

# THE ARCHITECT AS AN OBSERVANT: A REMEMBRANCE

**DANIEL CONCHA**

Arquitecto, Universidad de Concepción,  
Concepción, Chile

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What role should the architect take in the face of an insurrection movement? Can practice be transformed after a political event? Reviewing the reactions of two renowned architects – Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi – to the French May, this article places us in front of an existential question: where is the architect located in moments of political upheaval, in the vanguard as an activist or in the rear as a journalist?

In a 2011 staged conversation between two leading contemporary architects, Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi, the moderator Stephan Trüby asked about the role that the events in Paris during May 1968 played in the development of their work. “I was there as an observant,” answered Koolhaas, somewhat annoyed by the biographical nature of Trüby’s questions, explaining that, although he felt identified with what happened, he was there “definitely not as a protester.” Tschumi added that he was “fascinated with Rem’s ability to be in the right place at the right time,” while recounting his experience of the events when working at the Parisian architectural firm Candilis, Josic & Woods:

[...] in late April 1968 things started to get quite active on the streets. Candilis was an old socialist who didn’t want the office to strike against him and so he said: “go, go, go! Go to the streets and come back in the morning to tell me what happened” (Tschumi et al, 2011).

The particular May that Tschumi experienced is part of the well-known story of a group of students, teachers, and workers who occupied streets and buildings, paralyzed the city for roughly six weeks, putting the whole country in the verge of political collapse and making General de Gaulle flee to a military base in

Germany. Describing the aftermath of such protests, Tschumi's inspiration is comprehensible:

I was quite obsessed with the idea of an insurgency, realizing the very clear correlation between a certain type of urbanism and a certain type of social structure; in a time when Henri Lefebvre, who was close to the Situationists, was writing those extraordinary lines talking about Tuscany and saying "Look! Do you think this is nature? No! It's all the projection of society on the ground." And suddenly starting to look at any city, any organization and territory on the globe as a projection of social systems or economic systems, became quite revelatory of what we, as architects, were either responsible for, or we could actually transform, change, take advantage of, or simply document (Tschumi et al, 2011).

Whereas Tschumi was very much an active participant of the riots and protests (which he demonstrated to the audience by narrating how he was arrested along 600 other people), Koolhaas was only present as a reporter. Nonetheless, he felt affected by what he saw on the streets:

That was, for me, the key, and it also connected to the fact that that summer I happened to be in Prague when the Russians came. It really gave me an incredible sense of how little has to change to completely transform the aspect of the city, and I think it made me, like Bernard but perhaps in a more direct way, focus on its political aspect (Koolhaas et al, 2011).

Two years after the events, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre reflected on the historical importance of May's protests. He argued that the events "overthrew the structures and even more, the superstructures of the existing society, not just the University but 'values' and value systems" (Lefebvre, 2003:178). Among the value systems that were overthrown, he stated, was town planning (*l'urbanisme*) – paradoxically, Paris had seen the birth of this value system little over a hundred years before (right after another, and certainly bloodier, revolution) with Haussmann's plan for the renovation of the city developed between 1853 and 1870. The 'event' – generalized Lefebvre (2003:178) – is temporal by definition: we can't wait for it to end, to disappear, adding that only by means of its historicization, the event might leave traces. "Did the events of May 1968 in Paris leave traces?" he asked. Of course, this was just a rhetorical question for him: the trace was left by its "ambiguous, complex and rich character," in which the students "revealed the maladapted, outdated features of French society" thus freeing themselves from the past, "but in the name of a certain historical consciousness still alive in them" – a consciousness inherited from the *Paris Commune*. "Is this a trace?" he asked again.

For our contemporary architects, these events certainly meant something. In 1995, Rem Koolhaas, in collaboration with the Canadian designer Bruce Mau, published a collection of studies and projects titled *S, M, L, XL*. In the

essay "Whatever happened to urbanism?" he recalled his experience in Paris, giving the impression that these events were symptomatic of a disciplinary dismantling that relegated architects and urbanists to an "exile in a virtual world." He wrote:

May '68 launched the idea of a new beginning for the city. Since then, we have been engaged in two parallel operations: documenting our overwhelming awe for the existing city [...] and, at the same time, laughing at the professional field of urbanism out of existence (Koolhaas, Mau, 1995:965).

