

THE VALUE OF DESIGN

design is at the core of what
we teach and practice

PHOEBE CRISMAN + MARK GILLEM, EDITORS

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Topic Chairs

NANA LAST, *Rice University*

THOMAS MICAL, *Carleton University*

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AMIR H. AMERI, *University of Colorado*

Monster@thesis.edu

ANDREW HERSCHER, *University of Michigan*

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A Thesis Fable

AMIR H. AMERI

University of Colorado

The following dialogue, framed around the question of thesis in architecture, may or may not have happened in one department. However, it may well happen, in one form or another, in one degree or another, in many departments. Nonetheless, it is merely a fable. Its merit is only its moral.

THE FABLE

Something happened between May 7th and October 29th. I am not certain what it was, or even whether or not it was an *event*. The only reason I ascribe its occurrence to an unspecified time in between the two dates is the traces it left in evidence of its presence before, or was it after its occurrence? The first trace is in the second page of a memo to all Thesis Students regarding Thesis requirements. It reads:

The Universal complaint of faculty members about thesis is that little time is spent discussing and debating theoretical issues and their implications and too much time is spent pushing the student to undertake simple basic tasks in some reasonable way.

The universal complaint of the generic faculty follows the proclamation that the thesis "program must have theoretical content." In turn, the following passage from the "Revised Thesis Requirement" handout supervenes the complaint of a few pages earlier:

The Architectural Thesis provides the opportunity to develop an innovative architectural concept and explore an interest, which may expand or uplift the understanding of Architecture.

The second trace is left in a memo dated October 29th that comes from those present to those absent in the October 18th meeting of the thesis ad-

visors. The intent of this memo is, I surmise, to inform those absent on behalf of those present that even though we may still wonder "what thesis is or should be," nevertheless "we all must be collectively clear as to what the present thesis mission is." The reason why this clarification is collectively deemed necessary is the perception of a present danger to the health and welfare of the thesis "mission" which is identified and remedied as follows:

Thinking and making, concept & development of building require more balance between the two. It appears in some instances that the pendulum has swung too far toward the abstract.

We read in the second page that in one section of the Thesis Preparation course the instructor is "getting" the students:

.... to see that their ideas are intellectually not new, and emphasizing that they locate themselves in the *field of thought*.

This latter diagnosis, to say nothing yet of the former, is certainly at odds with what the students are asked to accomplish, i.e., "develop an innovative architectural concept" that "may expand or uplift the understanding of Architecture." Are we to conclude that the instructor is unwittingly professing to the students that what they are *required* to do in order to graduate is an impossible task? I think not because from a certain historic perspective - and we should keep in mind that history and time are precisely what are at issue here - the instructor is certainly correct. In a certain sense, it may be said that those familiar with the history (of architecture) are condemned to see it repeated time and again.

I have spent much of the past two decades pointing to the various ramifications of this seemingly

innocuous point. If I have any conclusions to offer it is that no set of ideas have as yet managed to fall, by virtue of inventiveness, outside of - should there be one - the historic boundaries of theoretical discourse on architecture. To the list of historic repetitions, I would add - most critically - the distinction between "thinking" and "making," the "concept" and the "building," the "abstract" and the 'concrete' as the opposing sides of an analogical "pendulum" whose movement the voice of reason disdains behind the rubrics of "balance" in the above memo.

I must confess to you that I do not know the difference between "thinking and making" or the "abstract" and the 'concrete' in architecture insofar as the difference is conceived and defined - particularly by analogy - as the opposing sides of a "pendulum." Though I have seen the distinction made many times before, though it is all too familiar, though it has a long history, though its genesis is no other than the genesis of Western metaphysics, I have never seen it without the battleground of ideologies in architecture. I have never seen it resurrected or resorted to for any reason other than the deprecation and exclusion of the 'other' as the voice of excess.

I wish I could see the opposition. I wish I could make the distinction. I wish I could seek the "balance." In short, I wish I could heed to the voice of reason. Alas I lost my innocence long ago on the hills overlooking Cayuga Lake.

I know not whence the voice of reason comes, if not from within the battleground of ideologies carrying the ominous sound of a battle cry. I know not the balance of which it speaks in the face of the destruction it brings.

