

The Emergence of a Public Sphere: Architectural Texts from 1960 to 1990

El surgimiento de una esfera pública. Textos de arquitectura de 1960 a 1990

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Abstract

The period from the 1960s to the 1990s is very important for the emergence of architectural discourse in First World countries. This discourse was the result of the prolific publication of texts during this period that proved to be markers of a shift in architectural practice, raising awareness among architectural professionals and lay people alike regarding the state of the discipline and suggesting a need to alter methods of conceptualization, design and practice.

This article reveals the relationship between print media and architecture, with a focus on the texts published in the selected time period.

This paper bases itself on the hypothesis that there was a prolific publication of architectural texts between the 1960s and 1990s and recognizes the emergence of the public sphere due to the impact of a variety of print media, such as books, journals and magazines, on human thoughts and actions. This paper is divided into three parts: the first discusses print as a medium of communication, the second traces the evolution of the public sphere in architecture and the third identifies theory institutions as being part of the public sphere.

Keywords: architecture texts, theory institutions, printing press, public sphere.

Resumen

El periodo de 1960 a 1990 es muy importante para la formación del discurso arquitectónico en los países del primer mundo. En él hubo una publicación prolífica de textos que marcaron un cambio en la práctica de la arquitectura, crearon conciencia entre los profesionales del campo y en el público en general sobre el estado de la disciplina y mostraron la necesidad de alterar los métodos de conceptualización, diseño y práctica.

El artículo muestra la relación entre los medios impresos y la arquitectura, con atención en los textos publicados en el periodo seleccionado. Se propone la hipótesis de que en él hubo una publicación desbordada de textos arquitectónicos y se reconoce que en dicho periodo surgió la esfera pública debido al impacto de una variedad de medios impresos, como libros y revistas, en los pensamientos y las acciones humanas. Esta investigación se divide en tres partes: la primera analiza la imprenta como medio de comunicación, la segunda describe la evolución de la esfera pública en la arquitectura y la tercera identifica las instituciones teóricas que constituyeron dicha esfera.

Palabras clave: textos de arquitectura, instituciones teóricas, imprenta, esfera pública

In architecture, there is a constitutive relationship between built environments and the text. Both are forms of practice and are mutually interdependent. The act of writing in architecture has been given prominence since the beginning of the twentieth century. After World War II, the act of theorizing spread due to changes in concerns about life and the design of built environments. The anthologies published in the 1990s, edited by Nesbitt,¹ Jencks and Kropf² and Hays,³ show that theorizing and publishing were at their peak. Texts had a major impact on architects, architectural theorists and philosophers and encouraged rational-critical thinking.

The years between 1960 and 1990 were a key period, marked by the emergence of two superpowers (the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and their struggle for dominance. In the midst of this rivalry, there were those who began to question society's prevailing ethos. The search for freedom and a new way of life and the urge for human connectedness prevailed, with the emergence of countercultures and the rise of social media both in the United States and the U.S.S.R. Europe, though divided, had a rich intellectual history. This period laid the ground for a paradigm shift. The changes this implied have been analyzed by Kisho Kurokawa from a variety of perspectives.⁴ In architectural thinking and practice, there was a shift from conceptualizing designs with the human mind to using algorithms in design, as well as from print to electronic media, from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Theorizing was on the agenda of the time; the period was largely affected by the upheavals within the profession, as well as among students. Critical debates, discussions and exhibitions were organized by the faculty and the student community. Major institutions hosted critical debates that were specific to the period, creating a public sphere⁵ by gathering together like-minded people who intended to change existing practices. The publication of this architectural discourse played a major role in the dissemination of new ideas and practices.

This article argues that this architectural discourse is the result of the discipline's public sphere, which emerged through the impact of a variety of print resources, such as books, journals and magazines, on human thoughts and actions. The paper is divided into three parts: the first discusses print as a medium of communication, the second traces the evolution of the public sphere in architecture and the third identifies theory institutions as being part of the public sphere.



