At The Threshold of Critical Architectural Theory: New Possible Solutions…

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to emphasize the breaking points in critical architectural theory which leaded to our today’s hotly debated and unstable environment, and discuss new possible solutions, and thoughts started from 90’s. The ongoing capitalist system, the pragmatic approaches don’t leave space for utopias or representations. There is a shift from the critical architectural theory to new stages which have their roots from high technology, ecology, sustainability, daily life etc. Ethnical, political issues and societal impacts have a great power on this system. As the critical theory once achieved, today’s chaotic environment will find its way inside this fuzziness.

Keywords: architectural theory, critical architecture, projective practice

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays debates about architectural theory mostly focus on post-critical or projective approaches. They indicate a new kind of architectural thinking, but they also represent an open and revealing approach, which the critical architectural theory has lost in its main discourse in recent years.

Deriving from a Neo- Marxist discourse, the critical architecture theory seems to fulfill its task as belonging to an elite culture. As Fisher indicates, the contemporary discourse on architectural theory is now about the relationship between architecture, and power, capital, media [1]. First pragmatism, which challenged architectural arena starting from 90’s, has created many confusions. Than the famous essay ‘Notes around the Doppler Effect’ by Somol and Whiting emerged a second thought about the necessity of liberalizing architecture from all its engagements like globalization, politics, and representations. Instead a relationship between society and capitalism could evoke more interest and also be more useful for the participants, e.g. the users. As the critical theory was actually aimed to liberate critique from history, it is maybe time to reconsider it in changing circumstances. In this frame, new terms, like performance, irresistibility, engagement of society with capitalism, urban concepts, and user’s involvement can be accepted as major forces.

Starting from the 60’s, when the critical theory gains its roots, a chronological trace can lead architects to our worlds’ new problems, to the architects’ role in these new arrangements, and possible solutions. Whether the critical theory will be efficient enough of supplying the demands in a new challenging world will be determined by future predictions, and scenarios.

This study has two objectives. The first one is to make a retrospective of critical architectural theory, and the second is to discuss new possibilities, which can be visible through certain examples.

2. FROM 60’S TO OUR DAYS: A RETROSPECTIVE

Associating architecture with critical theory can be traced back to 60’s. Those years represented a new era, where theoreticians started to spread their ideas through writing, and new institutions were founded; in other words architectural theories were opened to discussion.
Unattached from the history, in its own autonomy, the critical architectural theory has undertaken the responsibility of reflecting the strategies of architecture about power, and economy, strengthening the conditions of architecture, and preparing the society for new possible scenarios…

First study ingenerated with the foundation of ‘Institute of Architectural History’ by Manfredo Tafuri in 1968. It was followed by the publishing of journals within the scope of ‘Institute of Architecture and Urban Design’.

The theory journal ‘Opposition’ started in 1973, and published 26 issues until 1984, where it went off publishing; whereas, ‘October’ starting in 1976, is still continuing.

At the same period, ‘Intentions in Architecture’ written by Christian Norberg Schulz in 1965; Aldo Rossi’s ‘The Architecture of the City’, Robert Venturi’s ‘Complexity and Contradictions in Architecture’, again his book ‘Learning from Las Vegas’ written together with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour in 1972, and finally Charles Jencks’ ‘The Language of Postmodern Architecture’ published in 1977, were books placing emphasis on theory. These books and especially journals opened a new perspective in architectural criticism and theory.

Of course, besides these journals and books, there were other developments, which showed themselves mostly in differentiated architectural designs in practice. In 1969 five architects declared themselves as ‘being involved’ in this discrepancy. Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk and Richard Meier known as ‘New Yorker Five’ in architectural circles, indicated the possibility of converting forms into signs. This was maybe the first uprising voice against postmodern architecture. In between the question ‘Back to Modernism?’, these architects, calling themselves as ‘Whites’ cared about the meaning, and believed in the representation of every single piece of form as signs. As architectural history and theory both passing an unsteady period, if it comes to ‘Whites’, ‘Grey’s’ come to the scene, who were the protagonists of conservative postmodernism. The declaration of acceptance of the conservative and traditional approach to architecture by the ‘Greys’ polarized the environment, which resulted in a pluralistic architecture; and architectural theory kept this polarisation on the agenda for a very long period.

