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The School of Architectural Scandals

The question of the current state of "history/theory" is, of course, now a fully historiographic issue. One has to remember that there was no such thing as "history/theory" as a specialized discipline prior to the late 1970. There was, of course, a field called architecture history, but it was still rather tightly associated with art history. As to the history courses taught in schools of architecture after WWII, these were mostly taught in a rather ad hoc way and often allied with studio. What "theory" meant in the pre-1970s days was mostly an informal amalgam of ideas associated with architecture's long association with proportion – with Rudolf Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* from 1949 being one of the key readings – or with function – as in Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941). What the "history/theory" moment of the 1980s accomplished was to bring these strands to a close while hoping also to renew the starting point of conversations about history and theory within the architectural curriculum. In this it largely succeeded with the emergence of PhD programs that increased their legitimacy, especially in tenure-track-oriented institutions.

All this means is that today, one can no longer think of history/theory as outside of the academic imaginaries of the history of its own formation. Unfortunately, the history of "history/theory" is not really prepared to self-reflect. With that in mind, I propose two initial observations:1) the "theory" part of history/theory was not one thing, but several, and 2) that the "theory moment," if I can call it that, had a relatively short shelf-life. In the name of a false sense of clarity, these two quite simplistic observations can be expanded into a few hypotheses. Each hypothesis needs serious expansion, or at least a lot more explanation, but on the whole, they are an attempt to sketch out some ideas in the fuzzy space of architecture's disciplinary self-reflection.

1.

In the 1970s, theory, if we think of it at the level of what is sometimes called "critical theory," had a traditionally leftist focus on labor, or at least on something that falls under the rubric of "the social."[1] While labor was and remains an important issue, critical theory – with its residual fantasy of an avant-garde – did not transition well into a critique of neoliberalism, since it became increasingly uncertain where exactly "labor" was to be found. This deficiency was picked up by the post-criticalists who, in essence, wanted to get back to the "work" of designing without the guilt of accusatory complicity.

2.

Theory, if we think of it at the level of an intellectual tradition that involved the likes of Derrida, Heidegger, Deleuze, and Foucault, was a mind-set that self-consciously tried to replace the "theory" that came out modernist intellectual formations. It had a presumption that the intellectual energy spent on mastering a difficult literature – mostly in translation – would enrich architectural discourse and trickle its way down into practice. Most of this was built around the idea of *delaying* access to the architectural object. Think of Stanford Anderson's interest in Karl Popper; Peter Eisenman's Wittgensteinian "games"; Alberto Perez-Gomes's phenomenology; or Anthony Vidler's interest in the Enlightenment. It was hoped that architecture could be taken out of the deadening nexus of modernism and professionalism and be given a "thicker" disciplinary identity. Most people in this "genre" of theory were, like myself, to a large degree self-taught. There were no theory courses. Discussions took place in coffee shops or around a desk out of ear-shot of the studio teachers who mostly had no idea what was being discussed. The great thrust of all of this was that one should come to architecture not knowing what it was. Most architecture schools teach architecture from day one as if the architectural object was – and is – knowable. After all, what architecture school does not have a design studio in its first semester, making every student feel like they could be Frank Gehry? The trouble was that the epistemology of delayed gratification could find its resonance in advanced history/theory work (i.e. PhD work), but not in the normative world of the studio. Furthermore, in order to implement such an intellectual turn – to make it into a disciplinary staple as opposed to an autodidactic horizon – one would need not just teachers well versed in post-Enlightenment philosophy, but also a good amount of classroom time to write, think, and discuss. The former were in short supply, and as to the latter, with the arrival of computation, "intellectually-oriented" classes became increasingly impossible to justify in the curriculum. Furthermore, and importantly, with the arrival of the globalized student population in American universities, it became increasingly unclear how this Eurocentric reading list dealing with issues from a pre-globalization era could related to the wide range of issues coming from the global realities.

3.

Theory, if we think of it at the level of semiotics (from Saussure to Jencks et al.), promised to expand the cultural resonances of architecture. For some people, the book *Meaning in Architecture* by Jencks and Baird (1970) was nothing short of a bible. Finally, a book to replace the dreaded *Space, Time and Architecture*! But the semiotic approach evaporated away. Like the intellectualist stand, it proved to be too difficult to teach. Maybe we also were too embarrassed by what architecture was saying, or more likely not able to say.

4.

