# Architectural Theory: A Construction Site

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# Territory and problems - theoria

Like all young academic disciplines, the theory of architecture is still in search of its identity, as its representatives strive to define the boundaries of their territory. But what is this territory? Obviously, there must be specific problems waiting to be solved by architectural theorists if taxpayers' money is to be invested in the creation of new chairs, professorships, and design-based academic grades, which is a completely new and somewhat puzzling phenomenon. Undoubtedly, even mathematics would no longer be on the university agenda today if it did not contribute substantially to the development of new technologies; what then can we expect of architectural theory?

The field of architectural theory should be defined on the basis of the problems the discipline is intended to solve. But disciplines for architectural problem solving, from the design of a doorknob to regional planning, already exist. What kind of specific tasks does architectural theory have to tackle, what kind of inquiries does it intend to pursue? The future standing of architectural theory, indeed perhaps its survival depends on the answers to these and similar questions.

We can debate the value of etymology in understanding the usage of terms, but its capacity to question generally accepted, fixed meanings is beyond any doubt. The Greek origin of the word theory, *theoria*, is illuminating. *Thea* is an occurrence which wants to be understood, and *theoros*  is an observer, an envoy sent by a *polis* to a place of oracle like Delphi, to be present at the oracle and report it to his principals with authority, that is, without altering it, 'for neither adding anything would you find a cure, nor subtracting anything would you avoid erring in the eyes of gods' - as the poet Theognis of Megara (6th Century BC) had warned the *theoros*.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of theory, therefore, indicates a particular way of observing: the way of the detached and uncommitted spectator, rather than the participant. It seems, therefore, that the original meaning of *theoria* leaves no space for a pro-'projective' interpretation, with its interest in performance and production.

However, important questions remain. The decision of the Athenians whether to start a war against the Persians or to take a defensive stance depended on the report and interpretation of the oracle's utterances by the theoros. The theoros created a narrative in order to bridge the gap between human intelligence and divine interaction. The narrative of the theoros, however, had to be negotiated: in cases where the Athenian ambassadors declined to accept an oracle, they refused to confer authority to the theoros. We have to ask, therefore, whether detachment will give us a more profound insight than participation, or whether observation itself is a kind of intellectual participation. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the theoros becomes part of the festive celebration by attending it; via his attendance, the theoros acquires a qualification and certain privileges. Being a spectator is an authentic form of participation, Gadamer wrote in his 'Truth and Method'.<sup>2</sup> Earlier, Martin Heidegger pointed out, in his essay 'Science and Meditation', that in the Greek world '... a way of life (bios)' was based on *theorein*.<sup>3</sup> *Bios theoretikos*l was defined by the philosopher as 'the way of life of those who contemplate, who look in the direction of the pure appearance of things present',<sup>4</sup> in contrast to the *bios praktikos*, the existential mode that essentially implies action. However, even though Heidegger was aware of the difference, he stressed that: '... one thing must be kept in mind at all times: *bios theoretikos*, contemplative life, especially in its purer forms, is for the Greeks supreme action'.<sup>5</sup>

# Architectural theory: aesthetics or discourse?

This brief excursion into the difficult problem of observation/reflection versus participation might explain why many theorists of architecture were of the opinion that architects involved in the process of designing buildings are unable to understand what they called the 'essence', the most important principle of architecture, unaffected by individual languages. In his essay 'The Paradox of Architectural Theories at the Beginning of the "Modern Movement", published in 1951, the architect and architectural essayist Paul Zucker claimed: 'While architects in all German academies and institutes of technology at the end of the nineteenth century were taught in terms formulated by the holy trinity of Schinkel, Bötticher and Semper, new architectural theories were formulated from another side. Now no longer creative architects, but theoreticians began shaping a new approach toward architecture: Wölfflin, Schmarsow, and Adolf von Hildebrand...'.6 Zucker stated the primacy of theory for modern architecture in shifting its focus from the issue of 'functional expression' toward the more substantial issues of space, volume, symbol, and abstraction: 'It will be up to the architects of the second half of our century to express in their creations those ideas which were the intrinsic problems of the theoreticians of the first decades of our century'.7

Zucker was, of course, focusing on the written statements of architects and not only failed to recognise that the issue of space was already very much an 'intrinsic problem' for architects in the first half of the twentieth century (e.g. Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos, or the Cubist architects in Prague), but also that this design work - along with new discoveries in the field of optical perception or psychology - contributed to the elaboration of theories on the Wesen der Architektur ('essence' or 'nature' of architecture) as formulated by architect-theorists such as Fritz Schumacher, Paul Klopfer or Geoffrey Scott. Although Zucker himself worked previously as a designer, his strict division of 'architects' and 'theorists' followed the supposed gap between observation and participation.

