

Jean Nouvel 2008 Laureate Essay

Jean Nouvel: The Allure of Modernity

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Even a critic who is entirely enamoured with architecture, and the last great modern utopia that it pursued—to truly help its intended users to live a better life—cannot pretend to ignore his beloved’s defects. This social Sleeping Beauty has finally succumbed to the fleeting and superficial dimension that defines all of man’s actions—psychological and concrete—beginning with the most intimate spaces of dwelling and arriving at the unsettling scale of the city, which simultaneously exposes individuals and their associations, positive and negative, for better or worse. Of the many definitions of contemporary civilization, from which the city derives its name, the most appropriate now seems to be that of the *liquid modernity* defined by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman: a modernity centred on the economy and its fluctuations, where people and spaces are akin to islands in a river. However, these islands are necessarily mobile and neither interpersonal relationships, forms of expression (a sublimated variation of this type of relationship), and perhaps even structures, buildings included, are able to assume stable configurations. In a society where loyalty, the attachment to a person, an ideology or even a genre or “style” of architecture may be seen as dangerously negative, coherence—be it existential, artistic or design-based—has become a serious weakness, capable of undermining the system of power that we are constantly obliged to construct and modify to ensure our own salvation, and perhaps that of those most dear to us. Long gone is the time when modernist architects and designers, not the dreamers, but rather the concrete utopians, sought to configure the space of dwelling as dynamic and mobile, undoubtedly flexible and, at the same time, faithful to the choice of a new architecture as a lifestyle. The future is now and the utopias of the 20th century are capable, at best, of generating nostalgia as we perpetrate a system in which merchandise continuously attempts to surpass expression. This system may have succeeded had it not been for the existence of artists such as Jean Nouvel.

Utopia and Destiny

Nouvel is the most important contemporary architect to have survived the period of modernism, inhaling and becoming slightly intoxicated by the last vapours of the Modern Movement before definitively sublimating them into a new and painful understanding of the objective limits of reality. The latter is much faster and more imposing and pervasive than design, any form of design. This human condition, which we can call post-modern, where real destiny prevails over its ideal utopian counterpart, could not have hoped for a better architect as its present day representative. In the face of the sophisticated intellectualism of many of his peers and colleagues—who often produce bizarre buildings with an “unfinished” nature that results from their uncertain existence as form or meaning—Nouvel appears to move with the natural elegance of an acrobat, walking the unstable tightrope that unites the two extremes of the dilemma faced by any contemporary architect or builder: real or virtual?

Almost obliged by the digital evolution of the tools of the trade (capable of producing images and structures once unthinkable) to generate progressively more unusual forms, architecture is now forced to use its image to compete against the immense universe of new media, where thousands of other parallel worlds—from reality shows to *Second Life*—condition the existence, culture and lifestyle of millions of people, in many cases, more than any work of architecture.

Similar to a *mantra* to be recited during this acrobatic competition, Nouvel appears to have captured one of John Lennon’s aphorisms: *Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans*. It is precisely “what happens” outside of any program or plan that Nouvel believes to be the responsibility of architecture: When presenting the enormous complexity of the projects that he has designed and continues to design and the necessity of dealing with the real conditions of the city and its spaces, he does not rail against its unhappy and ungrateful inhabitants or curse the

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mythological figure of the European or global City and its unavoidable reproach of the ultimatum and opposition between center/periphery, ancient/contemporary, beautiful/ugly, *hi/low* or *sprawl/monument*. Nouvel prefers instead to present the image of the built and the buildable based on principles that are more ethical than aesthetical, more pedagogical than economic, making architecture and its mutations “appear” even to those incapable of understanding it, either because they have no need to make the effort or simply because they inhabit it each day as an urban or rural dweller, optimist or pessimist, enthusiastic or worried, perhaps indifferent to what, in many cases, may seem to be simple formal exercises in academic architecture even when concealed behind the mask of contemporary language.

