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# This Thing Called “Design Theory”

Giorgio Ponso

## *Abstract*

The inclusion, proposed by “Ardeth”, of the word “design” in between “architectural” and “theory” aims at establishing a field of «autonomy of the architectural project» and questions not only the reciprocal position of theory and practice within architecture, but also the relational nature of architecture towards its outside.

By reviewing some of the essays included in the book *This Think Called Theory*, this text aims at showing how problematic the definition of the autonomy of design theory is. Even when produced making use of specific disciplinary devices only (e.g. drawings), theory inevitably opens up the project to a series of wider reflections on how architecture relates to the world: theory is the instrument that redefines architecture disciplinary boundaries continuously, and re-position architecture in relation to other disciplines, to cultural, and political contexts. This process, far from being and endless critical/negative exercise, delineates the very role of theory in relation to practice, the use of theory for architectural design.

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In the course of one year, from November 2015 to November 2016, two events – a conference and a book – recorded the discussion around *This Thing Called Theory* within the discipline of architecture. The two events – related to the activity of Ahra (the Architecture and Humanities Research Association) – aimed «to explore current practices of theory» ([thisthingcalledtheory.org](http://thisthingcalledtheory.org), 2015) and to document «the developments of a fluid conversation [...] on architecture theory in the making» gathering different voices that propose «not a thinking for architecture or about architecture but, more essentially, by architecture» (Stoppani *et al.*, 2016: 2).

The conference, held at Leeds Beckett University, could be seen as a survey of multiple possible ways in which architecture theory is addressed in the global academic scene.

The numbers related to the organization of the conference are somehow stunning (195 abstracts received, 107 speakers, 98 papers, 24 sessions...) and seem able to dissolve theory in a cloud of figures, and topics, one can hardly make sense of.

With an almost opposite movement, the book condenses that cloud in a much smaller format, twenty-nine essays: selecting a few papers presented at the conference, inevitably reduces the number of themes addressed and tries to put forward more clearly a series of issues that seem to animate the theoretical discourse in and around architecture.

Having had the chance to take part both in the organization of the conference and in the editing of the book, I might not be the right person to make a review of the conference and to present the book (its first chapter performs this function). In fact, my (re)view would be inevitably distorted by the information I could gather “behind the scenes”. In this sense, I would be inclined to say that theory is not just the finished product that could be experienced at the conference and can be read in the book; on the contrary, the hundreds of emails sent to and received from authors, keynote speakers, reviewers, publisher, inevitably already tell something about (and have an influence on) the meaning and the making of theory. Not too different from a design project, architecture theory has a context – with its rules and regulations – within which it is produced. The individual texts and the edited collection take shape in the dialogue between authors and editors, publisher and reviewers, mediated by circumstances, schedules, and events. In the texts, some statements acquire importance or fade in the background, or get cut. By looking at the leftovers, one clearly has the impression that there would be enough material to produce another text, another book. In the office of the architect this would correspond to the series of drawings and models that are not included in the final resolution of a project: however, they enrich the architect’s archive and might be conducive to start another project, responding to another brief.

This text will use the editorial framework of *This Thing Called Theory* and, by reading through a very small selection of the contributions made by different authors, it will try to address some of the questions raised by “Ardeth”.

The inclusion, proposed by “Ardeth”, of the word “design” between “architectural” and “theory” seems to push further the already difficult problem of defining what “architectural theory” is and what it does, if theory has, for example, the right to exist – as a discipline – when it is so closely bounded, on the one hand, by the disciplines of the humanities, architectural history and criticism, and, on the other hand, by the technical and normative knowledge that informs architectural production. Moreover, the word design aims at establishing a field of «autonomy of the architectural project» that seems willing to take a distance, if not directly dismiss, *critical theory* as a practice that perpetuates negative discourses in its boudoirs but is unable to establish a productive relationship with the design practice.

All the attempted redefinitions of the relative positions of theory and practice produced in the time span that goes, as an example, between Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting’s (2002) *Notes around the Doppler effect and Other Moods of Modernism* and the recent *2000+: Urgencies of Architectural Theory* (Graham, 2015), demonstrate that the autonomy of the architectural project – that architectural *design* theory calls for – is not easy to be recognized and isolated under the much larger roof of Architecture. The following paragraphs will try to articulate a few possible ways in which the very questioning of the autonomy of the project and the continuous challenge of its borders establish a productive dialogue between architectural theory and architectural design, beyond the impossible disentanglement of thinking and making.

