



Michel Ragon

**AND AFTER
LE CORBUSIER?**

This exhibition is the first presentation of the career of Michel Ragon (Marseille, 1924 – Suresnes, 2020), the anarchist writer, poet and art and architecture critic who, in the mid-1960s, together with the young members of the GIAP (Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective), encompassed a new generation's interest in rethinking the forms of habitation.

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MICHEL RAGON: AND AFTER LE CORBUSIER?

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The critic of art and architecture, writer of literature and poetry, cultural agitator and autodidact Michel Ragon is, over and above his importance as a historical figure in art and architecture criticism, proof that there is an ideological and aesthetic confrontation that still affects today's concerns about the meaning of art and about urbanism.

Ragon was born in 1924 into a modest family originally from La Vendée in France. After the war, he moved to Paris and met the proletarian writer Henry Poulaille, with whom he founded the magazine *Les Cahiers du peuple* and who supported him in drafting the book *Les écrivains du peuple*, a compilation of proletarian literary writings published in 1947. In 1946, Ragon collaborated with *Maintenant* magazine, contributing an article about the artist and cobbler Gaston Chaissac, entitled 'Gaston Chaissac tailleur de cuir', and published stories by him (Ragon, 1946). He also published poetry.

In 1948, Ragon curated an exhibition in Copenhagen about the painters Jean-Michel Atlan and Édouard Pignon and came into contact with the CoBrA group. In 1950, he wrote a pamphlet about Atlan and another about Ejler Bille, published by the small Bibliothèque de CoBrA. His translation and prologue to Asger Jorn's book *Guldborn og Lykkenhjul / Les cornes d'or et la roue de la fortune* demonstrates that he shared the group's interest in popular expression in art and literature, and he went on to become the group's French editor. His contact with CoBrA strengthened his conception of creative expression and the social role of art. Concepts such as primitivism, popular art and instinctive expression were developing at that time beyond Picasso's exoticising vision of black art. His search for popular expression that he embarked on with Poulaille in literature and with CoBrA and Dubuffet in art was connected with the search for the forms of working-class emancipation that the philosopher Jacques Rancière explored years later in *La Nuit des prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier* (Proletarian Nights) and *Le philosophe plébéien* (The Plebeian Philosopher).¹

¹ Jacques Rancière, *La Nuit des prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier*. Paris: Fayard, 1981. Gabriel Gauny, *Le philosophe plébéien*. Writings compiled and presented by Jacques Rancière. Paris: La Découverte, 1983.

In the first issue of *Les Cahiers du peuple*, published in November 1946, the editorial team identified two precedents for this activity prior to the Second World War. The first of these was the *Musée du soir*, with Poulaille, René Bonnet and Ferdinand Teulé as its driving forces. This 'museum' was a meeting place for the working class and a metaphor in which we find the idea of the time of emancipation that runs through Rancière's work. The second was the 'Germinal' collection of works of popular expression, published by Jean Vigneau. Neither Poulaille nor Ragon were philosophers of popular expression, as they put it, but cultural activists, facilitators, comrades.

This was also the time of his contact with libertarian thinkers and activists such as Louis Lecoin, whose writings he discovered in 1947, the year he began to contribute to magazines of an anarchist bent, a practice he continued throughout his life. He edited the magazine *Défense de l'homme* between 1948 and 1954. Lecoin was a friend of Buenaventura Durruti and through him Ragon met other anarchists, among them Gaston Leval, who had collaborated closely with the CNT in Spain. In his filmed interview of Bernard Baissat, Ragon states that while the libertarian family had taken him in during the most underprivileged period of his youth in Paris, providing him with accommodation and food, it was Leval who most influenced his way of thinking, along with the pacifist Lecoin. In his *Dictionnaire de l'anarchie* (Dictionary of Anarchy), he recalls the constructive nature of the anarchist principles advocated by Leval during the Second Spanish Republic. Perhaps, he stated, the Spanish revolution brought about libertarian communism for the first time (Ragon, 2008, p. 309).

This red thread ran through Ragon's activity throughout his life in occupations as disparate and seemingly bourgeois as art and architecture criticism. It was from this moral standpoint that he interpreted all his activity in relation to art, publishing, criticism and cultural activism.

Ragon gave over numerous writings and interviews to his experience and to the history of anarchism, beginning with his novel *La mémoire des vaincus* (The Book of the Vanquished) published in 1990, in which he novelises the history of anarchism in the twentieth century. Its leading characters are some of the people he met over the course of his life. He also published essays such as *La voie libertaire* (The Libertarian Way) in 1991 and the *Dictionnaire de l'anarchie* in 2008.

It is difficult to connect these concerns with Ragon's interest kindled in the 1960s by the utopian proposals of young architects and

artists such as Yona Friedman, Paul Maymont, Walter Jonas, Georges Patrix, Ionel Schein, Nicolas Schöffer and later Pascal Häusermann, Jean-Louis Chanéac, Edouard Utudjian and Guy Rottier, whom he brought together from 1965 onwards in the GIAP (Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective).² Firstly there was an aesthetic assessment in the visionary forms of architecture that they proposed. Secondly, there was an urgent need to reflect the changes in contemporary ways of life in architecture, hence the concept of prospectivity: the increasing population, the environment and mobility. Later, this concern with architecture transformed into a concern with urbanism, the organisation of society and its leading figures other than those in political or financial power who govern our existence. There was an evolution in the themes and interests of the group, of which Ragon was one of the ideologues, but which also changed with the other members of the group.

In a text published by *L'Arc* magazine in 1984, Ragon compares anarchy and urbanism, contrasting the will of the state and economic forces to create a regulatory space that counters the dispersed, disordered space. Firstly, the notion of de-urbanism as a rejection of the delegation of political or financial power that is always a feature of the design of a great city and the principle of direct democracy and self-management of the space are, according to Ragon, among the great contributions of libertarian thinking³ (Ragon, 1984).

This idea of force is the product of a vision of the city based on consumption and not the organisation of the forces of production. It is the contribution made by Kropotkin in *The Conquest of Bread*, a seminal book of libertarian ideas about the management of the space,

² That same year, other artists, set designers, sociologists and critics also joined, as well as one biologist, Dr. Ménétrier. The other new members included Matias Goeritz, Carl Nesjar, Victor Vasarely, Lucien Hervé, Jacques Polieri, Abraham Moles, Pierre Restany and Géraud Gassiot-Talabot.

³ 'The history of modern urbanism is driven by two tendencies. The first is situated under the banner of the restrictive space, the regulatory space, the regenerative space. Its source is the models of the utopian socialists who, in turn, continued the utopias of Plato, Thomas More and others. The second is situated under the banner of the exploded space, the space shattered into smithereens. The first is an oppressive space that leads to state aberrations. The second questions, fundamentally, closed systems and the powers-that-be and, hence, the state. There is an entire ideology of the libertarian space that began with Proudhon and Kropotkin, one that is largely unknown but with considerable influence' (Ragon, 1984, p. 85)

which later materialised in the concept of the 'right to the city', the brainchild of the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, as the 'ineluctable future of urban struggles against capitalism' (Oyon, March-August 2014).

