Practical theorization in the digital era

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Abstract

Rem Koolhaas has declared in several occasions, that there have not been real manifests on architecture after “Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture” (R. Venturi, 1966). He claims that the architectural theory has been abandoned by practitioners. In his opinion, theory has been cloistered in Architecture Schools, whereas Architectural Offices tend to stack practice.

This disengagement of practicing architects versus scholarship profiles might be one of the biggest challenges regarding the process of collecting and classifying the current architectural production. Given the changing and unforeseeable nature of this field, it is almost impossible and usefulness trying to create a still-photograph (an anthology) of a certain moment that, in no event, give a complete picture. We might research a way to proceed under these circumstances, resorting to digital mapping tools that can be automatically and constantly updated.

Regarding the segregation among theory and practice, we find specially interesting the case of architects that not only use the theorization but also requires it in order to develop their architectural practice. That is the case of Rem Koolhaas, who retrieves the tradition of pragmatic theorizing, previously developed by great masters such as Le Corbusier. They both have had the ability to create the chronicle of their own story. At the end of his career, Le Corbusier was so conscious of his legacy that he registered everything he did and brought them to his Foundation. (El Croquis nº 134-135, 2007).

Meanwhile, Rem Koolhaas explains that the main reason for creating the “think tank” AMO was to wean their intellectual concerns from the need to build, turning to purely speculative and theoretical experimenting lines. Somehow, they created their own tool to enable the coexistence and interaction of theory and practice. In those cases, the theorization is a tool to escape from the fleetingness of globalization.

Key words: theorization, globalization, architectural practice, digital.
1. End of theory.

In his article “Thinking and Doing” (Content, 2004), Rem Koolhaas makes a curious comparison between the manifestos addressed in the Twentieth Century and the urban development in the World. The analysis of those data lead to very important conclusions. First, the architectural theorization has been developed basically in Europe and North America whereas the most intense and important urban developments of the last years have been undertaken in Asia. Secondly, the researching and theoretical activity has declined radically since 1970, whereas the urban activity has exponentially increased since that date. These two data reflect perfectly the increasing gap between the theoretical and the practical activity in architecture (Fig. 1).

In that same article, Rem Koolhaas declares: “Asia is modernizing at three times the speed of its predecessors. Urbanization doubling every 20-30 years, but Europe and America are no longer thinking – not for themselves, not for others. We export the two most sterile outcomes of the vertical and the horizontal-the skyscraper and the “themed” (often gated) suburb – and witness Asia’s urbanization with cruel smugness. The final chapter of modernization is taking place in an intellectual void partly of our making…”

Rem Koolhaas asserted that “Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture” (Robert Venturi, 1966) was the last manifesto on architecture, and since then, only some referential books have emerged on urban space. He argues that architectural theory has been abandoned. In his opinion, Venturi’s manifesto opened a “space for a possible architecture” beyond the Modern Movement. He made this statement in the context of an interview made by himself and Hans U. Obrist to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, to celebrate the 30 years of the publication of "Learning from Las Vegas" (1972).

In Venturi’s opinion, the Modern Movement stripped the architecture of its communicative essence and had a significant influence on the architecture of the 20th century, which generated a “burnt land” scenario. He considers that, since then, there has been no in-depth reflection on the processes, media and content for which the built environment can issue information to the user, nor on the mental processes that provide information to the image that develops a building, or the implications of such perception in that image’s construction. He concludes that the architecture’s mechanisms of representation have not been explicitly analyzed since the Modern Movement and argues that it is necessary to review that approach, understanding the double condition of architectural communication: the built element and the architectural narrative.
This reflection can be applied to the architectural theorization, whose revitalization went hand in hand with radical post-modern movement and groups (such as Archigram, Superstudio or the Situationists) with a less practical component. Progressively it led to the cloistering of theorization in the Schools of Architecture and to the exacerbation of the gap between practicing architects and scholar profiles.

2. Practical theorization.

At present, there is a clear divergence between theory and practice in architecture. Theorization has been confined in Universities and Schools of Architecture, that have also abandoned the architectural practice or the practical research, in many cases due to a lack of resources. At the same time, studios working in architectural “production”, have not developed the necessary theoretical processes that could support their activity, as they are usually immersed in a frenetic activity and there is not any remaining time for reflection on theoretical subjects.

However, it is possible to find some examples thorough history of architects whose architectural practice relies on an important theoretical background, such as Le Corbusier or Koolhaas himself. He retrieves the tradition of pragmatic theorizing. His design methodology requires theorizing and translating the conclusions into practice. This system includes a systematic recording of every document developed in the process, in an almost compulsive manner.

