

Architectural Anthropology as an Omission in Architectural Theory

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From the beginning, architectural theory has shown difficulties to deal with the sphere of knowledge that is occupied, both in method and content, by so-called architectural anthropology. In my view, the emergence of architectural anthropology itself can be understood as an outcome of a conceptual omission in architectural theory — this is the central thesis of this paper. To support this thesis, I will, in a first step, recall the historiographical self-understanding of architectural theory; in a second step, I will sketch the early field of architectural anthropological research in order to name forms of differentiation of this field. Finally, I will explain what can be described as the real achievement of architectural anthropology: Beyond its occupation with the material culture of popular architecture, it is a field-research practice through which empirical methods have entered into architectural research.

I. "Criticism" or "Research"?

Architectural theory is today largely congruent with architectural historiography and draws its raw material from this history when it brings itself to theoretical trains of thought. One can explain this primacy of the historical in the formation of theory in architecture since the early 1960s with reference to both theoretical reasons and reasons to do with how architectural history is written. In addition to the general significance of a Marxist philosophy of history, it is the relevance of a novel memorial conceptualism as exemplified by Aldo Rossi's *L'architettura della città*. In Manfredo Tafuri these two currents were reflected in their interdependency and raised to a new theoretical level. In his preface to *progetto e utopia* (1973), Tafuri speaks of the “examination of the history of modern architecture with the methodological instruments of a strictly Marxist critique of ideology”¹, with which he sought to draw attention to the crossover of the theory of history and the history of architecture.

(Tafuri, it is known, regarded synchronous analysis as being second-rank to historical analysis, as H el ene Lipstadt and Harvey Mendelsohn have pointed out.²)

Concurrent with the comprehensive appreciation of the historical, comparative and empirical approaches had also been tested in the new field of architectural theory, without, however, ever properly entering into the repertoire of architectural theory. As late as 1980, the German architectural historian Jan Pieper spoke of an “anthropological approach to architectural theory.”³ In the late 1960s he was part of an informal network of architects who had been conducting research in different countries in Asia. In his essay “An outline of architectural anthropology in relation to the general history and theory of architecture” he addresses the then-novel architecture-anthropological research and the still completely unresolved relations to the project of a theory and history of architecture. Reading his essay today, it is remarkable that he puts architectural anthropology in an explicit, informatory relation to architectural theory. Pieper describes “architectural anthropology as the methodological counterpart to architectural history”.⁴ “Historical understanding alone can never be the sole purpose of architectural research”; an insight not least indebted to the extra-European contexts where this research was conducted.⁵ Pieper points, certainly referring to considerations by Manfredo Tafuri, to “the scholarly and the programmatic aspects of architectural theory”⁶ and emphasises its fundamental ambivalence: “This dual aspect of architectural theory created some confusion as it fostered a frequent change in the plane of reflection; and this was not favourable to a substantial and methodologically convincing contribution to either part of the problem.”⁷ Where architectural theory is (all too often indistinguishably) both programmatically and scholarly formulated — just think of *Learning from Las Vegas* of 1972 — architectural anthropology has to react with a decided scholarly approach to the empirical research practice: “Architectural Anthropology does not speculate”⁸, as Pieper claims it in his essay.

Correspondingly, in Pieper's writing, the figure of the *critic* is replaced by that of the *researcher*, who is not primarily concerned with a (critical) appraisal of European post-war modernism and its historical foundations, but rather — in light of the Indian, Nepalese and Japanese research-environments — has to develop heuristics which resemble those of the ethnologist. While with Tafuri, the function of architectural theory emerges from a role-play as historian-architect⁹, with the inclusion of architectural anthropological questions another option is added: the role-play as an

ethnographer-architect. *Historiography* is methodologically supplemented by *ethnography*; Tafuri's project of a *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* is expanded by Bernard Rudowsky's programmatic display of an *Architecture without Architects*.

