

## French Theory In The United States' Academic Periodicals Between Seventies And Nineties.

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### Abstract

Is here considered the influence of the French Theory on the architectural periodicals "Oppositions" and "Assemblage" during the period between Seventies and Nineties; the wide presence of philosophical theories, without being a guarantor for the discipline, is a sign of the increasing consciousness of its own possibilities. From the critic of the Modern Movement and of its legacy to a form of promotion of new studies on the nature of language based on the structural method, French Theory was theoretical set of ideas that have informed architectural debate. The importance of theory increase, changed and posed itself out of the field of critic and history, more and more often until the debate became a mirror in which architecture gazes at itself.

**Keywords:** Architectural Theory, European philosophy, influence.

The aim of this work is to analyse the nature, the role and the purpose that a philosophical theory may have in the architectural discourse via the periodicals, peculiar objects in their typical brief life, in their close relationship with what is happening in design practice.

In particular, I will consider the debate that the influences of European (or Continental) philosophical context originated, during the Seventies and Nineties on the intellectual *milieu* that gravitated around the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies (1967-1984), in particular in its main publication "Oppositions" (1973-1984) and on the editorial board of its ideal successor *Assemblage* (1986-2000).

Doing this, I do not want to defend the position that philosophical theories are, in these decades, an essential and necessary part of the architects' work or that a theoretical consciousness is characteristic of the contemporary architectural practice: that statements hide the intention that theoretical thought may play as a guarantor for the quality (whatever it is) of architecture itself or of its design, but the issue that in these periodicals took place the increasing consciousness of its own possibilities, with particular regard to the separations between the tasks of criticism and theory.

Because of the importance of a building rarely emerges in its only pure presence, theoretical processes take place (and form) before and after the design and the construction of the building itself, and need specific intellectual and methodological tools.

To consider the nature, the role and the purpose that theories may have had in contemporary architectural discourse, we necessarily have to start from the place of *research and development* of that relationship: places of production, of reception, of critique and criticism, of use, of sharing and spreading. In the last decades we

attended to a certain conceptual twist in architecture, even in the rhetorical mechanism as a literary device: we never had so many periodicals, books, exhibitions, so that we can consider these as the very permanent state of contemporary architecture. Especially periodicals were the place of discussion: the wide presence of interviews, reports of competitions, critical and historical essays, prove that both in descriptive sense (as an explanatory way) and in prescriptive sense (as a concept of design), theories are the two poles between architecture sets in.

The history of the origin of “Oppositions” is well known, especially after the publication of the anthology by K. Michael Hays (Hays, 1998), where he call attention to the core of the theoretical positions occupied by the founders Peter Eisenman, Kenneth Frampton and Mario Gandelsonas. ‘The Oppositions of Autonomy and History’ is the title of his introduction, registering the realms that are primarily investigated: by Eisenman the problem of the form in its immanent and autonomous presence, by Frampton the history of the nineteenth-century architectural culture and by Gandelsonas the introduction of althusserian interpretation of Marxism as lens to read the architectural and urban design. Maybe this is the first attempt to give new forces to the American discourse about architecture; as Joan Ockman wrote:

Theoretical discourse in American architecture had always been meager, lagging well behind other aesthetic and intellectual disciplines. [...] In most schools a professional orientation was ingrained, and the relationship between theory and practice unfocused. In this milieu, the IAUS, founded in 1967 and dedicated to design education, research, exhibitions, and publishing, was, despite its mainstream sponsorship, an exception; and for American architects with a more theoretical or European bent, as well as for the community of foreign architects passing through New York, it filled an important vacuum (Ockman, 1995, p. 59).

and as Mitchell Schwarzer noted:

In the period from 1952 to 1973, *Perspecta*, published by Yale University School of Art and Architecture, was practically the only academic journal engaged with contemporary architecture, history, and theory (Schwarzer ,1999, p. 343).