### *This Thing Called Theory, an open project*

*This Thing Called Theory*, as a conference and as a book, was constructed through different sections that relate (architectural) theory to other disciplines or phenomena: history, criticism, economics, politics, technology, the practice of architecture...

These different sections can live a life on their own, separated (as panels in the conference or parts of the book). This would render an image of architectural theory as a discipline that can address different specializations and enables architecture to establish a dialogue with a number of specific disciplinary “outsides”. However relevant to keep architecture in touch with what is happening in other fields of knowledge, artistic practices, social and political conditions, the specialist view of theory was not the main purpose for setting in place such a structure. In fact, the book addresses interdisciplinarity, but it does it from within architecture not from the outside in: how architecture can generate thinking rather than absorb thinking from the outside; how, having introjected and having been transformed by and with its outside it continues to instigate its change and redefine its role, moving with(in) its outside. The notion of

the outside of architecture and of theory's position in this relation then has to be addressed. The claim here is that architecture theory operates in architecture from within.

[...]While architectural praxis is already defined within its constitutive edges, theory as mediator plays a critical role in addressing architecture's relation to the outside and by doing so re-configures the discipline of architecture (Stoppani *et al.*, 2016: 2).

One of the interesting aspects that emerge from this movement along the disciplinary borders is the acknowledgement that there is not one theory of architecture, or *for* architecture, and that it is not possible to write a book about architectural theory as if it was describing one cohesive subject: 'it is only through a choral project that the multifaceted nature of architecture theory, its differences and complexities can be grasped and articulated' (Stoppani *et al.*, 2016: 2).

This plurality of voices could be recognized as a common feature to other collections of essays; however, *This Thing Called Theory* had the ambition to deal with theory through a series of thoughts that, on the one hand, do not present "a theory for ..." and, on the other hand, avoid a dogmatic interpretation of theory. The paradox is that it is precisely the purposelessness of theory what makes it instrumental to operate (for example designing, or teaching design...) in the world.

Theory does not provide answers; on the contrary, it is an open invitation to look for more questions. Theory has the potential to be re-thought at the starting of a new project: there is not one theory that suits all positions and answers all possible questions. Theory is productive only when it continuously redefines its own borders and the relationships among other disciplines it touches upon.

We could say that architecture theory performs two movements: one of introjection and absorption from other disciplines, and one of expansion when it goes back into the real world. Possibly, the moment of *design* is the brief moment of suspension between the two. But it is difficult to say where one ends and the other begins. Moreover, theory is a collective product, the more one tries to define it, the more it escapes definitions; it is relational and mobile. Precisely because architecture is in the world it is always a collective construction, even in its theoretical foundations.

Working with theory is like using a map of a *terra incognita*, where the map works not only as documentation of what has been found but it prefigures future developments: by means of the white spots, the map traces the direction of future research, where one knows that there are things to be discovered whose nature is, however, yet unknown. And the trajectory of the exploration is not set in advance: it can only be defined in its making.

### *Theory, with «a passion for the real»*

If this position seems unbalanced in favour of a critical endless loop within which theory wraps itself, it is important to say that a theme that is common to all the essays presented at *This Thing Called Theory* conference and included in the book is that theory is not a safe haven where one can retreat and elucubrate about purely abstract things, or a narcissistic mirror used to reflect one's work. On the contrary, theory is a way of engaging with reality, and it is the trigger that pushes to action.

In his *In The World Interior of Capital*, Peter Sloterdijk (2013) reminds us how modernity is characterized by the very close relationship between theory and practice, and by the actual experience of the world: «theory [...] no longer means the quiet gazing of thinkers before the icons of being; what is now meant is the active establishment of sufficient reasons for successful deeds» (Sloterdijk, 2013: 62).

Going back to the essays contained in *This Thing Called Theory*, this notion of theory as a thing that is closely related to action, that prepares to action, is central to Roemer van Toorn's (2016) position. His agenda for a theory that avoids being a mere critique of the contemporary condition and, instead, engages with reality – ultimately opening up possibilities for changing it – questions the very definition of the autonomy of architecture. On the one hand, autonomy must be pursued to avoid «an architectural knowledge of practice of design intelligence based on pragmatic needs only» (van Toorn, 2016: 253) or flattened on the needs of the clients. On the other hand, it has been widely argued that «architecture is not autonomous but plays an integral part in the legal, institutional, political, economic and social order» (van Toorn, 2016: 254).