II. Constitution of the field

The beginnings of an intellectual field of architectural anthropology in the present sense can be found in the first half of the 1960s;¹⁰ in this period, architectural anthropology appears as a (cross-cultural) comparative research interest shared by a number of architects of different background. As Günter Nitschke later wrote: "At that time few Western architects worked in India, Nepal and Japan, all struggling in their research to define a new anthropological field of human inquiry. The discourse in this field was initiated by, and centred around, the work of Niels Gutschow, Gerd Auer and Jan Pieper in India and Nepal; two Swiss researchers, Gaudenz Domenig and Nold Egenter; and two German researchers, Manfred Speidel and myself in Japan. An English architect, Chris Fawcett and a Canadian, Fred Thompson contributed to the same studies concerning Japan in their own way. We met informally, occasionally, often accidentally."¹¹

The beginnings of anthropological research in architecture can be described by the emergence of empiricism-assisted investigations. The focus of the interest of these young architects was the adequate description of what was seen on site. In the words of Manfred Speidel: "As a 'student' of Takamasa Yoshizaka, who was himself a student of Kon Wajiro, I did 'field research' all the time and everywhere."¹² The research work in the villages and cities they visited did alternate with their participation in international architectural competitions. Since the end of the 1960s, the first research reports appeared that were based on fieldwork (including extensive building surveys) and affiliated with research in the social sciences. The precise empirical study of the built environment and its use should provide a basis for contemporary architecture and city planning. Significant differences were found in the urban, as well as the constructional scales at which the respective studies operated. While the German architects devoted themselves in particular to investigations of whole cities, the Swiss architects mentioned show a greater interest in constructional-architectural questions and traditional building practices in religious contexts. The particular feature of all these investigations was the cultivation of a researcher's

perspective *as an architect*. What Eduard F. Sekler stated in 1982 about the ethnographical working methods of Niels Gutschow could also be said about the other representatives of comparative architectural research at that time. "Niels Gutschow has approached the exploration of his theme from the point of view of an architect for whom architecture and anthropology are inextricably linked and for which drawing as a means of working and expression remains irreplaceable. He thus stands in a venerable tradition that reaches back to men like Gottfried Semper and William Lethaby".¹³

The territories of early architectural anthropological research are characterised by a high degree of architectural diversity. Over the centuries, groups of people developed specific architectural approaches that distinguish them from neighbouring groups and indicate their ethnic affiliation. In her book *Architecture in Northern Ghana* Labelle Prussin reports from six villages of six different ethnic groups in northern Ghana: from Kasuliyili, a Dagomba village; from Yankezia, a Concomba hamlet; from Tongo, a settlement of Tallensi; from Sekai, an Isala village; from Larabanga, a Gonj village as well as from Birufu, a LoWiili settlement. Gaudenz Domenig, on the other hand, reports in *Tektonik im primitiven Dachbau* on the Batak groups of North-Sumatra (Indonesia), the Karo, Toba, Simelungen and Pakpak. The architectural comparison makes the ethnic differences between these groups visible, which explains its central methodological significance for anthropological research on architecture. Labelle Prussin described the parallelism between ethnic and architectural differences in the north of Ghana as a means of conveying the regional character of cultural diversity. "Each of these peoples [...] is territorially distinct, linguistically discrete, and internally cohesive. The distinctiveness is expressed architecturally in building form and surface decoration. As the casual observer crosses over ethnic boundaries, he can identify each of the peoples by architectural nuances, even though he may be completely uninformed about them."¹⁴

III. Semantic battles

Only a precise analysis of the different intellectual biographies of the participating protagonists can reveal the difficulties of bringing anthropological research conducted by architects into the architectural theoretical reflection taking place in the world's universities. In a Swiss context, it was first of all the art historians who opposed an

architect-driven, empirically grounded architectural theory in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁵ In personal talks that I conducted with protagonists of an early architectural anthropology, there was mention of rejection and blocked dissertation projects. It must be borne in mind that the art historical mould of the "Institutes for History and Theory" in the architectural schools of this world was, in the 1970s and 1980s, not a foregone conclusion. Rather, the orientation of these institutes in their content and methods should be seen (as Reinhart Koselleck coined it) in terms of "semantic battles" (semantische Kämpfe); what was contested was the scope of architectural theory and how it should be conducted. Jan Pieper, for example, managed to establish himself as conventional architectural historian and to pursue his anthropological interests under the cloak of historiography. The empirical impetus of anthropological research in architecture, shaped by the construction knowledge of the architect, was a recurring challenge to an architectural theory that was still barely consolidated in the 1980s. As we now know, anthropological research in architecture has not been absorbed by architectural theory; on the contrary, there has been an independent differentiation of the field (as architectural anthropology). I would like to mention four aspects of this differentiation with all necessary brevity.

