Architecture Manifestos
From Le Corbusier to Rem Koolhaas

In 1978, Rem Koolhaas posed a question in his first book *Delirious New York* – itself a manifesto, albeit a "retroactive" one, for Manhattan – of how to write a manifesto "in an age disgusted" with manifestos.[1] Yet even considering this supposed disgust, the twentieth century, no less than the nineteenth, was evidently an age of manifestos. Proof for this claim is offered, among other things, by at least three well-known anthologies of various selected manifestos and programmes of architecture of the past century.[2] Some examples of this specific genre, however, stand out as enduring landmarks amidst the turbulence of their time. The impetus for this thematic issue came from the centenary of a book which, although it does not itself use the term "manifesto", is often ranked among the most influential manifestos of twentieth-century architecture:[3] Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (*Toward an Architecture*), first published in 1923 and then slightly altered and republished in 1924. The recent commemoration of this seminal text provides an apt occasion to revisit it and to take stock of this and other subsequent manifestos.

Manifestos, whether political, literary or artistic, constitute a distinctive genre whose purpose is not merely to describe or analyse but, above all, to exhort: they issue a challenge, an appeal, and a formulation of a programme. In this respect, architectural manifestos rank among important cultural documents of the last century, articulating not only aesthetic or social but also civilisational ambitions. At the same time, they embody a distinctive mode of thought which, in the case of Le Corbusier's first book, is unquestionably worth exploring – not least because, as Charles Jencks observed in his introduction to *Theories and Manifestos of Contemporary Architecture*, "Le Corbusier … prove[s] theory is an engine of architecture".[4]

This thematic issue is concerned not solely with *Vers une architecture* and its legacy; rather, we have broadened the scope to encompass manifestos across much of the twentieth century. Manifestos, like Le Corbusier's texts and ideas, have also recently aroused the interest of the architectural world. Some commentators have claimed, for example, that "manifestos find themselves at a point of ideological impasse as a dying craft" or that "in its purest form [the manifesto] is no longer referential nor is it relevant" and even that "manifestos ... are now only debated rather than produced".[5] Such assertions are readily contestable, and one can identify opposing – and equally persuasive – positions in response. There appear to be as many manifestos today (though perhaps no longer utopian in character) as in the previous century; yet they rarely attract wide public attention, and when they do, their prominence is short-lived. Nevertheless, in this thematic issue our principal concern is retrospective: to look back, to learn, and to understand.

At the same time, Le Corbusier's book partially diverges from the conventional form of the manifesto. I would like to mention two levels which, I believe, demonstrate why it remains valuable to engage with it. First, Le Corbusier's book does not fully adhere to the approach of many manifestos that openly seek to change the world. This idea can be traced back to the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) as an early source, though Marx's most famous formulation – "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it." – in fact appears as the 11th and final of his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845). This impetus persisted for more than a century, informing neo-Marxism, the Frankfurt School, critical theory, and beyond, and may be described as emancipatory thought, or at least a substantial component of it. Such thinking, while highly confident and assertive, wants to change. It is clearly present in Le Corbusier, yet his book also inclines, in certain chapters (notably "Eyes that do not see"), towards a very different side, namely it turns to the individual and calls for opening one's eyes, for a transformation of the self, for metanoia. And this is a markedly different kind of appeal.

One may assume that this mode of thought – the call for a change of the world – is possible only within a particular conception of time: a linear time, progressing from past to future. It is within Western civilisation that such a temporal framework has existed, and it is there that manifestos have developed in the strict sense of the term. Cultures with non-linear conceptions of time have existed without them. With the weakening of traditional modern temporality, one may expect a corresponding decline in the capacity to think in terms of manifestos. Manifestos are intrinsically bound to time – whether responding to a specific historical situation, anticipating the future, offering a vision, or enacting a discontinuity, defining themselves against the past, for example, often rejecting it. In this respect, *Vers une architecture* and the legacy it has transmitted, at least subliminally, to architecture is distinctive, for it turns to the future that it wishes to change and shape, yet simultaneously to the past, even to the ancient past, to learn about architecture.

In several of the studies that follow, this theme emerges explicitly. The complex relationship to temporality is, of course, not unique to Le Corbusier; Robert Venturi, too, in his *Gentle Manifesto*, refers to Mannerist, Baroque and Rococo architecture, and Rem Koolhaas – while presenting a clearly forward-looking programme – writes about a development of Manhattan, about "Manhattanism", from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century – transformations already half a century old at the time he propounded them.

