CHAPTER 14

Consequences of Pragmatism: A Retrospect on “The Pragmatist Imagination”

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By way of introduction

The following essay centers around a project – a deliberate intervention into “theory’s history” – that I undertook as director of the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, a semi-independent unit within the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University. I ask the reader’s indulgence if I write this account partly in the first person as I think it will be the simplest and most honest way to tell the story.1

My tenure began in 1994. Not having previously identified myself as an Americanist, I felt obliged to think through the name of the institution I was now heading. What, if anything, was distinctively “American” about American architecture? What were the implications for formulating an intellectual project at the Buell Center in the mid–1990s? Soon after my appointment, I also began working on a long essay on Alexander Dorner, a German museum director and art historian who, during the Weimar Republic, transformed a provincial museum in the city of Hannover into a contemporary art institution. Convinced that “anyone wishing to construct a new esthetics, art history, or philosophy of the museum must first expose himself to the impact of practical life,” Dorner enthusiastically embraced the new contents of modernity. To him this also entailed discarding the metaphysical foundations of Western thought (Fig. 1).2 Forced to flee Nazi Germany in the 1930s, he emigrated to the United States, where he discovered the Pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey. What Dorner found most revelatory in American Pragmatism was the critique of metaphysics implicit in Dewey’s conception of art as experience and the path this opened beyond traditional aesthetics. In 1947 Dorner published a book entitled The Way Beyond “Art.” He dedicated it to Dewey, and Dewey wrote an introduction for it.
problems of contemporary art

alexander dorner: the way beyond "art"

Fig. 1. Alexander Dorner, *The Way Beyond "Art,"* Wittenborn, Schulz, 1947.
Dorner’s embrace of Dewey proved a little belated, as it turned out. In the two decades after World War II, Dewey’s democratic-reformist brand of Pragmatism suffered a decline, eclipsed by the politics of the Cold War and the harder-nosed logic of Analytic Philosophy, many of whose representatives had, like Dorner, been forced to flee European fascism for the United States. Yet starting in the 1960s, in another pendulum swing, the fortunes of Pragmatism began to revive again. Recuperated by Richard Rorty and other philosophers, Neopragmatism became an instrument with which to challenge the positivism of the Analytic school. The revival of Pragmatism also coincided with the assault on metaphysics that French post-structuralists were then carrying out (Fig. 2).

This history, about which we shall shortly dilate further, led me to consider whether American Pragmatism, widely credited as the only philosophy in the Western canon fledged in the United States rather than imported from abroad, might offer a fresh point of departure for thinking about the history and theory of modern architecture and, more ambitiously, whether it might offer a way to bridge the schism that had opened in recent decades between architectural theory and practice. Most simply defined, Pragmatism is a theory of practice. It also anticipates postmodernism in its anti-foundationalism. This led me to wonder whether Neopragmatism might provide some new insight into the relationship between modernism and postmodernism in architecture. I didn’t know the answer to these questions, especially since in its undermining of foundational truths and its emphasis on practice, Neopragmatism also seemed to cast doubt on the inherent value of theoretical speculation. This was clearly a slippery slope. But as W. J. T. Mitchell pointed out in the mid-1980s in response to a diatribe by two Pragmatist literary critics, “the antitheoretical polemic is one of the characteristic genres of theoretical discourse.”

In any event, to assess Pragmatism’s potential for architecture, it seemed essential to gain a better understanding of what this “American philosophy” was about historically, and why and how it was being refunctioned for use in the late 20th century.

Pragmatism after postmodernism?

With a similar aim here, let us venture a little further into the history of Pragmatism. As Dewey insisted, it is necessary to grasp our time in thought. From the outset, Pragmatist philosophy affirmatively and unapologetically presented itself as a modern way of thinking. Emerging in the decades around the turn of the 20th century in the writings of three father figures, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and Dewey, as well as other leading thinkers, it was anything but a monolithic corpus.
The debate on the relationship between scientific knowledge and moral philosophy, which has been a central concern of the history of philosophy, is of particular interest in the context of the High Tide of American Liberalism. In his book, John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism, John Ockman explores the role of Dewey's philosophy in shaping the intellectual climate of the early 20th century. Ockman argues that Dewey's philosophy, with its emphasis on pragmatism and the importance of experience, was instrumental in shaping the intellectual landscape of the time.

Ockman's analysis is grounded in his thorough research of Dewey's works and the context in which they were written. He demonstrates how Dewey's ideas were not only influential in the United States but also had a profound impact on the intellectual discourse of the time. Ockman's study provides a comprehensive understanding of Dewey's philosophy and its implications for contemporary thought.

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Fig. 2. New York Review of Books, May 9, 1996, review by Michael J. Sandel of Alan Ryan's John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism.
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of ideas. Already in 1908, one intellectual historian pointed out its contradictions in an essay titled “Thirteen Pragmatisms.” But what constituted its shared core was, first, a belief that truth was constructed, not given; and second, a preference for action over reflection. Theory, as the word’s etymology from the Greek *theoria* implies, is by definition contemplative, a spectator sport. Practice, or *praxis*, on the other hand, involves participation. Against other philosophies’ armchair engagement with reality, Pragmatism came down on the side of hands-on experience, trial-and-error experimentation, innovation, and an open-ended future.