Ideas emerging outside of architecture will fertilise the practice of architecture by producing, in turn, a specific knowledge, Zucker emphasised. We can easily extend the scope of Zucker's investigation and consider other periods in which architecture as a discipline underwent a sweeping re-evaluation of its entire program. One major shift was the crisis of Vitruvianism in the seventeenth century and the subsequent rejection of nature and the proportions of the human body as models for architecture. Another blow, still resounding in the writings of Aldo Rossi, was delivered by Etienne-Louis Boullée, who rejected Vitruvius' statement that architecture was the art of building and stressed the *production de l'esprit* as the constitution of architecture.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the great theoretical systems of the nineteenth century attempted to look at the extra-architectural variables such as production, technology and material, from the perspective of their capacity to guide architecture toward an adequate, unified style. The speculation about space and its symbolism replaced the architectural theory of the nineteenth century, which was centred on issues of construction, technology, and the evolution of styles.

In his 1951 essay, Paul Zucker described architectural theorists as 'those who deal preponderantly with problems of architectural aesthetics'.9 The equation of architectural theory with aesthetics was a general phenomenon during the first half of the twentieth century. 'This is certainly not a theory of building technology but of building-art [Baukunst], therefore an aesthetics', Herman Sörgel already wrote in 1918 in the introduction to his important handbook 'Theorie der Baukunst', which consists of a historical-critical part (from Semper to Hildebrand), a theoretical-methodical part (aesthetics of perception) and a practical-applied part (ranging from material and technology to style and truth).<sup>10</sup> Sörgel saw the task as the mediation between the architect and the philosophically or historically educated theorist, using aesthetics as a 'rational' antidote against similarly 'rational' functionalism. Many important theorists trained in art history, such as Rudolf Wittkower, Rudolf Arnheim, Ernst Gombrich and Paul Frankl, developed analytical methods that became important tools for architects, often mediated by architectural critics like Colin Rowe. It is puzzling that Hanno-Walter Kruft disregarded practically all of them in his voluminous 'History of Architectural Theory' (1985). His chapters on twentieth-century architecture exclusively discussed the statements of practicing architects.<sup>11</sup> The fact that the authors who for Zucker represented architectural theory were now replaced by Van de Velde, Gropius, van Doesburg and Mies van der Rohe, indicates a major shift in the definition of architectural theory: not the aesthetics of architecture, but architecture itself in its structural relations with social life is now the focus of attention.

We can locate the origin of this paradigm change in the situation of around 1968. Indeed, we can speak of the birth of a new architectural theory, as the conjunction of architectural history and politically engaged architectural criticism. The term 'aesthetics' was now carefully avoided by the representatives of this new theory as something superficial and unworthy of attention, since the real significance did not lie in the visual appearance of a building but in its socio-economic existence. The problem with this line of argumentation is that the elimination of aesthetics as a means of evaluating architecture as a product of human labour radically limits the means of making a critical judgment vis-à-vis the product (which is a pity, since the real differences between the proposals of Rem Koolhaas and the architects of New Urbanism lie in their respective aesthetics, rather than in their social programs). Still, the reconfiguration of architectural theory was, in retrospect, successful in the sense that its representatives could gain the necessary attention by establishing an international network of intellectuals from in- and outside the discipline, forming a 'critical' mass and acting as a resonating board. The Any conferences, held each year between 1991 and 2000, were a case in point, even though the interest in a real exchange of ideas had declined during the final meetings.