70’s were hard times for America. While the private sector was complaining of inflation and high interest rates, the construction of public buildings was stopped due to the cutting of governmental support. There was less need for architects, but no decrease in number of graduates. In such a time the chance of architects with more aesthetic was higher [2]. In August 1976 Brian Brace prepared a special issue for l’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui named ‘New York in White and Grey’. In this special issue ‘The Ashes of Jefferson’ by Tafuri and ‘Grey Architecture as Post-Modernism’ by Robert Stern were put on the debate [3].

By the end of 70’s as postmodern architectural theories embraced the chaotic structure, 80’s represented a transition to a more transparent era.

The rebellious movement of postmodern architecture started to calm down, and tried to clarify its ideology. As the traces of conservative postmodern architecture was visible everywhere, the culture / architecture relation dominated the environment. While theoreticians like Jameson, Huyssen, and Harvey found the cultural tendencies in architecture more arguable, Jameson’s book ‘Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’ published in 1984, took the discussions a step forward. The war between ‘Whites and Grays’ shifted to another area between culture, capital and architecture [4].

As the 80’s passed, a new turn came into the debate: The exhibition in MOMA opened up in 1988 was called ‘Deconstructivist Architecture’. Gehry, Hadid, Koolhaas, Coop Himmelblau, Eisenman, Libeskind and Tschumi contributed to this exhibition. This was a new page in architecture and theory. Kate Nesbitt presented this exhibition and this era as being the new topic of a new discussion. In her words, it seemed that deconstructivism served as a stylistic label to exhibit some provocative work that may not have had much in common intellectually [5].

1990’s were almost a delirium stage for the architects. The rise of capitalist movement was of course the significant point. At the same time the representative role of architecture, its relation to history and critical theory were also put into the debate platform. The most challenging part of this discussion was the representation of the architectural product depending on the circumstances of the dominant power. These circumstances were mostly visible in form of power structures, societal conditions, and prejudgement. The critical theory evaluated the object according to the chosen circumstance of the designer.

In those years where the hectic debates about architectural theory continue, ‘Assemblage’ and ‘ANY’ became the common ground for the theoreticians. Assemblage in its short introduction in October 1986 presented itself as a journal of architecture, which is in a position to intervene. The founders of the journal declared that commercial, professional magazines have resigned themselves to pressures for the oversimplification of issues and easy consumption, reducing architecture to matters of taste and fashion. So, they decided to motivate and maintain a renewed critical consciousness of architecture and design, one that acknowledges the reciprocity between culture and design, between theory and material reality [6]. Indeed, during these 14 years they did exactly what they promised, which is why the termination of the publishing aroused many questions in architectural environment, whether theory is at the end, or what? As the new century started up with ‘theories after theories’ the editors Hays and Kennedy obliged to make an announcement that it has nothing to do with it, but they also confessed that this new transitional moment means that theoretical activity achieves a new excitement and urgency [7].

At the same time when also ANY terminated the publishing, urgent attempts were made to find a way out. The question whether theory really reached a ‘cul de sac’ remained unanswered until the book ‘Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995’ edited by Kate Nesbitt is published in 1996. The book contained 14 chapters, with the contributions of architects like Venturi,
Eisenman, Graves, Tschumi, Koolhaas and theoreticians like Gandelsonas, Tafuri, Colquhoun, and Frampton.

Editor Nesbitt summarized all the chapters in her 67 pages long introduction part. As the headlines were varied from feminism to nature, from politics and ethics to tradition, or from typology to transformation, they all had intention to evaluate the critical theory within 30 years period [8]. Besides showing the problematic points, and bringing alternative solutions, these articles contributed a special meaning for showing the problematic environment of architecture, while stepping by a new century.

3. NEW POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AGAINST CRITICAL ARCHITECTURAL THEORY.

“All of us, Andy Warhol famously said, have the possibility of fifteen minutes of fame, which we may read as the temptation of the Mephistophelian media. What happens to our amor, the discipline of architecture? Does architecture suffer the same fate as Dr. Faust’s lover?” [9].

