Observations on the State of Theory and Architecture

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ABSTRACT
Observations on the State of Theory and Architecture reviews movements in architecture theory over the last twenty years in order to speculate on the status of architectural theory today and its possible practice within, and alongside, architecture.

Twenty years ago, in 1997, the pages of theory-driven ANY *Magazine (aka* Architecture New York*) clearly suggested that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's* A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia *and their theories of striations and rhizomatic connections had captured a new imagination in architecture, surpassing in popularity the philosophical idea of deconstruction first theorized by Jacques Derrida and given a 'stamp of approval' in The Museum of Modern Art's 1988 exhibition 'Deconstructivist Architecture'. Also in 1997, K. Michael Hays, a professor of architectural history and theory at Harvard University, was putting the finishing touches on a collection of essays under the title*

Architecture Theory Since 1968 – *a book commissioned by Bernard Tschumi, then dean of architecture and urban planning at Columbia University.*

Two similarly focused volumes had preceded Hays's book: a collection of essays selected by Kate Nesbitt, an architect teaching design and theory at the University of Virginia, called Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965–1995, *published in 1996, and another collection edited by historian Joan Ockman, called* Architecture Culture 1943–1968: A Documentary Anthology, *which Tschumi had also commissioned, published in 1993. Tschumi, a well-known architect and theorist, had introduced Derrida and the architect Peter Eisenman in 1985 when he asked them to collaborate on a garden for Parc de la Villette in Paris, a project called 'Choral Works' that would not be built but eventually became a book of writings, drawings, and photos of models by Derrida, Eisenman and the American critic Jeffrey Kipnis.*

These three individuals would also participate in the theoretical framing of the Anyone Corporation's series of ten annual 'any' conferences on architecture that began in 1991, and which, in 1997, ran into anti-theory political correctness at the three-day multidisciplinary Anyhow meeting in Rotterdam. The mood was a restless one, caught in the diversifying arguments of postmodernism and, no doubt, a coming end-of-the-millennium anxiety.

So it was odd that at that moment, in a completely separate development, theory became a New York fashion brand, with a capital T*: Theory.*

Why would two fashion designers co-opt the word 'theory' to label a new line of "contemporary clothing for women and men?" Depending on who one talks with, Theory could be seen as either the beginning of the decline of theory in the discipline of architecture or the expansion of theory as a way of framing all creative practices. German literary critic and theorist Barbara Vinken believes the latter, and cites the importance of Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture, *coincidentally founded in 1997 and edited by Valerie Steele at the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, as an example of theory enriching fashion with meaning as well as form, and replacing what used to be drily called "the history of costume." What Vinken sees as fashion's movement away from traditional scholarship associated with history and toward more speculative theory seems, however, to be the reverse in architecture today.*

This was evident in late September this year, when the GTA at the ETH in Zurich convened a two-day 'celebration' of its 50th anniversary as an Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (a school separate from the ETH's School of Architecture) with an introspective conference on the current status of theory and history in architecture. GTA professor Ita Heinze-Greenberg

expressed her hopes for some joy and merriment in the proceedings, but the mood was far more somber. In a panel called 'Presence', for example, Joan Ockman pointedly, and rather depressingly, addressed the slash that elides history/theory in many academic departments today (though not in Zurich). In her 2000 article in the last issue of the American theory journal Assemblage, Ockman had argued, "There can be no history without theory. There can be no theory without history. History without theory is just one thing after the other. Theory without history is hubris"(p. 61).

This prior assessment would seem to make the forward slash not just the representation of 'and/or' but also the necessary glue between two ways of questioning the discipline of architecture. Yet the joining is not strong enough to withstand the move toward what Ockman now sees as various types of architectural research – 'advanced', 'applied' and so forth – that have overtaken what were once history/theory tracks, perhaps in keeping with what she identifies as a more 'managerial' way of thinking that has gained popularity in the disruptive practices of the new millennium.

As the editor of the journal Log: Observations on Architecture and the Contemporary City, I am often accused of, rather than acknowledged for, maintaining an American platform with space for architectural theory. In my pragmatist capitalist country, which prizes production over speculative thinking (better to speculate in the marketplace or New York Stock Exchange), theory is seen as having little value outside of comparative literature departments in certain universities. The question is: What does theory do?

