

## The USEFUL THEORY Project: an invitation

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I am writing to seek your participation in a project I have concocted. I'm calling it *Useful Theory*.

The idea is to assemble propositions from the theoretical literature that can aid in making architectural design decisions, to concisely place these propositions in context, to suggest how one might think about their implications during the design process, to provide examples of their prior application, and to offer sources for further study. I will edit this compendium.

I am motivated by frustration that so much intellect and energy was poured into theoretical production over the last couple of decades or more, and yet so little has proven *regularly* fruitful in practice. I'm further prompted by young colleagues who report that, while they enjoyed and were stimulated by discussions of theory while in school, they have been disappointed by how quickly such discussions have fallen away as they have engaged in practice.

I imagine the format something like this (which is just a sketch and is full of flaws; I welcome your instruction):

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### [passage]

"The tactile resilience of the place-form and the capacity of the body to read the environment in terms other than those of sight alone suggest a potential strategy for resisting the domination of universal technology . . . . One has in mind a whole range of complementary sensory perceptions which are registered by the labile body: the intensity of light, darkness, heat and cold; the feeling of humidity; the aroma of material; the almost palpable presence of masonry as the body senses its own confinement; the momentum of an induced gait and the relative inertia of the body as it traverses the floor; the echoing resonance of our own footfall. Luchino Visconti was well aware of these factors when making the film *The Damned*, for he insisted that the main set of the Altona mansion should be paved in real wooden parquet. It was his belief that without a solid floor underfoot the actors would be incapable of assuming appropriate and convincing postures." —Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *Labour, Work and Architecture* (New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2002), p. 88.

### [background]

Architect, historian and writer Kenneth Frampton has written extensively on tectonic and material factors in architectural design, as well as on the socio-political condition and role of architecture. In "Towards a Critical Regionalism," he addresses the universalizing tendency of technology—that is, the tendency for globally distributed techniques of construction to produce buildings that are non-specific to their place. As he puts it, "Today the practice of architecture seems to be increasingly polarized between, on the one hand, a so-called 'high-tech' approach predicated exclusively upon production and, on the other, the provision of a 'compensatory façade' to cover up the harsh realities of this universal system." (op. cit., p. 78) As an alternative to superficial attempts to mask the sameness of universal technology, he advocates for the differentiating potential of topography, context, climate, light, tectonic form, and sensory experience. In an accompanying example, given below, Frampton focuses on the acoustic effect of material choices. Other architects and theorists who have worked on similar themes include Marco Frascari (q.v.), Peter McCleary (q.v.) . . . .

### [to consider]

How may the acoustic or other physical properties of a material contribute to its symbolic associations?

How may the acoustic properties of a space affect one's self-awareness as an individual in a collective setting?

How may a *progression* or *contrast* of distinctive acoustic settings affect both perception and self-awareness?

### [for further study]

Frampton, Kenneth, *Labour Work and Architecture* (New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2002).

\_\_\_\_\_, "Alvar Aalto and the Nordic Tradition," *Modern Architecture, a Critical History*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), pp. 192-202.

Marco Frascari, "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," in Paula Behrens and Anthony Fisher, eds., *Via 7: The Building of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), pp. 23-38. "In architecture, feeling a handrail, walking up steps or between walls, turning a corner, and noting the sitting of a beam in a wall, are coordinated elements of visual and tactile sensations. The location of those details gives birth to the conventions that tie a meaning to a perception." (p. 28)

Rasmussen, Steen Eiler, "Hearing Architecture," *Experiencing Architecture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), pp. 224-239.

**[example]**

“[[I]n Alvar Aalto’s Säynätsalo [Finland] Town Hall of 1952 . . . the main route leading to the second-floor council chamber is ultimately orchestrated in terms which are as much tactile as they are visual. Not only is the principal access stair lined in raked brickwork, but the treads and risers are also finished in brick. The kinetic impetus of the body in climbing the stair is thus checked by the friction of the steps, which are ‘read’ soon after in contrast to the timber floor of the council chamber itself. The chamber asserts its honorific status through sound, smell and texture, not to mention the springy deflection of the floor underfoot.” [images to accompany]

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I phrase the “to consider” section in the form of questions, to avoid the risk of dogmatism. (It would be the death-knell for this project were someone to compare it to *A Pattern Language*—a rich source of ideas crippled by its absolutism.)

My goal is to round up as many such passages and treatments as possible—it could be an ongoing process, perhaps ultimately web-based, once a standard of quality and legibility has been established by a core of instances. (I own the URLs “www.usefulttheory.net” and “www.usefulttheory.org”; I decided “www.usefulttheory.com” was too paradoxical.) Online, robust cross-referencing would be possible, which would be great; but I do like books, so my thought at this time is that the project would become some combination of an online resource and one or more printed volumes—perhaps print-on-demand, or even assemble-and-print-on-demand, so that, for example, an architect could select a set of ideas germane to a particular commission and have those printed as references for members of the project team; or, similarly, a teacher could assemble a collection for a course reader.

The passages needn’t be from living authors; a treatment can be by the author of the passage or not. I hope you’ll agree to contribute.

Yours faithfully,



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