Le Corbusier is, without a doubt, his predecessor in this invented category of “practical theorization”. Many authors compare Rem Koolhaas’ media talent and ability to make visionary suggestions to Le Corbusier’s. Beatriz Colomina (El Croquis, 2007) describes how, when the Swiss architect realized his own actual significance, he began to record absolutely everything he did, said and produced. If he ever picked up a seashell, that shell would in the Le Corbusier Foundation in Paris.

Fig. 2. Diagram of “The Architecture of publications”, El Croquis Magazine nº 134/135, 2007. Source: El Croquis

However, OMA follows a diametrically opposite pattern. There is an almost compulsive obsession with the production of publications, recording and documentation of processes and ideas, OMA is said to issue a publication per day (Fig. 2). In many cases, it is rather an internal record that helps to assimilate the ideas, while inventorying them. Most part of the office’s work does not reach the client and passes on to the archive, which is constantly revisited in order to bring light into new designs (to address strategies such as “self-recycling”, one of OMA’s favorite design formulas). When comparing the diagrams showed in figures 1 and 2, it is ironic how the period of higher decrease of theorization at a global level, means the period of maximal theoretical intensity of OMA-AMO, especially after the implantation of AMO, as it will be referred further in the text.
OMA’s archive contain more than 10,000 works on paper and more than 3,000 boxes with models, samples and other objects. They were inventoried at the initiative of Aaron Betsky from NAI (National Architecture Institute, Rotterdam), in 2001, when the entity suggested to buy it. Finally, the archive was not sold, but hired the historian who had carried out the inventory, as the Head of Archive. Koolhaas understood that outsourcing these documents meant burying the creativity processes of OMA.

There is where it lies the fundamental difference between Le Corbusier’s and Koolhaas’ strategy in terms of data collection. Le Corbusier had a precise knowledge of every single element that subsequently would shape his legacy, whereas in the case of OMA, there is a deliberate ignorance of the dimension of everything that has been produced.

The exhibition “OMA Book Machine” curated by Brett Steele and Zak Kyes in 2010 at the Architectural Association of Architecture in London, could be understood as a simulation of the magnitude of OMA’s documental legacy. The exhibition showed the work developed by Beatriz Colomina’s students at Princeton University consisting in the creation a mega-book of more than 40,000 pages that gathered most of the books, pamphlets and publications of all kinds that OMA had developed since 1978. The “colossal” result contained all OMA’s conceptual construct, its history and yet it was completely measureless and useless. (Fig. 3) The work showed that it is not enough with having the knowledge, it is important to find a way to address the data managing, especially in the era of big data.

In the authors opinion, Le Corbusier’s Foundation represents a perfect example of “anthology” in the traditional terms, whereas OMA’s non-inventory is closer to the concept of “un-thology”, in the terms explicated in the call of this congress, but exclusively referred to his own work. However, it was also proven that this system does not encourages the knowledge interchange that enables the scientific progress. This kind of experiences show that, now-a-days, it is not enough with having the knowledge, it is important to find a way to address the data managing, especially in the era of big data.

3. AMO: an alternative approach.

In 1999, Dan Wood and Rem Koolhaas decided to establish AMO, as a parallel and independent entity from OMA, that could focus on pure theoretical subjects, regardless a previous commission or any engagement to the conditions of the market. AMO could be engaged in speculative research and pure experimentation, so
that its agenda would be shaped with internal interests in mind, and not external events. Free from the imperative weight of building the architectural object, it is possible to find efficient and accurate solutions, with faster and more flexible means.

OMA's website explains this dichotomy as follows:

"While OMA remains dedicated to the realization of buildings and master plans, AMO operates in areas beyond the traditional boundaries of architecture, including media, politics, sociology, renewable energy, technology, fashion, curating, publishing, and graphic design. AMO often works in parallel with OMA's clients to fertilize architecture with intelligence from this array of disciplines."

Certainly, OMA and AMO are not strangers to each other, they are related and interdependent. In certain occasions, they work in parallel and converge, as in the case of the Prada Foundation projects. AMO usually investigates aspects related to identity, technology, materials and new production possibilities in the world of fashion, whereas OMA works in the architectural design of the new flagship stores for Los Angeles or New York and the Prada Foundation in Milan, applying AMO’s findings.