Foreign architects, because the only American-born one was Peter Eisenman: Kenneth Frampton is British, Mario Gandelsonas and Diana Agrest are Argentinian and the other key-people as Colin Rowe, Kurt Forster, Anthony Vidler, Manfredo Tafuri are all European, so that the international quality of the editorial board led for the first time the United States’ architectural culture to a new impressive theoretical sophistication, out of former swampy academic positions.

In fact, until the early Sixties the theoretical horizon in the schools of architecture and in the professional world was still influenced by references resulting

from the Fifties, consisting by the knowledge of classic styles and other aesthetic constraints, by the application of the principles of modernist functionalism and by some genuine attempts to give a scientific frame to the discipline (for example, Christopher Alexander's texts), while philosophically the basis was mainly phenomenological and based on the reading of Merleau-Ponty and of Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space', wrote in 1958 even if translated in English in 1969, and on that constituted by the philosophy of language, all in a climate that was already characterized by the putting into crisis the foundations of the Modern Movement, that took place since the mid-Fifties.

In "Oppositions" too will take place a critic of the Modern Movement and of its legacy, especially in the form of a critic of the possible further development of its reasons, but often this was a strategy to respond and criticize the 'Grays' anti-modernist positions, as shown by Robert Venturi and Vincent Scully, and for this reason, the manifesto nature of this battle, the editors will claim a historical, and typically avant-gardist, consciousness.

Here we can find an important theoretical point; the "Oppositions" critics and historians will carry the duty to bring as far as possible a critique to the Modern Movement ideology: socially, politically, culturally, and to understand which may be the implications of such a critique.

That group of critics and historians was influenced by two different philosophical schools: the Frankfurt School with its Critical Theory, mainly personified in Kenneth Frampton, and the so-called French Theory, represented, with all their peculiarities, by Mario Gandelsonas and Diana Agrest; within their different ways to overcome Marx, particular importance have the different notions of history underpinning the two positions, so deep to pose problems to their epistemological coexistence. In the first case is still alive the Marxist terms of the search for scientific knowledge as a seeking for objectivity or truth, so the historiography bears within a faith in progress in the sense of a teleological model of an evolutionary history. The position of the French Theory, even if fragmented, implies a different position: the inability to obtain, or even the non-existence, of the truth, or of the meaning, of reality: knowledge is not a homogeneous block of facts, but a fragmented, and subject to interpretations, list of things.

The coexistence of these two points of views is synthesized, as in an attempt of its solution, with the articles of Manfredo Tafuri, who's proposing a historiographical project already present in Walter Benjamin, who had great influence on the whole school of Venice.

In fact, in his 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History', at XV thesis, Benjamin wrote: '*The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action*' (Benjamin, 1968, p. 261), and in the XVI thesis wrote:

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. [...] The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called “Once upon a time” in historicism’s bordello (Benjamin, 1968, p. 262).

For Benjamin, to stop the continuum of the history with the revolution represents an interruption on the self-realization of the history, because time of history is the time of dominion; in this sense he’s coherent with a messianic view of the past as made by sudden revolutionary moments that interrupt the linear historical process.

To write a story, so to speak, counter-hegemonic, made with scraps of historicism and, due to its neglected nature, still intact yet capable of authenticity. Torn from their context, the fragments must be reassembled in a different way, able to produce a new and more authentic truth. The famous collection of quotes that Benjamin owned, had to serve to write a novel made only of quotes, as Eisenman did in his article ‘Notes on Conceptual Architecture. Toward a Definition’ (Eisenman, 1970), made only by footnotes. Which better way to reconstruct the past if not demolishing the canonical monument that the bourgeoisie has erected, if not extracting the hidden parts of the history to rewrite a heretic and more true one?

In the Jewish tradition Benjamin found and use the notion of the messianic apocalyptic end-of-the history that may happen in the past, in the present or in the future indifferently, what he called *Jetztzeit*, so that this notion of time eliminate chronology, toward an eternal present. This was clearly understood by Joan Ockman in an article in *Assemblage 11*, where she wrote: ‘*Nothing less than a redemption of humanity through the reconsecration of history’s disenfranchised, a transmutation of the Judaeo-Christian myth of the meek inheriting the earth into a Marxian end of history*’ (Ockman, 1990, p. 97).

