After Theory

Debate in architectural schools rages about the value of theory and its effect on innovation in design.
By Michael Speaks

Over the past several years, some of our most prestigious schools and institutes of architecture have drawn up balance sheets in an effort to document where the discipline has been and to propose where it should be going. Despite their obvious concern, most schools have nonetheless been slow to recognize the fundamental nature of the challenges confronting architecture in a world increasingly dominated by technological change and marketization. Although they have done an adequate job teaching new digital techniques of design and analysis, schools have largely failed to develop an intellectual culture that would enable students to make the best use of these skills in a marketplace that puts such a high value on innovation.

One reason may be that since the 1970s, many of the so-called elite schools have embraced a form of vanguardism shrouded in Deconstruction and Marxism. They share an almost constitutional aversion to commerce and the marketplace, the very milieu of innovation and shaper of any future architecture, whether you are in Boston, Beijing, or Buenos Aires. The grip that these theories have on the intellectual culture of schools is so strong that until very recently it inhibited the development of alternative forms of thinking. Many critics, however, now recognize that these resolutely negative vanguard theories have been made irrelevant by the rapidly modernizing and flattened world that has begun to take shape over the past decade. Few, however, have recognized that we don’t just need a new “theory,” but instead we need a new intellectual framework that supports rather than inhibits innovation.

Nonetheless, there are signs inside the schools themselves that the grip of such theories is beginning to loosen and that alternatives to them are emerging. George Baird, dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto, published an essay in the Harvard Design Magazine (fall 2004/winter 2005) that summarizes recent debates between two generations of critics and teachers who hold very different views on the relevance of Deconstruction, Marxism, and theory in general to architectural education and contemporary practice. Baird focuses on an attack mounted by a younger generation, including Stan Allen, Sylvia Lavin, Robert Somol, Sarah Whiting, and me, on the “critical” architecture that has been promoted and defended for more than 25 years in architecture schools by the architect Peter Eisenman and Harvard professor of architectural theory Michael Hays. Eisenman’s writings, like the claims of theorist Jacques Derrida, the father of Deconstruction, contend that there is no ultimate truth, but only incomplete, critical engagements with historically determined versions of truth. For Eisenman, critical, or “dislocative,” architecture, as he once called it, critiques these normative versions of architectural truth in a seemingly endless search for a real but ultimately unattainable essence of architecture. And this essence, for Eisenman, can only be expressed in the abstract perfection of forms shielded from the market-driven demands of program, use, and commercial viability.

Hays, on the other hand, has established himself as one of our most influential theorists by extending and expanding Marxist historian Manfred Tafuri’s claim that all architecture is unredeemably corrupted by capitalism. Architects are thus obliged to either create work that resists capitalism or attempt to bring about an end to capitalism so that a new, utopian architecture can emerge. Eisenman and Hays have established—through the journals they respectively founded and edited, Oppositions (1973–84) and Assemblage (1986–2000), through the many books they have published, and through long, distinguished teaching careers—the intellectual foundation for architecture that resists, negates, and attempts to create alternatives to establishment or market-corrupted design and commercial culture in general.

The above-mentioned younger critics, or “post-critics,” as Baird sees them, have rejected “criticality” in favor of an engagement with the very same conditions that Eisenman and Hays seek to resist. Sylvia Lavin’s support for a “cool” architecture that is unapologetically fashionable, desirable, and ephemeral; Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting’s call for “projective” architecture practices that, as they say, engage market forces without capitulating to them; and Stan Allen’s

Michael Speaks, a contributing editor at RECORD, is former director of the graduate program at SCI-ARC, and has a Ph.D. in literature from Duke.
Robert Somol, assistant professor of architecture at UCLA.

assertion that “architectural practice does not comment on the world, it operates in and on the world,” certainly confirm this. Baird cites my own work, including a series of essays published in this magazine [RECORD, December 2002, page 74, and January 2002, page 72] as the most polemical and market-friendly of these critiques, and as having initiated the first frontal attack on criticality.

In addition, it is worth pointing out that Baird’s “post-critics” have distanced themselves from, and in some cases have rejected, architecture theory altogether. Lavin, in an essay published almost 15 years ago in Progressive Architecture (August 1990), and more recently Allen, in several roundtable discussions, have expressed considerable doubt about the impact of theory on design practice. While not dismissive of theory, Allen—who has admitted on many occasions that it played a very important role in his own intellectual development, and indeed in the development of the intellectual life of architecture inside and outside of the academy—feels theory’s importance is now a historical rather than a contemporary matter. As such, it has little or nothing to contribute to practice.