For example, keeping ANY magazine alive in the 1990s – a tabloid that not only supported but also activated architectural theory through public conferences and thematic issues – was largely possible because of corporate support from Japan, Korea and Germany[1]– countries where speculative thinking is more highly regarded; American corporations declined to contribute to the project because theory produced nothing marketable.

The question of 'doing' is also at the heart of the critique of theory associated with architectural practice. What or how does theory contribute to practice? What problems does it solve? I would argue that in questioning and reframing presumed truths in architecture, theory is the essence, or scaffold, of the discipline. Theory supplements architecture, makes it richer, more culturally relevant, in ways that go unnoticed precisely because the practice of theory and the practice of design – which both entail speculation – are intertwined.

In Zurich, in the small breakfast room of the charming Hotel Florhof, it was a complete surprise to encounter Anselm Haverkamp, a professor emeritus of literature and philosophy at New York University. In 1996, Haverkamp guest-edited an issue of ANY called "Memory, Inc.: Return of Repressed Architectural Memory." Memory, of course, is not just a mental construct. It is also deeply embedded in architecture both as a reflection of the history of the discipline and as a cultural artifact or symbol: think of Adolf Loos's edict that architecture is monument and graves – that is, constructions of memory. In ANY, Haverkamp wrote about ghost machines.

Over soft-boiled eggs and toast, I told Haverkamp about the GTA conference. He said he had just published a new book, Productive Digression: Practicing Theory (a promising title for production and practice). And he had comforting words for those who, like me, value theory: "Theory underlies everything, whether it is acknowledged or not". But perhaps even more important, Haverkamp also said, "Theory requires a vision. (…) Theory doesn't exist as such; it has to be practiced." If practicing theory can be seen as theory's 'doing,' the literary theorist Jonathan Culler may have suggested a methodology twenty years ago (again, in 1997) in the first chapter of his book Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction. "Raising follow-up questions," Culler writes, that is, interrogating speculative propositions such as Derrida's, is a "way of stepping into 'theory' and practicing it"(p. 13). Vision, questioning, and speculation again align the practices of theory and architecture.

A vision of theory and the practice of recycling are at the root of a recent Italian research project called "Re-Cycle Italy: New Life Cycles for Architecture and Infrastructure of City and Landscape." In the final GTA event, a panel simply titled Theory, I referred to the project's 'final chapter,' a book called Recycled Theory: Dizionario illustrato / Illustrated Dictionary, published last year by Quodlibet. The book's editors, Sara Marini and Giovanni Corbellini, write: "Usually we recycle things, objects, spaces, but it is still more usual to return [to] principles, positions and theories in order to review them, put them in order, put them back into circulation, rewrite, and often override them" (2016, p. 18). The authors continue:

"Albeit always under scrutiny for being too uncertain and autonomous to promise immediate economic efficiency, theory is the privileged tool to navigate a complex, changing landscape. (…) Recycling proposes a critical and purposeful attitude at the same time. (…) [It] does not belong to the vocabulary of architecture, but is derived from those of economics, industrial production and ecology, combining systemic issues and a conception of life, offsetting the problem of scale and linking the analysis of existing processes with their radical revision" (2016, p. 19).

This purposeful marriage of recycling and theory can perhaps be seen as "stepping into 'theory' and practicing it." The entries in the dictionary itself range from 'alphabet' and 'amnesia' to 'youth' and 'zone.' In the entry for 'theory,' written by Federico Soriano, the "follow-up questions" are disguised as translations:

"All the theories have been already written. Outlined. Trumpeted. Read. Overcome. Outdated. We cannot write new texts. (…) Theories will not be the texts or the words anymore, but their interpretations and translations. Translating is appropriating again, it is writing, inventing. Projecting anew" (2016, pp. 610–611).

In this particular proposition, recycling theory appears more akin to revising history. Will this practice lead to 'new life cycles' for architecture and landscape? Will recycling, or translating, fragments of 'old' theory accommodate a new generation's pivot to social activism and environmental action, issues now found not only in the pages of Teen Vogue *(at least until the magazine was* shut down in early November), but also in Alejandro Aravena's 'Reporting from the Front' exhibition at the 15th Venice International Biennale last year? (Social activism was de rigueur in Venice; theory, largely absent).*

The most recent and powerful vision and speculation to change the global landscape and how we occupy it did not come from architecture but from Silicon Valley: from Steve Jobs's theory of individual freedom and opportunity made possible by a carefully designed personal computer to Mark Zuckerberg's vision of Facebook as providing networked social life on the Internet. Putting their theories into practice, Jobs and Zuckerberg created value in the marketplace and changed human lives. Architecture theory has not achieved that status (partly because of architects who denigrate its practice). Rem Koolhaas's theories of bigness (1995) and junkspace (2000), for example, both keen observations of contemporary culture and building, have neither directly affected architectural production nor attracted clients. Rather, climate change, a theory supported by scientific research, is impacting architectural design and production and, yes, architectural research.

