

Review article

## Whatever Happened to Projective Architecture? Rethinking the Expertise of the Architect

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Over the past decade, there has been an increasing reflection on material conditions and constraints in architectural practice. Purely analytic models of the impact of architecture do not seem to suffice, and yet there is a desire for a structured theorisation of the architectural object. A return, as it were, to the material reality of architecture without losing the insights of the sustained critical reflection of the past fifty years.

In many ways, this seems to have been the original intention of the 2002 article 'The Doppler Effect: The Many Moods of Modernism' by Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting.<sup>1</sup> Their ideas seemed to indicate a potential shift in the architecture debate that resonated with various architectural developments in Europe. These developments were not related purely to the theoretical discourse, but were rather raised by issues confronted in practice. At the same time, these were not purely questions of pragmatic scope, but were related to the very underpinnings of architectural discourse. The increasing institutionalisation of theory from the 1960s onward had culminated in a pivotal role for critical theory in architecture. The ideas put forward in the 'projective' debate seemed potentially to reintegrate architectural practice and theory. In 2006, Stylos, a student organisation of the TU Delft Faculty of Architecture, contributed to this debate by gathering a number of the diverse voices for the conference 'The Projective Landscape', the particular aim of which was to bring together those who had originally put forward these ideas on the notion of the 'projective', and

those who seemed already to be implementing it.

In the end, the questions on the relation between practice and theory have remained on the table. Perhaps Willem-Jan Neutelings characterised the problem best when, during the round-table discussion, he noted that architects are currently in need of theory and reflection to help them in their work. In his view, rather than helping to explore and understand the many questions facing architects today, theorists were holding academic discussions on topics that had little bearing on practice or public culture at large. The 'projective' debate, insofar as it was one, was begun out of interesting intentions but stranded in, again, a return to a hermetic exchange between a few intellectuals, with very little connection to public debates on architecture. In fact, the issues put forth by various architects and academics from the European mainland seem much more engaged with contemporary questions of how architecture 'works' than their American counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

One of the primary problems arising from the traditional position of critical theory is the perceived opposition between architecture as a 'public service', demanding a critical social engagement (in the tradition of the modernists), and architecture as an autonomous art form (appealing to either the beaux arts or the avant-garde, depending on the tradition it is embedded in). This opposition has remained standing, yet at the same time one might consider that a current generation of architects does not feel constrained by the perceived incompatibility

between the political and the aesthetic.<sup>3</sup> This underscores the continuing relevance of the 'projective' discussion. The divide between theory and practice often places architects in a position of complicity when they serve their clients too well, while theorists appear to see few possibilities to inform those in practice of pressing matters. Both sides too easily dismiss the power of architecture 'at work', and do not adequately address its potential effects. In retrospect, rather than dismissing the 'projective' debate altogether, we can ask why the idea of the projective was so provocative at the time. Surely this points to some crucial questions that transcend the dividing lines between theory and practice. It does not involve an appeal for a new autonomy, but rather a recalibration of the relation between architecture and societal issues. They are, in the end, different domains and need to be treated as such, any tradition of spatial determinism notwithstanding.

Although the 'projective' as proposed by Somol and Whiting was a specific response to problems that had arisen in the discipline's relation with critical theory - in particular as it was expressed in the work of Eisenman - it also contained a question about the oppositions forced upon architecture. Somol and Whiting's idea of the projective encompassed specific traits in contemporary architecture, such as a kind of 'low-definition' in the spirit of McLuhan, allowing for individual differentiation, and a 'diagrammatic' architecture that gave preference to the pragmatic approach of Rem Koolhaas over the intellectual designs of Peter Eisenman. The suggestions of pragmatism were embedded within the article, as well as references to the sensuality of architecture, removing it from the more intellectual realm of critical theory.<sup>4</sup>

The very term 'projective' seemed a clever coinage in response to 'critical'. Precisely by not employing the 'post' addition of the 'post-critical' debate, but by turning to a word that seemed to incorporate already the idea of the architectural project, Somol

and Whiting proposed architecture to turn to the specificity of its own discipline. In proposing a new project, the architect by necessity becomes implicated, but this was not seen as an expression of powerlessness as put forth in the critical discourse.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it offered a line of demarcation, opening up the possibility to discuss the potential of architecture rather than its impotence. It also distanced itself from the apparent dismissal of critical agency that is embedded in the notion of 'post-critical', as not only *after* but also *beyond* the critical.

