H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean-Michel Leniaud. *Les bÖ¢tisseurs d'avenir. Portraits d'architectes XIXe-XXe siÖ¨cle: Fontaine, Viollet-Le-Duc, Hankar, Horta, Guimard, Tony Garnier, Le Corbusier.* Paris: Fayard, 1998. 503 pp. FF 170,00, cloth, ISBN 978-2-213-60168-7.

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Published on H-Urban (March, 1999)

Architectural libraries are full of large books, illustrated in brilliant colours and written by enthusiastic critics or historians, who almost daily discover a new star in the crowded architectural stardom, just to forget him or her the day after, when a new star is born. Too often, these are not biographies but propaganda for the previously unknown architect (if he's alive) or for the critic or historian (otherwise). Architectural biography seems to have been killed by its nasty brothers: eulogy and praise. But, after having glanced at Jean-Michel Leniaud's ponderous book, one can effectively say that architectural biography is still alive. Apart from an introduction (pp. 7-21) and an epilogue (pp. 391-404), its core consists of five chapters, dedicated to the biographies of seven well-known architects. Although their work might be more cited than studied, they do not need any eulogy or praise, being Pierre François Léonard Fontaine (1762-1853), Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-Le-Duc (1814-1879), Paul Hankar (1859-1901), Victor Horta (1861-1947) Hector Guimard (1867-1942), Tony Garnier (1869-1948) and Le Corbusier (1887-1965).

Each chapter could have constituted a single (and probably successful) full-colour monograph, but Leniaud and his publisher chose rather to put aside any seductive device. Nowadays, the presence of just twenty-nine small black-and-white illustrations out of five hundred written pages can be regarded as a difficult but useful challenge for many readers of architecture. Let's analyse its background and try to find the reason for such an unfashionable choice.

Leniaud is an architectural historian. He teaches in Paris, at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and at the École Nationale des Chartes. Among his first works, there's a biography already: *Jean-Baptiste Lassus (1807-1857) ou le temps retrouvé des cathédrales* (Génève: Droz, 1980). He also produced a study on *L'utopie française. Essai sur le patrimoine* (Paris: Mengès, 1992) and an impressive repertoire on *Les cathédrales au XIXe siècle. Étude du service des édifices diocésains* (Paris: Economica -C.N.M.H.S. - Inventaire Général, 1993). His most important book, *Viollet-Le-Duc ou les délires du système* (Paris: Mengès, 1994), was quite controversial, especially

in France. His innovative interpretation of such a national architectural myth found a firm, though sometimes preconceived, opposition. In spite of which Robin Middleton regarded the book as ^Óhighly provocative, intelligent, sustained and well-written^Ô (***The Burlington Magazine***, vol. 139, 1997, pp. 267-268). In later works, Leniaud widened his chronological horizons, focusing on an extraordinary case study, ***Saint-Denis de 1760 à nos jours*** (Paris: Gallimard/Julliard, 1996), essentially exploring the documentation produced by the administration of the Monuments Historiques.

In *Les bâtisseurs d^Òavenir*, he faces a more contemporary subject. In fact, he tackles a number of architects, living in the nineteenth and twentieth century, from a truly French starting point, and an enduring symbol in contemporary history: the destruction of the Bastille, in Paris. According to his own words, the pendular movement between destruction and (re)construction characterises contemporary architecture and, therefore, become the subject of Leniaud's investigation.

But this is neither a book on the transformations of the contemporary city nor a conventional summary of architectural history. Maybe, it could be defined as an essential portrait gallery, which could be national were not two of the portrayed Belgian. The spotlight is on each single picture, although the book must be read as a whole. It is not a collection of biographies, but a complete historical work narrated through some biographical sketches.

Nevertheless, Leniaud's intentions remain quite far from Vasari's or even Milizia's models. While extremely exhaustive and sometimes rich in pleasant private anecdotes, seldom do his biographies cover the entire life of the architects nor do they examine their complete activity from the cradle to the grave. The selection among the facts is severe and each chapter has a revealing subtitle as a concise definition of the portrayed architect(s). Leniaud is not interested in the person himself, but in the work he produces: in his eyes, an architect's life becomes important only when he's practising his daily job. In fact, the book aims at underlining exemplary professional lives more than unique human and cultural adventures. But what is the link between these architects? In the introduction, the author suggests that they shared common aims. As the title claims, they can be regarded as builders of the future, which means, in Leniaud's words, that they intended to change architecture as their contribution to changing the world. They acted in different ways, in harmony with their cultural contexts. In the nineteenth century they tried to regenerate common moral consciousness; in the twentieth they strengthened their social commitment. Such statements raise an essential question. If these architects had the possibility or felt the need to change architecture, who would be able and/or entrusted to change the world? Otherwise, who or what had the right to do so?

