political resistance, sexual transgression, and consumption. The trope of the Palais Royal could thus be charged with opposing political attributions, as Bofill's project demonstrates. On the one hand, the historic references embedded in the project embodied an 'architecture of liberalism' that could cater to bourgeois pedestrians in a gentrifying city. On the other hand, playing up the poetry of the non-usable and evoking an urban dream world that resists the normative logics of modernist technocracy also alluded to both freedom of choice *and* the right to the city. Yet, in spite of embracing the ambivalences of urban design and governance of 1970s France, Bofill's project became a matter of major political and economic contention, and was ultimately never realised.

POLITICS/AESTHETICS

The political ambiguity that was embedded in the project for the Reconstruction of the European City and the desire to shape good cities opened up a field of tension between politics and aesthetics. For instance, while Léon Krier was particularly concerned with the physical form of the city¹⁸ and sets out formal and numerical regulations for how this could best

13 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Robert Franc, 'Changeons la ville (interview)', *Le Point* 133 (1975): 60.

14 A press release that (likely) appeared shortly after 10 February 1976 stated: 'le chef de l'état avait souhaité que ce projet soit exemplaire, (...) et qu'il représente un (en)semble représentatif de l'architecture du XXème siècle.' 5AG3-2271 – quartier des Halles – aménagement, press release AP117, Archives Nationales.

15 Jacques Hébert, *Sauver les Halles, coeur de Paris: Un dossier d'urbanisme contemporain* (Paris: Denoel, 1971).

16 Bernard Huet, 'Quelques objets autour d'un trou – La revanche du cavalier Bernin', *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 176 (November -December 1974), 110.

17 Henri Lefebvre, 'Introduction', in: Lefebvre (ed.). *Actualité de Fourier: Colloque d'Arc-et-Senans* (Paris: Éd. Anthropos, 1975), 14–15.

18 Léon Krier, 'The Reconstruction of the European City or Anti-Industrial Resistance as a Global Project', in Léon Krier and Maurice Culot (eds.), *Contreprojets – Controprogetti – Counterprojects* (Brussels: Editions des Archives d'Architecture Moderne, 1980), n.p.

be achieved,¹⁹ Culot maintained that the stakes were “a great deal higher than simply aesthetic ones: what is involved is the battle to retain the liberating tool which is the city and to maximise its gains to the profit of the working class.”²⁰ This tension had an effect on the tools that those involved in the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City used, as well as in the roles that they adopted.

From the late 1960s, those supporting the Reconstruction of the European City began designing counter-projects. Founded on the “memory of [...] pre-industrial European Cities,”²¹ these paper projects illustrated alternative modes of urban design that defied the C.I.A.M. dogmas and were conceived as instruments in the “battles conducted by the workers [...] against the appropriation of the city by monopolies [...] and in active opposition [to] private and public speculation.”²² Culot and his colleagues drew up dozens of such counter-projects for Brussels at the behest of the residents’ committees.²³ These projects were not intended to be built, but rather to critique existing proposals prepared by architects, authorities, and developers for specific sites. The counter-projects were thus tools for political provocation; to assist residents’ committees and action groups in placing pressure on decision makers by demonstrating that other, better, urban solutions were possible.

Initially, these counter-projects were not very refined aesthetically, and adopted various formal guises. For Schoonbrodt, counter-projects were after all not about aesthetics but first and foremost about politics.²⁴ However, gradually, they did adopt a more pronounced historicist aesthetic. The proposals that the architectural staff and students of La Cambre produced during the 1970s, for instance, became increasingly articulate, and drew mostly on the architectural language of the historic city.²⁵ Activism and engagement in the struggle for *le droit à la ville* through site-specific interventions thus gave way to theoretical reflections on the city, which were conceived as self-contained exercises for urban scar tissue that had fallen prey to the perceived malfeasance of the Modern Movement.

19 Krier, for instance, stipulated that urban conglomerates should not exceed 35 ha in size and should not house more than 15,000 inhabitants. See: Krier, ‘The Reconstruction of the European City’.