Secondly, there is the defence of self-build. Ragon mentions the Dutch group Provo, founded in 1965, which believed that the architect and urban planner should do no more than provide the infrastructure for self-build. However, this is a concept also found in some of the proposals of members of the GIAP, such as Yona Friedman's megastructures.

Thirdly, there is insurrectionary architecture, exemplified by Chanéac, also a member of the GIAP. In the struggle against functionalist urbanism, Ragon proposed the constant confrontation between power and freedom, a state of alert against the capitalist advance. He raised the examples of the Swiss architect Chanéac and the *bulle pirate* (pirate bubble) of the architect Marcel Lachat, who proposed a parasitical room attached to his small home in an HLM (housing at moderate rents) building in Geneva as a protest, not only against the lack of a room but also against the anti-aesthetic nature of the monotonous proposals for housing blocks.

In keeping with anarchists of the past, Ragon connects functionalist modernity to the oppressive state, and contemporary megacities to the exercise of power, of whatever kind, over the worker. Functional modernity is anti-anarchical par excellence and oppressive by definition. Only the end of the capitalist state would lead to genuine socialisation. Given that capitalism is increasingly widespread, even in countries with socialist roots, this leads to 'constant combat between power and liberty, between the totalitarian central government space and the anarchist space' (Ragon, 1984, p. 92).

In an article published in 1977, Ragon, in a state of alarm, denounced the appropriation of public opinion through central government structures for its own ends and he advocated syndicalism as the basis for participation. His statements on civic intervention in urban decisions are devastating:

The aim of the authorities is to divert neighbourhood associations away from their protest action and to push them towards a facilitating function. To this end, a prior selection is made, eliminating the nuisance associations, which the authorities refuse to see as representative, and favouring 'sympathetic' associations by granting them subsidies. [...]

Will we see the emergence of official marginalism? Only a true syndicalism of housing, but a syndicalism starting from the base and not reclaimed by the middle classes, as is often the case at present with neighbourhood associations the authorities deem 'representative', seems to us to offer guarantees of both popular representativeness and credibility vis-à-vis the authorities. (Ragon, 1977)

From abstract art to architecture and urbanism

Together with R. V. Gindertael, Herta Wescher, Julien Alvard and the gallerist Jean-Robert Arnaud, in 1953 Ragon founded the journal *Cimaise*, unequivocally in support of those working in Lyrical Abstraction and against *Art d'aujourd'hui*, the mouthpiece for Geometric Abstraction. Ragon was a member of the editorial team and wrote his first article about his friend Jean-Michel Atlan, which he had offered to the Bibliothèque CoBrA, and in January 1954 contributed his text 'Lettre à un ouvrier à propos de l'art actuel' (Letter to a Labourer on Art Today) (Ragon, 1954). These were followed by articles about Doucet, Gerdur, Hajdn, Soulages, Poliakoff, Corneille and Dubuffet, among others, most of whom became close friends of his.

André Wogenscky, a close collaborator of Le Corbusier's, wrote about architecture in the same journal. It was not by chance, then, that Ragon's name was put forward as the organiser of the visual arts section of the Festival of Avant-garde Art, overseen by the theatre director and set designer Jacques Polieri and held in 1956 in Le Corbusier's newly opened Unité d'habitation in Marseille.

There Ragon discovered the work of the Swiss architect and decided to change his career from art critic to architecture critic. Even so, he did not abandon art history and continued to write numerous monographs and collective works on art and Lyrical Abstraction until after the year 2000. He instantly fell in love with Le Corbusier's work. At that moment, Ragon seemed to be divided between three irreconcilable worlds: his defence of popular culture, his fascination with Lyrical Abstraction and his interest in architecture criticism.

Following this experience, which he described as a revelation, Ragon decided to embark on his research in architecture and urbanism. In 1958, he wrote *Le livre de l'architecture moderne* (The Book of Modern Architecture), followed by *Où vivrons nous demain?* (Where Will We Live Tomorrow?) in 1963, *L'urbanisme et la cité* (Urbanism

and the City) in 1964, *Paris, hier, aujourd'hui, demain* (Paris Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow) in 1965 and *Les cités de l'avenir* (The Cities of the Future) in 1966.

Ragon explained that he moved from art criticism to architecture criticism because of his aversion of the art market's commercialisation of criticism and use of critics. He would also later criticise the clientelist stance of the architecture critic in favour of criticism based on the social aspects of housing (Jannière, 2013, p. 183).

In his book *Le livre de l'architecture moderne*, he admired Le Corbusier's architecture, but in 1963, in *Où vivrons nous demain?*, he began to question the continuing relevance of modern proposals as a way to solve the problems of contemporary society.

Since 1961, Ragon had been collaborating with the weekly periodical *Arts*, contributing articles about architecture and urbanism. The impending transformation of the urban face of Paris made him question the appropriateness of the proposals. On 28 February 1962, in a special issue of *Arts* on 'Les plans d'un Paris d'avantgarde' (Plans for an Avant-garde Paris), in which Gassiot-Talabot analysed twenty urban development proposals under the heading 'Envisager la construction d'un Brasilia français' (Envisaging the Construction of a French Brasilia), the names of two architects who would later become members of the GIAP, Yona Friedman and Paul Maymont, were mentioned for the first time in an article entitled 'Un plan révolutionnaire, le Paris spatial' ('A Revolutionary Plan, Spatial Paris', cited in Ragon, 1962). This was the start of Ragon's new proposal on the city of the future that would lead him to question the validity of planning based on the Athens Charter. Moreover, without entirely losing faith in the Swiss architect, he pondered on the question: What will happen after Le Corbusier?

And after Le Corbusier?

Ragon came to the world of urbanism and architecture through the concept of 'prospective',⁴ a neologism he borrowed from Gaston Berger which means researching, systematically examining and studying possible futures. This led him to connect the concept with futurology in the third volume of his world history of architecture and modern urbanism, *Prospective et futurologie* (Prospectivity and

⁴ Gaston Berger (1896–1960) founded the *Prospective* journal in 1958 and a Chair of Prospectivity in the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in Paris.

Futurology). To design on the basis of prospectivity is to lay the foundations for the possibility of the ways of life in the future (Ragon, 1986). He founded the GIAP (International Group of Prospective Architecture) in 1965.

Ragon's interest in Le Corbusier derived from the widespread belief that the Swiss architect, like Picasso, was the very symbol of the Avant-garde.

His study of Le Corbusier's work prompted him to travel through several countries and to see for himself that contemporary architecture was still anchored in the early Avant-garde, in the past of the pioneers represented in the main by the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier.