Thus, Leniaud's attention necessarily shifts to the relationships between architecture and power. Throughout his book, he focuses on how the first changed as the second modified its identity. First came the King or the Prince, then the State, and sometimes the Bourgeoisie. The early twentieth century saw the raise of the Municipality and, after World War II, of the State once again. And the epilogue closes on the fading features of power dominating the last thirty years. During two centuries, the architect gradually sharpened or broadened his professional instruments, his cultural horizons, his own identity. He has turned out to be not only an architect, but also a promoter, a contractor, an entrepreneur, a political man, an urban planner.

This is a delicate but pivotal passage in Leniaud's hypothesis. In his description, such multiple identities generate an almost evolutionary design and can generate unexpected misunderstandings. It is quite impossible to compare the Belgian bourgeoisie in the 1890s with the French Ministry

of the Reconstruction in the 1950s, although both of them promoted well-known architectural works. Moreover, it's hard to demonstrate that only contemporary architects act as promoters, contractors and so on: what about Jacques-Ange Gabriel, for instance?

Fortunately, in most cases, by "power," Leniaud only means any kind of "institutional" power. Furthermore (and maybe unfortunately), he never aims at writing a history of public or private architectural patronage or even a social history of contemporary architecture, whatever this could be in the 1990s. Evidently, his task is circumscribed to mark the boundaries between the State intervention and the architect's freedom. He aims at describing the extraordinary dependence (still) existing in France between the State and the architects, and its political meaning. The thread connecting the architects to the State remains the very primary subject of his study and the structure of his book strictly depends on such premises. The architectural work of Fontaine (pp. 23-99) is described as an attempt at "building the power" while cultivating, at the same time, the consciousness of his identity as an artist. Living from Louis XVI to the Second Empire, he was the witness of a changing era that he constantly recorded in his diary, only interrupted between 1833 and 1841. Fontaine was always on stage, working for the State--and for any political regime rather than with it. He regarded himself as an artist and strongly preserved his identity and privileges, constantly struggling for his work to be recognised and dignified. He didn't want to be a civil servant, or he didn't need to: he remained the architect of the King, even when the King was dead. Leniaud wonders why Fontaine did not join the "Societé centrale des architectes," founded in 1840, in view of a renovation of the academic and professional system. One possible answer to this question is that, evidently, he had nothing to discuss or share with them. Eclecticism and professional purposes were not his realm.

Particularly in the 1860s and 1870s, the work of Viollet-Le-Duc (pp. 101-168) aims at the "invention of a new profession," passing through many cultural, social and technical break-ups that definitively changed the roles and functions of an architect. The change appeared with the utmost evidence during the international conference of the Société centrale des architectes, in 1867. Viollet did not take part in it, but Leniaud examines the possible answers to the three questions the conference raised: about the general meaning of architectural work, about the teaching of architecture, and about the changes in the professional context and the relationships with the industrial production. In the mid-nineteenth century, the institutional counterpart of the architect had changed. Napoleon III was not the same as Napoleon I, as the vicissitudes of Garnier's design for the Paris Opéra demonstrated. Viollet's "reasonable eclecticism" tried to balance the architect's individuality with the public's needs and aspirations. Sometimes his plans failed, as for the renovation of the École des Beaux-Arts, which remained the main (and most conservative) source of French "national" art. In spite of the thorough analysis of Viollet's ideas, Leniaud never faces the underlying question: what represented French national art for Viollet? Was it a question of style? To which extent was France a nation based upon an architectural tradition instead of a State constantly promoting architectural programs? Questions of identity are frequently evoked by recent historiography, but scarcely considered in Leniaud's perspective. This is the weak part of his work, where he theorises upon scarcely discussed definitions.

