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Autor: Critchley, Matthew
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Diachronic Dialogues: A Sketch of Shared Themes at the gta 50 Roundtable Talks

Matthew Critchley

Any attempt to summarize, in brief, the fine grain of contributions made during the talks in the Semper Aula on September 29, 2017, on the occasion of the gta's fiftieth jubilee is impossible and undeniably unfair. The day had been framed to scrutinize interactions between "history" and "presence," the subjects of the two roundtables held in the morning, and between "praxis" and "theory," the two afternoon roundtables. Rather than capture the many key points exchanged, what I shall try to do here is trace a few of the concerns, beliefs, and reflections that were shared, in order to sketch a figure of the day's discussions.

Unsurprisingly, the existential question mark, ever hanging over history in an architectural faculty, remained an ongoing concern. But the traditional formulation of the question in terms of history's relation to contemporary practice was not entirely the problem. This familiar anxiety was well parried by several participants, chiefly on the grounds that the serious study of history is crucial in combatting the most tired received ideas, those whose thoughtless repetition has reached the harmful state of naturalization. The most valuable potential of history, particularly pre-1850 history, might therefore be the untimeliness of its systems of knowledge when compared to our own.

The distant past gives us the chance to deal with a distinct otherness whose shifted perspective may have an inherent creative potential. History seemed therefore to be in a strong position. It was noted that in recent years we have seen a reconnection with the past in contemporary practice, and that in research the ongoing expansion of architecture history into other fields has strengthened its constitution. This demonstrated adaptability should help to ensure the survival of architecture history within the larger ecosystem of the humanities. But if the relevance and vitality of historical studies itself appears robust, the existential question was nonetheless re-posed precisely within larger institutional mechanisms.

Joan Ockman explained how in the United States, "history theory," "history & theory," or "history/theory" were being usurped by "research." She did not mean history is no longer being practiced. Quite the contrary. Unlike theory, history, with its wealth of untapped archival material and ever-widening field of inquiry, can neatly fit into the new dominance of "research." The problem instead lies in the fact that history is slowly being permeated by the logic of research, albeit research couched in the terms of the market, with its emphasis on quantifiable outcomes. Neutral results are valued more and more, and the critical impulse, which had been so important to architectural history in the second half of the twentieth century, is concomitantly discouraged. Even if we may have overcome the old

questions of history's relevance in architectural studies, Ockman's contribution rephrased the problem away from an existential one toward an awareness of constitution. She pointed not to history but to what we have valued in architectural history: its criticality, its awareness of ambiguity.

But this brings us to one of the subtle contradictions present in the roundtables when seen as a whole. Throughout the day the historian's optic was generally praised. Its plurality of perspectives and widening of what constitutes architectural studies were lauded as the breakers of both nineteenth-century historicism and the modernist *tabula rasa*. However, several times during the talks an unrequited desire for ideology was named. There was even a warning that if architecture did not embrace ideology it was in danger of alienating a coming generation that might be more politically aware than its predecessors. What was curious about this desire was that participants simultaneously appeared to share an aversion to the simplifications seen to be inherent within "positions" in architectural history, prompting the question: How can we bring ideology back into the practice of architectural history? How this ideological desire can be consummated without instrumentalizing history is difficult to see. In fact, the complex plurality of history might well be one of the contingent factors that have led to the absence of ideology in the first place.

Despite the plethora of examples discussed, the meaning of *history* itself seemed relatively stable. The same cannot be said for *theory*. Two forms of theory appeared to be at play throughout the day. Theory with a capital "T," known as the product of the treatise and the operative use of precedents, which was the subject of rebuke and appeared almost as an anachronism. And theory with a small "t," consisting of a hard-to-define set of shifting ideas that inform practice but cannot so easily be written down into a cohesive scheme. Peter Eisenman suggested this conception of theory was better captured by the Italian term *progetto*, and this looser definition of theory appeared to be the one participants were more willing to rally around. For one contributor, its existence and relevance were so axiomatic as to warrant no further discussion.

This particular definition of theory—as an open field of entangled ideas—conspicuously mirrored the figure of history simultaneously being sketched during the roundtable discussions, suggesting that we may be witnessing a dominance of history over theory. This is reinforced by the fact that, for some, the new existential threat is to theory, not history. Echoing the concerns of several participants from the United States, it was remarked that, while an awful lot of money is available for "research," little is available for "theory" or "thinking." While still practiced, the latter's relevance has been subsumed under more institutionally sanctioned topics.

Among the many suggestions for future investigations was a repeated request for the geographic widening of the discipline. This began with a call—seconded by several participants and reiterated at the end of the day with a strongly felt sense of urgency—to study how cultural networks within different geographic regions affect one another, the idea being to move away from histories built on the logic of center and periphery in order to realize multipolar narratives. In one of the final contributions, Murray Fraser remarked that the room was hopelessly Euro-American, which cannot possibly be acceptable in today's world and that we must overcome what seems to be an apparent resistance to becoming a truly global form of inquiry.

As pertinent as this call is, the methods by which studies in architecture expand globally may be fraught with more obstacles than we assume. They will hopefully not be problems attached to the commodification of academia, which will more than likely welcome more global histories as a widening of the field of seemingly "neutral valued" research. Instead they will come from the very way we practice history and theory today. As the roundtables in the morning indicated, we have benefitted greatly from historiographic research showing how writing on the architecture of the past is itself historically contingent. Such research has demonstrated that the histories we practice are not normative. This should inevitably lead us to be wary in our geographic expansion not

to transmit anachronistic European ideas to locations steeped in entirely different traditions. We should follow the call to expand beyond our Euro-American confines but at the same time capitalize on the self-awareness of our historiographic work, thus avoiding the positivist's trap.