In architecture, the notion of the projective involves more of a recalibration of the critical than its mere dismissal.<sup>6</sup> Critical theory presumes an outside and disinterested view, as argued by Bruno Latour in 2004.<sup>7</sup> To Whiting, this requires a utilisation of architectural expertise:

*Architects must engage, lead, catalyse - act, rather than react. [...] Unlike other disciplines in the liberal arts, architecture's relationship to critical theory is not entirely concentric. Rather than bemoan this fact or conclude that theory has no bearing on architecture - two options that guarantee architecture's intellectual suicide - architects interested in the progressive project have no choice but to take advantage of our ability to slip in and out of critical theory's rule.<sup>8</sup>*

In following Marxism and the Frankfurt School, the 'critical' of critical theory has come to be identified with resistance and negation, while the recent debate suggests less focus on resistance and more on critique 'from within'. Whiting's emphasis on architectural expertise reins theory back into a relationship with the actual production of architecture. Her willingness to accept that something must be *defined* or made specific to have an impact allows for a more active engagement with the world than a permanent position of resistance. If, for example, public space has become too entangled with corporate interests, it is more useful to design a public

space that transcends these interests than it is *not* to design anything at all, or merely to point out that something is complicit. Architecture, when built, is by its very nature entangled with commercial interests, or the interests of the client (which are not always the interests of the general public). After all, what good is a building that 'critically' discourages people from even entering, to a client? However, if it is to remain valuable, architecture must have something more to offer than mere compliance: be it a 'comfortable' environment or a 'critical' one.

Although the specific suggestions differ, the search for a new vocabulary is shared, seeking a new approach to and evaluation of architecture. This indicates the shortcomings of critical theory for addressing the problems of this time, particularly when applied too directly to architecture. The different approaches under the general umbrella of 'projective' share Latour's sense of the shortcomings of critical theory, which in the contemporary world seems not to do justice to the full complexity of reality. But these approaches also specifically point to the problematic role of architecture when conflated with critical theory. The projective attempts to recast architecture in a position that is less strictly deconstructive and analytic, and does more to incorporate the process of making, which inevitably reveals unforeseen complications and new approaches. Despite this focus on making (and, for example, aesthetics and compositional strategies), contemporary architects are not prepared to rescind the insights that have been gained over the past forty years through the sustained attention for critique. In this sense, the projective revolves not around resistance but is rather aimed at incorporating critique and embedding it within the cultural fabric precisely through a sophisticated use of aesthetic qualities.

By focusing primarily on critical theory, architecture has been required to justify its interventions through a critical discourse that was tailored to

an analytic approach, not to the experimental and prescriptive one that is by necessity part of architectural practice. The disciplinary tradition of architecture is constrained by a spectrum of external regulations, ideals that need to be given concrete form, a public presence, and its dependence on a client's finances, as well as its typically longstanding lifetime (depending of course, on use, materials and other contingencies). And yet it is a powerful practice: following Koolhaas, architecture is in that sense both 'omnipotent and impotent'. Architects contribute only to a small fraction of the built environment, and are dependent on their patrons to do so. And yet they have an impact on their surroundings simply by virtue of the unavoidable presence of the built environment, which has the potential to evoke a response from the broadest possible public: one need not seek it out nor acquire special skills to approach it. Architecture is simply there, to be experienced by all. It is deeply embedded in our cultural history, shot through with cultural conventions that seem all but invisible, yet have the strong powers of evoking ideals and fictions based on a long cultural history. The architect needs to understand the societal conditions surrounding his work, and yet a specific expertise is necessary.

While the article by Somol and Whiting began a trajectory that returned to the specific conditions of architecture, gently steering the debate away from external societal conditions, as well as the questionable role of 'critique', it is in *The Craftsman*, a recent publication by Richard Sennett, that the role of 'making' as contributing to reflection takes a central position.<sup>9</sup> Sennett explores a broad scope of activities that require physical mastery of technique and not solely intellectual reflection. These extend from the work of traditional goldsmiths and sculptors to lab technicians and computer programmers. In the second part of the book he focuses more precisely on what this 'mastery of the hand' means when it reaches a level of subconscious activity, incorporated in reflective explorations. Through the three

fields of music, cooking and glassblowing, Sennett specifies his argument on craft as an activity that goes beyond mere replication of traditional (artistic and cultural) standards. These activities stand as examples of crafts, or perhaps disciplines, that cannot abide by talent and thinking alone: they all require doing. And not only do they all require doing, but they also require reflection on the results, as well as a critical eye, palate or ear. This list of disciplines that combine reflection and making could easily be extended: indeed, architecture returns throughout the book in examples of the mutual influence of thinking and making.

What makes this focus on 'making' particularly interesting here is how it might help us redirect the 'critical/projective' debate. It no longer speaks of intellectual models but of concrete problems, which bridge the divide between social-political conditions and the work of design and execution. In Sennett's argument, quality does become a determining factor, which is not only recognisable by a small group of experts but rather extends outward to the general public. Simply put: any layperson can to some degree distinguish between a beginning piano player and a talented, advanced one. The further the musical education, the more specifically the distinction can be made: why someone is better, based on which techniques and qualities, or how improvements might be made. This is in direct contradiction to the debates of recent years that suggest that discrimination is solely based on social preconceptions or acquired tastes.

