

# Agency in Architecture: Rethinking Criticality in Theory and Practice

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## Why agency and criticality?

Architecture is, by its very nature, 'in the world', in both spatial and temporal terms: buildings are concrete and tangible elements of our everyday life-world. Yet, also architectural designs, urban plans, utopian schemes or paper architecture are 'in the world': they might not define the way things work, but they do change the way we think about how they work, or should work. It is this peculiar, myriad being-in-the-world-ness of architecture that raises fundamental questions about how architecture enacts, how it performs, and consequently, how it might 'act otherwise' or lead to other possible futures. This possibility underlies all questions regarding architecture's ability to be critical. Agency can be understood as the very vehicle of such *drive* or intention to create alternative worlds.

In the wake of the problematisation of modernism, the discipline of architecture has witnessed a marked turn in its understanding of this ability. The potential for architecture to be engaged with and thus critical of the existing, was no longer to be located in the affirmative realm of the architectural project, but shifted, with Tafuri - under the influence of various schools of Marxism and critical theory - to the realm of history and theory. Whether asserting architecture's socio-economic determination, or promoting its autonomy, the arguments were founded upon one central inclination: the preference for theory as the ultimate guide for criticality in architecture.

Over the past decade, this paradigm has been

called into question. With the demise of 'big schools' of thought, the idea of a Theory that would directly guide architectural practice has lost its appeal. What has become known as the 'crisis of theory' can be brought back to the awareness that critical theory does *not* automatically lead to a form of critical practice. While in US architectural culture the rejection of theory as the preferred locus of criticality has been expressed most vocally by advocates of a so-called 'post-critical' or 'projective' approach,<sup>1</sup> there has actually been a more general emergence of proposals for an alternative to the reign of critical theory.<sup>2</sup> These range from neo-Marxist derivatives of the old critical theory now turning towards critical *practice*, to those re-claiming the agency of the architectural object, against the decades-long influence of the social sciences in architectural production.<sup>3</sup>

But more is going on. Concerns with criticality have hardly been limited to architecture alone. The now landmark conference on the future of theory and criticism, organised by the editors of *Critical Inquiry* in 2003,<sup>4</sup> mirrors architects' preoccupations in the wider arena of the humanities and social sciences. In domains from geography to cultural studies, renewed critiques of late capitalism have often been inspired by a search for new ways of thinking about criticality and political engagement - whether through theoretical 'third ways', or, more concretely, by imagining alternatives to 'global neoliberalism' as it manifests itself in the contemporary city.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, as these disciplines outside of architecture have shown, the world outside has radically

challenged some of the foundations of architectural production. New conditions - from global economic restructuring to an emerging information society based on networks, simultaneity, multiplicity and nonlinearity - provoke us to question not only architecture's critical potential but also, the *univocality* of its agency in the world. Consequently, rather than casting architecture in terms of either societal relevance or aesthetic quality, current approaches tend to be guided less by what architecture *means* or *intends*, than by how it *works*, and what it *does*. Whether addressed as 'an object in flight',<sup>6</sup> or an 'imbroglio',<sup>7</sup> such approaches aim to unravel architecture in its spatial and temporal engagements, which have undoubtedly leaked out of the hermetic space of critical theory.

Hence the main question of this issue: if we think differently about architecture's being in the world today, what to do with theory and criticality? If, despite its current inability to deal with the complexity of architecture's 'earthly' entanglements, theory cannot be given up, then how to use it? A particularly fruitful concept for understanding architecture's multiple ways of engaging with the world is that of agency - a notion that in current debates is as fundamental as it remains implicit. The goal of this *Footprint* issue is thus to rethink criticality in architecture by harnessing the multifarious notion of agency. Theorising agency, and making it more explicit as a category of contemporary thinking in architecture, this issue aims to transcend the engrained dichotomies of the current debate - such as that of critical, progressive social change versus the allegedly uncritical performance of the architectural object - and to trace novel connections between such seemingly disparate concerns.