The critical architectural theory was discussed for many years. The power integrated to the architecture by the architects evoked our interest, and at the same time draw all attention to the power wars and dominant structure. In such a case it was impossible to find a bound between the architectural object and the user. This problem was primarily detected in 90’s, and was assumed to be the right time for reviewing the critical theory. The theories apart from the critical theory were mostly developed outside United States. This was inevitable because of the disputative positions of Tafuri and Eisenman.

The first debates started in 1999, when Francesco dal Co indicated, that theory, being neither project, nor history, nor criticism, should occupy the place where those three disciplines crossed. That was where architects might be questioned about the sense of their activity, being interrogated on the meaning and the ways of architectural practice [10].

The necessity of the theory to retreat was then mentioned in the article of Somol and Whiting. ‘Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism’ was published in Perspectives in 2002; and re-published in the most spoken book ‘Constructing a New Agenda, Architectural Theory 1993-2009’ in 2010 [11]. Somol and Whiting believed that disciplinarity has been absorbed and exhausted by the project of criticality, and it is time for searching new alternatives. While rejecting the traditional methods of critical theory, they suggested a new thought, a new way of thinking, called ‘projective practice’. According to this new approach rather than isolating a singular autonomy they wanted to concentrate on the effects and exchanges of architecture’s inherent multiplicities: material, program, writing, atmosphere, form, technologies, economics, etc. It is important to underscore that this multiplying of contingencies differs greatly from the more dilute notion of interdisciplinarity, which seeks to legitimize architecture through an external measuring [12].

The common point of these statements is that they were directing to a new definition of designing, or new creation of theories. It was times when mostly capitalism, technological development, and pragmatism were dominating the world. The contribution to this new debate was high. In spring of 2003, the magazine that staged that debate, Critical Inquiry, again questioned the future of theory and criticism. The editor, W. J. T. Mitchell, asked ‘what can the relatively weak power of critical theory do in such a crisis?’, and was it true that the great era of theory is now behind us and that we have now entered a period of timidity, backfilling, and (at best) empirical accumulation? [13].

As the discussions continued in a heated debate, the major confrontation was ingenerated between Reinhold Martin and George Baird. In his article ‘Criticality and Its Discontents’, published in 2004, Baird clearly positioned himself as being against projective practice, by saying: “…Most fundamentally, in my view, it is clear that a new projective architecture will not be able to be developed in the absence of a supporting body of projective theory. Without it, I predict that this new architecture will devolve to the ‘merely’ pragmatic, and to the ‘merely’ decorative, with astonishing speed” [14].

After a short while, Martin responded to this article. He was calling these kind of attempts as ‘erecting straw figures’... At the risk of erecting yet another straw figure that tramples on the subtleties of Baird’s analysis, it might be fair to characterize such practices, variously named “post-critical” or “projective,” as sharing a commitment to an affect-driven, non-oppositional, nonresistant, non-dissenting, and therefore non-utopian form of architectural production [15].

This discussion created parties for and against projective practice, or more precisely, for critical theory. But the main question was still on the table. If there is a need for a new order, how will it be organized? At that point Schaefer brought a solution as proposing a theory after (after-theory) that, like practice, can be developed, changed, and modified overtime, not unlike a scientific hypothesis [16]. Her opinion is a sign for a mature mind of architecture, and she also questioned the manners and expectations were changing. Cultural changes were effecting production, and the relation between technology and humanities. The after war society with its vivid and hopeful expectation didn’t exist anymore. Now it was about keeping the individual under control and manipulate him to consume. This was predicted long ago by Horkheimer and Adorno. They described this triangle between consumption, culture, and mass production as ‘culture industry’ [17].

Pragmatism was the consequence of these developments, and used very effectively by Koolhaas. He appeared as a designer in such a period, and he was not reacting against the new order of capitalist system; he even thought that the system is very utilizable. In his thoughts a different architectural set up was visible: Designing and building are totally different issues!