Print as a Medium of Communication

Throughout history, mankind has gone through four major phases based around different mediums of communication: speech (oral), manuscript (writing), print and electronic. Each medium has had a strong impact on the human mind and, therefore, on the thinking process. Of all these technological revolutions, writing has been important as it has not only transformed societies, but also restructured the way individuals think and exercise their sense of belonging. An epistemological breakthrough can be accorded to the moment in which a coded system of visible marks was invented through which a writer could determine the exact words that the reader would understand. This is what is usually meant today by writing in the strictest sense.

In terms of phases of communication, the period from the 1960s to the 1990s was characterized by the shift from print to electronic media. McLuhan's writings⁶ analyzed this shift with reference to the earlier change in consciousness caused by the shift from the spoken word to the written word. He observed this change in the thinking of European man and the consequent evolution of a new culture. This was also true in North America and the rest of the world, as there was a major reliance on print materials in academia. Universities such as Cambridge, Toronto and Massachusetts, to name a few, had their own printing presses, allowing the voices of individuals to reach the masses. This period was characterized by *Typographic Man*:⁷ an individual who obtains a great deal of information through the written word and interprets it in accordance with their own personal understanding.

Print media includes books, magazines, journals and newspapers; multiple copies of the same content are printed and can be reproduced as needed, thus reaching a large number of people. Electronic media uses electronic or electromechanical equipment to transmit data to its audience, which can access this content via video and audio recordings, slide presentations, CD-ROMs, computers and the internet. In 1989, the British scientist Sir Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web, making the world into the global village predicted by McLuhan.⁸ The period between 1962 and 1989 was marked by the transition in which humans started dreaming about a world connected through electronics.

What happens to the human psyche and, therefore, to society when a lot of the information available is in the form of printed documents? The historian, theorist and philosopher of English literature Walter Ong⁹ argued that there is a relationship between human consciousness and the written word as "writing restructures consciousness." His research demonstrates that writing attained its dominance with the invention of the movable type in fifteenth-century Europe. Print, an extension of writing, involved an external agency (a machine) that helped the text attain its final form. The typographic space fixed the author's ideas on paper and was charged with meaning, generating a virtual dialogue between the author and the reader. Analysis and critical review of a piece of writing was born when print materials on the same topic were published by various authors. This opened up the possibility of intertextuality. According to Ong's research, print culture led to a transformation in the West in the twentieth century with its intense publishing activity. The situation may be similar in the East, but the period may vary.

The effects of print are immense, but not explicit. It subtly generates a personal dialogue with the reader. Print media made different types of data available, which had a major impact on society. The diffused effects of print include the quantification of knowledge through the publication of mathematical analyses, charts and tables; the "correctness" of language through the publication of dictionaries; and the confidence given by the private ownership of words.

The invention of electronics led to a new age that Ong calls Post-Typography and recognizes as a "Secondary Orality." Radio, television, computer and long-distance messaging equipment have taken over the typographic space that was dominated by books and newspapers. These developments have not eliminated books and newspapers, but they produce more information and transmit it to more people. It can be observed that the period of major upheaval during the Cold War and the transition from print to electronics occurred simultaneously. This transition can be seen in the massive theoretical activity in the field of architecture after World War II. The role of print was important to developing a culture that questioned the old ethos. This questioning affected all domains of knowledge and architecture, too, was transformed by the publication of writings that generated discourses and debates. Each text means something to an individual, which in turn leads to certain observations, either in consensus or in opposition.

Architectural texts published in anthologies suggest that architecture is the product of a societal way of thinking. The problems of architecture are to be traced back to their origins. Attention needs to be focused on the thinking and considerations that influence its production, rather than just analyzing buildings stylistically.

This explains the relevance of architectural texts in generating meaning for future practice. All the problems and challenges then faced by architecture were questioned in texts, a process in which the emergence of a multitude of printing presses played an important role. These texts were published via different platforms and institutions that supported architectural research published regular newsletters and journals that fostered debate on the discipline's theory and practice. These platforms acted as the public sphere, leading to a change in architectural thinking and practice.

