

Miloš Kosec:

Interrogating Architecture

Interview with Teresa Stoppani, an architect, architectural theorist and critic

Teresa Stoppani is an Italian architect who grew up in the Venezia-Giulia, not far from the Slovene border. After studying in Venice and Florence she continued her career of teaching and research in Great Britain. Her work is focused on architectural history, contemporary architecture and in particular on the role of critical theory in architecture today. She recently participated in the symposium *On Power in Architecture*, organised by the Igor Zabel Association and Mateja Kurir and held at Museum of Architecture and Design in Ljubljana, where she presented a paper on Manfredo Tafuri. After the end of symposium, we both agreed that the intensive and stimulating day had taken its toll on both of us, which is why we agreed to postpone the interview to a later date, especially since we both live and work in London - Teresa has recently become Professor of Research in Architecture at London South Bank University, moving there from Leeds Beckett University. A month later I visited her – the area where London South Bank University is situated is highly typical of the processes currently underway in London and especially south of the Thames. Once a relatively destitute area of the capital, it is now quickly transforming into one of the most expensive areas of the metropolis. Foreign investors, CEOs and students often live a stone's throw from social housing tenants unsure of how long they will still be permitted to stay and when their estates will be redeveloped by private investors. A very suitable background for our discussion on criticality, gentrification and the understanding of the role of the architect today.

Liz Diller, partner at Diller Scofidio + Renfro, has in an extremely interesting recent interview in *The Guardian* admitted that their firm's extremely successful project High Line has had some undesired effects as well. Not only did the High Line accelerate the gentrification of the area; as Diller said, the success of the project and the higher rents that it produced might result in forcing their own architectural office out of the area. But despite the fact that the office might paradoxically become a victim of its own success, she assured that she wouldn't do anything differently. My question is: if we all agree from the start that a successful architectural project might necessarily have also structurally negative consequences – wouldn't that prescribe a renewed redefinition of success in architecture?

Oh dear, this is a gigantic question (laughs) ... The problem seems to lie in the side effects, like with prescriptions. A successful project cannot be successful for everyone – at least not for the marginalised, pushed out, and also the ones who simply don't like the project on aesthetic grounds. But I don't think we can measure the success in quantitative terms. Can the High Line be considered architecturally successful and yet socially unsuccessful? I think so. It is as with anything else. Like a film that has great success with the audience and not so much with the critics. I think this is inevitable.

This seems reasonable to me for the period of Hausmannisation in the 19th century, for instance – when the definition of architectural quality had nothing to do with its social impact. But today,

with architects' obsession with sustainability, participation and social effects of their work ... Doesn't this mean that such an "ethical turn" should result also in a redefinition of architectural quality?

I would prefer to say that the social has always been an eminently architectural question. It is not about the fact that today we cannot escape architecture's social content – we never could. Simply because architecture is predominantly a social discipline – even if you're building your own house. Architecture cannot escape its social effects.

Interestingly, just before this interview I was discussing the High Line project with one of my students. Perhaps the key issue here is the architect's intention. When shall the architect stop with his or her work? Will it stop with the computer aided design produced in the office, with the involvement on the construction site, or perhaps only after the building is already in use? Anticipating the effects of such a complex public infrastructural project as the High Line is highly unpredictable. In this sense, it is an excellent example of the ambivalence of the different functions architecture performs. The High Line certainly highlights the problem of architectural responsibility, but in the end the architect cannot be responsible for everything.

The moment that a building is "emancipated" from its author and let into the world, starting to react very differently to anything the architect did or didn't conceive, is truly one of the most fascinating aspects. Since we are in these days commemorating the centenary of the October Revolution I always think how interesting it is that all the revolutionary event had to take place within the buildings of the ancient regime, its ideological opposition. It seems that architecture always has the potential to "deceive" the intentions of its own author.

All the talk of flexibility in architecture addresses precisely this notion. Architecture is always produced, defined, articulated anew. Is this its weakness or strength? I'm sure it's a positive quality, regardless of naming it flexibility, or multipurpose-ness or ...

