

Editorial. Ariadne's Thread: Jean-Louis Cohen,
ouvrir des enquetes
Carlo Olmo

Any attempt to measure the reputation, or even merely to organise the research of Jean-Louis Cohen, whose archives and libraries are scattered far and wide, may seem superfluous, even pointless. Though perhaps this is not the case. Certainly, there are terms to be reconsidered, if one wished to do so. The first is the notion that reputation is entirely quantitative, or that it can be reduced to indices and algorithms. Or that it is tied to citations in journals, newspapers and specialised texts over the years. Of course, to criminalise “quantity” would be utterly foolish. But it is enough, to escape this impasse, to take up Antoine Lilti's *L'invention de la célébrité* and find oneself holding one of the most intricate Ariadne's threads of this issue.

Cohen's writings do more than establish his indisputable reputation. By extension, they also reveal some of the epistemological limits of our profession. At different times and in different forms, Cohen knows how to distinguish, as Lilti writes, between fame and celebrity. He recognises the fundamental role that public reception plays in shaping relevance (of a text, a sculpture, or a project): in more general terms, the role of reputation when it comes into being or becomes a rhetorical figure that is acknowledged publicly.

Texts and exhibitions are not merely interconnected media apparatuses; they are essential to one another, giving reception a role that is not only exegetical and pedagogical but also critical. And though it may seem paradoxical, for Cohen the public is at once his user and his judge. The difference between fame and celebrity lies entirely in the kind of perception one seeks, and the audience one wishes to reach.

Reception is in fact the second essential word for anyone wishing to enter into the language of Cohen the historian. Reputation is a rare asset, precisely because for its being formed in a dialogue between experiences and allows one (as Wolfgang Iser reminds us) to measure even the negative ones, as in Cohen's experience with the *Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine*, from which he was removed in the late spring of 2004. A key event and moment in his intellectual and personal life.

Recognition, fame and celebrity are rhetorical figures, useful for asserting a role for culture and architecture that is ever more present in this society of information over knowledge. With one caveat: scale. In this context, scale is not merely an artifice. The one-to-one scale, for example, chosen by Cohen to present the duplex of the *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille, or for the *Cité* he envisioned, does not represent a rhetorical exaggeration (the model that can dispense with reality) or the assertion of an artificial language capable of playing a sophisticated architectural, urbanistic, artistic and social *jeu des politiqués*.

Rather, it is a means to synthesise, in an otherwise cryptic language, the ways in which architecture and forms of sociality integrate.

The duplex of the Musée is only one of the key moments in which Cohen's dual nature, as architect and creator of imaginaries, in the sense assigned to the term by Gilles Deleuze, reveals itself. It would be wrong, however, to isolate examples, themes, or periods in Cohen's biography. Certainly, this is done in this issue too, and not out of academic cynicism.

A review is a chance to celebrate or investigate different figures and, through different points of view, offer an interpretation. Investigation opens, as the monograph closes, almost like a cocoon, the life of an author: and investigation is precisely the third key word necessary to give shape to the essays that follow in this issue. Even more so in recent years, when Cohen's investigation expanded both geographically and thematically: from South America to Africa, making “Africa” – through the paradigm city of an unfinished modernity, of which the book *Casablanca*, thanks also to the presence of Monique Eleb, already represented almost an incunabulum – the true point of departure. Making investigation and its tools – the hypotheses, the plots, the clues – the keys to a comprehensive approach: so much so that Fernando De Maio went as far as to compare Cohen to a *rocambol*e of modern architecture in Africa.

Perhaps Eleb and Cohen were, in fact, primarily interested in investigating the figures of the Arab adventure that a laboratory city like Casablanca has represented since the works of Henri Prost. And in introducing into a narrative that might otherwise be too linear the contradictions that architecture, read as ethnographic material, brings; in revisiting the controversial origins of that unfinished modernity, which in the conception of this issue opens a door that may still be closed to contemporary historiography.

It will be an almost philological work that highlights Cohen's attention to writing: such is the case with the introduction to the reprint of the first American edition of *Vers une architecture*. For it is precisely in the temporal and conceptual definition that *Vers une architecture* represents that a fourth key word is found: the *incipit* of this modernity.

