

## Re-setting the Critical Project

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The notion of “critical architecture” has gone in recent years through some thorough questioning by a series of critics (including Robert Somol, Sarah Whiting, Sylvia Lavin, Stan Allen, and, especially, Michael Speaks) who challenged the particular declination of it that K. Michael Hays gave in his 1984 seminal essay by the same title. These authors have argued, in various ways and from different points of view, that “theory” is an obsolete support for the practice of architecture. Speaks, actually, went as far as to say that “[theory] is not just irrelevant but was and continues to be an impediment to the development of a culture of innovation in architecture.” (Speaks 2005, 74).

Hays’ interest in Manfredo Tafuri’s work and his association with Peter Eisenman (therefore with the Eisenman-sponsored publications of Tafuri’s essays through *Oppositions*) have even suggested a Tafurian lineage for “critical architecture”, and have offered *de facto* a honorary citizenship to Eisenman’s projects and theories to that same lineage. Thus, a critique to Hays became a critique to Eisenman, and therefore to Tafuri.

These authors (who, however, had and have very little in common) have been superficially gathered in a monolithic notion of “Theory”, within the American discourse in architecture, and the myth was thus created and nurtured.

True to Tafuri’s method, on the other hand, we need to question such a myth. Not just as a matter of critical exegesis, but in the best interest of architecture. Liberated from this myth, architecture will be able to reset its epistemological paradigm,

redefine its cultural project, gain strength (not impediments) from a critical stance by its practitioners and thinkers, and move forward to recapture a critical role within the on-going transformations of our cultures and societies.

### THE MYTH OF THEORY

Hays’ theory of critical architecture, tested on Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as a case-study, has little to do with Tafuri’s theory, except for borrowing the critical metaphor of “silence” that Tafuri had already used to interpret Mies. Paraphrasing Austrian *fin-de-siecle* critic and philosopher Karl Kraus, Tafuri saw Mies, before the chaos of the contemporary metropolis, especially at the Seagram’s building, “as stepping back and remaining silent.”<sup>1</sup>

Tafuri was an historian and as such he chose to be (Leach 2007) and wanted to remain and work. Reflecting on how best to pursue his “historical project” was his scholarly agenda, as he tested such a “project” and developed it through his research. His criticism was geared at unearthing and interpreting the often hidden ideologies behind works and projects of architecture. Giving advice to architects on how to (think and) practice was not his goal, nor, in his view, should have been the goal of any critic/historian. In fact, one of his early targets was precisely the so-called “operative criticism” (namely Nikolaus Pevsner and Bruno Zevi), who used the celebratory critique of historical precedents as a way to advocate a particular approach to architecture (the Modern Movement in Pevsner’s case and “organic architecture” in Zevi’s case). Or, more broadly, to pursue a particular political agen-

da: "History is not an instrument of politics. History is history." (Tafuri 1992, 31). Thus, for Hays (or for other critics to attribute to Hays) to suggest his notion of "critical architecture" as a way to approach the practice, it meant being completely anti-tafurian.

Eisenman's research (erroneously considered in America "the" theory) has in turn little to do with Mies, who exercised his resistance to late capitalism, governing the transformations of the American city, yes through "silence", but also by "doing" (as an architect). Eisenman, on the other hand, exercised his "resistance" by simply retreating within the realm of purely speculative theory, while letting that resistance, once he moved in earnest into the realm of practice, actually evaporate.

In addition, Eisenman's architecture (or, as Tafuri would have put it, "his ideology") cannot possibly complement Tafuri's discourse, to compose a supposed "Theory", Eisenman's architecture being one of the objects of Tafuri's analysis.

Tafuri himself could have not distanced himself more clearly from Eisenman:

"The way, for architecture, is not then the retreat into the silent night of pure form, relating only to itself, nor that of charging itself with allusive representations and showing with guilty blindness an utter alienation mistaken for independence. Reference to the specificity of the basic problems of the architectural discipline will be useful only if it is then able to invest the global nature of the planning process, precisely identifying the margins of meaning of the discourse on language." (Tafuri 1980, 232)

To summarize in its essential terms a rather articulated and complex discourse, Hays made a case for "critical architecture" using Mies as a testing ground. According to Hays, Mies showed a critical stance: therefore an example of a possible "critical architecture", one that does not simply accept the status quo, nor celebrates it.

