

Architecture Set Free

(The Place of Theory Silpakorn 2013)

Architecture set free? Do we know, even in our best thinking, how much we remain in the shadow of those who come from the last century? And if we speak of the intellectual project in architecture from the last century as one of willed prejudice, then what of the prejudice project of this century. It might help us if we could add a coda to the suggestions we previously observed from Witold Gombrowicz. In effect this is an inner enquiry that rightly poses questions back to architecture, its discipline and practice, about theory, its role, its relationship, its fictions as well as its unaltering realities.

But *theory* itself - in all the ways we use it, abuse it and are comforted by it, is a shape shifter. Theory wonderfully writes out our autobiographies in borrowed form and language. It fictionalizes the very best of our engagement in our disciplines, in our theses and concerns. It attracts the best minds for the scholar's journey only sometimes, and sometimes not, to take the return journey. This is the journey out of Virginia Woolf that meets Mrs Dalloway on the way to *The Lighthouse*.

It is not that the *place of theory* is irrelevant in its waves and how it adds up to a room of our own; it is far from irrelevant. But it is what we do with the relevance, the distortions that can feed reality, and how we strike up ideologies like committees which often unwittingly hand down unerring beliefs in a profession in need of re-defining itself 'critically' and once and for all being released from the 20th century.

What Ms Woolf could not write out was probably not worth knowing; what architects have attempted to write out, often with little communication skills, seems to be due to be ignored once more. We had enough 'archo-babble', soliloquies, monologues - what amounts to an elegant if not wanton hijack of thinking - in the last 30 years of the 20th century to sink a battleship. So much so, that if we are to talk of theory and its place today, more versions of an archo-babble or critical fictions are not what is needed now.

Yet something continues to intrigue. Why do we not have the convincing confession of architects, educators, critics and practitioners who have written out architecture, who have written such convincing critical fictions out of using, reading, applying or hijacking theory for other ends?

Such a statement may surprise but really can we sit here today and still think that architects are listened to? Was there a moment or period when they were listened to more, or even taken more seriously as agents with a power to shape the world? The 20th century with its movements, thinkers, its modernist and postmodernist shape shifters, monsters and power brokers has never frankly been about communication.

In a century when some of the best ideas and theories about communication were developed, after the semiotic and structuralist impulse, with a towering figure like Marshall McLuhan, or a towering network informational mapper like Edward Tufte, communication has never been uppermost. Does this surprise us when time and again we hear today of the benefit and advances there are for communication through new technologies?

Nor, if we are strictly honest, has the 20th Century been about collaboration even though collaboration might have been considered, along with communication, to be one of the major characteristics of that century. We need only consider the first decade of this century to realize that listening to the other, or others has made little inroad into the politics and practice of architecture.

Might it not then follow that a century with such seductive but shifting allegiance to theory, in all its forms, in so many disciplines and cross-disciplines, that 'theory' itself may have played a major role in the distortions and un-listening of the last century.

It has become acceptable in many schools of architecture to consider the current market condition one of architectural banality. *Theory* has played its role. When *theory* was really 'theory' is a useful cliché. It allows processes to continually hoodwink architect, educator and student into thinking their time now is less than the time then (whenever 'then' was). It goes further: deprived of thinking for the present we are often pulled back and seduced by inescapable programs of the past vision of architecture. This vision scripted by those outside the students' world convinces them that they will never know how to contribute to architecture if they are not let into the hallowed and revered thinking, theories and belief systems of others.

There are at least two reasons why we should at least think this is flawed. Given the role of the 'digital' in almost all our lives, which implies more and more 'immediacy', those who have no way of negotiating theory in the present or negotiating a theory of immediacy will continue to hold back architecture from what it can be this century.

Secondly, 'architecture' still suffers from a position of privilege and arrogance which

lords it over students; the maestro, the star architect, big ass studio, attack dog crits and ego games, militant micro games between historians and theoreticians all potentially turn out talented mimic-men and women. It is hoped contemporary theory realizes it needs no part in such games.

Architecture set free. The production that blurs contracting with design, architects with investment, and planners with economists is considered out of control. Generally, there is a feeling this market architecture is blighting new and old city alike. Is this true? Or is this fueled by the nostalgia for the lack of a there 'there'? Whatever attitude one takes towards this feeling of malaise (it goes for 'theory' too) it is often considered that students need guiding in the true but lost secrets and theory of architecture as it may once have been prescribed.

Theory, history and practice are petty criminals in this illusion. As if to compensate for the 'proper' history and theory that we no longer appear to teach at architecture school we have continued to see practice diverge from education. And we have seen education divide off into specific programs and courses that are often measured by the immediacy with which they reward the student/graduate. The reward is nearly always - today - monetary, or something very close to it, employment.

Yet we no longer teach or offer late-teen students a wide basis for understanding the

world, a theory to counter other theory, a history to counter other histories, an immaturity to counter later immaturity and prejudice, or more importantly a strategy for reading against the culture they are taught. In other words, we educate students to proceed into a profession as we, or a set of accreditation criteria think fit, with very little tools to think through their own experience.

If we are failing to situate the world for students to do their own theoretical situating, do we blame them for not situating the world as we once did? When theory was 'theory'? In short - within this failing - is this not the place for theory? Architecture set free!

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