In 1965, in *Les visionnaires de l'architecture* (The Visionaries of Architecture) he expressed this concern under the title 'Après Le Corbusier' (After Le Corbusier).

And after Le Corbusier? was a question various groups of architects were asking themselves at the time.

After more than twenty-five years of functionalism put forward in international congresses on modern architecture and after twenty of the Athens Charter, led unquestionably by Le Corbusier, a group of young architects grouped together in 1954 in Team 10 challenged the postulates of functionalism and the Athens Charter. This movement established itself with the publication of the Doorn Manifesto that same year, which noted that "The problem of human relations fell through the net of the "four functions" (dwelling, recreation, work and education), proposed by the functionalists (Hereu, Montaner and Oliveras, 1994, pp. 290–91).

In 1958, Yona Friedman was the leading figure in the Mobile Architecture Study Group (GEAM). He was probably familiar with Le Corbusier's three projects in which the Swiss architect posited a structure for inserting housing modules: the Algiers Plan, in which every user would construct their home beneath road infrastructure; the Unité d'habitation for Marseille, in which slabs serve as the floor in the space on which the housing modules were built; and, most clearly, the Rob project in Cap Martin, where the intention was to build slabs on which *cabanon* (log cabin) units were to be placed on the infrastructure.

It is understandable that Friedman would show Le Corbusier his mobile architecture project as another step in the Swiss architect's proposals. For Friedman, who summed up his ideas thus, 'The fun-

damental aspect of the idea of mobility lies in the hypothesis that the architect is unable to determine “definitively” the use and character of the building that is going to be built and that it is up to the user of said building to decide (and redecide) the use they wish to make of it. The building must, then, be “mobile” in the sense that whatever the use the user or social group wish to put it to, this will always be possible and achievable without the building presenting obstacles to the transformations that may result from this. The aim of the GEAM (Mobile Architecture Study Group) was to promote this approach’ (Friedman, 1978, p. 9).

In a private interview with Friedman at his home in 2002, he told us: ‘Le Corbusier told me that he had got that far, that he was now old and it was time for a young architect to continue the research’.

The Japanese Metabolists and Moshe Safdie in Montreal, among others, were also researching what architecture to advocate after Le Corbusier, as they too regarded the proposals of functionalism as obsolete.

Similarly, according to Ragon, ‘Le Corbusier’s true future impact lies not in his followers but among those who, like him, put research before social success. In those who at times attack his theories in the name of other prospective theories, and those who, like him, but with other criteria, seek to define the city of tomorrow’ (Balladur, J. et al., 1965, p. 5).

With this spirit, he began in March 1961 to write a column on architecture and urbanism in the *Arts* weekly periodical, edited by André Parinaud. He met Friedman, Maymont, Chanéac and Jonas and in 1962 began to publish in the same paper his articles on prospective architecture, a concept he described in ‘Les buts du GIAP’ (The goals of GIAP) as ‘A science of long-term forecasting defined and advocated by Gaston Berger and his team. Urbanism and architecture should be driven by a prospective spirit if they do not wish to be left behind before the plans are executed. To build for today is to end up building for yesterday. We have to learn how to build for tomorrow’ (GIAP, n.d.).

Throughout 1962 and 1963, Ragon continued to publish about prospective architecture in *Arts*. A number of his articles deal with the development of Paris:

- ‘Un plan révolutionnaire d’urbanisme spatial’, 28 February 1962, including the publication of Maymont’s and Friedman’s projects.

- ‘Le Paris de demain sera souterrain ou aérien’, 23 May 1962, including the publication of Jonas’s Intra-Haus and E. Utudjian’s underground Paris.

- ‘Robert Le Ricolais, précurseur de l’urbanisme spatial’, 30 May 1962.

- ‘Paris souterrain peut sauver Paris’, 24 October 1962.

- ‘Les parkings peuvent devenir les centres vivants des villes de demain’, 13 February 1963.

- ‘Construisons des villes sur la mer’, 3 April 1963, about Friedman’s bridge-towns.

- ‘Paris sous la Seine’, 8 May 1963, a project by Maymont.

- ‘Une maison-sculpture’, 4 July 1963, a project by Häusermann.

- ‘Demain nos villes seront immatérielles, transportables, climatisées et sonorisées’, 9 October 1963.

- ‘L’Urbanisme spatial’, 6 November 1963.

- ‘Schöffers rêve sa ville idéale’, 13 November 1963.

Ragon used the magazine to assemble a circle around prospective architecture. In May 1965, the group consisting of Ragon, Friedman, Maymont, Schein, Schöffers, Jonas and Patrice drafted the *Manifeste du Groupe International de l’Architecture Prospective*, in which they noted the transformation of industrialised society and the need to adapt architecture and urbanism to the new times. This adaptation was required in response to the population explosion, technological advances, the improved standard of living and the importance of time as a factor in communication, but also a number of political aspects such as the socialisation of time, the space and art. For the first time, the GIAP aimed to bring together technicians, artists, sociologists and specialists from every country in researching urban and architectural solutions three years before this was done by the Taller de Arquitectura set up by Ricardo Bofill, who also integrated artists, poets, sociologists and other experts in a novel manner, but whose project for the City in the Space for the Moratalaz neighbourhood in Madrid dates from 1968.

Between 1965 and 1967, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, in the centre of Paris, allowed the group to use one of its spaces for the GIAP gatherings on Thursdays at 9.00 pm. Each of the members and a number of guests would talk about topics of interest to them and about

their projects in the field of prospective architecture and urbanism. The subjects discussed varied widely, ranging from the arts, music and the city to the new technologies and urbanism.

In 1967, the GIAP moved its activities to the Centre d'Etudes Architecturales in Brussels, where it issued a series of publications by its members.

Relations with the other groups we have seen that were questioning the validity of functionalist architecture after Le Corbusier were diverse, extending from the GEAM and its leading figure Friedman, who integrated himself and his research fully into the GIAP, to the Japanese Metabolists and Moshe Safdie, who were affiliated with the GIAP's interests but shared no more than that.

In contrast, Team 10 was far removed from the GIAP's interests, inasmuch as it was a group of architects in professional practice who were seeking alternatives that would improve the response of their works to the merely functionalist approach that was now outdated according to the Doorn Manifesto, the central tenets of which are:

- A specific form of habitat must be developed for each particular situation. The place where people will work must be taken into account.
- An image that shows a new aesthetic and way of living must be presented.
- An inherent building model exists for every form of association.
- Every new situation exists in the context of other older ones and a new value should be given to the forms of the old communities by modifying them (Hereu, Montaner and Oliveras, 1994).

This last point was a source of disagreement in the Team 10 group since some members held differing views in relation to a number of works by Italian architects. The Torre Velasca in Milan, designed by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, and Jean Carlo di Carlo's building in the city of Matera were deemed by Peter Smithson, another member of the group, to be historical revivalism.