However, while Hays and Tafuri used a similar metaphor (silence) to interpret Mies, their intentions were quite different. Tafuri never spoke of "critical architecture" per se'. He always emphasized very clearly the difference of tools, objectives and *ethos* of the critic/historian and those of the architect. The account of the very moment of his own personal decision about which line of pursuit to choose



Figure 1: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Seagram Building, New York, 1958

adds a personal touch to a question on which he later elaborated quite often. <sup>2</sup>

In addition, such a notion of "Theory" (quite limited actually to the American debate) has been challenged in the last decades by many other authors from various cultural contexts. As George Baird has already noted, "Eisenman and Hays do not exhaust the modalities of 'criticality' that have had influence in recent years." (Baird 2004, 17).

### WHICH "PROJECTIVITY"?

Even though Tafuri may not then be the grandfather of "critical architecture", as we tried to argue, his influence on many architects (whom he nonetheless critiqued) has resulted in the cumbersome myth of "Theory", which has proved to be ineffective, Speaks and others would argue. Such "Theory" has shown its self-imposed limits. The only way for architecture to move forward and take advantage of the new opportunities of our time would be to free itself from the burden of theoretical reflections.

Somol and Whiting argued for a "projective practice", as opposed to a "critical practice", one which is reflective, representational and narrative" (Somol and Whiting 2002, 77). "Projective practice" is a more pragmatic, effectual, empirical approach, more attuned with the culture of our time. The rapidly expanding potentialities offered by new materials, new technologies, and new research/lab capabilities, would further lend, adds Speaks, to such a projective character of the discipline/practice: "Making becomes knowledge or intelligent creation. In this way, thinking and doing, design and fabrication, prototype and final design become blurred, interactive, and part of nonlinear means of innovation." (Speaks 2005, 75)

Firstly, whereas the term "critical" (whether or not we agree with Hays' thesis) adds a quality to architecture, the term "projective" really speaks of architecture's inherent nature, by reiterating its constituent character. In other words, isn't the term "projective", applied to architecture, theoretically redundant? How can architecture not being projective?

By recalling Tafuri's demarcation of tools, tasks and media between the critic/historian and the architect, Andrew Leach observes how "historiography is essentially analytical, while architecture is fundamentally projective." (Leach 2007, 125).

Different is the meaning of "projective theory", like the line of research pursued by the group at the Berlage Institute led by Roemer van Toorn<sup>3</sup>, which is a theoretical reflection that wants to remain engaged with the practice of the project of architecture, as opposed to a theory that wants to build its own discourse on purely speculative terms (as it could be Tafuri's "historical project" or Eisenman's theory – which are two very different efforts and not related). At any rate, even if one accepts Somol's and Whiting's definition, "projective architecture" would need, as Baird has noted: "... the supporting body of a projective theory. Without it, I predict that this new architecture will devolve to the 'merely' pragmatic, and to the 'merely' decorative, with astonishing speed." (Baird 2004, 21).

The point though is a broader one: do we really need an interpretive paradigm to identify the most progressive architecture? or should we not instead ask ourselves whether an architecture-that-reflects-critically on its own operations and "project" has still some validity or not?

Somol's and Whiting's argument could be questioned also by recalling that "pragmatism" (what they advocate for and which permeates, according to them, the most interesting research in contemporary architecture – and one could well agree on this) is "a" theory, a philosophy, not the "anti-theory". Pragmatism is not about making/practicing without thinking. It is about practicing without an ideological program established *a-priori*, before the doing. Rather it is an on-going reflection on the goals and the *ethos* of the practice *a-posteriori*, after the doing, which will realign the practice approach for the next design task in a sort of circulatory, recursive process. Peirce, James and Dewey, just to name the founders of American Pragmatism, had a philosophy. They were not about the negation of philosophy. As John Dewey put it: "... [my] effort had not been to practicalize intelligence, but to intellectualize practice".<sup>4</sup>

An architecture focused solely on the play of, and the experimentation with, new materials and new digital technologies is no different, epistemologically speaking, than an architecture of the "Theory", completely imploded in the pleasures of its linguistic and formal games. They are both locked in "*boudoirs*", to use Tafuri's well known metaphor: the former only more technologically wired than the latter.

