

Introduction: Critical Architecture

Jane Rendell

The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London

This special issue of the *Journal of Architecture* includes a number of papers presented at the 'Critical Architecture' conference held in November 2005 at The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London.¹ The conference was organised by Jane Rendell and Jonathan Hill of the Bartlett, and was held in association with AHRA (Architectural Humanities Research Association) represented by Murray Fraser of the University of Westminster and Mark Dorrian of the University of Edinburgh.

'Critical Architecture' aimed to examine the relationship between critical practice in architectural design and architectural criticism. The intention was to place architecture in an interdisciplinary context, and to investigate the relationship between theory and practice, by exploring architectural criticism as a form of practice and considering the different modes of critical practice in architectural design: buildings, drawings and texts. The thirty nine speakers, including Andrew Benjamin, Howard Caygill, Philippe Rahm of Décosterd & Rahm, Kim Dovey, Steve McAdam of fluid architects, Hal Foster, Patrick Keiller, Sharon Kivland, Hilde Heynen, Ben Nicholson, Eyal Weisman, Sarah Wigglesworth Architects came from theory and practice, from inside and outside architecture and from twelve different countries.

It became clear to us, as organisers, at the early stages of developing the intellectual content of the conference that our discussions were far more exciting when we stopped dividing criticism and design. We decided therefore to locate the themes of the conference around our own particular understandings of 'Critical Architecture'. These turned out to revolve around various notions of what some might call critical practice, four different intersections between architectural criticism and architectural design. We felt that these both reflected issues of

¹ The conference was part funded by the British Academy and part funded by The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London.

concern to practitioners and theorists alike, but also allowed the relation between criticism and design to be negotiated by participants in a number of different ways.

I have decided to use these four themes, 'Criticism/Negation/Action' (Mark Dorrian), 'Architecture-Writing' (Jane Rendell), 'Criticism by Design' (Jonathan Hill) and 'The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture' (Murray Fraser), to structure this issue of the *Journal of Architecture*. Each chair has been invited to develop the main areas of interest within their theme either as an introduction or as a paper, to work with two contributors from their sessions of the conference in developing their papers, and to briefly situate these papers in relation to the concerns of their theme overall. The themes are as follows:

Criticism, Negation and Action (Chair/Editor: Mark Dorrian)

In the wake of developments in theory over the last 30 years, how should the idea of criticism in architecture be understood? Does criticism still have pertinence or have we moved, as some have argued, into a 'post-critical' condition, and if so what are the limits of this? On what terms should criticism be mounted and what models do we have? Are the historical models adequate or do we have to imagine new kinds of reconfigured critical practices? What would these be like and how would they integrate with questions of action?

Architecture-Writing (Chair/Editor: Jane Rendell)

This theme is interested in exploring new ways of writing architectural criticism. Discussions in art criticism concerning art-writing open up possibilities for new writing practices and also for re-thinking the relationship between criticism and critical practice in the visual and performing arts. This debate questions objectivity and judgement, as well as introduce considerations of subjectivity, positionality, textuality and materiality in writing. What kind of issues does such a debate raise for architectural and spatial criticism? How do these allow us to speculate upon the relation of creative and critical practice in architecture-writing?

Criticism by Design (Chair/Editor: Jonathan Hill)

The history and status of the architect are interwoven with those of design. The term 'design' comes from the Italian 'disegno', meaning drawing, suggesting both the drawing of lines on paper and the drawing forth of ideas. What then is the relationship of designing to building? Is there a role for the design project that is critical but not intended to be built? Can a design, whether drawn or built, question existing conditions and propose alternatives? Is the dependence of designing on drawing positive? Are other means of design more effective in developing a critical architecture?

The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture: (Chair/Editor: Murray Fraser)

The term critical architecture creates problems. It implies a clear distinction for a mode of architecture that opposes dominant economic and cultural strands, and hints at an alternative form of practice that does not reproduce prevailing values. Perhaps it is more useful to recognise a complex and negotiated concept of critical architecture that depends on cultural context. What are the variations between rural, suburban and urban conditions within developed countries? How are globalisation and cultural diversity affecting critical discourse in architecture? Might it be that critical architecture is a relative standpoint culturally, maybe a luxury in Western countries, yet more needed elsewhere?

Excerpted from Jane Rendell, 'Introduction', Jane Rendell (ed.) *Critical Architecture*, special issue of the *Journal of Architecture*, (June 2005), v. 10. n. 3.