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The Conditional Autonomy of Tafuri’s Historian

The education and functions of the historian in architectural culture has been subject to renewed attention in recent years, sparking a sustained and fervent discussion since the late 1990s, with echoes of the 1960s debate on disciplinarity, ‘technique’ and discourse that pervaded the architectural sciences. The renewed importance of Manfredo Tafuri’s writing in testing the limits of those disciplines thought of as ‘architectural’ is hardly coincidental in light of this development. Part of the phenomenon of his return is undoubtedly generational, his presence revisited by younger scholars upon the senior stratum of architecture’s intelligentsia who had comprised his first audience, at home in Italy or at a geographical and linguistic remove. The terms of current, second degree, readings of his contribution to the architectural discourse have largely remained entrenched, though, in the terms of his initial reception. A problematic rhetoric surrounding Tafuri’s reception undermines his real utility to our present discursive moment. His potential contribution lies less with any answers that his writing might contain, than in his clear articulation of a series of positions proper to critico-historical practice in architectural culture, informing the critic’s or the historian’s relationships with architects. His concern with the interactions of these two abstract disciplinary figures (architect and historian) pervades his written œuvre, which in turn is more than a little concerned with an ethics of historical representation and with the architect’s historiographical encounters.

While Tafuri is a notoriously difficult figure on whom to reach any kind of critical consensus, the broader issue changes if we identify his preoccupation with the implications of historical practice to architectural culture rather than considering him an architectural theoretician. His books, articles, encyclopaedia entries, exhibitions and scientific articles are neither the fruit of a historian unconscious of the contentiousness of the limits of his practice, nor the theoretical production of a critic whose observations programatically correspond to new, though unrealised, forms of architecture.

Francesco Paolo Fiore, with whom Tafuri curated Francesco di Giorgio architetto (1993), advocated viewing his historical practice as an elaborate case for the disciplinary autonomy of architectural history. Fiore’s point works to an extent, but fails to acknowledge the implications of Tafuri’s demand for an integral knowledge of the architect’s discipline. Tafuri’s historian has the capacity to be complicit with architectural work, and by extension with architectural theory, but maintains a critical distance in order to pursue different tasks, as he writes in Teorie estoria dell’architettura (1968). In constructing, therein, an abstract
and idealised disciplinary scheme, he argues that historians and architects do not possess different types of technical knowledge pertaining to architecture. Rather, historians chose to approach the material of their practice with different goals in view; this in turn shapes the nature of their practice.

The capacity for historians and architects to engage in conversation, simply put, lies in the construction of their shared 'territory'. It seems redundant to point out that both architectural historians and architects are interested in architecture, yet their coexistence within the same culture is predicated on their capacity for fruitful interactions between these two figures. There are two bases for their exchange: (a) they both occupy a present moment, neither past (the terrain of history) nor the future (that of the architect); and (b) they both invest heavily in architecture's history (though to different ends).

Tafuri identifies architecture's artistic emancipation in the Renaissance with a capacity to intellectualise and rationalise history as a representation hinting directions for the future. The operation of platonic ideals in architectural theory, for instance, guiding a quest for a pure classical order from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, relies heavily on an idea that history contains evidence of a recoverable truth regarding architectural form pursued by architects. This conflation of an artistic and an intellectual project comprises a selective appreciation of the past informed by a relationship between past and future rather than present and future. The historian, argues Tafuri, eschews the construction of images that inform the future; rather, he occupies the position of provocateur, undermining the historical images upon which architectural theory and thus architectural practice proceed. The provisionality of either the uses made by architects of historical images, or the disruptive nature of historical material that acts as a catalyst for the deconstruction of historical images, renders the kind of exchanges that may possibly occur between architects and historians necessary in perpetuity.

