

## The Death and Life of Theory

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay challenges a contemporary understanding of theory, largely through the assertion that architecture becomes servile when only read theoretically. It explains some of the conceptions involved in the editing of the long-running journal AA Files, among them the preferential treatment this publication gives to history, and makes a more fundamental argument that architecture does not need the appliqué of philosophy because multiple ideas and allusions are already embedded within it. Nevertheless, it recognises that among all of architecture's various objects is theory itself. Following Alberti's distinction between theory and practice it argues that any form of architectural production not in the form of building is therefore by definition a theory.*

*"What upsets people is not things themselves, but their theories about things."*

—Epicetetus, quoted in the epigraph to Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, 1759.

*I want to make something clear from the very beginning: I have no time whatsoever for that branch of thinking that sells itself as architectural theory – a disinterest not borne out of a particular school of thought, or any kind of institutional or editorial allegiance, but out of an instinctive, almost emotional sense of loathing. I hate theory. I especially hate its myopia, its illiteracy, its insensitivities, its fundamentalism, its lead-footedness, its earnestness, even piety, its cod-philosophical ramblings, its perpetual one-upmanship and perhaps, more than anything else, the fundamental joylessness of it all. I also hate the things that it does, almost alchemically, when it comes into contact with architecture – a discipline that I love, and one that is rich, layered, materially compelling, linguistically mellifluous, rhetorically flexible and consistently nimble in its ability to deal with both object and idea, but one that suddenly becomes servile when read through theory, somehow reduced to the level of a functionary, relegated to an inconsequential backdrop, or worse, removed from the stage altogether. And so as to the question of its location, theory, as we know, is all over architectural academia – it has its own departments, professorships and journals – but it is resolutely not something found in AA Files.*

*By theory, of course, my tabloid reductivism means that succession of philosophers who flooded into the architectural*

*academy in the wake of 1968, just as its Corinthian capitals and Prix de Romes were booted out – a Mount Rushmore of eminences who each took over the zeitgeist for six or seven years before the baton was passed to their successor. And so a genealogy of architectural theory means the theories of Foucault, Debord, Bachelard, Deleuze, Lefebvre, Latour and Agamben. Or rather, to make an important distinction, architectural theory means all those hacks who quote these philosophers (who are actually all rather good), who claim them as their own, who boast of a deeper understanding, who muse on the architecture of their works (with architecture used only as an adjective), and who solemnly and ritualistically park their books on the surface of every seminar table, in the body of every sentence and in the detail of every footnote. In the process, all those other, formerly canonic lineages – like Brunelleschi, Bramante and Borromini; Boullée, Schinkel, and Soane; Le Corbusier, Mies and Gropius – become merely the fodder of architectural discourse, chapters two, three and four of any PhD, and the prosaic thing onto which the seeming greater nobility of theory applies itself.*

*Instead of theory I much prefer history. History is actually the thing that is inside AA Files. For me, history is much more sympathetic to the mechanisms of architecture, and also something that does not necessarily have to be old and dusty, consigned to the past, but is just as adept at analysing, polemicizing, even projecting the future. Of course, the preferential treatment the journal gives to history is meant as a provocation, initially to a pragmatic understanding of architecture that describes itself only through the bricks*

and mortar of its tectonics, but increasingly also to its seemingly symbiotic relationship with theory.

Over the last few years it seems as if architectural history is incapable of existing without theory. Courses and teaching positions are now advertised as 'history and theory'. More casually this then becomes abbreviated to 'history 'n' theory', like 'chicken 'n' chips' (as if the two complement each other perfectly). This is also reflected in academic publishing, with architectural journals often juxtaposing 'history' papers against more explicitly 'theory' papers. More recently, still, as Joan Ockman has noted, we have somehow lost the 'n' and the two are now separated only by a slash – history/theory – which we pronounce as if it were one kind of singular, all-knowing entity, 'historytheory'.<sup>(1)</sup> To write about architecture necessarily therefore means to adopt a kind of meta narrative that seamlessly intermingles historical and theoretical allusions, the balance of which modern editorship charges itself with policing. For example, after a friend of mine recently submitted a paper to an academic journal she was asked by its editors if she could make it 'a bit more theoretical', as if her text was a piece of fish that needed a little more seasoning.