The growing importance of the "workshop" in contemporary practice is a fact, and a positive one, given the expanding range of creative and expressive potentialities offered by the new materials and the new digital technologies. However, celebrating it as the epiphany of a new design epistemology - "thinking-as-doing, [one] that creates design knowledge or 'design intelligence'" (Speaks 2005, 75) – seems to be a critical proposal between naïvete' and a new version of that "operative criticism" that Tafuri so vigorously and effectively already questioned.

There is though another kind of "projectivity" that we should help architecture re-gain. It is not the one of the "design-project" (*a la* Somol/Whiting), because that is a given (architecture is projective or is not). It is the projectivity of the "cultural project" that we should be concerned about. The one that Tafuri urged architects (and intellectuals at large) to understand and elaborate as the main agenda for their work. Architecture needs a Project (with a capi-

tal P), not utopias, *boudoirs*, or, simply, just labs. And one cannot formulate a project without theory.

To better articulate this point, we need to discuss two theoretical knots in Tafuri's thought, where critics, architects and historians have entangled themselves in recent years.

## TWO TAFURIAN KNOTS

The first knot has to do with "plural vs singular". Tafuri (1980), in what he considered one of his most important books <sup>5</sup>, wrote about "*theories* and history of architecture" (note the plural). It never crossed his mind that there exists (or that we should build/talk about/strive for) a "Theory" of architecture, as if we were to write a "New Millennium Vitruvius". His research program was to uncover, analyze, criticize, dismantle, the ideologies behind architectural production, from a purely historian's point of view. "Architectural Historian": so simply reads his humble gravestone in Rome (Leach 2007, 87).

Yet the present was still the not so hidden goal behind the historical research program pursued by Tafuri and his collaborators at the School of Venice since the late 1960s – "We started to mount projects based on historical problems that were heavily involved with the present; we were doing real history, and the present was our task." (Tafuri 1999, 44). Consistently, Tafuri and his research group progressively embraced the strictly historian's approach of the French scholars of the *Annales*, such as Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, and of Michel Foucault (Leach 2007, 43). Quite uninterested in architectural criticism (Tafuri 1986).

If architects, especially in the US, but not only, particularly educated in philosophy, literature, semiotics, linguistics and criticism, got seduced by Tafuri's elaborated rhetoric and tried to emulate him by developing textual ornaments to their practices, thus engendering for sure the great myth of "critical architecture", or of the "Theory", that is an unexpected outcome of Tafuri's influence, certainly not welcome by Tafuri himself.

What we should retain from Tafuri's legacy is, instead, to remember that languages are not translatable, like he noted regarding the famous Heidegger's text *Building Dwelling Thinking*, so often (incorrectly) appropriated by architects and critics. <sup>6</sup>

In *Architecture and Utopia*, Tafuri clearly exemplified this point by discussing two groups of the 1920s avant-garde, the Russian Formalism and the French Surrealism. On the one hand, Viktor Sklovsky's plea for keeping art and propaganda separated ("in the name of agitation, take it away from art!"), and on the other hand, André Breton's self-imposition within the limits of literature (but still "wishing nothing but to serve", thus "utopian and realistic"): "Formalism and Surrealism essentially agreed in defending the 'professionalism' of intellectual work." (Tafuri 1976a, 64-65).

The work (the Project) of the historian/critic is other than the one of the architect. On this Tafuri could have not been clearer. He focused on the former, because the second was not his concern, even though it was his indirect target.

