

Questions That History Cannot Answer. Three Positions from 1981

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between history and architectural practice is complicated, specifically in the post-war period. By "reviewing" an issue of 1981 of the French magazine "AMC", in this article some of the questions that history cannot answer are addressed. Three different positions (and three ways of dealing with history at the end of the 20th century), present in this issue of "AMC", are examined: that of philosopher Hubert Damisch, of historian Manfredo Tafuri, and of OMA/Rem Koolhaas.

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KEYWORDS

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1.

In the summer of 1981, an issue was published of the French magazine "Architecture Mouvement Continuité (AMC)" – a themed double issue, numbers 54-55, under the editorial direction of Jacques Lucan and Patrice Noviant, entitled *Histoire et modernité. Quelques-uns que j'aime... parmi les modernes*. [Fig. 1] On the cover, a colour drawing was reproduced of the project by OMA/Rem Koolhaas (with Stefano de Martino and Kees Christiaanse) for Boompjes in Rotterdam (1979-81), consisting of two structures, a tower and a housing block. Other projects featured in the issue were by, among others, Christian de Portzamparc, Paul Chemetov and Frank Gehry. About twenty French architects (such as Jean Nouvel, Alain Sarfati and Yves Lion) were asked – as "citizens of the future" – to express "their ambition for the 1980s". In a theoretical postscript to the issue, six authors (such as Hubert Damisch, Georges Teyssot and Pierre Sady) reflected on the nature of historical and critical writing. The issue of "AMC" concluded with the essay *Le "projet" historique* by Manfredo Tafuri – the first half of the introduction to his book *La sfera e il labirinto. Avanguardia e architettura da Piranesi agli anni '70*, published in Italian in 1980.¹



FIG. 1 OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Project for Boompjes in Rotterdam, 1979-1981, with the 'White House' from 1898 in front, on the cover of: "Architecture Mouvement Continuité (AMC)", Nos. 54-55, 1981 (scan by the author, 2015).

A closer examination of this issue of "AMC" – a critical review more than 35 years after the fact – is revealing for the state of not only architectural writing but also of architectural culture and production. As exemplified in these pages of the Parisian magazine, and specifically by the positions of philosopher Hubert Damisch, historian Manfredo Tafuri and architect Rem Koolhaas, the nature of intellectual work in the field of architectural history has changed during the '80s, the '90s and the first decade of this century. At the same time, one versatile solicitude has remained: how to mediate between history and modernity, between the past and the future, after the Second World War? What is the relationship, in architecture, between the work of historians and architects? And how conclusive and comprehensive is the study of history as a scientific or cultural activity?

2.

The contribution to "AMC" by Damisch was entitled: *Pourquoi le XXe siècle?* His answer was straightforward.

Parce que je ne vois d'abord possible de l'architecture et de ses

1. A French translation of the second half of the introduction to *La sfera e il labirinto* was published four years earlier: M. Tafuri, *Architecture et historiographie*, in "La nouvelle critique", 1977, No. 103, pp. 107-12.

oeuvres, au moins dans un premier temps, que dans l'optique et selon les voies qui sont celles de notre temps. Et cela si même nous sommes tentés de chausser d'autres lunettes, de découvrir ou d'inventer d'autres chemins.²

Damisch' interest in architecture – in its histories and theories – is thus rooted both in the present and in the future. The architectural theory he practises is above all “cultural” in nature: for Damisch, architecture is a human practice that can help to interpret and to understand the world and the society we live in, both by constructing histories and by envisioning possible futures. In this sense, architecture does not (or should not) differ significantly from art or literature. In his contribution to “AMC” in 1981, Damisch makes a bold and almost apocalyptic statement in this direction.

Au point où nous en sommes de ce siècle, les choses ont le mérite d'être claires: ou l'architecture deviendra partie intégrante de la culture, ou l'on pourra faire une croix sur l'une et sur l'autre.³

Either architecture becomes a real, full-blooded and culturally embedded activity, or both architecture and intellectual culture will perish... It is hard to maintain that today, after the progressive professionalization and academisation of the architectural sciences, architectural theory, criticism and history has become a full part of what we in 2016 still regard as globalised “culture”. Since this culture has almost completely turned into a gear wheel of the machines of the culture industry, rather than developing into an accessible but intellectual sphere of knowledge, this is not necessarily a bad thing. But in Damisch' justified wish to “culturalise” architecture, lies without a doubt an echo of his post-war education and experience. In an interview from 1998, he talked with Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier and Rosalind Krauss about his preceptors at the Sorbonne: Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Francastel.⁴ Both encouraged him to study on the one hand history, but also to ascertain, on the other hand, that history itself – the study of the past – is not enough for the construction of assertion and meaning: “there are questions that emerge from the historical field that can be posed in historical terms but that history itself cannot answer”.⁵ Damisch continues:

You have to remember that we were just emerging from the war. It was extremely important to me, the idea that I had perceived history. During the war as a child and adolescent this was something I saw. I remember hearing the first news about the war announced on the radio; but I didn't really believe it until I saw the facts actually written on the posters. In the same way, I was profoundly marked by one of the first examples of what I experienced as graphic design as such: the eagle and the swastika on the deportation notices.⁶

What becomes clear from this statement from 1998, and what is already present in his contribution to “AMC” in 1981, is that Damisch regards contemporary designers, artists and architects as “mediators”

2. H. Damisch, *Pourquoi le XX^e siècle?*, in “AMC”, 1981, Nos. 54-55, p. 134.

3. *Ibid.*

4. See also my review of Damisch' most recent book: C. Van Gerrewey, *Noah's Ark. Essays on Architecture, Hubert Damisch*, in “sITA – studies in History and Theory of Architecture”, 2016, No. 4 (forthcoming).

5. Y.-A. Bois, D. Hollier, R. Krauss, *A Conversation with Hubert Damisch*, in “October”, 1998, No. 85 (pp. 3-17), p. 3.

6. *Ibid.*

between what is happening or what has happened in the world (in particular during the terrible years of World War II), and between the sense and significance we can subtract from these events. Art and architecture are creative activities that instigate the hermeneutic processes that are characteristic and decisive for human life. This also means that for Damisch historiography itself – as a scientific, strictly limited activity – is not enough. Again: “there are questions that history cannot answer”. What is needed to answer these questions is their projection into the future, with a little help from architecture and art. As the 20th century drew to a close, Damisch experienced how exactly these links between history and future, and thus also the attempts to make art and architecture truly cultural, became more and more scarce and even impossible. Again from the interview from 1998:

I am interested on the one hand in the archaic and in a future about which we have no means to think. This is important because today we are in a situation in which history only thinks retrospectively, in the past tense. All utopian, all projective dimension within it is thus aborted from the outset.⁷

7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

3.

The abortion, from the outset, of utopian and projective dimensions, can be regarded as the main goal of Manfredo Tafuri’s activities as a critical historian. Tafuri was obsessed with the fact that every form of understanding always and necessarily entails a form of pursuing, of continuing, of pushing on, against all odds. Truly “understanding” and “interpreting” the past always involves a form of “abuse” of history, or at least an activation of history for the future, and a reduction of the complex realities of the past. This critical conviction becomes clear in many sentences from his text in “AMC” from 1981, and thus from the introduction to *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*.

It must be made clear that history cannot be reduced to a hermeneutics, that history’s objective is not to rend the “veil of Maya” covering the truth, but rather to shatter the barriers that it itself sets up, in order to proceed and to go beyond itself.⁸

8. I quote from the English translation from 1987: M. Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth. Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1987, p. 5.

The great precursor of this deconstructive practice is Nietzsche, and Tafuri quotes deservedly from Foucault’s essay on the German philosopher’s influence on language and “counter-memory”: «Knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting».⁹ The cutting that Tafuri undertook was directed against (Italian) post-war architects and more specifically against historians (or so-called historians) that used the past of architecture to legitimize future practices. He addressed this so-called “operative” or “normative criticism” earlier – for example in the fourth chapter, bearing exactly that title, from *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* from 1968.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 4. The sentence comes from: M. Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, in D. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 140.

The post-war intellectual tradition Tafuri's position springs from, is almost diametrically opposed to that of Damisch, although the starting point is the same. For Tafuri, the horrors of the Second World War, of fascism, Nazism but also of optimistic post-war capitalism, have enlarged the crisis of intellectual and political work to an almost unbearable degree. Architects and historians cannot "mediate" this situation or make it understandable and thus in a sense "bearable", as Damisch believed. All they can do is try to sabotage every attempt, no matter how well meant, of consumption, recuperation, mendacious generalization or profitable mythologisation. Hence the last sentences of his article in "AMC" from 1981.

We harbour no illusions regarding the power of historical analysis to demystify per se; its attempts to change the rules of the game enjoy no autonomy. But inasmuch as it is social practice – a socializing practice – it is today obliged to enter into a struggle that puts into question its own characteristic features. Within this struggle, history must be ready to risk: to risk, ultimately, a temporary "inactuality".¹⁰

10. M. Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth...*, cit., p. 13.

The paradox of this "inactuality" of history – and of Tafuri's project as a whole – is in itself historical. That is to say: Tafuri's use of knowledge for "cutting" rather than for understanding, and his theoretical choice for deconstruction rather than for hermeneutics, had at the end of his life and the end of the 20th century, lost much of the large critical aura it could claim in post-war Europe. Critical history (to use the famous distinctions by Nietzsche) has turned into antiquarian art history. To reiterate the words by Damisch from the interview from 1998: all utopian, all projective dimension is in our society automatically aborted from the outset. Therefore, the decision to no longer interpret, to no longer attract meaning or direction from the past or from cultural production, is no longer polemical or unruly.

