The Architecture Exchange Workshop Series

Theory's Curriculum

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'SYMPTOMATOLOGY
not only strains theory's capacity to project alternative futures, it
also prevents it from saying anything about the present...'

Theory Beyond the Massage: A Thin Red Line
Jeremy Lecomte, 03

'It may be time to drop the term *theory* as a topic of architectural
pedagogy and adopt instead a term – such as "architectural
discourse" or even "architectural rhetoric."'

From the Boudoir to the Boxing Ring:
Or, How Architectural Theory Justified "Gym Crow"
Ginger Nolan, 14

'It may be the case that architectural theory in its most critically
engaged orientation is somewhat incompatible with its siting
inside a school, inside a curriculum, inside a university.'

Schooling Theory
Joseph Bedford, 30

'Globalizing architectural theory can fundamentally challenge
our conception of what theory is and what it should do.'

Is Architectural Theory Western?
Joseph Godlewski, 38

'theory is not a singular entity, nor a unified form of inquiry;
rather, it is a process of interrogating, situating, and
unsettling the present.'

Liquid. The Present of Architecture Theory
Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco, 51

'THEORY

DOES NOT

NEED

YOUR

PATRONAGE'

'Gen Z is intellectually agile and forward-looking;
rather than withdrawing into autonomy, they seek
immediate material consequences for their actions.'

'Criticism's ability to challenge itself
depends on greater participation... '

'Can we imagine aesthetic judgements
to be shared but not universal?'

'... BINARY CAMPS ALLOW FOR
THE STAGING OF DEBATES ...'

Generational Shifts, Criticality, and the Relevance of Architectural Theory Today

Gabriel Fuentes

> "I believe I drank too much wine last night at Hurstbourne; I know not how else to account for the shaking of my hand today. You will kindly make allowance therefore for any indistinctness of writing, by attributing it to this venial error."
> –Jane Austen

> "Thanx for ur txt last night. ended up gettin totaly maggotd n my hands r still shakin dis mornin so if any typos thats y."
> –Jane Austen via text message[1]

When considering the state of architectural theory and its pedagogies, we must ask: *who* is theory for? Who, in other words, are we teaching? What shapes *their* world? And how is architectural theory relevant for them? Today's architecture students are part of the first generation born into a hyper-integrated world—digital natives of a neoliberal eco-informational society. Coming of age in the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis, their worldviews are influenced largely by the socio-economic inequalities of neoliberalism, ubiquitous technology, and the flattening effects of network culture layered onto the institutional (infra)structures set in place by their Silent and Boomer elders. As a result, they have been subject to extreme (mis)characterizations, ranging from Mark Bauerlein's characterization as the "dumbest generation" to what Neil Howe and William Struss call the "next great generation," a generation of heroes poised to bring about massive global change.[2]

In what follows, I trace collective and meta-critical shifts in architecture along the Howe-Strauss generational theory model—situating architecture's theoretical turns and historiographical pressure points (1968 being one of many) as symptoms of these broader generational shifts. Seen this way, the so-called "problem" or "death" of theory should not be misconstrued as an outright lack of criticality. To the contrary, the "post-critical" tendency to be critical *toward* theory reflects the same "post-modern" tendency to theorize modernity *against*

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1   Mark McCrindle and Emily Wolfinger, "Influences on 21st Century Language," in *Word Up: A Lexicon and Guide to Communication in the 21st Century* (Braddon, AU: Halstead Press, 2011).

2   For more on Bauerlein's position, see: Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Culture: Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008).

modernism.[3] Both are symptomatic of larger generational cycles
through which different generations negotiate their places in history.

In *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069,* Howe and
Strauss claim that generations develop along four distinct phases
(childhood, young adulthood, midlife, and elderhood) over a span of
eighty to a hundred years.[4] With a birth span of twenty to twenty-five
years in between, each generation defines their values around a
constellation of historic events, pressing (or trending) issues, and
contemporary technologies.[5] Having their strongest collective agency
during young adulthood and midlife, each generation challenges,
without always subverting, the strictures of previous generations while
constructing the milieu of the next.

