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Towards an Oceanic Architecture

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Towards an Oceanic Architecture

The optimism for progress that characterized the beginning of the 20th century has been replaced by a sentiment of crisis. Daily doses of doomsday flicker past on our screens - floods, epidemics, fires and ash clouds. Biochemical mutations, zombies ravaging in suburbia, genetically modified primates conceived in the basements of big business. Sepia colored dreams of the space age, flying cars and freedom, have been replaced by images of our self-created ending. Our moment is fatal and full of equal parts of doom and days of hope.

In 1923, Le Corbusier's "Towards an Architecture" was published, the cover of which was adorned with the perspective gaze down the promenade deck of a giant ocean liner. The book was a manifesto for an architecture created in accordance with a new world, which was driven forward by petrol and coal. Iconic image juxtapositions: Paestum posed next to the Humber luxury car. Parthenon opposite the sports car Delage, "Grand Sport". Images of buildings were to be found in the greatest creations of the machine age which Corbusier argued was equal to the canonical works of classical architecture. Historicist styles of the past were outdated and unrelated to the lifeforms of the new society that was emerging parallel with technological advances. The solution in 1923: A new architecture that pointed forward towards a horizontal and dynamic space. Early modernism was driven by strong arguments and optimism for the future. However, the ocean liner has accelerated ever since and its inertia is now so strong that it threatens to pull the ship and its crew over the edge of the ocean and into the abyss.

A hundred years ago, according to Corbusier, architecture dragged behind the progress made in engineering and the visual arts - today we find ourselves in a similar situation where modernist architecture stands in the place where historicism stood 100 years ago. The poets and visual artists of our time are inventing language that correspond to a world in which mankind acts on a planetary scale and have been doing so for a while. At the same time architects seem to be stuck both formally and intellectually, either in the pragmatist vocabulary of modernism, when futuristic cities are presented as rendered ghosts full of technological solutions and happy people - or in prehistory - with architectural projects that market the local, the rural and the anonymous. Both are architectural anachronisms!

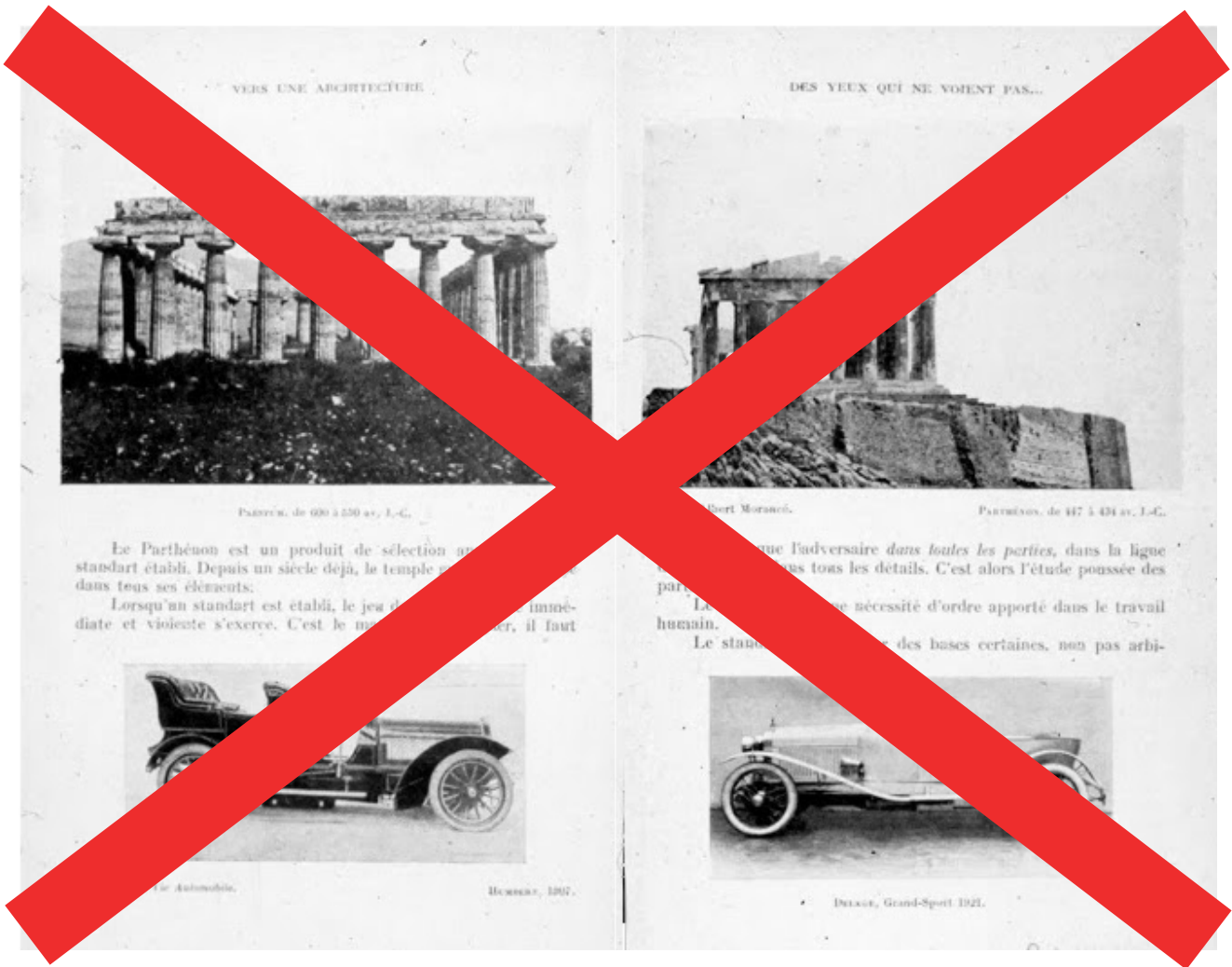
In contemporary poetry and visual art, the escalating ecological crisis has been given an artistic expression - but not convincingly so in architecture. Mankind causes the oceans to rise and the rain to fall. The fact that we are embedded in the processes of our planet has given rise to a new view upon nature, which has been trans-