1) *Private Initiatives*: As early as 1969 to 1972, Nitschke, Domenig and Speidel made the first, though unsuccessful, attempts to institutionalise the emerging research interest. To this end, detailed conceptual outlines and partly funding applications were drafted. This led to the foundation of the "Institute for the Anthropology of Building" in Kyoto, Japan, with Nitschke and Speidel as founding members.¹⁶ Nold Egenter, on the other hand, also attempted to provide wider recognition for his own research interests with the establishment of his own institution (since 1979), the "Documentation Office for Fundamental Studies in Building Theory" (Zurich) and in the founding of a publishing house "Structura Mundi" (Lausanne). Such one-man research ventures were the product of a far-reaching institutional disregard for their research interests. Those who engaged themselves in the field without a permanent employment at a university were forced to finance their research with temporary assignments, lecturing, occasional support by research foundations, and private funds.

2) *Concepts of Science*: Whereas the comparative architectural research in the German-speaking world since the 1960s aimed at a disciplinarily defined identity under the rubric of *Architektur-Anthropologie*, the comparative architectural research in the Anglo-Saxon world pragmatically established itself on the basis of a common research topic

named *Vernacular Architecture*. Amos Rapoport rightly remarked in 2001 that the disciplinary project of an architectural anthropology originated "from the non-English-speaking world".¹⁷ Architectural anthropology and vernacular architecture stand for two different developments founded on the different academic traditions of the respective linguistic domains. The Mexican ethnologist Mari-Jose Amerlinck speaks of a dominant "empiro-positivism" in the Anglo-Saxon world and a predominant "phenomenology" in the German-speaking world.¹⁸ However, with significant works by Labelle Prussin (*Architecture in Northern Ghana*), Amos Rapoport (*House, Form and Culture*), and Paul Oliver (*Shelter and Society*), all published in 1969, the year should be understood as being seminal to the foundation of both architectural anthropology and of vernacular architecture research.

3) *French Connection*: Between 1981 and 1993 a first institutionalisation took place in Paris in the form of regular meetings of the "Laboratoire architecture / anthropologie". The meetings led to the establishment of a first international network of architectural anthropology, the "Réseau de la recherche architecturale Architecture / Anthropologie" at the Ecole d'architecture de Paris-La Villette. In particular, its aim was to counter the Euro-centrism and the "reductionism" of contemporary "architectural theory" with a more in-depth knowledge of cultural sciences.¹⁹

4) *Architects and Anthropologists*: Meanwhile architectural anthropology is (in contrast to its beginnings) an interdisciplinary research-field of architects *and* ethnologists. Over the last 20 years, an increasing interweaving has taken place between architectural anthropology, vernacular architecture research and a revived material culture research in ethnology. At the beginning of this convergence were the *Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, edited by Paul Oliver in 1997, and the volume *Architectural Anthropology*, edited by Mari-Jose Amerlinck in 2001. The most promising development of architectural anthropological research is today known as *Design Anthropology*, in which both the conception and production of architecture are brought into view.

IV. Architectural theory, ethnographically informed

At large, one can speak of a historically parallel genesis of architectural theory and architectural anthropology. Possibilities for the cultivation of an ethnographically

informed architectural theory would certainly have existed. However, an integration of the aforementioned four architectural anthropological research fields into the architectural theoretical reflection did not take place — it would have represented a radical challenge to the historiographical self-understanding of the architectural theorist, as mapped out in the 1960s by Tafuri and others. — With his investigations, inspired by a Marxist philosophy of history, Tafuri ultimately played into the hands of the educated historians, even though the masquerade of the *architect as historian* has become a widespread phenomenon. — However, for a globally oriented architectural theory, which takes on the contemporary spatial phenomena of the world, the historiographical approaches (coined by European archives) proved themselves insufficient.²⁰ In particular, the progressive planetary urbanisation and informalisation pose enormous challenges for architectural theoretical reflection today.²¹

Although the *postcolonial turn* in architectural theory points in the right direction, it has been too little understood that the study of forms of appropriation in colonial architecture includes contemporary phenomena and thus methods of field research, thereby overstepping the horizon of the historiographical. It is precisely today's globally oriented architectural theory, which deals with questions of the transfer of culture and technology, that is dependent on analytical forms that combine diachronic and synchronic, historiographical and ethnographic research methods.