At the GTA conference in Zurich, the architect Jacques Herzog, who is not a fan of architecture theory – and who in 2000, at the last Any conference, Anything, in New York City, clearly felt a need to reference theory (Hans Gadamer) as he talked about the phenomenon of the wood floors in the new Tate Modern Museum – argued before an overflow audience that buildings have a reality beyond the text; that they are understood through experience. Herzog:

"Neither Rossi's nor Venturi's theoretical message was manifested in relevant, compelling built work. They left no legacy of a 'physical architectural shrine' that would influence and inspire future generations. Architecture does not speak in words; it speaks physically. All theory must be inherent so that you feel it, consciously or unconsciously" (Eisenman, Forster, Herzog, & Ursprung, 2017).

In other words, Herzog, whom one would never call a writer like Aldo Rossi or Robert Venturi, produces work according to a theory of experience. He may argue that texts that supplement architecture are superfluous, but he himself clearly has ideas about creating experience through architecture — that is, he practices *a theory of architecture.*

When Ockman, Nesbitt, and Hays assembled their respective anthologies of architectural theory, it could be argued that they were seeking to reconcile how architecture theory had arrived at that moment in the 1990s, that moment before research and postcriticality – that is, the rejection of judgment – took over the conversation. At the same time, architecture plunged headlong into computation and digital production, becoming addicted to the new speed of processing information that threatens to dismiss the slower space of speculation and the text – what I call the slow, contemplative space of the page in printed journals like Log. *The good news may be that many young architects who consider themselves part of a 'postdigital' generation are turning away from software-driven design and toward history for architectural references, an act of looking back that requires slowing down (a version, perhaps, of Walter Benjamin's angel*

of history blowing backward into the future). The directors of the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, architects Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee, of Los Angeles, explicitly use history as a touchstone in their call for large models of new "Chicago Tribune towers" and for reappraisals of famous architectural interiors.

*In the catalogue entitled after the exhibition 'Make New History', the art historian Philip Ursprung (2017) captures a 21st Century mood with his poignant essay "*Melancholia – Write New Theory.*" Calling architecture theory "a phantom that haunts us and cannot find rest," Ursprung (who is director of the GTA) asks, "Can melancholy as a concept be made fruitful in writing new theory?" The melancholy he describes clearly both stems from and permeates the current European situation and the unknown future economic stability of a post-Brexit EU. For those who celebrate cross-cultural exchanges in a globalized world, the retrenching of nationalist politics is also cause for degrees of melancholy. What architectural theory can withstand these political and economic pressures if theory is not perceived as a productive practice?*

At the same time, one could argue that architecture has no centre today because there is no dominant architectural theory, only the marketplace. If meeting the demands of consumption has overtaken architecture, splitting it into niche market practices that produce meaningless flamboyant objects, then the idea of memory in architecture, of architecture as monuments and graves, is truly a ghost of the past.

Ursprung suggests an answer to his question about melancholy at the end of his essay, where he writes:

"As I see it, melancholy refers to the alternation of action and passivity, performance and stasis. It stands for a theory of the present, one that allows us to change an opinion and revise its judgments, to speculate, follow a path obsessively, and then change direction again. It is characterized by ambiguity and by internal contradictions. (...) It cannot be reduced to one meaning. It is about latency and therefore contains the potential of a new beginning" (2017, p. 35)

What is the mood today? Where is the potential for new beginnings? Twenty years after the branding of theory, the young models posing in Theory's contemporary clothing exude a certain petulance. But I like to think of their expression as a mask that conceals a passion for ideas, for envisioning Haverkamp's new practices and productive digressions and Ursprung's broad definition of melancholy. For keep in mind the manifold meanings not only of melancholy but also of the fashion company's slogan: "In Theory, anything is possible." m

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