

# Revisiting *Assemblage*: A Search for the Force of Architectural Thinking

Thinking is never the natural exercise of a faculty. Thought never thinks alone and by itself; moreover it is never simply disturbed by forces which remain external to it. Thinking depends on forces which take hold of thought...it will never attain this power if forces do not do violence to it. Violence must be done to it as thought, a power, the *force of thinking*, must throw it into a becoming-active.<sup>1</sup>

—Gilles Deleuze

## DEMISE

The demise of the architectural journal *Assemblage* in 2000 is nearly coincident with the rise of the Post-critical turn in architecture. This article uses *Assemblage* as a touchstone to frame an argument for reclaiming the power of philosophy in architecture by connecting architectural theory to architectural thinking. That is, I am not interested in making theoretically informed buildings; but rather, I am interested fostering rigorous practices of thought within the architectural discipline.

Even prior to the demise of *Assemblage* many architects argued architectural theory to be irrelevant. Architecture, they would assert, should be about doing architecture, not theorizing it. In Mark Wigley's estimation, one reason for such strong sentiments is that "architectural theory generally preempts an encounter with the object. It is concerned with veiling rather than exposing objects."<sup>2</sup>

Despite attempts in the latter half of the twentieth century to find relevance to architectural practice, in 1986 K. Michael Hays recognized that theory still had a reputation of irrelevance. In initiating *Assemblage*, Hays observed, "academic history and theory is thought to ennoble design culture, but not to intervene; it is seen as marginal to, and uncontaminated by, the gritty sociopolitical and practical concerns of society."<sup>3</sup> *Assemblage* sought to reenergize theory, attempting to establish that:

Both architecture and scholarship are ineluctably in the world...dealing adequately with architecture and its worldly condition must often involve crossing institutionally defined disciplinary boundaries... all of this underscores the conviction that there can be no fixed principles for making or interpreting architecture, or—as an important corollary—no set form for its presentation.<sup>4</sup>

By 1988, at the deconstruction exhibit in New York, Wigley proclaimed hopefully, "the traditional status of theory has changed. No longer is it some abstract realm of defense that surrounds objects, protecting them from examination by mystifying them."<sup>5</sup> Despite the important contributions that were made during this period, difficulty with theory persisted.

## RANDALL TEAL

University of Idaho

In the final, April 2000, issue of *Assemblage*, Mary McLeod observed, “*Assemblage’s* end hardly seems coincidental. An anti-intellectual current seems to be sweeping across American architecture schools.”<sup>6</sup> Of this current, McLeod wondered, “to what extent has recent architecture theory played a role in its own demise?”<sup>7</sup>

Here, McLeod was suggesting that theory, in large part—despite its pleas of relevance—had simply reprised its arcane convolutions and hermetic solipsism, and continued to reduce complex lines of thinking into canonical “pet theories” applied as architectural justification; all the while avoiding the real complexities of theoretical inquiry, critical practice, and life itself.<sup>8</sup> If these charges are indeed correct, then it is understandable that a skeptical disposition toward theory would persist and theory itself would remain marginal.

Though I take seriously McLeod’s suggestion that theory should look to itself as the source of its own undoing, it seems overly hasty to assume that theory is dead. Perhaps it is better to follow her later suggestion that “a more vigorous engagement of theory with practice might generate richer, more relevant theory, and might even spark more creative and progressive architecture.”<sup>9</sup> Following this charge it seems a richer theoretical practice might allow architecture to interface more deeply and directly with contemporary environmental, economic and social challenges; however, this requires that theory confront the fact that its future relevance depends on finding a voice *within* these challenges. In short, theory must no longer be viewed as a supplement to practice; theory needs to become a practice in its own right—a practice that incorporates and activates more potent intellectual habits into the discipline of architecture.

#### **PRACTICING THEORY**

In *Assemblage*, No. 30, Hays observed:

‘Good’ theory is often difficult to distinguish from sloppy speculation. Writers of theory often presume that their readers possess background knowledge that few in fact have. And theory seems to draw its life from too many, and too many suspect, outside fields that have little relation to professional architectural practice.<sup>10</sup>

In this statement, Hays makes clear that writers of “good” theory must be rigorous in both their research and their writing so as to avoid the eclecticism, obscurity, and irrelevance that alienate an audience. Whether the employment of too many outside fields is a problem *per se* is debatable; nevertheless, authors who do not demonstrate how their particular framing of architecture contributes to a greater architectural discourse certainly undermine theory’s relevance. Further, perhaps the fundamental problem reinforcing all the worst stereotypes about theory is authors who are not clear, complete, or precise in articulating their basic argument. Those who agree with Hays would find plenty of ammunition in contemporary architectural theory. For example, despite two separate clarification clauses (“in other words,” and “for example”), the following passage seems to slip further and further into obscurity as it proceeds:

