

... Modernism survived on the dream of austerity and the dream of not playing the game of consumerism

A conversation with Stanislaus von Moos on the rooftop terrace of the Getty Research Institute

Celia Ghyka

PhD, Associate Professor, "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism, Bucharest, Romania
ghyka_uauim@icloud.com

Stanislaus von Moos is one of the most distinguished and exceptional architectural historians of the last decades. Trained as an art historian and having worked closely with Sigfried Giedion, he is also the scholar to whom we owe the very first posthumous assessment of Le Corbusier's entire work,¹ in his 1968 book "Le Corbusier. Elements of a Synthesis."² As the interview will suggest, his research interests vary from the study of interwar housing to the work of Venturi & Scott Brown to scholarship on recent Swiss architecture.

In 1971 he founded and was the first editor of the Swiss journal *Archithese*, a vibrant forum for architectural debate and critique.

Besides his prolific and momentous work as a writer of the architectural history of the 20th century, he has been teaching in various prestigious institutions, such as the Yale School of Architecture, Princeton University, Harvard University, Technische Hogeschool, Delft, the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio. He is a Professor Emeritus of History of Art at the University of Zürich.

I had the great honor and joy to meet professor von Moos during the winter semester 2018/2019 at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in Los Angeles, where we were both working around the topic of *Monumentality*. An incredibly generous and genuinely inquisitive person, he accepted to have a conversation for this year's issue of our journal.

While I was consulting the Aldo Rossi archives in the special collections of the GRI, I found a photograph showing Aldo Rossi, Stanislaus von Moos and Heinrich Klotz, concentrated around a table that was visibly a conference table. This photograph triggered our conversation, around that conference from September 1974 - a symposium actually that took place at the IDZ (International Design Center) - Berlin, under the title "Das Pathos des Funktionalismus" (*The Pathos of Functionalism*).

The symposium gathered architects, art historians and even sociologists and called for a discussion for "architecture as form as opposed to the pure sociological critique which tends to disqualify aesthetic experience of architecture as an offence to critical awareness and social concern" (as stated in the magazine *werk. archithese* from March 1977, dedicated to the event). Organized by professor Heinrich Klotz, who was also a contributor, speakers such as Julius Posener, Aldo Rossi, Adolf Max Vogt, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and of course Stanislaus von Moos participated at the conference.

Here is the transcript of our conversation, at some point interrupted by the noise of too many helicopters flying over the Getty mountain.

1 As we know, Le Corbusier had been extremely adamant in controlling the image of his work. Von Moos' book remains one of the most pertinent scholarship works on the subject, although the opening of the Le Corbusier's archives in Paris was followed by an avalanche of studies on the topic.

2 First published in German in 1968, then translated into English in 1979 for the first English edition at the MIT. Recently reprinted by the Berlage Institute in 2009, with postscripts for every chapter.

Celia Ghyka: *I am extremely delighted and honored that you accepted my provocation, and please do not think about it as an interview, but as no more than a conversation.*

Stanislaus von Moos: And surely nothing less than a conversation.

CG: *I wanted to invite you to go back in time to the symposium from 1974, organized by Internationales Design Zentrum in Berlin, that was centered around one of the big issues of Modernism — functionalism. As we have been looking at photographs of heroic figures of Modernism and late Modernism (among which yourself), it seemed to me that you were happy to reminisce about this moment.*

SvM: Yes, *Pathos des Funktionalismus*. It was really an interesting event and actually also quite early in the history of Postmodernism, because I remember that Charles Jencks' book only came out later, after this conference, and of course after Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction*. Rossi's book had come out before, but they were only *post-festum* attributed as postmodernists. And *Learning from Las Vegas* had come out just two years before, so, in a sense, it was almost before Postmodernism really being born as a movement; it was already like a caveat uttered by Heinrich Klotz, reminding us that Modernism too had a symbolic, or an expressive, or a monumental ambition and a *Pathos*.

