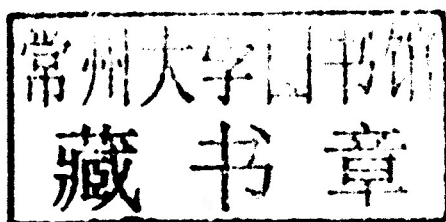Colin Davies

THINKING ABOUT ARCHITECTURE

An Introduction to Architectural Theory

THINKING ABOUT ARCHITECTURE
An Introduction to Architectural Theory

CONTENTS

THINKING ABOUT ARCHITECTURE

An Introduction to Architectural Theory

Colin Davies

THINKING ABOUT ARCHITECTURE

An Introduction to Architectural Theory

PICTURE CREDITS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s, architectural theory in Europe and America was a makeshift affair, a mixture of old ideas about composition surviving from the time when architecture students were expected to know about the classical orders, newer ideas about form and function derived from the modernist manifestos of the 1910s and 20s, and a body of research aimed at making the process of design more rational and scientific. The discipline was intellectually rather un-ambitious.[1] Theory stuck close to practice, which seemed the only way to justify its existence. By the mid 1960s those modernist ideas had become an orthodoxy and were already beginning to seem a little stale. Teachers and writers on the fringe of the profession began to ask if architecture really was just about problem solving and the updating of the building industry. In Italy, for example, Aldo Rossi sought to restore respect for the pre-modern European city in his book *L'architettura della città*, first published in 1966 (published in English as *The Architecture of the City* in 1982) and Manfredo Tafuri brought Marxist theory to bear on architecture in his book *Progetto e Utopia*, first published in 1973 (published in English as *Architecture and Utopia* in 1976). Meanwhile, in America, Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) laid the foundation for a new post-modernist critique, and the MIT-based magazine *Oppositions* began to publish decidedly intellectual articles by architect/thinkers like Peter Eisenman, Colin Rowe and Alan Colquhoun.

Two distinct philosophical strands began to emerge: a phenomenological approach, typified by the popularity among architects, teachers and students of a book called *The Poetics of Space* by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, and the revival of an old idea: that architecture might be thought of as a kind of language. At about this time, controversy was raging in the English departments of universities about a new approach to literary criticism that went by the name of Structuralism. Structuralism came from France and before long French

An illustration from Aldo Rossi's *La città analoga* (1976). The collage of layered images is analogous to the layered history of the city.
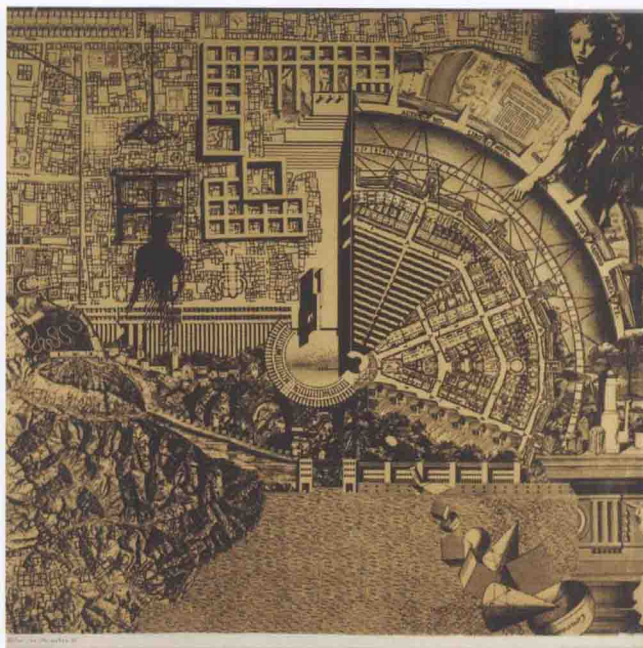
critical theory, represented by thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, began to spill over into the relatively much smaller cultural field of architectural theory. Suddenly it seemed possible that architectural theory might become more than just an adjunct to the practice of architectural design; with an injection of French critical theory, it might become a respectable branch of philosophy in its own right. It was not long before post-graduate courses in the new architectural theory were being set up in British and American universities.[2] People began to specialize in it and not all of them were architects. The link between practice and theory weakened. Theory was now seen mainly as a form of criticism, not just of individual buildings but of the city as a whole and of the relationship between architecture and modern life. It began to float free, developing its own language, its own kind of writing, its own store of ideas. It became a kind of miniature economy, producing books, articles and paper projects for consumption by a small group of specialist post-graduate students who then went on to produce more books, articles and paper projects.