Our understanding of the critical previously rested upon Immanuel Kant’s conviction that the critical represented the possibility of knowledge within knowledge. In other words, the critical traditionally meant a possibility lying within any discourse. In architecture, for example, this might mean the possibility of being within being.<sup>11</sup>

Writing of this sort reinforces a sentiment that theory is merely the conjuring’s of an architectural intelligentsia, unconcerned with the “real” issues of making or teaching architecture, or even of truly communicating with anyone. This type of shadowy theory sometimes withholds information, sometimes covers a lack of understanding, and sometimes is just bad writing.

That said, one must be careful not to equate the complex with the “bad.” What at first blush

may seem convoluted might simply be a difficult subject that requires more attention and thinking from the reader. A good example of this situation is Wigley's article in *Assemblage 8* called "The Translation of Architecture, the Production of Babel." This well written, but difficult, article provides a thoughtful explanation and discussion of deconstructive theory's relation to architecture. The demanding content of the article depends on a reader who is patient, careful, and thorough. In this example, one discovers that a practice of theory is not simply an individual undertaking but is rather a collective effort that requires attentive, receptive, and disciplined practitioners. Here, the rigor of philosophy is useful.

Michael Speaks has observed, "theory, like modern architecture, was detached from its Continental origins and replanted in the States, where it took on a lighter, more occasional existence... theory was fast philosophy."<sup>12</sup> In this lighter, more occasional state, fast philosophy theory—like fast food—fails to provide substance.

Take, for example, the thinking of Gilles Deleuze. The force of Deleuze's thought was stated broadly and plainly in Michel Foucault's well-known musing that one day this century will be known as Deleuzian.<sup>13</sup> In architecture, Deleuzian thinking has been said to represent a "fundamental shift of interest in architectural theory"<sup>14</sup> and this shift is revealed in part by Silva Lavin's suggestion that, "the work of Gilles Deleuze has permitted the affective terrain of buildings to organize itself anew."<sup>15</sup> However, how this terrain is to be organized must be viewed as an ongoing project. As one would imagine, the way of Deleuze's thinking is treacherous and when not taken slowly it has proven to be easy prey for formalist interpreters. In light of this reality one must follow up Lavin's comment up quickly with Martine De Maeseneer's advice that "architecture doesn't have to look fluid to be 'open'"<sup>16</sup> In other words, building an image of a Deleuzian concept misses the point of engaging theory entirely, because such an interpretation does not endeavor to think; instead, it mines sources in a search of novelty. As Jennifer Bloomer notes,

The most outstanding examples [of using philosophical concepts metaphorically] concern the appropriation of the metaphors of Gilles Deleuze (with and without Felix Guattari)—smooth space, holey space, desiring machines, rhizomes, the fold—which he has used to tag complex and slippery theoretical apparatuses that work to undermine faith in the substantiality of epistemological structures that authorize such conceptualization as that in which the "avant-garde" architects are engaged. This is demonstrative of how the avant-garde, which endeavors to be new and original, fails to escape the sticky traps of tradition and convention.<sup>17</sup>

As Bloomer indicates this particular employment of Deleuze's thought is merely interested in producing "something different" and this in itself is a "profoundly nostalgic project." So whether one uses Heidegger to validate the vernacular or Deleuze to validate the experimental, one is still engaged in either opportunistic dilettantism, or the totalizing belief that there is a "solution" to the "problem" of architecture and that it can be discovered in form derived and justified by theory. These practices bring philosophy into architecture, but only in its most limited forms.

As an alternative, I would argue that one's openness toward a particular set of issues, the way one understands other people, and the manner in which one engages the design process—areas that can be enriched through philosophical thought—are the things that allow appropriate form to emerge. The notion of response links thinking to a certain disposition that is not objective, but is rather participatory; a practice of theory would aim to train designers to better understand and respond to existence itself.

For example, unlike this fast philosophy theory, Nietzsche has argued that philosophies are meant to be ruminated upon. Rumination situates one *within the act* of thinking. Rather than

making observations from afar, rumination demands that one inhabit a region of thought and participate in the thinking of a thought. This practice recognizes that perhaps what is most valuable in reading other thinkers is not this or that concept; but rather, a thinker's very manner of thinking. Martin Heidegger reinforces this point saying, "every great thinker always *thinks* one jump more originally than he directly speaks. Our interpretation must therefore try to say what is unsaid by him."<sup>18</sup> Thinking the unsaid requires that one be thinking *along with* their source.

