

THE ARCHITECTURE(S) OF THE AMPERSAND

Mission Statement

BORDERS & TERRITORIES

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1 Introduction

How can an architectural research program nowadays operate in a discursive field that Manfredo Tafuri had, at one point, described as a ‘no man’s land, the boundaries of which are forever shifting’? How can one possibly, in an age of increased fragmentary orientation and specialization, define an architectural research program of which the intent and ambition is to break new theoretical ground and to introduce new techniques and methods of design intrinsically connected to this theoretical framework. Where Tafuri still had considerable difficulty with the ‘hotchpotch’ of architectural production and the fragmentary state of the discipline in his era, any current attempt at an architectural discursive act(ion) has long accepted the un-orderly state of contemporary architectural research practices, even though attempts at an occasional ‘rappèl a l’ordre’ resurface in international or local debates.

Nowadays it is clear that contemporary architectural research cannot be reduced to a singular trajectory of thought and analysis, just as the practice of architectural design is not founded on a singular theoretical structure, nor that spatial analysis is confined to one disciplinary form or that the understanding of an architectural object could be limited to one all-encompassing idea. It would seem that, in short, within the general contemporary ‘hotchpotch’ of approaches and positions, it is apparent that any architectural research program nowadays only makes sense when one attempts, as any striving towards a ‘research program’ would indicate, to structure an implied ‘discursive whole’ based on the incorporation of the diversification of architectural knowledge, tools and methods.

2 Architecture and the Problem of Discipline

The specific task Tafuri had set himself was to properly organize and dissect architectural historical material for its own sake. This historical material, in total fact actually the larger discursive tradition of architecture, was not to be purposely investigated for contemporary architectural design practices themselves, in other words not to try to make historical material operational, but to be able to dissect any architectural statement towards an understanding of its

cultural context (or setting) and towards a clarification of its embedded meaning(s). This 'tendency' Tafuri had attempted to clarify was, naturally, not an isolated case, but formed one of the more ambitious endeavors at the time. Other attempts to make sense of the debris caused by the ongoing societal, scientific and economic developments and upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, combined by an emerging historical awareness, gave rise to a great variety of architectural and urban theories that attempted to, still, provide for an all-encompassing theory of architecture. During this period, however, the problematic nature of such endeavors was clearly visible, if only in hindsight. Though not consciously acknowledged, the positions in this period are characterized by their great emphasis on the limitation of scope, the fragmentation of the experience of the city, certain relativisms towards issues of 'truth', as well as an awareness of the claimed 'bankruptcy of the meta-narrations' in historiography.

This period of intense reconsideration of the specific knowledge and tools of architecture was followed, during the 1980s, by the emergence of deconstruction or, more exponentially, the expanded discursive interest in the fields outside architecture. The aftereffect of two decades of intense study of architecture's rich history, which established a clear core (and an assumed autonomy) of the architectural discipline, was the infection of the profession with other disciplines. Cross-, trans- and multi-disciplinary investigations allowed for an assessment of the outer edges of the architectural discipline, which not only clarified the position of the architectural discipline in the larger field of discursive practices, but also explored, and thus opened, the discourse to the shared territories of disciplinary action. Simultaneously, or perhaps even coming out of these explorations, is the emergence of 'research' as a separate and distinctive field of operation within architecture (next to design, theory, history and criticism).

3 Theory versus Research

Starting with Vitruvius's ten books on architecture, the historical origin of architectural theory is located in the great tradition of architectural treatise writing. Through the written and drawn accounts of a treatise, architectural and building practices are extended to include at least two distinctive activities, namely the prescriptive gathering and systemized ordering of knowledge, and the possibility of debate and discussion of the inherent logic and meaning of these practices. Architectural theory, at least until the 18th century, maintained and cultivated this prescriptive character by insisting on its basic objective to provide for a systematic body of knowledge, combined with a set of instructions that 'ground' architectural design. During the Enlightenment, the architectural treatise gained more precision through the attempt to provide for the scientific basis of architecture based on the principles of reason. Still, in all these cases, theory was considered to be the proper means to develop such a consistent way of thinking and working in architecture. In the course of time, however, theory started to increasingly emphasize its reflective role, i.e. the second category mentioned previously, and transformed into architectural criticism.