In the line of Sennett's argument, the opposition between social impact and architectural quality is no longer inevitable. Critique has not disappeared in favour of a pure formalism, but is rather embedded within the very object of architecture. This requires not less, but more architectural definition. Or as Whiting notes: 'Our expertise lies in defining forms, spaces, and materialities; we should not be afraid of the results and subjectivities (read: *biases*)

that such definition implies.'<sup>10</sup> Whether framed in terms of a 'pragmatic idealism' or a focus on 'affective' qualities in architecture, critics and theorists are still struggling to find a vocabulary to suit the architectural production that appears to cross over boundaries of either political engagement or aesthetic perfection. While these critics seem unable to escape the critical framework they have confined themselves to, architects continue to build, exploring their ideas within the material forms of their discipline. Some have simply given up on the kind of 'theory' that redirects all discussion of the building to the networks of power that underlie it. Some continue to cloak themselves in provocative statements that direct attention away from the architectural aspects of the design.

How can we possibly turn this position toward a more productive discussion? Perhaps we first need to acknowledge the responsibility architecture has. Architecture cannot be seen outside of its societal role, yet we do need to acknowledge its limits. The various utopian projects of the twentieth century placed so much emphasis on the transformative power of architecture that they almost inevitably led to the cynicism of current theorists. Acknowledging the limits of architecture's agency does not however imply the complete denial of its relation to the social and cultural fabric. Precisely by redirecting our attention to the expertise within the discipline, we may create space for a new form of agency, one in which architects may read the newspaper and engage with their socio-cultural framework, but do so first and foremost as architects, not as sociologists, economists, or philosophers.

If architecture thus has an agency it can appeal to, a sphere of influence that extends beyond the mere fulfilment of spatial requirements, it will not be found in the framework of 'post-critical' architecture, and perhaps not even in 'projective' architecture, as long as it remains primarily defined within an intellectual debate. It will be found in the embedding

of speculations on fundamental societal questions (sustainability, allowing space for a community to feel 'at home', grounding the spatial experience of those who are overwhelmed by the speed of contemporary society) in the material forms of architecture that allow a multiple reading, independent of societal hierarchies and preconceptions. This is the expertise that we may expect from the architect: having incorporated the basic functions of design and spatial composition, to address himself to the task of creating buildings that 'work' in the broadest cultural sense.

#### Notes

1. Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, 'Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism', *Perspecta*, 33 (2002), pp. 72-77.
2. One might also say that it was fortuitous to hold this discussion in Delft, since Dutch architecture in particular over the course of the 1990s had gained extensive credibility in being both pragmatic (and attractive to clients) and challenging to the status quo. From the innovative work of OMA, and the flag that was passed down from them to KCAP, MVRDV, Neutelings Riedijk and many others of the so-called 'Nine + One' generation (the title of a 1997 exhibition on young Dutch architects and the catalogue edited by Michael Speaks), Dutch architecture became the site for an embedded form of questioning architectural preconceptions.
3. For example, the relatively young magazines *Frame*, *Mark* and *A10* seem to balance comfortably between a critical assessment of projects and extensive documentation of the everyday reality of practice.
4. See for example *Arch+* 178 on the theme 'Die Produktion von Präsenz' (June 2006); Manuel Gausa and Susanna Cros, *OpOp: Operative Optimism in Architecture* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2004); the upcoming Bauhaus colloquium 2009, 'Architecture in the Age of Empire', which includes workshops on 'projective vs. critical practice', and 'affect, ornament and sensuality'.
5. See in particular Iain Borden and Jane Rendell, 'From chamber to transformer: epistemological challenges and tendencies in the intersection of architectural histories and critical theories', in *InterSections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, ed. by Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 3-23.
6. George Baird, "'Criticality" and its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine*, 21 (Fall 2004/Winter 2005). Available at [http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/21\\_baird.pdf](http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/21_baird.pdf) [accessed 20 March 2009].
7. Latour, 'Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 2 (Winter 2004), pp. 225-48. As Latour explains, the position of the critic in traditional critical theory disallows any true agency. If the actor turns to an object to find meaning, the critic attacks him for projecting his own ideas on the object. If the actor then takes his newfound freedom to act and project, the critic reprimands him for not acknowledging the deep-seated societal structures that subconsciously guide him. In both cases, the critic remains outside of this process, placing himself outside of the sphere of influence of societal conditions.
8. Sarah Whiting, 'Going Public', *Hunch, The Berlage Institute Report*, 6/7 (Summer 2003), pp. 497-502 (p. 502). She implies here that critical theory is both useful and limited, and that architectural production itself allows for a freedom from (destructive) critique.
9. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Yale University Press, 2008).
10. Whiting, 'Going Public', p. 502.

#### Biography

Lara Schrijver holds degrees in architecture from Princeton University and the Technical University in Delft, and a PhD from the Technical University of Eindhoven. As an assistant professor at the TU Delft, she is one of three program leaders for the research program 'The Architectural Project and its Foundations'. She was an editor with OASE for ten years. Her first book, *Radical Games*, on the architecture debate of the 1960s and its influence on contemporary discourse, is forthcoming in 2009.

