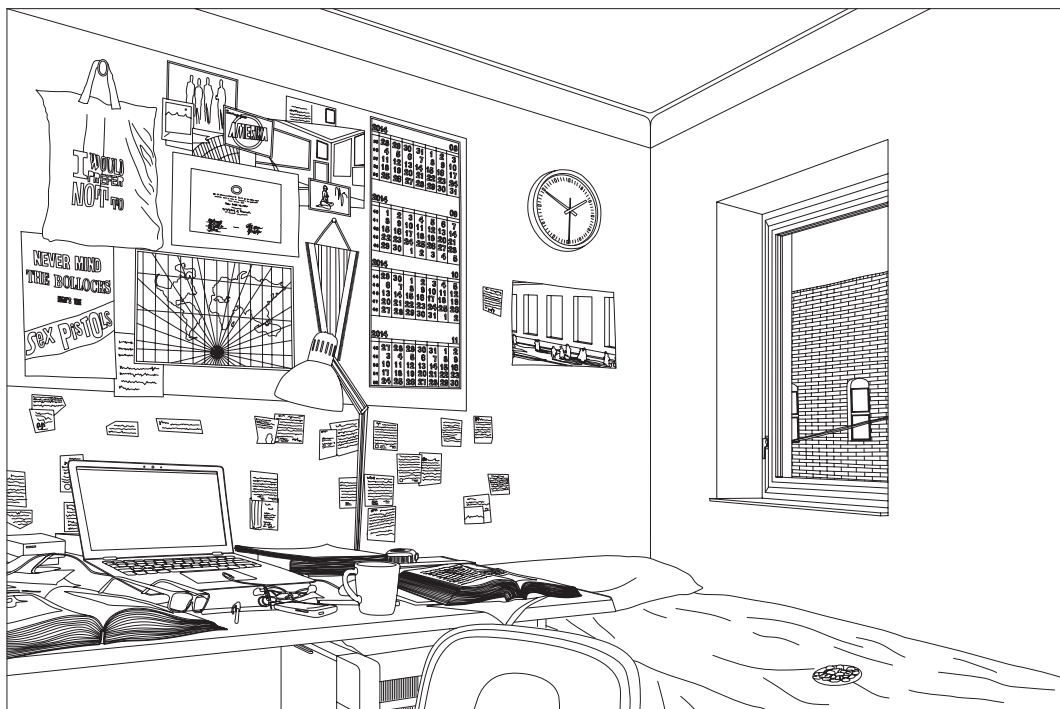


# CHOOSING ARCHITECTURE

Christophe Van Gerrewey

Criticism,  
History and  
Theory since  
the 19th Century



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For centuries, architecture has been one of the most publicly discussed subjects, by architects and users or inhabitants, but also by critics, theoreticians, historians, and writers. This book offers an overview of these discussions in the Western world, by means of four thematic trajectories, focused on housing, society, history, and art. Each of these four chronological paths starts in the 19th century, traverses the 20th century, and ends as closely as possible to the contemporary moment.

The stepping stones are historical documents – texts, books, essays, and articles – that are analyzed, interpreted, criticized, and compared. The aim of this book is to show that architecture remains a vital subject matter for anyone interested in our contemporary world and its recent history. Reading, inquiring, and thinking are essential for making substantiated choices, with architecture as a starting point. The writings discussed in this book, both canonical and virtually unknown, are condensed into little pearls of knowledge, attached unto a string, and put together to form a kind of necklace – a talisman that can help us understand and face the present condition.

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*Architecture (comme mon esprit s'y retrouve!)*

Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*. Tome II

*Tell me, which of the two arguments  
carries more weight?*

Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Parere su l'architettura*





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# Introduction

## Abandon Your Pencils

### 1.

This book offers an overview of some of the different ways, since the 19th century, in Europe and the United States, in which criticism, history, and theory have been combined to write about architecture – to develop ideas and arguments in order to make reasoned choices concerning the built environment and the spatial organization of life. *Choosing Architecture* is divided into four parts – housing, society, history, and art – that look at Western architecture’s historically evolving relationship with these cultural notions or domains. Each part starts with a prologue from the 19th century, walks through the 20th century (sometimes with giant leaps, sometimes with tiny steps), and ends as close as possible to the contemporary moment. The reasons for limiting the scope to this period and this area are practical and epistemological – they will become clear as the text develops. The subject of this book can be defined as the Western discourse on architecture in “the long 20th century,” beginning with the many political, economic, and technological revolutions of the 19th century, and concluding with (or just before) the present day, defined as it is by, on the one hand, the advent of the Internet and its many implications, and on the other hand, the dominant combinations of globalization and capitalism. This period, not coincidentally, is the era in which architecture became a multifaceted “subject” – an integral part of culture, at the center of the public intellectual debate.