It occurred to me that the advent of Pragmatism not only coincided with the rise of industrial capitalism but also with the emergence of modern architecture and urbanism. This contemporaneity – including a common location in Chicago in the 1890s – had largely been ignored by historians of architecture. Yet in stating in 1928 that “America” was the oldest country in the world because “it is she who is the mother of the twentieth-century civilisation,” Gertrude Stein, a student of William James, clearly perceived that the course on which the United States had embarked was also destined to transform the rest of the world. The firsthand reports of European architects like Hendrik Petrus Berlage, Erich Mendelsohn, and Richard Neutra seemed to confirm her intuition.

To other European intellectuals, however, Pragmatism appeared then and later as little more than a craven celebration of the machine age and the dollar – “a Ford efficiency engineer bent on the mass production of philosophical tin lizzies.” Its stress on ends over means – on “cash-value,” as James put it, using an intentionally crass metaphor – made it suspect to European thinkers of various stripes, from Heideggerians to Marxists. Ernst Bloch, whose “principle of hope” might have found some sympathy with Dewey’s “social hope,” denounced Pragmatism as a theory in which truth was synonymous with the “utility of ideas for business.”

Those who were hostile to mass culture, including the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, remained especially hostile to a Pragmatist ethos.

Yet in its initial phase of development, Pragmatism was part of a wider social, educational, and political reform movement in the United States known as Progressivism. It had close ties with endeavors like Jane Addam’s Hull House, with the first wave of American feminism, and with Dewey’s own Laboratory School in Chicago. As explicit in the thought of Dewey, its most socially and politically minded exponent, Pragmatism was not a triumphalist philosophy of laissez-faire capitalism but rather a theory that commented on and criticized capitalism from within. Dewey had few illusions about the dangers inherent in a system driven by the profit motive, but he believed they could be mitigated through organized and creative intelligence. If his writings lacked the tragic coloration of his Continental counterparts, he would remain a crusader against social injustice throughout his life and a public intellectual who spoke out on subjects from war to racism to
educational reform. Against the arguments of some of his contemporaries that an advanced industrial society could only be governed efficiently by a cadre of technocrats, Dewey wagered in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) that modern communications technologies like radio and the syndicated press would bring citizens together and facilitate the construction of a “Great Community.”11 Were he alive today, he would surely look to social media as a vehicle for new kinds of political agency and civic culture.

Dewey was no Pollyanna, however. Witnessing the crises of the 1930s, he decried the gross disparities of wealth in the United States and the venality of the banking system. Once a moral philosophy based on belief in equality and toleration of differences, the liberal worldview had become an alibi and ideological prop for the powerful, he feared. In calling for a “renascent” and “radical” liberalism, he envisioned something remote from what goes under that name today. “Liberalism must now become radical,” he stated, “meaning by ‘radical’ perception of the necessity of thoroughgoing changes in the setup of institutions and corresponding activity to bring the changes to pass.”12

But if Dewey’s faith was shaken by historical events, especially during the Depression, he refused to abandon the “party of hope.” Some considered his politics naive. But hope over truth was among the legacies he would bequeath to Richard Rorty a generation later. When asked in 1917 whether he was an optimist or a pessimist, Dewey replied, “I am a tremendous optimist about things in general, but a pessimist about everything in particular.”13 He was, in fact, influenced by the writings of both the young Marx and Antonio Gramsci. Like Rorty after him, he would have subscribed to Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach.14 Like Gramsci, who counseled “optimism of the will” in the face of “pessimism of the mind,” he believed in institutional reform, including (and especially) educational reform. But unlike his Marxist counterparts, he did not see class conflict as inevitable, and his vision of social change was incremental and meliorist rather than revolutionary.

After World War II, with the influence of Peirce, James, and Dewey on the wane and an imported-from-Vienna Logical Empiricism – now renamed Analytic Philosophy – in the catbird seat in American philosophy departments, Pragmatism was not so much rejected as selectively adapted by Analytic philosophers like Rudolf Carnap, W. V. O. Quine, and Hillary Putnam. According to historians Robert Hollinger and David Depew, the midcentury period was a second or interim stage in Pragmatism’s evolution, that of a “positivized and scientized pragmatism.”15 Yet in 1962 Thomas Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* signaled the emergence of a more skeptical attitude towards the truths of empirical science, suggesting – especially in Rorty’s tendentious reading – that scientific conclusions had no more validity than interpretations in other fields of knowledge and human experience.
In the wake of Kuhn’s questioning of scientific truth claims, Rorty’s edited volume *The Linguistic Turn*, which appeared in 1967, represented a repudiation of his own Analytic training. With subsequent books like *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), Rorty initiated a third stage of Pragmatism, or Neopragmatism, which he framed not just as post–Empiricist but also as post-philosophical and postmodernist. Rorty now demoted philosophy to “theory,” describing it as a subjective discourse and, most provocatively, “a matter of telling stories.”

The similarities to the ideas of Jacques Derrida were evident; the French philosopher of Deconstruction and the American philosopher of Neopragmatism were “natural allies,” as Rorty himself put it.