Tafuri's ideas about the way that historians and architects can interact rely upon several contentious points. Firstly, his construction of the historian as an insider to architectural culture who is specifically not an architect owes a great deal to his own attempt to institutionalise the conditions under which Tafuri himself stepped forward as a historian. The elevation and enlargement of his Istituto di storia dell'architettura to a full dipartimento of the Istituto universitario di architettura di Venezia in the 1970s under Carlo Aymonino's dean-ship broadly undermined the radical position of Tafuri and his colleagues from 1968 until 1976 relative to the rest of IUAV. As Jean-Louis Cohen has noted, his own attempts to contest this figure as a force in architectural culture largely failed during his lifetime.

Secondly, the impossibility of operating within a pure disciplinary stance means that the figures we draw from his scheme are only ever, at best, provisional. This is clear from his identification of such 'historiographical' exemplars as Borromini, Piranesi or Scarpa; or of such 'architectural' (read 'operative') intellectuals-historians as Alberti, Bellori, Giedion, Zevi and Portoghesi. The kind of communication about which we write can therefore be
enacted within an individual whose complex take on architecture’s relationship to the past can nonetheless inform a production concerned with the future. His high opinion of Scarpa as a maestro of modern architecture comes from precisely this kind of observation of his practice.\(^\text{11}\)

Thirdly, it presupposes that historians require a technical knowledge of architecture equivalent to that of professionally trained architects. However, he observed in 1992 that one of the frayed threads of architectural education was the student’s inability to understand his or her precedents – quite literally, the art of building comprised an obstacle to the effect of exposing historical knowledge in the present.\(^\text{12}\) In contrast, he praises the knowledge of such scholars as Joseph Connors or Christoph Frommel, who maintain an extremely competent grasp of the technical knowledge proper to architects of the past, as if their knowledge was equivalent with those same architects, while coming to architecture from the ‘foreign’ disciplines of (respectively) literature and art history.\(^\text{13}\)

We are not, then, proposing that Tafuri offers a permanent answer to the problem of communicability between the positions pegged out historically and contemporaneously by historians and architects. However, insofar as he describes distinct actors in architectural culture, whose places on the stage implicate specific disciplinary agendas, he demonstrates the need to articulate terms of interaction that are bound up in the ethics of publication and architectural production. Within this, Tafuri argues the historian’s point of view; from his uncompromised position, he elaborates the challenges of being an architectural historian within an architectural culture principally concerned with production from a clear ‘disciplinary’ scheme against which other figures come under our scrutiny. Understanding his theoretical preoccupation as being with history and its practice rather than with architecture and its practice quickly renders his entire bibliography significantly more coherent than previous analyses have allowed. How does it inform our understanding of the specific dimensions that call for the historian’s interjection? In what terms, we ask of Tafuri, can historians and architects fruitfully enact on intellectual or disciplinary exchange? And to what ends?

In light of these questions, we can point towards three historiographical themes that pervade Tafuri’s practice that bear directly upon our present debates: ideology, memory and representation. In many respects they implicate a constant dialectic of historical practice, between homogeneity and heterogeneity. They equally reference an interplay between closed and open analyses, between completion and conclusion as states of historical enquiry.

**Ideology**

In his short essay ‘Architettura e ideologia’ (1969), Tafuri advances two postulates underpinning the figure of the classical ideologue of the fifteenth century Florentine Renaissance: the identification of Reason and Nature, one inextricable from the other; and the positioning of the ‘classical’ as a more perfect Nature.\(^\text{14}\) Tafuri regards Brunelleschi as the first architect to declare architecture as an object in the city that intellectualises

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\(^\text{12}\) Manfredo Tafuri, ‘History as Project,’ ANY, ‘Being Manfredo Tafuri,’ edited by Ignasi de Solà Morais (nos. 25-26, 1999), 64. This source is an oral history conducted with Tafuri by Luisa Passerini in 1992.

