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# HISTORY AGAINST PLANNING: THE ROLE OF MANFREDO TAFURI IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL THOUGHT

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Panayotis Pangalos<sup>1</sup> | Sarra Matsa<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Athens School of Fine Arts
- 2 Architect

What role does the historian hold in the evolution of urban planning? According to Manfredo Tafuri, the position of the historian cannot be innocent. Through the historians' writings, the past becomes one of the most powerful technological means, a dynamic way of producing moral and cultural models, capable of binding contemporary decisions. Historians can cure the theoretical voids of architecture and therefore historical word is easily transformed into a specific technical tool in the construction of interpretation of a specific urban form. Is it though possible for the presence of history to function reversibly and, instead of strengthening architecture with certitudes, to provoke vivid concerns? Is there a critical history against planning? Such enquiries will lead Tafuri to review the historical facts, and, as he will observe that "the discipline itself was rotten to the core", get involved again with the writing of basic chapters of architectural history, making widely understood the fact that morphological revolutions are not destabilizing, because they flow from the economically powerful. Beyond Tafuri, architects cannot any more address to historians in order to purify conscience, to clarify notions, to choose rules, to break through doubts and build truths, because history constitutes a procedure of subversion par-excellence. How do we owe to act today under the suggestions of Tafuri? Only if any field of planning is removed from the educational programs of architectural studies, we could expect a quality change of architectural thought.

## Keywords

Manfredo Tafuri, operative criticism, history against planning, ideological myth, non-operative history, ideology of urban planning

## How to Cite

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## INTRODUCTION

Two parallel worlds participate in architectural education: that of theory and that of technique. Without theoretical knowledge, architect wouldn't have the opportunity of constructing the difference and, on the other hand, without technical skills he couldn't appear with the objective certainty of a scientist. History and theory of architecture constitute in an international level the two cognitive objects of theoretical knowledge of architectural program of studies, that reassure the connection between architecture and common language, in contrast with architectural design and practical application courses (construction, architectural survey, arts, descriptive geometry, informatics), that concern the relation between architecture, representation and technological vocabularies.

Which is, however, the role of history in architectural education? Is historical knowledge necessary for architects? When does history become a technological weapon in architects' hands and when is it considered undesirable? Which is its connection with critique? How do you design history?

The abovementioned questions afflict architects, which eventually realize that during their work, they are requested necessarily to compete with history and decide whether they will join it or they will contradict it. Along with history as tool, architects are able to understand *how* but also *why* an architectural project is born. They may study special cases or general phenomena and result to technical or theoretical conclusions. History, in contrast with theory's introversion and abstract self-reference, provides a way of open investigation of specific relations between architecture and social conditions in time. The social meaning of history will expand during 19th century with the institutionalization and professionalization of historians. Moreover, regarding the historiography of Art, the shift in its direction -from the biographical speech of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) to the research of national consciousness coordinates of Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768) during 18th century- will fertilize history, indicating its ability through works of art, to reveal ideological mechanisms and social intentions, to contribute in the construction of cultural identity, to build national origins and transfer in a wide range the necessary convictions on the political strategy of a nation.

After German historicism, within the west European civilization, civils will acquire historical consciousness through educational process and things that increase their historical knowledge will be evaluated positively. Since then, the "distinct" history of a nation will convert to a political right of self-determination. Every national ideology will turn to history, in order to demonstrate that it disposes longstanding autonomy. Even when this is not possible, the historical reality will be damaged and replaced by an *illusion* of reality.

## WHAT KIND OF CONNECTIONS ARE THERE BETWEEN HISTORY, IDEOLOGY AND URBAN PLANNING?

Since the state constitutes a source of morality for society and of guaranty for the development of the nation, during 20th century, west European historiography of Art will mainly move towards a Marxist type of comprehension of social structures, but also towards new methods of interdisciplinary approach, such as these of the representatives of Annales School<sup>2</sup>: multiple time layers, abandonment of linear history and anthropological reading of the past. The Annales School will feed the postmodern historical approach of Art, with the clarification that the unit of the body (corpus) we call society is conventional, as it is full of heterogeneities and conflicting parts that claim for power. Therefore, the term history constitutes an unrecorded convention: histories are many and only through ideology one is able to define each different content and its interpretations.