Manfredo Tafuri's thesis regarding the impossibility of a critical architecture contributed to the institutionalisation of a critical theory of architecture.12 After 1973, 'Oppositions', the journal of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, founded by Peter Eisenman, Kenneth Frampton, and Mario Gandelsonas, played a major role in this respect. The editors of 'Oppositions' wanted to create a committed critical voice, outside of academia or the architectural profession, although university journals such as Yale's 'Perspecta', with its characteristic mixture of historical analysis and new projects, certainly served as a point of orientation. Still, the effect of the long-lasting hegemony of Clement Greenberg's formalist aesthetics in the United States should not be underestimated. Just like 'October', the journal for theoretical inquiry in art which announces its rebellious spirit already in its title, 'Oppositions' became the forum for opinions calling the traditional foundations of architectural culture into question.

The initial goal of the editors of and contributors to 'Oppositions', to revise the historiography of modernism by critically investigating its socio-economic underpinnings, soon had to be revised itself: the journal shifted its focus toward the processes of signification in language and culture in general, and understandably, easily found allies in literary theory (the postmodernism of Fredric Jameson), semiotics (W.J.T. Mitchell, Norman Bryson), and in post-structuralist and deconstructivist philosophy. It is rather remarkable that, in spite of all its programmatic claims, the sociology of art made almost no impact in the U.S., except maybe for a slight interest in Pierre Bourdieu's work. Following the closure of 'Oppositions', its successor 'Assemblage', founded in 1985 by architectural historian K. Michael Hays and literary theorist Catherine Ingraham, wanted to anchor the new journal in the poststructuralist academic discourse. The attempt of 'Oppositions' to 'open' up traditional architectural journalism with historiographical and critical tools helped 'Assemblage' to assign new roles to architecture. Strategies of literary criticism, such as misreading, and concepts borrowed from philosophy, psychoanalysis or linguistics were used as guiding ideas for interpretations of design as well as design proposals. The growing distance from design practice, on the other hand, yielded the applause of a relatively small, mostly academic audience.

The rifts between architectural historians (writing for the established scholarly journals such as 'The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians'), architectural theoreticians (writing for journals such as 'Oppositions', 'Assemblage' or 'Any'), and architects were impossible to overlook. The question was whether the discipline was self-contained, with an established object of study and a given methodology, or - as Louis Althusser defined science - whether it was a discipline which had a theory for its object of study. Architectural historiography itself became the object of theoretical research, with anthologies of architectural theory now a genre of its own, by now filling many library shelves.13

As a result of this development, it is no longer possible to study architectural history without a critical reflection on the method of the study itself and without a certain grade of interdisciplinarity. However, the multitude of topics and methods which have appeared in architecture theory journals very rarely resulted in real interdisciplinary research; on the contrary, the restructuring of schools as a consequence of the Bologna process and the necessity to secure funds has forced parts of the discipline to emphasise uniqueness and 'core competences'. The recent 'iconic turn' is a telling example: art historians, historians of science, and architects are trying to establish their own interpretation of the 'image', producing competing definitions of a Bildwissenschaft (science of images) - thus, it is no wonder that Klaus Sachs-Hombach speaks not of one discipline, but of disciplines of 'image science' in his anthology of relevant texts of Bildwissenschaft.14

# Mining for metaphors

Ironically, architectural theory today, both as analysed by Kruft and as represented on the pages of 'Oppositions' and 'Assemblage', is an historical artefact; it is easy to compare them and see how traditional methods of historiography and iconography have been replaced by new approaches configured by psychoanalysis, deconstruction, epistemology, and by gender and cultural studies. Appropriation has become the proof of criticality both in architectural theory and in design, starting with the 'death of the author', followed by the critique of representation, resignification and so on. Eisenman's understanding of Chomsky's linguistic distinction between surface and deep structure, of 'post-humanist' displacement and de-centring, of Derrida's misreading, all invented to call certain basic statements of hermeneutics into question, is, basically, metaphorical. By 'using' them in order to justify decisions of architectural design, Eisenman cancels their critical potential and turns them into

'illustrations'.