The appearance of AMO corresponds to a moment of a deep crisis in the office that forced them to undertake profound changes in the structure of OMA and its constitution. This process started with the publication of the book “S.M.L.XL.” (Monacelli Press, 1995), which meant the biggest success in the history of architectural publications. This "almost three-Kg weight silver cobblestone", as defined by Luis Fernández Galiano, led to Koolhaas' massive recognition and has become a fetish object and a reference for anyone involved in architecture, design or publishing.

Koolhaas explained the process in an interview with Jennifer Sigler, editor of the book: "The book ("SMLXL") was published at a moment of serious crisis in our office, so everything that happened since is part of the construction of a new office, the construction of a new way of looking at architecture that culminated in the founding of AMO. AMO doesn’t stand for anything specific, but it could be Architecture Media Organization. OMA and AMO are like siamese twins that were recently separated. We divide the entire field of architecture into two parts: one is actual building, mud, the huge effort of realizing a project; the other is virtual — everything related to concepts and “pure” architectural thinking. The separation enables us to liberate architectural thinking from architectural practice. That inevitably leads to a further questioning of the need for architecture, but now our manner of questioning has changed: first we did it through buildings; now we can do it through intellectual activities parallel to building."

AMO was, at the same time, a determined attempt to open the interest on architectural topics to a wider audience, by addressing the problems that actually matters our society, with no previous commission or requirement needed. There is an in-depth discussion on the future of the discipline of architecture and the figure of the architect. Koolhaas’ proposal is based on the possibility of bypassing the intermediate entities and working directly with the final costumer.


Koolhaas’s concern on the growing polarization between architectural practice and its theorization has been a recurring theme along his career. His previous background as a journalist might be in the origin of his interest in the theoretical foundations of architecture.

Several years previous to the emergence of AMO, and only three years after OMA’s foundation, Rem Koolhaas created Groszstadt Foundation (1978). He considered it as a separate section whose aim was to coordinate cultural activities such as exhibitions and publications. The name was due to the book by Hilberseimer’s “Die Architektur der Groszstadt” (1927), that developed an analogy between the European and the American metropolis.

"There has always been a secret, German affinity running through our work. In a way, ‘Metropolitan Architecture’ is now increasingly a misnomer for what we do. A silly misnomer. We are much more interested in defining what other typologies of city are emerging. Metropolitan is a nostalgic word. It was to avoid that nostalgia that we called our foundation Groszstadt, but perhaps we merely replaced one nostalgia with another."


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The existence of Groszstadt was certainly unknown for most of the members of the past and present OMA staff and it is not a usual fact in his biographies. Koolhaas describes it as follows:

“It was a non-profit device to raise a lot of money. It was run by Donald van Dansik, then a partner. He used it as vehicle to raise money for exhibitions and research. OMA never made any money; we needed funds for our expensive habits of thinking and presenting. AMO has taken over some of the activities but we are thinking of resurrecting it. The name is good, and I think that the intention is important since the influence of the market enters into everything, a nonprofit entity acts like a sign, a shield against the commercial. We are resurrecting it as our ‘critical’ arm.”

Since its foundation, Groszstadt has been dormant but, it has been definitely a precursor to AMO.

“Groszstadt bore AMO. Its resurrection represents a conceptual overhaul of the whole office: we are adding one old thing, Groszstadt, and one new thing, Generics, to OMA and AMO.”

In this sentence, Koolhaas mentions the resurgence of “Groszstadt” and also the creation of a new entity called “Generics”. This new entity has its precedent in the “Patents” section of the publication “Content” (Taschen, 2004). It emerges as a reaction to the icon-strategy that dominated the international scene in the last decade of the Twentieth Century. He describes the situation as follows: “It’s a complicated story, but I am really nauseated by the current over-production of icons, at the expense of all other potentials. I really think the current idolatry of architecture causes an accumulation of bad faith. We have to find a way, short of totally withdrawing, of re-inventing plausibility for architecture, so we have been designing a whole range of unbelievably simple, un-inflected, radically neutral buildings: Generic buildings. They have the same relationship to OMA’s other ‘patented’ work as generic drugs do to brand name drugs.”

AMO frees OMA from the dependence of the global market and “Generics” frees OMA from the need of the permanent form-innovation. It brought to the search of a new sobriety, a “white label” for OMA. The creation of these entities sustains Koolhaas’ concept of theorization based on a permanent link with the architectural practice. He considers both tools as essential for the development of the discipline, with the implicit interaction between them.

