End of Theory?
Philip Ursprung

Philip Ursprung is Professor of the History of Art and Architecture at ETH Zurich.

As with many human beings in their fifties, the fiftieth birthday of the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) in 2017 revealed a kind of midlife crisis. This became manifest when the professors of the institute started planning the anniversary. We did not polish motorcycles, but we did tinker with the 1970s "gta" logo until its italics were more slanted, as if we wanted to express the eternally juvenile character of the institution. Nor did we open a microbrewery; instead, we hesitated, unsure whether we should celebrate at all. Were we looking backward or forward? Were we living up to the expectations of the institute's founders? Had the institute become an anachronistic legacy, or was the best yet to come? Could we draw on the past in view of the development of the future? Eager to find out more about our past but anxious about facing our mirror image, we decided not to hide our uncertainty but to make fruitful use of it instead.

Our uncertainty is symptomatic of something more generalized; namely, that architecture today is in both an atheoretical and ahistorical phase. No theoretical framework, no grand narrative, and no normative system of values offer to orient today's architects. Neither is there a clear idea of historical continuity. The narrative of "modernism" has lost its relevance, as has the narrative of "postmodernism." Prognosis — that is, the ability to project the future using knowledge of the past — has lost much of its plausibility. The absence of a theoretical and historical horizon goes hand in hand with the segregation and specialization of the academic disciplines of architectural design, urban design, architectural technology, and architectural history and theory. Much ink flows in these disciplines. New paradigms and concepts are proclaimed. Every architecture biennale, every architecture journal, every architecture school, and even every office and chair is eager to proclaim their own new paradigms, themes, and concepts.

However, these new paradigms, themes, and concepts resemble individual design projects more than overarching theories. The themes that prominent designers such as Rem Koolhaas or Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee proposed for recent biennales — "Fundamentals" for the 2014 Architecture Biennale in Venice or "Make New History" for the Chicago Biennale in 2017 — affirm the attitudes of these designers and their peers, setting the tone for an exchange but not opening up a critical debate. The authority to propose such themes is, with few exceptions, in the hands of designers not theoreticians. The statement has, to some extent, absorbed critical discourse. At our own institute

we research historic and more recent architects, architectural elements, and themes. Yet what we produce is more a historicization of theories of the past than new theories. We react to the proposals of designers rather than actively contribute to the production of theory. Innovation takes place in reference to other fields of knowledge, such as anthropology, sociology, economy, technology, and political philosophy. Today, architectural theory is difficult to grasp. It is evoked as something that was or might be, as a phantom that haunts us or an immanence soon to be made solid. This is why we titled the exhibition that presented an outline of the history of our institute "Phantom Theory." As if it were a promise that has not (yet) been fulfilled, we compared theory to a ghost unable to find its rest.

New institutes—or, "labs"—for digital fabrication are mushrooming throughout the world's universities. Simultaneously, libraries are closing and archives are rotting. Many universities, particularly in the English-speaking world, are reducing their programs in the humanities, especially in the field of history. Today, no university president would want to found a new institute for the history and theory of architecture. Our institute is an "asset" in the newspeak of university administration. The scholarly "output" and "impact" is important and contributes massively to the excellent ranking of the Architecture School of ETH Zurich as a whole. But it is not on the list of fields that are growing or attracting massive investment. The strategic priorities of the ETH include topics such as "health," "digitalization," "big data," and "security" but not "memory," "criticality," or "reflection."

The situation was clearly different at the time of the establishment of the gta. In the late 1960s and 1970s, architectural theory was the future. Animated by the intellectual dynamics and the aspiration for cultural reforms of the student movements, the new generation of architects perceived the realm of theory as an opening in the obstructed discursive environment of twentieth-century architecture. To young architects in Zurich, New York, or Venice, theory must have appeared as a *terrain vague* full of possibilities, ready to be cultivated. It allowed an escape from the oppressive heritage of the heroic founding figures—Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Sigfried Giedion—whose monumental *oeuvres* spanned the century but whose influence had led to a static system of values. Theory offered an alternative to the homogenization of practice and form in the guise of an International Style. It provided new points from which to observe the fundamental historic changes unfolding under the eyes of the alert observers—whether, on the one hand, the decay of heavy industry, the transformation of economies, or the production of

spaces of labor and consumption; or, on the other hand, the independence of former colonies, the need to house masses of people coming from those former colonies to countries such as France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, and the discovery of an architectural heritage beyond Western history. Theory was not seen as something apart from practice but as something within, or as a kind of condensation of, practice.

The gta was not the only institute of its kind established around this time. Peter Eisenman opened the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York in 1967, too, and launched the journal *Oppositions* in 1973. Many of the most influential voices of the 1980s and 1990s passed through his institute. A genuine institute for advanced studies, its resonance was much stronger than that of the gta, which mainly was set up as a place where education and research met. The Institut für Architekturtheorie, Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften at the Technische Universität Graz was also founded in 1967, and the Institut für Grundlagen moderner Architektur und Entwerfen in Stuttgart followed in 1968. The journal *Arch+* was founded in Stuttgart in 1968, *archithese* in Zurich in 1971. Practitioners in the early days of these ventures had spare time to reflect on theory because the recession that followed the 1973 Oil Crisis paralyzed the construction industry and left many architects without jobs. Even in Switzerland, which was less affected by the crisis than the former centers of heavy industry in the United Kingdom, North America, Germany, France, and Italy, young architects in the 1970s where confronted with what they called a "vacuum." Toward the end of the decade and during the 1980s this vacuum was filled with discussions and texts and the production of theory by authors such as Manfredo Tafuri, Charles Jencks, Henri Lefebvre, Kenneth Frampton, Robin Evans, Alan Colquhoun, Fredric Jameson, Anthony Vidler, Martin Steinmann, Bruno Reichlin, Kurt W. Forster, Diana Agrest, Jean-Louis Cohen, and many others. Of course, the past tends to appear in a golden light. We tried to reflect our relation to this period—and the fact that we project our own wishes onto an earlier phase—with a series of lectures entitled "Founding Myths."