I agree, but at the same time I find it interesting that architects tend not to deal with this "afterlife" of their otherwise carefully-conceived designs. If I return to gentrification – often it seems as if it is a coincidental and unpredictable result, but in fact it is the natural outcome of a successful project. And in the case of Diller where it might through its own success push out the architects who designed it, it is especially clear.

It also says a lot about architects' incomes (laughs).

Can the architect act differently?

Definitely; but I'm not sure if this is primarily up to the activity of the architect. Here the question of normative and legislation becomes key – it could redefine the relations between different values, taxes, limitations and mutual obligations ... These are the things where the architect never had much power. It is the same today when these things are less and less a matter for a central authority, and more and more a result of cooperation and integration of different actors. The architect is only one of these actors. But we mustn't forget about the ambivalence between the technical and wider professional knowledge of the architect. With his or her knowledge of spatial and social phenomena the architect can exert a decisive (though never formalised) influence. An architect who is merely a service provider is not an architect. To be able to influence the initial conditions of the project itself

through professional knowledge is a key characteristic of the architect. This brings up the problem of the education of the architect – something that is part of an extensive public debate in the UK at present. It is anachronistic that these key points are not addressed by universities. But I think there is a need to preserve the key ambivalence of the architect I was mentioning: I would call it “specialised generalist”. Education in this aspect of the profession crucially affects the later professional role of the architects as coordinators of projects. I am often part of multidisciplinary groups myself, and usually I don’t talk much, but at the end we always come to the question: but who is ultimately responsible for the whole project? And it is invariably me, as the architect in the team, even if I am not a practicing architect. This is an implicit recognition of the mediating role of the architect. We can find something similar to that already in Vitruvius, with a bit of [post?? rationalisation?] [retroactive rationalisation]. It is an interesting and difficult question which perhaps explains why we still call it Architecture and not something else. I firmly believe in this and I think it is key to the rethinking of the current role of the architect. After all the word “architect” doesn’t mean an individual, a white male of a certain age anymore; it often includes a whole group of different knowledges within a network of cooperating individuals. Is this the end of the “architect”? No, it is merely changing.

I’m sometimes afraid that the architect today might become only a communication tool, a mediating infrastructure that would sacrifice its own autonomy ...

I actually like the idea of the architect as infrastructure – as long as this infrastructure is not designed by an engineer (laughs). I would call it enabling, and you call it infrastructure, but I like it. But a part of this non-quantifiable process would always have to be a break, a stop, a decision: an almost irrational element. Which I don’t think of in the sense of nonsensical. Yet, without that moment, a completely rational process can have as an outcome different and equally valid solutions. The moment of decision can only be introduced through practice, through experience. In the past, this would have perhaps been called apprenticeship – the word has today become popular again. But it is an old idea, that there is a form of knowledge that is not necessarily verbal or expressed in form of a narrative. That there exists also a different way of learning. After all, architects go through a process of education that lasts far longer than just the time in architecture school. I think this is where the uniqueness and ambivalence of the architectural profession is, and that should be maintained. So: infrastructure, but not only in the sense of a tool.

At the September event in Ljubljana there was a lot of talk about critical theory. You yourself were talking about Tafuri and his “pessimistic” critique of architecture that is often understood as a cul-de-sac of critical theory which we cannot break free from since the ‘70s. But isn’t precisely pessimism, posing hard questions and rethinking the existing, the only consistent way to attempt for a more optimistic future?

I’m a “dinosaur” in this regard and I believe in critical theory. Being critical enables the practice, whether it is writing, architecture, or something else ... Criticality is present in the work itself, even if the author perhaps claims to be “post-critical”, whatever that is ... If pessimism is a way of asking questions that are not afraid of cul-de-sacs, this is even more important in today’s situation. I think that such criticality never completely disappeared. It is present in architecture in the self-critical nature of the project, which can later be overcome, concealed or suppressed ... But it has to be present in a certain moment in order to produce solutions. Such pessimism never stops by itself, it always digs deeper, it is incredibly active, loud, propulsive, it is not afraid, and is therefore a

necessity. I sound old fashioned now, but I don't care – this is the core of the role of the project and of the architect.