"Isn't the historian's work a language that, by continually engaging the many techniques of environmental design, may work as a 'litmus test' to verify the validity of architectural discourses? Therefore, only apparently, we [historians] shall talk of something 'else'. (...) ... historical criticism must know how to strike a fine balance between disenchantment and participation." (Tafuri 1977, 11, 17)

However, even though "... were he still alive, Tafuri would align himself with the disenchantment of the younger Americans with their own avant-garde" (Baird 2004, 20), he also continually challenged architects to articulate, envision, and practice their own (cultural) Project. And a plurality of them, according to the various cultural, economic, political, professional conditions: therefore, "Projects".

This takes us to the second knot, which has to do with "upper vs lower case".

Diane Ghirardo (2002) has already effectively criticized many misrepresentations of Tafuri's thought, proposed by some thinkers/critics/architects of the 1980s and 1990s. Ghirardo has aptly discussed also a particular point: Tafuri was for "architecture" with a lower case, not for "Architecture" with an upper case:

"Tafuri spoke of 'architecture without a capital A' as the most interesting, because it does not wallow in its crises and problems; instead of talking, it acts. Acting, or movement, he insisted, mattered more than results, and the movement that 'tends towards something' constitutes the 'rectitude of all political activity' (...) ... even though architecture became



Figure 2: Karl Ehn, Karl Marx Hof, Vienna, 1926-30

instrumental to late capitalism, this needed not be its only result, nor did this mean that the architect should have retreated into contemplative games." (Ghirardo 2002, 41).

Raymond Unwin at Letchworth, Fritz Schumacher in Hamburg, Karl Ehn in "Red" Vienna <sup>7</sup>, Cor van Eesteren in Amsterdam, Ernst May and Martin Wagner in social-democratic Frankfurt and Berlin, and Hannes Meyer, the director of the Bauhaus who "fought the Bauhaus style" <sup>8</sup> - but also Clarence Stein and Henry Wright in the US, or Ludovico Quaroni <sup>9</sup>, Carlo Aymonino and Giancarlo De Carlo in Italy - with all their limitations, contradictions, and naïve hopes, they were examples, for Tafuri, of a practice of architecture engaged with its broader political dimension. As Baird has noted: "So preoccupied are Tafuri's American readers with 'the architecture in the *boudoir*', that they fail to pay comparable attention to ... [Tafuri's] strong commitment to professional 'engagement' ". (Baird 2004, 20)

We are therefore being proposed an idea of architecture as a knowledge at the disposal also of the less wealthy and powerful segments of society and not simply a privilege for the elite. In spite of his cynical and sharp analytical dissection of architecture and its ideologies, Tafuri was not ruling out modes of (reflective) practice with the ambition of making a difference in the world. As Massimo Cacciari observed in the eulogy for his colleague and dear friend <sup>10</sup>, "Tafuri taught [us] the most difficult lesson: the art of disenchantment together with hope and faith." (Ghirardo 2002, 46).

What does this discussion on two Tafurian theoretical knots offer to our argument? It shows how architects need, more than ever, reflection, theories (better theories), to build (cultural) projects, where practice may find sense, direction, meaning, beyond the "glass bead game" <sup>11</sup>, even if these beads were to be produced by a CNC machine tool. Projects that go beyond their design-projects of architecture, to become "cultural projects" helping architects understand their new roles in a fast changing world. <sup>12</sup>

In the conclusive pages of *Architecture and Utopia*, which in Italian reads *Project and Utopia*, Tafuri notes that:

"... it is useless to propose purely architectural alternatives. The search for an alternative within the structures that condition the very character of architectural design is indeed an obvious contradiction of terms. Reflection on architecture, inasmuch as it is a criticism of the concrete 'realized' ideology of architecture itself, cannot but go beyond this and arrive at a specifically political dimension." (Tafuri 1976a, 181-182)

## WHICH PROJECT?

In other words, we certainly do not need more of the "Theory", rather more (better) "theories". Even with a pragmatic take, the "noble and liberal art of architecture" (to use one of Tafuri's favorite definitions <sup>13</sup>) needs to reflect on its own role within culture, politics, society and the global economy, with all the articulations required by the complexities that our condition of the mature Modernity brings along. As noted by Joan Ockman:

"Today, an architecture that inquires deeply and radically into the relationship between itself and society, itself and the world, is more resonant and