Obviously he wanted to avoid the simplistic ideas that some architects had been heralding in the 1960, namely that the so-called Modernism was devoid of any symbolic dimension, had no expressive power, was totally economy-driven in a trivial kind of exploitative sense of the word. And so, it is almost an anticipated warning against an all too trivial definition of postmodern architecture as being an alternative to modern architecture, by saying that functionalism was not without its own pathos or without its own representative ambition and glamour. And I think that this was a very powerful idea and made a lot of sense — Klotz was its author.

You know, I hardly ever read his name lately in Anglo-Saxon literature, although he worked brilliantly and many of his books were translated into English — in any case, more than mine; however, he is not acknowledged. He was aware of every intelligent position in architecture between 1965 and 1985 and wrote brilliantly about it.

This conference was a challenge to Rossi and Venturi, in the presence of Julius Posener who was an old theoretician of functionalist architecture. So, this symposium was in a way establishing a dialogue between a so-called Postmodernism and a functionalist tradition.

CG: *Could you tell me a little more about that conference? I am curious how things were happening in those days as opposed to what you see now.*

SvM: Well, you see, in 1967, only a few years before that 1974 conference, there was another clamorous conference: Ungers'. It was really a clash, because those years were truly revolutionary, and the contemplation of the big housing projects (Märkisches Viertel) were taken by the students.³

Then there was the last public lecture given by Sigfried Giedion, when there were balloons rising at the back of the audience and the students began to make funny noises, and the atmosphere was highly politically charged. I was not there, and what I know is what I heard from Giedion for, at that moment, I was doing my PhD, and this was not my world of interest. As I understood, it was the end of Ungers' presence in Berlin for quite a few years — he went to Cornell and returned to Berlin later. In hindsight, I put these things in relation, because at the time when I was in Berlin, I had no knowledge of Ungers; of course, except for the buildings he had done.

3 In the 1960s Oswald Mathias Ungers was interested in form and composition and rejected the idea of architecture being political. This stood in opposition to the ideas of many colleagues, especially to those of Team X. In 1967, while he was still teaching forms and types of buildings, he organized a conference on architectural theory at the TU Berlin. Militating for a radical change in the structure of their architectural studies, his students protested at the conference with signs stating "Alle Häuser sind schön, hört auf zu bauen!" ("All houses are beautiful, stop building!")

It was an interesting moment, and I remember for me — it is also *la petite histoire* — that *Pathos des Funktionalismus* is connected to my quitting to smoke. I was a heavy smoker and I was at an AICA conference in East Germany, where there was no way of finding the *Gauloises* that I used to smoke; as I had a flu before going to Germany, the moment was a combination of disgust and impossibility to find cigarettes. Back in West Berlin, I decided that it is going to be either to stay stupid or silent during the conference, but stick to my decision not to smoke, or to smoke again and make an active contribution. And then what happened was that Klotz said: “Listen, can you talk tomorrow about the Berliner Siedlungen” — you know the Britz of Bruno Taut, on which I had given classes, indeed. And I remember sitting in the Europa Hotel and thinking about the decision between giving up smoking and the conference that I had to give...

I do not remember the discussion afterwards, but I do remember that, in another meeting, the couple Venturi – Scott Brown and Rossi were sitting next to each other behind a table, reading their papers — in fact, Venturi was reading and the other two were speaking more freely. Yet they were not engaging, they were only tentatively “friends.”

The really interesting parts, that I remember well, were the excursions to Mendehlson’s houses and to Britz, and the questions they asked, and the comments they made about the role of color to people like Posener... Those were really interesting questions. And then students wanted things to be criticized; you know, the social democratic utopia of pushing the working classes into pigeon cubs ... To these critiques, Klotz often retorted: “What do you mean?”, because those buildings were really — even by today’s standards — good housing units. Housing that was done in the 1920s was really interesting.

CG: *This issue of our journal is actually looking at the complicated history of Modernism, starting from the assumption that we have heard so many times that Modernism is dead. In fact, we are challenging this very assumption.*

One of the questions was whether we can discern which Modernism is dead? Do we always think in radical or heroic terms? We’ve been discussing a lot (here, at the Getty Research Institute) about monuments, monumentality, about heroic things. I am afraid of putting things on pedestals, but on the other hand it is what we read very often.

