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Introduction:

‘The inescapable conclusion is that cultural theory must start to think ambitiously again…’

(Eagleton. T. 2003. P.73.)

I hold considerable anxiety on behalf of Architecture and have done for some time. Intuitively and consistently I have felt disturbed by its reactive tendencies and remain concerned regarding its future prospects. I have often felt the need to inhabit the edges of the subject; on one hand in an attempt to try to assuage this concern, but also in the hope of finding an antidote to what I define as the maladies.

In the late 1970s I sought the company of social sciences: perhaps my first engagement with the act of architecture in opposition to the object. In the early eighties, I immersed myself in neo-rationalist philosophy, striving to find the answers in intellectual abstraction. Two years later, it was Semiotics to which I turned, hoping that there was something important in the signification of architecture. In the late eighties and early nineties, it was sustainability that appeared to offer solutions, at least in the area that interested me at that time; of Gaia and deep ecology. Whilst each of these pursuits were informative, none of these theories, held the diagnosis, prognosis or indeed the possible restoration of architecture.

In parallel, across this period I have studied a diverse range of ways of thinking and by implication, being. An intuitive yet consistent alignment has developed within what we might (rather bluntly) term Eastern thought, and somewhat in counterpoint, an increasing interest with the philosophy and practice of phenomenology.

These concerns have led to speculations upon the nature of, and the processes within, the production of what I term ‘architecture of authenticity’. What I have sought is a more substantial, interconnected, inclusive and one might suggest, healthy way of approaching architectural endeavour. Furthermore, each of these theoretical exemplars (above) that I discovered, sought to apply external culturally founded theories to architecture, which upon reflection has proven to be rather vacuous. I have begun to conclude that the ‘holy grail’ of understanding architecture through singular theoretical frames is at best, counterproductive, at worst; naive.

‘A long time ago…people used simply to drop things from time to time. But nowadays we have physicists to inform us of the laws of gravity by which objects fall; philosophers to doubt whether there are really any discreet objects to be dropped at all; sociologists to explain how all this dropping is really the consequence of urban pressures; psychologists to suggest that we are all trying to drop our parents; poets who write about how all this dropping is symbolic of death; and critics to argue that it is a sign of the poet’s castration anxiety. Now dropping can never be the same again. We can never return to the happy garden where we simply walked around dropping things all day without a care in the world. What has happened, rather, is that practice has now been forced to take itself as its own object of enquiry. Theory is just human activity bending back upon itself, constrained in a new kind of self-reflexivity. And in absorbing this self-reflexivity, the activity itself will be transformed.’


Eagleton and Payne illuminate a number of issues pertinent to the examination of architectural endeavour. Originally, architecture existed without theory and indeed without architects. It was a practice of wisdom, intuition and embodied memory, dependent upon available material and infused by particular cultural, social, political and physical contexts. It was architecture of pragmatism.

Of Theory:

Vitruvius (c.80BC-after 15BC) in his text ‘De Architectura libri Decem’, initiated a process of codification; an intellectual frame that was exclusive, articulating what was, and by implication, what was not architecture. His tri-partite structure of firmitas, utilitas and venustas, effectively marked the death-knell of ‘architecture of pragmatism’. Such a position was reinforced by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) who articulated Renaissance thought upon art and architecture. In his text ‘Della Pictura’, he provided mathematical authority for perspective, a vehicle that itself provides a singular ‘viewer centric’ image of the world, further detaching man from his context through abstracted ocular manipulation.
‘The gradually growing hegemony of the eye seems to be parallel with the development of Western ego-consciousness and the gradually increasing separation of self and the world; vision separates us from the world whereas the other senses unite us with it.’


If we leap forward to the Enlightenment, we see philosophy and architecture conjoining and a sense of a utopian, rational, perfection emerging. In the work of Bouleé (1728-1799) (for example) we see the rationalist project articulated through Platonic forms as exemplified by his un-built project, the Cenotaph for Sir Isaac Newton. Claude Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806) extended upon this sense of abstraction through the vehicle of neo-classicism and, in his Arc et Senans Saltworks Project (1775), captured and gave expression to societorial hierarchies and cultural divisions, later to be reformed through the French Revolution of 1789.

