

# The End of Theory?

## The Duplicity of the relationship between presence and theoretical subversion in architecture

Jean-Pierre Vallier

### Abstract

In implicit terms, the question *The End of Theory?* can gradually come to be seen as a text, at once a concentrate of and a key to all the intensity and complexity of the issues concerned. Not to discredit the query as such, when for example it turns inside out like a glove, encompassing not only the person supposed to reply, but all the rules and regulations of replying, it causes us to adopt an overtly deconstructive agenda. It is at this point that we reach the outer limit of contemporary expression of a complex, a-temporal problematizing, of the attraction-repulsion relationship between architecture and theory.

So the interrogative microtext *The End of Theory?* is a landmark in two ways: as an ideal condensing a nebulous feeling, a situation that is very much of its time, and as a perfect concentrate of ancient but enduring basic questions.

One of the aims of this article is to demonstrate how the reformulation of these fundamental questions via some of the most significant aspects of the present situation in the practice and teaching of architecture can bring us to a more accurate understanding of the age-old and conflicted *architecture/theory* relationship.

The phenomena of attraction and resistance between the two terms are symptomatic and direct us towards hypotheses suggesting that the architectural, even more broadly than architecture as such, calls into question the production of meaning on its own ground. The generic concept of *architectural paradox* can introduce the genealogy of this set of issues by starting out from the observation – as close to its origins as you can get in respect of architecture – that their lack of a mimetic tradition constructs, negatively as it were, one of the planes of refraction of the permanence of their *divided* relationship with the *reference*.

Different writers associate this "mark" of the absent formal referent with the disturbing coalescence of the two contradictory "signatures" of architecture's presence, definable perhaps as the co-presence of an in-itself happily situated total presence, and the intangible ubiquity of an abstract ideal referent. The duplicity of this relationship with the presence, this inherent commitment to encroaching on ever more (infra)structural fields of expansion, and the pre-

linguistic property of establishing categories and endlessly restructuring their cartography, explain that speculative thought is always potentially subverted by the logic behind all those architectural paradoxes. These considerations are then linked to some of the most significant aspects of current practice and instruction in architecture, especially the powerful international trend revolving around the emphasis accorded to the core notion of *process*, intimately linked – especially given the continuous expansion of possibilities offered by informatics – with such others as *parameterization*, *diagram* and *morphogenetics*. These practices are remarkable because the shifts they involve point up an extreme problematization of the relationship with the discipline. Externalization, initial shift, drawing-out, delaying, relinquishment: all these combine in the shaping of a self-sustaining, operative transformational logic. The key word here is "operative". How is it that such trajectories, which so activate and draw on the theoretical, can also, in their own way, write a certain ending of the theoretical? The analyzed reasons are many and interwoven, pragmatic and theoretical. But in all the cases, the allegory of the theory is not the theory.

### **Jean-Pierre Vallier**

Jean-Pierre Vallier is an architect and theoretician practicing in Paris. He studied architecture in Paris, and holds a DEA in philosophy from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris under the direction of Jacques Derrida. From 1998 to 2002 he taught at the Ecoles d'Architecture of Paris-Villemin, Paris-La Villette, Paris Malaquais and St-Etienne. He was a founding member of the Ecole d'Architecture Paris Malaquais, which opened in 2000, where he is a titular Lecturer in the *Theory History Project* Department. He opened his own practice in 1987. He participates in diverse competitions and has built public buildings and medical programs, which have been published in professional magazines. He is member of the Research Laboratory GERPHAU linked to CNRS, conducts research for the Culture Ministry and Equipment and Housing Ministry, and has written on diverse issues devoted to the relationships between architecture and philosophy. He is member of the Réseau International de Philosophie since 1996 and of the Conseil scientifique supérieur de l'Enseignement de l'architecture since 2005.