Tafuri himself – an extremely lucid observer of the culture he was part of – was aware of this, and experienced at the end of his life how the professionalization of scientific historiography in architecture had indeed given rise to an autonomous discipline, but also to a discipline threatened by its own disciplinary isolation. In one of the last interviews he gave, he talked about architectural historiography at the end of the 20th century.

There is a sick academic ambition, and one often privileges chronological periods where sources are easily accessible (for example, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), and one reiterates discourses already made which can be retold in a more complex jargon. In the end one produces a monograph of four hundred pages without polemics and dissent. No polemics, no dissent, no history. This is a visible trend, especially inside the universities; effectively, it is a new scholasticism, of which it is difficult to get rid, because when the student is very intelligent and

very serious he grips to the documentary evidence as it were the last anchor to survive.¹¹

Nevertheless, exactly this tendency of architectural historians, reproached by Tafuri, to focus on the facts and leave speculation, interpretation or projection aside – a tendency that has only spread during the beginning of the 21st century – is also an almost logical consequence of his post-war condemnation of dealing with all too human hermeneutic desires by means of architecture.

11. P. Corsi, *For a historical history. Interview with Manfredo Tafuri*, in "Casabella", 1995, Nos. 619-620 (pp. 145-51), p. 150.

4.

And what about architecture? On the cover of the double issue 54-55 of "AMC" from 1981 figured an unbuilt project by OMA/Rem Koolhaas – a project that originated in many ways in the Second World War. Koolhaas wrote the accompanying text, as a reconstruction of the architectural but also historical context of the Boompjes project and of the city of Rotterdam.

The centre of Rotterdam was bombed in 1940: overnight, it was turned into a 3 km wide crater. [...] Immediately, Rotterdam architects started to plan the eventual "reconstruction" project which began during the war and which is still incomplete. During the '50s the new Rotterdam became a paradigm: a CIAM city of slabs that were tied together by a Team X-like "connective tissue" by Bakema, the Lijnbaan. In the '60s and '70s, that emblematic architecture was discredited: on the periphery of the centre, on the other side of the railway track, a second, revisionist reconstruction was started – an assembly by Piet Blom (a small forest of his tree houses), Bakema and others. The new reconstruction was the absolute opposite of the '50s effort: where they were sober, ordered and logical, the new city was chaotic and obsessively humanist. The two cities are separated by a "fault", formed by a railway line and a highway that both cross the river at this point. The separation is further reinforced by a new suspension bridge across the Maas whose approach makes its way into the city through two inexplicable twists.¹²

For Koolhaas, and specifically for the city of Rotterdam, where the offices of OMA were (and still are) located, the Second World War was above all an opportunity: for a development (in an optimistic political climate) of post-war reconstruction architecture, but also for the reactivation of modern architectural principles developed in reaction to another conflict: the First World War. Much more than the postmodernism that developed during the 1980s, Koolhaas professed a kind of architecture that was explicitly historical and contextual, in the sense that it reacted against both past and current developments. At the same time, the work of OMA also followed the belief that there are always questions that history cannot answer, and

12. R. Koolhaas, *Deux structures pour Rotterdam*, in "AMC", 1981, Nos. 54-55 (pp. 51-53), p. 51. I quote from the English original text, published (among others) in: Robert Maxwell (ed.), *OMA. Projects 1978-1981*, London, Architectural Association, 1981, p. 39.

that ask for an architectural projection, rather than a Tafurian negation. The project for Boompjes – consisting of four connected apartment towers with commercial and communal facilities, and the erection (as a fifth tower) of a section of a nearby old bridge as a viewing tower – is in the OMA oeuvre probably the clearest expression of this belief: architecture is always historical, but it also reacts to and even “against” history. In a text from 1985 on the four plus one towers for Boompjes, Umberto Barbieri has indicated this.