A self-contained speciality

Architectural theory in this new form was not meant for architects and architectural educators, or even for architectural critics in the everyday sense, still less for non-professionals with an interest in, and love of, architecture. It was meant for other architectural theorists. Was there anything wrong with this? Perhaps not. The pursuit of theory for its own sake brought intellectual rewards that a less rigorous and penetrating approach might have failed to reach. But theory had become a self-contained speciality and the difficulty of penetrating it, of learning

its language and understanding its approach, meant that it failed to inform the rest of the cultural field that we call architecture. In schools of architecture, for example, where the main thrust of the course is the project-based teaching of design, the teaching of theory was either hived off into small, separate enclaves or taught in a fragmentary way in occasional lectures and seminars which went straight over the heads of the mostly practical and visually-orientated students. There was simply not enough time to undertake the necessary preparatory teaching in general philosophy. The new theory effectively blocked the development of a different kind of theory that might actually have served to strengthen and clarify the thinking of practising designers.

Generally speaking this is still the situation. From the point of view of most people who are interested in architecture, there are four main problems with the discipline of architectural theory as at present constituted. The first is the overvaluing of novelty. Like most academic disciplines, architectural theory is competitive, and the best way to compete is to come up with something new. In the past this has often meant finding a French philosopher that nobody else knows about. So just when we had got used to Structuralism – the principles of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic analysis, for example – along came the phenomenologists saying that we had to read Maurice Merleau-Ponty and perhaps Martin Heidegger. Then avant-garde architects like Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman found out about Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction (such a temptingly architectural designation) and began to apply it to architecture. No sooner had we got used to that idea (if we ever did) than everybody was talking about Gilles Deleuze and the possible relevance to architecture of, for example, his concept of 'the fold'. I do not mean to imply, of course, that these were in any way regressive or regrettable developments or that the breaking of new ground should be discouraged. But the relentless, competitive forward motion of the discipline soon left the non-specialist far behind. One philosopher after another became fashionable and each was treated as if he or she had all the answers.

The second problem is an emphasis on named philosophers rather than on themes that might be useful to architects. If we want some help understanding buildings, whether our own designs or other people's, we do not want to immerse ourselves in the life's work of a particular philosopher, very little of which is relevant to the questions we actually have in our minds. Once again, I don't want to discourage anybody from trying to fathom the depth of thinking of Derrida or Deleuze, but such a project might be out of proportion with the immediate need to understand or communicate fundamental ideas about meaning in architecture or about the relationship between design and natural processes. We should reserve the right to learn from the philosophers without becoming philosophers ourselves. A publisher recently launched a series of books with titles like *Heidegger for Architects* and *Deleuze and Guattari for Architects*[3], which is an excellent idea, but still requires us to approach theory through specific philosophical channels, one

at a time, when what we really need is a thematic approach that focuses the philosophical ideas in areas that our own curiosity leads us to.

The third problem is the problem of obscurity. Some subjects are genuinely hard to understand and require special languages to handle their concepts. Quantum physics might be case in point. Is architectural theory difficult in this sense? Perhaps it is. But there might also be something else going on, something that is familiar in many fields of elite culture: the operation of a law of intellectual supply and demand. In order to maintain a position as an expert in any given field of culture, one needs to know things – ideas, theories, the contents of certain books – that almost nobody else knows. The smaller the number of people that know them, the more valuable they are. If everybody knows them, they are worth nothing. So it is a good idea to protect them and limit their circulation. Of course it is necessary for people to know *about* them, and to think that they are worth knowing, so complete secrecy would be self-defeating, but it is essential to maintain their market value. We are not necessarily talking about monetary value, though that may come into it indirectly. More often we are talking about intellectual authority and prestige. One way to control the supply of ideas is to make them hard to understand, to talk about them in a kind of code or special language that has to be learnt and practised. A lot of architectural theory is written in just such a language. Here is a typical example published in 1994 in the *Journal of Architectural Education*. It is the introduction to an article called 'Representation and Misrepresentations: On Architectural Theory'.

> 'A recent trend in architectural theory is the derivation of methodology from a post structuralist critique of representation to illuminate the triangulation of architectural production, representation, and power. Using an exemplary text by Mark Wigley, the article questions whether this (or any) theoretical endeavour is exempt from the attractions to power that it strives to disclose. It considers a contradiction characterized by a theory's shift of attention away from architecture's multiple claims toward the production of theory itself, and it illuminates the consequences of theoretical endeavours that avoid contact with resistencies put forth by non-discursive architectural thought.'[4]

The relentless abstractness of this kind of writing – all those shapeless Latinate words, piled one on top of another – make this a challenging read even for someone familiar with the style. And bear in mind that this is the introduction to the article, printed in bold print at the top of the page, where we might reasonably expect something more gentle and enticing. Note also that the article is based on an earlier article by Mark Wigley called 'The Production of Babel, the Translation of Architecture', which in turn is based on an article by Jacques Derrida called 'Architecture where the Desire May Live'. The main underlying idea is an important one – that philosophy often makes use of architecture as a metaphor and that this has interesting consequences for architectural theory. But we are very far removed from anything visible or tangible, anything recognizably architectural in the ordinary sense, like a building. Most readers, even if they know and understand a lot about architecture,

will soon give up trying to understand this article. It is useless to architecture in the broad sense. The important thing to its writer, however, is that limiting its accessibility maintains its value in the limited market of architectural theory.