I wish not to see the difference as opposition, for I wish not to enter the battleground, for I wish to have no other to deprecate and chastise.

This much said let us return to our fable - had we left - and decipher its moral - should it have one.

THE MORAL

What did indeed happen between May 7th and October 29th?

What is certain is that the voice of reason was seeking an evidently elusive "balance" between the opposite sides of an analogical "pendulum" on both dates, as on each day before, in between, and after.¹

To what do we attribute the fact that the desired balance - the harmonious resting place of the analogical "pendulum" - is not readily marked and reached before, on, or even after either of the two dates? How do we explain the fact that in its desire to mark the resting place of the analogical "pendulum" the voice of reason finds itself caught in a paradoxical swing and a self-contradictory movement on the bows of the very "pendulum" that it wishes to bring to rest in the name of "balance?"

The culprit is not the fabricated other - the voice of excess. If anywhere it is in time and history or time as history that the voice of reason meets (finds, makes, fabricates or is fabricated by) its other. The one that denies the desired "balance" is the very "pendulum" that explains things by analogy. It is the "pendulum" whose motion fabricates the opposing sides as such, i.e., any opposing sides - be it "thinking" as it is opposed to "making" or reason as it is opposed to excess. It is only after a certain pendulum-like motion in/of time, after a certain self-fabrication as what the other is not, i.e., after fabricating the voice of excess as its absolute other on the bows of the analogical "pendulum" that the voice of reason can wish for a unique identity on an assumed middle ground in the name of a self-professed "balance." Yet, it is not possible to wish in rest what is owed to motion. The voice of reason is only what the voice of excess is not. To wish the demise of its other is tantamount to self-destruction. Yet, to wish the demise of one's other is also the will to survival, though only in so long as the balance is never reached and the "pendulum" never stops. Hence the voice of reason must forever seek and hope never to gain the proverbial "balance." It must force the "pendulum" into motion in order to desire its rest. It must perpetually fabricate an other on the one side or the other in order to fabricate its own identity as the voice of reason.

The moral of our fable may at long last be professed to be that the paradox of reason is neither an accident nor the trace of an event. The paradox we have witnessed is just a trace - the one that marks the condition of the self-fabrication of reason.

Where does all of this leave us, and moreover what does all of this have to do with the "mission" at hand, i.e., "to advise, not direct or lead?" This is a most difficult distinction from beneath the "pendulum" in motion, before any question of choice. Does "advice" speak with the voice of reason and its other - "lead" - with the voice of excess or is it the other way around? Is there a difference?

One may seek the answer in what each speaks of or what is not absolutely different what the other purports it to speak of. The topic of conversation is, in either event, the thesis which even though we may not know what it "is or should be," we are to know what it is not or should not be - to say nothing of what it is that we ought not be doing. The answer - should it be found/fabricated - inevitably leads us back to the battleground of ideologies. Is there no way out of this battleground?

There may well be no way out, i.e., no outside to this battleground. Yet there are the margins and the borderlines in between the one and the fabricated other from which one may view the battle insecurely.

Is thesis by some inevitable necessity an invitation to battle, i.e., an invitation to (re)take a stance and (re)mark a spot on the "field of thought" - or is it action - so as to have something to defend with all of one's might? Not necessarily!

Let us see if we can chart a *different* route; one that may or may not lead us from the middle ground to the borderlines.

Let us assume at the outset, as it is customary in many fields of study, that a thesis is a proposition, i.e., a theorem or a hypothesis regarding the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. If it is, it cannot precede the investigation. It cannot be formed before any observation.² Such in the least is the rule of the game as it is played, for better or worse, in academic circles. Although a thesis, once formed, assumes or rather should assume prior investigation and observation, the latter does not have to assume by some inevitable necessity - academic or otherwise - the formation of a theorem as its end result. Investigation does not have to be *constructive*. It does not have to result in a thesis that is by definition an *affirmative* or a *positive* proclamation. The singularity of such

an assumption excludes analytical or otherwise critical investigation to the extent that it may be neither constructive and affirmative nor destructive and negative. Criticism and/or analysis need not be the means to constructive proclamations. This distinction is of particular relevance when and if the phenomenon investigated is already a construct, i.e., the formal expression of a theory that may be original or what is not absolutely different, mimicked.