The building blocks of this narrative are essays, book chapters, and articles, which are questioned, compared, illustrated, analyzed, and criticized. These texts – often canonical and well

known, sometimes peripheral, forgotten, and undervalued – are considered as historical documents; their context is reconstructed and interpreted, although this does not imply that the ideas and the convictions of its authors have lost all of their value or validity. These writings represent a moment in architectural and cultural history, offering ideas that aim for a lasting impression, at the least. The selection is based on the “constructive” function each text fulfills in relation to the theme of each part, in ways that can seem dated or topical, or both. What these texts have in common is that they are the result of a deliberate choice: a choice *for* architecture, but also a distinct choice in favor of a particular kind of making, imagining, and projecting architecture – a choice that always, inevitably, excludes and rules out other options. The writings discussed and reviewed in this book are condensed into little pearls of knowledge, attached unto a string, and put together to form a kind of necklace – a talisman that can help face the present condition.

## 2.

Almost two decades into the 21st century, it might seem harder than ever to “choose” architecture – as a profession, a discipline, a subject, or as an alibi for spending your life meaningfully. Architecture is, simply put, *guilty*; mistaken for the building industry (of which it is only a very small part), it is considered as the most visible and material symptom of mankind’s hubris (or more precisely of its white, male, and Western members), co-responsible for ongoing climate change and the destruction of the earth. Architecture is inevitably complicit, or at least suspect; it reproduces power mechanisms, and it requires capital and its approval in order to exist.

One of the main arguments of this book is that exactly this complicity is the most important reason for choosing architecture. An architecture scrubbed clean of its sins and its vices or – to put it more mildly – its risks and its dreams is not worthy of our interest, simply because it can no longer be considered as architecture. Conceiving architecture implies taking a position, developing a vision for the discipline (no matter how implicit), and consciously rejecting (polemically or in silence) what other architects are trying

(or have tried) to achieve. Making architecture involves evaluating options, making choices, and making decisions. These choices can never be completely justified, because they don't involve checklists, calculation models, or technical procedures – they involve ideas, values, and convictions. This, and this alone, guarantees architecture's ongoing contribution to culture: what architects do can be talked about, discussed, criticized, historicized, or theorized, but it cannot be *proven* – it cannot be reduced to a set of facts and figures.

This is why architecture is not an exact science or a form of technology. The very day it becomes one, it disappears. This is also why dealing with architecture in terms of durability or other aspects of its pure mathematical technicity, no matter how important, have nothing to do with choosing, nor with developing a cultural argument, exactly because no real choices are involved – the act of choosing is transferred to a calculation or a building standard, and the specificity of the architectural discipline is ignored. The texts discussed in this book always present, to a more or lesser degree, a real *choice* – a substantiated answer, by means of architecture and taking into account historical considerations, to questions concerning individual dwelling and collective housing, the changing role of the architect within society, the difficult problem of the past and of history, and the sticky presence of art whenever architecture is concerned.

### 3.

It is a paradoxical consequence of the cultural task of architecture that its many discourses do not immediately “help” architects and students when they design or build. The usefulness of theory, history, and criticism is more complicated. Developing and discussing ideas about architecture is a cultural goal, and it can be – or it aspires to be – worthwhile for every human being. The texts discussed in this book are a form of applied philosophy – of general, speculative, and contemplative thinking and searching for truth. What is at stake is a way of thinking about the world, about society, and about human life by means of architecture – still one of the most complex, revealing, and variegated cultural activities on earth.