The fourth problem with architectural theory has already been touched upon: its increasing remoteness from practice. Theory and practice have effectively parted company. Theory is still taught in schools of architecture (where else would it find a home?) but mainly as a separate speciality. It is no longer contained within the disciplinary boundaries of architecture. Of course, breaking through disciplinary boundaries might be a good and necessary thing to do – a consequence of the age-old tension between structure and content, between the urge to be set free from things like disciplinary boundaries and the need to know where one stands and how to orientate oneself. But in this case, at this time, there is a need to restore a sense of balance, to re-establish a line of communication between theory and practice, to re-ground theory and prevent it from floating off into the intellectual stratosphere.

And that is what this book sets out to do. It does not reject the discoveries that theory has made over the past 40 years but absorbs them and links them with earlier theories, striving for clarity rather than novelty. Understanding has too often been blocked by theorists' refusal to meet architectural readers on their own territory. This book is addressed directly to architectural readers. It uses ordinary language, not specialist jargon, and it takes the trouble to explain things rather than taking for granted an unrealistic depth of understanding. It is organised thematically, not chronologically or biographically. It is neither a history of theory nor an introduction to named philosophers. Names are mentioned in passing and can be looked up in the footnotes and bibliography but the main focus is on ideas.

In order to begin to understand architecture in all its cultural complexity it is necessary to grasp certain basic concepts such as representation, typology, tectonics, the language metaphor, the organic metaphor, harmonic proportion and authorship. These and other concepts are introduced at the most basic level. Sometimes it is useful and illuminating to restate and see afresh the 'blindingly' obvious. But this is not a children's book and the development of those concepts at times leads to quite subtle and advanced interpretations, including many that are the product of recent architectural theory. Reading this book might be good way to break into that specialized, academic field but that is not its main aim. Its main aim is provide designers, teachers, students, and interested laypersons with a set of ideas that will enrich their conversation, their writing, and above all their thinking about architecture.

What is architecture?

But before we begin examining some of those basic concepts, we should first take an overview of the territory that we shall be exploring, the territory called 'architecture'. What is architecture? That must be the first question in any book about architectural theory. The dictionary tells us that the word means 'the design of buildings'.

Does this include all buildings or only some of them? The twentieth-century architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner famously said that Lincoln Cathedral was a piece of architecture but that a bicycle shed was just a building. For him, a building had to be designed 'with a view to aesthetic appeal' before it could be called architecture. Those of us of an egalitarian frame of mind might wish to abolish this class distinction and extend the concept of architecture to include even the most humble structures. Surely even a bicycle shed can be beautiful? On the other hand, if all buildings are architecture, then the word ceases to mean much. We might as well just talk about buildings. It might be more useful to ask ourselves what the word 'architecture' actually refers to in practice, to list all of its meanings and connotations. If we do then we will find that, in the most general sense, it refers to a specialized cultural field in which certain kinds of people compete for social and cultural capital. This field includes not only architects and the work that they do, but everything else associated with architecture: its values, ideologies, specialized skills, jargon, codes of conduct, professional institutions, education, history, books, magazines, exhibitions, networks of patronage, prominent personalities, mythical heroes and canonical buildings. What it does not include, rather surprisingly, is most ordinary buildings. Popular housing, for example, which is probably the most common building type, is routinely excluded from architecture conceived as a cultural field. You will not find many developer-built suburban housing estates featured in architectural history books, magazines or exhibitions. The architecture field is not an abstract concept but a concrete social formation. It is therefore full of imperfections and absurdities and arguably is in need of radical reform. Such reform is not, however, among the aims of this book, which is content to inhabit the architecture field, describing its theoretical parts as accurately as possible in the hope that this might be helpful to future reformers.

