

OASE 118 Rationalism Revisited

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Does the contemporary condition of scarcity not demand a critical revision of the economics of building? And does this then include a renewed focus on the rationalisation of building production?

The rationalist tradition

Against the backdrop of the post-First World War crisis, the Modern Movement of the 1920s backed a programme of social reform, accepting the logic of industrial production in building. In turbulent times, one might infer, the essence of architecture must be sought in a rationalisation of processes, using efficient forms of construction.

A combination of crisis phenomena can be seen again today: now, however, the need for economic construction is no longer based solely on financial considerations, but very much on the finite nature of material and energy resources. Even a concept such as 'waste' has to be defined differently from what it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. This also implies that the prevailing practice of demolition and new construction is fundamentally in question. Architecture is again becoming what it mostly was for a long time, a practice of repairing cities and buildings. In doing so, the need to think about construction – its conceptualisation and its economy – is once again coming into focus.

The recalibration at the beginning of the twentieth century was by no means new: since the Industrial Revolution, the relationship with industrial processes and products had already been one of the main forces for the development of new forms in architecture, the impetus of which was provided by the invention of new materials and constructive possibilities in the nineteenth century. The effects of this tradition defined, among other factors, the positions of Viollet-le-Duc and his followers in relation to established theories and their transmission in schools of architecture (the Beaux-Arts tradition).

In the 1920s, while distinguishing Rationalism from Functionalism, Adolf Behne picked up this thread in Germany. He gave a new twist to the term, however. According to Behne, Rationalism connected with the driving forces of society, while Functionalism was mainly motivated by reactions to incidents and an underlying individualism. The emphasis on technology (or construction) was for Behne, as it was for Giedion in his *Bauen in Frankreich* (1928), a necessary response to the conditions of an industrial society – more than use or social practice. The economy of means, as reflected in architectural design and to be displayed by this same design, was presented as the essential source for finding form. For Behne, type, standard and, on another level, universal validity, were the essential characteristics of rationalism in architecture.¹

An echo of this tradition could be found in the 1950s in J.M. Richards' renewed interest in Victorian industrial buildings, railway sheds, etcetera.² These are just a few examples, but what unites them is the idea that architecture develops from a logic of production, while deriving its sense of conceptual unity in tendency from construction – in the broader

¹ Behne defines the new architecture along four main lines: 'Peinlich genaues Erfassen und vollkommenes Erfüllen des Zweckes', 'glückliche Wahl des Ausführungsmaterials', 'einfache und ökonomische Konstruktion', and finally 'die aus diesen Positionen entstehende Form'. Behne also writes: 'Wenn der Rationalist sich auf die Maschine beruft, so sieht er in ihr die Vertreterin und Förderin der Normung und Typisierung.' Adolf Behne, *Der moderne Zweckbau 1923* (Berlin/ Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1964 [1926]), 51.

² J.M. Richards, 'The Functional Tradition', *The Architectural Review* 122/726 (1957), 6.

meaning – rather than composition.³ This essentially inherent logic initially seems to understand buildings as freestanding objects, which consequently also implies a tension with the context, or even ignores it.

Better a Crutch Than a Lost Limb

What would a resumption of the impulses that connect with rationalist tendencies in the nineteenth or twentieth century bring to the present situation? What does it mean for the conceptualisation of structures if every building element used must be examined for its intrinsic reusability before it is even deployed? The dominant materials of the twentieth century – concrete, steel, glass and aluminium – tend not to adapt and can often only be reused at the price of ‘down-cycling’, that is energy-intensive processing into less valuable raw materials. In contrast, the elements of ‘pre-industrial’ building were always reused: Bricks were detached from their context and rebricked, wooden beams were reused in new structures, window frames were added, changed and installed elsewhere. The tools needed for this – hammer, saw, trowel – were also well known and widespread. In many ways, the new culture of *Umbau* (or adaptive reuse) thus requires a rediscovery and reactivation of latent knowledge about building – and with it a different relationship between industrial standardisation and improvisation, which comes with repairing.