Yet for Rorty, as for his younger colleague Cornel West, Neopragmatism was not just a matter of demolition work at the level of philosophy and textual criticism. It was also an effort to sustain Dewey’s “social hope” at the level of politics (Figs. 3a, 3b). Politics was a different form of practice from professional philosophy, Rorty insisted. It took place not in the ivory tower but at the ballot box and on the picket line, at the union meeting and in the front of the bus. “Disengagement from practice,” he stated, “produces theoretical hallucinations.” Increasingly impatient with his academic colleagues on the left who were “haunted by ubiquitous specters
[of] ‘power’ à la Foucault, he denounced their “cultural politics” as cynical and nihilistic. Nothing short of a “moratorium on theory” was required. Not quite a ban, Rorty’s call for a moratorium on theory recalls (in an altogether different context) Louis Sullivan’s call a century earlier for a moratorium on ornament. Like architectural ornament for Sullivan, philosophy – or theory – was a desirable, even essential, form of cultural production for Rorty. But in its current state of abuse (“Hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left – principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness”) it had ceased to be a social good. In his late book Achieving Our Country, his most explicit stand on behalf of American exceptionalism, he endorsed Dewey’s belief that “the only point of society is to construct subjects capable of ever more novel, ever richer, forms of human happiness.”

*From the theory-death of architecture to the death of architectural theory*

The preceding excursus is intended not only to give a sense of Pragmatism’s historical and political complexities but also to clarify the thinking behind my recourse to this philosophy as I set out to formulate a program at the Buell Center. Rorty’s unabashedly patriotic liberalism was by no means unproblematic, but I felt that the question of American national identity, and of identity politics in general, begged to be addressed specifically in relation to American architecture (Fig. 4). Even more pressingly, new architectural currents were surfacing in the U.S. in the mid-1990s that demanded attention. While the “theory frenzy” of the preceding two decades was beginning to abate somewhat, it had produced a backlash, with an increasing number of American architects shunning hyper-intellectualization and impatient to plunge back into the business of building (Fig. 5). In this conjuncture, Pragmatism appeared to me not just a useful interlocutor, as already suggested, but also a way to challenge the unthinking and largely depoliticized culture that prevailed in architecture at this moment. Might it be possible to smuggle some of Dewey and Rorty’s social ideas back into architectural discourse? This was the gambit of the “Pragmatist Imagination” project, which would come to fruition in 2000.

I am not going to claim that it was a success.

Before turning to this project, however, it is necessary to say something more about the state of architecture culture in the last three decades of the last century. While the inflation of theory was in synch with what was going on across academia in the 1970s and ’80s, the architectural manifestations had their own special features and flavor and their own cast of celebrities, epigones, and naysayers. What was striking was how quickly architectural theory in the United States blossomed into a full-blown, marketable commodity from what had been little more than a
cottage production after World War II. It is not possible to rehearse that whole story here. Yet it is important to touch on a handful of flashpoints, ones that loomed especially large from my particular vantage point in New York City.

The journal *Oppositions*, a product of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS), an architectural “think tank” founded in midtown Manhattan in 1967 by Peter Eisenman with support from his mentor Colin Rowe and the backing of the Museum of Modern Art, heralded things to come. Some of the institute’s initial energies were directed towards urbanism, as its name implies, reflecting the engagement with the city that characterized progressive-liberal architectural practice in the United States in the 1960s. Yet by the early 1970s, when the IAUS began publishing its journal, attention shifted to more purely intellectual concerns. From the first issue, the rubrics “History,” “Theory,” “Oppositions” (later changed to “Criticism”), and “Documents” structured *Oppositions*’s editorial content. Frankfurt School theory and neo-Marxian interpretations, especially as represented by the writings solicited from the circle around Manfredo Tafuri at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura in Venice, were among the new and formidable currents of thought that *Oppositions* imported into a still sparse American theoretical discourse and deployed, at least at first, to counteract the juggernaut of postmodernism.

By the mid-1970s, however, and most vividly with the staging of the exhibition *The Architecture of the École des Beaux-Arts* at MoMA in 1975, postmodernism had
become an accomplished fact. The editors at *Oppositions* put their own gloss on the incursion of the Académie into the erstwhile bastion of high modernism while acknowledging the reality (Fig. 6). Concurrently, professional architecture schools in the United States began reorganizing their academic courses, inventing the hybrid “history/theory” or “history/theory/criticism.” Over time these backslash-linked offerings tended to coalesce into a separate program in the curriculum, and specialized instructors were hired. The model of the studio critic tasked with teaching a theory or history seminar from time to time did not altogether disappear, but as
history/theory increasingly became semi-autonomous from instruction in design, technology, and professional practice, its faculty were expected to have an academic degree in addition to a professional one, or at least a record of scholarly publication. The first doctoral program in an American architecture school, MIT’s History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art, launched by Stanford Anderson and Henry Millon, opened in 1974, and others followed in quick succession.