Although thesis may be, and it has been constructively defined in many fields of study as a theorem or a hypothesis regarding the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, this definition cannot be readily used to structure investigation in the field of architecture. It requires modification or in the least greater specification.

The required modification is in recognition of the fact that whatever is subject to investigation in the field of architecture is, by virtue of being a cultural artifact, always an elaborate construct already, i.e., the formal expression/embodiment of a theory. The subject of investigation in this particular case is itself a theorem or a hypothesis.

Intended or not, architecture is always a theoretical construct, a form of speech, or a cultural "myth" in the making.³ Every edifice inevitably speaks of a thesis regarding itself specifically (including the cultural conditions of its conception and production) and architecture broadly (including the cultural conditions of architecture's conception and definition).⁴ This is to say that, adhering to the general definition of thesis, an architectural thesis would have to be a theorem about a theorem, or a hypothesis regarding a hypothesis.

This seemingly problematic definition does not have to imply that an architectural thesis is necessarily an exercise in tautology. It could imply instead - and this is the required modification - that an architectural thesis differs from a generic thesis insofar as it is not so much a hypothesis regarding the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, as it is a posture assumed or a stance taken on the theorem that is the phenomenon under investigation. It is different insofar as it seeks to understand not so much a thing, as a theorem with respect to which it must then position itself: affirmatively or otherwise. An architectural thesis is different inso-

far as it must first analyze in order to understand, and understand in order to construct again: in affirmation or not.⁵

This brings us in turn to another difference, namely, an architectural thesis is in the end not a single, but a double construct: an intellectual construct and a formal construct (the two, of course are intertwined in that every intellectual construct assumes prior formal constructs and every formal construct assumes a prior intellectual construct). An Architectural thesis must be written twice, i.e., written and translated (the full force of both terms assumed).

To demand that a thesis "have theoretical content" is at best tautological, and at worst a dictate that speaks eloquently of a desire for purity and innocence, i.e., an architecture outside of theory; an architecture of truths and facts. The dictate assumes the possibility of such a construct and along with it - most critically - the possibility of a clear distinction between "thinking" and "making," 'theory' and 'practice' insofar as it treats theory as a thing that can be demanded or added on by choice. The most critical dimension of this dictate is not, however, that theory is a thing that may or may not be added by choice, but that it tries to set certain aspects of architecture beyond the reach of theory.⁶ Architecture of "substance," we read in the May 7th handout, "cannot grow out of function or spatial requirements alone - it must take on intellectual position which will then guide the design decisions."⁷ Are we to assume that "function or spatial requirements" can precede an intellectual position, that this 'practice' is or can be non-theoretical, i.e., performable in the sanctity of a realm innocent of complicated intellectual positions and messy theoretical formulations: the mythical realm of facts and truths? If not, can we then find (make or fabricate) a building that is too functional as opposed to theoretical or too theoretical as opposed to functional? What will we mark and separate as functional or non-theoretical in such a building?

Assuming that there is no clear difference between the functional and the theoretical, that no historic practice has as yet managed to escape theory, how does one begin a thesis investigation, knowing that in the end one must assume a specific posture with respect to the subject of investigation?

One may choose one of two intersecting paths. One may begin with a set of assumption or preconceptions, the investigation into which requires the identification of an appropriate building type as the vehicle of investigation, and in the end, of expression.

Alternatively, one may begin with the building-type that is the subject and the projected end product of the investigation. In either case, the question to ask at the outset is not what patent 'theory' should the proposed building speak of, but what arcane theory does its type historically hide under the rubrics of "function" or "practical" requirements? What myth, in other words, does the type refuse to acknowledge as theory in the name of practicality or functionality?⁸

To find an answer one must reconstruct the genealogy of the building type under investigation - the genealogy of forms inseparable from the genealogy of the institution served. One must decipher the formal/architectural framing process by which the given institution turns its theory/ideology into myths and passes them on as functional and practical truths. One must analyze and critically evaluate the historic role architecture plays in establishing and effecting a given institutional/social order as the true, natural, and practical order of things.

The pedagogical goal of such an investigation is not simply to attain a rudimentary understanding of architecture as myth(s) in the making, but above all the development of the type of analytical skills essential to deciphering the complex relationship between architecture and the culture industry it perpetually serves.