This concern with the role of history in contemporary architecture was the main difference with the trends of the GIAP and appeared in various scenarios, one of them the famous heated de-

bate between Reyner Banham and Ernesto Nathan Rogers, both of whom were editors of architecture journals.⁵ Banham accused the Italians of embracing Neo-Liberty, of basing themselves on the architecture of the past and of retreating from the modern movement, to which Nathan Rogers retorted by dubbing him the 'guardian of refrigerators'.

Despite the enormous divide between Team 10 and the GIAP, there are two points of convergence that are worth mentioning:

- The founding of the 'Construire le Monde' collection by the Robert Laffont publishing house, with two titles published in 1963: *L'avenir des villes* and *La maison de demain*. Parinaud (the editor of the *Arts* weekly), Ragon and Georges Candilis were among those who sat on the editorial board. Candilis was a leading member of Team 10 and a specialist in vacation cities, one of the areas of interest to the GIAP.
- During the heated debate over historicism, Aldo Van Eyck, the architect who collaborated with the CoBrA group in the 1950s, stated: 'architecture is going to reconcile the basic values. To gather the old into the new not along historicist lines but by rediscovering the archaic qualities of human nature' (Eyck, 2008, pp. 202-05). This was the extremely small nexus that joined Ragon and his interest in urbanism with Team 10: the roots of popular expression.

In 1975, in his viva voce at which he defended his thesis, *La pratique architecturale et ses idéologies: de la Révolution industrielle à nos jours* (Architectural Practice and Its Ideologies: From the Industrial Revolution to the Present Day), included in this publication, Ragon referred to the various stages of his own evolution as a historian of architecture:

- Crisis of architecture in the face of industrial society
- Crisis of urbanism in the face of the population explosion
- Crisis of functionalism in the face of the current architectural prospective
- And in our research now in progress, crisis of the architectural prospective in the face of the practice of everyday life

⁵ *Architectural Review*, no. 747, 1959, and *Casabella*, no. 228, 1959.

In this statement, Ragon seems to recall that whereas he moved from subscribing to Le Corbusier's tenets to criticism of the Athens Charter and from there to a search for new visionary forms of architecture and urbanism based on prospectivity, in the final stage, which seems to correspond to his research in the years he drafted his thesis, he identifies a crisis in architectural and urban creation as an idea based on prospectivity and this raises the confrontation between architectural practice and everyday life. He recalls here the decisive step taken by Friedman and which he speaks about in his book *Prospective et futurologie*: 'I have addressed architects and I should have addressed people'.

In later years, some of the GIAP architects gave up their research and went into teaching or architectural practice. In the case of Friedman, his research on social organisation, the critical group, self-build and self-determination, as applied to urbanism, constitute evolutions of the ideas of the GIAP: 'An ideology comes to light through certain theorists such as Yona Friedman: the ideology of self-planning, a kind of architectural self-organisation that has already begun to find certain practical answers, for example, the "dwelling à la carte" of the Arsène-Henry brothers, the various approaches to evolving housing. Involving users in architectural practice, the creation of neighbourhood committees responsible for protecting the environment, the 'urban struggles' that manifest themselves in Latin America and in Europe are all advance indications of a positive re-encounter between ideology and practice.'⁶

May '68

Just three years after the creation of the GIAP, the events of May 1968 occurred in Paris. Ragon experienced this era from an official position, that of president of the French branch of the AICA (International Association of Art Critics) and as the person responsible for the French section of the 1967 São Paulo Biennial and the 1968 Venice Biennial.

However, even though Ragon knew that he represented a mixed group of art critics from various movements, he did not adopt an impartial stance at the time of the protests. Together with the art critic Pierre Restany, a friend of his, he took sides on various fronts. Firstly, he opined on the reform of the teaching of architecture, regarded by lecturers and students as obsolete, devoting an article to the subject

⁶ See Ragon's defence of his thesis in 1975, included in this publication.

entitled 'De l'architecture considérée comme un acte politique' (On Architecture Regarded as a Political Act), published in 1968, in which he stated: 'We founded the GIAP in 1965 in order to mitigate the ridiculous teaching, to bring together some of the architects and other people concerned with the urban environment, to assert that architecture and urbanism could only be political acts and that there was a need to socialise "time, the space and art".' Secondly, he supported Restany's demand for the closure of a national museum of modern art viewed as unrepresentative of 'living art'. Thirdly, he resigned as director of the Venice Biennale in protest at the expulsion from the country of the artist Julio Le Parc, detained while he was making his way to join striking Renault workers. In reality, however, it was a consequence of his disagreements with the reactionary government of the Fifth Republic (Mallordy, 2018). In a column published in *Combat* magazine entitled 'Malraux, rejoignez-nous' (Malraux, Rejoin Us), published in 1968, Ragon backed the student protests and urged Malraux to adopt a position in favour of the students. By taking sides, Ragon, who was always critical of the authorities, offended certain sectors of the world of art and criticism, who viewed his resignation as opportunistic and contrary to his position as their representative.

In short, the events of May '68, which Ragon applauded as a return to the libertarian spirit he had always held dear, marked a before and after, a turning point. Not long afterwards, in 1970, Ragon began working on a collection of books about contemporary thinking with the Casterman publishing house, which specialised in comics. This collection, 'Mutations-Orientations', continued with 'Synthèses contemporaines' between 1974 and 1982. The selection of titles and authors was not determined on ideological grounds and encompassed many contemporary areas of art, sociology, philosophy and museology. The published authors include Marxist writers such as Lefebvre, structuralists such as Abraham Moles and anarchists like Maurice Joyeux; musicians such as Xenakis; architects such as Friedman, Claude Parent, Richard Neutra and Wogenscky; and plastic artists such as Vasarely.

In 1971, Ragon wrote a book in his own collection, *L'art pour quoi faire?* (Why Make Art?). In his handwritten notes in his own copy, held by Françoise Ragon, he added a comment in pencil on the flyleaf, in preparation for a second edition, 'a libertarian manifesto', a definition of his stance and a summing-up of his thinking on art and artistic institutions. The book summarises the interests shared and debated by critics of the time and apparently runs counter to his

career, as in the case of his criticism of fascination with technology, when he had previously defended technological artists such as Schöffer in the GIAP. He also goes on immediately to talk about the stance of artists and critics vis-à-vis politics as opposition, and lastly about the death of art. Each of these subjects is discussed in a chapter in the book.

With regard to his ostensible distancing from technology, which he had supported theoretically with the GIAP, Ragon justified himself by arguing that architectural prospectivity had to take into account technological and industrial progress but without thereby becoming a tributary of the utilitarianism and false progressiveness of capitalist society. Even so, he was critical of the fact that this progress was understood solely from the perspective of economic interests and not from the viewpoint of humanism. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, the concept of invention and progress has been linked to technological advances and as a result, the artist, who cannot join this system, has been regarded as a pariah ever since the advent of industrialisation.