This periodisation, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s, unleashed genuine wars of religion. Cohen addresses this fundamental aspect of the historian's work in two, otherwise very different texts. The first is precisely the introduction to *Vers une architecture*, as we have seen. In art-historical literature, the theme of origins is among the most debated, with all the historiographical reverberations it entails. Yet it is in the writing of his only “academic” work, *Scenes of the World to Come*, that the *incipit* of modernity, set in motion by an exposition (that of 1889) and by an engineer (Eiffel), breaks with a tradition that had seemed to play out between a rare Paxton and the many Piranesis,

Blondels, Boullées, Ledoux, Adams and Chambers. It is a modernity not only unfinished, but one that defines an *in-cipt* and a genealogy that are profoundly different.

Cohen the historian of a thoroughly twentieth-century modernity, thus raises the question of a profession that over time manipulates identities, roles and norms.

This issue of the review, and the investigations it subjects to the scrutiny of its readers, have three fundamental axes, in a form that geographers would call Counter Mapping Action.

The first, also chronological, is the importance and development of politics, which evolves over the decades but remains fundamental in the writing, and not only the writing, of Jean Louis Cohen. Considering the path that Cohen followed from his initial involvement in the French communist sphere, forms and periods of Cohen's belonging to a political area in strong transformation were shaped by the essential influence of expected authors, such as Walter Benjamin or Henri Lefebvre, and others less so, in particular Louis Althusser, the early Manuel Castells, a French critical Marxism enriched by semiologists such as Roland Barthes, philosophers such as Georges Canguilhem, and psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan. But it was Venice, the IUAV, *Contropiano*, Manfredo Tafuri and Massimo Cacciari that marked a phase in the formation of Cohen's Marxist political thought. A thought that shares some positions, such as those on ideology, but not others, especially those regarding architecture as a superstructure.

For Cohen, architecture will never be a paratext or a superstructure; his "point of view" will always start from architecture, whether designed (as for the Frank Gehry catalogue) or nearly in ruins, as the *bataille de Ronchamp* illustrates. A harsh confrontation, complete with lists of affiliation and prescription, which would take somewhat emphatic names, such as the *bataille de Ronchamp*, and which unfortunately saw the absence of restorers in particular, even as the work for UNESCO recognition testified to an extensive scientific effort on the testimonial value of the chapel.

The break between Cohen and Venetian culture occurred in parallel with Cohen's participation in the editorial team of Vittorio Gregotti's *Casabella*, a team that was a "political laboratory" to borrow the name of the journal that explains much about the early Venetian Cohen. Moving beyond the orthodoxy, even if mediated by Asor Rosa, of a Marxism that aimed to be scientific, Cohen, drawn by Gregotti into phenomenological, critical, geographical and linguistic reflections, was distanced from the fascination that Marxism, presented as hermeneutics, carried with it. But it is above all two worlds that would need to be studied: anthropology and ethnology, mainly French, which brought Cohen back to a reading very close to that of the locality as distinct from place, of artistic iconography, and of the migration of symbols (a splendid example in this regard is the exhibition *Interférences/Interferenzen*, curated with Hartmut Frank in 2013), and which took him away from the still predominant iconological reading of architecture.

Cohen also had complex relationships with sociology: one example can be seen in the sometimes intense discussion between Luc Boltanski and Nathalie Heinich on critical sociology. But Cohen always constructs the *remontage du temps passé* to reach an explanation of a particular building element, its genesis, its reception, and its fortune. The New York exhibition he curated with Barry Bergdoll, *Le Corbusier. An Atlas of Modern Landscapes* at MoMA in

2013, is the most exemplary display of the reception of a theme in often unexpected contexts, even in a term rarely used in the language of French geographers who are not Paul Vidal de la Blache or Marcel Roncayolo: the hermeneutic rather than descriptive use of *paysage*. Bergdoll and Cohen's atlas is a refined survey of how a translation can generate complex and often divergent receptions.