Undoubtedly even this attempt by Nouvel to overcome the division between the intellectual/inventor and the profane/consumer—creating projects that also speak for the observer and the user—is just one of the many unavoidable paradoxes of the work of any artist. The buildings that he designs and builds are also a triumph of form, or better yet, of forms. Nevertheless, for Nouvel this does not seem to be an end in and of itself. Even more paradoxically, notwithstanding the infinite possibilities of materials, treatments, techniques, *maquillage* and metamorphoses of construction, Nouvel chooses only those solutions that allow him to create buildings in which reality manages to surpass itself, where the final result describes another world that is infinite and without restrictions, obligations or confines: the world of imagination.

More than an architect, Nouvel is perhaps best defined as an experimental philosopher of construction. He is capable of overcoming dichotomies, impossible to resolve for a simple designer, based on the strength of a vision—a visionary approach—that results from a “politically” oriented artistic education marked by the concrete utopian ideal of restoring the twofold nature of architecture as both art and concrete social action.

It is no accident that his early projects were collective actions. In Paris, together with other French architects, shortly after turning 30, he founded the *Mars '76* movement, promoted a counter-competition to avoid the destruction of the historic Les Halles and curated the first International Architecture Biennale at La Grande Halle de La Villette. He also entered into an ongoing dialogue, direct and intellectual, with the new branch of French philosophy, from Gilles Deleuze to Felix Guattari, from Jean Baudrillard to Paul Virilio (the philosopher/architect with whom he collaborated for a few years as a young professional), a variety of authors and intellectuals served to heighten and support his attempt—Marxian more than Marxist—to reunite architectural theory and practice. It is also no coincidence that his truly important revelation as a totally innovative designer, with respect to the French modernist tradition, took place during the so-called Mitterrand Era: A lengthy period that lasted from May 1981 to May 1995 during which architecture, under the socialist President of the Republic François Mitterrand, was witness to a fortunate, and most likely unrepeatable, period in history. Architecture re-acquired a central role as part of the Government’s illuminated political culture and new talents, many young like Nouvel, were offered the possibility to earn recognition through the promise of built work.

Immaterial Concreteness

Even the project that is unanimously considered to be his *opera prima*, the *Institut du Monde Arabe* (Arab World Institute, Paris, 1987), belongs to a particularly French political climate. More evident in the 1980s, though fundamentally rooted in national culture, it corresponds with an exceptional openness towards the multiethnic voices of non-European countries: Asia and Africa in particular—attributable in part to its colonial past—without disdaining the mix of cultures represented by America (in part also a former French colony), a country with which France has a love-hate relationship of admiration and conflict, at least with regards to its exceptional technological progress and, more in general, a certain pragmatism that is not without visionary elements. In similar terms, the work of Nouvel also breathes in a cultural atmosphere that is a mixture—like the air itself,

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or the American *melting pot*—of different elements. From Mediterranean cultures he seems to gather, above all, the importance of more immaterial elements, first and foremost, light and its natural opposite, shadow. We could say that the *Institut du Monde Arabe* is a large metaphor of the peaceful and comfortable coexistence of these two opposing elements that, together, produce an equilibrium that is both visual and climatic, unpredictable and fortunate. Mediating between the two is technology that, in the design of the *Institut du Monde Arabe*, remains at the level of craft and mechanics, regulating light using devices that are similar to the shutters of a photo camera and inspired by the *rowasheen*, the traditional Islamic window. However, in Nouvel's later work, even technology grows more sophisticated, moving progressively closer to the possibilities offered by the digital and the virtual.

For Nouvel the temptation to create inhabitable structures and spaces through the immaterial is evidently as immediate as it is irresistible—a mysterious entity, apparently elusive, though in reality so present in our everyday existence (light, darkness, sound and silence) and human psychology (affections and passions, illusions and delusions, fears and hopes). Throughout his entire and by now lengthy career, Nouvel returns again and again to this particular and highly sensible building material: the *immaterial*. In some cases, it is with almost a hint of dissatisfaction, as if he doubts the success of his approach to the dematerialisation of architecture, pursued with miraculously lightweight structures, gigantic reflective surfaces animated by digital images, transparent surfaces of fabric and mesh, large voids and enormous and massive solids. His is a precise search for the most intimate essence, more real than the construction of inhabited space.