By the early 1980s, postmodernism in architecture was an established international style with local variations, as well as being a media phenomenon. Instrumental in its success was the hugely expanded machinery of theoretical production. “Theory” became a new career path in architecture education and took on a life of its own in conferences, lectures, and exhibitions. *Oppositions* published its final issue in 1984, already in slightly modified and reduced format, coinciding with the closure of the IAUS in its original setup. Two years later the journal *Assemblage* began a run out of Cambridge, Massachusetts, under the direction of K. Michael Hays. It would last until 2000. While maintaining *Oppositions*’s attention to architectural history, it underwent a shift from the earlier journal’s Italian inflection to French-oriented post-structuralism. A meeting and subsequent collaboration between Eisenman and Derrida, brokered in 1985 by Bernard Tschumi in the context of Tschumi’s winning competition project for the park of La Villette in Paris, turned into an emblematic encounter between architecture and philosophy. The subject of a long essay by Jeffrey Kipnis in *Assemblage* 14 titled “Twisting the Separatrix,” the Eisenman/Derrida dalliance—figured by the backslash, gendered feminine for arcane Derridean reasons—was traced in a series of oppositions that Kipnis proceeded, in virtuoso fashion, to deconstruct, with the master binary architecture/philosophy playing its reversible game.26

That Eisenman’s architecture should excite the attentions of a French philosopher of the aura and stature of Derrida was naturally a compliment to Peter and very thrilling to avant-garde architectural culture in the mid-to-late 1980s. Though relatively short-lived, at least from the philosopher’s side, the bromance provided ballast for the mixed metaphor that soon underwrote a new architectural -ism, Deconstructivism, which became the subject of another blockbuster show at MoMA in 1988 (Fig. 7). There the most politically committed of twentieth-century avant-gardes, Russian Constructivism, underwent its ultimate depoliticization, staged as antechamber to the work of seven international architects who, taken collectively, had built little to date and whose affinities were less a matter of shared ideas than personal ties and tactical public relations. The metaphor of construction/destruction was further stirred and shaken in the main catalog essay, where it was overlaid with a pseudo-Freudian narrative of “violated perfection.”27 All of this was backed by the full publicity apparatus and prestige of MoMA, resulting in an event comparable in notoriety to the International Style show five and a
half decades earlier. If in the earlier exhibition European modern architecture was stripped of its social concerns and repackaged for capitalist consumption, in the later one “Decon” was offered up as materialized theory and aestheticized politics.

Much of the new theory-driven work, both textual and architectural, was marked by intense intellectual ambition as well as dense jargon. Strands of other
fashionable theories, from psychoanalysis to postcolonialism to feminism, were woven in, mixed and matched according to the author’s predilections, and stars from other disciplinary galaxies entered the architectural firmament. Among them was Fredric Jameson, who made an initial appearance in architectural circles at a symposium held at the IAUS in its waning days. This event was sponsored by Revisions, a group of younger architects mainly based in New York, of which I was a member. The neo-Marxist literary critic and theorist delivered a brilliant reading of Tafuri, calling, if somewhat vaguely, for a “Gramscian alternative” to the Venice historian’s intransigent negativity, and we included it along with a chapter from Tafuri’s book *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (as yet unpublished) in a volume titled *Architecture Criticism Ideology* (Fig. 8). The third term in our title was meant to drive home the point that theory was a form of ideology. If, as I realize now, we had chosen *Theory* instead of *Ideology*, we would have had the acronym *ACT*. But activism wasn’t so much on our agenda at the time.

A year after the *Deconstructivist Architecture* show, the fall of the Berlin Wall occurred, a world-shattering event. On the exhilarating global horizon that was opening up, the theory wars and paper architecture of the 1970s and 1980s appeared increasingly irrelevant and provincial, and the raging American debates on postmodernism began to look like a tempest in an East Coast teapot. Soon enough, the avant-garde’s death-by-theory was being widely autopsied across the disciplinary spectrum. Excitement in architecture was also mounting over the increasing availability of powerful new computer technology. Not that the obsession with theory dissipated overnight. The infatuation with Derrida and Foucault soon gave way to one with Deleuze, whose thinking architects now found more attuned to a global-digital age and dynamic, future-oriented form of practice. *Assemblage* continued to publish, but ANY (an acronym for Architecture New York) made the bigger splash, appearing belatedly in 1991. The series of ten conferences it staged, cleverly organized around the prefix “any,” were studded with celebrity architects and theorists, who trotted the globe in a movable talkfest. Like *Assemblage*, the ANY publications, under Cynthia Davidson’s skilled editorial direction, came to an end in 2000. A newcomer, *Grey Room*, picked up the relay, making its debut the same year and broadening its purview beyond architecture to encompass art, media, and politics. Persisting to the present day, *Grey Room* has had the longest run in the lineage of publications just described. But by the turn of the millennium the “golden age” of theory was “long past.”

One more event needs to be registered in concluding this highly compressed and admittedly selective history. The opening of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao in 1997 not only astounded the cultural world with its titanium-clad bravura but also served notice that theory, if not dead, was largely superfluous. “Bilbao” was built fact, and Gehry could justify its existence simply by proclaiming it to be art.
Fig. 8. Revisions (Joan Ockman et al., eds.), *Architecture Criticism Ideology*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1985.
The Pragmatist Imagination project

In 1998 the Skidmore Owings & Merrill Foundation unexpectedly approached me and asked if I would be interested in proposing a “millennium project” that they might underwrite. As the reader may now comprehend, “Pragmatism” came tripping off my tongue. It did not prove difficult to interest SOM in the idea. Pragmatism seemed to have something to do with the firm’s early history, the mid-century period when it made its reputation designing office buildings like Lever House in New York and other corporate headquarters. These edifices were hailed in their day not only as expressions of a benevolent business capitalism but also as products of rational problem-solving, teamwork, and innovative technology; their values chimed with those of Pragmatism. Or so the case was made.

