Caroline Maniaque, Eléonore Marantz, and Jean-Louis Violeau, curators *Mai 68. L'Architecture aussi*

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Looking ahead to the exhibition

October 1964 – students in Berkeley start to demonstrate, beginning the Free Speech Movement.

April 18, 1966 – Mao Zedong launches the "Cultural Revolution" in China.

Summer 1967 – over 100,000 persons celebrate The Summer of Love in San Francisco and other places in the USA, Canada and Europe.

April 4, 1968 – Martin Luther King is assassinated in Memphis, USA.

One month later, France gets enflamed by a revolutionary wind, came to be known later under the expression of "Mai 68."

The curators of the exhibition *Mai 68. L'Architecture aussi* had in mind these few dates, among others, as "songlines" (English in the text)[1] helping to define the content of the show. The choice of the term *songline* – that is, a spatialized story – is truly significant, as these events, which might seem apparently disparate and more or less disconnected from the wave of protests that outburst in France in the Spring of 1968, are not only precursory for the French emblematic *Mai 68*, but they reflect indeed the climate of these years – a time of restless quests, radical fractures and new beginnings.

The exhibition provides an architectural French response to this agitated international environment. If Paris, and other French cities, are hosting this year several shows commemorating half a century from the influential movement of *Mai 68*, the exhibition at the Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine is not only the sole one to look at it exclusively from the perspective of architecture, but – most importantly – it is the first one to treat this topic so extensively.

The three curators strived to combine their complementary expertise in order to embody a common discourse. By doing so, they followed a strategy of cross-contextualization, presenting the architectural facts in relation to both the local politics (focusing mainly on the administrative measures concerning the expanded field of architecture) and the intellectual drive of the time.

How to speak about revolution and architecture 1: the structure of the exhibition

If its title indicates a precise chronological moment, the exhibition goes much beyond the month of May 1968. As a matter of fact, its timeline covers almost two decades, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, a chronological span witnessing the rise of an engaged architecture. As explained

1 See Caroline Maniaque, Eléonore Marantz and Jean-Louis Violeau, *Mai 68. L'Architecture aussi* (Paris: B2, 2018), 112-113.

in the opening chapter of the show, "May 68, the end of the Beaux-Arts system, free way to invention,"[2] this period reflects a strong will to reform the French architectural system, from the outside and especially from the inside. The second part of the show's title, *L'architecture aussi* [Architecture, too] – refers to this engagement of the architectural field to reform itself while striving to reform the entire society.

The curators articulated this expanded discourse in four sections: Refusing the Legacy / 68, All is Politics / Reinventing School / Hypotheses for a [New] Architecture.[3] Though covering each of the specific elements of the reforms (or tentative reforms) of the architectural field, all four sections of the exhibition converge upon a common topic: the complex mutations of the academic system. Hence, teaching architecture appears to be the leading thread of the show, a choice that allowed the curators to address several major issues, such as the successive reforms of the academic system, the rage of students (and the criticality of their political commitment), the various attempts to reinvent architectural education, the correlations between this (informal) education and the concrete needs of society.

In order to build up this complex discourse, the curators employed several types of testimonies – drawings, notebooks, models, photos and other memorabilia from the educational years, press clips, posters, an abundant published material (books, periodicals, etc.), video recorded interviews.

How to speak about revolution and architecture 2: walking through the exhibition

In February 1962, a decree stipulated – with no further success – the creation of State institutions for higher architectural education ("Écoles nationales supérieures d'architecture"). It was followed by two other decrees: the "small reform" of October 1965, and the major breakthrough, in December 1968, resulting in the creation of eighteen provisional "pedagogical units" (UP, *unite pédagogique*: five in Paris, thirteen in the rest of the country). Highly politicized, these "units" later gave birth to the current schools.