Figure 3: OMA, Waterfront City, Dubai/Abu-Dhabi, 2008. Masterplan.

relevant than ever. The complexities of contemporary practice demand not only strategic realism, but also critical discernment and conscience. Indeed, while architects have a minimal responsibility to do no harm, they may also aspire to do some good.” (Ockman 2009, 27)

Even Rem Koolhaas, the disenchanting, “wicked” and cynical champion of the “new pragmatism” – “there is in the deepest motivations of architecture something that cannot be critical” (as quoted in Baird 2004, 16) – may be caught, at times, as taking “critical stances” towards the current agenda and processes of global capitalism and its agents.<sup>14</sup> For example, OMA’s Waterfront City (2008) at the border between Dubai and Abu Dhabi, if considered in itself, may superficially be chastised as an act of nostalgia for “manhattanism” or as another celebratory chapter of the Gulf “urbanism on steroids”. But, if considered in context, it may instead be seen as a “critical” commentary (still from within the logic of global real estate and development) on the coastal *boudoir* for the orgy of the objects in which the cities of the Gulf have morphed in the last decade. “... Aiming at generating a critical mass of density and diversity, .... [Waterfront City is] a rational, repeatable, and exponential urbanism redolent of Manhattan”<sup>15</sup>. Waterfront City seems to suggest, critically, an oasis of urbanistic order amidst a desert-storm of architectural and urban hallucinations. In spite of its “bigness” (twice the size of Hong Kong island, for 120 million sqft), it is “urbanism without a capital U”.

At the other end of the spectrum, we can think of Alejandro Aravena and his “Project” of ELEMENTAL,



Figure 4: Waterfront City within its larger context.

a building system/socio-political strategy/research forum to address the problem of low-cost housing in Chile: “[Elemental is] A ‘Do-Tank’ operating the city as a source of equality”.<sup>16</sup> Offering true “design intelligence” to the cause of low-income people for a practical, rational, pragmatic alternative solution to the easy, but costly, and unsustainable in the long term, policy of low-income housing neighborhoods moving ever further from the city proper, Aravena shows us an architecture with a “Project”. Instead of “critical architecture”, ELEMENTAL could be better defined as a “critical Project”. It emerged not by “simply doing”, but out of a theory of architecture as an intellectual practice with social obligations and cultural aspirations. It is a (system)design-project that is also a social critique to the traditional way of addressing the housing needs of the poor.



Figure 5: ELEMENTAL Project “at work”. Iquique, Chile, 2004-06.

Therefore, we need not just to be “projective” (about the design-project), but, more importantly, to elaborate our “Projects”, in order to give sense to our practice. Thomas Fisher has aptly recalled, in a recent article, Lewis Mumford’s lamentation about the post-WWII architects’ retreat from their role as public intellectuals. Says Fisher:

“... the obscurity of so much academic writing underscores the fact that we have largely walked away from our role as public intellectuals. How can we take part in larger public debates if even we [italics in original text] get lost in the jungle of our jargon words and stuck in the quicksand of our questionable prose? ... We do not need less criticism; we need better criticism: a criticism that engages the broadest public possible in what our field has to say about the world’s most pressing problems.” (Fisher 2009, 15)

What is the role of architects/designers (and educators of) within the current transformations of global capitalism? Especially at a time when, in most countries of the Western world, more regulatory mechanisms are both advocated for and experimented, which in turn puts ever greater responsibilities on the public sector and its operators? How do we position ourselves relative to the increasing demand for more participatory and democratic protocols in the decision-making process for the transformation of the physical environment? Where should architecture “tend toward”? How do we reset architecture vis-à-vis the increasing demand for cross-disciplinary collaborations and epistemological contaminations?

While remembering that “however, art has the power to indicate the problem, and not to resolve it” (Tafuri 1989, 200), starting to answer these and other broader questions would help us define, beyond Utopia and Theory, our “Projects”, for our time, our challenges and our world.

## ENDNOTES

1. Author’s recollection from Tafuri’s lectures. The reference was to Karl Kraus’ quote: “Since the facts have the floor, let anyone who has anything to say come forward and keep his mouth shut.” As quoted by Walter Benjamin in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 243.

