

OECODOMICS

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Perhaps it is the almost total irrelevance of architectural theory to architectural practice that drives historians of the Modern Movement to despair, cynicism or—worst of all—eighteenth-century studies.

With this sentence, Reyner Banham began his review of Renato de Fusco's *L'Idea di Architettura* in the AR, July 1966. In its context, it was simply a witty paradox introducing some pointed comments about Ruskin, Croce, etc.; but isolated from its context, it distends to constitute an ominously disquieting apophthegm. For if, in fact, architectural theory is considered among the intelligentsia to have "almost total irrelevance to architectural practice," either the word "theory" is being used merely as an existentialist gibe, or else Dr. Banham's definition of "theory of architecture" needs a radical overhaul.

His own first book, it will be remembered, was entitled *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*; but curiously enough on the few occasions when the word "theory" occurs in the text, it occurs in conjunction with such adjectives as Cubist, Elementarist, Futurist, except of course in the first few pages, when he discusses Guadet. In other words, though the title might lead one to think that Dr. Banham is concerned with theorists of architecture, he is only in fact concerned with what he calls on page 66: "theorists of Abstract art." Now if the purpose of his book was to demonstrate that the architectural ideals most vociferously enunciated during the First Machine Age were in fact architecturally-irrelevant theories of painting, sculpture, literature and music, his argument is, in my opinion, brilliantly conclusive. But if this was not his purpose, it would be fallacious to deduce from his evidence that "architectural theory" was, is, and always will be, eye-wash.

Before going any further, I suppose I must stick my neck out and say what I personally think the term "architectural theory" did, and always should, mean. This is embarrassing, not because I have any doubts on the matter, but because "Vitruvius go Home" was the most inspired lecture-title Dr. Banham ever devised. However, since Vitruvius, whether we like it or not, supplied the most enduring definition of architectural theory so far published, it will not be amiss to begin with his definition of *Ratiocinatio*:² "Theory is that which is able to explain and analyse material constructions by the ex-

ercise of skill and reason." In other words, theory for him, as for me, means the sum total of academic knowledge required to design a building, as opposed to the sum total of practical experience.

To avoid the opprobrium attached by Dr. Banham to "eighteenth-century studies," I will gloss over the fact that the traditional interpretation of "architectural theory" was first undermined in that era by the ruins of Athens (when J.D. Leroy divided his book into two parts so as to study the buildings (a) as related to "history" and (b) as related to "theory"), and simply assert that the subdivision of architectural studies into "theory" and "history" officially occurred in 1818. In that year, the French Government, when revising the Statutes of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, created a *second* architectural professor; and in order to distinguish between the two, the first was called "the professor of theory" and the second "the professor of history."

This official distinction could not have occurred at a more opportune moment, since Historicism, in the form of archaeological Revivalism, had already eroded the traditional roots of architectural evolution beyond repair. Unfortunately, however, the schizophrenic system of teaching developed in Paris in the nineteenth century disregarded the distinction between history and theory, and as a result made the confusion worse. Successive professors of history, being practising architects, understandably tried to relate their courses to contemporary problems. But the professors of theory thought only of justifying the tectonic forms they favoured by triumphantly demonstrating their primeval origins. Indeed, one professor of theory, J. B. Lesueur, actually entitled his book: *The History and Theory of Architecture*.

Julien Guadet was probably the first professor of theory to attempt to find a way out of this dilemma. Appointed in 1894, at the age of sixty, his basic solution was certainly not ideal; but at least it was clear-cut, and developed with extraordinary lucidity. He took "theory" to mean the detailed study of *building-types* which the students would one day have to design for eventual clients; and as far as he was concerned, history could be taught in any way the archaeologists wished.

The conventional prohibition against criticizing (and hence mentioning) the works of living colleagues naturally inhibited him when dealing with the more immediate aspects of contemporary building-types; hence much of the informa-

tion he imparted was inherently obsolete, and would have remained so even if steel and reinforced-concrete construction had not just then been invented. But when all his difficulties are taken into consideration, his attitude must command our respect, since he was more concerned than any of his predecessors with giving students solid notions on which they could develop and assess *future* designs. Perhaps his philosophy of teaching is best summed up by a remark in his lecture on theatres. Commenting on Charles Garnier's elaborate analytical monograph, he said: "unfortunately this sort of book is rare; I regret it all the more because if there existed one for each type of building, the collection would constitute a complete course on the theory of architecture" (iii. p. 73).

The task of those who immediately succeeded Gaudet was unenviable, and the first occupant remained in office until 1933 without giving any lectures at all.³ In 1937 Georges Gromort made a gallant attempt to evolve something different; but although in the preface to his own course he dismissed Gaudet's course as mere history, the bulk of his book is little more than a superficial summary of Gaudet's text. However, he seems to have felt certain in his own mind that this superficiality was one of the prime virtues of his approach. "The theory of architecture," he asserted in his preface, "is that ensemble of uncontested principles which are equally valid for every type of building." Thus, following Auguste Comte's dictum as quoted by Vaillant⁴ (to the effect that "true theory is always general, just as healthy practice remains constantly special"), and pursuing a method already popularized by Trystan Edwards and others, he elaborated upon such generalities as "unity," "duality," "contrast," etc., thereby boosting an abstract notion of "architectural aesthetics" which had been hotly repudiated by Gaudet and his friends, especially after Viollet-le-Duc (who was responsible for instituting a Chair of Aesthetics at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts) had been replaced by Hippolyte Taine.