Such practice promotes a notion of theory that is non-linear, cumulative, and takes time; it becomes meaningful as it is allowed to work on us, wash over us, and permeate our being. In short, ruminative theory's usefulness grows slowly but can gradually alter the way one thinks about things, sees the world, and makes architecture. In this way, theory is not so much a tool as a way of living, which requires a continual committed engagement.

For example, Finnish architect Riema Pietilä engaged theory not to simply inform specific works; but rather, it might be argued that he made architecture to help him become a better thinker. Pietilä's approach was sharpened and driven by his intellectual interests; however, as Roger Connah observed: "He didn't read them (Wharf, Beckett, Heidegger, Hall or Feyerabend) to move in that direction, he was already there."<sup>19</sup> From these influences, to the unending qualities of Schwitters, to the incompleteness of Godel, to the indeterminacy of Cage, to the temporal dynamism of Boccioni, for Pietilä, "theory was about process itself. It was the indivisible space between life and architecture."<sup>20</sup> In other words, his engagement with theory was akin to the building of values. Pietilä did not use these influences in direct application, because this contrivance would have obscured the architectural opportunities; rather, he used theory to sharpen his methods and deepen his beliefs of what architecture could do.

When one does not think along-with but instead *looks at* theory as an object of interest, thinking degrades into simple calculation. A letter to the editor in *Assemblage 30* expressed concern that *Assemblage* was falling into this very trap. The author provided the following quotation from Heidegger's, *What Is Called Thinking?* to illustrate his point:

To be underway on the way in order to clear the way—that is one thing. The other thing is to take a position somewhere along the road, and there make conversation about whether, and how, earlier and later stretches of the way may be different, and in their difference might even be incompatible—in-compatible that is for those who never walk the way, nor ever set out on it, but merely take a position outside it, there forever to formulate ideas and make talk about the way.<sup>21</sup>

It is this notion of thinking as a "way" of involvement that can bring us theory at its most vital. An additional comment from Heidegger helps to clarify how this differs from our typical practice of thinking:

A precise conceptual definition that ticks off the various characteristics of what is to be defined remains vacuous and false, so long as we do not really come to know in an intimate way what is being talked about and bring it before our minds eye.<sup>22</sup>

If one were to apply this entreaty to the practice of architectural theory it would suggest that for the author, writing must be an activity of inhabiting a topic. Writers must write in such a manner so as to invite readers to inhabit the topic with them, and readers must understand the article to be an armature for thought and reading to be a mode of thinking. When this occurs, a conversation ensues and a practice of theory is enacted.

Unfortunately, the "light and occasional" approach has tended to dominate, which is why Post-Criticality became a "thing." In the brief history of contemporary architectural theory,

thinkers, movements, and approaches have been taken up, used, and discarded over the course of only a few years. Here, the usefulness of a certain thinker, movement, or approach is seen (falsely) to be proportionate to its newness. Such consumerist thinking transforms areas of thought into products, and like any consumer item subject to planned obsolescence, thinkers and philosophies are readily discarded after brief use.

Further, not only are areas of thought quickly discarded, but also a by-product of this attitude is that even the substantive ideas they managed to generate often get reduced to caricatures and sound bites (like Deleuze above). And this is not just limited to formal reductions. Take for example, Heidegger. The very advocate of thinking writ large has been lightly drawn as an anti-technological critic of modernism who wished we could all “dwell” in Black Forest farm-houses. “Dwelling” in particular has become such a codified and abused term in architectural discourse that no one even thinks to question its philosophical force anymore.

Obviously the use of others’ concepts as springboards can be helpful at times. However, one must be careful with such exercises as their danger lies in their ease of appropriation and re-application. A case in point is the infamous Nazi misappropriation of Nietzsche’s thought, which occurred by their willful misreading, picking, “‘raisins’ out of the cake of his philosophy” without acknowledging (or perhaps understanding) that the overall context of his thought was incompatible with their ideology.<sup>23</sup> And unfortunately, such distortions negatively color contemporary reception of many thinkers.

Avoiding such gross distortion requires a practice of theory that does not repeat what is “true” about someone or something, lest we relegate all of our sources to the rank of cliché. Instead it is critical that interrogation of the source itself is a primary method of engagement. Returning to Heidegger, “thinking the un-thought in others’ thought” is particularly apropos for those thinking about the “architecture” in tangential fields. Here instead of applying a source to architecture, one thinks architecture framed by another way of thinking. Such ruminative thinking does not think over the top of other thinkers, using them to prove forgone conclusions, it engages them in dialogue—in the act of thinking—so as to uncover previously obstructed understandings.