The Emergence of the Public Sphere

In the discipline of architecture, the nineties were marked by the publication of a number of anthologies. The period starting in the sixties was one of upheaval, which was softened by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991. The many writings on architecture that were published suggests that people were critically looking at issues in the field. The response to this professional crisis took the form of exhibitions, publications and the rise of theory institutions. Notable institutions where theorization was being done were located in New York, Venice and London. *Lotus*, *Casabella*, *Domus*, *The Yale Architectural Journal* and the *Architectural Association Quarterly* were a few of the prominent magazines and journals that brought together various perspectives on issues of concern.¹⁰ *The Architecture of the École des Beaux-Arts* in 1976, *Transformation in Modern Architecture*, in 1979, and *Deconstructivist Architecture* in 1988, were a few of the major MoMA exhibitions where emergent architecture was displayed, discussed and analyzed. Debates and discussions on developments in architecture spilled out of the institutions to other places and platforms. This suggests the emergence of a public sphere.

Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere¹¹ drew a parallel between eighteenth century society and the Cold War period that was the focus of this research. The concept of the public sphere is not to be equated with that of "the public" – i.e., a group of individuals who gather together – but rather an institution that assumes concrete form through participation. It cannot be characterized as a crowd, however. The public sphere is "the sphere of private people who come together as public."¹² The formation of the public sphere implies a domain of our social life in which public opinion is shaped, its access assured to all citizens.

The most important characteristic of the public sphere as it existed in the eighteenth-century was the public use of reason in rational-critical debate. The concepts of the public sphere and public opinion first arose at this time. Rational-critical debate occurred among the bourgeois public in response to literature and took place in institutions such as salons and coffeehouses.¹³ Habermas calls this a "literary public sphere." For the first time, art and literary criticism became formal disciplines where those interested could make their influence felt. Inclusiveness was a characteristic feature of the public sphere, but acceptance depended on one's education level and status as a property owner. Habermas emphasizes the role of the public sphere as a way for civil society to articulate its interests through gatherings at which societal issues were discussed. Translated into English at the end of the Cold War, Habermas's thesis guided scholars studying the relationship between the state and civil society, the emergence and possibilities of democracy and the role of the media. Postmodern architects turned to the written word and theoretical projects to explore complex issues. The widespread academic publishing during this period resembles the recent impact and accessibility of desktop publishing on non-commercial markets.

Theory Institutions as Public Spheres

Public spheres emerged in the United States of America and Europe, engaging in theoretical activities pertaining to then-contemporary trends and currents in architectural thinking and practice. These multi-disciplinary think tanks¹⁴ consisted of individuals who questioned, debated, experimented, explored and rethought architectural education and practice.

Many architectural institutes and publishers were actively involved in bringing about an architecture that questioned the modern movement. The most influential architectural schools were the Institute of Architecture at the University of Venice¹⁵ (IUAV) and the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies¹⁶ (IAUS) in Manhattan, which became nodes for architectural research and teaching. During the existence of the IAUS, those involved questioned architectural education and practice through lectures, seminars, symposiums and publications. The archives of both institutes do not reveal their formal connections, but they shared the concept of introducing theoretical viewpoints into architectural practice. Their conceptual grounding can be explicitly seen when the theoretical projects and teachings of their members are investigated.

The IUAV's most influential professors included Aldo Rossi and Manfredo Tafuri. Rossi taught and conducted research at IUAV, and Venice was the city from which he developed his idea of "the architecture of the city"¹⁷ from 1963 to 1965. During his time at IUAV, he and Carlo Aymonino questioned conventional teaching methodologies. They introduced "the idea of the design studio as a place for research. Their teaching environment became a kind of laboratory for exploring the idea of design as collective work, an approach that challenged the identity of the architect as either a solitary artist, the maker of images or a mere technician. From their viewpoint, the architect should be an intellectual practitioner working against, yet within, mass culture."¹⁸ This instilled a questioning attitude among their students and opened up avenues for research in architectural education. Teaching history was another radical move that inspired critical thinking at the institute.