We leap forward in time again, to 1923, and the publication of Corbusier’s ‘Vers une Architecture’ (Towards an Architecture), suggesting singularity of expression of architectural endeavour fuelled yet again by a utopian vision. As Amédée Ozenfant (1886-1966), a painter and collaborator of Corbusier, wrote:

‘Can we really believe any longer in the existence of frontiers as regards to ideas? Can we really go on working only for a chapel, a school, a clan, a group, a province, a nation?’

(Weston 1996 p. 105)

In these words we witness the genesis of attitudes that were ‘Universal’ and culturally ignorant.

As the modernist project fell increasingly under question, in the 1960s we saw the emergence of movements that strove to:

‘…reconstitute the architectural discipline through mediatory concepts - derived from fields such as philosophy, linguistics, psychology and anthropology – that simultaneously connect architecture to other social realms and (attempt to) claim for architecture its own unique territory.’

(Krista Sykes. 2010. p. 14)

Within this period, movements in architecture emerged, that were founded upon externally generated theoretical frames from such diverse disciplines and literary criticism, philosophy and social sciences that shifted architecture away from the relative monoculture of the modernist project. Yet, as Eagleton and Payne suggest, these diverse frames of theory, as with all theories in architecture, inevitably become inculcated within praxis and, as a consequence, become self-fulfilling, hermetically sealed paradigms.

Thus, this brief historic interrogation begs the question:

What is the place of Theory in architecture, or indeed the wider domain that we might call ‘cultural production’?

I have recently been examining ‘Integral Theory’ as articulated by Ken Wilber, Jean Gebser, Terry Patter, Adam Leonard, Marco Morelli and others. It provides a powerful and coherent analysis of why we are where we are, and posits an open theory of synthesis of a ‘new order’, that might rebalance our current imbalance. For the architect and indeed the artist, it explains our ‘now’ and suggests, what we might term, healing solutions.

In his text ‘No Boundaries – Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth’, Wilber describes the way in which Western Society has incrementally bounded itself as it developed. From Adam in the Garden of Eden being required to name all plants and animals, through to philosophical and scientific developments of the Enlightenment to the development of abstraction in mathematics in the use of algebra, Wilber illustrates the growth of delineation, from simple boundaries, to meta-boundaries, to meta-meta boundaries, all developed on the basis of ordering, counting and measuring, and resulting in an incremental distancing from natural phenomenon. As Wilber writes:

‘Man had gained control over nature, but only by radically separating himself from it. In the mere span of ten generations, he had for the first time in history awarded himself the dubious honour of being able to blast the whole planet, himself included, to smithereens.’

(Wilber 2001. p.34.)

It is both the existence and the nature of these barriers, and the consequential distancing from natural phenomena, that is distinct to what we might term the Western theoretical paradigm. Wilber describes how the very act of making boundaries produces oppositions: them/us, me/you, heaven/hell, right/wrong, up/down, and in the case of cultural production; body/spirit, intellect/intuition, mind/hapticity and of course, theory and practice. Furthermore, these dualities are somehow oppositional, producing a (counterproductive) condition of one versus the other.

Within both academia and praxis, cultural production (and by implication, architecture) has consistently held an uncomfortable relationship with Theory. The fundamental issue is that the term Theory has its genesis within the domain of the pure sciences. The pure scientist primarily seeks to explain the world. The architect and artist seek in some way, to change the world;

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a credible intellectual territory, utilising Theory as an academic shorthand for validity.

This search for Theory in cultural production is often, in contrast to praxis. Many significant architects never subscribed to, or were ascribed, a singular theoretical position. That makes the interrogation of their work through extant constructs of theory challenging, and in such cases, makes the concept of Theory redundant.