In this light, architectural projects are not *machines à habiter*, as Le Corbusier proposed in *Vers une architecture*,<sup>1</sup> but *machines à comprendre*, devices constructed by architects but expediently operated by anybody who decides to ponder the human condition by means of that strange activity that is called architecture. Projects, buildings, designs, and architectonic oeuvres can become a grindstone to sharpen ideas. These ideas, convictions, and interpretations may become more important than architecture itself, because they deal, for example, with the difference between what is natural and cultural, with the weight of history and the possibility or the desirability of progress, with the distribution of wealth, means, and power, and with the revelation of the goals some of us would like to achieve – goals that can be compared with the duties, restrictions, and habits that are imposed on us persistently, and that become visible thanks to architecture.

#### 4.

It is not possible to completely separate architectural theory from criticism and history. This does not imply that theory, criticism, and history are interchangeable, nor does it imply that they do not strive for an ideal, independent form. Where criticism deals with discriminating between good and bad options, and history is concerned with understanding architectural production in a past era, theory has two properties that are as extreme as they are unrealizable, because history and criticism always intervene: eternity and objectivity. A theory that is eternal is valid for all times and successfully ignores its historical condition. When, for example, Christian Norberg-Schulz developed the notion of *genius loci*, the “spirit of a place,” he was not limiting the applicability of this notion to, let’s say, the period between 1500 and 1750.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary: the *genius loci* was put forward as important and true for architecture in the past, for architecture in the present, and for

<sup>1</sup> Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, Paris, G. Crès, 1923, p. IX.

<sup>2</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, London, Academy Editions, 1980.



architecture in the future. This aspect of theory is always there, albeit as a wish rather than as a given. Theorists often want to declare that something is true because it is independent of historical change. Of course, a theorist, like any human being, is also shaped by the times he or she is working in. Understanding what Norberg-Schulz meant, and knowing why he was so obsessively engaged with the spirit of a place, is impossible without giving him and his theory a place in history. He wouldn't have developed the same ideas if he had been living in another era, and his convictions cannot be introduced, let alone applied, in an era such as ours, dominated as it is by, for example, the Internet, mass transportation, and a rather paradoxical handling of generic environments. The entanglement with history and the desire to achieve eternal and Platonic ideals are linked to the other torment of Tantalus that defines theory: objective truth. Again, when Norberg-Schulz talked about *genius loci*, this phenomenon was for him undeniable. The *genius loci* should be reckoned with by everyone, no matter where, and it was considered to be above suspicion. Being immune to history and to criticism may seem a valid commitment for theory, but after careful consideration, this cannot be the case. It is not the aim of architectural discourse to deliver a proof or a fact, such as the determination that water boils at 100° Celsius, or that to avoid buckling, the section of a column needs to be calculated correctly. The aim is not to end the conversation about architecture, but to keep the conversation going.

This is less obvious than one might think. During discussions of student projects, for example, I have heard it said more than once that it makes no sense to talk about the urban character of designs because the only objective characteristic of urbanity is the large concentration of people in one place. All the rest – issues of congestion, confrontation, capital, durability, diversity, modernity, representation, politics, or democracy – is subjective speculation. This may be true, but the very act of culture, of being human and social, of building, constructing, and dwelling, of developing theories and of trying to understand what it means to be alive in a spatial, ethical, and valuable way, boils down to subjective speculation – to propositions that are presented as being true and as important for everybody.

## 5.

In *2000+: The Urgencies of Architectural Theory*, published on the occasion of the end of Mark Wigley's tenure as dean of Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Wigley discusses the form in which architectural theory can exist. "Alberti's *Ten Books on Architecture* might be theory," he writes, "but it's not all theory, nor is his book any more theoretical than any other document in the field. There's just as much theory in a label, a regulation, a syllabus, a competition, a joke, a protocol, an advertisement, a contract, an instruction, a tomb, an address, an account, a chart, an image, a ticket, or in modes of censorship and prohibition."<sup>3</sup> This is a bit like saying that a steak is delicious without taking into account that a piece of meat – preferably – has to be prepared, seasoned, or cooked before it can be eaten. Things like labels, regulations, competitions, protocols, and so forth, can without a doubt lead to theory, but first and foremost they have to be described, interpreted, analyzed, historicized, and criticized. The same goes for buildings and designs, and, in a sense, for every cultural product and for everything that results from human activity.

