Chapter 29

Post-scriptum
'But that is not enough'

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Claim

The question behind "this thing called theory", asked in architecture but without mentioning architecture, has a purposeful if not arrogant implication: that architecture has a theory of its own, or rather, that architectural theory is intrinsic to architecture, and an indispensible part of it – "architecture" theory then, rather than "architectural" theory. The question is the same as affirming that theory does exist (exists, existed, will exist) in architecture as something different than other forms and areas of theory, although it remains deeply interconnected with them, and is all too often reliant on them. "This thing" then calls for specificity, and for a return to the discipline of architecture, as well as to the thinking that occurs within it.

The arrogance of architecture theory, its calling for its own (*ad-rogare*), that forceful claim that appropriates, is an assertion of and for the right to be. It requires, as in the Latin *adrogatio*,[1] a statement of commitment made in front of the public (the Roman *populus*, and later its representatives) that legitimizes a consensual and mutual appropriation (and affiliation): in this case, in relation to architecture, it is the claim to an area of discourse, as well as the claim to a role within architecture itself.
The "arrogance" of this thing called theory is ultimately a claim of responsibility, a serious act of incorporation, as well as a commitment to a form of care. It is also a commitment to a relation to an-other.

In arrogating architecture (to itself), architecture theory claims a stake on it, cares about architecture and helps define it. Architecture theory attributes to itself the right to exist within architecture; it also claims a necessary role with(in) it. As in the Roman *adrogatio*, the relation of convenience and limitation is mutual, as architecture claims theory to itself. Architecture thinks. The two – architecture theory and architecture – do not coincide, but each cannot exist without the other. They co-(l)laborate, that is, they are at work together. Architecture without its theory is not architecture.

The mutual and public claim of care is important, as it is not a claim of autonomy. Far from it: architecture can only exist in relation to what it is not, to what makes it possible, to what inhabits it, and architecture theory plays an important role in articulating such relations. Relations change (are changing), and with them the adaptable, fleeting, sometimes volatile voice of theory, while architecture itself remains relatively slow, caught by its very nature between the space of experimentation and that of realization (although these too are amazingly brought to converge today).

A practice that changes constantly, that has no axioms or definitions, that is not prescriptive but relational both within architecture and with building, a malleable practice that that thinks with society and both reflects it and transforms it, cannot be a discipline. "This thing called architecture theory" does not exist, the historian tells me; and he is right: as a discipline, this "thing" does not exist. It ceased to exist as a discipline (and ancillary one) when it stopped being descriptive and prescriptive, that is, when it stopped being a tool for, rather than a voice with. Yet, even that form of architecture theory – a "discipline disciplining" theory – was indeed struggling to keep at bay contrasting voices, unorthodox practices, material evidence, endeavouring as it did, throughout its history (yes, the history of theory), to find (but read, fabricate) the origin of architecture – that one, single, dignified and pure origin that never existed. Even then the role of this "non-discipline" that is theory was indeed that of interrogation: asking questions of itself rather than formalizing appeasing solutions.

Similarly, the recent post-theory[2] movement in architecture, attempted again to fix-frame architecture theory as a discipline, this time with a sentenced and staged death rather than with a search of origins. What it produced instead, rather than a forever after-theory, was indeed a restart moment of reenergizing, as it magnified questions of architecture at the beginning of the new millennium. The opposite of an after-theory has happened instead. Opening up the divergence between the critical and the projective, the debate has indeed set free and re-launched the thinking in architecture that is caught in between. And questions remain (some of which are addressed in this book). Dislodging architecture theory from an established and generational association with critical theory, with psychoanalysis, or with semiology or post-structuralism, the after-theory moment in fact re-started conversations, not only with current developments in philosophy, but also with material sciences, politics and economy, and indeed with the convergence of them that we are now witnessing. Not only that: the bastardized origin-less material nature of architecture makes it the ideal ground to develop original thinking in making.

In architecture

Architecture theory needs to return to itself, that is to architecture, in order to find how it has changed, not why. Why it has changed is obvious and becomes a redundant statement if we imply architecture's relationality as a sine qua non condition of its being.[3] To look at "how" architecture theory is changing means to engage not only in exploring the relationship between architecture and theory, but also to redefine theory as a plurality of different and discordant contributions to how (the "how of hows") theory is produced in architecture, which means: for architecture, about architecture and, more essentially, by architecture. The idea of "in architecture" was introduced by Andrew Benjamin in his 2000 book *Architectural Philosophy* to think 'the particularity of the architectural' and 'to engage with architecture understood as a site of repetition', where 'the critical is defined as a repetition that takes place again for the first time'.[4]