20 Maurice Culot, ‘The counter-projects’, in Léon Krier and Maurice Culot (eds.), *Contreprojets – Controprogetti – Counterprojects* (Brussels: AAM, 1980), n.p.

21 Krier, ‘The Reconstruction of the European City’, 1980.

22 Krier, ‘The Reconstruction of the European City’, 1980.

23 Many of these projects are documented in: Maurice Culot, René Schoonbrodt, Léon Krier, *La Reconstruction de Bruxelles: Recueil de projets publiés dans la Revue des Archives d’Architecture Moderne de 1977 à 1982* (Brussels: Editions des Archives d’Architecture Moderne, 1982).

24 René Schoonbrodt, ‘Tradition et Luttes Urbaines’, in École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture et des Arts Visuels (ed.), *La Tour Ferrée: Projets dans la Ville. Projets réalisés à La Cambre, Bruxelles de 1975 à 1978* (Brussels: Éditions des Archives d’Architecture Moderne, 1978), 12.

25 This becomes clear when analysing the counter-projects published in various architectural periodicals throughout the 1970s, including in *Lotus International*, *Wonen TA-BK*, and *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*. Léon Krier and Maurice Culot also published an anthology in 1980 that mainly focused on the later generation of historicist projects; Léon Krier and Maurice Culot (eds.), *Contreprojets – Controprogetti – Counterprojects* (Bruxelles: Editions des Archives d’Architecture Moderne, 1980). For a more detailed study of counter-projects and in particular the shifting tensions between politics and aesthetics, see: Isabelle Doucet, ‘Counter-Projects’ in: *The Practice Turn in Architecture: Brussels after 1968* (London: Routledge, 2015): 39–78; and Isabelle Doucet, ‘Aesthetics Between Provocation and Production: Counter-Projects’, *Oase 97* (2016): 91–98.

As the counter-projects shed their role as political provocateurs focused on specific local sites and instead became aesthetic and theoretical exercises, their appeal broadened. Apart from activists engaged in *les luttes urbaines*, also others, whose interests mainly lay in reviving traditional and historical urban aesthetics, became interested in the work of the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City. One of these 'traditionalists' captured by the polemicising potential of counter-projects was His Royal Highness Prince Charles, Prince of Wales. Convinced that the post-war planning of London had caused more damage to the city than the bombs dropped by the German Luftwaffe, he pushed for a return to pre-modernist urban forms, and from the early 1980s became heavily involved in the British architectural debate.²⁶ In 1987, for instance, when a consortium of property developers led by Stuart Lipton set up a closed competition for the redevelopment of Paternoster Square,²⁷ the royal invited a group of architects, including John Simpson,²⁸ to formulate a response to the winning scheme by Arup Associates.²⁹ Supported by the Prince and published in the *Evening Standard*, Simpson's counter-project garnered much attention.³⁰ Architectural critics were particularly confounded by Carl Laubin's painting of the scheme that steeped the British capital in a medieval atmosphere, replete with a procession of priests wearing white vestments.

Laubin also painted the imagery for Poundbury, the urban extension to Dorchester, which was initiated by Prince Charles. In the late 1980s, no longer content to exercise his stewardship of the Duchy of Cornwall in the traditional way, the Prince began acting as a developer – he allegedly often said that "I'm not against development"³¹ – and engaged Léon Krier to draw up a masterplan. Krier, who had long proclaimed that "a resistance movement cannot be organised on the battlefield"³² and therefore preferred to limit himself to theoretical treatises and paper projects, was now forced to translate his theories into built form. One of the key design instruments that he applied in Poundbury was the 'urban code.' Setting out requirements for building materials and proportions, and going as far as to stipulate that elements such as clothes dryers, meter boxes, air extractors, dustbins and soil pipes "shall not be located such that they will be visible from the streets,"³³ this urban code achieved the desired aesthetic effect, but seemed far removed from the revolutionary political ideas that had kick-started the movement. However, Krier's uncoupling of politics and aesthetics had arguably already reached an apex a few years earlier; when

26 'Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate', *Architectural Design* 59, no. 5/6 (1989); Federico Ferrari, 'Charles d'Angleterre et la "Guerre des Mots" des Années 1980', in Federico Ferrari, *Le Populisme Esthétique: L'Architecture comme outil identitaire* (Gollion: Infolio, 2015), 118–162.