This difficult negotiation between autonomy and engagement can be carried out precisely by the practice of design blurring the «taxonomical division between dead objects and people» and help us to «study the performance of buildings in their discourse of use, both on the level of perception (being both representational and experiential), and the space of appearance, the affects (sensations) and the usefulness» (van Toorn, 2016: 257). It is in this sense that «the Greek meaning of *theoria* – to see, to look, to speculate, to have the possibility of a vision» (van Toorn, 2016: 254) more closely echoes the meaning of design itself and where theory necessarily becomes design theory, escaping the danger of being a merely critical practice.

### *The (mis)use of theory*

To some extent this position invites to recognize that there is not such a thing as a non-political architecture: «in architecture (and even less in urban studies) [...] each work – whether public or private – contributes to shape the social space, and therefore has a political value, whether or not the architect realizes this, whether or not he or she wants it to be so» (Ciorra, 2016: 263).

After the global financial crisis of 2008 calls for a politically engaged architecture became more and more vocal and visible. Theory here has to play (another) difficult game: it has to be instrumental to work politically with(in) reality, and has to avoid, at the same time, to be politically instrumentalized.

Pippo Ciorra (2016) differentiates modes of political and architectural *commitment* (based on activism, participative, and bottom-up processes of design and construction) versus *engagement*; for the latter, theory is mainly understood as political theory, and it emerges in a form of nostalgia, or even “atavism” (Spencer, 2016: 284) that aims at cutting-off the project from the contemporary context, both on the political level and in terms of architectural manifestation. This position establishes a direct relationship between a formal expression that seeks isolation (where eventually the archipelago is the figure of utmost integration within a network) and a claim for political autonomist engagement. The ultimate goal of this project is to establish a clearly recognizable and safe boundary within which a radical (and at the same time unpractical) alternative to the current socio political scenario can grow. The detachment, the very act of taking a distance, becomes the political act in itself, a dogma that has to be recognized as the only possible option and cannot be questioned without being accused to be an accomplice of the system in place. This project negates the relational character of both politics and architecture, and uses them to propose an ideal space, isolated, in a context that is impossible to be challenged “from within”. Architecture can only work to make this detachment apparent and recognizable, and becomes subservient to an indisputable theory.

### *The position of theory*

This troubled relationship between design, theory and political engagement can be addressed by changing the relative positions of theory and design; rather than seeing design as a direct translation of political statements, theory can critically work on a certain context and help to build a design agenda.

In this case, the theoretical investigation engages with the spaces that contemporary society produces apparently without a declared political agenda; theory works to disclose the untold (political) project that lies behind specific spatial strategies, and becomes a practice that, at least in a first moment, works critically and retroactively: the theory behind a project can be written when the project is long time accomplished, and we could say that a “retroactive manifesto” could be written for any project (being it built, realized, or not).

Theory works as a therapy for the project, it aims to uncover the reasons of architectural deeds, and enunciate them even when the authors would avoid (or negate the possibility of) this enunciation. Platon Issais (2016), Helen Runting and Hélène Frichot (2016), show how this methodology works in the case of Athens and Stockholm, where neoliberal politics work seamlessly on the domestic space and on urbanism in the growth

of the greek capital in the 21<sup>th</sup> century and in the undermining of the swedish welfare state. This form of theory/therapy aims at making sense of the spaces we live in, not accepting them as “natural” and unavoidable developments, thus opening the way for a different project. With an almost opposite perspective to the autonomist view, the project becomes political (in the sense that it contributes to shape the social space) precisely because it engages with the concrete architectural manifestation of certain phenomena. Theory is not used to escape reality; on the contrary, it works on a layer in between reality and an alternative project for an architecture to come that will address specific issues concretely experienced in the cities we live in.

### *Producing (design) theory*

From what I delineated so far, it seems that architectural theory, and – yes – even design theory, can be produced only making reference to disciplines and techniques that are outside architecture disciplinary boundaries.

There are, however, two spaces where architectural design can produce theory by focusing on its own modes of production, the processes, the techniques and the skills that materially contribute to the definition of a project: the office and the school of architecture.