Each history constitutes a kind of ideological myth and every myth is a history brought into alignment with the needs of an ideology. The past is constantly reconstructed, in order to support the present's choices<sup>3</sup>. In the present different kinds of memories are uncovered and encounter. Too many memories lead to the collapse

of “historical truth”, that is to the insufficiency of *One history*: multiple subjectivities of memory eliminate the objectivity of history, as memories and history are connected through research. Besides, as Jacques Le Goff mentions, “just as the past is not history but the object of history, so memory is not history, but both one of its objects [...]”<sup>4</sup>. The selected past, through historians’ writings, will become one of the most powerful technological means, a dynamic way of moral and cultural archetypes’ production, capable of binding new decisions, or, as Nietzsche suggests, “knowledge of the past has at all times been desired only in the service of the future and the present”<sup>5</sup>.

Through this process of “organizing the memory” for an ideological use, history becomes a technical parameter and the city is the field of its application. Therefore, in the construction of the collective memory, the boundaries between myth and history are often being refuted and the consciousness of the myth as a true story turns the mythical time into an experienced one. In this game, the spatial signs of time play a major role: monuments, buildings, ruins, become documents through which historians assemble the pieces of the past, establishes their constructions and tame the social present. Under this assumption, the city is not a place of spaces but of histories and the urban planning is the result of a systematic management of the ideologies.

The past’s project occasionally undertakes to stimulate nostalgias and to feed the romantic spirit and sometimes to raise doubts and objections. When a work of art is transformed into history, it is displaced from the active commentary to the field of imaginary memory, to refer to Hobbes, who supports that “imagination and memory are the same thing that for various reasons has different names”<sup>6</sup>. However, in order for the historical knowledge to function as a creative impulse for an “alive future”, the reverse should happen, as Nietzsche highlights: “...only if history can endure to be transformed into a work of art will it perhaps be able to preserve instincts or even evoke them”<sup>7</sup>.

In which way could history convert into a “work of art”? Which is the missing link between art and history? The answer will come from the historian of architecture Manfredo Tafuri, who will fight the useful, active, practical and applicable history with a new kind of history focused on the act of critical view. The art of history implies criticism, which means, as Tafuri himself explains in the introduction of *Teorie e storia dell’architettura*,

*[...] to catch the historical scent of phenomena, put them through the sieve of strict evaluation, show their mystifications, values, contradictions and internal dialectics and explode their entire charge of meanings*<sup>8</sup>.

According to Manfredo Tafuri, the position of the historian, as this of the artist, cannot be innocent. On the contrary, to the extent that he determines behaviours and directs actions, he is critical and dangerous.

*In fighting a cultural revolution there exists an intimate complicity between criticism and activity*<sup>9</sup>.

The pure historian, that chooses to keep a distance from the practical application of theory, constitutes a threatening form of clarity that is fed from the anxious research of reasons and intentions. As every critical commentary, criticizing art or architecture owes to investigate and expose the procedure of production of a form and not to describe the form itself. Critique constitutes a radiography of a work, that will bring to the front the parameters behind its realization. Critique deals with the causes of phenomena in order to reveal what the creator avoids to declare. But the issue needs further attention, because, as Tafuri marks:

*There is no such thing as criticism, there is only history. What usually is passed off as criticism, the things you find in architecture magazines, is produced by architects, who frankly are bad historians. What should interest the historians are the cycles of architectural activity and the problem of how a work of architecture fits in own its time. To do otherwise is to impose one’s own way of seeing on architectural history*<sup>10</sup>.