It is true that the specific act of interpreting architecture can take almost anything as its point of departure. It is explained later on: Walter Benjamin sharply defined the values, dreams, and nightmares of modernist architecture at the beginning of the 20th century by making an inquisitive detour via Mickey Mouse. But this does not mean that looking at a Walt Disney cartoon coincides with theory, or that students sharpen their critical, historical, or theoretical intelligence by paying a visit to the Rolex Learning Center in Lausanne.

Whether we like it or not, and no matter how old-fashioned or conservative this may seem, "doing" architecture, and doing architecture theory, history, and criticism in particular, remains a matter of careful speaking, of meticulous writing, and of slow and close reading. As Adrian Forty described it concisely (and proved it in his written oeuvre): "Without language, there would be no

<sup>3</sup> Mark Wigley, "Flash Theory," in James Graham (ed.), *2000+: The Urgencies of Architectural Theory*, New York, GSAPP Books, 2015, p. 270.



Lucien Kroll, La Maison des Médecins (Mémé), Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe, Belgium, 1970–1976.

architecture.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the presence of photographs or drawings, and of buildings and projects, is never self-evident. There can never be a transparent and unproblematic translation between words and pictures, or between a set of concepts and a visit to a building. One of the tasks of architectural discourse is to break the spell of images and objects, and thus of form and composition, by showing how ideas and intentions can never be connected in a logical and undeniable way with drawings or buildings. The joke about professors who, as an experiment, decide one day to exchange their PowerPoint presentations right before the start of

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Forty, “Pevsner the Writer,” in Peter Draper (ed.), *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2004, p. 91.

their lectures, only to realize that they hardly need to adjust their preparatory notes, is an illustration of this issue. The link between words and images, and between theory and projects, is provisional and even arbitrary, or at least – once again – historically defined. A striking example from the 20th century is the famous student housing complex designed by Lucien Kroll and built in an academic suburb of Brussels around 1970. At the time of its construction, *la Maison Médicale*, also known as *La Mémé*, was developed and presented as an icon of populist, post-May 1968 participatory architecture – as a project built and designed for and by the students. It would be a dazzling exercise to try to explain and legitimize Kroll's design by means of different theoretical constellations, such as the ideologies of the data-driven architecture of the 1990s SuperDutch generation who followed in the footsteps of OMA/Rem Koolhaas, the “chaos theory” of adaptable form and temporary architecture (whether computer-generated or not), or the ideas of thinkers critical of academic education in a neoliberal and individualistic society, turning *La Mémé* from a utopia for liberated students into a total dystopia, filled with students as individualistic entrepreneurs engaged in constant competition.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from ascertaining the excessive and imprecise character of Kroll's architecture, this exercise could lead to two related insights. On the one hand, it would show how architects are never to be trusted when they are talking about their work. This is not abnormal; although self-knowledge is in some instances achievable for human beings, a clear and precise insight into what we produce is quite a rare, if not inexistent, thing. Commentaries, statements, interviews, or full-blown theories developed by practicing architects constitute a different category of theory, one that is often more passionate and progressive but also – for the reader – more demanding and complex. On the other hand, the tragicomic relationship between language and images can lead to the seemingly drastic but also simplifying and liberating decision to conduct a theory course without PowerPoint presentations by simply holding reading sessions. So instead of concentrating on objects

<sup>5</sup> On Kroll's *La Mémé*, see Christophe Van Gerrewey, “Living in Liberty after 1968: Charles Vandenhove versus Lucien Kroll,” *OASE* 97 (2016), pp. 99–108.