But the work attempted in this issue, as in the mysteries of Ed McBain, is not to betray the signature of its author. And the most indecipherable signature, even for those who worked with Cohen since the early 1970s, is his lack of connection with the *École des Annales*, to narrow the field of observation. Despite having a brother, Ives, who taught at the EHSS, and despite having completed with Hubert Damisch, *directeur d'études* at the *École*, the first *mise en scène* of *Américanisme et modernité* – which he would continue to practise until his untimely death, intertwining (and the nature of the intertwining itself would merit investigation) catalogue and exhibition – the history of the *longue durée*, of *structure*, of *mentalité* (three among the various interpretative categories that rightfully belong to Cohen) do not appear, except in very rare instances, among the organising principles of his writings. Even when the intertwining approaches an almost Bachian variation, as in the last exhibition dedicated to Americanism, thirty-three years after the publication of *La Mystique de l'URSS*, with the text *Building a new New World: Amerikanizm in Russian Architecture*, those fundamental structures of historiographical narrative do not appear.

Few are the coauthors or collaborators he involved in his lectures when called to teach a course at the Collège de France, revealing himself as an architect with an unbridled passion for archival research, a historian of an artistic culture in the Warburgian sense, among the most refined, capable of giving investigation a framework very close to that of Carlo Ginzburg's *Tracce*. And yet it is precisely from here that this issue was born. What legacy does Jean-Louis Cohen leave behind? The answer, if it is not to be reduced to an absurd and pathetic game of appropriation, raises a question for the entire historiography of the modern.

Cohen posed a first question to those who call themselves modernists, whether historians, designers or restorers: does the modern have definable temporal boundaries? He also posed a question of boundaries to the most learned historians, extremely open to the history of art in all its forms, even extending to artistic sociology, but, for example, cautious regarding the history of elites, which in that Paris knew scholars such as Bergeron or Chaussinand-Nogaret. Even more, Paris is the university city that raises two essential historiographical issues, doing so through scholars and themes that today resonate with too many death knells. The first concerns the Jewish question, which Cohen experienced in his family and addresses in the anti-rhetorical text he curated on the Vichy question (*Architecture et urbanisme dans la France de Vichy*, at the Collège de France) among his most anguished and important texts. The second concerns the distance separating history and memory, which Cohen knows how to bring out from a slippery and ambiguous theme, that of Americanization around the Second World War. Why Americanization? This opens a research frontier that is still almost untouched. It involves retracing the many paths explored since the foundations of American architectural and urban culture and its curious historical trajectory, becoming simultaneously a colonised culture and a colonial culture.

Cohen's American journey, from his appointment as Sheldon Professor with the Department of Art History at NYU, speaks of a discontinuity even with the great American scholars of the Renaissance and Baroque, from Ackerman to Burns, recently deceased. As with modernity, Cohen redefines boundaries and perspective, seeking to understand what Americanism is, from Turin to Moscow, from the Second World War and the Californian cities of Boeing, to its impact on his Paris.

Another path, still open and unexplored, is the connection Cohen seeks between his participation in the *Commission du Vieux Paris* and his studies of the French capital. He does this always with an eye on the architecture he examines, in this case closer in approach to the great Jewish-Arab and then Christian exegesis that has Averroes, Ibn Gabirol, and Maimonides as its references, rather than to the historiography familiar to him: from Daniel Roche to Louis Bergeron, from Jacques Le Goff to Marcel Roncayolo.

It is therefore a legacy rich in enigmas, open to answers that are not consistent with the traditional approach of modern cultural studies, and it has yet another fundamental area for reflection. This issue does not address the subject most frequently studied by Cohen: Le Corbusier. Snobbery on the part of the editor? Perhaps an awareness that, even for Cohen, as for all historians of modern architecture, Le Corbusier is the true Cape Horn. And I believe that the legacy he leaves us (with essays, drawings, works, exhibitions, work at the Fondation, monographic or contextual texts) and the reception of his work, particularly in France, Italy, the United States and the Soviet Union, deserves a dedicated issue and a separate exegesis. This, I hope, will be possible once his archives are made fully accessible.