We should not underestimate the liberating effect of these and similar ideas on architecture: the attention to developments in other disciplines and in other fields of culture was a significant change. But this new theory soon began to wither as it had increasingly lost touch with design practice. The most important warning signs were not so much the discounted theory books in the sales' bins of bookstores, but the grant applications showing no interest whatsoever in discovering anything new, yet bolstering a refined jargon which identified the authors as followers of intellectual fashions. This situation has had and still has devastating consequences both for scholarship, which can only decline without practical knowledge, and for practice, which expects some theoretical basis at least in order to establish the qualitative differences between possible results. It was in the catalogue of Peter Eisenman's exhibition Cities of Artificial Excavation, notably, that the art critic Yve-Alain Bois rang the alarm bell, stating that the symbiosis of architecture and philosophy is turning into a mutually exploitative relationship:

During the last ten years or so we have seen architectural theory achieve its level of incompetence. It is simply not the case that architects write such good books or that philosophers have such interesting ideas about architecture, and in a sense Eisenman's recent exchange with Jacques Derrida marks a recognition, on both sides, that perhaps it is now time to put an end to the reciprocal trivialization of their own discourses and the flood of gobbledygook that poured out of their sycophants' word processors.<sup>15</sup>

Bois accused architects like Eisenman of translating certain key concepts of the latest philosophical thinking into architectural form, rather than trying to understand its deeper significance - an accusation which could be directed against other architectural trends with theoretical implications as well. In

recent years we have seen that architectural theory makes a rather deliberate use of complex theories of natural sciences, such as genetics. It seems that many universities only bestow recognition, and therefore support, on disciplines that can be labelled 'sciences'. The results are clearly visible in the attempts of universities to have architectural design recognised as scientific research - arguing that science itself lacks the solid basis and methodological rigor with which it is normally associated. Facing the consequences, architectural theoreticians today are either happy to give up the observation post of the theoros and jump on the bandwagon of architecture marketing, or to withdraw to their studios to dedicate themselves to the recherche patiente in pursuit of the precision and delusion of the masterwork.

# Design as research

A similar development can be observed in art, where a growing number of artists use methods taken from natural sciences such as biology, genetics or geography. During the 1990s we have seen a new strategy emerging, moving rapidly away from the traditional concept of art and replacing it with notions borrowed from natural sciences. Catherine David, curator of 'Documenta X' in 1997, was interested in the responses of artists to phenomena such as global migrations and the transformation of cities and landscapes under such pressures. Artists such as Olaf Nicolai and Rosemarie Trockel exhibited their biological crossover-experiments, and Rem Koolhaas presented the results of his 'field work' in China, introducing 'a number of new, copyrighted concepts, that [...] represent a new conceptual framework to describe and interpret the contemporary urban condition'.<sup>16</sup> Satellite imagery became particularly important for presenting the urban condition of Europe, as in the work of Stefano Boeri and the Multiplicity group, or in Switzerland, in the work of Studio Basel. Artists such as Peter Fend and Ingo Günter also use satellite photography of crisis regions to create the utopia of a 'Refugee Republic'. Architecture, urbanism and art appropriate the terminology, concepts and visualisation methods of science: 'a world of numbers turns into diagrams. These diagrams work as emblems for operations, agendas and tasks. A "datatown" that resists the objective of style', MVRDV write in the introduction to their book 'Metacity Datatown'.<sup>17</sup> Diagrams as emblems: the groundwork is laid here for a new iconography which is staged as a 'reality show'.

Nobody seems to mind whether an artwork masquerading as 'research' fulfils the criteria of a research work in natural science - the possibility of verification, for example - as long as the work has an aesthetic value. But the problem is difficult: art has an almost nostalgic longing for regaining 'usefulness' and for a 'task', though ties to the market and the production conditions of art prevent artists to consider themselves 'free'. However, design and architecture show art a to be mirror image of itself, a mirror image of which art is horrified: a mere aesthetic shell for the social world. If an artwork is planned, generated or executed using the latest computer-controlled machinery, it is not the precision of CAD that will be appreciated, nor the sophistication of a cutting-edge processing package that will make a work of art out of CAM programs not even when these programs are used in order to drive a milling machine to create a sculpture.