These two spaces seem to finally provide a field of autonomy of the architectural project: here, architecture could almost be understood as a craft, based on a set of traditions as well as on a commitment to experimentation and research that relies onto internal generative forces; the workshop (a definition that suits both the office and the school) becomes the model for this kind of practice that addresses the production of drawings, the use of materials, compositional strategies, aesthetic assessments..., in cycles of trial and error that eventually lead to a design resolution.

In these spaces, the primary goal of the thinking (design theory) associated to the making – drawing and modelling – is to have a hold on the internal consistency of the discourse put forward by the specific designs. But, once more, the ambition to draw a space of autonomy is doomed to fail (or to last briefly – let’s say, until the project deadline). Even when design tries to focus on its own internal values it will go back into the world carrying meaning and opening possibilities that transcend its intentions. And, I would say, this is good news.

Referring to two historical drawings, Gerrit Rietveld’s axonometric drawing of the Schroeder house and one of Mies’ perspectives for the Barcelona pavilion, Desley Luscombe shows how the ‘interruption of technical accuracy’ (Luscombe, 2016: 116) of design drawings – operated during the design process – is able to open up the space for a philosophical reflection related to modes of knowledge and the effect of architectural space on cognition: each drawing subverts expected technical conventions in order to introduce specific responses from the viewer (not necessarily an architect) and communicate a development of meaning beyond those usually associated with the axonometric and perspective.



These drawings cannot be seen just as presentation drawings and, by means of the suspension of certain technical rules operated in the course of their production, in the offices, as drawings, become diagrams that put forward a strategy that aims at delivering «meaning beyond technical representation, [anticipating] a role for the viewing subject that frames the bodily interaction between viewer and viewed image» (Luscombe 2016: 115).

Luscombe shows how Rietveld's drawing uses the axonometric technique for its powerful capacity of dealing with the highly sophisticated and abstract spatial concept of the project. In the axonometric drawing the viewer is positioned outside the drawing, in an infinite space. However, Rietveld completes (most likely in a late stage of development) the drawing with a detail that operates a radical move: the realism (unusual, if compared to the simplified silhouettes of the other furniture elements) used to represent Rietveld's Berlin chair within the house moves the viewer's gaze from «one surveying the drawing as artefact to one focused on questioning the role of [the project] logic into the real world» (Luscombe, 2016: 119): the viewer is, at the same time, outside the drawing (thanks to the axonometric abstract representation) and inside the architectural space, inhabiting it thanks to the corporeal engagement produced by the realism added by one – and just one – piece of furniture. If Luscombe shows how the manipulation of drawings operated within the architects' office is able to generate architecture thinking within and outside disciplinary boundaries, Mario Carpo (2016) looks at what happened in architecture schools during the Nineties, significantly re-telling the story that led a «handful of digital designers, trained in the tradition of Western architectural theory, inspired by some philosophy books and trying to put to task some brand new software for drawing lines on a screen» to completely revolutionize the way in which not only we design and think architecture, but to initiate the global digital revolution, a technical logic of digital tools that is changing the world in which we live. For Carpo, and for the generation of designers he refers to, *Having Ideas* goes through the continuous questioning of the means of production of architecture, both as at the stage of design research and experimentation, and at the stage of the materialization (or, as we should say with Carpo, *fabrication*) of the architectural object in the world. The birth and development of parametric design was able to perform a major shift for the design disciplines demonstrating how the boundary between mass production and customization could be overcome; complexity and variation could now inform projects without increasing its production costs; this process of mass-customization, born within American architecture schools, became influential and successful also beyond the borders of the architectural discipline, opening up the development of the ever larger market of bespoke objects we all experience today.

But, inevitably, these explorations show how architecture theory (here understood as the thinking behind the production of architecture) becomes meaningful – in the world – only if it not only «made of ideas about buildings» (Carpo, 2016: 293).

These last examples aim to end the present text with an optimistic invitation to pursue the fascinating investigation of design theory as a necessary moment of solitary focus and concentration before a new brave challenging of its boundaries.

Architecture theory needs to return to itself, that is to architecture, in order to find how it has changed, not why. Why it has changed is obvious and becomes a redundant statement if we imply architecture's relationality as a sine qua non condition of its being (Stoppani, 2016: 300).

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