After extensive discussions, SOM generously agreed to fund not one but two events, the first a workshop organized by the Buell Center and held in the spring at Columbia, the second a symposium the following autumn at the Museum of Modern Art, a higher-profile event, as the foundation desired. The workshop was to be speculative and framed around a series of “Pragmatist questions.” It would engage leading thinkers from around the world and across a range of disciplines. The symposium would focus more explicitly on architecture. Publications were to come out of both events; if possible, the one from the workshop was to be out prior to the symposium so as to “educate” architects in advance about what was at stake.

In starting now to think in earnest about staging a pair of public events around Pragmatism, I saw the problem as twofold: first, how to inform architects about the history and significance of this philosophy; and second (and essential from a more political standpoint), how to salvage the term pragmatist from its more familiar and generic associations with practicality and, more pejoratively, expediency and opportunism. I wanted to draw a clear distinction between what I began calling capital–P Pragmatism and lowercase–p pragmatism. Pragmatism not only had to be introduced into architectural discourse as a theory of practice and, as such, a potential means of suturing the rift between academia and the profession, but also as a socially engaged theory of practice, one that drew on the philosophy’s progressive background more than its positivistic one. The relationship between Neopragmatism and postmodernism also had to be central.

First, of course, I needed to educate myself. I had already taught a seminar at Columbia in 1996 entitled “American Architecture and American Pragmatism”; I repeated it in 1999. I also sought out the collaboration of two scholars on the wider university faculty who were knowledgeable about architecture, John Rajchman, a philosopher teaching in the art history department, and Casey Nelson Blake, a historian who headed the program in American Studies. Rajchman had written extensively on French post-structuralism. He had also coedited an anthology titled
Post-Analytic Philosophy (1985) with the African American philosopher and activist Cornel West, who had been a student of Rorty’s at Princeton. Rajchman was interested not only in the link between Derridean deconstruction and Rortyan Neopragmatism but especially in the Deleuzian connection, which went by way of Henri Bergson, whose ideas had had a powerful impact on William James early on and who would be crucial to Deleuze later. Rajchman proposed the passage from James’s most Bergsonian book, A Pluralistic Universe (1909), that gave the Pragmatist Imagination project its subtitle, “Thinking about Things in the Making.” Stating in 1909 that “what really exists is not things made but things in the making,” James made clear Pragmatism’s fundamental concern with temporality, growth, and creative evolution and with processes rather than objects.33 Blake, for his part, was interested in public art and democratic space and had extensively explored the ideas of Randolph Bourne, Lewis Mumford, and other leading Progressive Era intellectuals who belonged to early American Pragmatist circles.

In preparation for the two-day workshop, we put together a reader of over five hundred pages and distributed it to the thirty-three invited presenters and moderators. Among them were philosophers, sociologists, cultural theorists, historians from several fields, a legal scholar, an activist artist, and a hip hop musician, along with a sprinkling of architects and architectural theorists.34 Some had previously engaged with aspects of Pragmatist philosophy either directly or tangentially, but only one or two would have identified themselves as a Pragmatist or a Neopragmatist. Our
intend was to foster unscripted exchanges and possibly to forge unorthodox connections – the event was, in short, to be a thought experiment. But in framing the half-dozen sessions around specific questions, we also wanted to zero in on matters that went to the heart of Pragmatist thinking: how to imagine the future in light of the past? How to construct democratic public space? How to understand technology’s social impacts? How to relate aesthetic experience to ordinary experience? How to reconnect philosophy to everyday life? How to approach issues of citizenship and place making in an increasingly globalized world?

After the workshop, Blake expressed reservations about the event. Not unjustifiably, he was wary that architects would consume Pragmatism like one more intellectual fashion. He also felt that the presentations by a number of the speakers, which ranged from Marxian critiques to reflections on economic globalism, had stretched the meaning of Pragmatism too far, maintaining only a tenuous connection to it as “a historically coherent intellectual tradition.” By most of those who participated or were in the audience, however, the workshop was received with considerable interest, and I believe it is fair to say that the discussions and the subsequent publication succeeded in opening up some new avenues of thought (Figs. 9, 10).

On the heels of this experience, Rajchman and I went to work on the symposium, collaborating on the planning with Terence Riley, MoMA’s chief architecture curator (Fig. 11). It was now the turn of architects turn to fathom what consequences, if any, Pragmatism had for them. The individual talks and panel discussions at the symposium were, it may be stated frankly, uneven. Of the two
dozen participants, many of the practitioners reverted to lowercase–p interpretations, endeavoring to find visual equivalents for a set of ideas that resisted easy translation into architectural imagery. This resistance seemed to me not necessarily a bad thing, especially given the “slash and crash” literalism of Deconstructivism.