In addition, most recent architectural Theory, whether overtly or covertly, has sought to distance itself from the praxis of the discipline, producing a dangerously bi-polar context for the subject. Across the pure and applied arts, we observe similar ambitions to codify, classify and explain practice through theoretical frames. Many of those who we may call 'cultural producers', have resisted such attempts. These factors have, since the demise of the post-modern project in the mid 1990s, produced an intellectual void in architecture (for example) that has been populated variously by disparate and rather nebulous movements such as 'sustainable architecture' and its nemesis 'starchitecture'.

It is also clear that the application of theoretical constructs within architecture has been largely 'backward facing', engaging largely with historic interrogations rather than speculations upon future aspirations for the discipline. As Krista Sykes posits:

'We are still in the midst of a transitional period in architecture that began in the 1990s. This makes the exploration of the contemporary architectural situation – as well as any attempt to intellectually frame it – a rather difficult proposition, as there is no obvious vantage point from which to view the landscape of the recent past.'

(Krista Sykes. 2010. p.12)

**Of a Theory of Critical Non-Theory**

I propose a resolution of this complex conundrum through the examination of cultural production, focusing upon architecture, through a frame of 'Critical Non-Theory'.

As the nomenclature suggests, paradoxically, Critical Non-Theory is itself a Theory, insofar that it defines territories of consideration and is suggestive of appropriate methodologies of interrogation. The differentiation between Critical Non-Theory and Theory is that the former excludes less and includes more; influences, attitudes, contexts and methods, that draw from and projects-forward, the opportunities exposed through Integral Theory.

'A', because this is a speculative proposition, and does not presume either absolute authority, or indeed singularity.

'Thesis', because the term infers discourse upon the origin of the proposition, as distinct from Criticism that discusses the proposition.

'Of' appertains to the subject of interrogation; in this case, Critical Non-Theory.

'Critical,' because the architect and artist is required to build upon the work of recent French philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida that somehow capture both a cultural critique of 'what is' and proffer a vision of what 'could be'. What 'could be', is of course a fundamental component of critical production; in re-imagining our world.

'Critical', in an alternative sense of the word, suggests a methodology of selection and rejection; of ideas, artefacts and paradigms. This dimension of selection is important in cultural production in determining what are, and are not, appropriate influences to draw from in the broader context of the specific project.

'Non-Theory', because 'Theory' has not necessarily served cultural production very well to date.

'Non-Theory is distinct from Anti-Theory in that it does not seek to deny either the utility or potential of 'Theory'.

'Non-Theory' is, by definition able to facilitate the intellectual interrogation in wider and more inclusive frames that Theory provides. It is suggestive of an open system of investigation, founded upon paradigmatic methods that embrace the complexity and unbounded nature of creative endeavour.

We must however, fundamentally acknowledge that Critical Non-Theory does not seek to remove either the contribution of rigorous enquiry to process of production, or indeed the rigorous interrogation of both the process and the artefact. Rather it seeks to frame these processes within a much wider realm than singular theories permit, embracing both the physical and metaphysical dimensions of the creative endeavour.

'The current over-emphasis on the intellectual and conceptual dimensions of Architecture contributes to the disappearance of its physical, sensual embodied essence.'

(Pallasmaa. J. 2005. p. 32)

This hypothesis holds the potential to rebalance rigorous enquiry and praxis within the realm (at least) of cultural production.

The question of course is how?

**Of Paradigm, Archi, Technes, and Poetic Conjunctions:**

It is self-evident that for Critical Non-Theory to be valid and credible, a broad and inclusive methodology is demanded. I begin with the concept of Paradigm and I must at this point declare that paradigm is a core concept in my understanding of architecture.

I have with colleagues, written previously with regard to the concept of paradigm ii and its consistent
utilization as a pedagogic vehicle at my own institution the University of Portsmouth School of Architecture.