In addition, architectural discourse has become increasingly aware of the exponential growth of its possible tasks. This increase in tasks has obviously been a result of the industrial revolution and the emergence of capitalism, and as a result have meant that the original set of instructions defined in the history of architectural theory, which addressed a rather limited amount of possible architectural projects, no longer dealt with the entire range of (future) possible architectural action and, therefore, production. Theory had become rather ill-equipped to still provide for a systematic body of knowledge in a period during which a substantial

'division of labor' occurred. Furthermore, since the tasks of the architect were broadened, and even made explicitly open and flexible to allow for adjustments based on the logic of the market-economy, theory could no longer properly anticipate the architect's production a-priori, but had rather to approximate these. As a result, and especially in recent decades, research has become an alternative to theory in providing another, distinct, rather specific and almost unrelated, set of knowledge and instruments informing architectural production.

What is currently high on the agenda in this contemporary engagement with research is the elaboration of its role in relation to the architectural design project. A point of obvious critique when assessing these efforts is that the specific prescriptive role that was played out in architectural theory previously, is not very specifically elaborated upon in contemporary architectural research. This omission, or absence of clarification, about the role research has in a design process needs to be addressed. Nowadays, research is specifically used to describe the contextual preconditions of an architectural project: it sketches out the social, political and economic state of affairs related to a specific location; it addresses the specific types of knowledge coming out of these investigations; but it hardly ever addresses the way this knowledge is instrumentalized, conceptualized or made operational within an architectural design process. In other words, how forms of contextual analysis (and context is to be understood, here, in the direct and indirect sense of cultural, intellectual and/or spatial context), influence the process of architectural design.

4 Architecture and the Problem of the Contemporary City

The so-called 'problem' of the contemporary city falls somewhat in line with the changed role of the architect in modernized times. Not only the activities of the architect have expanded and diversified, also his field of operation has diversified and multiplied. Since its emergence, the modern metropolis has evoked an impressive array of artistic and architectural responses, based mostly on the profound experiences of condensed space. In the last couple of decades, however, spatial experiences of the city have started to be described by using theories taken from the exact sciences (for instance chaos or catastrophe theory), and by implementing an equivalent terminology (using words such as complexity, network, multiplicity, topology and instability). This terminology marks the transition that has taken place in reflections on the urban context of architectural production, namely the shift from descriptions of the city as an undiversified space of densification, to descriptions that emphasize the city as a field of intensities and differentiations. As such, the contemporary city has become a territorial entity, circumscribed by networks of relationships and ecologies.

This revised interest in the city is precursed by the American deliriums found in the early 1970s. Both Boyarski, Banham and Venturi/Scott Brown/Izenour were the first to acknowledge and bring forward 'the contemporary city' as a concrete and 'real' subject of architectural investigation. Chicago, Los Angeles and Las Vegas are the subsequent first three examples where the characteristics and specificities of 'a' particular city were considered indicative towards a larger discursive understanding in architecture. The city as factual and real entity could potentially have certain properties that one can distill and project forward as basic principles of a contemporary architectural focus. Kooolhaas had understood this probably the clearest, not only because of the retro-active manifesto of Manhattan he pleaded for within a few years after the Learning from Las Vegas manifesto, but especially given the fact that his investigations of New York have remained a blue-print for constructing a similar, journalistic theoretical manifesto, to

be followed, or made into a specific methodology, with his fascinations with Atlanta, Lagos, and the Chinese/Asian generic city.