### **Explicating / Implicating agency**

The question of agency in architecture seems to be a common one. So common, in fact, that it is hard to pin down exactly what is meant by it. Are we talking about the agency of the architect, and if so,

the agency to do what: to act in service of the client, or to guide society towards a better end? Or do we mean instead the power of the architectural project or the building itself, to convince its users about the virtuous lifestyle it hopes to instil, or its spectators about the beauty of its form? Or is it rather the role of the user, or of the built environment at large, in the make-up and transformation of society? Are we perhaps even referring to the world of concepts, of architectural theory, to have some concrete effects in the world beyond? Facing such a wide and seemingly disparate range of questions, how is it possible even to propose agency in architecture as a single topic of analysis?

Rather than constructing a 'big theory' of agency that would replace a 'big theory' of structure gone out of fashion, this issue proposes to work with the concept of agency by - as Margaret Crawford describes it in her contribution to this issue - cutting it up into workable bits that can then be reconfigured and stitched together. As such, we break up the question of agency into smaller sub-questions.

An obvious first question that would allow explicating the notion of agency is to ask: 'the agency of *what*?' Posited in the realm of architecture, this question brings up not only the by now familiar human / non-human division, but perhaps more fundamentally, the issues of multiplicity and relationality. In something as mundane as the process of constructing a building, how many agents do we take into account, and how do we conceive of the relation between them?

A second set of questions, which follows directly from the first, circles around the question of '*how*?' How do agents operate? How does an object exert agency? How do they, together, shape or affect a certain situation or condition? This is, more broadly, a question about means, modes and vehicles. In architecture, a key divide in this respect has been that between empiricism and idealism: what is the

relative importance of ideas versus action, thinking versus doing, theory versus practice?

The third question - undoubtedly the most crucial for this issue - is that of 'why?' or 'to what effect?' This encompasses, more broadly, the notion of intentionality. If we acknowledge that the concept of agency is indebted not only to the figure of the goal-oriented actor, but more fundamentally, to 'subject-verb-object thinking',<sup>8</sup> then this question pertains literally to the goal or the object. The prevailing way of answering this question in the discipline of architecture has for a long time been to focus on meaning: architecture tended to be interpreted according to models and principles developed in the realm of theory and focused primarily on the intentions of the architect. The recent infatuation with performance in architecture can be understood as an attempt to move away resolutely from meaning as it was espoused in architecture theory, and to think instead through the Deleuzian concepts of *immanence* and *affect*. What is most striking is how these recent attempts are accompanied by the triumph of 'star architecture', and thus entail, despite their lofty ambitions, a return - in the most confining of guises - to authorship and intentionality. A more productive endeavour would thus be to expand the notion of intentionality in architecture, without reverting to the conventions of architectural hermeneutics, but also, without trying to do away with the notion of meaning altogether.

How to go about this? Network theories have suggested one possible answer, which is to trace the *real* in the ongoing construction of networks of agents in the making of architecture. Yet, such a strategy fails to take into account the imaginary and the symbolic in shaping a particular constellation of agents. Without falling into the trap of the idealism of a *zeitgeist* that would determine historical reality, we need to complement our analysis of the multiplicity of the real - of emergence and invention - with a depth: a dimension that would provide agency with

a sense of direction. Perhaps one possible way is to conceive of agency in terms of *activity*, and of structure in terms of *situation*. This could also lead to a better understanding of 'un-intentionality', a crucial idea when thinking about the multiplicity of actions that makes up the city. Many of these suggestions have emerged out of our conversation with Scott Lash, Antoine Picon and Margaret Crawford, which has served as the theoretical exploration of our overall editorial concerns, and in this respect adopts a particular position in this issue.

The contributions to this issue have been assembled with the idea that focusing expressly on agency allows one to transcend, in diverse ways, the constraining dichotomies of current debates about criticality mentioned above. We believe that each article in this issue throws new light on one or more of our questions outlined above.