In the end Nouvel seems to have found the answer to the eternal question that any architect asks himself when at work: What is architecture? As revealed in this aphorism: *C'est l'essence même de l'architecture de sortir de ses limites*, the very essence of architecture is that of exceeding its own limits.

Architecture Equals Cinema

To assist architecture in exceeding its own limits, Nouvel focuses on dematerialising not only its construction but also the traditional tool used to imagine a built work before it is completed: the drawing, so fetishistically venerated during the century of academics. Like any respected philosopher, legend has it that Nouvel does not draw (a legend fed by Nouvel himself)—though I have seen him with my own eyes trace a few lines on a piece of paper to explain a design concept while visiting Frank Gehry's Los Angeles office. What is evident, however, is that he continuously reconsiders, conceives and "acts out" the social role of the architect. Listening to him speak, on the various occasions when we have met, of things such as nature, materials or the virtual world, is similar to listening to a theatrical monologue or a recital by an existentialist poet.

Only the words vary, and they are much simpler than any sophisticated theoretical or dramatic elaboration. I know of very few others who are able to so effectively describe the reasons and contradictions of a project through the movement of their facial muscles and hands, following a coherent and continuous line of reasoning, without excesses, and with only the most essential intonations, suitable for convincing the listener, the visitor, the spectator or the client. To better understand Nouvel and his thinking, it is necessary, at least once, to listen to his reasoning, in real life or on video: two equivalent conditions for Nouvel. Less for his (admirable) skill in "acting out" his favourite speeches in front of a video camera than due to the fact that the interview is perhaps the means of expression that comes closest to his critical attitude towards the architect's trade.

Nouvel does not attack the world or the interlocutor, nor does he propose unrealistic ideas. He reacts, in any and all cases, to the provocations of reality. He responds to its questions as if they were asked by an interviewer. The vast majority of the commissions he receives, and thus the

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buildings that he builds, are the result of competitions—of growing importance over the years—won with projects that are highly representative of the countries, cultures and societies in which they are located. A recurring typology in his work is that of the theatre, from the early renovation in 1984 of a small hall in Belfort to the Opera House in Lyon, from the Cultural Center in Lucerne to the grandiose new *Philharmonie de Paris*. The space and construction of the theatre appear to be the perfect metaphor for his idea of architecture as a *mise en scène*, the work of the architect as something more similar to that of a film or theatre director than that of a builder. It is no accident that the film director Wim Wenders is one of Nouvel's greatest friends or that a small and extremely delicate work in Lucerne—The Hotel—renders homage to the world of cinema: a different image selected from amongst the most beautiful scenes from recent films is projected onto the ceiling of the hotel's rooms.

The metaphor of architecture as representation is so perfect and so simple that it can be immediately understood. The Italian term *rappresentazione* also refers to a theatrical performance, and thus the theater and the cinema (a movie theater) speak the language of entertainment or meditation, focusing on reality or its perception, overturned or deformed through the eyes of the protagonists and, even before, through those of the author, often the director himself. It is common in European cinema to distinguish films with an authentic artistic quality from the purely commercial by using the Italian term *cinema d'autore* (art house cinema). In these cases, the designer manages to filter the technical and functional problems of construction through a vision that is open to other worlds, not necessarily so clearly and immediately comprehensible. In the same manner that cinema has accustomed us for many years to watching its protagonists live out their hallucinations through flashbacks, repetitions or actions that no longer take place in linear temporal sequences but are modified at whim (by the author or the director). Nouvel's architecture is made of overlaps, repetitions, reflections and references that make it appear different according to the different points of view adopted in space and over time. Like spectators in a cinema, those who find themselves inside, or simply observing one of Nouvel's works (and not only his theatres) are constantly able to discover new visions, meanings and ways to use them.