Of the theorists who took part, Michael Hays, having gamely agreed to moderate the first session, took a dissenting position, issuing a polemical statement in advance of the symposium entitled “Against Pragmatism.” While stating that he welcomed an open-minded revisiting of the legacy of Dewey, James, and Peirce, he defended “the rich legacy of architecture theory since 1968” and assailed Neopragmatism, especially in its Rortyan version, as “ideological smoothing” – uncritical compliance with, and legitimation of, the status quo. The most cogent and philosophically informed of those who undertook to refute him was Stan Allen. Stating that he had “no feelings of nostalgia for the theory-driven practices of the past decades,” Allen disputed Hays’s claim that a Pragmatist conception of architecture was synonymous with “generic instrumentalism.” Citing the American poet William Carlos Williams’s dictum “no ideas but in things,” he called for a form of practice that operated “in and on the world” and was tough-minded but also generous, thoughtful but also optimistic. Another presentation that was likewise bent on moving beyond the theory/practice impasse came from Robert Somol. Entitled “Performing with a Vengeance,” it put forward the alternative of “design as research.” The issue, Somol asserted in a lively presentation, was “to provide trajectories for a design-research agenda that positions the discipline as a projective operation.” Advocating Deleuzian diagrammatics as one such trajectory, Somol’s
talk would serve as a first draft for a widely read essay on which he would collaborate two years later with Sarah Whiting.\textsuperscript{38} The latter would, in turn, become Exhibit A in the case for the “postcritical,” or (as Somol prefers) the “projective.”

But undoubtedly the most provocative moments at the symposium came in two keynote conversations that framed it, each involving a leading architect and a leading philosopher. The opening conversation was between Peter Eisenman and Richard Rorty (Fig. 12), the closing one between Rem Koolhaas and Cornel West.\textsuperscript{39} In his preliminary remarks, entitled “The Artist’s Use of Philosophy,” Rorty, mounting a characteristic attack on metaphysical truth claims, expressed the view that philosophy had nothing more valuable than any other field to impart to creative artists and architects:

Do not think that making past ideas coherent with one another will ever enable you to find a substitute for imagination. Do not think that philosophy will ever succeed in its attempt to trump poetry and the arts. Do not look to philosophers for anything different than the sort of inspiration that you get from poets, painters, musicians, and architects. For the ability to find coherence will never give you more than a perspicuous archival arrangement of the imaginative products of the past. It will never provide authoritative guidance for the imagination of the present.

If this disavowal of philosophy’s efficacy proved slightly confounding to the assembled architects, Eisenman, in turn, upheld the need for “doubt” – for an ongoing critical-theoretical discourse within architecture that unsettled the discipline’s “certainties.” Their ensuing dialogue revolved around the difference between what Eisenman called “criticality” and Rorty called “novelty,” with the philosopher making the case that the latter, if it was effective (that is, genuinely inventive and not just frivolous), posed the greater challenge to architecture’s established practices as it did not rely on \textit{a priori} assumptions.

The conversation between Koolhaas and West proved more contentious (Fig. 13).\textsuperscript{40} Koolhaas began by stating that he was disturbed by the “almost nationalistic” claims that had been made for Pragmatism as an American philosophy by participants in the symposium. He pointed out that in \textit{Delirious New York} he had argued that architects in the United States had historically been unconscious of, or impervious to, the ideological implications of their work; hence his “retroactive manifesto” had been a necessary act of revisionism – a “mopping up” operation, as he put it – to defend the virtues of a pragmatic architecture that lacked the wherewithal, or at least the desire, to produce a manifesto for itself. Ironically, in imputing an unconscious ideology of (lowercase–p) pragmatism to American architecture, Koolhaas offered a generalization no less sweeping than the chauvinist agenda of
which he accused the symposium. This led to West to demur. While he agreed that jingoism was always to be avoided, to deny that ideas and practices belonged to particular contexts was to be dishonest “about where you are.” In his view it was better to ask, “How do we accent historical specificity, distinctiveness, without falling into chauvinist, nativistic traps?” Conversation then turned to the politics of architectural theory and practice, and more specifically to the nature of Koolhaas’s own practice. In the question-and-answer period a member of the audience posed the following to Koolhaas:

Research is clearly a very important part of the practice of your office and your intellectual life. Although I’m captivated by this research, I don’t get a sense of whether there is any progressive incentive or motivation to it.

Allowing that it was an important question, Koolhaas responded:

I would say [we use] research to transform these brutal demands that come to us into forms or operations that in themselves have a progressive component…. I think you would have to look at our work as … a radical reading of the current conditions.
Which led West to observe:

The word “research” is, of course, used in a number of ways. But I like the word “inquiry” better…. Judgment is always a question of some evaluation. And inquiry is much more open about that. Research has such a positivistic, scientistic history that you might begin to think the facts are talking to you as opposed to you [talking] to them…. Design as inquiry strikes me as a little more intellectually honest than design as research.

More than a semantic quibble, West’s distinction between inquiry and research effectively summed up the difference between Pragmatism and pragmatism.

(?) consequences

Following the symposium, reviews in the New York Times and elsewhere expressed equal parts interest and incomprehension (Fig. 14). For my own part, and in hindsight, it increasingly appeared that the project had served to open Pandora’s box. This isn’t to say that the postcritical position wasn’t already in the making, so to speak, before the MoMA symposium. But it now had a philosophical rationale, or at least an articulated discourse. The discourse of the postcritical would unfold over the next several years, producing a certain amount of heat and light before itself running up against the accelerating cycle of intellectual consumption.