For the architectural discipline, conversion and reconstruction means nothing less than a paradigm shift. It also implies a redefinition of architecture and its theory. John Ruskin, who has a reputation as an arch-sentimentalist for his opposition to the reconstruction of medieval cathedrals and to the building frenzy of his contemporaries, wrote: ‘Watch an old building with an anxious care; guard it as best you may, and at any cost, from every influence of dilapidation. Count its stones as you would jewels of a crown; set watches about it as if at the gates of a besieged city; bind it together with iron where it loosens; stay it with timber where it declines; do not care about the unsightliness of the aid: better a crutch than a lost limb.’⁴ At a time when repairing the existing should be a priority, these words take on an urgent and essential meaning. Architects need to reinvent themselves as bricoleurs, as tinkerers, or simply as experts who understand repair. This involves not only the latest technology, but also age-old knowledge. ‘I may use an electric drill, but I also use a hammer,’ wrote Bruno Latour, striking at the heart of a long-suppressed truth about building. The new rationalism thus embraces hybridity – another important departure from history.

Rationalism ‘Reconsidered’

From this historical development and current events, there arises the question of the renewed relevance of rationalist approaches to contemporary architecture, which will be addressed from different angles in this issue of *OASE*.

1. Technology

The modern premise of technological excellence is no longer evident. What if the qualities of bricolage are taken seriously, beyond an aesthetic of ruins? What if incompleteness and impermanence were incorporated into a language of technology in architecture? And also connections that embrace the principle of de-assembly.

2. Materiality

While rationalism, in the context of nineteenth-century industrialisation, mainly emphasised materials such as steel and glass, today, in the context of sustainability,

³ See also: Jacques Lucan’s *Composition Non-composition* (2009).

⁴ John Ruskin, *The Complete Works: Library Edition*, vol. 8, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London: George Allen, 1903) 244-245.

it might rather prioritise wood and other biobased materials. In fact, are hybrid structures using the innovation in the production of performance elements in wood not an example of a rational form of building, and a new economy of resources?

3. Context

While historical rationalism presupposes a tabula rasa, it is the spatial and material context that has become an inseparable part of contemporary building conditions. On the other hand, recent environmental perspectives emphasise a process-oriented approach focused on the lifecycles of a building, with production methods again taking precedence over the final outcome. Is a contextual rationalism – a *contradictio in terminis* along a more traditional definition of both terms – conceivable in which such a process-based approach is translated into the conceptualisation of a design for a specific site?

Call for Conversations

OASE has always been committed to the exchange of ideas between theory and practice, between academics or writers and practicing architects. Therefore, for this issue we are now looking for texts based on conversations with contemporary design practices. In this 'Call for Conversations', we especially invite young writers and researchers to submit a proposal for an in-depth dialogue between themselves and a contemporary design practice that fits within the theme of the issue. The work of the designer in question gives rise to a reinterpretation of rationalist building. The conversations the designers conduct should result in a text, whether in interview/conversation form or not, reflecting on the practice of the agency in question in relation to the theme of this issue. The theorisation feeds from the realisation of built objects. This implies the question of how the interplay between two fields (theory and practice) can lead to a reflection about the contribution of the making process to the transmission of meaning in architecture, and about the different economies of building.

Indeed, this Call for Conversations serves as a platform for the exchange of ideas where designers are challenged and questioned to reflect critically on their own practice beyond the average office presentation on the one hand, and academics and writers to mirror theoretical knowledge and research questions to state-of-the-art design practices on the other. Therefore, it is important that the interviews result in structured texts with a balance of substantive contributions from both the interviewer and interviewee. OASE 109 Modernities may be considered as an example for the format of the texts and this issue of OASE.

We invite authors to submit an abstract of up to 300 words as a proposal for an article of 2,500 to 3,000 words. The abstracts should be prepared and submitted by the writing co-author(s) and should include at least the following:

- A brief outline of the (own) theoretical framework regarding rationalist building.
- With which design office a series of discussions has been/will be started and which projects will (probably) be reflected upon.
- What the reason in the designer's work is for a reinterpretation of rationalist building and thus what the approach of the conversation and text will be.

Abstracts should be submitted no later than 17 December 2023, using the following e-mail address: info@oasejournal.nl. Authors will be notified around 22 January 2024 whether their proposal has been accepted and will then be asked to submit their full article by 1 April 2024.