The *Torre Agbar* (Agbar Tower) in Barcelona is both an urban landmark, visible from miles away, and an enormous shifting polychrome sculpture that symbolises water and its constant flowing over time. At the same time, it is also an office building where interior spaces are an extraordinary combination of furnishings and architecture that creates a more intense relationship between those working inside it and the company represented by the building itself. The *Kilometro Rosso* (Red Kilometer) in Bergamo, designed for Brembo—a mega structure that contains offices and a research center—is destined to become an enormous landmark alongside the highway and the symbol of an industrial culture that, instead of disappearing, continues to stubbornly transform itself into *something else* so that it can continue to support and serve our social existence. The Culture and Congress Center in Lucerne, with its roof like a giant arrow pointing towards the landscape of the lake and the city (both structures can be admired from the terrace located beneath the roof itself), becomes a surprising sequence of spaces inside of which one can listen to and “look at” music, visit exhibitions and understand the role of art.

The Cartier Foundation in Paris, with its double skin in steel and glass—more than most other works by Nouvel—recalls the idea of an immense screen that simultaneously conceals and reflects the image of reality, while its interior is transformed into a workshop for the artists invited to present their work in its vast expansive spaces, obliged to deal with this immense glass wall as if forced to face up to the reality that surrounds them.

La Ville Gazeuse

Paris—the city, or better yet, the metropolitan region in which Jean Nouvel affirmed himself with some of his most important buildings—came close, for a short period of time, to resembling

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the *Ville Radieuse* imagined almost a century ago by Le Corbusier. This is not because it tends to re-construct itself as a rational conurbation, or because its principles of development are truly inspired by the ideas of the Master, but because its urban image was, at least at the end of the 20th century, more promising and richer with architectural promise than other world “capitals” (Rome, London or New York, for example), which never benefited from a Le Corbusier capable of imagining the necessary conditions to create an entirely solid utopia of the Modern Movement.

In Paris, in France, in Europe in general, the solid utopia of the modernists has been transformed into a *liquid modernity* in which all human behaviour—including the design of the environment, architecture and its possible meanings—is subordinated to speed, to mutation, to the ability to transform and adapt instantaneously to momentary conditions, with the sole objective of surviving, at any cost and under almost any condition. The liquid is thus a metaphor for the new way of conceiving the world and human interaction with it. Yet, as demonstrated by elementary physics, there is another, more instable state of matter, which now appears more similar to a range of ideas: the gaseous state defined by the aforementioned sociologist Bauman and his prediction that *desire* will be overcome by *impulse*, as part of a progressively more unmotivated mechanism of consumerism that gives form to the vast majority of the developed capitalist world, its cities and its architecture.

Thus if we were expecting the *Ville Radieuse*, if architects for some time believed in its radiant utopia, we must now face up to the *Ville Gazeuse*, the Gaseous City, an entity that is neither solid nor liquid but impalpable, composed of atmospheres, colours, virtual images and sensations and devoid of any precise geographic location, such that it can be found in equal or similar measure in almost any region of the world, independent of its culture, economy or society. It is precisely against this indeterminate state that Jean Nouvel continues to fight, against the planned, voluntary and almost criminal diffusion of a single model of architecture, lacking any reference to the site in which it is located or where it is to be built, to the meaning of any lifestyle, national custom, climate or spirituality.

In his most recent text, *Manifeste de Louisiana* (The Louisiana Manifest), perhaps his richest in terms of programmatic declarations—inspired and written for a personal exhibition held in 2005 at the homonymous Museum of Modern Art in Denmark—Nouvel presents his ideas in a number of decisive affirmations.

At a time when we rush across the world faster and faster, when we listen to and watch the same global networks, share feelings about the same disasters, when we dance to the same hits (...) In the name of the pleasure of living on this Earth, we must resist (...) the automatic rot that is obliterating the cities of all continents, in all climates, feeding on cloned offices, cloned dwellings, cloned shops, thirsting for the already thought, the already seen in order to avoid thinking and seeing.

