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Summaries in English

Towards an architecture for the nuclear age?

(see page 240)

In this Issue, dedicated to the architecture of the nuclear power plants in Switzerland, we have sought to present a complete report on projects now completed, under construction or in planning stage in this country, and we have attempted to steer clear of all polemics on the fundamental problem having to do with the advantages of nuclear power, its potential dangers or its future cost.

An endeavour like this smacks more of science fiction than of straight information. One could believe that everything having to do with nuclear energy is wholly political and absolutely taboo. Indeed, merely gathering material has been for us an adventure: so many evasive answers, so many refusals to communicate data having any value, lazy excuses, subterfuges! In short, there is no end to the dodges we have been confronted with.

«Your question is premature», we were told whenever we would ask the authorities to give grounds for their decisions. «Files incomplete», we were told in certain enterprises, or: «We have no plan at our disposition», «Everything is now undergoing complete transformation», «No definitive architectural sketch exists», «The plans are no longer valid, we are starting again from scratch», etc.

Everyone hides behind a thousand good reasons for not letting us have information where we would like to be as objective as possible, since the interested parties themselves were concerned to get projects accepted which they were called on to present. And that tells us a great deal about the anxiety experienced by many planning offices, public authorities and certain enterprises! To be sure, some of them proved to be very cooperative, and we herewith extend our thanks. However, this was most certainly the exception.

When it comes to nuclear matters, then, people are treading on eggs. No doubt there is a certain "bad conscience" involved here. Why a bad conscience? Aside from purely nuclear questions, do not these people fear that they are vulnerable when it comes to architecture? Are they aware of the general dullness of the projects, as regards building design? After all, we have here what amounts to a veritable orgy of lost opportunities, as can be seen from the official descriptions of our future power centres: Beznau, Gösgen-Däniken, Kaiseraugst, Leibstadt, Graben, Mühleberg, Rüthi, not to mention still inchoate projects like Inwil and Verbois...

Who was consulted when there were designed the vastest constructions since the war, aside from the great hydroelectric dams? In setting up this colossal programme, which transcends the scale of our great artificial lakes, which are mostly tucked away in remote Alpine valleys, were well-known designers, landscaping authorities, architects ever called on?

It will be retorted that technology is self-sufficient. Indeed, we have before us the example of the bridges of Maillart to prove that the same construction, created by the engineer, can be magnificent in one place and hideous elsewhere, with identical spans and in the same natural setting. To be sure, there are emerging from the general mediocrity of nuclear architecture the great "diabolo" figures, the cooling towers, which are light and airy in effect, despite their height of 160 meters, with their elegant curves that constitute firm accents in a countryside that is often enough deprived of character. But is that enough to justify these projects?

Let us recall once more the fact that this article has one single objective: it aims to draw the attention of

architects and of all those who are concerned with the environment to a large-scale constructed volume that is likely to modify our lowland landscape in a profound way.

That is why we are not getting involved in the numerous questions having to do with the construction of nuclear power plants, such as the disposal of radioactive waste material, which to this day has not been given an absolutely satisfactory solution, the climatic influence of evaporation into the atmosphere of water from the cooling towers, the cost of dismantling of worn-out plants (after only a few decades!) and the absolute neutralization of the radioactive elements which will remain in the core of the reactor, with the aid of huge masses of concrete, which will rise like colossal cenotaphs on the sites of abandoned power plants, etc.

Whenever a competent architect willing to look at the problem is presented with the architectural aspect of these nuclear power plants, the fact emerges – and this is shown by the work of Claude Parent – that it is possible to conceive of harmonious complexes, to design interesting building volumes, to replace chaos with better coordinated shapes, without having to have recourse to the eternal "design" style, which is too often resorted to in such cases. Let this be a lesson to us. The architect ought to be consulted and asked to assist in the fashioning of the great projects of the future.

Henri Stierlin

The architecte Claude Parent and the nuclear power plants

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The construction of nuclear plants in various parts of the landscape of France, in such important regions as the estuary of the Gironde, the banks of the Rhône or of the Moselle, the shores of Brittany or of the Boulonnais, is presenting us with a real moral problem, the problem, that is to say, of how successfully to integrate in these characteristic localities very large-scale construction complexes, which transcend by far the magnitude of ordinary industrial plants. If we bear in mind the fact that the cooling towers for these nuclear power plants are 165 meters high with a ground-level diameter also of 165 meters, and if we also realize that there will be three of these towers, and sometimes six of them, depending on the capacity of the plant, it is brought home to us that we have not been confronted with a problem on such a scale since the construction of the great hydroelectric dams. And the dam, after all, was tucked away in the high mountains, far away from densely settled areas, in regions that had not yet experienced any great influx of tourists.

By contrast, the nuclear power plants are going to be erected within plain sight of all in regions that have been inhabited for a very long time, on age-old communication routes: valleys, estuaries, shores. This means that the problem no longer involves the relationships between man and architecture, but calls for study of the confrontation between architecture and the natural environment. In fact, we can sum up the problem of nuclear architecture as follows: *the power plants will be accepted by people only to the extent that they will be made acceptable to their sites.*

This problem, then, can be resolved only in terms of human sensitivity. What is involved here is a labour of creation in the raw state, where the two factors being combined, distinctive site and large-scale construction, cry out for *the presence of the architect*, owing to the essentially qualitative nature of his approach. *The engineer can no longer be left in sole charge of a game whose rules escape him.* We find our-

selves, indeed, as in the most glorious epochs of the architectural past, on the verge of a period of big constructions that will shape the civilization of the future; architects of renown have always been involved in such works. Now then, it has to be admitted that the present development of our society is benefiting big engineering projects, with architects having little to say, and this is, of course, detrimental to the cause of architecture itself.

In this new human adventure in the field of power generation, if man wants to prevail, he must, without hypocrisy, assert human creativity and restore to architects a chance (perhaps the last in view of our emergent philosophy of life) to intervene under conditions that are valid, in circumstances that are favourable. For thirty years now, in France as elsewhere, after the repudiation of the architect, our patrimony has been disintegrating, the landscape has been undergoing degradation, cities have been growing stupid. The rational and profitable structures of business and technology, accomplices in mediocrity, which offers a minimum of risk with a maximum of income, are despoiling a splendid country, the heritage of a long history of patient and continuous human endeavours, both in the cities and on the land.

To miss our chance in the nuclear age would amount to "perfecting" what the builders of the Riviera, of Opale and of Vermeil have already managed to concoct.

However, in view of the nuclear venture, some idea of responsibility is slowly making its appearance. "Electricité de France" sees the urgency of the problem, and, despite the financial and technical limitations involved, wants to permit architects to have a say at the top decision-making level before it is too late. In fact, it is trying with difficulty (for, once again, this is against the trend of the times) but with sincerity not to restrict the architect to the role of a mere "packager of the atom" by handing him a hot dish and then expecting him to cool it. If my ideas are followed up with honest and open discussion with the engineers, our group containing architects like Willerval, Andreu, etc., architecture will escape from its packaging role to which it has been confined and will again become the great synthetic art it was in the past, mediating between the structure, the landscape and man.

We can only wish that this awareness on the part of "Electricité de France" will permit architecture to flourish instead of withering away on mere "French Design" projects and will permit the architect to rediscover his real function, which is to organize space in the full sense of the word and will permit man as such to find human meaning again in the places he inhabits or frequents.

Claude Parent