These regulations were indispensable in the context of a fossilized education based on the Beaux-Arts system, with "patrons" for each studio and projects for the final-degree disconnected from the (social) realities. At the legendary École des Beaux-Arts, in Paris, students were already simmering before 1968: "L'École des Beaux-Arts is going to explode," titled an article published in February 1967 in *Le Figaro Littéraire*. The contestation spirit emerged before the 1968 and lasted several years afterwards, as it originated not only in the desire to break obsolete rules, but mainly in the urge to reflect, if not anticipate, the needs and expectations of society. This appears as a recurrent motive in the filmed interviews – "we never worked on real topics," stated Roland Castro, along with Ginette Baty-Tornikian, Pierre Clément and others. Hence, alternative self-teaching modules were experimented, while projects were turned into manifestos, in terms of topics (in direct relation to the fabric of the contemporary city), of materials and technology (exploring ultimate advances or utopic, futurist situations), but also in terms of visual graphic representation.

Some of the mentors shared with their students this desire to change the system. "Reinventing school" was a task that was seen as both educational (preparing the future generations of architects) and political (forging the tools for changing society). Most of the UPs were thus functioning as test-benches, most of them turning their back on the obsolete Beaux-Arts education. If the curricula were massively renewed, innovation was also reflected by the new buildings hosting some of the UPs, as in Toulouse and Lille, for instance. (Fig. 1) The new buildings were meant as metaphors of their main function – "educate the students to become architects," as Georges Candilis put it –,[4] hence embodying the belief that a new architecture was possible.

2 "Mai 68, fini les Beaux-Arts, on invente."

3 Réfuser l'héritage / 68, Tout est politique / L'école réinventée / Hypothèses pour l'architecture.

4 Maniaque, Marantz and Violeau, *Mai 68*, 81.

There are two remarkable aspects of this renewal that are brought forward by the exhibition. The first one is explicitly displayed, striving to make visible (drawings, models, period publications) the new complexity of the architectural education: there is a clear will to connect architecture with other disciplines. If the desire for a fine arts synthesis is still there (reminding one of the successive attempts to achieve it during the long modernity), there is a strong commitment towards social sciences and history, aiming to found architecture on an "objective knowledge." (Fig. 2) The second aspect, which is implicitly referred to, reveals the significance gained by the concept of space. Space merges like a central element, on a theoretical level (like in Philippe Boudon's or Robert Auzelle's writings), on a structural level (like in the volumetric exercises imagined by David Georges Emmerich or Jean Aubert, both inspired by Buckminster Fuller) (Fig. 3), or on a social level (as in Henri Lefebvre's influential book published in 1968, *The Production of Space*).[5]

The new topics, be they social, interested in the historic fabric of the city or environment-oriented, circulated freely in between the schools of architecture and the architectural offices (many of the instructors being practicing architects), pointing to a dynamic that ensured a high emotional reactivity and a drive for innovation. Moreover, not only that architects were increasingly committed to social/ political/ ideological causes, but architecture itself stepped into the public arena – as happened with the competition for Les Halles (1968-1979) and the involvement of the inhabitants of the neighborhood. Less than ten years after the 1968 events, architecture became undisputedly a matter of public interest, as decreed by the 1977 *Loi sur l'architecture* (The Act on Architecture).

Tout est politique

One of the sections of the exhibition states it unambiguously: all is political. Such a commitment reminds one the ending lines of Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923): "Architecture ou revolution / On peut éviter la revolution" – Architecture or revolution/ the revolution can be avoided. Yet, what appeared from the architects' unrelenting efforts was that revolution could not be avoided, at least in terms of a radical reform of the field.