The aim of such an investigation, on the other hand, is neither to simply accept and promote a given institutional theorem/myth, nor to assume the luxury of rejecting it in favor of a different theorem/myth. To pursue either of these two routes is tantamount to seeking one's way back to the center of the battlefield. Though one may choose to follow either route, it is essential to first understand what it is that one is opting to defend or supplant. From a pedagogical standpoint, the defense cannot be, or rather should not be blind, i.e., conducted expeditiously and unknowingly under the guise of functionality and/or practicality.

Before any question of choice, it is essential to decipher and understand the mechanics of the particular and complex dialogue between form, function and ideology in the subject of study. It is only with this understanding that one may knowingly opt and then successfully pursue either of the two routes that lead, albeit differently to a constructive or affirmative proclamation, i.e., the center of the battlefield.⁹ It is also with this understanding and only with this understanding that one may also choose an alternate route: not the affirmative (pro or con), but the analytic, i.e., the route that may take one from the centerline to the borderlines.

One may choose not to promote a given institutional myth, i.e., cease to frame and present the myth as a natural given, or what is not fundamentally different, supplant the myth with another presented in the same guise. One may choose not to affirm but question, not to engage but to disarm. One may choose not to pose but to expose. The choice, nonetheless, it is important to note, is only afforded the investigator who does not presume theory an ornament of architecture's autonomous existence.

Neither of these choices, it is important to note, enjoys a privileged position. An affirmative position is not a repetition given the inevitable contextual variations. A counter position does not fundamentally differ from the position it seeks to supplant, in that it must rely on the same critical strategies as its other to exact the needed authority to supplant it. The analytic position differs from the other two only in that it seeks to expose what the other two must veil as the condition of an authoritative assertion. This position, however, can no more distance itself from the other two, as the other two can out distance each other.

The pedagogical interest in the analytic exercise - and we should not forget that the thesis exercise is above all a pedagogical exercise - lies in the fact that it mandates a conscious reevaluation of all the sacred presuppositions regarding spatial organization, the relationship of parts to whole, the inside to the outside, the particulars of volume and mass, solid and void, path and place, structure and material, ornamentation, proportion, scale, and others. This is by way of designing a building that in the end is all too familiar and yet all too alien, one that is neither a copy nor strictly an original, one that is

neither simply good nor simply bad, neither simply theoretical nor simply functional, neither simply abstract nor simply concrete.¹⁰ A building that speaks silently of the designer's ability to willfully manipulate the language of architecture as opposed to faithfully re-produce its various speech acts.

ENDNOTES

1. Should there be any doubt, let it be noted that the referent of the 'voice of reason' is not a person. There is no one individual that voices it. Though it is uttered, it subsumes and presumes all individual utterances.
2. This is to say that one cannot expect from a student a clear declaration of what his/her thesis is, much less where it is going to take place, after the allotted three weeks.
3. I am using the world myth in Roland Barthes sense, designating a motivated ideological construct that assumes the guise of truth, as outlined long ago in *Myth Today*. Please see: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Noonday Press, New York, 1972
4. Every house, for instance, inevitably assumes a theory *of* living and presents a theory *for* living.
5. The element of choice, it is important to note, is afforded the researcher or the investigator by virtue of the enterprise and not otherwise. This realization is a primary pedagogical intent of the thesis exercise.
6. If theory was not a matter of choice one could not demand its presence.
7. One cannot help but hear echoes in this re-mark of Vitruvius' inaugurating divide, reverberating since from mouth to mouth, pen to pen, keyboard to keyboard and all resolutely without question or doubt.
8. Although myth and theory both seek to explain and thus assign 'meaning' to 'reality,' they are different in the sense that myth is a forgotten or naturalized theory, i.e., a *truth*.
9. The route that pursues the promotion of the institutional myth leads to what we extol as *good* architecture. The route, on the other hand, that pursues the replacement of the myth with another myth invariably leads to what we condemn as bad architecture.
10. The voice of reason, of course, would always try, by a certain internal necessity, to reduce and categorize such a building as too theoretical, too abstract, non-functional, unpractical, etc, not because it is, but because it is also not.