Surely, one of the contradictions that came out of this period is the fact that the city as a whole is 'processed' towards a thematic proclamation, ignoring any kind of differentiation embedded within this city itself. The contradiction in this is located in the fact that the end of the meta-narrations of post-modernity should have resulted in the clear conclusion of the impossibility of such an endeavor. On the contrary though, Koolhaas's emblematic role in sublimating the general tendencies of New York in the 20th century or Atlanta in the 21st, meant a simplification beyond reason when describing the city as a real model. On the other end of the spectrum, one can position for instance the work of the Situationists and be perplexed by their fragmentary understanding of the city which is not only being made explicit but is almost 'forced upon' the city. The Situationists refusal to consider the city as a consistent whole can be retraced in, for instance, *The Naked City*, which not only forcefully dissects the city in smaller bits and pieces but transfigures it by detaching the parts that are spatially connected in order to arrive at an understanding of the city that offers a set of instructions of how to operate, maneuver and/or live in it.

5 Research versus Design

The general tendencies sketched thus far, namely the discursive developments towards increasingly multi-disciplinary perspectives on architectural issues and activities; the need for overcoming the differences between spatial analysis (i.e. research) and architectural design; and the inexhaustible and in fact ever-expanding relationship of architecture with its urban and territorial context, converge in the 'Borders & Territories' (B&T) research program. The need to address the expanding range of architectural production as well as the inherent complexities of the urban and territorial fields in which architecture nowadays operates, focuses the attention of contemporary research in architecture on the changing ways architectural production is conceived and perceived. The consequences of this changed perspective are rather extreme, as a radical reconsideration is required with respect to [1] the employed techniques of design and spatial analysis, [2] the additional and related ways of understanding, interpreting, conceiving and representing architectural construct and [3] the theories with which the architectural object is understood (i.e. spatial models). In this discursive constellation, the sets of relationships that can be constructed between these three modalities become the primary points of attention. The diversity in modes of expression, which Tafuri considered problematic, consequently turns into an appreciation of diversity. The heterogeneity that fundamentally lies at the basis of this intent includes the multiplicity of ideas that are not limited to the architectural discipline only, but should be related to other discursive debates as well. The 'border condition' of the B&T program thus also implies a considerate elaboration of the limit of the discipline, making this research speculative and challenging, as a particular kind of decentering or disorientation is inevitable within this framework (at least if one were aiming at changing the orientation of the architectural discipline).

Within the B&T research program, the difficult, non-apparent yet intrinsic relationship between context and architectural construct is investigated along several lines of inquiry. The main emphasis in each of these inquiry lines is the attempt to counteract, or balance out, the measuring of the territory with the mapping of the border and to relate both aspects of

contextual consideration to the architectural imaginary. Additionally, beside these conceptual considerations of the relationship of spatial context ('territory') and architectural construct ('border'), the B&T research focuses attention on instrumental and operational ways of developing, elaborating, experimenting and testing this relationship. The tools used to analyze a context through spatial categories (be it cartographic, textual, digital, or otherwise) are related to the methods used during architectural design acts and processes. In each case, the undeniable relevance of a plurality of investigative and design approaches, as discussed at the start, is thus incorporated into a research framework that focuses on the relationship between the acts of research and design (hence the term 'design by research' that opened this argument). This type of research would be best termed as 'contextual speculations' as this kind of contextualism within architecture is both speculative and reflexive at the same time. In general, when considering the attempt to relate design to research in architecture, three different categories can be distinguished that describe the relationship between architectural research and architectural design; namely to consider design as a specific form of research, thus considering the act of design in itself as an investigative act; to consider design as object of research, by concentrating on design as methodological process and thus describing design as a reasonably controlled procedural act; or to clarify how research might potentially inform design, thus directly relating spatial investigation to the projective act of design. From the previous remarks, it is clear that the B&T research program is interested mostly in the last category, without simultaneously dismissing the need to remain highly critical of the ways this relationship between research and design has been established in architecture.