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Building versus Bildung. Manfredo Tafuri and the construction of a historical discipline

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2005

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hoekstra, T. R. (2005). *Building versus Bildung. Manfredo Tafuri and the construction of a historical discipline*. s.n.

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Tafari as a guru. From www.arch-fanzine.fiume10.org

EPILOGUE

THE QUEST OF THE ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIAN

→ As first-year students at the I.U.A.V., we experienced a great shock. We attended the courses in architectural history given by Manfredo Tafuri: in his lessons, the attention shifted from proper architecture to something called ‘the ideology of architecture’. For us, that was an incredible step to take, like the change from studying animals to studying the psyche of humanity.¹

These words recall Alessandro Fonti’s personal *Chockerlebnis* after being exposed to Tafuri’s historiographical rupture for the first time. It must have been an alienating experience for Tafuri’s students to witness what seemed like a voluntary exchange of the security of a material stronghold for the insecurity of the vague and transient world of ideas. It was an absurd *capriccio*, perhaps, to go beyond the materiality of a phenomenon which, in the case of architecture, is so clearly marked by its concrete manifestation.

Manfredo Tafuri was one of the most important architectural historians of the twentieth century. He was the initiator of an emancipatory process in which architectural history grew from an auxiliary science for architects, and a Cinderella for art historians, to a fully-fledged academic discipline. My thesis in this study has been that Tafuri should be considered as a builder; as a constructor of the academic discipline of architectural history, and that his historiographic value should be seen in close relation to this role. I have argued that Tafuri’s career is exemplary for its role in the realization of an academic discipline. By making a plea for non-operative architectural history, Tafuri engendered a crucial phase in the growth of architectural history as an independent, autonomous historical discipline.

Tafuri struggled to make architectural history an independent subject within the humanities. His professional life involved a fascinating journey from a supportive use of history – history as a means to validate the design choices of architects, for example – to a conception of history in which architecture and urban planning were seen as instruments for reflection on society. For Tafuri, the challenge of the architectural historian was to bring meaning to the material artifacts of architecture and urban planning by providing them with a sense within the broader context of social, political and artistic history. The stress he put on the complexity of a building or an architect should be viewed in this light. Tafuri’s most distinctive move was to put architectural history forward as a history of mentality. This was a provocative act for an architectural historian whose discipline was so concerned with its material manifestation. Tafuri favoured the spiritual and ‘mental’ qualities of architecture and spoke of it in terms of symbols, sentiments,

¹ In May 2002 I interviewed Professor Alessandro Fonti at the I.U.A.V. in Venice, during which he explained his experiences as a student of Tafuri at the end of the 1960s. This is one of his statements during the conversation (my translation). Alessandro Fonti is now a professor in architectural history at the I.U.A.V.

beliefs, attitudes and imagination. He gave architectural history a place among such fields as literature, religion and the history of everyday life.

It is my contention that, among the many possible perspectives on this historian, it is important to understand his work in the light of its Italian background, more specifically, in the light of the meaning that architecture conveys within Italian society. In a country that is so extensively defined by its built, material heritage, architecture has a unique relevance. Throughout Italian history, architecture has been a privileged medium for reflecting events within society. In no other Western country has architecture absorbed and represented the history of cities, regions and the nation to such an extent. In Italy, architecture assumes the form of a 'solidified history': it is in this light that Tafuri's stress on the layered, plural presence of meaning in a building should be viewed.

In this study I have argued that a second explanation for Tafuri's work can be found in the intellectual climate of the 1960s. The centrality of architecture to Italian society re-emerged and dominated the cultural revolution of the 1960s, knitting the two closely together. While in the Western world the 1960s were decisive for much of academic life as we know it today, in Italy the faculties of architecture were true centres of innovation and change and so formed an avant-garde in this process. It was through architecture that epistemological change – changes in knowledge and its place in society – was communicated.