In AA Files I have long tried to avoid such garnishes. In fact, I try to avoid anything that sells itself only through the dogmas of its theoretical methodology. In AA Files no essay ever begins, "As Deleuze once said...", or "In exploring what Mies means by form, it seems pertinent to first ask what Latour means by the network". What I much prefer, instead, is writing reducible to the subject matter of its architectural object – to drawings, photographs, buildings, books or architects themselves – which I like to be described in all of their material, objecthood, before a text then progressively radiates out and evokes wider ideas and associations (these objects are what are

really in AA Files, or to put it another way, architecture is what is inside AA Files). This is fundamentally the opposite model to the standard academic way of writing, which begins with interpretation – which it misreads as theory – and then crudely applies this to a succession of unfortunate exemplars, before tautologically concluding with a reiteration of the introductory theorem. For me, the advantage of rejecting this approach is not only to induce writing that has a little more humility to it (writing that hides under cover of the object before unravelling it through association, appreciation or critique), but because it also shows that architecture does not need the appliqué of philosophy, because multiple ideas and allusions are already embedded within it.

More radically, in adopting such a model one soon discovers that among all of architecture's various objects is of course theory itself. It also goes almost without saying that this theory did not arrive in 1968 but was there from the very beginning, from the moment Vitruvius chose to define the discipline of architecture through "a systematic statement of rules or principles to be followed" – that is, the Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'theory'. To this originary moment we should then consider Alberti's distinction between theory and practice and recognise that any form of architectural production not in the form of building is therefore by definition a theory. This means that every movement, style or treatise therefore becomes a demonstration of theory, just as any school, any pedagogy, any exhibition and certainly any magazine is theory. AA Files, then, is both a work of architectural theory and a place for architectural theory. To call it anything else would be heretical.

It is also a place for other theories, not so much those concerned with the semantics and meanings of the discipline, but the rhetorical devices we use to describe and

give an account of this discipline – in other words, theories of writing. In AA Files this is demonstrated through an implicit allegiance to essayistic theorems, notably to that cast of essayists that begins with Montaigne ('inventor' of the essay) and then extends, historically, through Bacon, Milton, Johnson, Hazlitt, Lamb, Ruskin, de Quincy, Pater, Chesterton, Strachey, Woolf, Huxley, Benjamin, Adorno and Barthes.<sup>(2)</sup> Along the way it also doffs its cap to the architectural sub-branch of architectural essayists, to Summerson, Rowe, Colquhoun, Banham and Evans – all of whom understood that intelligence resides not simply in what you know, but the sonorous sentences you construct in describing this knowledge.

As a kind of brief intermission, or parlour game, one can identify this obvious felicity with writing in the opening sentences of essays written by these architectural historians. And so Summerson begins Georgian London with the wonderful instruction,

"I ask you to imagine yourself suspended a mile above London, and to imagine yourself staying up there for a period of time proportional to two centuries, with the years speeding past at one a second. The spectacle below you proceeds like those nature films which accelerate into immodest realism the slow drama of plant life. The life of a city, condensed so, would be dramatic" (1986, p. 17).

This, to me, seems like the perfect demonstration of a theory of beginnings; but so too is Colquhoun's more polemical, "Criticism occupies the no-man's-land between enthusiasm and doubt, between poetic sympathy and analysis" (2009, p. 140); or perhaps the single best opening sentence in all architectural writing, Evans' "Ordinary things contain the deepest mysteries" (1996, p. 56).

But the best demonstration of the idea that writing is its own architectural subject, I think, comes from Banham. This is how he begins his first, and perhaps most significant book, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*:

*“While a series of revolutionary gestures around 1910, largely connected with the Cubist and Futurist movements, were the main point of departure for the development of Modern architecture, there were also a number of particular predisposing causes that helped to guide the mainstream of development into the channels through which it flowed in the 1920s” (1988, p. 14).*

This is a spectacularly turgid opening sentence. But what makes Banham so loveable is that if we jump to the end of the book, we find that the last two lines are utterly wonderful:

*“The architect who proposes to run with technology knows now that he will be in fast company, and that, in order to keep up, he may have to emulate the Futurists and discard his whole cultural load, including the professional garments by which he is recognised as an architect. If, on the other hand, he decides not to do this, he may find that a technological culture has decided to go on without him” (1988, pp. 329-330).*

And so I would argue that what *Theory and Design* really is – much more than an architectural survey, much more even than a history – is a treatise on writing and Banham teaching himself how to write.

