

THEORY'S

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HISTORY

Challenges in the
historiography
of architectural
knowledge

KU Leuven – Belgium

9 - 10 February 2017

CALL FOR PAPERS – International Conference in Brussels Submission Deadline: 15th June 2016

In recent international literature addressing the history of 20th century architectural theory, the year 1968 is indicated as a decisive moment, giving rise to a 'new' architectural theory. This is clearly visible in Ockman's and Hays' anthologies, in which the latter replaces the notion of 'architectural culture' with 'architectural theory'¹. From that moment onwards, emphasis was no longer placed on the aesthetics of architecture, but on its critical potential.

Yet, according to some scholars, this intensification of

1 Ockman 1993; Hays 1998; also: Nesbitt 1996; Leach 1997; Sykes 2010

2 Puglisi 2009; Mallgrave and Goodman 2011

3 Baird 2004

4 Rendell et al. 2007

5 Ockman 1993; Nesbitt 1996; Hays 1998; Heynen et al. 2001; Sykes 2010; Mallgrave and Goodman 2011; Vidler 2011; Crysler, Cairns, and Heynen 2012

6 Lavin 1999; Moravánszky 2007; Ockman 1993

theory was short-lived². A presence of coexisting and even contradictory paradigms derived from very different epistemic domains (anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, social

sciences, etc.) led to a setback of theory, resulting in an end-of-theory atmosphere in the 1990s. Different responses were formulated to deal with this crisis: some architects wanted to counter the dominant abstract reasoning by pragmatics (New Dutch School), critics issued a 'post-critical' stage³, others contradicted the end-of-theory thesis⁴, and – what is of interest to us – historians turned to mapping and historicizing the life course of architectural theory in the recent past⁵.

It is not a coincidence that the so called death of architectural theory concurred with the upsurge of anthologies on architectural theory that collect and classify referential texts. Instead of burying theory, these anthologies had an additional effect, namely to institutionalise it. In other words, they offered both closure to a past period and also defined the locus of a next period of theorisation, invoking a 'historical turn'⁶. At the same time architectural discourses, and

especially architectural historiography, were engaging with new theoretical fields such as gender studies ⁷ or postcolonial studies ⁸, giving rise to a continued production of theoretically informed books and articles.

The goal of this conference is to discuss the methodological challenges that come along with this historical gaze towards theory, by focusing on the concrete processes in which knowledge is involved. Today's main premise is that between 1965 and 1990, architectural theory lost its trust in the causality, objectivity and teleology of history, notions which are inherent to the modern thinking. ⁹ Anthologies on architectural theory have (sometimes implicitly) accepted the conceptual tools that philosophers introduced to represent and map historical changes: think of terms such as 'paradigm shift' ¹⁰, 'discursive formation' ¹¹, 'historical narrative' ¹² and 'conceptual history' ¹³. By screening the unspoken rules of engagement that these accounts of post-war architectural theory have agreed to and distributed, we want to point at dominant assumptions, biases and absences. While anthologies inevitably narrate history with rough meshes...

We particularly welcome case-studies from the 1960s to the 1990s that deal with one or more topics formulated below:

- A. The place of knowledge
- B. The figure of knowledge
- C. The time of knowledge

We are in other words not only interested in *what* theorists and practicing architects were arguing for, but also how, why and where they did so. Looking at case-studies, the singular and 'minor' ¹⁴ expressions of theory, the local discourses and the different formative contexts (e.g. education, publication culture) can be subjected to careful scrutiny.

...we believe it is time to search for those versions of theory formation that have slipped through these nets of historiography, in order to question the nature of theory and the challenges it poses to historians. How do you do historical research on something as intangible as theory, or in a broadened sense, the knowledge of architecture?

⁷ Rendell, Penner, and Borden 2000

⁸ Nalbantoğlu and Wong 19979

⁹ Schwarzer 1999; Tournikiotis 1999;
Molinari 2000

¹⁰ Kuhn 1962

¹¹ Foucault 1969

¹² White 1984

¹³ Kuukkanen 2008

¹⁴ Ockman 1990

A. THE PLACE OF KNOWLEDGE

1. Theory's geography

What is the impact of geography on architectural theory? The work of many intellectuals is framed by national boundaries, while others are so abundantly represented across the boundaries. In general, architectural theory seems to address a non-specific, international public, but how are concrete articulations of architectural theory influenced by the condition of being articulated in a somehow delimited area?

Especially the geographical reach of language, but also other aspects of linguistics, culturally related preferences and political systems all impact the articulation of thought in a myriad of ways.

In what way does the local enter into the unbounded realm of theory?

2. The expressions of knowledge

As Cairns, Crysler and Heynen (2012) already noted, the privileged medium for architectural theory has been printed text – monographs, edited collections, anthologies, journal articles and conference proceedings. An eagerness for manageable and packageable information has led to the favouring of theory in a published form. Yet theory is produced and disseminated throughout

various media (such as texts, models, images, films, exhibitions, etc.).

Can the contemporary historian use these artefacts to delve into the production of theory?

Would it be beneficial to study for instance exhibition formats as carriers of architectural knowledge? And what about the life of theory in architectural education, a context marked by an urge to transmit knowledge? Isn't this a privileged domain to search for these other loci of theory? One can ask when and in which capacity theory entered the curriculum.

3. The agendas of theory

This topic sees theory as an instrument in the multiple identity politics prevailing in the post-war period: theory contributed to the formation of a discipline, it strengthened the academic profile of educational institutions, it legitimised practice, it offered new approaches and guidelines for design, it reinforced critical positions, it engaged with newly emerging fields like gender studies or postcolonial theories, etc.

