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LA FIN DES CHOSES



The new development for the Order of the Poor Clares at Ronchamp was opposed by the Fondation Le Corbusier and particularly by the late Michel Kagan Hon FRIAS (1953 – 2009). Here, his widow, Nathalie Régnier-Kagan Hon FRIAS, reflects on a fight, sadly now lost (translated from the French by Pierre Fuentes of Architectural Translations).

In the preface to his *Critical Essays*, Roland Barthes summarises perfectly the writer's fate, and that of the critic:

"Writing must go hand in hand with silence; to write is in a sense to become 'still as death', to become someone to whom the last word is denied; to write is to offer others, from the start, that last word, even if it is his function to discuss the language of others in such a way that he apparently (and sometimes abusively) seeks to conclude it, the critic, like the writer, never has the last word"¹. What eventually matters is not what gets written, but "the persistent decision to write it"².

The first draft of the present text was written in April 2008 at the request of the Société Française des Architectes and its 1st Vice-President, architect Laurent Salomon, with the aim of publishing it in the journal *Le Visiteur*. It was not published in the issue on Ronchamp,³ but was made available online.

These words are the result of a long process during which the late Michel Kagan, as a Member of the Fondation Le Corbusier, took a firm stand in the debate about the chapel at Ronchamp, which was the target of a development on behalf of the religious community of Poor Clares. The development was to include a new visitor centre, accommodation, a restaurant, an oratory, and more.

Michel reacted immediately after the initial Renzo Piano scheme was presented to the members of the Fondation in Le Corbusier's apartment at Rue Nungesser et Coli in Paris on 2nd April 2007. Following the meeting, Michel pointed out that the aim of the Fondation was: "to protect the work of Le Corbusier and to disseminate his theory". Michel wanted to focus the architectural debate on the key issues. He quoted Capolavori – its author, Swiss architect, Livio Vacchini, had sent us a copy of the essay before he passed away (ironically on the very date of the 2nd April 2007 meeting): "The hill itself forms the base. The old path's steps climb steeply up to the chapel because the natural surrounding must remain untouched".⁴

Let's not get into the whole story again. The aim of this article is not to explain how the controversy evolved into a 'battle of the schools': tradition against modernity, Le Corbusier's followers against his detractors. But it seems that the media and the architectural press have missed the nub of the problem: *the*

¹ Barthes, R. 1972, *Critical Essays*, translated from French by R. Howard, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. xi-xii

² Ibid, p. xiii

³ *Le visiteur* no. 11, May 2008, Paris: SFA éditions.

⁴ Vacchini, L. 2006, *Capolavori, chefs d'oeuvre*, Translated from Italian into French by Anna Rocchi-Pullberg, Paris: éditions du Linteau.



importance of preserving a piece of our modern architectural heritage, a unique element of both 20th century architectural history and Le Corbusier's work, and of preserving the fragile environment of the site. Regarding this latter aspect, the French Ministry of Culture openly supported the Renzo Piano scheme by organising conferences and exhibitions to promote it.

Michel Kagan attended a debate organized by the Ministry at the Cité de l'Architecture on 25th June 2008, where he proposed locating the Renzo Piano scheme far enough from the Chapel to avoid any impact on the hillside. Located within Ronchamp, the scheme would regenerate the town. But his argument was ignored.

"Criticism is easy, art is difficult" Michel Kagan warned on 24th October 2007, during the second Pierre Riboulet symposium, entitled *Vacances de la critique* (Where are the critics gone?)⁵ Nobody could accuse him of being overly didactic, or of being a theorist with no roots in practice. Much less was he an "ayatollah of Modernity", as Frédéric Edelmann once suggested in his article on Ronchamp⁶. But Michel Kagan did lament the fact that the great philosophers of our time overlooked architecture. He used to refer to the 'dictatorship of kitsch', quoting Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*: "the word 'kitsch' describes the attitude of those who want to please the greatest number, at any cost. To please,

one must confirm what everyone wants to hear, put oneself at the service of received ideas"⁷.

Michel lamented the absence, in France, of,

"Critics who rise up and protect, who explain why one must stop Renzo Piano building a convent on the hill of Ronchamp Chapel. If no one understands that the path of the pilgrims who climb the hill is Le Corbusier's age-old donkey track and that it will be irreparably mutilated, that it will become a straight road for tourist coaches and the likes, who will be able to reach Ronchamp Chapel without an effort, to take their pictures, then yes, there is serious cause for concern. For any site can be spoiled and full credit – in the political sense of the term – will be hijacked by the architect who comes next, claimed as honour and glory in reward for his own work"⁸.