That the thinking that defines architecture must happen (literally, take place) in architecture as a site of repetition has always been the case, whether this was being

recognized at the time of its happening or not. This becomes apparent and almost inescapable with the demise of classical (and modernist) prescriptive theory, and with the emergence of an architectural history that is distinct from both art history and architectural practice, and triggers the formulation of questions in the specifics of architecture. From the mid-1960s the discipline of architectural theory started to be redefined and opened up to and by the non specifically architectural —borrowing from political ideologies, psychoanalysis, linguistics and semiology, literature criticism and cultural studies. As early as 1966 Aldo Rossi clearly articulated the intrinsically manifold nature of architecture, claiming for the "project" a unique and specific form of embedded criticality. In his text 'Architettura per i musei'[5] Rossi identifies the most important 'moment' of architecture theory in the 'relationship between the theoretical view of architecture and the making of architecture'.[6] It is in its making, through the combination of its multiform expressions – the text, the drawing, the building – that for Rossi architecture both produces and expresses its 'thinking'. Rossi sees the 'thinking' (*pensare*) in architecture as one with the 'design' (*progettare*) of architecture. Subjective, rational but also evocative, and far from the modernist prescriptive 'method', architecture theory for Rossi remains internal to the discipline of design. A stubborn obsession, architecture theory operates in architecture by choosing and selecting, focusing and persevering on the same problem, which is then repeatedly tackled by the different occasions of the "project". Architecture produces an autonomous discourse that, while it is informed by external disciplines – in Rossi's case, economy, sociology and linguistics –, is expressed by the specifics of the project, its representation and its construction. Reflective and iterative, critical and specific, architecture 'presents itself as a meditation on things, on facts; its principles are few and immutable, but the concrete answers to changing topical problems that the architect and society can offer are manifold'.[7]

Relation

Architecture theory is not a discipline, and yet is it a practice, difficult to accept, to grasp even, because it is not regulated. It may be quiet, embedded in architecture's buildings; it may subtle, silenced at times, but it is not going away, despite oppositions, dismissals and ridicule. Ridicule in fact it welcomes, as a sign that theory

is very much alive, provoking and provocative of thinking, eliciting whatever reactions, making indifference impossible. The laughter that theory laughs is the Bataillean laughter that mirrors the being laughed at with laughing it back out, louder and sharper.[8] It is the laughter of that least definable and frameable of theorists, through which the unfashionable shakes the established mainstream. Theory laughs, and it laughs back.

Theory laughs also at itself. In prefacing the book series *Frontiers of Theory*,[9] literary theorist and cultural critic Martin McQuillan writes that: 'Since its inception Theory has been concerned with its own limits, end, and after-life.' McQuillan observes that in its process of auto-critique Theory needs to ask:

> […] what is the relation of Theory to philosophy and the other disciplines that inform it? What is the history of its construction and what processes of amnesia and the repression of difference have taken place to establish this thing called Theory? Is Theory still the site of a more-than-critical affirmation of a negotiation with thought, which thinks thought's own limits?[10]

And architecture theory? How does it construct itself? How does it reinvent itself and think its own limits (in the iterations of architecture's project) while architecture continues to reinvent itself?

As it reconsiders its status as a discipline in relation to digital technologies, material sciences, biology and environmental transformations, architecture continues to introject thoughts and practices developed 'outside' architecture. It is indeed its very openness and connectedness that offer a line of continuity in the ongoing process of self-definition and reinvention that has always characterized architecture as a practice of the multiple and of the critical, that, far from only making physical environments, continues to act in and through all its intersections with its "other" as a critical and cultural agent. Architecture has always borrowed narratives, tools, concepts and images from other disciplines, always defining itself in relation with an "other". It is by definition relational: internally, in how it organizes itself through rules or paradigms of form and space making; externally, in how it relates to forms of inhabitation, use, and cultural and physical conditions.

The relational nature of architecture is intrinsic to its making since the very beginnings – which are themselves multiple, uncertain, open and negotiated. Designed for human inhabitation and interaction, architecture needs to respond to requirements that are both practical and more extensively intangible: social, political, psychological, etc., depending on its spatial and temporal conditions of production. Architecture establishes, that is, a series of external relations, rules, narratives and situations.[11]

Yet, in each instance of its repetition, in its every "act" – design, construction, practice, writing - architecture calls into question also its own languages, its materials, its history as a discipline, thus producing a self-redefinition at its every re-enactment. Is Architecture too, then, 'A thought that thinks its own limits'? (to paraphrase McQuillan). Architecture changes itself in each of its "instalments", in its repetitions; each time it is enmeshed in a web of relations, both external and internal, which affect it and which it produces. These relations occupy also a space that is only apparently void of architecture's direct intervention. It is in these apparent voids that the relational nature of architecture emerges more forcefully, where possible alternative practices of architecture are exposed. It is in these "voids" that the discourse and the critical space of the words of architecture take place, as well as other alternative practices. It is in this space that the relational nature of architecture becomes more evident.[12]

'But that is not enough …'

Architecture theory is how architecture thinks itself and in itself, and therefore, ultimately, thinks *what* architecture is – not in the sense of grasping an impossible essence or fixed origin, but in order to confirm its multiple and changeable position in response to the basic issues of inhabitation and environment, and in relation to space and time. If there is an essence to what we do in architecture, and in thinking with it and writing in it, it is in this constant questioning. Because buildings can be architecture and architecture can be buildings, but the two do not necessarily coincide. It is the space of these differences and non-coincidences that architecture theory inhabits, explores and constantly redefines.