¹ Tafuri, Manfredo (1977 (1973)), *Kapitalismus und Architektur. Von Corbusiers "Utopia" zur Trabantenstadt, Hamburg West Berlin*.

² "Structuralism, while useful for its scientificity, is, for the critic, inferior to historicity." Hélène Lipstadt and Harvey Mendelsohn (1993), *Philosophy, History, and Autobiography: Manfredo Tafuri and the "Unsurpassed Lesson" of Le Corbusier*, in *Assemblage*, No. 22 (Dec.), pp. 58-103. The MIT Press, p. 64.

³ Pieper, Jan (1980), *An outline of architectural anthropology in relation to the general history and theory of architecture*, in *art and archaeology research papers*, March, Vol. 117, London, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ "Tafuri accused his critics, Zevi and Portuguese, as performing "operative" (or instrumental) architectural criticism, i.e., using their agendas as practicing architects to frame the history of architecture, anathema to his own "critical" position. He instead suggested that architectural criticism and history should be considered the same thing, and that practicing architects abandon criticism. The controversy distilled to the means by which architectural historians could positively affect the work of architects." <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/tafurim.htm> (Jan. 5, 2017)

¹⁰ This section is based on my book *Weltkonstruktion* (Gebr. Mann Verlag, Berlin 2013).

¹¹ Nitschke, Günter (1993), *From Shinto to Ando – Studies in Architectural Anthropology*, London Berlin, S. 7. As Gaudenz Domenig, one of the protagonists mentioned here, emphasized in a private correspondence, there was a loose network of architects with common interests, rather than an integrated group. "Wenn Nitschke schreibt 'We met informally, occasionally, often accidentally', so kann er nur meinen, dass er selbst die dort genannten Personen kannte und einzeln ab und zu getroffen hat, denn das war keine Gruppe, die je zusammenkommen wäre. Nur Günter kannte alle Aufgelisteten. Einige kannten wohl neben ihm auch noch zwei oder drei weitere aus der Liste, doch ein gemeinsames Treffen gab es sicher nie." Private correspondence, December 18, 2016.

¹² Manfred Speidel, private communication, January 18, 2017.

¹³ Sekler, Eduard F. (1982), in Gutschow, Niels: *Stadttraum und Ritual der newarischen Städte im Kathmandu-Tal – Eine architekturanthropologische Untersuchung*, Stuttgart, p. 6.

¹⁴ Prussin, Labelle (1969), *Architecture in Northern Ghana – A Study of Forms and Functions*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, p. 16.

¹⁵ Early representatives at the gta of ETH Zurich have been Adolf Max Vogt, Paul Hofer, and Werner Oechslin.

¹⁶ Domenig was never a member of the Institute because his independent research was in those years funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Gaudenz Domenig, private communication, December 20, 2016).

¹⁷ Amerlinck, Mari-Jose (Ed.): *Architectural Anthropology*, London 2001, p. 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁹ Le LA/A vise également à contribuer à la construction d'un nouveau champ, l'anthropologie de l'espace, qui doit permettre d'échapper aux divers "réductionnismes" qui guettent les théories architecturales." <http://www.archi.fr/RECHERCHE/annuaireg/pdf/LAA.pdf>, p. 4 (Dec. 28, 2016)

²⁰ Neither the entry in the *Sage Handbook of architectural theory* on "Concepts of Vernacular Architecture" has changed this finding. See: Brown, Robert / Maudli, Daniel (2012), *Concepts of Vernacular Architecture*, in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, edited by: C. Greig Crysler, Stephen Cairns & Hilde Heynen.

²¹ See: Roesler, Sascha (2015), *Habitat Marocain Documents. Dynamics between Formal and Informal Housing*, Zurich.