Visuality and Vision in the Teaching of Architecture
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While architectural monographs usually are on the top of the bestseller lists of architectural bookstores, recent successful publications such as *The Projective Cast* by Robin Evans, *The Space of Appearance* by George Baird or *Studies in Tectonic Culture* by Kenneth Frampton deal with issues of architectural theory. In February, the Wood Auditorium of Columbia University was bustling with students interested in a discussion of Frampton’s book. The debate focused on issues such as “art-form” and “core-form,” or the relation of construction and cladding in architecture, which would have hardly generated any attention a few years ago, except for a narrow circle of scholars. What explains this sudden interest in the theories of nineteenth-century architects like Carl Bötticher or Gottfried Semper? Is it just the impact of the media success of architects, who are more versed in the marketing of their ideologies than in design? Or is it the recognition that if architecture wants to regain its social relevance, architects have to understand the ways it communicates? The changing interpretational schemes of traditional architectural history, however, are telling us more about the interpreter and the context than about the buildings.

The call for a greater role for theory in architectural education is urgent. But are the hopes and expectations regarding theory-aided design realistic? Is it chance that since Semper’s *Der Stil* no attempt has been made to write a comprehensive theory of architecture? Semper’s
ulrich_tarter_1971, fiction


2. Andreas Papadakis, Cathrine Cooke, Andrew Benjamin eds, Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume, 1970, Rizzoli, New York; Catherine Cooke, Russian Precursors

magnum opus itself remained unfinished. Not only unfinished, it was misunderstood by following generations who read it through their fundamentally different frame of interpretation. What architects of our century called theory was formatted for quick consumption and maximum effect. The manifesto is the characteristic genre – Ulrich Conrads could easily compile the most important documents of modern architecture in a slim volume. The most memorable architectural programs became the soundbites, preferably three words such as “form follows function” or “less is more.”

In architectural history, buildings and figures in time are connected by trajectories, frequently depicted like leaves, twigs, branches, trunks and roots of an imaginary tree. Buildings such as Gehry’s Vitra building are supposed to be close to us, while Richardson’s Trinity church is far away. We can reach it from recent California architecture only via a Schindler-Wright-Sullivan itinerary. In reality Trinity church is closer to us than the Vitra museum, certainly geographically, but for many, also in an intellectual sense. The latter has a strong material presence, and we can enter it whenever we happen to be on Copley Square, while the other only exists as the memory of a magazine illustration. Although even deconstructivists seem to need the ennobling effect of the proper family tree (see the references to Tatlin and Chernikhov in the exhibition catalogues), the evolutionary tree of architectural history is a fiction itself.

Architectural history is generally regarded as a particular field of art history, using the same philosophical assumptions and methodologies. However, the disregard for the specificity of architecture, for its direct ties to everyday life and technology, frequently results in false conclusions. The definition of the avant-garde as an art movement critical of the separation of bourgeois art from the practice of everyday life certainly can not be directly applied to architecture.

Architectural history writing today is dominated by the intention to bolster certain intellectual positions. Whether these are advanced as a critique of structures of domination (based on gender, class relations, nationality) or the destruction of certain assumptions of traditional historiography, historians produced an enormous ideological superstructure. By disregarding information that does not fit into the picture, buildings and architects are exploited as mere evidence for a preconceived thesis. Justified by the poststructuralist skepticism in judgements based on
“truth,” in the workshops of architectural historiography any meaning can be installed in a given architectural form. Many architects and historians of architecture reject the historical method altogether, and argue instead for a poetic description guided by the visual experience of architecture, by the archeology of the “surgical eye.”

Although “critiquing” modernist positions is still an entertaining pastime of seminars, the discomfort with the relatively easily applicable recipes is growing. Students of art history learned to regard the art object as the signifier of reality and proceed from here to the signified. The thinking of architectural students usually moves from the architectural object, as a part of reality, toward the questions of its production. This approach, which probably could be called “pragmatic” in a wider sense, could be used to outline a program for an object-based architectural theory.

This theory would look at the building not as the representation of an idea, or the form of a content to be deciphered, but would try to reconstruct how it was produced. Without first describing the specific political, cultural, economical constellation of the time, we would be interested in the concrete decisions made by the architect, those which resulted in the given architectural solution. It is not the conventions of style of the period in question which would interest us, but how and why these conventions were accepted or refused in the specific case, whether and how a problem was recognized and formulated. This approach implies that we do not take for granted that architecture is defined by the cultural context, but rather are interested exactly in the different possibilities of the architects to evaluate and to accept or to reject the general approach of the conventions and norms of his time. What were the margins of freedom in a given case? How

Vitra Design Museum with a Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen sculpture in foreground.
were these margins explored as the project developed from the first sketch to the executed building? These are questions whose exploration would be very fruitful for design students.

An architectural “vision” is a utopia, the anticipation of something that does not yet exist. It is easy for us today to see the architecture of Otto Wagner or Adolf Loos as early examples of a modern language. But around 1900 such buildings were the “seeds of time,” to paraphrase Fredric Jameson. In their time, they appeared as mutations, as their design required a radically new way of imagination. How is it possible, that in a social environment with one economy, one dominant culture, a different reality can take shape in architecture? One of the most important tasks of architectural theory is to answer this question by analyzing the outstanding achievements, unimimidated by accusations of a masterwork-centered “elitism.”

We need to reject the notion that the question of quality should remain open, since such judgements are not based on truth. The quality of the architectural solution depends to a great degree on the readiness to explore the margins of freedom and to risk a jump into the unknown.

Quality can be discussed, of course, also in terms of the material appearance of the work which is too often overlooked when we analyze architecture. Moral concepts such as the “truth to material” need to be critically analyzed. Our recent understanding of architecture still depends on hierarchies of material values in an idealistic system. Material is appreciated as representative of certain qualities (for instance, the ruggedness of the granite, the
hand-made appearance of the brick, the clarity of the glass), rather than the physical qualities themselves. Eventually, a material such as a roughly hewn stone plinth contrasted to the smooth surface of the facade is shaped to show a primitive, more “earthen” state, because it has to represent a subordinated, lower step within the entity of the artwork. Materials became during the history of architecture loaded with meanings. Today we are no longer aware of these meanings, and their conscious “reading” has turned into a more direct appreciation of the sensuality of material surfaces, both natural and industrial.

The issue of materials is only one, albeit important, area for architectural theory. Technology, anthropology, the architectural profession itself (including education), domesticity and daily life are further issues. What matters is the question what architecture can be if it will start anew the interrupted dialogues with science, art and first of all, with society. Only an architectural theory that is anchored in the body of buildings could help to resist the dissolution of architecture in pure visuality or in technological procedures.

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