

# (historising) Theory

Claes Caldenby

## Introduction to the section PRAXIS

I understand Praxis to be about the historicity of the praxis of designers as well as historians and theoreticians. That is historising theory, where theories are the more or less elaborate paradigms of the professional practices.

There seems to be an extension of the field of architecture going on since the late 1960s. It can be said to extend in two directions: one is a growing interest in history, the other in theory.<sup>1</sup> They are by no means contradictory but neither completely parallel. In Sweden at least the newborn interest in history can be dated to the late 1960s with a broader breakthrough in 1975, the building heritage year.<sup>2</sup>

The factors behind this change are several:

- The critique of late modernist praxis.
- The interest in urban renewal and conservation as opposed to modernist praxis.
- A new interest both in the praxis and the theory of older architecture, once the absolute and a-historical modernism began to be questioned.

- Growing research in schools of architecture, which started to investigate the history and theory of the architects' own praxis.

This development was to a large extent lead by architects; in fact the extension of the field of architecture into history seems to be followed by the opposite tendency in Art History where Architectural history is losing ground. This is a trend in Sweden but similar things can be seen in other countries.

An extension into theory is already noticeable in the 1960s, as already mentioned. There has been a wave of publications on architectural theory and a boom of architectural theorists in international academia.<sup>3</sup> Architectural research has changed its scientific model from sociology in the 1970s and ethnology in the 1980s to philosophy in the 1990s. Theory is in the late 1990s becoming a subject of its own in Swedish schools of architecture, which it has never been before in the very pragmatic Swedish building culture. Already the changing list of scientific models indicates the historicity of such paradigms. The international theory boom recently caused counter reactions. The isolation of academia from design praxis and the search for "post

theory” or a “pragmatic turn” of an architectural theory suffering from a surprisingly long-lived linguistic turn of the 1960s, have been criticised.

The historicity of architectural theory has its counterpart in what could be called the historicity of history in the sense indicated here. In the early 2000s urban renewal and conservation are no longer “hot” subjects. At best they have become routines, maybe waiting for a new generation to make them contemporary topics.

All this is however yet another argument for the necessity of an historical perspective. The Swedish historian of ideas, Sven-Eric Liedman, has argued for the use and usefulness of history in a way that might be helpful in sorting these things out. According to him history research has a fourfold usefulness:<sup>4</sup>

1. The first one is the “genetic” argument, where history tells us how things became the way they are. This is also an argument for the special importance of the short or contemporary history.
2. The second one, on the other hand, is about the long-term changes in social and economic systems. If we stay within the short-term perspective we tend to take the present state for natural, without an understanding of qualitative changes. This is an argument for theoretically conscious history research.
3. The third “usefulness” is that history gives us a lively image of how human life and societies could be very different, an image by no means less lively and colourful than ordinary science-fiction or utopias. This is an argument for an exotic and distant history.
4. The fourth (but not necessarily last) “usefulness” is that historical studies can give us certain more precise understandings by studying finished chains of events. This is also an argument for a more theoretical history research.

The conclusion drawn from these four points regarding the usefulness of history is that all of them are needed and need to be integrated: the genetic, the theoretic and the exotic history. They are complementary but, according to Liedman, have one thing in common: the “ideological” use of the humanities in shaping a human

understanding of the world.

This could also be a program for the usefulness of architectural history in the teaching of architects. I understand the task of teaching architectural history to students of architecture as being very much to help them avoid becoming prisoners of their own time, a risk which is close at hand with the contemporary exposure to a flow of architectural images. This includes discussing how things became the way they are, which, with the present speed of paradigm shifts, also means showing how they could be different. Admiration of models is a necessary part of the architect’s training and the only protection against the risks of this is still more (and other) models, thus building the repertoire that is one of the most important tools of the designer.

Considering that architecture is more about “sense making” than about “decision making” I would also like to stress that a useful architectural history should be very much about professional history.<sup>5</sup> That means not being focused only on the products of the great masters but also on the processes of a broader architectural culture. “Historical institutionalism” is an approach developed in political science that could be valuable to architectural history as well.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. For a discussion in Swedish of this change see Claes Caldenby & Johan Mårtelius, "Den nödvändiga historien", i *Nordisk Arkitekturforskning* 3-2002, p. 23. One of the references for the changing role of architectural history is *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, volume 58, no. 3, 1999.
2. The architectural historian Anders Åman, then a teacher in history of architecture at the school of architecture in Stockholm, dates the change very precisely to the students of the 1967-generation, which suddenly showed a surprising interest in history.
3. A number of anthologies have been published recently. Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture. A Reader in Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge, 1997, is but one example of many. Even in Swedish there is an anthology, Sven-Olov Wallenstein (ed.), *Arkitekturteorier*, Skriftserien Kairos no. 5, Stockholm: Raster, 1999.
4. Sven-Eric Liedman, *Surdeg. En personlig bok om idéer och ideologier*, Stockholm: Författarförlaget, 1980, p. 93.
5. About "sense making" and "decision making" cf Dana Cuff, *Architecture. The Story of Practice*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.
6. See for example Bo Rothstein & Sven Steinmo (eds.), *Restructuring the Welfare State*, N.Y.: Palgrave Press, 2002.