## WHAT ROLE DOES THE HISTORIAN HOLD IN THE EVOLUTION OF URBAN PLANNING?

The maturation of Tafuri's thought on the role of historian will emerge with his complete detachment from every planning [regardless of scale and form in art and architecture], but also with the ascertainment that society's crisis, and consequently the crisis of intellectuals of post-war period, will not be healed through nostalgic reference to the past.

Moreover, Tafuri's historical view does not isolate history of art from that of architecture or of city's planning, since the significance of prolonging culture as a tool of controlling social behaviour, is revealed through cultural histories and as a result the intensions of dominant ideologies arise. Thus, whether this concerns Tafuri's book *La città americana dalla guerra civile al "New Deal"*<sup>11</sup>, or *Raffaello architetto*<sup>12</sup>, or *Storia dell'architettura italiana, 1944-1985*<sup>13</sup>, the interpretative approaches that constitute Tafuri's writings always aim to the enhancement of bonds between the artwork and the power that generates it in every period. Consequently, his analysis on architecture of renaissance in *Venezia e il Rinascimento*<sup>14</sup> or in *L'architettura dell'umanesimo*<sup>15</sup> does not differ from this we find in *Architettura contemporanea*<sup>16</sup> or in *La sfera e il labirinto*<sup>17</sup>. For Tafuri it is also evident that the ideological power of a cultural object is not influenced by its scale, approving the modernist slogan of Walter Gropius and Ernesto Nathan Rogers "From teaspoons to cities", which was assimilated by the post-war rationalist thought of architects such as Aldo Rossi, Vittorio Gregotti, Giancarlo de Carlo etc.

In history he will find answers, but will not search for solutions for the present, because, as himself explains, "in history there are no solutions"<sup>18</sup>. Certainly the same applies to architecture: the regression in time relieves temporarily its position, but will never be capable of confronting its real crisis. As Tafuri mentions:

*I think that the problem of working within a historical context arises together with the insecurity of architecture about its own foundations. When this insecurity, the fear of one's own gestures, reaches a maximum, there is the need to reconnect with the past*<sup>19</sup>.

*When an architect manages to transfuse meaning to a planning strategy and strengthen his choices using the historical knowledge –either by doubting or by honouring the past–, critique maximizes the value of its product and the relation between creator and history is of instrumental type. In this case, critique cures the semantic voids of architecture and consequently historical speech participates, as a specialized technical tool, in the construction of interpretation of a specific urban form. Then, the historian of architecture owes to intervene by undertaking a complex responsibility: to work as a collector of crucial historical information in order to publicly judge the architectural practice by connecting the results with the ideological researches of the creator and, if necessary, to even question the conceptual framework in which he acts.*

## IS IT THOUGH POSSIBLE FOR THE PRESENCE OF HISTORY TO FUNCTION REVERSIBLY AND, INSTEAD OF STRENGTHENING ARCHITECTURE WITH CERTITUDES, TO PROVOKE VIVID CONCERNS? IS THERE A CRITICAL HISTORY AGAINST PLANNING?

Art and science do not constitute autonomous fields of human activity, but composed mechanisms, through whom the human exploitation takes place. On this idea, Manfredo Tafuri will carve his own path in the field of history and will use the interpretation of architecture only as an elegant excuse to perpetually reveal the constructed social conditions based on the political economic pursuits of the powerful class. On his hands, history of architecture will become an analytical tool of programming and producing architecture techniques, from the birth of the upper middle class onwards, with ultimate purpose to appoint the permanent bonds between the

capitalistic development and the degradation of the working class. The basic result of his work will be for the humanitarian power of representation and the utopia of design to encounter strong obstacles by the poetics of history.