The prosperous phase of architecture theory faded out toward the millennium. Some of the institutes closed; some of the journals ceased to exist. The historicization of theory, and the publication of theoretical texts in readers, started around the same time. Theory lost its autonomy and its critical edge, its role as agent provocateur, its performativity. One finds it in the academic backseat, mostly occupied with its own history. Critical judgment has retreated to the final crits in classrooms or to niches in journals and online publications. Architects have not only delegated,

during the last two decades, responsibility for norms, materials, and techniques to experts, the industry, and the administration; they have also outsourced architectural theory to philosophers and sociologists, mostly of the recent past. The majority of them still quote the same authors who were invoked in the 1970s, as if time had come to a standstill. Furthermore, art, in some respect, has taken over the role of the theoretical horizon. Pop art, minimal art, land art, conceptual art, and more contemporary practices such as installations and participatory performances form points of orientation and critical reflection. Architecture exhibitions, particularly architecture biennales, copy the models of the more established art exhibitions. They form institutions of exchange and discussion and take over much of the function of academe, but affirmation prevails over critical reflection.

Our uncertainty in preparing the gta's anniversary celebration and the many potential exhibition, conference, and lecture formats we discussed correspond to the prudent tone of the current theoretical debate. Unlike in the late 1960s and 1970s, architecture theoreticians do not write manifestos. Rather they gather on panels. The production of meaning in the realm of architecture theory takes place in conversations and roundtables. Interviews have replaced the polemic essay. These malleable forms of interaction allow for immediate feedback and prevent the interlocutors from fixating meaning. Yet they also lead to a culture of compromise and agreement. What is left of theory remains constantly in flux, ready for adaptation and revision, void of normative functions, and virtually deregulated.

Nothing about the current situation is lamentable. Never in history has the time been better for architects; never have the attention, money, mobility, possibilities, talent, and exchanges been greater. What we were interested in was to ask why, in this phase of prosperity and expansion, theory has lost its momentum and impact. Why, in the golden phase of architecture and urbanism that lasted from the early 1980s until the early millennium, did theory became so meager? The roundtable "Perspectives," which gathered a large group of historians and theoreticians, was meant to offer a diversity of voices and generate ideas about the possible future of architectural theory, about new methods and concepts.

One hypothesis is that the very success of architecture in the wake of the economic boom of the 1980s, along with the personalization of the architectural author and their rise to the figure of the star-architect, has led to an absorption of history and theory. The generation entering the world of architecture in the late 1980s brought architecture center stage, made it attractive

to capital, politicians, and a widening public. It also colonized the field of theoretical reflection and autonomous criticism. Theoretical speculation shrank in the shadow of the producers' rhetoric and self-legitimation. In consequence, architecture theory withdrew—or was confined—to a field where it could do no harm. It remained busy with itself, debating two axioms that both stand in the service of the built reality. The first is the opposition of modernism and postmodernism; that is, the debate about the historicist place of architecture. This axiom is based on binary thinking and on the premise that the meaning of architecture relies on its relation to earlier architecture. The second axiom is the idea of urbanization, the mantra that more and more people live in cities. The narrative of urbanization and centralization is also based on binary thinking—placing the urban against the rural—and is in line with the older teleological idea of progress and linear growth. As if someone had thrown a bone to a group of bored dogs in order to divert them or keep them busy, architecture history and theory got entangled in these two unsolvable issues for decades.

The pragmatism, speed, and popularity of the figure of the architect as someone who can realize large-scale projects in every corner of the world led to a devaluation of theoretical speculation. While, in the 1970s, architects' status was defined by what they did not build, since the 1980s their status has depended on their built *oeuvre*. These issues were discussed by a panel that included Eisenman, Kurt Forster, and Jacques Herzog, three protagonists who embody precisely this shift from autonomous theory to absorbed theory. The panel's title, "End of Theory?" included a question mark to emphasize that we are not certain whether theory has actually ended.

The result of the panel, and of most of the other presentations and discussions, too, was actually encouraging. A clear outcome of the meetings was that the disciplines of history and theory of architecture can profit most if they overcome the separation from the designers and planners. Isolation and self-absorption will only deepen the gaps that are separating the chairs and institutes. The midlife crisis of our institute offered a mirror image showing where revisions of the premises and practices of the institution itself can take place. The current latency of history and theory in architectural practice, we found, is an occasion for new beginnings. The fact that so many scholars and students are asking about the current situation of architectural history and theory is also a sign of its vitality and relevance. The absence of a grand narrative leaves room for alternative and contradictory narratives. A large community of scholars already focuses on

the nature and future of architecture theory. Our meetings were packed with people, and the discussions have been ongoing in other formats and at other universities. There might be no more master narrative. But this is also a chance for innovation. Architecture theory, we found out, is obviously building up steam and waiting for its comeback. Perhaps it is already back. To subsist, it depends on institutions, on places where theory is taught, made, distributed. The aim of our institute is to continue to offer this support, act as a place of production and encounter, and be a basis for change.