2. Tafuri made the decision to focus only on history after he had vehemently reacted to the 1964 “Michelangelo architetto” exhibition curated by Bruno Zevi and Paolo Portoghesi, responsible, according to Tafuri, of having distorted Michelangelo’s figure to align it with their critical and political agendas: “That exhibition made me so angry! I understood it as an

example of how not to do history!” (Tafuri 1992, 30).

3. “... the Projective Theory Program [at the Berlage Institute], headed by Roemer van Toorn, offers a series of theoretical and historical seminars on the effects, scenarios and strategies of architectural form. This program aims at mobilizing theory and activating history by developing innovative forms of aesthetic, urban and architectural knowledge to seek new political opportunities in architectural work.” (from the Berlage Institute web-site).

4. Quoted in Michael Eldridge. *Transforming Experience: John Dewey’s Cultural Instrumentalism*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press 1998: 5.

5. “... the book wasn’t written like the others. It followed several years of reflection... (...) In my view, *Teorie e storia* is more important than any other of my books because it binds my personal experience to the histories of individual and collective crisis together in a sort of complex knot.” (Tafuri 1976b, 37)

6. “Too many hopes were raised among architects, during this last decade [1970s], by the appearance in *Lotus* of the translation of a text by Heidegger, whose metaphorical language is not ‘translatable’ into that of architectural culture.” (Tafuri 1989, 200). See Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking”, in *Poetry Language Thought*, San Francisco: Harper & Row 1971: 141-161. Or. ed., *Bauen Wohnen Denken*. 1951.

7. See Manfredo Tafuri, *Vienna rossa. La politica residenziale nella Vienna socialista*. Milan: Electa 1980. See also Eve Blau, *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-34*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press 1999.

8. Hannes Mayer, in Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus 1919-1933*. Bauhaus Archiv – Berlin: Taschen: 1998 (199). Mayer was the second Bauhaus director (1927-30), after Gropius (1919-25) and before the school was moved from Dessau to Berlin under the direction of Mies van der Rohe (1932-33).

9. “Quaroni was not a great architect, even if he had produced important, even beautiful, projects later in life that were never realized. ... [But] He spent the period of neorealism and social engagement working as a protagonist: it wasn’t easy to find an architect who had spent so much of his time doing research for the parliamentary commission on poverty.” (Tafuri 1992, 29, 30).

10. Massimo Cacciari, “Quid Tum?”, *Domus*, 762, 1994: 35-38.

11. Tafuri used often to refer to Hermann Hesse’s novel *The Glass Bead Game*, New York: Bantam Books 1969. Or. ed. 1946 – author’s recollection from Tafuri’s lectures.

12. “... to the architect (or to the critic) who accepts the new roles that today’s difficult reality proposes, we shall never desist from asking the questions posed by [Walter] Benjamin: ‘Does the intellectual succeed in promoting the socialization of the intellectual means of production? Does the intellectual see how he/she can organize the intellectual workers in the production process? Does he/she have proposals for the *Umfunktionierung* [transformation] of the novel, the drama, the poem [the architecture]? The more completely he/she can orient in his/her activity toward this task, the more correct the political tendency, and necessarily also the higher the technical quality, of his work will be.’ ” (Tafuri 1974, 167).

13. Author's recollection from Tafuri's lectures.
14. Baird (2004, 21) has recalled Koolhaas' pronouncement against the "Disneyfication" of Manhattan's 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, with the consequent destruction of its distinctive street culture, perpetrated by recent development projects.
15. Project description, OMA's web-site: <http://oma.nl/>
16. <http://www.elementalchile.cl/> The pilot project at Iquique (Chile) consisted of 93 expandable dwelling units of a row-house type, with a 65 units/acre density. Each basic unit cost US\$7,500.

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1. Photo Ezra Stoller. *Casabella* 619-620, (1995: 10).
2. Blau 1999 (note 7): 328.
- 3/4. OMA web-site: <http://oma.nl/>
5. Photo Cristobal Palma, 2006. <http://www.elementalchile.cl>