The architects who taught history at the institution included Zevi, Benevolo and Tafuri. "At the IUAV [...] Tafuri discussed Benjamin and Adorno, Lucas and Nietzsche, about semiology and psychoanalysis, establishing a dialogue between young students and left-wing thinkers like Massimo Cacciari, Alberto Asor Rosa and Mario Tronti. Within the political climate of the time, this exchange was considered extremely controversial."¹⁹ Through his writings, Tafuri established a relationship between architecture and Marxism. Francesco Dal Co was an IUAV student with whom Tafuri coauthored research on modern architecture, published in two volumes in 1987. They identified and contextualized architectural challenges and questioned the emergence of form. Architecture was examined with reference to philosophy, history and urbanism and those associated with the institute were collectively identified as belonging to the "Venice School."

As Italy was one of the major centers for the dissemination of theory, a public sphere focused on architectural discourse emerged. Here it is important to understand the role of the Milan-based publisher Electa and *Contropiano* or *Controspazio*, an Italian journal founded in 1968. In the sixties and seventies, Electa promoted "the study and knowledge of art as well as protecting it through increased public recognition, photographic documentation and the subsequent publishing of academic books."²⁰ Acting as a platform for dissemination, Electa published important magazines and book series in the field of architecture. Tafuri, Dal Co, Gregotti and Frampton were among the many who published their writings through Electa.

Contropiano was a short-lived journal that grounded various aspects of material culture in theory. It was edited by the writer and linguist Alberto Asor Rosa, the politician and philosopher Massimo Cacciari and the Marxist sociologist and philosopher Antonio Negri. They addressed politics and ideology and the magazine responded to contemporary developments.²¹ Tafuri, an architect, Marxist and active member of IUAV, published the essay 'Towards a Critique of Architectural Ideology' in the first issue of *Contropiano* in 1969. When it was later translated into English, it reached a wider audience.

IAUS was an independent, nonprofit educational institution that served as an alternative to New York's conventional universities. Students worked as interns and architects as research assistants, associates and fellows. Architects, both domestic and from abroad, engaged in a variety of activities at the institute and the methodology and teaching styles they explored in their theoretical practices were adopted as a model for intellectual development and experimentation in later stages of their lives. Notable architects and critics associated with the IAUS included Peter Eisenmann, Diana Agrest, Mario Gandelsonas, Robert Stern, Michael Graves, Richard Meier, Kenneth Frampton and Anthony Vidler, among others. Non-Americans associated with the institute included Rem Koolhaas, Aldo Rossi, Rafael Moneo and Manfredo Tafuri. In "The Institute as the Women Saw It," Diana Agrest stated that, before the institute was established, "America was always looking to Europe, and what the institute managed to do was reverse that and have the Europeans come here and look into what was going on here."²² It attracted Europeans to the United States. Though not formally associated, the members of both institutes were in contact with each other and frequently worked together.

Passionate yet varied in their approach to architecture, the institute's fellows produced a tremendous amount of literature that investigated then-contemporary practices. They enunciated their ideas in essays and articles that were published in journals that were conceptualized at the institute. *Oppositions: A Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture* and *October* were first published in 1973 and 1976, respectively, and the newsletter *Skyline: The New York Architecture and Design Calendar* was published at the end of the seventies. While focusing just on architecture, *Oppositions* captured the architectural, social, political and cultural climate of 1970s Europe and America. Unlike *Oppositions*, *October* focused on then-contemporary art and theory. The writings published in *October* were interdisciplinary, but architectural projects and practitioners

were not published. However, a certain common ground did exist between the journal and the architectural community. The reconsideration of criticism in the light of structuralist and semiotic theory can be seen as an intellectual project shared by the editors of *Oppositions*. Authors and editors at *Oppositions* included Kenneth Frampton, Mario Gandelsonas, Peter Eisenmann and Anthony Vidler and their writings for IAUS have been republished in many anthologies.