SvM: Well, what I found interesting is that you speak very elusively about various Modernisms, and present me with a choice of a kind of Modernism that might not be surviving these days — and if yes or if not — for what reasons. I find that, put in such general terms, the issue is very difficult, if not impossible to answer.

I, myself — I must say — I tried; but if I have to look at what I have been writing or what I have been involved in in terms of discussing issues of architecture in the last say 40 years, then, of course, the 1974 conference in Berlin was more or less at the beginning of my interest in what many people would call Postmodernism. I gave it a name: it’s what I would call the work of Venturi and Scott Brown who were actually participating at this conference.⁴ And as you refer to these terms, Modernism and Postmodernism, I remember having said in a book that I wrote later about these architects, that I was purposefully avoiding the term Postmodernism for I find it simply useless. It is useful for somebody who fights a fight in the name of the movement, which was not at all my interest — I had a more analytical, investigative kind of interest in these phenomena and in these architects. Postmodernism was already bent for me, a label attributed by some ideologues and protagonists for certain work and certain positions, that obviously could explain some intentions, but it didn’t actually explain the phenomenon as far as I am concerned.

⁴ Stanislaus von Moos is the author of several comprehensive monographies of the architects: *Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown: Buildings and Projects* (1960-85, Rizzoli, 1986) and *Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates: Buildings and Projects 1986-1997* (Monacelli Press, 1999). He is also the editor, together with Martin Stierli, of an impressive volume that revisits *Learning from Las Vegas* more than 40 years after its first publication. *Eyes that Saw: Architecture after Las Vegas* is expected to come out in June 2020 (Scheidegger & Spiess).

The *isms* that are being proclaimed by certain cultural protagonists are part of the game, but not the thing. As architectural historians, we should be as analytical toward this kind of *isms* as we are to the *modernities* and I always had a certain amount of caution with respect to this idea of saving “Das Projekt der Moderne” — Habermas’ idea. Obviously, I know what Habermas means, because behind this lies the whole idea of Enlightenment and the Enlightenment is also in crisis, as we all know. And I respect the idea of those who would want to save a certain kind of humanistic modernity, but the *Modernisms* as practiced by so many architects...? I don’t know, what do you feel?

CG: *I feel that it has become just a label that goes with everything — and now, even this idea that we are looking at Modernism with such detachment is not true. I often see that the teaching that is given to students is a very distant and, sometimes, quite poor echo of Modernism. Although they claim to be doing something else.*

SvM: It is interesting what you say, because it confirms my suspicion that discourse is one and practice is another. Although there is a general consensus that Modernism should be the Modernism of Team X — one that people don’t really know —, what people really do is not so consistent with what they say and maybe they should even say less. I don’t want to sound as someone who criticizes the logocentrism of architects, especially American architects. But there is a curious disconnection between discourse and practice among architects and I don’t really understand why.

CG: *Do you see this as a failure in a certain way? To me if you go back to Vitruvius, it is always thinking about what you are doing. And quite often architects fall into a certain pseudo-intellectual trap, and they go on and on about things that just aren’t relevant.*

SvM: That is a very serious statement, and unfortunately it may not be wrong. And obviously praxis itself is an issue, because it is less and less determined by traditional crafts or by traditional knowledges of architecture, but it is more determined by the possibilities of industry and technology. And obviously, at the same time, technologies are an invitation to try out novelty over novelty, and in doing so one upholds a self-understanding of “updatedness” and of modernity and Modernism, while losing more and more the ground of traditional concepts of architecture, to put it in a banal way. For instance, I find that especially the recent decades the tendency to talk about context, identity and all these postmodern issues without developing a sensibility for traditional crafts or traditional methods is something worrying.