In 1996 Koolhaas established the parallel “think tank” of the architecture media office (AMO), which was dedicated to design consulting, branding, media, politics, arts, exhibitions, publishing, graphic design, and a loosely defined commitment to “research”. Thus, in this rare instant, the “business” of architecture was expanded to include a mode of architectural thinking separated from the actual making of building [18].

Koolhaas’s ability to combine building scale with urban scale made him special in the profession. A more pure,
nature friendly, and material oriented architecture with a minimalistic spirit was becoming the current issue. This awareness together with high information technology was giving rise to a post-critical era, and Koolhaas and his company OMA were the pioneers of this new thought.

His approach to liberalize architectural thinking from practice became the milestones of today’s ‘after theory’ thoughts. This kind of architecture was more than a ‘product’ depending on the context. It was more a new way of liberalization. In 1999 during an interview with Sarah Whiting, Koolhaas declared his views: “We have discovered that there are a number of clients who want architectural thinking but not necessarily building. These clients are either dealing with very long term strategies that may eventually lead to something built, or they may be including issues of identity - of which building is only a major or even a minor part. It allows to abandon the passive stance of the architect” [19].

But, the main question still stands on the table: If the critical theory is now at the parting of the ways, what will be new definitions, new concepts, and the designs visualizing these concepts?

The main concern of the 21st century was to deal with the forthcoming possible scenarios and a new search for alternative suggestions. The termination of the term ‘postmodern’ was not articulated, but the wind blowing in the air could be felt in every field. In 2011 an exhibition called ‘Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970 – 1990’ was opened in London. This exhibition raised many questions especially about the real definition of postmodernism. At this point Martin Roth, the director of the museum explained the main intention of the exhibition as enlightening the new generation about the very fragmented and dramatic era of both art and design history [20]. Sending postmodernism to the dusty pages of history was not the overall aim of the exhibition, but still it succeeded to gain the adjective of something which should be stepped away of, and old fashioned. Now there was an urgent need for new perspectives or even theories.

Actually, the definition of Somol and Whiting with “projective practice” opened a new horizon in architecture. This definition can be more clarified with Fischer’s reference to psychology. Fischer describes this unintentional notion of projective deriving from psychoanalysis and refers to the projection (imaging technique) of internal wishes onto external objects or persons. In this regard it is consequent for Somol & Whiting to align projective with the psychological, perceptive and sensual qualities of architectural space experienced by the observer, an agenda they share with Sylvia Lavin’s architecture of the mood [21]. It is not very clear which features the projective practice should have, and which buildings can be classified and labeled as being ‘projective’. Besides, the critical issue is not about classification, but it’s about clarifying the new relationship between architectural space and the user.

Obviously the very essential approach of Somol and Whiting was a good stance against the capitalist ideology, and in the frame of a post-Marxist ideology it created a kind of awareness. But, is architecture capable enough re-construct the world alone, or what happens if the architecture is so strongly bounded to its traditional rules, like context, place...

Latour and Yaneva have foreseen this new situation years ago. They describe the advantages of taking a gull-in-flight view of buildings where that context could be done away with. When they refer to the phrase ‘Context stinks’ as Koolhaas so famously said, they knew that it stinks only because it stays in place too long and ends up rotting. And of course every new project modifies all the elements that tries to contextualize it [22].

It’s the same with Eisenman’s famous term ‘event’, an environment expelled from its static condition. Eisenman strongly advocates that architecture can no longer be bound by the static conditions of space and place. Architecture must deal with new conditions like the ‘event’. Eisenman’s Rebstock Park shifts the notion of figure / ground to one of assumed Deleuzian folding [23].

Until 2000 postmodernism was dominating the architectural environment within certain rules and traditions. Representation and language were best tools of the architect. But today our society has reached another level. This position gives the user the right to demand all possibilities of green architecture, daily life with best moments, and computer technologies. As Jarzombec states, new urbanism, green architecture, and even advanced computation, are all part of our brave new age in which criticality is shaped not by concepts like resistance and novelty but by the need to solve pressing and large-scale communal, ethical, corporate, computational, and global problems [24].

