

Why do architectural schools bother to teach theory?

Urša Komac, The University of Canberra

"Next day the master saddle-maker came again. /.../ For a long time he gazed at the drawings [of Professor's Studio] and his eyes were brighter and brighter. Finally he said: 'Professor, if I understood as little about riding, about horses, about leather and about workmanship as you do, then I would also have your imagination.' "

Adolf Loos¹

J. S. Bach composed a cantata every week for Sunday Mass during his time as cantor at St. Thomas's church in Leipzig. By doing that he was earning an honest life, being of great use for the Church and the congregation, and composing some of the best music of all times. The idea of art for art's sake only emerged in force with Romanticism and, in spite of very serious attempts, is still not easy to apply it to architecture. Before being polluted by a late whiff of Romanticism, architectural theory was easy and straightforward. Socrates, Vitruvius, Vasari, Sullivan and Semper pretty much agreed. They said it in different ways from *Artis sola domina necessitas* to *form follows function*. Essentially architecture has, first and foremost, to serve a need or human needs. Both the technical aspects and the aesthetics must follow need in an economical way. The teaching of architecture followed, to a large extent, this principle. Architectural problems had to be solved in a clever, logical way, making use of appropriate technical knowledge and artistic sensibility.

In recent times, however, the architectural profession has managed to either outsource or automatise most technical aspects. Construction in the CAD era may be still tedious, but nonetheless easy. Complex structural calculations are simply sent to the engineers. As a result architects are increasingly trained as aspiring Artists, and from an academic training point of view, buildings are seen mainly as Works of Art. The old *art pour art* romantic ideas are seen as new. Irrationality is praised. Also the study and the practice of architecture are romanticised and thus regarded as an artistic, sophisticated, highly intellectual and desirable lifestyle.

¹ Adolf Loos, *Trotzdem*, 2nd ed. (Innsbruck, 1931).

As a matter of fact architectural practice is quite aloof, not very well connected with the needs of the real world. As a consequence, architects do not design the vast majority of the built environment. For instance, in Australia architects design about 3% of the buildings. Most of the houses in other countries are just endorsed (signed) by an architect, but actually drawn by someone else with basic drafting skills.

An obvious and immediate problem is how can architects generate trust in the profession. After all, previous generations of architects are responsible for occasionally beautiful, but generally unliveable, CIAM housing states and Voisin² plans; abominations filled with very beautiful buildings like Brasilia. Well, someone has to say it: architects need to learn to behave with a measure of modesty. Indeed, the basics of our trade are not so complicated so most people could live without architects. To become relevant architects need to show how they can improve people's lives. As a first step architects must learn to communicate better and avoid reflecting irrelevant ideological disputes copied-and-pasted from theorists even more aloof than them. Effective communication can be learnt and should be taught at the schools of architecture.

In spite of the lukewarm commercial success of the architecture, the reality of recent and not-so-recent graduates stands in a sharp contrast with those romantic views of the profession. Practise is characterised by long hours of tedious work, often under the supervision of whimsical boss in badly organised and not well-paid offices. All-nighters are common. The pay is low and the results, unsatisfactory. The young architect reminds his theory classes. He pretended to understand the pseudo-philosophical blabber taught by an expert who thought he could understand it. Something in the theory was always very clear: Marx said Capitalism is the culprit. Women, the transsexual, the people of the third world, the weak in general are oppressed by Capitalism. Capitalism makes architecture to serve the wrong masters, to

² Le Corbusier did like everyone to have cars, like Hitler, Thatcher and George W. Bush.

work long hours for a meagre salary, and it's build of shonky "commercial" designs.

Occasionally a practising architect stands from the crowd, establishes a successful practice and starts to get very profitable commissions. He will again suffer from an acute self-serving bias. He will pay little to his slave drafters, who will work long hours in a disorganised office. He will still work hard, but he has now access to the lifestyle that a True Artist deserves: designer clothes, champagne, a magnificent apartment... Fame comes with increasing artistic freedom so his designs, especially the ones done for the public realm, will be increasingly bold, borderline ludicrous. His behaviour will still be well grounded in theory. The sharp, un-structurally sound diagonals are a protest against sexist violence. An expensive lattice is a semantic form play in support of the oppressed. By enjoying the riches he is personally protesting against capitalism. He read somewhere something about George Bataille being in favour of the expenditure in art and luxury. He is being a revolutionary himself. Someone will soon write a theory piece about him.

