

**Contents**Vol. 9, No. 2  
March 2005**Current Views in Architectural Theory**Kari Juhani  
Jormakka  
Vienna**A Comment on Architectural Theory**

Architectural theory cannot deliver the truth about architecture. Even in philosophy, the status of truth as the absolute value and goal of the investigation has been questioned since Nietzsche. Instead of a search for truth, philosophy was for him a practice of demystification, unmasking and genealogy, ultimately aiming at emancipation. And yet, Heidegger insisted that Nietzsche never broke free from that which the Greek called *ousia* in its ordinary sense of “the household”, namely the circle of the stable *Bestand*.<sup>[1]</sup> Heidegger’s own work, and that of Derrida, for example, attempt to free thought from this residual domesticity. This may be achieved through a critical close reading of traditional modes of thought, as in Derrida’s deconstruction, or perhaps through the active creation of new concepts, as Deleuze and Guattari promise – making Derrida grumble.<sup>[2]</sup>

To destabilize *ousia*, rather than settle the truth about architecture, appears to me as the real task of architectural theory. Of course, the general term “architectural theory” has been used to refer to at least three radically different kinds of writing (and, occasionally, non-verbal projects and buildings). I would characterize these three as design theory, criticism, and the philosophy of architecture. Much of Le Corbusier’s literary output can be called design theory: he attempts to formulate new concepts in order to set rules and goals for design. Theory is used as criticism when we attempt to understand what Le Corbusier really has done by comparing his buildings with his writings, or the writings of other architects. Colin Rowe’s observations about the resemblance of Corbusian villas to Palladian ones would fall in this category. Finally, architectural theory as a metatheory or as the philosophy and aesthetics of architecture investigates the possibility of formulating design theories (the first kind of theory) as well as the relationship between a theory and a building or the intentions of the author and the work (the second type of theory) but there are many other questions as well.<sup>[3]</sup> It is the third kind of theory that I see as indispensable.

As I see it, architectural theory in general does not have a method of its own any more than philosophy, for example, has one – even though, of course, particular theories can develop their own methodologies, such as for example Bill Hillier’s ways of mapping the “social logic of space” or Douglas Graf’s elaborate diagramming. Nor

do I think that architectural theory has a unified object of study. It appears to me that there is no stable discipline of architecture, and any classification of (material or conceptual) objects as architecture should be contested. The lack of method and object are in fact the greatest resources of architectural theory in its critical and emancipatory function, as they imply a lack of established ossidic structure. Architectural theory is not at home anywhere, not even in architecture.

### Some issues

As a challenge to *ousia* within architecture, theory needs to expose the domestic biases in the conceptualization and representation of architecture from small scale structures to the city and beyond. Insofar as we are talking about high architecture or architecture as art, I would define a design for a building as architecture when it thematizes one or more of its aspects to the degree that it makes a contribution to an architectural discourse. In other contexts I have analyzed in some detail how architecture in this sense is constructed, interpreted and evaluated.[4] On this basis, it is also possible to practice criticism as a form of theoretical investigation.[5]

However, if we do not wish to concentrate on high architecture alone, theory can also study what buildings (or the built environment as a whole) do to people as a tentative definition of architecture in the broader sense. In addition to being physical objects, buildings also organize human behavior, protect property, create privacy and publicity, constitute particular kinds of subjectivities, bring about social values and roles, affect exclusions; they also communicate meanings and afford aesthetic experiences; finally, they also have physiological effects, some of which are relevant to theory, rather than medicine. To understand how buildings manage to do such things – and many more – is a major challenge to theorists but it is a necessary step if we wish to change any of these mechanisms.

Much of what buildings actually do to people is not clearly recognized. I have attempted to articulate some principles of architectural performatives or rituals which need to remain unconscious or at least unquestioned in order to have any effect.[6] The connection between action and its architectural envelope remains undertheorized, despite decades of environmental psychology. The more recent introduction of cultural and gender studies into architecture may provide some of the necessary tools to work out a theory between space, function, activity, and subject.[7]

Some of these results may necessitate a rethinking of how architecture is produced. To develop sharper ethical tools to tackle with problems in architecture and urbanism is an urgent task.[8] Our attempt is to combine the concept of freedom implicit in Foucault and Deleuze with the ethical theory of Mark Johnson in order to both analyze and go beyond the “projective practice” of Koolhaas. Here, a number of economic issues also come to the fore, from branding to city marketing and tourism on the one hand and consulting on the

other, as the values and the practices of the profession change.[9]

However, it is not just the problems that face every architect that need to be addressed: an equally important field of study is defined by the study of the design process, including the methods of representation. Both the traditional methods and the possibilities offered by the new media contain various kinds of presuppositions and commitments that delimit the range of the possible results and push the design in some direction. It is the task of theory to bring the ontological commitments and other limitations of design and representational methods to the foreground in order to make rational decision-making possible. In particular, we have examined the quasi-algorithmic design methods of Eisenman, Lynn, MVRDV, and Marcos Novak.[10] A special focus was placed on motion-based design techniques that in the 1990s sponsored a different kind of architecture and in general foregrounded the potential of motion as an architectural element.[11]

The study of design processes and representational methods are elements in a theory of architectural practice that would also need a sociological dimension. In an earlier study, I have argued in a Bourdivin vein that design theories often function as responsive to very concrete social pressures, albeit within the field of possibles in the discourse. Other topics studied in our department of theory include the mechanisms of fame in the architecture world and in particular the logic of the architecture competition.

However, perhaps the most significant field of study at the moment involves the impact of new technologies. In the nineteenth century, architects engaged in theoretical debates (about styles etc.) with passion but what seems to have been more important for the development of modern architecture were the changes in construction technology as well as the introduction of new materials. At present, we are witnessing the emergence of ubiquitous and pervasive computing in both domestic and work environments. There is no question that building automation is going proceed, but the theory is generally speaking inadequate for architectural applications. Here, the input of architectural theorists is needed and welcomed by the engineers, in particular as regards such abstract issues as “In what sense could a building be said to possess consciousness?”, “Which conception of man is tacitly assumed in various existing computer models?” or “What is a function?”[12]

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Notes:

[1] Martin Heidegger, “Über Nietzsches Wort: Gott ist tot.” *Holzwege*, Frankfurt: Klostermann, p. 221.

[2] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Tr. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, passim.; Jacques Derrida, “I’m Going to Have to Wander All Alone.” In Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (ed.), *The Work of Mourning*. Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 193.

[3] Kari Jormakka, *Architekturtheorie und dergleichen*. Wien: Edition Selene. 2005; Kari Jormakka, *Geschichte der Architekturtheorie*. Wien: Edition Selene. 2003; Dörte Kuhlmann, *Lebendige Architektur*. Weimar: Verso, 1999. Dörte Kuhlmann (ed.); *Ars Imitatur Naturam. Thesis 18*. Weimar: Bauhaus, 1997.

[4] Kari Jormakka, *Constructing Architecture*. Tampere: TTKK/Ars Magna, 1991. Kari Jormakka, Dörte Kuhlmann, Kristian Faschingeder, *Lost in Space*. Wien: Edition Selene. (Forthcoming).

[5] Kari Jormakka, Jacqueline Gargus, Douglas Graf, *The Use and Abuse of Paper*. Tampere: Datutop, 1999; Kari Jormakka, *Form&Detail*. Weimar: Bauhaus-Universitätsverlag, 1998; Dörte Kuhlmann, *Mensch und Natur*. Weimar: Bauhaus-Universitätsverlag, 1999.

[6] Kari Jormakka, *Heimlich Manoeuvres*. Weimar: Verso, 1995.

[7] Dörte Kuhlmann, *Raum, Macht und Differenz*. Wien: Edition Selene, 2003; *Building Power*. Eds. Dörte Kuhlmann, Sonja Hnilica, Kari Jormakka,. Wien: Edition Selene, 2003; *Building Gender*. Eds. Dörte Kuhlmann, Kari Jormakka. Wien: Edition Selene, 2002.

[8] Kari Jormakka, *The Practical reason of Architecture*. Wien: Edition Selene. (Forthcoming)

[9] Oliver Schürer, Gordana Brandner, *Architecture: Consulting*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2004.

[10] Heimo Schimek and Dörte Kuhlmann, *Cybertecture*. Wien: Löcker, 2002; Kari Jormakka (ed.) *Absolute Motion*. Tampere: Datutop, 2002.

[11] Kari Jormakka, *Genius locomotionis*. Wien: Edition Selene, 2005; Kari Jormakka, *Flying Dutchmen. Motion in Architecture*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2002.

[12] Oliver Schürer, *Beyond the Machine*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2005.

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