Among the things that put the brakes on the postcritical, at least temporarily, were the shock of September 11, 2001, and subsequently the recession of 2008. The first triggered an outpouring of grief and empathy, with architects in New York and elsewhere sharing in an idealistic moment of solidarity with their fellow citizens and feeling a renewed sense of social responsibility. Soon after 9/11 Koolhaas received the commission for the CCTV headquarters from the government of China – a lucky break, as he himself acknowledged, as it enabled him to escape the smoking ruins in Manhattan for Beijing. Empathy has never been his strong suit. Meanwhile, the protracted rebuilding of Ground Zero devolved into business as usual. While the beginning of the Obama presidency inspired a newly hopeful political climate, recovery from the worst of the economic crisis soon permitted a resumption of pragmatist (lowercase—p) agendas, in both the United States and, for aggressive global architects, around the world. This retrenchment may continue to serve them well in the age of Trump and Brexit; as the Trump administration prepared to take office in late 2016, the prospect of bountiful infrastructure projects had some American architects licking their chops. On the intellectual side, it is noteworthy that many of those who allied themselves with the postcritical a decade
CHAPTER 14. CONSEQUENCES OF PRAGMATISM

The New Face Of Architecture

It's about rolling with the punches, and it's called pragmatism. It's defined more by what it's not than what it is.

BY SARAH BOXER

You may remember the romantic hero of Agnieszka Holland's novel "The Fountainhead." He's Howard Roark, an uncompromising Modernist who moves up in his own building when he sees that someone has altered it. Changes are tough, that you have no recollection whatsoever of Roark's feet. Peter Keating, in a compliant and pragmatic flavor who will do anything to keep developers and the public happy. He is the architect no one remembers.

Yet, in those days Keating is in the limelight. If Roark was the caricature of independent-minded Modernism, Keating has become the caricature of architecture's latest trend: the embrace of pragmatism, the century-old American philosophy of Charles Peirce, John Dewey and William James.

For a few years now, pragmatism has been shaping a little revival. Pragmatist philosophies have been published. There is a group of prominent philosophers, including Richard Rorty, Cornel West and Hilary Putnam, who are identified by these pragmatists.

And now there is a budding architectural movement. Last spring Columbia University was the host of an architecture conference on the subject, and its proceedings are being published by Princeton Architectural Press. This month, architects, philosophers, engineers and critics gathered at the Museum of Modern Art for "Things in the Making," another conference on the marriage of architecture and pragmatism.

Just what does the marriage mean? Are architects becoming more like Peter Keating and less like Howard Roark, more business-oriented and less visionary? Is this the end of grand modern architectural theorizing and the beginning of cost-driven practicality? Or is this an attempt to ground architecture in a philosophy that is all-American rather than European?

The answers are not all that clear, even to pragmatism's advocates. Pragmatist architecture is defined mostly by what it is not. It has no moral mission of truth or beauty. It does not advocate a particular style over another. It does not link a particular style with a particular meaning or form with function. It is not Modernist, postmodernist or deconstructivist. In fact, it doesn't really even have practitioners.

It is, as John Ralston, a philosopher, said, foremost on things we can't quite pin down, on "unformed things" and "intentional spaces," in things that are not yet made.

The precepts of pragmatist architecture, "things in the making," come from a quote from William James: "What really exists is for things made but thought in the making. Once made, they are dead."

Pragmatism is first and foremost a philosophy with a rationalist idea of truth. A century years ago, James wrote that a belief is true if it benefits us to think so. You despise the artist's eye or the sky is blue because you like the practical consequences of thinking them true. James said: "What difference would it practically make in anyone if this were not rather than that notion were true?" Or, as he once put it, "What is its cash value in terms of practical experience?"

One of the main ideas that architects have taken from pragmatism is that truth and beauty are all tied up, as Dewey said, with the work of human experience. They are dynamic; they constantly shift, they evolve.

Robert Venturi, an architectural iconoclast, observed the shifting role of the Brueghel building of 1893 in Chicago as an

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From Modernist to "pragmatic" top, Lever House, the 1952 icon on Park Avenue, middle, Frank O. Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, in Bilbao, Spain, a vehicle for critical thinking; bottom, a "pragmatic" television studio in Taiwan, where buildings are expected to have happy decor. Fig. 14. Review of Museum of Modern Art symposium by Sarah Boxer, *New York Times*, November 25, 2000.
ago now occupy leading posts in academia, and the managerial jargon of neoliberalism – performativity, implementation, risk analysis, deliverables, big data, design intelligence, et al. – has thoroughly permeated the design studio. The theory fetish of the late 20th century has yielded to the research project of the twenty-first.

One of the lessons that may be taken away from a project like the Pragmatist Imagination is that history has its own agendas, despite carefully laid plans to hijack them. Ironically, the operational-affirmative position has always been closer to the critical-negative one than their respective progenitors would care to admit. While Rem Koolhaas and Manfredo Tafuri might initially appear strange bedfellows, both emerged out of the political disillusionment of the 1960s, and early in their careers both expressed scorn for any would-be redemptive form of architectural practice. Much as Tafuri attacked architects in *Architecture and Utopia* for naively harboring “hopes in design,” Koolhaas has denounced architecture as a trivial pursuit in an apocalyptic world of junkspace (even as he himself continues to produce major buildings all over the world).