One year before, Bernard Tschumi published a compilation of his recent work. One of the arguments of *Event-Cities* was to put forward the idea that "architecture's importance resides in its ability to accelerate society's transformation through a careful agencing of spaces and events" (Tschumi, 1994:11). For Tschumi, the 'event' is an alternative for architecture to escape from the mutually exclusive categories of the ideal and the experiential. In the writing "The Architectural Paradox," (originally published in 1975), Tschumi proposed that the event allowed architecture to be political, thus escaping the "financial manipulations of market economy" by being comparable to fireworks: "a delight that cannot be sold or bought, that has no exchange value and cannot be integrated in the production cycle" (Tschumi, 1998 [1975]). He took things literally in 1992 when he developed a fireworks show in order to both celebrate Parc de la Villette's anniversary and to give – temporary – material form to his ideas.

But, can we agree with the idea that the 'event' has no exchange value? What is particularly interesting in the fireworks project is that, by being ephemeral like the events of May '68, it liberated itself from the vertigo of having to last, being freely able to become a pure event, with temporary images and actions immediately absorbed, produced and reproduced, by the media. If we accept that architecture retains the power of participating in the political sphere, one could argue that May '68 – at least – transformed its way of doing it. Since then, the images and theoretical projects proposed by Tschumi have rendered an architecture that is, at once, everything (because of its ambitious effect on the city and its inhabitants) and nothing (because of its lack of specificity and permanence in time). However, this does not mean that these images are not productive at all: they mobilize an ethical apparatus in which we can no longer distinguish under what purpose the future of a city is being imagined or who is benefiting from it.

It is interesting to notice the differences between the particular experience that Tschumi and Koolhaas had and the tone of their writings. Tschumi's grand revelation (that architecture can be politically engaging) reflects on the difficulty that the architects of the time faced when dialoguing with the students participating in the events. As he states:

“For both architects, Koolhaas and Tschumi, either by being immersed in the revolts or as direct witnesses, the violence happening on the streets became the signifier of the possibility of change in a moment of crisis. Borrowing some of Lefebvre’s words, the events of May in Paris 1968 were experienced as ‘the presence of the possible.’”

[May ‘68] was a moment where you could see ‘this is right and this is wrong’ and of course, architecture being on the side of power, was definitely not the place to be in if you wanted to be socially responsible or even progressive (Tschumi et al, 2011).

Perhaps, by not being immersed in the revolts, Koolhaas had a more cold perspective that made him able to comment on the general mood of the times, of which the events in Paris were a symptom. The tone of his analysis is less optimistic than Tschumi’s. He proposed that the ‘generation of May ‘68’ was to be blamed for the death of the discipline of urbanism; a demise that now disables us from making basic decisions in the construction of our urban environment. *San Rocco*, a Milanese magazine, recently dedicated an issue to 1966, that is, architecture in an idealized era before May 1968. In a sense, it shares the same position about the events as Koolhaas’ self-critique. While certainly being stimulating for the reader, the responsibility assigned by its editorial board to that “bunch of spoiled idiots” that “decided to celebrate their fake revolution” in May 1968, while making the neoliberal’s position the “common sense for the next 50 years” (Ghidoni, 2018), were rushed conclusions, just like Koolhaas’ self-critique.

For both architects, Koolhaas and Tschumi, either by being immersed in the revolts or as direct witnesses, the violence happening on the streets became the signifier of the possibility of change in a moment of crisis. Borrowing some of Lefebvre’s words, the events of May in Paris 1968 were experienced as “the presence of the possible.” But then again, we have to remember that the way they experienced these events, was rather particular. In this sense, and since the assigned meaning of May ‘68 that would locate and inform Koolhaas and Tschumi’s arguments is constructed through an interpretation of the single Parisian student narrative; the ‘demise of urbanism,’ and ‘the alternative for architectural practice,’ also constitute the reduction of the whole historical complexity of the events to a symbolic instant. Could a singular event, a spontaneous act, be that powerful? This is again, of course, a rhetorical question.