Over the 20th century (and into the 21st), this milieu has been defined
by a constellation of seven generations: the Lost Generation (b. 1883-
1901); the G.I. Generation (b. 1902-1924); the Silent Generation (b.
1925-1942); the Baby Boom (b. 1943-1960); Generation X (b. 1961-1981);
Generation Y or The Millennials (b. 1982-1991); and Generation Z (b.
1992-2009).[6] As the offspring of late-Generation X/early-Generation Y,
today's architecture students (Z'ers) are the first born into a
technologically connected world. Yet while the information economy
offers them the advantage of being the most global generation in
history, it cannot be separated from dysfunctional politics, global
terrorism, economic uncertainty, social inequality, overt racism and
xenophobia, corporate corruption, and environmental crisis, forces that
have increasingly impacted architectural theory, education, and

3 Postmodern discourses were (indeed are) symptomatic of Modernity's
   internal contradictions as it negotiated the antifoundational, and hence
   hegemonic, forces of late capitalism. In this sense, Modernism—as
   a set of early 20th century aesthetic practices—lost its political and
   social agency as it fell one generation behind Modernity—the socio-
   psychological and philosophical conditions of "being modern," or
   "contemporary."
4 Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584
   to 2069* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991).
5 Technology and media, whether television and radio in the 20th century
   or social media platforms and artificial intelligence in the 21st, play a
   significant aesthetic and political role in mediating social values and
   systems of meaning across generations.
6 That this model is limited *to* and *by* a clear Anglo-American framework
   demonstrates both the opportunity and the critical need to widen the
   frame to include non-Western contexts—or, perhaps better said, to
   displace the West (particularly North America and the United Kingdom)
   from the evolutionary center of global culture.

practice in the 21st century.

Little wonder that theory has died a thousand deaths. To discourse on these issues can almost seem unethical, an intellectual indulgence that enables us to spin our linguistic wheels self-servingly while the world spins to ecological destruction, or a naive academic pursuit that distances us from the very markets that empower our capacity to initiate innovation and change (capitalism, after all, thrives on crisis). In "After Theory," Michael Speaks draws a generational line through the sand of architectural discourse by attacking architectural education's failure to "recognize the fundamental nature of the challenges confronting architecture in a world increasingly dominated by technological change and marketization," insisting that while schools have adequately instilled digital competency, they 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."[7] Theory, he claims, handicaps innovation by advancing Enlightenment ideals of ultimate truth and by splitting thinking from doing; that is, by asserting that "manifestos *guide* political action; that architectural theory *guides*

• architectural practice."[8] In a post-theoretical world, architectural theory must give way to a strategic and pragmatic realism capable of engaging our market-driven world rather than resisting it via anachronistic models of thinking (e.g. Deconstruction or Marxism). Architecture must operate, as Stan Allen writes, "*in* and *on* the world," not as commentary *about* the world.

But Speaks's argument for "post-theoretical" practices is neither anti-theoretical nor "post-critical" (a term applied to him by George

• Baird that he, in any case, denies).[9] To be sure, he resists, negates, and offers alternatives to the modes of architectural thinking and practice promoted by K. Michael Hays and Peter Eisenman. In other words, he is

• not *acritical* but rather *critical of a particular kind of criticality*.[10] In his *theory of atheoretical practice,* architecture engages the world affirmatively by *resisting resistance* (*Oppositions,* anyone?).

To resist resistance is to be both frustrated by and optimistic about the status quo—a middle-ground position that resonates with a generation overwhelmed by ever-changing news cycles (or media streams) that flicker between hope and doom. In *Millennials Rising,* Howe

7   Michael Speaks, "After Theory," *Architectural Record* 193, no. 6 (June 2005).
8   Ibid.
9   George Baird, "Criticality and Its Discontents," *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (Fall 2004/Winter 2005).
10   It should be noted that Speaks never used the term "post-critical."

and Strauss predicted that the Millennial Generation (according to some, a generational constellation of Generation Y and Generation Z)[11] would be heroes and rebuilders during the next crisis age, which they have since pegged to the economic recession of 2008.[12] More numerous, affluent, educated, and diverse than previous generations, this generation, they argued, would recast the Boomers' narcissistic emphasis on talk over action and Generation X's youthful image of free agency and alienation, emphasizing collaboration, modesty, kindness, good conduct, ethics, and social justice. They based their prediction on a close study of Anglo-American history that reveals cyclical patterns and generational archetypes.[13] If history is influenced by generations and vice versa, they argue, the two form a symbiosis between time and life. And if one is seasonal, the other must be also.