Independent groups of students and alumni at different universities engaged in debates and discourses and their ideas were published by their respective university presses, adding to ongoing debates on architecture and urbanism. Architectural journals published during this period include *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*, published by the Yale School of Architecture and distributed by MIT Press since 1952; the University of Pennsylvania's *VIA* and *Architectural Association Quarterly* from 1969 to 1982; the University of Virginia's *Modulus*, which first appeared in 1979; *Précis*, a student publication from Columbia's graduate school, which was published from 1979 to 1987; the *Harvard Architectural Review* from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, published since 1980; the *Princeton Journal*, published by Princeton University Press since 1983 and renamed the *Princeton Architectural Journal* in 1992; and *Center*, published by the University of Texas at Austin since 1985.

In addition to those institutions focusing on theoretical discourse and the publication of journals by university presses, there was a variety of magazines that covered then-contemporary architectural practices. *Domus* and *Casabella* had been published since 1928, *Architectural Design* since 1930, *Lotus* since 1963 and *Skala: Nordic Magazine of Architecture and Art* was published from 1985 to 1995. *Domus*, *Casabella* and *Lotus* were published in Italy, *Architectural Design* in the UK and *Skala* in Denmark. These magazines initially published important works of architecture from their places of origin, but during the seventies and eighties, they began to cater to an international scene. They proved to be the real marker of then-contemporary practices.

In response to a period marked by architectural challenges, many platforms were created where like-minded people gathered together and critically investigated the situation. They not only questioned traditional belief systems and patterns of work, but also provided solutions that were formulated theoretically and, therefore, could be applied in different contexts. They covered a varied range of projects and issues and their solutions were likewise pluralistic. In addition to these place-specific public spheres, there were organizations in the United States that provided grants for research and education: the American Academy in Rome (since 1911), the Fulbright Scholarship (since 1946) and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts (since 1956), to name a few, provided funding for architectural education and theoretical research.



Diana Agrest with Manfredo Tafuri as her guest in NYC, April, 1974. ©Diana Agrest



Forums were organized to discuss theoretical positions. The *Oppositions* forum on Aldo Rossi, 1976. © Dorothy Alexander. From the film *The Making of the Avant-garde: The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies 1967-1984*, written and produced by Diana Agrest



Exhibition at IAUS where small group discussions took place. © Dorothy Alexander. From the film *The Making of the Avant-garde: The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies 1967-1984*, written and produced by Diana Agrest

Conclusions

In sum, these public spheres focused on print as a medium of communication, allowing debates and curated exhibitions to reach a larger audience. They voiced their concerns in a way that situated architectural production in a context of ideas, society, culture and politics. People from around the world took notice of this expansion of architectural practice. With the proliferation of printing, the world truly became a global village. For example, in post-World War II Japan, when traveling outside Japan was restricted for Japanese citizens, Kenzo Tange saw and read about the architecture of Le Corbusier in magazines, which inspired him to become an architect. The electronic printing press was able to generate a corpus of literature that was not just based on words, but also supported by drawings and images.

Print media has had a huge impact on architecture since the twentieth century. The second half of the twentieth century saw a transition from print to electronic media as the Internet fulfilled the media and communication theorist McLuhan's predictions of a global village. Yet, despite the enormous impact of electronic media in the twenty-first century, the importance of print media is still recognized as the individual connection is much greater when reading books, periodicals and newspapers.

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7. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).
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9. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982).
10. Kate Nesbitt, *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*.
11. Jürgen Habermas was a German sociologist whose thesis on the structural transformation of the public sphere, published in 1962 (translated into English in 1991), was influential during this time.
12. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 27.
13. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, IIX.
14. Kate Nesbitt, *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*, 22.
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22. Suzanne Frank, Diana Agrest, Suzanne Stephens and Frederieke Taylor, moderated by Julie Iovine, "The Institute as the Women Saw It," Vimeo video, 26:47, posted by Van Alen Institute, April 18, 2012, <https://vimeo.com/40874068>.

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