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# THEORY IN CONTEXT

Moderators: Christine Macy, Dalhousie University

**Key Panelist:**

JOAN OCKMAN  
Columbia University

**Panelists:**

GIA DASKALAKIS  
Washington University in St. Louis

JOSÉ GAMEZ  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

MARK LINDER  
Syracuse University

PATRICIA MEEHAN  
University of Arkansas

## Session Summary

CHRISTINE MACY

Dalhousie University

In her text written for the final issue of *Assemblage*, Joan Ockman questions the utility of the recent “theory explosion” in architectural discussions. Is it “symptomatic of modernism’s end game” she asks, or must the theory industry be seen as a part of the ever-increasing “commodification affecting architecture and culture generally today”? She proposes that the architectural discipline is ready for a more judicious inquiry into the utility of theory itself. Turning to the Pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey, she proposes an investigation into how the practice of architecture can be more aware of its present condition and its real consequences. The four panelists took up various aspects of Ockman’s critique — exploring the foundations of critical practice, criticizing its theorizing of publics, and exploring its effects on audiences and users.

Gia Daskalakis reminds us that the avant-garde in the twentieth century has been inextricably bound up with the notion of crisis: a criticism of basic assumptions and values, a rethinking of norm and convention. Today, she says, “with the fragmentation of knowledge, the dispersal of values and the disappearance of ideas, it no longer seems possible to construct a universal or absolute system for ... aesthetic production, experience or practice.” Questioning the premise that theory can offer a foundation for practice, she suggests that architects today must “think our world” from the “impossibility of a common ground”, turning instead to experimental, provisional and particular designs that aim not for intellectual understanding but “experimentation, intensity and resonance.”

Jose Gamez begins by stating that architectural theory is produced within powerful institutions and reflects the biases and interests of those institutions. He acknowledges recent attempts by theoretically-oriented architectural journals to criticize “the architectural center’s role in the ... maintenance of structures of

marginalization,” yet he points out that even these continue to reduce, historicize or in other ways marginalize the politics of race in the built environment. He proposes that by recognizing “architectures of the everyday” — places and spaces that are informally produced and appropriated — “theory may be broadened and its significance to historically marginalized communities may be strengthened.”

Mark Linder reminds us that pragmatism’s appeal has long been its critical stance towards autonomous theorizing. He finds that pragmatism may hold a broader appeal for architects, because it insists “that theoretical work remain tangible and that it address ordinary problems.” In architectural terms, this leads him to ask “What does the architect do? and then: What are the consequences?” He proposes that the architects Frank Gehry and Herzog & de Meuron acknowledge the “qualitative background” and “ordinary experience” of architecture, but that the theoretical tack of these architects has remained unacknowledged as it derives from outside the discipline of architecture, in particular the “literalist” techniques of 1960s minimalist art.

Patricia Meehan takes a step back to explore the increasingly fragmented nature of architectural education, a process she sees as inextricably tied up with modernization itself. Using the work of Johan Fornas, she proposes that “reflexive dialogue is necessary, if the tension between making and thinking” is to contribute to a more productive disciplinary discourse. She argues that we must confront the relationship between institutions and daily lives, she values resistance and identity politics as valuable cultural processes, and proposes that art and architectural practices offer a particularly effective means for “people to invent their own imagined worlds” and “communicate with others in interpretive communities.”