This is an explicit incitement to rebel against the conventions that also affect architects, against the idea of the possible existence of a personal style that is always the same, and thus against a model of architecture that can be “exported” everywhere and for everyone, like Coca Cola, the iPod or Facebook. The vast number of products and more or less stable trends now render equal, or at least similar, to the behaviour of people, from the most superficial to the more reflective. This condition risks transforming mankind into a single being that continually repeats the same actions, the same rhythms and the same passes, out of control and no longer subject to individual opinions. Nouvel instead reclaims the taste for individualism expressed by the architect/author/director of a building, and in the end, offering the world an international debate—not only amongst architects—his own highly personal solutions to the problem of modifying and inhabiting the man-made environment, based on respect for the natural and the pre-existing:

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Architectural design at the large scale does not mean inventing ex nihilo.

Architecture means transformation, organizing the mutations of what is already there.

Architecture means encouraging the embedding in the landscape of places that, in any case, have a tendency to invent themselves.

(...)

It means prolonging lived history and its traces of past lives.

It means listening to the breathing of a living place, to its pulsations.

It means interpreting its rhythms in order to create.

Let us love architecture that knows how to focus,

that can let us read, feel the light for sure, but also read the topography, the lie of the land, feel the wind, the skies, the soils, the waters, the fires, the smells, the trees, the grass, the flowers, the mosses...

that remembers the usages and customs of a place and, at the same time, interfaces with the information terminals of our world, that show us the ages and those who have journeyed through them.

It is the poetic search for new rules, part of the battle declared against the contamination of the generic city that has tainted other architects, even the most intelligent, who accept and do not rebel against the rules of real estate speculation and profit over all else. Nouvel, on the other hand, does not demonstrate any trust in the “self-regulation” of the market (real estate included), in the dream of capital that is transformed into a triumph for the good of all mankind, or the illusions of only one possible, singular and interchangeable world created by globalisation. Instead he believes in diversity, or better yet in *unity through diversity*. This is clearly demonstrated in his projects, each different from the next, always unpredictable, yet recognisable as his work, not as a result of a style, materials or forms—which may be tectonic or curvilinear, heavy or light, aerial or underground, Mediterranean or foreign, lush or arid depending upon their context—but for the intellectual and critical discourse that they imply.

Fragments of a Speech in Love

In conclusion, it is worth repeating that the work of Jean Nouvel is above all a discourse, a flow of ideas and reflections that, at some point along their trajectory, are transformed, solely for economic reasons, into the design of objects at a wide range of scales. It may be a chair or a skyscraper (Nouvel also has a way with industrial products, invented literally from nothing, similar to the architecture that he furnishes with them), yet there remains a trace of uncertainty and ambiguity, the unstable dimension of thought as the story being told by the author stops for a moment, an interruption that obliges concentration and synthesis for the benefit of its interlocutors. Whether we are speaking of clients/investors, the future inhabitants of a building or the builders of a project, they all appear to be united by a strong faith in the quality of the final result that Nouvel is capable of guaranteeing, no matter how indeterminate the project, or perhaps precisely for this reason. Behind what may appear as the difficult process of managing a project, Nouvel conceals above all a *labour of love*—impossible to ignore in a passionate observance of his *oeuvre*—a love for the world and its inhabitants, worthy of a better future than the simple mirage of riches promised by Satan to those who agree to throw themselves from the heights of standardisation *into the lost paradise of social indifference*. On the other hand, we can observe the strength and positive rage of the moral and categorical imperative used in the Louisiana Manifesto to describe, with synthetic precision, the ultimate meaning of being and remaining an architect, even with a full understanding of the current global crisis:

The age needs architects who doubt, who seek without thinking they have found, who put themselves at risk, who rediscover the values of empiricism, who surprise themselves, who notice the mildew on their windows and know how to interpret it.

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In a few simple phrases Jean Nouvel presents us with a poetic encouragement to rebellion, an appeal for the critical importance of design and, in the end, a self-portrait of the man as a contemporary artist.

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