As for the death of art, far from representing a real threat in Ragon's mind, this refers to the relationship art had established with the powers-that-be up to the Industrial Revolution, when the bourgeoisie attracted for its own benefit everything related to progress. In fact, it alludes to the death of a certain type of practice whose evolution, in the past and today, has always been linked to the powers-that-be, whether that be the government or the Church. At the general assembly of the AICA in Venice in 1964, the question of the death of art was addressed (Mallordy, 2018, p. 57). According to Ragon, the artist's duty was to react solely to the permanent revolution: 'Thus the goal of art remains a form of the revolution advocated in the past by Trotsky. Permanent revolution must be constant self-criticism, self-criticism, obviously, of permanent revolution itself. In short, what living art is' (Ragon, 1971, p. 135). Living art was thus to be characterised by perpetual self-criticism. Art conceived thus had not died, as had those older artistic conceptions allied to the powers-that-be, initially the aristocracy or the Church; then the technological and capitalist bourgeoisie that appropriated everything to transform it for its own benefit; and lastly the state, in any of its forms, that demanded of the artist and critic the false loyalty of both ideology and opposition.



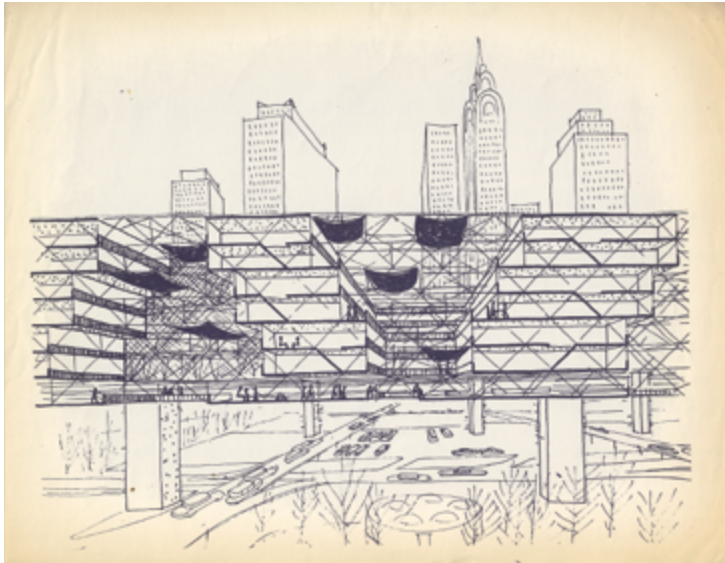
Cover of Michel Ragon's book *Atlas*, published by Bibliothèque de CoBra, 1950



Cover of Michel Ragon's book *Expression et non-figuration*, 1951



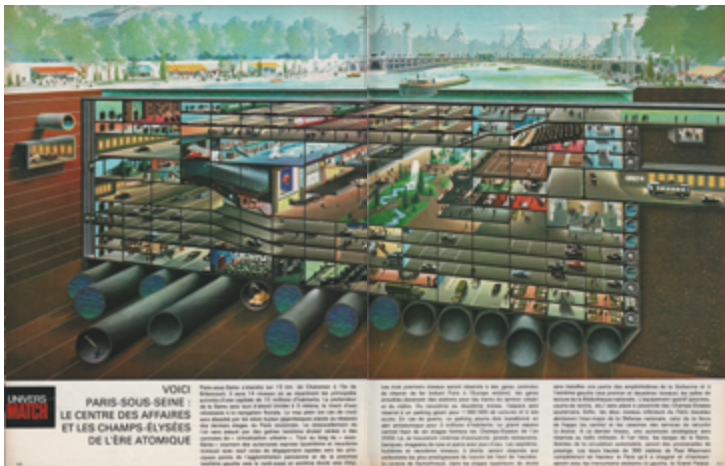
Michel Ragon and Jacques Polieri in front of the painting *Les trois arbres* by Jean Fautrier and a sculpture by Etienne Hajdu. In the centre, *Méta-mécanique* by Jean Tinguely. Festival of Avant-garde Art, Marseille, 1956. Michel Ragon Fonds (FR ACA MRAGO PHOT0019, INHA) – Archives de la Critique d'Art Collection, Rennes



Photograph attributed to Lucien Hervé of a drawing by Yona Friedman
Spatial Villa Floating Over Manhattan, c. 1960



Cover of Michel Ragon's book
Où vivrons-nous demain?, 1963



Paul Maymont, 'Paris under the Seine'.
Paris Match 2 November 1963



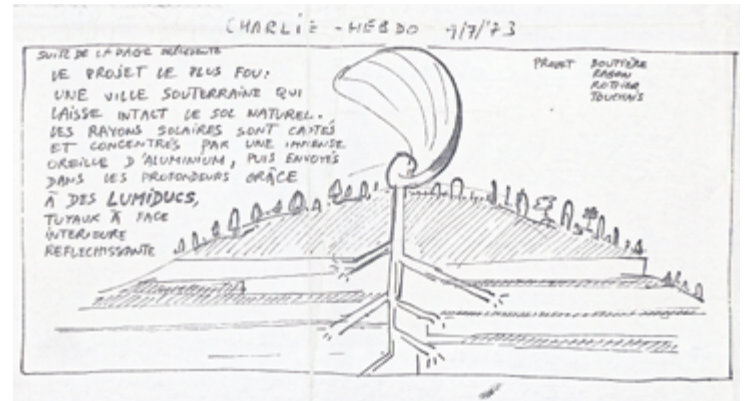
Denise and Yona Friedman, Claude and Naad Parent, Paul Maymont, Michel Ragon, Georges Patrix, Jean Maneval and, in front, Marc and Anne Gaillard at the home of Françoise and Michel Ragon, 1978
Courtesy of A. Patrix, Françoise Ragon and *Topophile*



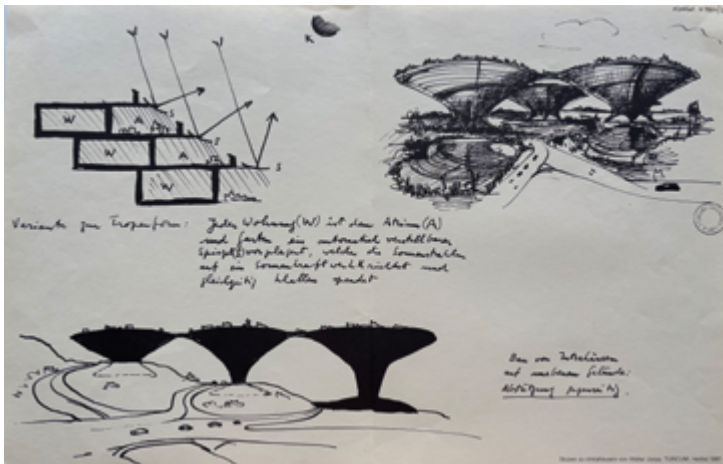
Cover of Nicolas Schöffer's book
Le spatiodynamisme, 1954