Breaking, perhaps, with Baird’s other “post-critics” (a designation, in any case, I do not acknowledge), I would argue that theory is not just irrelevant but was and continues to be an impediment to the development of a culture of innovation in architecture. Posing as a youthful alternative to Enlightenment certainty, theory was instead old-fashioned enlightened critique turned on itself—unremitting critique chasing its own tail, without purpose or end. Theory also perpetuated the Enlightenment belief that thinking is separate from and in fact guides doing; that manifestos guide political action; that architecture theory guides architecture practice.

Action is thus dependent on the discovery or declaration of a set of guiding truths or principles, even if, as was the case with theory, the truth is that there is no truth. This was certainly the case with the famous Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1988. Like the “truths” discovered by early-20th-century architecture vanguards and written down in their manifestos, theory offered Mark Wigley and Philip Johnson, the show’s curators, a new truth masking as nontruth. Published in an accompanying catalog, Wigley’s brilliant manifesto bound together the vanguard theory of Jacques Derrida and the vanguard architectural forms of Russian Constructivism.

Such was the role theory played in architecture beginning with the first issue of Oppositions and ending with the final issue of Assemblage: to provide the architecture vanguard a left-political intellectual agenda that would enable it to resist, criticize, and propose utopian alternatives to capitalism and the market. That fantasy has finally lost its allure and all connection to the real world. The architecture community is now left to face the future without guidance from the all-knowing theory vanguards that dominated schools since the 1970s.

More perhaps than anything else, the certainty of theory vanguardism has retarded the development of a culture of innovation in schools of architecture, which requires a more fluid, interactive relationship between thinking and doing, as well as an expanded definition of what counts for architectural knowledge. Suggesting one way this might be accomplished, Jeffrey Kipnis, one of the most important theorists of Deconstruction in architecture and a participant in “How to Become a Star,” a cheeky public discussion on architectural education hosted by Wolf Prix at the Academy of Applied Arts in Vienna last spring, proposed that schools focus on teaching architectural expertise, which he carefully distinguished from mere technique. Only those who have mastered the basic competencies of the discipline can innovate, Kipnis con-

Jeffrey Kipnis, professor of architecture at Ohio State’s School of Architecture.

Michael Hays, professor of architectural theory at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design.
tends, because only such experts know how to use technique to exceed the boundaries and limitations defined by that discipline. Kipnis may very well be right, but just what that expertise consists of and how it will be taught is still an open question, perhaps the most important question facing schools today.

In the meantime, it is not surprising that the most promising answers to the question regarding the future direction of architecture are not being formulated in the studios and seminars in our best schools, where all manner of digital design and fabrication techniques are being taught, and where new species of form are born (at least on the screen) every day, but in the workshops and on the desktops of small offices—in the test labs, that is, where new forms of architectural practice are being forged.

William Menking, in a recent essay in The Architect's Newspaper (January 25, 2005), for example, noted the growing importance of the workshop to several New York area architecture and design offices, including Sharples Holden PasquereUi (ShoP), Freecell, and FACE in New York City; William Massie in Troy, New York; and Veyko in Philadelphia. “What makes today’s workshops unique is that they can quickly fabricate models directly from laser-milling machines to build one-to-one full-scale models,” he wrote. “This allows them, as Sean Tracy of FACE told Menking, to make rapid prototypes to quickly see the limitations of a design and the complexities of its construction.”

This kind of speculative testing and prototyping is an example of what Michael Schrage, codirector of MIT Media Lab's E-market Initiative, calls a “spreadsheet way of knowledge.” This is a form of thinking-as-doing that creates design knowledge, or “design intelligence,” as I have called it in this and other magazines, through design prototyping. Recounting the introduction in 1979 of the first personal digital spreadsheet, “VisiCalc,” which made it possible for a single accountant or manager to model and manipulate a “phantom business” inside their personal computer, Schrage proposes that spreadsheet thinking introduces the possibility to project plausible business futures or design prototypes that can be tested, redesigned, and retested quickly, cheaply, and under conditions that closely approximate reality. Such prototyping is inherently innovative because it allows the designer to make and test numerous “phantom” designs, speculating—and thinking, that is, by doing—on a range of plausible designs, which, in the absence of such speculation, might seem implausible. Moreover, it allows the designer the ability not only to offer the client alternative solutions to design problems, but it also permits the designer to reframe and present alternative design problems that the client had no way of formulating. Of course, this has always been the case, but with CNC (Computer Numerical Control) milling, digital fabrication, and parametric modeling, speculation happens in real time with real material.

Significantly, prototyping also creates a shared design space that enhances collaboration and thus the introduction of variables that might not otherwise have been considered, leading to further innovation. Alejandro Zaera-Polo of Foreign Office Architects describes this process well when he says regarding the way his team worked on the Yokohama Port Terminal [record, November 2002, page 142], “The design process became in itself a process of creating knowledge.” Schrage believes that this is one of the most exciting features of new, digitally driven forms of prototyping, where the prototype, which can be analyzed, tweaked,