In *May ‘68 and its afterlives*, Kristin Ross analyses the memory of the events and its representations in order to trace how these memories – or ‘forgettings’ – have taken material form, demonstrating that the ‘official’ account of what happened in May ‘68 is but a small part of the narratives that were inscribed within that singular

moment. According to Ross, the construction of the official narrative of May '68 – established upon the social category of 'youth' – occurred during the 1980's through its commemorations transmitted by French television (Ross, 2002:26). And certainly, these 'forgettings' have also been passed down in the context of our discipline by way of the architects of that generation. Ross argues that the revolts conducted by the students were very much a reaction against functionalism, a functionalism that they saw represented by the police. Via the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, she differentiates the 'empirical police' – people walking the streets, establishing order baton in hand – and 'the police' following Rancière's "theoretical differentiation [...] as the order of distribution of bodies as a community, as the way places, powers and functions in the state's production of a chosen social order" (Ross, 2002:24). Having no other clear end, the contestation that had united workers and students was directed towards the establishment of order by force embodied in the police, which Ross exemplifies by quoting testimonies, of which one by an anonymous activist, is an example: "[...] the fact of seeing that thick grey and blue wall of police revolted me, that kind of wall advancing towards us [...] and I too wanted to throw something at them" (Ross, 2002:29).

Considering the careful construction of the 'official' May '68 exposed by Ross and the ambivalences of what we perceive as a consistent and clear political revolt, let's take into account the possibility that, at least for the discourse of architecture upon the city, the events of May '68 were less a trigger than a climax of an earlier and deeper process of urban and cultural transformation. In this sense, the years that preceded the events were certainly productive. A large series of renovation plans had begun immediately after WW II in Paris, in which the limited potential for the city's growth during the depression and the years of the occupation was reversed through a steady economic recovery. The plans opted for a national policy of decentralization in order to regulate the so-called "abnormal and unhealthy" dominance of Paris within France (Evenson, 1979:337). This 'decentralist phase,' as the historian Norma Evenson classifies the period between 1945 and 1962, saw a sequence of conservative plans (every five years) that among other measures, restricted the industrial and office developments in the city, and put forward the idea that the plans were needed to cope with the evolution of modern life in all the country; so that people did not only converge in the capital (Evenson, 1979:337).

Paul Delouvrier was appointed as *Délégué de la Région de Paris* in early 1962. In 1963, he presented a document arguing against the attempts of constraining the 'natural' development of the city: "All these great movements, which are already underway and going to accelerate, lead one to believe that it would be vain to try and halt Paris in a plan in progress" (Delouvrier, 1963, cited by Evenson, 1979:341). Delouvrier would dismiss all conservatism and fully support Paris' internationalization and unrestrained economic development, welcoming all the wonders of

modern life: “the city of tomorrow must adapt itself to the automobile, to the democratization of the automobile” (Delouvrier, 1963, as cited by Evenson, 1979:341), he stated almost as if winking to the culture of the automobile that Jean-Luc Godard references in numerous – and often annoying – sequences of Juliette’s red Austin Mini driving around while honking incessantly in the 1966 film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle*. When revising the strategies of Padog, Delouvrier worked towards a new plan for the development of the region published in 1965: the *Schéma directeur d’aménagement et d’urbanisme de la région de Paris* (Evenson, 1979:337). Playing the skillful politician, Delouvrier promoted the imagination of Paris’ future by getting in touch with “prominent cultural figures in France to ask for their thoughts.” The letter that he sent to these prominent figures claimed: “there must [...] be a ‘prospective’ view of the Paris region as an ensemble, which makes an appeal to the spirit of synthesis and imagination” (Busbea, 2007:119).

Perhaps anticipating Delouvrier’s call for the reimagination of the city’s future, the editorial board of the journal *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* in its issue of February 1960, included an extensive article containing a proposal for ‘another Paris,’ or more precisely a ‘parallel Paris.’ This proposal was published in three issues across the span of the decade. The first publication reacted to the growth of the Parisian region, arguing that 40,000 housing units that were constructed in 1950 would double in number by 1970 if the decentralization plans were to be maintained as they were at the time (*L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, 1959:5-9). In the light of these facts, the proposal intended to do no more and no less than to construct another Paris, a settlement that would not oppose the traditional city, its monuments, its historical neighborhoods, but complement it via dialogue. The proposal consisted first of a critical assessment of the impact of the housing projects constructed the decade before in the fabric of Paris (*Grand Ensembles*), projects that the editorial board strongly opposed to, rejecting them with a rotund “*Les ‘grandes réalisations’: dispersion, médiocrité*” (*L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, 1959:5-9). What was to be done though, remained at an abstract level. A series of sketchy drawings in ink and basic colors, presented the project in three stages, the first of which would group and relocate the ‘new towns’ – constructed years before – within one agglomeration outside the Parisian region. This new estranged center, in a second stage of the process, would be reconnected with the original Paris via highways and other infrastructure. In a final stage, the new *Paris Parallèle* would have received the excessive growth of the original, allowing the city’s restoration to a previous state, before the decentralization plans.