5. What’s next?

We can conclude that AMO’s first achievement is to insert the theorization in the communication strategy. A deep analysis of this strategy and its information’s management, has allowed us to extrapolate it to the state of the art in research and design, beyond the figure of Rem Koolhaas. This subject is playing a decisive role in the current development of architecture, with a growing influence in the initial stages of the project or the theoretical developments. It allowed us to determine that there is a deeply positive confluence and feedback between both disciplines: architecture and architectural investigation. The inclusion of the record (and not only as its completion) as part of both the design process and the researching process, allows an exponential growth of experimentation and creativity in both disciplines and enables the positive data interchange.

It could also enable the creation of a global data base that could take advantage of the advances developed around big data mapping. The kind of data interchanging we might be proposing shares most of the challenges surrounding big data, such as: capturing data, data storage, data analysis, search, sharing, transfer, querying, updating and information privacy. As it is well known, specialist consider five dimensions when speaking about big data: Volume, Variety, Velocity, Veracity and Value. Regarding the subject considered, the authors might include Visualization. The possibility of having a spatial comprehension of the data allows the researcher to answer questions and ask new ones.

There is a very interesting research project developed by The Social Computing Group at MIT Media Lab (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), called “You are Here” (Fig. 4) The group is an interdisciplinary laboratory consisting of computer scientists, mathematicians, artists, architects, designers, and educators. Their goal is to map 100 different cities around the world. As they define the project “each map gives a collective portrait of one aspect of life in the city and is designed to give communities meaningful micro-suggestions of what they might do to improve their city. The interplay between the visualizations and the community work they induce creates a collective, dynamic, urban-scale project”.

The research integrates techniques in data mining and visualization to connect people with information, social computational techniques to connect people with one another, and cultural and artistic techniques to help unlock their human potential. The authors consider that this kind of initiatives that link a graphic process
with the data collection, would help provide a useful data base, focused on concepts and not authors, or institutions.

The authors propose to create a parallelism between the management of information regarding the city that allows us to map these big data, with the management of the information generated by research. In the digital era the access to multiple data is instant, but the problem is how to determine the accuracy. Besides, the management of Big Data, whose scope is still far from being understood, has decisively influenced the manner in which we must present the information. The authors consider that a graphic mapping of the information might be a prospective solution.

Thorough this text, the authors have declared the end of theorization as a pure and isolated discipline, the need for a theoretical-practicing or a practical-theorization in order to guarantee the continuity of the disciple and have shown the strategies followed by figures such as Le Corbusier of Rem Koolhaas to address this issue. But it is necessary to go one step further: to create a system that enables the instant interchange of knowledge breaking the barriers of bureaucracy and the oligarchy of scientific journals. This fact would mean the equivalency to a “white label” of scholar research: a “generic” research where names and entities wouldn’t necessary indicate quality by themselves and excellence would be accomplished and guaranteed by the automatic data corroboration of a global “digit-ology”

Bruce Mau has explained that “every new social condition demands and creates new visual forms for expressing the new ideas. The new forms of expression then generate new ideas and social organizations. This process where new ideas invent new visual languages and new visual languages invent new ideas is always happening in architectural and urban thinking”.

The authors consider that the concept of “digit-ology” that is being posed must come together with a new visual language that strengthen the topics addressed. The communicative strategy would be fundamental not only regarding the interface of a possible operating system for the data-sharing, but also as an essential tool of research, especially when facing topics related to architecture.

Gregory Bateson suggests in “Steps to an Ecology of Mind” that the essence of communication is the creation of redundancy or an apprehended pattern that adds a degree of predictability to the message. Therefore, the goal is no to decode a message through a language, but he suggests that the representation consists in the creation of a context that is capable of generating partial and fragmented interpretations that expand the object’s perspective. In other words, the creation of a specific graphic language that codified the data collected would improve its interchanging capability in an exponential way. The confluence of these two concepts would provide an enhanced view of the discipline and would allow to revisit its past from an
additive view, generating multiple visions of what is already known and implementing architectural research creative possibilities.

The concept of “visualization” information leads us once again to Rem Koolhaas. As it is well known, he is one of the biggest communicators of our time; his figure and his influence goes beyond the purely architectural atmosphere. In his studio OMA-AMO, the representation of architecture has plunged into the creative process, both practical or theoretical. The communicative strategy acquires the same importance as the message that is intended to convey, because it has the potential to strengthen it and even transform it. This is what Rem Koolhaas called “information design”. There is a “bijective exchange”: Communication-Design. It generates an exchange of variables, an intellectual permutation that benefits both parameters, indistinctly (Fig. 5).