Theory, if we think of it at the level of phenomenology, promised to enliven the inner spirit of the designer. In the 1970s and well into the 1980s, quoting Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Gadamer was a clear indication of a writer's allegiance. In the US, it even appealed to a repressed libertarian strand of individualism. Mostly, however, it promised a disguised spirituality residing not in humans alone but in materials, or even, more importantly, in joinery, in that proverbial tectonic. Its general drift in the domain of architecture was in opposition to a previous generation of leftist, community-active practitioners, many of whom left architecture altogether for departments in city planning. Nonetheless, phenomenology has persisted, even though its grip on the architectural imaginary has weakened considerably, overcome largely by the "digital turn."

5.

Theory, if we think of it as the post-colonial critique of Eurocentrism, tried to open up an awareness that history – and its critical role in defining the "consciousness of the young student." Here, we are talking mostly about the history side of "history/theory." Though it became fashionable for my generation to try to purge all things Eurocentric, especially in survey courses, the critique largely failed. Today, out of the around 120 or so architecture schools in the US, one half – if they teach history at all – still teach the old curriculum from pyramids onward. Architectural history teaching in schools of architecture is mostly an embarrassment. In Europe, the situation is not much better, given its awkward self-affiliation with Eurocentrism – so hardly a peep from them.

6.

Theory – in whatever formation – could only barely deal with the problem of global warming. The emergence of sustainability in the 1980s reflected this, defining an alternative disciplinary horizon allied, correctly or not, with ethics, management theory, and building technology. In the last decade or so, the term Anthropocene, post-Holocene and post-human have come into vogue, but still with little traction on the design world.

7.

Theory – in whatever formation – failed to address the rise of nationalism in the post-colonial context. It is astonishing how little attention the discipline-constructing realities of nationalism attracted. More national museums were created in the last thirty years than existed in the previous hundred. They all need curators and book venues, not to mention architectural monuments to salivate over. In China, Eurocentrism was replaced by Sinocentrism. And this is true in many countries. In India, regulations from the 1980s stated that 50% of books used in architectural curricula have to have the word "Indian" in the title. In a complex, global world, is it really a victory when Eurocentrism is replaced by nation-centrism?

8.

Theory – in whatever formation – could not cope well in the expanded field of "historical architecture." A good part of it was embraced by a new discipline – preservation – yet this division was a disciplinary disaster. Beginning in the 1980s, people could travel to places that were only seen in textbooks. Distant places that I saw in grainy black and white photos in my history classes in the mid 1970s are now visited by millions of people a year. In a sense, the "worldliness" of architecture's past overwhelmed architecture's epistemological systems. Scholarship is a necessarily slow-moving reality and, still today, one can say that the discipline of architectural history is behind the times in working through its vast amounts of material. In the meantime, no one knows how to teach architectural history, and there were few "theoretical" takes, especially since most of the effort at "theory" now tries to address issues in the contemporary world, a world often conveniently stripped of historical and cultural backgrounds. We have moved from modern architecture to environmental architecture, which serves to bring modern architecture towards its teleological end. In much of the world, older buildings are taught by preservationists. This has led to the alliance of architectural history in many places with cultural nationalism that places architecture at the apex of national imaginaries, in direct alliance with and support of both UNESCO and tourist industries.

9.

Theory – in whatever formation – passively, though in some cases actively promoted the emergence of Modernist Majoritarianism. Most schools of architecture came to emphasize the history of modernism as part of its core epistemological project. The bookstore of the AA in London is symptomatic. When I last visited it last year, there was not a single book dealing with a subject prior to the Werkbund. And even the idea that Modernism begins with the Werkbund is now itself a rather antiquated position. Most survey courses in the US are now modern-heavy, and most of the PhDs that are produced are Modernist. The field of Renaissance architecture, for example, once considered foundational, all but died out in the US. The "disciplining" of the "Modern Movement" is not a bad thing, but in a tight curriculum, breadth is being sacrificed. Fortunately, we no longer talk about Modernism, but about Global Modernism. The downside is that colonialism, its history, theory, and geopolitical legacies tend to disappear, since that would bring us back to the fifteenth century. In this context, theory failed to critique the important institutional changes *within* the world of history/theory, the most important being the split between Modernism and Tradition, and now, more recently, Modernism and Pre-modernism. Pre-modernism began to emerge as a field in the 1980s and has had toxic impact on architectural history and theory, but is rarely addressed. In Seoul, the Leeum Museum is exemplary of this historiographic disaster. One museum for "Traditional Korean Art" and another for "Modern Art."