#### **THE WAY OF THEORY**

Michael Speaks thinks that the solution to the problem of light and occasional theory is a, “managerial approach,” because it:

Provides the intellectual infrastructure necessary for the development of a fleet-footed generation of architects and urbanists ready to meet globalization’s challenge: namely, the challenge presented by quantity and commercialization to develop softer design strategies flexible enough to deal with the demands of the market.<sup>24</sup>

Although I agree that understanding current circumstances and the challenges they present is critical for an architecture that contributes to society, one must be wary of giving over the power of resistance. A categorical acceptance would be abdication of the ethical role of the architect. Here, it is useful to remember Deleuze’s comment:

The use of philosophy is to sadden. A philosophy that saddens no one, that annoys no one, is not a philosophy. It is useful for harming stupidity, for turning stupidity into something shameful. Its only use is the exposure of all forms of baseness of thought ... turning thought into something aggressive, active and affirmative.<sup>25</sup>

In short, one must find oneself simultaneously empowered and troubled by the pressures from markets, globalization, and commercialization. It is the negotiation of the resultant tension that affords insight into matters of great concern.

## ENDNOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 108.
2. Mark Wigley, "Deconstructivist Architecture," in *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 677.
3. K. Michael Hays, "About Assemblage" *Assemblage*, No. 1 (Oct., 1986), pp. 4-5. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171050> (Accessed: 13/07/2009)
4. *ibid.*
5. Mark Wigley, "Deconstructivist Architecture," in *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 677.
6. Mary McLeod, "Theory and Practice" *Assemblage*, No. 41 (Apr., 2000), p. 51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171311> (Accessed: 17/07/2009)
7. *ibid.*
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. K. Michael Hays and Catherine Ingraham, "Editorial" *Assemblage*, No. 30 (Aug., 1996), pp. 6-11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171454> (Accessed: 17/07/2009)
11. Peter Eisenman, "Autonomy and the Will to the Critical" *Assemblage*, No. 41 (Apr., 2000), pp. 90-91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171348> (Accessed: 18/07/2009)
12. Michael Speaks, "Which Way Avant-Garde?" *Assemblage*, No. 41 (Apr., 2000), p. 78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171338> (Accessed: 17/07/2009)
13. As presented in Sean Hand in: Gilles Deleuze, Foucault, trans. Sean Hand, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) p.xli.
14. Sylvia Lavin, "The New Mood or Affective Disorder," *Assemblage* No. 41 (2000).
15. At the end of his collection, *Architectural Theory since 1968*, K. Michael Hays, says this of R.E. Somol's Deleuze influenced essay "One or Several Masters."
16. Martine De Maeseneer, "Make Architecture Sound" *Assemblage*, No. 41 (Apr., 2000), p. 23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171283> (Accessed: 18/07/2009)
17. Jennifer Bloomer, "The Matter of the Cutting Edge" *Assemblage*, No. 27, Tulane Papers: The Politics of Contemporary Architectural Discourse (Aug., 1995), pp. 106-111. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171436> (Accessed: 17/07/2009)
18. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche Volume 1: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell, (New York: Harper One, 1979) p. 134.
19. Roger Connah, Phone Interview, 2015
20. Roger Connah, "We Let the Goldfish Go," (Unpublished Work 2015), 9.

For example, sustainability needs a theoretical discourse, lest it degrade into mere catalogues of 'sustainable' products and technical manuals on energy modeling and daylighting; and thus exclude dialogue on issues of perception, emotion, cultural significance, economic viability, and associated pedagogy and design processes. Now more than ever with instrumental technology poised to leap in with answers to questions that have yet to be asked, there is a pressing need for thoughtful and dynamic practice to participate critically within the greater discourse on the built environment. Here Dagmar Richter's statement from *Assemblage 41* is worth revisiting:

Authors have to be aware of a network of simultaneous realities that are intricately connected. Architecture has to support an open structure able to transform and adapt to the pulsating life of different realities, all of which will appropriate the structures for their own purposes and readings. It cannot remain a compositional art with formal givens, it cannot become a space of total flow without resistance. Resistance remains at the foundation of the architectural discipline.<sup>26</sup>

In the context of sustainability making theory useful begins with making sustainability architectural; that is, infusing it with questions of culture, society and economics, and finding ways—through theory—to allow these issues to be co-informing, correcting the traditional linear flow of information (i.e. form follows function) in the pursuit of materially and spatially sophisticated places of inhabitation. It is only through such questioning that the environmental issues of our civilization will be able to be addressed in ways that exceed simply applying LEED criteria to evaluate and validate architecture and installing technological fixes in response.