The presence of the philosopher Massimo Cacciari at the architectural historical department and his close relationship with Tafuri is explained by this fact. For Cacciari architecture was a touchstone which allowed him to formulate a different kind of knowledge. From this basis, he attacked Cartesian rationality through Loos' hatred of ornament, Baudelaire's vision of Paris, and Georg Simmel's 'nervous life' in the *Metropolis*. The dominant role of architectural historians in the journal *Contropiano* and in the elaboration of a different Marxist critique of ideology should also be viewed in this context. While holding on to the specificity of their own domain, architecture became part of a larger project attempting to deal with knowledge in a certain way, viewing and criticizing the world from a certain point of view.

While architecture was perhaps the most tangible of the disciplines hoping to contribute to an improved world, it was precisely in the study of this field that Tafuri and his colleagues took an unexpected step. Architecture became the privileged material through which to shape the new, heretical identity of the left-wing intellectual. It was no longer the point of departure for a progressive-constructive world view, instead, it became the touchstone for the destructive-critical task of the intellectual. To paraphrase Cacciari's 'theory of the *Metropolis*', it was a change that was not conducted through language but through architecture.

Through his early infatuation with the Marxist critique of ideology, followed by a period of doubt and disillusionment and an opening of his thinking towards the *histoire des mentalités*, the French Annales School and Foucault, Tafuri represents an important development in the intellectual history of the second half of the twentieth century. The value of his historiography also lies in the fact that he demonstrated that architectural history was not peripheral to those developments, but on the contrary formed an

important area of experimentation in its study of urban spaces, artistic languages, and the interaction of these with society.

Tafuri made architectural history relevant to a wide array of disciplines from history, to philosophy, cultural studies and sociology. At the same time, he demonstrated the relevance of intellectual developments – micro-storia, psycho-history, the *nouvelle histoire* to name but a few – to the material of architectural history. For architectural historians, this implied a passage from a modern-positivist belief in a neutral science, to a new stress on the methodology of the historian – on the role of his or her point of view in the structuring of a historical account. However, Tafuri never ‘simply’ applied the insights gained in other disciplines: the value of his historiography is closely connected to the way in which he positioned himself as an equal partner in conversation, with Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and others. He was convinced that the study of architecture necessarily involved an epistemological choice. From this point of view he engaged in debate with intellectuals who proclaimed other epistemological points of view.

Tafuri’s work symbolizes an important passage in twentieth-century intellectual history. From the middle of the 1970s and certainly after the publication of *La Sfera e il Labirinto* and the essay *Il Progetto Storico* in 1980, his work can be labelled as poststructuralist. With his stress on the endless, ongoing character of historical research, his conception of ‘ricerca terminabile interminabile’, Tafuri proved himself to be an important representative of poststructuralist historiography. Where for modernists a meaningful historical account was able to put an end to research by providing an explanation that was so exhaustive and convincing that others were made redundant, poststructuralist or ‘postmodernist’ thinkers argued that the only ‘true’ facts were the debatable facts.² Poststructuralist intellectuals recognized the law of the multiplication of information: the importance of information should not be measured by its ability to complete an information process, but rather by its ability to be a creative and productive element within the process; by its ability to create for ‘posterity’.

Striking in this respect is the dominance of the theme of the plurality of languages in Tafuri’s essay *Il Progetto Storico*. Here Tafuri confronts the language of the historian with that spoken by the architectural object. He allows them to clash, fuse and fragment into a myriad of linguistic fragments. This is symptomatic of the poststructuralist insight that scientific language is no longer a mirror of nature, but ‘just as much part of the inventory of reality as the objects in reality which science studies.’³ Tafuri portrays architectural history as the outcome of a clash between the ‘language’ of the historian and that of the object of study. The discourse of the historian is not about reality, it is situated within reality and forms an object among other objects. The first pages of *Il Progetto Storico*

² My explanation of poststructuralism in history is based on: F.R. Ankersmit, ‘Historiography and Postmodernism’, in B. Fag et al., ed., *History and Theory, Contemporary Readings*, Oxford, 1998, pp. 173-223.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴ This was formulated by Hans Bertens during a Dutch conference on postmodernism and was quoted by Ankersmit in his essay, *ibid.*, p. 181.

illustrate this poststructuralist insight that language, as used in science, is a thing, while things in reality acquire a 'language-like' nature.⁴

For an architectural historian, the choice of poststructuralism was remarkable. In Tafuri's case, it led to strange encounters in which he studied the symbols of modernism – a white cubist house with a flat roof, for example – from a poststructuralist point of view. The poststructuralist character of Tafuri's history writing becomes most clear in his interest in Freud. Tafuri started to conceive of architectural history as a tracing of signs. As part of his ambition to turn architectural history into an independent and critical discipline, he looked for what the architect did not say, or only whispered, or what the architect said in a slip of the tongue.