As postmodern theory emphasizes the importance of daily life, one of the solutions might be to concentrate on the “moment”, when the scene is very clear. This can be the next topic of forthcoming debates after projective practice is truly absorbed and prepared to a paradigm shift. Bhattacharya points to a new way of the notion of “everyday life” developed by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre and by cultural theorist Michel de Certeau [25]. It’s now to time to seize the moment within the real life, not in the abstract senses of architecture.

In a sense it should be a kind of architecture, which can be transforming, accelerating, self-cooling, but ambitious enough to deal with the varying and incalculable effects of daily life. As the very creative definition of Connah, it is time for a “pulp architecture”, which does not takes its influences from the star architects, but programmed by film, street culture, art, play, terror, surveillance, the hacker ethic and new media [26].

When we look today’s world more precisely, we can see: The traces of cold war are almost invisible in the world; the neoliberal approach is dominating the economies. At this point architecture is seen as a rescue tool. This new world was over loaded with all kind of technology, computing systems, communication tools, and media services, that it is an un-veridical bound of art and economy under the umbrella of economy. So, there should be some attempts to change the limits of architecture.

Even the spirit of 68’s is lost; the reality of never finding it back is a fact; and there are some other issues which occupy the agenda in a serious manner, like the growth
of world population, pollution, loosing natural resources, and the over-contribution of the technology to the daily life. Designing big scale buildings, which are abstracted from the environment, should be considered as one of the key factors to be re-evaluated in the frame of new world, and new user’s point of view.

In this frame Koolhaas’s passion to embrace the whole world with a new architectural spirit can be counted as a good starting point. What promising will be a shift in architecture system, which includes daily life with strong bounds to the user. This bound can be described in some examples.

With the CCTV building Koolhaas indicates this necessity and the right timing. As Dunham-Jones describes, CCTV is a spectacular object that is simultaneously rational and irrational, exuberant and withdrawn, monumental and unstable. But, sadly, the one contradiction it doesn’t resolve is the choice between icon-making and city-making. It ends up rebranding architecture and avant-gardism in service to the society of the spectacle rather than to the culture of congestion [27].

Figure 1. CCTV’s enigmatic form

In 2015 Catherina Shaw interviewed Koolhaas. During this very sincere conversation Koolhaas explained his new stance in profession. Exaggerating, dealing with vast and sublime objects was past issues. With the opening of the Fondazione Prada art gallery Koolhaas and his company OMA showed a totally different approach to architecture, as they abandoned the clichés of recent architecture. In his words, he was bored and irritated. “…For a couple of years now, I have been... well, I don’t know what the best word is, but it is somewhere between bored and irritated, by the current course of architecture forcing people to be extravagant even if they don’t want or need that. I think there is a fatigue with “originality” now and an interest in the modesty of an artist. We discovered that—in terms of size, intimacy, and also materials, existing architecture has so many conditions that, even if we wanted to, we couldn’t reproduce any more. It would be too expensive, and there are so many invisible rules now that didn’t exist before…” [28].

Koolhaas’s new discourse is actually a prediction for the new architectural perspective. Buildings with the same look, and overdosed technological attributes do not address to the people anymore. By means of new computer technologies, and high CAD programs all buildings look the same. Like being cloned, these buildings, are either designs of star architects or of those who emulate those. The post critical terms or the well-intentioned phrases of projective practice remain incapable. Especially the term “from hot to cool” from the projective practice approach should be developed. In this new world, a new addition to this concept might be sustained as “from cool to instant”. In an interview with Perspecta magazine in 2010 Eisenman reveals a similar veracity. While talking about the taboos of architecture Eisenman refers to the problem of social housing and the reasons why such a big problem is not solved, and adds that Pritzker prize should go to someone who deals with social responsibility and community action [29]. This wish comes true after 6 years. In 2016 this prize is awarded to Alejandro Aravena, an architect from Santiago Chile. Aravena’s works became the main subject of architectural debates especially with his low income housing projects. The main difference of his projects is delivering the houses half completed, but affordable, instead full but unaffordable houses. While his projects include certain and basic principles of architecture, his actual intention is to liberate architecture from its contemporary rules and unwritten restrictions.
Figure 2. Quinta Monroy housing by Alejandro Aravena half completed