By focusing on material contingency, Pep Avilés has carefully disentangled the multiplicity of historical agents shaping postwar Italian neorealist architecture. Charting the historical coalescence of economic autarky with aesthetic austerity in 1930s Italy, his article transcends the teleological idealism that tends to protrude some analyses of architectural style, while at the same time avoiding the trap of material determinism. Avilés has conceived of autarky not just as an agent in itself, but as a complex including political-ideological, as well as economic and material agents.

With his analysis of Venturi and Scott Brown's project for South Street in Philadelphia, Sebastian Haumann places architectural aesthetics on a par with the political agency pursued by so many architects and planners of that period. By emphasising this project over *Learning from Las Vegas*, Haumann confronts architecture theory with its own limitations. With the new perspective of urban history he brings to it, Haumann is able to question the unitary nature of agency: he demonstrates how

architecture is shaped by the duality of the architect as a societal agent - in between architectural culture, discourse, and theory on the one side, and political engagement on the other.

Rolf Hughes argues that, because transdisciplinarity is pertinent to contemporary practice, the agency of architecture needs to be seen as located not in its disciplinary identity, but rather in novel approaches to design research, theory and practice that are shaped by what he calls 'transverse epistemologies'. Such approaches - based on a concern with relationality - have yet to be taken on seriously by architecture theory. Taking 'experience design' as the primary example, the paper sketches the outlines of such a novel form of practice, which allows combining conceptual creativity and innovation with critical thinking and societal responsibility.

Robert Cowherd brings in the sociological notion of reflexive modernisation - developed by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash - as a way out of what he sees as the false dichotomy between theory and engagement in the so-called post-criticality debate. He argues that a 'reflexive turn' in architecture would not necessarily entail the vilification of theory, nor would it prolong the current infatuation with innovation; it could instead lead to a renewed capability to be critical. Rather than locating criticality in either theory or practice, Cowherd thus makes a case for the indispensable *both/and* of theory and practice.

Gevork Hartoonian argues that the theme of agency in architecture is tectonic in nature. Departing from New Brutalism's critique of International Style modernism, his paper proposes tectonics as the legitimate base for criticality in contemporary architectural practice - being inevitably faced with what he calls the image-laden culture of late capitalism. Reading two projects, Zaha Hadid's Phaeno Center and OMA's Casa da Musica, in this light, Hartoonian recognises in the tectonic an attempt to 'reach that

which is architectural' while facilitating 'architecture's entanglement with the constructive structures of capitalism'.

For Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, the notion of agency in architecture is directly linked to social and political power. Against the internalisation of architectural discourse, they posit the notion of *spatial agency* in order to question the architect as neutral expert, and instead to emphasise the architect's responsibility in the politics and process of building. By showcasing a number of alternative empowering practices, they understand criticality primarily as a matter of practice, yet inevitably guided by theory. Ultimately, they propose a more careful use of theory, based directly on the concrete (political) conditions of architectural practice.

Two of the three review articles included in this issue demonstrate the ideological rifts of the current debate, despite their communality in defending practice as the preferred locus for criticality. The first, a report by 'The Agency' group of the 2008 AHRA conference entitled 'AGENCY', proposes to include in the notion of agency not only architecture theory or practice, but also teaching, pedagogy, social activism, and the organisation of conferences like this particular one itself. With the second report, starting from the 2006 conference 'The Projective Landscape', Lara Schrijver invites us to consider 'projective' architecture not as an argument against theory, but rather as a potential for criticality through practice. She argues for a return to the disciplinary core of architecture, by valorising the craft and expertise of the architect. In a third review article, Tahl Kaminer explores, through a meticulous reading of Beatriz Colomina's *Privacy and Publicity*, a recent trend in architectural history, namely the shift away from understanding architecture as part of the concrete base of society, towards casting it as a cultural product in the realm of representation. While he understands this shift as part of a larger 'retreat from social concern', Kaminer questions its

outright denial of architecture's agency in society.