As Ankersmit confirms in his essay, a result of this strategy was that it emphasized that the events that the historian focuses on will always be interpreted within the context of the *present time*. History is always made in the here and now: it is the *destinataire* who decides the content of history, depending on his or her ability to manage the traces of the past and give them a satisfactory interpretation. For Tafuri, this 'psycho-history' was a part of his attempt to overcome the historicist, linear, idealist history in his own country. Referring to Walter Benjamin, he claimed that the past had to be reread from the position of a clear concern for the present, all the while trying to read the past in terms of the dramatic moment in which events produce the ephemeral spark of their own brief present. The way in which the object of investigation is chosen, composed, represented or even misrepresented, makes a difference.⁵

Tafuri interpreted the traces and signs of the architectural past, but he did not think he could have direct access to the past. For Tafuri, there was no truth in historiography, as the past is forever beyond our reach: the past could not serve as a source of the validation of the correctness or incorrectness of historical discourse. Tafuri studied the traces left behind by the past in the present; he interpreted them and projected patterns upon them, but he did not believe that he could gain access to historical reality through the traces. Tafuri's historical writing in works such as *Ricerca del Rinascimento* (1992) was strictly nominalistic.

Tafuri's own struggle with the Venetian critique of ideology may be viewed as indicative of the passage from structuralism to poststructuralism in the Venetian department of architectural history. Behind the attempt to subject architecture to the critique of ideology there was still the ambition to know 'how the machine works'. Tafuri and his colleagues saw architectural ideology as a means of penetrating into capitalist reality. They not only projected patterns *upon* the traces of the past, but they also searched for something *behind* those traces. However, after their recognition that reality was discursive by nature, consisting of many languages, ideologies and texts, their world view became more 'horizontal', focusing on the confrontation between the texts of the historian and other texts that forge our world.

⁵ Patrizia Lombardo, 'Introduction: The Philosophy of the City', in Mark Rakatansky ed., *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, New Haven, 1993, pp. 37-38.

The scholars from Venice – Tafuri, Cacciari and their colleagues within the department of architectural history – developed a conception of history consisting of two elements: on the one hand there was a plurality of fragments, and on the other there was the absolute nothing. They considered fragments to be engaged in an intense dialogue with each other while the nothing remained mute. The nothing at the centre consisted of an absolute silence, of a core that was impregnable and, like a Kantian *noumenon*, inaccessible.

For Tafuri, reality was made up of a plurality of institutions, discourses, architectural-ideological systems and political decisions. Knowledge about this reality could be achieved by establishing relations between these elements, but the construction that is then created did not reflect a sacrosanct truth. It was determined by contingent needs and interests and it depended on what was perceived as being relevant at that time. However, all these strategies circled around the nothing, the silent core in which meaning could not be named or grasped through words or reflection. As Tafuri and Cacciari stated, 'history has a hole in the middle'. However, they argued that despite the impregnable character of the centre it is the task of the historian nevertheless to say something about its silence, to try and denominate its effect. This can only be described as the *improbis* labor of an impossible mission.

The impossibility of this mission is indicative of the impossibility of any epistemological mission: the unfeasibility of touching the silence, and the impotence of any attempt to name the truth. Tafuri and Cacciari now saw that their task was to demonstrate the 'false' character of past attempts to develop epistemological structures – to remove their masks of absolute certainty and authority. This was the nihilistic approach to the bottomless abyss: in the end there was no truth, only the genealogy of meaning which is endless and without foundation in the past or future. Only by developing a sensibility for the abyss could a spark of the silent centre be experienced. The scholars from Venice now defined their epistemological strategies around the silent centre as a *dispositivo*: an interpretational instrument, a device in the hands of those who, like a negative plate in photography, rendered present something of the relationship with the silence.