From a philosophical perspective, it may be that Neopragmatism stands in the same relation to neoliberalism and postmodernism as early Pragmatism did to classical liberalism and modernism. In precisely this respect, however, Rorty’s relationship to Dewey is paradoxical. His attempt to partition politics off from philosophy and aesthetics remains impossible in a world in which cultural practices are inseparable from other forms of social and environmental production. No field demonstrates this more dramatically than architecture. Likewise, his assault on the traditional truths claimed by philosophy has an insidious affinity with the relativism of the alternative-fact, fake-news, reality-show universe in which we currently find ourselves.

Still, Rorty’s Deweyan project of sustaining a narrative of “social hope” with respect to the democratic and egalitarian reconstruction of civic institutions and public discourse may yet be among the best strategies – at once radical and reformist, quixotic and pragmatic – available to progressive-minded people right now. As a final commentary, not just related to architecture, it is noteworthy that a decade after Rorty’s death in 2007, his book *Achieving Our Country* has suddenly been rediscovered and is being read alongside George Orwell’s *1984*. One dystopian passage in particular has gone viral. In it Rorty warns that a sense of hopelessness among a large and disempowered group of voters will inevitably lead to the election of a strongman who purports to speak in their name. The strongman will “assure them that, once elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots.” After the new leader has taken office, he will turn his back on his populist promises; he will likely “worsen economic conditions” and “make his peace with the international super-rich.” While his specific abuses of power will be unpredictable, “One thing that is
very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out.” Others too will suffer: “Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion”; “a renewal of sadism” on the part of those who resent being dictated to by academics with elite credentials “will come flooding back.” These are the perils, Rorty admonishes, of intellectual condescension and political indifference.

One last reflection on the other half of the title of the Pragmatist project. Concerning the question of imagination, on which we have only touched in passing, the last words will be Dewey’s:

[Imagination] designates a quality that animates and pervades all processes of making and observation. It is a way of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole. It is the large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world. When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. When the new is created, the far and strange become the most natural inevitable things in the world. There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination.

Notes

1. I wish to express my gratitude to Hilde Heynen for her thoughtful comments on this paper.
6. With very few exceptions. For one, see Hugh Dalziel Duncan, Culture and Democracy: The Struggle for Form in Society and Architecture in Chicago and the Middle West during the Life and Times of Louis H. Sullivan (Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press, 1965).


17. Ibid., 135.


19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 91.

21. Ibid., 37.

22. Ibid., 31.


31. Terry Eagleton, After Theory (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 1. For a more monumental (over 700-page) postmortem on literary theory, with a title somewhat similar to that of the conference that gave rise to the present publication, see Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, eds., Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

32. The workshop publication actually came out a month after the symposium. A symposium volume never appeared.

33. The passage from James continues: “Once made, [things] are dead, and an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions can be used in defining them. But put yourself in the making by a stroke of intuitive sympathy with the thing and, the whole range of possible decompositions coming at once into your possession, you are no longer troubled by the question of which of them is the more absolutely true. Reality falls in passing into conceptual analysis; it mounts in living its own undivided life—it buds and burgeons, changes and creates. Once adopt the movement of this life in any given instance and you know what Bergson calls the devenir réel, by which the thing evolves and grows. Philosophy should seek this kind of living understanding of the movement of reality—not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results.” William James, A Pluralistic Universe (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909), 264.


37. All quotations from the symposium come from an unpaginated transcript of the recorded proceedings.


39. Eisenman and Koolhaas were chosen as keynote speakers not only because of their reputations as two of the most theoretically inclined practitioners in the field. Eisenman had been at Princeton in the 1960s when Rorty was teaching there and had admired him from afar. Koolhaas has implicitly and explicitly endorsed a form of practice that he himself has characterized as “pragmatic.” In *Delirious New York*, for example, he presents Raymond Hood – approvingly – as a “specialist in pragmatic sophistry at the service of pure creation”; see *Delirious New York: A Retrospective Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), 195. Like Eisenman and Rorty, Koolhaas and West had never met, although both were teaching at Harvard at the time of the symposium. Interestingly, while Harvard had no problem putting its imprimatur on Koolhaas’s *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, published by Taschen in 2000, West’s scholarship and his recording of a rap CD were deemed to undermine the values of the university, leading to a widely publicized feud with the university president, Larry Summers, that caused West to leave the faculty two years later.

40. The conversation between Koolhaas and West was moderated by Rajchman and included interventions by Rorty and others. It is published in Spanish and English in *AV Monographs* 91 (2001): 14-33, as part of a special issue titled “Pragmatism and Landscape.”

42. For a comprehensive account of the Pragmatist Imagination project that delves more deeply into both individual contributions and surrounding debates, see a recently completed dissertation: Pauline Lefebvre, “Tracer des reprises du pragmatisme en architecture (1990-2010): Penser l’engagement des architectes avec le réel” (PhD diss., Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2016).


46. For a deeper understanding of the relationship between Rorty’s philosophy and politics, see various essays in his *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999).