Its value is that it provides an inclusive rather than exclusive frame of reference of interrogation; in the context of architecture embracing not only the production of artefacts but also process, methodology and less tangible elements such as influences.

Again, in recent academic Papers \(^1\), I have with colleagues posited the possibility of the consideration of architectural endeavour through the discreet yet interconnected frames of Archt and Techn, as vehicles to capture both the extent and density of the work. These plural frames naturally overlap but are more formally are reconnected or fused through the third element of the paradigm, the metaphysical domain that we term 'The Poetic Synthesis'.

Drawn from the ancient Greek and the root etymology of the term Architect, Archt: represents the origin (of the thing or indeed the idea) and Techn: the bringing forth of the Archt: Such a plural framework mediates between theory and praxis. However, although they overlap, Archt: and Techn: require formal fusion through what we term 'The Poetic Synthesis'; a term designed to capture the metaphysical dimension of the architect and of course the artefact.

Through the conceptualisations of Paradigmatic study, Archt, Techn, and the Poetic Synthesis, this Paper introduces a hypothesis that encourages the consideration of both the idea and the artefacts of architecture through the framework of 'Critical Non-Theory'.

To illustrate and populate this hypothesis in the context of this Symposium, I will briefly explore the work of Jørn Utzon. Utzon is an exemplar of an architect that never subscribed to, or indeed was ascribed a particular theoretical position. Rather, he drew from a diverse range of influences that have been captured by the Jørn Utzon Research Network (JURN) as being:

![FIG 1: UTZON'S PARADIGMATIC NETWORK](image)

Jørn Utzon (1918-2008) is internationally recognised as one of the most original, innovative and socially concerned of modern architects, perhaps the last great exponent of the humanistic Nordic tradition within modern architecture. As the citation of the Jury for the 2003 Pritzker Architecture Prize to Jørn Utzon states:

‘He rightly joins the handful of Modernists who have shaped the past century with buildings of timeless and enduring quality.’

(Jury Citation: The Pritzker Architecture Prize 2003)

Best known for his monumental architecture, such as the Meli Bank in Tehran, the Kuwait Parliament Building and of course the international icon that is the Sydney Opera House, Jørn Utzon’s more modest contributions to his discipline, such as his housing projects, have been perhaps less rigorously interrogated within the realms of architectural discourse.

However, in defining the thematic frames within the context of Archt and Techn: we are able to construct a coherent and cohesive study of Utzon’s oeuvre that captures his own non-theoretical approach and exposes that his experiential influences are central components of his work and his ‘manner’.

It is clear for example that his Father, a Shipyard Manager and Yacht designer had considerable influence upon the young Utzon, later informing a range of elements of his architecture embodied within his personal memory. Similarly Utzon’s lifelong interest in the ‘architecture of nature’ had significant impact. Utzon was a voyager into cultures that were not his own and from each of those experience he brought elements that were transformed and translated in other contexts; the idea of ‘plateau’ from the Mayan Temples of Mexico, the idea of ‘floating roofs’ from the temples of Japan and China, the idea of ‘courtyard’ from Morocco. Utzon was attentive to conditions of landscape and place; evidenced perhaps most overtly in his Kingo Housing project that drew upon and reinterpreted his Moroccan experience. Yet what underpinned his work was an ethical and humane dimension that was anchored deeply within his personal values and reflected the collective values of his native culture and broader regional context. These dimensions of his work would be meaningless had they not been revealed through the process of Techn:. His consistent ability to draw form, structure and construction, from naturally occurring phenomena, his fascination with ideas of ‘making’, his profound understanding of materiality and light in a Kahnian sense, his fascination with geometry, the discovery of the utility of repetition and his utilisation as prototyping as a design tool, in combination gave his work a very particular character.