All-embracing theories of "aesthetics" today reign supreme, and since we no longer consider it indelicate for a professor to discuss the work of his colleagues in front of his students, it would be flogging a dead horse to show that Gaudet's approach is now hopelessly inadequate for present needs. But the main reason for this is that, whereas eighty years ago all the "historical, theoretical and practical" knowledge required of an architect could be published in a single volume, such as Gwilt's revised *Encyclopaedia*, the knowledge required today is so complex and subdivided that many architectural students spend about three hundred and fifty hours a year in lecture-rooms during their five-year academic training. Thus the task of writing a modern synthesis of "The Theory of Architecture" would be as formidable as trying to bring Dr. Robison's *Mechanical Philosophy* up to date.

Many authorities argue, very cogently, that since the theory of architecture is so complex, and fragmented into so many disparate parts, a course of study specifically entitled "The Theory of Architecture" is no longer valid, and hence the term itself is meaningless. I have every sympathy with the main conclusion, but none with its corollary. On the contrary, I would contend that it is precisely because the theory of architecture is so diffuse and subdivided that a synthesis is absolutely essential. An architect must not only know how to evolve designs; he must also know how to assess them. The means of achieving this within a university is of course debatable. Perhaps the answer is to be found in the arguments for or against the *Intentions* of Christian Norberg-Schulz. I myself believe that it is impossible actually to *teach* students the criteria of assessment, and that all one can hope to do is provide

the stimulus and techniques which will permit each student to evolve a true philosophy of design for himself.⁵

I am convinced that it is wrong, in this age of constant change, even to attempt to impose a neat philosophy of architectural ideas on architectural students. Moreover, gifted and imaginative students would reject such an attempt with derision. Hence it would seem to me that the problem confronting our schools of architecture is not how to expound a viable and coherent theory of architecture (which still means, for me, those unlimited permutations of *Firmitas*, *Utilitas* and *Venustas* which can produce the best environment with respect to each individual programme), but how to expound the *history of theory* in such a way that each student can then go on to create a theory valid for his own generation.

This of course involves an appraisal of the meaning of Dr. Banham's term: "historians of the Modern Movement," since architectural history is too readily evaluated today in its threadbare nineteenth-century terms as the science of attributing precise dates to extinct ornament. Anyone who has attended congresses of architectural historians will be only too well aware that these meetings are still dominated by art-historians and archeologists who are concerned with little more than the classification of forms: chronologically, morphologically, or chrono-morphologically;⁶ that the majority of participants tend to be indifferent to the synthesis of forms/programmes/technology/environent. I do not despise the work of these scholars; but it is useless to architectural students unless someone has first sifted it for such theoretical implications as it may contain.

To sum up, then: my view is (a) that each student must be given the appropriate means to create his own viable, synthetic theory of architecture, and (b) that the most promising way to achieve this would seem to be by discussing fully, in his presence, all the architectural ideals formulated since the invention of printing. If philosophers limit themselves to the architectural implications of symbolism and semiotics (i.e. to purely abstract "theories of form"), and if historians limit themselves to digging in Anatolis, no harm will be done; but each architectural student will then have to fend for himself. For it cannot be emphasized too dogmatically, *pace* Dr. Banham, that all conscientious architects evolve *some* theory of architecture of their own, whether it be good, bad, or indifferent; and their teachers' main concern must be that a viable, coherent theory should have taken possession of their minds before they are legally empowered to modify the environment in which we live.

NOTES:

1. Since neologisms like "Ekistics" and "Semiotics" are fashionable nowadays, Professor Collins has preferred "Oeconomics" to "The Theory of Architecture" as the title of his essay. But the term is simply a Greek equivalent of *De Re Aedificatoria*, and should therefore be strenuously resisted by all who share his view that "The Theory of Architecture" is still an appropriate and meaningful expression.
2. For the benefit of those Latin scholars who at this point are taking out their pens to write a letter to the Editors, I should state that every manuscript variation and printed Latin version of this text has been submitted to the Classics departments of Columbia and McGill, so I am well aware that there are as many translations as there are translators.
3. According to verbal information given me by his son-in-law Paul Gélis.
4. See title page of A. Vaillant's *Théorie de l'Architecture* (Paris, 1919).
5. Cf. Gaudet, i. 652: "I shall be happy and proud if, when you think over these lectures, seeking to summarize their contents for yourselves, you find that the only way to condense their substance is to use the single word: TRUTH."
6. The most advanced stage of the disease. For example, no one knows whether Baroque is a morphological or a chronological term. Architectural taxonomy has reached such profundity that we find Professor Morrison claiming that the earliest "Georgian" house in North America was built in 1688, whilst Professor Gowans has named the period from 1725 to 1750: "American Queen Anne"....