\(^\text{13}\) Manfredo Tafuri, ‘History as Project,’ op. cit., 64.

the city as something other than architecture, a field in which the architectural object is figure. The key to this differentiation is the translation into architectonic terms of Alberti’s theory of perspectival space. In the intermezzo between *De pictura* (1435) and *De re aedificatoria* (1452), architecture emerges as an art predicated on the capacity to apply a ‘superhistorical’ idea to a context. For Tafuri, the Brunelleschian architectural object belongs not to the city, but to a discourse on architecture, framed and advancing a new device: architectural theory in general, and a classical theory of architecture in particular. This development introduces an ideological dimension to architectural culture because it intervenes in the secular bourgeois city in order to modify it according to a perceived lesson from the past constructed along the lines of the religio-cultural and political forces of the present. Brunelleschi’s ‘architectural ideology’ operates as a distancing device keeping the reality of the city from intellectual work concerned with architecture. His architecture constitutes a ‘civil proposal’ justified by historical abstraction.15

Tafuri reasons thus: the artificial differentiation of architecture from the city through a discursive device that ‘emancipates’ the architectural object on specifically architectural terms relies heavily on a selective and programmatic reading of the past that imbues the object with (historical) values different to its context.

The ‘eclipse’ of history that Tafuri describes in the first chapter of *Teorie e storia* extends this development from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries. The rise of architectural theory as an ordering mechanism for architecture, which constructs and defends the borders of its discourse (and thus its capacity for disciplinarity), removes architecture more and more from being able to experience the past except as an abstraction. Tafuri readily admits that any ‘experience’ of history is shaped by values of the present, but the persistent expunging of any past beyond the ‘classical’, recovered by reading Vitruvius and codified by Alberti, is carried out according to an architectural ideology. It is therefore subject to specific values, justified on disciplinary (and not extradisciplinary) grounds. Even the naturalist rejection of the classical in favour of the rustic origins of architecture from the sixteenth century is not an attempt to set aside an architectural ideology in favour of a direct engagement with the past, albeit one shaped by civil, religious, economic, etcetera, dimensions in the present. It is an alternative, internalised architectural debate, equally removed from conditions of the real world. He identifies, in a well-rehearsed lineage from Michelangelo to Borromini to Piranesi, the capacity to undermine the classical tradition in order to ‘recall’ canons beyond the limits of the dominant lines of architectural theory. In locating the capacity of these figures to return architecture to its ‘historical’ disciplinary and artistic contexts through an experience of science, mathematics or philosophy, he also points towards strategies for the critique of architectural ideology latent in architectural practice.

The lesson of Tafuri’s famous essay ‘Per una critica dell’ideologia architettonica’ (1969) thus takes on a specifically historiographical hew: if architectural theory as an ideology acts to divorce architecture from a direct experience of context.
(or the past), then a critique of architectural ideology (taking theory as target) exposes the artificiality of that condition as a lesson to architectural practice. This constitutes one of the ‘tasks’ for history that Tafuri elaborates in Teorie e storia, contingent upon the capacity for communication between architects and historians.

**Memory**

The specific challenge posed by the differentiation of architecture from ‘city’, as enacted (argues Tafuri) by Brunelleschi, is that each subsequent generation regards the primary ideological act – the intellectual choice to emancipate the architectural object and the architect as artist – less and less as a choice based on values and a specific setting and increasingly as a natural dimension of the contemporary architect’s disciplinary heritage. His equivocation of ‘mental health’ and an experience of the past unmediated by ideology quickly lent itself to the metaphor of historian as psychoanalyst, even if in very specific and selective terms. Several points lend weight to this observation. For instance, in ‘Il “progetto storico”’ (1977), Tafuri observes that historians, in exercising a ‘critique of architectural ideology’, also reverse the collective suppression of memories. Also, he suggests that the unresolved recollection is a vital element in the confrontation of memorial suppression. Finally, he indicates a model of historical practice bound up in Freud’s own prescribed method.