This is a project that forms part of the development of an idea of the city characterized by the use of archaeological relics. The use to which they are put is not just historical but also architectural, projecting them into the future. So Koolhaas’s challenge to the functionalist bias of Rotterdam’s planners and architects is based on an architectural project in which history is not seen as “conservative restoration” but as reference and stimulus for new images. The idea of preserving one span of the old Willemsbrug is in part founded on a conception of image and memory not as static moments but as dynamic ones, in that they stimulate new technical reflection and the construction of a new urban reality. A reality in which nineteenth-century engineering is transformed into constructivist architecture, being “translated” into a “modern” language.¹³

One axonometric drawing by OMA summarizes these positions: in the north, on the quay side, the apartment building; at the foot of the old bridge, the erected tower; on the other side of the train tracks, the “White House” (an *Art Nouveau* construction from 1898, one of the few buildings in Rotterdam still standing after World War II), and the projects from the ‘70s by Blom and Bakema; opposite these: typical, rather generic post-war reconstruction architecture. [Fig. 2] It is a drawing that represents the architectural history of Rotterdam of the past 100 years. It also shows how a new architectural project (by OMA) can reveal aspects of this history, and of that of the modern architecture that is being re-activated, that would otherwise have remained hidden. But most importantly, it is an architectural project that defines future possibilities and scenario’s, not simply extracted from history or as a next step in a simple linear progression, but nevertheless based on an understanding of the past and of the present. In 1935, French writer Paul Valéry gave a lecture entitled *Le Bilan de l’intelligence*. According to Valéry, he was living in a chaotic era, defined by a constant stream of data, innovations, updates and new sensations. In this kind of culture, intellectual and cultural work no longer offered a traditional fundament for action.

Le travail accumulé des hommes amorce sans doute un certain avenir, mais un avenir qu’il nous est absolument impossible d’imaginer; et c’est là, entre les autres nouveautés, l’une des plus

13. U. Barbieri, *From the bridge to the tower. A project by Rem Koolhaas, OMA*, in “Lotus”, 1985, No. 47, p. 126.

grandes. Nous ne pouvons plus déduire de ce que nous savons quelques figures du futur auxquelles nous puissions attacher la moindre créance.¹⁴

14. P. Valéry, *Le Bilan de l'intelligence*, Paris, Editions Allia, 2015 (1936), p. 8.

Written and spoken in the years preceding the Second World War, this analysis is not only applicable to our current situation in 2016, but it also sheds a different light on the post-war era, its architectures, and their theories and history. The period from 1950 to 2000 has been a flowering period for architectural culture, not in the least because of the constant interactions, no matter how polemical or critical, between history, historiography, architectural practice, criticism and theory. It would be naive to think that all these ideas and projects can be simply reactivated in our current era that is more devoid than ever of clear visions, interpretations and battle plans. The questions that continue to emerge from the historical field of post-war architecture will not be answered by history itself. I think therefore historians (or "architectural writers") must be ready to risk, ultimately – and contradicting or rather historicizing Tafuri – a temporary "actuality", if only by showing what used to be possible in the period since 1945, what is no longer possible today, and why. To paraphrase a famous sentence by Koolhaas: more than ever, the 20th century is all we have.

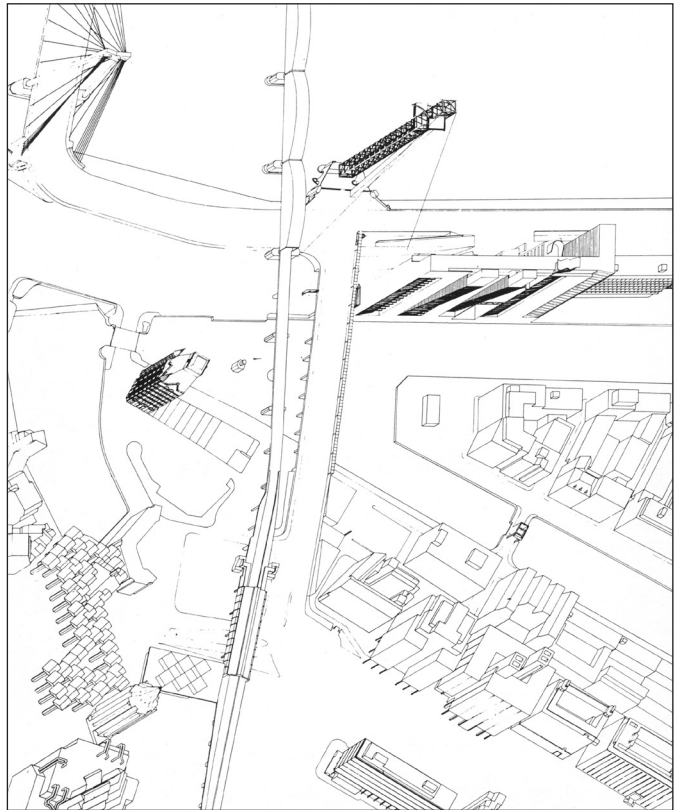


FIG. 2 OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Project for Boompjes in Rotterdam, 1979-81 (© OMA/Rem Koolhaas).