formed into artistic expressions. Perhaps because this realization creates a sense of connectedness with the natural world, which has been a central motif of the arts since Romanticism - not so strange, seen in light of the parallel development of capitalist industrial society that has raged a war against nature - on land, in the air and on the water.

The new nature, which follows the recognition of the role of mankind, as a driving force in the current ecological crisis, permeates the profession of architecture. At worst as a sales ploy and at best as well-integrated technical measures, but only in rare cases as a catalyst for true spatial and material innovation. Modernism perpetuates and is draped in green robes, while the spatial and aesthetic potential of a new view of nature remains untapped. We must therefore ask a fundamental question: What stands next to the Parthenon in a manifesto of architecture at the beginning of this century - what image adorns the front page in 2023? Perhaps it is the image of a butterfly whose metamorphosis can be interpreted as a metaphorical promise of a future where the man-made environment can rise from the ashes of the 20th Century - a hopeful promise with architecture as the messenger! Maybe it's the oceans that should sit next to Parthenon? For suppose it was the sea, not the ocean liner we used as an image of reference to the practice of architecture? The distant horizon, the constant change - what architecture would such an understanding of scale give birth to if it was incorporated into built form? If landscape projects were not just copies of natural biotopes and buildings did not simply get tapestered with the image of mountains on the facade - what spaces would then arise if it was nature's scale and its processes, not its image we tried to translate into architecture? The human scale, which is celebrated in Nordic architecture, must be accompanied by something greater. The architect of our time must lift the gaze and look past the local, the cozy and the pleasing, which is celebrated in the nordic countries - the planetary scale must be our standard of measure! Architecture must accommodate the recognition of the man-made and the natural world as one interwoven and continuous process - not a fixed image! Architecture must give rise to a sense of connectedness to the world just like the poem and the painting - only thin walls of plaster and paint separate us from the Cretaceous! Towards an oceanic architecture!"

Top right: Crossed out illustration of a spread from Towards a new Architecture, Le Corbusier, 1923

Bottom Right: Alternative illustration of a spread in accordance with the manifesto on this page.



Paestum, 550 - 450 f.Kr.



Parthenon, 447-438 f.Kr.
v. arkitekterne Iktinos og Kallikrates



Vija Celmins. Untitled (Big Sea #1) (detalje), 1969



Leptidea sinapis,
Last observation in Denmark, 1976