We can readily locate the epistemological consequences of this equation in this same essay, wherein Tafuri looks closely at Freud’s seminal essay ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’ (1937). Freud, Tafuri notes, argues that complete ‘health’ is theoretically attainable, but impossible in pragmatic terms. Psychoanalysis forces a self-confrontation with repressed memories in order to free the analysand and to enjoy a less burdened life in the present. Likewise, an architectural experience of the past, unmediated by a disciplinary ideology in the form of architectural theory, is hypothetically feasible under the conditions that Tafuri lays out for historical practice, yet the historian must acknowledge that, as a ‘project’, it will remain ‘inconclusive’. This leads us to the distinction between ‘completion’ and ‘incompletion’ that holds the same meaning for both Tafuri and Freud: one may finish a historical analysis by publishing an essay or a book, or opening an exhibition, but that comprises a decision, and is not an inherent state of the analysis. The publication of a project is a choice made by the historian, reflective of a balance between the historian’s tools and tasks with respect of the architect as audience.

In being underpinned by a representation of the past (as history) that suppresses some canons in favour of others as a programmatic action, the architect encounters the vicissitudes of memory in his or her daily practice. Yet, Tafuri regards this mechanism as so completely internalised within architectural theory that the specific function of memory in architectural discourse is largely overlooked. For Tafuri, though, the excuses are scant. The operation of historical memory is a primary concern of the historian and of historical research. Tafuri thus
indicates that historians need to keep their ‘tools’ sharp relative to their ‘tasks’, to avoid the conflation (which, he purports, pervades architecture) of representation and fact, that is, of the past and history.

Tafuri dedicates the final chapter of Teorie e storia to the historian’s ‘tasks’. Put extremely simply, Tafuri charges the historian with the role of reminding architects, at every opportunity, that the past is as complex as the present is now. Given that the mechanisms that homogenise the complex past are historiographical, he warns architectural historians to identify strategies to elude fixed conclusions from historical practice.

In many of his own histories, therefore, we find evidence of the kind of ‘ferocious autocritique’ with which he launched his professorial career as a historian, in Teorie e storia. The (artificial) diptych from Peter Weiss’s Marat-Sade play that Tafuri uses to open Teorie e storia encapsulates the quandary of the historian in architectural culture: how to balance commitment with perpetual doubt; how to publish without offering instructions?

Representation
Oddly enough, Tafuri turns to an architect, G. B. Piranesi (1720-1778), for ‘advice’ on this Catch-22. In many of Piranesi’s etchings, Tafuri observes the dialectical interplay of recovered memorial fragments and the image. Two of Piranesi’s projects have direct historiographical consequences for Tafuri’s view of the past and its representation. The first of these is his depiction of the Campo Marzio (published in 1762), which plays the architectural monument of Roma antichità against the ‘field’, Tafuri perceives in Piranesi’s images of Rome’s pre-Christian past a lesson for historians. While architectural theory positions architecture against the city as an ‘exception’, Piranesi demonstrates for Tafuri the vast extent of the ‘field of exceptions’. In other words, when Brunelleschi differentiates architecture from context at an artistic, contextual and discursive level, he establishes (for Tafuri) a general model for the action of architectural theory that Piranesi, in turn, confronts head on. All theory, Tafuri argues, tends towards homogenisation. All history, as Tafuri would have it, agitates for heterogenisation.

The second example is Piranesi’s realised altar at Santo Maria del Priorato (1764-1765). The altar’s rear face conveys a pointed metaphor for the ‘burdens’ of historical representation. Beneath its crown, the apotheosis of San Basilio, is a structure that articulates a historiographical case. Above two parallel sarcophagi sits a third, broad sarcophagus, within which is embedded a large sphere; San Basilio is on the top of the sphere, his own rear ‘signed’ with a sculptural form corresponding to Piranesi’s seal. The lesson, as Tafuri appreciates it, translates directly into terms that inform the historian’s practice: the sarcophagi represent the accumulated traces of human civilisation; the sphere that bears down upon it is a platonic symbol for the entirety of the past. Interior and formless, the historian cannot know such a past in any rational sense. It is unknowable, but a burden nonetheless.