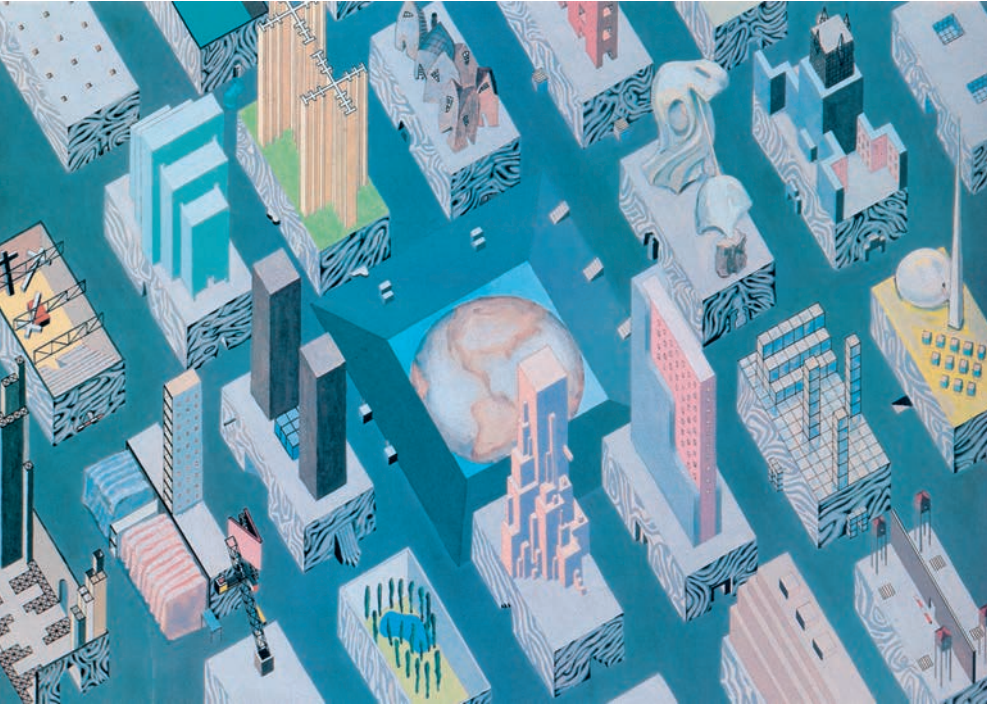
and images (what architects and contemporary human beings do all the time, seemingly as *automatons*), thinking, writing, and speaking about architecture should concern itself with words, thoughts, and ideas – the things that ultimately give content, color, and direction to our lives. Shakespeare’s Hamlet stated it clearly, and his words are eminently applicable to architecture: “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”<sup>6</sup>

## 6.

It is often suggested that theory, and architectural theory in particular, reached its end at the close of the 20th century. The British literary theorist Terry Eagleton, for example, published his book *After Theory* in 2003, although a book with the same title, by Thomas Docherty, had already been published in 1990. Notwithstanding, both Eagleton and Docherty are critical of the idea that we can and should continue without theory in the 21st century. The previously mentioned *festschrift* for Mark Wigley is entitled *2000+*, also indicating the importance of the year and the shift between the two centuries. It is undeniable that the 20th century yielded an enormous and impressive amount of theories, ideologies, convictions, critical models, philosophical positions, and architectural poetics. In an issue of *ARCH+* from 2015, entitled *Tausendundeine Theorie*, a rather large number of theories are collected alphabetically – from Actor-Network Theory to Image Theory to Transmission Theory. The contemporary situation that arises is similar to a prognostic project by OMA/Rem Koolhaas from 1972: *The City of the Captive Globe*, included in the book *Delirious New York* from 1978. Koolhaas presented a grid of “theories, interpretations, mental constructions, proposals and their infliction on the World.” Each theory has at its disposal one plinth and can grow and develop “indefinitely toward heaven.” In the center of this possibly infinite field is the Earth – our globe that is held captive but that is also totally “captive” by all the

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, London, Methuen and Co, 1899, pp. 74–75.





Rem Koolhaas, *The City of the Captive Globe*, 1972.

ideas that are being ventilated in its immediate vicinity. “Through our feverish thinking,” Koolhaas concludes his statement, “the Globe gains weight. Its temperature rises slowly. In spite of the most humiliating setbacks, its ageless pregnancy survives.”<sup>7</sup>

The question today is whether this is still true. Is it still possible for ideas, despite their endless proliferation and juxtaposition, to make a difference and to profoundly influence, navigate, or at least adjust our thoughts, acts, decisions, lives – and our architecture? As Pier Vittorio Aureli has suggested, *The City of the Captive Globe* was prescient because it predicted the 21st century condition of “anything goes.” In the contemporary city (and, one could argue, in its virtual counterpart the Internet), there are no

<sup>7</sup> Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1978, p. 294.

longer real and conflicting positions or oppositions; there is simply one continuous field of redeemable icons or – to shift from the field of architecture to the domain of the public sphere – individual but spectacular opinions instead of profound and sharply defined ideas and beliefs.<sup>8</sup> A theoretical development threatens to become just another personal eructation that can't stake a claim to wider validity.