DEBATE

Writings on Architecture and on the History of Architecture

Jorge Torres Cueco

This article provides an introduction to the writings of Jean-Louis Cohen from his origins to his latest works. First of all, it discusses his origins and his intellectual training, which shape an awareness of his social and political role as a historian. It then explores the persistent lines of research in his production: the idea of modernity, a rethinking of Le Corbusier's legacy, Americanism, Russian architecture, the relationship between architecture and war, the urban transformations and the history of architecture of the 20th century. Cohen employs concepts such as cultural transfer, interference or transurbanity, to explain the interrelations between countries or movements, with their significant metamorphoses, hybridizations and translations between architectural and urban phenomena. Cohen's work achieves a balance between the clarity of his writing, the rigour and diversity of his research methods, and the symbiosis between historical genres and temporal frameworks. His approach avoids linear narratives and oversimplifications, opting instead for a more complex and holistic analysis. Instead, he seeks to uncover and explore the contradictions and aporias inherent in the practice of architecture.

Jean-Louis Cohen, a "Total" Intellectual *Marco Biraghi*

Jean-Louis Cohen was an intellectual capable of navigating multiple cultural territories with philological rigor and broad vision. Thanks in part to his multilingual talent, he explored distinct yet interconnected "planets": Russia, Paris, Le Corbusier, and America, each analyzed in its uniqueness and in relation to the others. Influenced by Manfredo Tafuri and the Venetian intellectual milieu, Cohen engaged in multidisciplinary research grounded in archival documentation and critical interpretation. He bridged cultural divides, highlighting transnational connections – from Casablanca to Mies van der Rohe, from Gehry to Koolhaas – and addressing neglected historical issues, such as those of the 1940s. His work is not a fragmented mosaic but a coherent organism, a unified intellectual project driven by the desire to bridge the gap between architecture and culture. A body of work that, though incomplete, reveals its encyclopedic ambition and rare depth.

Reading Brazilian and Argentine Modernity *Jorge Francisco Liernur, Jonas Delecave*

This essay traces how architecture produced in Latin America – particularly in Argentina and Brazil – figures in Jean-Louis Cohen's conceptual geography. Drawing on testimonies, publications, and personal encounters, we suggest that, for all his generosity and cosmopolitan reach, at its core, Cohen's active engagement with the region was marked by his interest in the figure of Le Corbusier. Thus, in the case of Argentina we examine his advisory role in rethinking the management and potential of Villa Ocampo – a somewhat challenging donation to UNESCO by the Argentinean intellectual and LC's client Victoria Ocampo. For Brazil, we analyze how he situated the work of Oscar Niemeyer and Paulo Mendes da Rocha, and outline his institutional ties to Brazilian graduate programs. Despite his expressed preference for "interference" over "influence," potential south-to-north effects remain less visible in his writings: Cohen situates Brazilian and Argentine figures within global modernity, yet he often treats the region as an echo of canonical histories rather than as a site capable of reshaping the global trajectories of architecture.

An American in Paris, a Parisian in New York *Gaia Caramellino, Paolo Scrivano*

Jean-Louis Cohen's interest in Americanism and Americanization in architecture transcends the historiographical attention to the cultural exchanges between the two shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Instead, it intersects a biographical trajectory and a profoundly transnational intellectual project, encompassing studies and research works as well as academic and institutional experiences. This essay proposes to read Cohen's contributions to these themes – from his pioneering seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in 1982 to his most recent Detroit-Moscow-Detroit, published posthumously in 2023 – as the broadest testimony to an original historical-critical methodology and a personal approach to the discipline. These contributions embody both his idea of

a “zigzag” history and the ambition to build an “underground and diffuse” school, a global network not tied to a specific location but capable of uniting generations of researchers and scholars.

Constructing Soviet Architecture

Alessandro De Magistris

This essay places Jean-Louis Cohen’s seminal and complex contribution within the specific context of Soviet architecture, analysing it particularly from the perspective of some of its international connections – such as the presence of Le Corbusier, the work of Lurçat and the multifaceted phenomenologies of Americanism – and in the broader framework of specialised historiographical developments. The field of observation encompasses either the studies developed in the West and the fundamental yet less-known works produced in the Soviet and post-Soviet context. These studies as a whole – between the 1960s-1970s and the late 20th century, early 2000s – had decisive advances – Cohen’s work is part and participant of – which make our knowledge of this particular chapter in the architectural history of 20th century deeper and deeper.