In order to assist the architectural discipline in providing resistance, theory must make itself simultaneously more diverse and more interactive. In becoming more diverse, there will certainly remain some theory that is purely formal, historical, or speculative as this range is necessary and desired; but theory must also find ways to situate itself more consequentially within practice without becoming instrumental—this is why the ability to participate, to "be-in" as Heidegger might say, is central to a successful revitalization. As a method of participation, theory can help us become more adept when dealing with complex causal relations, non-linear processes, and the complex systems and ethical dilemmas we will need to engage if we are to be successful in bringing architecture, environment, and culture together in mutually beneficial ways.

In order to do this the aims of theory must get over an "obsession with space, originality, and the utopian search for the new,"<sup>27</sup> and initiate dialogues on issues of perception, emotion, cultural significance, economic viability, and associated pedagogy and design processes. These goals must get recalibrated in order for theory to be relevant to current concerns; and must be recalibrated because as Hays puts it bluntly, "any theory that talks about architecture only, that does not relate architecture to the larger social, material field, is utterly useless."<sup>28</sup> This point says quite clearly why architectural theory must be philosophical in its basic nature.

## MOVING FORWARD

One of the historical shortcomings of theory has been that for centuries its primary representation has been in the form of the treatise—"the theory of architecture." Some have been less prescriptive than others but in general from Vitruvius to Perrault where the classical reigned, to the 18th century eclectics who asked, "in what style should we build?" to the polemics of the 20th century, most have argued for some circumscribed and totalizing view of architecture. Given this lineage, something akin to architectural religion, it seems wise that we became skeptical of theory.

In order for theory to find new sites for attachment it must be proactive, participatory and probing, as K. Michael Hays advocates:

Interpretive and explanatory theories of artifacts should be seen as empirical hypotheses about the causal, relational structure of things and events in the material world rather than as mere linguistic generalizations about observable features of the artifacts or mere arbitrary, intersubjective agreements about correct “points of view....theory-constitutive conventions are introduced to afford us epistemic access to phenomena that we believe exist but that we do not yet fully understand and cannot yet adequately explicate.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, theory that is undertaken as a practice of thinking can open up grounds for communication, comprehension, and progress by its very questioning advance. To this end, theory need not be readily transparent, in fact this would be impossible exactly because of its ruminative nature. However, in order to allow philosophical thinking to flourish in architecture, architectural writers must be vigilant, not using jargon, not employing philosophical ideas superficially, and not writing theory strictly for audiences of other theorists.

One place for immediate action is in the venues for the dissemination of architectural thought. With the majority of conferences operating on the same format of four people presenting for fifteen minutes each with a brief group discussion, there is neither enough focus nor time to encourage depth in scholarship, or depth in audience participation for that matter. Contrast this model with a philosophy conference I have attended in Canada where each paper is provided a written commentary and is given a full hour for consideration. However it is done, there is a pressing need for a greater range of opportunities that promote *thinking of architecture* over the common *production of scholarship*.

The speed and ease of internet publication seems to make electronic resources another obvious place for improvement. A journal of critical practice might be one opportunity that could be implemented in this realm. This move would also address many professors' concerns about being essentially forced to curtail practice because of the lack of scholarly venues for theoretically minded design work. This lack sends a negative message, encouraging the very people who are teaching others to design to not practice design and suggests that the act of making and rigorous thinking are somehow mutually exclusive. The fact is that architecture can no longer afford to promote a duality of theory and practice. However, this requires that theory communicate; it requires that theory find the force of thought.

21. K. Michael Hays and Catherine Ingraham, "Editorial" *Assemblage*, No. 30 (Aug., 1996), pp. 6-11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171454> (Accessed: 17/07/2009)
22. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche Volume 1: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell, (New York: Harper One, 1979) p. 37.
23. Rudiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) p. 300.
24. Michael Speaks, "Which Way Avant-Garde?" *Assemblage*, No. 41 (Apr., 2000), p. 78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171338> (Accessed: 17/07/2009)
25. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 106.
26. Dagmar Richter, "P.S. (Overcoding)" *Assemblage*, No. 41 (Apr., 2000), p. 66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171326> (Accessed: 18/07/2009)
27. *ibid.*
28. K. Michael Hays and Catherine Ingraham, "Editorial" *Assemblage*, No. 30 (Aug., 1996), pp. 6-11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171454> (Accessed: 17/07/2009)
29. K. Michael Hays, "Theory-Constitutive Conventions and Theory Change" *Assemblage*, No. 1 (Oct., 1986), pp. 116-128. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171058> (Accessed: 13/07/2009)