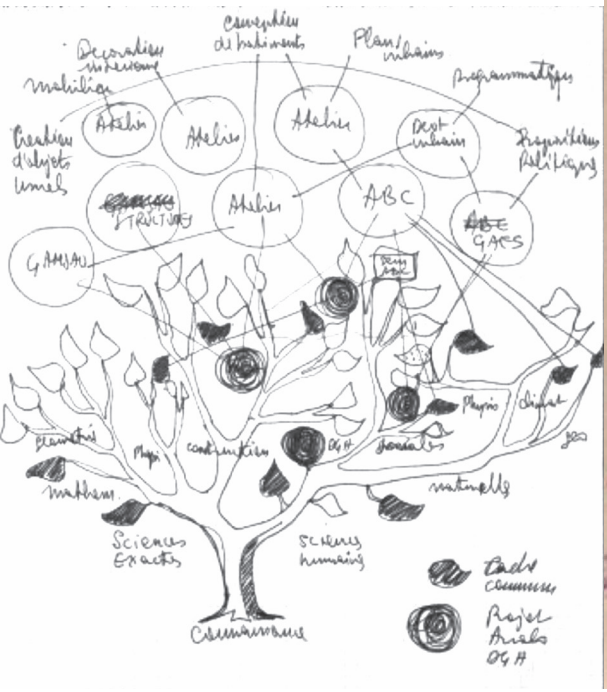
Together with the Sorbonne, the Odéon Theater (occupied by the students who opened it for public debates) and the Renault plants in Billancourt, the École des Beaux-Arts plays a major role in the 1968 movement. The students here, future architects included, founded the *Atelier Populaire* which produced during its brief existence 30 posters in the service of the "three U": *Usine* / *Université* / *Union* (Factory / University / Coalition) (Fig. 4). Many of the students had strong leftist beliefs (of different nuances, from the Trotskyists to the Maoists), so they embraced the model of an engaged art, serving the cause.

But this engagement went beyond the few months of sit-in at the École des Beaux-Arts, being continued in time and spread also in several of the UPs across the country. The engagement gathered professors and students alike, the first being seen (as was the case of Candilis, for instance) as role models. In Nantes, Marseilles, Grenoble, students created platforms for social fight, meant to ensure a unrelenting political commitment, supporting and taking part in short-time and long-time protests. Aside their field actions, students engaged an intellectual fight, by publishing politicized articles (Fig. 5) and even by turning the political commitment into Master thesis topics. Jean-Louis Cohen's thesis, defended in 1973 at the UP6, was entitled "Y a-t-il une pratique architecturale de la classe ouvrière?"[6] and illustrated on its cover with the appropriated image of a French anti-communist poster from 1919, where the knife between the teeth of the young Bolshevik was replaced with a pencil.

5 Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974).

6 The thesis was published 1974: Jean-Louis Cohen, *Y a-t-il une pratique architecturale de la classe ouvrière?* (Paris: Institut de l'Envirronement / Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, UP n° 6, 1974).

Fig. 1: Fine arts studio, Nantes 1975 (1973-1975, architects: Georges Évano, Jean-Luc Pellerin)
Fig. 2: Scheme of the curriculum imagined by Roger Dabat for the Unité pédagogique in Marseilles, around 1970



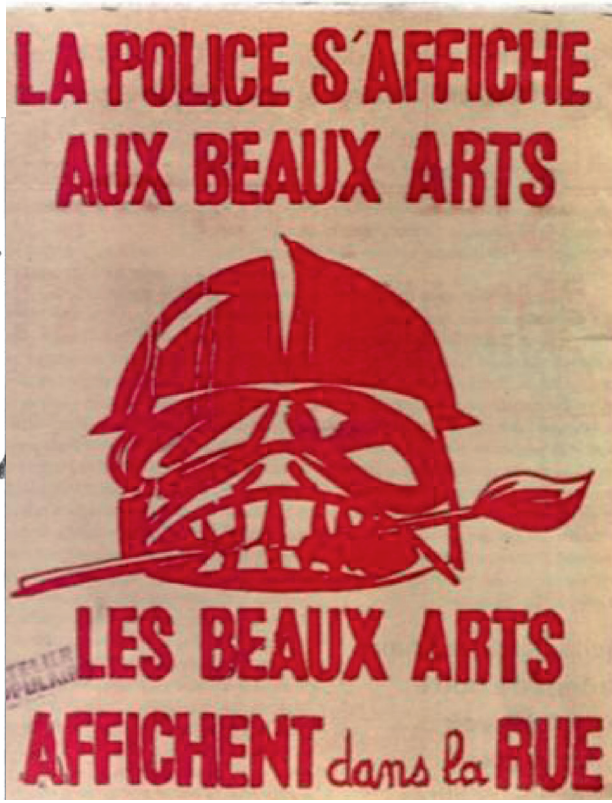


Fig. 3: Construction exercise during the summer workshop in Aix-en-Provence, 1966
Fig. 4: Serigraphy printed by the Atelier populaire at the l'École des beaux-arts, 1968
Fig. 5: Jean Aubert, collage for the essay "L'architecture comme problème théorique," L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui 139 (1968)