Cover of Georges Patrix's book
Beauté ou laideur?, 1967



Guy Rottier, 'Vers une architecture solaire'. *Charlie Hebdo*, 9 July 1973
Michel Ragon Fonds (FR ACA MRAGO. XT004/255), INHA – Archives de la Critique d'Art
Collection, Rennes



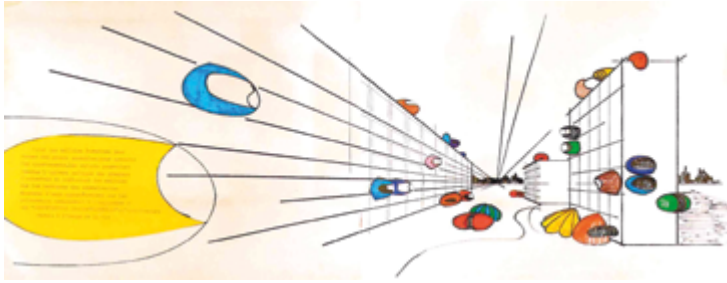
Walter Jonas, drawing of his Intrapolis project, 1962
Michel Ragon Fonds (FR ACA MRAGO. XT004/255), INHA – Archives de la Critique d'Art
Collection, Rennes



Cover of Yona Friedman's book
L'architecture de survie, 1978



Cover of Michel Ragon's book
Les erreurs monumentales, 1971



Chanéac, *Cellules Parasites*, 1968. Architect's notebook
Gift of Nelly Chanéac. Courtesy of the Frac-Centre – Val de Loire



GIAP manifesto, May 1965

Monumental errors

In his book *Prospective et futurologie*, the third revised volume of his *Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme modernes* (World History of Modern Architecture and Urbanism), published in 1978, Ragon included a survey in which he questioned each of the members of the GIAP about the actuality of their proposal.

Friedman moved towards urbanism of a social nature and Chanéac towards protest against the dirigisme of social housing flats, both from a position of defence of the freedom of societies to choose their own destiny.

In an interview given to the Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française on 26 August 1973, Friedman set out his 'critical group' theory, giving as an example Somorrostro, a shanty town district in Barcelona. Once again, the idea of the insurrectionary city grew in Barcelona. Friedman recalled that the group of residents in the neighbourhood had expressly decided against integrating into the city because it knew that increasing the group critical of a society that deems itself to be egalitarian leads to dissolution, to self-destruction.

Chanéac addressed another eternal subject, that of the lack of social housing and the ugliness and insalubrity of outlying urban districts. In Brussels in 1968, he put forward a Manifesto of Insurrectionary Architecture in which he stated:

'The visionaries at the start of the century condemned decadent ornamentation, useless spaces, structural lies. The struggle that was necessary at that time has calmed the consciences of those who build big housing complexes today. The precious useless spaces have disappeared. The forms have become primary on the pretext of rationalisation.

'[But] It has become difficult to live there. How can one take possession of such poor spaces? To counter administrative barriers, the reactionary mass of construction professionals, I propose the following strategy: the creation of insurrectionary architecture.

'When I look at a vast housing complex, I want to give its residents the means to make their dreams come true and to satisfy their immediate needs by making available to them or giving them the technical means to clandestinely create "parasite cells". They will be able to extend their apartment by using "suction cells" stuck to the façade [...]' (Ragon, 1986).

In the maelstrom of aesthetic options that emerged and confronted each other after the Second World War, Ragon was a per-

petual dissident and that makes him undefinable. Over and above the contradiction of his support for anarchism, his early background and his self-taught character, together with his work as an art and architecture critic in the bourgeois milieu of artistic promotion and technological progress, Ragon, as an art activist and dissident, challenged the bourgeois conception of abstract art, the trends of a compliant Geometric Abstraction, Socialist Realism, and both the right-wing and left-wing dirigiste definition of architecture and urbanism, and showed himself to be in favour of urbanism linked to society. His struggle remains utterly relevant today.

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ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE AND ITS IDEOLOGIES: FROM THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION TO THE PRESENT DAY

*Address given by Michel Ragon on 14 December 1975
at the Sorbonne*

Gentlemen,

It is something of a miracle or a fantasy to find myself before you in this room at the Sorbonne today. At the risk of boring you, I cannot help but mention that young boy I once was, leaving school at the age of fourteen, equipped with my school-leaving certificate, and starting out on the hard apprenticeship of the life of the proletarian manual labourer. The fact is that this training as a proletarian and as an autodidact explains an entire part of my work, that which began when I was twenty-three on the publication of my first book on proletarian literature, and which continued much later with the great role we have accorded to working-class housing in the history of architecture, and to the city as a practice of a space of everyday life.

Between the two, my seduction by pictorial practice, my friendship with the artists of the generation of lyrical abstraction, the practice of art criticism. Proletarian literature and avant-garde art criticism may seem contradictory activities, but only to those who forget that at certain points in history, the aesthetic avant-garde and the political avant-garde have marched shoulder to shoulder. Nevertheless, let us admit that in the confined realm of pictorial art as it is practised today, and in its commercial environment, we have often felt uncomfortable. The young boy I mentioned earlier came back to take me by the hand. With architecture and urbanism, he and I rediscovered our early social and political interests. Architecture, which is both an art and a science and which combines both aesthetics and politics, enables us to unite our social concerns and our aesthetic concerns.

The subject you have kindly agreed to examine, and which we will be discussing, is an attempt to decipher the architectural practice and ideologies in the new urban world that has grown out of industrialisation.

Does the solution reside in the descendants of the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier and the Athens Charter? We naively believed this to be the case when we wrote our first *Histoire de l'architecture moderne* (History of Modern Architecture), published in 1958. It is true that no other

work of its kind existed in the French language at the time, however unlikely that may seem. This book was intended to be followed by a second that would have arrived at an assessment of architectural practice after the Second World War, a practice that grew out of the theories of the pioneers of the 1920s... But the more we advanced in our research, the further we found ourselves going up a dead-end street. So much so that we never published the book. And in its place, we ended up completely changing direction and in 1963 published *Où vivrons-nous demain?* (Where Will We Live Tomorrow?), with a large question mark.

Où vivrons-nous demain? was an abandonment of practice for theory. It was an attempt to open the door of modernity in architecture by using a new key: the prospective key. Applying the methods of economic and political forward planning to architecture and urban development – which had previously never been done – led to what? Well, to writing scripts, so to speak, for the architectural future based on new propositions, all of which broke with the generation of Gropius and Le Corbusier. It meant asking the question: 'After Le Corbusier, what?' We were accused of utopian thinking. Another key of potential use to us was aesthetics. Gathering documentation on the finest works of architecture of the post-war period, classifying them by genres, or more accurately by signs, led to what? Well, again, to erecting a kind of utopian city. All those edifices published in our *Esthétique de l'architecture contemporaine* (Aesthetics of Contemporary Architecture) exist, but they are scattered all over the world. Brought together in a single book, this book, they form a kind of fabulous imaginary city. But it is a mirage. Removed from its environment, architectural practice has become a white lie.