And at the same time, I don’t know what I would really recommend that architects do. If I were to think of Léon Krier, I have a real understanding of some of what he says, like “why do architects think that they need to do everything?” I remember I visited his house and I was really impressed by how he was presenting it; he said: “Look at this door, it was not done by me, but by a local mason and it is much better than anything I could have done.” And he is absolutely right. And I would not know of any architect friend of mine who could have said that.

The part of the message that I find really important is to give the traditional a chance of survival. I actually own an older house and I live in a “classical modernist” house at the same time, and I find, first, that both have been built with an enormous amount of care for craftsmanship; they both belong to the same era, except that one is modernist and the other is regionalist. And secondly, I realized that when work has to be done — you know, like a door that doesn’t close or a hole in the roof or something alike —, the architects seem to be totally surpassed by the challenge of technical issues that I would consider to be simple, although I do not have a solution because I do not have the formation; but nor do they, because they have been formed in a technical school.

CG: *It is happening in schools such as ours: part of the school is crying technical issues, but those who look at the process of making, at the craft, fall in this dangerous trap of looking exclusively at traditional or vernacular architecture.*

SvM: The fake Swiss chalet that I inherited is really a stupid chalet, almost a standardized house you may call it, but the details are made with such a sensibility for the stairs, for the handrail... The stairs are done with a finesse that is actually superior to the modernist house that I inhabit in Zürich, though it is actually a very good example for handling very carefully these details, like handrails and so on.

But if I look at handrails of contemporary buildings, especially designed by the highly praised contemporary Swiss architects, I almost get hurt by even thinking of using them — for instance, going up or down the stairs. In this respect, architects like Herzog & de Meuron are really good because they encourage people to touch architecture as they move about it.

CG: *Would you say that this has been a topic often discussed, or that the question of the craft and detail in good modernist architecture is very often neglected. Even in schools of architecture, it is almost always just about the plans, the façades, etc. but when it comes to details, to how things are done, these are rather overlooked. And perhaps Le Corbusier is not the best example in this sense, but he was about something else.*

SvM: Le Corbusier was about something else, and maybe you're right; he is perhaps part of the problem. Surely, you could not say this about others like Wright, Mies, Aalto... But Le Corbusier, especially after the WWII, was doing precisely what he called "tonic architecture." He understood architecture as means of avoiding that people get too comfortable, just to keep them alive and alert. And this is a kind of philosophy that may have its shortcomings...

CG: *Do you think this may be linked in some way to his voyages to Greece, his Voyages d'Orient?*

SvM: I wouldn't know exactly, because it relates to the degree that the model for this kind of conception of architecture as being something alien and superior and possibly even antagonistic to everyday small-scale comfort. Architecture is seen as a temple — in this sense maybe the Acropolis is a problem, but not necessarily Greece, because there is another Greece...

CG: *I mean by this the monastic experience.*

SvM: The monastic experience is not discomfort, but just austerity and that is definitely a moral category of quality of life for him, within a certain concept — and here we go back to Modernism. And I can respect that a certain kind of late functionalism and Modernism survived in the postwar years, on the basis of that dream of austerity and the dream of not playing the game of consumerism.

CG: *A kind of a spiritual dimension?*

SvM: Yes, also, a kind of an ambition to operate on a spiritual, moral level. But that is why I am really interested in architects like Aalto or Josef Frank, because they were conscious that while architecture has a spiritual comprehension, the practical aspects, too, must work 100%.

CG: *If I look at things that were built in Romania before World War II but even in the 1950s and 1960s, there is a sophistication of details in small scale modernist architecture, very much adapted to the local context, and I lived in such apartments, which were extremely careful with life, with the quality of life, of enjoying it — the handrail, how you touch it, how it goes up — even in very unheroic architecture, no name architecture, completely forgotten an architecture that is disappearing and disregarded, I would say even by architects...*

SvM: No, I would say especially by architects. I am enamoured by the quality and the details and this is something that I rarely find in contemporary architecture. The architects that I am interested in share this preoccupation of mine — with the exception perhaps of Le Corbusier for whom disregarding it was an agenda.