Actually, politics permeates all the sections of the exhibition, being present even where it is the less expected. The fascination with Fuller, for instance, was not limited to the technical aspect of his structures, but was motivated by his image of hero of the countercultural arenas at the time.[7]

The entire discourse of the show is about how architecture wants to step into the real life of the polis. Though not explicitly addressed in the exhibition, the whole history of the political engagement of modern architecture is somehow present: from the politicized approach of the Modern movement, to the criticism of the late CIAM meetings. Hence, *Mai 68* appears not only as the outburst of a milieu locked within the rigid system of the French academia (and politics), but also as a consequence of a tradition-line of (modern) architecture as an engaged discipline.

Looking back at the exhibition

All scholars involved with the discipline know it very well: it is not an easy task to put together a show about architecture. Such an installation is seen either too arid – by those outside the discipline –, because of its too numerous "technical" exhibits, or not sufficiently relevant – by the insiders –, because it is stuffed with too much collateral evidence.

I think that the second case applies somehow to this show. It is true that the visual material – drawings, note-books, final-degree projects, etc. – was difficult to gather, depending very much on the state of private archives (and extent of the research on the latter). It is also true that period publications and TV documentaries, as well as interviews filmed expressly for the show, represent a precious contribution in understanding such a complex movement as *Mai 68* and its entire context. But although very abundant, these testimonies did not help to contextualize enough the exhibition because they lack complementary comments.

The thorough visitor, who would want to have such comments, would find them in the booklet summarizing the exhibition. The same visitor would deplore the absence of a real catalogue, even if the mentioned booklet is ingenious and rather complete. Such an absence is truly paradoxical for an exhibition that resembles more a book in its approach, favoring analytical documents in the detriment of the visual pieces.

Speaking about context, if the political background is explained in the booklet (which lists all the major events and significant regulations), the international context is strangely almost absent. Aside some publications and some implicit influences (like Fuller's), there is hardly any projection of the French movement on the international scene which was not only very active at the time but which had also significantly influenced the French milieu. I should however add, in the defense of the curators, that this absence of context was palliated by the two-day international symposium that they organized immediately after the opening of the exhibition.[8]

Two more other things are missing, or at least could have found a brief mention in the "Epilogue" of the exhibition. Both address the notion of "consequence" but from different chronological perspectives. If we look from the perspective of long modernity, the 1968 movement appears, behind the protests against the French political system, as a reaction against the failure of modernity – a criticism against a *régime d'historicité*, to quote François Hartog.[9] But if we look from the perspective of the present, we can see that several upheavals taking place today in the architectural field in France might be seen as a consequence of the 1968 spirit – as the participatory movement, celebrated by the French pavilion at the current Venice Biennial.

7 Felicity Scott, *Outlaw Territories. Environments of Insecurity/ Architectures of Counterinsurgency* (New York: Zone books, 2016).

8 "Les années 1968 et la formation des architectes. Perspectives internationals," May 15-16, 2018.

9 François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expérince du temps* (Paris : Seuil, 2003).

But critical gaze aside, *Mai 68. L'architecture aussi* essentially fulfils its role as an exhibition, as it invites its visitors to reflect upon the architectural engagement in general and, in particular, upon the French architects' response to the radical transformations undergone by the (post) modern society. To oversimplify, one can say that French architecture / architects needed a revolution in order to make things change in the realm of the discipline and catch-up with the flowering post-modernity, blooming already in other places.

But to paraphrase Charles Jencks, quoted in the exhibition, was it a revolution or just a "refolution"?[10]

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:

Fig. 1: Collection of ENSA Nantes.

Fig. 2: Bouches-du-Rhône Departmental Archives.

Fig. 3, 4: Private collection.

Fig. 5: Architectural Archives of the 20th century.

10 Charles Jencks, *Critical modernism: Where is Postmodernism Going* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2007). Jencks borrow the term from the political analyst Timothy Garton Ash, who plays with the terms of 'revolution' and 'reform' and the difference between their respective meanings.