While for art the 'void' of a blank sheet of paper or a video screen without theoretical or technological certainties is essential, architecture and architecture schools tend to fear any such void and fill it with solid knowledge from the very beginning of a curriculum. The task of theory to demonstrate the provisional character of such 'fillings' is not a rewarding one, not even regarding its closest ally, architectural history, since the separation between the past and its representation is frequently pasted over. Implicitly or explicitly, architectural theory should investigate this separateness from the perspective of narrativity or by analysing the connection of historic consciousness to collective and individual memory. While Hayden White speaks of a total discontinuity between the messy, chaotic past and its 'preparation', its ordering for consciousness, Paul Ricoeur sees a connection based on narrativity. Everyday life and action have a narrativity based on the experience of the past, present and future; memory has a temporal structure, which makes memory and history parts of a continuum - even if there are breaks in this continuity. The process of collecting and selecting information introduces a first break between the heterogeneous historical material and the envisioned homogeneity of what is seen as the 'representative' body of work, followed by additional breaks of interpretation: the interpreter has to identify causes and construct convincing narrative structures. If architectural theory criticises these constructs as such, should it propose alternative explanations?

All these doubts are connected with the central issue: should every school of architecture define the channelling of young people toward the 'profession' as their most important task? And if the 'profession' itself is diversified today, should theory not try to act as a mediator between the different actors who shape the identity of the school? The problem with 'criticality', or rather, the possibility of a critical self-reflection, posits theory within the framework of an architectural school with specific problems.

MoMA's 'Deconstructivist Architecture' show in 1988 clearly exhibited the early signs of exhaustion - critical theory giving way to the theoretical packaging of the latest design propositions. The strong oedipal desire of 'projective' theory (albeit this term was not around yet) for a satisfying relationship with the market or even the willingness to deliver branding services for design practice are understandable after the long abstinence in the post-1968 era. Contemplating architectural theory's 'will to anthology', critics like Sylvia Lavin urge architectural theoreticians to return to their roots in architectural history studies in order to achieve the 'long-awaited radicalization of history'.<sup>18</sup> The important question is whether this new desire will result in changes in the discipline, or whether built architecture will be given short shrift once again.

#### Bachelors, masters, and masterpieces

The questions regarding architectural theory take on a new meaning and urgency in the context of architectural education. In a school of architecture there are as many architectural 'philosophies' as design studios, since those who teach architecture certainly could not do so without theoretical reflection. University presidents, in their relentless efforts to turn their institutions into 'centres of competence' funded by the state and by private research grants, opt for 'design as research'. This term suggests that the advanced education of architects is aimed at comparability and the enhancement of the quality of written coursework. This, in itself a positive development, nicely fits in with the process of neo-liberal restructuring of higher education. Such doctorates frequently consist of a curious mixture of the traditional PhD thesis and the idea of the 'masterpiece', as required by the medieval guilds in order to be admitted into their ranks. In the announcement of a university course for a doctorate in the Liberal Arts in Hungary, for instance, we may read: 'Our course realises the old world of traditional master courses: the focus of the course is the making, designing and realising of the independent masterpiece'.<sup>19</sup> While it is easy to comment on such reanimation of the past with sarcasm, it demonstrates the need to cling on to authority, and, primarily, that the mere 'presence' of the master facing the 'void' we discussed above is a necessity in an art school. Let us now return to some of those remarks and see how the situation differs in an architectural school, and examine the consequences for theory.

An architectural school is always deeply embedded in the larger intellectual context of the time; today, this seemingly means that architectural

education has been purged of all its metaphysical and teleological elements. Nobody would agree today (certainly not openly) with Otto Wagner, that the 'mysterious and overwhelming power' of architecture has to do with the 'innate ability' of the architect.<sup>20</sup> But many of these discarded concepts are returning through the back door, as the celebration of the star architect or, as we have seen, in the myth of the masterpiece. The design studio is a ripe around for such developments, since it could not exist without a consensus in terms of a so-called 'design philosophy'. As Charles Correa wrote about the dilemma of education: the studio of the master is one model, what he calls 'the guru-chela system a wonderfully effective process which unfortunately can all too easily result in the kind of brainwashing from which the chela [the apprentice] never recovers. In the other model, we have the kind of healthy contemporary scepticism which ends up with learning hardly anything at all'.21