Our thematic issue of A&U offers seven contributions, each from a different perspective. The first three studies engage directly with Le Corbusier's book and the question of what constitutes a manifesto. Monika Mitášová, in "*Vers une Architecture – Complexity and Contradiction – S, M, L, XL*: Three Bibles of Architecture?" compares three books that have profoundly

influenced twentieth-century theoretical thinking: Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture*, Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* and Rem Koolhaas' *S, M, L, XL*. She is particularly intrigued by the "biblicality" (or, as she terms it, "vectoriality") of Le Corbusier's book and the manner in which the two younger authors, Venturi and Koolhaas, engage with its prophetic-religious character. It may be revealing to read both Venturi's and Koolhaas' works as texts that entered into a critical dialogue with Le Corbusier's primary publication. Jiří Tourek, in "Toward Le Corbusier's Thinking in *Vers une architecture*" investigates the intellectual sources of Le Corbusier's ideas. He turns to several authors, mainly philosophers, and demonstrates how their thought permeates the book under examination – a kind of intellectual autopsy. Adam Korcsmáros, Bruno Pella, and Andrea Vrtelová, in "Towards the Manifesto: Tracing a Genre at the Crossroads of Architectural Theory and Practice" explore the very meaning of the concept of manifesto. Le Corbusier's book serves as a key example: historically regarded as a manifesto, its hybrid structure has generated diverse interpretations. This raises a question as to whether its "manifestness" was inherent or retrospectively assigned thanks to its influence. Their study situates these issues within broader architectural discourse, addressing the ontological and epistemological problem of what defines a manifesto, and aims to establish frameworks and criteria for recognising architectural manifestos and their variations.

The next two studies address the further dimensions of Le Corbusier's book. Jana Tichá, in "The Whole City Is Covered with Greenery. Le Corbusier and His Vision of a New Urban Landscape", focuses on the role of greenery and the landscape context. It is evident that the complex nature of *Vers une architecture* permits a broad interpretation, particularly concerning the relationship between buildings and their surroundings. The text considers urban planning, landscape integration, and the incorporation of gardens in architecture. Analysing the manifesto from this perspective underscores its relevance to modern approaches to landscape and public space. The study thereby extends its interpretation and situates it within contemporary discourse on urban and environmental design.

Marija Milikić, in "From Standardization to Chaos: Everyday Life in Architectural Manifestos" explores how everyday life shaped twentieth-century architectural manifestos. Le Corbusier sought to rationalize and standardize daily life, exemplified in the Cité Frugès project, yet his approach revealed the contradictions between serial production and lived experience. In contrast, Rem Koolhaas embraces everyday life as chaotic and unpredictable, epitomised by the concept of the Generic City. The study juxtaposes these divergent positions to assess the successes and failures of addressing everyday practices, aiming to identify consistent elements of everyday life that might inform future architectural manifestos.

The subsequent studies shift attention towards comparison with other manifestos, either within the context of Western civilisation or in contrast with another tradition.

Dimitris M. Moschos, in "Architecture and Social Dreaming: Three Generations of Attempts to Revolutionize Architecture, from Le Corbusier to Ant Farm and Critical Speculative Design" compares three seminal texts – *Toward an Architecture*, Ant Farm's *Inflatocookbook*, and Dunne & Raby's *Speculative Everything*. His chosen lens is a notion of "capitalist modernities". The study argues that capitalist modernities constitute an evolving, self-critical sociocultural condition shaping development of architecture and its social conscience. It tries to demonstrate how modern architecture sustains its relevance through political critique and speculative practice, ultimately attempting to underscore the continuing struggle of architecture to assert political agency within shifting modernities.

Ana Tostoes, in "From Toward an Architecture to the Metabolism Manifesto. Paris–Tokyo 1923–1960" traces the intellectual trajectory from Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* (1923) to the Metabolist Manifesto (1960), underscoring their shared conviction that architecture constitutes a vehicle for societal transformation. By examining affinities between Le Corbusier's technological poetics and the Metabolists' biological metaphors, it situates both manifestos within a broader vision of urbanism conceived as dynamic and evolving.

Mgr. Jiří Tourek, PhD.
orcid: 0000-0002-4595-4874
Faculty of Humanities
Charles University
Pátkova 5
182 00 Praha 8
Czech Republic
jiri.tourek@fhs.cuni.cz

1 KOOLHAAS, Rem. 1978. *Delirious New York*. New York: Monacelli Press.

2 JENCKS, Charles and KROPF, Karl. 1997. *Theories and Manifestoes of Contemporary Architecture*. Chichester: Academy Editions, John Wiley & Sons; CONRADS, Ulrich. 1964. *Programs and manifestoes on 20th century architecture.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; LYON, Janet. 1999. *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

3 There was a small international colloquium held at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague (14 October 2023). Three of the papers presented appear in the present issue as studies (Tourek, Tichá and Mitášová).

4 Jencks, Ch. and Kropf, K., 1997, p. 4.

5 Holt and Looby summarised a symposium held on 18 November 2011 at Columbia University's GSAPP and called "What Happened to the Architectural Manifesto?" See: HOLT, Michael and LOOBY, Marissa. 2011. What happened to the architectural manifesto? *Domus*, (843), December.