

Theory in Context

This essay was written for the final issue of Assemblage (41) and is reproduced here courtesy of MIT Press.

JOAN OCKMAN
Columbia University

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.

The last three decades saw an unprecedented expansion of theoretical discourse in architecture. If *Oppositions* served to introduce theoretical sophistication into American architecture, *Assemblage* has been an effective and important instrument of its naturalization. Yet Michael Hays' claim in his book *Architecture Theory since 1968* that architecture theory has by now "all but subsumed" architecture culture remains mystifying to me. If architectural theory is not a form of cultural production, what is it? While the evolution from *Oppositions* to *Assemblage* indeed exemplifies the ascendancy of "Theory" to an almost autonomous discipline, its production has tended to be carried out by many of its foremost practitioners defensively or in a self-congratulatory mode. Rarely have its ideological underpinnings and reception been interrogated and historicized. In this respect the "Theory" phenomenon appears more a reflection of the recent situation than a critical intervention in it. In other words, the question has yet to be posed: why the proliferation of architectural theory at this juncture? And what have its consequences been?

Andreas Huyssen suggests (in *After the Great Divide*) that poststructuralism, although generally associated with postmodernism, in many ways constitutes a belated form of avant-garde modernism—"the revenant of modernism in the guise of theory"—even if it is distinguished from its 1920s progenitor by an acute awareness of the latter's limitations and failures. From this perspective, the rise and fall of modernism, understood as a response to the contents of modernity, may be seen to bracket the 20th century. It is hardly surprising that this trajectory should have induced a deep sense of anxiety and ungroundedness in its latter-day protagonists, who, by the early 1970s, would find themselves polarized ideologically between nihilism and exorcism. This led Manfredo Tafuri to read the white architecture of the New York Five and the neorationalism of the Italian *Tendenza* as manifestations of an "architecture dans le boudoir," a last-ditch attempt to construct myths of architecture's potency and autonomy

in order to ward off the anguish provoked by its increasingly apparent status as a "negligible object" and their own marginality. One may also read the production of theory in the ensuing decades as "theory in the boudoir." The elevation of theory to an independent, often arcane field of expertise, and the dalliance between architecture and philosophy at a moment when architecture was increasingly being annexed by a culture of consumption, spectacle, and entertainment, may likewise be seen as symptomatic of modernism's end-game.

Beyond this characteristically Tafurian diagnosis, however, it is also clear that the production of theory over the last three decades has reflected a profound cultural transformation. Paradigm shifts, as Thomas Kuhn elaborated in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, are marked by periods of intellectual instability, when old explanations no longer suffice to account for new circumstances. At such moments, experimental, often rival theories tend to proliferate, with both destructive and constructive consequences. This model of intellectual change (which has nothing to do with any progress toward truth) accords with a reading of postmodernism as a response to the new contents of "postmodernity." Certainly the rise of the "theory industry" cannot be understood apart from the global forces of commodification affecting architecture and culture generally today, which are quantitatively and qualitatively different from the older dynamics of modernity. In this context, it is hardly surprising that the recent theory explosion, or implosion, has led to pronouncements of "the theory death of architecture." As a by-product, a certain exhaustion or impatience with an often ponderous and obscurantist theoretical discourse may be sensed.

At the least, the institutionalization of "Theory" as a system within the academy and the media, with its own aura, stars, and fashions, has provoked an urgent need for deconstruction. A comparable situation occurred two decades ago in literary studies. I am thinking of the polemics that surrounded Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels's essay "Against Theory," in which they "scandalously" rejected the entire practice of literary theory from an antifoundational, Neopragmatist position. As W.J.T. Mitchell commented at the time,

“Given the dominance of theory in contemporary literary study, it was inevitable that someone would issue a challenge to it.... ‘Against Theory’ may be seen as an inevitable dialectical moment within theoretical discourse, the moment when theory’s constructive, positive tendency generates its own negation.”

I think that after an excess of architectural theory we are now in for a “correction” of this sort. A number of recent architectural practices, from Herzog & de Meuron to Frank Gehry, already insist on their own antitheoretical or atheoretical *modus operandi*, for better or worse. In the intellectual arena, the recourse to theories of sensation, everydayness, or, say, analyses of shopping, is likewise indicative of a desire to reconnect architectural thought with the immediate, perceptual, matter-of-fact world. But the case for a rigorous historicization of architectural theory, on the one hand, and, on the other, a critical theory of architectural practice is, in my view, unarguable. With respect to the latter, suffice it to say that the issue is not how to instrumentalize theory—that is, how to make theory operative or practical—but rather, as the Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey emphasized, how to make praxis intelligent, how to infuse the making of architecture with a sense of its own contemporaneity and social consequences. With respect to the relation between theory and history, another statement by

Dewey, from *Philosophy and Civilization* written 70 years ago, has never seemed more timely. Just replace philosophy with theory:

“...Philosophy, like politics, literature, and the plastic arts, is itself a phenomenon of human culture. Its connection with social history, with civilization, is intrinsic. There is current among those who philosophize the conviction that, while past thinkers have reflected in their systems the conditions and perplexities of their own day, present-day philosophy in general, and one’s own philosophy in particular, is emancipated from the influence of that complex of institutions which forms culture. Bacon, Descartes, Kant, each thought with fervor that he was founding philosophy anew because he was placing it securely upon an exclusive intellectual basis, exclusive, that is, of everything but intellect. The movement of time has revealed the illusion; it exhibits as the work of philosophy the old and ever new undertaking of adjusting that body of traditions which constitute the actual mind of man to scientific tendencies and political aspirations which are novel and incompatible with received authorities. Philosophers are parts of history, caught in its movement; creators perhaps in some measure of its future, but also assuredly creatures of its past.”