The Historical Project
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INTRODUCTION

The course examines the oeuvre and legacy of architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, focusing mainly on his seminal work The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s (1980), in which Tafuri puts forward the idea of the historical “project” as an open construct that reactivates past events in its reading of the present. History is redefined and reinvented as a shifting and complex plurality rather than a given monolithic and comprehensive whole.

For Tafuri, history as re-construction is first of all a deconstruction, decomposition and analysis of the pieces that provide the elements for the new montage. In this sense history is active, not only determined by the objects it analyses but also determinant of the realities it deconstructs and recomposes. Acting on a multiple and non-linear time, such history is able to produce the future, while it offers itself as an always provisional and intrinsically endless analytical construct.

Tafuri stresses the need to acknowledge the ‘irreducible tension between the analysis and its objects’, which makes the historical project always a ‘project of a crisis’. For Tafuri it is necessary to always multiply the principles in relation to the research of a unitary principle. The historian must think by ‘tangles’ of phenomena, of these phenomena study the collisions, and of these collisions study the remains, the residues that are left at the edges.

The manipulation of architectural forms always has an objective that transcends the forms themselves. It is this “beyond architecture” which is at the core of Tafuri’s interest. The work of the historian must therefore focus on the ideologies, and these always operate in “bundles”: the task of the historian is to trace many independent histories and lay them out next to each other to disentangle the bundle of threads and distinguish interdependencies and antagonisms. Tafuri’s “project” therefore proposes not a piece of history complete in itself, but rather an intermittent journey through a maze of tangled paths, one of the many possible “provisional constructions” obtainable by starting with the chosen materials.’ (Tafuri, ‘The “Historical” Project’)

The course begins with the analysis of a few key texts by Walter Benjamin, which strongly influenced Tafuri’s definition of history. Examines the formation of the idea of “historical project” in Tafuri’s earlier works, from Theories and History of Architecture (1968) to Architecture and Utopia (1973). Works through its development and definition, in Tafuri’s reassessment of modernism and its avant-gardes and of the 1970s avant-gardes in The Sphere and the Labyrinth. Offers some examples of its applications on key figures of architectural ‘modernity’ (Piranesi and Le Corbusier) and on the historical case study of Renaissance Venice. Analyzes the impact and relevance of Tafuri’s project on architectural discourse and theory today – from the crisis of languages and the role of representation, to the impact of political and feminist discourses on the architectural.

KEY TEXTS


TIMETABLE

Wed 25 Jan 2006
Room
17.00-18.30 Lecture 1

HISTORY BEFORE TAFURI
18.30-20.00 Lecture 2

BEFORE THE HISTORICAL PROJECT

Wed 01 Feb 2006
Room
17.00-18.30 Lecture 3

HISTORY AS A PROJECT
18.30-20.00 Lecture 4
1 HISTORY BEFORE TAFURI

Tafuri’s redefinition of the history of architecture and his investigations of the economical, social and political contexts, beyond the immediate material presence of the architectural object were highly influenced by the teaching of the Frankfurt School, and in particular by the work of Walter Benjamin. This lecture introduces some key texts by Benjamin, which influenced the development of Tafuri’s “project” of history in architecture: the fundamental 'Theses on the Philosophy of History’ and ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’; but also ‘The Destructive Character’, in which Benjamin argues that the open project of critical historiography must be destructive in the sense of ‘seeing nothing [as] lasting. But for this very reason [it] sees ways everywhere. [...] What exists [it] reduces to rubble, not for the sake of rubble, but for the way leading through it;’ and ‘The Author as Producer’, in which Benjamin asks literature key structural questions that Tafuri will borrow to challenge the crisis of architecture’s political and economical engagement in the 1970s: “Rather than ask, “What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?” I should like to ask, “What is its position in them?” This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary technique of works.” (W. Benjamin)


2 BEFORE THE HISTORICAL PROJECT
From the late 1960s and through the 1970s Manfredo Tafuri develops his “historical project” through different strands of research, before finalizing it in the text that opens his book The Sphere and the Labyrinth (1980). This lecture examines the two fundamental texts that preceded the introduction of the “historical project”.

In Theories and History of Architecture (1968), Tafuri produces an analysis and critique of the established methodologies of the history of architecture, and questions the very notion of criticism: the production of ideas in architecture - be it in form of history or theory - is in itself a project, a form of making, rather than a discourse applied ex post to the architectural project. In Architecture and Utopia (1973), Tafuri introduces a new way of writing architecture’s history in which the architectural object is studied as a cultural as well as a technical product of its context.


3 HISTORY AS A PROJECT

‘The historical project is an intermittent journey through a maze of entangled paths, one of the many possible “provisional constructions”’. Manfredo Tafuri thus defines his “historical project” in the introduction to The Sphere and the Labyrinth (1980, Engl. 1987), a book that reaffirms his definition of a long modernity in architecture and identifies its key moments in a fragmented history made of ruptures, redefinitions and constant self-questioning of architecture in relation to the social, the political, and the other ‘multiple techniques of environmental formation’.

This lecture examines the key passages of Tafuri’s seminal text, which proposes the history of architecture as a form of making, rather than a discourse applied ex post to the architectural project. The task of the historical project is to refrain from the instrumental definition of a figure – a solution, a form, a history, a story. Its project remains open, in a continuous re-engagement with the present. The tension between the historical project and the processes it investigates develops a critical method that is capable to transform itself and its own language together with the material it produces and reactivates.