27 This was a sensitive area in the old part of London, close to St Paul's Cathedral.

28 Other architects that were invited to formulate a counter-project for Paternoster Square were Léon Krier and Dan Cuickshank. Ferrari, 'Charles d'Angleterre', 136.

29 Ferrari, 'Charles d'Angleterre', 133–136; Christopher Martin, 'Second Chance', in 'Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate', *Architectural Design* 59, no. 5/6 (1989), 11.

30 Charles Jencks, 'Ethics and Prince Charles', in 'Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate', *Architectural Design* 59, no. 5/6 (1989), 62.

31 Christopher Martin, 'Second Chance', 9.

32 Krier, 'The Reconstruction of the European City', 1980.

33 Richard Economakis (ed.), *Léon Krier: Architecture & Urban Design, 1967–1992* (London: Academy Editions, 1992), 264.

in 1985 he published a book on Albert Speer that praised the architect's plans for Germania for their aesthetic appeal.³⁴

Together with this shift in tools, also the role of the architects involved in the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City changed. Along with Krier and Bofill, who affiliated themselves with Prince Charles and Giscard d'Estaing respectively, and like Culot, who added built work to his activist paper projects,³⁵ many of those who were once drawn to the radical, activist potential of this movement, became part and parcel of the very establishment that they had originally eschewed. British architect Rod Hackney, for instance, who rose to fame in the 1970s for his grassroots community activism,³⁶ was appointed President of the RIBA in 1987, where he – perhaps not surprisingly – found an ally in Prince Charles.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper shows how from the very beginning, the urban politics of the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City were imbued with concepts of liberalism. However, over time, emphasis shifted from a broad understanding of liberalism towards economic liberalism, as aesthetics displaced politics. This shift was paralleled by an evolution in the tools that those involved in the movement used, as well as in the roles that they adopted. From the 1980s, in an attempt to change their – by then economically-driven – urban imaginaries with cultural value, many traded political resistance for cultural activism. During the 1980s and 1990s, the AAM, for instance, was involved in the publication of design manuals that carefully analysed historical urban types to facilitate their reconstruction. At the same time, influential think tanks and foundations emerged, whose stated aims included promoting the genius locus of the European city and stimulating a dialogue with the past in urban design.³⁷

Although today's historicist urban design has become both an asset for global real-estate industries and an instrument for reactionary populist politics – as exemplified by the debates on *Rechte Räume* in the recent *ARCH+* issue – the early counter-projects of the ARAU, and the 1970s

34 Léon Krier, *Albert Speer: Architecture 1932–1942* (Bruxelles: Editions des Archives d'Architecture Moderne, 1985).

35 Culot's architectural practice is called 'Arcas Architect' and is, according to its website, '... an office for architecture and urbanisation ... [w]ith over 25 years of experience in architecture and urban planning and ... an international reputation in residential real estate projects and hotels. The realisations range from villa apartments to residential towers, from beach resorts and hotels to residential care centers and from residential neighborhoods to multifunctional city centers.' Source: <https://www.arcas.be/about/>, accessed on 11 October 2019.

36 Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt, *Community Architecture: How people are creating their own environment* (London: Routledge, 2014).

37 Prominent examples include the Philippe Rotthier Foundation, which was established in 1982 by the architect Philippe Rotthier, and the Council of European Urbanism. The former awards a triennial European Prize of Architecture rewarding works of collective and cultural value with regional roots and using natural and sustainable materials that draw on the genius of the European town and a dialogue with the past and with history, while the latter was founded in 2003 to attempt to revise and reorganise the American Congress for the New Urbanism Charter to relate better to European conditions.

drawings of Taller de Arquitectura held a radically different political promise. They sought to safeguard differences, provoke desires, and embrace contradictions. We therefore believe that untangling the complex past of the Movement for the Reconstruction of the European City – along with the political ambiguities embedded in the projects that it produced – might offer clues for how to re-think the capacity of urban design to assemble difference in the present.