This role as mediator of the two historical schools set the importance of the role that Peter Eisenman thought Manfredo Tafuri may have in “Oppositions”, precisely in this attempt to reconcile the duality of the historiographical visions of German and French philosophies trying a synthesis, via Benjamin, even if Tafuri in ‘The Sphere and Labyrinth’ introduction (Tafuri, 1987, p. 4), explaining what history consists in, does not cite Benjamin but Foucault citing Nietzsche: ‘*Made up of little, not obvious, truths, arrived at by a rigorous method*’, in ‘Human, All Too Human’ (Nietzsche, 1984). So Tafuri’s notion of history is something more than an incremental notion: it keeps his project back from the pure nihilism edge: this is a warranty, and a need, for Eisenman to set “Oppositions” in an avant-gardist position and not only as a place for critics influenced by German or French philosophy. Eisenman values the high complexity of Tafuri’s historiographical project, already influenced by, and critic with, Foucault, and knows the danger to consider the fragments of the history as autonomous and self-significant units. Tafuri knows very well that the core and the task of the historical analysis is the critic of reality and not an epistemological recording of traces, that may

lead to loose every political potentiality. In this, the role of “Oppositions” was significant.

French philosophy’s influence is here present in a second way: in the form of the promotion of new studies on the nature of language based on the structural method, so that linguistic studies soon became a new intellectual horizon for architects. The notion of structural patterns that lay behind the perception of phenomena organized according rules, both semiotic and syntactic, allows a new formal approach to architectural analysis.

French structuralism influence is easy to find in Mario Gandelonas essays, since the appearance of ‘Semiotic and Architecture: Ideological Consumption of Theoretical Work’ on the first issue of “Oppositions” (Gandelonas, 1973), where he theorizes the experiments of formal architecture as a semiotic discourse, using the example of the differences of the notions of *communication* and *signification*. In an another article, in “Oppositions” 17, ‘From Structure to Subject: the Formation of an Architectural Language’ (Gandelonas & Agrest, 1979), he critically reviewed the Eisenman’s ‘House Series’ syntactic operation where the influence of Noam Chomsky’s theory is used as an early structural method applied to architecture, and has to deal with the mannerist method that Palladio used in many of his villas project (and maybe it is not casualty that Eisenman is, in this period, still working on a book on Palladio’s villas).

The more explosive cultural and architectural thought of late Eighties and Nineties is the horizon in which “Assemblage” sits itself, and to be academically based in Harvard University allows to the journal to naturally entertain dialogues with other disciplines and subjects, as psychoanalysis, feminism, poststructuralism.

Founded by K. Michael Hays and edited with Catherine Ingraham from issue 14 to 35, the content of the articles changes very rapidly and widely during the years. The name *Assemblage* itself is, naturally, a manifesto, a word taken from Deleuze and Guattari ‘A Thousand Plateaus’:

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an *assemblage* establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 22, italic mine).

This mean that, without publishing contemporary projects of architecture, the aim of the journal is to open itself widely to the refusing of the historical dimension toward a conceptual field of theories that, without being critical, accentuates all the difficulties of interpretation as the crucial point of view, subsuming in a sort of psychoanalytic treatment of the discipline, all its desires, disorders, diseases.

Deconstructive speculative philosophy, based on Jacques Derrida work, and especially on the Yale literary critic version by Paul De Man, and in general all the post-modern open-ended conception of reality on the irresolute nature of writing and

speaking, allow to explore freely the field surrounding architecture, even if in the last years seems to be underway a dismantling of the disciplinary discourse in the dissolution of the architectural project, in a generational reaction to the theoretical dimension, especially after poststructuralism, so, if “Oppositions” ions was like a double mirror, the mirror in which America saw Europe and the mirror in which Europe saw America, “Assemblage” seem to be more a mirror in which architecture gazes at itself.

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