So, we had to go back to the drawing board. We had to consign to the garbage heap our first history of architecture (which was never reissued) and recheck events and dates, search for sources of influence and outcomes. We had to attempt to start from scratch, as if we knew nothing. Fifteen years of travelling, reading, studying and reflecting led us in 1971 to writing our *Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme modernes* (World History of Modern Architecture and Urbanism), a history of architectural ideologies of practices, constantly compared and contrasted.

The conclusion is that the new urban world born of industry is still searching for its city. Questioning history, the history of humankind and their cities, was perhaps helpful to arriving at a better un-

derstanding of our city ravaged by the Industrial Revolution, a revolution that did indeed generate an urban revolution, but an urban revolution that is stuck at the insurrectional state. During this insurrection lasting more than a century, the pre-industrial city gradually disappeared under the rubble. But where is the city that this revolution ought to have given rise to?

Our most recent work led us to conclude that the democratic city, which should have been the outcome of the Industrial Revolution, remains a mirage. But even so it is in this democratic city still to be built that our everyday lives could find their urban expression.

Determination of the field of research

So, we study architecture and urbanism (as we previously did painting and sculpture) in their times of crisis:

- Crisis of architecture in the face of industrial society
- Crisis of urbanism in the face of the population explosion
- Crisis of functionalism in the face of the current architectural prospective
- And in our research now in progress, crisis of the architectural prospective in the face of the practice of everyday life

In *La Peinture française et l'art nègre* (French Painting and Black Art), Jean Laude writes: 'What is important in radio or television, cars or planes is less the device itself—whatever the form it is given—than the changes they make in our lives. Anyone who travels by plane or car, uses a phone on a daily basis, listens to their radio or watches something on a film or television screen no longer has—nor can they ever have again—the same conceptions of time and space as those of someone in the nineteenth century; and they no longer have the same lived experiences of space and time.'

Siegfried Giedion and Le Corbusier made similar observations on architecture and urbanism. We live in flats where the living space is the same (in miniature form) as it was under Napoleon III and Haussmann. Working-class HLM flats (housing at moderate rents) are, as we know, the reduction to the bare minimum of the bourgeois apartment of the Second Empire. We therefore practice two lived spaces at the same time: an everyday machinist space of the end of the twentieth century and an inhabited space of the nineteenth century. Resulting in a certain unease... certain.

Methodological problems

We must now speak to you of the methods that we have had to contend with. There are several ways of reading, of decoding, architecture: the classic historical reading, the aesthetic reading, the ideological reading and the scientific reading.

We asked Monsieur Teyssèdre to support our work because one of his aims is (or has been) to find a solution to the French rift between the history of art and thinking on art. Because our history of architecture and urbanism is both the history of ideologies and practices and the history of the confrontation between these ideologies and practices. Because our history also rejects the segregation between aesthetics and practice that was a tenet of most classic histories of architecture.

We are mindful of the overly ambitious aspect of our work. To write that ideal history of architecture and urbanism that we dream of one would need to be a historian as well as a geographer, aesthetician, sociologist, ecologist, political scientist and specialist in the built domain. An ambition that is way beyond us. Even so, we have endeavoured to access the maximum knowledge of the most diverse kind and the most varied information possible (and we are greatly indebted to the architects and engineers who have kindly [advised us]) in a bid to understand the vast field of planning the space. Because the domestic space is inextricably linked to the urban or rural space, which is itself dependent on the overall planning of the territory. And the intermediate spaces, the interstitial spaces, between the private and the public spheres, those spaces ignored by so many contemporary architects, spaces for living in, spaces that are themselves also lived in between the interior and the exterior, elastic spaces that are not easily identified, are no less important than the bedroom or the agora. Many neuroses stem from the fact that these transitional spaces have not been studied by architects who are also psychologists.

Furthermore, if we compare the historian of architecture with the historian of art, we can see that the first differs from the second if only by virtue of their approach to their sources. The historian of architecture always faces problems, some of them insurmountable, in relation to sources and references. There is no legal deposit on architectural and urban development plans that would make it possible to assess the evolution of a study, from the first sketch by the designing architect to the amendments made by various committees,

amendments that mean the constructed result frequently bears only a very distant resemblance to the initial project. Imagine a work of literature in which each reader at a publishing house made their own cuts and suggestions, in which at each stage of the making of a book everyone deleted, added and altered as they saw fit. Such, however, is the fate of most works of architecture. That architecture is an art is indisputable, but a very singular art and so dependent on politics and finance that censorship and self-censorship are common.

It should be said that this encounter between the architect's initial idea and a programme, with various programmers, even users, may be negative, but it may also lead to certain improvements. A collective awareness of the architectural work sometimes develops solely at the maquette stage or while construction is underway. Architecture is, then, an art whose singularity also resides in the fact that it is a collective art.

There are strange gaps, even persistent errors, in the history of architecture due to the difficulty of getting to the sources of the work itself. Baltard's role in the history of metal architecture, for example, is totally exaggerated, to the detriment of the visionary of spaces roofed using metal, Hector Horeau. If it were only for our resurrection of Horeau, regarded in the nineteenth century as the 'Victor Hugo' of architecture yet mentioned just once in all the histories of modern architecture, leaving us in the dark as to whether he was an architect or an engineer, if it were only for this restoration of Horeau to his rightful place, we would be happy to have written our *Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme moderne*.

But there are many other gaps still to be filled. Who will undertake, for example, to study the Saint-Simonian architects? Who will do for the architects of the French Revolution, known to have been influenced by Ledoux and Boullée, what Anatole Kopp did for the architects of the Russian Revolution? The history of architecture is essentially the history of monuments, in other words, of the signs of power, of the authorities. The history of company towns and the history of middle-class suburbia and an analysis of the reasons behind them have only recently begun to be sketched out. The role of cars, or rather, the role of car manufacturers, in the history of urbanism in the 1920s can barely be glimpsed. Similarly, might it not be possible to detect the growing role played by bankers in certain urban development plans today, just as it can be discerned in the new reorganisation of the art market and, hence, of the artistic 'values' foisted on us?

Conclusion

The dichotomy between ideologies and practices is the crux of our subject. In this respect, it is important and worrying to note that many of the architects who have wanted, with the best of intentions, to build for the masses have made mistakes. Rather than creating a democratic architecture, they have often been the unwitting interpreters of the worst tyrannies.

