

## Subversive Capabilities

At a recent event staged at the Architecture Foundation in London the critic William Curtis and five distinguished colleagues galvanised each other in a move to resist what they saw as the increasingly turgid, market-led demands of commercial architectural publishing. In Curtis's opinion the critic's role is to 'reveal the mechanisms' of power – something, it is evident, that he and his fellow critics are largely failing to do. Hearing these thoughts made us reflect on the independent status of **arq**, its subversive capability, its singular position in the market and its potential to offer different interpretations of architecture.

The 'mechanisms of power' play a central role in Marwan Ghandour's readings (pp37–49) of a series of twentieth-century master plans for Balbaak in the Lebanon. The city's extraordinary temple complex has been co-opted and recast by successive ruling authorities to further their own ends, and working with students at the American University in Beirut, Ghandour suggests another ordering of the city, based on sensitive engagement and intense observation.

Curtis made a further plea for the 'delicate, intense reading' of buildings that are subtle and emanate from architectural concerns rather than those of status or fashion – buildings, we would suggest, like the Urray House discussed by John Brennan in his paper on Scottish Highland architecture (pp12–23). Ostensibly simple in form and detail, it engages in quiet but eloquent conversation with both its owners and the exposed rural setting.

An intense reading of Le Corbusier's studio residences, the Atelier Ozenfant and his own penthouse at 24 Nungesser et Coli is offered by Todd Willmert (pp57–78). In a ground-breaking analysis, a potentially mundane issue of building servicing – the provision of heat – is tied into the overarching narrative of the architecture. Given that Louis Kahn constantly referred back to Le Corbusier, it is perhaps unsurprising that a parallel strand of thought is revealed by Steven Fleming in his analysis of daylight in Kahn's work (pp25–36). Although apparently more instinctual in his theorising, Kahn also, Fleming argues, sought meaning in Platonic thought when asked to design a religious building.

As the divorce between conceptual idea and constructional technique grows ever wider in mainstream practice, should it be our remit to reassert the act of detailing as an art? The etymology is revealing: derived from the latin *artem*, art refers to skill or craft. Such simple definitions can hardly describe the overlapping fields of activity that constitute architecture, yet in our increasingly bureaucratic world we are forced to define ourselves at every stage. Products of art or craft can be ascribed different levels of VAT; Health and Safety legislation is variously interpreted; and expected standards of workmanship and utility differ. Confronted by a Building Control officer, thoughts of artistry have a tendency to evaporate – all the more reason to applaud those who hold fast to their aspirations.

THE EDITORS

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