A 'design philosophy' tends to conceal its own ideological nature as a highly personal ars poetica, not leaving much space for critical questions and understanding. If this 'philosophy' only serves the justification of a design practice, the use of the term 'theory' is unwarranted. On the other hand, an offensive strategy to subsume design practice would damage theory in the long run, because the unfulfilled as well as unfulfillable claim for a 'theory-guided architecture' could result in theory's self-inflicted isolation. The history of architecture, e.g. the different meanings and programs 'rationalism' has taken on during the last century, demonstrates the limits of normative theory, just as it demonstrates the potential productiveness of theoretical 'errors' for architecture. Instead of condemning ideologies as documents of false consciousness, we should regard them as the possibility of the mind, capable of transcending the determinacy of knowledge by the actual social situation.

In order to pave the way for new experiments

in architecture, one must be critical of theoretical schemes and abstractions and build a method deductively, searching for a reflective equilibrium. We can agree with Aldo Rossi that 'l'architettura sono le architetture', but not in the sense that he meant it, that is, as the presence of the past in a dead language of architecture, but rather as a chain of experiments, as trials (and errors), as 'constructs' with a 'constructedness' which is not only unconcealed but appreciated as an essential 'quality' we have to take into account and work with.

This means that the problem for a school of architecture lies not in the 'criticality' of the kind of architectural theory we described as emerging from the spirit of 1968, and subsequently becoming a sort of ennobling patina, but in its discursive nature. But the disciplinary specificity of architecture resists a discursive approach, and architectural students frequently question the usefulness of theory which undermines the foundations of practice, such as place, style, identity, tectonic, context, and even the notion of the 'project' itself, without articulating a constructive proposal. Projectivity does not seem to provide an answer; its claim of performativity lacks the program to regain its organising power over contributions from other specialised disciplines and practices.

Nevertheless, all this does not mean that theory has to withdraw into ineffectiveness. The practice of theory, however, has to remain rooted in language, and should affect the use of language. A course in architectural theory has to question the very terms of architectural discourse. Theory should focus on the terms of our discipline, which are so close to our 'core beliefs' regarding architecture that we usually take their meaning for granted. In order to understand an architectural problem, however, we have to learn about the history of its central terms, the meaning of the words in their respective, relevant theoretical 'surroundings'. 'Space', for example, had a very precise meaning for August Schmarsow, the German art historian who was among the first to analyse architectural space in 1893. and similarly precise, but quite different meanings for Martin Heidegger, Henri Lefebvre and Fernand Braudel. Is the notion of 'space' limited to the sum of these meanings in their respective surroundings? Can the architectural meaning of 'function' be clarified by summing up the mathematical, biological and mechanical understandings and usages of the word? Can we distinguish between correct and incorrect usages? Yet, is it not precisely the unwarranted intrusion into the discourse of architecture of a term developed by another discipline that triggers a process of induction, setting the scene for a new condition? These are questions of a different kind than the question regarding the tensions in a cantilevered support. We can only expect such archaeological work and critical reflection to help us gain an understanding of the problems of space, function or tectonics, not to 'solve' them. In this respect, the terminology of architectural theory is closer to that of philosophy than to that of the natural sciences.

Theory in an architectural school (a discipline which has different tasks than architectural theory in general) has to be helpful in relating questions arising from the confusion regarding the meaning of the words themselves to other, extra-architectural problems. Reflecting on issues such as space or identity requires further thought on issues of politics or the ethics of genetic research. Such a linguistic *bricolage* produces outcomes that are by no means predictable - but could, nevertheless, lead to stimulating results, when the student succeeds in grasping seemingly diverse phenomena at a glance.

This might sound like a withdrawal of architectural theory into the realm of language. We are indeed dealing with language, but it would be wrong to see this focus of theory as a withdrawal. Indeed, after a period of theory alienating architects and the general public, it could now create a rhetoric to influence our understanding of our environment, which is itself organised on the level of language. Any attempt to turn architectural theory into a research modelled on the ideal ontological quality of the natural sciences, delivering permanent results for practice to build on, will necessarily fail. On the contrary, the very requirement that theory should not be directly involved in design practice, but help students to grasp the underlying problems and their historic roots, will allow theory to exert its influence on design development.

# Notes

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# Biography

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