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DOSSIER TRANSLATIONS

The Place of Theory

Guest Editor: Gabriela García de Cortázar

The Place of Theory

Gabriela García de Cortázar

The idea that something called architectural theory might exist has consistently tormented architecture, whose every historical stage has raised the same question – what is theory? – even when it increasingly knew that theory is both the thing furthest removed from a discipline predicated on materiality, and at the same time the elusive object closest to its very essence.

This issue of *Materia Architectura* looks to maintain this ongoing tradition, but in an attempt to avoid both cliché and the same old ontological bear trap, it rephrases the question – now, not so much what is theory as where is theory? Such a simple displacement is useful, because it suddenly removes all the tension associated with trying to identify not just what theory is, but whether it is the best, the latest, the hottest. In substituting existence with location, it also reanimates the discussion around the idea of the place of theory – from the space it takes within the discipline (that is, a historical question), to where it is produced (that is, a stocktaking question), to what is its place in relation to the product of architecture, the building (that is, whether theory comes before, during or after building), to what is its actual place, understood in the most literal way (that is, where can it be found physically?).

All of these questions are posed over the following pages, which go on to offer multiple answers. But one common and highly simplified answer to the place of theory might be ‘on paper’ since theory, of course, is written, using signs committed to paper. In this, it shares the same space as the architectural project, since designs are also drawn or printed on paper. But if the building is where an architectural project is ultimately tested – where gravity tests a structure, and where time tests both material and programmatic qualities – the publication is the place where theory is put to test.

Periodical publications of architecture have long been at hand. Almost always of a portable format, magazines are, in general, lightweight yet dense in content. Unlike the book, their sequential qualities allow for the development of lines over time (“serial thinking”, as Véronique Patteeuw refers to it) and at the same time for correcting and reworking “on the go” (as Jimena Hogrebe characterises it). Together with the ephemeral presence of each issue of a journal on a library’s

shelf, its material background is that there are editors, copy editors, designers, translators and writers performing a slow and arduous job. But, again, one thing precludes the other: the “slow and contemplative space of the page” (as described by Cynthia Davidson), may contain essays that are devoured at lightning speed (as advocated by Thomas Weaver).

To look at the paper of the journal as a space for theory also opens up all those other scales of the architectural project – for instance, the place where theory becomes useful, pragmatic, and supportive of practice (as argued by Pier Paolo Tamburelli), or where it relates to the building as its own theoretical formwork (an allusion provided by Emilio Tuñón), which just like a temporary wooden structure, offers a moment of support before necessarily disappearing. In another register, theory may be a bridge between the far-off and the near (a relation historicised by Aitor Acilu), while it can also be thus in relation to time (the problem of theory not so much in relation to the past, but to the future, as tackled by Pedro Correa F). Occasionally, theory is simply out of sight, clouded by tall glass towers and under the weight of concrete (which is no impediment for Francisco Silva to ask what would that theory be – and where would that be). Because, finally, the space defined by the pages of a magazine is a space for speculation – a speculation that is in dialogue (with other articles, with readers, with the zeitgeist), that is in negotiation (with its material conditions, and with an idea), that assumes a stated position (even one subject to revision), and is also one that simply offers an excuse to start a conversation (of the editor with her writers, and of the readers with each other).

Perhaps this space is not so different from the one revealed inside the ‘6’ cut-out on the cover of this magazine. This is the only existing drawing by the architect and theorist Leon Battista Alberti: a design for a public bath house, a place for gathering and a setting for many conversations. Whether Alberti imagined these to be about architectural theory we, of course, cannot know. Architecture only generates the conditions in which actions can occur – Alberti the architect only prescribes the dimensions of the bathhouse walls, just as Alberti the theorist locates theory rather than predetermining what is being theorised. The important thing is that this place exists. And if it doesn’t, then we simply have to design it. 