A discourse on theory I: Sounding the depths—origins, theory, and representation

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Abstract

This essay addresses the idea of theory and representation in landscape architecture. It asks: what is theory, or what might it be, and why should we need it? The essay begins by suggesting that theory is something more enigmatic and elusive than would first appear, and its use today is riddled with misconception and difficulty. By tracing the ancient origins of theory back to its basis within cultural cosmology, the essay explains how this understanding was profoundly altered during the scientific revolution, through the Enlightenment, up to the present day. Here, it suggests that contemporary aesthetics, historicism, and theory are in fact disembodied constructs—autonomous and self-referential. Some of the major shifts in 18th- and 19th-century landscape architecture are used to illustrate the evolution of this trend. The author argues that the contemporary crisis of meaning and existence is actually an outcome of the epistemological break with tradition during the 18th century. It concludes that modern technological thinking works to perpetuate an excessively "hard" world in which culture can no longer figure or recollect itself. Landscape architecture stands poised within the arts to address this crisis, and its theory needs to reflect that.

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Discourse Representation Theory is a specic name for the work of Hans Kamp in the area of dynamic interpretation of natural language. Also, it has gradu-ally become a generic term for proposals for dynamic interpretation of natural language in the same spirit. These proposals have in common that each new sentence is interpreted in terms of the contribution it makes to an existing piece of interpreted discourse. This essay addresses the idea of theory and representation in landscape architecture. It asks: what is theory, or what might it be, and why should we need it? The essay begins by suggesting that theory is something more enigmatic and elusive than would first appear, and its use today is riddled with misconception and difficulty. By tracing the ancient origins of theory back to its basis within cultural cosmology, the essay explains how this understanding was profoundly altered during the scientific revolution, through the Enlightenment, up to the present day. Here, it suggests that contemporary aesthetics, historicism, and theory are in fact disembodied constructs—autonomous and self-referential. Some of the major shifts in 18th- and 19th-century landscape architecture are used to illustrate the evolution of this trend. The author argues that the contemporary crisis of meaning and existence is actually an outcome of the epistemological break with tradition during the 18th century. It concludes that modern technological thinking works to perpetuate an excessively "hard" world in which culture can no longer figure or recollect itself. Landscape architecture stands poised within the arts to address this crisis, and its theory needs to reflect that.