10.

Theory – in whatever formation – failed to adequately address the digital until it was too late. The only critique came from a conservative camp that lamented the digital for the supposed Real. The irony is that the old humanist-optimism of the 1950s morphed into techno-optimism. Women were difficult to find in this new field. There were various levels of complaining and hand-wringing, but the larger digital turn was created and "theorized" for far too long by those who were invested in its success. It is now an entrenched voice in the field, promising a techno-visualist, post-labor utopia that exports theoretical questions about society to the apologists of Neoliberalism.

11.

Theory – in whatever formation – failed to deal with the humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century and still struggles with issues of violence and trauma. Mostly, efforts on this front are to be found in planning departments, most of whom are allied with architecture only as a matter of academic convenience.

If we now return to the phrase that was posed to us for discussion, that "there is no theoretical framework, no grand narrative, no

normative system of values that offers architects orientation today as there might have been fifty years ago," I would argue that we need to recognize that *normative* theoretical systems do exist, they are just not called history/theory.[2] They go by other names such as preservation, digital architecture, modern architecture, sustainability, pre-modernism, etc. In other words, the period between the 1970s and today saw huge disciplinary transformations that competed for space within the narrow confines of academe and that did not demand a particularly high level of theoricity, or for that matter historicity. The entire issue is usually met with awkward silence, since any attempt to change or modify this new normative fights against its establishmentarian ideology.

It is not that there are no scholars and intellectuals who tackle the profound issues of our day, even within the fields mentioned, but they are few and far in between, and they are most certainly not part of the normative realities that govern architectural discourse and education. It is also not that the normative disciplines are in any way inadequate to the task. Instead, I am simply arguing that the very success of the last decades is now coming to haunt the system, creating immobile boundaries that mitigate against interdisciplinarity. Advanced scholars who now work in the domain of "history/theory" do indeed often bridge into the realm of political science, anthropology, colonial studies, philosophy, geography, and other disciplines in the humanities. But whereas these other fields have made strong and important inroads into developing critical positions, architecture as an educational platform has in the last decades moved in the opposite direction, cleaning out its curriculum from disciplinary entanglements, placing the entire weight of that operation on the narrow ledge of "history/theory."

Within the theory moment in the 1970s and early 1980s – and it was a moment, certainly not a movement – it was hoped that the architecture school, in the broadest sense, could become a site where a particular type of creative and intellectual energy could be formed. There were some successes for sure, but we were all too optimistic. There were too few players anda large array of issues – geopolitical in scale – quickly overwhelmed the system. It is now obvious that architectural schools – front and center to some of the leading geo-political issues of the day – are institutionally and intellectually underequipped to deal with the world of the twenty-first century.

To make matters worse, many elite schools decided to follow the neoliberal model of labor by tenuring only a few people and farming out the rest of its curriculum to hired guns who had little vested interest in – and no power to – transform the curriculum. This meant that entrenched attitudes prevailed and that young blood remained at the inconsequential periphery. It was a system that produced a fake sense of vibrancy around the supposedly fast-moving field of contemporary architecture. The negative consequence was that the complex intellectual issues of the discipline had no ground on which to sustain themselves apart from a token professor with a PhD in the history of modern architecture. No wonder theory seems to be collapsing, leaving the burden of critique in the ever-optimistic realm of something now know blandly as "contemporary architecture."

So, maybe we should be worried less about its presumed death of history/theory than about the broader health of architectural education. Architecture schools today can still produce stuff that is called "architecture," and they can easily go through the motions of teaching "history" and "theory," but any certainty around the meaning of the word "architecture" is lost. Is it a building by KPF? Is the rebuilt Parthenon? Is a single course called "Architectural Theory," placed arbitrarily in an otherwise jammed curriculum even remotely adequate to the title? Maybe they are all just symptoms of a type of activity that is more scandal than architecture.

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1
The term “critical theory” is so terminologically messy that one shudders to even evoke it. Both critics and defenders sometimes seem to think that all “theory” is – or was – critical theory, which doubly forecloses a conversation.

2
Nick Axel, Maarten Delbeke, Ita Heinze-Greenberg, Nikolaus Hirsch, Laurent Stalder, Philip Ursprung, and Anton Vidokle, "Editorial," *History/Theory* (e-flux Architecture, October 24, 2017), □.