The challenge for architectural discourse today – a challenge that is inherent to every form of public thought, and that has a long history – is to offer interpretations of our current situation that aim at general validity without seeking to represent an exact truth. The way to do so is to confront architecture with basic, simple but existential and social problems: dwelling, being, housing, dealing with the past and with the future, living together, working, studying, creating, earning and paying, learning, getting sick, dying, loving, and being born. These confrontations do not have to result in unilateral and definitive solutions – on the contrary, what is at stake is the development and the elucidation, in the good old dialectical tradition, of clear positions, of striding alternatives, and of polemical viewpoints. Showing, in other words, that alternatives *do* exist and do make a difference – and that, for example, the former optimism of Rem Koolhaas can still be confronted with the classicism of Léon Krier, that the problem of social change is dealt with differently by Manfredo Tafuri than by Denise Scott Brown, or that the idea of progress, innovation, and growth may be supported divergently by Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand or Marc-Antoine Laugier, but that this does not prevent them from having something to say to us. So indeed, architectural thinking and developing arguments to choose architecture is in large part a question of the *history* of thought – of going back to older ideas and testing them in the present. Rather than a problem, this is the real goal: to see that we are part of an enormous tradition of ideas, options, and decisions, without having to be dominated or suffocated by the presence of the past.

<sup>8</sup> Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, Cambridge/London, MIT Press, 2011, pp. 21–26.

## 7.

Who is the target of architectural discourse? What is its possible use (or abuse) for life or for architecture? It is an impossibly idealistic and optimistic point of view, but I would argue that architectural ideas are important, interesting, and worthwhile for everyone. The reason is quite simple: the same goes for architecture itself. We all have to dwell, to be *somewhere*, to deal with remnants of the past, to think about future projects, to cross, ignore, or respect borders and thresholds, and to decide or at least to ascertain whether a space or a building is public, private, or collective. So yes, architectural thinking is first and foremost – also in a literal sense – a form of *Bildung*: the development of one's own individual intelligence and abilities, which in turn lead to the development of society.

In an interview about his education as an architect at Rome University in the 1950s, Manfredo Tafuri quoted the neoclassical architect Carlo Domenico Rossi, who said to his students: “From now on, you must abandon your books. Take your pencil as your only instrument.”<sup>9</sup> Tafuri regretted the complete lack of historical, critical, or theoretical ideas, and the emphasis on architectural composition. To architecture students, as to all people who feel they need knowledge and understanding, the opposite can be declared: “From now on, you must abandon your pencils, your computers, and your smartphones. Take your books as your only instrument.” This does not mean that discourse is incapable of having positive effects on architectural composition or that it cannot help in understanding design decisions. But for at least a few hours, during the reading of a text, the architectural “act” is set aside, and designing, constructing, or envisioning is replaced by thinking, criticizing, and understanding. People who argue that this kind of activity has nothing to do with architecture, and that it could be an intellectual activity for philosophers, researchers, or critics but not for architects or architecture students, should understand that architecture can only be truly *seen* from a theoretical viewpoint. In ancient Greek, *theoria* meant “looking at,

<sup>9</sup> Luisa Passerini, “History as Project: An Interview with Manfredo Tafuri,” *ANY* 25/26 (2000), p. 17.



viewing, beholding.” Mark Wigley stressed this in the aforementioned text: “If architecture is that which allows you to see those things that you cannot see because they’re right in front of you all the time, and if architecture necessarily disappears in making the environment visible, then my proposition here is that theory is the thing that makes architecture visible.”<sup>10</sup> Architectural theory, interwoven with criticism and history, can offer a chance to understand both our situation and the way it is defined, on a daily basis, by architecture. And precisely this understanding is a prerequisite for the possibility of change.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Wigley, “Flash Theory,” p. 274.