The names of Hankar, Horta and Guimard (pp. 169-248) mark the "age of the artist-architects." Their parallel lives are highlighted especially for what concern their profession, their clients' identities and their *agences*. The predominance of Horta's diary as a source accentuates the importance of the author of the Maison Tassel and a better choice for these years could have been Henry

van de Velde's biography (perhaps excluded on the basis of not being a French speaker). The change described by Leniaud is definite: just as a good part of their contemporaries in France and Belgium, these three architects generally work in the 1890s for those private patrons and clients, "who accept to spend their money for an aesthetic adventure" (p. 195). Thus, private houses became the main subject in architectural design at the turn of the century. This, as far as ***art nouveau*** architects were concerned. In fact, in the same years, many other architects and engineers worked designing and building public and semi-public architecture, such as law courts, State ministries, insurance and bank headquarters, commercial and industrial buildings and so on. The problem is that these buildings were not modern or, at least, modernist (sometimes, Leniaud's definition of the modernity seem uncertain, with the exception of Viollet's ***primogeniture***).

Explicitly symmetrical with Fontaine's, the architectural work of Garnier (pp. 249-322) is described as an attempt at "building the city." In the first part of his biography, unexpectedly and with some difficulties, Leniaud tries to compare Garnier's and Frank Lloyd Wright's educations. Afterwards, he tries a different and more traditional pattern, focusing on the unavoidable relationship between the Garnier's drawings in ***La cité industrielle*** and his architecture in Lyon. Leniaud states that Napoléon I was to Percier what Édouard Herriot was to Garnier: actually, this makes things look simpler than they really are. The municipal authority in the early twentieth century substituted the imperial authority of the early nineteenth (when it did so!) for reasons depending on many different political, social, economic, even demographic transformations. Maybe, architecture is only one visible side of the change and can't be regarded as the absolute unit of a long and uncertain historical process. This thesis jeopardises a little bit the substance of Leniaud's generally accurate account of the architect's life, works and culture.

And then to Le Corbusier (pp. 323-389). His "research of new projects" (an echo of the new profession invented by Viollet-Le-Duc?) closes the book, presumably opening to new scenes of the world to come. This is the most conventional of Leniaud's portraits. Especially for the first part of Le Corbusier's life, he examines all the stages of what seems to be an exemplary pioneering existence. In spite of the abundance and correctness of the data, almost nothing in the picture seems new. But the intentions get clearer, when Leniaud highlights the works in Paris, Geneva, Moscow, Rome and Vichy. There, Le Corbusier remains the positive hero, always foretelling a better future, struggling against the forces of Power and tragically losing the game. Like an architectural Robin Hood (or Don Quixote?), he seems to epitomise one of the most enduring myths of the contemporary age: the unfinished project of Modern Architecture. After all, every story can be seen from different perspectives.

Although some of his conclusions are not easy to share, Jean-Michel Leniaud displays a profound erudition in his portraits, managing a huge quantity of primary and secondary sources. Clearly, he has thoroughly read the large number of books, articles, diaries, letters that he attentively discusses. However, it is almost unavoidable that some small mistakes occur, here and there. Some are editing inconveniences, such as the name of the Italian architect Raffaello Stern transformed in "Raffaelo Sterni" (p. 34) probably on the authority of Fontaine's ***Journal***; or the dates of Georges Haussmann, amazingly born in 1853 and deceased in 1810 (p. 149). Another statement seems much more misleading: together with Philip Johnson, the "principal historiographer and actor" of the ***International Style*** is not Siegfried Giedion (p. 21), but Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the American architectural historian, deceased in 1987 (but presumably still alive according to the name index).

After all, these are venial sins. Leniaud's work is detailed and generally convincing. His portrait gallery seems glorious and illustrious. Only one slight doubt might disturb the reader's mind. And if they were too illustrious, too glorious? If Fontaine, Viollet-Le-Duc, Guimard, Garnier, Hankar, Horta and Le Corbusier were exceptions? Perhaps, the opportunities they had during their long and successful lives were incomparably rich and fruitful. Perhaps, their professional work could be seldom regarded as ordinary. It's only a slight doubt, but one demanding an answer. The grand tenors and whimsical sopranos are now portrayed: next time, the picture should include the chorus somehow.

Citation: Sergio Pace. Review of Leniaud, Jean-Michel. *Les bÖ¢tisseurs d'avenir. Portraits d'architectes XIXe-XXe siÖ¨cle: Fontaine, Viollet-Le-Duc, Hankar, Horta, Guimard, Tony Garnier, Le Corbusier*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2877