A truly Marxist view of architectural theory

In the previous section we have characterised contemporary architectural theory as a collection of beliefs, a cultural system that creates a worldview necessary to explain and justify architectural practice. In other words, architectural theory works as a religion. As such is cryptic, at times incomprehensible, it has a hierarchical priesthood and exonerates the true believers: it's not you; it's this despicable capitalistic society.

Therefore architectural theory is in Marxist terms a superstructure, a set of ideas determined by the base or forces and relations of production and helps to justify and perpetuate them. One should not forget that architecture is essential for the creation of capital (fixed capital in particular). Architects work for clients who can afford the high costs of construction. See, the emperor is naked, architecture *is* at the very centre of capitalism.

Furthermore, note that the work done by architects is suspiciously similar across capitalist and non-capitalist societies. Basically, design buildings to respond to the needs of the client. Promoters want to build ugly apartment towers in Ultimo, an inner city suburb of Sydney. The functionaries of the five-year plan wanted to build *Plattenbau* apartments in Bratislava. The results are, not surprisingly, quite similar. The needs architecture has to respond to are very basic: shelter from weather, security, living space, privacy, to store belongings, and to comfortably live, work and interact. Those needs are essentially the same across societies, more or less advanced, more or less wealthy, more or less “capitalistic”.

The consequence of both having such a fundamental purpose is for architecture to be the most conservative of the Fine Arts. It is far easier for a painter to question the traditional purpose of its art (ornamentation), to subvert it, to use it for social comment. That is a lot more difficult, and somehow a silly undertaking, for an architect. Paint and canvas are cheap, but social commentary by means of other’s people money is an expensive activity.

Architects failed badly when they tried to play the social reformer role. Nothing precludes them from designing the architecture of social reform, but we believe they should refrain from setting the agenda.

So, do we need any theory after all?

Let’s first distinguish between two types of theory, positive and normative theory:

1) Positive theory is about how things are. In architecture it would be about explaining why the buildings are like they are (the technology available at the time, what was then in fashion, the budget limitations for the project, what the client wanted etc.). Positive theory can be tested or, at least, challenged.

There are good examples of positive theory in architecture. The excellent work of both Joseph Rykwert and William J. R. Curtis are prime examples.

2) Normative theory is about how things should be. In architecture it could be about how to make buildings better in one or several aspects. Normative theory in architecture could follow the principles of Vitruvius, Otto Wagner, Louis Sullivan etc. Normative theory is about opinions, about how things should be, so it cannot be really tested.

The “form follows function” ideas are grown up, clearly stated normative theory. Statements such as architecture should reflect/help/lead the class struggle/revolution are also normative theory. The mumbo-jumbo in which they are usually dress-up is not theory. It’s only blabber to impress the reader. Opinions such as “the architecture of RCR³ is very beautiful and thus it should be use as an example for students” are also normative theory.⁴

So, the answer is yes. The didactic interest of positive theory is on showing students the process that resulted on the construction of exemplary architecture. The emphasis should be on the constraints (technological, economic, cultural etc.) that the architects faced at the time rather than on the anecdotal gossip⁵.

Normative theory maybe also relevant and interesting, but first and foremost it must be made comprehensible to the students. A course should not be structured around a list of messy readings. A responsible lecturer should be knowledgable, yes, but essentially deliver the punchline to students and assess them in a clear and fair way. Student should not be forced to write comments on (or even worse produce) incomprehensible, unexplained

³ RCR Arquitectes stands for Rafael Aranda, Carme Pigem, Ramón Vilalta Arquitectes.

⁴ The work of Kenneth Frampton includes both far left political statements and unashamed praise to the Modernists. Frampton is a good, interesting and stimulating read anyway as the politics are clearly stated and not mixed with Derridas, Foucaults, Žižeks and other charmers of non-poisonous snakes.

⁵ Gossip and lighthearted stories can be used to make the class more palatable, but it should be made clear that is gossip, and far from essential. For instance, whomever Le Corbusier was sleeping with is generally, *generally*, irrelevant to the purpose of the course. Whoever the lecturer is sleeping with *should* be irrelevant.

“theory”. Ludicrous so-called theory, or the confused writings of practicing architects, deserves a mention in the curriculum of a serious school not because there is not much to be learnt from it, but for the influences of this objectively nonsensical blubber in perfectly fine practicing architects. Going any further than that is a perfect waste of time.

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