### Agenda, by way of conclusion

The contributions to this issue allow us to rethink some of the basic assumptions and polarities of the debate around criticality in architecture. By explicating the notion of agency in architecture, they provide new insight in how criticality both informs and is shaped by the relation between theory and practice, between architecture's disciplinarity and its societal embedding, and between the individual, the social, and the architectural object. Yet, does this fundamentally challenge the way we understand criticality? If one conclusion is to be drawn from the diversity of threads in this issue, it is that agency, and thus criticality, in their very essence, still entail the question of 'what can we hope for?', or the creation or imagination of alternative worlds. In other words, that agency and criticality still imply some form of *transcendence*, above the here and now of the real. And, that agency, no matter how multifarious or intricately entangled, is what continues to give architecture its critical potential.

A better understanding of agency, so we believe, will help us steer away not only from the outright denunciation of (critical) theory, but also from dismissing the proposals that have recently emerged - the 'projective', calls for new political engagement, or the importation of Actor-Network-Theory - no matter how contradictory or premature they may seem.

Rather than doing away with it, the focus on agency in architecture allows us to transcend the notion of criticality as an *a priori* - as if architecture is either critical or not; or as if *these* practices are *entirely* critical, and *those* are not *at all* - or as something that can be evaluated, tested or realised only by following the principles developed from an external viewpoint. Instead, we can now approach criticality as a *question*, and an agenda for further research. Such an agenda would continue to be

challenged by both theory *and* practice, by both earthly accounts speaking through the real *and* by hopeful accounts for things yet to come.

### Notes

1. See: Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, 'Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism', in *Perspecta*, 33 (theme: Mining Autonomy), ed. by Michael Osman, et al. (New Haven: Journal of the Yale School of Architecture, 2002), pp. 72-77; Michael Speaks, 'After Theory', *Architectural Record* (June 2005), pp. 72-75; George Baird, "'Criticality" and Its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine*, 21 (Fall 2004/ Winter 2005), pp. 16-21; Reinhold Martin, 'Critical of What? Toward a Utopian Realism', *Harvard Design Magazine*, 22 (Spring/Summer 2005), pp. 1-5. This debate found reception in Europe with the 2006 conference 'The Projective Landscape' organised by Stylos at TU Delft.
2. See: Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser, and Mark Dorrian (eds.), *Critical Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2007); Véronique Patteeuw, Joachim Declerk and Filip Geers (eds.), *Oase*, 75 (theme: 25 Years of Critical Reflection on Architecture, 2008); <http://www.criticat.fr> [accessed on 15 March 2009]; <http://www.field-journal.org> [accessed on 15 March 2009].
3. For instance: the AHRA (Architectural Humanities Research Association) initiative established in 2003 and its first conference entitled 'Critical Architecture' (2004), and its most recent one entitled 'Agency' (2008); the Architecture Biennale Rotterdam on Power; Conference 'Architecture of the New World Order' (Bauhaus, Weimar 2009). Recent initiatives to revive the architectural project of autonomy resonate with: Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).
4. See: *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 2 (2003); Emily Eakin, 'The Latest Theory Is That Theory Doesn't Matter', *New York Times* (19 April 2003).
5. For instance: Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity*

at large: *Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Spaces* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996); David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Los Angeles, Cal.: California University Press, 2000); Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2002). Frank Moelaert, Arantxa Rodriguez, and Erik Swyngedouw (eds.), *The globalized City: Economic Restructuring and Social Polarization in European Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

6. Bruno Latour and Alben Yaneva, 'Give me a Gun and I will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture', in *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design, Research*, ed. by Reto Geiser (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008), pp. 80-89.
7. Imbroglio was used as the name for the website ([www.imbroglio.be](http://www.imbroglio.be)) related to the 'The loyalties of knowledge' research project, funded by the Belgian Science Policy, and involving amongst others Serge Gutwirth, Isabelle Stengers, and Bruno Latour. It is dedicated to the study of imbroglios of knowledge, institutions, actants and things.
8. Suggested by Scott Lash in this issue, see the article 'Agency and Architecture: How to Be Critical?'