Yet, there was a dimension to his work that was metaphysical, almost beyond definition; the poetic, that fused all of these elements into a symphonic expression of architecture. One only has to sit peacefully in the Bagsvaerd Kirke and watch the natural light dance
across the curved roof-form to capture an existential moment beyond the everyday. Here the role of the poetic synthesis is clear in fusing Utzon’s Arkitekton and Techné: in the poetic vision Utzon held of the spiritual procession under the clouds that house the deities; resonant of Heidegger’s concept of the fourfold.

Of Cabinetry, Wrestling, Music and Authenticity:

If the position articulated within this Paper is credible, it must extend beyond the consideration of a single architect working in a particular manner. In closing, I speculate upon how such a methodology may be applied to other architects and perhaps beyond into the wider sphere of cultural production.

Often classified as a phenomenologist, would Peter Zumthor’s architecture been diminished had he not worked as an apprentice cabinet-maker? What was the impact upon Ando’s early career as a wrestler upon his work? What is the connection between Leibskind’s music, mathematics and his architecture? What was the impact upon his oeuvre of Kahn’s emigration from Estonia to North America at the age of five, or indeed is education at the University of Pennsylvania within the Beaux Arts tradition? My intuitive sense is that it is these textual, contextual, yet fundamentally important dimensions of cultural production, are all too often left behind in the wake of the search for singular theoretical frameworks. These words are attributed to Constantin Brancusi:

‘There are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realistic, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea. The essence of things.’

( Pearson. 1994)

Here we derive a sense that Brancusi is resisting (naïve) classification and the consequential misinterpretation of both the process and indeed act of production of the work of art. This resistance may be suggestive of the need for wider frames of reference for the rigorous interrogation of cultural production that are, by design, inclusive rather than exclusive. If the hypothesis is proven to have substance, what is the potential for extension within the pedagogy of cultural production? It is clear, that many disciplines within the pure and applied arts, struggle to define tangible parameters through which the process and the artefact may be measured. The paradigmatic methodology offers the potential of a student-generated frame of creative ambition to be reflected-upon, manipulated and assessed.

Of Projection:

If these speculative ideas have any value, the value lies in their application. Otherwise they will be consigned to the (considerable) detritus of theoretical speculations. It is the hypothesis of this Paper that engagement with Critical Non-Theory provides the opportunity for a deeper, more expansive and dimensional understanding of architecture and the arts utilising the meta-frame of Paradigmatic Study, and the sub-frames of Architekton, Techné and the Poetic Synthesis. The proposition invites a deeper and more authentic understanding of cultural production. The artefacts of cultural production are projected into the world and the world makes of them what it will. The intention is now, in the same way, to project these speculations into two realms; the rigorous examination of cultural production and, in parallel, the pedagogy of cultural production, across a diverse range of disciplines. It will be only then, that critical reflection may occur, establishing the efficacy of the hypothesis. Drawing upon the open ethos of Integral Theory, the project adopts open, expansive, inclusive and reflective processes that acknowledge the potential of that yet to be uncovered.

Of Coincidence:

When I began teaching at Portsmouth my erstwhile tutor, constant mentor and now friend, Dr. Richard Bunt had a small sign on his office door that read; ‘Ministry of Coincidences’. Within a short time Dick had formally appointed me Under Secretary of State for Serendipity. That room was a receptacle of revelation. Of ideas, people, opportunities, and potentials. The unique quality of those within that space was that each, in their own unique way, was open to coincidence, in the rather less colloquial sense of the word co-incidence. Implicit within the hypothesis set out within this Paper is an openness that celebrates coincidence and what, as a consequence, is revealed.

It is self-evident that to engage with the hypothesis set out within this Paper an open spirit is required. An attitude that seeks to include rather that exclude, seeks to conjoin rather than separate and strives to define connections rather than make distinct classifications.
Notes:

i Towards an Architecture as distinct from the often wrongly translated Towards one Architecture.

ii My sincere thanks to Professor Geoffrey Broadbent who posited this view in conversation 01.08.2013.

iii The Utzon Paradigm: A Humane, Transcultural, Tectonic And Innovative Approach Within Contemporary Architecture


References:


