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Exploring the discursive practices of architecture

Arguments for social and democratic access to the discipline

Theory and histories

Jane McAllister

Organised and introduced by Doreen Bernath and Teresa Stoppani with ThisThingCalledTheory, this 'Theory and Histories' symposium included a series of paper presentations by Mark Cousins (AA), Joel McKim (Birkbeck), Lorens Holm (Dundee), and Mark Morris (AA). The speakers contextualised the question of 'Theory and Histories' with respect to their own design interests, resulting in the presentation of four contrasting papers and concerns relating to the discipline of architecture. The idea of 'Theory and Histories' was presented as an integral part of architecture's discursive practices with the subject matter, reaching beyond the academic institution, placing the architect and designer precariously on a threshold between theory and practice, designer and audience.

My review draws out these thresholds, giving voice to the practice woven between designer and audience, articulating each paper as a discourse in its own right, in relation to the philosopher and cultural theorist Michel Foucault's definition:

> *Discourse, for Foucault, was more than simply passages of writing or speech that were put together. Foucault instead saw discourse as a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment* [...] *Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But* [...] *since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect.*[1]

Architectural categories and architectural periods

When first starting at the AA as a tutor, Mark Cousins asked the design students: how do you start a project, what is your inquiry, and what is the process by which you explore it *[1]*? Why ask the students rather than the tutors? Perhaps Cousins was aware that the process of learning through design started with the familiar, a building typology, before the task became inescapably complicated as the design was articulated through layers of social engagement and material production. He suggested that the accepted pedagogic logic of starting with a 'type' and continuing as a discursive process rendered something far less familiar to the new students, certainly than their experience of buildings. As the studio projects developed, they dipped into history, economics, and politics, they unfurled across the computer screen, mixed with analogue materials and entered a forum that was to become both the students' and studios' thematic discourse; designed to challenge the role of our profession through discursive academic practices.

Cousins further probed discourse as a studio practice by questioning the need to produce buildable projects, and by extension, asked whether the individual as author – and the things they deliver – should take primacy over the discourse. If generating discourse was to 'shape and influence', forming an



1 Mark Cousins.

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2 Joel McKim.

ideological assembly to critically and collectively initiate futures, then the egotistical discussions that have ensued during cross-marking at the end of the academic year could more generously assemble as critical discourses to bear on society.

Discourse as a form of architectural freedom[2] in the academy set the scene for Cousins to frame the role of education. Sartre's 'Critique of Dialectical Reason' became influential in the Parisian social unrest of 1968 – igniting the student uprising as a reaction to the influence of capitalism on French society – and his existential writings have affected moral attitudes for decades, problematising the alienation of the individual under capitalism versus the freedom and creativity of the group: a mood noted by speakers later in the session.

Cousins argued for teaching history as a discursive practice rather than as a 'survey', his concern being its active integration with studio practices. He noted the tendency for more 'prosperous' bourgeois societies to fix or use systems to categorise historic events, as opposed to non-Western societies who collectively remember as a lived experience. As Charles Stuart has reflected:

> *All societies* [...] *have historicity in the historians' sense of past factuality, but they also have different cultural frameworks for perceiving and representing the past. Through complexes of myth and ritual, some societies seek to annul the effects of time, whereas other societies embrace change or progress as foundational assumptions.*[3]

In his assertion of pedagogy as discursive practice, Cousins suggested that history should be neither objectified nor static. Rather, it needs to be embedded in culture, becoming part of everyday practices alongside its customs, rituals, and myths. If the architectural academy is to be a place of discourse and its practices necessarily embedded in culture, then in setting the scene for 'Theory and Histories', Cousins argued for knowledge as a discursive language which can 'embrace change or progress as [part of our] foundational assumptions'.

A near history of digital architecture: responses at Ground Zero

Joel McKim surveyed architectural digital history after the 1970s, particularly with reference to an influential software package, CATIA *[2]*.[4] This was originally designed for the aviation industry to facilitate design to on-site execution, and was embraced by architects such as Frank Gehry in the development of the Lewis Residence (1989–95, unbuilt) and then the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (1997).

The capabilities of CATIA, McKim reflected, became symptomatic of an ontological approach adopted by writers, artists, architects, social theorists, and philosophers. Published in 1988, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book *A Thousand Plateaus – Capitalism and Schizophrenia*[5] ignited a theoretical interrogation of emerging digital programmes in relation to critiques of the arts, with their 'rhizome' root-like system re-imagined as a social, material, and linguistic discourse. This prompted a change in Western binary thought, to decentring the primacy of origins or totalising structures,[6] suggesting a kind of anarchic growth, capable of independence and self-generation as it deterritorialised and reterritorialised. This reconceptualisation embraced the theorisation of self-organising systems that perform a holistic and non-linear response to their environmental conditions, as developed by Manuel DeLanda in relation to Deleuze's 'assemblage' theory as a social response to the city,[7] and appropriated into architecture by both Patrik Schumacher and Greg Lynn. Lynn's book *Folds, Bodies & Blobs: Collected Essays* (1998) drew upon theories arising from the writing of Deleuze and Guattari and took them into the design studio and office, attempting to close the gap between design and practice and produce it as a normative operational mode for both practice and academia. Meanwhile, Schumacher's parametric work with Zaha Hadid's architectural office sought to operationalise digital programmes as a spatial design process. When viewed alongside Lynn's *Archaeology of the Digital* (2013), the idea of visually and conceptually bridging analogue with digital formats engages with the social and political parameters of digital tools applied to live spatial contexts. Today, the offspring of these digital packages have been adopted by even small architectural offices, in various forms of CAD and BIM, and in most cases have become a mandatory part of the production process with institutional clients and the fabrication industry. The streamlining of project from keyboard to habitation appeared to offer effective use of time and resources to the client and arguably shaped and monitored products for the user to a higher degree of fidelity.

Against this background, McKim introduced several digital projects that contributed to competition entries in 2002 for the Ground Zero site in Lower Manhattan. The competition, hosted by the Max Protect Gallery in collaboration with the Architectural Record, invited one hundred architects worldwide, of which sixty submitted drawings, models, and photographs.[8] The competition was speculative, inviting radically innovative social, economic, and philosophical design approaches promising to both 'memorialise the site' and look forward to the future of the city, and the resulting 'designs [...] spoke of a spirit of pride and patriotism that swept the country after the events of September 11, 2001'.[9] Nox and Ocean North produced works that employed self-organising systems to generate their tower proposal and the super-team of United Architects including FAO, Ben Van Berkel, Carloine Bos of UN studio, Reiser + Umemoto, and Greg Lynn created a cathedral-like crystalline construction in steel and glass over the footprint of the original towers, describing it as 'a very visionary, utopian proposal for a city in the sky'.[10]

A critical view of the competition entries understands them as biased

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towards memorialising the architecture with associated star designers, rather than reflecting on the politics that contributed to the traumatic event. As a result, McKim suggested, it brought adverse responses to the architectural ambition and philosophical approach that generated them. Deleuzianism was criticised for its perceived tendency to facilitate capitalist market driven causes, and socially engaged architects suggested that Patrik Schumacher's brand of parametric design was received as an apolitical and homogeneous project of formalist beautification, characterised by Teddy Cruz as 'the official architectural facelift of neoliberalism'.[11] As Peggy Deamer has reflected:

> *Can there be a 'positive' proposal, and, if so, does this mean a building? If not, why respond at all? Can it only be a visionary project? If architecture intrinsically reflects culture, what culture did the World Trade Center represent and are we still beholden to it?* [12]

But McKim made a case that this criticism of Deleuzian theory was only partial. What symbolically appeared to support the flow of commerce, and in eyes of the public as an iconographic response to Ground Zero, was only a partial appropriation of theory as practice. Perhaps instead, we should understand Deleuzian history and theory more as reservoir for organisational forms than their mere objectification.

We are all statesmen – we all love the smell of napalm in the morning

The title of Lorens Holm's paper refers to the scene from the film *Apocalypse Now*[13] in which Robert Duvall portrayed Lieutenant Colonel William Kilgore on Hamburger Hill, South Vietnam, surrounded by a burning orange fog, the deafening clatter of helicopters and continuous gunshots *[3]*. Stripped to the waist, in army boots and cavalry Stetson among the devastation caused by gasoline incendiary, Kilgore celebrated the smell of burning napalm, which for him signified 'victory'. A war aimed at overturning the Communist regime in Vietnam and thus changing the balance of power in Southeast Asia in the interests of the United States, instead, created loss of life and mutilation to both sides without clear resolution. It raised such serious political and social unrest during the mid-twentieth century that the inevitable retaliation from within the US provoked a long-term scepticism of the politics that had given rise to the idea of the American Dream.

Holm turned his attention to the question of architecture and its role in making a positive contribution to the environment. He argued that, in causing the current environmental crisis, we have unwittingly been undergoing a long-term 'self harm', problematising the pursuit of domestic bliss and its assistance in capitalist ideals. He suggested that by merely eradicating the material objects that assist with degrees of self harm – measured in terms of carbon footprint – we were only 'outsourcing our responsibility'. Thinking that the environmental question may be addressed by sustainable architectural procurement would only scratch the surface. Instead, Holm suggested, architecture and the profession have an ethical role to play in upholding these concerns, which are more fundamental and far reaching than curating a materials balance sheet. He suggested that architecture should transform consciousness of the individual as part of a collective, embedding them within the symbolic institutions of civilisation, such as language and other cultural practices. These Holm meant as a radical readdressing of the sociopolitical interests of cities, to which architecture could offer only support rather than become instrumental.

Exploring this concern, Holm turned attention to Sigmud Freud's book *Civilization and its Discontents*,[14] noting the plurality of 'discontent' in relation to civilisation, drawing our attention to the extent and complexity of the project it inevitably entails for society. For Freud, civilisation and its institutions were self-imposed by human subjects in order to control their instincts: it bound individuals into corrective social formations to police their 'drive', without which they would find themselves fighting and fornicating. The 'drive' of the individual and the civilisation we create to control it was fundamentally paradoxical. For Freud, civilisation was created to protect ourselves from unhappiness but paradoxically produced discontent as a result. Bonds formed through language and other symbolic institutions, however, had the effect of dialectically ordering the individuals' 'drive' with the collective.

> *This replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilisation. The essence of it lies in the fact that the members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual knew no such restrictions. The first requisite of civilisation, therefore, is that of justice, that is, the assurance that a law once made will not be broken in favour of an individual.*[15]

From the role of the individual in society, Holm suggested Freud's account of the 'drive' was also present in Aristotle's ideas of the 'State': 'one can rid the world of the potentially violent inconveniences



3 Lorens Holm.

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of political friendship only by suppressing the freedom to use our reason which leads to the establishment of political communities'.[16] It is also to be found in Vitruvius's account of architectural beginnings, where communion around the forest fire gave rise to 'writing' as a form of architectural language in the primitive hut.

Returning to the problem of how we raise and transform consciousness of the individual as part of a collective, Holm concluded in reference to the work of the psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, suggesting it was our moral duty to fully inhabit our own and each other's desire, for the unconscious to become a social institution in which we might all look after one another's desire. Holm did not suggest architecture could be a remedy for, or order or organise civilisation, but rather that it might facilitate a social consciousness to dispense with self harm, positioning his argument for architecture, not in the objects itself, rather in the ethics of making it, their practices, and in relation to the sociopolitical context.

What's so funny about architectural history?

Mark Morris ended the four presentations by asking about the difference between certain kinds of architecture and certain kinds of cartoons *[4]*. He suggested that cartoonists mediated several roles: firstly, insight, wit, intellect, and knowledge of the practices of the architect; secondly, the wit of the audience and; third, the politics of architect, audience and society, which informs and produces the cartoonists' intellectual space through visual discourse.

The cartoon, as a conveyor of complex subject matter to a lay audience, has a long narrative history, from Homeric tales on ancient Greek pottery to Japanese manga comics. These have narrated complex sociopolitical meanings, expressed as human behaviour in familiar or semi-familiar environments and, as such, were designed ultimately to engage a wide demographic. Cartoons are formatted to situate event, environment, and politics and clearly still prompt a method of communication for the architectural designer. Their power to storyboard the dialectical



4 Mark Morris.

pairing of actor and author, where architect and audience are placed within an ambiguous hierarchy, offers a vehicle for political commentary and a format for publication in fanzines, newspapers, or comic books achieving wide circulation. Being 'funny' or satirising the scene introduced yet another layer of intrigue for Morris. By showing human behaviour, folly or vice, the cartoon was intended to critique the event and suggest some social change. Although the scene may be absurd to highlight a point, the power balance between audience and actors, usually worked at the expense of the actors, places the audience in the position of adjudicator of change.

Morris's paper introduced five cartoonists narrating architectural practices visually from the late nineteenth century to the present. Windsor McCay's extraordinary drawings of Little Nemo[17] depicted a world that was part fantasy, part urban, positioning the audience between reality and dreamscape. The drawings exploded across the page, juxtaposing interior and exterior scenes, inviting the audience to suspend their disbelief as they inhabited a complex spatial, imaginary world in real settings. In graphic style, structure, content, format, and social practice, these cartoons no doubt influenced Chris Ware's contemporary graphic novel *Building Stories*[18] and architectural drawings such as those of C. J. Lim, Pier Vittorio Aureli, and Maria Shéhérazade Giudici.

The cartoonists cited by Morris all inhabited the space between the knowing academic world of the architect and the 'user' we imagine, such as the client or reader: a critically informed and far-from-facile choreographed space. In his book on architectural language, *Pillar to Post*,[19] historian and cartoonist Osbert Lancaster aimed to dispel the mystique of architectural history for the layperson through text and cartoon, placing the observer in a position of empowerment. The book comprised drawings of key buildings in architectural history, accompanied by witty descriptive comments – its humour and accessibility announced on the front cover, showing a couple sunbathing at the convenience of a flat roof of a 'modern' building.

Alan Dunn's cartoons from the 1950 to the 1970s engaged the architectural community more explicitly, addressing concerns with modernism's unfamiliar housing and public building forms from a middle-class perspective. Here drawings of open-plan and surface geometry were parodied in captions such as 'I guess your feet adjust to the angle',[20] showing a well-dressed middle-aged woman dressed in furs as she discussed the floor incline of the Guggenheim with a security guard as she descends. Morris suggested that architectural cartoons, as authored by McCay, Lancaster, Dunn, Hellman, and Peter Cook were designed to be consumed by the intelligent layperson and – although they appeared superficially witty or funny – they required a great depth of architectural knowledge to be effective as a sociopolitical discourse.

Perhaps then, it is more important than ever that architects are able to deliver a spatial and sociopolitical critique of our cities to a varied audience. Today, forms of building contract between client, architect, and contractor have a tendency to place the architect's creative role at the front end of the project. Increasingly, the sophistication of production methods involving digital drawing and parametric software remove the responsibility of the architect as a communicator beyond the initial design stages, as these programmes streamline ideas direct to the manufacturing industry. Acknowledging the power of the cartoon in the production of satire, irony or burlesque, their ability to mediate between author, client and politics, cartoons clearly present a valuable form of discourse to unwittingly engage a

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wide demography, with complex subject matter. While cartoonists such as Louis Hellman in the UK have played a critical role in architectural circles, Morris suggested that more could be achieved with this form of communication. If we reflect on architectural education and the changing role of the architect in relation to its procurement, then perhaps the cartoon as a mediator between the learned and the layman could become a discursive 'production of knowledge through language' while keeping its tongue firmly in cheek.

Choreographing architectural settings

Throughout the session, discourse was presented as a way of choreographing the architectural setting. This approach was framed both as a pedagogic method, initiating discursive processes of the unfamiliar, and as a way of rendering something far less familiar: self-organising systems performing a holistic and non-linear response to their environment. Holm argued for social practices to lead the sustainable organisation of our cities, and Morris, similarly, for the re-representation of space between the knowing academic world of the architect and who we imagine to be the 'user'. Although the speakers offered seemingly diverse approaches to what architectural theory might constitute, as a group of academics and educational practitioners, they presented mindfully strong arguments for social and democratic access to the discipline.

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Notes

1. Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben, *Formations of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press & Open University, 1992), p. 291.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).
3. Charles Stewart, 'Historicity and Anthropology', *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2016), 79–94.
4. CATIA: Computer Aided Three-dimensional Interactive Application.
5. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone, 1988).
6. A 'rhizome could be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines'. Ibid., p. 10.
7. Manuel De Landa, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006).
8. Max Protech, 'Invitation to Daniel Libeskind to World Trade Center Competition NYC', 28 September 2001.
9. Edward Wyatt, 'A Vision for Ground Zero: Overview', *New York Times*, 19 December 2002, online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/19/nyregion/visions-for-ground-zero-overview-7-design-teams-offer-new-ideas-for-attack-site.html> [accessed 6 June 2019].
10. Ibid.
11. Joel McKim, *Architecture, Media, and Memory: Facing Complexity in Post-9/11 New York* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
12. Peggy Deamer, '"A New World Trade Center" Exhibition', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 56.3 (2003), 71–4 (p. 71).
13. Francis Ford Coppola, dir., *Apocalypse Now* (1979).
14. Sigmund Freud and Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).
15. Ibid., p. 740.
16. Bernard Yack, 'Community and Conflict in Aristotle's Political Philosophy', *The Review of Politics*, 47.1 (1985), 107.
17. A cartoon character who has fantastical dreams and wakes up in the last scene. Comic invention of Windsor McCay.
18. Chris Ware, *Building Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012).
19. Osbert Lancaster, *Pillar to Post: The Pocket Lamp of Architecture* (London: John Murray, 1938).
20. Osbert Lancaster, *NewYorker*, 11, 1959.

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