In your past work you've also thematised Koolhaas – an architect who seems to be as far from Tafuri as possible. But you have linked his *Delirious New York* and his “retroactive manifesto” for Manhattan precisely with Tafuri's work.

Koolhaas never really explains why he uses the word “delirium”. Of course, I looked at its psychoanalytical definition. Freud links the word to erasure, which I find very interesting. Erasure is not always complete; it can only be partial and incomplete. Koolhaas illustrates this with the blueprint. I concentrated on the breaking points of, let's call it, Koolhaas's “historical project”. He needs to stop at a certain point, so he can become something else and return to architectural practice. The process reaches a point where continuation with words would be senseless, even with such a polemical manifesto as *Delirious New York*. This break is also where one could sense continuity between Koolhaas's early theoretical work and his current practice.

And this links him to Tafuri. Tafuri identifies the role of architecture, and carves out for himself the role of its historian - but the sort of historian that is not afraid of the anxieties and conflicts of the present. In the end, he devotes himself particularly to the unresolved moments. If Koolhaas's delirium, in a sort of a clinical definition, produces a shift from the text towards the project, and a renunciation of polemical activity, we're talking here about a different sort of history – a return to crisis, to the cul-de-sac we mentioned earlier when talking about critical theory. I don't advocate continuity where everything merges into a unified story. These shifts or radical breaks are a sort of restart, but not from zero point. In one way or another, through affirmation or negation, we build on everything that already was, and this is in my opinion the crucial quality of architecture.

I teach architectural history but I'm not a historian. This is important for me – because I try to identify in architectural history the reoccurring problems. It is a sort of interrogation of architecture – what is architecture, what it does and in what way, again and again. Architecture can never identify itself precisely, which is why it is obsessed with the search for its origins. This is why it pretends it is the most material and most solid of the arts, but in reality it is the weakest and the least self-assured.

Obsession with the origins of architecture is truly interesting – especially since the profession of architect (as opposed to architecture itself) is relatively recent, at least in its current form. Is this a retroactive establishing of one's own professional indispensability?

I prefer to think that the profession of the architect is older than a couple of centuries. With this I mean the profession that unifies the intellectual, the designer and the coordinator of the building process. Perhaps what you're talking about is true for the 20th century architect. But the contemporary architect is more and more alike to the one of centuries ago, when the idea of collective building by master masons resulted in the construction of cathedrals. It is getting harder and harder to sign a project with a single name; the multitude of authors is a little bit like that of the stonemasons who carved their names in their stonework. Perhaps we're moving in this direction, though of course not as a pure return of the past. We spoke of pessimism earlier, but I'm more and more optimistic. It seems that contemporary practice involves something we're not exactly capable of naming or defining, and yet it persists.

Perhaps the most interesting architectural articulation of this unknown content is for me Lacaton & Vassal's Bordeaux square where they resisted gentrification through making a project of "doing nothing" – not as a renunciation but as a project. Perhaps it is such "passivity" that successful resistance towards gentrification can be achieved?

This reminds me of one of Sorkin's projects for 9/11, where he proposed leaving the site intact. Of course, doing nothing is never really nothing. It cannot be nothing; it is always at least the affirmation of concepts like maintenance, preservation ... Barthes similarly wrote about silence – it is never completely silent, completely in the middle or completely passive. If it were complete, it would simply be just a choice, one of the possibilities. True silence is almost silent – as a sort of whisper. I mean something similar when I say that we should keep alive the intrinsic ambivalence of architecture. That is why architecture is not only in the buildings, but it also thinks itself, it persists in redefining itself. In some cases, it can be a document that says: sorry, dear mayor, we won't do anything. Or: we'll do something, but you won't even notice. But this is not going to make anybody rich. On the contrary – you end up being evicted from your own office (laughs).