4 TAFURI AND PIRANESI

Eighteenth century architect and engraver Giovanni Battista Piranesi is a key figure in the historical work of Manfredo Tafuri. Piranesi’s work on the classical language of architecture, his dissolution of architectural form, his explosion of pre-established orders in architecture and in the urban space, are elements which Tafuri identifies as part of a wider and deeper crisis of architecture at the dawn of modernity. For Tafuri, Piranesi is one of the earliest voices to express such crisis, and a pivotal figure significantly placed on the edge of the certainties of the classical language and on the verge of the modern avant-garde.

This lecture explores Tafuri’s engagement with the work of Piranesi, form the earlier critique in Architecture and Utopia (1973) to the later and more extended study in The Sphere and the Labyrinth (1980).


5 TAFURI AND LE CORBUSIER

In architecture, modernity produces the crisis of the architectural object and the explosion of the urban form. The solutions proposed by modernism introduce a clear-cut new beginning: the modernist tabula rasa offers itself as a new and totalizing
And also


Les Corbusier des critiques [The Corbusier of the critics], Archis, no. 11, 1987, Nov., pp. 12-48. Contains: Le Corbusier's intellectual Career (by Marc Dubois); The Corbusier of von Moos (Ceoes Boekraad), Frampton (Hans van Dijk), Tafuri (Herman van Bergeijk), and of Curtis (Hans van Dijk); Art Under the Wing of Architecture: Le Corbusier and the Synthesis of the Arts (Bart Lootsma).

6 TAIFURI AND THE CRISIS OF THE 1970S

Tafuri's engagement with the present addresses contemporary (1970s') architectural production – both theoretical and built – in its relationship with modernism and with capitalism, and challenges the distinction between an inside and an outside of architecture. There is no outside of architecture, affected as it is by the conditions of its production. Even the most exclusively theoretical and apparently self-referential forms of architecture are affected by 'the multiple techniques of environmental formation'.

This lecture focuses on Tafuri's analysis of the crisis of architecture and criticism in the 1970s, when 'every ideology, every dream of a social function, every utopian residue' are reduced to a 'zero degree'. Tafuri concentrates on several significant examples of such crisis, which include the "architectures dans le boudoir" of James Stirling, Aldo Rossi, Vittorio Gregotti in Europe, and the linguistic experiments of Louis Kahn, Venturi and Scott Brown, Gandelsonas and Agrest, the NY Five, and others in the United States.

For Tafuri, 'the task of criticism is to begin from within the work [of architecture] only to break out of it as quickly as possible in order not to remain caught in the vicious circle of a language that speaks only of itself.' (282) 'Criticism must ask the following question: 'In what contexts and in what structural conditions are [these works] rooted?" (283) In order to move from the single work to the system that gives meaning to it, 'critical analysis has to operate on the material plane that determines that cycle of production. [The focus is shifted] from what architecture wishes to be, or wished to say, toward what the building production represents in the economic game.' (287) 'What criticism ought to ask about architecture is in what way does it, as an organized institution, succeed or not in influencing the relations of production.' (288) (Tafuri, 'L'Architecture dans le Boudoir').

7 TAIFURI AND VENICE

'From the second half of the 15th century onwards, Venice sees an interaction between centres and peripheries, between innovations and established mentalities, between the use of the "new" and the jealous preservation of a sacral identity.' (Tafuri, Ricerca del Rinascimento) Manfredo Tafuri's "Venetian" works offer a practical (material) answer to his questioning of the role of the theory and history of architecture in the 1960s and '70s. His works on Venice are a re-foundation, an answer per exempla to the question of the redefinition of the historical project. Based on a rigorous architectural and historical specificity, these studies construct at the same time a new theory and a new way of "making" history.

Venice is an ideal laboratory for the testing of the historical project, as it offers not a passive object of investigation but an active
subject that reacts to the analysis, and Tafuri's attention focuses on understanding the workings of the complex system of the city in a specific temporal frame. His writings concentrate on the impact of the Roman and Florentine culture of the Renaissance on Venice, and on the reaction of Venice to what it perceives - and resists - as "other" and "new". Tafuri's aim here is twofold: the application of a historical method and, at the same time, the construction of a theory of the contemporary, or - better - the acknowledgement that they are both parts of the same endless "project".


8 TAFURI AFTER TAFURI: HISTORICAL PROJECT, DELIRIUM AND FEMINISM

The historical project is 'one of the many possible "provisional constructions" [...] The cards can be reshuffled and to them added many that were intentionally left out.' (Tafuri, 'The Historical "Project")

In Theories and History of Architecture (1968), Tafuri pictures the work of the architectural critic as a walk on the cutting edge of a tightrope, external accidents notwithstanding. Later, as Tafuri unfolds his definition of the historical project, the construction reveals the discontinuous structure and uneven nature of this work. The wind swept tightrope on which the critic is asked to proceed is walked upon through selections and exclusions, returns and correspondences, and the line of investigation opens up to complications and multiplications of discontinuous and plural discourses.

This lecture argues that the historical project is still at work today, and continues to offer rich possibilities, not only as a method for the production of histories, but also for the development of new lines of research - be they design, critical, textual. The lecture focuses on the developments of some of Tafuri's key ideas in the corpus of discursive practices and projects produced by the current generation of architectural feminist theorists, and in particular on the notions of "delirium" and "linearity" as they are explored, redefined and appropriated as tools for the critical work in architecture.


