The Figure of Knowledge

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The counter-critical and anti-theoretical arguments that emerged at the turn of the second millennium cast the theoretical project of the 1980s and 1990s, and its authors, as effete or effeminate. Which is not to say that the figure of theoretical knowledge in architecture took female form. Rather, the figure that was conjured was a male architect-writer whose impotency was exposed by the action-oriented pragmatism of the architect-builder. These attacks used the very same gendered dichotomies that feminist theorists had sought to expose at the heart of architectural discourse. Anti-theoretical tracts followed a decade during which female theorists had published widely and been professionally rewarded with positions in elite architectural academies. This paper seeks to reveal and understand the relationship between the “effeminizing” of architectural theory and the broader context of divisions of academic labor and institutional regulatory regimes, feminist backlash, loaded metaphors, and territorial disputes between gendered actors. It questions the effects of these attacks, not just on architectural theory and its venues, but for women practicing architectural theory.

Effete theory

Michael Hays and Alicia Kennedy observed in 2000 that the “anti-theoretical rants” that were then gathering force came “from deep within the theoretical camp.” They may well have been thinking about Michael Speaks. Speaks obtained a doctorate in literature at Duke University under the supervision of Fredric Jameson in 1993, completing a dissertation titled *Architectural Ideologies: Modern, Postmodern, and Deconstructive.* Adept in the lingua franca of critical cultural and architectural theory, Speaks, nevertheless, came to repudiate theory and the
belief, treasured by the leftist avant-garde, that architecture could critically refuse to accept things as they are. In 2000 Speaks wrote, “Architecture should no longer recoil from the degraded world of business and corporate thinking; on the contrary, it should aggressively seek to transform itself into a research-based business.” He provocatively celebrated the “managerial avant-gardists” or “class of doers” showcased in business lifestyle magazines. Two years later, in an essay ostensibly advocating for intelligent solutions to the development of the World Trade Center site after September 11, Speaks collapses Deleuze’s writings on Spinoza with the utterings of the management theorist and former Shell Oil Company strategist Arie de Geus. Here, Speaks launches an argument for entrepreneurialism, adaptability, innovation, formal diversity, and rapid prototyping, as if these were interchangeable aspects of the real – a position reminiscent of certain arguments from the 1970s which saw in the “real,” be that Las Vegas or Manhattan, opportunities for architecture to gain renewed relevance and an expanded audience.

There were more philosophically astute assessments of the trajectory and positions of the architectural avant-garde, such as that delivered by Charissa Terranova to the 2002 ACSA annual conference, which disappeared from view. But Speaks’s essay, along with several others published around the same time of a post-ideological, post-theory character, attracted much attention and were given longer lives by their subsequent inclusion in architectural theory compendiums and curricula. By 2004, George Baird in “‘Criticality’ and its Discontents” characterized the situation in terms of a generational struggle, brought about by “the understandable career efforts” of the protégés of architect Peter Eisenman “to cut loose from him.” Baird and others observed that trajectories such as that taken by Speaks, while announcing theory’s end, could equally be seen as evidence of its success, given that he and others drew heavily on its precepts and techniques. With greater distance, we can now also add that Speaks’s defection proved a savvy career move. In the context of an increasingly conservative and managerially attuned academic sector, rhetoric around enhanced professional relevance and industry engagement is more enthusiastically received than is talk of autonomy and resistance. Taking up a deanship at Syracuse University in 2014, Speaks emphasized his ongoing commitment to the vocational aspect of architectural training over what he describes as an Ivy League approach characterized by “an art historical inquiry into the fundamentals of the discipline.” He insists that architecture students should be conversant in the language of real estate, finance, and development as a practical matter, enabling them to act.

Speaks came to this position via a doctoral dissertation that, in its scope and references, would anticipate a quite different conclusion. In it he cites Barthes, Althusser, Jameson, Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida, and literary theorists and writers such as Linda Hutcheon, Kathy Acker, and Robert Siegle. His dissertation
is very much concerned with textuality, the relationship between writing and architecture, and the possibility of a “type of architectural writing which, rather than producing representations of significations, is itself a virtual architectural form [...]”

Speaks revered Bernard Tschumi’s La Villette Project in Paris and praised Derrida’s reading of its competition drawings and models as an example of “a new, theoretical, ideological architecture.”

Derrida had impressed upon his enthusiastic readers, and we can include Speaks in this group, that philosophy cannot be extricated from the rhetoric it uses, in large part due to philosophy’s dependence on metaphor. There can be no speaking directly, no action that evades or precedes text.

It is not unreasonable, then, given his education and interests, to assume that Speaks’s choice of words in “Design Intelligence: Part 1, Introduction” (2002) is deliberate and, if it is not, that he would in any case appreciate the deconstruction of this text. Like Derrida, this essay latches onto one troubling word that has not been subject to interrogation in the retrospective consideration of Speaks’ text and its historical moment in architecture. It is the word effete. Speaks writes contemptuously of the intellectual arguments of the 1980s and 1990s that proposed architecture’s autonomy from the imperatives of capitalism. “Whether effete Derridian or ponderously Tafurian, theoretically inspired vanguards operated in a state of perpetual critique,” Speaks fumes; they were “incapacitated by their own resolute negativity.”

This caricature of the Derridian as effete is, it will be argued, symptomatic of a battle for the right to theorize, to speak of, and for, architecture.

“Effete” once described a person or group of people that are enfeebled and powerless, who lack strength or courage. Alternatively, it meant to be affected and pretentious, degenerate and decadent. Etymologically derived from the Latin “ex” meaning out, and “fetus,” effete refers in the Latinate sense to one who is worn out by bearing young. Despite its roots in childbearing, the word “effete” is not typically used to describe old women. Indeed, like the word “butch,” its power lies in the gap between gender assignation and gendered expression. As the Oxford Living Dictionary observes, in its contemporary use effete describes a man who is weak, or unmanly, a man who is effeminate. The Macmillan Dictionary tells us that the word effete is now “used about a man who looks or behaves like a woman.”

The Oxford English Dictionary applies the term effete to one “that has become like a woman: Womanish, unmanly, enervated, feeble; self-indulgent, voluptuous; unbecomingly delicate or over-refined.” The notion that to be like a woman is to be feeble and delicate is obviously contestable; nevertheless, this is the stereotype conjured by the epitaph “effete.” The effete has also been linked to literary writing and a particular cliché of queer identity. Alan Sinfield situates the implosion of the categories of aestheticism, literariness, aristocracy, homosexuality, and effeminacy with the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde.

From here on, the epitaph “effete” is one
of a chain of words that inculcate writing itself. More recently, we might refer to
Harvard Professor Niall Ferguson’s assertion that the economist John Maynard
Keynes “would take this selfish world view because he was an ‘effete’ member of
society.” Ferguson proposes that Keynes’ economic philosophy is flawed by lack of
interest in the future, a selfish worldview he ascribes to Keynes’s lack of children
and alleged homosexuality.\footnote{14}

Use of the term \textit{effete} to deride Derrida and the Derridian was not new. Mark
Edmundson, for example, discerns in the New Critics gathered around Harold
Bloom a tendency to dismiss Derrida as “an effete textualist.”\footnote{15} The quality of being
effete does not relate to Derrida’s social or sexual life but is ascribed to the fact of
his attending to and reveling in the textual, of being caught up with the surficial
and aesthetic effects of words and literary modes and styles. It is not Derrida’s
power\footnote{16} or masculinity\footnote{17} that is on trial. Nor perhaps even what he argues, but \textit{how}
he argues. Derrida’s enthusiasm for etymology, onomatopoeia, alliteration, meta-
phor, grammar, translation, and syntax—all of these interests are philosophically
suspect and \textit{unmanning}.

Derrida, naturally, is alert to the use of masculine and feminine terms and
concepts in philosophical texts. Indeed, one could say that he fixates on the ways in
which gender, sexuality, sex, and procreation play out in language and metaphysics
—a fixation exemplified by the essay \textit{Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles} (1978). As the theorist
of difference, he is much interested in the implications of the conventional binary
concepts of man and woman, masculinity and femininity in philosophy. He often
adopts paradoxical lexemes, hymen, for example, that are startlingly gendered
while proffering them as a way to think beyond binaries. He sees the failure and
impurity of sexual norms as something like an opportunity for their redescription.
Derrida is also adept at repeating and twisting these norms in ways that confuse
readers seeking a clear moral or political position on feminism and criticism. For
example, in \textit{Spurs}, he “translates” Heidegger’s description of the philosopher of art
as one who “even though he at times fancies himself an artist producing works, is
content merely to gossip about art, he is a woman—and what is more he is a sterile
woman […] impotent, a sort of old maid.”\footnote{18} It is something like this assertion that
Speaks compresses into the word “effete.”

Derrida is also sensitive to the ways in which writing, and poetic writing espe-
pecially, are dismissed. Richard Rorty claims that Derrida explains “why writers are
thought effete in comparison with scientists – the ‘men of action’ of our latter days.”
Rorty believes that Derrida exposes the roots of Kant’s desire to show directly
rather than through the thick veil of writing,\footnote{19} arguing that Derrida’s treatment
of philosophical texts allows us to see the Kantian versus non-Kantian contrast as
that “between the man who wants to take (and see) things as they are, and thus
make sure that the right pieces go in the right holes, and the man who wants to
change the vocabulary presently used for isolating pieces and holes.”

The work of the Kantian, Rorty continues, “is no effete paradise, but one who does his share in the mighty time-binding work of building the edifice of human knowledge, human society, the City of Real Men […] the non-Kantian is a parasite, flowers could not sprout from the dialectical vine unless there were an edifice into whose chinks it could insert its tendrils. No constructors, no deconstructors.”

(It is remarkable, that in a discussion about Derrida, Rorty himself seems to repeat the Sartrean metaphor of empty holes so vulnerable to accusations of sexism. The gendered view of the Kantian man-of-action as edifice-builder to the theorist’s vine, emanates, Derrida claims from the “castrated delusions of virility” evident in philosophy’s dogmatic belief in “truth, science, and objectivity.” Derrida could well be speaking of the projective or pragmatic turn in architecture.

The use of “effete” here is not an isolated instance of Speaks resorting to feminizing insults. In “Two Stories for the Avant-garde” he describes both Sanford Kwinter and the “theory avant-garde” more generally as “hysterical.” The word’s origins are in the Greek hysterikos, of the womb, and it was adopted in the 19th century to describe a neurotic condition thought to be caused by dysfunction of the uterus. The gendered distinction between interpretation, criticism, and theorizing, and the straightforward action of building, making, and acting directly on the world that words such as “effete” and “hysterical” effected went largely unnoticed at this time. Perhaps it was because this gendering was furthered in quite subtle ways, a word here, a metaphor there. Take Whiting and Somol’s argument for projective architecture in “Notes around the Doppler Effect” (2002). Drawing from Dave Hickey’s obituary on Robert Mitchum, they pitch Robert De Niro’s “laboured” method acting – their equivalent of critical architecture’s reflective and narrative approach – against a “rakish, lascivious” action-oriented Robert Mitchum. De Niro is emasculated, Mitchum is hyper-masculine. Whiting and Somol repeat Hickey’s claim, that as an actor Mitchum performs and that performance is delivered, not expressed or represented. Because he performs with his entire body, Mitchum is plausible and surprising. In contrast, with De Niro’s style of acting, you can see the struggle and the construction of the character. De Niro, adhering to the “Method” style of acting, constructs the character out of details. Both actors played the same role in versions of the film Cape Fear. Where in the 1991 remake, the film opens with De Niro’s character exercising, in the 1962 original, Mitchum enjoys a cigar and is shown “checking out two women as they leave the courthouse, cool as the breeze.” The critical architecture of the 1980s and 1990s that Whiting and Somol repudiate is, like De Niro’s acting, “one where architecture represented its procedure of formation.” Whiting and Somol call for an architecture that delivers performance and “never looks like work.” Several years hence, Robert Somol dismissed writing in no uncertain terms, stating...
“despite the common wisdom of recent history and theory, architecture is a verbal, not textual discipline.” In 1999, writing for Peter Eisenman’s Diagram Diaries, Somol, who had not trained or practiced as an architect, dramatically heralds the diagram as having emerged as the “final tool … for architectural production and discourse.”

Real effects

It is not, however, Derrida’s personal reputation that is at stake in Speaks’s essay, nor even of deconstruction, but the status of architectural theory and of its practitioners. Derrida himself had, in a 1992 discussion with an architectural audience at Columbia University insisted, “[d]econstruction was not primarily concerned with discourse, with text in the trivial, traditional sense but with institutions, that is with the solid, real, building of social constructs in which discourse, texts, teaching, culture, literature, are produced.” While it is possible to discern here, too, the relegation of the text to an inferior role to building, what Derrida is pointing at is the intersection between institutions, social constructs, and texts. Deconstruction for him is not limited to a form of literary criticism but is an exposé of the rational and essentialist structures of philosophy, and of the political institutions and discourses that follow. The idea that the discourse around the “death of theory” is the product of an internal intellectual argument unrelated to social events, authors, and institutional structures is one of those philosophical fantasies that does not hold up under interrogation. So, why was the projective argument and the pronouncements of architecture theory’s end so compelling at the time? Why were they not seen as symptoms of a newly invigorated free market liberalism and a backlash against all progressive ideologies, especially those around diversity?

The answer lies partly in the resonance such announcements had with contemporaneous critical theory debates beyond architecture. These debates were colored by a pervasive sense of doom; theory’s impotence was seen to be related to global events. In 2003, the editorial board of Critical Inquiry held a conference to debate the future of the journal and theory more broadly. W. J. T. Mitchell observed of the timing of that conference that it “occurred at the very same moment that the United States was plunging into an unprecedented preemptive war against Iraq, without the approval of the United Nations and in the face of overwhelming opposition from great multitudes of people around the globe.” The events provoked questions about how theory might “counteract the forces of militarism, unilateralism, and the perpetual state of emergency.” It led, Mitchell postulated, to the more difficult question as to the value of “intellectual work in the face of the deeply anti-intellectual ethos of American public life…” In other words, the self-doubts
that paralyzed theorists at the beginning of the second millennium mirror the withdrawal of public confidence in intellectual pursuits. There was a growing feeling that theory’s concerns, modes, and arguments were shaped by external factors to a degree that made the critic’s onlooker stance untenable. Bruno Latour, in “Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern” (2004), reprimands the critic’s assumption of a position outside of societal conditions and their influences. He asks how it is that sociologists and cultural studies academics can argue the social construction of, say, science, religion, power, or sport, but “not one of us readers would like to see our own most cherished objects treated in this way.”

Of course, the situatedness of the critic, her gender, class, race, and embodiment had been central to feminist arguments, including those made in architecture. The rights of minorities to speak and participate in architectural discourse, to celebrate and articulate difference, was at the heart of architectural theory in the 80s and 90s. It behooves us then to see the gendering of theory as effete as part of a wider struggle about the political value of intellectual reflection and a larger struggle for women’s rights. Such a struggle tends to be expressed, as Speaks would have it, as a question of how to influence and contribute to society at large – how to be effectual, rather than effete.

Yet, what were the effects of this shift in discourse on practice, beyond the reification of Dutch architecture, with its seemingly pragmatic and data-driven aesthetics? The so-called “effete” and idealistic critical avant-garde – Tschumi, Eisenman, and Libeskind, for example – found themselves leading commercially successful practices delivering large projects for institutions, corporations, and the state. Those who repudiated architectural theory – Somol and Speaks, for example – continued to build their careers around writing, theorizing, and academia. The whole affair could be dismissed as the striking of inconsequential poses. Yet, there were effects. Careers were forged or faltered around the changing fortunes of architectural theory. Many theorists moved sideways into history and what has come to be called the architectural humanities. Others dropped out altogether. I am particularly interested in the dilemmas faced by female theorists as theory became “effete.”

**Women and the critical margins**

As Anne Freadman, Elizabeth Grosz, Meaghan Morris, Sneja Gunew, and many of the French feminists active in the 1980s argued, feminism and post-structuralism shared the conviction that writing, through formal experimentation and interrogation of the conditions of writing, opens up new speaking positions. Gunew, for example, claimed that to “speak as a feminist critic means no less than to be alert to
the ways in which ‘woman’ is constructed in various signifying practices, and to use this awareness to deconstruct texts,” adding that it followed that one would also be a writer of texts.37 For Grosz, feminist writers explored “the transgressive borders or margins of tolerance between philosophy and writing.”38 More than that, women claimed a critical advantage as outsiders. Take Diana Agrest’s statement from 1988: “It is from that outside that we can project better than anyone the critical look […] Woman, representing both the heterogeneity of matter through her body and the historical negation of her gender, is in the perfect position to develop such a discourse.”39 Many women saw themselves as critically enabled by the historic marginalization of the feminine and of female bodies in the discipline and in the academy. In a period in which marginality was seen as an instrument of political subversion and transgression, women made their marginalization a place of intellectual prospect from which experimentation could be advanced. They took the outsider status to which they had been historically relegated as muse and model, and redescribed the situation as an opportunity – to claim the coveted space of criticality for women.

Writers who were doubly outsiders, as women and as outsiders to the discipline, were among the first to write about gender and architecture. Half of the contributors to Beatriz Colomina’s _Sexuality and Space_, an edited volume of proceedings from a 1990 Princeton University conference of the same name, came from outside architecture. Laura Mulvey, Patricia White, and Lynn Spigel are film theorists, Molly Nesbit is an art historian, and Meaghan Morris and Elizabeth Grosz are philosophers. These women created a space for post-structuralist theorizing and for the question of gender and identity in architecture. In 1996, Cynthia Davidson’s _Anyone Corporation_ held its annual conference _Anybody_, in Buenos Aires, around the implications of new understandings of the body, including those emerging out of “the raised consciousness of the female body.” The year 1996 also saw the publication of multiple anthologies of architectural theory dedicated to questions of gender and sexuality: Coleman, Danze, and Henderson’s _Architecture and Feminism_; Francesca Hughes’s _The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice_; Diana Agrest, Conway and Kanes Weisman’s _The Sex of Architecture_; McCorquadale, Ruedi, and Wigglesworth’s _Desiring Practices: Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary_; and Joel Sanders’s _Stud: Architectures of Masculinity_. Kate Nesbitt includes a section titled “Feminism, Gender, and the Problem of the Body” in her 1996 anthology, _Theorising a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995_.

While there had been a trickle of prior texts, the year 1996 can be seen as a triumph of feminist theory in architecture, as well as a significant moment for women in architectural academia. Four of the above books were published by Ivy League presses – Yale, MIT, and Princeton – where several of the female contributors had advanced successful careers as architectural theoreticians, Peggy Deamer, Jennifer Bloomer, and Sylvia Lavin among them. But as audiences for their critical writings
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grew and institutional rewards accrued, the situation became paradoxical and disorienting. Beatriz Colomina, writing in the last issue of Assemblage, recalled that in the journal’s heady days in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the contributors were “more or less all disenfranchised. Nobody at the time had more than an assistant professor job. In fact, the majority didn’t have a real job at all. By the time we became more or less established, I wanted to end the magazine.”

In 1999, Sylvia Lavin spoke of the benefits of the marginalization of theory in the university, a situation she found “abets critical theory’s claim to be the origin of radical design” and allows theory to maintain its “criticality through institutional marginalization.”

In 2000, Catherine Ingraham wrote that theory is “still seeking the edge although the edge keeps moving out from under it.”

The retrospective feminization of architectural theory breaks this détente, but in ways that ultimately deny and misread the historic place for the feminist project of speaking from the outside. In place of Agrest’s picture of women enabled by their peripheral condition, we find instead narratives that approximate the breakup moment of the “bromance genre,” as if the debates about theory’s end or future were a matter for men to decide between themselves. The situation as Karen Burns describes it is one of homophobic irruptions in the exclusively homosocial address of men’s bonding to men in architecture.

Or as Reinhold Martin writes, “whether the name of the father is Peter or Rem, the postcritical project is deeply Oedipal.”

It is a matter of sons and fathers, of exchanges between men. Speaks’s argument is, thus, not with Bloomer, the most overtly Derridian of the theorists of the period, or even with Derrida, but with his rivals and mentors.

Conclusion

I have focused on the ways in which stereotypes of masculinity and femininity were used to diminish the value of theory in architecture, and of women’s contributions to theory. It is undeniable that feminine attributes were used derogatively to undermine critical theory. It is, though, another leap, and perhaps a paranoid one, to suggest that declarations of the end of theory were, at base, a backlash against feminism and the ways in which women had, through critical theory, turned their outsider position in architectural history to advantage. If one accepts that this is plausible there are several contradictory conclusions one could arrive at. The first is that the response was overzealous, something like killing the dog to eliminate the fleas, for the eminence of female theorists, perhaps of theory itself, was, even at its height, not assured. In the venues where theory’s death was being debated, men still held the reins. The journal Architectural Design had an editorial board consisting of nineteen men and two women. Its special issue on “Theoretical Meltdown” in
2009 engaged twenty-eight male contributors and just five women. The outpouring of publications on questions of gender and sexuality in architectural practice and theory in the year 1996, could, against this fact, be seen as a failed revolution. Catherine Ingraham seemed to succumb to this pessimistic assessment when she wrote that “it was inevitable that the field of architecture would retake its practice from the various practitioners of something other than architectural practice in order to revive empiricist and formalist approaches to material and (now-digital) technology in architectural practice.”

A second conclusion would take heart from the skirmish, noting that the gendered and homophobic narrative of “post-criticism” confirms the very weaknesses in architectural discourse that feminist theorists had sought to expose. Projective architecture failed to escape from binary oppositions between writing and building, resistance and complicity. It failed to recognize its own hubris in believing the architect could work productively to temper and modulate the aesthetic and social casualties of free-market libertarianism. Its contemporary flag bearer is not so much the parsimonious architecture of the Dutch, as the post-capitalist excesses and Trumpisms of Patrik Schumacher. Meanwhile, theoretical discourse about architecture has not disappeared but remains more necessary than ever.

Notes

7. “Michael Speaks of Syracuse Architecture.”
9. Ibid.
11. The pairing of “ponderous” and Tafuri in Speaks’ essay is a quite different insult. Ponderous derives from the Latin, ponder, meaning weight; it is related to the word pound. It could refer to a turidity of writing, a pessimistic worldview, or heaviness of person, none of which assail Tafuri’s masculinity or authority.
16. In 2002, Derrida was aged seventy-two and not yet diagnosed with the pancreatic cancer that would kill him two years later. He was still very much sought out and powerful, teaching at the University of California, Irvine, where he had been Professor of Humanities since 1986, and serving as a regular visiting professor at several other major American and European universities.
20. Ibid., 157-58.
21. Ibid.
22. Sartre discusses slime and holes in Being and Nothingness, declaring “the obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which ‘gapes open.’ It is an appeal to being as all holes are.” Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 613. His claims infuriated numerous feminists. See Christine Daigle, “Where Influence Fails: Embodiment in Beauvoir and Sartre,” in Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle


24. Ibid.


27. Somol and Whiting, “Notes around the Doppler Effect,” 76-77.

28. Ibid., 77.

29. Ibid.


35. Ibid.


41. Sylvia Lavin, “Theory into History; Or, the Will to Anthology,” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 58, no. 3 (September 1999): 497.


