Manfredo Tafuri & the Crisis of Architectural History (Zürich, 6–7 Mar 15)

Zürich, Cabaret Voltaire, Mar 6–07, 2015
Deadline: Sep 14, 2014

Martino Stierli

Once upon a Time: Manfredo Tafuri and the Crisis of Architectural History

Against the background of a general revision and critical reflection of the history of architecture in its relation to theory and criticism, this conference aims at opening up a space of discussion on the contemporary nature and condition of architectural history. We propose to do so by referring to the legacy of Italian historian and theoretician Manfredo Tafuri (1935–1994), who may be seen as one of the most influential thinkers of the relationship between the history and theory of architecture of the contemporary period.

Architecture is a shifting and elusive object whose nature remains difficult to define. It relates not only to buildings and projects, but also to written and oral sources, and is deeply embedded in social, economical and political contexts. For this reason, architectural history seems to be predestinated to be interdisciplinary and calls for a multitude of historical narratives. Furthermore, the relatively weak disciplinary condition of architectural history leans on a long tradition of partial and subjective histories that have often been written by architects themselves. This leads to the question whether an "objective" history of architecture is possible, and to what extent architectural history is fundamentally linked to changing architectural trends. But while both “general” history and the history of art have performed a critical reframing of their claim for objectivity and have underscored the implicit theory and ideology beyond every form of historical narrative, architectural history, by contrast, has widely escaped such a critical reframing. And while in particular art history has reflected upon the history of theories that framed its discourse – the history of style, iconology, phenomenology, to name but a few –, this kind of reflection seems to be yet missing for the history of architecture.

The work of Manfredo Tafuri is an interesting starting point for such a reflection on the nature of the history of architecture. Tafuri’s position was mainly based on a questioning of what he called “operational critique”, which was put in the service of a particular architectural tendency. By contrast, he defined his own critical take as progetto storico, as a performative and self-reflexive questioning of the history of architecture. His work was strongly influenced by historical materialism, thus highlighting the socio-economic and political conditions in which architecture is embedded. We propose to understand Tafuri as a critical agent, for questioning both his own theory of history and the nature of architectural history today. We propose to do so in reference to cultural models underlying our current position, in particular the resurgence of Marxism and historical materialism in contemporary architecture. By undertaking a critical reevaluation of Tafuri's legacy from a con-

temporary perspective, we not only aim to point at the inherent aporias in the Italian historian's thinking, but also want to contribute towards a theoretical framing of the discipline of architectural history.

The conference is divided into three sections:

1) The many styles of architectural history. If architectural history (like art history) has been determined by a sequence of different methodological foci (style, iconology, phenomenology, technology, social history, etc.), where do we situate Tafuri in this continuity and where do we situate ourselves in the current debates? Do historical methodologies represent a toolbox of possible heuristic approaches to chose from, or should these all coexist in any contemporary historical work? If we roughly distinguish between the (formal) description of projects/buildings and their political/-cultural/economic contexts, and how can and should their relationship be defined?

2) Architectural history and the zeitgeist. What are the historical and theoretical narratives underlying our thinking today, and to what extent is it possible to abstract from them? Can and should we escape the cultural and political context in which we act?
Regarding Tafuri, it is interesting to reflect upon his repeated but difficult to understand critique of deconstruction, and upon the strong influence of structuralism in his work, as well as the difficulty to combine it with Marxist thought.

3) Architectural history and contemporary architecture. To what extent should the architectural historian comment upon contemporary architecture? Would this be theory or criticism, and how may it be differentiated from the writing of history? While criticizing the critica operativa because of its engagement with contemporary architecture, Tafuri too referred frequently to contemporary architectural discourse and had many personal relationships with architects of his time, thus pointing at another contradiction in his theoretical and historical oeuvre.

Keynote speakers:
Dr. Victor Buchli (University College London)
Prof. Dr. Andrew Leach (Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia)
Prof. Dr. Michael Osman (UCLA, Los Angeles)

We invite interested individuals from art and architectural history, history and cultural studies as well as related disciplines to send a 250-word abstract and short CV to Andri Gerber and Martino Stierli (andri.gerber@gta.arch.ethz.ch; martino.stierli@uzh.ch) by September 14, 2014. Confirmations will be sent out by end of October 2014. The definitive program will be communicated by the end of November 2014. The conference is co-organized by the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture, ETH Zurich, the Institute of Art History, University of Zurich, and the Center History of Knowledge. It is supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Depending on funding, grants for travel and accommodation will be made available.

Conception and Organization:
Dr. Andri Gerber, Institute for the History and Theory ?of Architecture, ETH Zurich
Prof. Dr. Martino Stierli, Institute of Art History, University of Zurich

Reference:

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