Architects' deference towards those in power, whatever that power may be, is a constant in the history of architecture. The architect is the artist responsible for aggrandising power, for imposing the everyday presence of the Prince through monuments intended to inspire fear, respect and a love of the monarch. One would have thought that the advent of democracy would have toppled this feudal structure, but this has not been the case. Charged with creating architecture for the common man, the architect was only able to call to mind barracks and created the Grand Ensemble. If he no longer builds for the Prince, the architect feels lost. Like Charles Fourier waiting at midday every day at the Place du Palais Royal for the financier who would enable him to realise his phalanstery (and who never came), Le Corbusier waited all his life for the Power (which he termed the Authority) that would allow him to create his Ville Radieuse. This search for those in authority may seem both irritating and puerile. But who, other than the Power (political power or financial power) is empowered to decide the fate of cities, and of the housing module? Through urbanism and architecture, every authority exercises an insidious tyranny.

We are no longer subject to the megalomaniacal tyranny of a Peter the Great in St. Petersburg or of a Louis XIV in Versailles, both of whom wanted to build edifices that would express their magnificence. Although, when Kubitschek decided to establish the new capital of Brazil far from any spontaneous population centre, and above all far from that developed strip along the Atlantic that represents the sweetness of life for Brazilians, was he not acting as despotically as Peter the Great when the latter decided to tear Russia from Asia by opening a gateway to Europe through the creation of an Italianate capital on the Baltic?

Whereas the authorities and architects never request the involvement of the populace, people on occasion demonstrate their dissent later on. For example, in the end St. Petersburg did not by any means match up to the dream of Peter the Great, whose despotism,

despite being considerable, failed to influence the destiny of the city he had created. The plan of the French architect Le Blond, approved by the tsar in 1716, was in effect gradually abandoned for the simple reason that the population shunned the islands that were to constitute the heart of St. Petersburg and preferred to settle on the left bank of the Neva. Despite the interdictions of the tsars, which remained in place until 1740, it was on the left bank of the Neva that the city grew spontaneously, regardless of the initial plans. An interesting reaction on the part of the citizens—who in a way built their counter-city—in opposition to the city of power and which was repeated in our own time in response to the construction of another ‘artificial’ capital, Brasilia. Everyone knows that the liveliest part of Brasilia is its favela, which grew spontaneously near the monumental city but was not included in the plans.

The participation of the users of architecture (that is to say, of everyone) is the subject of our most recent research. The latest architectural ideologies are challenged by new practices—among them psychology, psychiatry and environmentalism—that seem to elude architecture, but which may lead to a new concept of the city and of housing. A new ideology is emerging thanks to certain theorists such as Yona Friedman: the ideology of self-planning, a kind of architectural self-organisation that has already begun to find certain practical answers, for example, the ‘habitat à la carte’ of the Arsène-Henry brothers, the various approaches of an evolving habitat. Involving users in architectural practice, the creation of neighbourhood committees responsible for protecting the environment, the ‘urban struggles’ that manifest themselves in Latin America and in Europe are all advance indications of a positive re-encounter between ideology and practice.

The ideology of the liberated city, of a playful city, hangs over today’s cities. Today’s cities are, as we know, the product of an ideology of financial, technocratic and bureaucratic power. But today’s cities are also a theatre for the staging of a propaganda play with its sights on production efficiency and increasing consumption. As Jean Duvignaud has underlined, the theatre is the opposite of festivities. There was no celebration at the Versailles of Louis XIV but never-ending theatre. The various authorities still in possession of the city have striven constantly to ensure that festivities do not invade the city. They have repressed the city’s capacity for playfulness in a kind of ritual theatre: commemorations, parades, processions and

event ceremonies. Festivities only enter the city violently and merely for a brief while at times of extreme crisis: the taking of the Bastille, the Paris Commune and May ’68.

If the ideology of a liberated city, of a playful city, hovers above our alienated cities, if a slogan like the ‘right to the city’ has been taken up by angry citizens in what can only be termed ‘urban struggles’, in other words, struggles for all things urban, it is because the myth of the end of the city is as fragile as that of the end of history or of the death of art. The end of history would of course signify the end of the city, as the city is the place par excellence where history is made. And undoubtedly the death of the city would signify the death of art.

Because the city is a person. The city is a living being. Like every living being, the city is a place of contradiction. True, it is a sign of power, but also the place of freedom, exchanges, randomness, contacts and speech. The place par excellence of utopia.

Gentlemen,

Each of the stages I have endeavoured to outline in this brief address constitutes an approach. The approach of functionalism and a critique of that functionalism. Because a machine can easily be ugly and entirely effective. Perhaps our civilisation is at last able to overcome its complex about the machine. And to rediscover that just as an effective tool is not necessarily beautiful, an art object is not necessarily useful. Or, if you prefer, it has no other use than to be beautiful.

An approach of the arts of the environment and hence a sketch of what could again become an urban art.

An approach of architecture as a form of social communication. Because if painting and sculpture are forms of social communication, what can be said of architecture, which organises the space for private life as well as for relations between people? It is in this dual function of the edifice as a closed private space and an open public space that one of the major difficulties of the architectural work lies.

And even though the path we have taken has led us from the Corbusian credo to the ideological critique of Le Corbusier, we have nevertheless learned from our former master that there can be no separation between architecture and urbanism. Without urbanism, an edifice is merely an isolated object deprived of the context that would bring it to life. Without built architecture, urbanism remains in the domain of sociology or politics. Urbanistic ideology ceases to

be a utopia when it is embodied in a group of buildings and ‘voids’ that constitute a city.

Our conclusion is not a conclusion, because we are going to end up at the necessary openness to other research. History continues, it is made every day... But is making the history of present-day art, of today’s architecture and, even more so, of prospective architecture, is that also history? And if it is not, what is it? What is the history that is lived, that we are living and which, we are, in some way, shedding light on through a militant practice? Does the practice of ideas fall to history or aesthetics or literature?

I leave it to you, gentlemen, to judge. And that is why I have submitted to you, with emotion but also with confidence, the dossier of these thirty years of work and activities.

Address given by Michel Ragon during his defence of his thesis on his published works—*La pratique architecturale et ses idéologies: de la Révolution industrielle à nos jours* (Architectural Practice and Its Ideologies: From the Industrial Revolution to the Present Day)—on 14 December 1975 at the Sorbonne. The examining panel was chaired by Marc Le Bot and consisted of Jean Duvignaud, Jean Laude, Bernard Teyssède (director) and André Wogensky.

We wish to thank Françoise Ragon, Michel Ragon’s wife, for forwarding this text to us and for granting us permission to reproduce it here.

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MICHEL RAGON’S WRITINGS

Michel Ragon wrote numerous monographs and articles, as well as prologues to books and exhibition catalogues. He was the editor of book collections, among them the Germinal collection, published by Jean Vigneau, in 1947; the Mutations-Orientations collection, published by Casterman between 1970 and 1973; the Synthèses contemporaines collection, also published by Casterman between 1965 and 1982; and the Mémoire populaire and Géographie littéraire de la France collections, published by Slatkine.

We have placed special emphasis here on Ragon’s monographs and a number of his articles. A detailed bibliography can be found in *Michel Ragon. Critique d’art et d’architecture*, published by PUF.

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