We ask if the study of architectural theory can benefit from a more sociological approach to knowledge, thereby establishing a relationship between architectural thought and the political, social and institutional contexts within which it arises.

B. THE FIGURE OF KNOWLEDGE

1. Minor historiography

Is it desirable to go beyond the Tafuri's, the Banham's and the Venturi's, to those not being canonized in the various readers and introductions to architectural theory? Is it desirable to look in between the meshes of the nets of historiography?

When local situations are being investigated, and when focusing on the 'circulation of ideas' and the 'exchange of knowledge', many other actors enter the field. These supposedly non-exceptional, or 'minor' figures actually constitute the majority of reality.

What can they teach us about the nature of theory? Can they be representative figures through which the production and use of architectural theory can be mapped?

2. The making of the architectural theorist

In Ancient Greece, theoreos was an observer who reported about the oracle in Delphi to the authorities in an impartial and disinterested way. The persons dealing with theory in architecture however, created theoretical narratives that were geared toward their disciplinary frameworks. From art historians placing central emphasis on the question of

aesthetics ¹⁵, to the theories of practicing architects ¹⁶, to social scientists and philosophers not necessarily dealing with architecture, but reflecting on related issues ¹⁷. In this topic, the historical intersects with the historiographical. On the one hand, it looks at those who have taken or who were given the mandate to produce and disseminate theory.

| Which roles did the theorist take on?

On the other hand, this topic questions how the figure of the theorist was typecast in historical work, such as recent anthologies. ¹⁸

Why are there for instance so few records of the theoretical trajectories of pedagogues or art critics? And does the historiography of architectural theory repeat the tendency of art and architectural historiography to write out women who were part of the field? ¹⁹

C. THE TIME OF KNOWLEDGE

1. Problems of periodization

Researchers focusing on the 1970s and 1980s have the disadvantage of not being able to use a shorthand term for the period in question: there is no equivalent to ‘the interwar years’ or

to ‘the post-war years’. Instead of such temporal classifications, they seek

solace in terms like neoliberalism, postmodernism, the welfare state, etc. The terms that substitute the more neutral temporal classifications based on world-time-structuring events such as the World Wars, convey in a more explicit manner the historian’s framework to interpret society, but might also evidence less holistic attempts of narrating history. Guided by the (im)possibility of overarching temporal terms, this topic encourages attempts at describing the synchronic interrelationships of different

¹⁵ Zucker 1951
¹⁶ Krufft 1994
¹⁷ Leach 1997
¹⁸ Grubbauer and Steets 2014
¹⁹ Heynen 2000; Pollock 2010

contemporaneous phenomena in the realm of architectural theory, ...

... is it possible to bring together e.g. such diverse phenomena as deconstructivism and pragmatism?

2. Architectural theory and postmodernity

The rise of architectural theory since the 1960's overlaps with the trend of postmodern architecture in the 1970's and 1980's, placing postmodern architecture amidst a strongly theorized architecture culture. Today, postmodern architecture has already become a subject of architectural history in its own right. But while much attention has been paid to the various links between modernist architecture and modernity ²⁰ – as a set of characteristics of an evolving society –, ...

... the links between postmodern architecture, architectural theory and postmodernity have not yet been as extensively scrutinized.

What do the theorized debates on postmodern architecture teach us about postmodernity, analogously theorized as characterizing some fundamental aspects of society? ²¹

3. Problems of historical distance

With architectural theory from the 1960's onwards becoming a historical topic in its own right, researchers are often confronted with the fact that their subjects are still alive and sometimes still active. Oral history for instance has become a valid and more common research method ²². As theory is quite strongly colored by the theorist's personality, this diminishing historical distance between historian and subject asks for extra caution. Often the protagonists are involved through interviews looking back on their trajectory, thus contributing to shaping their own history. And, more than often the historian depends on the protagonist in question in order to access archival material.

Is yesterday's breath felt down today's historian's neck?

After all, the possibility exists that the protagonist in question intervenes in his work, either in advance by means of interviews, or afterwards by judging the historian's work.

²⁰ Călinescu 1987; Heynen 1999; Prakash 2002; Hvattum and Hermansen 2004

²¹ Huyssen 1984; Harvey 1990; Jameson 1991; Jameson 2002; Aureli 2008; Martin 2010; Kaminer 2011

²² Groat and Wang 2002

D. PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Please visit our website for up to date information:

architecture.kuleuven.be/theoryshistory/

This two-day conference will be held in Brussels on Thursday and Friday 9th - 10th February 2017. The conference aims to bring together both young and established scholars from every discipline that is able to engage with the topics outlined above. Confirmed keynotes are Joan Ockman, Ákos Moravánszky and Łukasz Stanek. We're happy to receive abstracts of up to 300 words until the 15th of June, 2016. Information on how to submit is provided on our website. Abstracts will be anonymously reviewed by an international scientific committee.

Authors will be notified of acceptance on the 15th of July 2016. In order to provide a solid conference, we expect full papers one month in advance of the conference, i.e. 1st of January, 2017.

Please note that there will be a conference fee for participants of maximum €150 and a reduced price for students.

Organising committee:

Hilde Heynen
Yves Schoonjans
Rajesh Heynickx
Maarten Delbeke
Ricardo Agarez
Elke Couchez
Sebastiaan Loosen
(KU Leuven/UGent)

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Ákos Moravánszky (ETH Zürich)
Łukasz Stanek (University of Manchester)
Teresa Stoppani (Leeds Beckett University)
Hélène Jannièrè (Université Rennes 2)
K. Michael Hays (Harvard) (TBC)

For any other questions, please contact

theoryshistory@kuleuven.be

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