'But that is not enough'. Architecture theory is the 'not enough' of architecture, its 'not-enough-ing', with the oppositional 'but' that accompanies it. '*Aber das genügt nicht',* Walter Benjamin writes in a fragment of his First Sketches for the *Passagenwerk* (Arcades Project)[13], one of the many in which he approaches the dialectical image as a constellation, a critical construct that itself escapes fixed definitions.

> It is said that the dialectical method consists in doing justice, at each moment, to the concrete historical situation of its object. But that is not enough. [*Aber das genügt nicht.*] For it is just as much a matter of doing justice to the concrete historical situation of the interest taken in the object. […] the object is felt to be concretized in this situation itself and upraised from its former being into the higher concretion of now-being [*Jetzsein*].'

For Walter Benjamin placing the historical object in its context is not enough; it is necessary to place it in relation with the current situation of the observation point. The historical object is always and again re-concretised in the present, and it is the dubitative "but" that triggers the performance of the "not-enough-ing". In architecture, the now-being of the object is in the "not-enough-ing" that each time and again questions the stability and the finished-ness of the object. The architectural object therefore becomes a site of discourse. It is such kind of object that architecture needs to be: dialectical, tensioned, questioned and ultimately unstable.
But that too is not enough. In his fragment Benjamin continues proposing the now-being as a concretion that 'has overcome the ideology of progress', to pursue instead a philosophy of history that is 'an increasing concentration (integration) of reality'.
In architecture, this would mean to dismiss linear histories of pacifying progress, and seek an architecture that remains actively capable to engage both its past and present in a trans-historical, discipline-specific processes of self interrogation. For Benjamin the 'dialectical penetration and actualization of former contexts puts the truth of all present action to the test.' 'But that is not enough' then proposes a criticality that is intrinsic to the object under consideration, and that the object itself performs. The architectural object must perform, incessantly and relentlessly, a critique not only of

its own time, but of the now-time of its activity. Architecture is such self-critical object, but within it it is the work of architecture theory that triggers its laughter.

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field:, *Urban Blind Spots*, edited by Florian Kossak, Tatjana Schneider, and Stephen Walker, vol. 6, no. 1 (2015): 97-111. Available at www.field-journal.org.

Notes

[1] '*Adrogatio* was the process of Adoption by which a man *Sui Iuris* (that is, a *Paterfamilias* who was not under another man's *potestas*) could give up his independence and come under the *potestas* of an adoptive father (a different process called *adoption* was used to adopt individuals *in potestate parentum*).' See: Fred.K. Drogula, "Adrogatio", in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (John Wiley & Sons: Chichester, 2012). DOI: 10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah13007

[2] See: Robert E. Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," in *The New Architectural Pragmatism: A Harvard Design Magazine Reader*, ed. William S. Saunders, Harvard Design Magazine Readers 5 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 22–33. See also: Michael Speaks, "Design Intelligence: Or Thinking After the End of Metaphysics," *Architectural Design*, vol. 72 no. 5, (October 2002): 4–9.

[3] I have discussed this in Teresa Stoppani, "Relational Architecture: Dense Voids and Violent Laughters," in *field:*, vol. 6 no. 1. 2015, Urban Blind Spots (F. Kossak, T. Schneider, S. Walker, eds.), Sheffield:, The University of Sheffield, 97-111. Available at www.field -journal.org.

[4] Andrew Benjamin, *Architectural Philosophy*, (London and New Brunswick NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000), 3.

[5] Aldo Rossi, 'Architettura per i musei' (1966; 1968) now in Aldo Rossi, *Scritti scelti sull'architettura e la città, 1956-1972* (Milan: CittàStudi, 1975), 323-339.

[6] Rossi, *Scritti scelti,* 323. My translation.

[7] Rossi, *Scritti scelti*, 328. My translation.

[8] See: Georges Bataille, "The Labyrinth" (1935-6) now in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-39* (trans. A. Stoekl) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). Writer, critic, philosopher, independent intellectual who operated outside academia and across disciplines, Georges Bataille (1897-1962)

performs in his work a counter-reading of reality. The subversive character of his texts does not consist in a demolition from the outside of established sets of values, but in a systematic and pungent exposé of their contradictions and intrinsic ambiguities. The laughter that he discusses in "The Labyrinth" is a key instrument in Bataille's critique of society.

9 Martin McQuillan, "Series Editor's Preface," in Andrew Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals*, [Frontiers of Theory], (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), xi-xii.

10 McQuillan, "Series Editor's Preface," xi.

11 On the idea of exteriority and interiority in architecture see: Peter Eisenman, *Diagram Diaries* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999). See also: Peter Eisenman, *Cities of Artificial Excavation: the work of Peter Eisenman, 1978-1988* (New York and Montreal: Rizzoli and CCA, 1994), and Peter Eisenman, "Diagram: An Original Scene of Writing," in Peter Eisenman, *Written into the Void: Selected writings, 1990-2004* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 87-94.

12 See: Stoppani, "Relational Architecture: Dense Voids and Violent Laughters."

13 Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk* [O°, 5]. In Walter Benjamin, "First Sketches,", in *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), <O°, 5>, 857.