Crossties. Methodological Elements for a Historiographical Practice in Architecture

Habilitation thesis abstract
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The thesis *Crossties. Methodological Elements for a Historiographical Practice in Architecture*, referencing the period following the doctoral thesis defense, 2009-2026, presents the main concerns, results and research intentions within the disciplinary field of architectural history. The topic of the doctoral thesis, elaborated between 2003 and 2009 within the Catholic University of Leuven (supervised by professors Krista de Jonge, Marcel Smets, and Mircea Moldovan) was the history of the mutual determination relationships between the railway infrastructure and the architectural space, conceived in a multiscale sense, from that of the building and the ensemble, to that of the urban and interurban territories. Theoretically, the thesis problematized and supported an extended conceptualization of the field of architecture, pursuing an architectural approach to the systems and technological networks of modernity – in this case, the railway space. The doctoral approach has initiated an ongoing concern for an architectural understanding of the spatial, social and psychological implications of industrial and post-industrial technologies, for the architectural appropriation of modern and contemporary socio-technical systems. The historicization of the interaction of the technical with the spatial and the social, in this case through the study of railway space, represents the main research direction of the post-doctoral period referenced in this thesis.

The research allegorically involves the figure of travel, unfolding both in space and time. In space, from the colonization of increasingly vast exotic territories, to the mobilities of contemporary daily life. In time, from the industrial colonization of natural resources as well as workforce, to the industrial colonization of mentalities and intersubjective relationships. The “railway journey” thus underlies the metamorphoses of modernity from the first industrial revolution to its subsequent and recent hypostases.

The thesis intertwines three themes. The first addresses the history of the urban project of architecture in an increasingly technological world, seeking ways in which architectural history can reveal the (post)industrial complexity of the relationship between architecture and the city. This theme highlights objects and their interpretative models in architectural history.

The second theme is the industrial, as a paradigm that the railway simultaneously generates and symbolizes and which, despite its apparently obsolete character, still determines both the contemporary urban condition and, it is argued, the ways it is researched. The third theme is historiography: the connection between the past (things that have been, *res gestae*) and history (the knowledge of things that have been, *congnitio rerum gestarum*) that is, the possibility but also the limits of representing the past through word and image (since historiography involves both meanings of the Greek word *graphḗ* / γρᾰφή, to draw and to write, to write and to draw).

Drawing on previous and ongoing research that "maps" the history of railways in Transylvania and beyond within different disciplinary contexts adjacent to the main field of architecture (art history, urban history, social history, urban rehabilitation practice, contemporary art practice), the thesis suggests that interpreting the railway as a "symbolic form" (Cassirer 2020) or as a "cultural metaphor" (Freeman 1999), has the potential to confront the history of architecture with important methodological and disciplinary questions. Specifically, it is argued that (1) by approaching the railway (and by extension mobility infrastructure) as research object, the architectural historian is faced with the need to position herself or himself with respect to their own disciplinary territory, and (2) researching the railway *as architecture* catalyses a self-reflexive architectural history, which must constantly adjust its questions and methods, attempting an ever-provisional understanding of a spatial-socio-technical reality impossible to represent in the form of stable "images."

The research takes inspiration from the works of the art historian philosopher Hubert Damisch *Théorie du /nuage/ - pour une histoire de la peinture* (1972) and *L'origine de la perspective* (1987) and interweaves the historiographical theories of Michel de Certeau in *L'écriture de l'histoire* (1975) and Manfredo Tafuri, especially in *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* (1968) and *La sfera e il labirinto* (1980). The thesis hence outlines a theory of the /railway/ understood as a semiotic "graph" for a historiographical practice of architecture dealing with the industrial and post-industrial.

The work is structured in three parts and comprises seven chapters. The first part mainly reflects the "achievements," while the third outlines a research ethics and a thematic area of "intentions." The second part situates the research issues in the context of a discussion of the current urban condition, referencing authors who advocate the relevance of a historiography of architecture *in interaction* with the technological field, especially with the mobility and communication technologies. The seven chapters discuss interdependent themes, considered productive for architectural history, due to having the quality of interrogating both constitutive domains of the discipline – both architecture and history. Each theme constitutes

a sequence of *an allegorical railway journey*, a journey of the formation and transformation of (post-)industrial culture, but also the personal journey of a formation and transformation in architecture. The allegory of the railway journey structures the text into seven chapters, each focused on a different aspect of the route spatiality, from the encounter with the reception building to the conversation with the "travel companions." These seven "concrete" situations correspond to as many historiographic themes, targeting three types of intertwined problems, namely the conceptualization of the object of architectural history, the definition of its disciplinary territory and, finally, the problematization of historiographic representation or meta-representation – the history of history.

In the first part, "Conceptualizations of the object | "Achievements","

Chapter I – "Station | Artefact" – discusses architectural historical analysis understood as *Bauforschung*, as exercised on its "traditional" objects – buildings, designed spaces, ensembles; the material object of the analysis is not only conceived as a "text" (characterized by spatiality and materiality), but also as an "index" (opening up to typologies, hierarchies, synchronies or diachronies).

Chapter II – "Station premises | Productive system" – in analogy with the organization of the railway station enclosure as the "assembly line" of mobility, the object of historical investigation becomes the productive context, together with the processes (technological, economic or epistemological) and the systems of objects or social and institutional relations that constitute it, as well as the dynamics of these immaterial determinants in the industrial modernity.

Chapter III – "The periphery | Fragment without whole" – in analogy with the industrial colonization of the urban periphery, highlights the methodological figure of the fragment, in a Tafurian sense: as a constructed artifact or as an archive document, witness of the past, irreducible and inexplicable element of unmediated reality, the fragment confronts the historiographic "image", disturbing and problematizing its claim of coherence; the fragmentary and the provisional are therefore valued as methodological principles.

In the second part, "Between object and discourse,"

Chapter IV – "Interurban territory | Disciplinary field" – thematizes the disciplinary space of architectural history, in analogy with the complexity of contemporary interurban territories; crystallized in the sphere of art history, becoming autonomous in the post-war period within the framework of architectural education, the history of architecture becomes a simultaneously self-standing and open cultural field, in which the linearity of borders gives

way to a diffuse territoriality, inextricably intertwined with other domains of cultural production.

In the third part, “Historiographical meta-discourse | “Intentions”,” the epistemological possibilities and limits of (architectural) history are discussed in the last three chapters through the lenses of the historiographic theories of Michel de Certeau and Manfredo Tafuri:

Chapter V – “The carriage window | Representation” – in analogy with the framing and filtering operated by the window upon the traversed places’ image, in function of both atmospheric conditions and the viewer’s perception, problematizes historiographic representation – understood on the one hand as research praxis and, on the other hand, as its concrete result, publication.

Chapter VI – “The mirroring | Subject becomes object” – in analogy with the mirroring of the traveller figure in the carriage window, brings to the fore the object-subject dialectic, the need to “graph” – write and draw – histories of history and to historicize the ideological, disciplinary, social and institutional contexts in which historiography is produced; this engenders a deconstructive practice of historiographical discourses, understood as representations of other representations.

Chapter VII – “The conversation | Intersubjectivity” – in analogy with the dialogical relationship of the travelling companions, discusses modalities of intersubjectivity in historiographical (doctoral) practice, forms of relationship with the “other,” understood as “past,” fellow researcher, or public; the chapter also outlines a research agenda for which the historicization of the technology-architecture-city interactions is conceived as an implicit form of resistance to the sensed transformation of historiographical labour into mere technology.