The architecture field is a small branch of western culture. It nevertheless extends all over the developed world with outposts even in relatively remote non-western societies. That is not to say that it represents the only architectural tradition. China, Japan, India, the Middle East, Africa and pre-Columbian America all have rich architectural histories stretching back to ancient times. But it is the western tradition that has ridden the expansive wave of twentieth- and twenty-first-century globalization and for that reason the examples used in this book are mostly drawn from that tradition. In some cases this is an arbitrary choice, a bias resulting from the author's background and education. Often the examples might almost as easily have been chosen from non-western traditions, and in a few cases they have been – the Ise Shrine in Japan, for example, the Dravidian Hindu temples of southern India or the vernacular architecture of Morocco. But in other cases, such as the discussion of harmonic proportion, only western examples will do. Some might see this as an annoying inconsistency but this is a practical as well as a theoretical book. It does not aim to break new ground but to be a guide for newcomers to a territory already mapped out, and that territory, like history itself, is partial, biased and heterogeneous.

CHAPTER 1
REPRESENTATION

Consider the following quotation from the introduction to a book called *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation* by Dalibor Vesely:

> 'In a conventional understanding, representation appears to be a secondary and derivative issue, associated closely with the role of the representational arts. However, a more careful consideration reveals, very often to our surprise, how critical and universal the problem of representation really is.'[1]

The passage goes on to develop the idea that architecture, like painting and sculpture, is a representational art. How can this be? Surely architecture is just the design of buildings, and the main function of most buildings is to provide shelter from the weather for a variety of human activities? Buildings are practical things, not so different from boats or bridges or umbrellas. How can a building represent anything in the way that, say, a portrait represents a person? What does architecture have to do with painting and sculpture? We have no difficulty with the idea that painting and sculpture are representational arts. Even an abstract painting seems to represent something, some intangible or hard-to-define aspect of experience, like an emotion or a predicament. Perhaps it is precisely because painting has no obvious practical function that we assign to it the function of representation. By the same token, architecture, because it does have an obvious practical function, ought surely to be relieved of the function of representation? So why do theorists insist that buildings often, or perhaps always, represent something beyond themselves? I have chosen ancient Greek temples to illustrate some possible answers to this question, for several reasons: because Greek temples are familiar and easy to visualize; because, being somewhat removed from our everyday experience, they have a certain simplicity and purity; and because they have so often been seen as

the original prototypes of western architecture. But this is not a chapter *about* Greek temples. The arguments apply in principle to all architecture.

Sculpture and architecture

One obvious way that a building can be representational is when it incorporates painting or sculpture. A very famous ancient building will serve as an excellent example. The Panathenaic frieze is a long strip of shallow relief sculpture, originally painted, that was incorporated into the temple known as the Parthenon in Athens. It is thought to represent a procession that took place annually in the ancient city on the 'birthday' of the goddess Athena to whom the temple is dedicated. Most of the frieze was removed from the ruined building by Lord Elgin in the early nineteenth century and installed in the British Museum, but originally it was wrapped like a ribbon round the top of the 'cella', or enclosed part of the temple, behind the 'peristyle', or external colonnade. It was not added to the structure, like a painting hanging on a wall, but was carved *in-situ* out of stone of which the wall was built. It is therefore 'incorporated' in the true sense. And it is certainly representational. In fact it is considered to be one of the supreme examples of representational art in the whole western tradition. When it first arrived in London, John Flaxman, the outstanding English sculptor of the day, described it simply as 'the finest work of art I have ever seen'.[2]

But is it architecture? Surely it is just surface ornament and not in any way essential to the function of the building. This is true, though one might argue about what the true function of the building was exactly. After all, the goddess Athena did not really need to be sheltered from the weather. Perhaps the real function of the building was precisely to provide a frame for monumental sculpture, including the long lost ten metre (32.8 foot) high gold and ivory statue of the goddess that stood in the gloomy interior. Sculpture representing mythical scenes like the birth of Athena and her battle with Poseidon was literally framed by the gables or 'pediments' at either end of the roof. Elgin removed most of this sculpture too and looking at it close up in the museum, you can see how inventive the sculptor had to be to fit his figures into the awkward tapering space allotted to them. Evidently, the frame came before the figures. In other words architecture took precedence over sculpture. Besides, not all Greek temples were equipped with representational friezes and pediment sculptures, so we can't argue that these were essential components of temple architecture. We have to conclude that sculpture-framing was at best a secondary function of the building.

So far, then, architecture remains aloof from representation. But the sculpture is not the only artistic stonework in the Parthenon. More obviously 'functional' parts of the building such as columns, beams and roof overhangs, are also artistically carved, though in a more abstract way. The tops or 'capitals' of the columns, for example, take the form of flat plates sitting on exquisite swelling cushions of stone. In the upper part of the 'entablature' that rests on the columns, relief panels called 'metopes', depicting fights between lapiths and centaurs (many also removed by Elgin), alternate with 'triglyphs' embellished by abstract triangular grooves. So here representation and abstraction