Ultimately, Michel Kagan mentioned the need for true "modesty" in architecture, as opposed to "feigned humility", as a means of putting things back in context. "To be modest is to measure and be measured"⁹. He lamented the showy forms of current architectural production, the obsessive quest for difference, for uniqueness, for making a statement, for feeding the

⁵ *Colloque Pierre Riboulet*, 2007, *Vacances de la critique*, Actes du 2e colloque Pierre Riboulet, Paris, éditions du Linteau.

⁶ Edelmann, F. 2008, "La messe n'est pas dite sur le projet de Ronchamp", *Le Monde*, 26 June.

⁷ Kundera, M. 1983, *The Art of the Novel*. Translated from French by L. Asher. London: Faber, p. 163.

⁸ *Colloque Pierre Riboulet*, 2007, *ibid.*

⁹ Borruet, R. & al. 1999, *Architecture et modestie*, Actes de la rencontre tenue au couvent de La Tourette (Centre Thomas More) les 8 et 9 juin 1996. Leques: Thémiste éditions.



RONCHAMP CHAPEL, INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR VIEWS



MICHEL KAGAN, RONCHAMP, JULY 2008

ego. Instead, the architect's purpose is to transform, to modify the sites for which they are commissioned. Their role is to prepare the ground, to lay foundations, to build. They ought to be "those who think as people of action", and "who act as people of thought"¹⁰.

For Michel Kagan, modernity in architecture didn't mean total freedom, a wide unexplored territory, a place where anything could be done. When he spoke about his own architecture, he often referred to "modernity with temperance" – modernity to meet the need for comfort, flexibility, fluid spaces, light quality, and a balanced approach, coming from a grasp of the site and its scale, from a respect for its environment, its orientation and its proportions.

When Michel Kagan passed away, Michel Richard, Director of the Fondation Le Corbusier, stated the Fondation's wish to pay him a tribute. I immediately proposed to gather the texts written during this debate, and to publish them under the direction of Jean-Louis Cohen¹¹. The Renzo Piano scheme is currently under construction; its completion will put an end to the criticism. Personally, I have great admiration for this architect and for some

of his works – I have written articles about his housing scheme at Rue des Meaux in Paris¹², and about the Pompidou Centre¹³.

The international debate surrounding Ronchamp has certainly pushed Renzo Piano to amend some elements of his scheme, and to entrust the implementation of the project to his very best associates. Yet however sophisticated the technologies involved in its execution, however magnificent the materials specified, the final product – even sunken into the hillside – will not achieve the 'rightness' of the original work, and is likely to cause irreparable harm to the essence, the deeper meaning of the site.

Unlike Athens' Acropolis, the Ronchamp Chapel will not benefit from the care of a dedicated 'Pikionis'¹⁴. The client and the community of Poor Clare sisters will be largely responsible for this missed opportunity. When clear-sightedness is discarded, when treasures of simple beauty are mutilated for profit and for "contemporaneity" at all costs, it becomes important to keep a record of the arguments in the hope of a better time to come, so that such opportunities will not be missed in future. "Intelligence and passion; there is no art without emotion, no emotion without passion"¹⁵ as Le Corbusier used to say. The best tribute we can pay to Michel Kagan is to communicate this emotion and his passion.

NATHALIE RÉGNIER-KAGAN HON FRIAS

10 Jankélévitch, V. 1953, *Traité des vertus I, Le sérieux de l'intention*. Paris: Flammarion/Champs.

11 Jean-Louis Cohen has been responsible for several major architectural exhibitions, including the recent *Architecture in Uniform* at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal from April to September 2011.

12 Régnier, N. 1993, "Variation graphique", *Construction Moderne*, no. 73.

13 Régnier, N. 1994, *Le choix constructif en architecture*, DEA dissertation, Paris: Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Belleville.

14 Dimitri Pikionis (1837 – 1968) was a Greek architect revered for his landscaping work on the surroundings of Athens Acropolis in the 1950s.

15 Le Corbusier, 1957, *Towards a new architecture*, translated from the 13th French edition with an introduction by F. Etchells, London: Architectural Press, p. 164.