Understood abstractly, these two examples illustrate the provisionality of the architectural ‘image’ and the historian’s
capacity to disturb that image with the fragment of past knowledge. In both Piranesi’s altar for Santa Maria del Priorato and in his Campo Marzio, the sphere and the labyrinth from which Tafuri’s well-known book (1980) takes its name, the fragment undermines the whole: the ‘completion’ of the sphere, on one hand, and the ‘resolution’ of the image, on the other.20 Returning to the themes of ideology and memory introduced above, these projects continue as an image-fragment dialectic the exchanges between myth and knowledge, memory and the unresolved suppressions that, Tafuri argues, also characterise the institutional and intellectual spaces in which the historian ‘publishes’. Herein, the historian comes closest to a productive, operative even, encounter with the architect. For this reason, Tafuri ironically refers to the ‘project’ of history. The project is founded on a notion of the image, a reduced homogeneous (utopian) goal; history, rather, seeks complexity and the disturbance of the image.

The notion of history as a project, considered in parallel to the architectural project, rests upon distinct foundations that owe less to a utopian vision than to a Freudian call for the conclusion of analysis relative to a pipedream ‘completion’. The historical ‘project’, at least as Tafuri positions it, takes as a hypothetical ‘completed’ state architecture’s unmediated experience of history. Given architecture’s entrenchment (as he observes at the end of *La sfera e il labirinto*) in its self-image, the historian’s fragment catalyses the image’s deconstruction. Put simply, Tafuri writes that the historian’s responsibilities in architectural culture involve balancing the tendency toward complete historical accounts (what he calls ‘myths’) by freeing up institutional, social, sexual or political prejudices built into existing ‘histories’. Tafuri demonstrates the historian’s responsibility to set aside emancipation in favour of disturbance. The task is not to tell more history, but to demonstrate the instability of any historical image.

To this extent, Tafuri’s 1974 essay ‘L’architecture dans le boudoir’ highlights an important risk in the construction of a critical architectural discourse on extra-disciplinary terms conceived within a discipline. As early as 1968 and *Teorie e storia*, Tafuri points to the difficulty of disciplinary borrowing. However, his description of the ‘burden’ of language as both a vehicle for history and a metaphor for historiographical rationality is never clearer than his application of a passage from Nietzsche’s *Morgenröte* (1881) to the challenges laid out before historical practice. While naming something solves one problem, it raises a host of others; Nietzsche famously describes the ease with which one can break a leg rather than destroy a word.22 Historians face precisely this challenge: the development of critical tools capable of setting aside the representation in favour of unmediated experience.

The specific activities that can evidence a critico-historical disciplinarity are several, involving different scales of historian-architect interaction, from the most passive response to history to direct intervention in historical preservation or restoration. We should not be surprised to find a proportional relationship between the degree of compromise that the historian might have to account for versus the messiness of intervention in professional,
principally architectural problems. When Tafuri writes, in Teorie e storia, of the historian's responsibility to deliver up the lesson of the past's complexity as proof of complexity in the present, he equates the historian's practice with a stern dismissal of architectural theory's tendency towards rationalisation.

Of course, Tafuri's historian is an idealised figure, whose existence is debateable at best. Nonetheless, Tafuri's argument for the position of the historian in architectural culture, in its dogmatic simplicity, offers a series of points against which we can define these relationships in today's terms. The historian is not an architect, he proposes; the critic is a historian without the time-delay, he advocates; historians eschew utopianism, he opines. Useful as these positions are, they avoid the fields in which the historians and architects must sit around the negotiating table.

The ongoing utility of Tafuri's scheme of architectural disciplinarity, therefore, lies in its description of the nature of such terrains upon which architects and historians meet – their shared territory of practice. We might admit that his theorisation of discipline and disciplinary engagement is limited, though we find evidence of its continuing relevance throughout a spectrum of critical writing practices. On the contrary, when all historiographical positions are the subject of conflict, as he suggests, the need for clearly defined disciplinary stances circumscribed by a theoretical discourse (challenged both internally and externally) evidences a healthy capacity to carry out an architectural discourse. The ends of such a discourse, we cannot suggest. However, we might well regain the predilection for vigorous disciplinary engagement by reflecting on such examples as Tafuri's.