Among the greatest Tafuri's weapons, the powerful cultural-cognitive background and the high level of handling the language is included. Having these, he will penetrate in the academic environment, he will acquire the right of teaching and will defend with ideal scientific adequacy his statements, as a tireless worker of spirit. Along with his educational and writing work, he will fight against the unwritten laws of historians' silence, he will demolish the established historical truths, he will dispel common myths about artificial values of the morphological vocabularies and he will bring to light the ambitions of the bourgeoisie. The paragraph with which he opens his theoretical problematic in the beginning of his book *Progetto e utopia* is characteristic:

*To ward off anguish by understanding and absorbing its causes would seem to be one of the principal ethical exigencies of bourgeois art. It matters little if the conflicts, contradictions, and lacerations that generate this anguish are temporarily reconciled by means of a complex mechanism, or if, through contemplative sublimation, catharsis is achieved.<sup>20</sup>*

With penetrative insight, he will reveal the true role of the intellectual elite in defending the capitalistic domination. The mission of the artistic avant-gardes, through the light of Tafuri, is concentrated in the avoidance of conflict. The artistic avant-gardes, having the doubt and the protest as basic characteristics of their products, raised their contradictions on the level of form, keeping secret the structures that are protected and established by this idealization. Thus, with the intermediation of art, the space of metropolis will be transformed in the most counter-revolutionary field of society.

Such enquiries will lead Tafuri to review the historical facts, and, as he will observe that "the discipline itself was rotten to the core"<sup>21</sup>, get involved again with the writing of basic chapters of architectural history. His considerations on architecture have functioned as authentic scientific sections, that undermined with key questions its genealogical constants. The subversive interpretations of architectural phenomena, as they appeared through the thirst of his writings for honesty, have mined the languorous academic narrations but also the professional ambitions of architects. After Tafuri, what became widely understood is the fact that morphological revolutions are not destabilizing, because they flow from the economically powerful.

Tafuri's dangerous mission on the limits of history will be fulfilled with extraordinary success. His complex personality in combination with the endless richness of ideas transformed the object of history into an alive researching machine within architecture and more. The schematic characterisation that was credited to his personality –from dogmatic Marxist to pessimist nihilist – is the result of an abstract and careless categorisation, that is not compatible neither with his work nor with his progressive thought. The philosophy of history, that will generously offer to contemporary architecture, will disassemble the bridge between invented theories and historical ignorance. Beyond Tafuri, architects cannot any more address to historians in order to purify conscience, to clarify notions, to choose rules, to break through doubts and build truths, because history constitutes a procedure of subversion par-excellence.

## HOW DO WE OWE TO ACT TODAY UNDER THE SUGGESTIONS OF TAFURI?

Many have attempted to distinguish the scientific from the ideological dimension of Tafuri's work. Himself chose to maintain a very high level of writing and speech, without ever overriding his own personal ideological aspect of approach. Therefore, having the linguistic sufficiency in his arsenal, he will manage to get acknowledged as a scientific expert in the field of history, reinforcing at the same time his critique against the omnipotence of bourgeoisie with strong arguments. As he always moved with exceptional facility between the cognitive fields

of art, architecture and philosophy, he will detach from the morphological description of artworks in order to systemically expose the inner intentions of the socially powerful.

As in every field -political, religious, cultural-, criticism aims in an action, thus every action of planning is a result of operative criticism, which strengthens one type of ideology against an another. This signifies that we need to revise the primary position that architectural and urban planning holds in cognitive specialisation of architectural studies in an international level today.

As in the case of teaching poetry, where it would be appropriate to teach history and technics of poetic writing but it would be unacceptable to correct a poem, likewise for making architecture, the act of operative criticism from professors of architectural design in form of revision of student projects in architectural and urban planning, is equally unacceptable. Students should be taught history of arts, philosophy and technology of structures and transform this triptych in pure knowledge on architecture, which after the end of their studies, will make them capable of deciding if they desire to proceed to planning and in what way. So, only if any field of planning is removed from the educational programs of architectural studies, we could expect a quality change of architectural thought.



