

The Construction of Concept-Driven Frameworks in Architecture: Rethinking Theory After the Post-Critical Stalemate

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In the late 1990s, a certain skepticism as to the instrumentality of “theory” in our field begun to settle in the American scene. Critical of criticality, the promoters of the so-called “post-critical” stance started to advocate for a return to practice as the only true source for architectural innovation, while rendering theory irrelevant, or at best, disassociated from the practical arena. On the other hand, two occurrences taking place in the year 2000 were opportunistically claimed to reify the move away from theoretical concerns: the end of the publication *Assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture* and the two-stage event (workshop at Columbia University, conference at MoMA) organized by Joan Ockman under the title *Things in the Making: Contemporary Architecture and the Pragmatist Imagination*. To be sure, the new paradigms shaking the foundations of the discipline – that is, the impact of the digital domain, the increasing demand for ecologically sound architectural practices, or the joint phenomenon of the “starchitect” and the building-as-icon– can be construed as dynamics emerging primarily from practice, and this the “post-critics” would stress time and again.

Yet, it is in this particular context that invoking Thomas Kuhn’s contribution to the question of paradigm shifts seems especially pertinent. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the American physicist and philosopher attempted to explain how paradigms in the sciences get transformed. Rather than due to the revolutionary discoveries themselves, these momentous processes occur, according to Kuhn, because there are certain modifications applied to received ways of thinking that accomplish to accommodate the new discoveries, these no longer appearing as anomalous. Similarly, one can argue that we are now in pressing need for theory in the field of architecture precisely because traditional rationales have been discredited by some significant changes that have originated in contemporary modes of practices.

From the 1960s through the mid-1990s, architectural theory sought to reconstitute the nature of the discipline. To that effect, it established relationships with other non-disciplinary structures and social realms through the use of mediatory concepts that were derived from a number of different fields, whether philosophy, linguistics, psychology or anthropology. In a sense, this logic has been reversed. Today, I will hold, an alternative model of theory based on the revision of extant, concept-driven frameworks must be produced in order to turn the challenges being *already* posed in the practical realm into effective disciplinary milestones.

Sea cual fuere la revisión propuesta por el autor, su tesis es oportuna y urge precisarla.

Los momentos de crisis en la práctica arquitectónica siempre han coincidido con aquellos de avance en la producción teórica. Y en esta misma publicación, HipoTesis, tenemos un claro ejemplo de vitalidad y diversidad que conducen a la redefinición del papel del arquitecto.

Is there a way, perhaps following pragmatic lines, for the relation between theory and practice to avoid the pendulum swing of either theory or practice? The example of Kuhn is interesting because it suggests that one might be engaged in both theory and practice simultaneously. In this sense, the increasing interest in ethics over the last 20 years seems relevant because of ethics’ capacity to link theory and practice.

No debe llevarse hasta el extremo el carácter más aparente de las tesis de Kuhn. El legado del historiador de la ciencia ha ido acompañado de cierta especulación por parte de la sociología que reduce toda voluntad de método científico a un paradigma irreparablemente falible en el tiempo. Ésta, que no era la visión estricta de Kuhn, es perjudicial para cualquier ámbito: desde la física hasta la arquitectura.

What example of theoretical production, past and current, constitutes a mere intellectual (and probably necessary) dissertation, and which has to do with a real evolution of architectural practice?
Is the economic global crisis positively accelerating certain types of debates based on theory and practice?

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