More compositionally, AA Files also advocates technical theories, not least to the theory of consecution advocated by Gordon Lish (fiction editor at Alfred Knopf

in New York in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, and a hero figure for all heavy-handed editors). As defined by one of Lish’s writers, Christine Schutt, this theory maintains that

*“each sentence is extruded from the previous sentence; look behind when you are writing, not ahead. Your obligation is to know your objects and to steadily, inexorably darken and deepen them. (...) Query the preceding sentence for what might most profitably be used in composing the next sentence. (...) The sentence that follows is always in response to the sentence that came before” (as cited in Lucarelli, 2013).*

The result of this consecution is flow, the seamless transitioning between paragraphs and the single most important quality of any good piece of writing – pace, meaning that essays of even many thousands of words can be read at lightning speed.

The wider transitioning between different articles in AA Files also abides by a certain theory of arbitrariness or association, and its resistance to any form of thematisation. I deliberately make AA Files free of any defining thematic, so that the only things that separate one issue from another is the issue number, the colour of the cover and, of course, the articles themselves. I do this partly as a way to set it apart from every other architectural publication – all drearily monogamous in their faithfulness to theme – but also because, as much as it is sold as a journal’s outward reflection of some known but previously uncategorised condition, the architectural theme seems to be an act of either editorial self-congratulation (I can see something you cannot), or cliché (architecture and theory). I prefer meaning to emerge out of juxtaposition, and for the value of a journal to reside not in what it tells us is important or necessary, but simply in the pleasures of its reading.

Other theories and theorems are also at work, like those of anonymity (there are no editorials in AA Files); like those of detachment (texts and images are typically separated, not integrated, in AA Files, allowing the graphics of the journal to wilfully over-indulge in both written and visual forms of communication); and like those that deal with the idea of biography (in AA Files, when architects speak, they do so not through the tired old lens of the project, but through the peculiarities and anecdotes of a life, which suddenly makes architecture appear as what we know it to be, human).

Indeed, perhaps the humanism of this human is the ultimate theoretical goal of AA Files, given that one of the oddities of our clichéd understanding of theory is that although it is typically reducible to a person (Marxian, Foucauldian, Deleuzian, etc.), it is otherwise inanimate. And so when people speak theoretically they tend to speak through insentient brands (through a dialectical materialism, through an order of things, or through a fold). But perhaps, in being more honest with ourselves about the innately theoretical nature of all architectural enquiry, we should be able to more readily discern the qualities we are aspiring to in the good theory, or better still, in the good theorist. And if forced to choose, my own theory of the good theorist would look to a sweetly compelling list of qualities compiled in 1955 by the English literary critic Lionel Trilling. In a rather obscure essay titled ‘Profession: Man of the World’ (1957), about a rather obscure nineteenth-century English poet called Richard Monckton Milnes, Trilling theorises on the value of Milnes before ultimately settling on a list on what he terms ‘An Irresistible Human Being’. In this list, I would argue, one can find not only the perfect theorist, but all the theory you need.

## “An Irresistible Human Being”

*Ambition**Beauty, quick response to**Boisterous high spirits**Charm of personality**Contrariness**Disinterestedness**Easy manner**Eccentricity and love of sensation**Emotionalism**Enthusiasm, capacity for**Flippancy**Friendship, genius for**Gaiety**Generosity**Genius, affinity to**Easy-going temperament**Good temper**Gossip, love of**Hospitable instincts**Humour, sense of**Imagination**Indolence**Kindheartedness and sympathetic helpfulness**Liberalism of mind**Magpie mind**Moodiness**Music, boredom with**Nervousness as a speaker**Notoriety, passion for**Open-mindedness**Originality of mind**Paradox, love of**Passionate love, incapacity for**Persistence**Pessimism**Pomposity in public speaking**Radicalism in literary judgment**Restlessness**Romanticism**Self-confidence**Sensitiveness and vulnerability**Sensuality**Sociability**Tact**Tactlessness**Tolerance**Touchiness**Toughness**Urbanism**Vivacity**Volatility**Volubility**Wit *NOTES

(1) For more on the evolving relationship between architectural history and theory see Ockman, 2017a, 2017b.

(2) For more on the historical lineage of essayists, and on architecture's own allegiance to the essay, see Weaver, 2016.

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