Figure 3. Quinta Monroy houses after the users finish their homes

Figure 4. The interior of Quinta Monroy houses
With Sarkis’s interpretation, he wants his publics to be engaged, he finds in architecture the power to disengage them from their mundane wants and to indulge them in the fulfillment of their basic needs. As much as he speaks to the political instrumentality of architecture, he ultimately wants to empower architecture to project a world outside of politics and out of time [30]. At this moment the topic turns back to the question of what architecture is, how the architect is responsible for the well-being of the profession. Today we live under two main realities: Everything is too much, and the war is everywhere...the people need radical precautions. We cannot put same principles again and again on the table. Architecture can easily be called death in certain aspects. It was once tried when Pruitt – Igoe was demolished in 1972; then in 90’s the death of autonomy was on the agenda, now we are talking about the death of cities, but this time in a literal way... The world is chaotic enough with its wars, over-population and decreased natural resources. We need clarification, instant solutions a way out. This way out can be easy, naïve and pure, without too much promises, without overvaluation. As Mc Morrough says, architecture might have promised too much. Contemporary architects have become educated in a context of hyper-articulated theoretical discourses [31]. As the architects become aware of this situation, recently a touch for this sensing also became visible. An exhibition called ‘Creation from Catastrophe- how Architecture rebuilds Communities’ is opened in London in January 2016. The exhibition explores the varying and sometimes magical ways that cities and communities have been re-imagined in the aftermath of disasters. It considers the evolving relationship between man, architecture and nature and asks whether we are now facing a paradigm shift in how we live and build in the 21st century [32].

4. CONCLUSION

Will there even be architects in thirty years? This is a question that no other generation has ever had to consider. The demand for design-and-design- in our over-engineered, over mediated world is both enormous and pervasive, yet the majority of architects still respond to it with the medieval language of the stoic autonomous building [33]. Right here this question is very meaningful. Of course there will be architects forever. But some critical points should be foreseen adapted to the circumstances and perceived in a crystal clear way. One of these circumstances is societal conditions. And when it comes to that as Schrijver says, most architects hold strong views on societal issues. Many architects enter into dialogue with their client, questioning their wishes, probing the boundaries of the project brief. They have a very strong sense of what they can contribute to the world [34]. The primarily task of the architect should be to liberalize himself from creating something chaotic, difficult, fragmented, and over-attractive. The period of overuse should come to an end, including history. When we go back to the modern period, the neglection of history was somehow ended up in a respectful position compared to the abused use of postmodernism. At the first quarter of the 21st century, the profession should get along with the history in a more respectful manner. As Vidler argues, we might see postmodernism as a special moment in posthistoire thought or, better, as a special case of posthistoire thought in architectural terms [35]. This should be the second step to be left behind: accepting postmodernism itself as history. The third fact is the acceptance of the reality that the denotative functions of the buildings can be transformed in a recycling daily life into other realities, which might be new and unexpected, like creating pure and simple architectural spaces, where even the comfort zone of context is not low. Establishing a melting point of theory and practice is crucial. As well as Aravena’s housing designs are in a small scale, but the contribution to the discipline might be expected in a higher volume. Yaneva questions the key question of architects for today as a detachment. The key question for architects today is no longer how to accommodate program into a building and make form follows function, but rather how to program buildings that once it is detached from functional requirements and cultural references, it operates as a quasi-autonomous architectural machine that mediates experience and practices [36]. And at last, while calling for new principles, and the projection of new forms [37] the architect should feel the magical influence of silence observer profoundly … Not too long, but a certain period will definitely serve for the sake of the discipline.

REFERENCES


FIGURES
Figure 1. CCTV’s enigmatic form. Photograph: Phillip Jones, 2012 (Dunham–Jones, 2014).
Figure 2,3,4 Quinta Monroy housing by Alejandro Aravena. Photograph: Christobal Palma / Estudio Palma Courtesy of ELEMENTAL, Tadeus Jalocha, retrieved from http://www.archdaily.com/10775/quinta-monroy-elemental, 01.02.2016.