Towards 1968, a final publication of the idea by the French architect Claude Parent, defended the proposal first suggested by André Bloc, explaining its criticism as misunderstandings of the essential point of the theoretical proposal, which dated back to the decade’s beginning. The publication’s function is explained by Parent (1968:LXXVII) as a much needed (creative) breath for a discipline that “without this systematic policy of setting up parallel cities”

would have died of suffocation. *Paris Parallèle* was recognized by Paul Delouvrier as an inspiration for his *Schéma directeur*, and Parent suggested that if the plan would have been taken completely into account, the 'old city' would "have been ready for a new vocation, a place of privileged encounter, learning and culture" (Parent, 1968:LXXVII). As the story goes, despite the best intentions of Claude Parent, Parisians felt estrangement when confronted with the plans for the normalization and modernization of the city, both in the new *Les Grand Ensembles* (inexpensive and large concrete blocks that were the government's response to housing demands) and in the new university buildings, such as Nanterre. To this regard, the situationists considered the university campuses to be the perfect place for promoting the ideas that would be expressed in the revolts, as they saw the 'outmoded' living conditions and rules imposed on the students as if they were "a microcosm of the general conditions of oppression, the spirit of a world without spirit" (Parent, 1968:LXXVII). Perhaps specially Nanterre Paris X, a campus seized on March 22, 1968, in an occupation considered as the detonator of the general insurrection that would follow later that year.

But the revolts were not only mediated by the urban renovations that were taking place in the city. Kristin Ross recalls the words of an engineer called Alain, who explained: "I saw a Chris Marker film on TV about the *Rhodiacéta* strike [...] Rhodia was one of the foremost branches of capitalist accumulation, and that strike brought with it demands and forms of struggle that prefigured May and post-May especially" (Ross, 2002:33). This sole testimony is not enough to generalize over the spirit of the student revolts, but it serves Ross to make the point that the motives of the students' reaction were already present before, in this particular case, in the documentary by the French filmmaker Chris Marker, *À bientôt, j'espère*. The film was:

[...] broadcasted on *Antenne 2* in February of 1968 and shown again at a number of film clubs and to students at Nanterre [...] provided many militants with some knowledge they may not have otherwise had of the politically turbulent atmosphere within French factories (Ross, 2002:33).

The exposure to the documentation of the *Rhodiacéta* strike informed the students how the Gaullist government would act by oppressing any attempt for political action, making their motives common with those of the workers who joined them (Ross, 2002:33). It is likely that this information was also available to Koolhaas and Tschumi, who are not only part of the generation represented by the students but, also, confessed cinema *connoisseurs*. As Tschumi (2011) puts it: "my only way to grasp reality and to perhaps understand another way of looking, was through the mediation of cinema."

Despite the different experiences and roles that Koolhaas and Tschumi had in May, their conversation

allows us to reflect on the fact that, even if these events were just a 'moment,' their integration into architectural discourse instilled them with promise and truth. Indeed, often the work of both Koolhaas and Tschumi is seen as an inaugural shift in architects' interest, from form and matter to people, spaces, and narratives. It is also referred to as the time when architecture became a form of knowledge in itself and an autonomous agent of research. Perhaps it is through this integration that the events of May '68 became so emblematic for architects, compared to other political events of that decade (Ross, 2002:19).

Nonetheless, the problem this entails is that, if we look at what happened that year through this 'mainstream' architectural discourse (considering the visibility that both Tschumi and Koolhaas have had in its construction), not only do the ideas that triggered the events become overshadowed, but also the historical consistency of May as a ubiquitous moment of crisis and revelation for architecture and the city proves to be elusive and unstable. One could argue that it constructs an allegory that merges within a single discourse, the general dissatisfaction of the Parisian students and workers, and the re-conceptualization of the city. These two phenomena are certainly divergent, and yet, when it comes to the work and arguments of architects, seem naturally related. As if a set of coordinates on a map, the 5/7/1968 seems to give architectural discourse a point of reference (although voided, deprived of content) in order to launch new but detached intellectual projects, while also evoking past times when architecture, in general, was more interesting. **ARQ**

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## Daniel Concha

<danielalejandroconcha@gmail.com>

Architect, Universidad de Concepción, Chile (2010). MA History & Critical Thinking, Architectural Association, United Kingdom (2012). He has designed, taught and written about the public role that private initiatives can have on the city. He currently works at COMUN as project supervisor.