In an earlier book, *The Fourth Turning,* Howe and Strauss argue that history oscillates on a pendulum in response to generational patterns and conflicts.[14] The structure that binds these historical rhythms is the *saeculum,* an ancient Roman term used to define a long human life or a natural century.[15] Within each *saeculum,* they argue, societies turn at least

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11 There is some discrepancy in the way generational theorists define the beginning and end of generations. While Howe and Strauss mark the Millennial Generation as born between 1982-2004, followed by the Homeland Generation born in 2005 and beyond (they do not recognize a Generation Z), Australian researcher Mark McCrindle argues that the speed of social, political, and economic change enabled by technology has triggered the emergence of a new generation born after 1991 (what he calls Gen Z). Hence what Howe and Strauss consider one Millennial Generation, McCrindle considers two, Gen Y (1982-1991) and Gen Z (1992-2009), respectively. McCrindle calls the next generation (2010-?) Generation Alpha.

12 Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

13 While the arguments of this chapter are filtered through and limited in scope by an Anglo-American framework, it is important to note that as a historical-theoretical model, Generational Theory is, or at least should be, applicable across many cultural and geographic contexts. I hope that this chapter opens up the critical need to expand Howe and Strauss' work toward non-Western contexts and provides a foundation for further research.

14 Neil Howe and William Strauss, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy—What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America's Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).

15 According to Howe and Strauss, Anglo-American history has gone through six full *seacula* and is currently on its seventh: 1. Late Medieval Period (?-1486), 2. Reformation Period (1487-1593), 3. New World Period (1594-1703), 4. Revolutionary Period (1704-1793), 5. Civil War Period

four times in line with the life-phase shifts of current generations and the birth of new ones, roughly every twenty to twenty-five years. Each generational "turning" is akin to a climactic season in a four-season cycle with two extreme periods (summer and winter) and two mild ones (spring and fall). And because we can rely on the certainty of seasons, and yet no two seasons are exactly alike, history always resets itself structurally without ever repeating itself specifically.

Along this model (its teleology notwithstanding), every generational turn brings predictable changes in collective moods and dispositions as generational constellations re-shift and current generations compensate for the perceived excesses of older ones. First turnings (mild springs) are *High* periods, times when new civic structures replace old values, collectivism is strong, and individualism is weak; second turnings (extreme summers) are *Awakening* periods, times when youth are volatile and critical of the civic and institutional structures of previous generations; third turnings (mild falls) are *Unraveling* periods, times when civic and institutional structures are at their weakest and individualism peaks; and fourth turnings (extreme winter) are *Crisis* periods, times of major social change, collective restructuring, and civic/institutional rebuilding. In this model, Generation Z is a hero generation coming of age during the fourth turning of the Millennial *Saeculum,* the lineage of which began in the US with the postwar American High (first turning, 1946-1964), transitioned to the Consciousness Revolution of the late 1960s and the culture wars of the '80s, '90s, and early 2000s (second and third turnings, respectively), before transitioning to our current global crisis period (2008-2029?), driven by neoliberal capitalism and
- climate change.[16]

Architectural theory, of course, turns along with these generational shifts, which often form the foundation of what is recorded as history. During the Consciousness Revolution of the long '70s, for example, architectural theory was driven by a *crisis of meaning* which was interrogated by early postmodernist practices that were dialectical, negational, introverted, and narrowly focused on disciplinary autonomy. Theory was the weapon of a young, aggressive, and reflective generation grappling with the failures (real or perceived) of their forefathers: the unfulfilled promises of heroic Modernism. It was indeed

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(1794-1864), 6. Great Power Period (1865-1945), and 7. Millennial Period (1946-2029?).

16   For an in-depth study of generational history, theory, and dynamics, refer to Neil Howe's Life Course Associates Website, www.lifecourse.com/.

an *Awakening;* such critical practices reflected a disillusioned postwar youth that questioned everything from the very need for architecture to the cultural, institutional, and political structures put in place by previous generations. The so-called death of Modernism (symbolized by the televised demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe Housing complex in 1972) along with the intensifying Cold War, the John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations, the war in Vietnam, the 1968 riots, Woodstock, Watergate, and the oil crisis, gave rise to a range of counter-cultural movements aimed at disrupting the status quo.

Individualism and disruption leads to *Unraveling.* The third turning of architectural theory—driven by weak collectivity and developing during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s—celebrated discourse and difference around Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida (and also Venturi, Tafuri, and Rossi). The Reagan and Thatcher years of rising neoliberalism, strengthening consumer culture, and the dot-com boom combined with the LA riots, widening inequality and racism, and MTV, gave rise to gangster rap, grunge, mallrats, and a new wave of critical theory. But because late postmodernism's anti-foundational project reduced the social to a system of differences divorced from the ideologies and institutions set in place by modernity, its criticality failed to foster collective agency for long-term institutional change. Witness the *crisis of theory* (and not necessarily *meaning*) and the rise of "post-criticality" in architecture into the 21st century.

But whither criticality? With Silicon Valley startups perfecting deepfake technology and the sixteen-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg named Time's 2019 "Person of the Year," can we really claim that today's youth passively accept the status quo? Whereas Boomers and Gen X'ers—characterized by their parochial self-reflection—used theory to disrupt neoliberalism (without any real hope of overcoming it), Gen Z is intellectually agile and forward-looking; rather than withdrawing into autonomy, they seek immediate material consequences for their actions. They are practice-driven; with (a capacity for) derivative intelligence, they are less interested in moral and philosophical complexity, authenticity, and "original" culture. Hence, if theory was once used as a weapon to resist, escape, or destroy the system, today's generation has a different arsenal for a different mission: armed with technology, algorithms, and a networked collective force, they are geared to hack into the system, to expand and reshape it from within to be more just, equitable, and inclusive. Instead of resisting capitalism through sophisticated theoretical procedures, they work reflexively *within*

 and *against* it (or, put differently, they work within capitalism *in order to* work against it, against capitalism *in order to* work within it), seeking opportunities to carve niches within society itself. Wittingly or not, they are critical but not necessarily negational.

So where does this leave theory when Gen Z students seem so indifferent to big ideas, when immediate gratification trumps the hard work of critical discourse? Students starting out today were affected by 9/11 and Bush's Global War on Terror, the 2008 economic crisis, and, most recently, the polarizing cultural and political landscape triggered by Brexit and the Trump presidency. With the world in such turmoil, who has time to indulge in slow, big picture, structurally critical, and self-reflective theory? Isn't the world too complex to understand, too entwined to disentangle? Doesn't theory—distant and abstract—preclude action? What good does it do when confined to the white walls of the academy?

In fact, it still does a lot. Theory has the benefit of being both historically situated and critically distanced, institutionally backed but not market-driven. Because of this, theory enables architecture to operate from the middle-in; that is, to engage the world from a uniquely disciplinary position, one that considers the specifically architectural (form, space, aesthetics, materials, systems, etc.) with the same intensity as it does the structural conditions that frame and enable it (the social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental contexts). Theory, in other words, can open up the world *to* and *for* architecture, making it visible to and *for* a generation empowered to effect change by means other than thought models and literary revolutions. Theory itself, then, is not dead; its modes of criticality, communication, and visibility are simply subsumed in a vast social media complex that shapes, partitions, and distributes the ecologies of knowledge that in turn shape the way we define, see, and effect "the global." These modes are key to understanding the role global issues might play in contemporary theory and its pedagogies.

To make theory relevant today, we must acknowledge that Gen Z is a *platform generation* through and through—their systems of meaning are in constant flux precisely because they are both grounded pragmatically in the world (socially, physically, economically) and digitally mediated. As Mark Wigley pointed out during a debate with Peter Eisenman regarding the status of "ground" in architecture, "this generation is grounded in the digital," not, as Eisenman would have it, in the metaphysics of presence. He continues,

> "…the concept of 'ground' has moved into the digital…
> (hence) it is more true to say that a building today stands
> (more) on the digital platforms with which it was conceived
> than on the (actual) site. Or to restate that same point,
> digital platforms ARE THE SITE; buildings are literally
> constructed in the space of digital transactions, a version
> of which could be dropped onto what we used to call a
> (physical) site…"[17]

In a media-saturated world, information platforms condition the
relational and representational dimensions of architectural theory, its
sites, and its pedagogies. The surface is the medium and the medium is
the message. But who is the message for? What kind of message is
architecture willing to engage?

   According to Marc Prensky, social media is not as remarkable in
itself as in its capacity to *enable* (now, reread the sentence with "theory"
in place of "social media"). In other words, the inherent programmability
of social media lends us the ability to channel mass anxiety toward
collective action (or, perhaps, *re*action). In "The Death of Command and
Control?" he argues that, through social media, today's generation can
shift our core concepts of democracy from within as their collective
agency grows and strengthens.[18] Hacking the systems once deemed
closed —from corporations and politics to education, pop culture, and
indeed architectural practice—they are (re)designing and supporting
the software that enables institutional change. But we must distinguish
criticality as reactive angst from *critique* as systematic analysis. As the
youth climate protests, #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter, and the
Parkland shooting protests (to name a few) have all recently shown,
criticality is alive and well among today's youth. But many are effecting
(or *wanting* to effect) immediate change without structural critique—the
potential agency of critical theory has been replaced by what Nick
Srnicek and Alex Williams call *folk politics.*

   In *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work,* Srnicek and
Williams describe folk politics as a "collective and historically

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17   Mark Wigley, "Wobble: The Cat Has Nine Lives," debate with Peter
     Eisenman at Columbia University, Graduate School of Architecture,
     Planning and Preservation on September 12, 2012, www.youtube.com/
     watch?v=Gu4-ErX6hDA.
18   Marc Prensky, "The Death of Command and Control?" in *Technology
     Alliance Partners,* January 20th, 2004, accessed February 18, 2013, www.
     marcprensky.com/writing/prensky-sns-01-20-04.pdf.

FIG 3:
Mark Wigley and Peter Eisenman discuss the status of "ground" in architecture during a public debate at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation on September 12th, 2012.
Photo: https://www.flickr.com/photos/ gsapponline/7983645335/

constructed political common sense that has become out of joint with
- the actual mechanisms of power."[19] In other words, by scaling global problems down to human scale, folk politics operate locally on the surface—reducing the overwhelming structural complexity of our neoliberal world to something affective, tangible, and thinkable by emphasizing temporal, spatial, and conceptual immediacy over large-scale, long-term strategy (all that is relevant evaporates into media). If critical architectural theory was at one point radical in its structural critique, the social relevance and political agency of such critique is now muted within the ubiquitous white noise of a fragmented collective hegemonically conditioned by finance capitalism and its infrastructures. There is no outside: if architecture is to resist anything, it can only do so
- incrementally from within the system[20]—Manfredo Tafuri meets Post Malone.

But while architectural practice—in its focus on the building scale, the local and affective, the collaborative and participatory, the material and its processes of construction—might be considered a folk political practice (or, at least, a practice conditioned by a kind of folk political thinking that maintains a gap between architecture's desire for deep structural change and its actual ability to effect it), architectural theory has the capacity to resist from within by reorienting and reconfiguring the infrastructures that condition both architectural and public discourse. Its strongest critical agency lies in its ability to collapse the scale(s) at which architecture operates, pulling the local and the global

- into each other as it (re)draws history in its own image.[21] For Gen Z, then, theory is a platform for hacking the world *through* practice, and vice versa.

Of course, time will tell if and how Generation Z—the hero generation of the Millennial *Saeculum*—will bring about the large-scale, long-term structural changes predicted by Howe and Struss. But one thing holds true: even though today's architecture students (and future architects/theorists) do not recognize—indeed, are conditioned never

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19 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2016).

20 See: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990).

21 In this sense, architectural theory not only remains true to its historical meaning as both critical contemplation (*theoria, theoros*) and theater (*thea*), but it also, and inescapably, risks (for better or worse) operating as what Srnicek and Williams describe as a "folk-political injunction...to reduce complexity down to human scale."

to imagine—a world outside of the oppressive hegemonic forces of neoliberal capitalism, their experiences within the system have not dulled their sense of angst, their desire for change, nor their disposition for action. If theory is in crisis, it is not for lack of criticality; what traditional architectural theory lacks, indeed what it has always lacked, is the ability to *exercise* the power necessary to transform capitalism.[22] Hence the relevance of architectural theory today—in an interconnected yet fragmented, eco-informational society—is not its traditional role as an instigator and protector of grand metanarratives, but rather its *representational* and *infrastructural* capacity to infuse the system and turn it against itself... at least until the next spring. ●

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22 In this area, the Right has overwhelmed and outmaneuvered the Left, by now all but subsumed under the hegemonic forces of neoliberalism. While effective as modes of disruption, traditional leftist tactics (analyzing, protesting, unionizing, striking, occupying, theorizing, etc.) often fall short of strategically engaging the deep structural conditions necessary for political change (evidenced by our current state of socio-economic inequalities and environmental crisis). As an aesthetic and political practice – and theorizing is indeed a kind of practice – architecture's critical capacity lies largely in its ability to fuse the radical tactics of the Left with the hegemonic strategies of the Right around strong ethical values, hybridizing new modes of theory and design toward reconfiguring what Keller Easterling calls contemporary "matrix space."