Casablanca and the Other Cities: Jean-Louis Cohen as a Collaborative Urban Historian

Denis Bocquet, Filippo De Pieri

Although he never defined himself as an urban or planning historian, Jean-Louis Cohen reserved an important place to cities in his approach to architectural history. The paper retraces his work as an urban-architectural historian, as it was carried out through a number of highly influential books (*Des fortifs au périf*, Paris 1991, with A. Lortie. Casablanca, with M. Eleb, 1998; *Paris-Londres*, with D. Arnold, 2016) and exhibitions (*Alger*, with N. Oulebsir and Y. Kamoun, 2001; *Interferenzen/Interférences*, with H. Frank, 2013). Cities, in Cohen’s view, greatly contributed to the understanding of the relationship between architectural cultures, local and historical contexts and a broader circulation of ideas, experts and imaginaries. They represent a crucial entry point for analyzing his trajectory as an architect and intellectual and his specific contribution to shaping architectural history as a field of research.

The Editorial Team of *Casabella*: Myths, Simulacra, and Reality

Pierre-Alain Croset

From March 1982 to February 1996, Jean-Louis Cohen was a very active member of the “external editorial team” of *Casabella* magazine under the direction of Vittorio Gregotti. Not only did he publish thirty-eight contributions covering a wide range of topics and types of articles, but he also used his extraordinary ability to engage a very large network of architects, authors and collaborators, not only from France. This essay analyses Cohen’s significant contribution and his commitment as a historian who was fully supportive of Gregotti’s project to conceive *Casabella* as a *partisan* magazine, focused on critical dialogue between architecture, urban planning, design and history. So important to his training as an architect-intellectual and militant critic, *Casabella* was used by Cohen as

a privileged platform to express critical, and sometimes decidedly controversial, positions on the architectural and historiographical debate of the period, but also to promote and disseminate the results of new lines of historical research that he would continue to cultivate in the following decades

Architecture in Uniform

Sergio Pace

Between 2011 and 2015, the exhibition *Architecture in Uniform: Designing and Building for the Second World War*, curated by Jean-Louis Cohen, travelled from Montreal to Paris and Rome, presenting an innovative reflection on the role of architects and architecture in World War II. Rather than a historical rupture, the war was interpreted as a driver of architectural innovation and transformation. Complemented by a comprehensive bilingual volume, the exhibition argued that the war had mobilised architects, industries, and ideologies, fostering continuity and discontinuity within 20th-century modernism. Based on research developed since the 1980s, Cohen’s project challenged conventional chronologies by exploring how the conflict had generated unprecedented cultural, material, and political experimentation. The exhibition design offered an original mode of knowledge through spatialized historiography, while the publication provided an in-depth analytical framework. Together, they exemplify Cohen’s dual identity as architect and historian and his commitment to rethinking architecture through the lens of geopolitical crisis.

The Importance of Studying a Legacy

Carlo Olmo

Why to study the legacy in a transitional phase in which Jean-Louis Cohen’s archives are not yet accessible? Defining the “legacy” is a very slippery slope. Its improper use has given rise, and even more today, to misunderstandings, not only of interpretation. The legacy addressed in this issue is the legacy as Chiara Saraceno defines it; the legacy that is made up of relational assets. The first of these relationships is the one that today allows us to speak of “modern” in less chronologically and culturally conditioned terms (by iconology, philosophy or restoration). The second is that relating to the relationships Cohen established with scholars, not only architects and architectural historians, on the occasion of studies, exhibitions, seminars, and which perhaps yielded its greatest results in some catalogues/exhibitions, such as *Architecture in Uniform* and *Interférences*. “Machines,” if I may call them that, capable of shaping public opinion on very sensitive issues. But above all, Cohen leaves us a legacy of the profession of historian, as a public and political activist. Not only for the themes (for example the way in which, over the time, he addressed the issue of Americanization), but for his seminars, courses, lectures, and interventions on issues such as the *Bataille de Ronchamp* or, sadly a lost battle, that for a model of museum of modern architecture. In a world as evanescent as today’s, the most difficult legacy to preserve is that of an ideological, civil and cultural commitment, with extraordinary French roots and the most diverse practices in almost every corner of the globe.