Therefore, as our perception of reality is based on its representation, that means that information and visibility are a whole. That leads to the necessary convergence between the story to be told and the way to do it, between the concept and the communicative strategy. The convergence of these two concepts encourages the progress in new approaches that provide an augmented vision of the data displayed and allow revisiting what we already know from an additional perspective, generating alternative visions of reality and implementing the creative possibilities of the subject of study.

In conclusion, there are two possible lines of research that might collude: the transposition of research data into big data mapping, and the graphic treatment given to this mapping in order to encourage the maximal interchange of knowledge and future advances on the discipline.

It might also enable the criticism around the discipline, which is something that in the digital world is lacking in recent years, where the norm is to find accurate description of processes but not so many critical perspectives. Rem Koolhaas himself introduces irony and humor as an indispensable part of his work, and critic as a design and research tool. He understands architecture strongly linked to criticism. His deep knowledge of architectural communication, his control of media and timing allows him to send strong messages voluntary using hyperbole and controversy to generate reverberance. In this sense, even the accuracy of the message, might not be the most relevant issue, but the wide amount of prospective possibilities that it opens. He brings a completely new perspective on any topic he is analyzing, introducing multiple readings and generating debate and discussion, which is the way to encourage evolution in science and any other experimental field.
Notes

3. Aaron Betsky is an American critic and curator. Director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam, the Netherland, from 2001 to 2006.
4. Brett Steele is Director of the “Architectural Association School of Architecture”, London UK.
6. Karl Ludwig Hilberseimer (Karlsruhe, 1885-Chicago, 1967) is German architect, who initially belonged to expressionism. He taught at Bauhaus and at IIT (Illinois Institute of Technology) in Chicago, under the direction of Mies van der Rohe. In 1927 he wrote “Die Architektur der Großstadt”, a book aimed at making a diagnosis of the architecture of his time in order to reach the new conditions for such architecture, developing projects that showcased truly radical cities.
7. Ibid 2
8. Ibid 7
9. Ibid 8
11. Sep Kamvar. “You are here”. MIT.

Image Captions

Fig. 1. Diagram on urbanization vs theorization. “Thinking architecture”, Content, 2004. Source: OMA-AMO
Fig. 2. Diagram of “The Architecture of publications”, El Croquis Magazine nº 134/135, 2007. Source: El Croquis
Fig. 3. OMA Book Machine Exhibition at AA Gallery, 8th may- 4th june, 2010. Source: Architectural Association
Fig. 4. Project “You Are Here project”. The Social Computing Group + MIT Media Lab + MIT. Source: MIT
Fig. 5. Article “An Autopsy”. Content, Ed. Taschen, 2004. Source: OMA-AMO

References

Biography

Belén Butragueño PhD in Architecture at the Polytechnic University of Madrid, ETS of Architecture (2015, International Mention, Degree with Honors, Extraordinary Doctorate Award ETSAM, UPM), Diploma in Architecture (Professional MArch Degree) at that University (2002, Outstanding). Associate Professor at Graphic Architectural Ideation Department, ETSAM, UPM, since 2007 and at IE Architecture (Segovia) since 2003. UPM License in research and teaching at Woodbury University (LA, California, 2017-18). She began her professional activity at MVRDV (Rotterdam, 2002), through a Leonardo European Grant. She has collaborated with prestigious architectural offices such as SMAO, PO2 or Soriano&Co. Since 2007 she works in the configuration of think tank called B2bConcept, conceived as an experimental laboratory in the field of architecture and urban activism. As a researcher, she works on the analysis of the different processes of communication and expression in Architecture. She is the author of several referential articles in that field.

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Mariasun Salgado PhD in Architecture at the Polytechnic University of Madrid, ETS of Architecture (2004), Diploma in Architecture (Professional MArch Degree) at the same University (1995). Currently works as a Associate Professor at the Graphic Architectural ideation Department, ETSAM, UPM. Her research lines are: Review of the relationship of the architecture with new media (cinema, video, art) and new technologies; review of the new communication modes applied to the architectural drawing. Hybridizations of the graphic language applied to architecture; teaching of the drawing in the field of Architecture's teaching. She is the author of several educational books and numerous articles related to her research lines. Professionally, she combines architecture practice with creation of graphical art works and participates regularly in architecture competitions in which she obtained several prizes. The production of her graphical works is characterized by the representation of the conflicts which are generated between architecture and its environments.