FIGURE 1 Panayotis Pangalos, The Architecture of Manfredo Tafuri



FIGURE 2 Charles Robert Cockerell, The Professor's Dream

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## Image Sources

Figure 1: Panayotis Pangalos, Architecture of Manfredo Tafuri, personal archive

Figure 2: Charles Robert Cockerell, The Professor's Dream, pencil, pen & grey ink and watercolour, 112,2 x 171,1 cm., Royal Academy of Arts, London [1848]

## Endnotes

- 1 Manfredo Tafuri was born in Rome in 1935. He was student of Ludovico Quaroni. He held the chair of History of Architecture in the famous School of Architecture in Venice (IUAV) since 1968, where he completely dedicated his work to this field and became a significant representative. His historical interests ranged from architecture of Renaissance to contemporary architecture. He collaborated with a series of leading Italian and foreign architectural magazines and he published some of the most famous books in the history of architecture as *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* (1968), *Progetto e Utopia* (1973), *La sfera e il labirinto* (1980). The influences of his thought emerged from his association with significant architects and intellectuals such as Aldo Rossi and Massimo Cacciari, but also Peter Eisenmann, Kurt Forster and Anthony Vidler. He died in Venice in 1994.
- 2 Bibliography regarding issues of historiography is wide. We mention the following: Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999) Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1983]); Georg Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University press, 1984). Specifically for the historiography of architecture, see also: Panayotis Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of modern Architecture* (The MIT Press, 1999); D. Arnold, E.A. Ergut, B. T. Ozkaya (ed.), *Rethinking Architectural Historiography* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 3 In this point, we also deliver the opinion of V. Petridou on the instability of history: "History narrates, describes, opens new dialogues and appears to have unanswered questions that eventually become new food for thought. It (a/n history) is not objective as it always depends on the historian's choices and is strongly characterised by the element of ephemeral. Therefore, it is written and rewritten, multiplying constantly in this way the opportunities for research, reconsiderations and new relations. Each history is based on its own analysis and composition of data, aiming in the discovery and interpretation of the powers and conditions in which each choice appears", in: Βασιλική Πετρίδου, «Άγχος και νοσταλγία: συμπτώματα της σύγχρονης ελληνικής αρχιτεκτονικής», *Άρχιτέκτονες*, ΣΑΔΑΣ-ΠΕΑ, 56, (2006), 65. On this issue, see also: Αντόνιος Λιάκος, *Πώς το παρελθόν γίνεται ιστορία*; (Αθήνα: Πόλις, 2007).
- 4 Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, transl. Steven Rendall, Elizabeth Claman, (New York: Columbia University press, 1992 [1988]), 129.
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely meditations*, Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy, transl. R. J. Hollingdale, (New York: Cambridge University press, 1997), 77.
- 6 «For as at a great distance of place that which we look at appears dim, and without distinction of the smaller parts, and as voices grow weak and inarticulate: so also after great distance of time our imagination of the past is weak; and we lose, for example, of cities we have seen, many particular streets; and of actions, many particular circumstances. This decaying sense, when we would express the thing itself (I mean fancy itself), we call imagination, as I said before. But when we would express the decay, and signify that the sense is fading, old, and past, it is called memory. So that imagination and memory are but one thing, which for diverse considerations hath diverse names.», in: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (London, 1651), 11-12.
- 7 Nietzsche, *Untimely meditations*, 95-96.
- 8 Manfredo Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1968), 1.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Manfredo Tafuri, «Non c'è critica, solo storia», interview to Richard Ingersoll, *Casabella*, v. 619-620, *Il progetto storico di Manfredo Tafuri* (January-February 1995), 97.

- 11 Manfredo Tafuri, G. Ciucci, F. Dal Co, M. Manieri Elia, *La città americana dalla guerra civile al "New Deal"* (Bari: Laterza, 1973)
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- 19 Manfredo Tafuri, «Storia, Conservazione, Restauro», *Casabella*, 580, (1991), 61.
- 20 Manfredo Tafuri, *Progetto e Utopia* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1973), 1.
- 21 Manfredo Tafuri, interview to Françoise Very, *Architecture Mouvement Continuïte*, v. 39 (June 1976), 64. Also published in Italian and English, under the title «I mercati della cultura» in *Casabella*, *Il progetto storico di Manfredo Tafuri*, 37.